

# The Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra

With Standless Verse Commentary and Explanation  
by Tripitaka Master Hua

SUTRA:

HE ILLUMINATED THE FIVE SKANDHAS AND SAW THAT THEY ARE ALL EMPTY.

Verse:

*Three lights shine everywhere, permeating the three forces.  
The one returns to the place of union, yet the one comes forth again.  
See that form is emptiness and that feeling is the same way;  
False thoughts are the shifting currents, while formation is the arranger  
of karma;  
With consciousness, which understands differences, the five shadows are  
completed.  
Mirror-flowers and water-moon, beyond defiling dust:  
Emptiness not empty--the great function of clarity;  
Vision is yet not a view--happiness indeed!*

三光普照透三才	一歸何處復一來
見色即空受納是	妄想遷流行業排
識乃了別五陰具	鏡花水月絕塵埃
空而不空明大用	見而未見樂快哉

COMMENTARY:

*The three lights shine everywhere, permeating the three forces.* "The three lights" are the sun, the moon, and the stars, which illuminate everything in the universe and thoroughly penetrate "the three forces" of heaven, earth, and humanity. The three lights are also the lights of wisdom: the light of the prajna of language, the light of the prajna of contemplative illumination, and the light of the prajna of the characteristic of actuality. The light of true prajna of the characteristic of actuality is the very deep prajna-light by which BODHISATTVA AVALOKITESHVARA ILLUMINATED THE FIVE SKANDHAS AND SAW THAT THEY ARE ALL EMPTY. With the three kinds of light he illuminates every place in the heavens and on earth, and the lights permeate the three motive forces.

*The one returns to the place of union, yet the one comes forth again.* "The one" refers to one's own nature. The "place of union" is where one's own nature dwells. Basically it is this: "Ten thousand dharmas return to one; one returns to unity." So says the verse about Shen-gwang:

Ten thousand dharmas return to one,  
The one returns to unity.  
Shen-gwang didn't understand,  
And ran after Bodhidharma;  
He knelt before him at Bear's Ear Mountain  
Nine years seeking Dharma  
To escape King Yama.

The "one" that the ten thousand dharmas return to is the mind or nature of each individual. The "one returning to unity" is the uniting with the Buddhanature.

After uniting with the Buddhanature, "the one comes forth again"; this is the giving birth to the wonderful functioning of the one, which is the Buddhahood you realize. The one that comes forth again is just you, this Buddha.

*See that form is emptiness and feeling is the same way.* You can see form, yet it is fundamentally empty. The Sutra says that FORM ITSELF IS EMPTINESS; what does this mean? We common people are attached to form, to a general form-body in which the many kinds of form-dharmas are united. This is what we call our physical body. "How can we say that the form-body is empty?" someone says. "It's really here! It wears clothes, eats, sleeps, so how can it be empty?" When you understand how form can exist, you can be empty.

I spoke earlier about the emptiness of analyzed dharmas. The body is analyzed as the summation of the characteristics of form, which are united together. This is the way it is. Earth, water, fire, and wind, the four great elements (mahabhuta), are the differentiated characteristics of form. The form-body comes into being when earth, water, fire, and wind unite. The skin, flesh, muscles, and bones of our bodies are the great element earth. The saliva, urine, excrement, water, and sweat are the great element water. The heat of our bodies is the great element fire; and the circulation of the breath is the great element wind. The four great elements unite to become a body, and when they separate, the body is destroyed. Each of the four elements returns to its original position, which is emptiness.

Most people are attached to the body as "me." That's wrong; the body is not "me." "Then what is 'me'?" you ask. You can control your body and have the perceptions of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and knowing. It is the perception-nature which is me. "So then what is the body?" One can only say, "This body is mine," not "This body is me." The body is like a house; you live in a house, but you do not say, "This house is me." If you were to say that, everyone would laugh their teeth right out of their mouths. But when you refer to your body as "me," most people don't laugh, because they also live with the same supposition. But it is just the same as supposing that your house is you. Because you live in a body-house, you say it is you. In the body there is seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, feeling, and knowing. But are those the Buddhanature? It is the Buddhanature which is you.

