

A Brief Exposition on Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is the apex of the Mahayana Buddhism thought (Phật giáo đại thừa). Buddhism developed from Theravada (Phật giáo nguyên thủy, or tiểu thừa) to Mahayana (Đại thừa). Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos are essentially Theravada. Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Hongkong, Singapore, Taiwan, Tibet and Mongolia are essentially Mahayana. However, Theravada has also had its presence in Vietnam as early as Mahayana.

In this long development of Buddhism, the key concept of Không (Sūnya in Sanskrit, “emptiness” or “void” in English) developed along. Life is non-permanent (vô thường) because everything comes and goes, depending on nhân duyên (the law of causation). Life is therefore illusory, not real. In other words, life is không or hư không.

This concept of Không may easily lead to the negative thought of nihilism. Mahayana Buddhism takes us back out of this extremist concept of Không to the middle way (trung đạo). This middle way still commits to the idea that “life is Không”; however không here is not different from có (existence), “không mà là có, có mà là không” (emptiness is existence, existence is emptiness). This middle way definitely takes away any inkling of nihilist negativism. It is realistic and positive about life.

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh presents this middle way while going swiftly through all teachings of the Buddhist tradition, from Theravada to Mahayana. Studying Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is really the studying of the whole Buddhism.

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is so central to Phật giáo đại thừa (Mahayana) that it is recited daily (kinh nhật tụng) by monks and nuns. In Vietnam, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is recited in hán việt (the Vietnamese transliteration of Chinese language). The hán việt version has the advantage of being a beautiful poem with good rhythm and sound and very concise language, therefore it is easy to memorize. The problem is that it is still a foreign language to most Vietnamese. However, since most Vietnamese Buddhist terms are hán việt anyway, it would be better for students of Buddhism to be familiar with some hán việt. For these reasons, in this study, we will use the hán việt version as the main version, along with the Vietnamese and English translations to facilitate the understanding.

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh

Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra

Heart Sutra, Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra, Essence of Wisdom Sutra

Hán Việt

<http://www.quangduc.com/kinhdiem/kinhbatnha.html>

Quán-tự-tại Bồ-tát, hành thâm Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa thời chiếu kiến ngũ-uẩn giai không, độ nhất thiết khổ ách.

Xá-Lợi-Tử! Sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc; sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc; thọ, tưởng, hành, thức, diệp phục như thị.

Xá-Lợi-Tử! Thị chư Pháp không tướng, bất sanh bất diệt, bất cấu bất tịnh, bất tăng bất giảm. Thị cố không trung, vô sắc, vô thọ, tưởng, hành, thức; vô nhãn, nhĩ, tỷ, thiệt, thân, ý; vô sắc, thanh, hương, vị, xúc, pháp; vô nhãn giới, nãi chí vô ý-thức-giới, vô vô-minh, diệp vô vô-minh tận, nãi chí vô lão tử, diệp vô lão tử tận; vô khổ, tập, diệt, đạo; vô trí diệp vô đắc.

Dĩ vô sở đắc cố, Bồ-đề tát-đỏa y Bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa cố tâm vô quái-ngại; vô quái-ngại cố vô hữu khủng-bố; viễn ly điên-đảo mộng tưởng; cứu cánh Niết-bàn. Tam-thế chư Phật, y Bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa cố đắc A-nậu-đa-la tam-miệu tam-bồ-đề.

Cổ tri Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa, thị đại-thần chú, thị đại minh chú, thị vô-thượng chú, thị vô đẳng đẳng chú, năng trừ như thiết khổ, chơn thiệt bất hư.

Cổ thuyết Bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa chú, tức thuyết chú viết: Yết-đế Yết-đế, Ba-la yết-đế, Ba-la-tăng yết-đế, Bồ-đề. Tát bà ha.

Dịch Nghĩa Tiếng Việt (TDH's version, worked from other existing translations)

Khi Bồ tát Quán Tự Tại thực hành Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa sâu xa, soi thấy năm uẩn đều không, liền vượt qua mọi khổ ách.

Xá Lợi Tử! Sắc chẳng khác không, không chẳng khác sắc; sắc tức là không, không tức là sắc; thọ, tưởng, hành, thức cũng lại như vậy.

Xá Lợi Tử! Mọi sự đều là không, chẳng sanh chẳng diệt, chẳng dơ chẳng sạch, chẳng thêm chẳng bớt. Cho nên, trong không chẳng có sắc, chẳng có thọ, tưởng, hành, thức; chẳng có mắt, tai, mũi, lưỡi, thân, ý; chẳng có màu sắc, âm thanh, hương thơm, vị nếm, xúc cảm, và các pháp; chẳng có nơi để nhìn, cho đến chẳng có có nơi để ý thức; chẳng có vô minh, cũng chẳng có chướng dứt vô minh; cho đến chẳng có già chết, cũng chẳng có chướng dứt già chết; chẳng có khổ, nguyên nhân khổ, sự diệt khổ, và con đường diệt khổ; chẳng có trí tuệ, cũng chẳng có đạt.

Bởi chẳng có gì để đạt, Bồ tát nương tựa Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa, nên tâm không vương mắc; vì không vương mắc nên không sợ hãi, xa lìa mộng tưởng điên đảo, rốt ráo niết bàn. Chư Phật ba đời nương tựa Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa nên đạt được vô thượng chánh đẳng chánh giác.

Nên biết Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa là thân chú lớn, là minh chú lớn, là chú tối cao, là chú không gì sánh bằng, trừ hết mọi khổ ách, chắc thật, không dối.

Nên nói chú Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa, tức là nói chú rằng: Yết đế, Yết đế, Ba la Yết đế, Ba la tăng Yết đế, Bồ đề, Tát bà ha. (Qua rồi, qua rồi, qua bờ rồi, qua bờ hết rồi, giác ngộ rồi, vậy đó!).

English translation

<http://www.cttbusa.org/heartsutra/heartsutra.htm>

The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra

(Translated by Tang Dharma Master of the Tripitaka Hsüan-Tsang

on imperial command).

When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound prajna paramita, he illuminated the five skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So, too, are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.

Shariputra, all dharmas are empty of characteristics. They are not produced. Not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish. Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness; and no ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, no accumulating, no extinction, no way, and no understanding and no attaining.

Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisattva, through reliance on prajna paramita, is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid, and he leaves distorted dream-thinking far behind. Ultimately Nirvana!

All Buddhas of the three periods of time attain Anuttarasamyaksambodhi through reliance on prajna paramita. Therefore, know that prajna paramita is a great spiritual mantra, a great bright mantra, a supreme mantra, an unequalled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is genuine and not false. That is why the mantra of prajna paramita was spoken. Recite it like this:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

Explanation

I. The Title Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh

The full name of Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is Bát-Nhã Ba-La-Mật-Đa Tâm-Kinh.

Bát Nhã is the transliteration of the Sanskrit term prajna. It means wisdom. In Hán Việt it is called Tuệ or Huệ. However, this wisdom is more than the regular wisdom we encounter every day. Our daily wisdom usually has “duality” in it—right wrong, black white, good bad, có không, yêu ghét, existence nothingness, etc. In deep analysis, this duality wisdom is the source of all troubles, because my right is your wrong and, therefore, conflict arises between us. Duality wisdom makes our heart discriminate between this and that (tâm phân biệt), makes our heart jumpy (tâm vọng động), leads us into conflicts and, therefore, makes us ignorant (si mê, vô minh). In short, our everyday wisdom is not true wisdom yet.

The true wisdom surpasses such duality, surpassing right and wrong, surpassing existence and nothingness, etc. It is the wisdom of a mother of 2 fighting children, each claiming that he is right and the other is wrong. The mother sees neither right nor wrong, but only that both children are ignorant in their fight.

To indicate this ultimate wisdom, the Buddhists see fit to keep the word “prajna” or its transliteration “Bát Nhã,” instead of translating it into the word “wisdom”, “trí tuệ” or “trí huệ”.

