

Form is (Not) Emptiness.

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Abstract

In Part I of this essay, I explore the language of the passage associated with the phrase “form is emptiness, emptiness is only form” from the Heart Sutra, acknowledged to be a quotation from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. I establish authoritative versions of the passage, in Sanskrit and Chinese. In Part II, I gloss over the existing commentaries, discarding them largely because they treat the *Heart Sutra* as a *tabula rasa* on which can be asserted various sectarian versions of Buddhism. Instead, I attempt to employ the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Aṣṭa*) as a commentary, relying on the continuity between the texts. The method is productive of interesting commentary on the passage. I argue that the original passage behind the Heart Sutra does not use the word *śūnyatā*, but rather it says *rūpam māyā* “form is illusion”. This well known Buddhist metaphor is based on the simile “form is like an illusion” which dates from the earliest phases of Buddhist literature. I argue that the change resulted in grammatical and logical nonsense. Errors of this kind are fairly common in Buddhist texts, but a dynamic of religious groups typically prevents Buddhists from correcting them. Incidentally, I show how other passages from Chapter 3 of *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* also influenced the composition of the opening lines of the Heart Sutra.

Part I: Establishing the Text

I was trying to have a discussion with someone about the *Heart Sutra* and it became apparent that as far as they were concerned the Sutra consisted only of the phrase “form is emptiness”. I realised that I’ve avoided saying much about this part of the text. It’s the part that most people are focussed on, though to me there are other more interesting facets of the content of the text, not least of which is its fascinating history. It seemed that the time had come for me to overcome my reluctance and to tackle this enigmatic passage and see what I can make of it.

This is as much a methodological problem as it is an exegetic challenge. I feel no obligation to take the tradition on its own terms, therefore I don’t feel bound to do what most Buddhist commentators do, which is to reproduce what has been said before whether it makes sense or not. In fact in the case of the *Heart Sutra* this typically Buddhist procedure is particularly unsatisfactory, partly because the text itself is problematic in ways that previous Buddhist commentators have almost without exception failed to notice, and partly because

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<http://jayarava.blogspot.com/2015/07/form-is-emptiness-part-i-establishing.html>
<http://jayarava.blogspot.com/2015/07/form-is-emptiness-part-ii-commentary.html>
<http://jayarava.blogspot.com/2015/07/form-is-emptiness-part-iii-commentary.html>

what has been traditionally said is more related to sectarian views than to the text itself, and finally because what is said very often does not make sense. I want to try to avoid the “Guru Effect”, the assumption that because we fail to understand what an intellectual says, that it must be profound (Sperber 2010). It seems clear to me that Buddhism suffers from this to a high degree, especially when it comes to Prajñāpāramitā texts. A great deal of obscurantist nonsense has been written about the *Heart Sutra*.

Despite the fact that the passage in question is short, just 16 characters in Chinese, the methods I adopt in working with this text require many steps and the method itself is (I hope) of as much interest as the outcome. Weakness in method plagues commentaries on the *Heart Sutra*. For example, commentators were prevented from seeing the simple grammatical error outlined in my JOCBS article *Heart Murmurs* (2015). They failed to parse the sentence properly. As popular as this text is, it seems to suffer from neglect born of complacency. If one person overlooks a grammatical error one time, that is one thing. When every highly trained scholar and passionate Buddhist overlooked it for a period of 60 years during which time the text received daily attention, then we have reason to distrust the whole enterprise.

My approach means that the essay is long by necessity. Part I deals with the text and its variations. Part II considers the traditional commentaries and begins to explore the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* as a commentary on the Heart Sutra. Part III presents a radical new approach to understanding the text by showing that the relevant quote was changed in the Larger Prajñāpāramitā text. Eventually this material will be incorporated into my book on the *Heart Sutra*.

At the outset, I assume that the *Heart Sutra* is a *Prajñāpāramitā* text, not a Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, or Tathāgatagarbha, or Tantric text. Those other points of view are, at best, secondary to the task of understanding the Heart Sutra. This passage, like much of the text is a quotation from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. So, although it spoke to the 7th century Chinese monk who copied some lines from the *Pañcaviṃśati* and framed thereby creating the *Heart Sutra*, and although these words have appealed to the various sectarian audiences over time (including the present), the words of the *Heart Sutra* ought first and foremost to be understood as an expression of Prajñāpāramitā thought from the early first millennium CE in North-West India. An approach that to my knowledge has never been tried.

I also assume that the Buddhists who wrote the early Prajñāpāramitā texts were still working within the domain of experience and were opposed to ontological speculation. Thus I see a continuity between these “Mahāyāna” texts and early Buddhist texts like the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* and the *Sabba Sutta*, which emphasise that the domain of application of Buddhist ideas is human experience. I find that this assumption is productive of more interesting and coherent readings of these apparently enigmatic texts.

The first step is to establish the text. This is particularly difficult with the *Heart Sutra* because the various Sanskrit editions contain errors, the manuscript/epigraphical tradition is rife with errors, the extant Chinese versions are different from each other and from the Sanskrit. Establishing the text in this case also involves comparison with relevant passages in the extant texts *Pañcaviṃśati* (in our case through both editions and manuscripts). A further difficulty is that all of these texts continued to grow in India, so that each subsequent Chinese translation is longer than the previous ones. Deciding which of the many versions is authoritative is reduced to a more or less arbitrary decision.

Having decided which text we are commenting on, we can begin to try to understand it. In order to do this I will, in Part II, turn initially to the traditional commentaries from India, China, and Japan. However, these offer very little insight into the text because as already stated they are simply sectarian monologues treating the *Heart Sutra* as a *tabula rasa* for other ideas. And this is not the same as commenting on the text.

So instead of relying on traditional sectarian commentaries, I will make a methodological leap and employ the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* as a commentary. *Aṣṭa* is the source text of the Prajñāpāramitā tradition and thus what it says on the subject ought to be both authentic and authoritative (taking into account that *Aṣṭa* itself is something of a moveable feast that changes over time). This approach poses a challenge to the idea that the *Heart Sutra* conveys the essence of Prajñāpāramitā. I raise the possibility that the flip side of “form is emptiness” might simply be a hyper-correction by an over-zealous early editor. Finally I reflect on some implications of this study, and my hermeneutic approach generally, for practising Buddhists. As usual, all translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

I hope a fresh approach to reading this all too familiar text will produce a new appreciation for the *Heart Sutra* and reinvigorate interest in the kind of practice it represents.

Establishing the text.

Our first task will be to look at the text and try to settle on a version to comment on. Another starting assumption is that the text was composed in Chinese based on selections from Kumārajīva’s Large Perfection of Wisdom text 《摩訶般若波羅蜜經》 = *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (T223; translated ca. 404 CE), which is a translation of the *Pañcaviṃśati*. The section beginning “form is emptiness” is definitely drawn from that text. We’ll first locate this passage in the Sanskrit manuscript tradition. I no longer trust Conze’s edition, though I use his notation for identifying the manuscripts, see his 1967 version of the edition for a key. So from the manuscripts I have personally transcribed, or that are published as individual transcriptions, we see the following variations:

- Nb *rūpaṃ śunyaṃ śunyataiva rūpaṃ na rūpān pṛthak śunyatā na śunyatā pṛthak rūpaṃ ||*
- Ne *rupaṃ śuyaṃ śunyataiva rupam . rupān. pṛthak . śunyatāyāṃ . pṛthak śunyatāyāṃ . pṛthak . śunyaṃ ||*
- Nh *rupa śunya śunyataiva rupam rupā {pr}tha{k} nā śunyatāyāṃ pṛthak sunye*
- Nk *rūpaṃ śunyaṃ śunyataiva rūpaṃ | na rūpāt pṛthak śunyatā | śunyatāyā na pṛtha(k) rūpaṃ*
- Ja *iha śāriputra rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ yad rūpaṃ sā śūnyatāyā śūnyatā tad rūpaṃ*
- Jb *rūpa śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ | rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ | yad rūpaṃ sā śūnyatā yā śūnyatā tad rūpaṃ |*
- Cc *iha śāriputra rūpaṃ śūnyatā [śu]nyataiva [na pṛ]tha[k] rūpa [śū]nya[tāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ]*

- *Ce rūpaṃ eva śūnyatā śūnyateiva rūpaṃ || na rūpaṃ pṛthak śūnyatāyāḥ nāpi śūnyatā pṛthagrūpāt ||*
- *Cg iti hi rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyateiva rūpaṃ rūpaṃ te pṛk śūnyatā śūnyatāyā pṛthaka rūpaṃ yat rūpaṃnta śūnyatā śūnyateiva sa rūpaṃ*

From this we might suppose that the first Sanskrit translation of the *Heart Sutra* probably read:

iha śāriputra rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyateiva rūpaṃ rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ

Although many mss., including Ja which is the oldest extant ms., add *yad rūpaṃ sā śūnyatā yā śūnyatā tad rūpaṃ*, we have reason to believe, from comparison with the Chinese canonical texts and *Pañcaviṃśati* that this phrase was added sometime later (see also Nattier 1992: 201, n.5a; 204 n.19). Conze decided to include the phrase in his critical edition, but does not discuss the reasons for doing so.

