

THE HEART
OF
TRANSCENDENT WISDOM

A Dzogchen Commentary

Pema JigdreI

*Here, Śāriputra, form is empty;
emptiness itself is form.
Emptiness is not different from form;
form is not different from emptiness.
Sensation, concept,
impulse and perception
are also thus.*

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PREFACE

This essay is a revision of a work originally published in Italian.¹ The main topic is the famous "Heart Sutra," a *mahāyāna* synthesis of the Buddha's teaching on "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). Its wide circulation is due to both the brevity of its content and the essentiality of its style, which reflects a literary taste that is more Chinese than Indian.

The text is known in two main versions, short and long, both characterized by three sections: introductory, central and final. According to Jan Nattier, the central section follows a passage from the Chinese translation of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* done by Kumārajīva (344-413).²

The compilation of the original short version presumably took place in China in the early 7th century. Hsüan-tsang/Xuánzàng (602-664) received this text before he left for India, and it is not unlikely that he was the one who translated it into Sanskrit, perhaps at the monastic university of Nālandā. Later, it is plausible that a scholar at the same university supplemented the Sanskrit text by making it take on the regular characteristics of a *sūtra*. In Tibet it was this long version that was accepted as canonical.

The text translated here from Sanskrit is the short version. In preparing the transliteration of the source, included in the appendix, I relied on the edition edited by Edward Conze,³ but also took into account the philological considerations of Jayarava Attwood⁴ and Jan Nattier.⁵ Especially crucial were the critical remarks of Shri Giteshwar Raj, a true *paṇḍit*, with whom I discussed my work when I went to Dharamsala in 2018, a year before his death.

¹ Giuseppe Baroetto (Pema Jigdre), *Il Sūtra del Cuore* (Torino: Libreria Editrice Psiche, 2020). My English translation has been revised by Andy Lukianowicz.

² See Jan Nattier, "The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 15.2, 1992, pp. 153-223.

³ Edward Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1967), pp. 149-154.

⁴ Jayarava Attwood, "Heart Murmurs: Some Problems with Conze's *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 8, 2015, pp 28-48.

⁵ Jan Nattier, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-163.

The appendix comprehends also my translation of the Sanskrit text into Tibetan. It was accomplished by referring to both the Tibetan short version found in Dunhuang⁶ and the long version translated by Lotsawa Gelong Rinchen De together with Vimalamitra in the 9th century.⁷

In the commentary, I have tried to highlight both the actual meaning of the words and their practical, existential significance. Moreover, I attempted to draw the connection between the text and older sources in the Pāli language to help recognize the continuity as well as the discontinuity of the *mahāyāna* with respect to the Buddha's original teaching. My interpretive key is that offered by the *dzogchen* (*atiyoga*) tradition, whose roots run through the *mahāyāna* and sink into Śākyamuni's Dharma.

Thinking back to my youthful years spent studying and practicing with Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, I realize that new generations face different obstacles, some of them seemingly insurmountable. Today the world's conditionings appear to be more and more fatally enchanting and insidious, nevertheless the liberating message of the ancient sages continues to echo powerfully, "The world is empty, the world is empty."

⁶ IDP (International Dunhuang Project): [Or.8212/77](https://www.idp.gov.cn/Or.8212/77). See Wladimir Zwalf (Ed.), *Buddhism, Art and Faith* (London: British Museum Press, 1985), Cat No. 69.

⁷ Si tu chos kyi 'byung gnas (ed.), "bCom ldan 'das ma shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po," *bKa' 'gyur (sde dge par phud)*, translated by sGro lo tsā ba rin chen sde, vol. 34, Delhi karmapae chodhey gyalwae sungrab partun khang, 1976–1979, pp. 288–291 ([BDRC](https://www.bodhi.com/BDRC)). Cf. Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, *Ceaseless Echoes of The Great Silence: A Commentary on the Heart Sūtra* (Boca Raton: Sky Dancer Press, 1993), pp. 9–23.

THE HEART
OF
TRANSCENDENT WISDOM

(1) The bodhisattva, the noble Avalokiteśvara, following the profound conduct of transcendent wisdom, looked at the five aggregates and saw that they were empty of substance.

(2) Here, O Śāriputra, form is empty; emptiness itself is form. Emptiness is not different from form; form is not different from emptiness. Sensation, concept, impulse and perception are also thus.

(3) Here, O Śāriputra, all phenomena are characterized by emptiness; they are without birth and without cessation, without impurity and without purity, without decrease and without increase.

(4) Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, there is no sensation, there is no concept, there are no impulses and there is no perception. There are no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. There are no form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object and mental object. There is no sphere of sight [etc.] up to no sphere of mental perception.

(5) There is no ignorance and there is no dissolution of ignorance [etc.] up to no old age and death and no dissolution of old age and death; there are no suffering, origination, cessation and path; there is no knowledge and there is no attainment.

(6) Therefore, O Śāriputra, since there is no attainment, the bodhisattva, relying on transcendent wisdom, remains without any obscuration of consciousness. As there is no obscuration of consciousness, he is not afraid; having completely transcended the erroneous conceptions, he has *nirvāṇa* as his accomplishment.

(7) All buddhas dwelling in the three times, relying on transcendent wisdom have fully awakened to supreme, true, full enlightenment.

(8) Therefore, the great mantra of transcendent wisdom, the great mantra of knowledge, the supreme mantra, the unequalled mantra, which relieves all suffering, should be considered true, because it is not false. The mantra spoken in transcendent wisdom is thus: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*. The Heart of Transcendent Wisdom is concluded.

COMMENTARY

Homage and praise to the mother
of the victors of the three times,
transcendent wisdom
which cannot be expressed
through words and concepts,
which has the nature of celestial space,
unborn and unceasing,
and is accessible to the knowledge
of one's self-awareness.⁸

I. INTRODUCTORY SECTION

PROLOGUE

In order to be able to fully understand the value of the text and the reasons for its wide circulation, despite the apparent abstruseness of its content, it is necessary to reflect on some aspects of its intricate history.

The short version was composed in Chinese, but was accepted as a translation of a *sūtra* from India, namely a canonical source that passes down the Buddha's discourses. If its true origin had been known, surely it would not have been held in such high regard.

Unlike the long version, the structure of the original version is not the traditional one of a *sūtra*; only the central section is taken from a *sūtra* translated by Kumārajīva, however, it is arranged according to an essential literary taste, which is exquisitely Chinese and is aimed at ritual recitation. So, its fortune also depends on its literary style.

As for its content, the theme of emptiness, while in the *sūtra* from which it is taken the exposition is typically prolix, here it is minimalist, yet capable of powerfully evoking deep contemplative insights.

⁸ Ratnakīrti, *sByor ba bzhi'i lha la bstod pa (Yogacaturdevastotra)*, *bsTan 'gyur (sde dge)*, vol. 1, p. 494.5-6 (BDRC): *smra bsam brjod med shes rab pha rol phyin/ /ma skyes mi 'gag nam mkha'i ngo bo nyid/ /so so rang rig ye shes spyod yul ba/ /dus gsum rgyal ba'i yum la phyag 'tshal bstod//*.

The central part is preceded by a section where the figure of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara enters the scene, and is followed by a section that enunciates the qualities of the supreme mantra. Both Avalokiteśvara and the mantra are surprising novelties, incongruent with the rest of the literature to which the *sūtra* translated by Kumārajīva belongs. Yet they contain two keys to the interpretation of the text, without which it would not be possible to correctly understand its real meaning as intended by the compiler.

The first exegetical key is represented by Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva who does not appear in the remaining *Prajñā-pāramitā* literature, but who was the subject of widespread devotion in 7th century China. Avalokiteśvara personifies the compassion of all buddhas, the compassionate eye that sees emptiness. That eye is the buddha nature, the spiritual essence equally present in all beings.

The second interpretative key is provided by the mantra. At a time when *mantrayāna* was emerging in India from *mahāyāna*, the recourse in China to a mystical Sanskrit formula anticipates the later spread of Buddhist Tantrism and concurrently indicates its deep and ultimate meaning in the supreme mantra of divine *Prajñā-pāramitā*. That mantra is the powerful and swift means of sudden enlightenment.

