

A Section-by-Section Commentary on the Heart Sūtra

Master Wang Xianglu

Contents

Preface

Section One: Dhāraṇī

Section Two: Form and Emptiness

Section Three: Original Nature

Section Four: The Function of the Dharma

Section Five: Virtues of Fruition

Part Six: Realization and Knowledge

Chapter Seven: Secrets

Preface

Section One: The Essential Summary

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, when practicing the profound prajñāpāramitā, clearly saw that the five aggregates are all empty and thereby crossed beyond all suffering and distress.

These four sentences are the essential summary of the entire sūtra. The first sentence is, moreover, the essential summary of the four sentences: it says that in practicing and attaining Buddhahood, one must reach complete freedom. One who is free oneself and further leads others to freedom is a bodhisattva. Its wondrous function lies in the single word “contemplate”: contemplate the original nature. It means that oneself and sentient beings are originally free; the only reason they are not free is that, through delusion and unawareness, they vainly give rise to afflictions. If one wishes to restore the original nature, one must activate the wondrous contemplation of prajñā, awaken to and enter the original nature, and

investigate it through the power of wisdom's illumination. This is the essential formula for cultivating the mind.

The following three sentences explain how wondrous contemplation is put into use. Within the lotus of one's own nature, practice the profound Dharma of prajñā in order to cross over and reach the other shore. Yet "shore" is only a provisional name; there is no this or that. For the time being, delusion is called this shore and awakening the other shore. The difference between delusion and awakening lies only in one mind. If the mind awakens, one is said to have reached the other shore.

Pāra means the other shore, mita means reaching, and tā means above. It is neither this shore nor midstream nor merely the other shore; only when one is above the other shore is it called ultimate. Therefore it is called profound practice. Yet the mind cannot be grasped: it is established in dependence on objects and stands in relation to them. Externally there are the six sense objects, internally the six sense faculties; all are form. Their opposition gives rise to sensation, just as wind is felt when it comes into contact with something.

Once there is sensation, thought is stirred; this is called conception. The moment-to-moment flowing of conception is called formation. Then consciousness knows it as wind, as cold or heat; all discriminations arise in mutual dependence. These five things gather and bind without dispersing; this is called the five aggregates. It means that mind and objects mutually enfold one another, becoming one through delusion. One wanders ever more deeply, not knowing how to return. Long habituation becomes customary, difficult to escape, and is even regarded as natural.

Thus there are success and failure in affairs, favorable and adverse conditions in the mind, and suffering and pleasure arise. Suffering is indeed suffering, but pleasure too is suffering, because pleasure is not ultimate; all things are impermanent and ultimately return to suffering. When the body undergoes illness or pain and the mind is uneasy, this is called suffering. When one's thoughts are inverted and the mind is uneasy, this is called distress. If prajñā has not opened and suffering and distress have not been removed, one cannot be said to have crossed beyond them.

To cross beyond suffering and distress is to cross beyond this illusory mind, for suffering and distress all belong to the various states of mind. To cross beyond the mind, one can rely only on profound prajñā, clearly seeing its original emptiness. What is emptiness? It is simply this mind and its objects. Objects are illusory appearances; mind is illusorily established. The five aggregates, this illusory conjunction of mind and objects, arise dependently out of emptiness and have no substantial reality. If one takes them as suffering, there is suffering; if one takes them as pleasure, there is pleasure; if one takes them as real, one mistakes the false for the true and becomes inverted. If one takes them as illusory, the mind has

nothing to which it is bound, and suffering and pleasure cease. Clearly seeing that the five aggregates are originally empty, the mind attains freedom. The mind is then empty and quiescent, and all things are liberated; therefore it is called “all.”

Thus, these three sentences are the supreme wondrous Dharma for saving the mind. Yet the meaning of the two words “all” is extremely subtle: unless one reaches the ultimate, one cannot call it “all.” The emptiness spoken of is not emptiness in the sense of existence and nonexistence. Things exist only through the coming together of conditions; their substance is originally empty, though their function is not absent. They are empty because they lack inherent nature, and empty because they are provisionally combined. Moreover, clear seeing itself belongs to the five aggregates; one need only not cling to it.

Ordinary beings do not know where suffering and distress arise. They do not know what the five aggregates are, do not know that suffering and distress lie in the mind rather than the body, do not know that the five aggregates are originally empty, and still less do they know the wondrous method of clear seeing. Therefore, life after life, they sink on this shore.

