



## The Heart Sutra

The Heart Sutra, in its Japanese form (the *Hannya Shingyo*), is often chanted by Zen groups before and/or after a meditation sitting. It's ideal for this purpose because its concise length (less than 300 syllables) makes it easy to memorize, while still capturing the essential elements of Buddhist teaching. It isn't necessary to understand the words of the *Hannya Shingyo* in order to derive benefit from it, simply allowing yourself to become absorbed in the act of chanting. However, it's possible to add another dimension to the experience with even a basic understanding of the words themselves, and that's the purpose of this page.

To understand any Buddhist text, it's useful to know how it fits into the cultural development of Buddhism. This applies both to the language and the content of the text. The earliest existing Buddhist writings are in the Pali language, in the form of *suttas*, or discourses of the Buddha. Slightly later come the *Abhidhamma* texts (also in Pali), which are a more systematic and theoretical presentation of the same ideas. Both the *suttas* and the *Abhidhamma* are full of lists, partly to aid memorization and partly to emphasize the central Buddhist doctrine of non-self (i.e. by analyzing long lists of items you can say "the Self is not found there, or there, or there..."). Some of these lists feature in the *Hannya Shingyo*.

Later developments of Buddhism (referred to as the Mahayana) were produced in the Sanskrit language. For example the Heart Sutra was originally written in Sanskrit (as the *Maha Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra* - "Great Wisdom-perfection Heart Sutra"). In the Mahayana writings, the doctrine of non-self is referred to as *sunyata*, or emptiness (i.e. "all things are empty of Self"). This is such a big and challenging idea that the Sanskrit texts move away from the literal, reductionist approach of Pali toward less logical, more contradictory language designed to break down in-bred preconceptions about the nature of the world (a trend which was later taken still further in the Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen traditions). It's fair to say that Mahayana Buddhist writings are much harder to understand than the earlier Pali ones.

When Buddhist teachings arrived in China, the Sanskrit texts were translated into Chinese. Most words were translated literally (e.g. *hridaya*, Sanskrit for "heart", became *xin*, Chinese for "heart"). A few very technical terms were represented phonetically - i.e. as a string of Chinese characters which sounded similar to the Sanskrit word (*Prajnaparamita* is an example of a Sanskrit word the Chinese translated phonetically rather than literally).

Japanese characters (kanji) are identical in form and meaning to the Chinese, but they are pronounced differently. It is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese version of the Heart Sutra that is chanted in Zen groups. This is written out below. Pronunciation is essentially the same as English, but with short vowel sounds (e.g. "MI" is pronounced like a shorter version of "me", not like "my"). Underlined vowels are doubled in length. In many cases the same pronunciation is used for more than one character (e.g. the characters for "heart", "body" and "true" are all pronounced SHIN). To make it clear which is meant, I've used numbered subscripts (e.g. SHIN<sub>1</sub>, SHIN<sub>2</sub>, SHIN<sub>3</sub>). I've also color-coded the words as follows:

**RED**..... phonetic representation of Sanskrit;

**GREEN**... proper names ("translated" from Sanskrit);

**BLUE**..... Buddhist technical terms translated from Sanskrit (explained further below);

**GRAY**... ordinary words with their regular meanings.

A word-by-word English translation is given in the right-hand column. For the technical terms, rather than giving a literal translation of the Japanese, I've used the corresponding word that is most commonly found in English texts on Buddhism. The superscripts in the English version refer to the notes after the text, which explain some of the technical terms - hopefully making the meaning a bit clearer. Finally, I've provided a few links to other web pages that have information on the Heart Sutra.

