



Platform Sutra Hui-Neng (6th Patriarch of Zen)

Chapter III Discourse on Prajna

On the following day Prefect Wai asked Patriarch to give another address. Having taken his seat, the Patriarch asked the assembly to first purify their minds (by a period of dhyana-silence) and then to join in reciting the Maha Prajna-paramita Sutra, after which he gave the following address:—

Learned Audience: Prajna, the Wisdom of Enlightenment, is inherent in every one of us. It is because of the delusions under which our minds labor that we fail to realise its presence, and that we have to seek the advice and the guidance of the more highly enlightened before we can realise it in our mind's Essence. You should know that as far as Buddha-nature is concerned, there is no difference between an enlightened man and an ignorant one. What makes the difference is that one realises it and the other is ignorant of it. Let me speak to you now about the Maha Prajna-paramita Sutra, so that each of you may attain wisdom. Listen carefully while I speak.

Learned Audience: There are many people who recite the word, Prajna, the whole day long, who do not seem to know that Prajna is inherent in their own nature. The mere talking about food will not appease hunger, but that is the very thing these people are doing. We may talk about the "Doctrine of Voidness" for myriads of kalpas, but merely talking about it will not enable one to realise it in his Mind-essence, and the talking will serve no good purpose in the end.

The name, Maha Prajna-paramita, is Sanskrit and means, "great Wisdom to reach the opposite shore." Now, what we ought to do with it is to carry it into practice with our mind; whether we recite it or do not recite it matters little. Mere reciting without mental practice, may be likened to a phantasm, a magical delusion, a flash of lighting, or a dew-drop. On the other hand, if we do both, then our mind will be in accord with what we repeat orally. Our very self-nature is Buddha, and apart from this nature there is no other Buddha.

What is Maha? Maha means, "great." The capacity of the mind is as great as that of space. It is infinite, it is neither round nor square, neither great nor small, neither green nor yellow, neither red nor white, neither above nor below, neither long nor short, neither angry nor happy, neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil, neither first nor last. All Buddha-lands are as void as space. Intrinsicly our transcendental nature is void and not a single dharma can be attained. It is the same with Mind-essence which is a state of the "voidness of non-voidity."

Learned Audience: when you hear me speak about the void, do not fall into the idea that I mean vacuity. It is of the utmost importance that we should not fall into that idea, because then when a man sits quietly and keeps his mind blank he would be abiding in a state of the "voidness

of indifference.” The illimitable void of the Universe its capable of holding myriads of things of various shapes and form, such as the sun and the moon, and the stars, worlds, mountains, rivers, rivulets, springs, woods, bushes, good men, bad men, laws pertaining to goodness and to badness, heavenly planes and hells, great oceans and all the mountains of Mahameru. Space takes in all these, and so does the voidness of our nature. We say that Essence of Mind is great because it embraces all things since all things are within our nature. When we see the goodness or the badness of other people, and are not attracted by it, nor repulsed by it, nor attached to it, then the attitude of our mind is as void as space. In that we see the greatness of our minds, therefore we call Mind-essence, Maha.

Learned Audience: When ignorant people have ideas they merely talk about them, but wise men keep them within their own minds and put them into practice. There is also a class of foolish people who sit quietly and try to keep their minds blank; they refrain from thinking of anything and then call themselves “great.” Concerning this heretical view, I have no patience to speak. You should know that the capacity of the mind is very great since it pervades the whole Universe wherever the domain of Law extends. When we use the mind we can consider everything; when we use Mind to its full capacity, we shall know all. All under one principle, one principle in all. When Mind works without hindrance and is at perfect liberty to come” or to “go,” then Mind is Prajna.

Prajna comes from Mind-essence and not from any exterior source. Do not have any mistaken notion about that. To cherish mistaken notions about that is to make a “selfish use of True Nature.” Once the “True Nature” of Mind-essence is realised, one will be forever free from delusion. Since the capacity of Mind is for great things, we should not busy it with trivial acts. (That is, the mind that can realise Mind-essence through the right practice of dhyana, ought not to be sitting quietly with a blank mind nor wasting its resources on idle talk.) Do not talk all day about “the void, without practising it in the mind. One who does this may be likened to a self-styled king who is really a commoner. Prajna can never be attained in that way and those who act like that are not my disciples.