Who could possibly have conceived of such a bold and striking synthesis of *sūtras* and *tantras*, which transcends the dogmatic patterns of both by leading them back to the essence of the Buddha's original teaching on emptiness?

Xuánzàng's biography contains this passage: "Formerly when the Master was in Szechuan, he once saw a sick man suffering from foul boils and dressed in rags. With pity he took him to his monastery and supplied him with food and clothes. Out of gratitude the sick man taught the Master this sutra, which he often recited."⁹

It sounds like an uplifting anecdote but, behind the poor man's derelict appearance, someone might discern an emanation of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva who personifies the wisdom of all buddhas. In any case, whoever that mysterious messenger was, the message is clear: sincere and deep compassion is the gateway to the heart of transcendent wisdom.

⁹ Jan Nattier, *op. cit.*, p. 179. Cf. Samuel Beal (tr.), Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1911), p. 21.

THE HEART OF TRANSCENDENT WISDOM

The text is known as the "Heart Sutra," but the Sanskrit title is the one translated here. The "heart" is the essence of the Buddhist teachings on transcendent wisdom, in Sanskrit *prajñā-pāramitā*.

Wisdom (*prajñā*) is actual knowledge. There is worldly wisdom, the acquired knowledge that enables one to practice a trade, a profession, and there is true wisdom or sapience that is not worldly: it does not serve to succeed in the cycle of karmic becoming, the so-called *samsāra*, but instead enables one to transcend it, freeing oneself forever from the conditionings of its illusory mechanism.

The term *pāramitā* is a feminine noun, normally rendered as "perfection." Actually, its intentional sense is that of "transcendent virtue," so the translation of the compound *prajñā-pāramitā* would be "transcendent virtue of wisdom." Since wisdom is a transcendent virtue, the same compound can also be loosely rendered as "transcendent wisdom."

(1) The bodhisattva, the noble Avalokiteśvara, following the profound conduct of transcendent wisdom, looked at the five aggregates and saw that they were empty of substance.

The Buddha, before he completely freed himself from the bonds of *samsāra*, was a bodhisattva: a being (*sattva*) committed to fully realize the enlightenment (*bodhi*) that ends suffering. In *mahāyāna* literature Avalokiteśvara is the name given to a bodhisattva who excels for his boundless compassion toward all suffering beings.

The presence of his figure in this introductory section stands to signify that, if one aspires to the enlightenment of a buddha, one must have a compassionate heart like that of Avalokiteśvara, because the attainment of full *nirvāṇa* is motivated by compassion and radiates compassion.

Avalokiteśvara is spiritually noble since, by following the profound conduct of transcendent wisdom, he has attained the superior knowledge of the true nature of phenomena.

In general, the bodhisattva's conduct is his or her way of life, his or her practice of the spiritual path in all circumstances of life. One who

follows the bodhisattva's conduct practices the transcendent virtues of generosity (*dāna*), ethics (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), diligence (*vīrya*), concentration (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*).

Conduct according to transcendent wisdom, in particular, is profound because knowledge of the true nature of phenomena is by no means easy to acquire, since it has as its object what is beyond both negative and positive actions, so it also transcends the practice of generosity, ethics, patience, diligence and concentration.

To follow the profound conduct of transcendent wisdom, initially we need to look at the place where suffering is experienced, namely the psychophysical organism consisting of five aggregates (*skandha*). The physical body is called "form" (*rūpa*) and constitutes the first aggregate. The mental body is referred to as "name" (*nāma*) and consists of the four aggregates of sensations, concepts, impulses and perceptions.

(1) The physical aggregate of form (*rūpa-skandha*) includes the elements of matter, sensory faculties and objects of the senses. (2) The aggregate of sensations (*vedanā-skandha*) comprises the pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations. (3) The aggregate of concepts (*saṃjñā-skandha*) gathers the notions or ideas created to name and distinguish objects. (4) The aggregate of impulses (*samskāra-skandha*) groups the thoughts, feelings and emotions which determine actions and reactions. (5) The aggregate of perceptions (*vijñāna-skandha*) is the whole of sensory and mental perceptions.¹⁰

For example, in the experience of a beautiful flower that one wishes to pluck there are the shape and colours of the flower seen through the faculty of sight and its fragrance felt through the faculty of smell, the pleasurable sensations, the concepts of the flower and its qualities, the impulse of the desire to pluck it, and the personal perception of all these.

What does it mean that the five aggregates are empty or devoid (*śūnya*) of substance (*svabhāva*)? Let us first examine the term *śūnya*, "empty." A canonical source in Pāli language that pass on the Buddha's original teaching, the *Suñña Sutta*, tells of an occasion when the senior disciple Ānanda asked the Master: "Sir, so it is said, 'The world is emp-

¹⁰ The term *vijñāna* is usually rendered as "consciousness," but here I prefer to translate it as "perception" because the context demands it. In fact, the corresponding aggregate consists of six types of *vijñāna*, which are not six consciousnesses, since in a sentient being consciousness (*citta*) is only one, but is characterized by six perceptual or cognitive modalities.

ty, the world is empty.' In what way is the world empty?" The Buddha replied: "Ānanda, it is said 'the world is empty' because it is empty of oneself or of anything belonging to oneself."¹¹

The same principle is reiterated in this passage attributed to Sāriputta (Skr. Śāriputra), another important disciple of the Buddha: "O friend, what is the release of consciousness through emptiness? O friend, here a monk goes to the forest or under a tree or to a place without people and reflects thus: 'This is empty of oneself or of anything belonging to oneself.' [...] Now, that imperturbable release of consciousness is empty of longing, empty of hatred, empty of ignorance."¹²

The "world" is one's experience of phenomena through the five aggregates. They appear to be oneself (*attā*) or to belong to oneself (*attanīya*) but, if one reflects on the fact that they are impermanent, imbued with suffering and not under one's full control,¹³ one can understand that they are not really oneself, nor do they really belong to oneself: they are "non-self" (*anattā*). The Buddha taught to meditate on each aggregate clearly recognizing that "this is not mine (*netam mama*), this is not me (*neso'hamasmī*), this is not my self (*na meso attā*)."¹⁴

Regarding the Pāli term *attā* (Skr. *ātman*), it should be remembered that it corresponds to the reflexive pronoun "oneself," but also has the value of the noun "self."

If each of the five aggregates is not really mine, me or my self, what am I really? The answer should arise from oneself when one experiences the imperturbable release of consciousness wherein longing, hatred, and ignorance, the three fundamental afflictions, come to an end.

Now let us examine the term *svabhāva*, "substance." In Buddhist philosophy it can have three main meanings: on the level of relative truth it means substance understood as the intrinsic nature of a phenomenon, for example, the physical characteristic that makes the element water different from the element fire; instead, on the plane of ultimate truth it stands for the true nature of phenomena, or the unchanging substratum,

¹¹ *Suñña Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya 35.85)*. Cf. Joaquín Pérez-Remón, *Self and No-Self in Early Buddhism* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), p. 183 sg.

¹² *Mahāvedalla Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 43)*. See Piya Tan (tr.), "Mahā Vedalla Sutta," [SD 30.2](#), pp. 27-28.

¹³ *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59)*. See Piya Tan (tr.), "Anatta Lak-khaṇa Sutta," [SD 1.2](#), pp. 49-50.

¹⁴ Cf. Piya Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Joaquín Pérez-Remón, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-157, 161 ff.

the supreme source of phenomena. There are contexts in which the last two meanings converge.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is the first Buddhist source in which the corresponding Pāli term *sabhāva* appears. Commenting on the aforementioned *Suñña Sutta*, the text employs *sabhāva* as a synonym for "self" (*attā*). Thus, if we replace *attā* with *sabhāva*, the Buddha would say, "Ānanda, it is said 'the world is empty' because it is empty of *sabhāva* or of anything belonging to *sabhāva*."

To understand whether *sabhāva* is employed with the meaning of substance understood as the intrinsic nature or the unchanging substratum, we must reflect on the fact that the text defines as "empty of *sabhāva*" (*sabhāvena suñña*)¹⁵ everything that is born (*jāta*) and is therefore destined to perish because of its transitory condition. So, it is clear that *sabhāva* means substance in the sense of unchanging substratum.