Ba-La-Mật-Đa is the transliteration of the Sanskrit term “paramita” and means “crossing to the other shore.” In Hán Việt, it is “độ” as in “phổ độ chúng sinh.” Crossing to the other shore also means “giải thoát” (liberate) or “giác ngộ” (enlightened).

But, what shore and what river are we talking about? In Buddhism, we are on the shore of suffering (khổ). By crossing the river of ignorance (vô minh), we get to the other shore, which is the shore of enlightenment (giác ngộ).

Thus, Bát Nhã is the ultimate wisdom that carries us (độ) across the river of ignorance (vô minh) to the shore of enlightenment (giác ngộ)

Tâm means the heart, the core, the essential.

Kinh means sutra, holy writing.

Thus **Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh** is an essential holy writing about the ultimate wisdom that carries us (độ) across the river of ignorance (vô minh) to the shore of enlightenment (giác ngộ).

(However, please note, when we talk about crossing from the shore of suffering to the shore of enlightenment, we are talking about duality—two opposite shores—which we have said is not really wisdom. Bát Nhã accepts no duality. As we will see later, in Bát Nhã, when we reach the other shore, we see that the true nature of all things is không, and in không there was/is/will be no river to cross. All the crossing is just a fleeting phenomenon of the mind).

II. The Essence of Wisdom (The first 2 verses)

The first 2 verses are the essence of Bát Nhã. All other following verses are further expansion of this essence. These are the first 2 verses:

Hán việt

Quán-tự-tại Bồ-tát, hành thâm Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa thời chiếu kiến ngũ-uẩn giai không, độ nhất thiết khổ ách.

Xá-Lợi-Tử! Sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc; sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc; thọ, tưởng, hành, thức, diệp phục như thị.

Tiếng Việt

Khi Bồ tát Quán tự tại thực hành Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa sâu xa, soi thấy năm uẩn đều không, liền vượt qua mọi khổ ách.

Xá Lợi Tử! Sắc chẳng khác không, không chẳng khác sắc; sắc tức là không, không tức là sắc; thọ, tưởng, hành, thức cũng lại như vậy.

English

When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound prajna paramita, he illuminated the five skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So, too, are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.

Bồ tát is the short form of **bồ đề tát đỏa**, which is the transliteration of the Sanskrit term “Bodhisattva.” It is a word in Mahayana Buddhism (phật giáo đại thừa). Bodhi (bồ đề) means giác ngộ, enlightened. Bodhisattva means “enlightened being.” In the Mahayana tradition, bồ tát is a person who has reached enlightenment (giác ngộ) but postpones final attainment of full Buddhahood in order to help other people reach enlightenment. Bồ tát is one step lower than a full Buddha, so to speak.

Tu bồ-tát thừa (training in the bodhisattva way) is the Mahayana way to reach enlightenment. This way is called lục độ ba-la-mật (six paths to cross to the other shore). They are: BỐ thí (giving), trì giới (keeping rules and precepts), nhẫn nhục (patient and humble), tinh tấn (advancing in the practice), thiền định (meditation) and trí huệ (wisdom). At the start of the training, the first thing a trainee of must do is phát tâm bồ-đề (start bodhicitta, start bodhisattva’s heart)—a commitment to achieve enlightenment in order to help other beings achieve enlightenment too. This is a very selfless vow. (Please see the Bodhisattva way at <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/viet/photphap/lucdobalamat.htm>).

Đại thừa (Mahayana) has **Bồ tát** (Bodhisattva) as an enlightened person.

Phật giáo nguyên thủy (Theravada) has two types of enlightened persons: (1) **Bích Chi Phật** (pratyekabuddha) is a person who reaches enlightenment through practicing Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên (the twelve links of cause and effect). This training way is called Duyên Giác (enlightenment through the law of causation). (2) **A-la-hán** (arhat) is a person who reaches enlightenment from practicing Tứ Diệu Đế and Bát Chánh Đạo (The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path). This training way is called Thanh Văn (sound and speech, of the Buddha). We will explore these different training ways later.

The fullest level of enlightenment is Buddha (**Phật**). There are many (full) Buddhas in the sutras, but there is only one historical (full) Buddha in the history of the world--that is Buddha Sakyamuni (Thích Ca Mâu Ni, the sage of the Sakyas family), the founder of Buddhism.

Thus, we have 4 types of enlightened persons, ranked from top down: Phật, bồ tát, bích chi Phật, a-la-hán (buddha, bodhisattva, pratyekabuddha, arhat).

Quán Tự Tại is the name of the Bồ tát. In most Buddhist sutras, a Bồ tát's name is both a proper noun (his own name) and a common noun (a generic term standing for something). The Sanskrit name is Avalokiteshvara, which is translated in this sutra as Quán Tự Tại—observing existence itself, observing existence as it is. In other sutras, Avalokiteshvara is translated as Quán Thế Âm—observing/ listening to the sounds of the world. One Sanskrit name with two slightly different translations: When we focus on philosophy, it is Quán Tự Tại; when we focus on compassion, it is Quán Thế Âm, listening to the voices of suffering people of the world.

Bồ tát Quán Tự Tại, in addition to being a proper name, also indicates any of us who is enlightened enough to be able to observe existence (our self and the world around us) as it is, without distortion, confusion, or ignorance.

Ngũ uẩn is five skandhas in Sanskrit, or five aggregates in English. The five skandhas are form (sắc), feeling (thọ), perception (tưởng), mental formation (hành) and consciousness (thức). Together these five skandhas make up our being. **Sắc** (color or form) indicates the physical part of our being. **Thọ tưởng hành thức** (feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness) make up the mental part. Thus, the term ngũ uẩn indicates human being, human existence.

The first verse of Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh, therefore, means “When the enlightened person who observes existence as it is practices the profound prajna wisdom, he sees that his being is không (emptiness, sūnya), then he crosses beyond all suffering.”

Here is the first important step into Buddhism. Non-Buddhists generally think that we exist, and our existence is solid, real, and permanent. This attitude is called “**chấp có**” (attaching to/grasping onto existence).

Buddhism says our existence is not real--it is fleeting, impermanent; our being is illusory, it is không, it is emptiness.

This was the earliest meaning of không in the long development of the Buddhist thought. At that time, không was still limited to human life. Many Buddhist schools of the pre-Bát-Nhã time maintained that our being is không but the world around us does exist.

A characteristic of không at that time was that không was understood as the opposite of có (existence, form), so không could easily be understood with the extreme meaning of nihilism. This nihilist extremist attitude is called “**chấp không**” (attaching to/grasping onto emptiness).

As we will see in the next verses, Bát Nhã (1) expands the concept of không from human to the entire universe, and (2) at the same time, pulls không back from the nihilist extreme to the **middle way (trung đạo)**--không mà có, có mà không-- and makes không more realistic and more positive to living.

Xá Lợi Tử means Son of the Sari family. This is the name of Buddha Sakyamuni's most intelligent disciple. Please note, in Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh, Xá Lợi Tử was addressed by name twice. Each time signifies a major development in the meaning of không in the history of Buddhism.

This first time is to take không from the nihilist opposite of có to the middle way, as the following phrase shows.

Sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc. Sắc is not different from không, không is not different from sắc.

Sắc (color, form) is one of ngũ uẩn (five skandhas, five aggregates) that make up our being. Sắc indicates the physical part of human.

Sắc is also one of six dusts (lục trần: sắc thanh hương vị xúc pháp –color, sound, fragrance, taste, objects of touch, dharma) that make up the universe.

Thus the term sắc in the above phrase serves two major functions. First, it is used as an antonym of không. Second, it is a subtle link to make a subtle announcement of the upcoming expansion of không from human to the entire universe.

While không is now quietly planning to expand its “territory” from human to the entire universe, không is also pulling its meaning back from the nihilist extreme to the middle way (trung đạo). Recall that, in the first verse, our being is không (ngũ uẩn giai không). However, this second verse shows that không surely doesn’t mean “nothing” or “non-existence.” In this second verse, không is not different from sắc, not different from colors and forms that we can see with our eyes. And sắc is not different from không.

In other words, không and sắc, the two seemingly opposite concepts, are really one and the same. The repetition, sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc, is a logical formula to confirm, in a negation mode of speaking, that sắc and không are the same.

