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The Heart Sutra: Prajnaparamita-Hridaya-Sutra

Commentary and translation of Text by Harischandra Kaviratna

This scripture has always been held in the greatest veneration in Mahayana countries. In China and Japan there are at least twenty-eight different recensions of this sacred bible of the Buddhist schools. The Prajnaparamita-Sutra is regarded as the holy mother that feeds the bodhisattva with the amrita (nectar) of prajna (transcendental wisdom), and guides him to paramita (the other shore). It is the "utmost great perfection" which gives full enlightenment to the bodhisattva after he has successfully completed the other five paramitas: dana (charity), sila (morality), ksanti (patience, forbearance), virya (energy), and dhyana (concentration).

Linguists who had only an etymological mastery of Sanskrit without even a rudimentary understanding of Buddhist thought have done much harm to the dissemination of esoteric Buddhism in Europe and America. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Samuel Beal published the first English rendition of the Prajnaparamita in his *Catena of Buddhist Scriptures*. Next appeared the English translation by Max Muller in the *Sacred Books of the East* series, Vol. XLIX. In the eighteenth century, although there already existed several Japanese renditions based on Chinese texts, Hion Shon translated it into Japanese direct from the Sanskrit. Tibetan Buddhists believe Boom or Bum (Prajnaparamita) to be the most infallible text to arouse them from the illusion of samsara (round of births and deaths). Various French and German translations are also in circulation, based on partial Chinese versions or on fragmentary Sanskrit texts.

Prajnaparamita-Hridayam (hridaya means heart) -- the most condensed recension of the Sutra -- was rendered into Chinese in the year 400 AD by the famous Indian scholar and Buddhist missionary, the Venerable Kumarajiva, and even today is used as a protective spell or charm by all Buddhists of Tibet, China, and Japan, monks and laymen alike. It was translated into English by D. T. Suzuki of Japan in 1934, by Edward Conze of England in 1958, and in America by Dwight Goddard in 1969. My verbatim translation, which follows, is made directly from the original Sanskrit.

The complete text of the Large Sutra of Prajnaparamita was ruthlessly destroyed by Muslim incendiaries in the conflagration of the Buddhist University of Nalanda. Millions of Buddhist and Hindu manuscripts were burnt in this great fire along with the monks and artifacts. Because the original Prajnaparamita is reputed to have consisted of a hundred thousand stanzas it was called Satasahasrika Prajna-paramita. It is primarily intended for memorizing, and is believed to protect the aspirant who knows it by heart.

The Heart Sutra: Prajnaparamita-Hridaya-Sutra

Om namo bhagavatyai arya-prajnaparamitayai!

Om! Salutation to the blessed and noble one! (who has reached the other shore of the most excellent transcendental wisdom).

(In this invocation the perfection of transcendental wisdom is personified as the compassionate mother of bodhi -- wisdom -- who bestows enlightenment upon the bodhisattvas who had vigilantly followed the course prescribed for the aspirant to full enlightenment – samyak sambodhi.)

Verse 1

arya-avalokitesvaro bodhisattvo gambhiram prajnaparamitacaryam caramano vyavalokayati sma:
panca-skandhas tams ca svabhavasunyan pasyati
sma.

The noble bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, being engaged in practicing the deep transcendental wisdom-discipline, looked down from above upon the five skandhas (aggregates), and saw that in their svabhava (self-being) they are devoid of substance.

Verse 2

iha sariputra rupam sunyata sunyataiva rupam, rupan na prithak sunyata sunyataya na prithag
rupam, yad rupam sa sunyata ya sunyata tad
rupam; evam eva vedana-samjna-samskara-vijnanam.

Here, O Sariputra, bodily-form is voidness; verily, voidness is bodily-form. Apart from bodily-form there is no voidness; so apart from voidness there is no bodily-form. That which is voidness is bodily-form; that which is bodily-form is voidness. Likewise (the four aggregates) feeling, perception, mental imaging, and consciousness (are devoid of substance).

Verse 3

iha sariputra sarva-dharmah sunyata-laksala, anutpanna aniruddha, amala avimala, anuna
aparipurnah.

Here, O Sariputra, all phenomena of existence are characterized by voidness: neither born nor annihilated, neither blemished nor immaculate, neither deficient nor overfilled.

Verse 4

tasmac chariputra sunyatayam na rupam na vedana na samjna na samskarah na vijnanam. na
caksuh-srotra-ghrana-jihva-kaya-manamsi. Na rupa-sabda-gandha-rasa-sprastavya-dharmah. na
caksur-dhatur yavan na manovijnana-dhatuh. na-avidya na-avidya-ksayo yavan na jaramaranam
na jara-marana-ksayo. na dukkha-samudaya-nirodha-marga. na jnanam, na praptir na-apraptih.

Therefore, O Sariputra, in voidness there is no bodily-form, no feeling, no mental imaging, no consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no sense objects of bodily-form, sound, smell, taste, or touchable states; no visual element, and so forth, until one comes to no mind-cognition element. There is no ignorance, nor extinction of ignorance, until we come to: no aging and death, nor extinction of aging and death. There is no suffering, no origination, no cessation, no path; there is no higher knowledge, no attainment (of nirvana), no nonattainment.

Verse 5

tasmac chariputra apraptitvad bodhisattvasya prajnaparamitam asritya vibaraty acittavaranah. cittavarana-nastitvad atrasto viparyasa-ati-kranto nistha-nirvana-praptah.

Therefore, O Sariputra, by reason of his nonattainment (of nirvana), the bodhisattva, having resorted to prajnaparamita (transcendental wisdom), dwells serenely with perfect mental freedom. By his non-possession of mental impediments (the bodhisattva) without fear, having surpassed all perversions, attains the unattainable (bliss of) nirvana.

Verse 6

tryadhva-vyavasthitah sarva-buddhah prajnaparamitam asritya-anut-taram samyaksambodhim abhisambuddhah.

All Buddhas, self-appointed to appear in the three periods of time (past, present, and future), having resorted to the incomparable prajnaparamita, have become fully awake to samyak sambodhi (absolute perfect enlightenment).

Verse 7

tasmaj jnatavyam: prajnaparamita maha-mantra mahavidya-mantra 'nuttara-mantra samasama-mantrah, sarva-duhkha-prasamanah, satyam amithyatvat. prajnaparamitayam ukto mantrah. tadyatha: gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha. iti prajnaparamita-hridayam sa-maptam.

Therefore prajnaparamita should be recognized as the great mantra, the mantra of great wisdom, the most sublime mantra, the incomparable mantra and the alleviator of all suffering; it is truth by reason of its being nonfalsehood. This is the mantra proclaimed in prajnaparamita. It is:

gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond (to the other shore)! O enlightenment! Be it so! Hail!

This concludes Prajnaparamita-Hridaya-Sutra.

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