Further confirmation comes from examining the term *suñña*, empty or void. In the specific context this adjective is used to define something through the negation of what it is not, as in the following example: "The characteristic of the fool is void of the characteristic of the wise man, and the characteristic of the wise man is void of the characteristic of the fool."¹⁶

Thus, the following definition would also be valid: the characteristic of what is born is empty of the characteristic of what is unborn, and the characteristic of what is unborn is empty of the characteristic of what is born. However, since everything that is born is empty of substance, it follows that substance is the characteristic of what is unborn, that is, the unchanging substratum.

In short, *sabhāva* is employed as a synonym for *attā* to denote the opposite of what is born, meaning the "unborn" (*ajāta*), which has the characteristic of being a substance understood as an unchanging substratum. However, this synonymy only makes sense if it presupposes the implicit acceptance or actual recognition of such a substance.

Many Buddhists who consider themselves orthodox might dispute this conclusion, deeming it a blatant heresy; yet, if one studies ancient sources without bias, there is no doubt: the Buddha denied the existence

¹⁵ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (tr.), *The Path of Discrimination* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1982), p. 357.5. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli translates *sabhāva* as "individual essence".

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

of the false self, the seeming substance or unchanging substratum of what is born, in order to point to the true self, the real substance or unchanging substratum that characterizes what is unborn.

A passage from the *Nibbāna Sutta* reads:¹⁷ "There is, O monks, the unborn, unbecome, unmade, unformed. If, O monks, there were not the unborn, unbecome, unmade, unformed, one would not know emancipation from that which is born, become, made, formed."

In *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*, the Buddha explains that "a person, being himself subject to birth, having understood the drawbacks of what is subject to birth, seeks the unborn, supreme freedom from bondage, *nirvāṇa*."¹⁸ So, the unborn is *nirvāṇa*, by nature free from what is subject to birth.

In fact, liberation from that which is born is defined as "the calm state, not associated with thoughts, permanent, unborn, unproduced, free from suffering, free from impurity, the cessation of painful phenomena, the dissolution of karmic impulses, happiness."¹⁹

None of the five aggregates subject to birth is really oneself, nor does it belong to oneself, one's true nature or substance that is unborn; therefore, if one searches for the unborn in the psychophysical experience, one will not find it, since it is not there.

Then, where should one look for the unborn? Only in the "consciousness without attribute, without end, radiant all around: here water, earth, fire and air have no place; here long and short, coarse and subtle, beautiful and ugly, name and form, everything ceases."²⁰

The Sutra of transcendent wisdom in 25,000 lines (Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra) departs from the previous exegesis by presenting a negative interpretation of emptiness, which denies any positive meaning of *svabhāva* and *ātman*. In fact, it states that the five aggregates and all phenomena are empty of substance because they lack a real identity or self, which exists nowhere: even a great bodhisattva and transcendent wisdom itself are empty of substance.²¹

¹⁷ *Udāna* 8.3.

¹⁸ *Majjhima Nikāya* 26. Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta," [SD 1.11](#), p. 292.

¹⁹ *Itivuttaka* 43.

²⁰ *Kevalāḍḍha Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 11)*. Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "Kevalāḍḍha Sutta," [SD 1.7](#), p. 174; "Brahma Nimantanika Sutta," [SD 11.7](#), pp. 119-121, 132.

²¹ See Edward Conze (tr.), *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 56, 105, 336.

This interpretation risks falling into nihilism, so it is criticized in some *mahāyāna* scriptures that deal with the theme of the "matrix of the tathāgatas" (*tathāgata-garbha*), the buddha nature which constitutes the potentiality of spiritual realization present in all beings.

The most important exposition of this theme is found in the *Ratnago-travibhāga*, where the matrix of the tathāgatas is defined as the "true nature of consciousness" (*citta-prakṛti*): it is empty (*śūnya*) of afflictions, extraneous and temporary, but it is not empty (*aśūnya*) of qualities, inherent and everlasting.²² This positive interpretation of emptiness is also central to the Tibetan *zhentong* (*gzhan stong*) tradition.²³

When there is recognition of the buddha nature, one understands that it is the spiritual body of all buddhas, the *dharmakāya*, which transcends the five aggregates. Śākyamuni also called it *brahmakāya*, that is, "divine body."²⁴

According to the *Ratnago-travibhāga*, the *dharmakāya* has four transcendent qualities (*guṇa-pāramitā*), named as follows: transcendent purity (*śubha-pramitā*), transcendent self (*ātma-pāramitā*), transcendent bliss (*sukha-pāramitā*) and transcendent permanence (*nitya-pāramitā*).²⁵

Impurity (*aśubha*), non-self (*anātman*), suffering (*duḥkha*) and impermanence (*anitya*) constitute the basic characteristics of the phenomena of *saṃsāra*, erroneously perceived as pure (*śubha*), as self (*ātman*), as blissful (*sukha*) and as permanent (*nitya*).

In contrast, buddha nature is purity that transcends impure phenomena conceived as pure; it is self that transcends non-self phenomena conceived as self; it is bliss that transcends painful phenomena conceived as blissful; it is permanence that transcends impermanent phenomena conceived as permanent.

²² Jikido Takasaki, *A Study on the Ratnago-travibhāga* (Rome: Is.M.E.O., 1966), pp. 54-57, 300-309.

²³ See Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo: A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 148-149.

²⁴ *Agāñña Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 27). Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "Agāñña Sutta," [SD 2.19](#), p. 225.9.5; Chanida Jantrasrisalai, "Early Buddhist *Dharmakāya* and Its Relation to Enlightenment," in Edward F. Crangle (ed.), *The Pathway to the Centre - Purity and the Mind: Proceedings of the Inaugural International Samādhi Forum* (Sydney: Dharmachai International Research Institute Inc., 2010), pp. 189-242.

²⁵ Jikido Takasaki, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-219, 297-299.

Indeed, the "Heart Sūtra" is a synthesis of the teaching on transcendent wisdom from the perspective of the matrix of the tathāgatas, the buddha nature. Such exegesis is by no means an innovation, since it goes back to the Buddha himself, who taught that "this consciousness (*citta*) is luminous (*pabhassara*), but it is obscured by adventitious impurities."²⁶ One's true nature is luminous consciousness, whereas the impurities of afflictions that hinder its recognition are only extraneous and temporary obscurations due to unawareness of oneself.

II. CENTRAL SECTION

(2) Here, O Śāriputra, form is empty; emptiness itself is form. Emptiness is not different from form; form is not different from emptiness. Sensation, concept, impulse and perception are also thus.

"Here" refers to transcendent wisdom, the recognition of luminous consciousness. Avalokiteśvara addresses Śāriputra because, among the Buddha's direct disciples, he stands out for his intuitive capacity to reason and understand. In the Pāli sources Śāriputta appears devoted primarily to the contemplation of emptiness.²⁷ This means that the people to whom this teaching is directed should have the same intuitive capacity as Śāriputra.

The term "form" denotes the physical aggregate of form: it is empty of substance or self, in that it is not really oneself, nor does really belong to oneself. Similarly, the other aggregates are also empty, hence every sensation, concept, impulse and perception is void of substance or self. This principle was stated in the introductory section. Now it is necessary to verify the correctness of one's understanding through intuitive reasoning based on examples.

Let us try to compare form, that is, the physical aggregate, to an empty pot: just as a pot is empty of water, for example, form is empty of

²⁶ *Pabhassara Sutta* (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 1.49-52). Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "The Radiant Mind," [SD 8.3](#), pp. 38-40. *Citta* is usually translated as "mind," but here I prefer to render it as "consciousness," being synonymous with *vijñāna* according to the preceding quotation from the *Kevalādhā Sutta*. The most common translation of the term *pabhassara* (Skr. *prabhāsvara*) is "clear light."

²⁷ See *Piṇḍapāta Pārisuddhi Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 151).

substance. The comparison would be valid if it also illustrated the next assertion: emptiness itself is form; in other words, the absence of substance defines form. But, evidently, the comparison does not hold, because such emptiness does not define a pot, since it concerns only its contents, which may or may not be there. So, the aggregate of form is not empty of substance meant as a temporarily absent object, similarly to the water of which a pot is empty.

