

## EARLY BUDDHISM & THE HEART SUTRA

The Buddha never used terms like ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Theravāda.’ These developed much later out of the inevitable concocting of cultures, time, and polemics. Could it be that their usefulness is past, especially in the melting pot of America?

My primary spiritual reference is ‘Early Buddhism,’ by which I mean the Buddha-Dhamma recorded in the Pali suttas, especially when sifted according to principles found within those very suttas.<sup>1</sup> I accept that I am a ‘Theravāda Buddhist’ with a tinge of reluctance. This is because much of Theravāda Buddhism seems more committed to the commentary system and its lynchpin, the *Visuddhimagga*, compiled a thousand years after the Buddha’s *Parinibbāna*. I prefer the original stuff. Further, I flatly reject the pejorative term ‘Hinayāna’ when applied to an entire school of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Following my teacher, I aspire to ‘Buddhayāna’ and take the Pali suttas as the primary starting point for discovering it.

My affection for the Pali suttas is not at the expense of so-called ‘Mahāyāna sutras.’ In fact, I find Buddhayāna there as well. Often, I discover vibrant echoes of the Pali suttas in classic Mahāyāna texts such as Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and Hui Neng’s *Platform Sutra*. In many cases, Mahāyāna sutras contain direct copies and paraphrases of Pali texts. To illustrate this, and to highlight the convergence of core Buddhism or Buddhayāna, I offer a detailed look at the Heart Sutra.

The Heart Sutra is probably the most widely know and studied of the Mahāyāna sutras thanks to its concise brevity and profundity. It wonderfully recasts core teachings from the Pali suttas within a Mahāyāna frame story involving the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Mahāyāna students may be shocked to learn that the Dhamma of their beloved Heart Sutra is largely recast Hinayāna, or, Pali Buddhism. That, however, may very well be the case. Please bear with me.

I will demonstrate the simple facts, without any argument, using a simple method. I will juxtapose the main sections of the Heart Sutra with Pali passages that sometimes say the same things and other times come pretty close.<sup>3</sup> You can do the rest.

‘Mahāyānists,’ please be careful. There is a tendency to assume that the Pali teachings don’t express the full Buddha-Dhamma. Please set aside that assumption and read the Pali suttas as they are written (here in translation). And ‘Theravadins, please don’t think the Heart Sutra is merely a later and spurious concoction. Give these important texts honest inquiry, rather than be shackled by old prejudices and polemics:

*The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, while moving in the deep course of wisdom’s perfection, shed light on the five skandas and found them essentially empty. Through this realization, he overcame all suffering.*

☞ In essence, suffering boils down to the five clinging aggregates (*upādānakkhandha*).<sup>4</sup>

☞ Ananda, because it is empty of self and what belongs to self, it is said, ‘empty is the world.’ And what is empty of self and what belongs to self? The eye is empty of self and what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and what belongs to self. Eye-consciousness is empty of self and what belongs to self. Eye-contact is empty of self and what belongs to self. Whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition — whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant — that too is empty of self and what belongs to self. [Repeated for ears, nose, tongue, and body.] The mind is empty of self and what belongs to self. Mental phenomena are empty of self and what belongs to self. Mind-consciousness is empty of self and what belongs to self. Mind-contact is empty of self and what belongs to self. Whatever feeling arises with mind-

contact as condition — whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant — that too is empty of self and what belongs to self.<sup>5</sup>

*Listen, Sariputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness. Emptiness is not other than form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.*

- ☞ One understands: ‘Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on sensual effluent are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on existential effluent are not present here; whatever disturbances there might be dependent on ignorant effluent are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, that connected with the six sense media dependent upon this body and conditioned by life.’ One understands: ‘This field of perception is empty of sensual effluent; this field of perception is empty of existential effluent; this field of perception is empty of ignorant effluent. There is present merely this non-emptiness, namely, that connected with the six sense media dependent upon this body and conditioned by life.’ Thus, one regards it as empty of what is not there, but as to what remains there one understands that which is present thus: ‘This is present.’ This is the genuine, undistorted, pure descent into emptiness, supreme and unsurpassed.<sup>6</sup>
- ☞ Any recluses or priests who speak of freedom from being as coming about through being: we say of all of those recluses and priests that they have not been liberated from all forms of being. Further, any recluses or priests who speak of freedom from being as coming about through non-being: we say of all of those recluses and priests that they have not been liberated from all forms of being.<sup>7</sup>