Only a minority of manuscripts address this passage to Śāriputra, which leaves us in some doubt about whether to include *iha śāriputra* at this point. The Chinese texts both include an equivalent phrase and each *Pañcaviṃśati* witness has some form of address to Śāriputra. So it was probably meant to be there, but the form of the address varies significantly.

The Chinese texts

There are three versions of the short text *Heart Sutra* in the Chinese Tripiṭaka, of which we will focus on two since the third (T256) is relatively late:

T250 摩訶般若波羅蜜大明呪經 = *Mahāprajñāpārami[tā]-mahāvidyā-sūtra.

T251 般若波羅蜜多心經 = Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra

Note that T250, ostensibly from two centuries earlier, doesn't call this text the *Heart Sutra* (心經) at all, but opts for *Mahāvidyā Sūtra* (大明呪經). There is quite a bit that could be said about this, it's arguably a much better title for the text, but this will have to wait for another essay. Please also see *Chinese Heart Sutra: Dates and Attributions*.² The relevant passages read:

T250: 舍利弗！非色異空，非空異色。色即是空，空即是色 (8.847c13-14)

T251: 舍利子：色不異空，空不異色；色即是空，空即是色。(8.848c08-9)

² <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/chinese-heart-sutra-dates-and.html>

I won't translate for now, but even with understanding we can see that they use much the same characters with minor variations (非 and 不 are both negating characters with slight different functions; 是 = 'is', verb 'to be'; 色 = *rūpa*; 空 = *śūnyatā*). We understand that these are quotations from Kumārajīva's translation of the *Pañcaviṃśati*, T223, and a direct comparison shows that T251 is almost identical with T223, except for how the name Śāriputra is written.

T223 舍利弗！色不異空、空不異色，色即是空、空即是色，(8.223a13-4)

However, Huifeng (2008) points out that the Taishō edition footnotes record that in the earlier Sòng, Yuán, Míng and Gōng editions of the Tripiṭaka, T223 reads 非色異空，非空異色 for 色不異空、空不異色. (See also *Variations in the Heart Sutra in Chinese*³). So in fact we can read T250 and T223 as being identical at this point, making T251 the odd one out.

Nattier's thesis additionally floats the possibility that T250 might have been edited to conform to T1509 《大智度論》 Dàzhidùlùn (**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*?), a commentary on *Pañcaviṃśati* incorporating the text and attributed to Nāgārjuna, also translated by Kumārajīva in the early 5th century. Or that the text was originally taken directly from T1509 and T251 has been edited to conform to Xuánzàng's style in T220-ii 《大般若波羅蜜多經》 (Vol. 7, Fasc. 401-478).

T 1509 非色異空，非空異色，色即是空，空即是色；(25.327c22-23)

T220-ii 舍利子！色不異空，空不異色，色即是空，空即是色 (7.14a11-12)

Given that Kumārajīva worked roughly two centuries before Xuánzàng we might assume that T223/T1509/T250 show the original wording. So we will assume that T251 took its final form relatively late, probably as a result of editing by Xuánzàng's students and take the Chinese text to follow T250:

非色異空，非空異色，色即是空，空即是色

This runs counter to the usual procedure of those who comment on the *Heart Sutra*, which almost always privileges the version attributed to Xuánzàng, i.e. T251. In my view, neither T250 nor T251 can be the ur-text or the source text for the Sanskrit translation. There are just too many discrepancies between Chinese and Sanskrit. Thus some work is required to establish an ur-text in Chinese through a detailed comparison of T250, T251, T223, T1509, and the Sanskrit text, along with comparisons with other translations by Kumārajīva to locate all the parallels.

Now we turn our attention to the next important reference point, the Sanskrit precursors.

³ <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/variatoins-in-heart-sutra-in-chinese.html>

Sanskrit Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

There are two modern editions of the Sanskrit *Pañcaviṃśati*, Dutt (1934) and Kimura (2010), though the latter is apparently a revision of the former based on the same Sanskrit manuscript. The Gilgit manuscript has been published in facsimile, but not yet edited or transliterated except in part by Stefano Zacchetti (fols. 1-27) and Yoke Meei Choong (fols. 202-205). A small extract with just the *Heart Sutra* material is also found in Nattier (1992: 161-3) and Tanahashi (2014: 205-6) and all three are slightly different! Tanahashi cites the initial transcription by Greg Schopen revised by Paul Harrison for the book, but gives no publication details. Nattier (204, n.15) credits her transcription to Schopen (unpublished), so presumably this is also the source for Tanahashi. Nattier's text is an uncorrected transcription with notes (1992: 204-5, n.s 15-26) recording record some scribal errors and variants; Zacchetti's edition has corrected scribal errors and the online version does not include any notes; whereas Tanahashi has included scribal errors with comments linearly in curly brackets in his text, and eschews any notes. The Gilgit ms. is dated to the 6th century. It seems to be very like Kumārajīva's T223 and must correspond closely to the Sanskrit text he translated. Thus, we would have a strong preference for using the Gilgit ms. over the later versions in this study. Fortunately, the passage concerned is in the Zacchetti extract.

tathā hi śāriputra nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā, nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ, rūpam eva śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam, (Kimura 2010: 1-1, 64)

na hi śāradvatīputrānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā nānyā śūnyatānyad rūpam rūpam eva śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam (Zacchetti 2005: 21v)

There are minor differences here. The most obvious being that Śāriputra is addressed as Śāradvatīputra. This seems to be based on a tradition that his mother was called Śāradvatī. In the Pāli tradition Śāriputta's mother's name is Rūpasārī. Other variations on his name in Sanskrit texts include Śāriputra, Sālīputra, Sārisuta, Śāradvatīputra, Sārisambhava. The confusion of r/l is a dialectical variation. other variations could be artefacts of the translation of oral texts from Prakrit to Sanskrit. See also Nattier 1992: 204, n.16). Most of the other differences, especially at the beginning are the result of *sandhi*: *na anyā > nānyā*; *śāradvatīputra anyad > śāradvatīputrānyad*.

However, the two versions are similar enough to establish the text addressed to Śāriputra:

na hi śariputra anyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ rūpam eva śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam.

Although the name Śāriputra is invoked at this point, it does not help to clarify in what way. Neither version uses the *iha* 'here' idiom, but both use the particle *hi* 'for' to make it clear that what follows relates to what has just been said. So if the particles were not missing entirely in Chinese we could say that *iha* was a back translation for *hi*. Since the way Śāriputra's name is invoked is at best secondary to the problem of understanding the passage we'll leave it off for the purposes of comparison.

The Text

Now we can see the passage in its journey from India to China and back, and note that this was one of the examples used by Nattier in establishing her Chinese Origins hypothesis (1992: 164). Our passage is a series of four statements

Pañcaviṃśati →	T223/T250 →	Hṛdaya
nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ rūpam eva śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam	非色異空 非空異色 色即是空 空即是色	rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpam
Form is not one thing and emptiness another (<i>anyad</i>). Emptiness is not one thing, and form another. Form is just emptiness. Emptiness is just form.	It is not the case that form is different from emptiness. It is not the case that emptiness is different from form. Form just is emptiness. Emptiness just is form.	Form is emptiness. Emptiness is just form. Form is not different from (<i>pṛthak</i>) emptiness. Emptiness is not different from form.

We might also have looked at the short texts in Tibetan discovered at Dunhuang, but my ability to analyse Tibetan is very limited. Nattier mentions a preliminary study that has not been completed, though see notes in Attwood (2015: 39-40). It seems likely that the Dunhuang Tibetan short text is a translation from the Chinese.

As per Nattier's (1992) comparison we can see that the *Heart Sutra* is a paraphrase of *Pañcaviṃśati*:

$$na\ anyā\ X\ anyā\ Y = X\ na\ pṛthak\ Y$$

The Chinese texts by contrast are all more or less identical with T250. Note also that semantically there is no distinction in Sanskrit between saying *nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā* and saying *rūpam eva śūnyatā*. On one hand, we are saying that form and emptiness are not different, and on the other we are saying that they are the same. It amounts to the same thing. Rather than adding anything new, we can see the second statement as emphasising the statement, with redundancy typical of Buddhist texts. Although Buddhist exegetes often see this kind of repetitious reinforcement as an opportunity to add more comments, this is unnecessary.

The simplest way to account for the texts as we find them is Nattier's Chinese Origins hypothesis: a text reading *nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā*, was transmitted to China where it was translated (T223) as 非色異空 and then this Chinese phrase was quoted in the Chinese *Heart Sutra*. When the *Heart Sutra* was translated back into Sanskrit it became *rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā*. In other essays on the *Heart Sutra* I have observed that other features of the text suggest that the person who translated the text from Chinese into Sanskrit was a native

Chinese speaker and unfamiliar with the Sanskrit conventions of the Prajñāpāramitā literature, and thus chose unconventional Sanskrit phrasing in several places.