Arhats know that the five aggregates are empty, but their *prajñā* lacks power. They cling one-sidedly to emptiness and have not understood its meaning; clinging to emptiness still amounts to existence. It is as though they have left this shore but remain in midstream, not yet reaching the other shore. Therefore they are called stream-enterers: their wisdom’s illumination is incomplete, and *prajñā* has not yet opened. Bodhisattvas already know that the five aggregates are originally empty, but their clear seeing has not itself become empty. They still cling to its function and at times lose that illumination. It is as though they have reached the other shore but have not yet gone ashore. Only bodhisattvas of the eighth *bhūmi* and above, equal in measure to Buddhas, see even clear seeing as empty; and they do not cling even to emptiness. Only then is it called “all empty.”

With such freedom, all hindrances are exhausted. Without exerting oneself in profound *prajñā*, one cannot rise above the other shore, which is ultimate *nirvāṇa*. Only then may it be called “all.” At this point, the wondrous function of contemplation is complete. What is called “illumination” is the activation of *prajñā* in wondrous contemplation; what is called “seeing” is directly seeing the original nature before one’s very eyes. It is neither empty nor existent, neither real nor unreal; it lies wholly in one’s own awakening, not in being completely delivered by the Buddha, for practice is in oneself and clear seeing is in one’s own mind. These four sentences already contain the full meaning of the Heart Sūtra; therefore this is called the essential summary.

Section Two: Form and Emptiness

Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Sensation, conception, formation, and consciousness are also thus.

Prajñā signifies completeness. Without penetrating prajñā, the two meanings of form and emptiness cannot be comprehensively understood. People commonly cling to form as truly existent and emptiness as voidness, not knowing that form, as form, does not exist only when present or become empty only when destroyed. Even at the very time it exists, its substance is originally empty. Therefore form and emptiness are nondual.

Moreover, emptiness does not mean that where there is existence it is not empty, and where there is nonexistence it is empty. Rather, things are empty precisely because, though present, they cannot be grasped: they are provisionally combined through causes and conditions and originally lack inherent nature. Therefore, to understand form is to understand emptiness; to understand emptiness is to find no form. Ultimately, emptiness does not depart from form, nor does form depart from emptiness.

Now, in addressing Śāriputra: “form is not different from emptiness” cures the ordinary being’s illness of clinging to existence; “emptiness is not different from form” cures the illness of the two vehicles’ clinging to emptiness; and “form is emptiness; emptiness is form” cures bodhisattvas who, though they understand form and emptiness as nondual, still retain the view of two. “Not different” still implies comparison and opposition; “is” means nonduality.

Since form is thus, sensation, conception, formation, and consciousness are also thus. This means that the five aggregates too belong to form. The appearances of external objects are certainly illusory, but the appearances perceived inwardly are also illusory. Both are illusory presences and therefore cannot be grasped. Without external objects, the mind does not arise; without inner perception, the mind is not established. If one uses wisdom’s illumination to break through these two forms, inner and outer, the mind becomes empty.

Yet wisdom’s illumination is also mind. If one further uses profound prajñā to sweep away this wisdom’s illumination, one does not cling to emptiness, and emptiness itself becomes empty. One who can empty emptiness is unhindered by clinging to existence or clinging to emptiness. Understanding the meaning of the eighteen emptinesses, one knows that all is ultimately empty. Outwardly one is not deluded by form; inwardly one is not confused by dharmas. Everything is purified, and one attains great freedom. What suffering or distress could then be spoken of?

Section Three: Original Nature

Śāriputra, the empty characteristics of all dharmas are neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.

What was said above is what is known through practice and realization. People therefore suppose that there is practice, attainment, and realization. They do not know that it is originally so, not that it becomes so only after practice. It is naturally so. All dharmas originally have empty characteristics. Since dharmas arise from mind, and mind is illusorily existent, dharmas too lack reality. Therefore it is said: dharmas are originally not existent, so do not adopt the view of nonexistence; dharmas are originally not nonexistent, so do not adopt the view of existence.

The mind originally does not arise; why then speak further of cessation? Since its fundamental substance neither arises nor ceases, defilement and purity, increase and decrease, coming and going, sameness and difference all belong merely to the illusory dharmas of opposition. Only through practicing profound prajñā can one reach the meaning of original non-arising. When the mind attains freedom and emptiness, suffering may be removed without being deliberately resolved, and sentient beings naturally cross beyond it. This section speaks exclusively of the substance of original nature; what follows speaks of the method of putting it into use.

Section Four: The Function of Dharma

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, conception, formation, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharma; no realm of the eye, and so on up to no realm of consciousness; no ignorance, nor ending of ignorance, and so on up to no old age and death, nor ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, origination, cessation, or path; no wisdom and no attainment. Because there is nothing to attain.

