

Form is (Not) Emptiness: The Enigma at the Heart of the Heart Sutra.

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Abstract

Connections between *Pañcaviṁśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* suggest a new interpretation of an important passage in the *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya* or *Heart Sutra*. I am able to show that the four phrases exemplified by “form is emptiness” were once a reference to the well-known simile, “Form is like an illusion” (*rūpam māyopamam*). As the *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus expanded, the simile became a metaphor, “form is illusion”. It was then deliberately altered by exchanging “illusion” for “emptiness”, leading to the familiar phrases. This connection opens the door to reading the *Heart Sutra*, and the early *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras more generally, along the lines of Sue Hamilton’s (2000) epistemological approach to the Pāli suttas; i.e. as focussed on experience and particularly the meditative experience known in the Pāli suttas as dwelling in emptiness (*suññatā-vihāra*). In this view, the *Heart Sutra* makes sense on its own terms without having to invoke paradox or mysticism.

Introduction

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The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* or *Heart Sutra* is often said to be the most popular Buddhist text, and, we are told, it is frequently chanted in Buddhist shrine-rooms and temples all around the world. Within the *Heart Sutra*, a formula consisting of four phrases, in two symmetrical pairs, is seen as the enigmatic essence, not only of the text, but of *Prajñāpāramitā*, and perhaps even of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole:

“Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is just emptiness; emptiness is just form.”

These symmetrical affirmations of the identity of form and emptiness lead to the negation of important Buddhist doctrines like the five *skandhas*, twelve *nidānas* and the four truths of the nobles, giving the *Heart Sutra* its distinctive paradoxical flavour.

However, the formula is not easy to understand. At face value, it just about makes sense to argue “form is empty” if one is familiar with Buddhist *dharma* theory. To say, “Form is empty-ness” (using the abstract noun) is less clear. Even when we interpret emptiness as “empty of essence” or “empty of own-being” (*svabhāvaśūnya*), what can it mean to say that form *is* the lack of essence? The typical Buddhist interpretation is to take form as representing the objects of perception. This is an ontological statement, but one that does not seem to make sense (at least in terms of Western metaphysical traditions). If we reverse the formula to say, “Emptiness is form”, the metaphysics is even more problematic. When one turns to the ancient commentaries of this text for guidance,¹ one discovers that, as Alex Wayman observed,

“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 particular learning in Buddhism to the terminology of the *sūtra*.” (1984: 309)

¹ Three Chinese commentaries from the Tang Dynasty are available in English translation: 《般若波羅蜜多心經幽贊》 T1710, by Kuījī 窺基, translated by Shih & Lusthaus (2006); 《般若波羅蜜多心經贊》 T1711, by Woncheuk 圓測, translated by Hyun Choo (2006); and 《般若波羅蜜多心經略疏》 T1712, by Fāzàng 法藏, translated by Cook (1978). These date from the late 7th or early 8th Century. Kūkai’s commentary from the early 9th century treats the text as a tantra (Hakeda 1972). We also have eight Indian commentaries from the 8th-12th centuries preserved in Tibetan, which have been translated and studied by Donald Lopez (1988, 1996).

In other words, each commentator takes the *Heart Sutra* to epitomise their views on Buddhism, *whatever* their views happen to be. Despite widely divergent metaphysics, the *Heart Sutra* is at once the heart of Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Huayen, Zen, and Tantric Buddhism; and sometimes quantum physics as well! (Mu 1994). Another modern commentator, Malcolm David Eckel, concludes:

“... 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. (1987: 69-70)

Similarly, English translations of the text continue to diverge. In each new translation, the translator strives to produce a unique text that reflects their particular understanding, often extemporising and expanding on the text to reinforce the uniqueness of their “translation”. Ironically, the expanding body of commentary seems not to have a heart. In some cases, the translators and/or commentators seem to have paid scant attention to the source text, a complaint Paul Harrison also makes about canonical Chinese translations of the Diamond Sutra (2010: 244). In some cases, the “translation” is simply a paraphrase of some existing translation, with words rearranged or substituted to highlight the preoccupations of the “translator”. Alternatively, the commentator purports to translate the Sanskrit text, thereby gaining the kudos of working with the putative “original”, but in fact translates a Chinese or Tibetan version of the text.

Jan Nattier’s (1992) watershed article demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the *Heart Sutra* was composed in China using fragments of texts translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva’s translation team. Nattier also identified some problematic aspects of the received Sanskrit text. Inspired by Nattier, some recent research on the *Heart Sutra* (Huifeng 2014, Attwood 2015, 2017) shows that bypassing sectarian commentaries and turning to the early *Prajñāpāramitā* literature can provide an illuminating context for interpreting the *Heart Sutra*. In this article, I employ the same method of tracking the passage of interest back to the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Pañcaviṃśati*) and thence to antecedents in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Aṣṭa*), to see what light they shed on the enigma at the heart of the *Heart Sutra*.

The Text

It has been known at least since the time of Kuījī's commentary (T1710), i.e. ca. late 7th century CE, that the “form is emptiness” passage is part of a quote from *Pañcaviṃśati* (Nattier 1992: 206-7, n.33). The passage consists of four phrases, in two symmetrical pairs. Conze's Sanskrit edition includes a further pair of statements: *yad rūpaṃ sā śūnyatā* and *yā śūnyatā tad rūpaṃ*. This was, in fact, a minority reading in his witnesses. The extra phrases are absent from the Sanskrit *Pañcaviṃśati*, from all the Chinese texts of the *Heart Sutra* and *Pañcaviṃśati*, and from the Tibetan canonical *Heart Sutra* (Nattier 1992: 204, n.19). I follow Nattier in treating them as a late interpolation and not properly part of the sutra.

The four phrases are shown below in their various versions: from the Gilgit manuscript of *Pañcaviṃśati* (Karashima 2016, and cited in Nattier 1992); two Chinese versions of the short text *Heart Sutra* (T250, T251)² attributed to Kumārajīva and Xuánzàng respectively; and the Sanskrit text of the *Heart Sutra* from Conze's edition (1948, 1967). Kumārajīva's Chinese translation of *Pañcaviṃśati* (T233) is problematic and will be dealt with separately below. All of the Chinese texts use 色 for “form” (*rūpa*); 空 for “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*); and 異 for “different”. The translations that follow were chosen to highlight differences in the source texts³:

Pañcaviṃśati (Gilgit Manuscript. Karashima et al. 2016, Folio 21, recto)

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| 1.nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ | Form is not one thing and emptiness another. |
| 2.nānyā śūnyatā anyad rūpaṃ | Emptiness is not one thing, and form another. |
| 3.rūpaṃ eva śūnyatā | <i>Form</i> is emptiness. |
| 4.śūnyataiva rūpaṃ | <i>Emptiness</i> is form. |

² T233 《摩訶般若波羅蜜經》 = *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

T250 《摩訶般若波羅蜜大明呪經》 = *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-mahā-vidyā-sūtra*.

T251 《般若波羅蜜多心經》 = *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*.

³ Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.

Heart Sutra attributed to Kumārajīva (T250; 8.847c13-14)

非色異空	It is not the case that form is different from emptiness.
非空異色	It is not the case that emptiness is different from form.
色即是空	Only form is emptiness.
空即是色	Only emptiness is form.

Heart Sutra attributed to Xuánzàng (T251; 8.848c08-9)

色不異空	Form is not different from emptiness.
空不異色	Emptiness is not different from form.
色即是空	Only form is emptiness.
空即是色	Only emptiness is form.

Heart Sutra, Conze's Sanskrit edition (1967)

rūpaṃ śūnyatā	Form is emptiness.
śūnyataiva rūpaṃ	Emptiness is form.
rūpān na pṛthak śūnyatā	Emptiness is not different from form.
śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ	Form is not different from emptiness.

The two Sanskrit expressions “*na anya X anya Y*” and “*X na pṛthak Y*”⁴ are equivalents. In the latter, X is in the ablative case, so parsing the Sanskrit we get “from X not different Y” and in English, “Y is not different from X”. Similarly, the Chinese expressions “非 X 異 Y” and “X 不異 Y” are equivalent; in these

⁴ *Anyā* is a pronominal adjective that takes the case, gender, and number of the noun it relates to, i.e. *anyad rūpaṃ* (neuter nominative singular), *anyā śūnyatā* (feminine nominative singular). Sanskrit *sandhi* rules dictate the spelling *pṛthak* before “ś” and *pṛthag* before “r”.

phrases, 非 negates the whole phrase, whereas 不 negates only 異. In plain English, all of these phrases say, “X is Y”.

In phrases 3 and 4, the syntax is “*X eva Y*” in Sanskrit and “X 即是 Y” in Chinese. In Sanskrit, the copular verb—*is*—is omitted by convention. It may also be omitted in Buddhist Chinese, but the *Heart Sutra* includes 是 “is”. The Sanskrit emphatic particle, *eva*, is represented in Chinese by 即. *Eva* is indicated in translation by the use of italics or by qualifiers such as “only” or “just”. So in plain English, again these statements boil down to “*X is Y*”. X here is any one of the *skandhas*, so it is not *only* form that is emptiness, but also *only* sensations etc.⁵

Two oddities are found only in the version of the four phrases in the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*. Firstly, the pairs of phrases 1-2 and 3-4 are inverted; and secondly, it omits *eva* in phrase 1, breaking the symmetry found in all the other versions. I know of no explanation for these oddities.

The four phrases are part of a longer quotation, but since T250 has the 非 X 異 Y syntax and T251 has the X 不異 Y syntax, this has led to some confusion about the source of the quote. The ostensible source of the four phrases, Kumārajīva’s translation of *Pañcaviṃśati* (T223), has X 不異 Y (8.223a13-4). This would make T250 the odd one out, despite the fact that it is attributed to Kumārajīva. The possibility is raised that the quote is from, or at least influenced by, another text translated by Kumārajīva i.e. 《大智度論》 *Dāzhi dū lùn* = Sanskrit **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (T1509, 25.327c22-23). T1509 is a commentary (*upadeśa*) on *Pañcaviṃśati*, attributed to Nāgārjuna (probably apocryphally) and it has the 非 X 異 Y syntax. This is the only difference between T223 and T1509 in the quoted passage.

Nattier (crediting the late Masatoshi Nagatomi) points out that the Taishō edition footnotes record that in the “Sung, Yüan, Ming, and K’ai-pao [Old Sung]” editions of the Tripiṭaka,⁶ T223 uses the 非 X 異 Y syntax instead (8.223, notes 1 and 2). She concludes, “My working assumption, at this point, is that these relatively late editions reflect an editorial emendation introduced on the authority of [T1509] itself” (1992: 215, n.75). History records that Kumārajīva

⁵ Mokṣala’s (291 CE) *Pañcaviṃśati* translation (T221) has “Form and emptiness, etc. (等) are not different. And why? Only form is emptiness, only emptiness is form. Just sensation, recognition, volition, and cognition are also empty... only emptiness is cognition.” (色與空等無異。所以者何? 色則是空、空則是色, 痛想行識則亦是空、空則是識。 8.6a05-07). Here 則 stands for *eva*.

⁶ Dated 1239 CE, 1290 CE, 1601 CE, and 1104-1148 CE respectively.

and his translation team alternately worked on T223 and T1509 from the summer of 402 CE to 27 Dec 405 CE, proof-reading and revising each in the light of the other (Chou 2004: 298-300). They were also comparing their text to previous texts. I'm not aware of any detailed comparison of the texts of T223 and T1509 so have no point of comparison for judging the significance of this discrepancy, though as far as the quoted passages found in the *Heart Sutra* go this is the only difference. Nor is there any surviving Sanskrit text of the *Upadeśa* for comparison. It does seem strange that Kumārajīva's meticulous translation team should have allowed this trifling discrepancy to remain.⁷ On the other hand, T1509 became the standard text for understanding *Prajñāpāramitā* in China, so if it were the source of the passage in the *Heart Sutra* this would not be surprising. There is still no way to resolve this conundrum.

In any case, we know where these passages are located in *Pañcaviṃśati*, so I will now move on to discussing possible antecedents for these passages in *Aṣṭa*.

Form and Emptiness in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā

Since *Pañcaviṃśati* is in principle an expansion of *Aṣṭa*, they have a similar structure.⁸ A passage found early in the former ought to have an antecedent early in the latter. We can reasonably expect any predecessor of this passage from Chapter Three of *Pañcaviṃśati* to appear in the first chapter of *Aṣṭa*. However, while *Aṣṭa* is full of references to *emptiness*, they do not occur in the first chapter. There are two passages in Chapter One that seem to shed light on the *Heart Sutra*. The first is:

“Exactly form, Elder Śāriputra, is free from (*virahita*) essence of form (*rūpasvabhāva*); just so for sensation, perception, and volition; exactly cognition, Elder Śāriputra, is free of essence of cognition.⁹

⁷ During this period of translating T223 and T1509, Kumārajīva was dependent on his team. His Chinese was poor enough for his Chinese editor, Sengrui, to complain, “The Dharma Master [Kumārajīva] has great difficulty with the Chinese language” (Chou 2004: 293).

⁸ In fact, the text of *Pañcaviṃśati* has “been adjusted to conform to the divisions of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*” (Conze 1975b). The Nepalese manuscripts (Kimura 2010) reflect this, but the Gilgit manuscript (Karashima et al 2016) predates this change.

⁹ *rūpam evāyūṣman śāriputra virahitaṃ rūpasvabhāvena | evaṃ vedanaiva saṃjñāiva saṃskārā eva | vijñānam evāyūṣman śāriputra virahitaṃ vijñānasvabhāvena |* (Vaidya 1960: 6).

