

Chapter 7

Buddhist Sutras

The Buddhist sutras mainly record the dharmas taught by the Sakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime.¹ According to the *Sutra of the Deathbed Injunction*, the Buddha (Sakyamuni) was once asked about what kind of guidance people should rely upon for cultivation and whom they should follow after his extinction. The Buddha replied that learners should take the precepts as their guideline rather than blindly following the views of so-called authoritative persons; learners should follow good and reliable teachers.

They should follow the four Dharma reliances: 1) reliance on the Buddhist teachings rather than the teacher; 2) reliance on the meaning rather than the letter of the teachings; 3) reliance on true wisdom rather than on discriminating cognition; 4) reliance on the complete teaching sutras rather than on sutras that contain incomplete teachings.²

This advice will benefit humans in the long run. The Buddha particularly warns us not to uphold differentiation and attachment. Therefore, it is against the doctrines of Buddhism to establish an authoritarian institution, which would be like the Vatican, to overrule the entire Buddhist world. The formation of different schools of thought is the natural result of Buddhist

¹ The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is the only exception. Its author, Master Huineng, was an eminent monk who attained the Buddha way in Mahayana Buddhism.

² 四依止法：依法不依人，依意不依語，依智不依識，依了義不依不了義。

development. On the negative side, the absence of an authoritarian institution allows those who do not understand the background of Buddhism to raise questions about the validity of the religion; on the positive side, it has avoided disputes among different schools of thought.

After attaining Buddhahood, the Buddha taught for forty-nine years. In three periods, the sutras were compiled by his five hundred disciples. In the latter half of this book, we will discuss why different scholars advocate the sutras of different schools. All sutras share the common purpose: they all aim to teach us to attain perfection. Esoteric Buddhism calls this attainment the Vast Perfection. Other sects call this attainment the Reality-Nature, which means the perfection of intrinsic nature.

Here I would like to introduce a key figure, Master Xuanzang of the Tang (602-664) who brought Buddhist classics back to China. During his sixteen-year pilgrimage to India, Master Xuanzang had to undergo many hardships and obstacles, and to hide from border patrols. He learned Buddhist classics and Sanskrit. After bringing back Buddhist texts to China, he translated them into Chinese. He travelled across China to lecture on the Dharma, making an enduring contribution to the promotion of Buddhism. We sincerely appreciate what he did to enable our learning Buddhism conveniently. His influence on Chinese culture is profound and lasting. It is said that he was escorted by an armed force with twenty horses to bring 657 volumes of sutras back to China.³ It would be impossible to describe each of the sutras in depth, but I would like to remark on the significance of

³ Yang Zengwen, *Zhongguo fojiao jichu zhishi* (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2005), 61-64.

this achievement for readers. The Chinese translations of Buddhist sutras are in such a large quantity that they easily surpass the general reading requirements of any doctoral syllabi at any university.

Generally, the following sutras are more well-known:

1. The *Sutra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*⁴: Concepts such as the three kinds of meritorious behaviour (Chapter 6), the Six Paramitas (Chapter 11), three general aspects of Buddhist practice (Chapter 14), and six harmonious ways (Chapter 15) find their references in this sutra.
2. The *Sutra on the Past Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva*⁵ is known for its emphasis on filial piety, which is also called the “Book of Filial Piety” in Buddhism.
3. The *Amitabha Sutra*⁶ illustrates the conditions for rebirth in the pure land and describes the western paradise. This is a renowned classic in the Pure Land School.
4. The *Sutra Spoken by Buddha on the Way of Ten Meritorious Deeds*⁷ is an introductory classic in Hinayana Buddhism.
5. The *Big Eight Appreciations Sutra*⁸ is very helpful for beginner Buddhists.

⁴ 觀無量壽經.

⁵ 地藏菩薩本願經.

⁶ 佛說阿彌陀經.

⁷ 佛說十善業道經.

⁸ 八大人覺經.

