

A Brief Exposition on the Heart Sutra

The Heart Sutra is the apex of the Mahayana Buddhism thought. Buddhism developed from Theravada to Mahayana. Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos are essentially Theravada. Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Hongkong, Singapore, Taiwan, Tibet and Mongolia are essentially Mahayana.

In this long development of Buddhism, the key concept of emptiness or void (Sūnya in Sanskrit) developed along. Life is non-permanent because everything comes and goes, depending on the law of causation. Life is therefore illusory, not real. In other words, life is emptiness.

This concept of emptiness may easily lead to the negative thought of nihilism. Mahayana Buddhism takes us back out of this extremist concept of emptiness to the middle way. This middle way still commits to the idea that “life is emptiness”; however emptiness here is not different from existence--emptiness is existence, existence is emptiness. This middle way definitely takes away any inkling of nihilist negativism. It is realistic and positive about life.

The Heart Sutra presents this middle way while going swiftly through all teachings of the Buddhist tradition, from Theravada to Mahayana. This sutra is so central to Mahayana Buddhism that it is recited daily by monks and nuns. Studying the Heart Sutra is really the studying of the whole Buddhism.

The Heart Sutra

Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra

The Heart Sutra is also called the Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra, the Essence of Wisdom Sutra, The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra.

<http://www.cttbusa.org/heartsutra/heartsutra.htm>

The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra

(Translated by Tang Dharma Master of the Tripitaka Hsüan-Tsang on imperial command).

When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound prajna paramita, he illuminated the five skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So, too, are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.

Shariputra, all dharmas are empty of characteristics. They are not produced. Not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish. Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness; and no ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, no accumulating, no extinction, no way, and no understanding and no attaining.

Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisattva, through reliance on prajna paramita, is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid, and he leaves distorted dream-thinking far behind. Ultimately Nirvana!

All Buddhas of the three periods of time attain Anuttarasamyaksambodhi through reliance on prajna paramita. Therefore, know that prajna paramita is a great spiritual mantra, a great bright mantra, a supreme mantra, an unequalled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is genuine and not false. That is why the mantra of prajna paramita was spoken. Recite it like this:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

Explanation

I. The Title “The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra”

The full name of the Heart Sutra is the Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra.

Prajna is a Sanskrit term and means wisdom. However, this wisdom is more than the regular wisdom we encounter every day. Our daily wisdom usually has “duality” in it—right wrong, black white, good bad, love hate, existence nothingness, etc. In deep analysis, this duality wisdom is the source of all troubles, because my right is your wrong and, therefore, conflict arises between us. Duality wisdom makes our heart discriminate between this and that (discriminating mind), makes our heart/mind jumpy, leads us into conflicts and, therefore, makes us ignorant. In short, our everyday wisdom is not true wisdom yet.

The true wisdom surpasses such duality, surpassing right and wrong, surpassing existence and nothingness, etc. It is the wisdom of a mother of two fighting children, each claiming that he is

right and the other is wrong. The mother sees neither right nor wrong, but only that both children are ignorant in their fight.

To indicate this ultimate wisdom, the Buddhists see fit to keep the original word “prajna” instead of translating it into the word “wisdom.”

Paramita is a Sanskrit term and means “crossing to the other shore.” Crossing to the other shore also means “liberate” or “enlighten.”

But, what shore and what river are we talking about? In Buddhism, we are on the shore of suffering. By crossing the river of ignorance, we get to the other shore, which is the shore of enlightenment.

Thus, Prajna is the ultimate wisdom that carries us across the river of ignorance to the shore of enlightenment.

Heart means the core, the essential.

Sutra means holy writing.

Thus **The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra** is an essential, holy writing about the ultimate wisdom that carries us across the river of ignorance to the shore of enlightenment.

However, please note, when we talk about crossing from the shore of suffering to the shore of enlightenment, we are talking about duality—two opposite shores—which we have said is not really wisdom. Prajna accepts no duality. As we will see later, in prajna, when we reach the other shore, we see that the true nature of all things is emptiness, and in emptiness there was/is/will be no river to cross. All the crossing is just a fleeting phenomenon of the mind.

II. The Essence of Wisdom (The first 2 verses)

The first 2 verses are the essence of prajna. All other following verses are further expansion of this essence. These are the first 2 verses:

When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound prajna paramita, he illuminated the five skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So, too, are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.

Bodhisattva is a Sanskrit term. It is a word in Mahayana Buddhism. Bodhi means enlightened. Sattva means a sentient being, a being with feelings. In the Mahayana tradition, Bodhisattva is a person who has reached enlightenment but postpones final attainment of full Buddhahood in order to help other people reach enlightenment. Bodhisattva is one step lower than a full Buddha, so to speak.

The Bodhisattva Path is the Mahayana way to reach enlightenment. This way is called “six paths to cross to the other shore” (or “six virtues of enlightenment”). They are giving, keeping rules and precepts, patient and humble, devotion (or effort), meditation, and wisdom. At the start of the training, the first thing a trainee must do is “to start bodhicitta” (to develop the Bodhisattva heart)—a commitment to achieve enlightenment in order to help other beings achieve enlightenment too. This is a very selfless vow.

Mahayana Buddhism has **Bodhisattva** as an enlightened person.

Theravada Buddhism has two types of enlightened persons: (1) **Pratyekabuddha** is a person who reaches enlightenment through learning and practicing the Twelve Links of Cause and Effect (the twelve nidanas). This way of training is called the Pratyebuddha Vehicle. (2) **Arhat** is a person who reaches enlightenment from practicing the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. This training way is called Sravaka Vehicle. We will explore these different training ways later.

The fullest level of enlightenment is Buddha. There are many Buddhas in the sutras, but there is only one historical Buddha in the history of the world—that is Buddha Sakyamuni (the sage of the Sakyas family), the founder of Buddhism.

Thus, we have four types of enlightened persons, ranked from top down: Buddha, Bodhisattva, Pratyekabuddha, Arhat.

