No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;
No color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object
of mind;
No realm of eyes and so forth until no realm of mind
consciousness;
No ignorance and also no extinction of it, and so forth until
no old age and death and also no extinction of them;
No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path;
No cognition, no attainment.
With nothing to attain
The bodhisattva depends on prajñā-pāramitā
And the mind is no hindrance.
Without any hindrance no fears exist;
Far apart from every perverted view the bodhisattva dwells
in nirvana.

“In the three worlds all buddhas depend on prajñā-pāramitā
And attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment.

“Therefore know the prajñā-pāramitā
Is the great transcendent mantra,
Is the great bright mantra,
Is the utmost mantra,
Is the supreme mantra,
Which is able to relieve all suffering
And is true, not false.
So proclaim the prajñā-pāramitā mantra,
Proclaim the mantra that says:
Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasamgate! Bodhi, svāha!”

The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sutra, one of the most well
known sutras, is commonly called the Heart Sutra. Most people
who are interested in Buddhism have heard of it and many recite
or chant it regularly. More than a hundred commentaries have been
published, and many are available in any Japanese bookstore. Despite
its popularity, I think the Heart Sutra is very difficult to understand.
I first read this sutra when I was sixteen years old. I was interested in
everything related to religion, philosophy, and literature, and so I was
interested in Buddhism. One of my uncles, a Shingon Buddhist priest,
went me a commentary on the Heart Sutra from his library. I read it but
couldn’t understand it. Even so, I found it very attractive, so I learned it
by heart, memorizing all 68 Chinese characters. School didn’t interest
me, so during class I would write out the sutra although I didn’t really
understand what it meant. When I took a walk, I enjoyed chanting this
sutra without thinking about the meaning. That was my first encounter
with the Heart Sutra.

When I studied the teachings of early Buddhism at Komazawa Uni-
versity, I was surprised by what I learned about this sutra. It says that
Avalokiteśvara saw that the five skandhas—the five mental and ma-
terial elements of which we are composed—are empty and do not exist.
It also says that the eighteen elements of our consciousness do not exist.
This refers to the six sense organs, their six objects (color and shape,
smell, sound, taste, touch, and objects of mind), and the six perceptions
that arise when the six sense organs interact with their objects.

The sutra continues, “No ignorance and also no extinction of it,
and so forth until no old age and death.” Ignorance is the first of the
twelve causes of suffering, and old age and death is the last. The sutra
denies the existence of all twelve. Next it says, “No suffering, no origi-
nation, no stopping, no path.” It claims that these four noble truths,
the basic teachings of the Buddha, do not exist. The Heart Sutra denies
the existence of the five skandhas, the eighteen elements of our expe-
rience, the twelve links of dependent origination, and the four noble
truths. Yet it claims to be the true teaching of the Buddha. I was amazed
and confused. How could the author of this sutra negate the Bud-
dha’s teachings and still call himself a student of the Buddha? After
studying Mahāyāna Buddhism as a philosophy I understood the mean-
ing of this sutra in an abstract sense. Only in the last few years have I
understood its significance for my own practice. This question of why
the Heart Sutra negates the teachings of the Buddha is essential to its understanding.

While I was in Japan, I had a chance to give a series of lectures on Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō to a group of Japanese Catholic laymen. I intended to talk first on “Genjōkōan” (Actualization of Reality), the first and most popular chapter of Shōbōgenzō. The second chapter of the seventy-five-volume version of Shōbōgenzō is “Makā Hannyā Haramitsu” (Mahā Prajñā Pāramitā), a commentary by Dōgen Zenji on the Heart Sutra. Since my audience knew nothing about Buddhism, I needed to talk about the Heart Sutra before discussing Dōgen’s commentary. While preparing these lectures I studied “Genjōkōan,” “Makā Hannyā Haramitsu,” and the Heart Sutra together. It was then that I first realized that the Heart Sutra is very important to an understanding of Dōgen Zenji’s “Makā Hannyā Haramitsu” and “Genjōkōan.” If we have a deep understanding of the Heart Sutra and “Makā Hannyā Haramitsu,” we can see that “Genjōkōan” is a clear and practical expression of Prajñā-pāramitā.

The sutra’s full title is Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sutra. Mahā means “great” or “vast.” It also means “absolute” in the sense of beyond comparison or discrimination. Mahāyāna means “great vehicle,” which can transport not just one person but many. Mahāyāna is also used as a synonym of “one vehicle” (eka yāna), which includes the three vehicles (itivakka-yāna, pratyekabuddha-yāna, and bodhisattva-yāna). Prajñā means “wisdom.” Wisdom and compassion are the two main aspects of Buddhism and must always go together. Without wisdom, compassion doesn’t work, and without compassion wisdom has no meaning; it’s not alive. This sutra is about the wisdom that sees emptiness.