Then the next verse, **sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc** (sắc tức là không, không tức là sắc), is another logical formula to confirm again, now in the affirmation mode of speaking, that sắc and không are the same.

Both the affirmation and negation modes of speaking aim to emphasize one central truth: Sắc and không are the same, existence and emptiness are the same, có and không are the same.

Not only sắc, which stands for our physical body, but the mental elements of our being also operate the same way—they and không are the same; they are không and không is them. That is the meaning of the next phrase of Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh: **thọ, tưởng, hành, thức, diệc phục như thị** (feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness are also like that).

In sum, at this point in the development of the Buddhist thought we have: Our being is không, but không doesn’t mean nihilism, không is the same as sắc or whatever makes up our being.

But why sắc and không are the same? Why apparently opposite things are the same?

Here we need to go into the “**Three Dharma Seals**” (Tam Pháp Ấn) to find the answer.

Dharma (pháp) is a rather confusing term in Buddhism, because, depending on the context of speaking, it has several different meanings. Here we will limit ourselves to 2 different meanings only. First, pháp means anything in the physical and mental universe, like a tree, a table, a feeling, a thought. Second, pháp also means a Buddhist teaching, a method of practicing Buddhism.

Tam Pháp Ấn (Three Dharma Seals) are three seals to prove that a teaching is true Buddhist teaching: 1. vô thường (non-permanence), 2. vô ngã (non-self), 3. niết bàn (nirvana). If a teaching misses one of these three seals, it is not Buddhist teaching.

a. Vô thường (anitya in Sanskrit) means non-permanent, ever-changing. Everything comes and goes, depending on causes and conditions. A tree comes to existence when the cause (the seed) and conditions (weather, water, soil, etc.) are ripe for the seed to grow. Like anything else in the universe, the tree goes through 4 stages: thành trụ hoại không (appearing, steady, decaying, disappearing). When causes and conditions become ripe for disappearing, the tree will disappear. This is **luật nhân quả** or **nhân duyên** (law of causation)—nhân means cause, duyên means condition. Everything is vô thường (non-permanent), because everything comes, changes and goes depending on ever-changing causes and conditions.

b. Vô ngã (non-self). Because everything is vô thường, none has a permanent existence, none has a permanent self. “The me” today is just the me today. Before I was born, there was no me. Right now, I am ever changing, ever getting older. Eventually I will die off, and after that there is no me. My self is not permanent. I have no permanent self. I have non-self. Non-self does not mean no self; non-self means no permanent self.

A natural question arises here: After I die off and my self dissolves, is that the total end of me? Yes and no. Yes, the me is ended, but how about the elements that made up me? I was formed by many elements in the universe—water, minerals, chemicals, electrons, electromagnetic, etc. When “the me” dissolves, I disappear, but the elements that made up me are still there in the universe; they just move around and, depending on causes and conditions, make up something else. In short, after death, my “self” is no longer here, but the elements that made me are still there in the universe. So, we say philosophically, “From the universe I come, and back to the universe I go.”

But what is the universe? The universe is a big expanse, a borderless, unlimited, never-ending space—a big không. So, if we replace the word “universe” with the word “không,” then our philosophical statement now reads: “From không I come, and back to không I go.”

And that is why we can say in Bát Nhã language “I am không, không is me.” I am a fleeting manifestation of the big không universe. This is the meaning of non-self in Bát Nhã language.

And this is also the basis of “sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc.” (Form is emptiness, emptiness is form).

(Note: The universe is good example to explain Không, but the universe is not really không yet. We will talk more about this in the next section).

At this point we have answered our question “why sắc and không are the same?” However, let’s go an extra step to finish the third dharma seal, nirvana.

c. Niết Bàn (Nirvana)

If we do not understand vô thường and vô ngã and we grasp onto the idea of a permanent life and a permanent self, we suffer when changes come, just like a person suffers when his beloved changes her heart or passes away.

The mental act of “grasping” onto something or some idea is called “attachment” or “**chấp**.” Attachment to anything or any idea will bring suffering. For example, grasping on the idea that life is miserable makes us suffer from negativism. Grasping on the idea that life is all good makes us suffer from naïveté. Grasping on the idea that “she is my life” makes us suffer when she leaves.

To relieve ourselves from suffering, we practice non-attachment (**vô chấp**). When we are no longer attached to anything, there is nothing to make our mind jumpy or stressed. No more suffering. The mind is calm and cool like a stove with the fire already extinguished. We have reached nirvana. Nirvana means “the fire is out.”

In short, vô chấp is the way to reach enlightenment, to reach nirvana.

However, why when Bồ tát Quán Tự Tại sees that ngũ uẩn are không, he crosses beyond all suffering?

Because when he sees that his being is không he no longer has any attachment. In life, we can grasp onto to millions of things around us—wealth, beauty, love, power, ideology. But in the final analysis, the reason we grasp onto anything is because of our self. Because we grasp onto our self, we want everything for our self. If we do not grasp onto our self--because we realize that the self is fleeting, is không--we will automatically drop all attachments to everything, then we cross beyond all suffering, we reach nirvana.

Thus, understanding không leads to vô chấp, which leads to nirvana.

Does this sắc-không philosophy have anything to do with my life?

Yes, this sắc-không philosophy has many fundamental implications on how we should conduct our life.

1. Affirmation of life: The constant negation language of Bát Nhã--with void, emptiness, not, and no--gives many people the misconception that Bát Nhã denies everything. But a careful reading reveals that Bát Nhã doesn't deny anything. Indeed, Bát Nhã confirms everything in life. "Sắc is not different from không, không is not different from sắc. Sắc is không, không is sắc." How could this statement mean a denial of anything? It is a clear and emphatic affirmation of both sắc and không, the two apparent extremities of life. Thus, Bát Nhã emphatically affirms life with all life aspects.

2. A relaxed and free attitude about life: Bát Nhã keeps us away from attachment. We do not grasp onto sắc to deny không, because không is sắc. We do not grasp onto the không to deny sắc, because sắc is không. Since Bát Nhã means non-attaching to either sắc or không, we call the Bát Nhã way "**trung đạo**" (middle way).

But the Bát Nhã middle way doesn't mean we grasp onto to the middle position on the road. All attachments, including attachment to the middle, are suffering. Non-attachment (vô chấp) means not attaching to anything, any idea, any position. So, **in Bát Nhã, we affirm everything while not grasping onto anything.** That is the meaning of "middle way."

Therefore, we can be selling without attaching to money, reading without attaching to the book, eating without attaching to food, driving without attaching to the car, doing politics without attaching to power.

In Kinh Kim Cang (The Diamond Sutra), in order to achieve a pure and tranquil heart, Bồ tát should "ung vô sở trụ" (không có chỗ trụ; fixed on no place) (Kinh Kim Cang, Section 10). Bồ tát can stand on any place as he wishes, as long as he is not fixed to that place. The bird has to stand on something once in a while; however, because the bird is not fixed on any place permanently, she is free--the entire sky is her domain. A bird that stands fixed on a place is a dead bird.

The reality of life is that we make living choices every day. We constantly make life decisions, constantly take a stand on some ground. However, we should not be attached to any choice we have made, lest we become the prisoner of our own choices. We should be ready to leave any selected choice when necessary. Ứng vô sở trụ. Not fixed on any place. Then our heart is tranquil and free; we are liberated; we are free.

3. Bát Nhã's middle way differs from indifference or non-commitment. Indifferent and non-committal people don't care about anything, are wishy-washy on all things, and never stand up for anything.

Bát Nhã's people care about life. They often take a stand for goodness; however, they are not so attached to their idea of goodness to the degree that they try to eliminate all people with a different stand.

4. Bát Nhã helps us lead an active and selfless life: In Kinh Kim Cang (the Diamond Sutra), Bát Nhã is the key to living an active and selfless life. There the Buddha said in essence, "I have helped liberate immeasurable, countless, infinite number of sentient beings, for them to enter nirvana, but indeed no beings have been liberated. Why? Because, if Bodhisattva still sees me, others, sentient beings, instruction recipients, then that is not Bodhisattva." (Kinh Kim Cang, section 3, paraphrased by TDH).

