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The Heart Sutra as a Translation

Note: this text consists of the Chinese characters of the Heart Sutra (in the most widely used translation), a literal translation of each character or word, and the KUSZ translation underneath. When you see Chinese characters grouped together, that is a distinct word (菩薩 = *pusa*, “bodhisattva”). The superscript numbers refer to the endnotes.

1) 觀 自 在 菩 薩

Perceive / from oneself / in that place¹ / bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva)
Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva,

2) 行 深 般 若 波 羅 密 多 時

Practicing (action)² / deeply or profoundly / Prajnaparamita³ / time (at that time)
When practicing deeply the Prajnaparamita

3) 照 見 五 蘊 皆 空

Realizes, comes to understand⁴ / five skandhas / all or each / empty⁵
Perceives that all five skandhas are empty

4) 度 一 切 苦 厄

Achieves or delivers perfect freedom from⁶ / all / suffering and calamity⁷
And is saved from all suffering and distress

5) 舍 利 子: 色 不 異 空, 空 不 異 色

“Shariputra / form⁸ / is not / different from / emptiness, / emptiness / is not / different from / form
Shariputra, form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form

6) 色 即 是 空 空 即 是 色

Form / exactly / is / emptiness / emptiness / exactly / is / form
That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness form

7) 受 想 行 識 亦 復 如 是

Feelings⁹ / perceptions / impulses, actions, volition¹⁰ / consciousness / also / like this
The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness

8) 舍 利 子 是 諸 法 空 相

Shariputra, / are / all / dharmas / emptiness / mark or appearance¹¹
Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness

9) 不 生 不 滅 不 垢 不 淨 不 增 不 減

Is not / born / is not / ceased¹² / is not / dirty / is not / pure / is not / increased / is not / ceased
They do not appear or disappear, are not tainted or pure, do not increase or decrease

10) 是故 空 中 無 色 無 受 想 行 識
It's for this reason (therefore) / emptiness / in, inside, in the middle of / does not have / form /
does not have / feelings / perceptions / impulses (actions) / consciousness
Therefore in emptiness no form no feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness

11) 無 眼 耳 鼻 舌 身 意
Does not have / eyes / ears / nose / tongue / body / mind
No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind

12) 無 色 聲 香 味 觸 法 無 眼 界
Does not have / color / sound / smell / taste / tactile phenomena / does not have / eye / world
No color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind, no realm of eyes

13) 乃 至 無 意 識 界
And / up to this point / does not have / thought / realization / world¹³
And so forth until no realm of mind consciousness

14) 無 無明 亦 無 無明 盡
Does not have / without-illumination / does not have / without-illumination / extinction, absence
of, exhaustion¹⁴
No ignorance and also no extinction of it

15) 乃 至 無 老 死 亦 無 老 死 盡
And / up to this point / does not have / old (age) / death / does not have / old (age) / death /
extinction, absence of, exhaustion
And so forth until no old age and death and also no extinction of them

16) 無 苦 集 滅 道 無 智
Does not have / origination of suffering¹⁵ / stopping, ceasing (of suffering)¹⁶ / path (Tao) / does
not have / cognition, knowledge¹⁷
No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, no cognition

17) (無 智) 亦 無 得 以 無 所 得
(does not have / cognition, knowledge)¹⁸ also / does not have / attainment / and also / does not
have / that which (can be) / attained
Also no attainment and nothing to attain

18) 故 菩提薩埵 依 般若波羅密多
therefore / bodhisattvas / arise from¹⁹ / Prajnaparamita
The bodhisattva depends on Prajnaparamita

19) 故 心 無 罣礙 無 罣礙 故 無有 恐怖
therefore / mind, heart / does not have / obstruction²⁰ / does not have / obstruction / therefore /
does not have / fear
And the mind is no hindrance; without any hindrance, no fears exist

20) 遠離 顛倒 夢 想 究 竟 涅槃
far from / confused, deluded²¹ / dream²² / perception / to go to the end of / to finish²³ / nirvana
Far apart from every perverted view one dwells in nirvana

21) 三 世 諸 佛 依 般若波羅密多
three / world / all / Buddha(s) / arise from / Prajnaparamita
In the three worlds all Buddhas depend on Prajnaparamita

22) 故 得 阿耨多羅 三藐 三菩提
therefore / attain / anuttara / samyak / sambodhi²⁴
And attain anuttara samyak sambodhi

23) 故 知 般若波羅密多 是 大 神 咒
therefore / know / Prajnaparamita / is / great / supernatural²⁵ / mantra
Therefore know that Prajnaparamita is the great transcendent mantra

