

## **Exegesis to the Essence of the Exalted Perfection of Wisdom**

In the language of India: *Arya prajnaparamita hridya vyakhya*

In the language of Tibet: 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'I snying po'I rnam par bshad pa

In the English language: *An Exegesis on the Essence of the Noble Perfection of Wisdom [Sutra]*

Salutation to the Bhagawati (Conqueror and Endowed Transcendent Mother), the Exalted Mother of the Perfection of Wisdom

As for the “Bhagawati (Blessed Conqueror Transcendent Mother), the Essence of the Mother, the Exalted Perfection of Wisdom”, it expresses/mentions the very name/title of the Discourse (Sutra), and hence it is called Bhagawati, the Essence of the Mother, the Exalted Perfection of Wisdom.

If the [text] is not given [its] title/name right in the beginning, then [the readers] would be at a loss as to which Discourse it is. Hence, the title is mentioned.

Not only giving the title but the entire *Sutra of the Essence of the Perfection of Wisdom* is gauged within it [the title] and hence it is proclaimed as the *Discourse* amongst the *Discourses* (*mdo'i yang mdo 'o*)!

As for the term “Conqueror”, it refers to conquering the four negative forces (*mara*): because the negative force of the aggregates (*skanda mara*) and so forth are not found when searched for with [the tool of] the perfection of wisdom and that all negative forces do not abide, therefore, they are ‘conquered’.

“Blessed” means being endowed with the six good attributes. As all the qualities of wisdom, too, come about through the blessings of the perfection of wisdom, therefore, it is ‘blessed’.

“Transcendent” means going beyond to the non-abiding nirvana: it is called ‘transcendent’ because of the wisdom gone beyond actually overcoming all thinking mind (Tib.: *sems*; Skt.: *manas*), core consciousness (Tib.: *yid*; Skt.: *citta*) and intellectual knowledge (Tib.: *rnam shes*; Skt.: *vijnana*) as well as becoming free from all the latent imprints.

It is called the “Mother” as even the buddhas of the three times (past, present and future) are the result of practicing the meaning of the perfection of wisdom; they are generated through the meaning of the perfection of wisdom. Hence, since the perfection of wisdom is the ‘mother’ of all the buddhas it is called ‘Mother’.

It is called “wisdom” because of understanding precisely what is correct through the triple understanding derived from hearing/study, reflection and meditation.

It is called “perfection/gone beyond” because wisdom does not see any phenomenon and therefore since it transcends fixated signs, the dual extreme, birth and death, it is called ‘gone beyond/perfection’.

It is called the “Essence” because this short [*Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*] *Sutra* completely captures all the profound and highest [subject matter] contained in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Hundred Thousand Stanzas* and others, leaving none of them.

“Homage to the Conquering Blessed Transcendent Mother Perfection of Wisdom” is paying homage in order to accumulate the store of merits and to worship as it is said in the A Hundred Thousand Stanzas of the perfection of Wisdom Sutra “Prostrating to the Perfection of Wisdom is the same as to bowing to all the buddhas of the three times!”

Now, we have come to the actual body of the text.

This perfection of wisdom is, beginning to end, clearly explained in seven points. What are they? (1) Introductory remarks, (2) entering wisdom, (3) definition of emptiness, (4) the object domain of wisdom, (5) qualities of wisdom, (6) the result of wisdom, and (7) the dharani formula of the wisdom.

The introductory remarks is shown by “Thus have I heard...” to “..sitting in one method”.

Till “..the five aggregates, too, should be seen as being empty of intrinsic nature” shows the entering into wisdom.

Till “..neither is it attained, nor not attained” shows the definition of wisdom.

From there till “..without attainment [the bodhisattvas] abide in and conduct themselves in the perfection of wisdom” shows the objective domain of wisdom.

Then till, “..reach the end point of going beyond sorrow (nirvana)” shows the qualities of wisdom.

Then till, “..become perfectly manifestly fully enlightened into Buddhahood” shows the effect/result of wisdom.

The dharani formula of wisdom is shown from the mantra at the end.

### **The Four Points of the Opening Remark:**

Now, I shall explain the opening remarks: “Thus did I hear” means that since the Noble Manjushri heard and compiled all the Great Vehicle sutras, it is said “did I hear”. And “thus” only expresses whatever synonyms of the essence of the wisdom discourses there are. “..did I hear” refers to listening to the Honourable Bhagawan (the Blessed Buddha), meaning, actually hearing with one’s own ear faculty (ears) what was spoken in his melodious voice. “At one time” should not

refer to mean the Heart of the Wisdom discourses was taught at other times. It refers to the Bhagawan having taught it “only once” to just the audience gathered at Rajgir.

