

Prajnaparamita – The Heart Sutra
Transcendent or Nonconceptual Wisdom
[OR the heart essence of ultimate wisdom]

Adapted from multiple sources and comments by Khenpo Drimed Dawa

Background: *The most popular and well known of all Buddhist “scriptures”, often recited daily. Written in China (adapted) from the Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra. Long version – 25 lines; short version – 14 lines. This is the long version with the contextual information at beginning and end.*

- *Literature*
 - *Prajnaparamita – Transcendent wisdom, Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom – personification as “Mother of All Buddhas”*
 - *Best known – Heart Sutra, Diamond Sutra, Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines, Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in 25000 Lines... about 40 texts 100 BCE to 500 CE*
 - *Second Turning of the Wheel – teachings on emptiness*
 - *Uttaratantra – Buddhanature*
 - *Asanga – 50-200 CE*
 - *Third Turning of the Wheel – Buddhanature*
 - *Known as a transmission from Maitreya (Buddha of the Future) to Asanga*
 - *Madhyamaka – The Middle Way philosophy*
 - *Nagarjuna (and others) 150-250 CE, influenced by Prajnaparamita but based on known teachings of the Buddha*
- *Heart Sutra History*
 - *Origin*
 - *One of the later Prajnaparamita texts*

- *Largely a quotation from the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in 25000 Lines*
- *Believed to be composed 350 – 550 CE*
- *Earliest existent copy is a stone stele 672 CE in Chinese*
- *Other Chinese versions date 7th century*
- *Sanskrit versions*
 - *Known versions 8th century*
 - *Two versions: short (14 lines or verses) and long (25 lines or verses adding the setting and context at beginning and end)*
 - *Sanskrit versions do not use “sutra” in title (i.e., not considered a direct teaching of the historical Buddha or his closest disciples*
- *Many consider it to be the “most beloved” of all Buddhist texts – often recited daily as part of morning prayers, especially in monasteries*
- *Awam Practice Manual includes a translation of the long version (pp. 4-5, used for this commentary); Innate Happiness has the short version (p. 135, 2nd Edition)*

***Essence** – Sometimes identified as “emptiness” or “empty of” one or more qualities: (1) Buddha said – empty of or lacking any innate or inherent quality of “self-existence” or “separate-self”, (2) he rejected Vedic terms of independent, permanent and partless, using their opposites: interdependent, impermanent, having parts, (3) he taught Buddhature – luminous emptiness [it illuminates our understanding] and is beyond a “void”, (4) bliss-emptiness [ultimate “happiness” – eudaimonia – or peace], (5) **pure** awareness – innate, the ability or potential to become **aware of things** (like potential energy vs. kinetic (action) energy).*

***The Philosophy of the Heart Sutra** – This is what philosophers sometimes call via negativa, inferring that you can't say **what it is**, only **what it is not**, OR reducing it to its essence (ignoring the fact that they still use words to say this, of course).*

Keep this principle in mind when reading or chanting the text.

HOMAGE to the Noble Lady [*Prajnaparamita – a female deity, not just a text*]:

Transcendent Conqueror – Heart [*or essence*] of Transcendent Wisdom

[transcendent – *peerless, incomparable, unequaled, unrivaled, unique, superior, supreme, sublime, magnificent, marvelous*; transcendental – *innate in the mind*;

Thich Nhat Hanh refers to Prajnaparamita as “the insight [wisdom] that brings us to the other shore” (Awakening)].

Thus I have heard [*a stock prefix to sutras – teachings attributed to the Buddha or his closest followers*]. . . . Once the Transcendent Conqueror [*Buddha*] was dwelling in Rajghir [*a town in NE India in the area of Bodhgaya – the place of Buddha's Awakening*] on Vulture Peak [*small peak with steep climb above the town of Rajghir where he is said to have given teachings; the place of the Second Turning of the Wheel – the teachings on Emptiness (1st Turning of the Wheel was the 4 Noble Truths in Sarnath at Deer Park)*], together with a great sangha of Bhikshus [*monks*] and a great sangha of Bodhisattvas [*those committed to helping others attain Full Awakening*]. At that time from among the different Dharmas [*teachings*], the Transcendent Conqueror [*Buddha*] entered the samadhi [*concentration or meditative absorption*] called “profound illumination.” [*Infers concentration on emptiness*]

[*Start of the short version*] At the same time the noble and powerful Avalokiteshvara [*Chenrezig*] – the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva [*bodhi = Awakened*;

maha = great; sattva = being, so Awakened Great Being] – looked clearly at the profound practice of transcendent wisdom and saw clearly that the five aggregates [*also skandhas or heaps: (1) form, (2) feelings [pleasant, unpleasant, neutral], (3) perceptions, (4) thoughts [mental formations], (5) consciousness*] are empty by nature [*that is, lacking 3 specific qualities: independent [vs. interdependent], permanent [vs. interdependent], partless [vs. having parts, components, elements, etc.]; i.e., nothing existent has those.*]

Then by the Buddha's power, the venerable Shariputra [*one of Buddha's top two disciples*] asked the noble and powerful Avalokiteshvara – the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, “How should noble men and women, who wish to engage in the profound practice of transcendent wisdom, train?” Thus he spoke.