Another difference is the inversion of the two halves of the passage in Sanskrit *Hṛdaya*, despite the agreement of *Pañcaviṃśati* and the Chinese *Hṛdaya* (both versions). Since the Chinese *Heart Sutra* has these the right way around, the change seems to have occurred in the translation back into Sanskrit. But there's no way to tell why.

Some Sanskrit manuscripts and all of the Indian commentaries preserved in Tibetan (Lopez 1996: 5, n.2) have *rūpaṃ śūnyam* rather than *rūpaṃ śūnyatā*, which may be a scribal error or related to the fact *śūnya* and *śūnyatā* are both indicated by 空 in Chinese. Comparison with the Sanskrit *Pañcaviṃśati* shows that *śūnyatā* was intended.

Summary

This is the kind of process that one must carry out to work seriously with the *Heart Sutra*, a process one does not find in modern translations and commentaries. A initial grasp of the history of the text allows us to locate the relevant information and to see that our text undergoes a series of changes over time. Indeed how we see the text depends on what our reference point in time is.

All previous commentators, except for Jan Nattier, have simply taken the textual tradition on face value. The Sanskrit version is the one reconstructed by Conze, the official Chinese one is T251 (attributed to Xuánzàng), and the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* is largely ignored, even when it is cited. A partial exception is the recent guide to the *Heart Sutra* by Kazuaki Tanahashi (2014). This is by far the best of the modern, Zen inspired, commentaries, but is still weak on Sanskrit semantics, grammar and morphology. Tanahashi does at least give lip service to the role of the earlier Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitā tradition, but he does not allow it to have any authority in understanding the text, whereas I argue that one cannot study the text without giving due attention to the *Pañcaviṃśati* in both Sanskrit and Chinese. Tanahashi also overloads his book with irrelevant versions in multiple languages drowning out important information with trivia. He is resistant to some of Nattier's revisions of the attribution and dating of the Chinese versions, insisting that T250 is the ur-text, "the α version", when plainly it cannot be. At least it is not the version from which the Sanskrit text was translated, nor the precursor for T251.

The history of this text makes establishing the text to be commented a complex task. When we take everything into account, it introduces a note of ambiguity into the proceedings, and not the kind that Buddhists like. What it does is undermine the idea that any one text is the authentic *Heart Sutra*. It's likely that from now on we'll always have to work with multiple versions: a reconstructed first Sanskrit translation, now partially obscured by the copying tradition, which introduces a number of changes and errors at different times and places; a first Chinese version, now lost and as yet unreconstructed (largely because of resistance to Nattier's thesis); a series of precursor texts in Chinese (particularly T223/T1509, T387, and T410) that are translations of Sanskrit texts, most of which have extant versions; and in the case of the 25,000 line Prajñāpāramitā, the 8,000 line text that predates and underlies it. On top of this is the fact that all the Prajñāpāramitā texts continued to evolve over time, independently and at different rates. So how we understand the *Heart Sutra*

depends in large part on our reference point. All existing commentaries also take an external reference point, usually in the form of a sectarian ideology.

Buddhists often tell me that they feel they can approach the essential meaning of a text by reading multiple translations. Except that in this case, all of the translators are repeating the same mistakes and none of them is showing enough of their working for a naive reader to see what those mistakes are. For example, as far as the popular translations and commentaries of the Sanskrit text are concerned it's clear that none is a reliable guide to the text, and none is sufficiently well versed in the early Prajñāpāramitā to put the text into its context. The Chinese text is better understood, since many of the commentators are at least competent in modern Chinese, but it gets slotted into the context that suits the ideology of the translator. The implications of Nattier's landmark 1992 article have yet to be fully appreciated. The article is long and complex, with a great deal of information tucked away in the many and voluminous footnotes.

Having established the text that we aim to study, in Part II we will briefly turn to the traditional commentaries, before attempting another approach, using the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* as a commentary.

Part II: Commentary

Traditional Commentaries

We have available in translation, two very early Chinese commentaries by Xuánzàng's top students Kuījī 窺基 (Shih & Lusthaus 2006) and Woncheuk 원측 (Hyun Choo 2006). These date from the 7th century, close to the composition of the text, with a strong suggestion that Woncheuk had a Sanskrit text to consult. (Lusthaus 2003). Kūkai's commentary from the early 9th century is perhaps the first Tantric commentary, and gives us insights into Kūkai's thought (Hakeda 1972). We also have eight Indian commentaries from the 8th-12th centuries preserved in Tibetan, translated and studied by Donald Lopez (1988, 1996). However, as almost every scholar who has ever studied these commentaries has complained, they are resolutely sectarian.

“One feature of these commentaries on the Heart Sūtra struck me quite forcibly: each commentary seemed so different from the others, and yet they seemed all to show in greater or less degree the influence of the Mādhyamika School of Buddhist philosophy. The writers seemed to be experiencing some difficulty in exposition, as though they were not writing through having inherited a tradition about the scripture going back to its original composition, but rather were simply arranging their particularly learning in Buddhism to the terminology of the *sūtra*.” (Wayman 1984: 309)

Each commentator takes the Heart Sutra to epitomise their views on Buddhism, whatever their views happen to be. There is no commentarial tradition that ties the Heart Sutra into the early Prajñāpāramitā tradition where it arguably belongs, since, especially with the words of this passage we are dealing with here, the ideas come from the early centuries of the Common Era at the latest. As Malcolm David Eckel says:

“... to approach the Indian commentaries in the hope that they will somehow yield the ‘original’ meaning of the text is to invite disappointment... what they thought it meant was shaped as much by the preoccupations of their own time as it was by the words of the sūtra itself. (Eckel 1987: 69-70)

The traditional commentaries are in short a major disappointment. The Chinese commentaries, for example, are couched in thick and impenetrable Yogācāra jargon. Without their own commentary, the commentaries don’t really make sense. The language of the translations in both cases is classic Buddhist Hybrid English, but worse, Kuījī constantly contradicts himself, alternating between telling us that *dharma*s exist and do not exist, perhaps as a result of a commitment to the Two Truths. It means that his argument on this passage is, on face value, incoherent. The Indian commentaries preserved in Tibetan have much the same problems, though looking at the *Heart Sutra* from different sectarian points of view. None take the text as their starting point. All take their belief system as a starting point and try to shoehorn the Heart Sutra into it. In other words, no commentator is trying to explain the text; they are using the text as a cipher to expound their existing views. This means that, though they might be interesting historical documents in their own right, they are next to useless in the quest to understand the text on its own terms.

There is one source which is not a commentary on the passage, but which may help reveal something about the text. As we know this part of the Heart Sutra is an extract from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, but the *Pañcaviṃśati* itself is an extrapolation from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. One way to approach understanding this passage, then, is to attempt to locate the original passage in *Aṣṭa* from which it descends and see what it says. I believe I can point to the passage in question and that it sheds previously unseen light on this famous rebus. Before we get there, however, we need to consider modern commentary

Modern Commentary

Unfortunately, all the remarks that apply to traditional commentaries can also be applied to modern ones. With one exception that I am aware of, which is in Jones (2012). Jones is a relative outsider in that he does not seem to hold either an academic or ecclesiastical post, but he does have appropriate qualifications and is well versed in Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka literature. And although his approach to translating the *Heart Sutra* is a sectarian one (based, I think, on the Yogācāra inspired exposition of Alex Wayman, though he neglects to say), in his book of Prajñāpāramitā translations there is a short essay on just the passage we are considering (2012: 224-226). Jones initially expresses considerable misgivings about “form is emptiness, emptiness only form”. “In fact,” he says, “the claim is odd.”

The first problem is that the text appears to make *śūnyatā* into “an ontological source of some kind... rather than simply the absence of self-existence.” Jones cites Thích Nhất Hạnh as a populariser of this view when he says: “form is the wave, and emptiness is the water”. But this is completely out of keeping with Prajñāpāramitā and with Madhyamaka thinking

about *śūnyatā*. There is nothing that emptiness “is” because conceptually and semantically it denotes an absence! If in Nhất Hạnh’s metaphor emptiness is the water, then it is a presence of something from which waves are made, not the absence that helps us to see the wave is insubstantial.

A related problem is that form is, in the Two Truths view, ultimately “unreal” whereas *śūnyatā* is not. I take issue with Jones here on the basis of *Kātyāyana*: real and unreal are not qualities that can be imputed to experience. What he means, I think, is that dharmas arise and pass away, whereas *śūnyatā* is always the characteristic of all dharmas. Form is contingent, but all forms lack *svabhāva*. To try to equate the two, as the *Heart Sutra* seems to, is to make a category error. My own view is that equating a substantive (*rūpa*) with an abstract (*śūnyatā*) is as best linguistically awkward, at worst nonsense. Jones briefly notes the alternate reading in some sources i.e. “form is empty” (*rupam śūnyam*). This is fine, until we try to turn it around and discover that nouns and adjectives play different roles in language and can’t be interchanged. The irony here, as we will see below, is that in a sutra largely devoted to negations, this positive assertion is the most problematic passage in the text.