Avalokiteshvara is the name of the Bodhisattva. In most Buddhist sutras, a Bodhisattva's name is both a proper noun (his own name) and a common noun (a generic term standing for something). In Sanskrit, Avalokiteshvara means "lord who looks down" or "lord who perceives sounds." Avalokiteshvara is a very prominent Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokiteshvara looks down upon the world and listens to the cries for help of all sentient beings.

Avalokiteshvara, in addition to being a proper name, also indicates any of us who is enlightened enough to be able to look at existence (our self and the world around us) as it is, without distortion, confusion, or ignorance.

Five skandhas (or five aggregates) are form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. Together these five skandhas make up our being. Form indicates the physical part of our being. Feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness make up the mental part. Thus, the term "five skandas" indicates human being, human existence.

The first verse of the Heart Sutra, therefore, means "When the enlightened person who observes existence as it is practices the profound prajna wisdom, he sees that his being is emptiness, then he crosses beyond all suffering."

Here is the first important step into Buddhism. Non-Buddhists generally think that we exist, and our existence is solid, real, and permanent. This attitude is called "**attaching to/grasping onto existence.**"

Buddhism says our existence is not real--it is fleeting, impermanent; our being is illusory, it is void, it is emptiness.

This was the earliest meaning of emptiness in the long development of the Buddhist thought. At that time, emptiness was still limited to human life. Many Buddhist schools of the pre-prajna time maintained that our being is void but the world around us does exist.

A characteristic of emptiness at that time was that emptiness was understood as the opposite of existence (form), so emptiness could easily be understood with the extreme meaning of nihilism. This nihilist extremist attitude is called "**attaching to/grasping onto emptiness.**"

As we will see in the next verses, prajna (1) expands the concept of emptiness from human to the entire universe, and (2) at the same time, pulls emptiness back from the nihilist extreme to the **middle way**—empty but existing, existing but empty-- and makes emptiness more realistic and more positive to living.

Sariputra is the son of the Sari family. This is one of Buddha Sakyamuni's disciples. Please note, in the Heart Sutra, Sariputra was addressed by name twice. Each time signifies a major development in the meaning of emptiness in the history of Buddhism. This first time is to take emptiness from the nihilist opposite of existence to the middle way, as the following sentence shows.

Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form.

Form is one of five skandhas--form, feeling, thought, cognition, and consciousness--that make up our being. Form indicates the physical part of human.

Form is also one of six dusts—form, sound, fragrance, taste, objects of touch, dharmas--that make up the universe.

Thus the term “form” in the above verse serves two major functions. First, it is used as an antonym of emptiness. Second, it is a subtle link to make a subtle announcement of the upcoming expansion of emptiness from human to the entire universe.

While emptiness is now quietly planning to expand its “territory” from human to the entire universe, emptiness is also pulling its meaning back from the nihilist extreme to the middle way. Recall that, in the first verse, our being is emptiness (five skandas are emptiness). However, this second verse shows that emptiness surely doesn’t mean “nothing” or “non-existence.” In this second verse, emptiness is not different from form, and form is not different from emptiness.

In other words, emptiness and form, the two seemingly opposite concepts, are really one and the same. The repetition “form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form” is a logical formula to confirm, in a negation mode of speaking, that form and emptiness are the same.

Then the next sentence, “**form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form,**” is another logical formula to confirm again, now in the affirmation mode of speaking, that form and emptiness are the same.

Both the affirmation and negation modes of speaking aim to emphasize one central truth: Form and emptiness are the same, existence and emptiness are the same.

Not only form, which stands for our physical body, but the mental elements of our being also operate the same way—they and emptiness are the same; they are emptiness and emptiness is them. That is the meaning of the next sentence of the Heart Sutra “**So, too, are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness.**”

In sum, at this point in the development of the Buddhist thought we have: Our being is emptiness, but emptiness doesn’t mean nihilism; emptiness is the same as form or whatever makes up our being.

But why form and emptiness are the same? Why two apparently opposite things are the same?

Here we need to go into the “**Three Dharma Seals**” to find the answer.

Dharma is a rather confusing term in Buddhism, because, depending on the context of speaking, it has several different meanings. Here we will limit ourselves to 2 different meanings only. First, dharma means anything in the physical and mental universe, like a tree, a table, a feeling, a thought. Second, dharma also means a Buddhist teaching, a method of practicing Buddhism.

Three Dharma Seals are three seals to prove that a teaching is true Buddhist teaching: Non-permanence, non-self, and nirvana. If a teaching misses one of these three seals, it is not a Buddhist teaching.

a. Non-permanence: Anitya in Sanskrit; it means ever-changing. Everything comes and goes, depending on causes and conditions. A tree comes to existence when the cause (the seed) and conditions (weather, water, soil, etc.) are ripe for the seed to grow. Like everything else in the universe, the tree goes through four stages--appearing, steadying, decaying, disappearing. When causes and conditions become ripe for disappearing, the tree will disappear. This is the **law of causation**. Everything is non-permanent, because everything comes, changes and goes depending on ever-changing causes and conditions.

b. Non-self. Because everything is non-permanent, none has a permanent existence, none has a permanent self. “The me” today is just the me today. Before I was born, there was no me. Right now, I am ever changing, ever getting older. Eventually I will die off, and after that there is no me. My self is not permanent. I have no permanent self. I have non-self. Non-self does not mean no self; non-self means no permanent self.

A natural question arises here: After I die and my self dissolves, is that the total end of me? Yes and no. Yes, the me is ended, but how about the elements that made up me? I was formed by many elements in the universe—water, minerals, chemicals, electrons, electromagnetic, etc. When “the me” dissolves, I disappear, but the elements that made up me are still there in the universe; they just move around and, depending on causes and conditions, make up something else. In short, after death, my “self” is no longer here, but the elements that made me are still there in the universe. So, we say philosophically, “From the universe I come, and back to the universe I go.”

