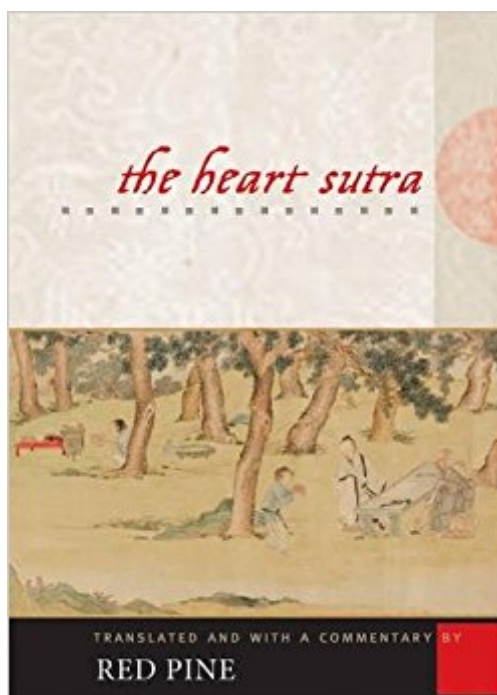


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The Heart Sutra: The Womb Of Buddhas



Synopsis

The short text of The Heart Sutra is Buddhism in a nutshell. It has had the most profound and wide-reaching influence of any text in Buddhism. Its full title, Prajna Paramita Hrdaya Sutra, "The Sutra of the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom," explains that this sutra contains the essence of the Buddha's teaching, the core of perfect enlightenment. It is the source of the famous and puzzling declaration, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." For this new translation into English, Red Pine, award-winning translator of Chinese poetry and religious texts, has utilized various Sanskrit and Chinese versions, refining the teachings of dozens of ancient teachers together with his own commentary to offer a profound word-for-word explication. The result is a wise book of deep teaching destined to become the standard edition of this timeless statement of Mahayana truth. Gate. Gate. Paragate. Parasungate. Bodhi. Svaha.

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Customer Reviews

The Heart Sutra, a mere 35 lines, is one of Buddhism's best-known teachings, "Buddhism in a nutshell," according to Red Pine, an award-winning translator of Chinese poetry and religious writings. But when he was asked to prepare a fresh translation, he found himself reconsidering its origins, reexamining every word, and reassessing every nuance. The result is a meticulous line-by-line interpretation that will radically deepen readers' understanding of not only the sutra but also Buddhism's underlying structure, Abhidharma, or the Matrix of Reality. Red Pine begins by noting that while no one knows where the Heart Sutra came from or who composed it, he has come to believe that its roots are in Northern India, and that "the noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva"

named in the first line is none other than an incarnation of Maya, the Buddha's mother. Red Pine then proceeds to explicate the Heart Sutra in its concentrated entirety, including its most cited pronouncement, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form," a feat that will engage and enlighten every serious student of the Dharma. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

With numerous commentaries written about the Heart Sutra, it is difficult to find something original to say about it. Red Pine's, *The Heart Sutra* is an excellent introductory commentary on the etymology of sanskrit terms used in the sutra. If I may add some additional personal thoughts on the history as outlined in this book, I would add that the Wheel of Dharma is round and as such, it neither has a beginning point nor an end one. There is no need for a first spinning of the Wheel of Dharma or a second or a third. There are many tributaries that flow into the river that flows into the Ocean of Excellence. That which is REALITY is immutable and yet the term immutable is only applicable as contraposition to that which is mutable and therefore, has no real basis in reality. To me the Heart Sutra is not about the supercedence of one teaching over another or a chronological, epistemological history but a digest of a normal progressional process/path for human kind. The lesson of the Heart Sutra is that which is worth experiencing is beyond the knowledge of language; it can not be known from a book but has to be experienced. Lesser Vehicle, Greater Vehicle are just mental diversions and have no real basis. The Suringama Sutra goes further stating that even the Tathagata, Arhat, Samyak-sambodhi and etc., are beyond identity and difference. How much more so is Advaita Vedantins, Theravadins, Sarvastivadins, Yogacaras, and so forth? I still enjoyed this book very much. It was an enjoyable read, well thought out and very, very thought provoking. From here I would recommend the commentary by Ch'an Master Han Shan for further reading. I hope you find this review helpful, if not a little informative. May everyone only see auspiciousness everywhere; let no one have the burden of sorrow or misery.

The most famous of all Buddhist Scriptures, the Heart Sutra encompasses endless wisdom and spiritual guidance within its enigmatic 35 lines. The Heart Sutra is chanted several times daily at Mahayana Buddhist monasteries and temples throughout the world. It is work that will reward repeated and sustained attention. The Heart Sutra has been the subject of extensive commentary, both ancient and modern. One of the finest modern commentaries is the work of the American scholar and translator Red Pine which I will discuss in this review. Red Pine's translation and commentary on the Heart Sutra is a worthy successor to Pine's earlier translation and commentary