Putting aside all abstract philosophical meanings, the above quote means one simple thing—Bồ tát doesn't see the difference between himself and others. Why? Because Bồ tát doesn't grasp onto "me" and "others" as separate and different entities. I am not different from others, others are not different from me. Sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc; sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc. I am others, others are me. So when Bồ tát helps others, he doesn't see that he helps others, he feels like he helps himself. Helping others is just as natural as helping himself.

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh and Kinh Kim Cang are two very significant Mahayana sutras. They go together well as a pair—Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is abstract philosophy, Kinh Kim Cang is living practice. Reading the two sutras together helps the understanding of each greatly.

(For an exposition on Kinh Kim Cang by HT Thích Thanh Từ, please see <http://buddhismtoday.com/viet/kinh/dt/044-thichthanhtu-kinhkimcang.htm>).

Is the Buddhist trung đạo different from the Confucian trung dung?

Both trung đạo and trung dung may be translated as middle way, but they are really different. In Confucianism, trung dung is a way of living with moderation and harmony—moderate in all things, including the application of rules of conduct (nhân lễ nghĩa trí tín; humanity, respect, loyalty, wisdom, honesty)--to generate harmony with other people and with trời đất (heaven and earth). Generally speaking, standing in the middle is the favorite position of Trung Dung.

The Buddhist trung đạo means not-attached (vô chấp) to anything, including the middle of the road. The Bát Nhã practitioner can stand on any ground, any place, the middle, the left, the right, the high, the low. It doesn't matter where. As long as his mind/heart (tâm) is not attached to his standing position or to anything else, then his position is good. In Bát Nhã, a pure and tranquil

heart (tâm thanh tịnh, i.e., non-attaching heart, tâm vô chấp) is what that counts, not the position on the road.

In Zen literature (văn học Thiền), many Zen masters did things that looked very extreme. A master chopped a wooden Buddha statue to make a fire to warm himself and his student in a very cold night when there was no wood. Another master answered his student's question by giving the student a hard slap on the face. Apparently these were very extreme actions, but the Buddhist masters did them, because they knew, in the circumstances at the time, doing so would help their student attain enlightenment, and because their mind was not attached (vô chấp) to the idea that the Buddha statue was untouchable or that it was unacceptable to answer a question with a slap. These actions probably would not be allowed in Confucianism.

Confucian Trung dung is a good managerial rule; Buddhist trung đạo is the free mind of a master artist.

(For the Confucian book Trung Dung, please see <http://www.personal.usyd.edu.au/~cdao/books/cpdd1.htm>)

III. Further expansion of Bát Nhã

As we've mentioned previously, the first 2 verses summarize the gist of Bát Nhã teaching. The following verses are further expansion of Bát Nhã.

Xá-Lợi-Tử! Thị chư Pháp không tướng, bất sanh bất diệt, bất cấu bất tịnh, bất tăng bất giảm.

(Xá Lợi Tử, mọi sự đều là không, chẳng sanh chẳng diệt, chẳng dơ chẳng sạch, chẳng tăng chẳng giảm.)

(Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness. They are not born, not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish).

This is the second and last time Xá-Lợi-Tử is addressed directly by name in Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh. This time is to indicate the major shift of không from human being to all things in existence. Recall in the first verse, we have ngũ uẩn giai không (five skandhas are emptiness) and ngũ uẩn indicates human being. In this verse we have chư pháp không tướng (all dharmas are emptiness). Chư pháp means tất cả các pháp, all things in the universe--both in the universe of the mind and in the external universe. Thus, now Bát Nhã expands Không's territory to affirm that not only human being but everything else in the universe is không.

Recall, previously in the example of my coming into the world and death, we said "From the universe I come, and back to the universe I go," and from that we changed to "From không I

come, and back to không I go.” The same thing can be said about everything else in the universe. From không the stars come, and back to không the stars go. Stars are born from không, and in due time, stars burst and disappear back to không.

But the universe itself, although serving as a good example to understand không, is not không yet, because we still can see the universe with our eyes and our mind—the universe itself is dharma (pháp), not không. We need to push our logic further, to its ultimate limits, to the absolute—all universes, both external and in the mind, come from không and back to không they go. **Không is the true substance of all things, and everything is only a fleeting manifestation of không, just like waves are fleeting manifestation of water.**

Here we can see the relationship between “**substance**” and “**phenomenon**.” Water is the substance, wave is the phenomenon. Substance and phenomenon are not two different things; substance and phenomenon are just **two different ways to talk about the same thing**. Wave is not different from water, water is not different from wave; wave is water, water is wave.

Similar to water, Khong is the substance of everything. And similar to wave, everything is the phenomenon of Khong. Every thing is not different from không, không is not different from anything; all things are không, không is everything.

Standing on the beach to watch the sea, if we look at the waves (i.e., the phenomenon) , we can see that some new waves are born, some old waves are destroyed, some waves are muddy, some waves are clean, some waves increase, some waves decrease. However, the water (i.e., the substance) is just water, always there, not born, not destroyed, not dirty, not clean, not increasing, not decreasing. Thus, when we look at all things in the universe, we see comings and goings and all kinds of movements and changes. But if we look at the substance of all things, which is không, then không is just không, always there, never born, never destroyed, never dirty, never clean, never increasing, never decreasing. That is the meaning of “Thị chư pháp không tướng, bất sanh, bất diệt, bất cấu, bất tịnh, bất tăng, bất giảm.”

So now we have the defining characteristics of Không:

1. Không is the substance of all things in the universe (and everything in the universe is the manifestation of Không).
2. Không is absolute—always there, never born, never destroyed, never dirty, never clean, never decreasing, never increasing.

This concept of Không is somewhat similar to the concept of God in theist religions, with one major difference: God has an active personality that actively engages in human life and the life of the universe, while Không is absolutely neutral.

Thị cố không trung, vô sắc, vô thọ, tưởng, hành, thức; vô nhãn, nhĩ, tỷ, thiệt, thân, ý; vô sắc, thính, hương, vị, xúc, pháp; vô nhãn giới, nãi chí vô ý-thức-giới.

(Cho nên, trong không chẳng có sắc, chẳng có thọ, tưởng, hành, thức; chẳng có mắt, tai, mũi, lưỡi, thân, ý; chẳng có màu sắc, âm thanh, hương thơm, vị nếm, xúc cảm, các pháp; chẳng có nơi để nhìn, cho đến chẳng có nơi để ý thức.)

(Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness).

From this verse on, Bát Nhã presents a list of all fundamental teachings by the Buddha himself. These teachings are the foundation of Buddhism. They make up Buddhism. However, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh starts to negate all teachings, one by one.

At this time, we need to keep in mind these points:

First, in Bát Nhã language, negation and affirmation are the same. Sắc bất dị không, không bất dị sắc; sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc.

Second, không is the substance of all things, including all teachings, all practices. Like everything else, teachings and practices are merely phenomena--fleeting manifestation of không.

Third, if we observe the sea and focus our thinking on the water, we can say that only the water exists and the waves do not really exist—they are just movements of water. Similarly, when we focus our thinking on the substance of all things in the universe—không—we can say that in không nothing really exists; everything is just fleeting manifestation of không. That is why in this verse that we are examining, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh says, “In không, there is no...”

And then Bát Nhã lists a full list of Buddhist teachings. The question is **“Why does Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh take the trouble to list an entire list of teachings, just to negate them one by one? What is the purpose of this careful negation?”**

We will answer this question, but before that we have to know what teachings are listed and negated. Let’s examine the list.

Ngũ uẩn (sắc thọ tưởng hành thức—five skandhas: form, feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness) are what make a human being. Bát Nhã now negates five skandhas.

Lục căn (nhãn nhĩ tỷ thiệt thân ý—sáu gốc: mắt tai mũi lưỡi, thân ý-- six roots, six sensing organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind): These are the gate, the interface, between the external world and the world of our mind. Without these we do not exist, both physically and mentally. But Bát Nhã now negates lục căn.

