

Essence of the Heart Sutra

The central purpose

The Heart Sutra explains the **perfection of wisdom**: the wisdom that directly realises emptiness. Emptiness does not mean that nothing exists. It means that no person, object, experience or spiritual attainment exists independently, through a fixed essence of its own.

Everything exists through dependence: upon causes and conditions, constituent parts, relationships and conceptual designation. Because things arise dependently, they are empty of intrinsic existence. Conversely, because they are empty rather than fixed and self-contained, they can arise, change and perform functions.

The sutra therefore tries to steer between two mistaken extremes:

- **Absolutism**: believing that things possess a solid, independent reality.
- **Nihilism**: believing that nothing exists and that actions have no consequences.

The **Middle Way** is that things exist both conventionally and dependently, while ultimately being empty

Chapters 1–5: Preparatory foundations

The first five chapters establish why the teaching on emptiness matters.

Human beings naturally **seek happiness and avoid suffering**, but material comfort alone cannot provide lasting fulfilment. Much of our suffering arises from mental **afflictions**: attachment, anger, hatred, jealousy and delusion. These afflictions are strengthened by the belief that the self and the objects around it possess a solid, independent reality.

The **Four Noble Truths & twelve links of dependent origination** explain the causal process:

Ignorance gives rise to mental afflictions and intentional actions; these produce karma, conditioned existence and suffering.

The relevant ignorance is not merely a lack of information. It is an active **misapprehension**: we perceive persons and phenomena as possessing an intrinsic existence that they do not have.

The earlier chapters therefore prepare the central argument:

If ignorance about the nature of reality is the fundamental cause of suffering, wisdom that correctly understands reality must be the means of liberation.

The Mahayana places this wisdom within the bodhisattva path. Wisdom is joined with compassion and the aspiration to attain buddhahood for the benefit of every being.

Part II: The Heart Sutra¹

Chapter 6: The setting and significance of the teaching

The Heart Sutra belongs to the wider collection of **Perfection of Wisdom** teachings. It is called the “heart” because it presents their essential meaning in an extremely concentrated form. The Perfection of Wisdom is called the “mother” because the direct realization of emptiness gives birth to the noble beings: those who have directly perceived reality.

The sutra opens at Vulture Peak. The Buddha is present with a community of monks and bodhisattvas and enters a meditative absorption called “**the appearance of the profound**.”

¹ For text of Heart Sutra see Appendix

The profound is emptiness: the ultimate nature of phenomena.

The Buddha does not initially deliver the teaching in words. While he remains in meditation, his presence inspires a dialogue between Shariputra and *Avalokiteshvara*. This suggests that the teaching proceeds from the Buddha's realization even though *Avalokiteshvara* speaks it.

HHDL also distinguishes the **essence of Dharma** from its external forms. Thrones, robes, rituals and cultural customs may have a legitimate place, but they are not the heart of practice. A teaching or teacher should be evaluated by whether the teaching reduces affliction, accords with reason and leads towards liberation.

The chapter therefore establishes both the authority of the sutra and the correct attitude towards it: respect must be joined with examination, understanding and practice.

Chapter 7: Entering the bodhisattva path

Shariputra asks *Avalokiteshvara*:

How should someone who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom train?

Avalokiteshvara replies that practitioners should see clearly and repeatedly that **even the five aggregates are empty of intrinsic existence**.

The five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness)² are the physical and mental processes that constitute a person. We habitually imagine that there is a separate “I” that owns or controls them. Yet no such independent controller can be found apart from those processes.

This does not mean that a person does not exist. The person exists conventionally, in dependence upon the aggregates. What is denied is an independently existing self underneath or behind them.

The word “**even**” is important. It suggests that the five aggregates are the beginning of a comprehensive examination. If the aggregates and the person based upon them are empty, then everything associated with “me” and “mine” is also empty. Ultimately, all conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, sentient beings, buddhas and even emptiness itself lack intrinsic existence.

Avalokiteshvara represents the union of the two essential qualities of the Mahayana path:

- **Compassion**, which remains concerned with the suffering of beings.
- **Wisdom**, which understands that beings and their suffering lack intrinsic existence.

Emptiness therefore does not lead the bodhisattva away from others. Properly understood, it makes compassionate activity possible by showing that suffering and its causes are not fixed and can be transformed.

