A Section-by-Section Vernacular Explanation of the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra

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Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, while practicing the profound Prajñāpāramitā, clearly saw that the five aggregates are all empty, and thereby crossed beyond all suffering and adversity. Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. Feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are likewise. Śāriputra, all dharmas are marked by emptiness: they neither arise nor cease, are neither defiled nor pure, neither increase nor decrease.

Therefore, in emptiness there is no form; no feeling, perception, mental formations, 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 realm of mind consciousness; no ignorance, nor extinction of ignorance, up to and including no old age and death, nor extinction of old age and death. There is no suffering, origin, cessation, or path; no wisdom and no attainment. Because there is nothing to attain, bodhisattvas, relying on Prajñāpāramitā, have no hindrance in their minds.

Because there is no hindrance, there is no fear. Far removed from inverted views and deluded dreams, they ultimately attain nirvāṇa. All Buddhas of the three times, relying on Prajñāpāramitā, attain unsurpassed, perfect, complete awakening. Therefore, know that Prajñāpāramitā is the great spiritual mantra, the great bright mantra, the unsurpassed mantra, the unequaled mantra. It can remove all suffering; it is true and not false. Therefore the Prajñāpāramitā mantra is proclaimed. It is proclaimed thus: Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, bodhi svāhā.

If ordinary people are to cross beyond suffering and adversity, transcend birth and death, and attain great awakening, they must begin with their own minds. Yet to understand one's own mind, these 260 characters alone are already sufficient. But if one does not understand the principle of emptiness, one will also find it difficult to fully comprehend the nature of one's own mind.

This sūtra chiefly expounds the principle of the emptiness of intrinsic nature. It is not the emptiness spoken of by worldly people—that is annihilationist emptiness. They misunderstand the Buddhadharma as passive self-liberation. I shall now divide this sūtra into seven sections and explain it word by word and sentence by sentence in plain language, so that people may understand the true meaning of emptiness and not mistakenly create karma. In this way, they may eliminate all suffering and adversity and also arouse a great compassionate and impartial mind to save the world, demonstrating the great practical function of the Buddhadharma in society. It is truly the sole Dharma treasure for bringing about a world of great unity.

[Prajñā] This is a Sanskrit word, called "great wisdom" in China. Because Chinese words cannot fully convey its meaning, the original term is retained untranslated, out of respect for these syllables. This prajñā entirely concerns the wondrous functioning of mind. From Buddhas above to sentient beings below, none can attain Buddhahood, transcend birth and death, or cross beyond suffering and adversity without it.

In terms of its essential nature, it is an indestructible vajra, neither arising nor ceasing. In terms of its appearance, it is the formless, featureless true reality. In terms of its wondrous function, it is an immeasurable, all-penetrating wonder beyond knowing. Everyone partakes of this prajñā; Buddhas and sentient beings are equal in this respect. Buddhas, however, have opened prajñā-wisdom, whereas sentient beings possess it without opening it, obscured by ignorance.

As for the two Chinese characters used to transcribe prajñā, many words are needed to explain them. Only "the great wisdom that comprehends worldly and supramundane dharmas, penetrates them without obstruction, is fitting in every respect, and yet does not grasp at any dharma" can fully convey their meaning. For worldly dharmas, human affairs, and so forth are all Buddhadharma. Buddha means awakening: being able to awaken to all the ways and circumstances of the human world. Only after fulfilling the human way can one become a Buddha.

In short, entering the world and leaving the world are nothing but one mind. Inverted afflictions, greed, anger, ignorance, and delusion are the minds of beings in the six realms. If one can be empty, pure, and at ease, without attachment, that is the mind of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Therefore, apart from worldly dharmas,

there is no Buddhadharma; apart from prajñā, one can only commit harmful deeds and undergo suffering and adversity.

[Pāra] This means “the other shore.” Because there is a word meaning “to cross,” we provisionally imagine a river of birth and death. Sentient beings stand on this shore of suffering and must cross over to the pure other shore. This is merely a metaphor; there is not truly a this shore or an other shore.

[Mi] This Chinese syllable is explained here as “arrived.” It means that one has reached the stage of fruition. The stage of fruition is ultimate nirvāṇa, and nirvāṇa is purity.

[Duo] This Chinese syllable is explained here as “above.” Only upon reaching the other shore and going beyond it does one attain final realization. We may now provisionally distinguish five steps. The first is on this shore. The second is entering the stream: one has boarded the ferry, like one who has first aroused the resolve, and is also a first-fruit arhat. The third is midstream, when the boat is in the middle of the river, like śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas. The fourth is reaching the other shore: these are bodhisattvas below the tenth bhūmi, yet this is still not ultimate. Only at the fifth step, upon going ashore, is the boat abandoned—that is, abandoning attachment to dharmas and sweeping away the clinging mind. This is the state of equal-enlightenment bodhisattvas and Buddhas, wholly without hindrance.

[Heart] What is mind? It is a shadow: it cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It has no shape or form; rather, the six sense faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—encounter the six objects—forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and dharmas—and cognition arises. This is called the six consciousnesses: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness. Thus mind is something that gathers and arises.

It is the illusory image that arises through dependent origination when mind joins with external circumstances; this is called the illusory mind. The principles arising within the mind are called illusory dharmas. Clinging to an illusory self produces an illusory view; when this matures, there is birth and death in the six realms.

Yet it is the illusory mind that creates this birth and death. To open prajñā-wisdom and transcend birth and death, one must still use this illusory mind. To become a Buddha—to attain nirvāṇa—one also uses this illusory mind. Since you know it is illusory, then the illusory mind produces illusory dharmas; are not all human affairs, birth and death in the six realms, and nirvāṇa alike illusory? From this one may realize that there was originally no birth and death; all of it is vain fabrication.