6. The *Nirvāṇa Sutra*⁹ expounds the concept of *nirvāṇa*, the condition that surpasses life and death. In the meantime, it offers explanations on the Four Noble Truths.
7. The *Flower Ornament Sutra*¹⁰ is considered the classic of classics. Buddhist practitioners take this sutra as a recipe for correcting their faults. The Flower Ornament School considers it the major classic (See Chapter 20).
8. The *Heart Sutra*¹¹ is written euphuistically, revealing profound ideas in short passages. It might be the Buddhist classic that is recited most frequently in the world. If you understand this sutra, you will understand the principles (buddha-nature, mind-nature, etc.), ideas and effects of cultivation in Buddhism.
9. The *Diamond Sutra*¹² is a classic for the refutation of characteristics and uncovering of enlightenment. Many people recite this sutra, as it is an extremely important classic in Mahayana Buddhism. The author especially introduces the intelligible version collectively annotated by the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and others.
10. The *Sutra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma*¹³, which is also called the *Lotus Sutra*, is a major classic in the Tiantai School.

⁹ 涅槃經.

¹⁰ 佛說大方廣佛華嚴經.

¹¹ 般若波羅蜜多心經

¹² 金剛般若波羅密經.

¹³ 妙法蓮花經 or 法華經.

11. The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*¹⁴ is the principle classic in the Chan School, containing the teachings of Master Huineng.

The author has selected two examples, the *Bodhisattva's Big Eight Appreciations Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, in order to give readers some general idea about what contents are included in a sutra.

The Bodhisattva's Big Eight Appreciations Sutra

This sutra is quite short. Divided into eight sections, the sutra tells us about real situations in the world and teaches us the eight key points of learning Buddhism, how to deal with people, and the reasons and purposes of our cultivation. Below is the translation of this sutra.

The First Appreciation¹⁵

Nothing is permanent in this world.

The security of our land is brittle.

Matters¹⁶ are sadly void in essence.

The five elements we encounter¹⁷ are not part of us.

The very existence of things comes and goes.

It is deceptive and devoid of a central theme.

The mind is the source of all evils.

The appearance provides evidence of sin.

If we can look at things from this perspective,

Gradually, we shall feel detached of life and death.¹⁸

¹⁴ 六祖壇經.

¹⁵ “第一覺悟：世間無常。國土危脆。四大苦空。五陰無我。生滅變異。虛偽無主。心是惡源。形爲罪藪。如是觀察。漸離生死。”

¹⁶ Including the four elements making up the substances: earth, fire, water, and wind.

¹⁷ Including the five constituent elements of all existences: form (色), feeling (受), conception (想), impulse (行), and consciousness (識).

¹⁸ Meaning we shall enter into a state of nirvana.

The Second Appreciation¹⁹

Avarice is the cause of suffering.
Life and death is tiring,
It all starts from greed.
If we compress our desire,
We will find peace in our minds and bodies.

The Third Appreciation²⁰

If we have no limit in our desire,
And keep on seeking material wealth and glory,
We will aggravate our sinful karma.
Bodhisattva cannot approve.
Always feel satisfied with what you have.
Be content in poverty and mindful of the dharma teaching.
Exercise wisdom in handling your affairs.

The Fourth Appreciation²¹

Laziness in our practice will make us fall.
We should always practice diligence.
It will break up our afflictions,
Subdue the four forms of demons,²²
And keep us away from the confinement of Hell and suffering.

¹⁹ “第二覺知：多欲爲苦，生死疲勞，從貪欲起，少欲無爲，身心自在。”

²⁰ “第三覺知：心無厭足，唯得多求，增長罪惡，菩薩不爾，常念知足，安貧守道，唯慧是業。”

²¹ “第四覺知：懈怠墮落，常行精進，破煩惱惡，摧伏四魔，出陰界獄。”

²² Including the anxiety demon (煩惱魔), the body demon (五陰身魔), the heavenly demon (天魔), and the death demon (死魔).