The body comes into being merely through the gathering together of conditioned causes. If the conditioned causes set themselves up in a different manner, then the form-body disperses. That is the reason one cannot say, "My body is me." One can only say, "It is mine. This is my body, and I can disown it or exchange it for another." You have that kind of authority, but you yourself don't know it yet. Because you live in the house, you don't know about the events which go on outside. You still suppose, "This house is me." Don't perceive the house as being you.

If we take a look into form and analyze it, form itself is empty--it doesn't exist. Therefore, it follows that emptiness can be changed into form-dharma. How does the change take place? Earth, water, fire, and wind merge to become a body. It has been said that god created people. His work of creation was just a matter of putting earth, fire, water, and wind together. If we use earth, fire, water, and wind, we can also create a person, or a lot of people. Anybody could do it. A few materials are used, and a person is created. When the conditioned causes come together, a person comes into being; When the conditioned causes disperse, the person ceases to be.

If you understand that FORM ITSELF IS EMPTINESS, then you shouldn't perceive the body as "me." It is only a possession; it just belongs to "me." But here especially you should not be attached. If you take the attitude that "the body is what I have," then you will want to help it a lot, and you will "make your mind your body's slave." Here "mind" means your awakened mind, which can understand that

your body is a form-dharma and thereby unreal. Therefore, don't be attached to it. Destroy the form skandha, and the form skandha will be empty.

"See that form is emptiness and feeling is the same way." Feeling, the second of the five skandhas is like form; it's empty.

*False thoughts are the shifting currents;* this refers to the cognition-skandha. *While formation is the arranger of karma;* this is the formation skandha. The karma created from formation is arranged together in an orderly fashion.

*With consciousness which understands differences:* the consciousness-skandha is fine discrimination and understanding of differences. *The five shadows are completed.* Form, feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness are the five skandhas, which are often represented in Chinese by the character yin ( 陰 ) which literally means shadow.

*Mirror-flowers and water-moon, beyond defiling dust.* The five skandhas—form, feeling, thought, formation, and consciousness—are like flowers reflected in a mirror, or like the image of the moon on the surface of the water. No dust at all defiles them, for the five skandhas are all empty.

*Emptiness, not empty--the great function of clarity.* When you don't understand clearly that the five skandhas are all empty, there is affliction, false thinking, and trouble. It is just within clarity about the five skandhas that you turn your consciousness around to realize wisdom. Doing just that is the especially great and wonderful functioning which you then understand.

*Vision is yet not a view--happiness indeed!* True emptiness produces wonderful existence. The production of wonderful existence has a great use. "Vision is yet not a view" means that then your seeing is the same as not seeing. When you are unaffected by this kind of experience, you attain genuine happiness. Therefore, the verse says, "Happiness indeed!"

SUTRA:

AND HE CROSSED BEYOND ALL SUFFERING AND DIFFICULTY.

COMMENTARY:

ALL refers to everything which is suffering and difficulty. SUFFERING by itself is already unpleasant to endure; add DIFFICULTY to suffering and the suffering is even greater. CROSSED BEYOND indicates deliverance from suffering and the attainment of happiness; it means liberation. "Why then doesn't the Sutra simply say 'liberated,' instead of CROSSED BEYOND ALL SUFFERING AND DIFFICULTY?" you ask. Even if you illuminate the five skandhas and see that they are all empty as Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara did, you still must cultivate. Only then can you cross beyond all suffering and difficulty. To illuminate emptiness and see it is merely to know emptiness; you must still practice. Although you have quickly awakened to the principle, there is still the gradual work of cultivation.

If you know about emptiness but don't cultivate, then emptiness is of no use. If you understand that the principle itself is empty, you should cultivate and cross beyond suffering and difficulty. If you want to cultivate, you yourself must actually do it. It's not just talk-Zen: "Hey! I've become enlightened. I've attained anuttarasamyaksambodhi, the Utmost Proper and Equal Right Enlightenment." Enlightened? How did you become enlightened? How did you do it? How was your anuttarasamyaksambodhi certified? It's easy to say, but hard to do! Just saying it is a dharma, but by doing it you arrive. If you say it, you must be able to do it. If you know about emptiness, then you should cultivate. Understand true emptiness, then cultivate wonderful existence.