The fundamental substance of prajñā is revealed through function. The wonder of prajñā lies in its ability to function, while the wondrous function of dharmas lies in non-clinging. To be non-clinging, one must first understand emptiness, for through emptiness there is neither clinging nor defilement. Therefore it says, "In emptiness there is no form," and so forth. This means that if one can understand emptiness, one will cling to nothing. The word "no" means not grasping. People often mistakenly take it to mean the "no" of existence and nonexistence; this is a fundamental error. From the five aggregates through wisdom and attainment, all belong to dharmas. If one knows the empty characteristics of all dharmas, one naturally does not grasp them and attains freedom.

Those who enter hell cling to a large measure of greed, anger, and ignorance; animals cling to a large measure of ignorance; hungry ghosts cling to a large measure of greed; demons cling to a large measure of anger; human beings cling to

half-measures of greed, anger, and ignorance; devas cling to a small measure of greed. All these are hindrances of birth and death; all belong to those whose five aggregates have not become empty and whose six sense faculties have not been purified.

People also mistakenly understand “the five aggregates are all empty” to mean stopping and extinguishing the five aggregates, cutting them off entirely, thus falling into annihilationism. They do not know that the absence of the five aggregates is not annihilationism, nor the abolition of the five aggregates; it simply means not grasping them and knowing that mind and objects are originally empty. Ordinary beings grasp the five aggregates, the six sense objects and six sense faculties, and even the six consciousnesses. Thus the eighteen realms gather and bind without dispersing, and liberation is difficult.

Although pratyekabuddhas are free of the three poisons, they cling to the twelve links of dependent origination. From ignorance through old age and death, all are illusory dharmas; yet they still lack the wisdom to empty them, and therefore have not reached the ultimate. Although śrāvakas have also understood segmented birth and death, they cling to the Dharma of the four truths, and likewise have not reached the ultimate. Bodhisattvas cling to the six perfections and the myriad practices; they still do not depart from the dharma-view of wisdom and attainment, still have hindrances, and likewise cannot be said to be ultimate. Therefore the wondrous function of dharmas lies in the single word “no”: simply do not grasp.

From ordinary beings up to bodhisattvas, and from the five aggregates up to wisdom and attainment, none can be grasped. Why? Because the characteristics of all dharmas are originally empty, and because there is nothing to attain. This section speaks exclusively of the method of putting Dharma into use: employ the practice of wisdom’s illumination and simply do not grasp.

For explanations of such matters as the twelve links of dependent origination and the four truths, one may consult other commentaries. In sum, they do not go beyond the cyclical flow of delusion, karma, and suffering. As for the word “ending” in the sūtra, it too should be understood as “no.” “No ignorance” means do not grasp ignorance; “ending” means no non-ignorance. Even non-grasping itself is not grasped. First, one empties the mind; afterward, one empties emptiness. First, one empties the personal self; afterward, one empties the dharma-self. Thus one ascends to Buddhahood.

Section Five: The Virtues of Fruition

Bodhisattvas, relying on prajñāpāramitā, have no hindrances in their minds. Because there are no hindrances, there is no fear. Far removed from inverted views

and delusive thoughts, they realize ultimate nirvāṇa. All Buddhas of the three times, relying on prajñāpāramitā, attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect awakening.

Ordinary beings and Buddhas are fundamentally nondual in substance. Ordinary beings are the causal mind; Buddhas and bodhisattvas possess the virtues of fruition. Yet the virtues of fruition also arise from causes: none can attain realization without practice. One simply must not cling to there being practice, attainment, or realization. But if one mistakenly clings to there being no practice, no attainment, and no realization, then ordinary beings could refrain from practice and simply become Buddhas of themselves. How could such a principle exist in the world? If one clings to there being practice, attainment, and realization, one has not understood the original nature; dharmas cannot become empty, and one will ultimately fail to reach the ultimate.

Only by relying on prajñāpāramitā does the mind attain freedom. It neither clings to cultivation, attainment, or realization as existing, nor to cultivation, attainment, or realization as nonexistent. All dharmas are empty and pure, and the mind is without hindrance. This does not mean that there is no attachment; rather, there is attachment without hindrance. Hindrance is the cause, fear the result; inversion is the cause, delusive dreaming the result. When nothing whatsoever exists, this is called ultimate nirvāṇa; ultimate nirvāṇa is Buddha.

Clearly knowing that all dharmas have the characteristic of emptiness, that there is no wisdom and no attainment, still does not amount to annihilation. To attain this unattainable is unsurpassed bodhi. Bodhi is not existent, for it cannot be attained; bodhi is not empty, for it is not annihilated. Within the true suchness and intrinsic nature of the unattainable are wondrous functions as countless as the sands of the Ganges. Intrinsic nature itself neither arises nor ceases, yet it can give rise to all dharmas.

