

Excerpt from *The Places That Scare You* by Pema Chodron, Chapter Eighteen
Groundlessness

The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and emotions, and to all people, experiencing everything totally without mental reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralizes into oneself.

--Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche

At one time the Buddha gathered his students together at a spot called Vulture Peak Mountain. Here he presented some revolutionary teachings—teachings on the wide-open, groundless dimension of our being—known traditionally as shunyata, as unconditional bodhichitta, as prajnaparamita.

The Buddha had already been teaching on groundlessness for some time. Many of the students there on Vulture Peak Mountain had a profound realization of impermanence and egolessness, the truth that nothing—including ourselves—is solid or predictable. They understood the suffering that results from grasping and fixation. They had learned this from Buddha himself; they had experienced its profundity in meditation. But the Buddha knew that our tendency to seek solid ground is deeply rooted. Ego can use anything to maintain the illusion of security, including the belief in insubstantiality and change.

So the Buddha did something shocking. With the prajnaparamita teachings he pulled the rug out completely, taking his students further into groundlessness. He told the audience that whatever they believed had to be let go, that dwelling upon any description of reality was a trap. This was not comfortable news for the audience to hear.

It reminds me of the story of Krishnamurti, who was raised to be the avatar by the Theosophists. His elders continually told the other students that when the avatar manifested fully, his teachings would be electrifying and revolutionary, shaking up the very foundations of their beliefs. This turned out to be true, but not quite in the way they had imagined. When Krishnamurti finally became head of the Order of the Star, he called the whole society together and officially disbanded it, saying that it was harmful because it gave them too much ground.

The Vulture Peak experience was something like that for the Buddha's students. It wiped away all their existing conceptions about the nature of reality. The Buddha's principal message that day was that holding on to *anything* blocks wisdom. *Any* conclusions we might draw must be let go. The only way to fully understand the bodhichitta teachings, the only way to practice them fully, is to abide in the unconditional openness of the prajnaparamita, patiently cutting through all our tendencies to hang on.

During this teaching, known as *The Heart Sutra*, the Buddha actually didn't say a word. He went into a state of deep meditation and let the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, do the talking. This courageous warrior, also known as Kuan-yin, expressed his experience of the

prajnaparamita on behalf of the Buddha. His insight was not based on intellect but came through his practice. He saw clearly that everything is empty. Then one of the principal disciples of the Buddha, a monk named Shariputra, began to question Avalokiteshvara. This is an important point. Even though a great bodhisattva was teaching and the Buddha was clearly in charge, the profound meaning emerged only through questioning. Nothing was taken complacently or on blind faith.

Shariputra is a role model for us as students. He wasn't willing just to accept what he heard; he wanted to know for himself what was true. So he asked Avalokiteshvara, "In all the words and actions and thoughts of my life, how do I apply the prajnaparamita? What is the key to training in this practice? What view do I take?"

Avalokiteshvara answered with the most famous of Buddhist paradoxes: "Form is emptiness, emptiness also is form. Emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness." When I first heard this, I had no idea whatsoever what he was talking about. My mind went completely blank. His explanation, like the prajnaparamita itself, is inexpressible, indescribable, inconceivable. Form is that which simply *is* before we project our beliefs onto it. The prajnaparamita represents a completely fresh take, an unfettered mind where anything is possible.

Prajna is the unfiltered expression of the open ear, open eye, open mind that is found in every living being. Thich Nhat Hanh translates the word as "understanding." It's a fluid process, not something definite and concrete that can be summed up or measured.

This prajnaparamita, this inexpressibility, is our human experience. It is not particularly regarded as a peaceful state of mind or as a disturbed one. It is a state of basic intelligence that is open, questioning, and unbiased. Whether it comes in the form of curiosity, bewilderment, shock, or relaxation isn't really the issue. We train when we're caught off guard and when our life is up in the air.

We train, as Trungpa Rinpoche said, in "not afraid to be a fool." We cultivate a simple, direct relationship with our being—no philosophizing, no moralizing, no judgments. Whatever arises in our mind is workable.

So when Avalokiteshvara says, "Form is emptiness," he's referring to this simple, direct relationship with the immediacy of experience—direct contact with blood and sweat and flowers, with love as well as hate. First we wipe away our preconceptions and then we even have to let go of our belief that we should look at things without preconceptions. We keep pulling out our own rug. When we perceive form as empty, without any barriers or veils, we understand the perfection of things just as they are. One could become addicted to this experience. It could give us a sense of freedom from the dubiousness of our emotions and the illusion that we could dangle above the messiness of our lives.