Since there is no birth and death, there is no need for nirvāṇa. Thus it is said that all dharmas bear the mark of emptiness, and that nirvāṇa and birth and death are equally like flowers in empty space. This is the meaning.

But why, then, distinguish true mind from deluded mind? This is only an expedient explanation for beginners. In truth, mind fundamentally does not exist and cannot be obtained, so how could it be divided into true and deluded? Yet the illusory mind cannot be eliminated, nor can the illusory functions of all human affairs be discarded. Therefore, true mind and deluded mind are provisionally distinguished.

The true mind is mind without mind. Why is it called mind without mind? When no thought arises, seeing, hearing, awareness, and knowing remain clear and distinct, yet without discrimination, still and unmoving: this is the true mind. If a thought arises and one discriminates among human affairs, yet the mind does not become inverted and does not drift after circumstances, but suddenly returns to its original ground of mind without mind, this too is the true mind.

When thought after thought drifts on, however, and one unknowingly and gradually enters a deluded path, this is called the deluded mind; yet its underlying essence is never lost. This Heart Sūtra teaches you the method of alert awareness: using wisdom to contemplate what mind is, what suffering and adversity are, and how to return to the original ground of pure, quiescent extinction—the mind without mind. Hence it is called the Heart Sūtra of Prajñāpāramitā.

[Sūtra] It has many meanings. It may mean “road,” indicating the road by which we return to the true mind; “Dharma,” meaning every method; “thread,” meaning that which links together the principles before and after; or “accord,” meaning that which accords with each person’s capacity and the principles of each matter. These are several of its explanations. The present 260 characters are textual prajñā, indicating the method of contemplative prajñā. By practicing accordingly, one directly realizes the ultimate of the prajñā of true reality. It never goes beyond matters within the minds and conduct of sentient beings. Thus this sūtra speaks entirely of ourselves.

This sūtra has seven translations in all. This one was translated by the Tripiṭaka Master Xuanzang of the Tang dynasty. Its wording is simple, but its meaning is profound. Although there are seven translations, their meaning is the same. When reading sūtras, one should value their meaning and must not cling rigidly to the words alone.

This sūtra was spoken for Mahāyāna bodhisattvas ascending to Buddhahood. It reveals the supreme Buddha-realm, whose inner realization can be known only by oneself and cannot be expressed in words. Therefore, it is called the wordless true sūtra.

It is not truly without words; students are invited to realize for themselves the level of their own state. As for the Buddha's state, it cannot be fathomed by followers of the two vehicles or by bodhisattvas below the tenth bhūmi. We people of the Eastern Land have many and deep Mahāyāna capacities. Therefore, whether male or female, literate or illiterate, all delight in reciting this sūtra. It is like smelling a fragrance: everyone knows that it smells pleasant, but most do not know what fragrance it is. Yet all receive its permeation equally; thus it is inconceivable. This completes the explanation of the title.

[Contemplates] To settle the mind and direct one's thought toward a principle is called contemplation. This contemplation is the wondrous contemplation of one who has already realized perfect fruition; it is not the contemplation practiced by one newly cultivating at the causal stage. It is the great contemplation of freedom. Prajñā's great capacity and great function have already been activated. The mind has neither a subject that contemplates nor an object contemplated: subject and object are both forgotten in this wondrous contemplation.

[At Ease] This is the freedom of being at ease with things as they are, without insisting that they must be one way or another; it is not mere liberty. Liberty means unwillingness to accept restraint, but when circumstances do not accord with one's wishes, one suffers. Only one who is at ease can abide wherever one is, naturally without being trapped by circumstances, accepting favorable and unfavorable conditions alike. One does not rejoice in pleasure or become troubled by pain, knowing that these are originally empty, while oneself remains self-mastered. This freedom refers to great freedom.

[Bodhisattva] The Chinese term pusa abbreviates putisaduo, the Chinese transcription of bodhisattva. One who can awaken oneself and then awaken others is called a bodhisattva. Thus such a person is a guide for humans and devas, and a spiritual friend within the three realms. The three realms are: (1) the desire realm, extending from a portion of the human realm down through the five realms; (2) the form realm, referring to the heavenly realms; and (3) the formless realm, referring to the dhyāna heavens. All are within the six realms.

Bodhisattvas are divided into lay and monastic bodhisattvas, those before the bhūmis, those who have entered the bhūmis, those of the tenth bhūmi and equal enlightenment, and so forth. The highest is a bodhisattva in the final lifetime, who succeeds to the Buddha's position after the Buddha withdraws, such as Maitreya Buddha in this world and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva in the Western Pure Land. The bodhisattva referred to here is a greatly free bodhisattva of the tenth bhūmi or equal enlightenment, about to ascend to Buddhahood.

[Practicing] This refers to the functioning of mind: the great function of producing within the mind all manner of wondrous contemplations and wondrous conduct, and undertaking the two kinds of work of benefiting oneself and benefiting others.

[Profound] This does not mean profound as opposed to shallow. It means immeasurable: a wondrous practice that is perfectly pervasive, vast, and ultimately unsurpassed.

[Prajñāpāramitā] This has already been explained above. It means that the bodhisattva's meritorious practice has reached the ultimate stage and gone beyond the other shore.

[While] The word "while" is of great importance. It makes clear that when this state is reached, one is at the stage of fruition, having already cut off all afflictions, crossed beyond all suffering and adversity, and become free from hindrance. The words that follow—"clearly saw that the five aggregates are all empty, and thereby crossed beyond all suffering and adversity"—point out the state of great freedom and should not be treated casually.