on the Diamond Sutra, a work emanating from the same "Perfection of Wisdom" group of Buddhist teachings as does the Heart Sutra. Both of Pine's studies work carefully and closely with the text, and both helped me in my approach to these difficult teachings. Pine's study opens with his own translation of the text of the Heart Sutra. This is followed by an introduction in which Pine discusses what is known about the composition, date, and original language of the work. He reviews some of the scholarly controversies over these matters and places the origin of the Sutra in Northwest India in about 150 A.D. He believes that the work was originally written in Sanskrit, in contrast to some recent scholars who believe it of Chinese origin. Pine follows his historical review with an overview of the text and its purpose. Fundamentally, the Heart Sutra is concerned with teaching wisdom rather than mere knowledge. Specifically, the Sutra is concerned with transcendent wisdom which, as Pine explains it, "is based on the insight that all things, both objects and dharmas, are empty of anything self-existent. Thus, nothing can be characterized as permanent, pure or having a self. And yet, neither can anything be characterized as impermanent, impure, or lacking a self." (p. 21) The wisdom of the Heart Sutra lies beyond mere reasoning and is in the realm of insight and sustained meditation and ethical practice. Pine makes this point eloquently, and it is basic to approaching the Heart Sutra. Pine divides the Heart Sutra into four sections each of which are explored in the four commentarial sections of his book. Each section includes a line-by-line discussion of the text of the Heart Sutra, beginning with Pine's own comments followed by the comments of other students of the work, both ancient and modern. The first part of the work (lines 1-11) set the backdrop of the Heart Sutra in the philosophical commentary of earlier Buddhist tradition known as the Abhidharma. Pine finds the Heart Sutra was written to correct the overly rationalistic approach of certain Abhidharmic texts. In this section, Pine describes briefly the nature of Abhidharmic thought and relates it to the protagonists of the Heart Sutra: Avalokiteshvara, the principle bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism who is usually seen as the figure of universal compassion, Prajnaparamita, a name both for the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism and of the goddess who personifies these teachings, and Shariputra, the Buddha's chief disciple who receives the teaching of Prajnaparamita from Avalokiteshvara in the Heart Sutra. The second part of the Heart Sutra, (lines 12-20) consists of a discussion of the conceptual categories of the Abhidharma, which the teachings of the Heart Sutra reject (or transform). Pine's commentary expands upon the nature of these categories, allowing the reader a means of approaching the key teaching of the Sutra that "form is emptiness emptiness is form." The third part of the Heart Sutra in Pine's study, lines 21-28, discuss the bodhisattva path to wisdom and to the realization of Buddhahood, contrasting these goals with the goals of Arahantship and Nirvana in earlier Buddhist teachings. These lines teach that bodhisattvas are

"without attainment" and that they live "without walls of the mind". Pine's commentary casts light on this difficult and suggestive teaching and way of understanding. The fourth and final part of Pine's analysis deal with lines 29-35 of the Heart Sutra including the obscure mantra with which it concludes: "Gate, gate, paragate, parsangate, bodhi svaha." In his commentary, Pine discusses the meaning and significance of this mantra and its relationship to the rest of the text. According to Pine, this mantra "reminds and empowers us to go beyond all conceptual categories. ... With this incantation ringing in our minds, we thus enter the goddess Prajnaparamita, and await our rebirth as Buddhas". (p. 7) The study concludes with a useful glossary of terms and of people mentioned in the text and with a translation of a slightly later and longer version of the Heart Sutra. In its detail and concentration, this book would not be the best choice for the beginning student of Buddhism. But for those readers with some basic grounding in the earlier forms of Buddhism which the Heart Sutra critiques and with the Mahayana tradition this book is invaluable. It is a book to be read and studied. Pine gives a thoughtful, well-organized, and learned account of the Heart Sutra that will help the reader approach this seminal text.

Given the prominence and role of the Heart Sutra in contemporary Buddhism, it would have been easy to ignore its origins. In Japan, for instance, it is probably the most chanted sutra, and many lay people have it memorized. Red Pine dutifully uses his introduction to review the existing scholarship to locate where the sutra may have been composed and why, even speculating on possible purposes (e.g., a summary of other Buddhist teachings or texts). He provides historical context to other sutras and points out that different translations in Chinese - let alone English - further confuse what a true Heart Sutra may look like. Finally, Red Pine notes that other Buddhists and scholars have been commenting on it for centuries (there are 80 extant Chinese commentaries that predate modern times). Red Pine does his commentary line by line. In so doing, he gives us an excellent overview of Buddhism, its core concepts, and plenty of nuggets for meditation. For instance, in analyzing line 11 of his translation, he reminds us of the often paradoxical nature of Buddhist teaching. "If ... all dharmas are empty of self-existence, impermanence no longer applies, as they neither come into being nor do they cease to be." That is, if there is no beginning or end, then there can be no impermanence. This is reminiscent of Joshu's dog: just like Buddha nature is not something that can be had, to say it is not there denies the reality. The logical mind freezes. Kensho. Great stuff. My only fault is the translation itself. I prefer the one used by the Rochester Zen Center. Incomplete though it may be, it is great for chanting.

Perfection! The Heart Sutra says it all and this translation is the best I've found. Highly recommend!

I have 5 other copies of this sutra and this is my favorite. Pine reads Sanscrit and Chinese, which most other writers cannot. I believe his translation is the best. His commentaries are outstanding. Continued study of this book increases my understanding of this most important sutra. First understanding, then knowledge, and finally wisdom.

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