Emptiness and the 'Perfection of Wisdom'

Mahayana sutras see the motivation underlying the arhat's attainment as lacking the great compassion of a buddha; of equal concern to the sutras is perfect wisdom. Together, wisdom and compassion become the two great themes of Mahayana thought.

The 'Perfection of Wisdom' (prajnaparamita) literature evolved over many centuries and comprises a variety of texts, including some of the oldest Mahayana sutra material.

Edward Conze, a pioneer of the scholarly study of this literature, considered the oldest and most basic text to be the Astasahasrika-Prajnaparamita ('Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines'), which he dates from the first century BCE. Subsequent centuries saw the production of vast expanded versions, such as those of 100,000 lines, 25,000 lines, and 18,000 lines, as well as shorter versions, such as the Vajracchedika and Hrdaya (the 'Diamond' and 'Heart' Sutras), although it now appears that the last, a text only a few lines in length, was originally composed in Chinese and only subsequently rendered into Sanskrit.

In the century or so prior to the appearance of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, Buddhism had, in the form of Abhidharma, begun to evolve increasingly detailed and sophisticated theoretical accounts of the nature of reality and of the stages of the path to awakening.

Central to the Abhidharma is the distinction between the conventional truth (that persons and selves exist) and the ultimate truth (that persons and selves are ultimately simply aggregates of evanescent dharmas – physical and mental events). The main teaching of the Perfection of Wisdom is that, from the perspective of perfect wisdom, even this account of the way things are is ultimately arbitrary.

Since we fail to see things as they really are – impermanent, suffering, and not self – we grasp at them as if they were permanent, as if they could bring us lasting happiness, as if we could possess them as our very own. Thus the cultivation of calm and insight involves breaking up the seemingly substantial and enduring appearance of things.
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Things – our very own selves, our own minds – are actually nothing but insubstantial, evanescent dharmas. Abhidharma theory and the associated meditations thus provide a way of getting behind appearances to a world that is quite different from the one ordinarily experienced – a way of easing the mind from the ways and patterns of thought it habitually uses to understand the world.

So far so good, but the currents of craving run deep, and the habitual ways and patterns of thought are subtle and devious. Our minds have a predilection to the formulation of views (drsti/ditthi), to conceptual proliferation (prapanca/papanca), and to the manufacture of conceptual constructs (vikalpa); it is these which we tend to confuse with the way things are and to which we become attached.

In other words, we are always in danger of mistaking our own views and opinions for a true understanding of the way things are. This danger – and this is the really significant point – may apply to views and opinions based on the theoretical teachings of Buddhism (the Abhidharma and the account of the stages of the path) no less than to views and opinions derived from other theoretical systems.

Perfect wisdom, however, is what sees through the process of the mind’s conceptual construction and is not tainted by attachment to any view or opinion. In particular, it is not attached to the views and conceptual constructs of Buddhist theory: unwholesome and wholesome qualities, the levels of meditation or dhyana, the stages of insight, the attainment of the Buddhist path, nirvana itself, the general theory of dharmas.

From the perspective of perfect wisdom all these are seen for what they ultimately are: empty (sunya/sunna). That is, the conceptual constructs of Buddhist theory are ultimately no less artificial and arbitrary entities than the conceptual constructs of the ordinary unawakened mind which sees really existing persons and selves. The mind can grasp at the theory of dharmas and turn it into another conceptual strait-jacket. Thus the Large Sutra can state that:

... there is no ignorance and no cessation of ignorance... no suffering and no knowledge of suffering, no cause and no abandoning of the cause, no cessation and no realization of cessation, and no path and no development of the path... It is in this sense, Sariputra, that a bodhisattva, a great being who practises perfect wisdom, is called one devoted [to perfect wisdom].... (Pancavimsatisahasrika 61)
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The teaching of emptiness should not be read, as it sometimes appears to be, as an attempt to subvert the Abhidharma theory of dharmas as a whole. After all it applies to the constructs of all Buddhist theory, including the Mahayana and, crucially, itself: there are no bodhisattvas and no stages of the bodhisattva path.

Two points are of importance here. First, we are concerned here with the perfection of wisdom, how the world is seen by the awakened mind. Secondly, the perfection of wisdom texts present what they have to say about wisdom not as an innovation but as a restatement of the original teaching of the Buddha.

The wisdom or understanding of ordinary beings becomes tainted by attachment to views and conceptual construction; this attachment manifests as a certain rigidity and inflexibility of mind; the perfect wisdom of a buddha is free of all attachment and clinging.

In carving up reality into dharmas in the manner of the Abhidharma, we are essentially constructing a theoretical 'model' or map of the way things are. Like any model or map, it may be useful and indeed help us to understand the way things are. In a provisional or conventional way, it may actually correspond to the way things are.

Some maps and models will reflect the way things are better than others, but they nevertheless remain models and maps. As such, none should be mistaken for the way things are.

Thus for the Perfection of Wisdom, just as persons and beings are ultimately elusive entities, so too are all dharmas. In fact the idea that anything exists of and in itself is simply a trick that our minds and language play on us.

The great theme of the Perfection of Wisdom thus becomes 'emptiness' (sunyata/sunnata) – the emptiness of all things that we might be tempted to think truly and ultimately exist of and in themselves.

To see any dharma as existing in itself is to grasp at it, to try to hold on to it, but dharmas are like dreams, magical illusions, echoes, reflected images, mirages, space; like the moon reflected in water, a fairy castle, a shadow, or a magical creation; like the stars, dewdrops, a bubble, a flash of lightning, or a cloud – they are there, but they are not there, and if we reach out for them, we find nothing to hold on to.
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Some of these similes and images are older than the Perfection of Wisdom, and in referring and adding to them the literature is not so much suggesting that the theory of dharmas is wrong as that it must be understood correctly. The term 'emptiness' is not new to the Perfection of Wisdom literature; it is already employed, albeit somewhat loosely and only occasionally, in the Nikayas/Agamas and the canonical Abhidharma texts to characterize the experiences of meditation, and the five aggregates and dharmas. But the emphasis on perfect wisdom as that which understands emptiness becomes the hallmark of the Perfection of Wisdom literature and its philosophical explication by Nagarjuna.