

WHY WE CHANT

We have been chanting the Heart of Great Wisdom Sutra because it is the foundational chant of the entire Mahayana Buddhist tradition, which includes the two schools of Zen as well as the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. It is foundational because it deals with Emptiness and the great matter of life and death as has been studied and practiced by Buddha and all the patriarchs and ancestors of our tradition. The Sanskrit word for heart is *hrdiya*; it means the kernel or essence of something. This sutra goes right to the heart of Buddhism. No, more than that, it goes right to the heart of what we are. But tonight, I decided to change the chants that we use in our service as a way of changing the context of our time together, to see how that changes things.

Perhaps, some of you may wonder why it is necessary for us to chant and light incense and bow and listen to Dharma talks. After all, we hear over and over again that our practice is just to sit. I think that these are natural questions that come to many of us when we first come to a sitting group. And these are important questions for us to address.

Many of us come to Zen because we cannot accept the beliefs and rituals of the religion of our childhoods. We can no longer pray with devotion to an external God. We come to Zen not to exchange one belief system for another, not to pray to Buddha instead of Jesus or Allah. We come to Zen for experience, not belief. Zen chants are not meant as a means to worship anything external to our Self. They are not declarations of organized beliefs. They offer us a means to study and experience ourselves in a new way, in the context of Buddhism's basic ideas.

The sutras and other things that we chant often contain the experiences that our ancestors have had during intense periods of practice. For example, the Heart Sutra begins: *Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva when practicing deeply the prajna paramita, perceived that all five skandhas in their own being are empty and was saved from all suffering.* It doesn't say that Avalokiteshvara believed in the emptiness that Buddha taught; it says that he perceived it. We shouldn't believe in what Avalokiteshvara is saying until we have experienced it for ourselves, in our sitting practice. We shouldn't take these chants as anything to believe in. Instead, we should take them as guidelines for our practice. We should use them as a means to understand what we are experiencing when we sit.

At the beginning stages of our practice chants are helpful in providing a Buddhist context to what we are doing. They provide a direction for our practice and for our lives. We talked about this in our discussion about vow and repentance. Practicing zazen without the backing of vow and repentance, with bodies and minds full of confusion cannot lead to truth.

As you may recall I mentioned that I repeat, inwardly, the first of the four great vows before I sit in the morning: *Beings are numberless, I vow to free them.* This provides a context and a direction for my sitting which I find very helpful, especially when I find myself struggling. If I didn't have a firm intention, if I didn't remember why I was sitting, I might give up at the first sign of pain in my legs or daydreams in my mind.

I have also found that if I am participating in a one-day or five-day retreat it is not necessary for me to repeat this vow before each sitting. I think that this is so because I come in contact with a deeper intelligence that knows why I am sitting. So what may be important for us at the beginning of our practice may be less so over time. Our practice is always about finding a way to respond wholeheartedly to whatever is in front of us at a particular time. What may be helpful for us on Monday, may be less so on Saturday.

It is helpful for us to see the Buddhist context for what we are doing tonight. Zazen came out of Buddhism, but most of us did not grow up as Buddhists so we need to become accustomed to a way of looking at things that is very different from the way we grew up. To understand what Buddha taught, it is very helpful to consider the religion of Hinduism and the practices of yoga that informed the early part of his life. To understand why we sit Zazen it is very useful to have at least a simple understanding of Buddhism.

It would be very difficult to understand sitting meditation as a way of experiencing our Original Nature, without having some idea of what Buddha Nature is. That is why I have tried to come back to that in most of my talks. Many of us don't have the time or the wish to spend hours reading books on Buddhism and Zen, so the easiest way for us to learn about Buddhism is in our chanting. Many of our chants are condensed versions of longer sutras. The Heart Sutra that we chant is about a page or two, but there are versions that go on for over 100,000 lines! Chanting the Heart Sutra over and over again is a way of letting the heart of Zen into ourselves, without thinking too much about it. That is, it is a way of letting something unknown into ourselves

without the censorship of the discriminative intellect getting in the way. Once it is inside us, it can be slowly digested over the course of our practice.

When we sit zazen, our posture expresses Buddha Nature and when we chant our voices express the truths discovered by Buddha and the ancestors in their own sitting practice. Chanting and sitting are two ways of harmonizing the body and mind. When in a group setting, we learn how to harmonize our practice with the practice of others. The silence of our sitting blends with the silence of others to create a deeper silence in the room. When we chant we learn how to let our voices blend in with others—neither too loud or too soft or too fast or too slow. This is a good way of losing one's sense of self and other and experiencing interconnectedness. It is a way of experiencing that we are all in this together, for as long as it takes...