Chapter 8: Selflessness in context

Ultimate bodhichitta

The “profound perfection of wisdom” is more than an intellectual understanding. It is a direct,

² The 5 aggregates (*skandhas*) are the **five continually changing processes** that together make up what we ordinarily call a “person” or “self”:

- **Form** (*rūpa*): the physical body and material phenomena.
- **Feeling** (*vedanā*): the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone of experience.
- **Perception** (*saṃjñā*): recognising, distinguishing, and labelling what is experienced.
- **Mental formations** (*saṃskāra*): intentions, emotions, habits, impulses, and other conditioning mental factors.
- **Consciousness** (*viññāna*): awareness arising through the **six senses**: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

Together they account for our embodied experience, yet none is permanent, independent, or an enduring self. In the Heart Sutra, *Avalokiteśvara* sees that all five are empty of intrinsic existence: and through this insight goes beyond suffering.

non-conceptual realization of emptiness united with **bodhichitta**: the intention to attain buddhahood in order to liberate all beings.

Wisdom without compassion does not constitute the complete bodhisattva path. Compassion supplies the motivation and purpose; wisdom removes the ignorance that obstructs liberation.

The doctrine of no-self

We ordinarily experience ourselves as a stable “I” that possesses and controls a body and mind. We may think, “My body,” “my mind,” or “my experience,” as though the owner were independently present.

When that self is sought through analysis, however, it cannot be identified either:

- as identical with the body and mind;
- as something separate from them; or
- as an independent master controlling them.

The self nevertheless exists conventionally. “Person” is a valid designation applied in dependence upon the changing physical and mental aggregates. The mistake is not using the word “I”; it is believing that the “I” possesses an independent essence.

The Four Seals

HHDL places this teaching within four defining principles of Buddhism:

1. All composite phenomena are impermanent.

Whatever arises through causes and conditions **changes** from moment to moment. Origination and cessation are not wholly separate events: the very fact that something has arisen means it is already undergoing change.

2. All contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory.

Experiences produced under influence of karma, mental afflictions & ignorance cannot provide lasting freedom. Even pleasurable states remain unstable and conditioned.

3. All phenomena are empty and devoid of self-existence.

Nothing possesses the independent reality that ignorance attributes to it.

4. Nirvana is true peace.

When the ignorance grasping at intrinsic existence is eliminated, the afflictions and suffering dependent upon it can also cease.

The four seals trace a movement from diagnosis to liberation: conditioned phenomena are unstable; experience governed by ignorance is unsatisfactory; ignorance is based on a mistaken view of reality; and freedom becomes possible when that mistake is removed.

Chapter 9: Interpreting emptiness

This chapter explains why Buddhist schools do not all interpret emptiness in the same way.

Two kinds of selflessness

It distinguishes:

- **Selflessness of persons:** a person has no permanent, independent self.
- **Selflessness of phenomena:** all physical and mental phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence.

Some Buddhist schools primarily emphasise the first. The Mahayana, especially the Middle Way tradition followed by HHDL, applies emptiness equally to persons and all phenomena.

Mind-Only and Middle Way

The Mind-Only School teaches that our apparent external world is deeply shaped by consciousness and habitual mental tendencies. It uses the doctrine of the “three natures” to distinguish dependent experience, imagined or projected existence, and ultimate emptiness.

The Middle Way accepts that mind contributes to experience but refuses to grant the mind a more substantial reality than external objects. Both mind and matter are dependently originated and empty. If external objects cannot be reduced to indivisible material particles, consciousness likewise cannot be reduced to intrinsically existing moments of awareness.

The practical importance is that attachment can arise towards either external objects or internal states. We can become attached to possessions and people and also to tranquillity, bliss, insight or consciousness itself. Complete freedom therefore requires understanding the emptiness of **both mind and world**.

Prasangika Madhyamaka

The interpretation HHDL presents as most subtle is that of the Prasangika Middle Way. According to this view, phenomena possess no intrinsic existence whatsoever: not even conventionally. They nevertheless exist conventionally through dependent origination and designation.

This means that something is not found as an independently established object when subjected to ultimate analysis, but it may still function perfectly well in conventional life. A person acts and experiences consequences; a chair can support someone; suffering can occur and practice can end it.

Emptiness and dependent origination therefore confirm one another:

Because things depend upon causes, parts and designation, they are empty. Because they are empty and not fixed by an intrinsic nature, they can arise, change and function.

This is the crucial protection against nihilism.

Chapter 10: Developing an unmistakable view of reality

Chapter 10 contains the philosophical heart of the commentary.

“Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form too is not other than emptiness.”

Correctly identifying what is being denied

The purpose of emptiness meditation is not to refute existence itself. It refutes the **intrinsic mode of existence** that things appear to possess.

The central question is therefore not:

“Do things exist?”