The problem that passages like this are addressing is assumed to be the incipient realism of the Abhidharma project, which culminates in the *skandhas* being seen as a description of reality. Compare Nyanatiloka in his *Buddhist Dictionary* (s.v. *khandha*), “These are the five aspects in which the Buddha has summed up *all the physical and mental phenomena of existence*” (1980: 98: emphasis added). Here the *skandhas* are an ontology. A complication for this discussion is that existence in this context is often assumed to be absolute. In other words, to say that something exists, at all, is to strongly imply that it exists in and of itself, permanently, and without change over time. Given this, it can be difficult to understand how Ābhidharmikas were drawn into their insistence that some *dharmas* are real (*dravya*).

The Ābhidharmikas started out using the word *svabhāva* to mean a “characteristic quality”. At first, *svabhāva* defined categories into which *dharmas* could be slotted by analysis. For example, a *dharma* might be categorised as good (*kuśala*), not-good (*akuśala*), or indeterminate in this respect (*avyākṛta*). Almost inevitably, the *dharmas* themselves came to be seen as not merely fitting into that category, but actually *possessing* such qualities. Before long, the qualities took on a separate life that did not arise and pass away with other *dharmas*. In this view, *kuśala* and *akuśala* are timeless, permanent qualities that exist above and beyond particularly experiences, in order that any experience may always be slotted into the appropriate category.¹⁰ If this were not true, then a project to categorise all *dharmas* would necessarily fail, precisely because the categories were mutable. Thus any project of categorisation has an inherent tendency to realism.

The Sarvāstivādins, however, were driven by a further problem. The last part of *pratītyasamutpāda* requires that when conditions cease, effects arising in dependence on them also cease (*asya nirodhād idaṃ nirudhyate*). In order to account for *karma* in terms of *pratītyasamutpāda*, Buddhists had to explain how a condition (specifically an action or *karma*), could produce an effect long after it ceased. While most Buddhists opted for the doctrine of momentariness, in which a cascade of infinitesimally short-lived *cittas*—each being the condition for the next—provide the appropriate and timely continuity required between action and consequence, the Sarvāstivādins instead reasoned that if a *dharma* (*qua* mental event) can act as a condition in the future, then it must *exist* in the

¹⁰ For a description of this process from Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda points of view respectively see Ronkin (2005) and Cox (2004).

future. Similarly, if a past *dharma* is the condition for a consequence now, then that past *dharma* must *still exist* in the present. If karma was to be connected across time to consequences, then *dharmas must* always exist, but only be active in the karma process in the present. The first Sarvāstivādin account of this is explored by Bastow (1995). Counter-intuitive though this seems from a modern Buddhist point of view, in fact it has some advantages. The main alternative approach, the doctrine of momentariness, led to a superstructure of speculative metaphysical entities such as *bhavaṅga-citta* (Theravāda) and *ālaya-vijñāna* (Yogācāra) that have to be taken on faith. On the other hand, the *sarva-astivāda* requires no new axioms and no supernatural entities beyond the *dharmas* themselves. It simply requires that *dharmas* function in particular ways that are implied by *pratītyasamutpāda* itself. However, this argument is academic because momentariness is now universally accepted amongst Buddhists.

I suggest that we can usefully step away from treating the *skandhas* as related to ontology at all. Huifeng (2014: 103) noted that if we read the *Heart Sutra* according to his suggested amendments, then it “shifts the emphasis away from an ontological negation of classical lists, i.e. ‘there is no X’, to an epistemological stance”.¹¹ This epistemological stance is similar to the reading of early Buddhism described by Sue Hamilton. In Hamilton’s (2000) account, the *skandhas* are the “experiencing apparatus” (81, 96), and “... the teachings are designed to enable to understand one’s world of experience by means of understanding the operating of one’s *khandhas*, and so bring about the ability to achieve liberation from rebirth” (205). Throughout the rest of this article, I explore how this hermeneutic can be applied to the *Prajñāpāramitā* generally and the *Heart Sutra* in particular.

Although we experience form or experience ourselves as having form, there is no self-existent form, no “essence of form”. The experience of “form” arises because a visual sense object (*rūpa-ālambana*) meets the visual sense faculty (*caḥṣu-indriya*) in the presence of visual sense cognition (*caḥṣu-vijñāna*), i.e. because the apparatus of visual experience is functioning. No “essence of form” is required to give being to form, because here “form” refers to an experience rather than a reality. Note especially, that the “object” is only a support (*ālambana*)

¹¹ Despite this excellent suggestion, Huifeng’s subsequent work on the “illusion” metaphor in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts (2016) does not seem to follow through on his move in this direction. His view of *skandhas*, for example, seems to be conventionally ontological throughout. This is unfortunate because although he covers exactly which semantic fields are involved he never explains *why* the *skandhas* might be amenable to these analogies, similes and metaphors.

for experience, rather than representing a Platonic ideal or noumenon (I'll return to this). Because experience is constantly arising and ceasing, if only because attention flits between objects, form *as experience* cannot have *svabhāva* in the sense of self-existence. Experience doesn't have "being" in the ordinary sense, let alone in an absolute sense. Experiencing a dependently arisen form does not give us certain knowledge of the corresponding object. Indeed, Buddhists say that we almost inevitably make mistakes when drawing ontological conclusions from experience.

So this first passage from *Aṣṭa* critiques realism with respect to *dharmas* and opens the door to an epistemological reading of the text. However, what we are looking for is a discussion of the emptiness of *dharmas* themselves. The second passage that sheds light is the only time that Chapter One uses the word *śūnya*.

Furthermore, Elder Subhūti, with reference to the *bodhisatva mahāsatva* said thus:... If he practises with respect to [the idea], "form is empty" (*rūpaṃ śūnyam*), he practises with respect to a sign (*nimitta*) If he practises with respect to "discernment is empty", he practises with respect to a sign... This *bodhisatva* is to be known as "lacking skilful means" (*anupāyakuśalo*).¹²

This is an unexpected turn. Here "form is empty" is not the essence of *Prajñāpāramitā*, but one of a long list of ideas (abbreviated above) that can become reified and lead the *bodhisatva* into error so that they are "without skilful means" (*anupāyakuśalo*). If one still perceives form, even if one sees it as empty, it is still a sign (*nimitta*) or percept. One of the refined states of awareness involved in Buddhist meditations associated with emptiness is the signless mental concentration (*animittaṃ cetosamādhiṃ*), in which all attention is withdrawn from the signs that constitute experience.¹³ The meditative state

¹² *Punar aparam āyuṣmān subhūtir bodhisatvaṃ mahāsatvaṃ ārabhyaivam āha ... saced rūpaṃ śūnyam iti carati, nimitte carati | ... saced vijñānaṃ śūnyam iti carati, nimitte carati... ayaṃ bodhisatvo 'nupāyakuśalo veditavyaḥ ||* (Vaidya 1960: 6). For the Gāndhārī manuscript and notes on Chinese counterparts compare Falk & Karashima (2012: 57 & n.52). Note that I follow the Buddhist Sanskrit spelling of *satva* thoughtout. Despite the tacit "correction" of this word to *sattva* by virtually all editors in all contexts, Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts and inscriptions invariably spell this word *satva*. See also Bhattacharya (2010) on the spelling of *bodhisatva* and Olivelle (2005) on the problem of Western editors of Sanskrit texts silently "correcting" variant spellings.