But what is the universe? The universe is a big expanse, a borderless, unlimited, never-ending space—a big emptiness. So, if we replace the word “universe” with the word “emptiness,” then our philosophical statement now reads: “From emptiness I come, and back to emptiness I go.”

And that is why we can say in prajna language, “I am emptiness, emptiness is me.” I am a fleeting manifestation of the big empty universe. This is the meaning of non-self in prajna language. And this is also the basis of “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”

(Note: The universe is good example to explain emptiness, but the universe is not really emptiness yet. We will talk more about this in the next section).

At this point we have answered our question “Why form and emptiness are the same?” However, let’s go an extra step to finish the third dharma seal, nirvana.

c. Nirvana

If we do not understand non-permanence and non-self and we grasp onto the idea of a permanent life and a permanent self, we suffer when changes come, just like a person suffers when his beloved changes her heart or passes away.

The mental act of “grasping” onto something or some idea is called “attachment” or “grasping.” Attaching one’s mind to anything or any idea will bring suffering. For example, grasping on the idea that life is miserable makes us suffer from negativism. Grasping on the idea that life is all good makes us suffer from naïveté. Grasping on the idea that “she is my life” makes us suffer when she leaves.

To relieve ourselves from suffering, we practice non-attachment. When we are no longer attached to anything, there is nothing to make our mind jumpy or stressed. No more suffering. The mind is calm and cool like a stove with the fire already extinguished. We have reached nirvana. Nirvana means “the fire is out.”

In short, non-attachment is the way to reach enlightenment, to reach nirvana.

However, why when Bodhisattva Avalotikeshvara sees that five skandas are emptiness, he crosses beyond all suffering?

Because when he sees that his being is emptiness, he no longer has any attachment. In life, we can grasp onto to millions of things around us—wealth, beauty, love, power, ideology. But in the final analysis, the reason we grasp onto anything is because of our self. Because we grasp onto our self, we want everything for our self. If we do not grasp onto our self--because we realize that the self is fleeting, is emptiness--we will automatically drop all attachments to everything, then we cross beyond all suffering, we reach nirvana.

Thus, understanding emptiness leads to non-attachment, which leads to nirvana. (And eliminating all attachments is the gist of the Diamond Sutra, another major sutra in the prajna tradition).

Does this form-emptiness philosophy have anything to do with my life?

Yes, this form-emptiness philosophy has many fundamental implications on how we should conduct our life.

1. Affirmation of life: The constant negation language of the Heart Sutra--with void, emptiness, not, and no--gives many people the misconception that prajna denies everything. But a careful reading reveals that prajna doesn't deny anything. Indeed, prajna confirms everything in life. "Form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form." How could this statement mean a denial of anything? It is a clear and emphatic affirmation of both form and emptiness, the two apparent extremities of life. Thus, prajna emphatically affirms life with all life aspects.

2. A relaxed and free attitude about life: Prajna keeps us away from attachment. We do not grasp onto form to deny emptiness, because emptiness is form. We do not grasp onto the emptiness to deny form, because form is emptiness. Since prajna means non-attaching to either form or emptiness, we call the prajna way "**middle way.**"

But the prajna middle way doesn't mean we grasp onto to the middle position on the road. All attachments, including attachment to the middle, are suffering. Non-attachment means not attaching to anything, any idea, any position. So, **in prajna, we affirm everything while not grasping onto anything.** That is the meaning of "middle way."

Therefore, we can be doing business without attaching to money, reading without attaching to books, eating without attaching to food, driving without attaching to cars, doing politics without attaching to power.

In the Diamond Sutra, in order to achieve a pure and tranquil heart, Bodhisattva should "not be fixed on any place." Bodhisattva can stand on any place as he wishes, as long as he is not fixed to that place. The bird has to stand on something once in a while; however, because the bird is not fixed on any place permanently, she is free--the entire sky is her domain. A bird that stands fixed on a place is a dead bird.

The reality of life is that we make living choices every day. We constantly make life decisions; we constantly take a stand on some ground. However, we should not be attached to any choice we have made, lest we become the prisoner of our own choices. We should be ready to leave any selected choice when necessary. Not fixed on any place. Then our heart is tranquil and free-- we are liberated, we are free.

3. Prajna's middle way differs from indifference or non-commitment. Indifferent and non-committal people don't care about anything; they are wishy-washy on all things, and never stand up for anything.

Prajna's people care about life. They often take a stand for goodness; however, they are not so attached to their idea of goodness to the degree that they try to eliminate all people with a different stand.

4. Prajna helps us lead an active and selfless life: In the Diamond Sutra, prajna is the key to living an active and selfless life. There the Buddha said in essence, "I have helped liberate immeasurable, countless, infinite number of sentient beings, for them to enter nirvana, but indeed no beings have been liberated. Why? Because, if Bodhisattva still sees me, others, sentient beings, things, then that is not Bodhisattva." (See, i.e, the Diamond Sutra, section 3).

Putting aside all abstract philosophical meanings, the above quote means one simple thing—Bodhisattva doesn't see the difference between himself and others. Why? Because Bodhisattva doesn't grasp onto "me" and "others" as separate and different entities. I am not different from others; others are not different from me. Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form; form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form. I am others, others are me. So when Bodhisattva helps others, he doesn't see that he helps others, he feels like he helps himself. Helping others is just as natural as helping himself.

The Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra are two very significant Mahayana sutras. They go together well as a pair—Heart Sutra is abstract philosophy; Diamond Sutra is living practice. Reading the two sutras together helps the understanding of each greatly.

(For the Diamond Sutra, <http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/clubs/buddhism/sutras/diamond1.html>)

Is the Buddhist middle way different from the Confucian middle way?

Although both ways are called middle way, they are really different. In Confucianism, middle way is a way of living with moderation and harmony—moderate in all things, including the application of rules of conduct (humanity, respect, loyalty, wisdom, honesty)--to generate harmony with other people and with heaven and earth. Generally speaking, standing in the middle is the favorite position of the Confucian middle way.

