

An introduction and background to this rendering of the Heart Sutra.

We commonly experience Reality as made of ‘things’ and assume that these entities do truly exist. When I encountered the Heart Sutra in 2003 at my first place of practice, I found that this short chant offered a very different understanding of the nature of existence and Reality from the one I/we usually assume as obvious and correct. This prodded me to explore more deeply a vague sense of the insubstantiality of existence that I had been uneasily wrestling with for years: What is a ‘Thing’? If each ‘thing’ is real, where is the first thing when it changes into something new?

More than a decade earlier, when teaching cabinetmaking apprentices at the New York City Carpenters Union, I began to question the concept of a solid and fixed ‘Thing’. Returning to my foundations as a philosophy major in college in the 60s, I remembered that Plato and Aristotle had postulated that all things have “essences”, that a chair had “chair essence”, a horse had “horse essence”, etc. I would ask: If a tree, which has “tree essence”, is cut down and cut into boards, which themselves are shaped into parts that are assembled into drawers to be slid into a bureau, where or when is there an “essence” of each ‘thing’ as it is transformed into another ‘thing’? Does the ‘thingness’ of being a board begin when the tree trunk is cut along its length? Does its “board-ness” disappear when it is cut and shaped into parts? Does its “part-ness” transform into “drawer-ness” when it is assembled into a drawer? Is “bureau-ness” different than “drawer-ness”? Or, are these all just our ideas that become fixed as we compile experiences and understandings into concepts that we believe to have some sort of permanence?

Over the more than two decades of teaching apprentices how to use tools to modify materials in order to achieve desired results, I began to observe that tools and materials actually had some sort of mutuality. Wood has a grain, i.e. the direction of the wood fibers. The hand saws used to cut wood are of two main types: rip saws with big chisel-shaped teeth are used to cut boards in the direction of the grain by plowing; and, cross cut saws with smaller knife-shaped teeth are used to slice across the wood fibers, as when one cuts a bunch of carrots. However, if I attempt to plow across a board with the big teeth of a cross cut saw, the saw’s flat teeth will jamb in the fibers and the cut will be ragged. The consequences of this simple mismatching of a saw’s tooth shape and the grain direction of a piece of wood brought about a deep and surprising insight. It was not just the tools that ‘created’ the outcome; it was how the tools and materials engaged at the moment of engaging that *became* the outcome! Over the years, I began to see that there were numerous conditions, which, at the moment of an action, became part of the outcome of that action. Increasingly, I taught my apprentices to pay attention to everything, because everything contributed to the resulting character and quality of their work.

With this attentiveness, I began to examine other operations occurring in my shop. One day, while cutting a board on a table saw, I watched the single piece of wood I was cutting become two pieces. Where, I asked, was the original piece, because, in cutting, it was now two? Shocked, I re-examined the events: Now, I have a single piece. Now, I have a piece being cut. Now, I have two pieces. If I cannot touch the single board of the past and I cannot touch the cut board of the future, and the board of the present is the ever changing engaging of the board and the whirring saw blade, what is ‘Now’? Does ‘Now’ have a Reality or is ‘Now’ just the engaging? As a consequence of that investigation, I asked: How could there be ‘things’? And, if there were no ‘things’, what was/is the nature of existence?

When I encountered Buddhism, I felt the answers might be found in the Heart Sutra. However, such an inquiry demanded more of me than intellectual discussion and debate, which simply replace one set of understandings with another. They required “Seeing”, and ‘seeing’ required something different—a meditative inquiry going beyond the ‘Thingness’ of even ideas. In the Heart Sutra, I found a meditative homing beacon that, when I coupled it with ‘still awareness’, led me to deeper and deeper understandings.

So often when we join a Buddhist sangha and take up chanting the Heart Sutra, and we accept that one version as a given. We tend to work with that same version in study, attempting to plumb the meanings of the words we have been chanting regularly. This has an inherent problem: Going beyond our habitual understandings and assumptions is simply difficult. Aware of that, I tried something else.

At the start of my intensive study, I downloaded around 100 translations of the thousands I found available online and began a parallel line by line comparative, but mostly meditative, study. In the parallel meditative process, I attempted to allow the implications in the words and phrasing to ‘waft over’ me, losing their concreteness and gaining a sense of implication of intention. Essential to that process was “not knowing.” In time, the translated words blended into a sensibility of implication, and, in that unknowing awareness, came forth a phrasing that expressed my (at that time) understanding. I folded that current understanding into the process of “not knowing” meditative examination, and gradually found phrasings that opened to deeper and broader awarenesses.

As I read more of the Buddhist texts, particularly the Mahayana/Prajnaparamita sutras, as well as, Nagarjuna/Chandrakirti, the Zen ancestors, and Dogen, the significance of different parts of the Heart Sutra became increasingly apparent. My understanding shifted and new words and phrases offered themselves. Over these nearly two decades of intense meditative inquiry, my phrasings began to give rise to understandings that are found throughout the Mahayana sutras and texts, but not obvious in any of the Heart Sutra translations I had encountered. Thus, this rendering of the Heart Sutra presents an experiential rendering that goes beyond the concept of “emptiness” and opens up what might possibly be ‘seen’ following gestating in Prajnaparamita.

As months of this study lengthened into years, I began to keep notes, explaining the insights that lay behind the new phrasings of this Heart Sutra. Often times we read these texts and wish we could enter the experiences of the writers. Based on the inquiries that I had received from friends who had read the various ‘current versions’, I found that answering and being able to answer those questions a vital and compassionate necessity. Those notes became a line by line set of explanations which, themselves, brought forward deeper insights through meditation into what underlay the experiential phrasings. These notes accompany the Heart Sutra, identifying their phrase referent by Verse and Line.

Now, thanks to Shodo, I am able to openly articulate this rendering of the Heart Sutra, explaining the meaning behind the phrasing and exploring, with the participants, the experiences that underlay the words and the explanations of those words. And so, I offer deep bows of the utmost gratitude to Shodo and to all those who might find this rendering of the Heart Sutra with its explanation useful in their studies and practice.

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