

# THE SHORE IS BEHIND YOU

A Brief Elaboration of the  
Heart Sutra




般若波羅蜜多心經 觀自在菩薩行深般若波羅蜜  
多時照見五蘊皆空度一切苦厄舍利子色不異空空  
不異空空即是空空即是空受想行識六復如是舍利  
子是諸法空相不生不滅不垢不淨不增不減是故空中  
無色無受想行識無眼耳鼻舌身意無色聲香味  
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至無老死二無老死盡無苦集滅道無智六無得已  
無所得故菩提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故心無罣礙無  
罣礙故無有恐怖遠離顛倒夢想究竟涅槃三世諸佛  
依般若波羅蜜多故得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提故知般若  
波羅蜜多是大神呪是大明呪是無上呪是無等等呪能  
除一切苦真實不虛故說般若波羅蜜多呪即說呪曰  
揭諦揭諦 般若揭諦 般若僧揭諦 菩提薩婆呵

集王羲之般若波羅蜜多心經 庚子年桐嶺敬書





**“The sea of  
suffering is limitless,  
you need  
only turn back to see  
the shore”**

The physical body, feelings,  
the three poisons and delusions constitute  
the sea of suffering, from which we can  
distance as long as we abide in our mindful  
awareness and reflect deeply  
on these four elements. 

## Preface

The Heart Sutra (*Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra* in Sanskrit), a 260-character condensation in its Chinese version, originates from the *Mahaprajna-paramita-sutra*, which has 600 volumes. Among the many Chinese translations, the more popular ones are the *Mahaprajnaparamita-six syllable charm-sutra* translated by Kumarajiva during the Eastern Jin/Later Qin period, and the *Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra* translated by Master Xuan Zang of the Tang Dynasty. This book is a commentary of Xuan Zang's translation of the *Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra*.

“Do no evil  
Practise all wholesome deeds  
Purify one's own mind  
This is the teaching of all Buddhas”

The above is a simple and concise encapsulation of Buddha's teaching. Based on this description, it is not difficult to find that different Buddhist scriptures have different starting points. Those emphasising “do no evil, practise all wholesome deeds” use precepts as the starting point, building on the concept of “distinctly differentiating between evil and wholesome deeds, and performing wholesome deeds and doing no evil”. Those emphasising “purify one's own mind” use concentration and wisdom as starting points. In concentration, purity is attained through the maintenance of mindful awareness, whereas in wisdom, it is attained by discerning and transcending evil and virtue. The Heart Sutra belongs to the category of scriptures that emphasise “purify one's own mind”, and uses concentration and wisdom as starting points.

Generally, scriptures are written for one or both of the purposes of imparting knowledge and teaching the methods of practice. The *Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra* meets these two objectives. The sutra imparts the knowledge that while both our mind and body exist, at the same time, they are “empty of self-existence” (while they exist in form, there is no real substance in their existence). Its method of practice is to live in our awareness, watching and thinking about the five aggregates, and realise that they are empty of self-existence. This book attempts to explain the *Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra* along this line of thinking.

The writing of this book is not for the purpose of academic discussion, neither is it intended for the spawning of debates. It explores the practical aspects of the sutra with the view of uncovering an approach to the method of practice.

Finally, may I present this book to all fellow learners for mutual encouragement in the journey of learning the Dharma.

## Shi Faliang

The fifth day of the tenth month of Jiawu year (2014)  
of the lunar calendar (农历甲午年十月初五日)



## **Preface by Translator**

In translating Buddhist literature, one often faces the difficult choices of whether to adhere closely to the author's original format of presentation or express the words in a different style for easy reading. The former method, while faithful to the original text, can make the translated work long-winded, sometimes even involving awkward sentence structures. This is because many Buddhist literature tends to employ the technique of repetition to bring forth an idea or give emphasis to it, so as to deeply ingrain it in the readers' mind. On the other hand, the latter approach, while facilitating easier reading, runs the risk of losing some flavour of the original text, or missing certain emphases that the author took great pains to instill.

In translating "The Shore is Behind You", I have taken the liberty to, as far as possible, preserve the textual and sentence arrangement of the original text. This is also the wish of the author.

**Goh Chin Ee**



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# The Heart Sutra

## (Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra)

(Translated into Chinese by the Tang Master of Tripitaka Xuan Zang)

The noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, while practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita, looked upon the five aggregates and realised that they were empty of self-existence, thus overcoming all suffering. Shariputra, form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form; form is emptiness, emptiness is form. The same holds for feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness in form, there is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction. Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no volition and no consciousness. No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind. No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch and no thought. No realm of sight and so forth, up to no realm of mind consciousness. No ignorance and no ending of ignorance; no ageing and death, and no ending of ageing and death. No suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering. No wisdom and no attainment. Therefore, without attainment, Bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and live without worries. Without worries, hence without fear and removed from delusions and dreams, they realise nirvana. All Buddhas of the three times also take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and realise Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Therefore we know that Prajnaparamita is the mantra of great power, the mantra of great brightness, the unexcelled mantra, the equal to the unequalled mantra, which can end all suffering and is true. Therefore the Prajnaparamita mantra is spoken thus: "Gate Gate, Paragate, Parasangate, Bodhi Svaha."

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多時照見五蘊皆空度一切苦厄舍利子色不異空空  
不異色色即是空空即是色受想行識亦復如是舍利  
子是諸法空相不生不滅不垢不淨不增不減是故空中  
無色無受想行識無眼耳鼻舌身意無色聲香味  
觸法無眼界乃至無意識界無至明亦無無明盡乃  
至無老死亦無老死盡無苦集滅道無智亦無得亦  
無所得故菩提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故心無罣礙無  
罣礙故無有恐怖遠離顛倒夢想究竟涅槃三世諸佛  
依般若波羅蜜多故得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提故知般若  
波羅蜜多是大神呪是大明呪是無上呪是無等尊呪能  
除一切苦真實不虛故說般若波羅蜜多呪即說呪曰  
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# Outline of the Sutra

Essentially, there are two ways to practise Prajnaparamita (the wisdom to reach the other shore). The first method is to discover and stay in one's mindful awareness (a detailed explanation of this can be found in my earlier publication "*Present Moment*"), followed by practising insightful contemplation (watching and thinking). The other way is to practise insightful contemplation first, discover and stay in mindful awareness, and followed by further contemplation. The *Heart Sutra* essentially expounds on the first method, a practice built on the foundation of having found and maintained mindful awareness (right mindfulness). Thus, the Heart Sutra refers to practising the "deep" practice of Prajnaparamita.

## Practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita

**Maintain mindful awareness**  
(right mindfulness)

**Practise insightful contemplation**  
(right mindfulness and right wisdom)

Look upon  
the Five  
Aggregates

Form and emptiness are not separate entities (Form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form; form is emptiness, emptiness is form; the same holds for sensation, perception, volition and consciousness.)

The middle path right view (All things are emptiness in form, there is no birth or destruction, purity or defilement, increment or reduction.)

The wisdom of no attachment (In emptiness there is no five aggregates, no twelve sense bases, no eighteen realms, no twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, no four noble truths, and no knowledge and attainment.)

Prajnaparamita  
(Gate Gate, Paragate, Parasangate, Bodhi Svaha)

Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi

# Elucidation of the Title of the Sutra

Prajna means “wisdom” in Sanskrit. Paramita means “get to the other shore”. Hridaya (heart) can be interpreted in two ways. One takes on the meaning of “core”, i.e. Prajna is the core of the Dharma. The other means “the mind of sentient beings”, as liberation (of the mind) refers to a mind freed from the bondage of defilements. Thus it can be said that the “heart” is fundamental to the practising of Dharma. “Sutra” refers to the literature documenting Buddha’s teaching. Simply put, Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra means **“by working relentlessly on the mind, develop the wisdom to enable one to be freed from the ocean of suffering and reach the other shore of liberation”**.

