The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries

Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

Printed in the United States of America

For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lopez, Jr., Donald S., 1952-
The Heart Sutra explained.

(SUNY series in Buddhist studies)
Bibliography: p. 215
Includes index.
1. Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapiṭaka. Prajñāpāramitā. Hṛdaya
—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title. II. Series.
BQ1967.L67 1987 294.3'85 87-6479
ISBN 0-88706-589-9
ISBN 9-88706-590-2 (pbk.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

The *Heart Sūtra* is perhaps the most famous Buddhist scripture.[1] Its cryptic delineation of the meaning of emptiness and its radical economy of expression have exercised a fascination over the minds of Buddhist thinkers in India, China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and Central Asia. Over seventy manuscripts of the sūtra were unearthed at Tun-huang. The *Heart Sūtra* has evoked commentaries from many of the pivotal figures in the history of Buddhist thought, including Kamalaśīla, Atiśa, Fa-tsang, K'uei-chi, Kūkai, and Hakuin Zenji.

The *Heart Sūtra* exists in two versions, the more extensive adding a prologue and epilogue to the briefer form. But even in its extensive version, the *Heart Sūtra* is the shortest of the major Buddhist sūtras, and this brevity accounts in part for its great popularity. The players are few and formidable: Śākyamuni Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Śāriputra, with Prajñāpāramitā, the mother of the Buddhas, silently present. As with so many sūtras, the structure is one of question and answer, but here only one question is asked, "How does one practice the perfection of wisdom?" Avalokiteśvara's answer, given first in one sentence and then expanded, contains references to all the major categories of Buddhist philosophy, proclaiming that they do not exist. Ingrained in his answer are the two most famous lines of this most famous of sūtras. The first is the potent and problematic declaration, "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form." The other is the mantra that culminates Avalokiteśvara's instruction, *"gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā"*. These two lines are considered at length in the chapters that follow.

The meaning of the *Heart Sūtra* has always seemed elusive to its readers, as is evident from widely divergent doctrines discovered in it by commentators. Speaking of some of the Chinese and Japanese commentaries, Edward Conze observed that "they tell us more what the text meant to them within their own culture than what the Indian original intended to convey."[2] It was Conze's view that this original meaning could be discovered in the seven Indian commentaries that remain extant in Tibetan translation (or at least six of them; he

disapproved of Vimalamitra's commentary).[3] It has been noted, however, that, "A text always has several epochs and reading must resign itself to that fact,"[4] so that the endeavor to determine "what the Indian original intended to convey" must always remain futile. Nevertheless, it is the Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* that concern us here.

One purpose of this study is to attempt to discern how the *Heart Sūtra* was variously understood during the Pāla Dynasty, which ruled Bengal from c. 750-1155 and Bihar from c. 750 until the Muslim invasions of 1199. It was during this period that Buddhist thought in India effectively came to an end. All of the seven extant Indian commentaries appear to have been composed during this period, the earliest probably being that of Kamalaśīla (c. 740-795) and the latest that of Mahājana (11th cent.). If Conze's dating of the *Heart Sūtra* at 350 C.E. is accepted, then these commentaries were written some five centuries after the sūtra. During these centuries the major Mahāyāna *śāstras* appeared that shaped the character of late Indian Buddhist thought: the works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, of Maitreyanātha, of Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti. This half-millennium also saw the rise of tantric Buddhism. The Indian commentators were writing in an epoch quite different from that of the author of the sūtra. Nonetheless, it was a time in which the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras continued to enjoy great popularity, as attested by the account of the reign of Pāla King Dharmapāla by the Tibetan historian Tāranātha:

> Upon ascending the throne, the king invited the teachers of the Prajñāpāramitā. . . . The king built some fifty centers for the doctrine, of which thirty-five were centers for the study of the Prajñāpāramitā. . . . From the time of this king, the Prajñāpāramitā was propagated widely.[5]

The authors of the commentaries were scholars who knew the Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras and, therefore, were well-versed in Mādhyamika and Yogācāra philosophy, in the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna *abhidharma*, in the delineations of meditative praxis that appear in works like the *Śrāvakabhūmi*, in the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrines, in the elaborate delineations of the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna paths as set forth in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and its commentaries, and in tantric thought. These are the contexts they bring to their understanding of the *Heart Sūtra* and which they project onto it.

The Place of the Heart Sūtra in the Prajñāpāramitā Literature

Edward Conze distinguished four periods in the development of the Prajñāpāramitā literature: (1) the elaboration of the basic text (ca. 100 B.C. to 100 C.E.), (2) the expansion of the text (ca. 100 C.E. to 300 C.E.), (3) the restatement of the doctrine in short sūtras and verse summaries (ca. 300-500), and (4) the period of tantric influence.[6] Conze placed the composition of the *Heart Sūtra* in the third period, at about 350 C.E., although others would date it two centuries earlier.[7] The "basic text" to which Conze refers is the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*), the oldest portions of which are generally considered to be among the earliest wisdom scriptures of the various movements in Indian Buddhism that came to be known as the Mahāyāna.[8] One view is that from this prototype there grew, through a process of interpolation, duplication, and iteration, the longer versions of the Prajñāpāramitā, such as those in 18,000, 25,000, and 100,000 lines. This was followed by a period of contraction and distillation, of which the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* are the best examples, although it is in the *Prajñāpāramitā sarvatathāgatamātā ekākṣarā* (*The Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter, the Mother of All Tathāgatas*, that letter being *a*) that the process of contraction seems to have reached its logical conclusion.