¹³ Compare the Pāli passages: "Here, friend, a bhikkhu withdraws his attention from all signs and

of emptiness is, like the state of signlessness, a state of awareness with no content: no subject and no object; no arising and ceasing of experience; just an intransitive alertness (i.e. one is aware, but not *of* anything).¹⁴ One comes to this state by progressively withdrawing attention from sensory experience using, for example, the method outlined in the Pāli *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* (MN 121).¹⁵

In a later chapter, *Aṣṭa* expands on the emptiness of *dharma*s:

Here Subhūti, the *bodhisatvas*, *mahāsatvas*, being fully-enlightened Buddhas, teach the *Dharma* that form has the [same] condition of space in the world. Sensation, perception, and volition are the same. In the same way, Subhūti, all *dharma*s 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 *dharma*s do not come or go, they are not made or unmade or shaped, they do not last, remain, or endure, they do not arise or cease, they are not falsely distinguished from these aspects of space. Why is that? Subhūti, the emptiness of form does not come or go. Sensation, perception, and volition are the same. The emptiness of cognitions does not come or go. In the same way, Subhūti, the emptiness of all *dharma*s does not come or go. The reason is that all *dharma*s are in a state of emptiness (*śūnyatāgatikāḥ sarvadharmāḥ*). They cannot escape that state.¹⁶

dwells having attained the signless mental concentration.” (*Idhāvuso, bhikkhu sabbanimittānaṃ amanasikārā animittaṃ cetosamādhim upasampajja viharati*. MN i.297); and “He knows that this [signless mental concentration], which is ultimately conditioned and volitional, is impermanent and by nature ceases. Knowing and seeing it this way the mind is freed from the taint of desire, the taint of being, and the taint of ignorance.” (*Yaṃ kho pana kiñci abhisankhataṃ abhisāñcetaṃ tad aniccaṃ nirodhadhamman ti pajānāti. Tassa evaṃ jānato evaṃ passato kāmāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati, bhavāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccati*. MN iii.107). On signlessness, see also Harvey (1988).

¹⁴ I speculate that ancient Brahmins had the same kind of experience but interpreted it differently, i.e. as Brahman or “being, consciousness, and bliss” (*saccidānanda*), a concept that Richard Gombrich has argued was familiar to early Buddhists (2009: 68-70).

¹⁵ For a practice oriented commentary on this *sutta*, see Satyadhana (2014).

¹⁶ *iha subhūte bodhisatvā mahāsatvā anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddhāḥ santo lokasya ākāśagatikāṃ rūpaṃ iti dharmāṃ deśayanti | evaṃ vedanā saññā saṃskārāḥ | evaṃ eva subhūte sarvadharmā ākāśagatikā anāgatikā agatikā ākāśasamāḥ | yathā ākāśam anāgatam agatam akṛtam avikṛtam anabhisamskṛtam, asthitam asaṃsthitam avyavasthitam, anuṭpannam*

The *bodhisatva* must not identify with the world of experience. The meditating *bodhisatva* (aspiring to liberation) aims at the state of emptiness, i.e. a state in which the world of experience has effectively ceased, but they are still awake and alert. The *Cūḷasuññata Sutta* also describes a “state of emptiness” (*suññatāvihāra*) that, in this case, is attained by gradually eliminating the arising of experience by withdrawing attention (*amanasi karoti*) from sources of experience. Since attention is one of the conditions for the arising of experience, withdrawing attention prevents experience from arising. This can result in “the attainment of the cessation of perceptions and sensations” (*saññā-vedayita-nirodha-samāpatti*), often simply called “cessation” (*nirodha*). In this context, Pāli *suñña* means something like “absent” and *suññatā* “absence”, i.e. the absence of sensory or mental experience. It can also refer to the absence of *ātman* (C.f. Choong 1999: 8-31).

Aṣṭa emphasises that “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*). This is different from how emptiness is used in *Nikāya* and *Āgama* texts (Cf. Choong 1999: 8-31). Here the meditative experience becomes an analogy for the nature of *dharmas*. Presumably, the reasoning was along the lines that, while in the state of emptiness, all conditioned *dharmas* are absent (*śūnya*); and since experience is simply a collection of *dharmas*, if emptiness applies to the whole state, then it applies equally to all aspects of that state. The *dharma* is the microcosm to the psycho-physical macrocosm of the human being. We know from early Buddhist texts that *dharmas* are empty of existence or non-existence, empty of *ātman*. This is extended to deny the Abhidharma *svabhāva*, especially in the later meaning of existing in and of itself. The idea is expressed in the metaphor of the state of emptiness experienced by the meditating *bodhisatva*: all *dharmas* are like space, in that, for ancient Buddhists, the ontological status of space is also indeterminate. None of the metaphysics that applies to objects, such as location, extension in space or time, causality, or dichotomies like “existence/nonexistence” can be applied to *dharmas* or to experience more generally.

aniruddham, evam eva subhūte sarvadharmā anāgatā āgatā ākṛtā avikṛtā anabhisaṃskṛtā asthitā asaṃsthitā avyavasthitā anutpannā aniruddhā ākāśakalpatvād avikalpāḥ | tat kasya hetoḥ? yā subhūte rūpasya śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā | evaṃ vedanāyāḥ saṃjñāyāḥ saṃskārāṇāṃ | yā subhūte vijñānasya śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā | evam eva subhūte yā sarvadharmāṇāṃ śūnyatā, na sā āgacchati vā gacchati vā | tat kasya hetoḥ? śūnyatāgatikā hi subhūte sarvadharmāḥ | te tām gatim na vyativartante | (Vaidya 1960: 148)

A similar analogy is found in the *Pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* (PraS), which applies *Prajñāpāramitā* ideas to Pure Land practices involving the visualisation of Buddhas (*buddhānusmṛti*). According to Paul Harrison:

“[PraS] first underlines the fundamental unreality of the entities experienced during the *samādhi* by comparing them with those things perceived in dreams... and then—often without the shift in focus being made explicit—proceeds to emphasise the emptiness of all *dharmas*, which supposedly constitute the basis of our experience in the waking state” (1990: xix)

Harrison describes this as an “analogical extension or generalisation” from the emptiness of meditative experiences to the emptiness of *dharmas* (xix). Although there is much here that is of interest in understanding *Prajñāpāramitā* generally, we do not seem to have discovered the direct antecedent of the *Pañcaviṃśati* passage that ended up in the *Heart Sutra*. In fact, there is a passage in *Aṣṭa* that has the same syntax as the *Pañcaviṃśati* passage, but with a significant difference.