# Explanation of the Sutra

The noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, while practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita, looked upon the five aggregates<sup>1</sup> and realised that they were empty of self-existence<sup>2</sup>, thus overcoming all suffering.

**“Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva”:** This refers to Bodhisattva Guanyin or those who achieve freedom of the mind by practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita. By extending this further, we can understand this as: “How can I achieve freedom of the mind through the practice of insightful contemplation?” By making this connection, it brings us closer to the Sutra, and also enhances the practical aspect of the Sutra, enabling us to free our mind from the bondage of our physical body while living in this world of suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Five aggregates: The five aggregates refer to the form aggregate, the feeling aggregate, the perception aggregate, the volition aggregate and the consciousness aggregate. “Aggregate” has the meanings of cumulating and categorising. (Ref: *Pancha Skandhaka Vaipulya Shastra*)

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the five aggregates, Vol. 27 of the *Ekottarika-agama* provides the following metaphor: “Form is like foam, feeling is like bubbles, perception is like wild horses, volition is like banana stems and consciousness is like illusions.” In addition, in Vol.12 of the *Vaipulya-mahavyuha-sutra*, Buddha said to King Bimbisara, “Your Majesty, form is impermanent, it is suffering, emptiness as well as no-self; so are feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. Like the accumulation of foam, form cannot be picked up; like bubbles, feeling does not persist; like banana stems, volition does not have a solid core; like dreams, perception is illusory; and like fantasies, consciousness is delusory. The three realms are unreal and everything is impermanent.”

**“Practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita”:** This is to practise the deep practice of insightful contemplation that will enable us to reach the other shore. Here, the word “deep” is used in relation to the phrase “not deep”. The word “deep” has two meanings: one refers to practising insightful contemplation only after achieving deep concentration (the type of concentration in the realms of form and no-form)<sup>3</sup>, while the other refers to practising insightful contemplation only after attaining right mindfulness<sup>4</sup>. Both practices are “deep” contemplations (all explanations in this publication are based on the latter type of contemplation). The phrase “not deep” refers to practising contemplation without the bases of deep concentration and right mindfulness. “Prajnaparamita” refers to the Prajna (wisdom) that enables us to reach the other shore, and that is capable of watching with insight and seeing through everything.

**“Looked upon”:** In Buddhist practice, the reason for its emphasis on practising both concentration and contemplation is due to the fact that normal practitioners tend to favour practising concentration alone, leading to strong concentration but weak wisdom. Hence, it is necessary to practise “contemplation”

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<sup>3</sup> This method of practice, built on the foundation of deep concentration (the type of concentration in the realms of form and no-form), is the requirement for liberation through concentration and wisdom.

<sup>4</sup> This method of practice, built on the foundation of right mindfulness and without going into deep concentration (the type of concentration in the realms of form and no-form), is the requirement for liberation through wisdom.

once one has built the foundation of “concentration”. It is only through practising “contemplation” that one can attain in-depth wisdom. Simply put, the practising of “contemplation” is the union of watching (right mindfulness) and thinking (right wisdom). By watching and thinking, one “looks upon” and discovers the truth of the five aggregates being empty of self-existence.

**“The five aggregates”:** This consists of the form aggregate, feeling aggregate, perception aggregate, volition aggregate and consciousness aggregate. The form aggregate refers to our body, made up of the four elements – earth, water, fire and wind. The feeling aggregate refers to the sensations of pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling and neutral feeling. The perception aggregate refers to our thoughts, expressed through sound and sight, sound appears as spoken words in our mind and sight as pictures in our mind. The volition aggregate has 73 elements. However, it is afflictions that ties us down. Therefore, in practising insightful contemplation, we can start with dealing with the six basic afflictions of greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, doubt and improper views. The consciousness aggregate refers to the six consciousnesses of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Consciousness has the function of cognizing or knowing (mindful awareness).

**“Empty of self-existence (Emptiness)”:** “Sunya” in Sanskrit, emptiness refers to the concept that all things that exist do not have intrinsic existence, real existence, or self. (Mahayana Buddhism offers an abundance of interpretation



of emptiness, eighteen<sup>5</sup> in total. I would not go into details in elaborating all of them, except “functional emptiness” and “form emptiness”.) “Emptiness” does not mean nothingness. As the concept of “emptiness” makes sense only in relation to “being”, we need to understand the meaning of “being” before understanding “emptiness”. The broad definition of “being” refers to all things worldly, subdivided into those with form and those without form. In the narrow sense, “being”<sup>6</sup> refers to all sentient beings in this world. In either case, “being” cannot escape from the laws of impermanence, and causes and conditions. As it has no real substance, it is said to be empty of existence (emptiness). For this reason, the scriptures state that “impermanence is emptiness” and “Buddha said that all things arising from causes and conditions are empty in existence”. Therefore, the reference to “emptiness” does not imply that besides “being”, there exists something else called “emptiness”. Instead, the reference to “emptiness” can be made simultaneously with the existence of “being”. “Being” refers to the presence of something, whereas “emptiness” refers to the fact that its presence is without real substance. As there is no real existence of its intrinsic nature, it is said to be “empty of nature”. However, from the viewpoint of its appearance, it is a fact that it presents itself right in front of us. It will help if we view “empty of nature” from the viewpoint of

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5 Ref. Vol 31 of *Mahaprajnaparamita-shastra*.

6 Being: it refers to mortal existence in the desire, form and formless realms; it also refers to the sentient beings in the three realms.

external forms. This leads to the concept of “empty of form”. What it means is that all that we have seen as “being” are in fact impermanent, and they arise from causes and conditions. There is no real substance, hence they are “empty of form”<sup>7</sup>. If we examine from first principles, since the intrinsic nature is empty of existence, let alone the form. Thus, with the emptiness of intrinsic nature, all things are empty of existence.

How to “look upon the five aggregates and realise that they are empty of self-existence”?

The form aggregate is empty of existence: Be it in a state of keeping still or in motion, we maintain our state of right mindfulness (mindful awareness). The maintenance of right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration, and with which the power of insightful watching, which allows us to experience the detachment of awareness from our physical body at all times, such as during walking, standing, sitting down and lying down. We would realise that our awareness and our body are apart, as they are separate entities. Maintaining such insightful watching would lead to deep understanding of the fact that our body is a burden to us, as its existence forces upon us the compelling nature of impermanence (suffering); and that our body is unreal and without substance, is constantly changing due to impermanence in the life cycle of birth, ageing, sickness

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<sup>7</sup> Empty of form: all things have no real substance because they arise from causes and conditions. For example, a glass takes on a certain shape and certain colours because of our need, supported by the conditions of quartz sand, heat, conceptual design and the process of cooling. Thus it is “empty of form”.

and death, and constitutes a process of change from nothing to something and back to nothing. Thus, to “look upon the form aggregate and realise that it is empty of self-existence (no-self)” is to live in our awareness and, without thinking, recognise that emptiness is the constant change of our body due to impermanence.

The feeling aggregate is empty of existence: Be it in a state of keeping still or in motion, we maintain our state of right mindfulness (mindful awareness). The maintenance of right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration, and with which the power of insightful watching, which allows us to experience the detachment of awareness from our feeling at all times, such as during walking, standing, sitting down and lying down. We would realise that our awareness and our feeling are apart, as they are separate entities. Maintaining such insightful watching would lead to deep understanding of the fact that our feeling in the life cycle of birth, ageing, sickness and death is a burden to us, as its existence forces upon us the compelling nature of impermanence (suffering); and that our body is in reality unreal and without substance, is constantly changing due to impermanence in the life cycle of birth, ageing, sickness and death, and constitutes a process of change from nothing to something and back to nothing. Thus, to “look upon the feeling aggregate and realise that it is empty of self-existence (no-self)” is to live in our awareness and, without thinking, recognise that emptiness is the constant change of our feeling due to impermanence.

