



The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings

Dalai Lama XIV, Thupten Jinpa (Editor)

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For more than two thousand years, the Heart Sutra has been part of the daily life of millions of Buddhists. This concise text, so rich and laden with meaning, concentrates the very heart of Buddhism into a powerful and evocative teaching on the interdependence of all reality.

In *Essence of the Heart Sutra*, the Dalai Lama masterfully unpacks the Heart Sutra so that any reader can benefit from its teachings - teachings meant to help us release ourselves from suffering and live with true compassion. Comprised of his "Heart of Wisdom" talks, originally delivered to thousands of listeners in 2001, the book offers the Dalai Lama's commentary as well as his easy-to-follow overview of Buddhist philosophy that places the sutra within its historical and philosophical context. With additional contributions by scholar and translator Thupten Jinpa, *Essence of the Heart Sutra* is the authoritative presentation of a text seminal to the world's religious heritage.

The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings Details

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From Reader Review The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings for online ebook

Amy-Lee says

Very interesting (though not light!) read. It's well written and accessible. I knew very little about Buddhism when I picked up this book, and maybe I still don't know much, but I feel like I have a general sense of the concept of "emptiness" and how it might benefit people.

Emily Schirmer says

Overall, this is a very good book. Very informative, as well as inspirational. I do, however, feel that at times it was a bit dense. I appreciate such a thorough breakdown and explanation of the Heart Sutra, but sometimes a more general summary is appreciated. Although the book is careful to explain all aspects of the explanation/breakdown, it still helps to have some basic background education/understanding of Buddhism prior to reading – it just makes it a bit easier to sift through. Other than that, the detailed synopsis of the Heart Sutra was very compelling and informative, and I always enjoy furthering my understanding of the beautiful teachings of this religion. I find that many traditionally Buddhist practices are beneficial when applied to my own life. Very comforting, and a worthwhile read.

Richard Pickett says

Excellent for being short and too the point on understanding some of the differences of beliefs in various forms of Buddhism at a high level and a handful of valuable insights on what is meant by "emptiness".

Magnus Lidbom says

I was looking for deeper practical insight into the mind training, psychology and philosophy of Buddhism. This was not that.

To me much of it read like an attempt at a god proof, except that he was trying to prove his version of Buddhism to be correct or how some cryptic statements should be interpreted. Tons of long sections of tortured logic apparently based on some assumptions about how certain parts of Buddhist doctrine can be assumed to be correct because they can be assumed to be written by the Buddha and the Buddha can be assumed to be omniscient. It was blindingly obvious that given the original statements you could come up with a ton of interpretations and it would be literally impossible to prove which was "correct". Not my cup of tea at all.

Mike Zickar says

This is a good summary of Buddhist theology as it relates to emptiness and the Heart Sutra, though it is largely a scholarly text. There is little personality or personal experience in here that may guide the practitioner.

I suspect that this is a book that would reward additional readings. . .

Jamie says

They try to blend a bit of history with the spirit of the sutra and fail to achieve both goals. I never felt more uninspired after reading a book about the heart sutra.

Alison says

Excellent explanation of the the Heart Sutra! The chapters on how Chittamtra and Madhyamaka differ in their interpretation and the hidden teaching on the Five Paths were particularly concise and helpful to my understanding.

Sandy says

A reread: Authoritative analysis of the Heart Sutra. The front and back are fairly dry. The middle is the analysis and definition of emptiness, which is so important. This is where the book shines.

S.H. Villa says

I was surprised by how short the *Heart Sutra* is. Only three pages out of 150. How long does it take to say everything is ‘emptiness’?

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, and no mind. There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, and no mental objects. There is no eye-element and so on up to no mind-element including up to no element of mental consciousness. There is no ignorance, there is no extinction of ignorance, and so on up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Likewise, there is no suffering, origin, cessation, or path; there is no wisdom, no attainment, and even no non-attainment...