Form and Illusion

In Chapter One of *Aṣṭa*, we find a passage that 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, and will he go forth to it?’ How would the Bhagavan explain the answer to this question?”¹⁷

Here *sarvajñā* “complete knowledge, omniscience” is a common synonym of *Prajñāpāramitā*.¹⁸ By way of answer, the Buddha asks Subhūti a related question:

¹⁷ *atha khalv āyusmān subhūtir bhagavantam etad avocat - yo bhagavan evaṃ pariṭṛcchet – kim ayaṃ māyāpuruṣāḥ sarvajñatāyāṃ śikṣiṣyate, sarvajñatāyā āsannībhaviṣyati, sarvajñatāyāṃ niryāsyatīti? tasya bhagavan evaṃ pariṭṛcchataḥ kathāṃ nirdeṣṭavyaṃ syāt?* (Vaidya 1960: 8).

¹⁸ “Sarva” here is sometimes interpreted as being related to the Pāli *Sabba Sutta* (SN 35.23) or to the *Āgama* parallel from one of the two Chinese *Samyuktāgama* translations (T99 #319, 2.91a24-b03) (Cox 1995). In this case there may be a link between *sarva* and the Upaniṣadic

What do you think Subhūti: is illusion (*māyā*) different from form? Different from sensation, apperception, or volition? Is illusion different from cognition?¹⁹

Subhuti answers:

Bhagavan, illusion is not different from form. Bhagavan, *the illusion* is form; *form* is the illusion. Bhagavan, illusion is not different from sensation, from perception, or from volition. *The illusion* is sensation, perception, and volition; sensation, perception, and volition are only illusions. Bhagavan, the illusion is not different from cognition. *The illusion* is cognition; *cognition* is the illusion.²⁰

It is this paragraph that uses the familiar sentence structures, but with “illusion” (*māyā*) instead of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). In the Gilgit manuscript of *Pañcaviṃśati*:

*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 |*

There are some minor spelling differences caused by *sandhi*, and by the use of pronouns and particles in *Aṣṭa*, but these are superficial. The basic sentence

idiom *idaṃ sarvaṃ* meaning “all of this, all of creation, the entire universe”. See also my notes on *sarva* and these texts (Attwood 2014).

¹⁹ *Bhagavān etad avocat – tat kiṃ manyase subhūte anyā sā māyā, anyat tad rūpam, anyā sā māyā, anyā sā vedanā | anyā sā saṃjñā, anye te saṃskārāḥ | anyā sā māyā, anyat tad vijñānam?* (Vaidya 1960: 8). The form of this question also suggests that Conze has erred in interpreting *māyāpuruṣa* as a *karmadhāraya* “illusory man”, i.e. a man who is an illusion. Rather we should read it as a *tatpuruṣa* the “man of illusions”, i.e. a man who has illusions about experience. The Buddha seems to be asking whether we can separate the man from his illusions about experience.

²⁰ *subhūtir āha - na hy etad bhagavan | na hi bhagavan anyā sā māyā anyat tad rūpam | rūpam eva 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 anyat tad vijñānam | vijñānam eva bhagavan māyā, māyaiva vijñānam ||* (Vaidya 1960: 8-9).

structure is still *na anya X anya Y*, followed by *X eva Y*. *Aṣṭa* only has three phrases instead of four, leaving out the expected first phrase: *na hi anyat tad rūpam anyā sā śūnyatā*. Otherwise, the two passages are too similar for this to be a coincidence. It seems plausible to conjecture that this *Aṣṭa* passage is the source of the passage in *Pañcaviṃśati*, and thus the ultimate source of the passage in the *Heart Sutra*. We may also conjecture that the author of *Pañcaviṃśati* deliberately changed *māyā* to *śūnyatā*.

What Subhūti is saying in this passage is that *māyā* or illusions—i.e. the conditioned experiences that the unenlightened take to be real—are not found outside the five branches of experience (*pañca skandhāḥ*). In fact, experience (in the sense of the operation of the *skandhas*) is the illusion. The *skandhas* working together are experience; they are what we mistakenly take to be existent or non-existent. At least for the unenlightened, experience is an illusion that we buy into. The Buddha can say this because he often dwells, per the *Cūḷasuññata Sutta*, in the state of emptiness (*suññatāvihāra*), i.e. in a state where the *skandhas* are temporarily inoperative.²¹ From this perspective, experience, including the experience of having a first-person perspective on experience, is an illusion, but one that a skilled meditator can wake up from. In particular, spending time in the *śūnyatā-samādhi* radically alters one’s perspective on experience so that one no longer mistakes it for reality.

The earliest Chinese translation of *Aṣṭa*, completed ca. 179 CE, by Lokakṣema (T224), renders the passage as:

“Illusion (幻) and form are not different; form is illusion, illusion is form; illusion and sensation, perception, volition, and cognition are not different.”²²

Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of *Aṣṭa* (T227) completed in 408 CE, better reflects the syntax of the passage in T223, and it includes the missing fourth statement that is absent in the Sanskrit edition of Vaidya (1960):

“Illusion is not different from form; form is not different from illusion. Illusion is just form; form is just illusion. Illusion is not different from sensation, perception, volition, or cognition;

²¹ E.g., “Now, as before, Ānanda I often dwell in the state of emptiness” (*Pubbepāhaṃ, ānanda, etarahipi suññatāvihārena bahulaṃ viharāmi*. MN iii.103).

²² 幻與色無異也，色是幻，幻是色，幻與痛痒思想生死識等無異。(8.427a20-1).

cognition is not different from illusion. Illusion is just cognition; cognition is just illusion.”²³

So it seems that *Aṣṭa* is consistent in using *māyā* here. Unfortunately, this passage does not occur in the 1st Century CE Gāndhārī manuscript of *Aṣṭa* published by Falk & Karashima (2012), but we can find a probable counterpart to this passage in the *Ratnagaṇasamcayagāthā* (Rgs).

Here, the one who knows that the five *skandhas* are like an illusion (*māyopamaṃ*),

Does not make illusion one thing and the *skandhas* another;
The one who practises for peace is free of multiplying perceptions,
He practises the highest perfection of understanding.²⁴

Having established that extant versions of *Aṣṭa* and *Rgs* have *māyā* rather than *sūnyatā*, it will be worth reviewing how Buddhists have viewed *rūpa* in the light of the concept of *māyā*.

The Relation Between *Rūpa* and *Māyā*.

In early Buddhist texts, the relationship between form and illusion is usually stated as a simile.²⁵ For example, in the Pāli *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta* (SN 22.95) we find:

Just so, *bhikkhus*, a *bhikkhu* sees some form, past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far away or right here, he studies it, investigates its origins... and to him it appears (*khāyati*) unreal, hollow (*tucchaka*), without substance (*asāraka*). After all, what substance (*sāra*) is there in form?²⁶

²³ 幻不異色，色不異幻。幻即是色，色即是幻。幻不異受、想、行、識，識不異幻。幻即是識，識即是幻。(8.538b27-9).

