The *Heart Sūtra*

Revisiting Its Texts, History, and Meaning

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The *Heart Sūtra*

The Heart of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*

(Translated by the Tripiṭaka Dharma Master Xuanzang of the Tang Dynasty)

Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, while immersed in the course of the profound *prajñāpāramitā*, had an illuminating vision that the five aggregates are all empty, and traversed all suffering and woes. Śāriputra! Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form; form is precisely emptiness, emptiness is precisely form. Feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness are likewise. Śāriputra! The mark of emptiness pertaining to all *dharmas* neither arises nor ceases, is neither tainted nor pure, and neither increases nor decreases. Therefore, in emptiness, there is no form, nor is there feeling, perception, volition, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental objects; no realm of the eyes, up to no realm of mind consciousness; no ignorance and no extinction of ignorance, and up to no ageing and death, and no extinction of ageing and death. There is no suffering, its origin, its cessation or the path [to its cessation]. There is no wisdom and no attainment. Because there is no attainment, the Bodhisattvas, through reliance on *prajñāpāramitā*, are free from mental hindrances. Because there are no hindrances, there is no fear. Far removed from perversion and dreamlike imaginings, [the Bodhisattvas] ultimately [attain] *nirvāṇa*. All the Buddhas of the three times, through reliance on *prajñāpāramitā*, have attained *anuttara-samyaksaṃbodhi*. Therefore, understand that *prajñāpāramitā* is the great divine mantra, the great illuminating mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, and the unequalled mantra, which has the capacity to eliminate all suffering. This is truthful and not false. Thus, proclaim the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā*, uttering the mantra as follows: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā.*

This is a literal translation of Xuanzang's version of the *Heart Sūtra*, *Bore boluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經. T8.251, 848c.

Preface

The precise moment when I first encountered the *Heart Sūtra* or committed it to memory eludes me. From a young age, the entirety of the text seemed to reside within my mind, effortlessly accessible. This familiarity is all the more curious considering that I was raised in a Catholic school in Hong Kong when the city was under British colonial governance. In an era preceding the internet, my exposure to the scripture likely stemmed from various sources: the Chinese novels I devoured, the television programmes I watched, or the freely distributed Buddhist scriptures found in restaurants and pamphlet stands. Regardless of the medium, my early acquaintance with the *Heart Sūtra* attests to its deep cultural embeddedness, which subtly cultivated my connection to this revered Buddhist text.

Many years passed before I revisited the *Heart Sūtra* in an academic setting during my master's studies at the University of Toronto, where I began an in-depth exploration of the Sanskrit text under the guidance of Leonard C. D. C. Priestley. This scholarly engagement marked the beginning of a profound transformation in my understanding of the scripture. This was further deepened by my encounter with Donald S. Lopez's *The* Heart Sūtra *Explained,* which illuminated the rich Indian and Tibetan commentarial traditions that had shaped interpretations of the text over the centuries. Lopez's subsequent work, *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the* Heart Sūtra, introduced an anecdote that stayed with me. He recounted how, when delivering public lectures on the *Heart Sūtra*, those introducing his earlier book would often remark with a hint of wistfulness, 'as if the *Heart Sūtra* could ever be explained'. This expression lodged itself in my mind as I continued to delve into commentaries, each proposing that the text could indeed be unravelled through different doctrinal frameworks.

I remained entirely unaware of Jan Nattier's provocative theory, suggesting that the *Heart Sūtra* might be a 'Chinese apocryphal text', until much later. As Jayarava Attwood observes, Nattier's article did not initially attract widespread

attention following its publication, and I might well have overlooked it had it not been for the growth of internet resources. However, her theory possessed a latent potency – rather similar to a seed that, though it may take time to germinate, has the potential to flourish. The cross-linguistic comparative analysis that Nattier undertook, juxtaposing the Chinese and Sanskrit versions of the *Heart Sūtra* alongside the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in 25,000 Lines*, was both innovative and groundbreaking at the time. It not only challenged established assumptions but also laid the groundwork for the works of Jayarava Attwood and Shì Huìfēng, whose contributions have become the cornerstones of the present study.

