



Unravelling Mantra's Meaning in The Heart of Wisdom Sutra¹

by Arya Shri Simha

Homage to blessed Vairocana and the buddhas.

Homage to the two mothers.²

Homage to the sangha, the supreme assembly.

In all of you, I take refuge! So that beings may be lovingly cared for;

And never cut off from compassion,

I will extract from the sutra of the three transmissions³

The Secret Mantra meaning.

I will explain it to those with excellence and fortune,

And withhold it from those who cling to logic.

The sutra's opening phrase, "**thus have I heard at one time,**" addresses the chronological background of the teaching. The phrase reveals that the teaching took place at this particular point and no other and that the teaching is not an expression of personal, immediate cognition, but that it was **heard** from someone else. This phrase also suggests that the compiler was well-practiced in listening and memorization. "**Time**" here alludes to the particular time when the Buddha's main disciples had assembled. Specifically, the phrase "**at one time**" emphasizes that the teaching was not given many times or spread over several occasions. It was given once, at this **one time**, when all the main disciples were present. "**Blessed One**" is an epithet for our teacher. Generally, **Blessed One**⁴ means one who has conquered the four maras or demons, holds the six perfections, and has transcended all wrong understandings. On a deeper level, **Blessed One** signifies the conquest of all appearance and existence, such as the five aggregates, within the state of the deity. In understanding the nature of reality, the Blessed One has transcended all objects of fixation. Ultimately, **Blessed One** means the effortless conquest of all phenomena of samsara and nirvana, within their essential nature. Such a one thereby holds the great self-knowing wisdom. Since this wisdom has no essential existence, the **Blessed One** has transcended all confines of dualistic perception, reaching the point where even the notions 'samsara' and 'nirvana' do not remain.

The phrase, "**in Rajgriha at Vulture Peak mountain**" indicates the specific place in which the teaching was given. The outer site of the teaching was **Vulture Peak**, resembling a mountain of jewels, within **Rajgriha**, the eastern part of Magadha, the domain of the King Bimbisara. It is said that all buddhas reside on this

circular, stupa-shaped **mountain**, and thus it is most exalted among all mountains. The inner site of the teaching is Akanishta—Above All—so called because it has not fallen under the sway of form, characteristics, or fixation. The secret site of the teaching is awareness itself, the heart of the awakened mind, the site wherein the entirety of samsara and nirvana is contained.

The phrase, “**together with a great community of monks and a great community of bodhisattvas**” describes the retinue present at the time of the teaching. The outer retinue are: **monks** who aspire and have interest, and thus abide in virtuous qualities; a **great community** of beings who observe meditation, maintain the view and are bodhisattva aspirants; and **bodhisattvas** who have the power to benefit others. All these as well as others are gathered together, forming a single retinue. The inner retinue are a sambhogakaya beings, such as the buddhas of the five families. The secret retinue is the indivisible essence of self-knowing wisdom. The Dharma should be taught in such a situation. The Dharma, likewise, can be divided into outer, inner, and secret. The outer Dharma is the Dharma to be trained in, such as the ten virtuous deeds. The inner Dharma is the Dharma of the Mahayana. The secret Dharma is the wisdom that is awareness. “**At that time, the Blessed One entered an absorption on categories of phenomena called ‘perception of the profound.’**” This means that **at that time**, when the five excellences⁵ were present and when it was time for maturing the retinue, **the Blessed One remained** without conceptual focus in **an absorption on categories of phenomena**—i.e., the outer, inner and secret phenomena. He thereby perceived **the profound** meaning, the non-existence of real phenomena, in other words profound emptiness. The outer **absorption** is supported by concrete things, the inner is devoid of entities, and the secret makes no such distinctions.

The text continues: “**At the same time, noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being, beheld the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom, and saw that the five aggregates are empty of nature...**” As our teacher remained within the disengaged state of dharmata, Avalokiteshvara—the foremost amongst his retinue—also came to rest in that same state. On the outer level, **bodhisattva** refers to someone who is on the stages of trainings; inwardly, it refers to someone who is on the ten bhumis. Secretly, it refers to the heart-essence itself. The one who embodies these three levels is called **great being**. Alternatively, we can understand **bodhisattva** to refer to mastery for one’s own benefit, and **great being** to mastery for the benefit of others.

Generally, **noble** refers to one who has risen high above the afflictions and the mire of samsara. On a deeper level, it refers to the sambhogakaya retinue. Ultimately, it refers to the essence of awareness, the dharmakaya.