[Clearly saw] This means lucid awareness and complete vision without remainder. It is functioning without deliberate effort, awareness without the slightest intentionality: one understands directly and inwardly.

[The Five Aggregates] Refers to form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. When these five factors are conjoined and inseparable, they are called the five aggregates. This means that mind and external objects are aggregated together; collectively, they are called form. The single word "form" encompasses these five terms, as well as all the myriad forms and appearances outside, and the formless aspects within, such as thought.

External objects are originally form, and my eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are also form. When external form and internal form come into contact, there is feeling. Once there is feeling, one begins to imagine it; this is perception. When a thought turns in the mind after it has been perceived, this is volitional formation. When knowledge arises from that turning, this is consciousness. Thus, the four—feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness—are still form. They are all functions aroused by the illusory mind, producing all manner of illusory dharmas.

These five aggregates are the capital by which sentient beings create evil karma, undergo suffering, and establish birth and death within the six realms. Yet they are also the means for opening prajñā, removing habitual tendencies, liberating oneself from suffering and adversity, and transcending birth and death; they are likewise the means by which Buddhas and bodhisattvas attain great awakening and liberate

sentient beings. All use the five aggregates, but Buddhas and bodhisattvas can see their original emptiness and use them skillfully, without being turned by them, whereas sentient beings are instead bound by them. The difference lies in awakening or non-awakening, and in understanding emptiness or not understanding it. Do not designate them as bad things and thereby give rise to biased views.

[All] It encompasses everything without remainder; it means all. Not only is the person empty; dharmas too are empty. Even seeing is empty, for seeing is also one of the five aggregates. Therefore it is called “all.”

[Empty] People in the world often do not understand the principle of emptiness and speak vaguely, saying, “Emptiness means that there is nothing.” They do not know that “empty” has various distinctions: space, empty space, the appearance of emptiness, and the meaning of emptiness. Here they are divided into two kinds. First is the appearance of emptiness, which has an appearance—for example, an empty room. When people fill it, the appearance of emptiness is destroyed. Thus, “existence” and “emptiness” are relative opposites. This is the sense in which worldly people say that having nothing is emptiness. The sūtras also speak of the meanings of eighteen kinds of emptiness, but there is no need to explain them all.

As for the “emptiness” spoken of in the Buddhist sūtras, it is the meaning of emptiness: emptiness of nature, original emptiness. It is inseparable from all existing things; it is not relative, and it is not mere nonexistence. It is existence that is empty.

To understand the meaning of this emptiness, one must first understand several points. Everything in the universe that takes diverse forms—mountains, rivers, the great earth, sun, moon, and stars, down to all utensils, plants, animals, and my own body—is an appearance with form. My thoughts, principles, human affairs, human feelings, joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are appearances without form. All are included within the collective name “form,” and at the causal stage they are all empty.

For among all the forms mentioned above, not one can be found to possess an independent self-nature. First, consider things with form. Take cloth as an example: cloth has no independent self-nature. To become cloth, it must depend on yarn; yarn cannot make itself into yarn, but must await cotton; cotton cannot exist by itself, but must come from seeds; seeds cannot sow themselves, but must rely on human labor, favorable weather, fertile soil, and so forth.

It is not only after analysis that they are empty. Before cloth and yarn come into being, and while cloth and yarn are present, they themselves are formed through the combination of many conditions. Because they arise from causes and

conditions, they have no substantial entity. Seeking their ultimate appearance, one ultimately cannot obtain it. The body is the same.

Therefore, absolutely everything lacks self-nature and substantial entity, arises from causes and conditions, and cannot be obtained; thus it is empty in nature. Second, consider what is without form. Take the mind: what is mind? Fundamentally, it does not exist; it is merely what is gathered together and called mind.

For example, on a cool mat in summer, a person may sleep most sweetly. At such a time there is no self and no mind. Suddenly a mosquito bites, and one feels it. That feeling is the mind arising from the coming together of the mosquito and oneself. Everything else follows the same principle. Thus mind too lacks self-nature, arises from causes and conditions, has no substantial entity, and cannot be obtained; therefore it is empty in nature.

Thus both things and mind are empty. Yet they exist while empty; they are illusory existence. This is emptiness of nature, inseparable from absolutely everything. There is not some separate emptiness outside mind and things; nor is this empty while that is not empty. Therefore, when speaking of form, one cannot depart from emptiness; when speaking of emptiness, one cannot depart from all forms. Yet one must clearly recognize that they are illusory existence arising from conditions, and must truly know that this emptiness is originally empty at the causal stage, emptiness of nature—not something the eyes and ears can see or hear. Its meaning is truly emptiness.

Once one has decisively known that everything is originally empty yet illusorily existent, why cling to it as real? Yet how could all worldly human affairs be discarded? I still respond to circumstances as they arise. This is not numbness or mindlessness; it is simply non-abiding—like drifting clouds and flowing water, at ease everywhere. This alone is true emptiness of mind.

This is what the Buddha meant by emptiness. How regrettable that people blindly and falsely criticize it! If worldly people could truly understand emptiness, their minds would naturally cease clinging. Greed, anger, and delusion would not take deep root, and there would be no extreme contention in the world.

Is not the Buddhadharma therefore the greatest benefit to society? What superstition could there be in it? Practitioners, moreover, often indulge in mere verbal Chan, saying, “Do not become attached to emptiness!” They fear attachment to a view of emptiness. Yet precisely because they have never understood emptiness, they continually theorize within the two views of emptiness and existence, thereby creating even greater confusion. Therefore, understanding emptiness breaks attachment to form; breaking that attachment leaves the mind empty. This is the first dharma gate for ending suffering and adversity!

[Liberate] It means to transcend—to ascend to the other shore, where views of dharmas have all been purified.

