

Judy Lief on Prajna

Wisdom, says Judy Lief, is not about answers. It's about the power of questioning, about developing a great inquisitiveness that cuts through all solidity and self-deception.

Mahayana is referred to as “the great vehicle” of Buddhism because it is vast and challenging and open to everyone. At the heart of the mahayana path are compassion and wisdom, or prajna. For the practitioner, the challenge is how to bring these two together.

Prajna is a Sanskrit word literally meaning “best knowledge,” or “best knowing.” Prajna is a natural bubbling up of curiosity, doubt and inquisitiveness. It is precise, but at the same time it is playful. The awakening of prajna applies to all aspects of life, down to the tiniest details. Our inquisitive interest encompasses all levels, from the most mundane, such as how do I turn on this computer, up to such profound levels as, what is the nature of reality?

Prajna is symbolized in many ways: as a book, a sun, a vase of elixir, as a catalytic spark. One of the main ways prajna is symbolized is as a sword. When you think of a sword, it may make you feel a little uncomfortable. A sword can be dangerous and if you do not handle it properly, you can get hurt. So depicting prajna as a sword points to knowledge that's threatening.

Why is prajna threatening? Because prajna is the means by which we perceive emptiness, or shunyata, it undermines our very notion of reality and the limits we place on our world view. Opening to the vastness and profundity of shunyata requires us to let go of our petty-mindedness and self-clinging completely.

Many sutras deal with the topic of prajna. One of the most beloved is the extremely concise and elegant exposition known as the Heart Sutra, which is recited daily by Buddhists of many traditions. In such famed and provocative phrases as, “No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind ... no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation of suffering, no path ... no wisdom, no attainment, no nonattainment,” the Heart Sutra, step by step, precisely and systematically—almost surgically—removes any and all barriers separating us from the vivid experience of shunyata.

The sharpness of prajna cuts at many levels. In the mundane sense, prajna represents a sharpening of perception and inquisitiveness. As we go about our lives, and particularly as we enter a spiritual path, we are always raising questions. We are always trying to understand. Instead of just accepting a superficial understanding, we think deeply and ask, “What do I really understand? Does any of this make any sense whatsoever?” Prajna has this quality of creative doubt—not just accepting things based on authority or hearsay, but continually digging deeper.

In addition to being sharp, swords have sharp points and they are able to puncture. The sharp-pointed sword of prajna punctures all sorts of delusions, all sorts of self-deception, all sorts of false understandings and false views. This puncturing quality of prajna is abrupt and immediate. It catches you by surprise. Perhaps you are a new practitioner exploring the dharma, studying these interesting new things and starting to practice meditation. Suddenly prajna sneaks up on you and you feel skewered. You are caught. Prajna has caught you in the act, whether it's the act of self-absorption, the act of being bloated, or the act of lying to yourself. Prajna is a lying-free zone. Whenever we try to remove ourselves from the present, immediate reality of things, we're setting ourselves up as a target for this puncturing quality of prajna.

You could say that prajna is a defense mechanism. If we keep bloating and bloating, at some point we are punctured by prajna and the whole thing collapses. That's good, but at the same time, this sharpness and puncturing quality can be seen as a threat. We are threatened by the possibility of being found out, but since prajna is our own inherent insight, who are we being found out by? By ourselves! It is not that someone else is going to say, "Oh, I know your number." Through prajna, deep down we actually know what's going on: we know our own number. To continue to fool ourselves takes effort. If we don't work to keep fooling ourselves, pretending that we don't really know what is going on, then sooner or later we are going to be skewered.

You could view all this as a bit of a warning: as soon as you enter the Buddhist path and start practicing meditation and studying the dharma, you are picking up this sword of prajna. Now that you have this sharp thing, this sword that skewers and cuts through ego trips of all sorts, you have to deal with it.

The sword of prajna has two sharp sides, not just one. It's a double-bladed sword, sharp on both sides, so when you make a stroke of prajna it cuts two ways. When you cut through deception, you are also cutting through the ego's taking credit for that. You're left nowhere, more or less. The more mindfulness you develop, the more powerfully the sword of prajna cuts. Once you have this sword, it cuts every possibility of escape. But no one is doing this to you—it is your own intelligence, not some cosmic boogey man. The stroke of prajna is like hara-kiri. As you are holding the sword, you take your back stroke, getting ready to attack—and you find you've sliced yourself in two. Prajna never stops cutting. If you are pruning a plant, you can just say, "I'll just prune, prune, prune and then I'll have this little twig left over to grow back." But prajna keeps cutting and keeps cutting, so there's nothing left over, just this sword, slicing and slicing. Prajna does not allow us to make a credential or ground out of anything. We could create credentials out of anything we do, including spirituality or the Buddhist tradition or the practice of meditation. We could use any of those things in our usual, conventional way of building credentials, building identity, trying to be special. We could say, "Now I'm a spiritual person

who does blabbady-blah-blah.” The response of prajna is, “Well, that’s fine. You can say that, but you know that it doesn’t hold a lot of water. You know that it’s not all that solid.” The sword of prajna cuts through our clinging to solid ground.