What is Prajna? It means, Transcendental Wisdom. If we steadily, at all times and in all places, keep our thoughts free from foolish desire and act wisely on all occasions, then we are practising the Paramita of Prajna. One foolish notion is enough to shut-off Prajna; one wise thought will bring it forth again. People in ignorance or under delusion do not see this; they talk about it with their tongue but in their mind they are ignorant of it. They are always saying that they practice Prajna, and they talk incessantly about “vacuity,” but they have not realised the True Void. Prajna is Wisdom’s Heart; it has neither form nor characteristic. If we interpret it in this way, then it is, indeed, the Wisdom of Prajna.

What is Paramita? It is a Sanskrit word (commonly translated, “ideal”) that means, “to the opposite shore.” Figuratively it means, “beyond existence and non-existence.” By clinging to sense things, existence and non-existence are like the ups and downs of the billowy sea. Such a state, metaphorically is called, “this shore”; while beyond existence and non-existence there is a state characterised by non-attachment that has the undisturbed calmness of running water, that is called, “the opposite shore.” This is why Prajna is called, Paramita.

Learned Audience: People under illusion recite the Maha Prajna-paramita with their tongue and, while they are reciting it, erroneous and evil thoughts arise; but if they put it into practice unremittingly they will come to realise its True Nature. To know this Dharma is to know the Law of Prajna; and to practice it is to practice Ideal Wisdom. He who does not practice it is an ordinary man; he who concentrates his mind on its practice, even if it be but for a moment only, he is the equal of Buddha. An ordinary man is Buddha! and defilement is Enlightenment (Bodhi). A passing foolish thought makes one an ordinary man, while an enlightened thought

makes one a Buddha. A passing thought that clings to sense-objects is defilement; a second thought that frees one from attachment is Enlightenment.

Maha Prajna-paramita! The Great Transcendental-Wisdom Ideal, supreme, most exalted, foremost. It neither stays, nor goes, nor comes. By it Buddhas of the present, the past and future generations attain Buddhahood. We should use this Perfect Wisdom to break up the five bundles of aggregates that make up our personality, and thus get rid of the pollutions and contaminations. To follow such a practice ensures the attainment of Buddhahood. The three poisonous elements (greed, anger and infatuation) will then be turned into good conduct (*sila*) and self-realisation (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*Prajna*). When one is free from defilement, Wisdom reveals itself steadily and cannot be distinguished from Mind-essence. Those who understand this Dharma will be free from idle thoughts. To be free from discriminations, from clinging to desires, from illusions; to set free one's true nature; to use Prajna for contemplation; to take an attitude of neither indifference nor attachment towards all things—that is what is meant by realising one's true Essence of Mind and (in its perfection) is the attainment of Buddhahood.

Learned Audience: If you wish to penetrate the deepest mystery of the Dharma-world and experience the deepest realisation (*samadhi*) of Prajna, you should practice Prajna by reciting and studying the Diamond Sutra (the *Vajrakkhedika*) which will enable you to realise Essence of Mind. You should know that the merit for studying this Sutra is distinctly set forth in the text in laudatory terms; it is immeasurable and illimitable and cannot be enumerated in detail. This Sutra expounds the highest thought of Buddhism and our Lord Buddha delivered it specially for the very wise and quick-witted. The less wise and the slow-witted doubt its credibility. Why? For example: When it rains through the power of the celestial Naga on the plains of India, cities, towns and villages are drifted about as if they were only leaves of the date tree; but should it rain on the great ocean, the level of the seas of the whole world would not be affected by it. When the followers of the highest school of Mahayana study the Diamond Sutra, their minds become enlightened as they realise that Prajna is immanent in their own Mind-essence. Since they have their own access to highest wisdom through the constant practice of concentration and contemplation (*dhyana* and *samadhi*) they realise that they no longer need to rely on scriptural authority.

