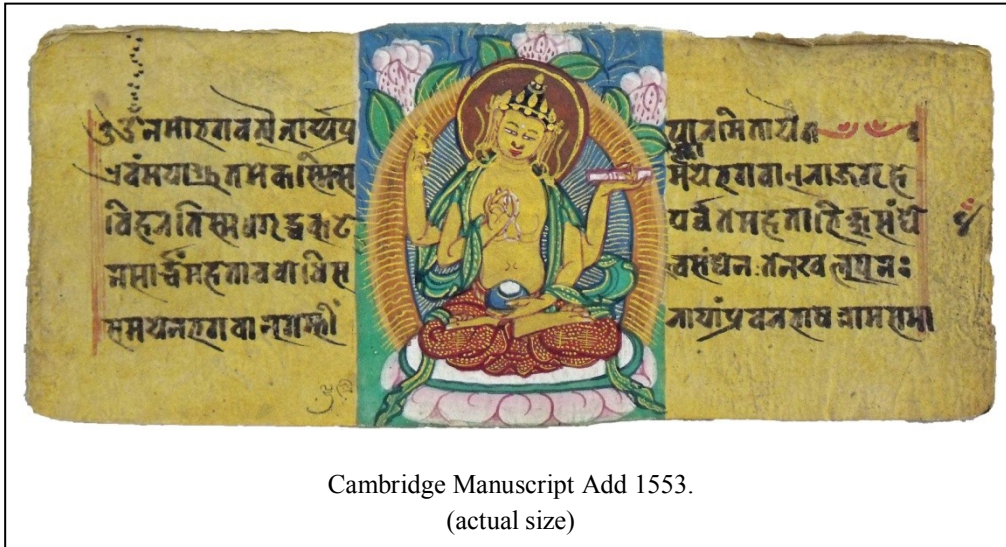


Heart Murmurs: Some Problems with Conze's Sanskrit Heart Sutra Edition. (An overview for the Triratna Buddhist Community).

Dharmacārī Jayarava
June 2015.

Introduction

In 2012 I was auditing the introduction to Sanskrit course at Cambridge University and decided to have a go at reading the Heart Sutra in Sanskrit. Almost immediately, I struck problems. I could not make sense of the first sentence and I could not understand how Conze arrived at his translation. I naturally assumed that it was my own inexperience that caused me to stumble. Over some weeks, I worried away at the problem and even arranged with my Sanskrit teacher, Dr Vincenzo Vergiani, to get access to the four Sanskrit manuscripts held in the Cambridge Library.



Cambridge Manuscript Add 1553.
(actual size)

It gradually became clear that the problem was not on my side, but that there was a grammatical error in Conze's Sanskrit edition. Over the next three years, I chased up as many of Conze's original sources as I could, and investigated the Chinese and Tibetan Canonical versions of the Heart Sutra. A strong case emerged for altering the standard edition of the Sanskrit Heart Sutra. My findings were recently published in the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* (Attwood 2015). The resulting article involves a highly technical linguistic argument and is behind a paywall until June 2016, so I thought it would be useful to the Movement to compose a less technical version of the article.

As we know, the Heart Sutra comes in two main versions: a longer text and a shorter text. The main focus of this article is the shorter version, though it also has implications for how we read the long text. We begin with the critical edition first published by Edward Conze in 1948. A critical edition is the result of a particular editorial process. An editor will gather up as many witnesses to a text as possible. Conze had several Sanskrit manuscripts

available twelve produced in Nepal, one from Central Asia, two in Japan, and some Chinese inscriptions. He also compared this with one Tibetan Canonical version.

Having gathered all the witnesses and decided which is best preserved, the editor compares all the other versions with the model version and notes all of the differences. Max Müller's (1881) edition of the short text had been based solely on the Sanskrit manuscript held at the Hōryūji monastery in Japan. This is traditionally dated 609 CE, but analysis of the writing suggests a date at least a century later. In any case, it is probably the oldest Sanskrit source and the basis for Conze's edition also.

The Heart Sutra manuscripts are all very corrupt. Late in 2014, I discovered a new long text Heart Sutra manuscript amongst a batch that had been digitised by the British Library (Attwood 2014).¹ This manuscript of about 280 words in Sanskrit required more than 140 footnotes to record all the misspellings, omissions, and additions. This was worse than average, but not the worst. The problem seems to be that manuscripts are copied as amulets by scribes who don't know Sanskrit and cannot proofread their work.