²⁴ *māyopamaṃ ya iha jānati pañca skandhāṃ
na ca māya anya na ca skandha karoti anyān |
nānātvā-samjñā-vigato upaśānta-cārī
eṣā sa prajñā-vara-pāramitāya caryā* || Rgs 1.14 || (Yuyama 1976: 11)

²⁵ For an exhaustive exploration of this metaphor and the semantic fields involved at different times, see Huifeng (2016).

²⁶ *Evam eva kho, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci rūpaṃ aūtānāgatappaccuppannaṃ [ajjhattaṃ vā 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*

The etymology of the word *sāra* is obscure, but it refers to the essential, inner core of anything, or to the best part of something: the heartwood of a tree, the marrow of a bone, the cream of milk. The point of the simile is that when one investigates the experience of “form”, it has no such core. Significantly, this means that Buddhists did not see the object of perception (*ālambana*) as the core of experience, though it is acknowledged to be present. They also did not see appearance as a manifestation of some ideal (they did not posit a noumenon behind every phenomenon). To reiterate, the ontology of an experience is ambiguous, hence the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* (SN 12:15) says that the experiential world (*loka*) is usually conceived of in terms of existence (*atthitā*) and non-existence (*natthitā*). The Buddha teaches a middle way between these two extremes, which amounts to saying that only *dukkha* arises and ceases.²⁷ Sue Hamilton has shown that in Pāli *dukkha* is synonymous with the *khandhas*, and both with *loka*, and all three with unenlightened experience (2000: 205). *Pañcaviṃśati*, echoing the Pāli *suttas*, says, “The *tathāgata* calls the five *skandhas* ‘the world’ (*loka*),”²⁸ implying that Hamilton’s observations also apply in the context of *Prajñāpāramitā*.

We certainly *have* experiences, but they are not real in the way that objects are real. Experiences are not simply subjective, since they require an object to be present; but when we have an experience, nothing comes into existence as a result, nor does anything cease when the experience stops. This view is also informed by the meditative experience of emptiness, i.e. the possibility of being alert, but unaware of any experience. The *Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta* concludes with a well-known verse:

Form is like a ball of foam, sensation like a bubble.

Perception is like a mirage, volition like a plantain.

Cognition is like an illusion. So Ādiccabandhu taught.²⁹

khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, rūpe sāro? (SN iii.140-1). The Chinese *Samyuktāgama* counterpart has a related pericope at this point “[form] is nothingness (Skt. *ākimcanya*), not-durable, not, real, without substance; like sickness, like a boil, like a stab, like murder; impermanent, disappointing, empty (空; Skt *śūnya*), and insubstantial (無所有、無牢、無實、無有堅固，如病、如癰、如刺、如殺，無常、苦、空、非我。 SA 265 T2.68c1-7). Cf also T105, T106 which are standalone translations of a similar text.

²⁷ *Dukkham eva uppajjamānaṃ uppajjati, dukkhaṃ nirujjhamānaṃ nirujjhatī ti* (SN ii.17). Compare the *Vajirā Sutta* (SN 5:10) “For only suffering is produced, persists, and ceases. Nothing other than suffering is produced, nothing other than suffering ceases.” (*Dukkham eva hi sambhoti, dukkhaṃ tiṭṭhati veti ca; Naññatra dukkhā sambhoti, naññam dukkhā nirujjhatī ti* SN i.136).

²⁸ *pañca subhūte skandhās tathāgatena loka ākhyātaḥ* (Kimura PSP 4:58).

²⁹ *Pheṇapiṇḍūpamaṃ rūpaṃ, vedanā bubbulūpamā / Marīcikūpamā saññā, saṅkhārā*

We also find the simile in *Aṣṭa*, “form is *like* an illusion” (*māyopamaṃ rūpam*. Vaidya 1960: 9; c.f. *Rgs* 1.14 above). A similar verse occurs at the end of the *Vajracchedikā* (*Vaj*), where the simile becomes a metaphor:

We should see the conditioned as a star, a kind of blindness, a lamp,
An illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble, a dream, a lightning flash, a cloud.³⁰

So there is some continuity of this idea from Buddhist texts in Pāli into the early *Prajñāpāramitā* texts (*Aṣṭa*, *Rgs*, and *Vaj*). Huifeng (2016: 245) notes that, compared to the early and mainstream (i.e. commentarial and Abhidharma) usage, the semantic fields in *Aṣṭa* and *Rgs* are narrowed down to simply “illusion”.

The substitution of *śūnyatā* for *māyā* in *Pañcaviṃśati* is an interesting development in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, especially as “only form is emptiness” becomes paired with “only emptiness is form”. In the introduction, I pointed out how difficult this is to understand taken at face value. Of course, there are various ways of resolving this difficulty, which are found in commentaries both ancient and modern. How does the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature view the problem?

The Relation between *Māyā* and *Śūnyatā*

Pañcaviṃśati also has the expression “form is like an illusion”. More importantly, it has it in conjunction with the phrase “form is emptiness” (*rūpam śūnyatā*). Chapter Three opens with a dialogue between the Buddha and Śāriputra. Śāriputra asks, “Moreover, Bhagavan, how should the *bodhisatva mahāsatva* practise with respect to perfection of wisdom.”³¹ The Buddha’s reply is that the *bodhisatva* does not perceive (*na samanupaśyati*)³² the fact of being a *bodhisatva*, the name “*bodhisatva*”, the practice (*cāryam*) of a *bodhisatva*, or the perfection of wisdom. And they also don’t perceive the *skandhas*. Why not?

kadalūpamā; Māyūpamañca viññāṇaṃ, desitādiccabandhunā (SN iii.142). The Chinese text of SA 265 closely approximates this: 觀色如聚沫，受如水上泡，想如春時燄，諸行如芭蕉，諸識法如幻，日種姓尊說。(T2 69a18-20).

³⁰ *tārakā timiraṃ dīpo māyāvaśyāya budbudaḥ |*

supinaṃ vidyud abhraṃ ca evaṃ draṣṭavya saṃskṛtam || Vaj 22 || (Harrison & Watanabe 2006)

³¹ *kathaṃ punar bhagavan bodhisatvena mahāsatvena prajñāpāramitāyāṃ caritavyam* (Kimura 2010: 1-1, 53).

³² Conze translates *samanupaśyati* as “reviews” (1975a: 56) and notes (n.4) that he takes it to mean, “sees repeatedly”, i.e. “re-views”.

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

What is the reason? Because *bodhi*, *bodhisatva*, and *sūnyatā* are merely names (*nāmamātra*). Form, sensation, apperception, volition, and cognition are mere names. For this reason, 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; essenceless and without essence; non-arising and non-ceasing, not decreasing nor growing, not defiled nor purified.³³

Note the similarity in meaning of the last part of this passage with a section of the *Heart Sutra*, though the choice of words is different. Here, form is emptiness because “form” is “merely a name” (*nāmamātra*) [for an aspect of experience or a *skandha*] and names are “like illusions” (*māyopama*). It’s not that there is some entity called “form” that is empty; but that emptiness is inseparable (*nānyatra*) from the experience of form; but at the same time “form” is not located anywhere in space, so it is unlike the object that supports (*ālambana*) the experience, which is located in space. Form is not the *object* of cognition; it *is* the cognition. This parallels Sue Hamilton’s observation that *dukkha* “... is not descriptive of the world *in which* we have our experience; it is not descriptive of everything we *perceive out there* and then react to. Rather, it *is* our [unenlightened] experience” (2000: 82; emphasis in the original). This outcome is not the result of the ontology of objects, but of the epistemology implied by the *skandhas* as “the apparatus of experience” (205).

