

The Heart Sutra — The First Half

般若波羅蜜多心經 · Xuanzang's Chinese (649 CE), Sanskrit in IAST · segments 1–5 of 10, up to character ~125 of 260

The first half is a demolition, carried out in order.

It opens with a claim about something seen, not argued — then works through the standard Buddhist lists and empties each one in turn.

1 · The claim, stated once

觀自在菩薩，行深般若波羅蜜多時，
照見五蘊皆空，度一切苦厄。

*āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo gambhīrām prajñāpāramitā-caryām caramāṇo
vyavalokayati sma: pañca-skandhāḥ, tāmś ca svabhāva-sūnyān paśyati sma*

Literal. Avalokiteśvara, practising deeply the perfection of wisdom, looked and saw that the five aggregates are all empty — and so crossed beyond all suffering.

Between the lines. The entire sutra's position arrives in its first sentence, and it arrives as a **report of something seen**, not a proof. 照見 is *illuminated-and-saw* — perception, not deduction. Everything that follows unpacks this one observation rather than building toward it. Worth noting: 度一切苦厄 (*crossed beyond all suffering*) appears in the Chinese but not in every Sanskrit manuscript.

2 · Form and emptiness

舍利子，色不異空，空不異色，
色即是空，空即是色，受想行識，亦復如是。

*iha śāriputra rūpaṁ śūnyatā, śūnyatāiva rūpaṁ · rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā,
śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṁ · evam eva vedanā-saṃjñā-saṃskāra-vijñānam*

Literal. Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form *is* emptiness; emptiness *is* form. Feeling, perception, formation and consciousness are likewise.

Between the lines. Two distinct claims, and the order is deliberate. First *not different* — there is no gap between them. Then *is* — they are the same thing. The second is much stronger than the first, and the text escalates rather than repeating itself. The address matters too: Śāriputra was the disciple renowned for analytical brilliance, and he is the one being told that analysis has reached its edge.

3 · The mark of emptiness

舍利子，是諸法空相，
不生不滅，不垢不淨，不增不減。

*iha śāriputra sarva-dharmāḥ śūnyatā-lakṣaṇā ·
anutpannā aniruddhā, amalā avimalā, anūnā aparipūrṇāḥ*

Literal. Śāriputra, all things bear the mark of emptiness: not arising, not ceasing; not defiled, not pure; not increasing, not decreasing.

Between the lines. Three pairs, each cancelling a different way we handle things — **existence** (arising and ceasing), **moral status** (defiled and pure), **quantity** (increasing and decreasing). The text is not claiming a middle position between each pair. It removes the axis the pair sits on. Asking whether something is pure or impure is the error, not the answer you land on.

4 · Emptying the inventory

是故空中無色，無受想行識，
無眼耳鼻舌身意，無色聲香味觸法，
無眼界，乃至無意識界。

*tasmāc chāriputra śūnyatāyām na rūpaṃ na vedanā na saṃjñā na saṃskārāḥ na vijñānam ·
na cakṣuḥ-śrotra-ghrāṇa-jihvā-kāya-manāsi · na rūpa-śabda-gandha-rasa-spraṣṭavya-dharmāḥ ·
na cakṣur-dhātur yāvan na mano-vijñāna-dhātuḥ*

Literal. Therefore in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, perception, formation or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind; no sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or object; no realm of sight, and so on through to no realm of mind-consciousness.

Between the lines. This is not poetry, it is **bookkeeping**. Each list is a standard Buddhist taxonomy — the five aggregates, the six sense faculties, their six objects, the eighteen realms — and the text goes through them in the canonical order, negating each. 乃至 (*and so on to*) is the text telling you it has skipped the middle because you already know the list. The effect depends on the reader recognising what is being dismantled.

5 · The chain, and its ending

無無明，亦無無明盡，
乃至無老死，亦無老死盡。

*na vidyā nāvidyā na vidyākṣayo nāvidyākṣayo ·
yāvan na jarāmaraṇaṃ na jarāmaraṇa-kṣayo*

Literal. No ignorance, and no end of ignorance; and so on through to no old age and death, and no end of old age and death.

Between the lines. These are the twelve links of dependent origination — the standard account of how suffering arises, running from ignorance to old age and death. The sutra negates the chain **and its cessation**. That second negation is the important one: it empties not just the problem but the solution. Having done that here, the text is set up to do the same to the Four Noble Truths at the opening of the second half.

What the whole first half means

- **It is a report, not an argument.** The claim is that someone looked and saw. Nothing afterwards tries to prove it; the rest unpacks what follows if it is true.
- **It proceeds by inventory.** Aggregates, then senses, then their objects, then the realms, then dependent origination. The canonical lists, taken in order and emptied one by one.
- **Emptiness is not nothingness.** *Form is emptiness, emptiness is form.* If emptiness meant absence, the second half of that line would be incoherent.
- **It removes axes, not positions.** Not-defiled and not-pure is not a midpoint between them. It says the question does not apply here.
- **It empties the cure as well as the disease.** No ignorance *and* no end of ignorance. This is the move that makes the second half's negation of the Four Truths follow naturally.
- **Then it stops.** The first half takes everything away and offers nothing in its place. What to do about that is the second half's job.

Note on sources — the Chinese is Xuanzang's standard 260-character text; the Sanskrit follows the shorter recension in IAST romanisation, which varies between manuscripts. Translations and commentary here are our own.