

# Stepping off a One-Hundred Foot Flagpole

by Richard Shrobe, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim

An old kong-an says: “Before the donkey has left, the horse has already arrived.” This kong-an tells something about our minds, because it points to the fact that moment by moment many different thoughts are occurring — horses coming, donkeys going. Before this one has even left, the next one is already on its way. In the Avatamsaka Sutra it says, “If you want to understand all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, then you should view the whole universe as being created by mind alone.” The Avatamsaka Sutra is one of the major Buddhist scriptures, a very vast, visionary work, and in one paragraph it says the essence of understanding Buddha is just to view the whole universe as being created by mind alone. How can we understand this mind that creates a universe?

At the end of a one-day retreat recently, I told the story of a man who encounters a genie, or supernatural being, who says, “I will fulfill one wish for you.” The man says, “I’d like to get a view of the difference between heaven and hell.” The genie says, “O.K., I’ll show you.” He takes him to a door and they enter a huge banquet hall. On the table is everything you might wish to eat, and if something is not there you only have to think about it to make it appear. But there’s one injunction in this setting: You have to use special utensils. These utensils have a glove that fits up to the elbow, and attached to this glove is a fork that is so long that the food doesn’t reach your face when you bend your elbow. All these people are sitting at the table trying to feed themselves, but they can’t get the food to their mouths.

Then the genie takes this man through another door, and they find an identical setting. Again, the same utensils are being used — so long that the food never reaches the people’s mouths. But in this particular room the people are seated across from each other at the table, and the person on this side of the table picks up a piece of food and extends it over to the person sitting across from him. Because the fork is extremely long, it just reaches the other person’s mouth, and likewise the man or woman sitting on the other side of the table picks up a morsel of food and extends it across the table and the person opposite eats it.

So, which one is heaven and which one is hell? Exact same setting, exact same situation, exact same implements, but the relationship to those implements and to the situation is totally different. One is a desperate attempt to feed oneself, and the other is a perception of cooperation and interdependence between beings who have similar needs, desires, wants, and interests — heaven, hell. If you want to understand the realm of all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future, then you should view the whole universe as being created by mind alone.

How does mind create this universe? When the Heart Sutra talks about the five skandhas (form, feeling, perception, impulse, consciousness), it indicates one way of organizing our perception of the world and of ourselves. The Sanskrit word “skandha” literally means a heap or aggregate. Thus, we bring

together these different aspects of experience and begin to relate to things and experiences through them. That means at any moment our experience of self and world comes into being through the interplay of these five elements.

Imagine a moment of absolute clear space before anything has occurred. The first thing that will happen is a sense of something coming into being. This is the aggregate or skandha of “form”, the mind’s tendency to form something out of the primary openness of any particular moment. Form, *feeling*: As form arises, you will begin to have a feeling about it — good, bad, or indifferent. Form, *feeling*, *perception*: Then you will perceive it in some way. Form, *feeling*, *perception*, *impulse*: Impulse here means the tendency to go towards it or to pull away from it. And *consciousness*: Final recognition of the whole event. That’s our experience, and it’s created through the interplay of those five energies. It’s just a way of looking at mind and perception; it’s an organizing principle. Somebody dreamed up that set of categories to talk about the way we organize our experience. You

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*Original mind, mind which is before thinking, is already relaxed, already clear, already radiant and perceptive.*

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could dream up any number of categories.

But the important thing about the Heart Sutra, and the reason you will never see a skandha face-to-face, is that it says all five skandhas are empty. To perceive that they’re all empty means to perceive that none of the things that we take as our experience is self-sufficient. These things don’t have a permanent, enduring self in them in any way. They’re all dependent on something else. Also, to see things as empty of the names, labels, and opinions we attach to them is to see the skandhas as empty.