The Buddhas of the three times neither come nor go. All who perfectly fulfill this fruition and virtue must rely on prajñā in cultivation. Only when cultivation reaches the point at which all is empty and pure is it called pāramitā. In the sūtra, the words “all,” “each,” “no,” “without hindrance,” “ultimate,” and “deep” echo one another from beginning to end, expressing the utmost perfection of virtue.

The foregoing five sections constitute the first half of the Heart Sūtra. They express the absence of substantiality, yet all remain on the ground of functioning, where speech is still possible; thus one turns from existence to emptiness. The following two sections constitute the latter half. They express the absence of vacuity, having already departed from the ground of functioning, where speech is no longer possible; thus one turns again from emptiness to existence. Together they express

the meaning of being neither substantial nor vacuous—namely, the Tathāgata’s meaning that all dharmas are such.

Sixth Section: Realization and Knowing

Therefore know that prajñāpāramitā is the great spiritual mantra, the great illumination mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, the unequaled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is true and not false.

This section speaks specifically of the realm realized and known by practitioners, and it is a major key to this sūtra. This word “know” has the wondrous quality of directly seeing true reality and awakens the faculty of prajñā. Its joy cannot be expressed in words; one can only apprehend it spiritually and praise it.

What is being praised? That which sentient beings and Buddhas equally possess, yet which even a thousand sages do not recognize. All Buddhas, together with the dharmas of the Buddhas’ anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi, arise from this. Therefore it is called a mantra: because it encompasses all, it is great; because nothing is beyond its reach, it is spiritual; because nothing lies beyond its illumination, it is luminous; because nothing can compare with it, it is unsurpassed; because it does not fall into ranks or stages and is ultimately equal, it is unequaled.

Its empty numinosity is as unfathomable as this; its benevolent power to shatter all things is likewise so. Its essence is limpid and still; its function is blazing. It cannot be known by wisdom or cognized by consciousness. Only a Buddha together with a Buddha can realize and know it. Above, so many words of emptiness were used for fear that people might fall into emptiness; now, by speaking of what is true and not false, one turns them toward existence. Between these, there is no middle way to speak of, for the middle way itself is originally unobtainable.

Seventh Section: The Secret

Therefore, the prajñāpāramitā mantra is spoken. The mantra is spoken thus: Gate gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā.

This section summarizes the entire text. Its meaning is that the secret of the mind-ground cannot be expressed in words and can only be indicated through a mantra. The four phrases, “gate gate,” mean: “Cross over, cross over; cross to the other shore; all cross to the other shore; swiftly realize bodhi.” Because the Buddha does not abandon a single sentient being, the dedication is still made to sentient beings. For liberating sentient beings is itself the provision for attaining Buddhahood.

This sūtra has two hundred and sixty characters. Its wording is concise while its meaning is profound; its language is brief while its import is broad. In speaking of prajñā contemplation, it may be classified under the Chan school; in speaking of

breaking through emptiness, under the Emptiness school; in speaking of the twelve links of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths, under the Dharma Characteristics School; in speaking of esoteric mantras, under Esoteric Buddhism; in speaking of the wondrous virtues and adornments of the great spiritual and great illumination mantras, under the Avatamsaka school; in speaking of neither defiled nor pure, under the Pure Land school; and in speaking of freedom from inversion, under the Vinaya school.

There is not a single school that can be apart from prajñā. Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas of the three times still rely on prajñā to reach pāramitā; how much more so inferior sentient beings. The World-Honored One appeared in the world for the one great cause and condition precisely for this matter; therefore, no other great matter can compare with it.

I have often said that countless matters of human life cannot compare with a single death; countless deaths cannot compare with a single cultivation; cultivation through countless lifetimes cannot compare with a moment of clear awakening. How could its importance be measured by worldly standards? What the Mahāvairocana Sūtra calls knowing one's own mind as it truly is can be entered ultimately through the Heart Sūtra alone. This is the Dharma gate of sudden awakening for entering the ground of the Tathāgata. The five gateways of arousing the resolve, subduing the mind, realizing the mind, seeing the Way, and unsurpassed bodhi are provisionally established; the Heart Sūtra is directly one meaning. How lofty and unsurpassable it is!

The explanation is complete.

Section One: Dhāraṇī

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, while practicing the profound perfection of prajñā, clearly saw that the five aggregates are all empty, and thus crossed beyond all suffering and adversity.