Avalokiteshvara, or ‘**the lord who sees**,’ has realized the ultimate meaning for his own benefit. He now **gazes** (**avalokita**) upon others to enact their benefit

which shows that he is able to teach disciples of whatever inclination. He is therefore the **lord (ishvara)** of both self and other, or of samsara and nirvana. This is the meaning of his name.

Through **insight** into the scriptures, one can teach the ways of samsara and nirvana, and through **insight** into reasoning one resolves their ultimate meaning. Through **insight** beyond reference, one makes no distinctions whatsoever, anywhere at all, and so one has **gone beyond** samsara. One has also **gone beyond** the freedom from suffering that is nirvana, and so compassion naturally bursts forth. This perfection of wisdom or 'insight gone beyond' is **profound** because its essence cannot be shown as anything at all, it is difficult to teach, and it transcends causes and conditions. **Practice** is the comprehension of this meaning. And so, the practice is **looking** at reality, again and again, without conceptually focusing on anything.

The object to be looked at are the **aggregates** determined as **five** in number. On a general level, **the five aggregates** are form, sensation, recognition, conditioning factors and consciousness. On a deeper level **the five aggregates** are the buddhas of the five families; and, the five qualities of the five aggregates are the five unsurpassable wisdoms. Thus, **the five aggregates** are pure in essence. Intellectually contemplating the **aggregates** as pure is the way of those in training, naturally seeing them as pure is the realization of the meaning.

The true meaning here to be understood is the **empty** quality of reality. This is not dependent emptiness, which is the absence of one thing in another. The emptiness of non-existence is like the essence of awareness and so on; the emptiness brought about by fourfold destruction is the subtlest particle of matter; and natural emptiness is the essential meaning, the absence of any real entity or conceptual focus. Of these, the wisdom beyond conceptual reference is the meaning of **seeing**. Now comes the question that Shariputra puts to Avalokiteshvara: "**Then, through the Buddha's power, venerable Shariputra said to noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being: 'How should a child of noble family who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom train?'**" The text specifies "through the power of the Buddha" because it is **through the Buddha** Shakyamuni's **power** that Avalokiteshvara was liberated and that Shariputra gained the courage to ask his question. Shariputra is **venerable** or 'youthful' because he has attained the ever-youthful deathless state, free from birth and death. **Child of noble family** refers to someone who has completely abandoned any other family or status and joined the family of Buddha Shakyamuni. The reason why he asked this question is to benefit sentient beings.

The question asked is this: If a son or daughter **of noble family** who aspires to the Mahayana **wishes to practice the profound** meaning of the **perfection of wisdom** of the unobservable, just like Avalokiteshvara, how should they **train**, and what methods should they use?

Then, “**the noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being, replied to venerable Shariputra as follows**” and thus began the teaching: “**O Shariputra, a son of noble family or daughter of noble family who wishes to practise the profound perfection of wisdom should regard things in this way**” In other words, “aspirants belonging to the Mahayana family, be they male or female, who wish to follow my example and practice wisdom beyond reference, should train in this way...” “**They should see the five aggregates to be empty of nature.**” “Since **the five ordinary aggregates** and so forth have always been primordially empty, they should be viewed as **empty of nature**, just as I, Avalokiteshvara, view them!” Avalokiteshvara said this to inspire faith and trust. Next, the phrase, “**form is emptiness**” identifies the essence of **form** as the nature of emptiness. “**Emptiness is form**” means that, through the unceasing quality of awareness, **emptiness** itself appears as though it were also form. “**Form is not other than emptiness**” indicates that, apart from this empty form, there is no other phenomena belonging to either samsara or nirvana that could possibly appear. There is no appearance of **form** other than as the unceasing quality of **emptiness**.

The text now makes explicit mention of the other aggregates. Just as form abides as described above, so should **sensation, recognition, conditioning factors and consciousness** be understood to abide.

