A Section-by-Section Commentary on the Heart Sūtra

Master Wang Xianglu

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Section One: Dhāraṇī

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.

Here the Chinese syllables boluo are explained as “the other shore,” mi as “reaching,” and duo as “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 feeling, just as wind is felt when it comes into contact with something.

Once there is feeling, thought is stirred; this is called perception. The moment-to-moment flowing of perception 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 without an independent basis 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 Chinese expression meaning “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 solely in being 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. Feeling, perception, 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. Nor is it empty only after it has passed. 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, feeling, perception, 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 the Dharma

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, perception, 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 mental 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 transcended 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: 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 concern; rather, concern does not become a hindrance. Hindrance is the cause, fear the result; inversion is the cause, delusive dreaming the result. When all these are absent, 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 expressions translated “all,” “all,” “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.

Part Six: Realization and Knowledge

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. Having spoken so much of emptiness above, the text now says “true and not false” to turn one back toward existence, lest one fall into one-sided emptiness. Between these, there is no middle way to speak of, for the middle way itself is originally unobtainable.

Chapter Seven: Secrets

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 mantra’s four phrases are interpreted here as: “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 Avataṃsaka 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 period of practice; 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.