Therefore, Shariputra, since bodhisattvas have no attainments they rely on this perfection of wisdom and abide in it. Having no obscuration in their minds, they have no fear, and by going utterly beyond error, they will reach the end of nirvana.

The Dalai Lama then helps us understand how this teaching can be true, and how it can be useful to us. Emptiness is a difficult concept to teach. Buddha’s attempt to leave us a trail of breadcrumbs has given rise to many descriptions of those crumbs, many interpretations. Buddhism has split into many schools, so the

Dalai Lama gives us a number of different and/or deeper points of view. There were places in the exegesis where this swapping between points of view was distracting, especially as the *Heart Sutra* was saying the end of nirvana lies beyond all points of view. I would have found it interesting to hear how the Dalai Lama himself used the text in connection with his own spiritual journey.

To compare the *Heart Sutra* with a text from the Christian tradition, *A Course in Miracles* comes at ‘emptiness’ from a different direction, but says much the same. The first lesson in *The Course* is: Nothing I see means anything. Then goes on in Lesson 5 to tell us about suffering: I am never upset for the reason I think. Lesson 16: I have no neutral thoughts. Lesson 22: What I see is a form of vengeance. By Lesson 27, we are engaged in the journey out of suffering: Above all else I want to see. Then God appears in Lesson 29: God is in everything I see. Lesson 97: I am spirit. Lesson 121: Forgiveness is the key to happiness.

While Buddhism shows us the dependent and therefore empty nature of perception, and the dependent nature of all manifest phenomena, encouraging us to see the emptiness of the definitions and values we place on all aspects of manifest life, thereby seeing them for what they are – empty; *The Course* also shows us the subjective and meaningless nature of perception which attacks self by attacking others, encouraging us to release our judgments on all such phenomena through forgiveness and so find our own innocence, our ontological Self, which we share with all life.

In the *Heart Sutra*, purity – innocence – is attained by *Having no obstruction in their minds, they have no fear, and by going utterly beyond error, they will reach the end of nirvana.*

What is ultimately true in Buddhism is the buddha state, the buddha mind, enlightenment. Only ignorance holds us back, subjecting us to karma, afflictions and conceptualisation, taking the form of the ‘three poisons’ – craving, hatred and delusion. Of course in a deistic theosophy, there is always God in the background. On the whole, I prefer the non-deistic philosophy of Buddhism. Less cluttered and confusing – ‘God’ means so many different things!

It is now held by physicists that the universe arose from literally nothing. Emptiness. This empty vacuum split into positive and negative particles. This can be reproduced in experiments and these particles last only an infinitesimally small instant, recombine and disappear. However, the big bang gave rise to a whole universe. It is theorised by some physicists that positive particles exceeded negative by one part in a billion, and so remained, forming our universe. Others say both the positive and the negative remain and a large amount of negative or ‘dark’ matter is hanging about unseen, unmeasured, and could or will recombine with the positive, resulting in a return to emptiness. Whatever physicists theorise, this emptiness is very reminiscent of the *Heart Sutra* which says: *Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; emptiness is not other than form, form too is not other than emptiness.*

If form is empty and has no intrinsic meaning, can it be said to exist at all? The various schools of Buddhism have been much exercised by this question. The Dalai Lama is of the emphatic opinion it does exist. He says: *Form lacks intrinsic or independent existence; thus its nature is emptiness... We should not, however, understand this self-emptiness or emptiness of self-nature to mean that form is empty of itself; this would be tantamount to denying the reality of form, which, as I have been repeatedly emphasizing, these teachings do not do.* But do they?

The Dalai Lama is also keen for us to understand that Buddhism is not nihilistic. There is right, there is wrong, there is a morality. But the *Heart Sutra* could be easily interpreted to say: nothing has an intrinsic meaning; there is no right, no wrong. So what is, is, and anything goes. But this, of course, could be asserted only from a position of ignorance and contribute to our burden of karma, which in turn anchors that

ignorance. A self-serving belief or action would itself make enlightenment, and so too the end of suffering, impossible.