Lục trần (sắc thanh hương vị xúc pháp—six dusts or six gunas or six sense objects: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, and dharmas). Lục trần correspond to lục căn in the preceding paragraph. Lục trần make up the entire universe. The first five (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch) make up the physical universe, the last one “dharmas”—all things (that the mind can see)--makes up the mental universe.

Lục trần (six dusts) from outside enter our body and mind through lục căn (six roots) and will give us sensations, which will make us desire, and from desire all troublesome things come. That is why these six things are called six dusts (lục trần). The act of lục trần entering our body through lục căn is called **lục nhập** (six entrances).

Lục trần is another fundamental Buddhist teaching. Lục trần make up the universe. But Bát Nhã now negates lục trần.

Vô nhãn giới, nãi chí vô ý thức giới. Chẳng có nơi để nhìn, cho đến chẳng có nơi để ý thức. No field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness.

Here we are talking about **thập bát giới** (eighteen realms)—**six realms of six sense organs:** nhãn giới (realm of the eyes), nhĩ giới (realm of the ears), tỉ giới (realm of the nose), thiệt giới (realm of the tongue), thân giới (realm of the body), ý giới (realm of the mind); **six realms of six objects of senses:** sắc giới (realm of color), thanh giới (realm of sound), hương giới (realm of smell), vị giới (realm of taste), xúc giới (realm of touch), pháp giới (realm of thought); and **six realms of consciousness:** nhãn thức giới (realm of eye-consciousness), nhĩ thức giới (realm of ear-consciousness), tỉ thức giới (realm of nose-consciousness), thiệt thức giới (realm of tongue consciousness), thân thức giới (realm of body-consciousness), ý thức giới (realm of mind-consciousness).

Bát nhã uses the short way of mentioning only the first (eyes) and the last realm (mind-consciousness) to indicate all eighteen realms. These eighteen realms make up the entire physical and mental universe. But again, Bát Nhã negates all eighteen realms.

Vô vô minh, diệt vô vô minh tận; nãi chí vô lão tử, diệt vô lão tử tận.

(Chẳng có vô minh, cũng chẳng có chấm dứt vô minh; cho đến chẳng có già chết, cũng chẳng có chấm dứt già chết.)

(No ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death.)

Here is another major Buddhist teaching that is negated—**Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên** (mười hai nhân duyên, the twelve links of cause and effect, or Law of Causation). As we have mentioned earlier, everything comes and goes by causation. Thập nhị nhân duyên enumerates twelve

causation links to show how ignorance ends up causing old age, sickness and death, which are at the core of suffering. Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên is also known as duyên khởi or duyên sinh (birth from law of causation, or “dependent origination”).

The twelve links starts with ignorance and ends with old age and death, with 10 other links in between. Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh does not enumerate all twelve, but only mentions the first link (ignorance) and the last link (old age and death) to indicate the entire chain of twelve.

The twelve links are:

- 1) Vô minh: Ignorance.
- 2) Hành: Mental moving, mental formation
- 3) Thức: Consciousness.
- 4) Danh sắc: Name and Form.
- 5) Lục Nhập: Six entrances through six organs (mắt, tai mũi, lưỡi, thân, ý--eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind).
- 6) Xúc: Contact
- 7) Thọ: Feeling, sensation.
- 8) Ái: Desire, craving
- 9) Thủ: Grasping, attachment
- 10) Hữu: Owning, possessing, existing.
- 11) Sanh: Birth.
- 12) Lão Tử: Old Age, (Illness) and Death.

Ignorance (vô minh), the 1st link, makes the mind lose its true nature of tranquility; ignorance causes the mind to move; this moving of the mind (hành) is the 2nd link. The moving mind forms Consciousness (thức), the 3rd link. Consciousness looks at the world of forms and gives names to the forms, that is the 4th link (danh sắc; names and forms). This world of names and forms enters our body and mind through six entrances (lục nhập), that is the 5th link. Six entrances generate contact with our body and mind; contact (xúc) is the 6th link. Contact gives us sensations (thọ), the 7th link. Sensations make us desire (ái), the 8th link. Desire makes us grasp onto things (thủ), the 9th link. Grasping gives us Possession (hữu), the 10th link. Desire, grasping and possession are said to carry the karmic force of samsara (nghiệp lực của luân hồi),

which will bring people back to a rebirth (reincarnation) at death, thus after Possession comes birth, the 11th link. And of course, birth brings old age, illness and death, and all kinds of suffering, the 12th link.

The conventional explanation of Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên is usually connected to the concept of luân hồi (samsara) and tái sinh (rebirth). However, there is also a bio-psychological explanation that desire, grasping and possession make us constantly, in every second of the day, die and be reborn into the suffering of the mind.

Thus, ignorance is the ultimate cause of suffering. Ignorance starts the causal chain that ultimately results in suffering. If we eliminate ignorance, we subsequently eliminate rebirth, old age, death and suffering. (For in-depth study of Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên, please see Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên by Thích Thông Huệ at <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/viet/photphap/thapnhinhanduyen.htm>, and Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên, translated by Phạm Kim Khánh at <http://www.thuvienhoasen.org/ducphatvaphatphap-25.htm>).

Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên is said to be studied and practiced in Theravada Buddhism (phật giáo nguyên thủy). Such a practice is called tu duyên giác (training based on Law of Causation), and the person who achieves enlightenment through tu duyên giác is called Bích Chi Phật (pratyekabuddha) or Duyên Giác Phật (Enlightened through learning Law of Causation).

However, now Bát Nhã negates this major teaching of Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên: Vô vô minh, diệt vô vô minh tận. Nãi chí vô lão tử, diệt vô lão tử tận. No ignorance, also no elimination of ignorance. Through the 12 links, all the way to no old age and death, and no elimination of old age and death. Thus Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên is completely negated.

At this point, we should take a brief break, to address the most misunderstood point in Buddhism:

If there is vô ngã (non-self, no permanent self), then what is it that is reborn many times, living many lives after many deaths?

Samsara (luân hồi) and reincarnation (tái sinh) were taught in Hinduism before Buddhism appeared. In Hinduism, each person has an eternal soul (Atman). This Atman survives death and reincarnates in next life, according to his karma (nghiệp). Karma is the result of each person's actions and is the force that determines reincarnation. The cycle of birth-death-reincarnation is samsara (luân hồi). When the person attains spiritual purity, he achieves salvation and is not reincarnated anymore. Then his Atman resides with Brahman (the One, God) in eternity.

Buddhism talks about karma, samsara and rebirth; however, Buddhist rebirth is different from Hindu reincarnation in a very fundamental point: In Buddhism, vô ngã means there is no permanent self. There is no permanent soul that survives death. A person's self dissolves after death. All the elements that made up him also dissolve; however, there is one element that survives—the alaya vijnana (a lại da thức).

Vijnana (thức) is consciousness, the knowing ability of the mind. There are eight vijnanas, the first five are associated with the five sense organs, the last three are associated with the mind.

1. Nhãn thức (eye consciousness, cakshu vijnana)
2. Nhĩ thức (ear consciousness, shrotra vijnana)
3. Tỉ thức (nose consciousness, ghrana vijnana)
4. Thiệt thức (tongue consciousness, jihva vijnana)
5. Thân thức (body consciousness, kaya vijnana)
6. Ý thức (mental consciousness, mano vijnana—evaluate and process information from the first five vijnanas)
7. Mạt-na thức (afflicted consciousness, klesha vijnana—thinking about itself, thinking that there is a self)
8. A-lại-da thức (store consciousness, alaya vijnana—the leader of all consciousnesses, storing memories of all thoughts and actions)

The 8th vijnana, alaya vijnana (a-lại-da thức), is the only element of a being's self that survives death. It is called “store consciousness” because it stores karma of the self as well as karma of all previous selves (in previous lives). It determines how the next rebirth will be and carries the karmic seeds from one self (one life) to the next self (next life), and it accumulates karma as it goes through lives. But this “storage” is neutral; it doesn't do “thinking;” all the thinking is done by the first seven vijnanas. In other words, this alaya vijnana is not “me” or “my soul” or my “self.” It is only an element of me (during in my life) and carries the karmic seeds of countless lives from the endless beginning, through my life, and countless more lives to come.