KAN-JI <sub>1</sub> -ZAI BO-SA GYO <sub>2</sub> JIN <sub>1</sub> HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA-HA-RA-MI <sub>1</sub> -TA <sub>1</sub>	Avalokita bodhisattva <sup>2</sup> practices deep prajnaparamita
JI <sub>2</sub> SHO <sub>1</sub> KEN GO UN KAI <sub>1</sub> KU DO I <sub>1</sub> SAI KU <sub>1</sub> YAKU <sub>1</sub>	then clearly sees five skandhas <sup>3</sup> all empty of everything suffering [and] hardship.
SHA-RI <sub>1</sub> -SHI <sub>1</sub> SHIKI <sub>1</sub> FU <sub>1</sub> I <sub>2</sub> KU KU FU <sub>1</sub> I <sub>2</sub> SHIKI <sub>1</sub>	Sariputra <sup>4</sup> , form not different emptiness, emptiness not different form;
SHIKI <sub>1</sub> SOKU <sub>1</sub> ZE <sub>1</sub> KU KU SOKU <sub>1</sub> ZE <sub>1</sub> SHIKI <sub>1</sub>	form then is emptiness, emptiness then is form.
JU SO <sub>1</sub> GYO <sub>2</sub> SHIKI <sub>2</sub> YAKU <sub>2</sub> BU NYO ZE <sub>1</sub>	Feeling, perception, volition, consciousness <sup>3</sup> also again [the] same are.
SHA-RI <sub>1</sub> -SHI <sub>1</sub> ZE <sub>1</sub> SHO <sub>1</sub> HO KU SO <sub>1</sub>	Sariputra, are all dharmas <sup>5</sup> empty appearances:
FU <sub>1</sub> SHO <sub>2</sub> FU <sub>1</sub> METSU FU <sub>1</sub> KU <sub>2</sub> FU <sub>1</sub> JO <sub>1</sub> FU <sub>1</sub> ZO FU <sub>1</sub> GEN <sub>1</sub>	not born, not destroyed, not dirty, not clean, not increasing, not decreasing. <sup>6</sup>
ZE <sub>1</sub> KO <sub>1</sub> KU CHU MU SHIKI <sub>1</sub> MU JU SO <sub>1</sub> GYO <sub>2</sub> SHIKI <sub>2</sub>	Is therefore emptiness amid no form, no feeling, perception, volition, consciousness;
MU GEN <sub>2</sub> NI BI ZE <sub>2</sub> SHIN <sub>2</sub> I <sub>3</sub>	no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;
MU SHIKI <sub>1</sub> SHO <sub>3</sub> KO MI <sub>2</sub> SOKU <sub>2</sub> HO	no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, dharma <sup>5</sup> ;
MU GEN <sub>2</sub> KAI <sub>2</sub> NAI SHI <sub>2</sub> MU I <sub>3</sub> SHIKI <sub>2</sub> KAI <sub>2</sub>	no eye-element etc. until no mind-consciousness-element <sup>7</sup> ;
MU MU MYO YAKU <sub>2</sub> MU MU MYO JIN <sub>2</sub>	no ignorance <sup>8</sup> , also no ignorance end;
NAI SHI <sub>2</sub> MU RO SHI <sub>3</sub> YAKU <sub>2</sub> MU RO SHI JIN <sub>2</sub>	etc. until no aging [and] death <sup>8</sup> , also no aging [and] death end;
MU KU <sub>1</sub> SHU METSU DO <sub>1</sub>	no suffering, origin, cessation, path <sup>9</sup> ;
MU CHI YAKU <sub>2</sub> MU TOKU	no knowledge <sup>10</sup> , also no attainment <sup>11</sup> .
I <sub>4</sub> MU SHO <sub>2</sub> TOKU KO <sub>1</sub> BO-DAI <sub>1</sub> -SA-TA <sub>2</sub> E HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA-HA-RA-MI <sub>1</sub> -TA <sub>1</sub>	Because nothing that attains, therefore bodhisattva follows prajnaparamita.
KO <sub>1</sub> SHIN <sub>1</sub> MU KEI GE	Therefore heart [has] no mental hindrances <sup>12</sup> .
MU KEI GE KO <sub>1</sub> MU U KU <sub>3</sub> FU <sub>2</sub>	No mental hindrances, therefore no exist fear [and] fright.
ON RI <sub>2</sub> I <sub>1</sub> SAI TEN DO <sub>2</sub> MU SO <sub>1</sub> KU <sub>4</sub> GYO <sub>3</sub> NE-HAN <sub>2</sub>	Far apart everything confused inverted dream thoughts ultimate end Nirvana.
SAN ZE <sub>3</sub> SHO <sub>1</sub> BUTSU E HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA-HA-RA-MI <sub>1</sub> -TA <sub>1</sub>	[In] three worlds <sup>13</sup> all Buddhas follow prajnaparamita,
KO <sub>1</sub> TOKU A-NOKU-TA <sub>1</sub> -RA SAN-MYAKU-SAN-BO-DAI <sub>1</sub>	therefore attain anuttara samyaksambodhi <sup>14</sup> .
KO <sub>1</sub> CHI HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA-HA-RA-MI <sub>1</sub> -TA <sub>1</sub>	Therefore know prajnaparamita
ZE <sub>1</sub> DAI <sub>2</sub> JIN <sub>3</sub> SHU ZE <sub>1</sub> DAI <sub>2</sub> MYO SHU	is great divine mantra, is great bright mantra,
ZE <sub>1</sub> MU JO <sub>2</sub> SHU ZE <sub>1</sub> MU TO DO <sub>3</sub> SHU	is no higher mantra, is no equal equal mantra,
NO JO I <sub>1</sub> SAI KU <sub>1</sub>	able [to] remove everything suffering.
SHIN <sub>3</sub> JITSU FU <sub>1</sub> KO <sub>2</sub>	[It is] true [and] real, not false.
KO <sub>1</sub> SETSU HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA-HA-RA-MI <sub>1</sub> -TA <sub>1</sub> SHU SOKU <sub>1</sub> SETSU SHU WATSU	Therefore speak prajnaparamita mantra, then speak mantra, saying:
GYA-TEI GYA-TEI HA-RA-GYA-TEI HA-RA-SO <sub>3</sub> -GYA-TEI BO-JI <sub>3</sub> SO-WA-KA	Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha! <sup>15</sup>
HAN <sub>1</sub> -NYA SHIN <sub>1</sub> GYO <sub>1</sub>	Prajna Heart Sutra.

