

Some Key Ideas in the Heart Sutra

Perfection of Wisdom, inexpressible, inconceivable, indescribable
Without beginning or ending, like the sky itself,
The experience of pristine awareness knowing itself.
To the mother of the buddhas of the three times I bow.

The Heart Sutra is said to be the summary and distillation of the methods contained in all the larger Perfect Wisdom Sutras. It is one of the spiritual treasures of humankind. Taking the view 'emptiness' is the primary method.

The “Perfection of Wisdom” is the method of the Goddess 'Prajnya Paramita' that removes all cognitive impediments to Enlightenment.

The samadhi (concentration) that the Buddha enters, the “Profound Illumination” or 'Appearance of the Profound' mirrors the emptiness of phenomena, the view that Avalokita is teaching to Shariputra.

“Avalokiteshvara” is the Lord of Compassion, 'he who looks down from on high'. Equivalent in East Asia is Kuan Yin, Kanzeon, 'she who hears the sounds of the world'. Here Avalokita represents the wisdom of the Mahayana, expounding it to “Shariputra” of the older school, considered the wisest of Buddha's direct disciples.

“Shariputra, ‘son of Shari’ had mastered what was later to become the Abhidharma system, a process of arising and ceasing phenomena. Clearly cognizant of the non-existence of ‘self’ or ‘ego’, Shariputra had the 5 skandhas thoroughly in view and was adept at the enumeration of phenomena, the enumeration of the “dharmas”

“5 Skandhas”: these 'heaps or 'aggregates' are categories of instantaneous phenomena. Several of these 'dharmas' or 'objects of mind' arise and cease in each moment, a process that transcends all concepts of an ego or a 'self'. ('dharmas' could be called 'atoms of experience' and the moments could be called 'molecules of experience') These 'dharmas' are the fundamental constituents of the abhidharma system of the Hinayana; these “phenomena” are thought by many in the older school to be 'real', having an ‘essential nature’.

The 5 skandhas that are empty of ‘essential nature:

1. Form , 'rupa'- what appears to the sight, and by extension, the other sense objects and the realm of matter.
2. Feelings, 'vedana'- positive, negative or neutral reactions to a sense contact.

3. Recognitions, 'samjnya' – the entire process of Perception from sense contact up to the recognition and naming of an object.
4. Karmic Formations- 'samskaras', motivating factors, mostly subconscious: 50 or so different kinds of phenomena. Some, the 'unwholesome' dharmas, are to be destroyed. Others, the 'wholesome', ones are to be nourished. The neutral ones can be left alone. Alternately, all, even the 'kleshas', the 'emotional afflictions', the 'negative emotions', can be observed and accepted without judgment.
5. Consciousness- 'vijnyana', activities of the dualistic mind; a mill of concepts.

“emptiness”- total interdependence of everything; deconstruction of all concepts, but it is not nothingness. Neither is it something. Taking the view of emptiness, concepts become more and more subtle, until, at the realization of emptiness, there are no concepts and no views. This is called The View: no view.

“ all phenomena are marked with emptiness”- in the abhidharma system, each phenomenon ('dharma') has a “mark” or “characteristic” indicating its 'own being' (“svabhava”), its ‘essential nature’. Here Avalokita points out that phenomena are interdependent . They have no being of their own; they are empty of ‘essential nature’
As emptiness, they have no characteristics.

“there is no arising, and no cessation, etc.”- 3 conceptual distinctions in the abhidharma system are shown to be empty.

Then, all concepts of the sensory and dualistic worlds are shown to be empty. There are no skandhas in emptiness, no six senses (the conceptual mind is considered to be a kind of sense organ). There are no sense objects either, at this level.

“there is no eye element, etc.”- this refers to the 18 ‘sense fields’: 6 organs, 6 objects and 6 sense-consciousnesses.

Then, the teachings themselves are shown to be empty: they are mere constructs:

“no ignorance up to no aging and death, etc.”- refers to the 12 links of 'dependent arising' and their extinction. None of it exists in emptiness.

“no suffering, etc”- the Four Noble Truths do not exist in emptiness: no Suffering; no Origin of Suffering; no Cessation of Suffering; no 8-fold Path.

“no obscuration of mind”- there are 2 obscurations: the coarse obscurations of emotional afflictions ('kleshas') and the more subtle cognitive obscurations of the 62 wrong views of reality.

“error”- all falsity, especially the 4 'upside down views', the overthrowers of inner calm: all attempts to find (in Samsara, in this 'vale of tears') permanence in what is intrinsically impermanent; to find happiness in what is intrinsically suffering; to find beauty in what is repulsive; to find selfhood where there is no self.

“ Buddhas of the 3 times”- past, present and future.

‘Complete Enlightenment’- “anuttara.samyak.sam.bodhi” the 'utmost right and perfect enlightenment'. This is the ‘realm of Nirvana, which leaves nothing behind’.

“mantra”- a verbal formula for holding the mind steady. Most mantras rhythm in Sanskrit and occasionally have discernable meaning.

The Prajnya Paramita mantra can be construed as referring to the '5 paths': “Gateh”-I accumulate wisdom and merit. “Gateh”- I seriously engage the Path. “Paragateh”- Aha! I see the entire Path before me. “Parasamgateh”- I practice the whole Path. “Bodhi”- Awakening, Enlightenment.
“Svaha”- So Be It!

“Tathagatas”- the Buddhas. the 'thusly gone ones', the 'thusly arrived ones'

“asuras”- antigods. The Titans of Indian mythology. They keep trying to take heaven . by storm.

“gandharvas”- subtle beings. They feed on incense vapors & make wonderful music.

The Heart Sutra, as the definitive exposition of ‘emptiness’ is widely chanted in many languages, both Asian and Western. Along with the ‘Diamond Sutra, it is considered to be the entrance to the vast literature of the Perfect Wisdom Sutras.