The perception aggregate is empty of existence: Be it in a state of keeping still or in motion, we maintain our state of right mindfulness (mindful awareness). The maintenance of right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration, and with which the power of insightful watching, which allows us to experience the detachment of awareness from our thoughts (the perception aggregate) at all times, such as during walking, standing, sitting down and lying down. We would realise that our awareness and our perception are apart, as they are separate entities. By continuing such insightful watching and as it strengthens, we would realise that our thoughts can vanish instantaneously. The changing of the thoughts from “being” (appear as words and pictures in our mind) to “nothingness” (the vanishing of words and pictures in our mind) shows that they are unreal and without substance, are constantly changing due to impermanence, and constitute a process of change from nothing to something and back to nothing. Thus, to “look upon the perception aggregate and realise that it is empty of self-existence (no-self)” is to live in our awareness and, without thinking, recognise that emptiness is the constant change of our thoughts due to impermanence.

The volition aggregate is empty of existence: Be it in a state of keeping still or in motion, we maintain our state of right mindfulness (mindful awareness). The maintenance of right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration, and with which the power of insightful watching, which allows us to experience the detachment of awareness from our six fundamental afflictions of greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance, doubt and improper

views (the volition aggregate) at all times, such as during walking, standing, sitting down and lying down. We would realise that our awareness and our volition are apart, as they are separate entities. By continuing such contemplation and with the strengthening of insightful watching, we would realise that our afflictions can vanish instantaneously. The changing of the afflictions from “being” (the emotions of greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance and doubt, and the concept of improper views) to “nothingness” (the vanishing of the emotions of greed, hatred, ignorance, arrogance and doubt, and the concept of improper views) shows that they are unreal and without substance, are constantly changing due to impermanence, and constitute a process of change from nothing to something and back to nothing. Thus, to “look upon the volition aggregate and realise that it is empty of self-existence (no-self)” is to live in our awareness and, without thinking, recognise that emptiness is the constant change of the volition aggregate due to impermanence.

The consciousness aggregate is empty of existence: Be it in a state of keeping still or in motion, we maintain our state of right mindfulness (mindful awareness) (right mindfulness is the cognizance function of the consciousness aggregate). The maintenance of right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration, and with which the power of insightful watching, which allows us to experience the detachment of awareness from our form aggregate, feeling aggregate, perception aggregate, and volition aggregate at all times, such as during walking, standing, sitting down and lying down. In other words,

a practitioner experiences the emptiness of the four aggregates of form, feeling, perception and volition, while maintaining the cognizance function of his consciousness aggregate. Furthermore, not only that the four aggregates are empty of existence, the consciousness aggregate functions between being and nothingness. Its existence is unreal and without real substance. It is empty of existence.

The consciousness aggregate, made up of six components – the eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and the mind consciousness, is the most delicate among the five aggregates. As the functioning of the six consciousnesses involve the six roots (our system of sensing organs), they could become weak when we are tired (especially during deep sleep, when we are unable to sense their existence). Thus, to “look upon the consciousness aggregate and realise that it is empty of self-existence (no-self)” is to watch the changes (from being to nothingness and from strong to weak, and vice versa) of the six consciousnesses due to impermanence, and realise that the cognizance function of the consciousness aggregate is without substance, and constitutes a process of change from nothing to something and back to nothing.

Now, we may face a bottleneck – since the cognizance function (mindful awareness) of the consciousness aggregate is without substance, do we still want to live in the state of cognizance (mindful awareness)? If we do, are we grasping yet another attachment? To resolve this paradox, we ought to return

to the fundamental definition of Buddha - a Buddha is someone who has awakened. With this definition, the following reasoning can be derived: "Although we live in the state of cognizance (mindful awareness), deep inside us we are not attached to it as we understand that cognizance (mindful awareness) is also impermanent and arises from causes and conditions. It is akin to someone who has achieved enlightenment needs not get rid of his body, but just not be attached to it because deep inside, he is fully aware that the body is impermanent, arises from causes and conditions, and empty of existence."

**"All suffering":** "Suffering" refers to its compelling nature. There are three types of suffering: the suffering of suffering, the suffering brought about by decay, and all-pervasive suffering.

The suffering of suffering refers to the compelling nature of suffering and the sensation of suffering that arises. For example, suffering is the fact that we are compelled to eat (as well as drink, defecate, urinate, sleep and breathe) for the continuation of our survival. This is the fundamental meaning of suffering and the truth of suffering (suffering as one of the four noble truths). Furthermore, when we are eating and unable to eat what we like, we would experience the feeling of unpleasantness, which is the sensation of suffering. Thus we say there is suffering of suffering.

The suffering brought about by decay refers to the compelling nature of suffering and the cessation of the sensation of joy and the emergence of the sensation of suffering. For example, suffering is the fact that we are compelled to eat


(as well as drink, defecate, urinate, sleep and breathe) for the continuation of our survival. This is the fundamental meaning of suffering and the truth of suffering (suffering as one of the four noble truths). Furthermore, when we are eating, there is the phenomenon of decaying as the initial temporary pleasant feeling of satisfaction from being able to eat what we like transforms into the unpleasant feeling caused by bloated stomach. Thus we say there is suffering brought about by decay.

All-pervasive suffering refers to the compelling nature of suffering and the sensation of suffering caused by changes due to the impermanence of things. For example, suffering is the fact that we are compelled to eat (as well as drink, defecate, urinate, sleep and breathe) for the continuation of our survival. This is the fundamental meaning of suffering and the truth of suffering (suffering as one of the four noble truths). Furthermore, when we are eating, in addition to the unpleasant feeling of suffering (suffering of suffering) and the decay of pleasant feeling (the suffering brought about by decay), as well as the feeling of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling. However, whichever type of these three suffering we are experiencing, we would not have a stable mind as we must face the changes due to the impermanence of birth, old age, sickness and death. Thus we say there is all-pervasive suffering.

In addition to the suffering of body and mind, "all suffering" includes all kinds of calamities in this world.



**“The noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, while practising the deep practice of Prajnaparamita, looked upon the five aggregates and realised that they were empty of self-existence, thus overcoming all suffering.”**

The insightful contemplation practised by Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is not the usual practice of contemplation, but the “deep” practice of Prajnaparamita. The usual practice of contemplation is based on the generation of thoughts. However, the deep practice of insightful contemplation referred to in the Heart Sutra is based on deep concentration or right mindfulness as the foundation. That is why it is able to look upon the five aggregates and realise that they are empty of self-existence, and because of that, relieve one from the suffering of the body and mind, and the suffering due to the calamities in this world. 

**Shariputra, form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form; form is emptiness, emptiness is form. The same holds for feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.**

**“Shariputra”:** Shariputra is one of Buddha’s ten disciples, known for his supreme wisdom.

**“Form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form”:** “Form” refers to the form aggregate, i.e. our body that is made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind. The essence of “emptiness” is that our body has no real substance and it is made up of earth, water, fire and wind. Why “form is no different from emptiness”? It is because “form” and “emptiness” do not exist as two separate entities. Why “emptiness is no different from form”? It is because “emptiness” does not exist separately from “form” as without “form”, “emptiness” becomes meaningless. These two phrases explain the theory that form and emptiness are not separate.

