



*Mu Soeng*

*the Heart  
of the  
Universe*

*exploring the*

**Heart  
Sutra**

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# The Heart of the Universe



*the* Heart  
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*exploring the*  
Heart Sutra

*by* Mu Soeng



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## Introduction

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At the heart of each of us, whatever our imperfections, there exists a silent pulse of perfect rhythm, a complex of wave-forms and resonances, which is absolutely individual and unique, and yet which connects us to everything in the universe. The act of getting in touch with this pulse can transform our personal experience and in some way alter the world around us.

—George Leonard<sup>1</sup>

The convergence between science and mysticism, between Eastern thought and Western pragmatism and empiricism, and the consequent emergence of a new paradigm in recent times, offers a renewed hope that we can transform ourselves and the world around us. The dangers of failing to do so are readily apparent, mostly in the near destruction of the ecological system of the planet. There are many tools of transformation, but the only place where transformation really takes place is in the human heart. The ancient traditions of the East have sought to understand the nature of reality within one's own heart. It is not an accident that the Chinese word *hsin* stands for heart-mind, rather than just one of those two concepts. In the Eastern way of looking at things, the thinking-feeling process is a unified field, in contrast to Cartesian dualism and Western science's separation of mind and body.

The Buddha spoke of *nama-rupa* (mind-body) as a continuum. Human experience has shown that the heart-mind, being deeply conditioned, is not an easy place for conflicts to be resolved. Deep meditative insights are just as difficult to be accepted by our conditioned emotional

frameworks as the findings of contemporary scientific research. We humans are still guided deeply, perhaps unconsciously, by our emotions, despite our claims to be rational beings. This was brought out most vividly in the intense emotional and even existential crisis that the pioneers of quantum physics (the post-Einsteinian branch of physics that deals with the molecular structure of organisms at the subatomic or the quantum level) underwent before they could accept the intellectual findings of their own experiments. Einstein reportedly said that “God does not play dice with the universe” on the findings of randomness in quantum mechanics and the uncertainty it generated. To accept that the universe is random or that uncertainty is its prime operating principle requires a huge emotional adjustment.

The Heart Sutra, an ancient scripture from the Mahayana wisdom school of Buddhism, offers us insight into the nature of an ultimate reality through intuitive wisdom. The spaciousness of this insight allows the heart to beat in its naturalness, beyond disputations and ideological arguments. Now that quantum physics has found some interesting parallels to the basic insights of the Heart Sutra, perhaps the intellectual and the intuitive can meet.

Although this commentary intends to view the insights of Mahayana Buddhism in the light of quantum physics, it carries no suggestion that the two are complementary or interchangeable. They are, at best, two entirely different orders of looking at “reality,” each reflecting completely different underlying processes. That these underlying processes happen to converge at some point is the source of a new paradigm. In his pioneering book *The Tao of Physics*, Fritjof Capra has observed:

The conception of physical things and phenomena as transient manifestations of an underlying fundamental entity is not only a basic element of quantum field theory, but also a basic element of the Eastern world view... The intuition behind the physicist’s interpretation of the subatomic world, in terms of the quantum field, is closely paralleled by that of the Eastern mystic who interprets his

or her experience of the world in terms of an ultimately underlying reality.

Buddhists express the same idea when they call the ultimate reality *shunyata*—“Emptiness” or “the void”—and affirm that it is a living Void which gives birth to all forms in the phenomenal world... Thus the Void of the Eastern mystic can easily be compared to the quantum field of subatomic physics. Like the quantum field, it gives birth to an infinite variety of forms which it sustains and, eventually, reabsorbs.<sup>2</sup>

The effort in this commentary is to see this convergence in a creative light, knowing full well that after convergence the two understandings of reality separate again and their underlying processes take a different turn.

Above all, this commentary on the Heart Sutra is offered in the spirit of a Zen practitioner. It is not intended to be a definitive statement about Mahayana philosophy to be dissected by academic philosophers. This commentary arose out of my own need, and presumably the need of like-minded Zen students, to understand the historical and doctrinal background of this seminal document. But I did not want to get caught in the minutiae of academic analysis and turn this commentary into yet another doctrinal point of view. My focus is not on doctrinal orthodoxy but rather on a radically new understanding of an ancient teaching: the model of the universe set forth in quantum physics.