However, by the end of his short treatise, Jones seems to have convinced himself that the passage does make sense.

“...’form is emptiness’ appears to mean that emptiness does not exist apart from the bodily aggregates and the other factors of the experienced world. Emptiness is not an ontological source or some transcendental reality to be attained by abolishing the phenomenal realm.”
(226)

Thus Jones manages to convince himself, through invoking “a Gestalt-like shift” that the text that seemed so problematic to begin with, in fact confirms his understanding of Perfection of Wisdom according to Nāgārjuna. The problems in Buddhist texts have to be rationalised and normalised. When one’s hermeneutic disallows nonsense, then finding it, one will simply re-interpret it as a new kind of sense that requires a special counter-intuitive perspective. At least Jones does not look down on his audience for their not having that special perspective, in the way that Conze did.

My approach is different. In my hermeneutic “nonsense” is not just a possible reading, it is expected. Reading a text as trying to express something about experience is a productive approach, but it cannot solve all the problems encountered, precisely because the author was frequently trying to make an ontological point. All ontologies that are based on the raw phenomenology of experience hold the possibility of error, of confusion, and of nonsense. Nonsense is a likely outcome when generalising about reality from individual experience. And this is not simply my opinion. The early Buddhists knew this, at least in principle, when they spelled out the kinds of wrong views that one could come to by generalising on the basis of recollecting one’s former lives through psychic powers developed in the fourth *jhāna*, see the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (DN 1; i.12-16). Thus we can expect to find nonsense as Buddhists embrace speculations about ontology, and by the time of the *Heart Sutra*, this embrace was already locked in.

Thus primed we can now move on to considering what the *Aṣṭa* can tell us about the *Heart Sutra*.

Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā

The first thing to say by way of commentary is that remarks about form (*rūpa*) and emptiness apply just as much to the other *skandhas* individually and collectively. We usually give extra weight to form because it is used as the example for this analysis, but this skews the view. Yes, form is empty of *svabhāva*, but so is sensation (*vedanā*), apperception (*saṃjñā*), volition (*saṃskāra*) and cognition (*vijñāna*); or all five together, since they only ever operate collectively. We could just as well conduct the whole discussion in terms of *vedanā* or *saṃjñā*. And that would give the discussion a very different feel, because the temptation to make an ontology out of *vedanā* or *saṃjñā* must be considerably less. If anything, such a discussion would tend to Idealism. So any conclusions we come to must be applicable to the entire apparatus of experience, not just to the locus or object of experience (*rūpa*).

Another preliminary comment is that talk of *śūnyatā* is, at least in part, an invocation of the three liberations (P. *vimokkha*) the signless (*animitta*); desireless (*apañihita*) and emptiness (*suññatā*). These refer to profound states of absorption in which sense experience does not impinge on the mind at all. It's entirely possible that some of these passages in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, in which the bodhisatva 'grasps at nothing' etc, relate to *śūnyatā-vimokṣa*. Compare the two *suññatā suttas* (MN 121, 122) and the *Mahāvedalla Sutta* (MN 43). More on these at a later date.

The Heart Sutra passage is in the third chapter of *Pañcaviṃśati*, so we expect to find any corresponding passages early on in *Aṣṭa*, probably in the first chapter. Where possible I will try to supply parallels from the first century CE Gāndhārī *Aṣṭa* (Falk & Karashima 2012). The *Aṣṭa* is full of references to *śūnyatā*, but not in the first chapter. However there are two passages in Chapter One which shed light on the Heart Sutra. The first is:

That said, Elder Subhuti said to Elder Śāriputra... “**Form, Elder Śāriputra, is free from self-existent form**; just so for sensation, names, volition; discernment, Elder Śāriputra, is free of self-existent discernment. Perfect-wisdom, Elder Śāriputra, is free of self-existent perfect-wisdom. Omniscience is free of self-existent omniscience. Perfect-wisdom is also free of the characteristic of perfect-wisdom. A characteristic is free of self-existent characteristics. The signified is free of self-existent. The self-existent is also free of a characteristic of self-existent signification. (Aṣṭa 1.12; Vaidya p.6)⁴

The highlighted sentence takes the form: *rūpam eva virahitaṃ rūpasvabhāvena*. This is fairly standard Buddhist metaphysics, and quite similar to the kind of argument we see in the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā* also (See *The use of Negation in Vajracchedikā*⁵). Although

⁴ 1.12 [6] *evamukte āyusmān subhūtir āyusmantaṃ śāriputraṃ etad avocat – etam etad āyusman śāriputra evam etat | rūpam evāyusman śāriputra virahitaṃ rūpasvabhāvena | evaṃ vedanaiva saṃjñāiva saṃskārā eva | vijñānam evāyusman śāriputra virahitaṃ vijñānasvabhāvena | prajñāpāramitāiva āyusman śāriputra virahitā prajñāpāramitāsvabhāvena | sarvajñātaiva āyusman śāriputra virahitā sarvajñātāsvabhāvena | prajñāpāramitālakṣaṇenāpi prajñāpāramitā virahitā | lakṣaṇa-svabhāvenāpi lakṣaṇaṃ virahitaṃ | lakṣya-svabhāvenāpi lakṣyaṃ virahitaṃ | svabhāva-lakṣaṇenāpi svabhāvo virahitaḥ ||*

⁵ <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/the-use-of-negation-in-vajracchedika.html>

we experience form, or experience ourselves as having form, there is no self-existent form. “Form” arises because sense object meets sense faculty in the presence of sense cognition; because the apparatus of experience is functioning. There is no ‘essence of form’ to give being to form. This places a strict limit on epistemology, on what we can know. Knowing the dependently arisen form does not give us knowledge of the object, only the experience. From a modern perspective this is too restrictive (I’ll discuss this in a forthcoming essay), but for now we need to accept that early Mainstream Buddhists accepted this limit on knowledge and seem to have passed it on to some early Mahāyāna Buddhists. Additionally, as per Nāgārjuna’s argument, if a form were to be endowed with self-existent form, then that form would either never exist, or always exist. Because experience is constantly arising and passing away, we know that it cannot have *svabhāva* in the sense of self-existence. (See also *Emptiness for Beginners*⁶) This also ties into the rejection of the terms existence and non-existence in discussing experience. And this is what we take “form is emptiness” to mean, though why the abstract noun *sūnyatā* is used in the *Heart Sutra* is, as I say, unclear.

We surmise that the problem that passages like this are addressing is the incipient Realism of the Abhidharma project. It used to be thought that this kind of language was a direct dig at the Sarvāstivādins. In fact seems to be a generalised critique with nothing specific to the Sarvāstivāda. The authors of the Abhidharma started out using the word *svabhāva* to mean something like a characteristic quality. At first, it defined categories into which *dharma*s could be slotted. Gradually the *dharma*s themselves came to be seen as having these qualities. And before long the defining characteristic took on a separate life, that did not arise and pass away. The early Prajñāpāramitā texts were in part a general critique of this kind of erroneous thinking.

So this first passage from *Aṣṭa* critiques Realism with respect to *dharma*s. But what we are ideally looking for is a discussion of the emptiness of *dharma*s. The second passage that sheds light is the only part of Chapter One that uses the word *sūnya*.

Furthermore Elder Subhūti, having begun [describing?] the bodhisatva mahāsatva thus, said: if he practises with respect to form, he practices with respect to a sign (*nimitta*). If he practises with respect to an external characteristic of form, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to ‘this is a feature of form’, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the arising of form, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the cessation of form, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the destruction of form, he practices with respect to a sign. **If he practises with respect to ‘form is empty’, he practices with respect to a sign.** If he practises with respect to ‘I am practising’, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to ‘I am a bodhisatva’, he practices with respect to a sign. Just perceiving ‘I am a bodhisatva’, he practices. Thus also with respect to sensation, designation, volitions.

If he practises with respect to discernment, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to an external characteristic of discernment, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to ‘this is a feature of discernment’, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the arising of discernment, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the cessation of discernment, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to the destruction of discernment, he

⁶ <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/emptiness-for-beginners.html>

practices with respect to a sign. **If he practises with respect to ‘discernment is empty’, he practices with respect to a sign.** If he practises with respect to ‘I am practising’, he practices with respect to a sign. If he practises with respect to ‘I am a bodhisattva’, he practices with respect to a sign. Just perceiving ‘I am a bodhisattva’ he practices. If moreover there is [the thought], ‘he practices with respect to the perfection of wisdom who thus practises, creating the perfection of wisdom’ he practices only [with] external features. This bodhisattva is called ‘not skilled in the good’ (Aṣṭa 1.14)⁷

The passage is in fact one long paragraph, but I have broken it up and added some highlighting to make the structure of it more clear. For the Gāndhārī manuscript and notes on Chinese counterparts compare Falk & Karashima (2012: 57 & n.52). The first section critiques the idea of practising with respect to form. If one’s orientation is to experience, then even if one is practising for the end of experience, it is still practising relative to experience. The form that impacts on the sense, causing an experience to arise and then cease, is of no interest to the bodhisattva. It’s all just sense experience and being caught up in sense experience is what traps us in *samsāra*. So the idea is to unhook from sense experience completely. And one of the ways of expressing this is the almost familiar phrase:

saced rūpaṃ śūnyamiti carati, nimitte carati | (Aṣṭa 1.14.7)

If he practises with respect to **‘form is empty’**, he practices with respect to a sign.