The Buddhist middle way means not-attaching to anything, including the middle of the road. The prajna practitioner can stand on any ground, any place, the middle, the left, the right, the high, the low. It doesn't matter where. As long as his heart/mind is not attached to his standing position or to anything else, then his position is good. In prajna, a pure and tranquil heart, i.e., non-attaching heart, is what that counts, not the position on the road.

In Zen literature, many Zen masters did things that looked very extreme. A master chopped a wooden Buddha statue to make a fire to warm himself and his student in a very cold night when there was no wood. Another master answered his student's question by giving the student a hard slap on the face. Apparently these were very extreme actions, but the Buddhist masters did

them, because they knew, in the circumstances at the time, doing so would help their student attain enlightenment, and because their mind was not attached to the idea that the Buddha statue was untouchable or that it was unacceptable to answer a question with a slap. These actions probably would not be allowed in Confucianism.

The Confucian middle way is a good managerial rule; the Buddhist middle way is the free mind of a master artist.

III. Further expansion of Prajna

As we've mentioned previously, the first 2 verses summarize the gist of prajna teaching. The following verses are further expansion of prajna.

Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness. They are not born, not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish.

(The main translated version use in this exposition writes: “Shariputra, all dharmas are empty of characteristics. They are not produced. Not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish”).

This is the second and last time Saraputra is addressed directly by name in the Heart Sutra. This time is to indicate the major shift of emptiness from human being to all things in existence. Recall in the first verse, we have “five skandhas are emptiness” and *five skandas* indicates human being. In this verse we have “all dharmas are emptiness.” *All dharmas* means all things in the universe--both in the universe of the mind and in the external universe. Thus, now prajna expands emptiness's territory to affirm that not only human being but everything else in the universe is emptiness.

Recall, previously in the example of my coming into the world and death, we said “From the universe I come, and back to the universe I go,” and from that we changed to “From emptiness I come, and back to emptiness I go.” The same thing can be said about everything else in the universe. From emptiness the stars come, and back to emptiness the stars go. Stars are born from emptiness, and in due time, stars burst and disappear back to emptiness.

But the universe itself, although serving as a good example to understand emptiness, is not emptiness yet, because we still can see the universe with our eyes and our mind—the universe itself is dharma, not emptiness. We need to push our logic further, to its ultimate limits, to the absolute: All universes, both external and in the mind, come from emptiness and back to

emptiness they go. **Emptiness is the true substance of all things, and everything is only a fleeting manifestation of emptiness, just like waves are fleeting manifestation of water.**

Here we can see the relationship between “**substance**” and “**phenomenon**.” Water is the substance, wave is the phenomenon. Substance and phenomenon are not two different things; substance and phenomenon are just **two different ways to talk about the same thing**. Wave is not different from water, water is not different from wave; wave is water, water is wave.

Similar to water, emptiness is the substance of everything. And similar to wave, everything is the phenomenon of emptiness. Every thing is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from anything; all things are emptiness, emptiness is everything.

Standing on the beach to watch the sea, if we look at the waves (i.e., the phenomenon), we can see that some new waves are born, some old waves are destroyed, some waves are muddy, some waves are clean, some waves increase, some waves decrease. However, the water (i.e., the substance) is just water, always there, not born, not destroyed, not dirty, not clean, not increasing, not decreasing. Thus, when we look at all things in the universe, we see comings and goings and all kinds of movements and changes. But if we look at the substance of all things, which is emptiness, then emptiness is just emptiness, always there, never born, never destroyed, never dirty, never clean, never increasing, never decreasing. That is the meaning of the sentences: “All dharmas are emptiness. They are not born, not destroyed, not defiled, not pure, and they neither increase nor diminish.”

So now we have the defining characteristics of emptiness:

1. Emptiness is the substance of all things in the universe (and everything in the universe is the manifestation of emptiness).
2. Emptiness is absolute—always there, never born, never destroyed, never dirty, never clean, never decreasing, never increasing.

This concept of emptiness here is somewhat similar to the concept of God in theist religions, with one major difference: God has an active personality that actively engages in human life and the life of the universe, while emptiness is absolutely neutral.

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, feeling, cognition, formation, or consciousness; no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or dharmas; no field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness.

From this verse on, the Heart Sutra presents a list of all fundamental teachings by the Buddha himself. These teachings are the foundation of Buddhism. They make up Buddhism. However, the Heart Sutra starts to negate all teachings, one by one.

At this time, we need to keep in mind these points:

First, in prajna language, negation and affirmation are the same. Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form; form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form.

Second, emptiness is the substance of all things, including all teachings, all practices. Like everything else, teachings and practices are merely phenomena--fleeting manifestation of emptiness.

Third, if we observe the sea and focus our thinking on the water, we can say that only the water exists and the waves do not really exist—they are just movements of water. Similarly, when we focus our thinking on the substance of all things in the universe—emptiness—we can say that in emptiness nothing really exists; everything is just a fleeting manifestation of emptiness. That is why in this verse that we are examining, the Heart Sutra says, “In emptiness, there is no...”

And then the sutra lists a full list of Buddhist teachings. The question is **“Why does the Heart Sutra take the trouble to list an entire list of teachings, just to negate them one by one? What is the purpose of this careful negation?”**

We will answer this question, but before that we have to know what teachings are listed and negated. Let’s examine the list.

Five skandhas (or five aggregates--form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness) are what make a human being. The Heart Sutra now negates five skandhas.

Six roots (or six sensing organs--eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) are the gate, the interface, between the external world and the world of our mind. Without these we do not exist, both physically and mentally. But the Heart Sutra now negates six roots.

Six dusts (or six gunas or six sense objects--sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, and dharmas). Six dusts correspond to six roots in the preceding paragraph. Six dusts make up the entire universe. The first five (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch) make up the physical universe; the last one “dharmas” (“all things”) makes up both the physical and mental universes.

Six dusts from outside enter our body and mind through six roots and will give us sensation, which will make us desire, and from desire all troubles come. That is why these six things are called six dusts. The act of six dusts entering our body through six roots is called **six entrances**.

