

The Heart Sutra

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Thousands of years ago, the great cosmic chef Avalokitesvara foraged through a wild field, gathered together all of Buddha's teachings, tossed them into a pot and let them simmer on a stove for 700 years. She then ladled the reduction onto a spoon and offered a taste to Shariputra, the renowned gourmand with a fondness for Buddhist cuisine.

It was all there! The Four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, the 12-Link Chain of Dependent Origination. Intimately familiar, yet completely fresh and alive.

For the first time in his life Shariputra was at a loss for words! After a few comical attempts to comment on this radical culinary breakthrough, he simply bowed down before Avalokitesvara and begged for another bite.

Good evening. Welcome to our little Heart Sutra dinner party. Avalokitesvara is with us tonight and, if you're lucky, you'll get to taste her celebrated concoction for yourself. But instead of opening your mouth, you need to open your mind.

The Heart Sutra contains the most condensed summary of Zen teaching of all Buddhist scriptures. So if you really want to understand our practice, this is a good place to turn. But be careful! When we first chant the Heart Sutra, most of us only remember a long string of "nos!": "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind." If you only remember that one sentence, the Heart Sutra will lead you into the weeds.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells a funny story about this:

A Zen Master once asked a novice monk to tell him about his understanding of the Heart Sutra.

The monk replied, "I have understood that the five skandhas are empty. There are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body or mind; there are no forms, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, or objects of mind; the six consciousnesses do not exist, the eighteen realms of phenomena do not exist, the twelve links of dependent arising do not exist, and even wisdom and attainment do not exist."

"Do you believe what it says?" asked the Master.

"Yes, I truly believe what it says."

"Come closer to me," instructed the Master.

When the monk drew near, the Zen Master reached out and twisted the monk's nose.

In great agony, the novice cried out "Teacher! You're hurting me!"

The Zen Master looked at the novice. "Just now you said that the nose doesn't exist. But if the nose doesn't exist, then what's hurting?"

Clearly, this monk had a problem: He was so attached to the sutra's words that he didn't even bother to look at something that was right in front of his face. But when the Heart Sutra appeared in the early part of the Common Era, many Buddhists had the opposite problem.

Tonight we'll take a look at how the Heart Sutra corrects both of these misunderstandings, shows us what it means to be a bodhisattva, and transports us to the realm the Buddhas!

The Heart Sutra is about wisdom. (But not just any ordinary kind of wisdom.)

Let's take a look at the first line of the chant, when we recite the sutra's full name:

The Maha Prajna Paramita Hrdaya Sutra.

Maha means *Great*;

Prajna means *Wisdom* — the transcendent, non-conceptual wisdom that comes from deep insight.

The word Prajna has two syllables: **Pra** means *before*, and **jna** means *to know*.

Before knowing. In our tradition we call this "Before Thinking."

It is sometimes called "**wisdom beyond wisdom**" to distinguish it from conventional wisdom; perhaps the kind of wisdom that your mother or grandmother passed down to you.

Paramita means *Perfection*,

so *Prajna Paramita* means *the Perfection of Wisdom* which transforms ordinary wisdom into *Prajna*.

Hrdaya means *Heart*, as in essence or core;

Sutra, as we know, is a teaching of the Buddha.

So the Heart Sutra is a highly condensed summary of a number of Prajna Paramita sutras which vary in length from 300 to 100,000 lines of text. (The Diamond Sutra also belongs to this category of sutras.)

Before we move onto the rest of the chant, it will be helpful to understand Buddha's teaching of The Two Truths. (If you are familiar with the Zen Circle, this will sound familiar.)

Buddha's Two Truths

Buddha taught us that everything we conventionally think of as a separate object is, at the same time, inseparable from all "other things." Everything is intimately inter-connected. (Logically, this is a paradox but, based on Buddhist insight into Prajna, it can be perceived.)

This quality of inter-being is called "emptiness," meaning empty of any separate, autonomous self. So in Buddhism, there are two aspects to the truth: Absolute Truth and Relative Truth.

Thich Nhat Hahn uses an analogy of waves and water to help us grasp this:

- Water is the "absolute" aspect (or substance) of a wave.
- A wave is a "relative" aspect of water; one of the forms that the substance of water can take on.

The wave and water are inseparable. In the same way, the Relative and Absolute are not separate.

("Wisdom" in Buddhism means perceiving this for ourselves.)

When we are ignorant of, or forget, either the Relative or Absolute aspect of truth, suffering appears.

Wisdom vs Knowledge

By the early part of the Common Era, many Buddhist sects had become very scholastic. Knowledge (*Jnana*) was prized over wisdom (*Prajna*). Buddhism was in danger of becoming a dry, academic philosophy, and had strayed far from Buddha's lifelong purpose, which was to ease suffering for all beings. Along the way, these sects had lost sight of the Absolute, empty aspects of Buddha's teachings.

The Heart Sutra was written to correct this misunderstanding.

The Heart Sutra, section by section.

Let's look at the sutra itself. I've broken it down into five parts so we can understand it more easily:

1. Introduction;
2. Prajna Paramita and the Five Skandas;
3. Emptiness: The common denominator;
4. The bodhisattva path;
5. The mantra that gives birth to all buddhas

1. Introduction

After we recite *The Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra*, it says:

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva

when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita or, "*the deep practice of Prajna Paramita*"
perceives that all five skandhas are empty or, "*empty of self-existence*"
and is saved from all suffering and distress.

Avalokitesvara is a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, similar to Kwan Seum Bosal.

All Buddhists at the time this was written knew Buddha's teaching of **The Five Skandas**:

During his lifetime, it was a given assumption that there is an eternal, permanent self.

But when Buddha looked closely, he instead found five kinds of mental and physical components that comprise what we assume is the self: *form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness*.