Traditional commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* often reveal more about what the text meant to those cultures than what the original Indian authors intended, as Edward Conze noted in his critique of Chinese and Japanese exegetical works. Conze sought 'the most authentic' understanding through Indian commentaries but overlooked the fact that these were also composed within the confines of distinct doctrinal traditions.

This study diverges from the conventional focus on deciphering the meanings of individual lines in the *Heart Sūtra*. I aim to explore the teachings embodied in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in 25,000 Lines*, which the *Heart Sūtra* is said to epitomise – if, indeed, the 'heart' of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra* can be understood thus.

My approach to explaining the *Heart Sūtra* unfolds in two stages. First, I undertake a comparative study of the Chinese and Sanskrit texts of the *Heart Sūtra* to arrive at a philological understanding of its lines. This investigation not only illuminates the complexities surrounding the text's historical formation but also allows the structural division of the text into six sections. Alongside this textual analysis, I delve into historical documents often neglected in Western scholarship, aiming to trace the origins of the *Heart Sūtra* and bring to light perspectives hitherto overlooked.

Second, I revisit the same six sections of the *Heart Sūtra*, shifting the focus to their 'Dharmological' context – situating the text within the broader framework of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra in 25,000 Lines* and other Mahāyāna scriptures. This dual approach seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the *Heart Sūtra* not merely as an isolated text but as an intricate condensation of the vast *prajñāpāramitā* tradition.

Thus, the structure of this book is designed as a form of 'spiral learning', encouraging readers to revisit and deepen their engagement with the sections of the text previously examined. This iterative approach subtly mirrors the Chinese interpretation of the three kinds of *prajñā* (transcendental wisdom): the *prajñā* of literary expression (*wenzi bore* 文字般若), the *prajñā* of contemplative illumination (*guanzhao bore* 觀照般若), and the *prajñā* of ultimate reality (*shixiang bore*

實相般若). This tripartite division appears in one of the earliest commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra*, Fazang's 法藏 *Bore boluomiduo xinjing lueshu* 般若波羅蜜多心經略疏 (Brief Commentary on the Heart of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra), and offers a distinct understanding that diverges from the Indo–Tibetan Buddhist threefold cultivation of *prajñā* as hearing (*śruta*), reflecting (*cintā*), and meditating (*bhāvanā*).

The Chinese formulation can be traced to the writings of Huiyuan 慧遠 (523–592) and is elaborated in the works of Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), and others who frequently attribute this interpretation to the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (The Great Treatise on the Prajñāpāramitā), a text traditionally ascribed to Nāgārjuna. However, a closer examination reveals that the *Da zhidu lun* does not actually present a tripartite classification of *prajñā*. Regardless of its textual origins, this interpretive framework proves a valuable heuristic, guiding practitioners to recognise three progressive levels of approaching enlightened wisdom: through intellectual engagement with words, through contemplative meditation of their meaning, and, ultimately, through the direct realisation of *prajñā*.

The spiral learning approach adopted here primarily engages with the first two levels: textual analysis and contemplative practice. While these methods facilitate a deepened understanding of the *Heart Sūtra*'s teachings, the final realisation of *prajñā* represents a direct and personal experience that transcends all conceptual and linguistic limitations. As such, the ultimate attainment of *prajñā* lies beyond the purview of this book, which instead aims to prepare the ground for that unmediated insight by guiding readers through the pathways of intellectual and contemplative exploration.

It is my honour to publish this book with Hong Kong University Press (HKU Press), an institution at the forefront of academic excellence in the city where I was born and raised. I am pleased to announce that HKU Press will also be publishing a Chinese edition of this work, a project that I look forward to undertaking. It is my hope that both versions will contribute to a renewed scholarly interest in the *Heart Sūtra* and inspire deeper engagement with the practice of *prajñāpāramitā*, the perfection of wisdom.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest gratitude to Leonard C. D. C. Priestley, under whose guidance I had the privilege of attending courses on the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Fazang's *Jin shizi zhang* 金獅子章 (Treatise of the Golden Lion), the works of Sengzhao 僧肇, Daoist classics such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and others throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. His teachings have been a wellspring of inspiration. I am also profoundly grateful to *vajrācārya* Dorje Jidral, a disciple of Dudjom Rinpoche of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose insights into the Indian commentarial traditions on the *Heart Sūtra* – specifically those of Vairocana, Śrī Siṃha, Atiśa, and Kamalaśīla – greatly enriched this project.