The suffering and difficulty which is crossed beyond is not limited to just one kind of suffering. All kinds are included: the three kinds of suffering, the eight kinds, and all the infinite kinds. The three kinds of suffering are: the suffering of suffering itself; the suffering of decay; the suffering of the activity of the five skandhas. The three sufferings are also called the three kinds of feeling: the feeling of suffering, the feeling of happiness, and the feeling of neither happiness nor suffering. Therefore, the suffering of suffering itself is the feeling of suffering, and the suffering of decay is the feeling of happiness. You shouldn't try to refute this by thinking that happiness is not caught up in suffering, because happiness can go bad. Happiness going bad is the suffering of decay. The suffering of the activity of the five skandhas refers to feelings which are neither happy nor unhappy. That one doesn't hold any interest either.

The first four of the eight kinds of suffering are: the suffering of birth; the suffering of old age; the suffering of sickness; the suffering of death. Who isn't born? At the moment of birth, you suffer. And who can prevent old age? Yet one might say, "A child died before it had a chance to grow old; since it did not get old, it basically didn't have any awareness." However, even though it wasn't old, it still suffered sickness and death, and one could also say that it suffered growing old, for the day it died it was old. If it had not become old, how could it have died? Because it died, one can also say the child changed to become old and endured the suffering of old age, even though its life did not bear fruit.

Who dares to say that sickness is not suffering? Sickness is especially bitter suffering. Even when one who has become enlightened gets sick, he still suffers in the same way. For example, Shakyamuni Buddha suffered from the retribution of the metal spear and the retribution of the horse-feed. Why did he have to undergo those retributions? When Shakyamuni Buddha was a child on the causal ground of a former life, he lived in a place where the populace was starving. One day the starving people pulled a great fish up from the sea to the shore. Before they had a chance to eat it, the child who was to be Shakyamuni Buddha picked up a big stick, approached the fish, and hit it on the head several times. Even after he realized Buddhahood, Shakyamuni Buddha's head often hurt as if it were being pricked with a spear. That was the retribution of the metal spear.

On the causal ground of a former life, Shakyamuni Buddha spoke wrongly to a cultivator of the Way. He said to the cultivator, "Your cultivation is still lacking in sufficient ascetic practices. If you were really cultivating, you would be eating horse-feed." After Shakyamuni Buddha attained Buddhahood, he was invited to a certain country to dwell in peaceful retreat for the summer, but the king didn't make offerings to him and only gave him and his bhikshus, the Buddhist monks who were his disciples, horse-feed to eat. This was the horse-feed retribution. The karma which you create on the causal ground must be undergone as retribution on the ground which is its fruition.

After the suffering of birth, old age, and sickness comes the suffering of death. Death: nobody welcomes it. Why? Probably because it is suffering.

The second four of the eight kinds of suffering are: the suffering of being apart from those you love; the suffering of being together with those you despise; the suffering of not obtaining what you seek; the suffering of the flourishing of the five skandhas.

Because there are all those kinds, the Sutra says ALL SUFFERING. By cultivating, it is possible to avoid the three kinds of suffering, the eight kinds of suffering, and all the infinite kinds of suffering. That is what the Sutra means by **CROSSED BEYOND ALL SUFFERING AND DIFFICULTY**. I have written a verse about it:

*Verse:*

*Across the sea of suffering, one leaves the revolving wheel.*

*The rains disperse, the heavens clear; just then the moon is fully bright.  
 The chyan source is the Way-substance, among people the sage.  
 His undecaying golden body is rare in the world.  
 Cast off life; what need of thousand-year drugs?  
 Attain extinction; why wait ten thousand kalpas?  
 Five dwellings ended, the two deaths disappear forever.  
 Roam at will from East to Weast, throughtout the Dharma Realm.*

度過苦海出輪迴	雨霽天晴月正輝
乾元道體人中聖	不壞金軀世上稀
脫身何須千年藥	證滅豈待萬劫期
二死永亡五住盡	逍遙法界任東西

COMMENTARY:

*Across the sea of suffering, one leaves the revolving wheel.* "The sea of suffering" is just ALL SUFFERING AND DIFFICULTY. If you wish to cross beyond all suffering and difficulty, you must first be released from the revolving wheel of the six paths of rebirth: gods, asuras, people, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-dwellers.

