

**The Heart Sutra:
Exploring Wisdom Beyond Wisdom
Taught by Kazuaki Tanahashi Sensei and Joan Halifax Roshi**

Talk One, Part 2: Encountering Enigma

ROSHI: Thank you very much. It's good to just take a pulse to settle down. I know some of you just arrived from Albuquerque or are just tuning in, and this kind of pulse of arriving, reflecting the mantra of the Heart Sutra—arrive instead of, you know, gone. We're trying to cultivate that sense of what it is to arrive right here in this situation and to cultivate the conditions for that quality of presence that is fundamentally inclusive—something that we touched into in the first session. The translation that Kaz has done that we've worked on is something that we hope characterizes a sensibility of fundamental inclusiveness, including our agitation, including our opinions—just phenomena.

I remember I was at an [*Araya Vinaya?*] program in Thailand, and a group of nuns from Sri Lanka were there. It was a gathering of monks and nuns from all over Asia, and it was actually a revolutionary gathering because it was the first time in Thailand's history that women went out and did *pindapata*—did alms round. We as monastics gathered at three in the morning, were given begging bowls by the monks, and proceeded into the streets, doing alms round. We learned a lot from each other and the women in Sri Lanka, who were fully ordained—ordained by Chinese nuns who carried the lineage, interestingly enough, and those Chinese nuns were present in our midst. But the women from Sri Lanka were mainly women who had been the wives of farmers. They're very kind of robust, real, grounded, earthy women. They weren't [*breath and gesture*].

At the end of this gathering, the people presented entertainment for us. I came out of the little *kuti* where I was sleeping (I had had a late afternoon nap in the heat), and this kind of Thai dancing was happening. I saw the Sri Lankan nuns were watching it, and I said to them "Well, I thought according to the vinaya, you weren't supposed to be watching entertainment." And this wonderful Sri Lankan . . . I was sort of teasing them. She teased me back, and she went, "Phenomena." [*Laughter*] We had a big, healthy female laugh.

The question that Kaz asked us to ask last night: I want us to return to that question as a pulse before we actually do the chanting—the recitation—of the Heart Sutra in this version. The two questions that Kaz asked us to contemplate: The first one was, when did you first encounter the Heart Sutra? And the second was, what came up for you? And then the question I'm going

to toss to him is, why is it an enigma? Why is it an enigma? And why is it important for it to be an enigma?

If we could just take some breaths and for you to recall, as a visceral experience, the first time you heard the chant, either in the language of the school in which you're practicing or in English. What was present for you? But call it forth internally, as a visceral experience—what was your visceral response?

Thank you.

I'd like to invite us to begin by chanting the Heart Sutra, and I'd love to . . . Maybe someone can be on the . . . [*inaudible*]. Can we have someone on the bell? And let me just say something about the process of chanting, something more. I mentioned in our first session that chanting is a very fundamental process in most schools of Buddhism and in most religions—chanting or singing in some way. It is both an experience where we individually tune in to our ability to be wholehearted in how we connect with the content, but really the spirit, of what we're chanting. It's also our capacity to tune in to the community, and in the case of Buddhism, but not in all Buddhist schools, but in the case of how we work here, chanting in unison points toward a quality of heart and mind and body that's unified—unified heart, mind, and body. In terms of neuroscience, it's very interesting, because our ability to actually listen to ourselves—to tune into ourselves—at the same time to sense into what's happening in the whole community relates very much to cultivating empathy. Without our capacity for interoceptivity—for self-attunement—those neural networks associated with our capacity to sense into the world, the boundlessness but also the particularities of this present moment, our capacity to actually do this is not actualized.

So I'm going to ask us to . . . It's like being in two places at the same time, but it's really one place, and it's a very deep process: your ability to hear yourself and also to hear the whole community and to harmonize or to be one with the whole community. And that capacity also relates to our energy for engagement. It's not like, "Well, I'm . . . [*inaudible mumbling*]." We're not just defaulting out of the field, which many of us do. We're actually engaging in the field—taking responsibility for the field, contributing to the field. Every voice is important. Every time we engage really counts. It's wholehearted. It's what Dōgen has called "giving life to life."

It's also addressing the issue of resistance that drains us of energy and that can demoralize the whole sangha, because our resistance is something that's deeply embedded, often in our childhood experience. It's like the *no* of two years old sticks with you, and you're

twelve and you're still saying no; you're twenty and you're still saying no; thirty, you're still in resistance; forty, you're still in resistance, and you die in resistance. It's that kind of no of resistance instead of the no that . . . [inaudible] means, the . . . [inaudible] means, which is not resistive, but it's the no of realization. Not this, not that—what one of our participants spoke about earlier. And in the ten-line sutra that we chant often, the Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo, it's life affirming—deeply life affirming.