There is nothing wrong with naming things. The problem is that we take those names seriously and think that if we name something it exists in that way. There’s a Buddhist saying that “all names are no names”. What does this mean? That is a kong-an. Names are no names; no names are names. That doesn’t mean that we have to get rid of all names and labels. It just means we should perceive that naming something isn’t solid. It’s translucent, transparent; don’t hold it tightly. When you feel your arms, there’s a feeling in your arms, there’s just feeling your arms. That’s the moment before you give rise to calling it “my body”, as if it were something apart from you. That experience is just that. It is empty of self-nature, empty of some category. It

just is what it is at that moment. It doesn't mean there is no body, like it dissolves or is insubstantial, although, from a scientific point of view, an atomic physicist would tell you the same thing as an ancient philosopher: Everything is in flux. Your body is ultimately just a mass of energy. You could say that means it is not a body, for it is not enduring, not permanent. There's no self-nature to it, and it depends for its existence on many things outside it.

If we were going to philosophize, we would say your body is dependent on the water, the air, the food you ate, the fact that a farmer in Nebraska grew the food you ate; the list could go on and on, until your body in this moment is only there because the whole universe is there around it. If you talked about the farmer who grew the wheat for the bread made this morning, then you would have to talk about all the things the farmer is depend-



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ent on as well; it goes on and on. Your body is not existing in and of itself. It's existing because of many other things. It's interdependent. And, if you recognize interdependence, then you recognize compassion, because you realize we're not in this alone. If someone is hurting that means I am hurting, and the sense of kinship and connection emerges.

In Zen training, we give rise to the question, "What am I?" Zen practice is essentially understanding my true nature, my true self. What am I? If you raise that question, immediately you are face to face with the state of mind that does not know. What is the essence of this "I"? All day long, I'm using the word "I" this, "I" that, "I" the other thing, but what does the word "I" refer to? As soon as you try to look for it, you're left with a big question mark. *Don't know.* You have just that mind, that actual experience of that moment of not knowing. And that not knowing is your original self before thought, before words, before ideas.

That not knowing is open. Why? "Clear like space" is clear like a mirror, so if red is coming at the moment, it totally just reflects red. If white is coming, it totally just reflects white. From that standpoint, the reflective mind is the mind that is responsive to the situation at hand, the mind that is involved in clear functioning. It is the mind that is capable of compassionate activity, because it is not holding anything in a limited way. It's like a mirror, reflecting and becoming one with the situation at hand. Morality, or right and wrong, or good and bad, are perceived in relationship to that moment. What is correct in the moment? If you're not holding a limited notion of anything, then you can perceive what is correct in this moment. What is my correct function right now? What is my correct situation right now? What is my correct condition right now? It doesn't come out of a preconception; it comes out of a responsiveness to the situation. But that can only occur if you let everything go and have that clear-like-space mind, mirror-like, just reflective.

But this letting go of knowing can produce a lot of fear. One old Zen Master said, "It's like when standing on top of the flagpole, 100 feet in the air, how will you take one step forward?" Letting go of all this knowing feels like stepping off a flagpole 100 feet high in the air, and — pkshhh! — that's the imagined sense because the whole world as we know it is organized around our experience and how we've categorized it. This is this, that is that, or this in relationship to that, etc., etc., etc. The whole world comes into being for us in relationship to categories that we have developed over a lifetime, or if you believe in reincarnation, over many lifetimes. If you let go and enter the realm of unknowing, at that moment fear arises because knowing is security.

If you think you know something, then you feel secure at that moment. The world is as it should be, because you know what it is. But the minute you enter the realm of not knowing, you give up that security and enter into the borderline of going beyond knowing. At that point vitality can emerge, because it's not being limited by what's known. But vitality that's not supported from within turns to anxiety. The physical experience of anxiety is a kind of narrowing down of the chest and not getting enough air at the moment. But if you can experience uncertainty without narrowing down, by getting enough support from your center of gravity and recognizing that you have eyes, you have ears, you have tongue, you have body, you have mind, you have orientation, you have all these things, then —POW! — you can just perceive without having to know beforehand.

I'm talking ideally here. Obviously, this is an ability that develops. But, we set up all these categories, all these knowings, as a way of securing our ground. Of course, it's necessary to have categories and to know things and to think about things in certain ways. That's not the problem. Knowing, or thinking, is not the problem. It's clinging to the knowing as if our lives depended on it, as if we were sitting on a flagpole 100 feet in the air, clinging to the known and rejecting the possibility of stepping beyond it at that moment. That's the difficulty. Clinging. Attachment. Holding something and declining that step beyond is the real issue at hand. The step beyond is the step of non-knowing. It is beyond knowing. If you step beyond the

categories of non-knowing and knowing, then what emerges? Something that is neither known, nor not known. Something that neither appears nor disappears. That's why in the Heart Sutra it says no appearance, no disappearance, no purity, no impurity. Stepping beyond all opposite categories just means coming to the realization of what *is*. And the most profound transcendental experience is the most simple fact of what *is*.