³³ *tathā hi sa bodhisatvo nāma svabhāvena śunyaḥ na śunyatayā rūpaṃ śunyaṃ na vedanā sañjñā saṃskārā na śunyatayā vijñānaṃ śunyaṃ nānyatra rūpācchunyaṭā nānyatra vedanāyāḥ sañjñāyāḥ saṃskārebhya nānyatra vijñānacchunyaṭā | śunyataiva rūpaṃ śunyataiva vedanā sañjñā saṃskārāḥ śunyataiva vijñānaṃ tat kasya hetoḥ tathā hi nāmamātram idaṃ yaduta bodhiḥ nāmamātramidaṃ yaduta bodhisatvaḥ nāmamātram idaṃ yadutacchunyaṭā | nāmamātram idaṃ yaduta rūpaṃ vedanā sañjñā saṃskārā vijñānaṃ | tathā hi māyopamaṃ rūpaṃ vedanā sañjñā saṃskārā māyopamaṃ vijñānaṃ māyā ca nāmamātram na deśasthā na pradeśasthāḥ asad abhūtaṃ vitathasamaṃ māyādarśanaṃ svabhāvarahitaṃ asvabhāvaścānutpādaḥ anirodhaḥ na hānir na vṛddhiḥ na saṃkleśo na vyavadānam. Gilgit ms. (folio 17 verso) – transcribed with minor corrections from Karashima (2016). Note that the manuscript spells *sūnya(tā)* with short *u* throughout.*

If we read the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature as expounding an epistemology rather than an ontology, some of the apparently paradoxical statements become clearer, especially if we keep in mind the context of meditations in which experiences cease (at least temporarily) without the cessation of consciousness per se.

Having explored the history of these ideas in the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, I want to say a few words about the introduction of such changes to Buddhist texts.

Changing Buddhist Texts

When the Pāli texts were written down it was the end of large-scale changes in them. They became a canon. By contrast, evidence from surviving manuscripts and Chinese translations suggests that Mahāyāna texts continued to change and especially to grow over centuries, despite being written down, so that each new translation into Chinese was longer than the previous translations. Some later translators and commentators, not appreciating this, criticised earlier translators for “abbreviating” the texts.

There are many reasons why texts are amended and adapted. These are not always to do with increasing wisdom over time; sometimes the changes are ideological; sometimes texts have been amended in ways that are dubious at best and catastrophic at worst. In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, for example, during a discussion between the Buddha and Ānanda on the Buddha’s funeral arrangements (between the sections on the four pilgrimage places and how to deal with the Tathāgata’s remains), there is a passage about how *bhikkhus* should have nothing to do with women (DN ii.140-1). It is out of place and destroys the flow of the narrative at a critical juncture. However, for an apposite example of poor editorial choices, we can turn to the *Heart Sutra* itself. Take the line:

No ignorance or end of ignorance... up to... no ageing and death,
no end of ageing and death (*nāvidyā nāvidyākṣayo yāvan na jarāmarāṇam na jarāmarāṇa-kṣayo*).

This is the standard list of twelve *nidānas*, in both the forward (*anuloma*) and reverse (*pratiloma*) directions at once, with just the first and last items on the list, and using the adverbial pronoun *yāvat* ‘as far as’ to stand for the middle ten items. One could hardly get a more orthodox pan-Buddhist idea than this list, and the Chinese *Heart Sutra* exactly follows the text of T223.³⁴ However, in the

³⁴ *Pañcaviṃśati* again uses a slightly different syntax, e.g. “There is no ignorance or cessation

palm-leaf manuscript held in Hōryūji Temple, probably the oldest extant Sanskrit manuscript of the *Heart Sūtra*, this passage reads (with interpolations underlined):

No knowledge, no ignorance, no end of knowledge, or end of ignorance... up to... no ageing and death, no end of ageing and death (*na vidyā nāvidyā na vidyāksayo nāvidyāksāyo yāvan na jarāmaraṇaṃ na jarāmarāṇakṣayo*)

It's almost as if the editor did not recognise the twelve links here and, noticing two negations, interpolated their opposites as though this was the point of the exercise.³⁵ Similarly, Huifeng (2014) has pointed out that in some manuscripts of the *Heart Sutra* the phrase “no attainment, no non-attainment” (*na prāptir nāprāptiḥ*), which is included in Conze's Sanskrit edition (1967), is problematic. The next phrase in the text attributes the success of *bodhisatvas* to “being without attainment” (*aprāptivād*), so it doesn't make sense to negate non-attainment.³⁶ None of the Chinese versions have an equivalent of “no non-attainment”.

Another example is found in the study of *śūnyatā* in Chinese *Āgama* texts by Choong Mun-Keat (1999). In the Pāli text SN 22.90, a *bhikkhu* called Channa asks some elder *bhikkhus* to instruct him and they give him a teaching on the impermanence and essencelessness of the *khandhas*. He replies that he also thinks about the *khandhas* the way the elder *bhikkhus* talk about them.

“However, as a result, my mind does not leap towards, gain faith in, settle on, find satisfaction in, or embody the calming of all constructs, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, or extinction.”³⁷

of ignorance...” (*na tatrāvidyā nāvidyānirodhaḥ*... Gilgit ms. folio 21 verso); or “No arising of ignorance, no cessation of ignorance...” (*nāvidyotpādo nāvidyānirodhaḥ*... Kimura, 1-1: 64). Which is further supporting evidence, if needed, for the Chinese origins hypothesis.

³⁵ This interpolation also occurs in some of the Dunhuang manuscripts of the *Heart Sutra*. Ben Nourse, personal communication, March 2017.

³⁶ In fact, Huifeng (2014) problematises the translation of the Chinese phrase 以無所得故 as *aprāptivād*, pointing out that Kumārajīva regularly uses the same characters to translate *anupalambhayogena*, which could mean “due to being engaged in [the practice of] non-perception [of objects]”, which would fit the context of the *Heart Sutra*. This suggests that the original translator of the *Heart Sutra* into Sanskrit was unfamiliar with Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* idiom.

³⁷ *Atha ca pana me sabbasaṅkhārasamathe sabbūpadhipaṭinissagge taṇhākkhaye virāge nirodhe nibbāne cittaṃ na pakkhandati nappasīdati na santiṭṭhati nādhimuccati* (SN iii.133).