## Notes

Depending on whether they come from Mahayana or Abhidhamma sources, I've used technical terms derived from both Sanskrit (color-coded in red on first occurrence) and Pali (blue) in these notes.

(1) **Prajnaparamita**, usually translated as "Perfection of Wisdom", is the name given to a body of Mahayana literature to which the Heart Sutra belongs.

(2) **Bodhisattvas** are mythical enlightened beings referred to in Mahayana literature. They're not supposed to be real beings (as the historical Buddha was) - rather they're idealized concepts to aid in the teaching and understanding of Buddhism. **Avalokita** is the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

(3) In the introduction I mentioned that the early Buddhists were fond of creating lists. One reason for such lists is to break things down into their component parts, in order to demonstrate that none of these component parts contains a "Self". The five **skandhas** (form, feeling, perception, volition, consciousness) constitute the first such list we encounter in the Heart Sutra. Avalokita's insistence that these skandhas are "empty" is an intensification of the concept of non-self.

(4) **Sariputra** was a disciple of the historical Buddha, and probably really existed. He is traditionally believed to have originated the Abhidhamma method (the highly theoretical and analytic approach to Buddhism referred to in the introduction), and it is to him that Avalokita is supposed to be addressing this sutra (i.e. discourse).

(5) Most people will have come across the word **Dharma** as a synonym for the teaching of the Buddha. However, the word literally means "law", and in Buddhist writing its meaning is even wider than that. The two occurrences of *dharma* in the Heart Sutra mean something like "any phenomena that can be perceived or conceived by the mind".

