

The Heart Sutra

Introduction

The *Heart Sutra* (in Sanskrit, *Prajnaparamita Hrdaya*), whose full title is *The Sutra of the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*, is widely considered the most popular and influential text of Mahayana Buddhism (the literal translation is “Heart of the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom” or as expressed at MZMC “Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra”). It is frequently chanted during ceremonies in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Mahayana-associated Buddhist centers in the West, and is an extensively studied text in Tibetan Buddhist schools and in the Shingon Buddhist school in Japan. It is an important, but later, component of the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajnaparamita*) group of Buddhist scriptures, a body of literature that includes the earliest Mahayana texts.

The *Heart Sutra* is important for two main reasons. First, it is a short text made up of 13 sentences and 250 words (in the MZMC version) that are arranged together in one paragraph. In fact, it is the shortest of the 40 or so sutras that make up the Perfection of Wisdom literature. It is partly for this reason that it is used both as a ritual and liturgical text by Mahayana Buddhists, and as a frequently consulted summary of the Mahayana vision of Buddhism. Second, it compactly summarizes more Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajnaparamita*) teaching than any other short scripture, either explicitly or implicitly. Through the teaching of emptiness, as most directly expressed in the sentence, “Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form,” it stresses that the objects of our conscious knowledge are exhaustively comprised of two truths, a truth of “form” (our conventional, illusory, “unenlightened” perception of reality) and a truth of “emptiness” (the ultimate, “enlightened” truth beyond delusion; the perception of reality as things really are), a conclusion whose consequences for our understanding of reality are drawn out below.

According to a common interpretation, “It is thought that Buddhas become Buddhas through their ability to penetrate and be transformed by this teaching.”¹ For this reason the sutra is considered the womb of the mother of buddhas (*Prajnaparamita*) from which all buddhas emerge.

Origin and Brief History

The *Heart Sutra* appears in both longer and shorter versions. We concentrate here on the short version, which we chant at MZMC during morning services, and at sesshins and some special events. At present, like Mahayana scriptures in general, the origin of the short version of the *Heart Sutra* remains obscure.² Many contemporary scholars believe that it is a Chinese composition composed, perhaps, in the 7th century CE, as a reaction to the Abhidharma teachings of the Sarvastivadin school of Buddhism (the

Sarvastivadins believed that reality was composed of distinctive entities with intrinsic existence called dharmas, a belief that the Heart Sutra counters through the use of the Mahayana concept of emptiness (in Sanskrit, *shunyata*).³

The Storyline

In very brief review the storyline of the sutra traces the replacement of an incorrect understanding of “the way things appear to the mind of a buddha” (a conceptual system known as the Abhidharma) by an important disciple of the historical Buddha (Shariputra) by an alternative and correct view known as the Prajnaparamita. In contrast to this incorrect understanding of the Abhidharma, an understanding that maintains that reality is made up of real existent entities called dharmas, Prajnaparamita sutras maintain that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic (real, inherent) characteristics, but can be seen as form/emptiness for pragmatic reasons. This teaching is provided by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, the bodhisattva of compassion. Following Red Pine, the storyline is usefully divided into four parts (see the copy of the sutra at the end of this primer).

In the first part Avalokiteshvara recounts how he was relieved of all suffering by clearly seeing through the practice of Prajnaparamita – which awakened the faculty of wisdom (*prajna*) within him – that all five aggregates (in Sanskrit, the *skandhas*) are empty of intrinsic characteristics. The five aggregates (form, sensations, perceptions, formations, and consciousness) are the constituents of an individual according to the Buddha. This part contains the famous and crucial statement, “form [and everything else, like events and processes, for that matter] does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form.” Here emptiness means that nothing is permanent and totally independent of everything else, that things (collections of things, events, etc.) arise in co-dependence. Said another way, everything “is interconnected and in constant flux” (the doctrine of dependent origination) and, therefore, no thing or being exists independently of other things or beings.⁴