24) 是 大 明 咒 是 無 上 咒 是 無 等 等 咒
is / great / illuminated, bright / mantra / is / does not have / higher / mantra / is / beyond all others
/ mantra
Is the great bright mantra, is the utmost mantra, is the supreme mantra

25) 能 除 一切 苦 真 實 不 虛
is able / relieve / all / suffering / true / real / is not / void, false, wrong
It is able to relieve all suffering and is true, not false

26) 故 說 般若波羅密多 咒 即 說 咒 曰
therefore / say / Prajnaparamita / mantra / exactly / say / mantra / speak
So proclaim the Prajnaparamita mantra, proclaim the mantra which says

27) 揭帝 揭帝 般羅揭帝 般羅僧揭帝 菩提 薩婆訶
gate / gate / paragate / parasamgate / bodhi / svaha²⁶
Gate gata paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha

¹ Avalokitesvara has two names in Chinese (and thus in all of East Asian Buddhism): the one given here, *Guanzizai*, which some commentators say is closer to the Sanskrit meaning, “One who looks down,” or simply “one who perceives,” and the more familiar 觀世音 *Guanshiyin* or Kwan Se Um, “perceiving the sounds of the world.” The great translator Kumarajiva is said to be the person who originated this second translation of the name.

² The verb 行 *xing* translated here as “practice” is a very general verb that can also mean “action,” “putting into action,” “going toward external objects.” It is also used to translate *saṃskāra*, the third of the five skandhas (see below). The particular practice of the Prajnaparamita (if there is one) is not specified.

³ Just as in English, in Chinese certain Buddhist concepts are represented in transliteration from Sanskrit rather than in translation. Here the word “Prajnaparamita” is transliterated as *boruo-boluo-miduo*. The name “Shariputra” is also transliterated as *shelizi*, and so on.

⁴ In our KUSZ translation we use the word “perceive” in this line: “Perceives that all five skandhas are empty.” We also use “perceive” to define the “Kwan” in “Kwan Seum Bosal” (“perceive world sound bodhisattva”). In Chinese, these are two verbs with different shades of meaning. *Guan* 觀, the “Kwan” in Kwan Seum Bosal, means “meditative insight, to perceive analytically through meditation.” *Zhaojian* 照見 as used in this line means “to distinguish, to determine through observation, to differentiate.”

⁵ This character is the core of the sutra: 空 *kong*, “emptiness,” which translates the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā*. From the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*: “the distinctive Mahāyāna Buddhist view of the character of all existence, wherein all phenomena are understood to arise in dependence upon each other, and thus there is no phenomenon that has independent, determinable, or permanent existence; nor do any phenomena possess any sort of unchanging inner nature 自性. This means that the everyday conceptions that we have of the existence of ourselves and the objects around us as concrete entities are inaccurate, as the determinations we make of ourselves and objects are arbitrary conceptual reifications.”

⁶ This verb 度 *du*, which we translate “is saved from,” in Chinese Buddhist terminology usually means “to cross over to the other shore,” “to save sentient beings,” “to achieve perfection.” Because we’re talking about Avalokitesvara, we should keep in mind that the line could just as well be translated as, “saves *us* from all suffering and distress.” This line does not occur in most early versions of the sutra and may be a later addition.

⁷ The second word in this expression, 厄 *e*, means “calamity, accident, obstruction.” It’s sometimes translated as “difficulty.”

⁸ The word 色 *se* translated here as “form” has at least two meanings: 1) the Sanskrit term *rūpa*, something which has been formed and can decay or break down, a material object that is subject to change; 2) Color and form, an object of eye consciousness, the visible material world. The second definition is the same as the “realm of eyes” later in the sutra.

⁹ From the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*: “The five skandhas are a classification of matter and mind into five categories, which are form, feeling, perception, impulse and consciousness. 'Form' (*rūpa*) is matter in general, the body or materiality. 'Feeling' (*vedanā*) is receptive or sensory function. 'Perception' (*saṃjñā*) refers to images that surface in the mind. Symbolic function. 'Impulse' (*saṃskāra*) is will, intention, or the mental function that accounts for craving. The power of formation potential. It is also understood as all of the general mental functions not included in the skandhas of feeling or perception. 'Consciousness' (*viññāna*) is the cognitive, or discriminating function. Knowing through discrimination (Skt. *pañca-skandha*). The first is physical, the other four mental qualities; (2), (3), and (4) are associated with mental functioning.”

¹⁰In his translation of *The Heart Sutra*, Red Pine translates *saṃskāra* (“impulses”) as “memory.” Here is his reasoning: “In the past this term has often been translated as ‘impulse,’ ‘volition,’ etc. But

these renderings involve certain limitations and distortions. ‘Volition’ suggests a separate will tantamount to a self, and ‘impulse’ implies the lack of any will or self. What *saṃskāra* basically refers to is our karmic genome, the repository of all we have previously intended, whether expressed in the form of words, deeds, or thoughts. Thus, *saṃskāra* embraces all the ways we have dealt with what we have experienced in the past and that are available as ways to deal with what we find in the present.”