**“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form”:** Why is it stated that “form is emptiness”? As “form” refers to our body and “emptiness” also refers to our body, hence “form is emptiness.” The difference between “form” and “emptiness” is due to the way we define them. While the former is defined from the viewpoint of it being a form of matter, the latter is given the name based on the fact that all matters have no real

substance. Why is it said, “emptiness is form”? It is because the term “emptiness” is expressed in relation to “form”. Without “form”, “emptiness” becomes meaningless. This is akin to liberation in relation to the bondage of afflictions, as well as nirvana in relation to cyclical rebirths. Without the bondage of afflictions, liberation is meaningless. Similarly, without cyclical rebirths, there is no such thing as nirvana. Therefore, the expression “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” is in essence “being form, being emptiness” (i.e. emptiness exists at the same moment when form exists). A pertinent point here is that as all of us live with the concept of the attachment to “self”, we tend to comprehend the phrase “being form, being emptiness” as form and emptiness being the same thing, i.e. “form and emptiness are one”. The concept of “one” is an extension of the concept of “self” hidden in our consciousness. With the existence of “one” (self) comes the existence of “two”<sup>8</sup> (you and him). In fact, “form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form” and “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” both convey the same message – do not

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<sup>8</sup> “Two”: While “one” refers to a single entity, “two” refers to multiple entities. The five aggregates is neither “one” nor “two”, rather it is “not one, not two”. From the viewpoint of the Correct View of the Middle Path, it is “not one, not different”, i.e. it is neither a single entity nor multiple entities (“different” refers to taking on a dissimilar form, meaning multiple). The Correct View of the Middle Path is built on the concept of being removed from the two extremes, or opposing ends. Instead of confirming, its principle is to negate all the way. In other words, its confirmation is the negation of all that are of two extremes or at opposing ends. Buddha uses “no-self” to break our attachment to “self”. The development of this concept became “not one, not different” in the Correct View of the Middle Path in Mahayana Buddhism.

search for “emptiness” outside “form”, as “emptiness” does not exist separately; it merely puts across the point that the “form” that exists has no real substance. This is “the approach of non-duality”<sup>9</sup> as stated in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. This is illustrated in the following example:

A cup is a “form”. It is made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind<sup>10</sup>. However, as it has no real substance, it is also “emptiness”. Therefore, while the cup exists in its form, it is at the same time “emptiness”.

“Form” refers to the shape  
and colour of the cup. →

“Emptiness” refers to the fact that  
the cup has no real substance. →



“Form” and “emptiness” are not two separate entities – Form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form.

“Form” and “emptiness” are concurrent, the cup that exists in form is at the same time empty of existence in real substance – Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

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<sup>9</sup> “The approach of non-duality”: Ref. Chapter 9 on “The Approach of Non-duality” of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*.

<sup>10</sup> The four elements: They are the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind. The culture of ancient India reckons that all matters in this world are made up of these four elements. Today, we say that a glass is made up of quartz sand, pure alkali, feldspar and limestone, which turn into liquid upon being subjected to high temperatures. A glass is produced by working on the melted mixture and allowing it to cool.

**“The same holds for feeling, perception, volition and consciousness”:** This is an extension of the previous paragraphs on “form”. As for “sensation”, the full sentence should read as follows: “feeling is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from feeling; feeling is emptiness, emptiness is feeling”. “Feeling” refers to our feeling, and “emptiness” refers to the fact that feeling has no real substance. Why is it said that “feeling is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from feeling”? It is because “emptiness” does not exist outside “feeling”. The two are not separate, and they refer to the same feeling of ours. Why is it said that “feeling is emptiness, emptiness is feeling”? It is because “feeling” refers to our feeling, and “emptiness” also refers to our feeling. The difference between “feeling” and “emptiness” is due to the way we define our feeling. While the former is defined from the viewpoint of it being our sense of feeling, the latter is given the name based on the fact that our feeling has no real substance.

As for “perception”, the full sentence should read as follows: “perception is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from perception; perception is emptiness, emptiness is perception”. “Perception” refers to our thoughts, and “emptiness” refers to the fact that our thoughts have no real substance. Why is it said that “perception is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from perception”? It is because “emptiness” does not exist outside “perception”. The two are not separate, and they refer to the same thoughts of ours. Why is it said that “perception is emptiness, emptiness is perception”? It is because “perception” refers to our thoughts,

and “emptiness” also refers to our thoughts. The difference between “perception” and “emptiness” is due to the way we define our thoughts. While the former is defined from the viewpoint of it being our thoughts, the latter is given the name based on the fact that thoughts have no real substance.

As for “volition”, the full sentence should read as follows: “volition is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from volition; volition is emptiness, emptiness is volition”. “Volition” refers to our six basic afflictions, and “emptiness” refers to the fact that they have no real substance. Why is it said that “volition is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from volition”? It is because “emptiness” does not exist outside “volition”. The two are not separate, and they refer to the same afflictions of ours. Why it is said that “volition is emptiness, emptiness is volition”? It is because “volition” refers to our six fundamental afflictions, and “emptiness” also refers to the same afflictions. The difference between “volition” and “emptiness” is due to the way we define our afflictions. While the former is defined from the viewpoint of it being our afflictions, the latter is given the name based on the fact that afflictions have no real substance.

As for “consciousness”, the full sentence should read as follows: “consciousness is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from consciousness; consciousness is emptiness, emptiness is consciousness”. “Consciousness” refers to our six consciousnesses, and “emptiness” refers to the fact that they have no real substance. Why is it said that

“consciousness is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from consciousness”? It is because “emptiness” does not exist outside “consciousness”. The two are not separate, and they refer to the same six consciousnesses of ours. Why it is said that “consciousness is emptiness, emptiness is consciousness”? It is because “consciousness” refers to our six consciousnesses, and “emptiness” also refers to the six consciousnesses. The difference between “consciousness” and “emptiness” is due to the way we define our consciousness. While the former is defined from the viewpoint of it being our ability to discern, the latter is given the name based on the fact that the six consciousnesses have no real substance.

As in the case of “form”, while we realise that “feeling and emptiness are not two”, “perception and emptiness are not two”, “volition and emptiness are not two”, and “consciousness and emptiness are not two”, we must not have the concept of “feeling and emptiness are one”, “perception and emptiness are one”, “volition and emptiness are one”, as well as “consciousness and emptiness are one”. It is because once we begin with “one”, we will have the concept of “two”, a derivative of “self”. The concept of “one” give rise to the attachment of “self”. Instead of “no-self”, “self” comes about because of the existence of “one”. “One” brings about “being”, not “emptiness”.

**“Shariputra, form is no different from emptiness, emptiness is no different from form; form is emptiness, emptiness is form.**

**The same holds for feeling, perception, volition and consciousness.”**

“Form” does not exist separately from “emptiness”. Similarly, “emptiness” does not exist separately from “form”. “Form” and “emptiness” both refer to the same thing, as “emptiness” exists because of the existence of “form”. The same reasoning applies to feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. The emphasis here is that their existence has no real substance.





**Shariputra, all things are emptiness in form, there is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction.**

**“All dharmas are emptiness in form”:** “All dharmas” refer to all things in this world. “Emptiness in form” means they are empty in nature and have no real form. In other words, everything in this world arises from causes and conditions, and they have neither real nature nor form. Thus it is said that they are empty in nature and form.

**“There is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction”:** The concept of “birth” and “destruction” is a relative one. It originates from the concept of “self”. The attachment to “self” gives rise to the concept of “the birth of myself” and “the destruction (death) of myself”. This way of thinking is the result of our propensity towards attachment. “Birth” is a product of causes and conditions (something arising from causes and conditions is empty of existence), and it has no real existence (it is empty of both nature and form). We say such an unreal existence is a “false being”. It has no real substance although there is a “birth”. Thus we say, there is a “no birth”. When the “no birth” ceases to exist or decay, it destructs but there is no real destruction. So we say there is a “no destruction”. Its decay and destruction are not real but a result of causes and conditions. This is how “there is neither birth nor destruction” should be interpreted.

Once there is the concept of "self" in the five aggregates, the concept of birth and destruction is generated, followed by that of defilement and purity. As our body and mind are afflicted with "defilements", we would want to get rid of them to attain purity. However, while we may rid the "defilements" of our body through cleansing, how do we rid the "defilements" of our mind (afflictions)? A common solution is through the method of repentance. By practising the method of repentance, one removes the "defilements" from his mind and eventually achieves purity (nirvana). But this is not the case from the viewpoint of "all things are empty of form", as the defilements or purity of something that may appear to be defiled or pure has no real substance, as both arise from causes and conditions. Thus we say there is "no defilement". As "purity" (nirvana) also has no real substance, thus we say there is "no purity". This is how "there is neither defilement nor purity" should be interpreted.