Avalokiteshvara’s insight is somewhat more easily understood by dividing the path of the bodhisattva into three phases and placing that insight onto this landscape.⁵ The first phase is the movement through the sea of samsara to an arhat’s understanding of enlightenment in which form is seen as empty.⁶ The second phase is the realm of emptiness itself; in this realm conventional reality, which is the normal way of understanding the world by the unenlightened during the first phase, is considered a false or delusional understanding, for all form is empty of a real existent.⁷ In the third phase, which is that part of the path that distinguishes a bodhisattva from an arhat, emptiness and form are considered two equal, pragmatically useful truths. Thus, “form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form.”⁸

In the second part Avalokiteshvara applies the understanding that all phenomena lack intrinsic existence to the major conceptual categories found in the Sarvastivadin Abhidharma. The categories as encountered in the sutra follow the order of their appearance in that version of the Abhidharma. The sequence begins with the Bodies of Awareness (the five aggregates: no form through no consciousness) and then moves through the Elements of Perception (which are divided into three sets of six: no eyes through no mind; no sight through no object of mind; and no realm of sight through no realm of mind consciousness, with the in between realms being understood as present), the Chain of Dependent Origination (with only the two ends of the sequence, ignorance and old age-and-death, mentioned), the Four Truths (no suffering through no path), and the attainment or non-attainment of Nirvana (no knowledge and no attainment). Each category is declared empty as an implication of the meaning of emptiness as realized by Avalokiteshvara through his practice of Prajnaparamita.

In the third part Avalokiteshvara turns from the Sarvastivadin interpretation of the Abhidharma, which is the arhat's path that leads to no rebirth and an arhat's understanding of emptiness (nirvana), to the bodhisattva path, which is based on the realization that, ultimately, since nothing comes into existence or is born in the first place (as a separate, existent thing in itself), then nothing can be said to cease, be impermanent, be destroyed, be defiled or pure, or be a hindrance.⁹ And, without hindrances or anything to attach to, suffering cannot occur. A consequence of this line of reasoning is the realization that there is no path or anything to attain: we are buddhas as we are. To thoroughly perceive this is "unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment." The latter section of the part lists some of the major landmarks that indicate when a bodhisattva is nearing enlightenment as understood in the Mahayana tradition. These are "the realization of the birthless nature of all dharmas, the absence of fear, and the decision not to enter (or, better, to rest in) nirvana."¹⁰

The final part provides the heart of the teaching of the Prajnaparamita in the form of a Sanskrit mantra ("Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha"). Among the various translations of the mantra are: "Gone, gone, gone over, gone fully over. Awakened! So be it!"; "Go, go, go beyond, go thoroughly beyond, and establish yourself in enlightenment"; and "Gone, gone (or ferried) fully over with everyone to the other shore right now!" The incantation urges us to go beyond all conceptual categories. By chanting the mantra, we create the womb of the goddess Prajnaparamita, where we await our rebirth as a buddha.

Sitting with the Heart Sutra

Like all Mahayana sutras, the words of the Heart Sutra are to be "sat with" and held in our heartmind at all times without excessive intellectualization; an understanding of the sutra unfolds through practice

and face-to-face training with a knowledgeable dharma teacher.¹¹ Phrased another way, the words of the Heart Sutra are not to be “believed in” in a pure knowledge (*jnana*) sense nor, though analysis is useful, are we to delude ourselves that the heart of the sutra can be grasped by intellectual inquiry alone. The practice is to simply hold the words of the sutra in one’s heartmind and let understanding emerge.

Puzzlements and Oddities

The Heart Sutra is considered one of the strangest of Buddhist sutras, for it contains baffling puzzlements and oddities.¹² Of course, all Buddhist sutras are baffling in the sense that they were conceived long ago in foreign lands by people whose understanding of the world was quite different from ours. As a consequence, we may not correctly grasp the intended meaning of a word at the time (for most words change meaning through time) or understand deeply enough the intended meaning of a metaphor or allusion, among many other stumbling blocks to a clear and incisive understanding of a sutra.¹³ Agreed. But the Heart Sutra remains baffling for other reasons as well. Four are mentioned here.

