

The Heart Sutra

The sutra deals with wisdom but not 'mundane or metaphysical' wisdom which causes one to attach to views, but rather 'transcendent wisdom', as Red Pine calls it. "Transcendental wisdom (prajna-paramita) is the wisdom that goes beyond anything 'earthly or sensory' yet leaving none of it behind, as Conze puts it. If it is so transcendent, how can we even speak of it? Yet we must as 'we have no other means to lead beings from attachment toward understanding.' (Red Pine)

Questions arise as to the authority of this and other sutras. Buddhism seems unique in this regard since we are urged to test the teachings in the light of our own experience rather than the authority of teachers or a canon of scripture.

Who Avalokiteshvara actually was seems a bit hazy but Red Pine seems to think he was an actual person. Anyway, he is usually represented as a bodhisattva, one who forgoes their own enlightenment until they can secure the enlightenment of everyone else. He looks down and hears the suffering 'the cries of the world.'

When he looked down, what he saw was not people but 'skandhas.' Each individual is analysed as a collection of aspects: form, sensations, perceptions, memory and consciousness. These are analytic constructs only, as Red Pine points out, and an attempt to find anything that could be called a self. No self can be found. All beings are empty of self, but the imagined, illusory being created from the skandas clouds our real being and is a source of tremendous suffering.