The editor then tries to reconstruct the text as the author might have intended it. They do this by correcting obvious misspellings and scribal errors (typos). Once the spelling is settled word and sentence level variants have to be considered. Often the majority opinion of the manuscripts can be the deciding factor, but sometimes an ancient mistake is propagated and becomes the mainstream reading. Sometimes a minority reading is clearly better.

An editor will also usually consult any traditional commentaries that exist as they frequently cite the complete text when commenting on it. There are eight Indian commentaries preserved in Tibetan (See Lopez 1988, 1996). Two early Chinese commentaries have only recently been translated (Hyun Choo 2006; Shih & Lusthaus 2006) and Conze did not know Chinese.² Lastly, existing translations may shed light on the text. Tibetan translations of Sanskrit used a standard terminology from an early period and most shed light on the text the Tibetan translator had before them. Chinese translations may also help, but they are subject to considerable variation in terminology. Nattier has said that, "when reading any given line of a Chinese Buddhist sūtra... we have a roughly equal chance of encountering an accurate reflection of the underlying Indian original or a catastrophic misunderstanding" (2003: 71). A significant drawback with Chinese is that most of the information about grammatical inflection is lost.

Finally, when none of the existing manuscripts or other sources gives a sensible reading, the editor may have to amend the text according to their knowledge of the language and the literature. The resulting text is referred to as a critical edition. These are often authoritative documents, but there is almost always room for improvement in existing critical editions of Buddhist texts.

Here is the first sentence of the Heart Sutra as Conze prints it (1948):

¹ The manuscript is titled *Ārya Pañcaviṃśatikā Prajñāpāramitā Mantranāma Dhāraṇī* "The Dhāraṇī called the Mantra of the Noble 25,000-fold Perfection of Wisdom" so it was not immediately apparent to owner/cataloguer that it contained the Heart Sutra. The title gives us an insight to how early modern Nepalese Buddhists saw the Heart Sutra.

² These Chinese commentaries were composed by leading disciples of Xuánzàng and look at the text from a Yogācāra point of view.

ārya-avalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo gambhīrāṃ prajñāpāramitā-caryāṃ caramāṇo
vyavalokayati sma: pañca-skandhās tāmś ca svabhāvaśūnyān paśyati sma.

He translates this (1975):

Avalokita, the Holy Lord and Bodhisattva, was moving in the deep course of the Wisdom which has gone beyond. He looked down from on high, He beheld but five heaps, and saw that in their own-being they were empty.

In order to understand the Sanskrit text I have examined most of Conze's manuscript sources, discovered a new manuscript, and compared the text with its Chinese and Tibetan equivalents. I've also consulted some of the world's leading experts on the Heart Sutra. Professor Donald Lopez who translated and commented on all the Indian commentaries preserved in Tibetan (1988, 1996) and Professor Jonathan Silk who produced a critical edition of the Tibetan Heart Sutra texts (1994) both aided me with understanding the Canonical Tibetan text. Professor Jan Nattier helped with the mostly unpublished Tibetan short texts found at Dunhuang (personal communication). My other Sanskrit teacher, Dr Eivind Kahrs, looked over the argument and confirmed the logic of it. The anonymous reviewer at the JOCBS, apparently an expert in the field, took exemplary care to provide constructive feedback that helped to iron out a few wrinkles. Finally, the editor of the JOCBS, Professor Richard Gombrich, also read and critiqued the article, confirming that the basic reasoning on the Sanskrit grammar was sound.

I identified four specific problems with Conze's edited version of the sentence. These relate to:

1. vyavalokayati sma – meaning and grammar
2. pañcaskandha – grammar
3. The punctuation of and number of clauses in the sentence
4. The meaning of the name Avalokiteśvara.