First, unlike other sutras the Heart Sutra is not attributed to the Buddha. Since sutras are traditionally considered the word of the Buddha, it remains unclear what the authority behind the sutra is, an important concern for those individuals who composed Mahayana sutras (note the pretense of speech as a legitimation factor here). Second, Prajnaparamita sutras usually begin by explaining the ultimate nature of reality and then proceed to describe a path to the realization of that reality. In the Heart Sutra the latter function is replaced by the Sanskrit mantra (sometimes called a *dharani*), whose meaning and function within the sutra remain unclear.¹⁴ Third, the sutra is regarded by some as a mantra in itself, as a tantra (because of the central importance of the closing mantra in the text), or as a supplement to a longer sutra. And fourth, questions have been raised about the central role of Avalokiteshvara in the sutra. Avalokiteshvara is more generally associated with Pure Land writings than Prajnaparamita literature and compassion rather than wisdom. So, what is s/he doing in the Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra?

These puzzlements and oddities only add to the enigma of what remains the most popular sutra today in Mahayana Buddhism.

Notes

1. Red Pine 2004.
2. Not only is the origin of the Heart Sutra obscure, the teachings of the sutra themselves are considered deep, subtle, and obscure as well. It is fair to say, then, that this brief introduction merely skims the surface of the meaning and intent of the sutra.

3. Traditionally, the date of the origin of the sutra has been placed between 150 and 350 CE. For reviews of the controversy over the origins and dating of the sutra, see Nattier (1992) and Red Pine (2004:16-27).
4. Although emptiness is a foundational doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, the doctrine is very often misunderstood. It does not mean that nothing exists; it refers instead to the nature of the existence of things, events, and beings. In the words of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, “The *existence* of things and events is not in dispute; it is the *manner* in which they exist that must be clarified.” Space does not allow an adequate discussion here, but readers should be aware that “things and events” are approached in Buddhism for the most part from a radical phenomenological perspective in which they are regarded as conscious experiences (as something in our mind so to speak) rather than as something “out there” (whether there is something “out there” was an issue the Buddha did not care to waste time thinking about while suffering suffused the world of sentient beings). According to the Buddha (as related in the Four Noble Truths), suffering is a result of thinking of oneself as an independently existing being with intrinsic existence; recognizing that this notion of the self is a delusion releases one from suffering.
5. These three phases are present by implication in comments by Dogen (Before I began to practice, mountains were mountains. After some years of practice mountains were no longer mountains. After still more years of practice mountains were really mountains) and in the ten ox-herding pictures (phases 1-7 in the pictures are equivalent to the first phase used in this text, phase 8 to the second phase, and phases 9-10 to the third phase).
6. This is the phase of the Four Noble Truths and Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamakakarika*. The insight at the end of the phase is that “the many are one” (“form is emptiness”).
7. This is an arhat’s version of nirvana or enlightenment, a view that Mahayana practitioners consider a “lesser understanding” (this is standard Mahayana rhetoric). To stress the point, there are numerous interpretations in Buddhism of what terms like nirvana, enlightenment, emptiness, and the Two Truths mean. Here, there is disagreement between arhat and Mahayana interpretations of nirvana and enlightenment. These disagreements arise in part from the Buddha’s practice of mentioning many of his key teachings without elaboration, leaving the meaning of the teachings open to divergent interpretations.
8. This is the Svātantrika Madhyamaka interpretation of the Two Truths doctrine. The interplay of these two views of existence in the mind of a bodhisattva is a central theme of the Diamond Sutra in which the one (emptiness) is now seen in the many (that is, in the myriad forms of conventional reality). Most basically, this is a typical example of the Buddha’s pragmatic teaching, for his primary concern is to free all beings from suffering (rather than to expound philosophical theories of existence). Once all beings are saved by taking both their conventional views of reality and emptiness into consideration, this pragmatic teaching is to be discarded because it too is empty, as Nagarjuna argues in the *Madhyamakakarika* (as people discard the raft [the Dharma] that has carried them successfully across the river of samsara to nirvana). Thus, as explained in the Diamond Sutra, the job of an ultimately nonexistent bodhisattva is to save an equally nonexistent sufferer from suffering, which, because all is empty, cannot exist either. For one version of a Madhyamaka interpretation of the Two Truths doctrine, see Red Pine 2004:41-96.
9. Red Pine, 2004:129.
10. Red Pine 2004.
11. This mode of practice is a fundamental characteristic of Soto Zen, which bypasses intellectual inquiries that focus on thoughts that arise in and rest in the neocortex of the brain. The practice concentrates instead on middle brain (limbic system) training, which relies on the constant holding of an image or ideal just at the edge of consciousness in a form of mental rehearsal. In this practice, the original intended meaning of the sutra is less important than what it invokes in us.
12. For examples of oddities and puzzlements in the Heart Sutra, see Loy 1999 and Red Pine 2004.
13. Readers unfamiliar with this line of thought will benefit from reading David Lowenthal’s *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
14. From a tantric point of view, the mantra is thought to summarize in a condensed form the five stages of the path of the bodhisattva: Gate, Gate (the two preparatory stages of accumulation and preparation); Paragate (the path of insight); Parasamgate (the path of meditation); Bodhi Svaha (which, at last, is the stage of no more learning) (Gyatso 2001:125). In this perspective, the mantra is both an instruction for practice and a means of evaluating one’s own level of spiritual understanding (the Dalai Lama 2005). In addition, some believe that those who recite the mantra acquire power that fuels their movement through the five stages of