The text continues with the phrase, “**Therefore, Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness.**” It is being explained to Shariputra that since, as with form, everything in samsara is emptiness and lacks concrete existence, it follows that **all phenomena** of nirvana are also naturally **emptiness**. The meaning of this emptiness is explained as being without **characteristics** of either form or emptiness; as being **unproduced** by any cause or condition. Its essential quality is being **unimpeded** by anything. It is utterly **untainted** by anything whatsoever. From the very beginning it has never fallen prey to fixation on either subject or object. It is also **not tainted**. This essential meaning can never be **decreased** by conditions and it can likewise never be **increased** by any causes whatsoever. “**Therefore, Shariputra,**” there is nothing to be practiced or mastered apart from this emptiness that is to be observed. Since **form** itself is **emptiness**, so too **sensation, recognition, conditioning factors and consciousness** are all non-dual. Likewise, the five sense faculties—**eye, ear, nose, tongue, body**—the five perceptual processes, and their five objects—**visible form, sound, odour, taste, and texture**—are all nowhere to be found. From the **eye element up to the mental consciousness element**, all are without distinction.

In the same way, within this essential meaning there is **no ignorance** and therefore no cause for the **extinction of ignorance**. Within this empty essence there is **no old age** or **death**, and therefore no exhaustion of the interdependent

links of birth, old age, sickness, and death. Likewise, there is **no suffering** forged by the five poisons and **no origin** of the state of thorough affliction.⁶ Thus, there is **no cessation** of suffering into bliss. Furthermore, as there are no entities of samsara to be practiced, **neither** is there **a path** leading to nirvana; nor are there any paths and bhumis to be trained in or traversed.

There are **no** conventional five **wisdoms**, for there is **no attainment** other than this essential meaning. Since the five wisdoms have always been present within and of themselves, there is also no reason for **non-attainment**.

“Therefore, Shariputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainment, they rely on and abide by the perfection of wisdom.” Here, Shariputra is told that, since there is no cause of attainment other than the path, there is also **no attainment** other than the fruition. Thus, since the **perfection of wisdom** is beyond reference it is called “the complete dharma of the essence.” The result, then, is to **rely on and abide by** exactly this! **“Since their minds are unobscured, they have no fear. They completely transcend error and reach the ultimate nirvana.”**

This indicates that the true fruition abides in and of itself, there is nothing apart from this. Thus, there are **no obscuring** factors in the **mind** and, since there is nothing to be attained elsewhere, there is also **no fear** because of doubts. All **false** modes of knowing are **transcended**, all the fixated cognition of samsara is gone and, thus **nirvana**, the state of **complete** buddhahood, is **attained**.

“All the buddhas throughout the three times fully awaken to unsurpassable, true, complete enlightenment by means of the perfection of wisdom.” In these terms, Avalokiteshvara lays forth the single cause of fruition, for it is not the case that attainment is uncaused. The **buddhas** of the past, future, and present rely upon the unobservable; they have no object other than the **unsurpassable** state of all the buddhas. They have perfected the **true** teaching and so forth; reached **enlightenment** by purifying the obscurations to omniscience, the personal benefit, and comprehending the essential meaning, the benefit of others; and **fully awaken** within themselves the manifestation of all good qualities.

Then comes the declaration, “Shariputra, **therefore, the great mantra of the perfection of wisdom,**” indicating that there is no cause for attainment apart from this one object of focus, this single means of practice, and this final fruition. This is the supreme **wisdom** that has crossed from samsara to the other shore. And, this wisdom is called **“the mantra”**; it has five qualities. This wisdom is called “mantra” since it is self-abiding and does not depend on anything else. The mantra’s five qualities are: 1) Since it knows itself by itself, it is **the mantra of great insight**. 2) Since it cannot be recited to others, it is **unsurpassed**. 3) Since it cannot be established as any entity whatsoever, it is **unequal** to all characteristics; and since the essence of all characteristics are its qualities, it is

equal to the nature of the inseparable essence. 4) When this heart-essence is realized, it will completely **pacify all sufferings** resulting from mistaken conceptions. 5) Since the mantra's meaning abides beyond reference, it is **undeceiving** and **should** accordingly **be known as the truth**, the very heart-essence.

Thereupon, Avalokiteshvara **proclaimed this mantra** which encompasses the totality of **the perfection of wisdom**. **Tadyatha** means "it is like this," indicating that all things of samsara and nirvana are the same in essence: they are the same in being unobservable, they are the same in being indivisible, and they have the same unchanging nature.

Om means that whatever appears as the five poisons within the perception of samsara, and all that appears as the five buddhas of the five families at the time of fruition, appears only to a mistaken mind and cannot be perceived in reality.

Gate gate.⁷ In realizing that wisdom does not abide anywhere else, one has gone —**gate**—to the other shore and reached fruition for one's own benefit. One has likewise also traversed the bhumi—**gate**—for the benefit of others.

Paragate⁸ means that one has reached the highest possible goal for one's own benefit and there is nothing to hope for elsewhere.

