

Saving All Sentient Beings

Saving all sentient being is one of the great bodhisattva vows chanted every time a sangha gathers to sit together. On the face of it, it appears to be a vow of compassion to help relieve the suffering of all others, and it is that. However, it is more than that. Saving all sentient being is the actualization of Buddha. It is through the actualization of Buddha that suffering is relieved. This is why compassion for all sentient being is so important.

When Shakyamuni Buddha had his great realization, while sitting under the bodhi tree, he said, “I now, together with all sentient beings, am enlightened.” From the great void of empty space, of total unification, came the realization that there is no separation between him and all sentient being. This first utterance of the Buddha, following his great realization, is an expression of prajna paramita, which is his great realization. Prajna paramita is the wisdom that sees the true nature of reality. It is the reality of interdependent origination, interconnectedness, impermanence and the lack of independent existence.

All living being consists of a great variety of elements and conditions which come together and manifest through a long chain of interactions. Also included in this chain of interactions are the codes, such as DNA, which dictates how any living being develops and sustains itself. The chain of interactions that creates living being is itself dependent on a vast chain of interactions that proceeds all the way back to the big bang and beyond. This vast chain of interaction, responsible for all of creation, is called Interdependent Origination.

Therefore, there is no living, or nonliving being, that exists outside this vast chain of interactions. This is interconnectedness and lack of independent existence, two other aspects of Prajna Paramita. What this means is that you are totally connected to the entire universe. All is one and one is all. Now, while the universe is one, it is not static. It is in a constant state of change, the consequence of the vast interaction and interconnectedness within the One. This change is responsible for the vast differentiation of form in the universe. None of the forms that arise from and recede into the One is new. Their appearance is just the morphing nature of the universe. This is Impermanence, yet another aspect of Prajna Paramita.

However, while each of us is at one and completely connected to everything else, we must discriminate between this thing and that in order to survive and thrive. That is, living being creates the illusion of subject-object orientation to identify the various conditions that may promote and/or threaten its survival and wellbeing. This is Mind. This is life. This is the very purpose and progenitor of sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness. In the entire universe only living being discriminates.

Within the vast variety of living being, there are many different ways discrimination is done. It is dictated by the how each form of life developed it's physical, sensorial, perceptive, cognitive, or lack of cognitive, and conscious capabilities. So, while discrimination and separation is delusion from the perspective of the absolute, it is a necessary fact of life! Thus, it is for life, for mind alone, that 'Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form'. No mind no form!

So, never fall into the delusion that there is any separation between body and mind.

Sensation is made up of the physical sense organs, eye, ear, nose etc. and their function, sight, hearing, smell, etc., which is the raw stimulation of the world by the world, both inside us and outside us. But in this stimulation alone there is no distinction or differentiation of form. With sensation alone the world is one.

Perception is the mental faculty that distinguishes one thing from another. The Gestalt theory of perception, called Field Theory, is consistent with Buddhist teachings. Field theory states that all perception is the product of the dynamic interaction of foreground and background in each and all the sensorial fields. The foreground is the perceived object. Now, from the absolute view, there is no object and this is the reason for all the negation in the Heart Sutra. The perceived object only appears to be separate from everything else through the process of perception. The background is everything else in that sensorial field.

So what determines what is in the foreground and what is in the background? It is the aggregate of consciousness, more specifically attention. Where the attention is focused becomes the foreground. A common expression that bespeaks this is 'object of attention'. However, object of attention and attention to object are the same thing in the absolute. The rest is the background, which is also absolute, or empty and completely integrated and interactive with the foreground, or the object of attention. When the attention is directed elsewhere, the foreground-background dynamic changes appropriately. What was in the foreground recedes to the background to be replaced by some perception arising from the background to become the foreground or the next object of attention.

Sometimes the foreground/background dynamic shifts even when you're looking at the same space. This is called a gestalt. There are many examples of gestalts. The classic one that most people know about is the picture of a vase. Usually this picture is in only two colors to make it easier to see. Let's say the vase is black and the background is white. The vase shows up very clear and distinct from the background. That's because attention is focused on the black space. However, if attention is focused on the white space, the background for the vase, you see two faces, in profile, looking at each other. A dynamic shift in foreground and background looking at the same space.

The dynamic interaction in a gestalt demonstrates Emptiness in the particular, but that dynamic also occurs universally, which the Heart Sutra teaches. Dogen's teacher Rujing, composed a poem related to this:

The whole body is like a mouth hanging in empty space.

Not questioning the winds from north, south, east or west.

Equally with all of them, speaking of Prajna.

Ding-dong-a-ling-ding-dong.