Since the teaching of the Heart Sutra is centered on insight into “emptiness,” the Sanskrit word *shunyata* (Pali: *suññata*) is used here throughout, rather than its quite inadequate English translation. It is thus hoped that the inherent vibrancy of *shunyata* teachings, which have infused the spirit of Mahayana for the last two thousand years, will emerge in the following commentary. Since the developed tradition of Zen bears the imprint of *shunyata* throughout, it is hoped as well that readers will approach this commentary through the prism of their own meditation practice, and that the vibrancy of their practice will find resonance in the insights of the sutra. As the pioneering scholar

Edward Conze has remarked, “It cannot be the purpose of a commentary to convey directly to the reader the spiritual experiences which a sutra describes. They only reveal themselves to persistent meditation. A commentary must be content to explain the words used.”<sup>3</sup>

A note on the English translation of the sutra: There are many translations of the Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra (Heart Sutra) now being used by various Zen communities in the United States and Europe. The translation used here is claimed to be based on Kumarajiva’s Chinese translation from the early fifth century. It is used by the Kwan Um school of Zen, where I did my own formal Zen training. I am most at home in chanting this version. Other English translations from the same Kumarajiva original may have different renderings. There are difficulties in certain words translated into English from Chinese or Sanskrit. A generation or two of Zen practitioners in the West have become used to chanting their own particular English version, and it’s quite hard to change these habits. I hope that these chanting habits can be momentarily set aside to investigate the spirit of the sutra through its textuality.

# *The Text Itself*



## The Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply Prajna Paramita, perceives that all five skandhas are empty and is saved from all suffering and distress.

Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness. They do not appear or disappear, are not tainted or pure, do not increase or decrease. Therefore, in emptiness no form, no feelings, perceptions, impulses, consciousness. No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind, no realm of eyes, and so forth until no realm of mind consciousness. No ignorance and also no extinction of it, and so forth until no old age and death and also no extinction of them. No suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path, no cognition, also no attainment with nothing to attain.

The bodhisattva depends on Prajna Paramita, and the mind is no hindrance; without any hindrance, no fears exist. Far apart from every perverted view, one dwells in Nirvana.

In the three worlds all buddhas depend on Prajna Paramita and attain Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi.

Therefore know that Prajna Paramita is the great transcendent mantra, is the great bright mantra, is the utmost mantra, is the supreme mantra which is able to relieve all suffering and is true, not

false. So proclaim the Prajna Paramita mantra, proclaim the mantra which says:

*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha!*

*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha!*

*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha!*



*Background and Setting  
of the Sutra*



## Historical Background of the Sutra

The term “Buddhism,” used generically and rather loosely in contemporary Western discourses, is best understood as an ever-evolving phenomenon with three distinct aspects to its history.

First, the *original teachings* of a historical person. This person was, of course, Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, the Awakened One. These core teachings are the four noble truths, which include the eightfold path, and the chain of dependent origination. There is a historical consensus on the authenticity of these teachings and the teacher. There is also broad agreement among scholars that the discourses contained in the Nikayas (discourse collections) of the Pali canon are the teachings of the historical Buddha.

Second, the Buddhist *philosophy*. This comprises the developed doctrines such as the Abhidhamma canon of the Theravada, the Sarvastivadin, and other orthodox traditions as well as the *sutras* (sermons attributed to the Buddha) and the *shastras* (commentaries on the *sutras*) of the Mahayana tradition, whose composition and compilation took place over a period of centuries after the death of the Buddha. (The Abhidhamma is a compendium of lists and categories for various functions and operations of the human mind that were taught by the Buddha but were not systematized. At the time of the third Buddhist council in ancient India [ca. 250 BCE], a defining moment in Buddhist history, various schools had their own specialized Abhidhamma, most likely for the purposes of monks being able to memorize these categories as part of their monastic learning. Today, only the Abhidhamma of the Theravada remains extant in its original form. However, in early medieval India, it was the Abhidhamma of the Sarvastivadin school that was most influential. The Sanskritized rescension of the subschools of Mahayana is known as Abhidharma.)

Third, the Buddhist *religion*, a smorgasbord of bewildering and seemingly contradictory practices and beliefs ranging from the marathon monks of Mt. Hiei in Japan to the devotees of Pure Land and Nichiren

sects in East Asia to lay supporters of forest monks in Thailand and Sri Lanka. The differences among these varieties are more properly the domain of anthropology and sociology.