[All] It includes everything, utterly and without remainder. All suffering and adversity involving form or formlessness, personal self or dharma-self, are wholly included within it.

[Suffering and Adversity] Bodily pain and mental unease, whether with form or without form, coarse, subtle, or extremely subtle, are all suffering and adversity. In truth, they all arise from mind. If I truly have no mind, where is suffering? If mind truly has no views, where is adversity? This does not mean not knowing or not experiencing. Because wisdom knows original emptiness, one can know while seeming not to know, and experience while being as though one does not experience. For example, when two people suffer at the same time, one cannot withstand it and even adds suffering to suffering, becoming ill because of it. The other, however, is unconcerned; the mind does not fix upon it, and suffering and adversity cease.

The preceding four sentences are classified as the section on dhāraṇī; they are the first part. They encompass all dharmas in the Three Treasuries and twelve divisions of the scriptures, and contain immeasurable meanings. They are also the outline of this sūtra. Once these four sentences are understood, the purport of the Heart Sūtra is understood. Put them into practice, and one will naturally be liberated from suffering and adversity, transcend birth and death, leave the three realms, and accomplish Buddhahood with ease to spare.

Those who do not understand the essential point of mind always seek understanding in words and are unwilling to seek it in their own minds. When they have exhausted all means, today they seek the Buddha and tomorrow they seek the Dharma. Those of still lower capacity seek blessings and spiritual powers, desperately demanding some tangible proof; thus they move ever farther from the Buddha Way. They sink deeply into a misguided path—how painful this is!

[Śāriputra] The Chinese names Shelizi and Shelifu refer to the same disciple of the Buddha. Among the śrāvakas, he was foremost in wisdom.

[Form Is Not Different from Emptiness; Emptiness Is Not Different from Form; Form Is Emptiness; Emptiness Is Form; Feeling, Perception, Volitional Formations, and Consciousness Are Also Thus] The first four sentences are in fact one meaning: they all express the principle that form and emptiness are nondual.

At first, “not different” says that they are not two different things; this is still a provisional way of speaking. Later, “is” says that they are one and cannot be divided; this is the ultimate statement—decisive and without the least hesitation. The single

word “form” represents not only the five aggregates, but also encompasses all the myriad forms of the external universe.

For all existing things in the universe are inseparable from my ocean of nature; wholly one body, they are all form. My feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness are appearances without form, and they too are form. These two kinds of form, inner and outer, arise from causes and conditions; they lack self-nature and substantial entity, cannot be obtained, and are fundamentally empty in nature.

Though they are presently illusorily existent, they ultimately cannot be obtained. Thus form itself is emptiness; there is not some separate emptiness outside form. If one thoroughly investigates the meaning of emptiness explained above, one will understand this meaning.

Thus the mind’s manifold forms are also the circulation of the five aggregates; and the manifold forms of matter are all like flowers in empty space chaotically arising and ceasing, scene after scene in a film—always existent yet unobtainable. Do not regard these four sentences as abstruse and wondrous; they are in fact an utterly ordinary and commonplace principle.

You need only recognize clearly: “Everything arises from causes and conditions, lacks self-nature and substantial entity, and cannot be obtained; therefore it is empty in nature.”

Not only is form thus; the four aggregates of feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness are also thus. Not only are the five aggregates thus; all the formed appearances among the myriad things in the universe, as well as all the dharmas discussed below—such as the eighteen realms, the twelve links of dependent origination, the dharmas of the Four Truths, and the wisdom and attainments of the six perfections and myriad practices, which are appearances without form—are likewise empty in nature.

But ordinary beings cling to existence, and so it says, “form is not different from emptiness.” The two vehicles, in turn, cling to emptiness, and so it says, “emptiness is not different from form.” There are also bodhisattvas who have not yet comprehended nonduality, and so it says, “form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” All of this is intended to destroy their views of dharmas. If one understands that views of dharmas too are originally empty, one will be completely free of hindrance.

The preceding seven sentences are classified as the section on form and emptiness, the second part, which serves to elucidate the principle that form and emptiness are nondual.

[Śāriputra] At this point the explanation must return to what is original; it has reached a crucial juncture. Therefore his name is called again and he is addressed, as a sign of solemn emphasis.

[All Dharmas Are Marked by Emptiness] What are dharmas? They are reflections of mind, the various principles arising dependently within mind. If there is no object, then there is no mind and no dharma. Therefore they arise from causes and conditions; though arising, they do not arise. They lack self-nature and real substance, cannot be obtained, and are originally empty—not an emptiness artificially produced.

The ancients said: “When mind arises, dharmas arise; when mind ceases, dharmas cease. Since mind itself is illusory, how could dharmas be real?” “All dharmas” means all dharmas—that is, all mind. People in the world always use mind to condition mind and dharmas to condition dharmas. Not knowing original emptiness, they take them as truly existent; thus they become mutually entrenched in their attachments, and disputes multiply from this. The word “mark” here should be understood as “meaning.” What follows directly points to the principle of neither arising nor ceasing.

[Neither Arising nor Ceasing] Of all the statements in the Buddhist sūtras, this is among the most difficult to understand. One must know that absolutely everything in the universe, including my thoughts, the five aggregates, and so forth, neither arises nor ceases. This is because everything: (1) does not arise by itself. As explained above, cloth cannot arise by itself as cloth. It has no self-nature and must depend upon the coming together of many conditions in order to arise.

(2) Not arising from another: it does not arise solely through other conditions, nor can it be separated from this cloth itself; thus it does not arise from another. Then does it (3) arise jointly? No. It does not arise jointly either, because both sides arise dependently and neither has any substantial reality; they are merely coincidentally combined. Thus it does not arise jointly either.