Let us then reflect on another comparison, that of the mirage: in the sunny desert, in the distance, we catch sight of a lake; however, if we try to reach it, we find that there is no water there. The mirage is empty of the substance of water, which is only seeming. In this case, the comparison is valid; in fact, the mirage is empty of water, and it is precisely the absence of water that characterizes the mirage. Therefore, the emptiness of water is not different from the mirage of the lake and the mirage of the lake is not different from the emptiness of water.

Let us take one more example, the full moon reflected in a body of water. Its reflection is empty of the moon, because it is evident that there is no moon in the water. The reflection of the moon is empty of the substance of the moon, which is only seeming; and it is precisely the emptiness or absence of the moon that characterizes the mirage. Therefore, the emptiness or absence of the moon is not different from the reflection of the moon, just as the reflection of the moon is not different from the emptiness or absence of the moon.

Similar to the mirage of the lake in which there is not the substance of water and the reflection of the moon in which there is not the substance of the moon, in the five aggregates of personal experience there is not the substance of oneself. A direct example of this is one's reflection in a mirror. In fact, the reflection is not oneself, nor does it belong to oneself; moreover, it is not contained by oneself, nor does it contain oneself.²⁸

The denial of oneself in one's reflection, however, does not imply the absolute denial of oneself, just as the denial of the moon in its reflection does not imply the absolute denial of the moon. In order to avoid the nihilistic deviation, it is necessary to consider the fact that one's reflection

²⁸ See *Yamaka Sutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22.85). Cf. Piya Tan (tr.), "Yamaka Sutta," [SD 21.12](#), p. 151.

depends on and refers back to oneself, similar to the reflection of the moon, which depends on and refers back to the moon.

Light is a metaphor for the cognitive clarity of awareness. The five aggregates of psychophysical experience appear to be luminous, characterized by awareness, but such light is reflected; therefore, they are empty of the substance of light or awareness, which is only seeming; nevertheless, their reflected light depends on and refers back to a source of light.

Luminous consciousness is the source of light that illuminates the five aggregates. Therefore, unlike aggregates, luminous consciousness is not empty of the substance of light or awareness, since it is by nature shining, aware.

Luminous consciousness, shining by its own light, is comparable to a lamp that illuminates itself naturally. The obvious, inherent capacity of the luminous source to illuminate itself is a metaphor for self-awareness: the true nature of consciousness is self-awareness.

Despite being obscured by adventitious impurities, luminous consciousness can be recognized by oneself, precisely because it shines by its own light within oneself; therefore, it cannot be known as if it were an object of the senses or the mind.

"You, monks," said the Buddha, "have been instructed by me through this clear Dharma, immediate, verifiable, which leads [to the goal] and is to be known personally by the sages."²⁹

The clear Dharma is the direct teaching of luminous consciousness, that must be known by oneself experiencing it personally. Verifying immediately, in the present moment, that the true nature of consciousness is "without attribute, without end, radiant all around,"³⁰ one achieves the goal of liberation from afflictions.

Transcendent wisdom cannot really be expressed or communicated by someone else through words and concepts, being beyond the limited field or scope of language and thought. It is only really accessible to the non-dual knowledge that characterizes one's self-awareness.³¹

²⁹ *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 38)*. Cf. Piya Tan, "Mahā Taṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta," [SD 7.10](#), p. 200.25; Joaquín Peréz-Remón, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

³⁰ *Kevaḍḍha Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 11): viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*. See Piya Tan (tr.), "Kevaḍḍha Sutta," [SD 1.7](#), p. 174.

³¹ One's self-awareness (Tib. *so so rang rig*, Skr. *pratyātma-vid*) is pure self-consciousness, so it must be distinguished from the self-consciousness identified with sens-

According to *dzogchen*, self-awareness (*rang rig*) is the true nature of consciousness, which has three aspects: its empty essence is like celestial space, "without attribute"; its clear nature is like the sun, "without end"; and its pervasive compassion is like the sun's rays, "radiant all around."³²

When Śāriputra, meditating on emptiness, achieved the realization of luminous consciousness, unborn and unceasing, he understood that it is the ultimate master and the highest deity (*īśvara*), present in all beings with its compassionate glance (*avalokita*). The glance with which Avalokiteśvara looked at the five aggregates of the suffering beings wandering in *samsāra* is the compassionate glance of luminous consciousness.

(3) Here, O Śāriputra, all phenomena are characterized by emptiness; they are without birth and without cessation, without impurity and without purity, without decrease and without increase.

A woman dreams of giving birth to a baby; she is happy, but shortly afterwards the baby dies and the happiness of birth is erased by the pain of death. The woman wakes up with the emotion of the loss she has suffered, but immediately realizes that it was only a dream: the baby was never born, so it never died.

Here, in the awakening to one's true nature, it is evident that all phenomena are characterized by emptiness; that is to say, the true nature of phenomena is emptiness, as they are fundamentally unreal. Similar to the child in the dream, which is empty of the substance of the child born and dead, apparently phenomena are born and cease, but in reality they are without birth and, therefore, without cessation.

Common Buddhist doctrine distinguishes between two types of phenomena: the impure phenomena of *samsāra*, which must cease, and the pure phenomena of *nirvāṇa*, which must be obtained. The phenomena of *samsāra*, the cycle of becoming conditioned by karma, arise because of

ory and mental data. Cf. Zhihua Yao, *The Buddhist Theory of Self-cognition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 123-127; Matthew T. Kapstein, "We Are All Gzhan stong pas: Reflections on *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness: A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defence* by Paul Williams," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 7 (2000), pp. 111-118.

³² rDza dPal sprul, *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* (BDRC), pp. 228-229: *ngo bo stong pa/ rang bzhin gsal ba/ thugs rje kun khyab/*. See Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), pp. 177, 413 n. 11.

the unawareness of one's true nature; consequently, they dissolve in the space of *nirvāṇa* due to the awareness of one's true nature.

Dzogchen teaches that there is no need to strive for the cessation of the impure phenomena of *samsāra* and the realization of the pure phenomena of *nirvāṇa*. All phenomena arise and vanish like reflections in a mirror; hence, the profound conduct of transcendent wisdom consists in maintaining the awareness of luminous consciousness, letting phenomena appear and disappear naturally.

If one seeks the cessation of the phenomena of *samsāra*, one is still identifying with them. Instead, when one has the recognition of one's true nature, one lets go the identification with the arising phenomena, yet without seeking their cessation.

The wise practitioner allows phenomena to arise and vanish naturally, without identifying with them by rejecting the negative phenomena and accepting the positive ones; in this way he or she understands that even the distinction between impure and pure phenomena only concerns appearance, reflection.

One's true nature is not really contaminated by the impure phenomena, such as the afflictions of longing, hatred and ignorance, nor is it really purified through the pure phenomena, such as the practice of generosity, patience, ethics, diligence and meditative concentration.

If one seeks purification by identifying with pure phenomena, evidently one still identifies with impure phenomena. Instead, when one observes them while remaining aware of one's true nature, the identification with impure phenomena, as well as with pure phenomena, ceases and purification happens naturally.

On the contrary, not being able to see the illusoriness of identification with phenomena, we end up believing that we are starring in a cosmic soap opera in which, episode after episode, life after life, we try to achieve the decrease of the defects of *samsāra* and the increase of the qualities of *nirvāṇa*. In truth, even personal evolution, characterized by the decrease in negative karma and the increase in positive karma, is only about the appearance, the reflection, the plot of the film.

A person who awakens to the true nature of oneself is like a spectator who, after being immersed in the movie narrative, regains his or her original status by recovering full self-awareness, totally free from both the causes and effects of the events recounted by the film.

(4) Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, there is no sensation, there is no concept, there are no impulses and there is no perception. There are no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. There are no form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object and mental object. There is no sphere of sight [etc.] up to no sphere of mental perception.

One's true nature, luminous consciousness, is empty of that which is non-self, so it is devoid of any phenomenal attribute. In such emptiness there is no identification of oneself with the five aggregates, therefore there is no form, there is no sensation, there is no concept, there are no impulses and there is no perception.

