

An Overview of the Heart Sutra, Part I

By Aaron Schlosser

The Heart Sutra is the most famous of all Buddhist teachings (sutras). It describes some fundamental truths that are applicable regardless of your spiritual path. It also manages to convey this truth with an incredibly small amount of words. The full text can fit on a single page. This article will give an overview and interpretation of the Heart Sutra, but can by no means cover the full depth of its message. My own understanding of the text changes with time and experience, as it should, so by the time you read this, I might understand it differently. This is not to say that my interpretation here is worthless, rather it represents a particular stage in my understanding that hopefully will be of some use to you. However, grasping the truths of the Heart Sutra is not just an intellectual matter; it requires developing spiritual insight through it. To do this, Buddhist and Tao practitioners cultivate a relationship with the text that includes recitation (chanting), deep contemplation (meditating), and using it to interpret the deeper meaning of life experiences. Fully understanding the truths that the Heart Sutra describes could take lifetimes and I am still quite new to it intellectually and spiritually, but I will share what I know and how it inspires me.



Xin Jing

“The Heart Sutra” in Mandarin is called the Xin Jing. It is helpful to think of the “Heart” in “The Heart Sutra” in terms of the Mandarin translation of *xin* (pronounced “sheen”). *Xin* represents not only the emotions and attitudes typically associated in the West with the heart, but also the workings

of the mind. The sutra helps explain the impact of our heart/mind on our collective and personal experiences of reality, and it helps us learn how to train our heart/mind to align itself with the deepest core of our being. Through this insight, we can see through illusions and find our “calling,” a deeper meaning and purpose.

Living with integrity to this deeper meaning, we ultimately become active participants in the positive evolution of the world around us. To put it another way, we learn how to manifest the Tao, or God’s will, in the world by learning to transcend the internal obstacles that block our truest spiritual intuition.

In Tao philosophy, *xin* is the connection between our spirit and our physical body. It is the gatekeeper. Our heart/mind determines to what degree our spirit will guide our actions. Think of the spirit as a light at the bottom of a pool of water, and our *xin* as the water in the pool. When the water is clean and calm, the light shines through undistorted. When our hearts and minds are clear and calm, the spirit, which is tied to the ultimate harmony of Tao, can inform our day-to-day lives. When spirit, heart/mind, and body are aligned, it amounts to a rewiring of our instincts and intuition to a higher purpose that serves not only the needs of our individual selves, but also the needs of the Universe as a whole.

Think of the spirit as a light at the bottom of a pool of water, and our xin (heart/mind) as the water in the pool. When the water is clean and calm, the light shines through undistorted.

Furthermore, when our personal trinity of spirit, *xin*, and body is in harmony, each serves the others: body serves spirit and *xin*, spirit nourishes the body and *xin*, *xin* sustains the connection between the other two. When *xin* does not sustain the connection, and spirit is removed from the equation, the fundamental needs of the body (food, sleep, sex, etc.) and *xin* (security, intimacy, self-esteem, etc.) can become pathological. This is because the needs of the body and *xin* cannot satisfy our deeper nature on their own, so in an attempt to achieve the authentic fulfillment that can only be achieved with a harmonization of all three, we seek more than what we need. This in turn spreads the imbalance we have within to the world around us. So, if our *xin* is not calm and clear and therefore blocking or distorting the guidance of the spirit, our lives can manifest more suffering and strife than harmony and healing.

Therefore, *xin* plays a very powerful role. There has been a lot of theorizing about the effect of intention (a facet of *xin*) itself on the physical world, whether by affecting the behavior

of subatomic particles, or through collective consciousness, or through positive thinking to achieve physical health, or through its effects on the enigmatic energy fields of *Qi* (chi). Whatever impact it has on those levels, it is easy enough to see the effects of *xin* on the material world without additional theorizing. *Xin* can inspire the hand to become a fist and hit someone, or to pull the trigger of a gun, or to press the button that releases the atomic bomb. Alternatively, *xin* can direct the hand to serve others, to create solutions, to spread compassion. When *xin* is aligned with the spirit, an individual can display a transcendent intuition of how best to serve the manifest world.

Another important aspect of *xin* is free will. Free will, in this case, means that it is up to us to align our intention with the higher purpose of the spirit. We can choose whether or not to be in harmony with Tao. No higher being will force this decision upon us. It is our responsibility, and the Heart Sutra is a tool to help us realize and act on that responsibility.

Prajna Paramita

The first few words in the English translation are quite significant: “After intensive practice of *Prajna Paramita*...”

Prajna is a Sanskrit word meaning ultimate wisdom, as opposed to conventional wisdom which is attained through the accumulation of knowledge. In Buddhist philosophy, *Prajna* is the wisdom of a Buddha, which is latent in us all, the ability to see things as they really are. In terms of Tao, *Prajna* is the kind of wisdom that can be attained through achieving enough clarity to form a deep connection with Tao and being able to flow with it effortlessly.

Paramita is also a Sanskrit term used for practices that help you get to the next level of enlightenment. The word itself means “going to the other shore.”