The Fifth Appreciation²³

Breaking away from the ignorance of life and death,
Is constantly the thought of Bodhisattva.
We need to be well read,
To enhance our wisdom and ability, and
To gain eloquence
In order that we may teach the truth,
So that all will get enlightened and feel happy.

The Sixth Appreciation²⁴

In the midst of poverty and grievances,
It is not easy to avoid facing bad karma.
The Bodhisattva will extend equal compassion to all.
Do not differentiate between
Those who love us and those who hate us.
Do not think of other people's errors, and
Do not hate wicked people.

The Seventh Appreciation²⁵

It is wrong to overindulge in human desires.
Although we are human,
We should not contaminate ourselves with worldly pleasure.
Always remember the triple gem,
And the basic needs of life.
Be prepared to sacrifice your daily routine;
Adhere to your ideals and purity.
Whilst the route towards divinity has a long way to go,
We extend compassion to all.

²³ “第五覺悟：愚癡生死，菩薩常念，廣學多聞，增長智慧，成就辯才，教化一切，悉以大樂。”

²⁴ “第六覺知：貧苦多怨，橫結惡緣，菩薩布施，等念怨親，不念舊惡，不憎惡人。”

²⁵ “第七覺悟：五欲過患，雖為俗人，不染世樂，常念三衣，瓦鉢法器，志願出家，守道清白，梵行高遠，慈悲一切。”

The Eighth Appreciation²⁶

In the midst of life and death,
Our being is full of problems and anxiety.
Take the Mahayana vows to assist.
Be willing, on behalf of all sentient beings,
To bear their sufferings so as to,
Enable all sentient beings to receive the ultimate happiness.

Conclusion²⁷

These eight appreciations make up
What the enlightened one has in mind.
Practice on the right path with due diligence.
Cultivate compassion and build up wisdom.
Join the vehicle of dharma,
To reach the shores of nirvana.

²⁶ “第八覺知：生死熾然，苦惱無量，發大乘心，普濟一切，願代衆生，受無量苦，令諸衆生，畢竟大樂。”

²⁷ “如此八事，乃是諸佛菩薩大人之所覺悟。精進行道，慈悲修慧，乘法身船，至涅槃岸。”

Heart Sutra

This literature is considered very important in Buddhist learning, regardless of different schools of thought. Secular families would post calligraphic writings of the Heart Sutra, for the purpose of decoration and admiration of the Buddha's teachings.

However, it is estimated that only a few could understand the true meaning of the *Heart Sutra*. It is beyond the introductory level to explain this sutra at this stage. But the author believes that readers will have had some basic understanding of the *Heart Sutra* after reading this book.

Below I have provided the scriptural texts of the *Heart Sutra* for reference.

When Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound *Prajñāpāramitā*, he illuminated the Five Skandhas and saw that they were all empty, and crossed over all suffering and affliction.

Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form. Sensation, conception, synthesis, and discrimination are also such as this.

Śāriputra, all dharmas are empty - they are neither created nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, and they neither increase nor diminish. This is because in emptiness there is no form, sensation, conception,

synthesis, or discrimination. There are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or thoughts. There are no forms, sounds, scents, tastes, sensations, or dharmas. There is no field of vision and there is no realm of thoughts. There is no ignorance nor elimination of ignorance, even up to and including no old age and death, nor elimination of old age and death. There is no suffering, its accumulation, its elimination, or a path. There is no understanding and no attaining.

Because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on *Prajñāpāramitā*, and their minds have no obstructions. Since there are no obstructions, they have no fears. Because they are detached from backward dream-thinking, their final result is *nirvāṇa*.

Because all buddhas of the past, present, and future rely on *Prajñāpāramitā*, they attain *Anuttarā Samyaksambodhi*.

Therefore, know that *Prajñāpāramitā* is a great spiritual mantra, a great brilliant mantra, an unsurpassed mantra, and an unequalled mantra. The mantra of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is spoken because it can truly remove all afflictions. The mantra is spoken thusly: “gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā”.