My initial engagement with the Tibetan and Dunhuang versions of the *Heart Sūtra* was guided by Shen Weirong, whose comparative scholarship on Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist texts shaped the trajectory of this research. I especially thank Chan Wing-cheuk for his invaluable perspective of the *Heart Sūtra* through the lens of Yogācāra Buddhism, and the late Julia Ching, David B. Waterhouse, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche, E. Gene Smith, and Raymond E. Robertson. Their support and encouragement were crucial to my scholarly development. I also thank Barbara Hazelton for her input in locating Tibetan sources relevant to the study.

In addition, the ecumenical ethos of Emmanuel College provided a fertile environment for scrutinising the theological and historical enquiries surrounding the *Heart Sūtra*, fostering a space that allowed interdisciplinary exploration.

The research and writing of this book were facilitated by the professorship in Chinese Buddhist Studies that Venerable Wude 悟德法師, founder of Ching Kwok Buddhist Temple 正覺寺 in Toronto, generously endowed on Emmanuel College. I am privileged to publish this inaugural work as the first holder of this

professorship, focusing on a Buddhist text to which Chinese Buddhism has made a profound and enduring contribution within the broader Buddhist tradition.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mikihiro Nishimatsu 西松幹浩, who graciously granted permission to use his woodcut print of the *Heart Sūtra* as the cover art for this book. My first encounter with this evocative artwork was decades ago, in the home of David B. Waterhouse. The image left an indelible impression on me. In September 2024, while attending an exhibition by Naoko Matsubara 松原直子, David's wife and a distinguished woodcut artist in her own right, I was drawn to this piece once more. It appeared in a documentary film featured in the exhibition, reigniting my admiration. When I shared my interest with Naoko, she kindly facilitated contact with Nishimatsu-san, who now resides in Japan. I learned that the original block had been destroyed. The cover now features the remaining half-block print. This work continues to captivate me with its bold calligraphy and its austere yet sublime quality – a tension that conveys a profound sense of struggle and suffering on the path to transcendence. The seal image of *bore* 般若 on the back cover also carries its deep significance. It was a gift from my teacher, Leonard C. D. C. Priestley, who took up the art of engraving seals as a retirement hobby. It is a gift imbued with meaning, for which I remain deeply grateful.

Above all, I am indebted to my mother, whose unwavering support for my journey into Buddhist studies and profound influence on my spiritual formation made this book possible. In fact, I completed this manuscript at her side as she received palliative care at home. I wrote the final revisions during the last days of her life, a period that, despite its sorrow, was marked by our shared dedication to seeing this work come to fruition.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Reception of the *Heart Sūtra*

For over a millennium, the *Heart Sūtra* has been deeply entrenched in the daily Buddhist rituals of various countries and regions, including China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Vietnam, Nepal, Mongolia, Bhutan, and, in more recent decades, Europe and North America. While other scriptures might be more important in distinct Buddhist traditions – such as the *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (Sūtra Displaying the Land of Bliss) in the Pure Land school (*jingtu zong* 淨土宗) and the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (Sūtra on the White Lotus of the True Dharma) in the Tiantai school (*tiantai zong* 天台宗) – the *Heart Sūtra* has an unparalleled stature, as it is the most celebrated Buddhist scripture both in traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist countries across Asia and in the Western world. Its universal renown testifies to its profound impact and enduring relevance in the vast landscape of Buddhist philosophical and practical discourse.

The scripture's significance to Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioners cannot be overstated. It is believed to encapsulate the essence of *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) teachings, and, consequently, the core of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Thus, it has been translated into more languages than has any other Buddhist text. In addition to its well-known Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan versions, it has been

translated into Manchu,[1] Khotanese,[2] Tangut,[3] Mongolian,[4] Sogdian,[5] and Old Uyghur.[6] The *Heart Sūtra*'s ubiquity can be partially attributed to its brevity, its most widespread Chinese iteration, translated by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), encapsulated in only 260 characters. This succinctness contributes to the scripture's versatility, which allows it to be effortlessly incorporated into numerous daily liturgies and rituals central to East Asian Buddhist practice.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the *Heart Sūtra* also serves as the foundation for both tantric *sādhana*s and 'exorcist' rituals (*sher snying bdud zlog*).[7] Beyond its ritualistic applications, the *Heart Sūtra* is often associated with protective or supernatural powers, thereby permeating various cultural narratives. This is notably demonstrated by the references to it in various literary classics, including the *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West). In this celebrated novel, attributed to Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (*c.*1500–*c.*1582), the *Heart Sūtra*'s mystical dimensions are invoked, further cementing its pervasive influence not only in religious practice but also in broader cultural and literary domains.