The noble and powerful Avalokiteshvara – the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva – answered the venerable Shariputra with these words: “Shariputra, noble men and women who wish to engage in the profound practice of transcendent wisdom should see this clearly – the five aggregates [*form [body], feelings, perceptions, thoughts, consciousness*] are empty [*interdependent, not self-entities*], thus transcending [*beyond*] all suffering [*e.g., the 3 sufferings – (1) suffering of suffering: physical pain and mental anguish (mostly the latter), sometimes listed as “suffering on top of other suffering”, (2) suffering of change, including not getting what you want or getting what you don't want, (3) all pervasive suffering: general discontent, dissatisfaction, etc.*]

Oh, Shariputra, form is emptiness [*or form is empty, i.e., is interdependent, impermanent (changes)*], emptiness is form [*has the same essence, interdependent; “yet there is this body of mine” – the Buddha*]; form is not other than emptiness [*empty*], emptiness is not other than form. [*They lack the quality of inherent self-existence. Each is interdependent, so their essence is the same. Two examples: (1) the sun and its rays – no sun, no rays; no rays, no sun; (2) a mirror and its*]

reflection – no mirror, no reflection; no reflection, no mirror. They are interdependent.] The same is true with feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness. [All 5 aggregates that compose the person (sentient being) lack or are empty of any inherent self-existence.]

[What follows here are lists of traditional Buddhist teachings or topics, which are shown here to be “empty” of or “lacking” any inherent self-existence; so all are the same in their essence, at least on the ultimate level of insight. All beings lack specific qualities, not a void.] Oh, Shariputra, all phenomena are [“bear the mark of”] emptiness [empty or lack of independent existence; they are interdependent]; [list of opposite pairings follows] they are not produced nor destroyed [their true essence is the same, unchanging, so that nature cannot be either produced or destroyed], not defiled nor pure [same], not deficient nor complete [same]. [The sutra continues illustrating the principle with other Buddhist concepts.] Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness [repeating the list of 5 aggregates, then...sense organs also lack any independence]. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind [the 6 sense organs; “mind” is included in the Buddhist list of sense organs and senses. Then, perceptions, too.]. There is no seeing, no hearing, no smelling, no tasting, no touching, no thinking [the 6 senses or perceptions]. There is no realm of sight and so on up to no realm of consciousness [Buddhism describes separate consciousnesses related to each of the 6 perceptions, e.g., seeing and eye consciousness]. There is no ignorance and no extinction of ignorance [a reference to the 12 links of dependent origination]. [The next sentence refers to the four sufferings: birth, old age, sickness and death.] There is no old age and death, and no extinction of old age and death. [Then, the Four Noble Truths.] Likewise, there is no (1) suffering, no (2) origination of suffering, no (3) extinction of suffering, no (4) path; [adding the fruition] there is

no wisdom, no attainment [*no Awakening itself!*]. [*Those last two, seemingly the very theme of the Heart Sutra itself, are not self-existent entities either! So what is left?! Via negativa. A “non-conceptual” direct experience beyond words, like Nagarjuna’s tetralemma: not a thing, not no-thing, not both, not neither.*]

Since there is nothing to be “attained”, the Bodhisattvas rely on this “perfection of wisdom” [*beyond words, labels, concepts, etc., i.e., nonconceptual insight*] and abide in it without fear. Liberating themselves from illusion [*that our perceptions and common understandings are “real”*], they awaken ultimate enlightenment [*Full Awakening*]. All Buddhas in the past, present, and future attained ultimate enlightenment [*or Full Awakening*] by relying on this perfect transcendent wisdom [*nonconceptual insight, perfect just as it is*].

Therefore, one should know that perfect transcendent wisdom [*nonconceptual insight*] is the greatest mantra, the highest mantra, the incomparable mantra, the mantra that clears all suffering, the deepest truth [*i.e., transcendent, terms we saw at the beginning*]. The mantra for perfect transcendent wisdom is proclaimed:

[Tat-yata and/or Om] **Gaté, gaté, paragaté, parasamgaté, bodhi soha!** [1X or 3X]

[Usually: Gone, Gone, Gone Beyond, Gone Far Beyond; expression of the joy of Awakening!]

[Another: Go, Go, Go Beyond, Go Totally Beyond; be rooted in the ground of Awakening!]

[*This is the end of the short version and remainder of the long version follows:*]

Shariputra, this is how a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva should train in the profound transcendent.”

Then the Transcendent Conqueror [*Buddha*] arose from that samadhi [*meditation*] and praised the noble and powerful Avalokiteshvara – the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva – saying, “Excellent, excellent noble son; it is so; it is just so profound. Transcendent wisdom [*nonconceptual insight*] should be practiced just as you have taught. All the tathagatas [*Buddhas*] rejoice.”

When the Transcendent Conqueror [*Buddha*] said this, the venerable Shariputra, the noble and powerful Avalokiteshvara – the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, the whole retinue and the world with its gods, people, demigods [*jealous gods*], and gandharvas [*lower level nature-deities*] rejoiced and praised these words of the Transcendent Conqueror. [*Buddhism does not reject the idea of gods or deities, although they are not Buddha-forms.*] Thus ends the Mahayana Sutra [*the Great Vehicle or Bodhisattva Path*] called Noble Lady [*Prajnaparamita*], the Transcendent Conqueror, the Heart [*or essence*] of Transcendent Wisdom [*or nonconceptual insight that brings us to the “other shore” of Full Awakening.*].