By “the conqueror blessed transcendent one” indicates ‘Who is the teacher?, ‘Where is the place?’ ‘Who are in the audience?’ ‘What is the purpose served after they have gathered?’

The ‘Teacher’ is Bhagawan teacher. The place is Vulture Hill in Rajgir. Those in the assembly (‘khor) comprised ‘the great community of fully ordained monks’ (Bhikshus) and ‘the great heroic bodhisattvas’. Them having gathered, what was the purpose served? This ‘Essence of the Perfection of Wisdom’ was taught.

The word for word explanation will be like the ones foregone: “At the Mass of Vulture Hill in the ‘Kingdom’ of Rajgir” means the ‘Kingdom’ (of Rajgir) (literally means ‘Kingdom’), derived from the name of the whole ‘Kingdom of Rajgir’ and applied to a specific location here due to the fame of the King Bimbisara’s qualities (personality?). And “Mass of Vulture Hill” means, since the area of the country and its landscape is huge ‘Mass of Vulture Hill’ is named because it’s high and many birds gathered there.

‘A great community of fully ordained monks’ is because because they are powerful and many in number. ‘A great community of bodhisattvas’ means there are numerous bodhisattvas all of whom while they directly understand the excellent meaning of the perfection of wisdom and they also place/set others on the perfection of wisdom. ‘Sitting in one method (together)...’ means the Bhagawan Buddha sits surrounded by many around him.

Up to this is the ‘opening remarks’.

### **Entering the Wisdom**

Now, I shall explain by way of the meaning of ‘entering the wisdom’:

“At the time, the Blessed One was absorbed in the meditative concentration known as the profound illumination of phenomenal aspect” shows the Blessed Buddha was absorbed in the meditative absorption due to his love for and in order to bless those around him and all other sentient beings.

As for the “profound illumination of phenomenal aspect”, this religious scripture teaches that all phenomena are beyond focus and all extremes and because it is understood. Therefore, it is called ‘profound illumination’.

“was absorbed in the meditative concentration” means he was in meditative equipoise on that very profound object.

With respect to the clause, “Also, at that time, the great heroic bodhisattva, the Lord Avalokiteshvara, contemplated this very profound object of the perfection of wisdom and saw the very five aggregates as being empty of intrinsic nature”: “Also, at that time” refers to that very time of the gathering of the retinue and

while sitting in meditative absorption. “..Noble Lord Avalokiteshvara saw...empty of intrinsic nature.” means due to his love for those in the retinue and for all sentient beings, the Lord Avalokiteshvara conceived that very profound perfection of wisdom and thought that those aggregates also are nothing other than being empty, without the nature of a referent object. Regarding the “five aggregates”, the aggregate of body is like a mass of bubbles; the feeling/sensation is like foams; discrimination is like a mirage; the abstract composite is like a banyan tree; and consciousness is like a magical illusion. Being “empty of intrinsic nature” means the five aggregates are devoid of intrinsic characteristics because they are beyond all extremes and without characteristic, and hence just empty.

“Then, through the power of the Buddha, the Venerable Shariputra asked this great heroic bodhisattva Noble Lord Avalokiteshvara” means Shariputra, the one having the best intellect from amongst the great hearer disciples [of the Buddha] inquired Lord Avalokiteshvara through the inspiration of the Tathagata.

“Son of the lineage, how should anyone who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom train?” ‘Son of the lineage’ means those who have become the children of the Tathagata being born through the most sublime scripture of the Great Vehicle. “Anyone” refers to whosoever has entered the Great Vehicle. “..to practice the perfection of wisdom” means those who practice the perfection of wisdom practice the inexpressible profound reality (de bshin nyid, tathata) of all phenomena. “How should the ones who so wishes to engage train?” This is asking how should those who wish to engage in the meaning of the perfection of wisdom understand what it is and train in it?

“Having asked thus, the great heroic bodhisattva Noble Lord Avalokiteshvara responded to Venerable Shariputra thus” means giving answer to the question that has been asked.

“Shariputra (Son of Shari), the Noble Son or Noble Daughter whosoever wishes to practice the profound activity of the perfection of wisdom should analyse like this...” This means those who wish to engage in the perfection of wisdom should analyse it according to the meaning explained below.