So long we deem there is a "self" in the five aggregates, there will be birth and destruction, followed by increment and reduction, hence giving rise to the concept of an increasing or decreasing number of people. However both "increment" and "reduction" have no real substance. In reality, the "increment" has no real substance, it arises from causes and conditions, thus there is "no increment". The "reduction" has no real substance, it ceases because of causes and conditions, thus there is "no reduction". Thus we say there is "neither increment nor reduction".

### Example 1:

A cup does not exist initially. It has no name. It is just a collection of substances arising from causes and conditions. Its "birth" is complete the moment we define its form (the form of a cup), and give it a name (a glass cup). In reality, there is fundamentally a "no birth". When the cup is broken, we say it suffers "destruction". In reality, there is fundamentally a "no destruction". Both "birth" and "destruction" are merely concepts introduced by us. In reality, there is no actual "birth" although there is the concept of "birth", and no actual "destruction" although there is the concept of "destruction". The "birth" and "destruction" of the cup are results of causes and conditions. Since the "birth" and "destruction" arise from causes and condition and they are without real substance, we say there is "neither birth nor destruction".



The apparent "birth" of the cup is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no birth".



The apparent "destruction" of the cup is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no destruction".

A cup will be stained after using for some time. The stains are the so-called "defilement". Once the stains are removed, the cup is returned to its original state of "purity". But what are "defilement" and "purity"? In truth, there is no difference between the two as they are just concepts introduced by us. The logic is simple: since the cup is not real, let alone the stains. The concept of "defilement" and "purity" are introduced with the false existence of the cup. Here, we are not refuting the phenomena of "defilement" and "purity", but merely stating that both "defilement" and "purity" arise from causes and conditions and they are without real substance. Therefore we say there is "neither defilement nor purity".



The apparent "defilement" of the cup is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no defilement".



The apparent "purity" of the cup is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no purity".

If you have a glass cup and I give you another one, you would think of increment, as one plus one equals two. If one of them is broken, you would think of reduction, as two minus one equals one. In reality, both increment and reduction are delusions arising from causes and conditions. If you put the broken pieces of two cups together, it is just a heap of broken glasses, not one plus one equals two. A cup is without real substance. In reality, there is no actual "increment" although there appears to be one, because of the presence of certain causes and conditions. There is no actual "reduction" although there appears to be one, because of the absence of certain causes and conditions. It increases but there is actually "no increment", it reduces but there is actually "no reduction", therefore we say there is "neither increment nor reduction". Any apparent increment or reduction is the result of causes and conditions.



The apparent "increment" of the cups is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no increment".



The apparent "reduction" of the cups is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no reduction".

On the surface, the glass cup appears to have “birth” and “destruction”, but in reality, there is “neither birth nor destruction”. There appears to have “defilement” and “purity”, but in reality, there is “neither defilement nor purity”. There appears to have “increment” and “reduction”, but in reality, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.

### Example 2:

A flame does not exist initially. When it appears, we speak about its "birth". When it disappears, we speak about its "destruction". However, if we question further about how the flame is produced, we would realise that there is in reality no "birth". Its formation is a result of a number of causes and conditions, including factors such as matches, a surface with friction, the air, and the action of striking a match. As its "birth" is without real substance, there is "no birth". Since there is "no birth", let alone "destruction". Hence there is "no destruction". As both its "birth" and "destruction" arise from causes and conditions, there is "neither birth nor destruction".



The apparent "birth" of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no birth".



The apparent "destruction" of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is "no destruction".

With the “birth” of the flame, we would then differentiate whether it is toxic or polluting from its colour or the burning agent used. If it is toxic or polluting, we say it has “defilement”. Otherwise, it has “purity”. In reality, the “defilement” or “purity” of a flame is without real substance, as they arise from causes and conditions. The “defilement” arises from the existence of a number of causes and conditions, and the “purity” arises when there are changes to the causes and conditions. As both the “defilement” and “purity” arise from causes and conditions, there is “neither defilement nor purity”.



The apparent “defilement” of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no defilement”.



The apparent “purity” of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no purity”.



With the “birth” of the flame, it can become stronger or weaker. If it becomes stronger, we say there is “increment”. If it becomes weaker, we say there is “reduction”. In reality, its “increment” and “reduction” are without real substance, as the “increment” arises from the existence of a number of causes and conditions, and its “reduction” arises when there are changes to the causes and conditions. As both its “increment” and “reduction” arise from causes and conditions, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.



The apparent “increment” of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no increment”.

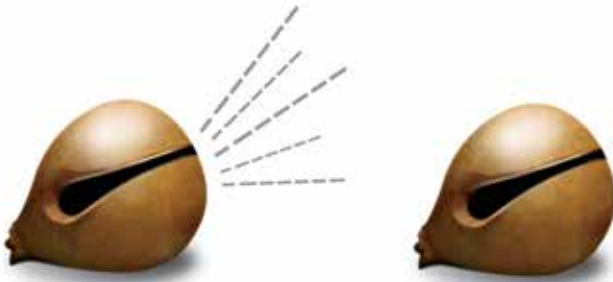


The apparent “reduction” of the flame is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no reduction”.

On the surface, the flame appears to have “birth” and “destruction”, but in reality, there is “neither birth nor destruction”. There appears to have “defilement” and “purity”, but in reality, there is “neither defilement nor purity”. There appears to have “increment” and “reduction”, but in reality, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.

### Example 3:

When a wooden fish is struck and the wooden fish sound is produced, we speak about its “birth”. When it vanishes, we speak about its “destruction”. However, its formation is a result of the existence of a number of causes and conditions, including factors such as the wooden fish, the mallet, the air, and the striking action. Similarly, it vanishes with changes to the causes and conditions. As both its “birth” and “destruction” arise from causes and conditions, there is “neither birth nor destruction”.



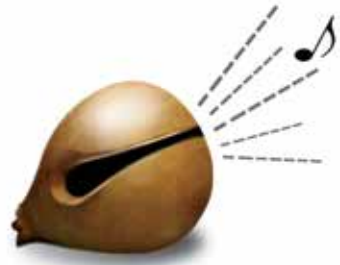
The apparent “birth” of the sound of the wooden fish is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no birth”.

The apparent “destruction” of the sound of the wooden fish is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no destruction”.

With the “birth” of the sound of the wooden fish, we can then differentiate whether it is noise pollution based on the quality of the sound. If it is polluting, we say it has “defilement”. Otherwise, it has “purity”. In reality, the “defilement” and “purity” of the sound are without real substance. The “defilement” arises from the existence of a number of causes and conditions, and the “purity” arises when there are changes to the causes and conditions. As both the “defilement” and “purity” arise from causes and conditions, there is “neither defilement nor purity”.



The apparent “defilement” of the sound is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no defilement”.



The apparent “purity” of the sound is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no purity”.

With the “birth” of the sound of the wooden fish, it can become stronger or weaker. If it becomes stronger, we say there is “increment”. If it becomes weaker, we say there is “reduction”. In reality, its “increment” and “reduction” are without real substance, as the “increment” arises from the existence of a number of causes and conditions, and its “reduction” arises when there are changes to the causes and conditions. As both its “increment” and “reduction” arise from causes and conditions, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.



The apparent “increment” of the sound of the wooden fish is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no increment”.



The apparent “reduction” of the sound of the wooden fish is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no reduction”.

On the surface, the sound of the wooden fish appears to have “birth” and “destruction”, but in reality, there is “neither birth nor destruction”. There appears to have “defilement” and “purity”, but in reality, there is “neither defilement nor purity”. There appears to have “increment” and “reduction”, but in reality, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.

#### **Example 4:**

If we pay attention to our thoughts (the pictures and sound in our mind), we would think there are “birth” and “destruction” of the thoughts. However, in reality, the formation of the thoughts is the result of a number of causes and conditions (the combination of the mind, the object and consciousness). For the same reason, they vanish with changes to the causes and conditions. Since their “birth” and “destruction” arise from causes and conditions and they are without real substance, there is “neither birth nor destruction”.



The apparent “birth” of the thoughts is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no birth”.



The apparent “destruction” of the thoughts is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no destruction”.