The physical senses and the mental sense constitute the internal bases (*adhyātma-āyatana*) of experience: sight (eye), hearing (ear), smell (nose), taste (tongue), touch (body/skin) and mind. The physical objects and those that are only mental are the external bases (*bāhya-āyatana*) of experience: form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object and mental object.

The eighteen spheres (*dhātu*) of experience include the six spheres of the senses (*indriya*), identical to the internal bases, the six spheres of objects (*viṣaya*), identical to the external bases, and the six spheres of perceptions (*vijñāna*) of physical and mental objects. The text mentions the sphere of sight and the sphere of mental perception, the first and last spheres, including by the expression "up to" the other sixteen spheres.

The essence of celestial space consists in being empty or devoid of things; otherwise, if it were a thing occupying space, it could not be a spacious expanse. Similar to the essence of celestial space, the essence of luminous consciousness consists in being empty or devoid of senses, objects and perceptions.

Although the essence of luminous consciousness is empty of phenomena, they continue to appear in its spacious expanse. In fact, the nature of luminous consciousness is cognitive clarity, which shines unceasingly like the sun illuminating both space and phenomena with its rays.

As long as the conditions of their manifestation are there, phenomena continue to appear; therefore, the problem of suffering is not due to the phenomena appearing, but to one's identification with them. By believing that one is or possesses the phenomena, one becomes trapped in the birth-death cycle of *samsāra*.

(5) There is no ignorance and there is no dissolution of ignorance [etc.] up to no old age and death and no dissolution of old age and death; there are no suffering, origination, cessation and path; there is no knowledge and there is no attainment.

The *samsāra* cycle of birth and death is characterized by twelve causes (*nidāna*), which are concatenated like links of a chain in a process of "dependent origination" (*pratītya-samutpāda*).

Tibetan Buddhist iconography symbolically depicts the twelve causes in the outer circle of the "wheel of existence" (*bhavacakra*) topped by the figure of Yama, the "judge of the dead."³³

1) The original cause of *samsāra* is ignorance (*avidyā*), the absence of awareness of one's true nature: a blind old person in need of help.

2) Because of ignorance, the impulses (*samskāra*) of positive and negative actions are created: a potter working at the potter's wheel, shaping future existences.

3) Because of the accumulated karmic impulses, in the intermediate state after death (*antarā-bhava*) appears the consciousness (*vijñāna*) projected toward rebirth: a monkey jumping from tree to tree, reaping the fruits of the karmic impulses.

4) Because of the descent of consciousness into the womb, a new psychophysical organism, "name-form" (*nāma-rūpa*), is born in *sam-sāra*: two babies in a boat.

5) Because of the birth of the psychophysical organism, the six internal sensory bases (*ṣaḍ-āyatana*) develop: a tall building with windows.

6) Because of the development of the six senses, contact (*sparśa*) arises between the sensory organs and objects: two bodies clasped in amorous embrace.

7) Because of the contact between the sensory organs and objects, sensation (*vedanā*) is produced, which is initially pleasant, but later becomes a source of pain: an arrow in the eye.

8) Because of the pleasurable feeling, thirst (*trṣṇā*) for sensory experiences is generated: a mug of beer offered by a woman.

³³ The figure of Yama is a representation of the entities that control and exploit the process of reincarnation; the Buddha called them Māra, "Death."

9) Because of satisfied thirst, attachment (*upādāna*) to pleasurable experiences arises: a woman picking fruit from a tree.

10) Because of attachment to pleasurable experiences, existence (*bhava*) develops, characterized by actions that will bear fruit in future lives: coition.

11) Because of the positive and negative actions of the previous existence, the next birth (*jāti*) appears: a woman giving birth.

12) Because of birth, death is inevitable, often preceded by the decay of old age (*jarā-maraṇa*): the corpse wrapped in a cloth is taken to the place of the "celestial burial."

Indeed, both the twelve causes of *saṃsāra* and their cessation in *nirvāṇa* are only illusive events, comparable to dreams; however, by not recognizing the illusory nature of all phenomena, one continues to suffer from birth to death, life after life.

According to the notion of reincarnation popular in the Buddha's time, consciousness transmigrates from one body to another because of the actions performed. By superficially reading the Buddhist sources that mention consciousness descending into the womb, for example the *Mahānidāna Sutta*,³⁴ one might think that Śākyamuni also corroborated the same belief. It seems that already in the Buddha's time this conviction was widespread.

In fact, Sāti, "son of the fisherman," a monk who was a disciple of the Buddha, used to say: "Just as I understand the Dharma taught by the Venerable One, it is this same consciousness, not another, that wanders through the cycles of births."³⁵ But when the Master learned of this, he had him summoned and asked him what he thought was the consciousness subject to reincarnation. Sāti replied: "Venerable, it is that which speaks and experiences here and there; it experiences the effects of good and bad deeds."

Sāti's conviction seems to be the same of those who, even today, believe in reincarnation: one's consciousness is the being that transmigrates from one body to another, so it is always the same entity in different

³⁴ *Dīgha Nikāya* 15. See Piya Tan, "Mahānidāna Sutta," [SD 5.17](#), p. 175. Concerning the various exposures and interpretation of dependent origination, see Piya Tan, "Dependent arising," [SD 5.16](#).

³⁵ *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 38)*. Cf. Piya Tan, "Mahā Taṇhāsankhaya Sutta," [SD 7.10](#), p. 187.

bodies, the one that experiences the consequences of the positive and negative actions it has performed in the different existences it has lived.

Even the vast majority of Buddhists would agree with Sāti, not knowing that the Buddha's position regarding reincarnation was quite different. His reply is eloquent: "Misguided one, to whom have you ever known me to have taught the Dharma in that way? Misguided one, have I not stated in many ways that consciousness is dependently arisen; that without a condition there is no arising of consciousness?"³⁶

Consciousness in the intermediate state between death and rebirth is called *gandhabba* (Skr. *gandharva*), meaning "spirit." The *gandhabba* transports karmic baggage from one existence to another, thus conditioning the formation of a new psychophysical organism. The transmission of karmic impulses from the *gandhabba* to the new life is analogous to the transmission of fire from one lamp to another.³⁷ So, just as the flame of one lamp does not transfer to another lamp by lighting it, the *gandhabba* does not really transmigrate from one body to another. Although the *gandhabba* descends into the womb, it does not become the consciousness of the new life.

The consciousness present in the new body arises and develops in dependence on both the karmic impulses received from the *gandhabba* and the concomitant factors of perception, namely the sense organs and sensory objects; hence, it is inseparable from the mental body (*nāma-kāya*), which appears for the first time together with the new physical body (*rūpa-kāya*), just as the yolk is generated together with the eggshell.³⁸

One's current consciousness is not the consciousness of the *gandhabba* and it is not the consciousnesses of previous lives either, yet all these consciousnesses are so closely connected that they appear as one stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*). The connection between the different consciousnesses is determined by the karmic impulses transmitted from one to the other. They constitute the psychic inheritance, comparable to

³⁶ Piya Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

³⁷ See Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Part I, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 111 (III.5.5). This explanation is found in *Milindapañha*, a non-canonical but authoritative text consisting of a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (Menander I Soter) and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77 (II.2.8).

the biological inheritance, for example, of a mango tree that, thanks to one of its seeds, determines the birth of another mango tree.³⁹

If the consciousness of the current life is not an eternal self transmigrating from one body to another, how do we explain the fact that those who remember past existences perceive them as being experienced personally? That is due to unawareness of the true nature of consciousness, which is not identified with the contents of experience. Because of the unawareness of one's true nature, the mind believes to be not only the experiences of this life, but also the experiences of other existences that it possibly remembers.

It is true that the Buddha himself was able to remember his own previous lives, but he spoke of them as "his own" merely conventionally, for the purpose of communication. In reality, he no longer identified with them, although he knew that he had inherited their memories and karma through the "great being" (*mahāsattva*) who descended into his mother's womb.⁴⁰

In the Buddha's case, his psychophysical organism was the emanation (*nirmāṇakāya*) of a great bodhisattva free from *samsāra*; therefore, to call the descended bodhisattava *gandhabba*, "spirit," is improper.