“The five aggregates also should be closely viewed as being empty of intrinsic nature perfectly.” This means the five aggregates are intrinsically empty by nature. As [they] lack definition, they are not born in the past time, they do not stay in the present, and they will not cease in the future: since in all these three times they lack birth, abiding and ceasing, they are emptiness because of being an inexpressible non-abiding nature. “Should view...” means the [five aggregates] should be ‘viewed’ precisely correctly like that and not viewed as anything other than that. Up to this is about entering the wisdom.

Now, I shall explain by the meaning of the characteristic of emptiness: “Form is empty. Emptiness, too, is form.”

“Form” is that which is seen and conceived, or labled with conventional words, as ‘form’ by those lacking the understanding of reality with their erroneous mind. “Emptiness” means because the nature/essence of form is emptiness, since it has no definition even in the past time, it is unobservable. Since it has no definition in the present and future, too, it is unobservable. Therefore, as all extremes and entities do not abide, they are called ‘emptiness’.

“Emptiness too is form” means ‘emptiness’ too being in the imperceptible nature it ‘is’ labled ‘form’ by conventional word and because it abides not apart from that ‘emptiness is form’.

“Emptiness is not other than form. Form, too, is not other than emptiness”. The form itself inexpressibly is ‘emptiness’ but leaving aside ‘form’, emptiness cannot be found when searched for, and hence, it is said, “Emptiness is not other than form.”

Since what is the inexpressible “emptiness” is labled “form” by a conventional term, which is inescapable and unfindable, therefore, “Form, too, is not other than emptiness.”

“Likewise, feeling, discernment, formation, and consciousness are empty.” What has been explained with respect to ‘form’ should ‘likewise’ be viewed with respect to the remaining aggregates as well.

“Likewise, Shariputra, all phenomena are emptiness...” “Shariputra!” is a call to utter, “Listen well/carefully without distraction!” “Likewise, ...all phenomena are emptiness,” means “Just as it was explained with respect to the five aggregates, you should know that the others, too, from the six sources of consciousness up to the all-aspect knowing mind—all the transcendental phenomena are all ‘emptiness!’”

Similarly, “without characteristics” means just as space has no characteristics, there are neither the characteristics of either the mental afflictions, nor the characteristics of total purification as well.

“Neither birth nor cessation” means what is presently born is something absent in the past that later has become existent. “Cessation” means something that existed in the past becoming nonexistent later. Because emptiness is unobservable, it has not taken birth in the past. Because of no birth it does not cease later.

“Without defilements” and “not being free from defilements” means “defilement” refers to the consciousnesses engaging things in terms of subject and object [duality]. As emptiness transcends consciousness it is without defilements.

“Not without defilements” means because of absence of defilement, there is no cessation [of it] as well.

“There is no decrease, nor completion.” “Decrease” refers to sentient beings and “completion” refers to buddhas, and “without” means sentient beings and buddhas cannot be found when searched for. Hence, they are “without decrease (waning), nor completion (vexing)”.

As such with regard to the statement, “Emptiness is not a form”, as ‘form’ is characterized by disintegration (gzhig par bya ba’I mtshan nyid yin) but ‘emptiness’ has no such characteristic, therefore, ‘emptiness is not a form’.

“It is not feeling. Likewise, feeling is characterized by experience. It is not discernment; discernment is characterized by perceptivity/apprehending. It is not formation; formation is characterized by clear conditioning. It is not consciousness; consciousness is characterized by perceiving individual specific grasping. However, since emptiness is not an observed focus, it is not perceiving consciousnesses! The plural suffix ‘-es’ in “not consciousnesses” means the five aggregates are characterized by contamination but emptiness is not the five aggregates.

“It is not the eyes.” Eyes are characterized by seeing but since emptiness has no characterization, ‘Emptiness is not the eyes’.

“It’s not ears; likewise, ears are characterized by hearing. It’s not nose; nose is characterized by smelling. It’s not tongue; tongue is characterized by tasting. It’s not the body; body is characterized by tactility. It’s not mind; mind is characterized by delineating specifics but emptiness has no characterization; hence, it is not mind (*vid; chitta*).

Thus the six faculties have the characteristic of grasping/holding/perceiving but since emptiness has characterization it is not the six faculties. It is not form. Form is characterized by colour and shape but as emptiness has no characterization it is no form. No sound. Similarly, sound is characterized by interesting or uninteresting. Not smell; smell is characterized by smelling. Not taste; taste is characterized by tasting. Not touch; touch is characterized by soft or rough texture. Not phenomenon; phenomenon is characterized by individual aspects. But since emptiness has no characterization, it is not a phenomenon.