When we deem there are “birth” and “destruction” of our thoughts, naturally we would then differentiate defilement and purity of thoughts. When an evil thought arises, we say it has “defilement”. When a virtuous thought arises, we say it has “purity”. In reality, the “defilement” or “purity” of thoughts is without real substance, as it is impermanent in nature and arises from causes and conditions. The “defilement” arises from the existence of a number of causes and conditions, and the “purity” arises when there are changes to the causes and conditions. In reality, it is defiled but there is actually “no defilement”, it is purified but there is actually “no purity”, therefore we say there is “neither defilement nor purity”.



The apparent “defilement” of the thoughts is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no defilement”.



The apparent “purity” of the thoughts is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no purity”.

When we deem there are “birth” and “destruction” of our thoughts, naturally we would then differentiate the increment and reduction of thoughts. When there are more thoughts, we say there is “increment” of thoughts. When there are lesser thoughts, we say there is “reduction” of thoughts. In reality, the “increment” or “reduction” of thoughts is just a state of affair under certain causes and conditions. Thoughts are without real substance, as their “increment” arises from the presence of certain causes and conditions, and their “reduction” arises because of the absence of certain causes and conditions. As there is no real “increment” although they increase, and no real “reduction” although they reduce, there is “neither increment nor reduction” of thoughts.



The apparent “increment” of thoughts is without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no increment”.



The apparent “reduction” of thoughts without real substance, as it arises from causes and conditions. Hence there is “no reduction”.



On the surface, the thoughts appear to have “birth” and “destruction”, but in reality, there is “neither birth nor destruction”. There appears to have “defilement” and “purity”, but in reality, there is “neither defilement nor purity”. There appears to have “increment” and “reduction”, but in reality, there is “neither increment nor reduction”.

Next, you may ask the following question: “Where were the cup, the flame, the sound of the wooden fish, and our thoughts before they were formed? And where have they gone?” The answer is: “They (the cup, flame, sound and thoughts) have no real substance as they are merely caused by a string of causes and conditions. They “come” with the right conditions, and are “gone” when those conditions are no longer present. As such, their coming and going are in reality “no coming” and “no going”. Hence there is “neither coming nor going” of the cup, the flame, the sound, and the thoughts.

Among the four objects, the cup is the most concrete, the flame is rather abstract, the sound has neither form nor shape, and the thoughts are the most subtle and can change very quickly. A Chan practitioner maintains his mindful awareness all the time, whether he is walking, standing, sitting down or lying down, and focuses his mindful awareness on his “thoughts”, observing their birth, staying, change and extinction. If he does it for a long time, he would realise that “thoughts” arise and

cease at the same time (the emptiness of all physical entities), and achieve the realisation that “impermanence is emptiness”. The “birth and destruction at the same time” is just the expression of thoughts. In reality, there is “no birth (emptiness)” of thoughts. Since there is “no birth”, it would be a fallacy to speak of “defilement”, “purity”, “increment” and “reduction” that are derived from the concept of “birth”.

There were two stories in the Chan School related to the above. One day, Chan Master Weishan asked his disciple Xiangyan, “Try answering this, it’s about something that is related to the root of life and death – what is the original identity before you were given birth by your parents?”<sup>11</sup> An earlier story on the same subject concerned Patriarch Huineng’s words to Huiming who went after him. Huineng said, “Since you came after me for the Dharma, take a pause and do not generate even a thought before listening to what I have to say.” After a span of silence, he continued, “Do not think of virtues, do not think of evils; at that very moment, what is your original identity?”<sup>12</sup> Both stories illustrate the same point of focusing our awareness on our “thoughts”, and through which investigate the origin of our mind.

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<sup>11</sup> Ref. Vol. 11 of *Jingde Biographies of Masters who Passed on the Light*.

<sup>12</sup> Ref. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*.

**“Shariputra, all dharmas are emptiness in form, there is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction.”**

While we live in the “false being” of our body and mind which are made up of the five aggregates, the concept of “self” hidden in our consciousness tends to regard the five aggregates as “real being”. In fact, “false being” and “real being” are the results of our understanding at different levels. The concept of “false being” enables us to view things in perspective and achieve transcendence, and in so doing reduce our suffering in this world. However, the concept of “real being” brings suffering to both our body and mind as we are confronted with changes due to impermanence in this world. Therefore, if we were to eliminate the suffering due to the five aggregates, we ought to eradicate the attachment to “self” hidden in our consciousness. Also, before we can do that, we have to change the concept of “birth and destruction” to “no birth and no destruction”, the concept of “defilement and purity” to “no defilement and no purity”, and the concept of “increment and reduction” to “no increment and no reduction”. The *Heart Sutra* teaches us the kind of wisdom that transcends the bondage of our body and mind - in emptiness, there is no such things as birth and destruction, defilement and purity, and increment and reduction. Thus Buddha said, “All dharmas are emptiness in form, there is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction.”



**Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no volition and no consciousness. No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind. No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch and no thought. No realm of sight and so forth, up to no realm of mind consciousness. No ignorance and no ending of ignorance; no ageing and death, and no ending of ageing and death. No suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering. No wisdom and no attainment.**

**“In emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no volition and no consciousness”**: Viewed from the perspective of emptiness, the five aggregates have no real substance. Hence it is said that there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no volition and no consciousness. Here, “no” does not mean nothingness. It refers to the absence of real substance.

**“Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind”**: They refer to the six sense organs, or roots. The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are the sensing system for vision, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought respectively. A root has the ability to produce. Just like plants grow from the root, the six consciousnesses

originate from the six root organs. Simply put, the eye organ gives rise to eye consciousness, the ear organ gives rise to ear consciousness, the nose organ gives rise to nose consciousness, the tongue organ gives rise to tongue consciousness, the body organ gives rise to body consciousness, the mind organ gives rise to mind consciousness.

**“Form, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought”:** They refer to the six sense objects. The eye sees the visible form, such as its colour, shape and lustre. The ear hears the sound, such as its volume, pitch and timbre. The nose smells the odour, such as whether it is fragrant, smelly, spicy or bloody. The tongue tastes the flavour, such as whether it is sour, sweet, bitter, hot, salty, or flat. The body feels the touch of things, such as whether it is soft, hard, cold, hot, coarse, fine, smooth, rough, painful or itchy. The mind senses the mind-objects, which are the thoughts in the mind related to form, sound, smell, taste and touch.

**“From eye consciousness to mind consciousness”:** They refer to the eighteen realms – the six sense organs, the six sense objects, plus the six consciousnesses. When the six sense organs come into contact with the six sense objects, the six consciousnesses come about as the ability of knowing and differentiating. The eighteen realms refer to the realms of the eye, the form and the eye consciousness; the realms of the ear, the sound and the ear consciousness; the realms of the nose, the smell and the nose consciousness; the realms of the tongue, the taste and the tongue consciousness; the realms of the body,

the touch and the body consciousness; and the realms of the mind, the thought and the mind consciousness.

<b>Eighteen Realms</b>			
<b>Six senseorgans</b>	<b>Six sense-objects</b>	<b>Six consciousnesses</b>	<b>Effect</b>
Eye	Visible form (colour, shape, lustre)	Eye consciousness	Sight
Ear	Sound (volume, pitch, timbre)	Ear consciousness	Hearing
Nose	Odour (fragrant, smelly, spicy, bloody)	Nose consciousness	Smell
Tongue	Flavour (sour, sweet, bitter, hot, salty, flat)	Tongue consciousness	Taste
Body	Touch (soft, hard, cold, hot, coarse, fine, smooth, rough, painful, itchy)	Body consciousness	Feel
Mind	Mind-object (thoughts in the mind related to form, sound, smell, taste and touch)	Mind consciousness	Thought

**“Ignorance, and ageing and death”**: They refer to the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, i.e. ignorance, volitional activities, consciousness, name and form, six bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and ageing and death, which explain why human beings are unable to attain liberation. “Ignorance”, represented by the afflictions of greed, hatred and delusion, is the main cause for our cyclic existence. “Ignorance” gives rise to “volitional activities”, followed by “consciousness”, the ability to differentiate, like a calf’s instinctive ability to recognise her mother. “Consciousness”, or the consciousness aggregate, is the first causal factor for the formation of our body form. The consciousness aggregate gives rise to the other four aggregates of form, feeling, perception and volition. As the five aggregates only has a name but does not possess a form at this stage, it is called “name and form”. “Six sense bases” comes about when the body form starts to take shape. Next arises “contact”, which is the interaction of sense-organs, sense-objects, and consciousnesses. Because of “contact”, “feeling” arises. It is followed by “craving”, the attachment to “feeling”. The addiction to “craving” gives rise to “clinging”, followed by “becoming”, the completion of the form of the five aggregates. “Birth” is the birth of the body formed by the five aggregates, and “aging and death” is its decay.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ref. Vol 5 of *Mahaprajnaparamita-shastra*.

