

The Sutra of the Heart of the Great Practice of Zazen

[Interpretation from the Sanskrit by Michael Eido Luetchford]

This I have heard:

Once, Gautama Buddha was staying on Vulture Peak with a large gathering of monks and bodhisattvas. The Buddha was about to finish the practice of Zazen, the practice that is wisdom itself.

At that time, the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara had come to recognize these things while practicing Zazen:

He recognized that the five aspects used to describe the psycho-physical body (physical form, feeling, perception, human constructs, consciousness) have no actual existence of their own.

Then the venerable Sariputra, with the dignity of a buddha, asked the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara:

If a sincere person from a good family wants to practice Zazen, how should we teach them?

Then the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara said this to Sariputra:

“Sariputra, when a sincere man or woman from a good family starts to practice Zazen, they will recognise that the five aspects used to describe the psycho-physical body have no separate existence of their own.

Physical form is without its own separate existence. That which is without its own separate existence is physical form.

There is no physical form other than the form which is without its own separate existence, and there is no form that is without its own separate existence other than physical form. Physical form and that which is without its own separate existence are the same.

In the same way, the other four aspects are also without their own separate existence.

In this way, Sariputra, all things in this world are without their own separate existences; there are not things that arise into the world, and then cease to exist, the classifications of pure or impure do not describe them, and they are neither deficient nor replete; they are “just as it is.”

At this very moment, Sariputra, it follows that in that which is without separate existence there is neither form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor human constructs, nor consciousness.

[In that which is without separate existence,] there are no organs of perception such as ears, eyes, nose, tongue, body or mind, or their functions of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Since the function of sight is without separate existence, there is no dividing of reality into the seeing subject and the object seen, and no mental interpretation.

Since there is no knowledge and no ignorance, and no place where knowledge is held, there is no aging and no death, and no basis for aging and death.

No four noble truths.

No building up of understanding, no attainment, nothing to get.

And since there is nothing to get, Sariputra, the practice of Zazen dispels mental illusions.

Realising that mental illusions are not real, people who practice Zazen overcome delusion and are grounded in reality.

All the buddhas of the past, present and future have sought their salvation in the practice of Zazen, which awakens them to wisdom.

So the mantra that describes Zazen is one of great insight, supreme, unequalled. It can heal suffering and is true not false. This is the mantra of Zazen:

Gone, gone, gone over into the oneness of the other side. Hail to perfect intuitive wisdom.

This is what people will realise through practicing Zazen.”

Then the Buddha got up from Zazen and praised the words of the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara:

“Good, good man! That is how it is. This is how you should teach people to practice Zazen. All the buddhas will rejoice!”

When the Buddha said these words, the venerable Sariputra, the great bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, the whole assembly, and the whole of the world rejoiced and praised the Buddha’s words.

Thus ends the Sutra of the Heart of the Practice of Zazen.