As we engage in the chant—and I'm going to ask us to actually do it three times, and those of you who are in the online course, join us, at least inside your heart, mind, and body as an internal process, but for us we'll actually engage in it—to chant this round three times, see if you can practice this quality of listening to self, to other, where self and other disappear, into a boundless field. Do you get that feeling? Do you sort of begin to touch? We're not just stupidly doing this, but in another way, it's kind of stupid, but never mind. [Laughter]

Joshin, if you would chant the title, and then I want us . . . The chant leader attunes very much to Joshin, so that Joshin holds the pitch, so that it's a very kind of sensitive ear; you're not chanting one third below; you're really chanting right with Joshin. You're listening to the chant leader; you're listening to the community; you're listening to yourself. That's waking up. That's practicing inclusivity.

So, Joshin.

JOSHIN: The Sutra on the Heart of Realizing Wisdom beyond Wisdom.

GENERAL: Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken, moves in the deep course of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom, sees that all five streams of body, heart, and mind are without boundary, and frees all from anguish. Oh, Sariputra, form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment. Oh, Sariputra, boundlessness is the nature of all things. It neither rises nor perishes, neither stains nor purifies, neither increases nor decreases. Boundlessness is not limited by form, nor by feelings, perceptions, inclinations, or discernment. It is free of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; free of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and any object of mind; free of sensory realms, including the realm of the mind. It is free of ignorance and the end of ignorance. Boundlessness is free of old age and death and free from the end of old age and death. It is free of suffering,

arising, cessation, and path, and free of wisdom and attainment. Being free of attainment, those who help all to awaken abide in the realization of wisdom beyond wisdom and live with an unhindered mind. Without hindrance, the mind has no fear. Free from confusion, those who lead all to liberation embody profound serenity. All those in the past, present, and future who realize wisdom beyond wisdom, manifest unsurpassable and thorough awakening, know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom is no other than this wondrous mantra. Luminous, unequaled, and supreme, it relieves all suffering. It is genuine, not illusory. So set forth this mantra of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom. Set forth this mantra that says, "GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA."

Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken, moves in the deep course of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom, sees that all five streams of body, heart, and mind are without boundary, and frees all from anguish. Oh, Sariputra, form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment. Oh, Sariputra, boundlessness is the nature of all things. It neither rises nor perishes, neither stains nor purifies, neither increases nor decreases. Boundlessness is not limited by form, nor by feelings, perceptions, inclinations, or discernment. It is free of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; free of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and any object of mind; free of sensory realms, including the realm of the mind. It is free of ignorance and the end of ignorance. Boundlessness is free of old age and death and free from the end of old age and death. It is free of suffering, arising, cessation, and path, and free of wisdom and attainment. Being free of attainment, those who help all to awaken abide in the realization of wisdom beyond wisdom and live with an unhindered mind. Without hindrance, the mind has no fear. Free from confusion, those who lead all to liberation embody profound serenity. All those in the past, present, and future who realize wisdom beyond wisdom, manifest unsurpassable and thorough awakening, know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom is no other than this wondrous mantra. Luminous, unequaled, and supreme, it relieves all suffering. It is genuine, not illusory. So set forth this mantra of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom. Set forth this mantra that says, "GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA."

ROSHI: Wait. Wait. Hold on. Hold on one second.

JOSHIN: Hold on one, please. I need you to . . .

ROSHI: You need to pitch up.

JOSHIN: The way to do this is to keep smiling, so . . . and if you know . . . I'm trying to keep it up, but the group is going down pretty dramatically, so if you keep a bright face and an upright posture and a bit of a smile, it will stay up, OK?

ROSHI: You know, people take photographs sometimes of me at my computer, and that's probably how a lot of us look—like we're staring into a screen, not into the whole world, so . . . Go for it, Joshin.

JOSHIN: The Sutra on the Heart of Realizing Wisdom Beyond Wisdom.

GENERAL: Avalokiteshvara, who helps all to awaken, moves in the deep course of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom, sees that all five streams of body, heart, and mind are without boundary, and frees all from anguish. Oh, Sariputra, form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment. Oh, Sariputra, boundlessness is the nature of all things. It neither rises nor perishes, neither stains nor purifies, neither increases nor decreases. Boundlessness is not limited by form, nor by feelings, perceptions, inclinations, or discernment. It is free of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; free of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and any object of mind; free of sensory realms, including the realm of the mind. It is free of ignorance and the end of ignorance. Boundlessness is free of old age and death and free from the end of old age and death. It is free of suffering, arising, cessation, and path, and free of wisdom and attainment. Being free of attainment, those who help all to awaken abide in the realization of wisdom beyond wisdom and live with an unhindered mind. Without hindrance, the mind has no fear. Free from confusion, those who lead all to liberation embody profound serenity. All those in the past, present, and future who realize wisdom beyond wisdom, manifest unsurpassable and thorough awakening, know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom is no other than this wondrous mantra. Luminous, unequaled, and supreme, it relieves all suffering. It is genuine, not illusory. So set forth this mantra of

realizing wisdom beyond wisdom. Set forth this mantra that says, “GATE GATE PARAGATE
PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA.”