Prajna Paramita is the same as what is referred to as “cultivating Tao.” To cultivate Tao means to take action towards the “other shore” of wisdom and clarity wherein we establish a deep connection with our “True Self.” Our True Self is our essential and unique role within the grand scheme of the universe, what we would call Tao. When we align our lives with this transcendent wisdom (*Prajna*), our deeper unique purpose begins to unfold, because we have become an active participant in our spiritual evolution. Putting this higher level of wisdom into practice can transform the nature of our experience of life. The beauty of the world becomes deeper and broader, our compassion reaches further, our relationships become more meaningful, our challenges become more rewarding, and our contributions become more profoundly important. Furthermore, our joys become more purely joyful and our sorrows are tempered

with understanding. If we were living our life inside a TV, putting *Prajna Paramita* into practice would turn up the “brightness” and “contrast” settings, and a vaster spectrum of vivid colors would begin to surround us.



“After intensive practice of *Prajna Paramita*...”

So, this translation of the Heart Sutra starts off with what is essentially a disclaimer. From the beginning it is telling us that the level of wisdom that is described by Bodhisattva Avalokita in the rest of the Sutra can only be truly understood after intensive practice. Paradoxically, this means that we must try to live according to a wisdom that will remain beyond our comprehension unless we put it into practice. This actually is not that foreign of a concept, in Christian terms, this could be described as acting on faith. Faith, in this case, is faith that applying the Bodhisattva’s wisdom in our lives will lead us to a deeper connection with our True Self. There can be no proof or guarantee of success unless we take action and experience the truth for ourselves. We have to take the leap.

1. Substance or Form - This means the forms of the material world in the objective sense.
2. Sensation or Feeling - This is the work of the five senses picking up on the world around us.

3. Perception or Discernment - This is when the signals sent to the brain from the five senses are processed, filtered, and interpreted.
4. Will, Impulse, or Ego - This is where desires linger and emotions grow. This is where the majority of our decisions are made.
5. Consciousness - This does not mean consciousness in the normal sense, because it encompasses all levels of our *individual* consciousness, including those that we are not aware of. This aggregate is what differentiates us spiritually from anything or anyone else. This differentiation is deepened by actions that generate karma. To use the "light at the bottom of a pool" analogy, karmic actions are those that create more ripples in the water, further distorting the light of the spirit. These actions further separate us from our True Self or spirit and alienate us from God and the unity of Tao. This separation manifests in our life circumstances or behavioral patterns. From a material point of view, it can seem positive, you become rich and famous, or negative, you become an angry alcoholic. Either way the circumstances can create more obstacles to realizing unity with Tao. It reinforces your separation. Karma affects the "emptiness" of all Five Aggregates, but the separation itself is the "consciousness" aggregate. It is the shadow that is cast when we separate from the unity of Tao.

The Five Aggregates are Empty?

So, let's imagine what it might mean for the true state of the Five Aggregates to be "empty."

Substance - The subject of the emptiness of physical form could and does fill books. Some argue that modern physics such as quantum mechanics and Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$ question the very nature of physical form, suggesting that matter is mostly empty space and particles which are at some level denser forms of energy, and that on some level this energy is tied in with the energy of intention, which then connects xin with matter itself. Whether or not this is true or whether it supports "substance is emptiness" is definitely debatable. Considering the frequently distorted nature of the other aggregates, the emptiness or fullness of the material world seems beyond my unenlightened ability to judge anyway, so let's continue...

Sensation - Sensation is limited to the five senses, which are dependent upon the physical body. So, for example, we cannot see what's going on in the next room, we cannot hear what dogs hear, and so on. To understand the emptiness of the Sensation aggregate, we need to recognize the limitations of the five senses. Not only are they limited in the scope of the information that they retrieve, but also in the accuracy



of that information (optical illusions, for example). Therefore, the information about the world around us that we gather through the five senses can be at best limited, and at worst entirely inaccurate. Recognizing this, we can approach the world with more humility and perhaps shift our focus to a deeper spiritual interaction.

Perception - When the Perception aggregate is empty, we let go of our prejudices.

Our minds are not filtering reality to fit preconceived notions. Therefore we will see things more clearly for what they are, making better use of the senses available to us.

Will/Ego - When the Will/Ego is empty, we become less concerned with our small selves (the physical form and the identity we have built to inhabit it). We become free from desires that can lead to overwhelmingly negative emotions (fear, jealousy, anger, etc.), and therefore we become able to apply our discipline toward any goal more easily. When we no longer identify ourselves with the ego, a lot of self-imposed limitations go away. We can then identify with the universe on a larger scale and act as an integral part of it.

Consciousness - When the Consciousness aggregate is empty, we have rid ourselves of our karma. The water in our pool is clear and calm and the light can shine unimpeded through it. Another way of looking at this is that a pole that points directly at the sun will cast no shadow, if it points somewhere else, a shadow appears. When we are truly aligned with Tao, the consciousness that separates us becomes empty. At that point, we are capable of what the Tao Te Ching refers to as *wu wei*, or "non-action", because we are no longer *acting* as an integral part of the universe, we simply *are*; it no longer requires conscious effort on our part because the separation is no longer there. Our role as an integral part of the universe might still include action, but without conscious effort to determine the wisdom or necessity of the action. When we practice *Prajna Paramita* intensively, we begin to experience glimpses of this experience which gives us faith to continue persevering.

To be continued... □