The logic of my arguments is set out in detail in my article, but since most members of the Triratna Movement don't have the language skills to appreciate the subtleties, here I will simply outline my conclusions. As I say, the argument has been scrutinised by leading experts in the field and found to be sound. However, if anyone wants to follow the argument in more detail, I can supply copies of the article on request.³

The meaning of *vyavalokayati sma*

An inflected language like Sanskrit indicates the relationships of words in a sentence by specifying the ending of the word. Suffixes tell us who the agent is; how many of them and what gender they are; and so on. They tell us where the action originates; who or what it acts

³ The article will be available for free after June 2016 on the JOCBS website: <http://ocbs.org/>

on; who or what it acts through; the reason for or purpose of the action; where it is directed; and where the action takes place. In English, this information is conveyed by word order. The suffix system means that word order can be very flexible in Sanskrit. When reading a Sanskrit sentence one is looking for word meaning (the main part of the word) and the relationship to other words (suffix). A beginner will often have to do this in two steps, but it becomes more natural with time.

The first problem identified concerns the verb *vyavalokayati sma*. The root of the verb $\sqrt{\text{lok}}$ means ‘to look’ and with the prefixes *vi* and *ava* (*vyava-*) the verb *vyavalokayati* means ‘to examine’. The addition of the particle *sma* makes the present into a past tense. It is also used to indicate the historical present. Conze seems to have used his translation of this word as an opportunity to channel the myth of Avalokiteśvara. The *avalokita* part of the bodhisatva’s name is from the same root $\sqrt{\text{lok}}$. The myth says that Avalokiteśvara looks down on the world (from heaven?) with compassion. Now the prefix *ava-* can add a downwards sense a verb. Using the example of the familiar verb *gacchāmi* ‘I go’, we find that *avagacchāmi* means, ‘I go down, I descend’. So Conze is not entirely wrong to interpret either *ava* $\sqrt{\text{lok}}$ or *vyava* $\sqrt{\text{lok}}$ as ‘look down’. And certainly, the traditional commentaries confirm this interpretation (Silk 1988). However, the addition of prefixes often has unpredictable effects on meaning. In this case the *ava-* prefix does not have the simple sense of ‘down’, but makes the verb ‘to look’ mean ‘to look closely’. Conceptually we can see that downwards is still relevant, to examine a thing one must get close to it, one must go down towards it.

So the first point is that Conze has misunderstood the meaning of the verb *vyavalokayati sma*. *Vyavalokayati sma* means ‘he examined’, it does not mean ‘he looked down’.

The object of examination

Verbs meaning ‘to look’ are typically transitive. When we look, we are usually looking *at something*. Conze takes this verb to be intransitive. In Conze’s translation, Avalokiteśvara just “looked down from on high” and it’s not clear what he was looking at, though of course what he *sees* is just the five skandhas. An examination of the word in Sanskrit shows that grammatically the verb *vyavalokayati* is always transitive. A detailed comparison of the Chinese and Tibetan texts shows that the traditional translators and commentators also understood it this way. In other words, in our Sanskrit text Avalokiteśvara cannot just have “looked down”. He was *examining* and focussing on *something*. The conventions of Sanskrit grammar dictate that the object of his examination be in the accusative case indicated by the appropriate suffix. However, in Conze’s text there is no word available in the accusative case that might function as the object of examination. This is the main stumbling block to parsing the sentence.

Now logically what he was examining was not the world, as implied by Conze, but the five *skandhas*, since in the next part of the sentence he makes an observation about them. However, Conze has *pañcaskandhās*, which is the nominative plural case. The nominative is used to indicate the subject of a sentence, or the agent of a verb. And yet it is nonsensical to think of the *skandhas* as agents, and grammatically there is no verb that could be the agent of. Sanskrit allows the use of implied verbs to be, with nouns in the nominative to assert the

existence of the noun. In fact, Conze’s translation “he beheld but five heaps” is a strange leap because he wants the *skandhas* to be the object of the other main verb in the sentence *paśyati sma* ‘he saw’, though again we’d want the word to use the accusative word ending.

When I examined the Sanskrit manuscripts, I discovered a minority reading. Some of the manuscripts have *pañcaskandhāms*, which indicates the accusative plural, making the *skandhas* the object of a verb. And this is just what we were looking for.

Now we have a little sentence: *vyavalokayati sma pañcaskandhāms* with Avalokiteśvara as the subject. It means, “Avalokiteśvara was examining the five skandhas”. Importantly this is a better fit with the Chinese text, familiar to the Triratna Community from the translation we chant in pujas, i.e. “The Bodhisatva of Compassion, when he meditated deeply, saw the emptiness of all five *skandhas* and sundered the bonds that caused him suffering”.