It is:

“How do things exist?”

They exist dependently and conventionally, not independently or from their own side.

This distinction is vital. If we refute too little, grasping at intrinsic existence remains; if we refute too much, we deny conventional reality and fall into nihilism. Wisdom refutes intrinsic existence alone, while preserving persons, ethics, causality and the path as dependently existing conventional truths.

“Form is emptiness”

Form includes matter and the physical body. “Form is emptiness” means that form is empty of intrinsic existence because it depends upon causes, conditions and parts. No self-contained essence of form can be found.

It does not mean that form is nonexistent. Form still appears and functions conventionally.

“Emptiness is form”

Emptiness is not an independent absolute lying behind the world. It is the manner in which each particular phenomenon exists.

Because form is empty of a fixed essence, it remains open to causality, relationship and change. If it possessed an unchangeable intrinsic nature, it could neither arise nor be transformed. In that sense, emptiness allows form to exist and function.

Thus:

- **Form is emptiness:** form lacks independent existence.
- **Emptiness is form:** that lack of independence is what permits form to arise dependently.

Emptiness is not a substance from which form is created. It is the absence of an impossible way of existing.

The two truths

The same phenomenon can be understood through two truths:

- **Conventional truth:** how it appears, functions and participates in causal relationships.
- **Ultimate truth:** its emptiness of intrinsic existence.

These are not two separate worlds. The ultimate truth is the ultimate nature of a conventional phenomenon. There is no independent “Great Emptiness” existing separately from particular empty things.

The eight aspects of Emptiness (the profound)

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.

The sutra says that phenomena are:

- empty;
- without intrinsic defining characteristics;
- not born and not ceasing;
- not defiled and not undefiled;
- not deficient and not complete.

These statements are made from the standpoint of ultimate analysis. Conventionally, phenomena have characteristics, arise and cease, and may be described as defiled, purified, deficient or complete. But none of these distinctions possesses an intrinsic nature.

“Not born” does not mean that nothing arises. It means **not intrinsically born**. Phenomena arise only through causes and conditions. “Not ceasing” similarly means **not intrinsically ceasing**: cessation is part of a dependent process, not an independently existing event.

The paired negatives (eg ‘not born and not unceasing’) do not deny ordinary differences; they deny that either side of the difference is permanent, independent or absolute.

The three doors of liberation

The eight aspects can be grouped into three approaches to emptiness:

1. The door of emptiness:

Examining the thing itself, we find no intrinsic nature or self-defining essence.

2. The door of signlessness:

Examining its arising and transformation, we find that birth, cessation, defilement and purification are not fixed, inherent characteristics. They can be altered.

3. The door of wishlessness:

Neither our present deficiency nor the perfection we seek is fixed or inherent. Practice still produces results conventionally: suffering can be overcome and liberation attained. There is no inherently deficient self that must acquire an inherently existing state of perfection. Because both the practitioner and the result exist dependently, we relinquish our grasping after liberation as something fixed that “I” must possess.

Wishlessness does not mean abandoning the aspiration for awakening. It means relinquishing grasping at awakening as an independently existing possession that a solid “I” can acquire.

Chapter 11: Attaining the result

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.

“In emptiness there is no...”

The sutra now applies emptiness systematically to the whole structure of Buddhist experience and practice:

- the five aggregates;
- the six sense faculties;
- the six kinds of sensory and mental objects;
- the eighteen elements of perception;
- the twelve links of dependent origination;
- the Four Noble Truths;
- wisdom, attainment and even non-attainment.

The repeated word “**no**” must always be understood as “no intrinsic existence.” The sutra does not discard these teachings. If the aggregates, dependent origination and Four Noble Truths were entirely nonexistent, teaching or practising them would be pointless.

Instead, it shows that even the Dharma path is dependently designated. The teachings are indispensable means of liberation, but they must not become new objects of attachment. Even wisdom, nirvana and buddhahood are empty.

Nirvana and “no 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.

A bodhisattva has “no attainment” because there is no inherently existing practitioner who acquires an inherently existing enlightenment. Nevertheless, liberation is conventionally attained through practice.

This absence of grasping removes mental obscuration and fear. When the self is not regarded as an independent entity requiring constant defence, the foundations of fear, craving and aversion are weakened.

Nirvana is the mind completely freed from afflictive obscurations. The afflictions are removable because they are not the intrinsic nature of the mind. Wisdom realises emptiness and undermines the ignorance from which those afflictions arise.

