Heart Sutra

BUDDHIST SCRIPTURE

Dhammapada, c. 3rd century BC

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प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदय

Translated from the Sanskrit with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

The *Heart Sutra*—in Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, "the heart of the perfection of wisdom"—is the shortest and best known of the Mahayana scriptures on the perfection of wisdom, a vast literature that took shape in India from around the first century BC. In a few lines it distils their central teaching. It is recited daily in Buddhist temples across China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, and its Chinese version is among the most copied texts in the world; its origins, and whether the Sanskrit or the Chinese came first, are still debated.

The bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion, deep in the practice of wisdom, sees that the five aggregates that make up a person—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—are empty of any nature of their own. He tells the Buddha's disciple Śāriputra that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," and goes on to empty, one by one, the categories of Buddhist teaching itself: the senses and their objects, the chain of dependent origination, even the four noble truths, knowledge and attainment.

Relying on this wisdom, bodhisattvas dwell without fear and reach nirvana, and all the buddhas of past, present and future awaken. The sutra ends with a mantra, still chanted in Sanskrit everywhere: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*—"gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond: awakening, hail!"

The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom

प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदयम् *(Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya)*

Avalokiteśvara, practising the perfection of wisdom, sees that the five aggregates are empty: form is emptiness, emptiness is form; the mantra "gone, gone, gone beyond."

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1 The noble bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, carrying out the practice of the deep perfection of wisdom, looked down: there were five aggregates, and he saw that they were empty of intrinsic nature.[1]

2 Here, Śāriputra, form is emptiness, and emptiness is form; emptiness is not other than form, form is not other than emptiness; what is form is emptiness, what is emptiness is form.[2]

3 Just so are feeling, perception, formations and consciousness.

IN EMPTINESS

All things are marked by emptiness, and in emptiness the aggregates, senses and objects are negated.

4 Here, Śāriputra, all things are marked by emptiness: not arisen, not ceased, not defiled, not pure, not deficient, not complete. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no formations, no consciousness; no eye,

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1 A bodhisattva is a being set on awakening, and the five aggregates are the constituents of a person: form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. "Intrinsic nature" means a nature of its own, independent of anything else.

2 Śāriputra was one of the Buddha's chief disciples, renowned for his wisdom.

ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, object of touch, things.[3]

[5] No eye-element, and so on up to no mind-element.[4]

[6] No knowledge, no ignorance, no ending of knowledge, no ending of ignorance, and so on up to no old age and death, no ending of old age and death; no suffering, its origin, its cessation, the path; no knowledge, no attainment.[5]

RELYING ON THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

Bodhisattvas and buddhas rely on the perfection of wisdom to reach nirvāṇa and awakening.

[7] Relying on the perfection of wisdom of the bodhisattva, one dwells with a covering of the mind. Since there is no covering of the mind, one is unafraid, has gone beyond inverted views, and reaches final *nirvāṇa*.[6]

[8] All the buddhas of the three times—past, present and future—relying on the perfection of wisdom, have fully awakened to unsurpassed, complete and perfect awakening.

THE MANTRA

The perfection of wisdom is praised as the great mantra, which is then spoken.

[9] Therefore one should know the perfection of wisdom as the great mantra, the great spell of knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequaled, which calms all suffering—true, because it is not false. The mantra spoken in the

3 "Things" renders *dharmas*, the basic elements of experience. In the last list the word means the objects of the mind.

4 The eighteen elements of cognition are the six sense faculties, their six objects and the six kinds of consciousness. Here they are listed from the eye-element to the mind-element.

5 "And so on up to" abbreviates the twelve links of dependent arising, from ignorance to old age and death. Suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path are the four noble truths.

6 Most later texts read *acittāvaraṇa*, "without a covering of the mind"; this translation follows the text as printed. *Nirvāṇa* is the final extinction of suffering.

perfection of wisdom goes like this: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* ("gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond: awakening, hail!").[7]

7 A mantra is a sacred formula recited aloud. *Svāhā* is the exclamation that closes a ritual offering.