*Hear Sariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing.*

- ☞ This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality — upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. However, for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.<sup>8</sup>
- ☞ Questioned by the Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi, the Tathāgatha responds: ‘All exists’ is one extreme. ‘All does not exist’ is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgatha teaches the Dhamma by the middle: ‘With ignorance as condition, concoctions; ... [and so on through the classic links of dependent co-origination].’<sup>9</sup>

*Therefore in emptiness there is neither form, nor feelings, nor perceptions, nor mental formations, nor consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no mind-object; no realms of elements (from eyes to mind consciousness); no interdependent origins and no cessation of them (from ignorance to death and decay); no suffering, no origin of suffering, no end of suffering, and no path; no understanding and no attainment.*

- ☞ Responding to Māra, the Tempter, the personification of defilement, the Buddha says: ‘The eye is yours, Evil One, forms are yours, eye-contact and its base of consciousness is yours; but, Evil One, where there is no eye, no forms, no eye-contact and its base of consciousness — there is no place for you there, Evil One. The ear ... nose ... tongue ... body ... mind is yours, Evil One, mental phenomena are yours, mind-contact and its base of consciousness is yours; but, Evil One, where there is no mind, no mental

phenomena, no mind -contact and its base of consciousness — there is no place for you there, Evil One.<sup>10</sup>

- ☞ To the wanderer Bāhiya, the Buddha explains: When seeing forms merely see, when hearing sounds merely hear, when experiencing things merely experience, and when cognizing phenomena merely cognize, then you will not be. When you are not, then you will not be stuck ‘in that.’ When you are not stuck ‘in that,’ then you will be neither here in this world nor beyond in another world nor in between. Just this is the end of suffering.<sup>11</sup>
- ☞ This "experientable thing" exists, in which there is no soil, no water, no fire, no wind; which is not the experience of limitless space, nor the experience of limitless consciousness, nor the experience of nothingness, nor the experience which is neither perception nor non-perception; which is not this world, not another world, not the moon nor the sun. Concerning this "thing," we do not speak of coming, nor of going, nor of stopping, nor of passing away, nor of being born; it does not stand, it does not proceed, and it is not a sense object (perch for consciousness). This exactly is the end of *dukkha*.<sup>12</sup>

*Because there is no attainment, the bodhisattvas, grounded in the perfection of wisdom, find no obstacles for their minds. Having no obstacles, they overcome fear, liberating themselves forever from illusion, and realizing perfect nirvana. All Buddhas in the past, present, and future, thanks to this perfection of wisdom, arrive at full, right, and universal awakening.*

- ☞ All Buddhas of the past, those yet to awaken,  
and the Buddha who dispels the sorrow of people today;  
All of those Buddhas without exception honor the Dhamma,  
So they have done, are doing, and will always do,  
Simply because that is the nature of all Buddhas.<sup>13</sup>
- ☞ One who has left behind all action,  
Shaking off the dirt of former deeds,  
Not longing, immovable, serene,  
Has no need to talk of it to people.<sup>14</sup>
- ☞ Whenever one has abandoned ignorance and true knowledge arises, through the fading away of ignorance and through its replacement by true knowledge, that practitioner doesn't concoct the concoctor of goodness, doesn't concoct the concoctor of badness, and doesn't concoct the concoctor of neutrality. When he doesn't concoct and doesn't create, he doesn't cling to anything in the world. When free of clinging, there is no fear or surprise. When free of surprise, one naturally cools thoroughly.<sup>15</sup>
- ☞ This is peace, this is sublime, namely, the nature which is the calming of all concocting, the tossing away of all attachments, the destruction of desire, the fading away of clinging, the quenching of *dukkha*, *Nibbāna*.<sup>16</sup>

*Therefore, one should know that perfect understanding is the highest mantra, the unequaled mantra, the destroyer of suffering, the incorruptible truth. A mantra of prajñāparamita should therefore be proclaimed. This is the mantra:*

- ☞ The Brahmin student Mogharaja asked the Buddha, “How should one view the world so that the King of Death will not see one?”  
The Buddha replied: Be ever mindful removing one's sense of ‘self,’ and always see the world as empty. You will have found a way beyond death in this way. Look at the world like this and the King of Death will not see you.<sup>17</sup>

There you have it. Draw your own conclusions.