(6) In his book on the Heart Sutra (see reference below), Edward Conze relates this phrase ("not born, not destroyed, not dirty, not clean, not increasing, not decreasing") to the three marks, or three signs of Being - **anicca** (impermanence), **dukkha** (suffering), **anatta** (non-self). This is another of the lists that was common in the very earliest forms of Buddhism.

(7) The Abhidhamma defines a list of 18 elements (**dhatu**), of which the eye-element is first and mind-consciousness-element is last. The phrase "etc until" is used in the Heart Sutra because the list is assumed to be familiar to the reader (this point is easily missed by Western Buddhists - later writings such as the Prajnaparamita and Zen are intended to build on the foundations of earlier texts, not replace them).

(8) Ignorance (**avijja**) and aging-and-death (**jaramarana**) are the first and last links in the twelve-link chain of dependent arising (**paticca samuppada**). This shows how all things arise by cause-and-effect dependent upon things that have gone before.

(9) Suffering (**dukkha** again), the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering are the Four Noble Truths - probably the most famous list in all of Buddhism.

(10) The Sanskrit word **jnana** is usually translated "knowledge", although its meaning is more akin to the English word "wisdom" (though this is normally reserved for **prajna**). It refers to the knowledge/wisdom to be gained in the higher stages of the Buddhist Path, by enlightened beings such as Bodhisattvas.

(11) "Attainment" (**prapti**), as used here, refers to attainment of the higher levels of the Bodhisattva's path - not to more materialistic achievements.

Up to this point, the Sutra has been through a number of lists and concepts taken from the heart of traditional Buddhist teaching, and either denied their existence, or equated them to emptiness. At first sight this may seem blasphemous, iconoclastic, cynical or irrational. Actually it's none of these - the sutra is merely reiterating the traditional teaching (albeit in stronger terms), not contradicting it. The Buddha's teaching is an artificially constructed means to an end, not an end in itself (the Buddha likened it to a raft one might use to get from one bank of a river to the other shore). Concepts like the Four Noble Truths are enormously useful learning aids so long as they are recognised as concepts - but like all concepts they become dangerous "wrong views" if we start believing in their ultimate reality. The aim of the Heart Sutra (and all Buddhist teaching) is to try to stop us projecting our own reality, meanings and expectations onto the world around us.

(12) "Mental hindrances" (**citta-avarana**) is a technical term relating to the obstacles that a Bodhisattva has to overcome to attain the highest stages of the Path. The last hindrances to be overcome are the "wrong views" (i.e. fondly-held beliefs) that the preceding sections of the Heart Sutra have sought to overcome.

(13) According to Conze, the phrase "three worlds" refers to past, present and future.

(14) **Anuttara samyaksambodhi** is a Sanskrit phrase meaning "utmost, right and perfect enlightenment" (another term for **nirvana**).

(15) After an impressive build-up, we finally come to the mantra itself: **Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi**

**svaha!**, meaning something like "Go, go, go beyond, go far beyond - awaken - Hail!"

Back in the first paragraph of the introduction, I said the benefit of the Heart Sutra could be obtained by chanting it. And ultimately that's its message - losing yourself in chanting the mantra is a way to the perfection of wisdom.

## References

### Books

- *Buddhist Wisdom* by Edward Conze, Vintage Books (2001)
- *An Introduction to Buddhism* by Peter Harvey, Cambridge University Press (1990)
- *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikku Bodhi, Buddhist Publication Society (1993)

### The Heart Sutra on the web

- [Heart Sutra Home Page](#)
- [BuddhaNet Heart Sutra page](#)
- [Glasgow Zen Group Heart Sutra page](#)
- [A nice version in Chinese characters and pinyin transliteration](#)
- [A Japanese version with Kanji characters and romaji transliteration](#)

### Other links

- For more general Buddhist links, see my [main links page](#)

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