The *Heart Sūtra* has inspired more commentaries than has any other Buddhist text. Within the Chinese canon, fifty-six commentaries on the scripture can be found in the *Zōkuzōkyō* 続藏經 (Extended Collection of the Tripiṭaka), representing all major schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Pure Land, Tiantai, Huayen 華嚴, and Chan 禪. Additionally, there are nine extant Indian commentaries on

1. John L. Mish, 'The Manchu Version of the Heart Sutra', *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines*, Cahier 5 (1974): 87–90.
2. Prods Oktor Skjærvø, 'The Khotanese Hṛdayasūtra', in *A Green Leaf: Papers in Honour of Professor Jes P. Asmussen* (Acta Iranica, II. Hommages et Opera Minora, Vol. XII), ed. J. Duchesne-Guillemin, W. Sundermann, and F. Vahman (E. J. Brill, 1988); Lewis Lancaster, 'A Study of a Khotanese *Prajñāpāramitā* Text After the Work of Sir Harold Bailey', in *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, ed. L. Lancaster (University of California, 1977).
3. Kirill Solonin, 'The Chán Teaching of Nányáng Huìzhōng (–775) in Tangut Translation', in *Medieval Tibeto-Burman Languages IV*, ed. Nathan Hill (Brill, 2012).
4. Olivér Kápolnás, 'A Heart-Sutra Fragment from Dunhuang', *Quaestiones Mongolorum disputatae* no. 10 (2014): 1–5.
5. Emile Benveniste, *Textes sogdiens: Édités, traduits et commentés* [Sogdian Texts: Edited, Translated, and Commented Upon] (Geuthner, 1940), 142–44.
6. Abdurishid Yakup, *Prajñāpāramitā Literature in Old Uyghur* (Brepols, 2010), 223–34.
7. See the account of a Tibetan ritual that employs the *Heart Sūtra* for the purpose of dispelling malignant spirits (*bdud bzlog*), a practice that Lopez has loosely characterised as an act of 'exorcism', in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 216–38. See also 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas's (1813–1899) *Bka' 'khor lo bar pa'i yang bcud shes rab snying po'i mdo la brten pa'i bdud zlog bar chad kun sel lag len* (Ritual for the Performance of Dispelling Malignant Spirits According to the Heart of the Prajñāpāramitā).

the scripture, eight of which are preserved in the Tibetan canon,[8] one recently identified from the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts.[9] There is even a commentary attributed to Āryadeva preserved in the Chinese canon, but this ostensibly 'Indian' commentary notably appears to be based on the Chinese version of the *Heart Sūtra*.[10] Furthermore, numerous Tibetan commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* have emerged, reflecting the perspectives of various schools within Tibetan Buddhism and illustrating the text's significance across multiple Tibetan traditions.[11]

8. The eight Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* that are extant in the Tibetan canon are Vimalamitra's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayaṭīkā* (*'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i rgya cher bshad pa*, Vast Explanation of the Noble Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, P-5217), Jñānamitra's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayavyākhyā* (*'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i rnam par bshad pa*, Explanation of the Noble Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, P-5218), Vajrapāṇi's *Bhagavatīprajñāpāramitāhṛdayaṭīkārthapradīpa* (*bCom ldan 'das ma shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i 'grel pa don gyi sgron ma zhes bya ba*, Commentary on the Bhagavatī Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra, Lamp of the Meaning, P-5219), Praśāstrasena's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayaṭīkā* (*'Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i rgya cher 'grel pa*, Vast Commentary on the Noble Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, P-5220), Kamalaśīla's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayanāmaṭīkā* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po zhes bya ba'i 'grel pa*, Commentary on the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, P-5221), Atiśa's *Prajñāhṛdayavyākhyā* (*Shes rab snying po'i rnam par bshad pa bzhugs*, Explanation of the Heart Sūtra, P-5222), Mahājana's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayārthaparijñāna* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i don yongs su shes pa*, Complete Understanding of the Meaning of the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom, P-5223), and Śrī Siṃha's *Mantravivṛtaprajñāhṛdayavṛtti* (*Shes snying 'grel pa sngags su 'grel pa*, Commentary on the Heart Sūtra as Mantra, P-5840). For English translations of all eight commentaries, see Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness*.