With regard to these three aspects, it is important to keep in mind that Buddhist thought and practice is a pluralistic tradition in Asia. Buddhism is not a unitary phenomenon. The term “Buddhism” is a nineteenth-century invention, no longer useful or helpful in our twenty-first-century discourses.

“Buddhism” as a unitary designation, bequeathed to us by Christian missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, survives today in the Western mind’s compulsive tendency to think in unitary terms. For a trained historian of religions it is important to separate philosophical issues from folk narratives. When done properly, the separation can require a certain quarantining of the philosophical from the folk narratives. This is true as much of Buddhism as it is of Christianity and other religions.

A primary shortcoming in the folk narratives of Buddhism in Asia (and, arguably, in each religious tradition) is that they are essentially local. These local expressions are not always capable of producing a grand narrative, which is often the domain of philosophical and doctrinal traditions. This is a problem that Western expressions of “Buddhism” must contend with. The critical question becomes: What do you do when local folk narratives, inherited from Asian traditions, collide with doctrinal traditions established by scholars in these same Asian Buddhist traditions? One possible strategy is to establish as wide and reliable a context as possible for negotiating the treacherous ground between these two uneasily coexisting facets of the same tradition.

Thus, a reading of the Heart Sutra by a Western practitioner has to balance its central teaching of “emptiness” with its popular and iconic status in the folk narratives of China, Japan, and Korea over the last several centuries. It is helpful to remember that Buddhism flourished in Asia for *millennia* as a folk religion and as an inspiration for civic institutions, both of which are aspects of Buddhist religion. The translation

of these frameworks in the modern West, practically and culturally, remains perhaps the most tangled of knots. In many ways these two aspects are the heart and blood of cultural Buddhism, but in some respects they have little or nothing to do with the original teachings.

It should also be noted that many of the texts that would normally be considered part of Buddhist philosophy assign primacy to practices and rituals that may have little to do with Buddha's teachings. A reader or practitioner not born into a Buddhist culture needs to track these boundary crossings in order to create a proper framework for understanding what's being addressed.

Historically, the Heart Sutra, or the Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra, to give it its proper Sanskrit name, freely crosses the boundary between Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist religion. The present commentary tries to keep track of such boundary crossings whenever necessary or helpful. The Heart Sutra is arguably the best known of the Mahayana sutras. Chanted daily in Buddhist monasteries in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet, and the West, this short sutra (containing about fourteen verses in Sanskrit and 270 characters in Chinese) is a basic text of Zen tradition and is considered to contain the essence of all Mahayana wisdom schools.

Zen (or Chan) began in China as a meditation school and was shaped mostly by its sutra literature (despite Zen's professed anti-intellectualism). These sutras, originating in ancient India around 200 BCE, capture the dramatic fervor and religious aspirations of new movements that had broken away from the earlier forms of Buddhism. The records of the Third Council (ca. 250 BCE) give us glimpses into various doctrinal experiments carried on by these new schools and movements. This council was convened by King Ashoka (r. ca. 272–236 BCE), who became a great patron of Buddhist communities in ancient India, for the purposes of ascertaining which of the many doctrines then prevalent were in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha. It was at this council that the Abhidhamma (in its Pali rescension) was accepted as the third "basket" (*pitaka*) of Buddha's teachings, the other two being the *sutta-pitaka*

(“basket of discourses”), and the *vinaya-pitaka* (“basket of monastic rules of conduct”).

Although the term “Mahayana” is of a much later vintage within Indian Buddhism (it is not to be found in the arguments at the Third Council), its doctrines are centered around the teaching of shunyata and the bodhisattva ideal. This ideal exhorts a practitioner to work for the liberation of all beings, however many, rather than striving just for one’s own liberation. This ideal developed in contrast to the model of the arhat, the Buddhist saint, of the earlier orthodox tradition, and the new ideal was claimed to be superior in its aspirations. These are the twin teachings of the Prajna Paramita group of sutras of which the Heart Sutra is the core expression. D. T. Suzuki, the great facilitator between the Zen tradition and the West, finds in the psychology of the bodhisattva “one of the greatest achievements of the life of spirit.”