Parasamgate⁹ means that the highest and most exalted benefit of others has been perfected, arising from the compassion focusing on sentient beings. One who has reached perfection in this will manifest as a nirmanakaya to those who have purified their karma, and as a sambhogakaya to those who are of pure nature.

Bodhi is the quality of unceasing compassion, appearing as the meaning of the perfection of wisdom to beings.

Svaha means that minds are naturally liberated. That is to say, they are liberated by their very nature. There is nothing else to seek, no essential instruction other than this.

Therefore, there comes the instruction: "**Shariputra,**" all of you "**should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in this way.**"¹⁰ **Thereupon, the Blessed One arose from that absorption and commended Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being: 'Excellent!'**" Thus we understand that, as soon as Avalokiteshvara has finished giving the teaching to Shariputra, the Blessed One emerged from the absorption through which he has ripened the assembly and caused the teaching to unfold. He commended Avalokiteshvara, saying "Since your teaching is the unmistakable sacred Dharma that I have taught, it is **excellent!** This teaching is **excellent indeed, O son of noble family,** since it is the goal for oneself and also the goal for others. My teaching that the ground, path and

fruition are naturally present is this! noble Avalokiteshvara, **just as you have taught** to Shariputra, **sentient beings should practice the profound perfection of wisdom**, the primordial wisdom that is inherently present within us.” These are the words directly spoken by the Blessed One.

The next phrase, “**And, then even the tathagatas will rejoice,**” indicates that, since the words directly spoken by the Blessed One and the blessed words spoken by Avalokiteshvara are in accordance, all the **tathagatas rejoiced** in this harmonious teaching. “**When the Blessed One had said this, venerable Shariputra, and noble Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva and great being, together with the whole assembly and the world of gods, human beings, asuras and gandharvas rejoiced.**” This description evokes the joy and delight of the entire assembly in the meaning of these harmonious words of Dharma, spoken by the Buddha and his representative noble Avalokiteshvara. In conclusion, all those gathered there—the four retinues, sublime Indra, king of the gods, Vemacitra, king of the asuras, Pancashikha, king of the gandharvas and so on—all offered their **praise**.

This concludes the commentary by Shri Simha, which is frugal in words and profound in meaning, and which, like the brightest of lamps, revealed to Vairotsana the Secret Mantra meaning of the Heart of Wisdom Sutra. Acharya Vairotsana later taught this commentary to King Trisong Detsen and his son, at a time when arrogance had arisen in their minds regarding the practice of the dharma of characteristics.¹⁰



Translation Origin

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Tibetan Source

Toh. 4353: sher snying 'grel pa sngags su 'grel pa, sna tshogs, co 203b7–209b7.

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Lopez, Donald S. 1996. “The Commentaries of Kamalashila and Shrisimha.” In Donald S. Lopez (ed.) *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 105–115.

1 The term mantra here refers to the scriptures of the tantra. Accordingly, this commentary is an explanation of the Heart Sutra's tantric meaning.

2 It appears that the two mothers are the Prajñāparamita, the female deity who is the embodiment of transcendent wisdom, and the Dharma.

3 This implies that this sutra holds the blessing of the three types of sūtras: 1. sutras spoken directly by the Buddha (zhal nas gsungs pa'i bka'), 2. sutras spoken through the blessing of the Buddha (byin gyis brlabs pa'i bka'), and 3. sutras spoken through mandate (rjes su gnang ba'i bka').

4 Here the author explains the meaning of Blessed One (bhagavat, bcom ldan 'das) by giving an explanation of the individual syllables of the term. For this, the commentary follows the Tibetan order of the syllables and the common Tibetan understanding of the term – as found, for example, in the Two-Volume Lexicon (sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa). Accordingly, the commentary explains 'Blessed One' as one who conquers (bcom), possesses (ldan) and transcends ('das).

5 The five excellences are the perfect time, place, teacher, retinue and teaching, as explained above.

6 Thorough affliction (samklišhta; kun nas nyon mongs) refers to the state of being dominated by the primary and secondary destructive emotions, which is another way of describing samsara.

7 Lit. "gone, gone"

8 Lit. "gone beyond"

9 Lit. "completely gone beyond"

10 Lopez (1996: 115, fn. 16) has pointed out that the Tibetan term mtshan ma'i chos spyod pa, here translated as 'the dharma of characteristics,' could also be a reference to Vairotsana giving this teaching at night (mtshan ma) in secrecy.