Traditional accounts of the rise of the Mahāyāna do not, of course, follow this chronology. All the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras were considered the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), either being actually spoken by Śākyamuni or the speaker being directly empowered by him (as is the case with the *Heart Sūtra*). Thus, the prologues of the sūtras report that the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras were set forth by the Buddha on Vulture Peak in what the gods in the *8000* declared to be the second turning of the wheel of the doctrine,[9] reinterpreting and superseding that delivered at the deer park in Sarnath. (The teaching of the second wheel was later held to be provisional by the Yogācārically inclined authors of the seventh chapter of the *Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra*, in which the third turning of the wheel is described.)[10] According to the Tibetan historian Bu-ston, the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras in 100,000, 25,000, 18,000, 10,000, and 8,000 lines were all spoken simultaneously by the Buddha.[11]

The authors of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras were sensitive to the charges made by the various Hīnayāna schools that these new sūtras were fabrications because no reference was made to them in the early councils in which the teachings of the Buddha were compiled. In response, it was claimed that the new sūtras had been taught by the Buddha to a

select group of disciples, their content being, at that time, inappropriate to a general audience. The sūtras were then placed into the hands of various deities and *nāgas* for safekeeping until the world was ready for their teaching. To prove that this was the Buddha's intention, prophecies were written into the new sūtras, such as that in the *Laṅkāvatāra*, where the Buddha proclaimed that four centuries after his passage into nirvāṇa, a monk named Nāgārjuna would reestablish the Mahāyāna.[12] And indeed, according to the traditional biographies of Nāgārjuna, he went to the land of nāgas from whence he retrieved the *100,000.*

The Structure of the Sūtra

The *Heart Sūtra* exists in two basic versions, a shorter and a longer, with the shorter beginning with Avalokiteśvara contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom and ending with the mantra and the longer adding a prologue, in which the Buddha enters into *samādhi*, and an epilogue, in which he rises from the samādhi and praises Avalokiteśvara. In that it is a distillation of the Prajñāpāramitā, there is little new in the *Heart Sūtra*; Conze has traced much of the shorter version to the sūtras in 8,000, 25,000, and 100,000 lines,[13] including the famous declaration that, "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form"; the negations, "in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling . . . no non-attainment"; and the epithets of the mantra.

The *Heart Sūtra*, however, cannot be considered simply as a pastiche. Its significance derives from the manner in which its components are woven together, as well as from what it retains, what it adds, and what it deletes from the formulae of the longer sūtras. These elements are most easily identified by briefly surveying the progression of the text (the longer version), a process repeated in far greater detail in the chapters that follow.

The prologue of the sūtra has two parts, a prologue common to other Prajñāpāramitā sūtras and a prologue unique to the *Heart Sūtra.* The former begins with the standard formula, "Thus did I hear at one time," and goes on to identify the site of the sūtra, Vulture Peak, and the audience, a great assembly of monks and of Bodhisattvas. The mention of Bodhisattvas in the audience provides some evidence of the lateness of the sūtra in relation to the longer texts, such as the *8000*, where the audience is composed of 1,250 monks, with no reference to

Bodhisattvas. It is in the unique prologue that the leading characters of the sūtra are introduced: Śākyamuni Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Śāriputra. The Buddha does not speak in the prologue, but enters into the samādhi called "perception of the profound." The Buddha says nothing until the epilogue, but rather silently empowers Śāriputra to ask and Avalokiteśvara to answer, illustrating a view of the Buddha characteristic of much of the Mahāyāna, a view classically portrayed in the *Lotus Sūtra:* the Buddha is no longer simply the teacher but is transformed into the principle of enlightenment, a silent, eternal, numinous presence, the *dharmakāya.*

Even in the earlier Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, much of the exposition is done not by the Buddha, but by the Elder Subhuti. But Subhuti is absent here, replaced by Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion. The *Heart Sūtra* is the only major Prajñāpāramitā text in which Avalokiteśvara appears.[14] His presence is another indication of the relatively late date of the sūtra, suggesting that the sūtra was written at a time when the cult of the Bodhisattva of compassion, textually associated with the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* and with the Pure Land sūtras, had become well-established. That Avalokiteśvara expounds the Perfection of Wisdom, rather than Subhuti, suggests also that by the time of the sūtra, the fissures between the movements calling themselves the Mahāyāna and more conservative elements had developed to the point that it was no longer deemed appropriate that the new wisdom be proclaimed by a *śrāvaka,* a Hīnayāna disciple of the Buddha, but could be spoken only from the mouth of a celestial Bodhisattva.