The mantra of the Perfection of Wisdom

The mantra is:

tadyathā gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā

HHDL renders its movement as:

“Go, go, go beyond, go totally beyond, be established in enlightenment.”

The “other shore” is liberation; this shore is cyclic existence governed by ignorance.

The perfection of wisdom is called a mantra because *mantra* carries the sense of **protecting the mind**. Wisdom protects the mind from mistaken views, afflictions and resulting suffering.

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.

It is called “true” and “not deceptive” in two senses:

- It directly knows ultimate reality without the disparity between appearance and reality found in ordinary experience. It sees reality without distortion.
- Its result is reliable: actual realization of emptiness removes ignorance and leads to freedom from suffering.

“Actualising the mantra” means realising its meaning, not merely repeating its sounds.

The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is proclaimed: tadyatha gaté gaté paragaté parasamgaté bodhi svaha! Shariputra, the bodhisattvas, the great beings, should train in the perfection of wisdom in this way.

The five stages of the path

The mantra also expresses the five progressive paths to buddhahood:

1. First “gate”—path of accumulation:

The practitioner develops merit, bodhichitta and an intellectual understanding of emptiness.

2. Second “gate”—path of preparation:

Understanding deepens through reflection & meditation & becomes increasingly experiential.

3. “Pāragate”—path of seeing:

Emptiness is directly and non-conceptually realised. The practitioner becomes an *arya*, noble being.

4. “Pārasaṃgate”—path of meditation:

The practitioner repeatedly familiarises the mind with this realization, progressively removing afflictions and their residual imprints.

5. “Bodhi svāhā”—path of no more learning:

All obscurations are removed and buddhahood is attained.

The sutra therefore contains two closely related teachings:

- Its explicit meaning is emptiness.
- Its **implicit meaning** is the progressive path by which the realization of emptiness becomes liberation and enlightenment.

At the conclusion, the Buddha emerges from meditation and confirms Avalokiteshvara’s teaching. This indicates the special quality of buddhahood: simultaneous awareness of ultimate emptiness and the diversity of conventional reality.

Chapter 12: Generating bodhichitta

Chapter 12 does feel structurally appended: it belongs to Part III rather than to the direct commentary on the sutra. It explains practical methods for generating compassion and bodhichitta, including equalising self and others, exchanging self with others, and the practice of giving and taking.

Nevertheless, it is not doctrinally unrelated. HHDL has defined the bodhisattva’s perfection of wisdom as the realization of emptiness **united with bodhichitta**. Chapter 12 supplies the compassionate or “method” side of that union.

It may therefore be treated as a companion chapter:

- Chapters 6–11 primarily explain **wisdom and emptiness**.
- Chapter 12 explains the **altruistic motivation** that makes this wisdom part of the Mahayana bodhisattva path.

The argument in its simplest form

The complete movement of the commentary can be reduced to this sequence:

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

The central message is therefore:

Things exist, but not in the solid, independent manner in which they appear to us. By understanding their dependent and empty nature, we can loosen self-grasping, overcome the afflictions it produces, and ultimately become free from suffering.

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.³

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 gaté gaté paragaté parasamgaté bodhi svaha!**^{See text box}

Shariputra, the bodhisattvas, the great beings, should train in the perfection of wisdom in

³ Because the Heart Sutra is a short text, with a length equivalent to twenty-five verses, it is designated as having only a single segment.

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.

The Perfection of Wisdom Mantra

The Sanskrit is usually written:

tadyathā: gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā!

A natural translation is:

“Thus: Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond—awakening! Svāhā!”

Word by word:

- *tadyathā* — “thus,” “in this way,” or “namely”
- *gate gate* — “gone, gone”
- *pāragate* — “gone beyond” or “gone to the further shore”
- *pārasaṃgate* — “gone completely beyond,” “gone altogether to the further shore”
- *bodhi* — awakening or enlightenment
- *svāhā* — a ritual exclamation of affirmation or consecration; variously rendered “hail!”, “so be it!”, or left untranslated

A more interpretive version would be:

“Go, go, go beyond, go completely beyond, and awaken—so be it!”

There is an important ambiguity here. Grammatically, *gate* can be understood as “gone” and also as a feminine form of address: “O you who have gone.” On that reading, the mantra addresses the Perfection of Wisdom:

“Thus: O gone one, gone one, gone beyond, gone completely beyond—awakening, svāhā!”

Because mantras are valued partly for their Sanskrit sound and ritual force, translators usually preserve the original rather than treating any English rendering as exhaustive. “The further shore” is the especially evocative Buddhist reading: crossing from saṃsāra and delusion to liberation and awakening.