In simple language of the computer age, we can say alaya vijnana is just a “memory chip.” After my death, the alaya vijnana carries “the memory of me” (and memory of countless lives before me) to the next life in a new self. This new self is not my self, although it does have “the memory of me” in it.

Upon enlightenment, alaya vijnana becomes pure and one with the Truth (Chân Như, Tathagatarba, Phật, Buddha), which is Không. Alaya vijnana itself as a separate entity ceases to exist. No more rebirth.

This subject of rebirth and samsara is very confusing, because:

1. Most Buddhists of Asia believe in the reincarnation of a permanent soul. This is really a Hindu teaching and is against the Buddhist teaching of non-self (no permanent self, no

permanent soul). However, the idea of a permanent soul is very simple and straight forward and fits human intuition well. It is also supported by some Buddhist sutras themselves, such as Kinh Vu Lan (Ullambana Sutra), in which Mục Kiền Liên (Mu-lien) found his mother's soul being punished in hell. (See Kinh Vu Lan at <http://www.budsas.org/uni/u-kinh-bt-ngan/vulan.htm>). The strong influence of this sutra is shown in the fact that Vu Lan festival (Ullambana day) is an annually observed day in the Buddhist Asia. Of course, Mu-lien's mother may symbolically stands for our own ego, our own self, which is the mother of our confusing mind, with its attachment to greed, anger and ignorance (tham, sân, si). But the point is, the vast majority of Asian Buddhists believe in the reincarnation of a soul.

2. Alaya Vijnana, and a rebirth without a permanent self, is a very complex teaching of a major school of Buddhism: Yogacara (Duy Thức Tông). Very few Buddhists master this subject.
3. Most western Buddhists don't believe in Samsara and karmic rebirth. They think the karmic rebirth theory is unnecessary in the large structure of Buddhist teaching. (Please see "A Buddhist Ethic Without Karmic Rebirth?" by Winston L. King at <http://www.quangduc.com/English/Ethics/20.buddhistkarma.html>).

(For some easy reading on non-self and Buddhist rebirth, please see "Anatta or Soul-lessness" by Narada Mahthera at <http://www.enotalone.com/article/4090.html>, and "Is there an Eternal Soul?" at <http://www.purifymind.com/EternalSoul.htm>. For a quick reading on A lại da thức, please see definition of A lại da thức at <http://thuvienhoasen.org/tudienphathoc-vietanh-thienphuc-A.htm>. For Duy Thức Luận (Yogacara), please see <http://thuvienhoasen.org/index-phathoc-tamlyhocphatgiao.htm>).

Vô khổ tập diệt đạo.

(Chẳng có khổ, nguyên nhân khổ, sự diệt khổ, và con đường diệt khổ.)

(There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinction of suffering, no path to extinction of suffering.)

This is the negation of the most fundamental of all Buddhist teachings: The Fourth Noble Truth (Tứ Diệu Đế) and the Noble Eightfold Path (Bát Chánh Đạo).

Tứ diệu đế (The Four Noble Truth) is four basic truths about life: **khổ tập diệt đạo** (suffering, causes of suffering, extinction of suffering, path to extinction of suffering). Tứ Diệu Đế is the

first teaching by the Buddha after he reached Enlightenment, written in Kinh Chuyển Pháp Luân (Dharma-Wheel Turning Sutra).

1. **Khổ (Suffering):** Life contains suffering. Generally we can classify suffering into physical suffering and mental suffering. (a) Physical suffering includes birth, old age, sickness, and death (sinh lão bệnh tử). (b) Mental suffering includes losing what we like (thương mà mất), contacting what we don't like (ghét mà gặp), and unfulfilled desires (muốn mà không được). (c) However, there is also another kind of suffering that encompasses all other suffering—it is the suffering coming from “grasping onto the self” as a permanent everlasting self. We all can just see how a person who lives like he never dies will suffer.

But what about so many happy times we have in life? Wouldn't it be too negative to define life merely as a sea of suffering?

Yes, life contains both unhappy times and happy times (assuming that they are really happy times and not miseries in disguise as our experience shows often). Let's just say that Buddhist knowledge and practices take away unhappy times, by training our mind to be absolutely tranquil. A tranquil mind is always calm. It is not excited. It surpasses the typical excitement of sorrow and jollity. It constantly carries with it a quiet everlasting joy, which is different from the noisy happiness of a beer drinking bout.

Suffering, ultimately, is a mental phenomenon. Even if the stimulus is external, such as a hard slap on the face, it is still the mind that suffers or not—if your cheek is burning from the slap but your mind feels happy about it, then where is the suffering? Therefore, Buddhism teaches the extinction of suffering by teaching us to control our mind, i.e., to keep the mind tranquil at all time. The mind is the beginning and the end—the mind is ignorance and Buddha.

Kinh Pháp Cú (Dhammpada) is the most important sutra in Theravada Buddhism (Phật giáo nguyên thủy) and one of the most fundamental sutras in the entire Buddhist tradition. The first verse of Kinh Pháp Cú says, “The mind leads all the phenomena of existence; the mind is the leader, the mind makes them.” (Ý dẫn đầu các pháp, ý làm chủ ý tạo). And verse 35 says, “The mind is unstable and flighty. It wanders wherever it desires. Therefore it is good to control the mind. A disciplined mind brings happiness.” (Khó nắm giữ, khinh động, theo các dục quay cuồng. Lành thay điều phục tâm, tâm điều an lạc đến). (English by Harischandra Kaviratna at <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/dhamma/dham-hp.htm>; Vietnamese by Thich Minh Chau at <http://buddhismtoday.com/viet/kinh/pali/phapcu1.htm>).

Thus, ultimately, the mind is the cause of both suffering and liberation. Buddhism takes away our suffering by training our own mind, not by directly changing the external world that we live

in. But of course, when our mind is changed inside, we will change our external world accordingly.

2. Tập (Causes of Suffering)

Craving causes suffering. In Vietnamese, it is tham ái (greed and desire) or ái dục (desire and want). Verse 335 of Kinh Pháp Cú (Dhammapada) says, “Whosoever is overcome by this shameful craving which creates entanglements in this world, his sorrows increase like the luxuriant birana grass in the rainy season” (Ai sống trong đời này, bị ái dục buộc ràng, sầu khổ sẽ tăng trưởng, như cỏ Bi gặp mưa).

Kinh Chuyển Pháp Luân (Dharma-Wheel Sutra) mentions 3 types of craving: a) Craving for sensual things; b) craving based on the idea that life is permanent—chasing after things thinking that life never ends, c) craving based on the idea that death is the end of all things—indulging in things thinking that there is nothing after death.

3. Diệt (Extinction of Suffering)

Since craving is the cause of suffering, to stop suffering we need “to stop, to denounce, to leave, to cut away craving.” The extinction of craving means the extinction of suffering and, therefore, means nirvana.

Please note, in Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên (twelve links of cause and effect), we have said ignorance is the first cause of suffering, and craving is the 8th link in the causal chain. To stop suffering there, we stop ignorance. But here in Tứ Diệu Đế (Four Noble Truths), we say that to stop suffering, we stop craving, meaning cutting off the causal chain in the middle at the 8th link.

This seemingly technical distinction has a profound implication in practice: If we are intelligent enough to gain wisdom, our wisdom will conquer everything, including ignorance, craving and suffering. If we are not endowed with high intellectual capacity to gain the ultimate wisdom, we still can stop suffering by following the simple rules of conduct to stop craving. The Buddhists usually say “There are 84 thousand Dharmas” (tám mươi bốn ngàn pháp môn), enough for each person in the world to choose a practice (pháp môn) that fits him/her. This methodology of using appropriate means for different kinds of people is called “phương tiện” (means, method). It allows Buddhism to grow everywhere, in all cultures, among all peoples, at all times.

