



The significance of *Heart Sutra* in Mahayana Buddhism

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Abstract

In this paper I have discuss a very important class of Mahayana literature that concerns the perfection of wisdom (Prajnaparamita). We look at the texts themselves, it may be useful to examine the meaning of the prajnaparamita and the history of the Perfection of Wisdom discourses. The term prajna, which is often translated "wisdom" or "insight", is composed of the prefix pra and the root jna which means knowledge. Pra added to the root jna gives the sense of spontaneity, penetration, transcendental. One might therefore better translate prajna as "penetrative or special knowledge or wisdom". The term paramita is most often translated "perfection"; other popular translations include "gone beyond", "transcendental", and even "the climax of" wisdom. We will understand the term better if we notice its similarity to the English words "parameter" and "meter", both of which concern measurement or limit. In paramita, therefore, we have a word that indicates "going beyond the limit". Thus the whole term prajnaparamita ought to be understood to mean "penetrative wisdom or insight gone beyond the limit." If we remember this, we will avoid the danger of thinking of the perfection of wisdom as something static or fixed. This inevitably happens because the word "perfection" conjures up images of an unchanging, perfected condition. Yet in the perfection of wisdom we have a dynamic idea- the idea of a penetrative wisdom or insight that transcends the limit that is transcendental. The perfection of wisdom is one of the Six Perfection of the Mahayana Buddhism. It is also name of a large number of Mahayana sutras that are collectively called the Perfection of wisdom literature of Prajnaparamita sutras.

Keywords: *Wisdom; Insight; Prajnaparamita; Sunyata; Emptiness; Voidness; Mahayana Buddhism; Heart sutra.*

Introduction

The short Buddhist scripture the Heart sutra: *Heart of Wisdom* is one of the most sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhism that traditionally flourished in India, China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and many regions of central Asia, including what is today modern Afghanistan. For more than two millennia this scripture has played an extremely important role in the religious lives of millions of Buddhists. It has been memorized, chanted, studied, and meditated upon by those aspiring to attain what Mahayana Buddhism describes as the perfection of wisdom. Even today, the chanting of this sutra can be heard in Tibetan monasteries, where it is recited in the characteristically deep overtone voice, in Japanese Zen temples, where the chanting

is done in tune with rhythmic beating of a drum, and in Chinese and the Vietnamese temples, where it is sung in melodious tunes. Often referred to by its short title, the *Heart Sutra*, the interpretation of the subtle meaning of the various passages of this sacred text has produced numerous commentarial treatises over the centuries. I am going to present this paper effectively serves as a comprehensive introduction to the central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Heart Sutra in Mahayana Buddhism

Historically, the *Heart of Wisdom* belongs to a well-known class of Buddhist scriptures known as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which the noted European scholar Edward



Conze, who dedicated much of his life in translating these scriptures, has suggested was composed sometime between 100 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. On the surface, these scriptures deal with the topic of the perfection of wisdom, this articulates the deep insight into what Buddhists call emptiness. In other words, the central theme of these Perfection of Wisdom sutras is found to be a profound union of compassion and wisdom. Perhaps to a reader unfamiliar with the Mahayana tradition, it may seem perplexing that a text such as the *Heart Sutra*, whose core message is a string of negative statements, can be a source of such deep spiritual inspiration to so many people. To dissolve this perplexity it is necessary to have some understanding of the role the language of negation plays in these Buddhist scriptures. From its earliest evolution, one of the central teachings of Buddhism has been to gain freedom from our bondage to clinging, especially to a belief in some kind of enduring reality, whether it be the external world or the internal world of one's own personal existence.