(4) Nor does it arise without cause. The present illusory appearance seems to arise, yet it must result from causes; without causes capable of producing cloth, there can be no result of cloth. By the same reasoning, all things are unborn. Though appearances are present now, they are ultimately arising without arising. Since they do not arise, they do not cease. Yet their present illusory appearances undergo an illusory cessation: they do not cease of themselves. For example, when cloth is burned into ashes, the cloth cannot burn itself. Nor does it cease through another; although there is fire to burn it, the fire cannot ultimately be separated from the cloth. Nor does it cease jointly, nor without cause. The principle is the same in every case and can be inferred.

[Neither Defiled nor Pure, Neither Increasing nor Decreasing] Because there is neither arising nor ceasing, defilement and purity, increase and decrease, length and shortness, right and wrong, good and bad, coming and going—each pair arises dependently through discrimination. All are illusory existents that cannot be obtained. All appearances are originally empty appearances. Since none of the affairs of the world comes about except through opposition, suffering too is established through opposition.

If one knows that the root of things is dependent arising, without self-nature, substantial reality, or anything obtainable—arising without arising, with only this temporary false appearance—why cling to them as substantial realities? Since one does not cling to existence, neither does one reject existence. That is, one engages in all dharmas while being free from all dharmas; one engages in this functioning while being free from this functioning. The mind is like the vast sky, encompassing everything, at ease and non-abiding. This is the Original Face of the empty appearance of all dharmas, and likewise the Original Face in which there is no mind that can be taken as mind.

But sentient beings have long failed to know this. Those who know nothing at all are beings in the six realms; those who know it halfway are the two vehicles; and those who know it but not thoroughly are bodhisattvas. All have hindrances. Thus there are said to be five divisions: this shore, entering the stream, the middle stream, the other shore, and the various states of not yet having reached the shore. The preceding five statements are classified as the section on the original nature, the third section. This point is of utmost importance for practitioners; do not pass over it lightly.

[Therefore] This is a tone of certainty.

[In emptiness there is no form, feeling, perception, formation, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharma; no eye realm, up to and including no mind-consciousness realm.] Having understood the principle of emptiness, what substantial reality could there still be to obtain within emptiness? The word “no” has two explanations: first, it means nonexistence, that something fundamentally is not; second, it means “must not.”

Although illusory appearances are presently present, they are ultimately nonexistent. There is no need to grasp at them as truly existent, thereby giving rise to a view of dharmas and adding many afflictions.

Thus, the five aggregates are form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. The six sense faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—together with the six sense objects—form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharmas—make up the twelve entrances. Adding the six consciousnesses—eye, ear, nose,

tongue, body, and mind consciousnesses—makes the eighteen realms. All are unobtainable, because they arise dependently, have no self-nature, have no substantial reality, and cannot be obtained.

Yet since people have these illusory bodies, there is naturally the functioning of illusory minds, which cannot be annihilated. Buddhas and bodhisattvas also use them to liberate sentient beings and relieve the world's immeasurable suffering. We ourselves must use them to open prajñā, transcend birth and death, and leave the three realms. Sages understand their original emptiness and therefore have no attachment to dharmas. Sentient beings, being deluded, give rise to inverted views; this is their great hindrance.

Beings in hell are hindered by abundant greed, anger, and ignorance; beings in the ghost realm by abundant greed; beings in the animal realm by abundant ignorance; beings in the māra realm by abundant anger; humans by half portions of greed, anger, and ignorance; and devas by a small portion of greed. These three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance all arise through the six sense faculties, six sense objects, and six consciousnesses. The single word "emptiness" can dissolve all afflictions and hindrances. Once they are dissolved, that very moment is bodhi. Thus afflictions and bodhi are one and the same thing.

[No ignorance, and also no ending of ignorance; up to and including no old age and death, and also no ending of old age and death.] This concerns the hindrance produced when pratyekabuddhas—those who have not heard the Buddhadharma but awaken through causes and conditions—cling to the teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination. They do not know the empty appearance of all dharmas. Since these are called causes and conditions, it is evident that they arise dependently and are not real; yet they cannot understand emptiness. Bound by a view of dharmas, they do not attain freedom. The twelve links of dependent origination are as follows:

1. Ignorance: the fundamental affliction from the past; whenever it encounters conditions, it stirs. "Condition" means that the process turns onward.

2. Ignorance conditions formations: formations are actions—the performance of various wholesome or unwholesome karmic deeds.

3. Formations condition consciousness: because of karmic deeds in the past, a single thought arises in the present life at conception; through consciousness, a cause becomes a result.

4. Consciousness conditions name-and-form: within the womb there is already physical form, and thus name-and-form.

5. Name-and-form conditions the six entrances: the six sense faculties are complete and can encounter the six sense objects.

6. The six entrances condition contact: after leaving the womb, one comes into contact with all things.

7. Contact conditions feeling: after contact, one experiences suffering or pleasure and gives rise to all kinds of sensations.

8. Feeling conditions craving: after reaching adulthood, strong desire arises.

9. Craving conditions grasping: once there is desire, one seeks to obtain its objects, and the mind races in every direction.

10. Grasping conditions becoming: once one has obtained, there is becoming; this is the fruition in which karma is brought to completion.

11. Becoming conditions birth: this establishes the process, which continues birth after birth and turns into the future.

12. Birth conditions old age and death: where there is birth, there is cessation. All things are inherently like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows, and must eventually change and perish. Old age and death are the result of this cycle of birth and death. But as long as ignorance has not been extinguished, the cycle turns again and continues from life to life without end, producing the six realms of rebirth. It is always ignorance that causes the mischief. The words “up to and including” leap from ignorance to old age and death, omitting the ten intermediate links.