The great being descended into the womb of Māyādevī, the Buddha's mother, to transmit his own experiences to the *nirmāṇakāya*; however, unlike a *gandhabba*, he did not remain attached to the physical body by falling asleep, but returned to the pure dimension from which he had descended.

Under the tree of enlightenment, the Buddha understood that the belief in an eternal self, who lives many lives doing negative and positive actions, is an illusion. The world is as impermanent as a bubble of air in the sea and as empty as a mirage of water in the desert. It is through this realization that one is freed from the clutches of Yama, the "king of death." The *Dhammapada* reads:

"Just as a bubble may be seen,
just as a faint mirage,

³⁹ Ibid., p. 120 (III.6.9).

⁴⁰ See Giuseppe Barotto, "The illusion of reincarnation," in Hans Thomas Hakl (ed.), *Octagon – The Quest for Wholeness* (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2016, Vol. 2), pp. 265-272 ([Zenodo](#)).

so should the world be viewed
that the Death-king sees one not."⁴¹

After the event of enlightenment, the Buddha went to Isipathana (Sārnāth), where he met the five monks who had been his companions in asceticism. They became the first disciples to whom he explained the "four noble truths."

The basic logic of the four noble truths is analogous to the medical logic of diagnosis, prognosis and treatment. Initially, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of the suffering, and then to identify its origin or cause, to see if there is a cure and, if there is, to follow it scrupulously until complete recovery.

"Birth is suffering. Old age is suffering. Sickness is suffering. Death is suffering. Union with what one does not love is suffering. Separation from what one loves is suffering. Not getting what one desires is suffering. In short, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering", thus taught the Buddha.⁴²

Then, what is the origin or cause of suffering? "It is the thirst that leads to rebirth, accompanied by pleasure and passion, seeking pleasure here and there, namely the thirst for sensory pleasures, the thirst for life and the thirst for annihilation."⁴³

Therefore, the definitive cessation of suffering is possible through the "complete dissolution and extinction of that very thirst, abandoning it, letting it go, freeing oneself from it, detaching oneself from it."⁴⁴

The path that leads to the cessation of suffering is "this noble eight-fold path, namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right attention and right concentration."⁴⁵

The heart of the right view is the understanding of the emptiness of the five aggregates and, therefore, of all the phenomena of one's psycho-

⁴¹ *Dhammapada* 170 (13.3). Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero, *Treasury of Truth: The Illustrated Dhammapada* (Taipei: Buddha Dharma Education Association, 1993), pp. 722-724.

⁴² *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 56.11). See Pia Tan (tr.), "Dhammacakka Pavattana Sutta," [SD 1.1](#), pp. 39-40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

physical experience. This means that even the twelve causes of dependent origination are empty of oneself, in that they are not really oneself.

The first cause of *samsāra* is ignorance, comparable to sleep; all remaining causes, up to old age and death, are similar to dreams.

The positive and negative impulses of previous lives are no more real than another person's dreams. The consciousness that believes it can return to life in a new body is no more real than the personality of another dreamer.

Birth, the development of the five physical senses and the mental sense, sensory contacts, sensations, longings, attachments and life activities are all events experienced as one's own dreams, believing in one's identity as a dreamer.

Since delusion does not cease with death, the attachment to the false self, created by one's identification with positive and negative experiences, results in the search for a rebirth. But the consciousness that is not aware of its true nature and desires to be reborn ends up falling asleep in the deep unconscious of the new body, conditioning with its karmic impulses the new consciousness, which is oblivious to the received inheritance. Thus, existence continues until the inevitable conclusion. Even death is experienced as a dream mistaken for reality.

If the twelve causes of *samsāra* are no more real than ordinary sleep with dreams, the quest for their dissolution is also unreal. Those who believe they must dissolve them one after another are deceiving themselves, similarly to a dreamer trying to extinguish the fire blazing in the house where he or she is dreaming of living.

The suffering endured in a dream is not real, so there is no need to search for its cause in the events of the dream in order to wake up. Even if the suffering ceased, having extinguished its cause in the dream, it would be just another dream experience.

In the dream of *samsāra* there are really no suffering, origination, cessation and path, because the person who identifies with suffering and strenuously seeks its cessation is as nonexistent as the dreamer. So, there is no real knowledge of the four noble truths and there is no real attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

In order to awaken, only one thing is needed: to detach attention from dream perceptions and turn it to oneself, to the true nature of consciousness that transcend the dreamer. When one regains self-awareness,

awareness of one's real self, the suffering of becoming in *samsāra* dissolves by itself, naturally, along with its cause.

The moment the dream ends, there is no doubt about the illusory nature of the oneiric experiences: in the empty essence of luminous consciousness "there are no suffering, origination, cessation and path; there is no knowledge and there is no attainment."

III. FINAL SECTION

(6) Therefore, O Śāriputra, since there is no attainment, the bodhisattva, relying on transcendent wisdom, remains without any obscuration of consciousness. As there is no obscuration of consciousness, he is not afraid; having completely transcended the erroneous conceptions, he has *nirvāṇa* as his accomplishment.

Luminous consciousness is not something to be attained, because it is already present as the true nature of one's consciousness. Therefore, the bodhisattva who relies on transcendent wisdom, that is, the recognition of luminous consciousness, remains in the imperturbable state that transcends the hope of attaining it and the fear of not attaining it. There is no obscuration of consciousness there: no afflictions, such as longing, hatred and ignorance, and also no cognitive hindrances, such as some erroneous notion of reality.

One who recognizes the source of light is not afraid of either the reflections of *samsāra* or their disappearance in the emptiness of *nirvāṇa*. By understanding that the true nature of consciousness is not an eternal self that is reborn countless times, nor is it a mind that dies along with the body, the erroneous conceptions of eternalism and nihilism are transcended completely.

Having completely transcended the erroneous conceptions of eternalism and nihilism, the bodhisattva has *nirvāṇa* as his or her own actual accomplishment; in other words, *nirvāṇa* is no longer a goal, but is the stable condition of luminous consciousness, here and now. Paradoxically, this attainment is a non-attainment. In fact, by awakening to one's true nature, one does not obtain anything new. What do we get when we wake up from sleep?

According to the gradualist doctrine of *mahāyāna*, the attainment of ultimate *nirvāṇa* characterizes the final path of accomplishment (*niṣṭhā-mārga*), the fifth, which is reached after walking four gradual paths: the path of accumulation (*sambhāra-mārga*), the path of application or connection (*prayoga-mārga*), the path of vision (*darśana-mārga*) and the path of meditation (*bhāvanā-mārga*).⁴⁶

In order to reach the path of accomplishment, where there is no more training (*asaikṣa*), it is necessary to walk the four gradual paths by being reborn a countless number of times, always having the motivation to become a buddha for the benefit of all beings.

But the bodhisattva who is able to recognize the true nature of consciousness, thanks to the subitist doctrine taught here, does not have to walk the four gradual paths at all. His or her path is solely the final one, which is not a path to be walked: it is the one path of sudden enlightenment.

The great bodhisattva, one who truly understands what *nirvāṇa* really is, lives only one human life, even though he or she may have inherited the memories of other lives; however, his or her benefit to beings in *samsāra* immensely outweighs that of a bodhisattva who believes he or she must reincarnate countless times. In fact, the greatest merit of a bodhisattva consists precisely in recognizing the emptiness of the world and becoming free from the illusion of *samsāra* for the benefit of all beings.

(7) All buddhas dwelling in the three times, relying on transcendent wisdom have fully awakened to supreme, true, full enlightenment.

All enlightened beings, in whatever time they manifest, past, present or future, have relied on transcendent wisdom and, through it, have fully awakened (*sambuddha*) to the true nature of consciousness.

The spiritual body (*dharmakāya*) of all buddhas is luminous consciousness, the heart of enlightenment (*bodhi*). Therefore, by recognizing the true nature of consciousness, all buddhas have awakened to supreme, true, full enlightenment (*sambodhi*).

⁴⁶ Cf. Gampopa, *Ornament of Precious Liberation* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2017), pp. 247-251.

Because this is the ultimate *nirvāṇa*, Avalokiteśvara is not simply a bodhisattva, intent on walking the path of enlightenment for the benefit of all beings: Avalokiteśvara is already a buddha.