the path of the bodhisattva (in this regard the sutra is said to have been used by Xuanzang and others to fend off demons in their travels).

Further Reading and Other Resources

General more accessible readings:

Gyatso, Geshe Keisand. *Heart of Wisdom: An Explanation of the Heart Sutra*. 4th ed. Tharpa publications, 2001.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. *Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*. Wisdom publications, Boston, 2005.

McLeod, Ken. *An Arrow to the Heart*. Trafford, Victoria, B.C., 2007.

Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Heart of Understanding*. Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1988.

Pine, Red (Bill Porter). *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas*. Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2004.

Academic overviews and commentaries:

Lopez, Donald S., Jr. *The Heart Sutra Explained*. State Univ. of New York Press, 1988.

----- . *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.

Loy, David. Review of Lopez's "Elaborations on Emptiness," *Philosophy East and West* 49 (4):520-524, 1999.

Nattier, Jan. The Heart Sutra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text? *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15(2):153-223, 1992.

Wikipedia. Heart Sutra. Accessed July 5, 2011.

The Heart Sutra has also been recorded in a variety of formats many times (see the "Recordings" section of the Wikipedia entry on the Heart Sutra).

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GG, last updated: January 14, 2012

Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when deeply practicing prajna paramita, clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty and thus relieved all suffering. Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself form. Sensations, perceptions, formations, and consciousness are also like this. Shariputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness; they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease.

Therefore, given emptiness, there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no formation, no consciousness; no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of sight ... no realm of mind consciousness. There is neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance ... neither old age and death, nor extinction of old age and death; no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path; no knowledge and no attainment.

With nothing to attain, a bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita, and thus the mind is without hindrance. Without hindrance, there is no fear. Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana. All buddhas of past, present, and future rely on prajna paramita and thereby attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment.

Therefore, know the prajna paramita as the great miraculous mantra, the great bright mantra, the supreme mantra, the incomparable mantra, which removes all suffering and is true, not false. Therefore we proclaim the prajna paramita mantra, the mantra that says:

“Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha.”