In the *Vaipulya Sutra*, dependent origination is presented as “a single thought of greed is enough to bring about the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination”<sup>14</sup>. When the eyes see a form (an object), craving arises. The action taken following the craving, which is also “ignorance”, is “volitional activities”. The focus and attachment to the action is “consciousness”. As “name and form” is just a transition from “consciousness” to “six sense bases”, it has only a name but no real substance. The “six sense bases” is so called as greed is generated through the six senses. The “six sense bases” desiring for feeling is known as “contact”. The attachment to “feeling” gives rise to “craving”. The longing for “craving” and its repeated occurrences is “clinging”. The yearning that is satisfied is “becoming”. The continuity of the process from “ignorance” to “becoming” is “birth”. The interruption of the process is “death”.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it is mentioned that “the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination is based on the mind”. Both greed and the mind (our true nature) come into being with the occurrence of phenomena. The mind is “consciousness”, whereas the phenomena is “volitional activities”. Getting lost in the phenomena is “ignorance”. “Name and form” is the union of “ignorance” and “the mind. It develops into “six sense bases”. The combination of sense-organs, sense-objects and consciousnesses become “contact”, which works together

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14 Ref. Vol. 23 of the *Mahavaipulya Mahasamghata Sutra*.



with “feeling”. The coveting of “feeling” is “craving”. The continued “craving” becomes “clinging”. The above nine links of dependent origination cumulate into “becoming”, fulfilling the conditions to be born. “Birth” is followed by maturing and decaying, i.e. “ageing and death”.

We would reach the following understanding if we analyse further from the perspective of the arising and cessation of our thoughts by investigating changes in their causes and conditions. “Ignorance” is being unenlightened (ignorant) about our thoughts. It clings on to the delusive thoughts as reality. “Volitional activities” are the actions taken based on “ignorance”. Thoughts are generated endlessly because of these actions. These two habits are the results of our cumulative karma from our past (lives). As “the mind never works alone, the generation of thoughts is dependent on the phenomena”, we start to generate thoughts once our “consciousness” become alive when stimulated by our past accumulated karmic habits. “Name and form” is the initial elusive state of the thought. The “six sense bases” is our attachment to the thought, convinced that it is real. “Contact” is a result of the interaction of the mind, consciousness, and thoughts. With “contact” comes “feeling”, which is what the mind feels. “Craving” is our attachment to “feeling”, and “clinging” is our addiction to “craving”. As delusive thoughts perpetuate because of “clinging”, “becoming” arises. The continuity of thoughts brings about various concepts, giving rise to “birth”. “Ageing and death” is the vanishing of thoughts.

The twelve-linked chain of dependent origination is the chain of life and death of our cyclic existence. To break the chain, the sutras and shastras provide us with the following pointer: "The existence here is the cause of the existence elsewhere, and the birth here is the cause of the birth elsewhere; the non-existence here is the cause of the non-existence elsewhere, and the extinction here is the cause of the extinction elsewhere." What it means is that once there is "ignorance", a string of conditions will arise. Hence, once "ignorance" is eradicated, the chain of life and death of our cyclic existence is broken. How to eradicate "ignorance"? In the Chan school, it is fundamentally to look at one's thoughts from his mindful awareness realised from his practice. If he is attached to the thoughts, "ignorance" arises. If, however, he realises that the impermanence of thoughts is equivalent to emptiness, then there is "no ignorance". If he is attached to his mindful awareness as "self" and considers it as real, "ignorance" arises. On the other hand, if he realises his mindful awareness is no-self and emptiness, then there is "no ignorance". In other words, since there is no real substance of "ignorance", therefore there is no such thing as "no ending of ignorance".

**“Suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering”:**

It refers to the Four Noble Truths. “Suffering” refers to the compelling nature of impermanence suffered by our body and mind made up of the five aggregates. “The cause of suffering” refers to afflictions, being the cause of suffering. “The end of suffering” refers to the eradication of afflictions. “The path leading to the end of suffering” refers to the practice adopted to eradicate the afflictions.

**“No wisdom and no attainment”:** “No wisdom” does not mean not having wisdom, but the realisation that there is no real substance in wisdom, i.e. the wisdom of emptiness. How to apprehend the wisdom of emptiness? This type of wisdom possesses the characteristics of both watching and insightful contemplation. Simply put, it allows us, while maintaining our mindful awareness, to observe all things and gain the insight that they are impermanent, are consequences of causes and conditions, and are empty. Because of these two characteristics, one with such wisdom would be involved with all things but would not be attached to any of them. This is what is meant by “no attainment”, i.e. there is not a single possession. When we practise the Dharma, we are doing subtraction, not addition. The more we practise, instead

of feeling enriched or better, the more we should feel having achieved “nothing much”. Only this way can we progress in the right direction of achieving “no self” and “emptiness”.

What is having achieved “nothing much”? You may be becoming more capable but you would not be conceited; you may have accumulated much blessings but you would not look down upon others; and you may have attained greater wisdom but you would not be arrogant. It is because all that you have achieved is “nothing much”. In the Chan school, it is related as “the ordinary mind is the way”.

**“Therefore, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no volition and no consciousness. No eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind. No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch and no thought. No consciousness, from eye consciousness to mind consciousness. No ignorance and no ending of ignorance; no ageing and death, and no ending of ageing and death. No suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering. No wisdom and no attainment.”**

All dharmas are emptiness in form, there is neither birth nor destruction, defilement nor purity, increment nor reduction. They include the dharmas told by Buddha, including the five aggregates, the twelve bases, the eighteen realms, the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths. As they are without real substance, it is said they are “nothingness”. From the perspective of “emptiness”, all dharmas are empty, there can be no attainment of a single dharma. Wisdom is the realisation of this aspect. There is no such existence of a dharma by the name of “wisdom” that is attainable, hence “no wisdom and no attainment”.



**Therefore, without attainment, Bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and live without worries. Without worries, hence without fear and removed from delusions and dreams, they realise nirvana.**

**“Bodhisattvas”:** Means the awakened sentient beings.

**“Prajnaparamita”:** Means the wisdom of arriving at the other shore.

**“Without worries”:** When our mind is free of attachments, we have no worries.

**“Fear”:** It refers to the fear due to anxieties. Normally we have such fear because of the uneasiness of our body and mind, worries, threats, and being compelled against our own will. The origin can be traced to four types of suffering, i.e. that due to living, ageing, sickness, and death.

The suffering of living – As human beings living in this world, we face the following five types of fear:

- (i) The compelling nature of and threats from nature (such as natural calamities, extreme cold, extreme heat, darkness, etc.) bring about much anxiety and fear;
- (ii) The compelling nature of and threats caused by changes due to impermanence of external non-living things (such as trees, buildings, food, etc.) bring about much anxiety and fear;
- (iii) The compelling nature of and threats imposed by other

- sentient beings (such as people, animals, etc.) bring about much anxiety and fear;
- (iv) For the continued existence of our physical body, the need for financial support brings about much anxiety and fear; and
  - (v) The lack of support from others, directionless, helplessness, boredom and loneliness bring about much anxiety and fear.