The part in quotes is our familiar line *rūpaṃ śūnyam* ‘form is empty’. In the *Pañcaviṃśati*, and therefore in the *Heart Sutra*, the statement has become decontextualised and abstracted: *śūnyatā* is an abstract noun from *śūnya* as ‘emptiness’ is an abstraction from ‘empty’. *Aṣṭa* is saying that if one practices with the idea that ‘form is empty’, then one is still getting it wrong, because one is still practising with respect to sense experience. And yet, this is a common interpretation. Buddhists go around quoting “form is emptiness” as though it is profound, as though it is the whole point, when *Aṣṭa* more or less says that it is a delusion. And this is so because, as the first passage says, form is free of self-existent form.

Now, as we know, liberation (temporary or permanent) is signless (*animitta*). And this description of the bodhisattva’s practice reads very like descriptions of the experience of *vimokṣa* described in the Pāli *suññata suttas* (MN 121,122). I just want to flag up this connection and will explore it in another essay.

In a later chapter the *Aṣṭa* expands on the emptiness of *dharmas* in a familiar way:

⁷ 1.14. *punaraparamāyusmān subhūtir bodhisattvaṃ mahāsattvaṃ ārabhyaivam āha – saced rūpe carati, nimitte carati | saced rūpanimitte carati, nimitte carati | saced ‘rūpaṃ nimittam’ iti carati, nimitte carati | saced rūpasyoṭpāde carati, nimitte carati | saced rūpasya nirodhe carati, nimitte carati | saced rūpasya vināṣe carati, nimitte carati | saced rūpaṃ śūnyamiti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ carāmīti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ bodhisattva iti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ bodhisattva iti hy upalambha eva sa carati | evaṃ saced vidanāyāṃ samjñāyāṃ saṃskāreṣu | saced vijñāne carati, nimitte carati | saced vijñānanimitte carati, nimitte carati sacedvijñānaṃ nimittamiti carati, nimitte carati | saced vijñānasyoṭpāde carati, nimitte carati | saced vijñānasya nirodhe carati, nimitte carati | saced vijñānasya vināṣe carati, nimitte carati | saced vijñānaṃ śūnyamiti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ carāmīti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ bodhisattva iti carati, nimitte carati | ahaṃ bodhisattva iti hy upalambha eva sa carati | saced punarasyaivaṃ bhavati - ya evaṃ carati, sa prajñāpāramitāyāṃ carati, sa prajñāpāramitāṃ bhāvayatīti, nimitta eva sa carati | ayaṃ bodhisattvo ‘nupāyakuśalo veditavyaḥ ||*

Here Subhūti, the bodhisattvas mahāsattvas, being fully enlightened Buddhas, teach the dharma that form has the [same] condition of space in the world. So also sensation, apperception, and volition. In the same way, Subhūti, all dharmas have the condition of space, not coming, not going, just like space. Just as space does not come or go; it is not made or unmade or shaped, it does not last, remain, or endure, it does not arise or cease, so also all dharmas do not come or go; they are is not made or unmade or shaped, they do not last, remain, or endure, they do not arise or cease. Why is that? Subhuti, the emptiness of form does not come or go. So also with sensations, apperception, and volition. The emptiness of cognitions does not come or go. In the same way, Subhūti, the emptiness of all dharmas does not come or go. The reason is that all dharmas are in a state of emptiness. They cannot escape that state. (Aṣṭa 15.2 Vaidya 148)⁸

The important point here seems to be that the bodhisattva must not identify with the world of experience. And this is where we might think of the bodhisattva as in the state of *śūnyatāvimokṣa* in which the world of experience has effectively ceased. In the terminology of the Spiral Path they become fed up (*nibbidā*) with sense experience and lose their fascination with it (*virāga*) and are thus liberated from *saṃsāra* (*vimukti*), which in turn produces the knowledge that they are liberated (*vimuktijñāna*). It is the last that is communicated to disciples in order to cause the arising of faith in the Tathāgata. Note that *Aṣṭa* says, “All dharmas are in a state of emptiness” (*śūnyatāgatikā sarvadharmāḥ*) which echoes the *Heart Sutra*’s phrase “all dharmas are characterised by emptiness” (*sarvadharmāḥ śūnyatālakṣanāḥ*).

So far, this is all pretty standard Prajñāpāramitā, even if the emphasis is somewhat different from the usual Heart Sutra commentary. The *Aṣṭa* has interesting things to say about the *Heart Sutra*, particularly that practising with respect to “form is empty”, is still not what the bodhisattva does. This is still a concept and the bodhisattva, perhaps in the meditative state known as *śūnyatā-vimokṣa*, does not pay attention to any such concepts. To emphasise this phrase is not necessarily the same as being wise.

Māyā

So far, we’ve been looking for a statement along the lines of “*rūpaṃ śūnyatā*”, which would be the obvious ancestor of the line from the Heart Sutra. So far the approach has been productive, but we haven’t really hit the mother lode. But what if, in being transmitted, the text was changed in an unexpected way? What if, for example, a key word was changed? Is this plausible?

⁸ 15.2 *iha subhūte bodhisattvā mahāsattvā anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhimabhisambuddhāḥ santo lokasya ākāśagatikāṃ rūpamiti dharmāṃ deśayanti / evaṃ vedanā samjñā saṃskārāḥ / evameva subhūte sarvadharmā ākāśagatikā anāgatikā agatikā ākāśasamāḥ / yathā ākāśam anāgatam agatam akṛtam avikṛtam anabhisamskṛtam, asthitam asamsthitam avyavasthitam, anuṭpannam aniruddham, evameva subhūte sarvadharmā anāgatā āgatā ākṛtā avikṛtā anabhisamskṛtā asthitā asamsthitā avyavasthitā anuṭpannā aniruddhā ākāśakalpatvādvikalpāḥ / tatkasya hetoḥ? yā subhūte rūpasya śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā / evaṃ vedanāyāḥ samjñāyāḥ saṃskārāṇāṃ / yā subhūte vijñānasya śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā / evameva subhūte yā sarvadharmāṇāṃ śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā / tatkasya hetoḥ? śūnyatāgatikā hi subhūte sarvadharmāḥ / te tāṃ gatiṃ na vyativartante / [148]*

In fact, this seems to be what has happened. In Chapter One of *Aṣṭa* (1.22) we find a passage that is identical in syntax to the famous passage from *Pañcaviṃśati*, except that one of the words has been changed. This passage follows on from the one that I identified with the *Kātyāyana Sūtra*⁹. The context is a series of questions and answers on the subject of how a Bodhisattva trains. The passage we are looking at begins with Subhūti asking a question of the Buddha:

“If the Bhagavan were asked, ‘Can the man of illusions (*māyā-puruṣa*) train in omniscience (*sarvajñā*), will he come near it, will he go forth to it?’ How would the Bhagavan explain the answer to this question?”¹⁰

Here *sarvajñā* ‘complete knowledge, omniscience’ is a synonym of *prajñāpāramitā* and originally of *mahājñāna* (which was hyper-Sanskritised to *mahāyāna* as we saw in *Early Mahāyāna*).¹¹ In East Asia manuscripts of the Heart Sutra, the *maṅgala* is often *namas sarvajñāya*. This seems to be the first mention of the *māyāpuruṣa* or ‘man of illusions’, or as Conze translations “illusory man”, so we’re not quite sure of the context of the word. By way of answer, the Buddha asks Subhūti a related question:

“What do you think Subhūti: is illusion (*māyā*) different from form? Different from sensation, apperception, or volition? Is illusion different from cognition?”¹²

The key phrase in Sanskrit is “*anyā sā māyā anyat tad rūpam*”. This is starting to seem familiar. The form of this question also suggests that Conze has erred in interpreting *māyāpuruṣa*. It’s not an adjective ‘illusory’, not ‘the man who is illusory’, rather ‘illusion’ is a substantive, as in the ‘man who is an illusion’, or more likely ‘...has illusions’. The Buddha seems to be asking whether we can separate the man from his illusions about experience. Subhuti answers:

“It is not the case, Bhagavan, that illusion is different form. Bhagavan, the illusion is form; form is only an illusion. It is not the case, Bhagavan, that illusion is different from sensation, from apperception, from volition. The illusion is only sensation, apperception, and volition, and sensation, apperception and volition are only illusions. It is not, Bhagavan that illusion is different from cognition. The illusion is cognition; cognition is only an illusion.”¹³

⁹ *Kātyāyana in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. (26 Jun 2015)

<http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/katyayana-in-astahasrika.html>

