

# Notes on the Heart Sutra

## Glossary

maha = great prajna = wisdom paramita = virtue, a.k.a. perfection. The six paramitas of Mahayana Buddhism are: generosity

(dana), ethics (sila), patience (ksanti), courage (virya), meditation (samadhi), and wisdom

(prajna) hrdaya = essence, or heart. The etymologically inclined can noticed the relationship between

the Sanskrit *hrdaya* and the Anglo-Saxon *heart*. sutra = scripture, generally the Buddha's teachings Avalokitesvara = the Bodhisatva of compassion = Kwan Yin = Kwan Se Um Bosal =

Kannon = Kanzeon. Avalokitesvara is generally depicted as male; Kwan Yin as either

androgynous or female. Shariputra = one of the Buddha's major disciples, considered the originator of the *abhidharma*

(= the early Buddhist theory of consciousness and existence) skandhas = heaps, or aggregates, of the basic constituents of reality: form, feelings (a.k.a.

sensations), perceptions, impulses (a.k.a. volition, the will to act), consciousness emptiness: not like a vacuum, more like original or fundamental substance dharmas = constituents of existence (not just material existence) nirvana = the end of cyclic existence, not to be confused with samadhi = the state of

complete concentration the three worlds = past, present, future; alternatively: desire world, form world, formless

world. These two versions are distinct. anuttara samyak sambodhi = unexcelled perfect enlightenment mantra = sound which is more fundamental than speech; in Korean, jin on = true words gate. gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha = gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond beyond, awake! hallelujah!

## References

*form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness* refers to the five skandhas *do not appear or disappear* refers to the fundamental early Buddhist teaching of impermanence *tainted or pure* refers to the fundamental early Buddhist teaching of purity vs. impurity *do not increase or decrease* is another reference to impermanence *no eyes, no ears...* refers to the first step in consciousness: the six organs of perception *no color, no sound...* refers to what is perceived directly *no realm of eyes...* refers to the world that lies behind what is perceived directly, e.g., the realm

of eyes is what can be seen: not the color red, but the red dress. *no ignorance... and so forth* refers to the 12 links in the chain of co-dependent origination:

ignorance, mental formations (karma), consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, sensation, desire, clinging, existence, life, old age & suffering & death *no suffering... no path* refers to the 4 noble truths: suffering, origination of suffering, the end of suffering, the path to the end of suffering *no cognition, also no attainment with nothing to attain* is responding to the notions of understanding and attainment *the mind is no hindrance* is sometimes translated “the mind has no hindrance.” In Chinese there is no verb: literally, “mind no hindrance”

*perverted* is the translation here of *dian dao* which means “upside down” or “inverted.” Many English translations use “deluded,” but that isn’t quite right either.

## Context

The *Heart Sutra* is a summary of the *Prajna Paramita Sutras*, much longer texts (from 8,000 to 100,000 lines) which were written roughly between 100 BC and 300 AD. (A couple of these have been translated by Edward Conze.) A charming legend is that the prajna paramita teachings were guarded by the nagas (mythical half-human, half-serpent beings who live under water) and were given by the naga king (named, naturally, Nagaraja) to the great monk and teacher Nagarjuna (who had one of the first major commentaries on the prajna paramita teachings — but not the *Heart Sutra*, since it had not yet been written). This legend gives us an idea of the importance of these teachings to the Mahayana.

The *Heart Sutra* was written between 300 and 500 AD. Its Chinese text is purportedly a translation from the Sanskrit, but that is a matter of dispute; there is some evidence that it was originally written in Chinese and back-translated into Sanskrit. There is no definitive agreement on this question.

It’s clear that the *Heart Sutra* was written in response to and as a refutation of some form of the *abbidharma*,<sup>1</sup> and of other early Buddhist teachings. *Abbidharma* texts present themselves as the early teachings of the Buddha pertaining to what is, what we know, what we perceive, and how we know and perceive — in other words, a conflation of psychology and philosophy. Its hallmark is the close analysis of (mental and physical) phenomena based on principles of classification and organization. Shariputra is, according to legend, the person to whom the Buddha gave instruction in *abbidharma*, and the one who later wrote it up in a series of shastras (shastras are almost like sutras, but not attributed to the Buddha). Thus, the *Heart Sutra* is addressed to the person whose interpretations of the Buddha’s words are being refuted.

The *Heart Sutra* is chanted widely within both the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, and is

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<sup>1</sup> Many schools of the *abbidharma* developed. Because of the terseness of the text, it’s not certain which one is being refuted here; you can make a case that it’s refuting all of them.

generally considered to capture the heart of Mahayana Buddhist teaching. Its wide adoption came after Hsuan-tsang (one of the major figures in the 7<sup>th</sup> century dialogue between Indian and Chinese Buddhism) attributed many miraculous escapes on his travels to chanting it. To anyone familiar with the *abhidharma* it would have appeared revolutionary; even if you come at it with no previous knowledge, it is an extraordinary text.

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