

The Heart Sutra: a Perfection of Wisdom Précis

Chinese Title: *Bore boluomiduo xin jing*

Sanskrit Title: *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*

Perhaps the most widely known and recited of all Buddhist scriptures in East Asia, the “Heart Sūtra,” an abbreviation of its full title, “The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra,” is a brief epitome of the central teaching of the PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ SŪTRAS, that all DHARMAS are “empty” (ŚŪNYATĀ) of self-nature. These scriptures, fundamental to all Mahāyāna thought, maintain that while there is a contingent reality to our selves and the world, these things exist as constructs only. Nothing exists in- and of-itself or arises from “self-cause”; everything is dependently arisen and causally conditioned. The scripture applies the notion of emptiness to the most fundamental categories of Buddhist thought: the Four Noble Truths and so forth, declaring that ultimately “There is no wisdom and no attainment. There is nothing to be attained.”

The version of the Heart Sūtra shown here lacks many of the formal characteristics of a sūtra, leading some scholars to propose that it was composed first in Chinese and then translated into Sanskrit. But no one questions the authenticity of its central teaching, which is, after all, nothing more (or less) than a distillation of the massive Perfection of Wisdom literature.

The *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara,
While deeply immersed in *prajñāpāramitā*,
Clearly perceived the empty nature of the five *skandhas*,
And transcended all suffering.

Śariputra!¹ Form is not different from emptiness;
Emptiness is not different from form.
Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.
So it is with feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness.²

Śariputra! All *dharma*s are empty in character;
Neither arising nor ceasing,
Neither impure nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.
Therefore, in emptiness there is no form;
There is no feeling, perception, volition, or consciousness;
No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind;
No form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or *dharma*s;
No realm of vision, and so forth . . . *up to* no realm of mind-consciousness;³
No ignorance or ending of ignorance, and so forth . . . *up to* no aging and death or ending of aging and death.⁴

¹ An early disciple of the Buddha, known especially for his wisdom and knowledge of Dharma. In Mahāyāna scriptures, particularly the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, he is sometimes the foil for criticism of Mainstream Buddhist views.

² Referring to the five *SKANDHAS*

³ I.e., the eighteen *DHĀTUS*

⁴ I.e., the TWELVEFOLD CHAIN OF CAUSATION

There is no suffering, no cause, no extinction, no path.⁵ There is no wisdom and no attainment.
There is nothing to be attained.

By way of *prajñāpāramitā*, the *bodhisattva's* mind is free from hindrances.
With no hindrances, there is no fear;
Freed from all distortion and delusion, ultimate nirvana is reached.

By way of *prajñāpāramitā*, buddhas of the past, present, and future attain *anuttara-samyaksambodhi*.⁶

Therefore, *prajñāpāramitā* is the great powerful mantra,
The great enlightening mantra,
The supreme and peerless mantra.
It can remove all suffering.
This is the truth beyond all doubt.
And the *prajñāpāramitā* mantra is spoken thus:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.

⁵ i.e., the FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

⁶ i.e., complete and perfect Enlightenment