Another image for prajna is the sun: the sun of prajna is illuminating our world. If we’re inquisitive, if we’re attentive, a kind of natural illumination happens. There is light shining on the dark corners and a sense of being under the spotlight, totally exposed. What is funny is that we actually think we can hide. How could we think that? How could we think that we actually don’t know who we are? But a lot of times we take the approach of not really wanting to look too closely at ourselves or at our lives. We just look the other way and move on. However, there’s no corner where the sun of prajna isn’t shining. Prajna is like having a sun shining all around, everywhere, never setting.

Once you open up to prajna, to this fundamental inquisitiveness, it tends to burst into full flame. It is like a little spark dropped into a pile of dry leaves. Once there is that little spark, that little bit of insight, that little bit of suspicion we actually know more than we think we do—it explodes, it’s all consuming.

Prajna is represented iconographically by the feminine deity Prajnaparamita and the masculine deity Manjushri. Prajnaparamita is depicted as a beautiful feminine deity with four arms. Two arms are folded on her lap in the classic posture of meditation, and her two other arms hold a sword and a book. Through these gestures, she manifests three aspects of prajna: academic knowledge, cutting through deception, and direct perception of emptiness.

As the masculine deity personifying knowledge, Manjushri is also depicted holding a sword. Sometimes he also holds a vase filled with the elixir of knowledge, which symbolizes direct intuitive insight. The sword is the activity of prajna and the vase is the receptive aspect of learning. Sometimes Manjushri holds a book and a flower. The book symbolizes scholarly learning and the flower represents the organic unfolding of prajna, which like a flower, naturally opens and blossoms. It does not need to be forced.

Prajna has to do with cultivating inquisitiveness of mind, cultivating deep understanding that is not a mere credential but transforms who we are altogether. How can prajna be cultivated? The process of deepening our understanding is referred to as the three levels of prajna, or the three prajnas. These are called hearing, contemplating, and meditating.

The first prajna, hearing, is based on being open to new information, gathering knowledge, and really trying to listen. Although it is called hearing, in addition to listening with one’s ears, it also includes reading and observing through all our senses. When you hear the dharma or listen to the teachings, you are supposed to be like a deer in the woods. You hear a noise—footsteps on

leaves—and you don't know if that noise is a hunter or a mountain lion. At that moment your senses perk up completely. You are focused and ready to leap from danger, if need be. You are absolutely alert and absolutely tuned into the environment. That quality of refined alertness and attention is the quality of hearing. You need to listen to the teachings as though your life depended on it. That is the proper way to go about the first prajna.

However, at this point, we see knowledge as something that's separate from us, an object out there that we are trying to figure out how to deal with. To go deeper, we turn to the second prajna, contemplating. Once we've heard or read or experienced something, contemplation means really chewing it over. We continually question what we have heard, looking at it from different angles, taking time to explore it. I remember my teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, saying that if you really understand the teachings, you should be able to describe them to your grandmother in a way that she can hear it. That's pretty challenging—you can't just march in and lay out your cookie-cutter talk or your many layers of lists and terms. You have to have chewed things over and really thought it through. You need to get to the point where you can express the teachings in your own words, your own images. You need to find your voice, and that takes time. That is the idea of contemplation.

Studying the Buddhist teachings is not like going to school, where you take one course after another. In the Buddhist tradition, you take one or two things and you study them over and over and over. You take a topic and you come back to it and come back to it. You work with it your whole life. Over and over you come back to a few basic ideas, and each time there's a deepening of your understanding. The process of contemplation is a long-term relationship, like that of an old married couple. It does not happen quickly; it takes time.

The third prajna is called meditating. This is the point where you have studied something so thoroughly, looked into it so completely, that it's not separate from you anymore. It is part of who you are, down to your very bones and marrow. The prajna of meditation means that you have actually digested the teachings. There's no need to try to call the dharma down from somewhere, or make an effort to reconstruct it, because it's already there. It's in your cells and your DNA.

Hearing is like putting a morsel of food in your mouth. Contemplating is like swallowing that food and starting to digest it and seeing whether it gives you indigestion or not. Meditating is when you've already digested it and that food is a part of you. It cannot be separated from you; it is completely incorporated in your being. You have taken the essence and you've discarded anything that's irrelevant, the same as we do with the food we eat or the air we breathe. The whole process is as natural as eating.

Usually we think that knowledge means having all the answers, but the quality of prajna is more like having all the questions. The phrase Trungpa Rinpoche used over and over again was, “The question is the answer.” We’re looking in the wrong direction if we think some path or some teacher or some book or some practice is going to provide us with “the ultimate answer.” What we really should be looking for is the ultimate question. We could learn to trust our questioning mind. We could learn to trust our insight without reducing it or pinning it down into our conventional categories. In fact, prajna can’t be pigeonholed. That would be like trying to put the sun into a pigeonhole. It simply doesn’t work.

What is this knowledge that can’t be possessed, that we can’t hold, that isn’t our credentials, that isn’t an object? What is this knowledge that seems to only appear when we’re not trying to grasp it? What is that knowledge that seems to come from nowhere? What is this knowledge that is inspiring, but at the same time threatening? What is this knowledge that challenges us to recognize what we know but prefer to keep buried? What is this penetrating insight that leads us to the direct experience of emptiness?

Fundamentally prajna is big questioning mind. It is big questioning, not even mind.