Skandas are usually translated as *heaps* or *piles*.

But since the skandas are always in a state of flux, it may be helpful to think of them as streams.

The main point of these four lines is that through prajna, Avalokitesvara:

- perceives the empty (or Absolute) aspect the five skandas and,
- *because* she realizes this empty aspect, she is liberated from suffering.

2. Prajna Paramita and The Five Skandas

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, or, "*is not separate from*"
emptiness does not differ from form.

That which is form is emptiness,
that which is emptiness form.

The same is true of feelings,
perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness;
they do not appear or disappear,
are not tainted or pure,
do not increase or decrease.

Shariputra was known as Buddha's most wise disciple, but his understanding of Prajna was not clear. So Avalokitesvara uses the skandas to perfect Shariputra's understanding of this teaching.

Avalokitesvara shows Shariputra that the Relative and Absolute aspects of Five Skandas are co-equals. It's not just that the skandas have a quality of emptiness, but that emptiness and each skanda are exactly the same.

This is also true of *dharmas* which, in this case, were more detailed subsets of each skanda. (The last three lines were known as the qualities that were thought to define a *dharma*.)

3. Emptiness: The Common Denominator

Therefore, in emptiness no form, no feelings, (The Five Skandas)
perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; (The Eighteen Dhatus)
no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch,
no object of mind;
no realm of eyes
and so forth until no realm of mind consciousness.

No ignorance and also no extinction of it, (The Twelve-Link Chain of Dependent Origination)
and so forth until no old age and death
and also no extinction of them.

No suffering, no origination, (The Four Noble Truths)
no stopping, no path, no cognition, no cognition/*na jnana* => *prajna*
also no attainment with nothing to attain. *no attainment of Nirvana*
..... *no attainment and no non-attainment*

Here, Avalokiteshvara shows us that all of Buddha's teachings have the quality of emptiness:
(notice references to the Five Skandas, the 18 dhatus, the 12-Link Chain and the Four Noble Truths).

This is the section in which there's a great deal of misunderstanding. Taken in isolation, it sounds like it contradicts the earlier line, "*That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness form.*" So it's crucial to understand that here Avalokiteshvara is only referring to the Absolute aspects of these teachings: IN EMPTINESS... no this, no that, etc.

Here, Avalokiteshvara is emphasizing wisdom (*Prajna*) over knowledge (*Jnana*) to bring Shariputra's attachment to knowledge into balance.

The last two lines which say, "*no cognition*" and "*no attainment with nothing to attain*" address the goal of the *shravaka* (early disciple of Buddha), which was to "understand" the Four Noble Truths and "attain" Nirvana.

In the next section, Avalokiteshvara introduces a new path made possible by Prajna Paramita: that of the Bodhisattva.

4. The Bodhisattva Path

The Bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita

and the mind is no hindrance; or, "*live without walls of the mind*"
without any hindrance no fears exist. or, "*and thus without fear*"

Far apart from every perverted view one dwells in Nirvana. .. or, "*they see through delusions*"

In the three worlds all Buddhas depend on Prajna Paramita .. or, "*all Buddhas also take refuge in*"
and attain Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi. or, "*realize unexcelled perfect enlightenment*"

While the goal of the early disciple was to attain Nirvana, which ends in no re-birth, the Bodhisattva path begins and ends in no-birth/no-death.

Because Bodhisattvas practice Prajna Paramita, the mind sees through all delusions including the "perverted" (upside-down) views of birth/death, being/non-being, and Nirvana/Samsara. In fact, the mind of Prajna, sees through all "opposites" ideas.

We also see that all Buddhas practice Prajna Paramita, and through it realize *Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi/unexcelled perfect enlightenment* (which, by the way, is also empty).

So without delusion, the path is now clear for us to wake up and liberate all beings; to become Buddhas.

5. The Mantra that Gives Birth to All Buddhas

Therefore know that Prajna Paramita *You should therefore know the great mantra*
 is the great transcendent mantra,
 is the great bright mantra,
 is the utmost mantra, is the supreme mantra
 which is able to relieve all suffering *which heals all suffering*
 and is true, not false.

So proclaim the Prajna Paramita mantra,
 proclaim the mantra which says: *the mantra in Prajnāparamita is spoken thus:*
 gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Let's look at how to translate the Prajna Paramita mantra:

gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

Gate means *gone* or *going*, (more specifically *going into the gone*);

Para means *beyond*, so **Paragate** means *going beyond* or *going into the gone beyond*.

Parasamgate means *going totally beyond* or *going totally into the gone beyond* (beyond even itself);

bodhi means *enlightenment*;

svaha is an exultant exclamation, something like *hallelujah* or *amen!*

OK, now that you understand the mantra's words, I recommend that you let them go! As Zen Master Seung Sahn said, "Just do it!"

This particular mantra is like a bullet train that instantaneously takes us to our destination:
 The realm of Enlightenment. Buddhahood. The realm that Buddha referred to as "the other shore" which
 is right here, right now. Its power lies in manifesting the transcendent. So if you're attached to the
 words, you'll remain standing at the station of conventional thinking.

A few comments about the Heart Sutra and the Zen Circle:

For those of us who are familiar with The Zen Circle, you may notice that the Heart Sutra takes us
 through its four worlds:

Opposites World: "*form is emptiness, emptiness form.*"

Absolute World: "*no form, no emptiness*"

Truth World: "*Form is form, emptiness is emptiness.*" (Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi)

Moment World: *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.* (Great wisdom and compassion).

After all of this thinking about the Heart Sutra, let's finish by chanting it together!

Special Thanks/Credits/For further study:

Red Pine (Bill Porter). *The Heart Sutra*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.

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Tanahashi, Kazuaki. *The Heart Sutra*. Shambala Publications, Inc., 2014.