The suffering of ageing – The compelling nature of ageing brings about two types of fear, as follows:

- (i) Ageing causes the degeneration of the functions of our various organs. The loss of control of our faculties brings about much anxiety and fear; and
- (ii) Ageing causes the loss of confidence in the face of competition, leading to much anxiety and fear.

The suffering of sickness – The compelling nature of sickness brings about two types of fear, as follows:

- (i) The lack of ability to function normally in our daily routines including eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, standing, walking, sitting down and sleeping cause much anxiety and fear; and
- (ii) The pain due to sickness brings about much anxiety and fear.

The suffering of death – Our lack of knowledge about death and its compelling nature bring about seven types of fear, as follows:

- (i) Not knowing where we are going after death;
- (ii) Unable to bring along anything;
- (iii) Having no idea of what lies in store for us;
- (iv) Separation from our relatives and friends;
- (v) Giving up all our possessions;
- (vi) Leaving the environment we are familiar with; and
- (vii) Having to leave this world alone.

**“Delusions”**: They are the four views of permanence, pleasure, self-existence and purity. To counter these four delusions, Buddha speaks of impermanence, suffering, no-self, and non-purity.

The delusion of permanence – Sentient beings only think about and plan of what to do today, tomorrow and in the future, but do not realise the impermanence and vulnerability of life. Death strikes the moment we are unable to catch a breath. This mistaken thinking is the delusion of impermanence.

The delusion of pleasure – Sentient beings perpetually seek and engross in the good feeling of pleasure. They see pleasure as a certainty in life but not the suffering caused by the compelling nature of impermanence. This misconception is the delusion of pleasure.

The delusion of self-existence – Sentient beings do not realise that our physical body is without real substance as it is



impermanent and arises from causes and conditions. Instead, they take it as the real self. This misconception is the delusion of self-existence.

The delusion of purity – Sentient beings continue to be attached to their physical body, without realising its suffering and impurity. This misconception is the delusion of purity.

**“Dreams”:** The state of being totally lost in one’s own thoughts and without right mindfulness, like being in a dream. In addition, as the concept of self-existence is a delusion, having further thoughts on this concept give rise to dreams, which run against the principle of the middle path<sup>15</sup>.

With the existence of “self” hidden in our consciousness, concepts such as “I was born” and “I will die” are generated (there are “birth” and “destruction”), followed by the thought of “what will happen when I die”? These concepts run against the view of “no birth and no destruction” in the middle path.

With the existence of “self” hidden in our consciousness, concepts such as “I come” and “I go” are generated (there are

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<sup>15</sup> Middle Path: It refers to the eight negations of the Middle Path – no birth, no destruction; no permanence, no cessation; no one, no difference; and no coming, no going. As noted in Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamika-shastra*: “Neither birth nor destruction, neither permanence nor cessation, neither identity nor difference, neither coming nor going. It is a matter of causes of conditions, and puts to rest all other meaningless propositions. I pay great respect to the Buddha. This is the highest among all teachings.” “The eight negations of the Middle Path” is an important theory of the Madhyamika school in India as well as the School of the Three Treatises in China.

“coming” and “going”), followed by the thought of “where do I go when I die”. These concepts run against the view of “no coming and no going” in the middle path.

With the existence of “self” hidden in our consciousness, concepts such as “I exist permanently” and “I cease to exist” are generated (there are “permanence” and “cessation”), followed by the thought of “do I go for rebirth or do I cease to exist after death”. These concepts run against the view of “no permanence and no cessation” in the middle path.

With the existence of “self” hidden in our consciousness, concepts such as “I am one” and “I am different” are generated (there are “identity” and “difference”), as well as the thought of “whether the “self” that has gone for cyclic rebirth is the same ‘self’ before death, or an additional one?” If it is the same “self”, why is it that one cannot remember the “self” in his past life? However, if it were an additional one, then there would be no end of additional “selves”. These concepts run against the view of “no one and no difference” in the middle path.

**“Nirvana”:** There are two types of nirvana – incomplete nirvana and complete nirvana. The “nirvana” here refers to complete nirvana, as there is no longer a physical body to suffer in this world.

**“Therefore, without attainment, Bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and live without worries. Without worries, hence without fear and removed from delusions and dreams, they realise nirvana.”**

As Bodhisattvas take refuge in the “no attainment” type of wisdom, there is “no loss” either. Without attainments and losses, there are no worries. As there are no worries, there is no fear. As there is no fear, they are removed from delusions and dreams. When the time of death comes, they are able to realise nirvana.



**All Buddhas of the three times also take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and realise Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Therefore we know that Prajnaparamita is the mantra of great power, the mantra of great brightness, the unexcelled mantra, the equal to the unequalled mantra, which can end all suffering and is true. Therefore the Prajnaparamita mantra is spoken thus: "Gate Gate, Paragate, Parasangate, Bodhi Svaha".**

**"All Buddhas of the three times"**: All Buddhas of the past, present, and future.

**"Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi"**: Unexcelled perfect enlightenment, which is the complete enlightenment realised by the Buddha.

**"Mantra"**: Dharani in Sanskrit, a kind of magic mastery in ancient India, comprising of incomprehensible chanting of secretive words.

**"The mantra of great power"**: Mantra of great divine power.

**"The mantra of great brightness"**: Mantra of great brightness that eliminates the darkness of sentient beings.

**"The unexcelled mantra"**: The highest unexcelled mantra.

It is unexcelled as it is based on reality.

**"The equal to the unequalled mantra"**: The one and only one mantra, which is unequalled.

**"Gate Gate"**: Go, go.

**"Paragate"**: Go to the other shore.

**"Parasangate"**: Determined to go to the other shore.

**"Bodhi Svaha"**: Bodhi is "wisdom of enlightenment", and Svaha is "achieve". Bodhi Svaha is "achieve the wisdom of enlightenment".

**“All Buddhas of the three times also take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and realise unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Therefore we know that Prajnaparamita is the mantra of great power, the mantra of great brightness, the unexcelled mantra, the equal to the unequalled mantra, which can end all suffering and is true. Therefore the Prajnaparamita mantra is spoken thus: “Gate Gate, Paragate, Parasangate, Bodhi Svaha”.”**

In addition to Bodhisattvas, all Buddhas of the past, present and future also take refuge in the wisdom of “no-attainment” to achieve unexcelled perfect enlightenment. Hence the wisdom of “no-attainment” is the mantra of great power that is superior to all other mantras, the mantra of great brightness that brings limitless brightness, the unexcelled mantra that is the highest of all, and the equal to the unequalled mantra that is unequalled by all other mantras. It can end all suffering and it is true. Thus the mantra of the wisdom of “no-attainment” as spoken by Buddha: “Go, go! Go to the other shore. Go to the other shore with great determination! Achieve the wisdom of enlightenment and liberation.”



# Epilogue

This publication - *A Brief Elaboration of the Heart Sutra* - is a continuation of my previous book *Present Moment*, which sets forth a model to learn and practise the Dharma. The original version of *Prajnaparamita-hridaya-sutra* is a concise text, which is easy to read but difficult to understand. In writing *A brief elaboration of the Heart Sutra*, I have tried to make the difficult subject easy to understand, so that readers would be encouraged to continue reading and be able to understand the profound meaning of the sutra, and make progresses in the path of seeking the truth.



般若波羅蜜多心經 觀自在菩薩行深般若波羅蜜  
多時照見五蘊皆空度一切苦厄舍利子色不異空空  
不異色色即是空空即是色受想行識亦復如是舍利  
子是諸法空相不生不滅不垢不淨不增不減是故空中  
无色無受想行識無眼耳鼻舌身意無色聲香味  
觸法無眼界乃至無意識界無至明亦無無明盡乃  
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無所得故菩提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故心無罣礙無  
罣礙故無有恐怖遠離顛倒夢想究竟涅槃三世諸佛  
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集王羲之般若波羅蜜多心經 庚子年桐廬敬書





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