These four sentences are the comprehensive dhāraṇī of the entire sūtra, and the first sentence is in turn the dhāraṇī of the four sentences. They say that in cultivating practice to attain Buddhahood, one must reach great freedom. One who is free oneself and further leads others to freedom is a bodhisattva. Its wondrous function lies in the single word "contemplate": contemplate the original nature. This means that oneself and sentient beings are originally free; the reason they are not free is merely that, through delusion, they fail to awaken and vainly generate afflictions. If one wishes to restore the original nature, one must still bring forth the function of the wondrous contemplation of prajñā, awaken and enter the original nature, and

investigate it through the power of wisdom's illumination. This is the essential formula for cultivating the mind.

The following three sentences explain the method by which wondrous contemplation is put into function. Upon the lotus of one's intrinsic nature, one practices the profound Dharma of prajñā, using it to cross over and reach the other shore. Yet "shore" is only a provisional name; there is in fact neither this nor that. For the moment, delusion is called this shore and awakening the other shore, that is all. The distinction between delusion and awakening lies only in one mind. If the mind awakens, this is called arriving upon the other shore.

Pāra means the other shore; mi means to reach; tā means upon. It is not this shore, not midstream, and not merely the other shore; one must be upon the other shore before it can be called ultimate. Therefore it is said to be profound practice. Yet mind cannot be grasped; it is established in dependence upon objects and stands in opposition to them. Externally there are the six sense objects, and internally the six sense faculties; all are form. Opposition gives rise to sensation, just as wind is felt when it comes into contact.

Once sensation has arisen, thought then moves; this is called conception. The moment-to-moment flow of conception is called formation. Thereupon, consciousness knows it to be wind, cold, or heat; all discriminations arise interdependently. When these five things accumulate and cohere without dispersing, they are called the five aggregates. This means that mind and objects mutually contain one another; through delusion they become one. One wanders and sinks ever deeper, not knowing how to return. Long habituation becomes customary and difficult to escape, and one even takes it to be only natural.

Thus affairs meet with success or failure, and the mind encounters favorable or adverse conditions; suffering and pleasure arise accordingly. Suffering is certainly suffering, but pleasure too is suffering, for pleasure is not ultimate. All things are impermanent and in the end return to suffering. When the body suffers illness or pain and the mind is uneasy, this is called suffering; when one's thoughts are distorted and the mind is uneasy, this is called adversity. If prajñā has not opened and suffering and adversity have not been removed, one cannot be said to have crossed beyond them.

To cross beyond suffering and adversity is to cross beyond this illusory mind, for suffering and adversity all belong to the various states of mind. To cross beyond mind, one can rely only on profound prajñā, clearly seeing its fundamental emptiness. What is emptiness? It is simply this mind and its objects. Objects are illusorily present, and mind is illusorily established. These five aggregates, formed by the illusory conjunction of mind and objects, arise dependently from empty space

and have no substantial reality. If one takes them to be suffering, there is suffering; if one takes them to be pleasure, there is pleasure. If one takes them to be real, one mistakes the false for the true and is thereby inverted. If one takes them to be illusory, the mind has nothing to which it is bound, and suffering and pleasure cease. Clearly seeing that the five aggregates are fundamentally empty, the mind attains freedom. The mind itself is empty and quiescent, and all affairs are liberated; hence the words “all suffering and adversity.”

Thus, these three sentences are the supreme wondrous Dharma for saving the mind. Yet the meaning of the two words “all” is exceedingly subtle: unless one reaches the ultimate, one cannot speak of “all.” The emptiness spoken of is not emptiness in the sense of being or nonbeing. Things exist only through the coming together of conditions; their substance is fundamentally empty, though their functioning is not nonexistent. They are empty because they lack intrinsic nature, and empty because they are provisionally compounded. Moreover, clear seeing itself belongs to the five aggregates; one need only not cling to it.

Ordinary beings do not know from where suffering and adversity arise. Nor do they know what the five aggregates are; nor do they know that suffering and adversity are in the mind rather than the body; still less do they know that the five aggregates are fundamentally empty, or know the wondrous method of clear seeing. Therefore, life after life, they sink and drift upon this shore.

Arhats know that the five aggregates are empty, but their *prajñā* lacks power. They cling one-sidedly to emptiness and have not understood its meaning. Those who cling to emptiness are still equivalent to clinging to existence. It is as though, although no longer on this shore, they remain midstream and have not reached the other shore. Therefore this is called entering the stream. Since the illumination of their wisdom is incomplete, *prajñā* has not yet opened. Bodhisattvas already know that the five aggregates are fundamentally empty, but clear seeing has not yet become empty; they still cling to its function and at times lose that illumination. It is as though they have reached the other shore but have not yet stepped onto it. Only bodhisattvas of the eighth *bhūmi* and above, equal in measure to the Buddha, have clear seeing that is itself empty; moreover, they do not cling even to emptiness. Only then can it be called “all empty.”