The Prajna immanent in the minds of every one may be likened to the rain, the moisture of which refreshes every living thing, trees and plants as well as sentient creatures. When rivers and streams reach the sea, the water carried by them merges into the one body, which is a good analogy. When rain falls in a deluge, plants which are not deep-rooted are washed away and eventually they perish. It is the same with the slow-witted when they hear about the teachings of the "Sudden School." The Prajna immanent in them is exactly the same as that in very wise men, but when the Dharma is made known to them they fail to enlighten themselves. Why is it? It is because their minds are thickly veiled by erroneous views and deeply rooted infections, just as the sun is often thickly veiled by clouds and unable to show its splendor until the wind blows the clouds away. Prajna does not vary with different persons; what makes the seeming difference is the question whether one's mind is enlightened or is beclouded. He who does not realise his own Mind-essence, and rests under the delusion that Buddhahood can be attained by outward religious rites, is rightly called the slow-witted. He who knows the teachings of the "Sudden School," and who attaches no importance to ritual, and whose mind always functions under right views so that he is absolutely free of defilement and contamination, such an one may be said to have realised his Mind-essence.

Learned Audience: The mind should be framed in such a way that it will be independent of external and internal things, at liberty to come and go, free from attachment, thoroughly enlightened, without the least obscuration. He whose mind is thus framed is able to measure

up to the standard of the Prajna Sutras. The sutras and the scriptures of both the Mahayana and the Hinayana, as well as the twelve sections of the canonical writings, were provided to suit the different needs and temperaments of various people. It is upon the principle that Prajna is latent in every man that the doctrines expounded in these scriptures are established. If there were no human beings, there would be no teachings; hence we know that all teachings are made for man and that all the Sutras owe their existence to preachers. Some men are wise, the so called superior men, and some are ignorant, the so called inferior men; the wise preach to the ignorant when they are asked to do so. Through this the ignorant may attain sudden enlightenment and their minds will become illuminated thereby; then they are no longer different from wise men. Without enlightenment there

would be a difference between a Buddha and any other living being; a gleam of enlightenment is enough to make a living being the equal of a Buddha. Since all truth (Dharmas) is immanent in our minds, there is no reason why we should not realise intuitively the real nature of Mind-essence (*tathata*). The Bodhisattva Sila Sutra says, "Our Essence of Mind is intrinsically pure; if we knew our mind perfectly and realised what our self-nature truly is, all of us would attain Buddhahood." The Vimalakirti Niradesa Sutra says, "At once they become enlightened and regain their true mind."

When the Fifth Patriarch preached to me I became enlightened immediately after he had spoken and spontaneously I realised the real nature of Mind-essence (*tathata*). For this reason it is my particular object to propagate the teaching of the "Sudden" School so that learners may know enlightenment at once and realise their true nature by introspection of mind. Should they fail to enlighten themselves they ought to ask some very pious and learned Buddhist who understands the teachings of this highest school to show them the right way. The office of a pious and learned Buddhist who guides others to realise Essence of Mind, is an exalted position. Through his assistance one may be initiated into all meritorious Dharmas. The wisdom of Buddhas, past, present and future, as well as the teachings of the twelve sections of the canon are immanent in the mind, but in case we fail to enlighten ourselves, we have to seek the guidance of the pious and learned. On the other hand those who enlighten themselves need no extraneous help. It is wrong to insist upon the idea that we cannot obtain liberation without the assistance of the pious and learned. It is by our innate wisdom that we enlighten ourselves, and even the extraneous help and instruction of a pious and learned friend would be of no use so long as one is deluded by false doctrines and erroneous views. As we introspect our minds with Prajna, all erroneous views will disappear of themselves, and just as soon as we realise Essence of Mind we will immediately arrive at the Buddha stage.

