Essence of the Heart Sutra

Central purpose

- Perfection of wisdom
  - Wisdom that directly realises emptiness
  - Emptiness does not mean that nothing exists
  - No person, object, experience or attainment has a fixed, independent essence
- Dependent existence
  - Everything depends on causes and conditions, parts, relationships and conceptual designation
  - Because phenomena arise dependently, they are empty of **intrinsic** existence
  - Because phenomena are not fixed and self-contained, they can arise, change and function
- The Middle Way
  - Avoid absolutism: things do not possess a solid, independent reality
  - Avoid nihilism: things exist and actions have consequences
  - Things exist conventionally and dependently, while ultimately being empty

Chapters 1-5 - Preparatory foundations

- Why emptiness matters
  - Human beings seek happiness and avoid suffering
  - Material comfort alone cannot provide lasing fulfilment
  - Much suffering arises from attachment, anger, hatred, jealousy and delusion
  - Afflictions are strengthened by belief in a solid, independent self and world
- Causal process
  - Explained by the Four Noble Truths and twelve links of dependent origination
  - Ignorance gives rise to afflictions and intentional actions
  - These produce karma, conditioned existence and suffering
- Ignorance
  - Not merely lack of information
  - An active misapprehension of persons and phenomena as intrinsically existent
- Preparing the central argument
  - If ignorance about reality causes suffering, wisdom that understands reality is the means of liberation
  - In the Mahayana, wisdom is joined with compassion and the aspiration to attain buddhahood for all beings

Chapter 6 - Setting and significance

- Place within the tradition
  - Part of the wider Perfection of Wisdom teachings
  - Called the "heart" because it presents their essential meaning concisely
  - Called the mother because realisation of emptiness gives birth to noble beings
- The setting at Vulture Peak
  - The Buddha is with a community of monks and bodhisattvas
  - He enters the meditative absorption called the appearance of the profound
  - The profound is emptiness: the ultimate nature of phenomena
- The teaching arises
  - The Buddha remains in meditation
  - His presence inspires the dialogue between Shariputra and *Avalokiteshvara*
  - The teaching proceeds from the Buddha's realisation although *Avalokiteshvara* speaks
- Essence rather than external form
  - Thrones, robes, rituals and customs are not the heart of Dharma
  - Judge a teaching by whether it reduces affliction, accords with reason and leads towards liberation
  - Respect should be joined with examination, understanding and practice

Chapter 7 - Entering the bodhisattva path

- Shariputra's question
  - How should someone who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom train?
- *Avalokiteshvara*'s concise answer
  - See clearly and repeatedly that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence
- The five aggregates
  - Form - physical body and material phenomena
  - Feeling - pleasant, unpleasant or neutral tone of experience
  - Perception - recognising, distinguishing and labelling
  - Mental formations - intentions, emotions, habits, impulses and conditioning factors
  - Consciousness - awareness arising through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind
  - Together they constitute the changing physical and mental processes of a person
- The self and the aggregates
  - We imagine a separate "I" that owns or controls the aggregates
  - No independent controller can be found apart from them
  - The person exists conventionally in dependence upon the aggregates
  - What is denied is an independently existing self beneath or behind them
- Why the word even matters
  - The five aggregates begin a comprehensive examination
  - If person and aggregates are empty, everything associated with me and mine is empty
  - Conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, beings, buddhas and even emptiness lack intrinsic existence
- *Avalokiteshvara*: wisdom and compassion
  - Compassion remains concerned with the suffering of beings
  - Wisdom sees that beings and suffering lack intrinsic existence
  - **Emptiness shows that suffering and its causes are not fixed and can be transformed**

Chapter 8 - Selflessness in context

- Ultimate bodhichitta
  - Direct, non-conceptual realisation of emptiness united with bodhichitta
  - Bodhichitta is the intention to attain buddhahood to liberate all beings
  - Compassion supplies motivation and purpose
  - Wisdom removes the ignorance obstructing liberation
- Doctrine of no-self
  - We experience a stable "I" that appears to possess and control body and mind
  - Analysis cannot identify the self as identical with body and mind
  - Analysis cannot identify it as separate from body and mind
  - Analysis cannot identify it as an independent master controlling them
  - Person remains a valid conventional designation based on the aggregates
  - The mistake is believing that "I" possesses an independent essence