As Lao Tse said, The path that can be spoken of is not the true path. No doubt, Buddha was well aware of how impossible it is to use words to engender an understanding which is beyond words, ineffable. Did he then use few words, words which might shock disciples into understanding, into wisdom? Perhaps inducing satori? (A later Zen Buddhist concept, but the principle might have been used earlier.)

So how to arrive? By meditation. Sit down, manoeuvre your legs into the full lotus and *the use of concepts in meditation gradually recedes. When all dualistic perceptions of subject and object, of conventional reality, and of intrinsic existence are removed, one enters the path of seeing. At this point, there is no separation of subject and object; it is as if the subjective experience and its object have become fused, like water poured into water, and one's meditation on emptiness becomes unmediated and direct.* During the stages of meditation one progresses through levels, leaving behind mental afflictions, arriving at stage 10 where one encounters only the footprints of those afflictions, and from there, on to omniscient mind, a new buddha.

It was the last chapter which I felt gave me a handle on how to make this text useful. To develop compassion.

A Course in Miracles asserts on many occasions that ‘only Love is real’ and offers us the path of forgiveness to release all our meaningless judgments and definitions, to release concepts of guilt and sin, to find our own innocence and experience that Love, that unity with Source, with Spirit, to do what we have all come to do – bring the light, save the world. Buddhism does the same, inviting us to develop compassion. In order to shuffle off the ego self and open ourselves to wisdom, we must experience the opposite of self-grasping: *bodhichitta*. This is our altruistic intention to attain enlightenment, to awaken not just ourselves but to save all sentient beings from suffering. To achieve this, *we develop a strong sense of empathy and gratitude toward other sentient beings.* This allows genuine intimacy with all beings. Also, we cultivate *a deep recognition of the fundamental sameness of oneself with others.*

Compassion, our first step on the path to end suffering for all.

Barbara says

Everyone says hard to read, but...It was the first Buddhist book that I read. It fell into my hands by accident, or, by auspicious reason...I could not put it down. I took more notes than ever in my life, and looked up more references and words than ever in my life too! Then went with a neighbor to walk atop a hill and I discussed with her finding Mahayana Buddhist Teachers after reading this book. It just happened there was an FPMT very small group starting here in Austin, TX. where we were blessed to meet two wonderful lamas at different times visiting. Geshe Tashi Tsering from London, and Geshe Thubten Soepa from Canada. Both Tibetan Lamas, wonderful teachers! Thank you your Holiness Dalai Lama for this profound book! I must read it a few more times in this lifetime:)

Sybil says

Happiness is all up to you.

Demi says

At my local Buddhist Centre, I was once asked to recommend a book to a beginner on Emptiness. Now this is can be a tough one. The subject of Emptiness is a beautiful and unique teaching of Buddhism, but there's no doubt that it's also incredibly profound and a topic that can be easily misunderstood. After much thought, I finally settled on recommending The Essence of the Heart Sutra by H.H the 14th Dalai Lama.

This book deconstructs a relative short sutra, The Heart Sutra, which covers the subject of Emptiness. The reason why this book is so good for beginners is largely due to the skill in which His Holiness explains Emptiness. He has a wonderful knack of discussing what can be a very complex topic in terms that even non-Buddhists can easily comprehend. His Holiness' humility is always tempered by his vast & well-studied knowledge and as he teaches on the Heart Sutra, you can tell that his understanding isn't just intellectual but based on deep and personal reflection.

By reading this book, not only will you gain insight into what the Heart Sutra is all about but also how Tibetan Buddhists understand and use Emptiness. I hope you enjoy this lovely read (and don't worry, the book is a manageable size in terms of reading time) as much as I did.

