The Heart of Wisdom Sūtra
Bhagavatī-Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya-Sūtra

Trans J Garfield (from sDe dge Tibetan)
(With Brief Commentary)

The *Heart of Wisdom Sūtra* is one of the many condensations of the earliest *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtra (the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā,* or 8,000 verse sūtra). There are many versions of this sūtra in circulation, falling into two groups, called the "long version" and the "short version," respectively. Following the research of Jan Nattier, there is a growing consensus among contemporary scholars that it was originally composed in Chinese in China around the 1ˢᵗ Century CE, and was back-translated into Sanskrit. The philological argument rests upon oddities in the Sanskrit grammar, the increasing profusion of versions in Sanskrit and then Tibetan as opposed to a more stable Chinese text, and the presence of the mantra, a common attribute of Chinese apocryphal sūtras, but unknown in other Sanskrit literature of this genre, as well as the presence of Avalokiteśvara as the central bodhisattva in a wisdom text. The present translation is from one of the long versions preserved in the Tibetan canon. My commentary reflects the oral commentary on this text I received from the ven Prof Geshe Yeshe Thabkhas, to whom I owe any understanding I have of this text.

This is what I heard at one time: The Lord was staying at Vulture Peak near the city of Rajgir. He was accompanied by a large assembly of monks as well as a large assembly of bodhisattvas.

> The opening line validates the sūtra. It is the line with which all Pāli suttas begin, attesting to the fact that the reporter was present at the discourse being presented. It is noteworthy that the authorial voice here is unidentified. We do not know who claims to have witnessed this event. Vulture peak is a small hill outside of the city of Rajgir, where the Buddha spent much time during his career. It is interesting that the Indian commentaries on this text give two incorrect explanations of the name of the hill. Some say that it resembles a pile of vultures; others that it is infested with vultures. In fact, as anyone who has visited the hill can verify, it is named for the strange vulture-shaped rocks near its summit. The presence of bodhisattvas is important. This indicates that this is a Mahāyāna sūtra.

At that time the Lord was absorbed in a meditation known as the profound enumeration of phenomena.

> The Buddha does not actually speak here, until the very end. But this is still regarded in the Mahāyāna tradition as *Buddhavaccana,* or speech of the Buddha. As the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* explains, Buddhavaccana is whatever is spoken by the Buddha, directly inspired by the Buddha, approved by the Buddha, or completely in accord with the teachings of the Buddha. (This last opens up a great hermeneutical space, of course, but set it aside.) The body of the present text satisfies the second two criteria.

> The Buddha himself is meditating on the diversity of phenomena, an analytical meditation in which he is aware of each existent and its nature. This valorizes analysis, an activity central to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, and hints at the importance of interdependence.

At the same time, the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom.

> The presence of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion is a surprise in this text, where we would expect to find Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. His meditation on wisdom indicates the importance of the inseparability in the Mahāyāna of wisdom and compassion, a theme developed in much greater detail by Śāntideva in *Bodhicāryāvatāra*.

He came to see that the five aggregates are empty of essence.

> That is, Avalokiteśvara apprehended the emptiness not only of all conventional phenomena, but also of all that they resolve into. The five aggregates are a shorthand for the more fundamental constituents of reality.

Through the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra approached the noble Avalokiteśvara and asked him, "How should a son of noble lineage proceed when he wants to train in the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom?"

> The Buddha is inspiring all of this. That is one reason it qualifies as Buddhavaccana. Śāriputra in the Pāli canon, is known as "the foremost of the wise." He is regarded as the wisest of the Buddha's disciples. In Mahāyāna sūtras he is often presented as asking questions, or as less astute than the bodhisattvas, indicating the superiority of the Mahāyāna, but also the idea that Śrāvakayāna practitioners ought to aspire to Mahāyāna practice. The phrase "son of noble lineage" refers to a person in an enobling teaching and practice lineage—one who has entered a path aimed at full awakening, following the teachings as passed down from the Buddha through realized individuals.

The noble Avalokiteśvara replied to the venerable Śāriputra: If any son or daughter of the noble lineage who wants to train in the profound discipline of the perfection of wisdom s/he should consider things in the following way:

> Not all versions of the sūtra contrast "son" with "son or daughter" this way. I chose this one because I like the early feminist moment where Avalokiteśvara chides Śāriputra for sexism. Note the relation of this to the episode where Śāriputra gets transformed by a goddess into a woman in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* as punishment for his sexism.