In turn, this suggests that a key practice for developing insight for the author of the text was a *skandha* reflection. As Nattier (1992) has shown, this section of the text was composed in Chinese, probably by a Chinese bhikṣu sometime in the 7th Century. It reflects the high profile of the cult of Avalokiteśvara in China. While this cult was largely devotional, clearly this monk was also familiar with the Prajñāpāramitā tradition and seems to have considered a *skandha* reflection practice appropriate to the context. In all likelihood, then, Chinese monks of the 7th century were pursuing Prajñāpāramitā through the *skandha* reflection practice. This observation seems not to have occurred to previous authors, though seems obvious in retrospect.

While we are on the subject of the *skandhas*, I have argued on my blog, that we ought to understand the *skandhas* as the “five branches of experience”. This is based on my reading of Sue Hamilton’s (2000) research into how the word *khandha* is used in Pāḷi. The *skandhas* are not the constituents that make up the universe, but the processes that make up experience. Although the etymology of the word is obscure, one can make an argument for the meaning ‘branch’ and for a relationship between the terms *pañcaskandha* and *prapañca*.⁴ In both cases, the underlying metaphor is the hand with five fingers. In the early Buddhist texts, the Buddha was focussed on the phenomenology of experience, rather than on the ontology (i.e. the *being*) of things.

Punctuation and Grammar

One of the things that emerges from a study of the surviving manuscripts and modern editions is that all were to some extent were aware of the problem parsing the sentence, but that they attempted to solve the problem in Sanskrit by the addition of punctuation marks. Sanskrit punctuation is primitive, using a simple vertical stroke, called a *daṇḍa* or ‘stick’, for any kind of hiatus. Something to note about Conze’s translation is that the punctuation, and even the sentence structure, does not follow his Sanskrit text. For example, he requires four phrases in English to communicate three phrases in Sanskrit. The introduction of an extra

⁴ See ‘Pañca-skandha: Etymology and Dynamics’. *Jayarava’s Raves*. 22 March 2013. <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/panca-skandha-etymology-and-dynamics.html>

verb is to compensate for treating *vyavalokayati sma* as intransitive and accounting for *pañca skandha* as nominative plural. It's another clue that something is wrong.

The sentence we are considering is a long sentence in any language. However, by correcting the suffix of *pañcaskandha* we can remove all the extraneous punctuation of the Sanskrit editions. Once we realise that *pañcaskandhāms* is actually an accusative plural and the object of *vyavalokayati sma*, the natural clause boundaries become quite clearly. The first is the present participle *caramāṇo* 'practising'. The second is *ca* 'and', which in Sanskrit comes immediately after the word it applies to and separates the two main verbs *vyavalokayati sma* 'he examined' and *paśyati sma* 'he saw'.

The Solution

To sum up, the Sanskrit text ought to read:

*āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisatvo gambhīrāṃ prajñāpāramitācaryāṃ caramāṇo
vyavalokayati sma pañcaskandhāms tāṃś ca svabhāvasūnyān paśyati sma.*

The three phrases are

1. *āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisatvo gambhīrāṃ prajñāpāramitācaryāṃ caramāṇo*
2. *vyavalokayati sma pañcaskandhāms*
3. *tāṃś ca svabhāvasūnyān paśyati sma.*

1. Practising the profound perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva noble Avalokiteśvara,
2. examined the five branches of experience
3. and saw them (*tāṃś*) empty of self-existence.

Or in the translation from the article

“Practising the deep practice of the perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva Noble Avalokiteśvara examined the five *skandhas* and saw them to be empty of self-existence.”

The correction is as small as it is possible to be, in the Sanskrit it amounts to the addition of a single dot to the last syllable of *pañcaskandha* – पञ्चस्कन्धास् vs. पञ्चसकन्धास्. This small change, however, clarifies the structure of the sentence as a whole and allows us to eliminate extraneous punctuation. The change is important because it means that a previously problematic sentence becomes straightforward. It also somewhat demystifies what is happening in the sutra. Meditating on the *skandhas* is something familiar to most of us. It connects our practice of the Dharma directly to the practice of Avalokiteśvara in this sutra.