The Four Seals

1. All composite phenomena are impermanent
   - Whatever arises through causes and conditions changes moment by moment
   - Origination means that the process of change and cessation has already begun
2. All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory
   - Experiences under karma, afflictions and ignorance cannot provide lasting freedom
   - Even pleasurable states remain unstable and conditioned
3. All phenomena are empty and devoid of self-existence
   - Nothing has the independent reality attributed to it by ignorance
4. Nirvana is true peace
   - Eliminating ignorance allows dependent afflictions and suffering to cease
- Movement from diagnosis to liberation
  - Conditioned phenomena are unstable
  - Experience governed by ignorance is unsatisfactory
  - Ignorance rests on a mistaken view of reality
  - Freedom becomes possible when the mistake is removed

Chapter 9 - Interpreting emptiness

- Two kinds of selflessness
  The Middle Way Interpretation
  - Emptiness applies equally to persons and all physical and mental phenomena
  - Neither the external world nor the mind possesses a fixed, independent essence
  - Mind is not more intrinsically real than matter
  - Understanding both as empty prevents attachment to external objects and internal states
- Prasangika Madhyamaka
  - HHDL presents this as the most subtle Middle Way understanding
  - Phenomena possess no intrinsic existence whatsoever
  - Nevertheless they exist conventionally through dependence and conceptual designation
  - Ultimate analysis finds no independently established object
  - Conventional phenomena still function and produce consequences
- Emptiness and dependent origination
  - Because things depend on causes, conditions, parts and designation, they are empty of intrinsic existence
  - Because they are empty and not fixed, they can arise, change, be modified, interact and function
  - Emptiness does not deny conventional reality; it explains how conventional reality is possible
- Avoiding the two extremes
  - **Absolutism** - mistakenly treating phenomena as independently and inherently real
  - **Nihillism** - mistakenly concluding that phenomena do not exist or that actions have no consequences
  - **Middle Way** - phenomena exist dependently and conventionally, while being empty ultimately
- Practical significance
  - Grasping at intrinsic existence supports attachment, aversion and other afflictions
  - Realising emptiness removes the basis for grasping at a solid self and world
  - This wisdom makes liberation from affliction and suffering possible
  - Because change is possible, karma can be modified
- Essential point
  - Things exist, but not independently or from their own side
  - Dependent origination and emptiness are two ways of describing the same mode of existence

Chapter 10 - Developing an unmistaken view of reality

- Philosophical heart of the commentary
- Key sutra passage
  - Form is emptiness; emptiness is form
  - Emptiness is not other than form; form too is not other than emptiness
- Correctly identify what is denied
  - Emptiness meditation does not refute existence itself
  - It refutes the intrinsic mode of existence that things appear to possess
  - The question is not: Do things exist?
  - The question is: How do things exist?
  - They exist dependently and conventionally, not independently or from their own side
  - Refute too little: grasping at intrinsic existence remains
  - Refute too much: conventional reality is denied and nihilism follows
  - Wisdom refutes intrinsic existence while preserving dependent persons, ethics, causality and path
- **Form is emptiness**
  - Form includes matter and the physical body
  - Form depends upon causes, conditions and parts
  - No self-contained essence of form can be found
  - Form is not nonexistent: it appears and functions conventionally
- **Emptiness is form**
  - Emptiness is not an independent absolute behind the world
  - It is the manner in which each particular phenomenon exists
  - Lacking a fixed essence leaves form open to causality, relationship and change
  - An intrinsically fixed form could neither arise nor be transformed
  - Emptiness permits form to arise dependently
  - Emptiness is not a substance but the absence of an impossible way of existing
- **The two truths**
  - Conventional truth - how a phenomenon appears, functions and enters causal relationships
  - Ultimate truth - its emptiness of intrinsic existence
  - Not two separate worlds, but two aspects of the same phenomenon
  - No independent Great Emptiness exists apart from particular empty things
- **Eight aspects of emptiness - the profound**
  - Sutra passage
    - All phenomena are emptiness
    - They are without defining characteristics
    - They are not born and do not cease
    - They are not defiled and not undefiled
    - They are not deficient and not complete
  - Meaning of the negatives
    not born and not ceasing
    - These statements are made from the standpoint of ultimate analysis
    - Conventionally, phenomena have characteristics, arise and cease, and may be defiled, purified, deficient or complete
    - None of these distinctions possesses an intrinsic nature
    - Not born means not intrinsically born: phenomena arise through causes and conditions
    - Not ceasing means not intrinsically ceasing: cessation is a dependent process
    - Paired negatives do not deny ordinary differences
    - They deny that either side is permanent, independent or absolute
- **Three doors of liberation**
  1. Door of emptiness - the thing itself
     - No intrinsic nature or self-defining essence can be found
  2. Door of signlessness - arising and transformation
     - Birth, cessation, defilement and purification are not fixed, inherent characteristics
     - Because they are not fixed, they can be altered
  3. Door of wishlessness - deficiency and result
     - Neither present deficiency nor the perfection sought is fixed or inherent
     - Practice still produces results conventionally
     - There is no inherently deficient self acquiring an inherently existing perfection
     - Wishlessness relinquishes grasping at awakening as a possession of a solid "I"
     - It does not mean abandoning the aspiration for awakening