According to Buddhism, the source of our suffering lies in a deeply embedded tendency to grasp at enduring realities where there are none, particularly the tendency to grasp at an enduring sense of self. It is this grasping that gives rise to dysfunction in our interaction with our fellow beings and with the world around us. Since this tendency is deeply rooted in the psyche, nothing short of a radical deconstruction of our naïve understanding of self and world can lead us to true spiritual freedom. The *Heart Sutra's* categorical negation of the intrinsic existence of all things, especially the five personal aggregates, can be seen not only as an extension of this key Buddhist wisdom but in fact as a supreme example of such wisdom. This is the key to the overwhelming veneration of this short text in the Mahayana Buddhist world. In addition to being utilized for deep meditative

contemplation on emptiness, the sutra is often chanted as a means of overcoming various factors that obstruct spiritual progress. By reflecting deeply upon the essentially empty nature of all things, we undercut any basis for the so-called obstacles to take root within us. Thus meditation on emptiness, undertaken often on the basis of reciting the *Heart Sutra*, is considered a powerful method for overcoming obstacles.

The *Heart Sutra* is unlike any other sutra in the Buddhist canon. It is by far the most popular sutra read today and contains some of the Buddha's most profound teachings. The English word 'heart' actually comes from the Sanskrit *hrdaya*, and, as it is used in the title, has many of the same connotations as both the Chinese and Sanskrit, which indicate that it is the essence, or fundament of atopic(as in the phrase "the heart of the matter"). For Buddhists, the *Heart Sutra* presents the essence of the Buddha's teachings on *prajna*, the highest form of wisdom attained by enlightened beings, and the means to its perfection (*paramita*). As such, it is praised for its precision and brevity in handling such a profound topic. The *Heart Sutra*, however, comes to us from a later time in the history of Buddhism, and presents a radically different understanding of the nature of phenomena and *dharmas*. As a *prajnaparamita* text, the *Heart Sutra* elucidates the fundamental doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, that all phenomena are empty of any independent, substantial or eternal existence. In other words, for the later schools of the Mahayana tradition, not only is the Self devoid of any real, objective existence, so are the very *dharmas* that combine to create the illusion of a Self. Or, as Avalokitesvara realizes in the Sutra, all five *skandhas* are empty, and it's through this realization of emptiness, rather than impermanence, that the Bodhisattva overcomes all suffering.



The doctrine of emptiness, (*sunyata*) in the *prajnaparamita* Sutras

Emptiness is not however a metaphysical entity. According to the teaching the Perfection of Wisdom and Mahayana masters, emptiness is synonymous with both interdependent origination and the Middle way. It is synonymous interdependent origination because all that exists is conditioned and, relative to other factors, empty of independent existence. Emptiness is synonymous with the Middle Way because understanding emptiness enables one to transcend the alternative dualities of existence and none existence, identity and difference, and so forth. Emptiness is not view. This is illustrated at considerable length in the works of Nagarjuna, the founder of the Middle Way School, which championed emptiness. Emptiness is itself relative and devoid of independent existence. This is why Haribhadra, in his commentary on the *Abhisamayalankara*, a text that elaborates on the message of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, lists among the various types of emptiness “the emptiness of emptiness”:emptiness, too is relative and empty. Emptiness is, in fact, a therapeutic device. It is a corrective for the exclusively analytical view, which leaves us with a residual belief in the real existence of the elements of experience. Emptiness is device that enables us to transcend this pluralistic belief in the independent existence of things. It is for this reason that emptiness is likened to a medicine that cures residual belief in the independent existence of elements. Emptiness is also likened to salt, which makes food palatable.

The doctrine of emptiness, called *sunyata*, is the ultimate conclusion of the Buddha’s teaching that all things depend upon causes and conditions to arise and, therefore, lack any intrinsic nature. A Buddhist monk from the south of India named Nagarjuna (150BCE-150CE) is credited with having founded an entire school of Buddhist thought based on the Mahayana doctrine of

emptiness, called the Madhyamika. Nagarjuna is considered the greatest expositor of Buddhist thinking after the Buddha himself, and his school of thought is considered the second turning of the Wheel of the Law. Nagarjuna constantly warns against the reification of *sunyata* as the underlying substratum or essential nature of reality. Hence, there is a danger in translating the most famous line of the Heart Sutra, which equates the first *skandha* (form) with *sunyata*, because there is the potential of construing emptiness as an object that simply replaces matter as the substance of the world. Rather, *sunyata* should be understood as a principle that explains the manifestation of all phenomena by revealing that the underlying nature of all things is empty, and that the perception of independent, self-existing objects in an illusion. As the Hear sutra makes clear, this is true of all *dharmas*, all things, ideas and concepts, including the Buddha’s most fundamental teaching about the nature of suffering. Therefore, in reality, there is no coming together or falling apart, nothing to be labeled pure or impure, nothing to be or not to be.