“Six dusts” is another fundamental Buddhist teaching. Six dusts make up the entire universe. But the Heart Sutra now negates six dusts.

No field of the eyes, up to and including no field of mind-consciousness.

Here we are talking about **eighteen realms**—six realms of six sense organs, six realms of six object of senses, and six realms of six sense consciousnesses—that make up our entire physical and mental universe.

(**Six realms of six sense organs:** realm of the eyes, realm of the ears, realm of the nose, realm of the tongue, realm of the body, realm of the mind; **six realms of six objects of senses:** realm of color, realm of sound, realm of smell, realm of taste, realm of touch, realm of thought; and **six realms of consciousness:** realm of eye-consciousness, realm of ear-consciousness, realm of nose-consciousness, realm of tongue consciousness, realm of body-consciousness, realm of mind-consciousness).

The Heart Sutra uses the short way of mentioning only the first realm (eyes) and the last realm (mind-consciousness) to indicate all eighteen realms. These eighteen realms make up the entire physical and mental universe. But again, the sutra negates all eighteen realms.

No ignorance or ending of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death or ending of old age and death.

Here another major Buddhist teaching that is negated—**the Twelve Links of Cause and Effect, or law of causation**. As we have mentioned earlier, everything comes and goes by causation. The Twelve Links of Cause and Effect show how ignorance ends up causing old age, sickness and death, which are at the core of suffering. The causal chain is also known as law of causation, or dependent origination.

The twelve links starts with ignorance and ends with old age and death, with 10 other links in between. The Heart Sutra does not enumerate all twelve, but only mentions the first link (ignorance) and the last link (old age and death) to indicate the entire chain of twelve.

The twelve links are:

- 1) Ignorance.
- 2) Mental moving, mental formation.
- 3) Consciousness.
- 4) Name and Form.
- 5) Six entrances through six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind).
- 6) Contact.

- 7) Feeling, sensation.
- 8) Desire, craving.
- 9) Grasping, attachment.
- 10) Owning, possessing, existing.
- 11) Birth.
- 12) Old Age, Illness and Death.

Ignorance , the 1st link, makes the mind lose its true nature of tranquility; ignorance causes the mind to move; this moving of the mind is the 2nd link. The moving mind forms consciousness, the 3rd link. Consciousness looks at the world of forms and gives names to the forms, that is the 4th link (names and forms). This world of names and forms enters our body and mind through six entrances, that is the 5th link. Six entrances generate contact with our body and mind; contact is the 6th link. Contact gives us sensations, the 7th link. Sensations make us desire, the 8th link. Desire makes us grasp onto things, the 9th link. Grasping gives us possession, the 10th link. Desire, grasping and possession are said to carry the karmic force of samsara, which will bring people back to a rebirth (reincarnation) at death, thus after possession comes birth, the 11th link. And of course, birth brings old age, illness and death, and all kinds of suffering, the 12th link.

The conventional explanation of The Twelve Links of Cause and Effect is usually connected to the concept of samsara and rebirth. However, there is also a bio-psychological explanation that desire, grasping and possession make us constantly, in every second of the day, die and be reborn into the suffering of the mind.

Thus, ignorance is the ultimate cause of suffering. Ignorance starts the causal chain that ultimately results in suffering. If we eliminate ignorance, we subsequently eliminate rebirth, old age, death and suffering.

The Twelve Links of Cause and Effect is said to be studied and practiced in Theravada Buddhism, and the person who achieves enlightenment through this practice is called Pratyekabuddha. However, now the Heart Sutra negates this major teaching: No ignorance, also no elimination of ignorance, through the 12 links, all the way to no old age and death, and no elimination of old age and death. Thus *The Twelve Links of Cause and Effect* is completely negated.

At this point, we should take a brief break, to address the most misunderstood point in Buddhism:

If there is non-self (no permanent self), then what is it that is reborn many times, living many lives after many deaths?

Samsara and reincarnation were taught in Hinduism before Buddhism appeared. In Hinduism, each person has an eternal soul (Atman). This Atman survives death and reincarnates in next life, according to his karma. Karma is the result of each person's actions and is the force that determines reincarnation. The cycle of birth-death-reincarnation is samsara. When the person attains spiritual purity, he achieves salvation and is not reincarnated anymore. Then his Atman resides with Brahman (the One, God) in eternity.

Buddhism also talks about karma, samsara and rebirth; however, Buddhist rebirth is different from Hindu reincarnation in a very fundamental point: In Buddhism, non-self means there is no permanent self. There is no permanent soul that survives death. A person's self dissolves after death. All the elements that made up him also dissolve; however, there is one element that survives—the alaya vijñana.

Vijñana is consciousness, the knowing ability of the mind. There are eight vijñanas, the first five are associated with the five sense organs, the last three are associated with the mind.

1. Eye consciousness, cakshu vijñana
2. Ear consciousness, shrotra vijñana
3. Nose consciousness, ghrana vijñana
4. Tongue consciousness, jihva vijñana
5. Body consciousness, kaya vijñana
6. Mental consciousness, mano vijñana—evaluating and processing information from the first five vijñanas.
7. Afflicted consciousness, klesha vijñana—thinking about itself, thinking that there is a self.
8. Store consciousness, alaya vijñana—the leader of all consciousnesses, storing memories of all thoughts and actions.

The 8th vijñana, alaya vijñana, is the only element of a being's self that survives death. It is called "store consciousness" because it stores karma of the self as well as karma of all previous selves (in previous lives). It determines how the next rebirth will be and carries the karmic seeds from one self (one life) to the next self (next life), and it accumulates karma as it goes through lives. But this "storage" is neutral; it doesn't do "thinking;" all the thinking is done by the first seven vijñanas. In other words, this alaya vijñana is not "me" or my "soul" or my "self." It is only an element of me (during in my life) and carries the karmic seeds of countless lives from the endless beginning, through my life, and countless more lives to come.