In this way one is free, and all hindrances are exhausted. Without vigorously practicing profound *prajñā*, one cannot ascend to the other shore, for this is ultimate *nirvāṇa*. Only then may it perhaps be called “all.” By this point, the wondrous function of contemplation and illumination is complete. What is meant by “illumination” is to bring forth *prajñā* for wondrous contemplation; what is meant by “seeing” is directly seeing the original nature before one’s very eyes. It is neither empty nor existent, neither real nor unreal; it all lies in one’s own awakening. It is

not wholly accomplished by the Buddha's deliverance, for practice lies with oneself and clear seeing lies in one's own mind. These four sentences already contain the complete meaning of the Heart Sūtra; therefore they are called a comprehensive dhāraṇī.

Section Two: Form and Emptiness

Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form. Feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness are likewise.

Prajñā means completeness. Without penetrating prajñā, the two meanings of form and emptiness cannot be perfectly reconciled. Worldly people habitually cling to form as truly existent and regard emptiness as nothingness. They do not know that form, as form, is not existent while present, nor empty because it has ceased, nor empty because it has passed. Rather, precisely when it is present, its essence is originally empty. Hence it is said that form and emptiness are nondual.

Moreover, emptiness is emptiness not because, in the absence of existence, it is called empty. Rather, because what exists cannot be grasped, being provisionally combined through causes and conditions and originally without self-nature, it is called empty. Thus, to understand form is to understand emptiness; to understand emptiness is to find no form. Ultimately, emptiness does not depart from form, nor does form depart from emptiness.

Now the Buddha tells Śāriputra: "Form is not different from emptiness" cures the ordinary person's malady of clinging to existence; "emptiness is not different from form" cures the malady of the two vehicles' clinging to emptiness; and "form itself is emptiness, emptiness itself is form" cures the bodhisattva's residual dualistic view of form and emptiness, even while maintaining their nonduality. The phrase "not different" implies comparison and opposition, whereas "itself is" means nonduality.

Since form is thus, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness are likewise. This means that the five aggregates also fall under form. The appearances of external objects are certainly illusory, and the appearances perceived inwardly are also illusory. Both are illusory existents and therefore cannot be grasped. Moreover, without external objects, mind does not arise; without inward perception, mind cannot be established. If one uses the light of wisdom to shatter these two forms, inner and outer, then the mind is empty.

Yet the light of wisdom is also mind. If one further uses profound prajñā to sweep away this light of wisdom, one does not cling to emptiness; thus emptiness itself is emptied. One who can empty emptiness is unobstructed by clinging either to

existence or to emptiness. Understanding the meaning of the eighteen emptinesses, one sees that ultimately all is empty. Outwardly, one is not deluded by form; inwardly, one is not confused by dharmas. Everything is purified, and one attains great freedom. What suffering or adversity could then be spoken of?

Section Three: Original Nature

Śāriputra, all dharmas bear the mark of emptiness: they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor diminish.

What was said above is what is known through cultivation and realization. People of the world therefore take it to mean that there is cultivation, attainment, and realization. They do not know that it is originally so; it does not become so only after cultivation. It is inherently so. All dharmas are originally marked by emptiness: dharmas arise from mind, and mind is illusory existence; therefore dharmas likewise have no reality. Thus it is said that dharmas are fundamentally not existent—do not form a view of nonexistence; dharmas are fundamentally not nonexistent—do not form a view of existence.

The mind originally does not arise, so why speak further of its cessation? Since the fundamental essence neither arises nor ceases, what can be meant by defilement and purity, increase and decrease, coming and going, sameness and difference? All these belong only to illusory dharmas of relativity. Only by practicing profound prajñā can one comprehend the meaning of original non-arising. When the mind attains freedom and emptiness, suffering can be eliminated without analysis, and sentient beings are naturally liberated. This section speaks specifically of the original essence; what follows speaks of the method of bringing it into function.

Section Four: The Function of the Dharma

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, perception, formation, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or dharmas; no eye realm, up to and including no mind-consciousness realm; no ignorance, nor the ending of ignorance; up to and including no old age and death, nor the ending of old age and death. There is no suffering, origination, cessation, or path; no wisdom and no attainment. Because there is nothing to attain.