Of course, Early Buddhism isn't going to set Avalokitesvara above the Venerable Sariputta, so that preface need not be discussed here, it's polemical character notwithstanding. And the concluding mantra is not typical of Early Buddhism, either. With the exception of these two framing pieces, the core Dhamma messages of the Heart Sutra are in harmony with some of the more profound teachings of Early (or Pali, or Nikāya) Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

Here, I have not intended to suggest or argue that the Pali texts are direct sources for the Heart Sutra, nor, conversely, that the Heart Sutra is completely independent of Pali sources. I doubt either position could be proven. Rather, what matters is that they are in a high level of congruence. Such congruence is the hallmark of Buddhayāna.

Finally, let's drop the Mahāyāna and Theravāda polemics, as well as Vajrayāna, Zen, Lotus Sutra, and other prideful or narrow biases. Such arrogance, defensiveness, and delusion does not serve Dhamma and the way of liberation. In fact, such attitudes tarnish the path for us all. Let us join each other in Buddhayāna.

We aspire to the way of Buddhayāna, originally taught by the Buddha, admirably preserved in Pali suttas, and echoed in the riches of Mahāyāna. Not limitable by any particular formulation, we dedicate ourselves to the harmonization of the noble eightfold and bodhisatta paths.

*Gate gate, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha.*

*Santiḷāro  
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## Notes

Translations are adapted from those of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, other Thai translations, and the following English translations.

CDB = *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, Boston).

MDB = *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Bhikkhu Nyanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, Boston).

NDB = *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Vistaar Publications, New Delhi).

Udāna = *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha*, tr. John Ireland (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy).

Sn = *Sutta-Nipāta*, tr. H Saddhatissa (Curzon Press, London)

<sup>1</sup> A guide to reading the Pali suttas in this way is in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> I find it more useful for describing an attitude or state of mind found among practitioners within all the schools of Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> If readers know of better Pali parallels than those offered here, please let me know via [santi@liberationpark.org](mailto:santi@liberationpark.org).

<sup>4</sup> Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, 'The Turning of the Dhamma Wheel Sutta' (the Buddha's first), S.v.421, CDB p.1844.

<sup>5</sup> Suñña Sutta, S.iv.54, CDB p. 1163.

<sup>6</sup> Cūlasuññata Sutta, M.iii.108, MDB p. 969f. "Effluents" or "fermentations" (*āsava*) build up and ferment in the unconscious depths of mind though familiarity with various forms of defilement and then flow out into and dominate conscious mind and behavior.

<sup>7</sup> Loka Sutta, Udāna 33 (Chapter 3, Sutta 10) p. 50.

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- <sup>8</sup> Kaccayanagotta Sutta, S.ii.16, CDB p. 544.
- <sup>9</sup> Jāṇussoṇi Sutta, S.ii.76, CDB p. 584.
- <sup>10</sup> Kassaka Sutta, S.i.114, CDB p. 208.
- <sup>11</sup> Bāhiya Sutta, Udāna 8 (Chapter 1, Sutta 10) p. 20.
- <sup>12</sup> Paṭhamanibbānapaṭisamyutta Sutta, Udāna 80 (Chapter 8, Sutta 1) p. 108.
- <sup>13</sup> Gārava Sutta, S.i. 306, CDB p. 235.
- <sup>14</sup> Kammavipākaja Sutta, Udāna 20 (Chapter 3, Sutta 1) p. 35.
- <sup>15</sup> Parivīmaṇṣanasutta, S.ii.82, CDB p. 587-8.
- <sup>16</sup> Jhāna Sutta, A.ix.36, NDB p. 235.
- <sup>17</sup> Mogharaja-manava-puccha (Sn.V.15)
- <sup>18</sup> Ajahn Buddhādāsa also called it “Pristine Buddhism,” meaning the original Buddha-Dhamma before unawakened beings messed around with it.