

Emptiness in Brief, a Very Ordinary Matter Indeed

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In the *Sutra of Brilliant Golden Light*¹ there is a chapter about “emptiness once again” which begins with the announcement that although emptiness has already been explained at length, it will now be explained once again, in brief.

I personally quite like these throwaway expressions in religious contexts. They remind me to take things seriously, but not too seriously. This is important in the study of religions in Japan, because like much else in that country religious matters are often quite muddled up in ordinary life.

When visiting a cemetery, it is usual to pour a little water from a ladle on to the head of a tombstone, or perhaps even on to the head of a small stone Jizō Bosatsu who is standing there keeping watch. Jizō Bosatsu is quite unassuming as a bodhisattva (*bosatsu*). He does not carry a large number of arms and heads around with him. But he is good for going down into the hells, plucking people out and guiding them back up into more normal forms of existence. Or he looks after the souls of poor children who cannot get across the river to the underworld and are stuck in the no-mans-land of a stony riverbed. The least one can do when coming across him in a cemetery therefore is to sprinkle some water on his head. Why is this done? One reason given is that “we always do it” and the other reason I have heard is that he likes it.

This may seem straightforward enough, but I will add to it a notice about a similar action found at a very small shrine to another divinity, whose name I admittedly forget. This divinity, unusually for a native *kami* rather than a Buddhist worthy, is represented by a standing image, before which there is a small basin of cleanly trickling water and a ladle. The purpose of this is to rinse hands and mouth before paying respects and asking for some sort of beneficial care. But some visitors evidently think it is for dripping water over his head. Hence there is a little notice pinned up at the side which reads “Please do not

¹ Also known as *The Sutra of Golden Light*. Cf. Nobel’s *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama-Sūtra. Das Goldglanz-Sūtra* (1958) for the only full translation of the version used in China and Japan.

pour water over the divinity!” Obviously, we must take care over what these noble spirits, no doubt competent in themselves, like and do not like.

These are stories out of the fullness. Now let us return to emptiness. It is briefly explained, or rather rehearsed, in the popular *Heart Sutra*. This has been copied out ritually countless times, for merit, and has also been recited countless times in front of temples all over Japan, and of course elsewhere in East Asia. It is a simple act, performed almost automatically by uncountable pilgrims going round any of the well-worn pilgrim routes devoted to Kannon Bosatsu (who always seems to me to be a little bit senior to Jizō Bosatsu). It is quite easy to pull out the little folding booklet, or indeed to have learned this short sutra by heart, and rattle off its very few lines, with or without comprehension. The point is that it might lead to the accrual of some merit, which in turn could be of benefit either to oneself or even to others. But it should be recited, ritually, in the right place. Not just anywhere. And here again people sometimes get into a muddle, because adjacent to a Buddhist temple (a right place, assuming it is not the wrong sect) there may be a Shinto-style shrine (wrong place). Hence I gently draw attention to a notice once viewed which said “Please do not recite the Heart Sutra here”. All these little notices are quite useful to people who are just trying to carry out a bit of normal religious behaviour, in the course of their ordinary lives. Let us look at one more example. In front of a Buddhist temple, apart from bowing, one folds one’s hands flat, silently, in the *namaste* or *gasshō* position. But in front of a Shinto shrine the attention of the *kami* is drawn not only by pulling on a rope to strike a gong up above (as is also common in front of Buddhist temples) but by clapping the hands firmly twice. This is preceded and followed by the appropriate bows, and a silent moment, which might possibly be prayerful. At Buddhist temples, some people mistakenly clap, making an unexpected sharp sound, and this is also regarded as rather poor behaviour. Young people, or secularised people, often get this all mixed up and fail to clap properly at Shinto shrines, even if their wishes are earnest. Hence there are notices at many a shrine which tell people how to do it properly. The notices are authorised by the Jinja Honchō, usually referred to in English as the Association of Shinto Shrines.

But does any of this matter? Well, it does, and then again, it does not. This is where a brief explanation of emptiness might be relevant. The matter is strikingly addressed in another chapter of the *Sutra of Brilliant Golden Light* which is about “the fulfilment of wishes on the basis of emptiness”. This might seem not to make any sense, and yet it does. Shifting the terminology, one might say that without ultimate reality there is no ordinary life (which is easy enough to follow) but also that without ordinary life no perception of ultimate reality is possible. I cannot expound this chapter about the fulfilment of wishes now, because my relevant texts are separated from me by about

10,000 miles as a result of the Corona Virus. But the same dialectic runs through all the “emptiness” sutras.

As is well known, a Buddhist sutra typically begins with the words “Thus I have heard” and purports to recount the words of the Buddha as uttered on such-and-such an occasion. Less widely recognised is that the historical Buddha could not possibly have uttered all the millions of words which are introduced in this way. The only defence against this comment, possibly scandalous in some people’s ears, is that the contents of the sutra *could be* in tune with what is otherwise known of his teaching. Some academics like to say that sutras which exist in Chinese but have no known Sanskrit original from which they were translated, are apocryphal. They are, but so are the ones transmitted in Indian languages, especially Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, a language both special and ordinary. In fact, *all* the sutras of Buddhism are “apocryphal” in that they are ascribed to the Buddha without there being any evidence or serious likelihood that they do in fact derive from him. Of course, there are also some nuggets of history in the deep past of Buddhist tradition, but that is not my topic here. The point is simply that the *Heart Sutra*, for all its charm, and incisiveness, just like the other Mahāyāna sutras, does not derive directly from the Buddha himself. Realising this, especially in connection with the sutras to do with Amida Buddha, caused quite a shock in nineteenth century Japan, even though a learned but underestimated man had pointed it out clearly in the early part of the eighteenth.