ROSHI: Thank you very much. Wonderful.

Kaz, I’d like to ask you a question: when did you first encounter the Heart Sutra?

KAZ: I wrote about it in my book. It was 1964. I first went outside of Japan and visited Diamond Sangha. [*inaudible*] and Aitken Roshi were having a meditation group, and then I kind of joined. I heard of this chant other times in Japanese, in some Japanese settings, but it was complete kind of nonsense to me—it was Sino-Japanese Heart Sutra. So in English, I heard that, and I was completely confused.

The question is how was your first encounter with the Heart Sutra? What was its attraction? What puzzled you?

STUDENT 8 (Jeff): My first . . . [*inaudible*] Heart Sutra . . . my first visit to Tassajara as a work-practice volunteer, and I clearly did not see that all five aggregates were empty—I had no idea. Going by the original, San Francisco Zen Center version, which is . . . [*inaudible*] different. This is the one that I hold close to my heart; this is the one I learned, and I didn’t want to abandon it. So I came here—it was a bit of jarring. I agree with John from yesterday. He said, “Boundlessness? You know, I was struggling with emptiness for all these years, you know, trying to make sense out of that.” So, when I first heard it, it was no different than maybe my favorite nursery rhyme like, “Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon, the dog laughed at seeing so much fun, and the dish ran away with the spoon.” I remember that—I hold that nursery rhyme as close to my heart too. Anyway, I have to . . . I keep reciting . . . Maybe once in a while I’ll recite the original version that I learned in San Francisco. I like that about “emptiness.” And I’m learning to make the change.

ROSHI: Thanks, Jeff.

STUDENT 9: Hello. Can you hear me?

ROSHI: Yes. Thank you, Laura.

STUDENT 9 (Laura): OK. So I first encountered the Heart Sutra when I was staying in a monastery in Vietnam, and in contrast to our twenty minutes of standing chanting, we would do an hour of kneeling chanting every day. I remember at first I was really . . . Just getting used to the chanting was really painful, and I didn't understand the point of it. Then eventually when I just surrendered to it, it was a completely different experience. Later, during that week when I heard the English translation of it, it made complete sense to me—the “form is emptiness.” But for some reason, going the other way, why does emptiness manifest as form? The mind couldn't understand that piece, but the other side of it—the flip side—I felt very connected to. So I found that interesting, the dichotomy. Yeah.

ROSHI: Thank you, Laura.

STUDENT 10: It was a Thursday, 1978. [*Laughter*] I woke up one morning, coming to the end of a nine-year stint in monasticism within the Christian tradition, and a prayer was on my lips. “Sovereign, reduce me to my true greatness.” It came as a great shock because I was an egotist of the highest order, but in the course of many years, reading D. T. Suzuki, I got it that it was my own religious tradition of kenosis—self-emptying—that leads to theosis, where God gets to be in charge.

ROSHI: Thank you for mentioning kenosis, self-emptying. Thank you.

So the homework assignment last night was to recall your first encounter with the Heart Sutra and also to explore the possibility that for you it was an enigma. The homework assignment in this session, as we conclude the session, is, what is irritating about this sutra? What is annoying? I'd like to invite those of you who are here and those of you who are listening to just write freely in the spirit of writing practice for just a few minutes, right now. Some of you (Marilyn and others) have chanted this sutra not just for a decade but for many decades, and some of you are encountering it for the first time, and you're hearing it with fresh ears, so to speak. Ask yourself, what annoys me about the Heart Sutra? Then just write from there. Just take a few minutes right now to write freely in an uncorrected way.

[Recording cuts out and back in]

ROSHI: And finish the sentence. Take an in-breath when you've finished the words. If you didn't write, notice that. If you had a hard time, notice that. One of the factors of awakening is investigation—a lot of us sit in resistance, and we don't investigate. We don't engage curiosity. We don't push the edge. Just notice that, if that's our experience. Or if we're grateful for the moment to say, "What about the Heart Sutra do I doubt? What is challenging for me in relation to how I see the world? Am I willing to go just a little deeper in the spirit of interest/curiosity/investigation?" Again, that is the spirit of our practice: to look deeply, to inquire deeply. Don't accept anything the Buddha said at "face value." Use doubt to drive doubt deep so that your view can really open to phenomena—not fixated in resistance, but to vastness. That is the spirit of this practice, I sense, from the time of the Buddha, and until just now. So thank you. [*Bows*]