Once this most profound doctrine of emptiness has been set forth, *Avalokitesvara* continues to apply this negation to all the basic components of the Abhidharma thinking that Shariputra represents in the text, including the eighteen bases of perceptual activity, the twelve links in the chain of causation, and the Four Noble Truths. The Bodhisattva explains that even *prajna*, the very wisdom that arises through this penetratingly deep understanding of emptiness, is also empty, and that ultimately nothing is attained in the practice of *prajnaparamita* because there is nothing to attain and no one to attain it. This paradox of non-attainment is at the very heart of the *prajnaparamita* literature and is nowhere more clearly presented than in the Heart Sutra.



The *prajnaparamita* Sutras are a genre of Buddhist literature that began to appear predominantly in the northern regions of the Indus Valley between 100 BCE and 100 CE. Although produced considerably late in the history of Buddhism, these sutras present themselves as records of the teachings of the historical Buddha, Sidhartha Gotama. According to Chinese tradition, the Buddha spent 22 years discoursing on *prajna* during his lifetime. Edward Conze, the foremost Western scholar of *prajna* sutras, lists forty different extant sutras dealing with *prajna* in his extensive bibliography of *prajnaparamita* literature. In Sanskrit these sutras are typically measured by their number of *slokas*, lines of verse in 32 syllables. The largest extant *prajna sutra* is in 100,000 lines, with other versions ranging in length from 25,000 lines to one of the smallest in 14 lines, which is also known as the Heart Sutra. Yet, despite having such a large body of information, the exact origin of this sutra is shrouded in veil of mystery.

The popularization of *prajnaparamita* sutras is usually traced back to the activities of the founder of the Madhyamika School, Nagarjuna. Legend has it that Nagarjuna was lecturing at the famous monastery at Nalanda when he caught sight of two shape-shifting serpents, known as *nagas*, in human form attending his class. Afterwards he followed them down to an underwater kingdom where he encountered the seven-headed Naga King named *Muchilinda*. *Muchilinda* had once protected the Buddha for seven days with his massive hood during a hail storm, for which the Buddha bestowed him with special teachings. It was from the Naga King that Nagarjuna first heard the Great *prajnaparamita Sutra*, which supposedly consisted of one million lines of metered verse. When he returned to the world of men, Nagarjuna began making known the wisdom he had obtained by teaching and writing about *prajna* and its related systems. The Buddhist tradition holds that over time the essence of the

prajnaparamita Sutra was distilled into more and more condensed versions, until it finally reached its most succinct form as the Heart Sutra. However, this story does not entirely agree with what we know from historical records. There are essentially two versions of the Heart Sutra, a longer and a shorter, which have both appeared in variety of different languages throughout the centuries, including: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Sogdian, Mongolian, Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese. The shorter version appears to be the oldest, judging by both Sanskrit and Chinese sources and lacks the traditional introduction of Buddhist sutra with the six characteristic marks: Faith in accuracy of the text, a rapporteur, the time, the Buddha, the place, and the assembly. The longer version have these elements appended to the front, yet none appear prior the production of Xuanzang's which is by far the shortest rendition, consisting of only 268 Chinese Characters.

The Five Profundities of Heart (*Hridaya*)

The Heart (*Hridaya*) Sutra is presently the topic. According to T'ien' T'ai' sect to explain one of the Mahayana sutras should cover five points of the scripture's profound meaning, or five profundities. What are they?