Hṛdaya means “heart.” In this context it means a part of our body and also the essence or most important point. The heart is the most important part of our body. If it stops, everything stops, and the whole body dies. Today many consider the brain to be more important. They believe that when the brain stops a person is dead, and their organs can be transplanted. But historically for Buddhists the heart is the basis for judging whether a person is alive or not. In Japan brain death is not recognized, and so heart transplants are still very uncommon. To remove a heart before it has stopped has been considered murder. There is a serious controversy among Japanese doctors over the proper way to determine death. Since “heart” means the most important or essential point, the Heart Sutra is very short. The Prajñāpāramitā Sutra cycle is a six-hundred-volume collection of sutras. It’s said that the Heart Sutra is the essence of those six hundred volumes.

Sutra means scripture or written expression of the Buddha’s teachings. Pāramitā, usually translated as “perfection,” is a word that is vital to an understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The title of this sutra is usually translated as “Perfection of Great Wisdom.” According to Chinese Buddhist philosophers, perfection or pāramitā means to cross the river to the other shore. It implies that we are living on this shore of samsara, and there is a river we must cross to reach nirvana. On this shore we transmigrate through the six realms of samsara: the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras (fighting spirits), human beings, and heavenly beings. We transmigrate according to our deeds. Nirvana is beyond these realms. Pāramitā, reaching the other shore, is a transformation of our way of life. The six pāramitās are commonly considered to be the method for transformation, but sometimes they are considered to be the transformed way of life instead of the means to reach there.

In samsara, our lives are based on desires. We chase after happiness. We want satisfaction, so we pursue our desires. We run after things we want and away from things we dislike. Sometimes we succeed and we are happy. Sometimes we fail and we are unhappy. This constant up-and-down is samsara.

Many people believe in transmigration from one lifetime to another. I don’t believe in this, but I know we transmigrate within this life. Sometimes we feel like heavenly beings, sometimes like hell dwellers. Often we are like hungry ghosts, craving satisfaction, constantly searching for more. When our stomachs are full and we have nothing to do, we become sleepy and lazy like animals. Sometimes we are like asuras or fighting spirits. As human beings we work to acquire fame and profit. Even when our stomachs are full, we are not satisfied. We
need something more, such as fame or wealth. Heavenly beings are like millionaires whose desires are completely fulfilled. They look happy but I think such people are rather bored. There’s no challenge for them because all their desires are fulfilled.

Within this constant transmigration there is no peaceful basis for our lives. This way of life is a vain attempt to satisfy our egos. A life based on this constant search for satisfaction is filled with meaningless suffering. Suffering means not just physical or mental pain but also meaningless effort. This is what the Buddha meant when he said, “Everywhere is suffering.” This is the first of the four noble truths.

According to the Buddha, the reality of our life is impermanence and egollessness. Nothing is fixed, and there is nothing that doesn’t change. In Buddhism, ego refers to the idea that there is something that is changeless. Our bodies and minds change continually from birth, and yet we believe there is something that doesn’t change. When I was born in 1948, I was a tiny baby; since then I have gone through many different stages of human life: a boy, a teenager, a young adult, a middle-aged person, and then a senior citizen. The conditions of my body and mind have changed in each stage and yet I think, “That was me and this is me. There is something that doesn’t change.” For Buddhists, the ego as an unchanging entity is that the owner and operator of the body and mind is an illusion. The Buddha taught that there is no such thing, that ego is an abstract fabrication.