In the simple language of the computer age, we can say alaya vijñana is just a "memory chip." After my death, the alaya vijñana carries "the memory of me" (and memory of countless lives

before me) to the next life in a new self. This new self is not my self, although it does have “the memory of me” in it.

Upon enlightenment, alaya vijnana becomes pure and one with the Truth (Tathagatagarba, Buddha), which is emptiness. Alaya vijnana itself as a separate entity ceases to exist. No more rebirth.

This subject of rebirth and samsara is very confusing, because:

1. Most Buddhists of Asia believe in the reincarnation of a permanent soul. This is really a Hindu teaching and is against the Buddhist teaching of non-self (no permanent self, no permanent soul). However, the idea of a permanent soul is very simple and straight forward and fits human intuition well. It is also supported by some Buddhist sutras themselves, such as the Ullambana Sutra, in which Mulien found his mother’s soul being punished in hell. The strong influence of this sutra is shown in the fact that the Ullambana Day is an annually observed day in the Buddhist Asia. Of course, Mulien’s mother may symbolically stand for our own ego, our own self, which is the mother of our confusing mind, with its attachment to greed, anger and ignorance. But the point is, the vast majority of Asian Buddhists believe in the reincarnation of a soul.
2. Alaya Vijnana, and a rebirth without a permanent self, is a very complex teaching of a major school of Buddhism--Yogacara. Very few Buddhists master this subject.
3. Most western Buddhists don’t believe in Samsara and karmic rebirth. They think the karmic rebirth theory is unnecessary in the large structure of Buddhist teaching. (Please see “A Buddhist Ethic Without Karmic Rebirth?” by Winston L. King at <http://www.quangduc.com/English/Ethics/20.buddhistkarma.html>).

(For some easy reading on non-self and Buddhist rebirth, please see “Anatta or Soul-lessness” by Narada Mahthera at <http://www.enotalone.com/article/4090.html>, and “Is there an Eternal Soul?” at <http://www.purifymind.com/EternalSoul.htm>).

There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinction of suffering, no path to extinction of suffering.

This is the negation of the most fundamental of all Buddhist teachings: The Fourth Noble Truth and the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Four Noble Truths are four basic truths about life: Suffering, causes of suffering, extinction of suffering, path to extinction of suffering. *The Four Noble Truths* is the first

teaching by the Buddha after he reached Enlightenment, written in the Dharma-Wheel Turning Sutra.

1. **Suffering:** Life contains suffering. Generally we can classify suffering into physical suffering and mental suffering. (a) Physical suffering includes birth, old age, sickness, and death. (b) Mental suffering includes losing what we like, contacting what we don't like, and unfulfilled desires. (c) However, there is also another kind of suffering that encompasses all other suffering—it is the suffering coming from “grasping onto the self” as a permanent everlasting self. We all can just see how a person who lives like he never dies will suffer.

But what about so many happy times we have in life? Wouldn't it be too negative to define life merely as a sea of suffering?

Yes, life contains both unhappy times and happy times (assuming that they are really happy times and not miseries in disguise as our experience shows often). Let's just say that Buddhist knowledge and practices take away unhappy times, by training our mind to be absolutely tranquil. A tranquil mind is always calm. It is not excited. It surpasses the typical excitement of sorrow and jollity. It constantly carries with it a quiet everlasting joy, which is different from the noisy happiness of a beer drinking bout.

Suffering, ultimately, is a mental phenomenon. Even if the stimulus is external, such as a hard slap on the face, it is still the mind that suffers or not—if your cheek is burning from the slap but your mind feels happy about it, then where is the suffering? Therefore, Buddhism teaches the extinction of suffering by teaching us to control our mind, i.e., to keep the mind tranquil at all time. The mind is the beginning and the end—the mind is ignorance and Buddha.

The Dhammapada sutra is the most important sutra in Theravada Buddhism and one of the most fundamental sutras in the entire Buddhist tradition. The first verse of Dhammapada says, “The mind leads all the phenomena of existence; the mind is the leader, the mind makes them.” And verse 35 says, “The mind is unstable and flighty. It wanders wherever it desires. Therefore it is good to control the mind. A disciplined mind brings happiness.” (See English version of Dhammapada, by Harischandra Kaviratna, at <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/dhamma/dham-hp.htm>).

Thus, ultimately, the mind is the cause of both suffering and liberation. Buddhism takes away our suffering by training our own mind, not by directly changing the external world that we live in. But of course, when our mind is changed inside, we will change our external world accordingly.

2. Causes of Suffering

Craving causes suffering. Verse 335 of the Dhammapada sutra says, “Whosoever is overcome by this shameful craving which creates entanglements in this world, his sorrows increase like the luxuriant birana grass in the rainy season”

The Dharma-Wheel sutra mentions 3 types of craving: a) Craving for sensual things; b) craving based on the idea that life is permanent—chasing after things thinking that life never ends, c) craving based on the idea that death is the end of all things—indulging in things thinking that there is nothing after death.

3. Extinction of Suffering

Since craving is the cause of suffering, to stop suffering we need “to stop, to denounce, to leave, to cut away craving.” The extinction of craving means the extinction of suffering and, therefore, means nirvana.

Please note, in The Twelve Links of Cause and Effect, we have said ignorance is the first cause of suffering, and craving is the 8th link in the causal chain. To stop suffering there, we stop ignorance. But here in Four Noble Truths, we say that to stop suffering, we stop craving, meaning cutting off the causal chain in the middle at the 8th link.

This seemingly technical distinction has a profound implication in practice: If we are intelligent enough to gain wisdom, our wisdom will conquer everything, including ignorance, craving and suffering. If we are not endowed with high intellectual capacity to gain the ultimate wisdom, we still can stop suffering by following the simple rules of conduct to stop craving. The Buddhists usually say “There are 84 thousand dharmas,” enough for each person in the world to choose a practice (dharma) that fits him/her. This methodology of using appropriate means for different kinds of people is called “method” or “means.” It allows Buddhism to grow everywhere, in all cultures, among all peoples, at all times.

