



The Heart Sutra

प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदय

The Heart Sutra, along with the Diamond Sutra, are the keystones to Zen. When at Mt. Baldy, we would chant the Heart Sutra in Japanese twice a day. When I was with Seung Sahn at Sambosa, we would also chant it twice a day, both in English and Korean. When I was with Thich Tien-An, we would chant it once a day in both Vietnamese and English. I suppose we also chanted it in English or Japanese at Maezumi Roshi's center as well as Kapleau's center, but I do not remember.

Therefore, I chanted it twice a day or more in four languages, off and on for 17 years.

It is so very difficult to understand. Therefore, do not try. As with the Nisargadatta books, just let the words speak for themselves and let them do their magic on you. The understanding will come if you persist. Of course, I did not try this passive approach myself. Do as I say rather than do what I did. In retrospect, it is probably a better, less stressful way – a middle way.

Robert used to say that the key to enlightenment, as well as attaining perfection in all other areas, was persistence, continuing long after most people give up.

Below are three literal translations and one that is more commentary with a translation. There are hundreds of translations and commentaries available on the Internet, as well as philosophical explanations of terms by various scholars and spiritual teachers.

I will not attempt such here. Remember though, all this is mere philosophy. Even the Heart Sutra is just philosophy. All the terms have meanings buried in hundreds of years of history, just as in the West we have Human idealism, Kantian idealism, Hegelian idealism, realism, naïve realism, logical positivism, etc., and each has a different take on knowledge and existence. One WILL get lost in exploring the meanings of the terms. The point is not to become a scholar arguing emptiness versus this or that, but to find out what is not.

Since the Heart Sutra is not easy to understand, some versions are better than others based on how well the translator understands his or her own mind and being. Each brings their own level of attainment to the table.

A WARNING: there are many people who think they understand the Heart Sutra and therefore think they are enlightened. Then they get weird and think they are masters, or become scholars and write books. But, unless this Sutra smacks you in the face, it has not finished the job. There is a huge difference between conceptual understanding--in fact, it is a rather trivial concept that phenomena arises out of nothing and nothing permeates phenomena--and the experience of penetrating reality to its root, which is the intent of this highest expression of wisdom.

Along these lines, you might want to read the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, where he talks about his sudden enlightenment when hearing the Diamond Sutra.



The Heart of Great Wisdom Beyond Wisdom

The great Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, in the deep course of wisdom beyond wisdom, seeing that the five aggregates are also empty of inherent nature, overcame all suffering and distress.

Shariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness. Emptiness is not other than form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness.

All phenomena are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.

Therefore in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no formations, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of eye, no realm of mind-consciousness, nor anything in between. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, no old-age-and-death, no extinction of old-age-and-death, nor any of the twelve links.

Likewise there is no suffering, no origination, no cessation, and no path; no understanding, no attainment, and no non-attainment.

With nothing to attain the bodhisattva relies on wisdom beyond wisdom and the mind is no hindrance. Without any hindrance, there is no fear. Passing beyond every upside-down view, the bodhisattva abides in Nirvana.

All Buddhas in the past, present and future, relying on wisdom beyond wisdom, realize unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment.

Therefore this is the mantra of wisdom beyond wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the mantra that is unsurpassed, the mantra that is equal to the unequalled, the mantra that pacifies all suffering. Free from deception, it is the simple truth:

Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!

The Heart Sutra

Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, meditating deeply on the Perfection of Wisdom, saw clearly that the five aspects of human existence are empty, and so released himself from suffering.

Answering the monk Sariputra, he said this:

Body is nothing more than emptiness,
emptiness is nothing more than body.
The body is exactly empty,
and emptiness is exactly body.

The other four aspects of human existence --
feeling, thought, will, and consciousness --
are likewise nothing more than emptiness,
and emptiness nothing more than they.

All things are empty:
Nothing is born, nothing dies,
nothing is pure, nothing is stained,
nothing increases and nothing decreases.

So, in emptiness, there is no body,
no feeling, no thought,
no will, no consciousness.
There are no eyes, no ears,
no nose, no tongue,
no body, no mind.
There is no seeing, no hearing,
no smelling, no tasting,
no touching, no imagining.
There is nothing seen, nor heard,
nor smelled, nor tasted,
nor touched, nor imagined.