The name Avalokiteśvara

One last feature of the text that my article comments on in passing is how Conze parses the name Āryāvalokiteśvara. At this time in China, important terms are marked with the prefix *ārya*. Once Tantric Buddhism becomes popular, the special word was *vajra*. *Ārya* means ‘noble’, but here it practically just means that the thing prefixed is held in high esteem by Buddhists. So we can translate this as ‘noble’ following convention, but we don’t need to insist on taking the denotation literally, because it connotes importance.

Conze does a strange thing with this name in his translation. He separates off *ārya* and *īśvara* and treats the name as Avalokita, and the extra bits as epithets: “Avalokita, the Holy Lord”. This is bizarre. It is true that sometimes Avalokiteśvara’s name is shortened. Śāntideva uses the shortened form for example. But it does not make sense here because the word *avalokita-īśvara* is a compound in which the words are bound together in an implied grammatical relationship ‘the lord of that which is observed’. For Avalokita to be a standalone here, per Conze’s translation, the Sanskrit would have to read *āryo īśvaro avalokito* or even *āryeśvaro avalokito* with the two epithets compounded.

I see this as further evidence that Conze was working with an agenda. And my supposition is that this agenda blinded him to the grammatical error in his text. Conze’s desire seems to be to see Avalokiteśvara as a remote saviour, perhaps in heaven, looking down on the world, but not involved in it, who gains mystic insight without undertaking systematic practice. It is almost incidental that the content of his insight regards the *skandhas*. The revised text undermines this mystical reading of the opening lines of the Heart Sutra.

Conclusion

It may seem strange that a 68 year old edition of the most popular text in Mahāyāna Buddhism could have mistake of this type. I was very surprised to find a simple grammatical error in this well known and loved sutra. So how did a basic mistake like this escape the intense scrutiny of millions of practitioners and scholars for more than 60 years? I can offer a few observations.

Firstly, most of the Mahāyāna Buddhists in the world use the Chinese version of the Heart Sutra attributed to Xuánzàng (Taishō, No. 251). Even in the Triratna Buddhist Community, we chant an English translation from this Chinese text. Scholarly interest in the text has been driven by its popularity in Japanese Zen Buddhism. The vast majority of the scholarly work done in the last 68 years has been on the Chinese textual tradition and published mainly in Japanese. Zen has an overwhelming influence on modern commentators and translators. Zen Buddhist, Red Pine, receives effusive praise for his translation and study of the Heart Sutra (2004). Ironically, his translation of this passage is consistent with my revised text, but not with the Sanskrit text he says that he is translating from (which appears to be Conze’s edition).

It’s true that Sanskrit is a difficult language (in the sense that one must memorise many grammatical paradigms in order to become fluent in it), but when we look at who has commented on the sutra since Conze’s edition was first published we see some real experts in Sanskrit. Perhaps the Heart Sutra escaped proper study by qualified scholars because it is so

familiar. Scholars may well have assumed that the text is so well known and studied, indeed that it is so short, that it could hardly be expected to harbour errors. In other words, it could be a case of the text being taken for granted due to over familiarity.

On the other hand, the more popular and accessible commentaries are written by enthusiastic amateurs like Red Pine, often relying on the Zen commentarial tradition. So amateurs who lack linguistic and critical thinking skills have muddied the waters somewhat. Conze himself obscured the problem in his own translation. Some of the translations that purport to be from Sanskrit reproduce Conze's text or simply paraphrase it. Familiarity with Chinese and English versions seems to have got in the way of reading the Sanskrit text.

Another problem may be the kind of mysticism the text seems to have fostered. Conze and D T Suzuki (1934) both write about the text, and the whole genre, as defying logic and employing paradox. Thus if the text does not make sense, the tendency seems to have been to accept that it does not make sense rather than dig deeper. There is a Romantic rejection of intellect and an embracing of the idea that sense can only be made of such a text on a 'higher level'. However, it turns out that this approach is rather confused about the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. Recent work by Professor Paul Harrison on the Diamond Sutra, for example, shows that it doesn't really use paradox, but is employing an idiom that relies on a context that is largely forgotten in modern times. Mystics may have been misreading the text and taking it out of context.⁵

The fact is, and some may find this a disturbing thought, that since Nattier's 1992 revelation that the Heart Sutra was composed in China and that the Sanskrit text is a back translation, probably by a Chinese monk in India (possibly Xuánzàng), we have been faced with a dilemma. It turns out that this very familiar and popular text is in fact a stranger. The Heart Sutra's parentage has been obscure, its content misunderstood, and its context forgotten. The text has become a kind of floating signifier for the mystic longings of modern Buddhists, whose Romantic embrace of irrationality has impeded the understanding of the text.