¹⁰ 1.22 *atha khalvāyusmān subhūtir bhagavantam etada vocat - yo bhagavan evaṃ pariprcchet - kimayaṃ māyāpuruṣāḥ sarvajñatāyāṃ śikṣiṣyate, sarvajñatāyā āsannībhaviṣyati, sarvajñatāyāṃ niryāsyatīti? tasya bhagavan evaṃ pariprcchataḥ katham nirdeṣṭavyaṃ syāt?*

¹¹ *Early Mahāyāna: Everything You Know is Wrong*. (3 Jul 2015) <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/early-mahayana-everything-you-know-is.html>

¹² *Aṣṭa 1.22 bhagavānetadvocat - tatkiṃ manyase subhūte anyā sā māyā, anyattadrūpam, anyā sā māyā, anyā sā vedanā / anyā sā saṃjñā, anye te saṃskārāḥ / anyā sā māyā, anyattadvijñānam?*

¹³ *Aṣṭa 1.22 subhūtirāha - na hyetadbhagavan / na hi bhagavan anyā sā māyā anyattadrūpam / rūpameva bhagavan māyā, māyaiva rūpam / na hi bhagavan anyā sā māyā anyā sā vedanā, anyā sā saṃjñā anye te saṃskārāḥ / vedanā saṃjñā [9] saṃskārā eva bhagavan māyā, māyaiva vedanāsaṃjñāsaṃskārāḥ / na bhagavan anyā sā māyā anyattadvijñānam / vijñānameva bhagavan māyā, māyaiva vijñānam //*

What the Buddha is saying here is that illusions (things the unenlightened take to be real) are not found outside the five branches of experience (*pañcaskandhāḥ*), but in fact that the five branches of experience are the illusion. At least to the unenlightened, experience is an illusion that we buy into. This is a useful observation.

Even more interesting is that this passage from *Aṣṭa* uses *exactly* the same syntax as used in the *Heart Sutra* passage from *Pañcaviṃśati* with one change: the word *śūnyatā* is replaced by *māyā*. A reminder that the form of the words from the Heart Sutra found in *Pañcaviṃśati* is:

**nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā | nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ | rūpam eva śūnyatā |
śūnyataiva rūpam**

And here in *Aṣṭa*:

na hi anyā sā māyā anyat tad rūpam | rūpam eva māyā | māyaiva rūpam |

In *Aṣṭa*, it is part of a discussion between the Buddha and Subhūti, but in *Pañcaviṃśati*, the protagonists are the Buddha and Śāriputra, and in the *Heart Sutra*, they are Avalokiteśvara and Śāriputra. There are some minor spelling differences caused by *sandhi*, and by the use of pronouns in *Aṣṭa*, but neither the words nor the grammar is changed by this. *Aṣṭa* only has three phrases, to *Pañcaviṃśati*'s four, leaving off an equivalent of *nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā*. Otherwise, the two passages are more or less the same. Too similar for this to be a coincidence. The *Aṣṭa* passage has to be the source of the passage in *Pañcaviṃśati* that became the famous line in the *Heart Sutra*, but with reference to *illusion* rather than *emptiness*.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate this passage in the Gāndhārī manuscript published by Falk & Karashima (2012). However, we can find a probable counterpart to this passage in the *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā* (Rgs).

Here, the one who knows that the five skandhas are like an illusion,
Does not make illusion one thing and the skandhas another;
The one who practices for peace is free of multiplying perceptions,
His practice is the highest perfection of understanding.¹⁴

The Relation Between rūpa and māyā.

The phrase in *Aṣṭa*, with “illusion”, makes sense in both directions with *māyā*: “the illusion is form; form is only an illusion.” Or “form is an illusion, which is the illusion of form.” Indeed this is fairly standard Buddhist rhetoric about the nature of experience, which seeks to undermine our fascination (or intoxication) with sense experience and encourages us to do the practices which enable us to detach (sober up) from it (especially the *vimokṣa* practices found in MN 121 & 122).

¹⁴ *māyopamāṃ ya iha jānati pañca skandhāṃ
na ca māyā anya na ca skandha karoti anyān |
nānātvasaṃjñāvigato upaśāntacārī
eṣā sa prajñavarapāramitāya caryā || Rgs_1.14 ||*

Initially in Buddhist texts, the relationship between form and illusion is stated as a simile. We find it said in *Aṣṭa* for example that form is *like* an illusion (*māyopamaṃ rūpam*. *Aṣṭa* 9 cf. Rgs 1.14a). The same simile is given at the end of the *Vajracchedikā*:

We should see the conditioned as a star, a kind of blindness, a lamp,
An illusion, a dew drop, a bubble, a dream, a lightening flash, a cloud.¹⁵

This simile is well known and comes from early Buddhism. For example in the Pāli *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta* (SN 22.95) we find it stated like this:

Just so, Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees some form, past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, faraway or right here, he studies it, investigates its origins... and it appears to him unreal (*rittaka*), empty (*tucchaka*), without substance (*asāraka*). After all, what substance (*sāra*) is there in form?¹⁶

The word *sāra* here might also be translated by ‘essence’, a metaphor drawn from the heartwood of a tree. In the passage below a plantain tree lacks any wood, let alone heartwood. The point being that nothing real comes into being when we have an experience that can be designated ‘form’. ‘Form’ is a label we apply to experience, even when we think we are applying it to the world. *Phena* concludes with a verse similar to *Vaj*.

Form is like a ball of foam, sensation like a bubble.
Apperception is like a mirage, volition like a plantain
Cognition is like an illusion. So the kinsman of the Sun taught.¹⁷

So there is some continuity of this idea from Mainstream Buddhism into the early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts (*Aṣṭa*, *Rgs*, and *Vaj*). Unfortunately, the replacement of *māyā* with *śūnyatā* in the comparison breaks the metaphor and the statement no longer makes sense. What makes the *Aṣṭa* version work is that *māyā* is another substantive noun (even though illusions are insubstantial). In *rūpameva māyā* we are comparing two substantives in a well known metaphoric relationship, based on an old simile. Anyone familiar with Buddhist literature is aware of the kinds of comparisons quoted above and can contextualise the statement to make sense of it. However, *śūnyatā* is an abstract noun from an adjective. In order for the apposition to really work we need something like *rūpatā śūnyata* ‘formness is emptiness’, but this still does make sense when we reverse it. So the substitution of *śūnyatā* for *māyā* leaves us with a mess of grammatical and exegetical problems. In short, it seems to have been a mistake.

¹⁵ *tārakā timiraṃ dīpo māyāvaśyāya budbudah
supinaṃ vidyud abhraṃ ca evaṃ draṣṭavya saṃskṛtam* | || *Vaj* 22

¹⁶ *Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci rūpaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ [ajjhattaṃvā bahiddhā vā, oḷārikaṃ vā sukhumaṃ vā, hīnaṃ vā paṇītaṃ vā], yaṃ dūre santike vā taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparikkhati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, rūpe sāro?*

¹⁷ *Phenapiṇḍūpamaṃ rūpaṃ, vedanā bubbuḷūpamā
Marīcikūpamā saññā, saṅkhārā kadalūpamā;
Māyūpamañca viññānaṃ, desitādiccabandhunā.*

But is it plausible to say that an ancient editor introduced a mistake into a “sacred” Buddhist text, rendering it nonsensical? Before answering this question we need to follow the lead just discovered a little longer. The invocation of *māyā* leads us back to the *Pañcaviṃśati*, which reinforces the idea that we have discovered the origin of the “form is emptiness” passage.

Back to Pañcaviṃśati

In a forthcoming article, I show that the passage known as “the epithets of the mantra” has two possible sources in *Pañcaviṃśati* that occur close together. One is far more likely to be the source, but the two are very similar in wording apart from the context. Nattier (1992) noted that in the epithets that the word *vidyā* had been translated into Chinese and then came out as *mantra* in the Sanskrit Heart Sutra. My article will examine this case in more detail.

Alerted by the word *māyā* to look again at the *Pañcaviṃśati* I discovered that the “*rūpam śūnyatā*” phrase also occurs twice. The other occurrence is at the beginning of Chapter Three. The form here is a dialogue between the Buddha and Śāriputra, and one of the main differences from *Aṣṭa* is that the answers are more long winded. Śāriputra asks how a bodhisatva ought to practice (*caritavyam*). In the Gilgit ms. the Buddha begins his reply *iha śāradvatīputra* (recall how uncertain was the wording of this address in Part I). The fact that Śāriputra is the interlocutor here also brings us closer to the *Heart Sutra*.

Importantly, the Buddha’s reply is that the bodhisatva does not *samanupaśyati* ‘perceive, observe, regard, consider’ anything about themselves or what they are doing (which sounds a lot like *śūnyatāvīmokṣa*). And they especially don’t perceive/consider the *skandhas*. And why not?

Because a bodhisatva is indeed empty of self-existence. It is not through being empty that form, sensation, apperception, volition and cognition are empty. **Emptiness is not separate (*anyatra*)¹⁸ from form.** Emptiness is not separate from sensation, apperception, volition and cognition. Form is only emptiness. Sensation, apperception, volition and cognition are only emptiness.