The presence of Avalokiteśvara is also significant for thematic reasons. The *Heart Sūtra* is renowned as the essence of the longer sūtras; one of the commentators remarks that there is not a single doctrine that occurs in the *100,000* that is not contained in this short sūtra. Yet there is no reference whatsoever to the other major theme of the Prajñāpāramitā, the compassion and skillful methods of the Bodhisattva. Atīśa, at the outset of his commentary on the *Heart Sūtra,* categorizes the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras into two types, those that teach the essence of the doctrine and those that teach the realizations (*abhisamaya*) whereby Bodhisattvas proceed to enlightenment. The *Heart Sūtra* teaches the first and the longer sūtras expound the second.[15] The *Heart Sūtra* does not set forth the path; it says that there is no path. This apparent omission is mitigated by the simple presence of Avalokiteśvara in the text: the wisdom essential for the achievement of Buddhahood is proclaimed by a Bodhisattva who has traversed the long path, a Bodhisattva who is said to be the embodiment of

compassion.

A common element of the longer sūtras absent from the *Heart Sūtra* is the polemic against the Hīnayāna disciples of the Buddha, inferior to the Bodhisattvas both in their wisdom and in their aspiration to enlightenment. This condescension is implied by the presence of Śāriputra, renowned in the Hīnayāna schools as the wisest of the Buddha's disciples, but who here is uninformed and perplexed, asking Avalokiteśvara how to practice the perfection of wisdom. This is a role that he plays in many of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras as well as in the *Lotus* and the *Vimalakīrti.*

The body of the sūtra between the prologue and the epilogue is made of two parts: Avalokiteśvara's short answer to Śāriputra's query and his long answer, the latter of which comprises the "form is emptiness" statement, the series of negations, and the mantra. "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness," is at once the most celebrated and problematic passage in the text. Here, in a statement startling in economy, the sūtra addresses the perennial problem of the relation of appearance and reality, the ultimate and the conventional. In the section of negations, Avalokiteśvara goes through the major categories of Buddhist philosophy—the five aggregates, the chain of dependent origin, the four truths—and seems to deny the existence of them all.

Before the rather stock epilogue, in which the Buddha rises from meditation to praise Avalokiteśvara's teaching, there occurs the mantra, further evidence of the relative lateness of the sūtra's composition. With the possible exception of *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, this is the most famous and oft-recited of Buddhist mantras, a mantra that occurs not in a tantric text, but in a sūtra. Further, this is not a mantra composed of "unintelligible syllables"; it seems to say, "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, enlightenment." The commentators treatment of the mantra is particularly interesting; for some it summarizes the entire sūtra, setting forth the entire path to Buddhahood in five words.

The Indian Commentators

The longest commentary on the sūtra is that of Vimalamitra; it fills some thirty-three folio sides in the Peking edition of the Tibetan *tripiṭaka.* According to traditional biographies, Vimalamitra was born in western India, probably in the eighth century, and studied at

Chapter 1

The Sūtra

The Sūtra on the Heart of the Transcendent and Victorious Perfection of Wisdom[1]

Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor was sitting on Vulture Mountain in Rājagṛha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a samādhi on the enumerations of phenomena called "perception of the profound." Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom and he saw that those five aggregates also are empty of inherent existence. Then, by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, "How should a son of good lineage train who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom?"

The Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara said this to the venerable Śāriputra: "Śāriputra, a son of good lineage or a daughter of good lineage who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom should view [things] in this way: They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent existence. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousnesses are empty. Śāriputra, in that way, all phenomena are empty, that is, without characteristic, unproduced, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished, unfilled. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no form, no sound, no odor, no taste, no object of touch, no phenomenon. There is no eye constituent, no mental constituent, up to and including

no mental consciousness constituent. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, up to and including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly, there are no sufferings, no origins, no cessations, no paths, no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

Therefore, Śāriputra, because Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend on and abide in the perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstructions, they are without fear. Having completely passed beyond all error they go to the completion of nirvāṇa. All the Buddhas who abide in the three times have been fully awakened into unsurpassed, perfect, complete enlightenment through relying on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering. Because it is not false, it should be known to be true. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is stated:

tadyathā oṃ gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā

Śāriputra, Bodhisattva Mahāsattvas should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in that way.

Then the Transcendent Victor rose from that samādhi and said to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, "Well done. Well done, well done, child of good lineage, it is just so. Child of good lineage, it is like that; the profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you have taught it. Even the Tathāgatas admire this." The Transcendent Victor having so spoken, the venerable Śāriputra, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, and all those surrounding and those of the world, the gods, humans, demigods, and *gandharvas* were filled with admiration and praised the words of the Transcendent Victor.