There is no ignorance,
and no end to ignorance.
There is no old age and death,

and no end to old age and death.
There is no suffering, no cause of suffering,
no end to suffering, no path to follow.
There is no attainment of wisdom,
and no wisdom to attain.

The Bodhisattvas rely on the Perfection of Wisdom,
and so with no delusions,
they feel no fear,
and have Nirvana here and now.

All the Buddhas,
past, present, and future,
rely on the Perfection of Wisdom,
and live in full enlightenment.

The Perfection of Wisdom is the greatest mantra.
It is the clearest mantra,
the highest mantra,
the mantra that removes all suffering.

This is truth that cannot be doubted.
Say it so:

Gaté,
gaté,
paragaté,
parasamgaté.
Bodhi!
Svaha!

Which means...

Gone,
gone,
gone over,
gone fully over.
Awakened!
So be it!

The Heart Sutra (Prajñápáramitá)

Om namo Bhagavatayai Arya-Prajnaparamitayai! {Bless the beautiful Perfection
of Wisdom!}

Koan-se-eum Bosal was in the practice of transcendental wisdom -- in the deep
course of wisdom which has gone beyond.

(S)he looked down from on high and saw but five essences of sentient beings --
form, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness -- which, in their own
being, were empty.

"Here, Oh Shariputra, Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form;
Form does not differ from Emptiness, Emptiness does not differ from Form;
- whatever is Empty, that is Form, whatever is Form, that is Empty!

The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness!

Oh Shariputra, all Dharmas are marked with Emptiness:
- they have no beginning and no end;
- they are neither imperfect nor perfect, neither deficient nor complete.

Therefore, Oh Shariputra, in emptiness, the five essences of sentient beings do
not exist: there is no form, no sensation, no perception, no volition, no
consciousness.

- There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind.

- There are no forms, sounds, smells, and tastes. There are no touchable or
objects of the mind, no sight organs, no hearing organs, no smelling organs, no
taste organs and no mind consciousness element.

- There is no ignorance or extinction of ignorance, no decay and death, nor
extinction of decay and death.

There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, no cognition, no
attainment, nor anything to attain.

There is nothing to accomplish and so Bodhisattvas can rely on the Perfection of Wisdom without trouble.

Being without trouble, they are not afraid.

Having overcome everything upsetting, they attain Nirvana.

All Buddhas who appear in the three periods fully awaken to the utmost, right and perfect enlightenment because they have relied on the Perfection of Wisdom.

Therefore, one should know the Perfection of Wisdom is the great mantra. It is the unequalled mantra, the destroyer of suffering.

Because of this truth, listen to the mantra:

Gate, Gate, Paragate, Para Samgate Bodhisvaha!
{Gone, Gone, Gone beyond, gone utterly beyond.}

The Heart Sutra

Thus Have I heard:

At one time the Blessed One was living at Rajagriha on Mount Sacred Eagle together with a great assembly of monks and laypersons. At that time the Blessed One was absorbed in a concentration concerning all phenomena that has come to be called “Profound Illumination.”

At that time also the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was looking perfectly at the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom and looking correctly at the emptiness of all phenomena.

Then, through the power of the Buddha, Shariputra said to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara “How should a son of the Lineage train who wishes to engage in the practice this of this wisdom?”

Thus he spoke, and Avalokiteshvara replied:

“Shariputra, whatever Son or Daughter of the Lineage who wishes to engage in this practice should realize is the emptiness of all existence; also empty are your five aggregates.

Form is empty and emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form and form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, the things that you are composed of, your aggregates are empty.

Shariputra, like this all phenomena are empty, having no inherent characteristics. They are not produced and do not cease. They have no taints or separation from taint. They have no increase or decrease.

Therefore, in this emptiness there is no form, no sensory input, no consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no taste, no tactile object, no phenomenon. There is no ignorance and no ending of ignorance and so on up to no ageing, sickness and death and no ending of aging, sickness and death.

Likewise empty are the four noble Truths, there is no special awareness no ‘attainment’ but also no non-attainment.

Therefore, because there is nothing to attain, Bodhisattvas rely upon and dwell in this perfection of wisdom. Their minds are always positive and feel no fear.

Passing beyond delusion they attain final Nirvana. All who have attained Buddha hood are enlightened to this knowledge.

Therefore, the Mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the mantra that quiets all suffering should be known as Truth. This mantra is proclaimed:

‘Tayatha Om Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Soha’