4. Đạo (the Path to Extinction of Suffering)

This path has eight lanes and is called **The Noble Eightfold Path (Bát Chánh Đạo)**

1. Chánh kiến (right view): The understanding of the Four Noble Truths (Tứ Diệu Đế), vô thường (non-permanence) and vô ngã (non-self)
2. Chánh tư duy (right thought): Thoughts about stopping craving (lìa bỏ ái dục), about no anger and violence (vô sân), about no harmful activities (vô hại).
3. Chánh ngữ (right speech): no lying (không nói láo), no divisive speech (không nói hai lưỡi, nói đâm thọc), no abusive speech (không nói lời độc ác), no idle chatters (không nói lời phù phiếm).
4. Chánh nghiệp (right action): No killing (không sát sinh), no stealing (không trộm cắp), no wrongful sexual conduct (không tà dâm).
5. Chánh mạng (right livelihood): No engaging in trade or profession that, either directly or indirectly, results in harm to other living beings.
6. Chánh tinh tấn (right effort): Try to prevent wrongful thoughts and actions from arising; if they have already arisen, try to stop them. Try to bring up good thoughts and actions; if they have already come, try to continue them.
7. Chánh niệm (right mindfulness): Observing our body, our feelings, our thoughts and Dharma (all things, all teachings) to conquer all cravings and distress.
8. Chánh định (right concentration): This is about the practice of meditation (thiền).

(For more about Tứ Diệu Đế and Bát Chánh Đạo, please read <http://www.budsas.org/uni/1-bai/phap002.htm> by Bình Anson, <http://zencomp.com/greatwisdom/uni/u-4de-pkk/4de-01.htm> by Phạm Kim Khánh, <http://www.budsas.org/uni/1-bai/phap002.htm> by Thích Viên Giác).

Tứ Diệu Đế is the first and most fundamental Buddhist teaching about a path to enlightenment. It is the way to reach A la hán enlightenment in Theravada. However, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh now negates Tứ Diệu Đế.

Vô trí diệt vô đắc.

(Không có trí, cũng không có đạt. No understanding and no attaining).

This is another negation of a very fundamental principle of Buddhism. All Buddhist teachings, regardless of what school, focus heavily on wisdom and knowledge (Trí), to conquer ignorance. Ignorance creates suffering. In Tứ Diệu Đế (Four Noble Truths), right view is the first element of The Noble Eightfold Path to extinction of suffering. In Thập Nhị Nhân Duyên (the twelve links of cause and effect), eliminating ignorance is the method to stop suffering. And of course, Bát Nhã itself is supposed to be the highest wisdom ever. Simply put, there is no Buddhism without knowledge and wisdom.

And, of course, the ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to cross over to the other shore, to attain enlightenment. But now Bát Nhã negates both wisdom and attaining (Nirvana). This is another way to say that no Buddhist teaching exists at all! The negation of all teachings has completed!

But why negate all the teachings? What does this negation mean?

1. We need to keep in mind that, in Bát Nhã, negation and affirmation are the same—*sắc tức thị không, không tức thị sắc*; negation is affirmation, affirmation is negation. And as we have seen, Bát Nhã affirms all things as they truly are.

Looking at the sea, if we focus our attention on the water only, we can say that the waves don't exist—waves are just the movement of water. However, if we focus our attention on the waves themselves, we can say that the waves do exist, but only briefly. Thus, when we are talking with our attention focused on *không*, we say, “In *không* there is no teaching.” If our attention is focused on the teachings themselves, we say, “Yes, there are teachings, but they are impermanent.”

The strong focus on *không* in Bát Nhã is a practical way to focus our attention on impermanence. Affirmation of the impermanence of the teachings means “Yes, there are teachings, so learn them and practice them. But they are impermanent, temporary, so don't be attached to them.” That means:

- a. Each listed teaching is important and deserves to be mentioned individually and specifically in Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh. So, please practice each teaching seriously.
- b. But each teaching is also impermanent and temporary. So, please don't attach yourself to it. That means, be flexible with the teachings. Don't follow them rigidly like a robot. Teachings are guidelines; use your mind/heart and be flexible when applying the teachings to life.
- c. Teachings are there temporarily to help, like a raft used to cross the river. When you have crossed to the other shore, don't carry the raft on your shoulder.

2. “In *không* there is no teaching” also describes the state of enlightenment.

All the teachings are there to help the practitioner achieve enlightenment, achieve nirvana.

But what is nirvana?

Nirvana means “the fire is out”—the completely pure and tranquil mind, the mind that has absolutely no attachment, the mind that sees all things but is attached to nothing, the mind of *không*.

This mind understands that không is its substance as well as the substance of everything else in the universe. This mind has found its true nature—không, the absolute, the never-born never-destroyed never-dirty never-clean never-increasing never-diminishing, the absolute tranquility, the Buddha. This mind, which has found its true nature, is now Buddha. Minh tâm kiến tánh thành Phật. Shine the mind, see true nature, become Buddha.

But has this mind just, in fact, turned itself from a regular human mind to a Buddha?

Yes and no. If we think the way we normally think with a time line of past, present and future, then “yes,” this mind has just turned from a regular human mind to a Buddha. Five minutes ago it was an ignorant mind, now it is a Buddha.

However, from the stand point of enlightenment, the mind has not become anything. The mind has always been there, has always been không. It didn’t know that it is không, but now it knows that it is không. That’s all. It did not become something else better or higher.

When ignorance is still around, ignorance acts like a veil that obstructs the mind’s vision; therefore, the mind cannot see itself clearly. When the mind has no attachment, the veil of vô minh (ignorance) is lifted, and the mind can see itself truly as không. The mind is now back to its true nature—không, the absolute tranquility, nirvana, Buddha. Nirvana has always been there, Buddha has always been there. It is just a matter of seeing or not-seeing.

So, indeed, there is no becoming Buddha, no attaining enlightenment, no river to cross, no crossing over. The Buddha has always been there. This is why at the beginning of this exposition, we say, “All the crossing is just a fleeting phenomenon of the mind.”

A note on “seeing”

When we say “the mind sees itself as không,” we may think of the word “see” as a function of the intellect, an intellectual capacity of our brain to understand. But true seeing involves much more than the intellect. Example: Wife tells drunken husband, “Do you know how miserable I am?” Husband answers, “Of course... I know... I spend all... the money... on booze... I get home late... and drunk every night... I mess ... up the floor with... my vomit... You... are stressed all the time... What is... so hard to understand... about that ...?” And he continues drinking day after day. That is the understanding or seeing of the intellect.

Until one day, the husband feels in every fiber of his body and in every cell of his brain how irresponsible he has been. He now feels every single miligram of his wife’s pain, and her pain

burns every cell in his body and mind like a holocaust. He wakes up, as if from a dream. Then he just quits drinking, forever. That is true seeing.

So, when we talk about seeing or understanding in the sense of enlightenment, we talk about a total “awakening” experience that involves every single aspect of our mental existence--the intellect, the will, the emotion, the id, the ego, the super-ego, the consciousness, the subconsciousness, the nonconscious and what have you--a total transformation, a total rebirth, that brings the mind to a completely new level of seeing, understanding, feeling, thinking and acting.

This total awakening, therefore, cannot be achieved merely by the intellect—i.e. not merely by reading Buddhist philosophy. The Buddhist road to achieve this total awakening contains three major elements: **Giới** (rules of conduct), **định** (meditation, concentrating the mind), **huệ** (wisdom). A typical example is Bát Chánh Đạo (The Noble Eightfold Path). The eight lanes of Bát Chánh Đạo are grouped into three groups as follows:

Huệ (wisdom): 1. Chánh kiến (right view), 2. Chánh tư duy (right thought).

Giới (rules of conduct): 3. Chánh Ngữ (right speech), 4. Chánh Nghiệp (right action), 5. Chánh mạng (right livelihood).