Chapter 11 - Attaining the result

- **Key sutra passage: "in emptiness there is no…"**
  - No five aggregates
  - No six sense faculties
  - No six sensory and mental objects
  - No eighteen elements of perception
  - No ignorance through to no aging and death, and no extinction of them
    - No twelve links of dependent origination
  - No suffering, origin, cessation or path
    - No Four Noble Truths
  - No wisdom, attainment or even non-attainment
- **How to understand "no"**
  - No always means no intrinsic existence
  - The aggregates, dependent origination and Four Noble Truths are not discarded
  - They exist and function conventionally as dependently designated teachings
  - Even the Dharma path must not become a new object of attachment
  - Wisdom, nirvana and buddhahood are also empty
- **Nirvana and no attainment**
  - Sutra passage
    Therefore, Shariputra, because bodhisattvas have no attainments, they rely on this perfection of wisdom and abide in it. Having no obscuration in their minds, they have no fear, and by going utterly beyond error, they will reach the end of nirvāṇa.
    - Because bodhisattvas have no attainments, they rely on and abide in the perfection of wisdom
    - With no mental obscuration they have no fear, go beyond error and reach nirvana
  - No inherently existing practitioner acquires an inherently existing enlightenment
  - Liberation is nevertheless conventionally attained through practice
  - Without a solid self requiring defence, fear, craving and aversion are weakened
  - Nirvana is the mind freed from afflictive obscurations
  - Afflictions are removable because they are not the intrinsic nature of mind
- **Mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom**
  - *tadyathā gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*
  - Go, go, go beyond, go totally beyond, be established in enlightenment
  - The other shore is liberation; this shore is cyclic existence governed by ignorance
  - Mantra means protecting the mind from mistaken views, afflictions and suffering
  - True and not deceptive
    - It knows ultimate reality without the distortion between appearance and reality
    - Its result is reliable: realisation of emptiness removes ignorance and leads to freedom
  - Actualising the mantra means realising its meaning, not merely repeating its sounds
- **Five stages of the path**
  1. First "gate" - path of accumulation
     - Develop merit, bodhichitta and intellectual understanding of emptiness
  2. Second "gate" - path of preparation
     - Understanding deepens through reflection and meditation and becomes experiential
  3. "Paragate" - path of seeing
     - Emptiness is realised directly and non-conceptually
     - The practitioner becomes an arya or noble being
  4. "Parasamgate" - path of meditation
     - Repeated familiarisation progressively removes afflictions and residual imprints
  5. "Bodhi svaha" - path of no more learning
     - All obscurations are removed and buddhahood is attained
- Explicit and implicit meanings
  - Explicit meaning - emptiness
  - Implicit meaning - the progressive path by which realisation becomes liberation and enlightenment
- The Buddha confirms the teaching
  - He emerges from meditation and praises *Avalokiteshvara*'s explanation
  - Buddhahood simultaneously knows ultimate emptiness and conventional diversity

Part III - Chapter 12: Generating bodhichitta

- Structurally a companion chapter rather than direct sutra commentary
- Practical methods
  - Equalising self and others
  - Exchanging self with others
  - Giving and taking
    tong len
- Doctrinal connection
  - The bodhisattva's perfection of wisdom is emptiness united with bodhichitta
  - Chapters 6-11 primarily explain wisdom and emptiness
  - Chapter 12 supplies the compassionate method and altruistic motivation

The argument in its simplest form

1. Minds governed by afflictions and karma experience suffering
2. Afflictions are rooted in ignorance
3. Ignorance mistakes persons and phenomena for independently existing realities
4. Analysis reveals that everything exists dependently
5. Dependent existence is what emptiness means
6. Emptiness explains how the world can function and change; it does not negate it
7. Direct realisation of emptiness undermines ignorance
8. As ignorance ceases, afflictions, compulsive karma and suffering cease
9. Joined with bodhichitta, wisdom becomes the bodhisattva path to buddhahood