How do we perceive what is, moment-by-moment-by-moment? Do we perceive what we are doing, moment-by-moment-by-moment? If we're resenting, do we perceive that in this moment? If we're pressuring ourselves, do we perceive that in this moment? If we're making ourselves afraid in some way, do we perceive that in this moment? How are we killing ourselves in this moment? How are we hesitating from taking one step forward off the flagpole 100 feet in the air? Out of embarrassment? Out of fear of humiliation? Out of fear of failure? Out of fear of being able to negotiate the next step? Little children do not have the same difficulty. Watch them when they start to walk. They get up, take one step, then another. They plop down, get up, walk some more. That's it. It's no big deal.

That's why we have to perceive that "not holding" mind, not holding so tightly to our ideas about what's going to happen next. That's why in the Heart Sutra it says, "When the Bodhisattva perceives that all five skandhas are empty, he is saved from all suffering and distress." Then there is no hindrance and no fear. If you see that all five skandhas are empty, that you are not a self-sufficient independent being at war with your surroundings, then there is not so much to guard here as you thought. There is not so much to secure. Then you can more readily go with what *is* without fear, without resentment.

That's why we practice, to get established and develop some degree of relaxed steadiness of mind. But that isn't the end that we're practicing for. That's just something you need in the practice. Essentially, the point is that original mind, mind which is before thinking, is *already* relaxed, is *already* clear, is *already* radiant and perceptive, so it isn't so much a matter of developing those qualities as a matter of returning to our original self, which *is* essentially those qualities. That's the deeper meaning of "even before the donkey has left, the horse has already arrived." Even to say it's "those" qualities is to put some label on it. It's something that is before labelling. But things such as relaxation or calmness or clarity are not things that you're practicing to develop, from the Zen Buddhist standpoint. Those things are the actual essence of mind energy, and are there the moment you let go of conditioning, clinging to a situation, clinging to an opinion, clinging to ideas.

It helps to understand that all this conceptual framework — good and bad, right and wrong, should and should not — comes from parental and authority figures. So Hui Neng, Sixth Patriarch, asks, "When you don't make good and bad, at the moment, what is your original face before your parents were even born?" Don't think that's something in the past, before your parents were born. At every moment that we get hooked onto the train of making opposites, making conceptual referents, holding opinions, that is giving birth to our parents. Time goes back-

wards, not forward. It goes from present to past. Any moment when we begin to get caught in some chain of associations, and rights and wrongs, and shoulds and should nots, and judgments, and seeing ourselves or the world in limited ways, then that moment is giving birth to our parents. So Zen means becoming an orphan.

At any moment, when you don't make good and bad, what is your original face before your parents were born? Original face means empty, like a mirror. That's why many Zen illustrations use this empty circle. That means empty and simultaneously full. Empty and simultaneously complete, whole. Totality is there in that moment. Meditation is to perceive that, to be with that, then to use that. So how will you know when you've seen the five skandhas face to face? You'll know when you recognize your original face before your parents were born.

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## What is this?

Gray Dharma caterpillar  
12 pairs of legs clomp, clomp, clomp, clomp  
through the dharma room and out onto the deck  
eating everything in sight:

thinking thinking legs hurting  
kimchee cricket sounds  
da wonderful soups of Do Won  
branches stirring up the wind

sitting walking eating sleeping  
through days and weeks and months  
while leaves turn red and fall  
and snow covers the ground

over and over again until nothing  
but a Buddha in the night sky  
that looks like a Pillsbury doughboy  
that eats the dharma caterpillar

burps up — butterflies  
with blue black wings and lapis lazuli spots  
that skywrites:  
WHAT IS THIS?

*David Jordan  
Diamond Hill Zen Monastery  
Summer Kyol Che, 1989*