4. The Path to Extinction of Suffering

This path has eight lanes and is called **The Noble Eightfold Path.**

1. Right view: The understanding of the Four Noble Truths, non-permanence, non-self, and nirvana.
2. Right thought: Thoughts about stopping craving, about no anger and no violence, about no harmful activities.
3. Right speech: No lying, no divisive speech, no abusive speech, no idle chatters.

4. Right action: No killing, no stealing, no wrongful sexual conduct.
5. Right livelihood: No engaging in trade or profession that, either directly or indirectly, results in harm to other living beings.
6. Right effort: Try to prevent wrongful thoughts and actions from arising; if they have already arisen, try to stop them. Try to bring up good thoughts and actions; if they have already come, try to continue them.
7. Right mindfulness: Observing our body, our feelings, our thoughts and dharmas (all things, all teachings) to conquer all cravings and distress.
8. Right concentration: This is about the practice of meditation.

The Four Noble Truths is the first and most fundamental Buddhist teaching about a path to enlightenment. It is the way to reach Arhat enlightenment in Theravada. However, the Heart Sutra now negates the Four Noble Truths.

No understanding and no attaining.

This is another negation of a very fundamental principle of Buddhism. All Buddhist teachings, regardless of what school, focus heavily on wisdom and knowledge, to conquer ignorance. Ignorance creates suffering. In Four Noble Truths, right view is the first element of the Noble Eightfold Path to extinction of suffering. In the Twelve Links of Cause and Effect, eliminating ignorance is the method to stop suffering. And of course, prajna itself is supposed to be the highest wisdom ever. Simply put, there is no Buddhism without knowledge and wisdom.

And, of course, the ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to cross over to the other shore, to attain enlightenment. But now the Heart Sutra negates both wisdom and attaining (Nirvana). This is another way to say that no Buddhist teaching exists at all! The negation of all teachings is completed!

But why negate all the teachings? What does this negation mean?

1. We need to keep in mind that, in prajana language, negation and affirmation are the same—form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form; negation is affirmation, affirmation is negation. And as we have seen, prajna affirms all things as they truly are.

Looking at the sea, if we focus our attention on the water only, we can say that the waves don't exist—waves are just the movement of water. However, if we focus our attention on the waves themselves, we can say that the waves do exist, but only briefly. Thus, when we are talking with our attention focused on emptiness, we say, "In emptiness there is no teaching." If our attention

is focused on the teachings themselves, we say, “Yes, there are teachings, but they are impermanent.”

The strong focus on emptiness in the Heart Sutra is a practical way to help us focus our attention on impermanence. Affirmation of the impermanence of the teachings means “Yes, there are teachings, so learn them and practice them. But they are impermanent, temporary, so don’t be attached to them.” That means:

- a. Each listed teaching is important and deserves to be mentioned individually and specifically in the Heart Sutra. So, please practice each teaching seriously.
 - b. But each teaching is also impermanent and temporary. So, please don’t attach yourself to it. That means, be flexible with the teachings. Don’t follow them rigidly like a robot. Teachings are guidelines; use your mind/heart and be flexible when applying the teachings to life.
 - c. Teachings are there temporarily to help, like a raft used to cross the river. When you have crossed to the other shore, don’t carry the raft on your shoulder.
2. “In emptiness there is no teaching” also describes the state of enlightenment.

All the teachings are there to help the practitioner achieve enlightenment, achieve nirvana.

But what is nirvana?

Nirvana means “the fire is out”—the completely pure and tranquil mind, the mind that has absolutely no attachment, the mind that sees all things but is attached to nothing, the mind of emptiness.

This mind understands that emptiness is its substance as well as the substance of everything else in the universe. This mind has found its true nature—emptiness, the absolute, the never-born never-destroyed never-dirty never-clean never-increasing never-diminishing, the absolute tranquility, the Buddha. This mind, which has found its true nature, is now Buddha. “Shine the mind, see true nature, become Buddha,” as Zen masters say.

But has this mind just, in fact, turned itself from an ordinary human mind to a Buddha?

Yes and no. If we think the way we normally think with a time line of past, present and future, then “yes,” this mind has just turned from a regular human mind to a Buddha. Five minutes ago it was an ignorant mind, now it is a Buddha.

However, from the stand point of enlightenment, the mind has not become anything. The mind has always been there, has always been emptiness. It didn't know that it is emptiness, but now it knows that it is emptiness. That's all. It did not become something else better or higher.

When ignorance is still around, ignorance acts like a veil that obstructs the mind's vision; therefore, the mind cannot see itself clearly. When the mind has no attachment, the veil of ignorance is lifted, and the mind can see itself truly as emptiness. The mind is now back to its true nature—emptiness, the absolute tranquility, nirvana, Buddha. Nirvana has always been there, Buddha has always been there. It is just a matter of seeing or not-seeing.

So, indeed, there is no becoming Buddha, no attaining enlightenment, no river to cross, no crossing over. The Buddha has always been there. This is why at the beginning of this exposition, we say, "All the crossing is just a fleeting phenomenon of the mind."

A note on "seeing"

When we say "the mind sees itself as emptiness," we may think of the word "see" as a function of the intellect, an intellectual capacity of our brain to understand. But true seeing involves much more than the intellect. Example: Wife tells drunken husband, "Do you know how miserable I am?" Husband answers, "Of course... I know... I spend all... the money... on booze... I get home late... and drunk every night... I mess ... up the floor with... my vomit... You... are stressed all the time... What is... so hard to understand... about that ...?" And he continues drinking day after day. That is the understanding or seeing of the intellect.

Until one day, the husband feels in every fiber of his body and in every cell of his brain how irresponsible he has been. He now feels every single miligram of his wife's pain, and her pain burns every cell in his body and mind like a holocaust. He wakes up, as if from a dream. Then he just quits drinking, forever. That is true seeing.

