

Notes on the *Heart Sutra*

The *Heart Sutra* is a summary of the *Prajna Paramita Sutras*, much longer texts (from 8,000 to 100,000 lines) that were written roughly between 100 BC and 300 AD. (A couple of these have been translated by Edward Conze.) A charming legend is that the prajna paramita teachings were guarded by the nagas (mythical half-human, half-serpent beings who live under water) and were given by the naga king (named, naturally, Nagaraja) to the great monk and teacher Nagarjuna (who had one of the first major commentaries on the prajna paramita teachings — but not the *Heart Sutra*, since it had not yet been written). This legend gives us an idea of the importance of these teachings to the Mahayana.

The *Heart Sutra* was written between 300 and 500 AD. Its Chinese text is purportedly a translation from the Sanskrit, but that is a matter of dispute; there is some evidence that it was originally written in Chinese and back-translated into Sanskrit. There is no definitive agreement on this question. In the Kwan Um School of Zen we chant the Chinese text using Korean pronunciation.

It's clear that the *Heart Sutra* was written in response to and as a refutation of some form of the abhidharma, and of other early Buddhist teachings. Abhidharma texts present themselves as the early teachings of the Buddha pertaining to what is, what we know, what we perceive, and how we know and perceive — in other words, a conflation of psychology and philosophy. Its hallmark is the close analysis of mental and physical phenomena based on principles of classification and organization. Shariputra is, according to legend, the person to whom the Buddha gave instruction in abhidharma, and the one who later wrote it up in a series of shastras (shastras are commentaries on the Buddha's teaching). Thus, the *Heart Sutra* is addressed to the person whose interpretations of the Buddha's words are being refuted.

The *Heart Sutra* is chanted widely within both the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, and is generally considered to capture the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teaching. Its wide adoption came after Hsuan-tsang (one of the major figures in the 7th century dialogue between Indian and Chinese Buddhism) attributed many miraculous escapes on his travels between China and India to chanting it. To anyone familiar with the abhidharma it would have appeared revolutionary. There is a story that when the prajna paramita teachings were first expounded many of the monks in the audience were so shocked that they died of heart failure (which is why a recent commentary on the *Heart Sutra* is titled *The Heart Attack Sutra*). Even if you come to it now with no previous knowledge, it is an extraordinary text.

Our translation is essentially the one originally done by Peter Schneider and Ryogen Yoshimura under the supervision of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi; we changed one word (“the mind has no hindrance” from “his mind has no hindrance”).

Key Terms

maha = great

prajna = wisdom

paramita = virtue, a.k.a. perfection. The six paramitas of Mahayana Buddhism are: generosity (dana), ethics (sila), patience (ksanti), courage (virya), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom (prajna)

hridaya = core, or heart. Etymologically related to the English “heart.”

sutra = scripture, generally the Buddha's teachings

Avalokitesvara = the Bodhisatva of compassion = Kwan Yin = Kwan Se Um Bosal = Kannon = Kanzeon. Avalokitesvara is generally depicted as male; Kwan Yin as either androgynous or female. Sanskrit meaning: either “the lord who looks down on the world,” or “one who observes the sound of the world’s suffering.”

Shariputra = one of the Buddha’s major disciples, considered the originator of the abhidharma (early Buddhist theory of consciousness and existence)

skandhas = heaps, or aggregates, of the basic constituents of reality: form, feelings (a.k.a. sensations), perceptions, impulses (a.k.a. volition, the will to act), consciousness

emptiness: (Sanskrit shunyata) neither non-existence nor a vacuum, more like the fundamental openness of space

dharmas = fundamental constituents of existence (not just material existence)

nirvana = the end of cyclic existence (not to be confused with samadhi = the state of complete concentration)

the three worlds = past, present, future; alternatively: desire world, form world, formless world. These two versions are distinct from each other.

anuttara samyak sambodhi = unexcelled perfect enlightenment

mantra = sound that is more fundamental than speech; in Korean, jin on = true words, Chinese translation is *ju*, “spell”

gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha = gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awake! hallelujah!

References to Early Buddhist Teachings

form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness refers to the five skandhas

do not appear or disappear refers to the fundamental early Buddhist teaching of impermanence

tainted or pure refers to the fundamental early Buddhist teaching of purity vs. impurity

do not increase or decrease is another reference to impermanence

no eyes, no ears... refers to the first step in consciousness: the six organs of perception

no color, no sound... refers to what is perceived directly

no realm of eyes is what can be seen: not the color red, but the red dress.

no ignorance... and so forth refers to the 12 links in the chain of co-dependent origination: ignorance, mental formations (karma), consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, sensation, desire, clinging, existence, life, old age & suffering & death

no suffering... no path refers to the Four Noble Truths: suffering, origination of suffering, the end of suffering, the path to the end of suffering

no cognition, also no attainment with nothing to attain refers to the notions of understanding and attainment

the mind is no hindrance is sometimes translated “the mind has no hindrance.” In Chinese there is no verb: literally, “mind no hindrance.” The Sanskrit text has “the mind has no walls.”

perverted is the translation here of *dian dao* which means “upside down” or “inverted.”

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