Each of these twelve links takes ignorance as its governing basis. One does not know that all are dependently arisen manifestations of the deluded mind and illusory dharmas, fundamentally without independent existence. “Ending” means the utmost limit: it is the ultimate nonexistence, meaning that even “nonexistence” itself does not exist. It means that they are absolutely unobtainable. Thus ignorance has no substantial reality; it is like flowers in empty space or events in a dream. A dream is not nothing, but when one awakens, it cannot be found at all.

It is regrettable that sentient beings cannot cut off ignorance. They proceed from condition to condition without end; it is nothing but delusion, karma, and suffering. Although pratyekabuddhas have awakened to the twelve links of dependent origination as a temporarily existing composite appearance, they take them to be fixed and unchanging dharmas. Thus their view of dharmas is not purified, and hindrances arise.

[No suffering, origination, cessation, or path.] This concerns the hindrance produced when śrāvakas cling to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Suffering, origination,

cessation, and path are called the Four Noble Truths, the four important principles. Suffering is the oppression and unease of body and mind. Sentient beings have three bodily sufferings: old age, illness, and death; three mental sufferings: greed, anger, and ignorance; and three sufferings in future lives: hells, ghosts, and animals.

There are also the sufferings of the three calamities and eight difficulties, the suffering of decay, the suffering of conditioned existence, the suffering of suffering itself, the suffering of dissatisfaction, the suffering of being unable to accept one's lot, and the suffering of having no support for the mind. These constitute the truth of suffering. They are the painful results of birth and death in the three realms and six realms, all formed by the conjunction of mind and circumstances; this is the truth of origination. Cessation means extinction: cutting off all suffering and returning to pure quiescence.

When karmic entanglements have been extinguished, there is no longer the burden of birth and death; this is the truth of cessation. But to eliminate all the assembled sufferings, there must be a path. The path is the right path; to practice the right path, auxiliary practices are necessary to help one leave all suffering and attain the bliss of nirvāṇa. This is the truth of the path. Śrāvakas cling to this dharma-view and take it as ultimate. Thus they may perhaps be liberated from segmented birth and death, but transformational birth and death is not easily ended. If one understands original emptiness and knows that these Four Noble Truths are only temporary dependent arisings, then form is empty not only at the level of results but also at the level of causes. There is no need to cling to them, and thus there are no hindrances.

[No wisdom and also no attainment.] This is the hindrance of bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas cling to the dharmas of the six perfections and myriad practices, believing that wisdom truly can be attained, sentient beings truly can be liberated, and Buddhahood truly can be attained. Their minds inevitably retain the appearances of practicing these pāramitās. Their subtle view of dharmas has not yet been purified, and therefore they do not reach the ground of ultimate nirvāṇa.

In the past, Ānanda asked the Buddha, "What are the dispositions that lead to the hell of afflictions?" The Buddha said that practicing the six pāramitās is a disposition that leads to the hell of afflictions. For instance, if I can practice giving but become disgusted on seeing others unwilling to give, this is a disposition that leads to the hell of afflictions. If I can uphold the precepts, and so forth, but resent others because they cannot uphold the precepts, and so forth, this is a disposition that leads to the hell of afflictions.

This is what the Amitābha Sūtra calls the turbidity of views. It is called a defiled dharma: one has been defiled and confused. Moreover, whether there is wisdom or no wisdom, both are functions of the illusory mind, discriminated into two. Both are

empty in nature; what dharma is there to attain? Long ago, when the World-Honored One was with Dīpaṃkara Buddha, he received the prediction that he would attain Buddhahood and unsurpassed bodhi. Yet at that time the World-Honored One did not take this as something superior, because he knew that all is empty in nature. In truth, not the slightest dharma can be attained; it is merely called bodhi. Therefore, only when bodhisattvas reach the stage of no self in dharmas are their hindrances completely exhausted.

[Because there is nothing to attain.] This is a concluding statement, emphasizing that the five aggregates, eighteen realms, twelve links of dependent origination, Four Noble Truths, six perfections, wisdom, attainment, and all else are fundamentally empty. Examined carefully, there is truly nothing to attain. The preceding thirteen statements are classified as the section on the function of dharma, the fourth section. Once emptiness has been explained, the function of prajñā naturally unfolds, and one is no longer bound by dharmas.

[Bodhisattva.] The full Chinese transcription putisaduo is abbreviated as pusa, "bodhisattva." Here it refers to a mind-realizing bodhisattva who has already ascended to the Buddha stage, also called a great adept or great being. Sattva is also translated as diligent and courageous: one capable of shouldering the Tathāgata's work.

[Because they rely on prajñāpāramitā.] Because they rely on the vajra prajñā of their own intrinsic nature and are thereby able to transcend to the other shore, they have the experiential realization described below. We should know that cultivation is not pursued for profit, much less for fame. Fame and profit are the deadliest poisons binding one to birth and death; unless the mind that seeks fame and profit dies, there will never be a day of release.

Therefore, the causal ground must be correct. One must always attend to one's own intrinsic nature, honestly investigate and genuinely practice, and never seek supernormal powers, marvels, or mysterious speech. Such things cannot protect one from birth and death in the slightest. Even bodhisattvas cannot depart from prajñā; how much less can we. Apart from prajñā, what other dharma is there? This is the fundamental condition for attaining Buddhahood. Only those willing to follow this dharma have wisdom, and they can certainly attain accomplishment in this very life.

[The Mind Is Free of Hindrance] This mind is utterly free of hindrance: a mind of great freedom and ease, in which self and dharmas are empty, quiescent, and at peace. It sees all worldly and supramundane things as vast and equal to empty space, without boundary, encompassing all that exists, and wholly free of hindrance.