Định (meditation): 6. Chánh tinh tấn (right effort), 7. Chánh niệm (right mindfulness), 8. Chánh định (right concentration)

Giới định huệ are called tam học (three studies) and work together. Good conduct, calm attitude and wise knowledge go together; we cannot leave one out and hope to gain an accurate understanding of Buddhism, not mentioning enlightenment. Reading Buddhist books while embezzling government money or getting drunk every day will not give us an accurate understanding of Buddhism. Buddhism is more than an intellectual philosophy. It is a comprehensive way of living. And all living needs practice.

IV. The Power of Bát Nhã to Bring Enlightenment

In the opening verse, we have Bồ tát Quán Tự Tại crossing beyond all suffering from practicing Bát Nhã. Now in the ending section, we come back to the power of Bát Nhã to bring enlightenment.

Dĩ vô sở đắc cố, Bồ-đề tát-đỏa y Bát-nhã-ba-la mật-đa cố tâm vô quái-ngại; vô quái-ngại cố vô hữu khủng-bố; viễn ly điên-đảo mộng tưởng; cứu cánh Niết-bàn.

(Bởi chẳng có gì để đạt, Bồ tát nương tựa Bát nhã ba la mật đa, nên tâm không vướng mắc; vì không vướng mắc nên không sợ hãi, xa lìa mộng tưởng điên đảo, rốt ráo niết bàn.)

(Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisattva, through reliance on prajna paramita, is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid, and he leaves distorted dream-thinking far behind. Ultimately Nirvana!)

Bồ tát, with Bát Nhã wisdom, sees that Không is the true substance of all things, everything is just a fleeting manifestation of Không, and in Không there is nothing--no nirvana, no attaining nirvana. Therefore, Bồ tát does not think about attaining nirvana and, thus, has no attachment in his heart. (If Bồ tát keeps aiming at the goal of attaining nirvana, then Bồ tát would never reach nirvana, because the attachment to the goal is there in his heart).

Since the heart is not attached to anything, Bồ tát is not afraid of anything. Here, we need to make a note that **fearlessness** is a very significant feature of the Bồ tát way. In **lục độ ba-la-mật** (Bồ tát's six virtues of enlightenment), **bố thí (giving) comes first**. (The other five are trì giới—keeping rules and precepts, nhẫn nhục--patient and humble, tinh tấn--effort, thiền định—mediation, and trí huệ—wisdom).

There are 3 kinds of giving: Tài thí (giving money), pháp thí (giving Dharma, giving Buddhist teachings), vô úy thí (giving fearlessness; vô úy means không sợ). “Giving” here doesn't mean just giving the extra things one doesn't need; it may be giving one's own life for others. Among the three givings, giving money is lowest and **giving fearlessness (vô úy thí) is highest**.

Thus, we can see the important role of fearlessness in the Bồ tát way. But no fear of what? No fear of pain and suffering; no fear of losing anything, including one's own life; no fear of not-gaining anything, including not gaining enlightenment; no fear of following and teaching a human-based way to liberation, in which man—and no one else, neither saints nor gods--is responsible for his actions.

Without attachment, without fear, Bồ tát drops all “crazy upside-down dream-thoughts” (điên đảo mộng tưởng), all distorted notions about life, and all attachments resulting from these distorted notions. Thus, Bồ tát attains nirvana.

(For more about the Bồ tát way, please see Lục độ ba-la-mật by Thích Thông Huệ, <http://www.buddhismtoday.com/viet/photphap/lucdotalamat.htm>; Khuyển Phát Bồ Đề Tâm by Đại Sư Thật Hiền, http://www.dharmasite.net/khuyenphatbodetam_hanviet.htm).

Tam-thế chư Phật, y Bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa cố đắc A-nậu-đa-la tam-miệu tam-bồ-đề.

(Chư Phật ba đời nương tựa Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa nên đạt được vô thượng chánh đẳng chánh giác.)

(All Buddhas of the three periods of time attain Anuttarasamyaksambodhi through reliance on prajna paramita.)

A-nậu-đa-la tam-miệu tam-bồ-đề is the transliteration of the Sanskrit term Anuttarasamyaksambodhi, which is the fullest level of enlightenment. Anuttara means highest, nothing higher (vô thượng). Sammyak means main/essential comprehensive level (chánh đẳng). Sambodhi means main/essential enlightenment (chánh giác). It is translated into Hán Việt as vô thượng chánh đẳng chánh giác.

As we have mentioned previously, there are 4 levels of enlightenment—A la hán (Arhat), Bích Chi Phật (pratyekabuddha), Bồ tát (Bodhisattva), and Phật (Buddha). All the Buddhas of the past, the present, and the future attain the highest rank of enlightenment—vô thượng chánh đẳng chánh giác--from relying on Bát Nhã.

Cố tri Bát-nhã Ba-la-mật-đa, thị đại-thần chú, thị đại minh chú, thị vô-thượng chú, thị vô đẳng đẳng chú, năng trừ nhứt thiết khổ, chơn thiết bất hư.

Cố thuyết Bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa chú, tức thuyết chú viết: Yết-đế Yết-đế, Ba-la yết-đế, Ba-la-tăng yết-đế, Bồ-đề. Tát bà ha

(Nên biết Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa là thần chú lớn, là minh chú lớn, là chú tối cao, là chú không gì sánh bằng, trừ hết mọi khổ ách, chắc thật, không dối.)

Nên nói chú Bát-nhã ba-la-mật-đa, tức là nói chú rằng: Yết đế, Yết đế, Ba la Yết đế, Ba la tăng Yết đế, Bồ đề, Tát bà ha. (Qua rồi, qua rồi, qua bờ rồi, qua bờ hết rồi, giác ngộ rồi, vậy đó!))

(Therefore, know that prajna paramita is a great spiritual mantra, a great bright mantra, a supreme mantra, an unequalled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is genuine and not false. That is why the mantra of prajna paramita was spoken. Recite it like this:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!)

This final verse is about the power of Bát Nhã as a mantra. In addition to being very sophisticated knowledge that can be learned consciously, Bát Nhã also operates at the level of human subconscious as a mantra. Mantra (chú) is a saying that is supposed to have supernatural power. Psychologically, a phrase, with a particular pattern of sound vibration of the words when spoken, the meaning of the words, and the regular repetition by the speaker, operates as a

smoothing self-hypnotism. For example, if someone keeps repeating every day “Be rich, be rich, I be rich” a hundred times a day, chances are he will find enough motivation to work hard to be very rich some day. In addition, many people also believe that mantra has supernatural power by invoking secret energies from the cosmos.

The Bát Nhã mantra is *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!*, which means “Gone, gone, gone to the other shore; all gone to the other shore, already enlightened, so be it!”

Mantra is recited in the original language to invoke its power. In Vietnam, the Bát Nhã mantra is written and recited as a transliteration of the Sanskrit original.

V. Conclusion

Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is highly abstract, contains very high level of logic, and uses very sophisticated logic language unfamiliar to many people. Therefore, it generates great confusion for many. But the sutra is not a game of words by philosophers with too much time on their hand. It is a solid philosophy about the cosmos and the human life. Upon that philosophical foundation grows a very good system of ethics that governs our conduct. Buddhist ethics and philosophy bind together in a very coherent structure.

A word of caution for new students of Bát Nhã: Since Bát Nhã language is extremely versatile, one can quote any little phrase of Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh to say anything crazy, such as “You are talking to me but you are not existing” or “It is OK to do that, wrong is right and right is wrong.” Bát Nhã is a comprehensive way of living—a logical philosophy, a system of practices and ethics, and a serious-but-non-attaching attitude on living. Playing word games with bits and pieces of Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh is like children building a house of cards, thinking that the house is the real shelter for them and their family. It is “Lost.” Don’t fall into that game.

As a living philosophy, Bát Nhã is positive, active, engaging, selfless, peaceful and liberating. It is a very good philosophy, upon which to build education and social development for any society. We Vietnamese are very fortunate to be the torch carrier of this philosophy. It is our honor and duty to preserve, nourish, enrich and share this philosophy widely with all our brothers and sisters, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike, throughout the world.

Trần Đình Hoàn

Washington DC

Friday, October 17, 2008