The Prajna Paramita sutras, or the sutras of Transcendent Wisdom, are inspirational sources for a number of early rebel or reformist groups that were present at the time of the Third Council. The earliest portions of these sutras go back to the period between 200 BCE and 100 CE; the Heart Sutra itself has been dated by Edward Conze at 350 CE. Another pioneering scholar, Heinrich Dumoulin, tells us:

The great Mahayana sutras form the center of Mahayana; in them the new religious inspiration is crystallized. A massive and imposing body of literature, the sutras differs greatly in content, but each and every one of them breathes the spirit of Mahayana. These widely scattered writings serve many religious communities. While individual sutras or groups of sutras take up particular themes, they concur and overlap at many points. Moreover, one and the same sutra can give rise to different religious movements. They are often accompanied by explanatory commentaries, or sastras.<sup>4</sup>

When the teachings of the Buddha first moved from India to China in its Mahayana forms, they were known not as Buddhism but as the Religion

of Prajna Paramita or, since the sutras of Prajna Paramita centered on the teachings of shunyata, as the Religion of Nothingness. In this chronological framework, the teachings contained in the Prajna Paramita sutras are what might be called proto-Mahayana.

The Heart Sutra is one of approximately thirty-eight sutras in the Prajna Paramita group, and it is the shortest of them. In it the dynamic vibrancy of shunyata and the seemingly cryptic delineation of its meaning have been captured with a radical economy of expression that has fascinated countless generations of Buddhist thinkers in India, China, Tibet, and other lands.

The Heart Sutra scholarship was thrown into disarray in recent years when Jan Nattier wrote a groundbreaking monograph, “The Heart Sutra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?”<sup>5</sup> in which she argued, on philological evidence, that the present version of the sutra was originally written in Chinese most likely by Kumarajiva in early fifth century CE and excerpted from the larger Prajna Paramita Sutra, re-translated into Sanskrit, and backdated to an Indian origin. If the Nattier thesis is correct, it would detract from the holiness that medieval Chinese Buddhists attributed to texts originating in India. These scholarly wrinkles do not necessarily diminish the historical prominence or popularity of the sutra in Chinese Buddhism (and now in the West), but they call for a new understanding of the sutra, in which it is seen as a Chinese rather than an Indian text.

The popularity and veneration of this sutra in China owes a good deal to the life and adventures of the great pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang; ca. 600–666), who journeyed to India to find the sources of the Buddhism that prevailed in China during his youth. The adversity he had to overcome in his journeys is the stuff of legends and has since become a staple of Chinese popular literature. He reported that during the extremely dangerous crossing of the Taklamakan desert in Central Asia, en route to India, he chanted the Heart Sutra almost nonstop to ward off dangers and difficulties, seen and unseen.

Xuanzang’s journey to and stay in India from 628 to 644 CE is one of

the great landmarks of Chinese Buddhist history, and is the subject of the popular sixteenth-century Ming romance *Journey to the West*. This epic is to popular Chinese imagination what *Don Quixote* or *Pilgrim's Progress* is to Western literature. Xuanzang's chanting of the Heart Sutra as a *dharani* (magical spell) of immense supernatural power has assumed mythic proportion in the popular Chinese imagination, at times without any reference to the deep insights of the sutra itself. The popularization of the Heart Sutra has been taken to extreme commercial ends in recent years in China, Japan, and Korea through its printing on such items as teacups, hand towels, and neckties.

Xuanzang's deep familiarity with the Heart Sutra suggests that the Kumarajiva translation, done more than two hundred years before Xuanzang's time, had become deeply embedded in Chinese Buddhism, at least within its monastic communities. Xuanzang himself did a highly acclaimed translation of the sutra in 649 upon his return from India. Both he and Kumarajiva are considered to be among the greatest translators of Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese.

Since Xuanzang's time some of the greatest thinkers in Buddhist history—among them Atisa, Fazang (Fa-tsang), Kukai, and Hakuin—have written commentaries on the Heart Sutra. This distinguished commentarial tradition highlights the need of Buddhist practitioners in each generation to understand how this seminal text speaks to them. It is not without interest to note how each generation of practitioners has applied not only its own particular understanding of Buddhist teachings but its cultural prejudices as well to the terminology of the sutra. The perspectives and concerns of the practitioners' milieus are quite distinct in these commentaries. The present commentary's forays into quantum physics and neuroscience are equally indicative of our contemporary culture's concern with its particular frames of reference.