What is the reason? Because this is a mere name; *bodhi* and *bodhisatva* are mere names which are emptiness. Form, sensation, apperception, volition and cognition are mere names. Because form, sensation, apperception, volition and cognition are like illusions (*māyopama*) and a mere name is not situated or located [anywhere]: non-existent, unreal, false, an illusory idea, self-existenceless, and without self-existence, non-arising, non-ceasing, not decreasing or growing, not defilement or purification.¹⁹

¹⁸ Note here that *anya* (other, different) is replaced by the locative *anyatra* (elsewhere, elsewhen).

¹⁹ Gilgit ms. (folio 17 recto - 17 verso) *tathā hi sa bodhisatvo nāma svabhāvena śūnyaḥ na śūnyatayā rūpam śūnyam na vedanā samjñā saṃskārā na śūnyatayā vijñānam śūnyam nānyatra rūpāc chunyatā nānyatra vedanāyāḥ samjñāyāḥ saṃskārebhyo nānyatra vijñānāc chunyatā | śūnyataiva rūpam śūnyataiva vedanā samjñā saṃskārāḥ śūnyataiva vijñānam (Gilgit 17v) tat kasya hetoḥ | tathā hi nāmamātram idaṃ yad uta bodhiḥ nāmamātram idaṃ yad uta bodhisatvaḥ nāmamātram idaṃ yad uta cchunyatā | nāmamātram idaṃ yad uta rūpam vedanā samjñā saṃskārā vijñānam | tathā hi māyopamaṃ rūpam vedanā samjñā saṃskārā māyopamaṃ vijñānam māyā ca nāmamātram na deśasthā na pradeśasthā: asad abhūtaṃ vitathasamaṃ māyādarśanaṃ svabhāvarahitaṃ asvabhāvaś cānutpādaḥ anirodaḥ na hānir na vṛddhiḥ na saṃkleśo na vyavadānam*

Although we can be fairly sure that the quotation from the Heart Sutra is taken from the passage a little further on, this passage may well have been influential. What this passage does, is tie us back to the *Aṣṭa* more clearly through the reference to the *skandhas* being mere names (*nāmamātra*) and like illusions (*māyā-upama*). The use of the locative adverbial pronoun, *anyatra*, means we read the text as saying that emptiness is not found outside of form in time or space. Emptiness, then, is a quality of experience, rather than a quality of reality. Or we might say that phenomena are characterised by emptiness and noumena remain unknown and (as far as Buddhists are concerned) unknowable.

It becomes more obvious why a *bodhisatva* is doing a *skandha* reflection at the beginning of the Heart Sutra. The context in the *Pañcaviṃśati* is precisely this:

How moreover, Bhagavan, should the *bodhisatva mahāsatva* practice with respect to perfection of wisdom.²⁰

The *Heart Sutra* begins with Avalokiteśvara, the archetype of a *bodhisatva* in 7th Century China, doing the practice of perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitācāryām caramāno*) which consists of examining the five *skandhas* (*vyavalokayati sma pañcaskandhān*)

It then proceeds to describe how the *bodhisatva* should relate to the *skandhas*, in a passage that seems to resonate with the Pāli *Cūlasuññatā Sutta*. Thus the opening of the *Heart Sutra* is probably not arbitrary, but also relates more generally to Chapter Three of *Pañcaviṃśati*. The main difference being that the abstract *bodhisatva* has been replaced by the archetypal *bodhisatva* Avalokiteśvara. An obvious next step is to compare this passage in Kumārajīva's T223, which I have not had the time to do yet. And this blog post is far too long already. We can also connect this with the *skandha* reflection practice in the *Mahāsuññatā Sutta* (MN 122) which shows how one pursues the experience of emptiness, while at the same time reflecting on experience.

On final comment on this is that in Conze's translation of the *Pañcaviṃśati* he uses the subject divisions of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, which would have us believe that passage quoted in the Heart Sutra (1975: 61) is related somehow to the Four Noble Truths. The *Heart Sutra* passage covers the end of the second and beginning of the third truth. This seems to me to be a very unlikely reading of the text.

Having established the connections, we need to say a few words about the introduction of deleterious changes to Buddhist texts.

How Buddhist Texts Change for the Worse

From the available evidence, it appears that Buddhists constantly tinkered with their texts in large and small ways, sometimes expanding them massively as with the extrapolation of the 8,000 line text to 100,000 lines; sometimes changing a single word. We often find that successive Chinese translations of texts get longer and longer. There are many reasons why texts get amended and adapted. These are not always to do with increasing wisdom over time.

²⁰ *katham punar bhagavan bodhisatvena mahāsatvena prajñāpāramitāyām caritavyam*

Sometimes the changes are ideological. Sometimes our texts have been amended in ways that are dubious at best and catastrophic at worst. For example in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, sandwiched between a discussion of the four pilgrimage places and how to deal with the Tathāgata’s remains is a passage about how male monks should have nothing to do with women (DN ii.140-1). It is so out of place that it jars the mind when reading the text. But for an example of poor editorial choices, we can use the *Heart Sutra* itself to demonstrate. Take the line:

Nāvidyā nāvidyākṣayo yāvan na jarāmarañam na jarāmarāṇa-kṣayo.

No ignorance or end of ignorance... up to... no ageing and death, no end of ageing and death.

This is the standard list of twelve *nidānas*, in both the forward and reverse directions at once, with just the first and last items on the list, and using the abbreviation *yāvat* ‘as far as’ to stand for the middle ten items. One could hardly get a more orthodox pan-Buddhist idea than this list. In an ideal world, we’d have given the directions separately, *tadyathā*:

Nāvidyā yāvan na jarāmarañam | na jarāmarāṇa-kṣayo yāvan nāvidyākṣayo

No ignorance [as a condition for the arising of volitions]... up to no ageing and death [arising on the basis of birth as a condition]. No cutting off ageing and death [through the cessation of birth] down to no cutting off ignorance [and thus putting an end to this whole mass of suffering].

Even so, the intent of the text is clear; it’s about the twelve *nidānas* and negating them as a set, for the purpose of undermining the idea that the words are more than mere words (*nāmamatra*). However, some editors or scribes have failed to see the twelve *nidānas* here and just noticed *nāvidyā* (or *na avidyā*) ‘no ignorance’ and interpolated *na vidyā* ‘no knowledge’ as though the point were simply to negate pairs of opposites. One of the manuscripts that does this is the *Horiuzi Palm-leaf Manuscript* held in Hōryūji monastery, the oldest extant Sanskrit manuscript of the Heart Sūtra. In the Horiuzi ms. this passage reads (interpolations in bold):

na vidyā nāvidyā **na vidyākṣayo** nāvidyākṣāyo yāvan na jarāmarañam na jarāmarāṇakṣayo

In fact, here the editor has gone one step further and also interpolated *na vidyākṣayo* as well. It’s a bizarre intervention. It’s difficult to explain. This particular manuscript has been very influential, especially in Japan. For example this mistake is replicated at least twice in John Steven’s book *Sacred Calligraphy of the East* (1995: 119, 120-1), and also in the modern Japanese Siddham script calligraphy manual, 梵字必携 (*A Manual of Sanskrit Writing*).

Depending on when the changes happen and how often manuscripts get copied such interventions can become the standard. In the first part of the long text *Heart Sutra*, the sentence in which Avalokiteśvara examines the *skandhas* and sees that they are empty of

svabhāva ought to have two verbs: one meaning “examined” (*vyavalokayati sma*) and one meaning “saw” (*paśyati sma*). However, in the extant versions the verb *paśyati sma* has been replaced by a second *vyavalokayati sma*. This is clearly a simple error, but it must have occurred early on, because it infected all of the extant long texts, including those in Tibetan, and no copyist since has been honest or brave enough to correct it.

Similarly I’ve showed that the 100 Syllable Vajrasattva Mantra routinely transmitted by Tibetan lamas is garbled (Jayarava 2010). The garbled version occurs in every Tibetan source that I have consulted over many years, except the *Kanjur*.²¹ So we can say that bizarre interpolations in texts seem to be *de rigueur*, and mostly because some Buddhists didn’t learn Sanskrit (at all or well enough), but a simple correction by someone who does know Sanskrit is almost always unwelcome because the text is “sacred” or because it would undermine the authority of the guru. Once a text has become nonsense, it seems to be resistant to being repaired, even when the repair is simple and obvious.

So the idea that someone who did not fully understand the text changing the wording in an ad hoc way that did not take the context into account and resulted in non-sense, and this bizarre intervention being accepted as authentic and transmitted faithfully, is not at all farfetched. In fact, it happens all too often! We can point the finger at ancient Buddhists, but in fact, the process continues. Conze’s translations, for example, are full of bizarre interventions and his Sanskrit editions of grammatical errors. My first published article on the *Heart Sutra* (Attwood 2015) looks at a simple grammatical mistake that appears to have been overlooked by Conze, apparently because of his religious beliefs. I’m not quite sure why anyone else overlooked it, but in fact, *everyone* did for over 60 years.²²

When someone we admire and believe to be wise says something incomprehensible, we are predisposed to assume that the statement is profound, too profound for us to understand. Dan Sperber (2010) has called this “The Guru Effect”. Sperber was largely focussed on secular contexts, living as he does in the France of post-modern philosophy that turned nonsense into an art form, to wide acclaim. Conze and many other commentators take this approach with Prajñāpāramitā. Their attitude is that the nonsense is a feature not a bug. “Of course it is illogical,” they say, “if it was logical anyone could understand it and it wouldn’t be profound.” This kind of aberrant thinking has prevented progress being made on understanding these texts for generations.