The essence of prajñā is revealed through its functioning. The wonder of prajñā lies in its ability to function, while the wondrous functioning of dharmas lies in nonattachment. If one wishes to be nonattached, the foremost requirement is to understand emptiness, for through emptiness there is neither attachment nor

defilement. Thus it says, "In emptiness there is no form," and so forth. This means that if one can understand emptiness, one will have nothing to grasp or cling to. This word "no" means not grasping or clinging. Worldly people often mistakenly understand it as the "no" of existence versus nonexistence. This is fundamentally a great error. From the five aggregates through wisdom and attainment, all belong to dharmas. If one knows that all dharmas have the marks of emptiness, one will naturally not cling to them and will attain freedom.

Those who enter the hells cling to a large measure of greed, anger, and ignorance; animals cling to a large measure of ignorance; beings in the realm of hungry ghosts cling to a large measure of greed; beings in the realm of māras cling to a large measure of anger; humans cling to a half measure of greed, anger, and ignorance; and devas cling to a small measure of greed. All these are the hindrances of birth and death; all are cases in which the five aggregates have not been emptied and the six sense faculties have not been purified.

Moreover, worldly people misunderstand "the five aggregates are all empty," supposing that it means to extinguish or cut off the five aggregates, thereby falling into annihilationist emptiness. They do not know that the absence of the five aggregates is not annihilation, nor does it mean discarding the five aggregates; it simply means not clinging to them, and knowing that mind and objects are originally empty. Ordinary beings cling to the five aggregates, the six sense objects and six sense faculties, and even the six consciousnesses. Thus, the eighteen realms accumulate without dispersing, and liberation is difficult.

Although pratyekabuddhas are free of the three poisons, they cling to the twelve links of dependent origination. From ignorance through old age and death, all belong to illusory dharmas. They still lack the wisdom to realize these as empty, and thus have not reached the ultimate. Although śrāvakas have also transcended segmented birth and death, they cling to the Dharma of the Four Noble Truths; likewise, they have not reached the ultimate. Bodhisattvas, for their part, cling to the six perfections and myriad practices. They still do not depart from the dharma-self view of wisdom and attainment, and still have hindrances; thus they too cannot be said to have reached the ultimate. Therefore, the wondrous functioning of dharmas lies in the single word "no": do not cling, that is all.

From ordinary beings up to bodhisattvas, and from the five aggregates up to wisdom and attainment, none may be grasped. Why? Because the marks of all dharmas are originally empty, and because there is nothing to attain. This section speaks specifically of the method of putting function into play: apply the work of wisdom illumination and simply do not cling.

For explanations of the twelve links of dependent origination, the Dharma of the Four Noble Truths, and the like, one may consult other commentaries. In general, they amount to no more than the cycle of the three words delusion, karma, and suffering. As for the character “ending” in the sūtra, it is also to be understood as “no.” “No ignorance” means do not cling to ignorance; “ending” means there is no absence of ignorance. One does not cling even to non-clinging. The former is emptying the mind, and the latter is emptying emptiness; the former empties the personal self, and the latter empties the dharma-self. Thus one ascends to the Buddha stage.

Section Five: Virtues of Fruition

Bodhisattva. Relying on prajñāpāramitā, the mind is without hindrance. Because there is no hindrance, there is no fear; one is far removed from inverted views and delusive dreams, and ultimately attains nirvāṇa. All Buddhas of the three times, relying on prajñāpāramitā, attain unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment.

Ordinary beings and Buddhas are originally not two in essence. Ordinary beings are the causal mind, while Buddhas and bodhisattvas are the virtues of fruition. Yet the virtues of fruition also arise from causes; no one can realize them without practice. One must simply not cling to there being practice, attainment, and realization. But if one mistakenly clings to the view that there is no practice, no attainment, and no realization, then ordinary beings could refrain from practice and simply become Buddhas of themselves. How could there be such a principle in the world? If one clings to there being practice, attainment, and realization, then one has not understood the original nature; dharmas cannot be emptied, and one will ultimately fail to attain completion.

Only by relying on prajñāpāramitā does the mind attain freedom. One neither clings to there being practice, attainment, and realization, nor clings to there being no practice, no attainment, and no realization. All dharmas are empty and pure, and the mind is without hindrance. This does not mean that there is no involvement at all; rather, one is involved without hindrance. Hindrance is the cause, and fear is the result; inverted views are the cause, and delusive dreams are the result. When none of these exists, this is called ultimate nirvāṇa. Ultimate nirvāṇa is Buddhahood.