This means that while the Heart Sutra celebrates shunyata as a timeless truth, it must also be seen as a historical document engaged in rivalry with the rationalist-schematic approach taken by the Abhidharma monks of the orthodox Sarvastivadin school whose doctrines were quite



influential in early medieval India. It should also be noted that there were scholarly monks of Mahayana persuasion in early medieval India with their own Abhidharma corpus. Their literature differs in significant details from that of the orthodox schools. In later centuries, while the Abhidhamma remained frozen as a sacred, inviolable text in the countries of Southeast Asia, the Mahayana followers created their own sutra literature to develop and support new indigenous practices and rituals in East Asia.

In the centuries after the Buddha's death, the orthodox Abhidhamma/Abhidharma monks, with their encyclopedic literature, created categories of analysis to the point where it became, in the words of the Zen historian Heinrich Dumoulin, "a dishearteningly lifeless product without metaphysical élan."<sup>6</sup> Mahayana sutras thunder again and again against philosophers (Abhidharmists) who are disposed to freeze reality into a categorical permanence and to discriminate between subject and object.

Doctrinally, the Heart Sutra seems to be a specific rejoinder to the Abhidhamma schema of the Sarvastivadin school that had become dominant in Indian Buddhism after the downfall of the Maurya dynasty (ca. second century BCE). Various responses to Sarvastivadin doctrines lie at the genesis of the movement that later came to be called Mahayana, and the Heart Sutra is a crucial text in the evolution of that movement.

Briefly stated, the Sarvastivadin Abhidhamma advocated a radical theory of pluralism that sought to affirm the existence of momentary entities (*dharmas*) in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Their important contribution to the theory of time need not detain us; their central argument was that reality is a complex system of dharmas. These building blocks of the universe cannot be reduced further—they are thus "ultimates"—but they can be known; and liberation consists of such knowledge. The Sarvastivadins offered a list of seventy-five dharmas, which, like the theory of *atoms* in Greek philosophy, represent final, indivisible units. In the Sarvastivadin view these dharmas are real; they have existed from beginningless time and only change from a latent to a

manifest state. These Sarvastivadin doctrines were trigger points that invited a response from Mahayana monks whose orientation was already shifting toward practices of faith and devotion. They were making a fundamental shift from analytical knowledge (of the dharmas) to gnosis (intuitive or mystical knowledge).

Why this prominence of the orthodox Sarvastivadin school in the scheme of things? Largely it's a matter of history and geography. After being excluded from the patronage network in the aftermath of the Third Council, the monks of the Sarvastivadin school moved from the eastern (Magadhan) to the northwestern part of India (present-day Kashmir). This was also the region where other nascent Mahayana forms of practice and philosophy developed. By the time of Nagarjuna (ca. second century CE) the northwestern part of India was the new and vital center of Buddhist practice and doctrinal development.

Nagarjuna is the most important of Mahayana thinkers; he is indeed the foundational teacher of all Mahayana philosophy. His dialectic of Madhyamika (Middle Way) has formed the basis of all subsequent Mahayana philosophy. In a roundabout way the Heart Sutra is a cogent and concise summation of what Nagarjuna conveys in his extremely sophisticated dialectic. The key difference is that the Heart Sutra was most likely written for purposes of memorization by monks and laypeople alike and also as a shortcut to reinforcing core Mahayana teachings of shunyata and the bodhisattva's path.

In the still-solidifying tradition of Mahayana, the Heart Sutra is a key document that demolishes all categories of plurality and dualism and points out that such categorical thinking is not conducive for the cultivation of wisdom that leads to awakening. In the earliest stages of the formation of Mahayana, some schools of thought proposed a doctrine of "five words" of the Buddha. According to this doctrine, meditation on these words alone has transcendental significance and the power to bring liberation (which, they claimed, was not the case with the rest of the discourses). These five words are: non-self (Pali: *anatta*, Skt: *anatman*); impermanence (*anicca*, *anitya*); anguish or stress

(*dukkha*); transcendence (*nibbana, nirvana*); and emptiness (*suññata, shunyata*).