- 1 Explanation of terms and names
- 2 Definition of the substance
- 3 Clarification of the principles
- 4 Discussion of its (sutra's) application.
- 5 Discernment of the doctrine

The five profundities regarding this sutra are as follows: The Dharma and the example stand for the name. All dharmas are empty (or void) of substance. "Noting there to be attained" is the principle. Breaking off the three hindrances (greed, hatred and ignorance) is the application and the ripening of the fruit is the doctrine. The following details will provide further explanation:

1 Explanation of terms and names



The title of The *Prajnaparmita* Heart (or *Hridaya*) Sutra combines Dharma, i.e., *Prajnaparamita*, with a specific example Heart or *Hridaya*. The terms used are in Sanskrit: *Prajna* means wisdom, and *Prajnaparamita* stands for wisdom acquired experientially, by means of intuitive insight, and perfected through cultivation to the level of transcendental knowledge; it is the original wisdom of the mind, or the True Mind. Why, then, add words to it? Because the sutra is axiomatic to the entire collection of the *Prajnaparamita* scriptures. Just as we hold the heart to be the centre, that sutra holds the essence of all the *Prajnaparamita* texts. Originally, *Prajna* manifested itself as intuitive wisdom in all sentient beings since time immemorial. That is called former wisdom or wisdom of life; but people became confused through grasping, and the True Mind fogged over by perverted views manifested itself as obsessive thought-patterns. The cycle of birth and death never stops turning the wheel of life, and it is difficult to get out. Actually, the True Mind is never separate from us, not even for one moment. The Buddha spoke the *Prajnaparamita* Dharma for close to twenty-two years. Recorded and compiled, the resulting text consisted of six hundred scrolls, classified into eight groups.

The differences that existed were merely differences in expedient means, adjusted to suit a particular potential, and in every case the aim was to free those who listened from perverted views, abandon grasping, and return to the original source and understand their True Mind. In other words, the *Prajna* teaching is aimed to remove confusion, bring about recognition of one's own True Mind, and return to the truth. According to this doctrine the mind has three layers. First is the layer of the deluded mind; the second is the *Prajna* mind, and the third is the centre, the heart, or the pivot of the *Prajna* mind, and such is also the relation of this sutra to the doctrine. The Heart Sutra is the axis of all the *Prajnaparamita* teachings, taking

further the example of the mind; one might call the Heart Sutra the centre of the central sutras. If we compare the core of this sutra with the worldlings' mind, the mind of *Prajna* is the true mind and the mind of worldlings is the deluded mind.

Again, the center of the mind's centre may be perceived as consisting of three layers, i.e., the mind of saints, the mind of bodhisattvas and that of Buddha. Minds of worldlings are immersed in suffering of many kinds. The mind of saint, such as the accomplished individual of the two vehicles, is approaching Buddhahood; next comes the mind of a bodhisattva with only one more rebirth to endure and at the centre of mind's centre is Buddha or the Ultimate or True Mind. The mind of *Prajnaparamita* Sutra is the True Mind, also referred to as the Essential wisdom. Essential Wisdom we are speaking of is to be distinguished from an awareness of objects or environment and their use and value usually characterized as "knowledge" by worldlings.

The term "*Paramita*" is in Sanskrit and it means reaching the other shore. *Prajnaparamita* or the Wonderful Wisdom, coursing like a boat, transports all sentient beings across the sea of defilement to the other shore that is Nirvana. The word Nirvana, also from Sanskrit, means transcending birth and death, or simply liberation. *Prajnaparamita* is, therefore, the Essential Wisdom and the center of all kinds of *prajna*. Most every sutra functions at two levels simultaneously: One level is general, the other, specific, but the *Prajnaparamita* Heart Sutra is just specific: Although its title includes the word sutra due to usage, the text does not function at the general level. "*Sutra*" in Sanskrit originally meant to uphold, and when applied to principles, it upholds the principles of all Buddhas moving upward, downward upholding sentient beings according to their potential. If the one who understands Buddhadharmas upholds the principles of all the past Buddhas, he/she can liberate



sentient beings. Whoever can understand the theory behind the flawless, accomplished Buddha, can understand also how to uphold the potential of sentient beings. Sutra means a shortcut, and a well frequented path. It means the way to complete enlightenment.