If even mind does not exist, on what could hindrances depend? Where, then, could suffering and adversity be?

[Because There Is No Hindrance, There Is No Fear; One Is Far Removed from Upside-Down Dreaming] Since the mind is pure, empty, and free of views, there are no imaginings by day and naturally no confused dreams at night. Like a thousand eyes and a thousand hands illuminating the ten directions completely, how could there be any inversion? Ordinary people are afraid because they first have a mind of gain and loss—the consequence of clinging to a self. This is precisely the propensity for birth and death in the six realms.

If one can realize that mind is empty and dharmas are empty, one ascends to the Buddha stage and is liberated from the two forms of birth and death. When bodhisattvas return to the world, it is through the power of their great compassionate vows, not through karmic force. Naturally, they have no fear and are far removed from upside-down dreaming; they have reached the state in which arising and ceasing have ceased, and quiescent extinction is bliss.

[Ultimate Nirvāṇa] Nirvāṇa means purity. The practitioners of the two vehicles attain nirvāṇa with remainder, which is not ultimate. Ultimate nirvāṇa is the Buddha stage, called nirvāṇa without remainder; even nirvāṇa itself cannot be obtained. What is called becoming a Buddha involves no dharma-view that one has become a Buddha. Nirvāṇa was originally spoken of in contrast to birth and death; since birth and death have never truly existed, how could nirvāṇa exist? Both are merely provisional names. This is the fruition virtue of a bodhisattva.

[The Buddhas of the Three Times] Whether present Buddhas, past Buddhas, or future Buddhas, all Buddhas throughout the three times are included. Whether they have already attained Buddhahood or not, they are one body and equal. You should know that Śākyamuni Buddha and Amitābha Buddha are Buddhas at the fruition stage, while I and sentient beings in the six realms are Buddhas at the causal stage. Our natures are inherently equal; therefore, we must neither abandon ourselves nor look down on others.

[Relying on Prajñāpāramitā, They Attain Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi] All Buddhas of the three times likewise attain unsurpassed bodhi through this dharma gate. All great wisdom is born from the Buddha-mother of intrinsic nature; “born” here means brought forth or awakened. This attainment is precisely attainment without attainment: only when one attains a state in which there is utterly nothing to attain in the mind can one attain one’s Original Face.

At this point there is no person, no self, no sentient being, and no life span. Serene and unmoving, yet wondrous functions as numerous as the sands of the Ganges are brought forth from this. This is the fruition virtue of a Buddha. Anuttarā means

unsurpassed, samyak means rightly equal, and saṃbodhi means right awakening; together they mean unsurpassed, rightly equal, right awakening, the state of mind of a Buddha. Consider this: even a Buddha cannot depart from this dharma gate. How could sentient beings exclude themselves from it and seek another path? Would that not be upside-down? Thus, seeking others rather than oneself is a distortion at the causal stage and only leads one astray.

The preceding ten sentences are classified as the section on fruition virtue, the fifth section. They describe the stage of fruition virtue, where all hindrances are finally exhausted and one reaches ultimate nirvāṇa. This is entirely accomplished through contemplating emptiness; there is no other dharma. The foregoing may also be regarded as the first half of the Heart Sūtra, which exclusively explains that this dharma is not real. Below, the discussion turns around to speak of its not being unreal. The Diamond Sūtra says that this Dharma is neither real nor unreal.

It teaches people not to cling to the real, nor to cling to the unreal, thereby revealing the wondrous functioning of non-abiding prajñā. Going a level deeper, if mind does not exist, on what could dharmas depend? If there are no dharmas, then one cannot even speak of their being real or unreal. Therefore, nirvāṇa and birth and death are equally like flowers in empty space.

[Therefore Know Prajñāpāramitā] What follows turns to what is not unreal and points out the wondrous function of the single word “know.”

This word “know” is numinous illumination and awakened knowing, expressing the state after awakening; it may seem to turn toward existence. Yet this knowing too is a dharma and is also empty in nature—arising temporarily through conditions and functioning only provisionally. Thus, it knows yet is without knowing; it arises yet does not arise. Therefore, without understanding the principle of the unborn, one cannot directly realize the principle of true emptiness.

Previously, the single word “empty” was discussed as the essence of prajñā; here, the single word “know” is discussed as the function of prajñā. Thus, prajñā’s supreme virtue cannot be described or expressed in words. At this point, the path of speech is cut off and the activity of mind is extinguished. There can only be silent realization and praise; it is precisely the time when one knows for oneself whether something is cold or warm.

[It Is the Great Mantra, the Great Bright Mantra, the Supreme Mantra, the Unequaled Mantra, Which Can Remove All Suffering and Is True, Not False] These six clauses are words of praise. A mantra conveys a secret meaning: that which is decisively and certainly so is called a mantra; that which is as strict and swift as a military command is called a mantra.

Because it encompasses everything, it is called great; because nothing is beyond its reach, it is called spiritual; because nothing is beyond its illumination, it is called bright; because nothing can compare with it or be added to it, it is called supreme; because it is ultimately equal, it is called unequaled. Empty, yet not biased toward emptiness; existent, yet not attached to existence: within the nature that abides nowhere in quiescent extinction, it can bring forth wondrous functions as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.

The Sixth Patriarch said: “How unexpected that intrinsic nature is originally neither arising nor ceasing, and originally unmoving. How unexpected that intrinsic nature can give rise to all dharmas.” The former is the essence of not being real; this is the function of not being unreal. Therefore, it can remove all suffering and is true, not false. Consider that no person in the world is free from the suffering of hindrances. Who can be apart from the Buddhadharma? And when has the Buddhadharma ever been superstition?