The school most prominently associated with the doctrine of five words as transcendental was the school of Bahushrutiyas (“those who have heard many teachings”). This school was itself a subschool of Lokottaravada, a school whose main argument was that the Buddha was a transcendental (*lokottara*) “principle” rather than a historical person. According to its followers the teachings of this transcendental principle can be divided into the mundane (for worldly understanding) and the transcendental (for final liberation). The position espoused by the followers of the Lokottaravada and Bahushrutiyas led to a transhistorical understanding of the Buddha and, in due course, opened the door to a fascination with the mystical and the magical, especially in Chinese and other East Asian cultures. Many practices in folk Buddhist traditions are, understandably, a continuation of this fascination. A fascination with the magico-mantric is equally prevalent in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, where Abhidhamma is the main textual source. The most prominent of such instances is the Buddhism of Burma (now Myanmar), where the scholastic and the folkloric coexist somewhat uneasily.

Early Mahayanists share the first four of the “five words” with the Nikaya tradition of Pali Buddhism; it is with the inclusion of the fifth word, *shunyata*, that early Mahayana asserts its differences with the orthodox schools. Thus it may be argued that *shunyata* is the only real doctrinal innovation of early Indian Mahayana philosophy. But then again, the term is not entirely absent in the Pali discourses. For the Nikaya followers, the term *shunyata*—emptiness—may have been synonymous with *anatta*—non-self or no-soul—but the latter term had restricted use in describing persons. The Mahayana invention was to postulate *shunyata* as the essential emptiness of the phenomenal world, including the world within a person’s mind.

The thinkers of Mahayana schools took care to deny the existence of *shunyata* as yet another category. Consequently, we have the teaching

of *shunyata-shunyatam* (emptiness of emptiness) in the later tradition, which warns against the dangers of conceptualizing shunyata as a thing-in-itself. Shunyata is an insight or wisdom that's captured in wordless intuition. In Mahayana understanding, it is only through this intuitive wisdom that one can realize the true nature of the phenomenal world, let go of all clinging to it, and reach the "other shore" of liberation.

The popularity of the Heart Sutra in Buddhist tradition lies not only in its brevity but also in the elusiveness of its meaning. Distinguished commentators over the ages have formulated a wide diversity of interpretations of it, which has led Edward Conze to observe that the [commentators] "tell us more what the text meant to them within their own culture than what the Indian original intended to convey."<sup>7</sup>

Thus Kukai (the founder of Shingon Buddhism) in ninth-century Japan speaks on the Heart Sutra from a tantric point of view that is practically impossible to understand for someone who has not been initiated into its esoteric ritual intricacies. But it nonetheless shows Kukai's distinctive interpretation of classical Indian Mahayana doctrines.

Similarly, in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, Kamalashila in eighth-century Tibet stakes out a position that is still central to the Tibetan understanding of the Heart Sutra, most notably in Kamalashila's influence on the seminal Tibetan master Tsongkhapa several centuries later. Today Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) is to Tibetan Buddhist tradition what St. Thomas Aquinas is to medieval Christianity—the font of all inviolable doctrinal frameworks.

The commentary on the Heart Sutra by Hakuin Ekaku, the Rinzai Zen master who revitalized koan study in Japan in the eighteenth-century is quite unlike any "spiritual" text one is likely to come across. If it were not for the fact that Hakuin was one of the greatest Zen masters in history, it would be easy enough to suspect his interpretation as inspired more by the pharmaceutical than the doctrinal. How else is one to understand Hakuin's description of the famous line "Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form," as "A lame turtle with painted eyebrows stands in the evening breeze"?<sup>8</sup>

All this goes to show that perhaps all the divergent interpretations of the Heart Sutra are somehow appropriate, each in its own way, since the elusive meaning of shunyata demands that each generation of Buddhist thinkers and practitioners in each culture come to grips with it through the praxis of experience.

The Heart Sutra has two versions, the longer and the shorter. The longer version, available to us in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, has a prologue in which the Buddha enters into *samadhi* (concentration) and an epilogue in which he rises from *samadhi* and praises the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who had just spoken what has become the text of the shorter Heart Sutra. The shorter version, available principally through the Zen tradition and discussed here, begins without the prologue and has Avalokiteshvara contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom. This shorter version also has no epilogue.