Indeed, from a deeper point of view, Avalokiteśvara personifies the very matrix of the tathāgatas, the buddha nature present in all beings. This is also the real sense of the representation of Avalokiteśvara with a thousand open arms and a thousand bright eyes, one in each palm: the infinite beings of *saṃsāra* are embraced equally by the compassionate glance of their true original face.

(8) Therefore, the great mantra of transcendent wisdom, the great mantra of knowledge, the supreme mantra, the unequalled mantra, which relieves all suffering, should be considered true, because it is not false. The mantra spoken in transcendent wisdom is thus: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*. The Heart of Transcendent Wisdom is concluded.

The concluding section ends with the enunciation of the "great mantra" of transcendent wisdom. It is the "great mantra of knowledge,"⁴⁷ because it summarizes the secret, magic meaning of the text in a few powerful words; it is the "supreme mantra," since the teaching of transcendent wisdom is unsurpassed; and it is the "unequalled mantra," having immense healing power, which relieves all suffering by erasing its actual cause.

This mantra should be considered true, authentic, because it is not false or illusory like mantras that do not really serve to achieve liberation from *saṃsāra*. Although it is not found in the canonical sources, it is nevertheless spoken or communicated in the tradition of transcendent wisdom attested here.⁴⁸

Just as mantras are commonly used to achieve difficult or seemingly impossible goals in a short time, even instantly, the mantra of transcendent wisdom enables one to achieve in this very lifetime a goal that would

⁴⁷ In this context the term "knowledge" (*vidyā*) refers to an esoteric science or lore. In *vajrayāna* literature it is often used intending a "magical formula," therefore the expression *vidyā-mantra* also recurs with the same meaning as *vidyā*.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jan Nattier, *op. cit.*, pp. 177, 211 n. 52; John R. McRae, "Ch'an Commentaries on the Heart Sūtra," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 11.2, 1988, p. 107 n. 10.

otherwise require many lifetimes. The effectiveness of this mantra, however, does not depend on its repetition, but on the actual understanding of its sense, which is not at all obvious.⁴⁹

Unlike the Tibetan canonical version of the text, the Chinese version excludes from the mantra both the Sanskrit word *tadyathā*, here translated as "is thus," and the initial syllable *om*. The latter is also not attested in the Sanskrit versions.

Formally, the mantra appears to be an invocation addressed to the female deity who personifies transcendent wisdom: "O gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond. Enlightenment. Hail!"

The deity Transcendent Wisdom is female since that is the gender of the Sanskrit word *prajñā*, "wisdom." Her essential quality or condition is that of being transcendent (*pāramitā*), because she has "gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond."

Transcendent Wisdom has "gone" (*gate*)⁵⁰ to the end of the path of accumulation (*sambhāra-mārga*) and she has also "gone" (*gate*) to the end of the path of application (*prayoga-mārga*), the first two paths travelled by ordinary people who aspire to become bodhisattvas. These paths include everything that is preparatory to the actual understanding of the Buddha's four noble truths.

Transcendent Wisdom has "gone beyond" (*pāra-gate*), to the end of the third path, that of vision (*darśana-mārga*), where for the first time one understands the real meaning of the four noble truths. This first vision of *nirvāṇa* is beyond the experience of ordinary people and is instead specific to noble bodhisattvas who have reached the first of ten levels.

Transcendent Wisdom has "gone completely beyond" (*pāra-sam-gate*), to the end of the path of meditation (*bhāvanā-mārga*), through which bodhisattvas cultivate the vision of *nirvāṇa* by following the noble eightfold path from the second to the tenth level. The conclusion of this path is the meditative stability called "adamantine concentration" (*vajropama-samādhi*).

Transcendent Wisdom is true awareness, the enlightenment (*bodhi*) realized on the path of accomplishment (*niṣṭhā-mārga*), where there is

⁴⁹ Cf. Donald S. Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 110-111, 157, 165, 183-184, 209 n. 6; *Elaboration on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 171, 201.

⁵⁰ *Gate* is pronounced "ga-tay" with the accent on the second syllable.

no further spiritual training. Although there is no deliberate training in the noble eightfold path, its qualities are nevertheless present naturally, without striving to search for them actively; therefore, the qualities of the other five *pāramitā* are also present naturally, without having to gain them strenuously. All aspects of the Buddhist disciplines, both *sūtras* and *tantras*, are included in transcendent wisdom, without having to practice them purposefully.

The concluding word *svāhā*, "hail," appears in Vedic mantras as a propitiatory greeting addressed to the deities, so that rituals dedicated to them may be successful. In the specific Buddhist context, it expresses the deep and firm confidence that arises from the encounter in one's heart with the divine Transcendent Wisdom, recognized as the original enlightenment that is the true nature of one's consciousness.

Through this mantra one should understand or remember that one's self-awareness is the same awareness of all buddhas. By recognizing luminous consciousness here and now, both negative and positive karmic ties can loosen quickly, even instantly, in a natural way. Therefore, to achieve full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, it is not necessary to walk the gradual paths by being reborn innumerable times. The mantra of divine Transcendent Wisdom is the supreme means of sudden enlightenment.

The secret meaning of the text, indicated by the mantra, is that Transcendent Wisdom, the enlightenment present from the beginning in all beings, has already "gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond" all the gradual paths. If not, it would not be possible to realize liberation from *samsāra* even after countless eons of spiritual practice.

The final sentence marks the end of the text: "The Heart of Transcendent Wisdom is concluded." But, at this point, some readers might still wonder what they have to do, practically speaking, to recognize luminous consciousness.

The great Chinese master Hsu-yun/Xūyún (1840-1959) taught thus: "you should unremittingly and one-pointedly turn the light inwards on 'that which is not born and does not die' [...]. To turn inwards' is 'to turn back'. 'That which is not born and does not die' is nothing but the self-nature."⁵¹

⁵¹ Lu K'uan Yü (Charles Luk), *Ch'an and Zen Teachings* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1970), p. 41. The expression "self-nature" translates the Chinese *zìxìng*, which renders the Sanskrit *svabhāva*.



Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara
Ink on paper by Robert Beer - Courtesy of Wisdom Publications



The wheel of existence (*bhavacakra*)

APPENDIX

I. TRANSLITERATION OF THE SANSKRIT TEXT

PRAJÑĀPĀRĀMITĀHRDAYA

(1) *Āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo gambhīrām prajñāpāramitācaryām caramāṇo vyavalokayatisma pañcaskandhāmstāmśca svabhāvaśūnyān paśyatisma.*

(2) *Iha śāriputra rūpam śūnyam, śūnyataiva rūpam. Rūpāna prthak śūnyatā, śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpam. Evam eva vedanāsamjñāsamskāravijñānam.*

(3) *Iha śāriputra sarvadharmāḥ śūnyatālakṣaṇā anutpannā aniruddhā amalā avimalā anūnā aparipūrṇāḥ.*

(4) *Tasmācchāriputra śūnyatāyām na rūpam, na vedanā, na samjñā, na saṃskārāḥ, na vijñānam. Na cakṣuḥśrotraghrāṇajihvākāyamanāmsi. Na rūpaśabdagandharasaspraśṭavyadharmāḥ. Na cakṣurdhātur yāvanna manovijñānadhātuḥ.*

(5) *Nāvidyā nāvidyākṣayo yāvanna jarāmaraṇam na jarāmaraṇakṣayo na duḥkhasamudayanirodhamārgā na jñānam na prāptiḥ.*

(6) *Tasmācchāriputra aprāptitvād bodhisattvaḥ prajñāpāramitāmāśrītya viharatyacittāvaraṇaḥ, cittāvaraṇanāstitvād atrasto viparyāsātīkrānto niṣṭhānirvāṇaḥ.*

(7) *Tryadhvavyavasthitāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ prajñāpāramitāmāśrītyānuttarām samyaksambodhimabhisambuddhāḥ.*

(8) *Tasmājjñātavyaḥ prajñāpāramitāmahāmanthro mahāvidyāmanthro'nuttaramantro'samasamantraḥ sarvaduḥkhapraśamanaḥ satyamamithyatvāt, prajñāpāramitāyām ukto mantraḥ, tadyathā gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā. Prajñāpāramitāhrdayam samāptam.*