When we use Prajna for introspection we are illuminated within and without and are in position to know our own nature. To realise our own nature is to obtain fundamental liberation. To obtain liberation is to attain the Samadhi of Prajna, which is intuitive insight. What is intuitive insight? Intuitive insight is to see and to realise all dharmas (things as well as truths) with a mind free from attachment. In action Prajna is everywhere present yet it "sticks" nowhere. What we have to do is to so purify the mind that the six aspects of consciousness (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mentation) in passing through their six sense-gates will neither be defiled by nor attached to their six sense-objects. When our mind works freely without any hindrance and is at liberty "to come" or "to go," then we have attained the intuitive insight of Prajna, which is emancipation. To enable one to attain such a mental state of freedom is the function of intuitive insight. To refrain from thinking of anything, in the sense that all mental activity is suppressed, is to be Dharma-ridden; this is an extremely erroneous view. (Discriminative thought which leads to desire and attachment, or to aversion and defilement, is to be controlled in the interests of intuitive thought which leads to self-realisation and freedom.)

Those who understand the way of intuitive insight will know everything; they will have the experience that all the Buddhas have had, and they will attain Buddhahood. In the future, if an initiate of my school should make a vow in company with his fellow-disciples to devote his whole life without retrogression to the practice and commemoration of the teachings of this “Sudden” School, in the same spirit as if he were serving the Buddha, he would attain without failure the Path that leads to Bodhisattvahood and Buddhahood. He should transmit from heart the instructions handed down from one Patriarch to another, and no attempt should be made to conceal the orthodox teaching.

Learned Audience: I have a Stanza for all of you to recite. Both laity and monks should put its teachings into practice, without which it would be useless to remember the words alone. Listen to this stanza:—

*A master of the Buddhist canon
As well as the teachings of the Dhyana school
Should teach nothing but the Dharma for realising Essence of Mind.
We can hardly classify dharmas into “sudden” and “gradual,”
But some men will attain enlightenment quicker than others.
For example: this system for realising Essence of Mind
Is beyond the comprehension of the ignorant.
We may explain it in ten thousand ways,
But all these explanations may be traced back to one principle,
To illumine our gloomy mind, stained by defilement,
We should constantly set up the Sun of Wisdom.
Erroneous views keep us in defilement,
But right views remove us far from it.
But when we are in a position to discard both defilement and purity
Then are we absolutely free.
Bodhi is immanent in our Mind-essence;
Any attempt to look for it elsewhere is foolish.
Within our defiled minds, purity is to be found,
And once our mind is set right, we are free from the bonds
Of defilement, of evil karma, of expiation.
If we are treading the Path of Enlightenment,
We need not be worried by stumbling-blocks.
If we keep an eye constantly on our own faults,
We cannot go far astray from the right path.
Every species of life has its own way of salvation;
They will not be antagonistic one to another.
If we leave our own path and seek for another way
Of salvation, we shall never find it.
Though we plod on till death overtake us
We shall find only penitence at the end.
If one wishes to find the true way,
Right action will lead him to it directly.
If one has not a mind to aim at Buddhahood,
One will grope in the dark and never find it.
He who treads the Path in earnest
Sees not the mistakes of the world.*

*If we find fault with others, p. 247
We ourselves are also in the wrong;
When other people are in the wrong we should ignore it;
It is wrong for one to find fault with others.
By getting rid of the habit of fault-finding,
We get rid of one source of defilement.
When neither hatred nor love disturb the mind,
Serene and restful is our sleep.
Those who intend to be teachers of others
Should themselves be skillful in the various expedients that lead to enlightenment.
When the disciple is free from all doubts
Then it indicates that his Mind-essence is unclouded.
This world is the Buddha-world
Within which enlightenment may be sought.
To seek enlightenment by separating from this world
Is as foolish as to search for a rabbit's horn.
Right views are called "transcendental,"
Erroneous views are called "worldly,"
But when all views, both right and erroneous, are discarded,
Then the essence of Wisdom manifests itself.
Kalpa after kalpa a man may be under illusion,
But once enlightened, it takes him but a moment to attain Buddhahood.*

*

After hearing what the Patriarch had to say, Prefect Wai, the government officials, Taoists, monks and laymen, were all enlightened. They made obeisance in a body and exclaimed unanimously, "Well done! Well done! Who would have expected that a Buddha would be born in Kwongtung?"

Dwight Goddard. *A Buddhist Bible*. Thetford, VT, 1932. This text is in the Public Domain.

© SophiaOmni, 2015. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.