“Thus, the objects [of cognition] are characterized by condition of being observed but since emptiness has no characterization, it is not the objects. From not being the constituent of eye through to not being the element of mind up to not being the element of mental consciousness as well.” The eighteen elements are characterized by malice/uncomeliness. However, since emptiness has no characterization, it is not the eighteen elements.

“It is not ignorance through to not being ageing and death; not extinction of ignorance through to not extinction of ageing and death.” The twelve links of dependent origination from ignorance to ageing and death are characterized by bondage in the cycle of existence but since emptiness has not characterization, it is not ignorance through to not ageing and death.

“From extinction of ignorance through to the extinction of ageing and death” are characteristic of purification [of cycle of existence]. But since emptiness has no characterization, it is not the extinction of ignorance through to the extinction of ageing and death.

“It is not suffering, not origin, not cessation and not path”. “Suffering” is characterized by mental afflictions; “origin” is characterized by appropriation; “cessation” is characterized by peace; and the “path” is characterized by knowledge. However, since emptiness has no characterization, it is not these four truths.

It is not exalted wisdom. Exalted wisdom is characterized by the manifestation of all phenomena to it whereas emptiness has no characterization and, therefore, it is not the exalted wisdom.

“It is not attainment, nor non-attainment.” ‘Attainment’ is the highest perfect complete enlightenment. ‘Non-attainment’ is the sentient beings not achieving the highest. ‘Not’ means there is no highest enlightenment nor sentient beings in the characteristic of emptiness. Therefore, there is neither attainment nor non-attainment.

Through this enumeration, as all phenomena are emptiness, it shows such is emptiness.

Till this is about the definition/characteristic of emptiness.

Now, I shall explained by way of the meaning of the objective dominion of wisdom: “Shariputra, thus without attainment the bodhisattvas abide in and partake of the perfection of wisdom.” This means because it happens that [some] think they have fathomed it without having fathoming it, as it is explained that if you possess just this much object dominion of the perfection of wisdom then you have a fixated sign of engaging emptiness. So, “thus” means all phenomena being empty.

That “the bodhisattvas engage in the perfection of wisdom without attainment” means the bodhisattvas, who have entered the Great Vehicle know/understand that anything from the five aggregates to all-knowing wisdom cannot be achieved and enjoys/engages the perfection of wisdom without even seeing any phenomenon, not even a particle of it.

“All phenomena are emptiness”, means thought they are of non-abiding nature, not knowing that due to being covered by the darkness of ignorance which is an erroneous mind they circle in and wander in the ocean of existence. When scrutinized, “What is the erroneous mind?” with the triple wisdom/intelligence, since the mind cannot be seen/observed the affliction are not seen, liberation is not seen, the five aggregates through to the all-knowing wisdom are not seen. Emptiness, lack of characteristics, no birth, no cessation and so forth are also not seen. Not even the wisdom itself is perfectly seen. Not seeing anything is itself seeing the essential face of the mind! Seeing the essential face of mind thus is

seeing enlightenment. One who sees enlightenment naturally sees Buddhahood. One who naturally sees buddhahood becomes a buddha in the unsurpassed enlightenment of manifest perfect buddhahood.

Here, this qualm is expressed: What, by stating all the time “nothing exists” would it not lead to the nihilism of the Forders or lead to fall into the cessation of peace of the Hearers?

In response this is said: it will not lead into them because of serving sentient beings keeping the perspective that nothing is observed fixated and that it is dedicated for the unsurpassable enlightenment and because the six perfections and others are practiced without the mode of a fixated observation. Hence, those faults do not occur.

Till this the objective domain of wisdom is covered.

Now, let me describe the positive qualities of wisdom. “Since they have no fear in their minds, they have no obscurations and hence going totally beyond error they go to the final nirvana.” As they do not fear hearing, reflecting and meditation on the meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom’s emptiness, they eliminate all mind, mental consciousness, consciousness and their imprints (vasanas). Therefore, it is said, “they have no mental obscuration”. As it transcends the childish conduct of the Forders, and since it utterly goes beyond the objective domain of the Hearers and Solitary Realisers and exhausts all obscurations of mental afflictions and obscuration of knowledge it reaches the great nirvana.

Till this the positive qualities of wisdom are covered.