9. Kamalaśīla's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayavṛtti* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po bshad pa*, Commentary on the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom). See James B. Apple, 'Kamalaśīla's Word Commentary to the *Heart Sūtra*, Translation and Edition', *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 70 (2024): 5–82.

10. Z26.526. The work is entitled *Bore xinjing zhu* 般若心經註 (Commentary on the Heart of Wisdom Sūtra) and is attributed to the 'Deva of Central India' (*zhong tianzhu Tipo* 中天竺提婆). Note that 'Tipo' is the conventional Chinese translation of the name Āryadeva.

11. Notable Tibetan commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* include rNgog blo ldan shes rab's (1059–1109) *Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel gyi bshad pa* (An Explanation of Extensive Commentary of the Heart Sūtra); Rong ston shes bya kun rig's (1367–1449) *Shes rab snying po'i rnam bshad yum don rab gsal zhes by aba bzhugs so* (A Detailed Explanation of the Heart Sūtra, The Meaning of the Mother [of the Perfection of Wisdom] Thoroughly Clarified); 'Jam dbyangs dga' ba'i blo gros's (1429–1503) *Shes rab snying po'i tikka* (A Commentary of the Heart Sūtra); Tāranātha's (1575–1634) *Sher phyin snying po'i mdo'i tshig 'grel* (Word-for-Word Commentary on the Heart of the Perfection Wisdom Sūtra); Ngag dbang bstan dar's (1759–1831) *Shes rab snying po'i 'grel pa don gsal nor bu'i 'od* (Commentary on the Heart Sūtra, Jewel Light Illuminating the Meaning); and Gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me's (1762–1823) *Shes rab snying po'i sngags kyi rnam bshad sbas don gsal ba sgron me* (An Explanation of the Heart Sūtra Mantra, Illuminating the Hidden Meaning). Horiuchi Toshio 堀内俊郎 (2019) produced a critical edition and a Japanese translation of rNgog blo ldan shes rab's commentary. Lopez (1996) provided English translations of two of the three commentaries from the dGe lugs pa tradition, written by Ngag dbang bstan dar (also known as bsTan dar lha ram pa) and Gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me. An English translation of the other dGe lugs commentary, written by 'Jam dbyangs

5. Conclusion

Although Xuanzang's translation of the *Heart Sūtra* contains only 260 characters, it is packed with teachings of profound complexity. Thus, a veritable garden of interpretations and commentaries on it has emerged, each shedding unique light upon this scripture's multifaceted meaning.

My study of the *Heart Sūtra* focused on its teachings connected to those of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*. While acknowledging the depth of the interpretive frameworks offered by the esteemed Buddhist traditions of China, India, and Tibet, I sought to transcend these traditional boundaries by comprehending the *Heart Sūtra* within the context of the fundamental principles of the *prajñāpāramitā* practice and the doctrines of Indian Mahāyāna texts.

I began with the pioneering research of Jan Nattier, which suggests that the *Heart Sūtra* was compiled in China from extracts from Kumārajīva's Chinese translation of the original Sanskrit *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*. After it was back-translated into Sanskrit, this Sanskrit version influenced the Chinese and Tibetan versions after the time of Xuanzang.

Regarding only the Buddhist scriptures compiled in India as authentic while neglecting those that originated in China or Tibet is untenable. The inception of the *Heart Sūtra* exemplifies the dual aspects of *bodhicitta*: over the centuries, it has illuminated the understanding of countless practitioners and scholars worldwide, shining as a radiant jewel within the treasure vault of Chinese Buddhism. The very act of distilling the essence of the teachings of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* demands a good grasp of the Dharma, embodying the element of wisdom (*prajñā*); the tasks of consolidating these teachings into a more accessible format, disseminating them widely, and translating them into Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan demonstrate compassion (*karuṇā*).