The preceding seven sentences are classified as the section on direct realization, the sixth section. Only through direct realization can one know this state; it cannot be known through words and writings. Therefore, those who wish to know must truly investigate and cultivate, applying effort to intrinsic nature. The sūtras are merely borrowed as corroboration.

In sum, penetrating mind is the greatest spiritual power. But if the mind is not empty, it cannot penetrate; if it cannot penetrate, it cannot be bright; and if it is not bright, all wisdom is obscured by ignorance and cannot be brought forth. This section says that when the mind reaches the state of true emptiness, it naturally possesses many powers. It is not that suffering is first present and then removed; rather, all suffering and adversity are left with nowhere to depend, so that fundamentally there is no suffering or adversity.

[Therefore He Spoke the Prajñāpāramitā Mantra, Saying: Gate Gate Pāragate Pārasaṃgate Bodhi Svāhā] Sanskrit mantras were originally not to be translated, for fear that those who recite them would become attached to the explanation, thereby adding views and confusing the mind. But this sūtra is for benefiting oneself and others, and one ultimately cannot forget sentient beings or depart from the fundamental vow of great compassion.

Let us briefly explain something of the mantra’s meaning. Gate Gate means, “Go beyond! Go beyond!” Pāragate means, “Go beyond to the other shore!” Pārasaṃgate means, “Let everyone go beyond together to the other shore!” Bodhi Svāhā means, “Swiftly realize bodhi!” The preceding six sentences are classified as the secret section, the seventh section: it is something that only one knows for oneself and cannot be put into words.

The Tripiṭaka and twelve divisions of the Buddha's teachings always speak of mind; this Heart Sūtra speaks of the essence within mind. In general, people have seven minds, though they themselves often do not know it. Six of these are the minds of the six realms, ceaselessly revolving each day: now the mind of the deva realm, now the mind of the human realm, and then the mind of the three lower realms. They are all minds that, without a master, wander after circumstances.

People of lesser capacity do not even know what is called mind. Those of middling capacity know only the discriminating mind that distinguishes good from evil. Those of superior capacity often have an aspiring mind and can attain favorable results in the human and deva realms.

There is also a seventh mind: the empty mind, the unsurpassed mind, the non-abiding mind, the mind with a master, the pure and free mind. Unless one cultivates and realizes it, one will not know this mind. Even practitioners of the two vehicles and bodhisattvas of the provisional vehicles do not know it. The Buddha said: "Tiny insects may go everywhere, but they cannot enter fire."

The minds of sentient beings can take anything as an object, but they are unwilling to turn toward prajñā; thus, they do not know the seventh mind. This mind is a supramundane mind. Once one understands it, Buddhahood is not far away. Sentient beings on this shore have the six minds; transcending to the other shore is the seventh mind—the mind of no-mind, the mind wholly free of hindrance.

But unless one begins with the six minds, one cannot transcend the world. One must penetrate afflictions through investigation and open up the hindrances before one can become a Buddha. It is like someone who has fallen into a mud pit and must pull themselves out of the mud. Thus, worldly dharmas are precisely provisions for transcending the world. One must first understand: what are afflictions? They are still my six minds.

Just let them rest; when the mind is empty and free from attachment, one then sees the mind of no-mind. Those who have cultivated the Buddha Way have always regarded transcending the world as something lofty and worldly matters as unworthy of attention. Ordinarily, they do not train the mind in human affairs and pay no heed to the principles of proper conduct. Filial piety and fraternal respect are the foundation; loyalty and trustworthiness are dharma functions. They are the basis for fulfilling the human way and precisely the capital for becoming a Buddha.

Mahāyāna Buddhadharma places primary importance on the foundation. Therefore, one can enter directly all the way through and reach the end in one stroke, without turning one's back on the teacher, forgetting the Way, or straying onto a wrong path.

Consider this: when the views of the five aggregates and dharmas have all been emptied, the root of greed has been cut off. Where, then, could attachment to fame and profit lodge itself? Therefore, I urge people to read the sūtras and act in accordance with them. The first step is to seek a dharma gate for realizing the mind. Enter deeply into one gate; upon seeing the true aspect of reality, prajñā naturally opens. The second step, once one has the method, is to train amid human affairs and sweep away habitual tendencies. Then one advances without retreating, until Buddhahood is attained.

Yet in this life one can only realize one's true nature and attain Buddhahood; to eliminate habitual tendencies completely still requires many lives. Without applying effort, it will be delayed still further. But after seeing one's true nature, one will never regress throughout life after life.

This sūtra is textual prajñā, which indicates the path of practice. One must personally undertake contemplative practice, which is contemplative prajñā. When prajñā is brought forth and one sees intrinsic nature, wisdom opens; this is prajñā of true reality. At this point, it is the sole path of return to the source, by which ignorance is forever cut off and one is liberated from birth and death.

Though the text contains only 260 characters, it is sufficient to sweep away emptiness and existence, and to directly realize bodhi. Neither bodhisattvas nor the Buddhas of the three times can go beyond its scope. Although this sūtra has seven translations, its meaning is truly nondual: it gathers the myriad dharmas into the One, then breaks even the One in returning to the source. There is no mind that can be called mind and no sūtra that can be spoken. For forty-nine years the World-Honored One taught the Dharma, yet he did not utter a single word; this points out that all things are empty in nature. May practitioners understand this through the principle of intrinsic nature, not through the principle of words. Only when the mind is emptied can it accord with the Heart Sūtra; this is called Mind-Seal.

The exposition of the Heart Sūtra is complete.

Respectfully recorded by fellow practitioners in the ninth month of the gengyin year, Buddhist Era 2515.