Buddhism is not pessimistic nihilism, because the Buddha also taught that there is a way to become free from this kind of life. There is a path that leads to liberation from this continual transmigration through samsara. We can make a peaceful, stable foundation for our lives. It’s called nirvana. It is not a particular state or condition of our minds but rather a way of life based on impermanence and egollessness. In every moment we must awaken again to the impermanent reality of our lives. Everything is always changing, and there is no substance. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this is called emptiness. The Buddha taught that there are two different ways of living. If we are blind to the reality of egollessness and impermanence, our life becomes suffering. If we awaken to this reality and live accordingly, our life becomes nirvana. This awakening is called bodhi or enlightenment. The way of transformation from the life of suffering in samsara to the life of nirvana is the eightfold noble path. This path is our practice. It is a change in the basis of our life from egocentricity to egollessness. This transformation is called pāramī, or “reaching the other shore.” This eightfold path taught by Shakyamuni Buddha consists of right understanding, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort (diligence), mindfulness, and samādhi (meditation). Instead of the eightfold path, the Mahāyāna practice for bodhisattvas emphasizes the six pāramīs or perfections. The first of the six is generosity (dāna). We are generous because we understand there is no one who can possess and nothing to be possessed. Generosity should be based on the realization of emptiness, egollessness, and impermanence. The second pāramī, the precepts (āśaṅga), is the same as right livelihood in the eightfold path. We base our day-to-day lives on the Buddha’s precepts or teaching. When we become Buddhists we accept the precepts as guidelines for our lives. We regulate our activities with the Buddha’s precepts—no killing, lying, stealing, and so forth. The third, patience (ksānti), is emphasized in Mahāyāna Buddhism because it is a practice designed for laypeople. In a monastery patience is not considered so important because monks are assumed to have similar values and aspirations. Laypeople are in greater contact with people who have different philosophies and ways of thinking. For this they need patience. For a bodhisattva, patience is one of the most important practices.” The last three pāramīs are diligence (vīrya), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā). The Heart Sutra and all the other Prajñāpāramitā Sutras say that prajñā is the most important of the six pāramīs to the practice of bodhisattvas.

Without prajñā the other five pāramīs don’t work. For example, generosity without wisdom can be harmful. We must understand what is really needed before we can help someone. If we give money or assistance without wisdom, the person may become dependent and have more difficulty as a result. This is also true of raising children. Too much protection will spoil a child. We need prajñā or wisdom to really
help people grow. Without prajñā the precepts become no more than a lifeless set of rules. We may even discriminate between people on the basis of a particular set of precepts or customs. Each nation or religion has its own set of precepts and taboos. It’s easy to see people who follow our precepts as friends and to believe that all the others will go to hell. This is an example of precepts without wisdom, a type of egocentricity of a group instead of an individual.

We need a deep understanding of a situation to see what is most helpful to everyone involved. Dōgen Zenji said in Shōbōgenzō “Bodhisattva Shishōbô” (Bodhisattva’s Four Embracing Dharma) that as bodhisattvas we should aim at activities that benefit both others and ourselves. We should try to see the whole situation and do what is best for everyone. If we aim only for patience, we may harm ourselves or others. Patience alone can be a kind of poison. It can make the situation worse.

The same is true of diligence. If diligence is misdirected, the harder we work, the farther we deviate from the correct path. Without the wisdom to see which way to go, our diligence is meaningless effort.

Wisdom is also essential to meditation. If we don’t understand the significance or meaning of meditation, our practice of zazen becomes no more than an escape from a noisy society. It becomes a meaningless method to simply calm our minds and reduce our stress. If our life is harmful to others and we practice meditation to relax and gain more energy for self-centered activities, our practice has nothing to do with Buddhist teachings. So wisdom, real wisdom, is essential. This is the meaning of pāramitā. According to the Heart Sutra, prajñā-pāramitā is the essence of Buddhist teaching. It is necessary to the transformation of our life from samsara to nirvana.

**The Situation in Which the Heart Sutra Is Expounded**

One reason the Heart Sutra is difficult to understand is that it’s not clear who is speaking. There are two versions of the sutra. The one we usually chant, which is printed at the beginning of this chapter, is the shorter of the two. The longer version describes the situation more completely. The opening lines of this version, translated from Sanskrit by Edward Conze, are:

Thus have I heard at one time. The Lord dwelled at Rājagṛha, on the Vulture Peak, together with a large gathering of both monks and bodhisattvas. At that time, the Lord, after he had taught the discourse on dharma called “deep splendor,” had entered into concentration. At that time also the Holy Lord Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva, the great being, coursed in the course of the deep perfection of wisdom; he looked down from on high, and he saw the five skandhas, and he surveyed them as empty in their own-being.

Thereupon the Venerable Sāriputra through the Buddha’s might said to the holy Lord Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva, the great being: “How should a son or daughter of good family train themselves if they want to course in the course of this deep perfection of wisdom?”

“Thus have I heard,” is the traditional beginning of a Buddhist sutra. The “I” is Ânanda, a longtime attendant of Shakyamuni Buddha who memorized all of his sutras.

The Lord dwelled at Rājagṛha, on the Vulture Peak, together with a large gathering of both monks and bodhisattvas. At that time, the Lord, after he had taught the discourse on dharma called “deep splendor,” had entered into concentration.

“Lord” refers to the Buddha. I question the use of this word. The Buddha never called himself Lord. In fact, he said that he owned nothing. The original word used in the sutra is “Bhagavat,” which is usually translated into English as World-Honored One. “Concentration” means