But “emptiness also is form” turns the tables. Emptiness continually manifests as war and peace, as grief, as birth, old age, sickness, and death, as well as joy. We are challenged to stay in touch with the heart-throbbing quality of being alive. That’s why we train in the relative bodhichitta practices of the four limitless ones and tonglen. They help us to engage fully in the vividness of life with an open, unclouded mind. Things are as bad and as good as they seem. There’s no need to add anything extra.

Imagine a dialogue with the Buddha. He asks, “How do you perceive reality?” and we answer honestly and say, “I perceive it as separate from me, and solid.” He says, “No, look deeper.”

So we go away and meditate and sincerely contemplate this question. We return to the Buddha and say, “I know the answer now. The answer is that everything is not solid, everything is empty.” And he says, “No. Look deeper.” We say, “Well, that’s impossible. It’s either one way or the other: empty or not empty, right?” and he says, “No.” If this were our boss, perhaps we wouldn’t care, but this is the Buddha, so we think, “Maybe I have to hang in here a bit and go further with the irritation I’m feeling at not being given any satisfaction.”

So we meditate and contemplate this question; we discuss it with our friends. Next time we see the Buddha we say, “I think I can answer your question. Everything is both empty and not empty simultaneously.” And he says, “No.” Believe me, we’re feeling very groundless and that means rattled. It’s uncomfortable not to be able to get ground under our feet. But the process here is of unmasking: even though we’re irritated and anxious, we’re moving closer to seeing the true, unfixed nature of mind. Since “no” is all we can get out of the Buddha, we go home and spend the next year trying to answer this riddle. It’s like a Zen koan.

Eventually, we return and say, “Okay. There’s only one other possible answer. The nature of reality is that it neither exists nor doesn’t exist. It is neither form nor emptiness.” And we feel good! It’s a beautiful groundless answer. But the Buddha says, “No, that’s too limited an understanding.” Maybe at this point his “no” is such a shock that we experience the wide-open mind of prajnaparamita, the mind that is satisfied with no resting place at all.

After Avalokiteshvara told Shariputra that “form is emptiness; emptiness also is form,” he went even further, pointing out that there is nothing—not even the Buddha’s teachings—to hold on to: no three marks of existence, no suffering, no end of suffering, no imprisonment, no liberation. The story goes that many of the students were so dumbfounded by these teachings that they had heart attacks. A Tibetan teacher suggested that more likely they just got up and walked out of the talk. Like the Theosophists with Krishnamurti, they didn’t want to hear this. Just like us. We don’t like to have our basic assumptions challenged. It’s too threatening.

Now, if this teaching had come only from Avalokiteshvara, the students might have been able to rationalize their fears. “This is just a warrior on the path, not so different from us. He’s very wise and compassionate, of course, but he has been known to get things wrong.” But the Buddha was sitting right there in deep meditation, clearly pleased with this presentation of how to abide in the prajnaparamita. There was no way out of this dilemma.

Then, inspired by Shariputra's questioning, Avalokiteshvara continued. He taught that when we understand that there is no final attainment, no ultimate answer or stopping place, when our mind is free of warring emotions and the belief in separateness, then we will have no fear. When I heard this many years ago, before I had any interest at all in a spiritual path, a little light bulb went off; I definitely wanted to know more about "no fear."

This instruction on prajnaparamita is a teaching on fearlessness. To the extent that we stop struggling against uncertainty and ambiguity, to that extent we dissolve our fear. The synonym for total fearlessness is full enlightenment—wholehearted, open-minded interaction with our world. Meanwhile we train in patiently moving in that direction. By learning to relax with groundlessness, we gradually connect with the mind that knows no fear.

Then Avalokiteshvara proclaimed the pith of the prajnaparamita, the essence of the rug-pulling-out experience, the essence of the fearless, open state of mind. It came in the form of a mantra: OM GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA. Just as a seed contains the tree, this mantra contains the entire teachings on abiding in prajnaparamita, abiding in the fearless state.

Trungpa Rinpoche's translation is "OM, gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awake, so be it." This is a description of a process, a journey, of always stepping out further and further. We could also say, "OM, groundlessness, groundlessness, more groundlessness, even beyond groundlessness, fully awake, so be it!"

No matter where we are on the bodhisattva path, whether we are just beginning or we've practiced for years, we're always stepping further into groundlessness. Enlightenment is not the end of anything. Enlightenment, being completely awake, is just the beginning of fully entering into we know not what.

When the great bodhisattva finished teaching, the Buddha came out of his meditation and said, "Good, good! You expressed it perfectly, Avalokiteshvara." And those in the audience who hadn't walked out or died from heart attacks rejoiced. They rejoiced at hearing this teaching on stepping beyond fear.