II. TRANSLATION OF THE SANSKRIT TEXT INTO TIBETAN

༄༅། །རྒྱ་གར་སྐད་དུ། བ་རྫོང་ལྷ་རམི་ཏུ་རྩི་དཔ། །

rgya gar skad du/ pra dz+nyA pA ra mi tA hr-i da ya//

བོད་སྐད་དུ། ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པའི་སྤྱིང་པོ། །

bod skad du/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po//

འཕགས་པ་སྤྱན་རས་གཟིགས་དབང་ཕྱག་བྱང་རྒྱལ་སེམས་དཔལ་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པའི་སྤྱིང་པ་ཟབ་
མོ་སྤྱད་པའི་ཚེ། བྱང་པོ་ལྷ་ལ་རྣམ་པར་གཟིགས་ཤིང་། དེ་དག་ལ་རང་བཞིན་གྱིས་སྤོང་པར་བལྟས་སོ། །

[1] *'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug byang chub sems dpas
shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i spyod pa zab mo spyad pa'i tshe/
phung po lnga la rnam par gzigs shing/ de dag la rang bzhin gyis stong
par bltas so//*

ལྷ་རིའི་བུ་འདི་ལ་གཟུགས་སྤོང་པ་དང་། སྤོང་པ་ཉིད་ཀྱང་གཟུགས་སོ། །གཟུགས་ལས་སྤོང་པ་ཉིད་གཞན་མ་
ཡིན། སྤོང་པ་ཉིད་ལས་ཀྱང་གཟུགས་གཞན་མ་ཡིན་ནོ། །དེ་བཞིན་དུ་ཚོར་བ་དང་། འདུ་ཤེས་དང་། འདུ་བྱེད་
དང་། རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ་ལོ། །

[2] *shA ri'i bu 'di la gzugs stong pa dang/ stong pa nyid kyang gzugs
so/ /gzugs las stong pa nyid gzhan ma yin/ stong pa nyid las kyang gzugs
gzhan ma yin no/ /de bzhin du tshor ba dang/ 'du shes dang/ 'du byed
dang/ rnam par shes pa'o//*

ལྷ་རིའི་བུ་འདི་ལ་ཚོས་ཐམས་ཅད་སྤོང་པ་ཉིད་ཀྱི་མཚན་མ་སྟེ། སྐྱེ་བ་མེད་པ། འགག་པ་མེད་པ། རི་མ་མེད་
པ། རི་མ་དང་བྲལ་བ་མེད་པ། སྲིབ་མེད་པ། གང་བ་མེད་པ་ལོ། །

[3] *shA ri'i bu 'di la chos thams cad stong pa nyid kyi mtshan ma ste/ skye ba med pa/ 'gag pa med pa/ dri ma med pa/ dri ma dang bral ba med pa/ bri ba med pa/ gang ba med pa'o//*

ལྷ་རིའི་བྱ་དེ་ལྟ་བུ་བས་ན་སྟོང་པ་ཉིད་ལ་གཟུགས་མེད། ཚོར་བ་མེད། འདུ་ཤེས་མེད། འདུ་བྱེད་རྣམས་
མེད། རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པ་མེད་དོ། །མིག་དང་། རྣ་བ་དང་། ལྷ་དང་། ལྷེ་དང་། ལུས་དང་། ཡིད་མེད་
དོ། །གཟུགས་དང་། སྐྱ་དང་། རི་དང་། རོ་དང་། རེག་བྱ་དང་། ཚོས་མེད་དོ། །མིག་གི་ཁམས་མེད་པ་
ནས། ཡིད་ཀྱི་རྣམ་པར་ཤེས་པའི་ཁམས་ཀྱི་བར་དུ་ཡང་མེད་དོ། །

[4] *shA ri'i bu de lta bas na stong pa nyid la gzugs med/ tshor ba med/ 'du shes med/ 'du byed rnams med/ rnam par shes pa med do/ /mig dang/ rna ba dang/ sna dang/ lce dang/ lus med/ yid med do/ /gzugs dang/ sgra dang/ dri dang/ ro dang/ reg bya dang/ chos med do/ /mig gi khams med pa nas/ yid kyi rnam par shes pa'i khams kyi bar du yang med do//*

མ་རིག་པ་མེད་དང་། མ་རིག་པ་ཟད་པ་མེད་པ་ནས། སྐ་ཤི་མེད་དང་། སྐ་ཤི་ཟད་པའི་བར་དུ་ཡང་མེད་
དོ། །སྐྱག་བསྐལ་བ་དང་། ཀུན་འབྱུང་བ་དང་། འགོག་པ་དང་། ལམ་མེད། ཡེ་ཤེས་མེད་དང་། ཐོབ་པ་ཡང་
མེད་དོ། །

[5] *ma rig pa med dang/ ma rig pa zad pa med pa nas/ rga shi med dang/ rga shi zad pa'i bar du yang med do/ /sdug bsngal ba dang/ kun 'byung ba dang/ 'gog pa dang/ lam med/ ye shes med dang/ thob pa yang med do//*

ལྷ་རིའི་བྱ་དེ་ལྟ་བུ་བས་ན་བྱང་རྒྱབ་སེམས་དཔའ་ཐོབ་པ་མེད་པའི་ཕྱིར། ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པ་ལ་བརྟེན་
ནས། སེམས་ཀྱི་སྐྱིབ་པ་མེད་པར་གནས་ཏེ། སེམས་ཀྱི་སྐྱིབ་པ་མེད་པས། སྐྱག་པ་མེད་དེ། ཕྱིན་ཅི་ལོག་ལས་
ཤིན་ཏུ་འདས་ནས། མཐར་ཕྱིན་པའི་མུ་དན་ལས་འདས་པ་དང་ལྡན་པའོ། །

[6] *shA ri'i bu de lta bas na byang chub sems dpa' thob pa med pa'i phyir/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa la brten nas/ sems kyi sgrib pa*

*med par gnas te/ sems kyi sgrib pa med pas/ skrag pa med de/ phyin ci
log las shin tu 'das nas/ mthar phyin pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa dang ldan
pa'o//*

དུས་གསུམ་དུ་རྣམ་པར་བཞུགས་པའི་སངས་རྒྱུས་ཐམས་ཅད་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་དུ་བྱིན་པ་ལ་བརྟེན་
ནས། ལྷ་ན་མེད་པ་ཡང་དག་པར་རྫོགས་པའི་བྱང་རྒྱལ་དུ་མངོན་པར་རྫོགས་པར་སངས་རྒྱུས་སོ། །

[7] *dus gsum du rnam par bzhugs pa'i sangs rgyas thams cad shes
rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa la brten nas/ bla na med pa yang dag par
rdzogs pa'i byang chub tu mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas so//*

དེ་ལྟ་བུས་ན་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་དུ་བྱིན་པའི་སྲུགས་ཆེན་པོ། རིག་སྲུགས་ཆེན་པོ། ལྷ་ན་མེད་པའི་
སྲུགས། མི་མཉམ་པ་དང་མཉམ་པའི་སྲུགས། སྲུག་བསྲུལ་ཐམས་ཅད་རབ་དུ་ཞི་བར་བྱེད་པ། མི་རྩོད་པས་ན་
བདེན་པར་ཤེས་པར་བྱ་སྟེ། ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་དུ་བྱིན་པ་ལ་སྦྱས་པའི་སྲུགས་ནི། འདི་ལྟ་སྟེ། ག་ཏེ་ག་ཏེ་སྤར་
ག་ཏེ་སྤར་སྤོ་ག་ཏེ་བོ་རྟི་སྤར་སྤོ། ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་དུ་བྱིན་པའི་སྦྱིང་པོ་རྫོགས་སོ། །།

[8] *de lta bas na shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i sngags chen po/
rig sngags chen po/ bla na med pa'i sngags/ mi mnyam pa dang mnyam
pa'i sngags/ sdug bsngal thams cad rab tu zhi bar byed pa/ mi rdzun pas
na bden par shes par bya ste/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa la smras
pa'i sngags ni/ 'di lta ste/ ga te ga te pA ra ga te pA ra saM ga te bo dhi
swA hA/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po rdzogs so//*