So, when we talk about seeing or understanding in the sense of enlightenment, we talk about a total "awakening" experience that involves every single aspect of our mental existence--the intellect, the will, the emotion, the id, the ego, the super-ego, the consciousness, the subconsciousness, the nonconscious and what have you--a total transformation, a total rebirth, that brings the mind to a completely new level of seeing, understanding, feeling, thinking and acting.

This total awakening, therefore, cannot be achieved merely by the intellect—i.e. not merely by reading Buddhist philosophy. The Buddhist road to achieve this total awakening contains three

major elements: Discipline, meditation, wisdom. A typical example is the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight lanes of this path are grouped into three groups as follows:

Wisdom: 1. Right view. 2. Right thought.

Discipline: 3. Right speech. 4. Right action. 5. Right livelihood.

Meditation: 6. Right effort. 7. Right mindfulness. 8. Right concentration.

Discipline, meditation and wisdom are called three studies and work together. Disciplined conduct, calm attitude and wise knowledge go together; we cannot leave one out and hope to gain an accurate understanding of Buddhism, not mentioning enlightenment. Reading Buddhist books while embezzling government money or getting drunk every day will not give us an accurate understanding of Buddhism. Buddhism is more than an intellectual philosophy. It is a comprehensive way of living. And all living needs practice.

IV. The Power of Prajna to Bring Enlightenment

In the opening verse, we have Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara crossing beyond all suffering from practicing prajna. Now in the ending section, we come back to the power of prajna to bring enlightenment.

Because nothing is attained, the Bodhisattva, through reliance on prajna paramita, is unimpeded in his mind. Because there is no impediment, he is not afraid, and he leaves distorted dream-thinking far behind. Ultimately Nirvana!

Bodhisattva, with prajna, sees that emptiness is the true substance of all things, everything is just a fleeting manifestation of emptiness, and in emptiness there is nothing--no nirvana, no attaining nirvana. Therefore, Bodhisattva does not think about attaining nirvana and, thus, has no attachment in his heart. (If Bodhisattva keeps aiming at the goal of attaining nirvana, then Bodhisattva would never reach nirvana, because the attachment to the goal is still there in his heart).

Since the heart is not attached to anything, Bodhisattva is not afraid of anything. Here, we need to make a note that **fearlessness** is a very significant feature of the Bodhisattva way. In six virtues of enlightenment, **giving comes first**. (The other five are keeping rules and precepts, patient and humble, effort, meditation, and wisdom).

There are 3 kinds of giving: Giving money, giving dharma (giving Buddhist teachings), and giving fearlessness. "Giving" here doesn't mean just giving the extra things one doesn't need; it

may be giving one's own life for others. Among the three givings, giving money is lowest and **giving fearlessness is highest.**

Thus, we can see the important role of fearlessness in the Bodhisattva way. But, no fear of what? No fear of pain and suffering; no fear of losing anything, including one's own life; no fear of not gaining anything, including not gaining enlightenment; no fear of following and teaching a human-based way to liberation, in which man—and no one else, neither saints nor gods--is responsible for his actions.

Without attachment, without fear, Bodhisattva drops all “crazy upside-down dream-thoughts,” all distorted notions about life, and all attachments resulting from these distorted notions. Thus, Bodhisattva attains nirvana.

All Buddhas of the three periods of time attain Anuttarasamyaksambodhi through reliance on prajna paramita.

Anuttarasamyaksambodhi is the fullest and highest level of enlightenment--the supreme balanced and right state of truth. As we have mentioned previously, there are four levels of enlightenment—Arhat, Pratyekabuddha, Bodhisattva, and Buddha. All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future attain the highest rank of enlightenment— anuttarasamyaksambodhi --from relying on prajna.

Therefore, know that prajna paramita is a great spiritual mantra, a great bright mantra, a supreme mantra, an unequalled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is genuine and not false. That is why the mantra of prajna paramita was spoken. Recite it like this:

Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

This final verse is about the power of prajna as a mantra. In addition to being very sophisticated knowledge that can be learned consciously, prajna also operates at the level of human subconscious as a mantra. Mantra is a saying that is supposed to have supernatural power. Psychologically, a phrase, with a particular pattern of sound vibration of the words when spoken, the meaning of the words, and the regular repetition by the speaker, operates as a soothing self-hypnotism. For example, if someone keeps repeating every day “Rich, rich, I be rich,” a hundred times a day, chances are he will find enough motivation to work hard to be very rich some day. In addition, many people also believe that mantra has supernatural power by invoking secret aenergies from the cosmos.

The prajna mantra is *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!* which means “Gone, gone, gone to the other shore; all gone to the other shore, already enlightened, so be it!”

Mantra is recited in the original Snaskrist language to invoke its power.

V. Conclusion

The Heart Sutra is highly abstract, contains very high level of logic, and uses very sophisticated logic language unfamiliar to many people. Therefore, it generates great confusion for many. But the sutra is not a game of words by philosophers with too much time on their hand. It is a solid philosophy about the cosmos and the human life. Upon that philosophical foundation grows a very good system of ethics that governs our conduct. Buddhist ethics and philosophy bind together in a very coherent structure.

A word of caution for new students of the Heart Sutra: Since prajna language is extremely versatile, one can quote any little phrase of the Heart Sutra to say anything crazy, such as “You are talking to me but you do not exist” or “It is OK to do that, wrong is right and right is wrong.” Prajna is a comprehensive way of living—a logical philosophy, a system of practices and ethics, and a serious-but-non-attaching attitude on living. Playing word games with bits and pieces of the Heart Sutra is like children building a house of cards, thinking that the house is the real shelter for them and their family. It is “Lost.” Don’t fall into that game.

As a living philosophy, prajna is positive, active, engaging, selfless, peaceful and liberating. It is a very good philosophy, upon which to build education and social development for any society. We are very fortunate to be the torch carrier of this philosophy. It is our honor and duty to preserve, nourish, enrich and share this philosophy widely with all our brothers and sisters, throughout the world.

Trần Đình Hoàn
Washington DC
Friday, October 17, 2008

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