1 The Definition of substance

The second profundity is the definition of substance. What is the substance of the Heart Sutra? Starting with “Oh, Sariputra, the characteristic of the voidness of all dharmas is non-arising” until “there is no wisdom, and there is no attainment whatsoever” is the definition of the substance. Consequently, the “characteristic of the voidness of all dharmas” is the substance of this sutra.

1 The Clarification of the principles

The third profundity is focused on the clarification of the purpose of the sutra. As we already understand the meaning of this sutra’s name as well as the meaning of its substance, we should have no difficulty understanding the sutra’s principle or purpose. We should understand its principle according to the sentence “There is nothing to be attained”. When there is nothing to attain, one is able to discern the characteristic of Emptiness.

2 Discussion of its (sutra’s) application.

As to the discussion of the application of the sutra- it being the fifth profundity- it is to break off the three obstacles. What are these? They are 1) passions; 2) deeds (past karma); and 3) retribution. Problems, worries and suffering all are related directly to the three obstacles.

There are two kind of retribution: 1. being the resultant person, 2. being in the dependent conditions(s). Being the resultant person means being what we are physically, our body. Some are strong, in good health and others respect them for it. Some are unsightly, unwholesome and others dislike them. The strong, the weak, the long-lived and the short-lived, the beautiful, the ugly, the wise as well as the foolish, all have

varied causes in their previous lives, and accordingly receive diverse effects in their present existence. Those who have produced good causes in their previous existence enjoy good health, longevity, beauty and wisdom in this life. Those who generated evil causes in their past lives have various deficiencies and shortcomings in the presents. That is what being resultant person means. Being in the dependent condition(s) means one’s circumstances, including clothing, sustenance and shelter. Obviously, those who have all their need satisfied live happily; favorable events occur, yet they do not have to exert themselves, because of good causes in their previous lives. A resultant person relies on dependent conditions for survival and the conditions, in turn, have their causes in the past existence. Good karma, practice and deeds that benefit others at present will produce favourable effects in future existence. The connection between cause and effect must not be doubted. The obstacles resulting from past deeds come into existence because we live in this world. It really does not make any difference who is lay person and who is monk or a nun. Most are involved in interactions inevitably connected with existence within society, which frequently produce circumstances generating obstacles through karma. Karma is of three kinds: Good, bad and unmovable. The original defilements count six in number: Greed, hatred, ignorance, aggregates, doubt and heterodox views. All three obstacles are served naturally when the meaning of the sutra is thoroughly understood because the application of this sutra is breaking off the three obstacles. To get rid of the three obstructions is to be released from many kinds of suffering. The suffering is all-pervasive and even devas must endure it, though to a much lesser degree than humans. Therefore the purpose of all Buddhadhrama is to depart from suffering and dwell in happiness.

3 Discernment of the doctrine



Since we have already reaches some understanding as to the meaning of the sutra in terms of the four profundities., i.e. its name, substance, principles and application, we are in positing to proceed to the last one- the discernment of doctrine. The entire body of the Buddha's teaching can be divided into five phases and the example of five ways milk is used to provide nourishment can be applied to situate the phase of the Heart Sutra in the context of the entire body of the Buddha's teachings. While teaching, the Buddha frequently referred to the example of the while white cow of Snow Mountains. On the slopes of the Snow Mountains grow many varieties of grass that make the cow healthy and strong. The milk is wholesome and rich in nutrients and helps those who drink it better to survive. Similarly, the Buddhharma can nourish our wisdom, and therefore the example of five uses of milk appropriately illustrates the five stages of the Buddha's teaching. Initially, the Buddha spoke the essence of the *Avatamsaka* Sutra, it being the first phase of his teaching. It was the teaching as formulated in the Mahayana sutras, and those with obstructions could not rise to its level. It was like offering fresh, raw milk to a baby; those with obstructions could not rise to its level.