Now, I shall explain by way of the meaning of the fruit of wisdom: “All the buddhas who live in the three times too abide by the perfection of wisdom and become manifestly awakened to the unsurpassed perfect and complete buddhahood.” This means that all the buddhas in the cosmos in the ten directions also, who pass through the three times—past, present and future—hold, read, recite in prayer, meditate and teach others this perfection of wisdom, and because they practice the perfection of wisdom they completely manifestly become buddhas into this unsurpassable enlightenment. As all the buddhas of the three times (past, present and future) are also born from the perfection of wisdom and ensue from the perfection of wisdom, the perfection of wisdom becomes the Mother of all the buddhas.

This section has covered the fruits of the wisdom.

Now, with regard to explanation through the meaning of the wisdom formula, “Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of is true since it is not false”, “Therefore’ is stated because of what has been said above. The mantra of the perfection is true because it is not false; it is due to the practice of the meaning of the knowledge of perfection of wisdom it is called “mantra” because all the mundane qualities as well become the unsurpassed enlightenment of the Great Vehicle and



that oneself and others too would become buddhas in the unsurpassed enlightenment. Therefore, it is true, not false.

“The mantra of great knowledge” means since the mantra of the knowledge of the meaning of the perfection of wisdom shows that attachment, hatred, ignorance, and all the suffering of cycle of existence are without inherent existence that is inexpressible and, therefore, the perfection of wisdom is “the mantra of great knowledge”.

“The unsurpassed mantra” means because the perfection of wisdom leads to the accomplishment of the unsurpassed enlightenment, it is “the unsurpassed mantra”.

“The mantra equal to the unequalled” means that because the perfection of wisdom is not equal to the conduct of the worldlings, Hearers and Solitary Realisers and that it makes one equal to the exalted wisdom of all the buddhas, it is “the mantra equal to the unequalled”.

“It should be understood as the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering” means that by holding and reading the perfection of wisdom, reciting it in prayers, correctly paying attention to it, and teaching it to others, all diseases such as eye disease would go away and that one would be protected by all the buddhas of the ten directions, nagas and so forth. Because of engaging in the perfection of wisdom the bad transmigrations and the ocean of cyclic existence would be eliminated, it is “the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering”.

“The mantra of the perfection of mantra is declared: Tad yatha, gaté, gaté, paragaté, parasangaté, bodhi svaha.” Because this mantra of the perfection of wisdom summarises all the meaning of the sublime profound [teaching], it is said to be the mantra that naturally establishes and grants blessings.

“Shariputra, the bodhisattvas, the great heroic beings should train in the perfection of wisdom in that way.” As all the buddhas of the three times (past, present and future) become buddhas by practicing the perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattvas who enter the Great Vehicle should also train in the perfection of wisdom.

“Then, the Blessed One arose from that meditative concentration and...” While the Blessed One remained in the profound meditative concentration and inspired Shariputra to pose the question and Avalokiteshvara to respond. When that had been completed he arose from that meditative concentration.

“He then commended Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great heroic beings: “Well done! Well done!” This means that the explanation of the essential meaning of the perfection of wisdom accorded with the teaching of all the buddhas: because it is unmistakable, he was commended, “Well done!”

“Son of the noble lineage, it is just so! Son of the noble lineage, it is just so: you should practice the profound perfection of wisdom just as you have shown...” “It

is just so” because whatever has been spoken by Avalokiteshvara is in accord with what all the buddhas teach. Just as the Noble Avalokita revealed, the bodhisattva too, who have entered the Great Vehicle should accordingly practice.

“Even the Tathagata rejoices!” means if even the Tathagata rejoices what Avalokita has explained, then it goes without saying that others would not doubt about it.

“The Blessed One was pleased and having spoken thus” means having thus explained the perfection of wisdom everyone gathered there also realized the meaning of perfection of wisdom and because of there being no obscuration to the Great Vehicle it was spoken like that with pleasure.

The entire retinue comprising the Venerable Shariputra, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, deities, humans, demi-gods and Smell Eaters (Gandarvas) manifestly praised what the Buddha had spoken.

Here ends the *Exegesis on the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom* authored by Acarya Jnanamitra.

© TENZIN TSEPAG (AKA TENZIN WANGDU (OFFICE OF H. H. THE DALAI LAMA)

This draft translation of Acarya Jnanamitra’s commentary of the Heart Sutra was translated by Tenzin Tsepag for the teaching of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in November 2018 in Japan. It is not finalized. So, the translator would appreciate any suggestion for improvement and polishing of this translation. Thank you for your kind consideration.