Conclusions

This exercise has proven the value of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* as a commentary on the *Heart Sutra*. The strategy has provided us with an important new insight into the meaning of the text. Though we still don’t have the passage in the original Prakrit, locating it in the early Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitā texts gives us a better sense of the history of the ideas. Now the history the passage looks like this:

²¹ See: *Canonical Sources for the Vajrasattva Mantra*. (29 Jun 2012)

<http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/canonical-sources-for-vajrasattva.html>

²² A less technical (and non-paywalled) summary of this article is also available: *Heart Murmurs*
<http://www.jayarava.org/writing/heart-murmur-summary.pdf>

- **Rgs**

*māyopamām ya iha jānati pañca skandhām
na ca māya anya na ca skandha karoti anyān |*

- **Aṣṭa**

*na hi bhagavan anyā sā māyā anyat tad rūpam | rūpam eva bhagavan māyā | māyaiva
rūpam ||*

- **Pañcaviṃśati**

*nānyad rūpam anyā śūnyatā | nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ | rūpam eva śūnyatā |
śūnyataiva rūpam ||*

- **T223/T250**

非色異空 非空異色 。色即是空 空即是色 。

- **Hṛdaya**

rūpaṃ śūnyatā | śūnyataiva rūpaṃ | rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā | śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpam ||

A fairly standard Buddhist simile—*experience is like an illusion*—becomes a metaphor—*experience is illusion*—and then given a seemingly deliberate, perhaps ideologically motivated, twist that makes it abstruse—*experience is emptiness*. The change left dozens of generations of Buddhists puzzling over what it could mean, caught in the “Guru Effect” trap of assuming that the text as presented was the most profound wisdom imaginable. Under these conditions, the apparent lack of logic and sense is used to undermine the reader (Conze does this quite openly). This is partly because the putative author of the Heart Sutra was the perfect Buddha, who by this time can do no wrong (I explored aspects of this change in the how Buddhists understood the nature of a Buddha in Attwood 2014). The Guru Effect means that we take what are simple mistakes, and construe them as inevitably failed attempts to communicate some higher Truth. The possibility of error is axiomatically ruled out. All that is left is the failure of the reader. And some readers can turn this to their advantage by claiming to understand the incomprehensible, often through their meditative experience. Unfortunately, meditation gives few insights into Sanskrit literary or grammatical traditions.

There seems to have been a simultaneous valorisation and decontextualisation of the term *śūnyatā* in Mahāyāna circles. If we see *Aṣṭa* in the light of the Pāḷi *Suññatā Suttas*, which focus on the *vimokṣa* meditations, especially the signless liberation (*animitta-vimokṣa*) and the emptiness liberation (*śūnyatā-vimokṣa*) we see a strong continuity of ideas. But in *Pañcaviṃśati*, the continuity was broken or least a good deal weaker. *Śūnyatā* was not longer an experience to be cultivated in meditation, but a kind of ontological absolute. The change from *māyā* to *śūnyatā* may have fitted with a developing Prajñāpāramitā ideology, but linguistically and philosophically, it was a disaster because the passage could no longer be parsed linguistically or logically.

The change might have remained very obscure, except that the *Pañcaviṃśati* was almost as popular as the *Aṣṭa* and this line came to form part of the *Heart Sutra*, which gained popularity far outweighing its humble origins (which were also soon forgotten). Again it

might have remained an obscure Chinese magical text had someone, likely Xuánzàng, translated it into Sanskrit, called it a *sūtra*, and re-imported it to China as an authentic Sanskrit Buddhist text. Again the context was forgotten and the Sanskrit version taken to be the ur-text. From there it took off. Generations of Buddhists, from quite early on, assumed that the obscure Chinese amulet was actually the Sanskrit essence of the superlative insights into “reality”, the *sarvajñā*, *prajñāpāramitā*, or *mahājñāna*. The fact that it was nonsense only made it seem more profound (via the Guru Effect). This left the text resistant to analysis, and each new generation of confused Buddhists went along with it for fear of being thought shallow and foolish. The willingness to submerge one’s identity to the extent that one will agree to endorse something that is nonsense is a key aspect of belonging to a religious group. In modern times the more Romantic one is, the easier this embracing of the illogical. To date the world of academia has done little to dispel the pall of foolish piety that hangs over the *Heart Sutra*.

Another surprising conclusion of this study is that “form is emptiness” is not in fact the be all and end all of the Heart Sutra, not the essence of the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* makes clear that when one practices with concepts like “form is empty” in mind that this is still an error. The *śūnyatā-vimokṣa samādhi* is free of such concepts. If we are looking for a key line in the Heart Sutra I suggest that it is in fact *sarvadharmāḥ śūnyatālakṣanāḥ* ‘all mental events are characterised by lack of self-existence’. This is the underlying reason that ‘form’ is like an illusion. It is this that opens up the discussion of what the text means and points to the profound insight that the Buddha had about the nature of experience.

We really ought to talk more about *śūnyatā* as one of the *trivimokṣa* or ‘three liberations’, a state in which all verbal cognition shuts down and the experience is empty of all concepts.²³ *Śūnyatā-vimokṣa* is a condition that can be attained temporarily in meditation and as a permanent condition is synonymous with *bodhi*. The *Cūlasuññatā Sutta* (MN 121) explains to some extent how one approaches this in meditation. But this is another subject that I’ll have to return to.

The alternate passage in *Pañcaviṃśati* also sheds light on the construction of the opening passage of the *Heart Sutra*, at least in outline we now understand more why Avalokiteśvara makes an appearance and what he is doing. And perhaps helps to explain why Śāriputra is the interlocutor.

Finally I have tried to show that “error” has to be a possible state in any textual hermeneutic. When we read a text, we have to be capable of seeing error as error. Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism are all too often blind to this possibility. The tendency, especially with respect to the *Prajñāpāramitā* has been to take error as “paradox” or as being a consequence of the ineffability of Reality. Notable exceptions to this criticism are Paul Harrison and Richard H Jones whose work has helped me to see errors for what they are. The refusal to see clearly means that there has been little investigation of errors in Buddhist texts. Ironically, errors seem to have two main sources: unfamiliarity with our canonical languages, and deliberate alteration motivated by ideology. Sometimes both at once.

²³ Something of this is hinted at in my discussion of SN 45.11 and 45.12 from 2008: *Communicating the Dharma*. (26 Dec 2008) <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/communicating-dharma.html>

Those of us who take study seriously, eventually learn that the texts are not a true refuge. Having now written 21 essays²⁴ on the text (this one is 12,000 words long), with one published article (Attwood 2015) and one in development, and having discovered a new Heart Sutra manuscript²⁵, I fancy I know a thing or two about the Heart Sutra. In the last five years, I have certainly discovered things about the Heart Sutra that were previously unknown, but the main thing I've learned is that knowing it, even understanding it, is no substitute for a systematic approach to transformation. *Śūnyatā* is primarily an experience. On the other hand, while nonsense is a possible reading for any passage in my hermeneutic, we get nowhere by assuming that the message of our texts is intentionally illogical and thus impervious to analysis. There has to be a balance.

For me, at least, the Heart Sutra will never be the same.

~oOo~

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- Zacchetti, Stefano. (2005) In Praise of the Light: A Critical Synoptic Edition with an Annotated Translation of Chapters 1-3 of Dharmarakṣa’s Guang zan jing, Being the Earliest Chinese Translation of the Larger Prajñāpāramitā, Tokyo. (Bibliotheca Philologica et Philosophica Buddhica, 8). IRIAB.²⁷ Sanskrit text also available from Gretil.²⁸

Although I don’t cite it directly, the material on *śūnyatā-vimokṣa* is inspired by an essay privately circulated by my colleague *Satyadhāna*, which I read when most of this essay was already sketched out. That essay was a follow up to his article (which I have only skimmed so far):

- Satyadhāna. (2014) The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness (Cūḷasuññatasutta, Majjhima-nikāya 121): translation and commentary. *Western Buddhist Review*. 6: 78–104. https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/satyadhana-formless_spheres.pdf

²⁷ <http://iriab.soka.ac.jp/orc/pdf/BPPB-VIII.pdf>

²⁸ http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/pplg1_u.htm

Satyadhāna's work seems to me to provide further keys for understanding the early Perfection of Wisdom. But in any case I'm now working on the Pāli material myself. A good introduction to *śūnyatā* in Pāli texts can be found in:

Anālayo. 2010. Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses. Pariyatti Press: 272-281