Although there are two suttas (i.e. sutras) about emptiness among the canonical texts of Theravāda Buddhism, these do not achieve the paradoxical brilliance of the Mahāyāna texts on this matter, of which there are both very long ones and very short ones. These are the “perfection of insight” sutras or as Edward Conze called them, the “perfection of wisdom literature”. This “insight” (corresponding to Erich Frauwallner’s use of the German term *Einsicht*), or this wisdom, was the quality “practised” by a bodhisattva (a *bosatsu*) who was set on achieving the highest goal of all.

In his *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom* (1968), which he “chose, arranged and translated” Conze included at the end a “supplement” entitled “The Mantric Path”. This consisted of a rather short text setting out the contraction of the perfection of insight into a few brief mantra-like syllables. It culminates in its expression in just one letter, namely “A”, which “is a door to the insight that all dharmas are unproduced from the very beginning” (p.120). In his exploratory Introduction, Conze has various interesting statements. He is quite forthright in stating that “the teachings of the Prajñāpāramitā have little significance for the present age” and continues “To be quite truthful, they are equally irrelevant to any other age. They are meant for people who have withdrawn from society, and who have little, if any interest in its problems.” (p. 16) On the other hand he declares,

“The Prajñāpāramitā expresses a state of intoxication with the Unconditioned, and at the same time it attempts to cope with it and to sober it down.” (p. 19) Those who, like Peggy Morgan and others at Lancaster, knew Conze in his lifetime would no doubt confirm that he was personally quite competent in sobering down his intoxication with any encounters with the Unconditioned which he may have experienced. He was neither a monk nor a pious householder. But he saw it like this: “Nirvana is called the Signless, because it cannot be recognised for what it is; the Wishless, because it cannot be desired; the Void, because it does not concern us at all.” (p. 15) It is because of this that the Prajñāpāramitā can be expressed either at length, or in brief. We may recite the Prajñāpāramitā in 100,000 lines, if we have time, or just bring it down to the letter A.



Figure 1. Rinzai Zen monks honour the divinity Benzaiten by reciting the *Great Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* at speed. Photograph, Michael Pye.

Ordained Buddhist priests in Japan have an excellent method of loudly reciting the version in 100,000 lines, called *tendoku*. This involves picking up the numerous folded booklets of this single sutra, reciting the first line of each, spinning it through the air like a fan, then reciting the last line and moving on to the next (see Figure 1 above).

In between the long and the short there are various other lengths which have attracted attention, notably the compact *Heart Sutra* already mentioned. This also concludes with a mantra, but above all it reflects very clearly the dialectic between the spiritual and the ordinary, which Conze was interpreting. He was in general a good guide to these matters, but mistaken in regarding this text as “addressed to the spiritual

élite” (above, p. 15), for as we know it is precisely this text which has been adopted in particular by multitudes of pilgrims and recited at temples all over Japan, sometimes even at inappropriate places. Famously, it begins with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (in Japanese Kanjizai, equals Kanzeon or Kannon) practising the “deep” *prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of insight), perceiving the five constituents [of ordinary experience] to be empty [of own-being] and [thereby] giving release from all sufferings. It moves quickly to the well-known saying “The very form is emptiness, the very emptiness is form” and having expounded this, in brief, it tells us that “a bodhisattva is free of hindrances in spirit” and therefore without fear. “He is far removed from upsetting daydreams, and he finally perfects nirvana.”² The bodhisattva does not need the concluding spell, but the pilgrims certainly conclude very clearly with that. After all, they are hoping to be released from all sufferings, and that could include various benefits in the world of ordinary experience. A short magical push might make all the difference: *gyatei gyatei haragyatei harasoogyatei boji sowaka* (in the Japanese pronunciation, which of course differs from Indian-Sanskrit). There is also the aspect of creating a little bit of merit, which can be transferred to others, to the deceased for their resting in peace, to the young who are finding their way and may need qualifications, or for the peace of the world around us. So it is that the fulfilment of wishes, or in other words this-worldly benefits, can arise “on the basis of emptiness”, and profound spiritual insight is transformed into ordinary experience.

I will conclude these brief reflections with other illustrations (Figures 2 and 3 below) that show a hanging scroll, hand-drawn and scripted by a devotee. Judging by the style of the mounting, this unidentified person was probably also a pilgrim. The text itself is the *Heart Sutra*, the figure below is the Bodhisattva Kanzeon (popularly known as Kannon-sama), and the thin lines of his or her attire (the gender of Kanzeon being ambivalent) are made up of a further text.

² See the writer’s *Japanese Buddhist Pilgrimage* (2015), 254-5, for an uninterrupted translation of the text as used in Japan, and Conze 1958 for a translation from Sanskrit with commentary.



Figure 2. Scroll with Heart Sutra and Kannon-sama.

Figure 3. Detail of same. (Personal collection)

The characters of the latter text are too small to read, but as they are apparently more numerous than are needed for the *Heart Sutra* itself it may be drawn from the Kannon chapter in the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Heart Sutra* is delivered in exquisite calligraphy, but unfortunately the precise year of this offering, indicated at the end, is not completely legible. It is stated to have been produced during the Shōwa Era (1926-1989) but for reasons relating to its provenance I estimate the date to lie between 1950 and 1970. Such is the evanescence of this ordinary world.

References

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