However, the *Heart Sūtra*, as the quintessential embodiment of the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings, should not be examined or understood in isolation

from the remainder of the *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus. It encompasses the process of studying and contemplating the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The emphasis should be placed on the practitioner's direct, intuitive experience and the text's successive revelation of wisdom, rather than on a mere logical dissection and analytical parsing of its sentences. Consequently, the phrase 'Form is precisely emptiness' must not be understood solely through textual examination by equating 'form' directly with 'emptiness'. If this were the case, the subsequent phrase, 'Emptiness is form', would become superfluous; and having declared the two as identical, why was the concept of them 'not differing' from each other still introduced? As such, the statement 'Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form' could either contradict the prior declaration of identity or become redundant. This mode of interpretation strays far from the scripture's original intention: to guide practitioners to observe all phenomena as they truly are.

This book interprets the *Heart Sūtra* in synergy with the Dhāraṇī Gate, the Three Gates of Liberation, and other teachings detailed in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, emphasising the principle of the practice of non-apprehension (*anupalambhayogena*) and unattainability (*anupalabdhitvāt*). It commences with the five aggregates and progressively approaches the realisation that all phenomena in the nature of thusness are 'neither existent nor non-existent', thereby genuinely awakening to the true characteristic of all phenomena. Consequently, the text's reference to 'no form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental objects' does not represent a simple denial of existence, refuting the form seen by the eyes or the sound heard by the ears in a self-deluding fashion. Rather, while coursing in the profound *prajñāpāramitā*, a state beyond words and thoughts, there is no attachment to, or misperception of, the six sense objects (*ṣaḍ viṣaya*), perceived as existent, with a mind swayed by ignorance. All phenomena are experienced as they truly are within the reality-limit.

From this viewpoint, the practice of *prajñāpāramitā* involves not clinging to what is attained or realised. As articulated in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, 'In the ultimate truth of all phenomena, the realisation, what is realised, the place of realisation, the time of realisation, and the realisation itself, whether together or separate, cannot be attained or perceived.'[1] If practitioners believe in an existent 'reality-limit' (*bhūtakoṭi*) to be realised and in a state of enlightenment to be obtained, they are succumbing to discrimination.

In the lexicon of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, this realisation is referred to as the realm of reality-itself (*dharmatā*), illuminated by non-conceptual wisdom (*avikalpapraveśa-jñāna*). The journey towards awakening to non-conceptual

1. T6.220, 669a: 於一切法勝義諦中，能證、所證、證處、證時，及由此證若合若離，皆不可得、不可見故。

wisdom harmonises with the teachings of the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* and aligns with the *Heart Sūtra*'s transcendence of the five aggregates, the eighteen realms, the twelve links of dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths, wisdom, and the stages of realisation. The method of navigating each stage is characterised by 'non-abiding' or 'non-apprehension'. This suggests manifesting all *dharma*s by truly perceiving them through non-conceptual wisdom and awakening to the realisation that all phenomena are essentially non-arisen.

Furthermore, the Dhāraṇī Gate delineated in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, such as 'One syllable encompasses forty-two syllables, [and] forty-two syllables can encompass one syllable', is considered an exercise of 'non-abiding'. The assertion that the *Heart Sūtra* is merely negating, using 'non-existence' or even annihilation as a sanctuary, implies a misconstrual of the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings.

Buddhists claim that *prajñāpāramitā* is profound, but its profundity should not be understood as referring to its intellectual depth but as a challenge to amend various distortions in our own minds to directly apprehend 'reality-itself'. Consequently, *prajñāpāramitā* is denoted as the great clarity (*vidyā*), the unsurpassed clarity, and the unequalled clarity. This is the domain of non-conceptual wisdom, as explained in the *Bodhisattvaśikṣāprabheda* chapter in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*. Those who can reside in this realm dwell in the 'patience with non-arising *dharma*s' (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*), where all *dharma*s are enveloped by non-arising, and all *dharma*s emerge out of non-arising.

This encapsulates the 'heart' of the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings.

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