The second phase is represented by the *Agamas*, comparable to thin, sour milk. The Buddha spoke the *Avatasmaka* first so that the eyes of Mahayana Bodhisattvas would open to the view of the Buddhas. At that time many of shallow root could not and would not accept these highest teaching; though they had eyes they could not see; though they had ears, they could not hear. Though they had mouths, they could not ask. It was if they were deaf and mute. The Buddha continued teaching the *Avatamsaka* for three weeks to convert all those with Bodhisattva potential. Many who could not listen later formulated the Theravada tradition. In the Deer Park, the Buddha chose to teach the *Agamas* thereby making his teaching comparatively easier to

understand. Five of his friends attained deep understanding and became his first monks (bhiksus) and that marked the beginning of what later became the Theravada tradition. The Buddha taught *Agamas* for close to twelve years. Those who could not follow the teachings during the *Avatamsaka* phase can be compared to babies, unable to digest fresh milk, but can take it thinned down or after the milk was allowed to turn. The teaching of *Agamas* is comparable to milk that was thus made easier to digest.

The third phase is *Vaipulya*, interpreted as containing doctrines of equal relevance. That phase is comparable to milk of full strength that was allowed to turn in order to be easily digestible. During that time the Buddha spoke four kinds of teachings, and the division into Theravada and Mahayana was not marked. The phase is said to have lasted for approximately eight years.

The fourth phase, that of *Prajna*, is believed to have lasted for twenty-two years; it can be compared to the ripened curd. The nourishment it provides is concentrated as well as digestible.

The fifth phase relates to the *Saddharma Pundarika* and to the Nirvana Sutras. Returning the milk simile, it has the quality of clarified butter. During that period the Buddha is said to have taught Mahayana Dharma, the unimpeded teaching pointing directly at the mind.

To summarized, the Buddha taught Dharma in five stages and each of these displays two facets: Expedience and reality. Expedience means following the causes and conditions (such as the sentiment and potential of sentient beings in a given situation); Reality equally Truth or the absence of falsehood. The Buddha spoke truth of the unsurpassed wisdom directly.

Conclusion

Wonderful *Prajna!* Mother of all Buddhas, the supreme guide and teacher of sages and saints. All that is from *Prajna* and returns to *Prajna*. Sentient beings experience birth and death in the wheel of



life, their mind deeply affected by ignorance, bent by the five *skandhas*, confused and submerged in the ocean of suffering for long kalpas. How regrettable! *Prajna* is said to be the light in the darkness of a very long night. On the ebb and flow of the ocean of suffering, *Prajna* is a raft. To a house consumed by blazing fire, *Prajna* is the rain. Without *Prajna* the universe is darkness, without *Prajna* the human mind is ignorant, without *Prajna* sentient suffer without respite. Cultivation of *Prajnaparamita*, the perfected virtue of knowing truth by intuitive insight, relieves us from our suffering and helps us to overcome every kind of calamity. All Buddhas of the past, present and future attain *Prajna*, all sages and saints have cultivated *Prajna*: Therefore, all of us need to cultivate the practice of *Prajna*.

Every version of the Heart Sutra concludes with a mantra, a sacred incantation used in the practice of meditation and the performance of ritual. Another word used for this type of formulae is a *dharani*, which is similar to a mantra but considered to have more protective or magical properties. A *dharani* can also be thought of as a mystical mnemonic device, containing vast amounts of Buddhist knowledge is highly condensed phrases. Thus, in the same way that the essence of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* retrieved by Nagarjuna from the *nagas* was condensed into smaller and smaller version until it finally reached the size of the Heart Sutra, the meaning and the essence of the Heart Sutra itself is believed to be held in the phrase: *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*.

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