First, s/he should understand clearly and thoroughly that the five aggregates are empty of essence.

> Emptiness, and direct insight into emptiness is the foundation of the perfection of wisdom.

Form is empty. Emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form. Form is not other than emptiness.

> This "fourfold profundity" is the heart of the *Heart*, and one of the best-known passages in Buddhist scripture. It is important to see that the four lines make four different, but related points, taking us deeper and deeper into an understanding of emptiness and its relation to conventional reality. Material form (really just *matter*) is taken as the example aggregate for two reasons. First, it is the easiest to grasp conceptually. Matter is all around us, and examples are always ready to hand, including our own hands! Second, it is hardest to convince oneself that matter, as opposed to the other, less tangible aggregates (sensation, perception, dispositions and consciousness) is really empty, given its tangibility. But it is only taken as an example; the point is not that there is something *special* about material form.

> "Form is empty" means that form lacks instrinsic identity, inherent existence, essence. It is empty of essence or of intrinsic nature. The reason for this is that all material phenomena are dependently arisen. Every material phenomenon is dependent in three important senses: dependent upon causes and conditions for its existence; dependence on its parts and on the wholes in which it figures for its existence and identity; and dependent on conceptual imputation for its identity. The details of each of these kinds of dependence are developed extensively in many Madhyamaka texts.

> "Emptiness is form" means that the fact that form is empty does not entail that emptiness is the *reality* lying behind an illusory material world. Emptiness is no more intrinsically existent or substantial than matter. Emptiness, that is, is only the emptiness *of form*. No form, no emptiness of form. (*mutatis mutandis* for the other aggregates) Emptiness is hence also dependently arisen, dependent upon that of which it is the emptiness.

> "Emptiness is not other than form" means that if one spells out analytically what it is to be material form—a thing that comes into existence as a result of causes and conditions, that exists only dependently, only impermanently, that depends on its parts, etc. one has spelled out what it is to be empty. The relationship between emptiness—ultimate reality—and material form—standing in for conventional reality—is hence not accidental, but rather one of identity. To be conventionally real is to be empty.

> "Form is not other than emptiness" makes the converse point. Emptiness is not a mysterious self-existent void. To spell out what emptiness is—dependency on causes and conditions, impermanence, dependence on conceptual imputation, etc, is to spell out the nature of conventional reality. To be empty is to be conventionally real.

In the same sense, feeling, perception, dispositions and consciousness are also empty.

> Mutatis mutandis for the other aggregates.

In the same sense, Śāriputra, all phenomena are empty. They have no defining characteristics. They are unarisen; they are unceasing. They are neither diminishing nor increasing.

> The sūtra first emphasizes that this analysis in terms of the five aggregates is meant to be an analysis of all existents. Then a bit more detail. To be empty is to have no essence, or defining characteristic. Empty phenomena, despite their impermanence, cannot be understood as inherently arisen or ceasing. (Note the similar point that Nāgārjuna makes in the homage verses of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.)* That is, there is no fixed point at which a thing comes into existence when it did not exist before; conventional entities are

all merely moments in intersecting continua of causal processes; these continua do not disappear just because we stop positing an entity. Things are not inherently in saṃsāra or nirvāṇa; these depend on our relations to them. Emptiness neither makes things more real nor less real.

Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no dispositions, no consciousness;

> Now the cascade of negations. It is important that these are all negations—indeed all *external,* or *non-implicative* negations. The sūtra is emphasizing that when one realizes emptiness, one posits none of these things as existing inherently; nor does one posit anything *instead* of them. First the aggregates are summarized. We then turn to the six sense faculties. Buddhist theories of perception are presented in a classical Indian format in terms of agent, object and instrument. The six sense faculties (the five external senses and the introspective sense) are the agents; their respective objects, the objects; and the relevant kinds of awareness are the instruments by means of which the faculties apprehend the objects. Each is negated in turn.

No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind;

> These are the agents.

No visible object, no sound, no smell, no taste, no tactile sensation, no mental object;

> These are the objects.

No sensory awareness; no cognitive awareness; no object of cognitive awareness.