There is an urgent need for proper study of this text. The first task is to properly establish the Sanskrit text, a task started by Max Müller in the 1880s, continued by Conze and others in the 20th century, but as yet incomplete. The critical edition needs to be revised in many places, not only because Nattier has drawn attention to its parentage, but because Conze made basic grammatical errors (and this problem extends to all his other Sanskrit editions also). The next, or even concurrent task, is to fully understand the Chinese textual tradition and the relationship between the Sanskrit and Chinese. My own view, following Nattier, is that the extant versions of the Heart Sutra in Chinese are the sectarian productions of versions based on a lost ur-text. Lastly, we need to bring the intellectual background of these texts into the light. The *Prajñāpāramitā* authors were writing in reaction to a powerful philosophical Realism that had emerged in Buddhism as a consequence of two forces: firstly, flaws in the Buddhist doctrine of karma (outlined for example in the *Kathāvatthu*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*); and secondly the Abhidharma

⁵ See for example my essays:

The use of Negation in Vajracchedikā. *Jayarava's Raves*. 15 Nov 2013.

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

Nonsense and Nonsensibility. *Jayarava's Raves*. 14 Mar 2014.

<http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/nonsense-and-nonsensibility.html> and

project to create an encyclopaedia of mental events. I've addressed the first in a series of essays on my blog⁶, which I am currently assembling into a book. The second I hope to address in a forthcoming book on the Heart Sutra in a few years.

~oOo~

Bibliography

- Attwood, Jayarava. (2014). *EAP676/2/5: Ārya Pañcaviṃśatikā Prajñāpāramitā Mantranāma Dhāraṇī*. (Diplomatic edition, draft). <http://is.gd/wjlaMF>
- Attwood, Jayarava. (2015) Heart Murmurs: Some Problems with Conze's Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya. *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*. Vol 8, 2015: 28-48. <http://ocbs.org/ojs/index.php/jocbs/article/view/104>
- Conze, Edward (1948) 'Text, Sources, and Bibliography of the Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya.' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April 80(1-2): 33-51.
- Conze, Edward. (1967) 'The Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya Sūtra' in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays*, Bruno Cassirer, pp. 147-167. Modified version of Conze (1948).
- Conze, Edward. (1973) *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts*. Buddhist Publishing Group
- Conze, Edward. (1975) *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*. 2nd Ed. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hamilton, Sue. (2000) *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*. Routledge.
- Hyun Choo, B. (2006) 'An English Translation of the Banya paramilda simgyeong chan: Wonch'uk's Commentary on the Heart Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra)' *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture*. February 2006, Vol.6, pp.121-205
- Lopez, Donald S. (1988) *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*. State University of New York Press.
- Lopez, Donald S. (1996) *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra*. Princeton University press.
- Müller, Max. (1881) 'The Ancient Palm Leaves containing the Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya Sūtra and Uṣṇiṣa-vijaya-Dhāraṇī.' in *Buddhist Texts from Japan* (Vol 1.iii). Oxford University Press. Online: <http://archive.org/details/buddhisttextsfr00bhgoog>
- Nattier, Jan. (1992) The Heart Sūtra: a Chinese apocryphal text? *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*. Vol. 15 (2), p.153-223. <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/ojs/index.php/jiabs/article/view/8800/2707>
- Nattier, Jan. 2003. *A few good men: The Bodhisattva path according to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariṣcchā)*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Red Pine (2004) *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas*. Counterpoint.
- Shih, Heng-Ching & Lusthaus, Dan. (2006) *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heart Sutra (Prajnaparamita-hyrdaya-sutra)*. Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research.
- Silk, Jonathan A. (1994) *The Heart Sūtra in Tibetan: a Critical Edition of the Two Recensions Contained in the Kanjur*. Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. (1934) *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Third Series*. Luzac

⁶ See the collection of my essays on the afterlife: <http://jayarava.blogspot.co.uk/p/afterlife.html>