*The Rains disperse, the heavens clear; just then the moon is fully bright.* The time of release from the paths of rebirth is likened to the time when the rain stops, the heavens clear, and the full moon is filling the sky with its radiance. The line represents the emptiness of all five skandhas:

The bright moon stands out upon the sky;  
 There are no clouds for ten thousand miles.

That is what you experience as soon as you give birth to genuine wisdom and are enlightened to all. Then you have **CROSSED BEYOND ALL SUFFERING AND DIFFICULTY**.

*The chyan source is the Way-substance, among people the sage.* When you have been certified as having reached the first stage of Arhatship, it can be said that your body is pure "yang." In the I CHING (THE BOOK OF CHANGES), chyan (乾), the first hexagram, represents pure yang substance.

*His undecaying golden body is rare in the world.* you have been certified as having reached the first stage, that is, when you have cut off the eighty-eight categories of deluded views, your body is flawless gold, very, very rare in the world.

*Cast off life; what need of thousand-year drugs?* Emperor Shr of the Chin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.), sought the Taoist elixir of immortality, and even sent an expedition to the Isles of the Peng-lai Immortals. Yet you do not need to search for elixirs of immortality. Just cross beyond all suffering and difficulty, and then if you wish to live, you can live, and if you wish to die, you can die. Just as with Bodhidharma, birth and death will be your own, and Yama, the lord of death, won't be able to have anything to do with you.

*Attain extinction; why wait ten thousand kalpas?* Extinction is the third of the Four Truths of suffering, accumulation, extinction, and the Way. If you can have your extinction certified, you can attain nirvana. Having realized the Way, you don't need ten thousand kalpas but can quickly attain the nirvana without residue ( anupadisesanirvana ).

*Five dwellings ended, the two deaths disappear forever.* When you have really crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty, have left the revolving wheel, and have obtained an indestructible vajra body, "the two deaths disappear forever." "Two deaths," you say. "Does that mean that you have to die twice?" No. It refers to the two kinds of birth and death of the fluctuations of thoughts. The birth and death of the delimited segment is ended by those who have been certified as having attained Arhatship. To end the birth and death of the fluctuations, Bodhisattvahood must first be attained. Avalokiteshvara has attained Bodhisattvahood, and so the birth and death of the fluctuations is no more. Both deaths have disappeared.

The "five dwellings" refer to the five dwellings in affliction, which are:

1. dwelling in views, which originally was called dwelling in the love of views;
2. dwelling in the love of desire;
3. dwelling in the love of form;
4. dwelling in the love of the formless;
5. dwelling in the love of ignorance.

Those five ways of abiding in love cause attachments which change into five kinds of affliction. Avalokiteshvara makes the five afflictions cease, and from that follows the last line of the verse to which you should pay a little attention:

*Roam at will from East to West, throughout the Dharma Realm.* "Roam" indicates ease, freedom, and being very, very happy. In what way? You can travel wherever you wish. "At will from East to West": you can go to the Western Paradise any time you want, or you can travel to the East, to the crystal world of Akshobhya Buddha. There's even less problem about going to this suffering Saha World right here. You have avoided the troublesome preparation of applying at a consulate for a visa. You just wish to go and then go.

Not just to the East and West, but to the North and South, up and down, to the ten directions all around; the whole Dharma Realm is included. Wherever you go you are welcome. It's not that you want to travel to some place, but find yourself unwelcome. Wherever you want to go you can go, and you are never unwelcome. To roam at will from East to West throughout the Dharma Realm is to be genuinely happy, genuinely carefree, truly at ease, truly free and equal; it is the truly real and equal nature of the Dharma Realm. When the five dwellings have been ended and when the two deaths disappear forever, this kind of freedom is attained.