Though one clearly knows that all dharmas have the aspect of emptiness, that there is no wisdom and no attainment, this is ultimately not annihilation. To attain this which cannot be attained is unsurpassed bodhi. Bodhi is not existent, because it cannot be attained; bodhi is not empty, because it is not annihilated. Within the true suchness and intrinsic nature of the unattainable are wondrous functions as countless as the sands of the Ganges. Intrinsic nature itself neither arises nor ceases, yet intrinsic nature can give rise to all dharmas.

“All Buddhas of the three times” means that there is neither coming nor going. All who have perfected these virtues of fruition must rely on prajñā in their practice. Only when practice reaches the point at which all is empty and pure is it called pāramitā. In the sūtra, the words “all,” “every,” “no,” “without hindrance,” “ultimate,” and “deep” echo one another before and after, expressing the utmost perfection of these virtues.

The above five sections constitute the first half of the Heart Sūtra. They express the absence of substantial reality, yet all remain within the sphere of practical application and can still be spoken of; they turn from existence to emptiness. The following two sections constitute the latter half. They express the absence of mere emptiness, having already gone beyond the sphere of practical application; they cannot truly be spoken of, yet are spoken of. They turn again from emptiness to existence. Together they express the meaning of neither substantial reality nor mere emptiness, which is simply the Tathāgata’s meaning that all dharmas are such.

Part Six: Realization and Knowledge

Therefore know that prajñāpāramitā is the great divine mantra, the great bright mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, the unequalled mantra. It can dispel all suffering; it is true and not false.

This section speaks specifically of the realm directly realized and known by the practitioner, and it is a major key to this sūtra. This word “know” carries the subtle meaning of personally seeing true reality; it awakens the faculty of prajñā. Its joy cannot be expressed in words; only those with spiritual apprehension can praise it.

What is it that is praised? It is that which sentient beings and Buddhas equally possess, yet which a thousand sages do not recognize. All Buddhas, and the Dharma of the Buddhas’ anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, issue from this. Therefore it is called a mantra: because it encompasses everything, it is great; because there is nothing it does not penetrate, it is divine; because there is nothing it does not illuminate, it is bright; because nothing can compare with it, it is unsurpassed; and because it does not fall into ranks and is ultimately equal, it is unequalled.

Its empty numinosity is unfathomable in that way; its compassionate efficacy shatters everything in this way. Its essence is utterly serene, while its function blazes forth. It cannot be known by intellect or recognized by consciousness; only Buddha and Buddha can directly realize and know it. Above, so many words concerning emptiness were spoken for fear that people might fall into emptiness. Now, by saying that it is true and not false, they are turned toward being. In between, there is no middle way to speak of, for the middle way itself is originally unobtainable.

Chapter Seven: Secrets

Therefore he proclaimed the prajñāpāramitā mantra, saying: “Gate gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā.”

This section summarizes the entire text. Its meaning is that the secret of the mind-ground cannot be expressed in words and can only be indicated by the mantra. The four phrases, “Gate gate,” mean: “Cross over, cross over; cross over to the other shore; universally cross over to the other shore; swiftly realize bodhi.” Because the Buddha does not abandon a single sentient being, the merit is still dedicated to sentient beings; for liberating sentient beings is itself the provision for attaining Buddhahood.

This sūtra has 260 characters. Its language is concise and its meaning profound; its words are few, yet its import is vast. In its discussion of prajñā contemplation, it may be classified under the Chan school; in its discussion of breaking through emptiness, under the School of Emptiness; in its discussion of the twelve links of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths, under the Dharma Characteristics School; in its discussion of esoteric mantras, under Esoteric Buddhism; in its discussion of the wondrous virtues and adornment of great spiritual power and great luminosity, under the Avataṃsaka school; in its discussion of neither defiled nor pure, under the Pure Land school; and in its discussion of freedom from inverted views, under the Vinaya school.

Thus, there is no school that can be apart from prajñā. Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas of the three periods of time still rely on prajñā to attain pāramitā; how much more so do inferior sentient beings. The World-Honored One’s one great cause and condition was precisely this matter; therefore, no other matter of great importance can compare with it.

I have often said that the myriad affairs of human life are no match for a single death; death, multiplied countless times, is no match for a single act of cultivation; cultivation over countless lifetimes is no match for a moment of clear awakening. How can its importance be compared with worldly concerns? As the Mahāvairocana Sūtra says, “to know one’s own mind as it truly is”: the Heart Sūtra alone is sufficient to lead one into the ultimate. This is the Dharma gate of sudden awakening for entering the ground of the Tathāgata. From arousing the resolve, to subduing the mind, to realizing the mind, to seeing the Way, and finally to unsurpassed bodhi, five gates are provisionally established; the Heart Sūtra is directly of one meaning. How lofty and unsurpassable it is!

Explanation completed.