¹¹ The word 相 *xiang* means “mark” but also “characteristic” or “observable quality.” In English, to say something “is marked with” seems to imply something visual, but *xiang* has a more general or abstract sense, almost like saying, “dharmas are self-evidently empty,” or, “we can observe that dharmas are all empty.”

¹² The expression “do not appear or disappear” can also mean “are not born, do not cease to exist,” or, “are not created, are not destroyed.” 生 *sheng*, which we translate as “appear,” literally means “born” “produced,” or “created.”

¹³ The Sanskrit term is *mano-vijñāna-dhātu*, the realm or element of thinking and consciousness.

¹⁴ This term for “extinction” also means “cessation,” and is equivalent to *nirodha*, the extinction of suffering in the Four Noble Truths.

¹⁵ “Suffering” (苦) and “origination” or “accumulation” (集) are meaningful separately, but together they have a distinct meaning, “the origin of suffering” as in the Second Noble Truth, *dukkha-samudaya*, that suffering is caused by the accumulation and consequences of desire (as in the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination). Instead of “no suffering, no origination” this part of the line could be translated “no suffering and no origins of suffering” or just “no origins of suffering.” Red Pine translates it as “no suffering, no source.”

¹⁶ This is the complimentary term to the one above, “cessation of suffering” (as in the Third Noble Truth). Together, these terms refer to the Twelve-Linked Chain of Dependent Origination, the Buddha’s basic explanation of how suffering arises through a progression of factors that create consciousness, attachment, and suffering based on attachment.

¹⁷ This refers to the Sanskrit term *jñāna*, meaning cognition, intelligence, knowledge.

¹⁸ Although in our translation “no cognition” is included in the previous line, the Chinese version usually includes that phrase in the following line, linking *jñāna* (cognition, intelligence, knowledge) to attainment. In other words, there is no intellectual knowledge of the dharma, nor is there attainment or enlightenment rooted in that knowledge.

¹⁹ “Depend on” 依 *yi* is one possible translation, but the verb can also mean “is grounded in,” “arises from,” “coming into being.” In Yogacara Buddhism, this verb refers “an element of consciousness that serves as the basis for another element of consciousness,” for example, the *ālayavijñāna* (the storehouse consciousness) serves as the basis for all other consciousnesses. This line could be worded, “the bodhisattvas are grounded in Prajnaparamita.” Red Pine translates this as “takes refuge in.”

²⁰ 罣礙 *gua ai* is defined this way in the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*: “a covering, veil, impediment, hindrance, obstacle, barrier, interference; esp. of the mind, preventing an accurate view of reality, or preventing enlightenment.”

²¹ This concept (Sanskrit *viparyāsa*) might better be translated as “inverted” or “confused” or “deluded”: to hold what is true to be false, to believe that something impermanent is permanent or vice versa.

²² Rather than “view,” which in Chinese is 見 *jian*, the two nouns here are “dream” and “perception,” therefore this part of the line might read, “Far apart from any delusion or dream...”

²³ The KUSZ translation is also a little inaccurate here: instead of “dwell in,” these two verbs mean “to finally reach” or “to reach in the end.”

²⁴ *Anuttara samyak sambodhi* is usually translated as “unexcelled perfect enlightenment.”

²⁵ Although Zen practice doesn’t place emphasis on magic or the supernatural, the *Heart Sutra* itself has always been associated with supernatural powers, rituals, and miracles. Indeed, for many Buddhist practitioners, the focus is on the text’s supernatural powers rather than its conceptual content. (Donald Lopez’s book *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra* details the particular importances of the sutra in esoteric and tantric practice and in exorcism). Red Pine translates this phrase as “the great magic mantra.”

²⁶ The mantra is transliterated from Sanskrit. Like almost all mantras or dharanis, it is recited because the specific sounds are supposed to have particular vibrations or powers. However, it can also be translated. Edward Conze (the first translator of the Prajnaparamita sutras) translated it as “Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, O enlightenment, all hail!” Red Pine puts it this way: “The function of this mantra is to go beyond language and the categories in which language imprisons us and to lead us into the womb of Prajnaparamita, which is the Gone, the Gone Beyond, the Gone Completely Beyond... While the first part of the mantra leads us into the womb, the last part gives us birth. *Bodhi*... means “enlightenment,” and *svaha* is exclamatory: ‘at last,’ ‘amen,’ ‘hallelujah.’ It was used at the end of Vedic rituals while making oblations to the gods and thus has the function of consecrating an offering.”