Kirstian says

Amazing! Whenever Jinpa and His Holiness team up, some kind of magic is bound to happen. This is one of those works that, out of nowhere, delivers all kinds of answers and insights into things that have nothing (overtly) to do with the specified topic. It was so inspiring that somehow, I found a way to (similarly) milk a comparative essay out of it...;)

Robin Friedman says

The Dalai Lama On The Heart Sutra

In its enigmatic 25 lines, the Heart Sutra is one of the most difficult of Buddhist Scriptures but also one of the most rewarding. It is a basic text of Mahayana Buddhism and recited daily in monasteries and by practicing Buddhists throughout the world.

There are many commentaries, ancient and modern, on this text, but I found this recent book by the Dalai Lama, "Essence of the Heart Sutra" an outstanding place for the beginner to start. The Dalai Lama's book also will reward study by those having great prior familiarity with the text. The book is based on a series of lectures that the Dalai Lama gave at the Land of Medicine Buddhist center in California and at the Three Rivers Dharma in Pittsburg.

This work is much more than a commentary on the Heart Sutra. It is equally valuable as an introduction to Buddhism and as a compendium of the teachings of the Dalai Lama. It is instructive to see how the Dalai Lama weaves his broad material together into a coherent whole. Thus, in the first part of the book, the Dalai Lama offers broad-based comments on the spiritual dimension of life, of the relationship between Buddhism and other religions, and of the fundamentals of Buddhist teachings. It is inspiring to hear words of ecumenism, tolerance, and willingness to learn from others. It is also important to read the Dalai Lama's exposition of the basic Buddhist teaching of Dependent Origination, which is, in later sections of the book, tied masterfully to the interpretation of the Heart Sutra.

The second part of the book offers a translation and commentary on the Heart Sutra. Consistent with his opening chapters, the Dalai Lama stresses the continuity between this Mahayana text and its earlier predecessors in Theravada Buddhism. (Many other commentaries emphasize how the Heart Sutra departs from and differs from its predecessors.) In addition, in a few brief pages the Dalai Lama offers great insight into the fundamental teaching of emptiness --- that reality is "empty of intrinsic existence." He points out clearly that the Sutra does not teach that nothing exists -- a nihilistic doctrine. Instead, the Dalai Lama relates the teaching of the Sutra to the doctrine of Dependent Origination -- stressing the lack of independent existence, substantiality, and ego. He discusses different ways in which various Buddhist schools interpret the doctrine of emptiness -- including the "mind-only" school and two variants of the "middle-way" school. This material is difficult but important and not stressed in various other commentaries that I have read.

The final part of the Dalai' Lama's study discusses the Bodhisattva path of Mahayana Buddhism -- the decision to dedicate oneself to the welfare of others -- and relates it to the text of the Heart Sutra. There are teachings and practices here on learning to practice lovingkindness, also set forth in other writings of the Dalai Lama, but informed here by the discussion of emptiness and nonclinging in the Heart Sutra. This discussion, and the short epilogue, tie together the ecumenical material in the book with the elucidation and analysis of the Heart Sutra.

This book presents difficult, profound teachings in an accessible readable way. It is ideal for the beginning student or for those who want to explore the Heart Sutra to see what it might offer. It also presents an exposition of this text by the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. For those who want to read further and compare and contrast other approaches to this inexhaustible text, I recommend Red Pine's study "The Heart Sutra" and Donald Lopez' "Elaborations of Emptiness", a detailed and difficult analysis of the Heart Sutra in light of its earliest Indian and Tibetan commentaries.

Robin Friedman

John Stepper says

I continue to be amazed at how the Dali Lama makes the seemingly impenetrable wisdom of ancient texts so simple and clear. For example, I never thought I would understand "Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form." - and even wrote it off as unnecessarily obtuse - until I read this book.

Also, this is yet another wonderful translation of HHDL's work into English by Thutpen Jinpa.

Now to look for more of these enlightening texts! (Pun intended, alas.)