- Central message
  - Things exist, but not in the solid, independent way they appear
  - Understanding their dependent and empty nature loosens self-grasping
  - Overcoming self-grasping and its afflictions leads to freedom from suffering

Appendix - Text of the Heart Sutra

- Title
  - The Blessed Mother, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom
  - Bhagavati Prajna Paramita Hridaya
- Opening and setting
  - The Buddha stays at Vulture Peak with monks and bodhisattvas
  - He enters the meditative absorption called the appearance of the profound
  - *Avalokiteshvara* sees that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence
- Shariputra's question
  - How should a noble son or daughter train in the profound perfection of wisdom?
- *Avalokiteshvara*'s answer
  - See perfectly that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence
  - Form is emptiness; emptiness is form
  - Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness
  - Feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness are also empty
  - All phenomena are empty and without intrinsic defining characteristics
  - They are not intrinsically born or ceasing, defiled or undefiled, deficient or complete
- Systematic application of emptiness
  - No intrinsically existing aggregates, faculties, objects or elements
  - No intrinsically existing twelve links or their extinction
  - No intrinsically existing Four Noble Truths
  - No intrinsically existing wisdom, attainment or non-attainment
- Reliance on perfection of wisdom
  - Bodhisattvas abide in wisdom without grasping at attainment
  - Their minds are unobscured and without fear
  - They go beyond error and reach nirvana
  - Buddhas of the three times awaken through this perfection of wisdom
- The mantra
  - tadyathā gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā
  - Natural translation:
    Thus - gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond - awakening, svaha
  - Interpretive translation: Go, go, go beyond, go completely beyond, and awaken - so be it
  - The further shore evokes passage from samsara and delusion to liberation and awakening
- Conclusion
  - The Buddha commends *Avalokiteshvara*'s teaching
  - The assembly rejoices and praises what was taught

The Text of the Heart Sutra
The Blessed Mother, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom
In Sanskrit: Bhagavati Prajna Paramita Hridaya
This is the first segment.
Thus have I once heard
The Blessed One was staying in Rajgriha at Vulture Peak along with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas, and at that time, the Blessed One entered the meditative absorption on the varieties of *phenomena* called the appearance of the profound. At that time as well, the noble *Avalokiteshvara*, the bodhisattva, the great being, clearly beheld the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom itself and saw that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence. Thereupon, through the Buddha's inspiration, the venerable Shariputra spoke to the noble *Avalokiteshvara*, the bodhisattva, the great being, and said, "How should any noble son or noble daughter who wishes to engage in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom train?"
When this had been said, the holy *Avalokiteshvara*, the bodhisattva, the great being, spoke to the venerable Shariputra and said, "Shariputra, any noble son or noble daughter who so wishes to engage in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom should clearly see this way: they should see perfectly that even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; emptiness is not other than form, form too is not other than emptiness. Likewise, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are all empty.
Therefore, Shariputra, all phenomena are emptiness; they are without defining characteristics; they are not born, they do not cease; they are not defiled, they are not undefiled; they are not deficient, and they are not complete.
"Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, and no mind. There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, and no mental objects. There is no eye-element and so on up to no mind-element including up to no element of mental consciousness. There is no ignorance, there is no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Likewise, there is no suffering, origin, cessation, or path; there is no wisdom, no attainment, and even no non-attainment.
"Therefore, Shariputra, because bodhisattvas have no attainments, they rely on this perfection of wisdom and abide in it. Having no obscuration in their minds, they have no fear, and by going utterly beyond error, they will reach the end of nirvana. All the buddhas too who abide in the three times attained the full awakening of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment by relying on this profound perfection of wisdom.
"Therefore, one should know that the mantra of the perfection of wisdom (the mantra of great knowledge, the unexcelled mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, the mantra that quells all suffering) is true because it is not deceptive. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is proclaimed:
tadyatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!See text box
Shariputra, the bodhisattvas, the great beings, should train in the perfection of wisdom in this way."
Thereupon, the Blessed One arose from that meditative absorption and commended the holy *Avalokiteshvara*, the bodhisattva, the great being, saying this is excellent. "Excellent! Excellent! O noble child, it is just so; it should be just so. One must practice the profound perfection of wisdom just as you have revealed. For then even the tathagatas will rejoice."
As the Blessed One uttered these words, the venerable Shariputra, the holy *Avalokiteshvara*, the bodhisattva, the great being, along with the entire assembly, including the worlds of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas, all rejoiced and hailed what the Blessed One had said.