In other words, though he thinks about things the same way as the elder *bhikkhus* talk about them, he is not yet liberated. In the Chinese version of this text, SA 262, the Pāli “calming of all constructs” (*sabba-saṅkhāra-samatha*) has been replaced with “the emptiness of all activities” (一切諸行空寂) (Choong 1995:34-5). Another example is that the classic list of three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇā*) of the *khandhas* (i.e. *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*) is extended by the insertion of “emptiness” giving four characteristics, for example in SA 259 “impermanent, disappointing, *empty*, and essenceless” (無常、苦、空、非我。 Choong 1995 = T2.65b15).

As the Mahāyāna developed, *śūnyatā* became the most important concept, so it may have seemed natural to insert or interpolate this word into texts. Even though these new readings were sometimes grammatically or semantically problematic, they came to signify something important for Buddhists who chanted and studied them.

Conclusions

By tracking the four phrases—“Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is just emptiness; emptiness is just form.”□from the *Heart Sutra* back into earlier layers of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, I discovered that an important change had taken place during the composition of *Pañcaviṃśati*. *Aṣṭa*, *Rgs*, and *Vaj*, all look back to existing imagery found in early Buddhist texts. It is only in *Pañcaviṃśati* that this is restated in relation to the experience of emptiness. And from there it appears in the *Heart Sutra*. We can diagram this progression:

form is *like* an illusion [simile]
(*Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*, *Aṣṭa*, *Rgs*)

↓

form is (an) illusion [metaphor]
(*Aṣṭa*, *Vaj*)

↓

form is emptiness
(*Pañcaviṃśati* → *Heart Sutra*)

The key to understanding the enigmatic affirmation in the *Heart Sutra*, then, is the old Buddhist simile that form “is like an illusion” or that it is “without substance”, where form represents all of the *skandhas*. As Huifeng (2016) has emphasised, this characterization of the *skandhas* originally referenced a broader set of semantic fields, but subsumed fields like “hollowness” under the concept of illusion (*māyā*).

We have experiences, but ontological terms such as “existence” and “non-existence” don’t apply to the world of experience. This is important because it tells us why the *skandhas* are amenable to the analogies, similes and metaphors in question. Form qua mind-independent physical object is *not* like an illusion. On the contrary, physical objects are the contrast against which an illusion is defined. An illusion is the *opposite* of physical form as interpreted in the usual ontological sense. The figurative use only applies to form qua experience; i.e. form as a mental object. Experience is like an illusion because it is unlike reality. This only makes sense when this contrast between solid objects and ephemeral experience is clear. Even now, the ontology of experience presents a difficult problem for scientists and philosophers alike. Clearly, we *have* experiences, but in the midst of an experience what has come into being? Even with our far more sophisticated understanding of the processes involved in having an experience, there is still no easy answer to this question.

Early Buddhists understood that the presence of an object was required for experience, but they subsequently ignored objects and focussed on the mental and emotional processes that contribute to experience, i.e. the activity of the five *skandhas*. They did not take objects as being real or as collectively constituting a reality; nor did they make a fuss about this conclusion. Early Buddhists vigorously attacked any suggestion of an unchanging entity underlying being or experience, e.g. *ātman*, *satva*, *puruṣa*, *jīva*, and so on. However, they did this on the basis that we never *experience* permanence, because experience itself is always ephemeral, even when objects are not—which is often the case. If experience is always temporary, then we have no way to experience permanence, therefore we never will experience permanence.

What we see in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature is the meditative attainment of emptiness, being used as an analogy for an anti-realist approach to experience. Rather than there being ultimately real entities in experience as the late Ābhidharmikas proposed, *Prajñāpāramitā* represented the (pre-existing early Buddhist) view that *nothing* in experience was ultimately real: the mental objects that Ābhidharmikas postulated to be real (and thus permanent and unchanging), cease altogether during the *śūnyatā-samādhi*. *Dharmas*, mental

objects, then are *not* like physical objects. Rather they are just like illusions: they have appearance, but not substance.

Buddhists understood that even (or *especially*) the observing self is an experience of the same kind; it can also simply cease. It does so in sleep, of course, but it can also cease while remaining alert in *samādhi*. In the key passage from *Pañcavimśati*, “form” (representing the *skandhas* or experiencing apparatus) is simply a name for an experience that arises and passes away. Along with the Mahāyāna, a new shorthand emerged for the ambiguous ontology of *dharmas*, i.e. that they are *sūnyatā*; or not simply empty, but like the meditator, in the *state* of being empty. Though if we think in terms of “forms are empty”, we are still dealing in signs (*nimitta*), which is not the same as being in the meditative state of emptiness in which there are no signs.

Far from being deliberately paradoxical, read in the light of Sue Hamilton’s work on early Buddhism, the *Prajñāpāramitā* is an attempt to discuss and celebrate the state of being empty: literally and metaphorically. Affirmatively, it tells us that experience is just like the state of being empty. The things we experience are just names, just illusions. Experience is just an appearance in which even the observer of the appearance is like an illusion. Experience arises without existing (i.e. without being permanent and unchanging) and it ceases without being nonexistent. Negatively, it tells us that in that state of being empty, there are no experiences, no categories of experience, no subject, no object, no directions, no time, and so on. This experience is an analogy for how *dharmas* are and how they may be categorised. In other words, when the ideas are appropriately contextualised, there is no paradox in the *Heart Sutra*. In (the state of) emptiness, there is *literally* no form, no sensation, etc.

Changing the simile “form is like an illusion” into the four phrases does more to obscure the message of the *Prajñāpāramitā* than reveal it. Whereas anyone can see what the simile is getting at, the four phrases are esoteric in the sense that they don’t make sense to anyone not *au fait* with the jargon of the sect. One can appreciate the enthusiasm for emptiness, particularly in an environment in which a powerful faction within Buddhism had announced that some or all *dharmas* were real and permanent, while another faction was regularly spending time in the meditative state of emptiness and knew that this could not be the case. Such is the power of this critique of realism, that the *Heart Sutra* had an almost universal and eternal appeal once it was created. It has meant that the *Heart Sutra* has a significance that transcends the grammatically and semantically problematic phrases. Conze typifies the approach of boldly stating something

that does not make sense such as “A is what A is not” (1975a: 84)—and asserting that it makes *perfect* sense, leaving his readers “dazed by so much splendour” (1975a: 90). A clearer case of the Emperor’s new clothes is hard to imagine, but it still draws crowds of admirers.

A secondary conclusion about the text itself is that the four phrases ought to be symmetrical. Where the received Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* has *rūpam śūnyatā; śūnyataiva rūpam*, to fit the pattern of all the other occurrences of this passage, it ought to have *rūpam eva śūnyatā; śūnyataiva rūpam*. We can add this to the list of problems with the received Sanskrit text identified by Jan Nattier (1992) and by subsequent research in the same vein (Huifeng 2014, Attwood 2015, 2017).

Abbreviations

Aṣṭa	<i>Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
Pañcaviṃśati	<i>Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
SA	<i>Samyuktāgama (Chinese translation)</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
T	<i>Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (The Tripiṭaka in Chinese)</i>
Vaj	<i>Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>

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