> These are the instruments of knowledge. At this point, then, the sūtra has concluded that the entire process of knowledge, or the basis of wisdom, is empty of inherent existence (and therefore, merely conventionally existent, but not illusory). One might think that this means that ignorance (the root of suffering and saṃsāra) is therefore inherently existent and therefore ineradicable, hence undermining the entire Buddhist path.

There is neither ignorance nor the end of ignorance; neither aging and death nor the end of aging and death.

> But no. Ignorance is also dependently originated, and hence is empty, and hence impermanent. Aging and death are the consequences of ignorance, impermanence in its aspect of suffering. Aging and death are empty, but this does not mean that they are illusory and that their cessation—nirvāṇa—is intrinsically real. It, too, is empty, and is fundamentally no different from that of which it is the cessation. Nāgārjuna returns to this point in chapter 25 of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.*

In the same sense, there is no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation and no path;

> Not even the four noble truths, the foundation of all Buddhist doctrine are non-empty. This line is perhaps the inspiration for the central 24th chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* in which Nāgārjuna explains why the four noble truths must be understood in terms of emptiness, and why to do so is to understand the deep identity between conventional and ultimate truth, which is, after all, the central point of this sūtra.

No wisdom, and neither attainment nor lack of attainment.

> The very perfection of wisdom that is the subject of this sūtra—all of the insight it is intended to impart—is similarly empty. The ideas developed here are not in any way immune from this very analysis. Attaining an understanding of emptiness and the identity of emptiness and dependent origination is just as empty as the objects of that understanding; in that sense is it no different from no attainment at all.

Therefore, Śāriputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend upon and dwell in the perfection of wisdom; their minds are unobstructed and they are fearless. They transcend all error and finally reach their goal—nirvana.

> Insight into emptiness, when it is not reified, when emptiness and insight into it are themselves apprehended as empty, and that emptiness is apprehended as empty… removes the obstruction to knowledge and to action, as that obstructions is the superimposition of inherent existence on empty phenomena.

> The mention of fearlessness here is intriguing. Recall that Avalokiteśvara is the speaker here, and is that he is the bodhisattva of compassion, and so connected directly to Buddhist ethics. In Buddhist moral theory and phenomenology, unawakened life is characterized as permeated by fear. This is represented graphically in the "Wheel of Life" that is depicted at the entrance of every Tibetan temple, in which the entire universe of transmigration, all of life, is held in the jaws of death. The subliminal awareness of our own impermanence (represented by the peripheral location of death in the image) generates a primal fear that leads us to grasp, to try to take ourselves as permanent, as selves, and to apprehend everything else in relation to our perceived interests, generating the whole mass of suffering. Practice, as Śāntideva explains so clearly in *Bodhicāryaavatāra,* is motivated by this fear. Insight into emptiness, he also emphasizes, is necessary to relieve that fear, and to enable awakened action motivated by genuine compassion. Compassion is in turn needed for full awakening and for the cessation of suffering. This text is hence really about ethics, as well as emptiness, which is not surprising, given that from the Mahāyāna perspective, they are interfused.

Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is a mantra of great knowledge; it is an unsurpassable mantra; it is an incomparable mantra; it is a mantra that totally eliminates all suffering. It is non-deceptive. Therefore, you should know that it is true. Here is the mantra of the perfection of wisdom:

> As noted above, mantras are characteristic of Chinese sūtras, given the Chinese fascination with tantra, but are absent from other Indian *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras. A mantra is a set of sounds which, when repeated, is thought to directly and non-conceptually transform the mind, bringing it to the state that would arise from extended study more rapidly and directly, sort of like psychosurgery as a substitute for studying.

Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasamgate, bodhi svāhā.

(Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, awakened existence.)

> Gone to practice, gone to wisdom, gone beyond conceptual thought, gone beyond all of conventional reality, to buddhahood.

Śāriputra, this is how the great bodhisattvas train in the profound perfection of wisdom.

Avalokiteśvara concludes his explanation.

Then the Lord arose from his meditation and said to the noble Avalokiteśvara, "Well said! Well said! That is just how it is, my son; that is just how it is. The profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced exactly as you have explained it. The tathāgatas are truly delighted."

The Buddha approves of all of this, hence, once again, validating this text as *Buddhavaccana,* as the speech of the Buddha.

When the Lord has spoken these words, the venerable Śāriputra and the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteśvara and the entire assembly of divinities, humans great beings and gandharvas were happy, and they praised what the Lord had said.

Applause.