

## Studying the Heart Sutra: Basic Sources and Methods (A Response to Ng and Ānando)

JAYARAVA ATTWOOD

Independent Scholar

jayarava@gmail.com

This article illustrates the importance of research methods in Buddhist Studies using the recent article on the *Heart Sutra* by Ng and Ānando (2019) as a case study. The authors make a novel conjecture about the *Heart Sutra* to explain a difference between the *Xīnjīng* (T 251) and the *Dāmíngzhòujīng* (T 250) but in doing so they neglect the relevant research methods and critical thinking. Their selection of literary resources is somewhat erratic and their evaluation of them appears to contain bias. The authors did not consult relevant Sanskrit texts (including the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*). The logic applied to their source materials appears to be faulty at times and this causes them to arrive at an unconvincing conclusion. By going over the same ground, using more appropriate methods and materials, a far better explanation of the problem emerges.

### Introduction

The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (*Hṛd*) or *Heart Sutra* is a hugely popular Buddhist text that has been sadly neglected in academia. Despite several one-off articles, few authors have paid sustained attention to the *Heart Sutra* and a good deal of basic philological, historical, and exegetical research remains to be done. Although there are relatively few manuscript and epigraphic sources, the relationships between them are complex. There is still no stemma or even an agreed taxonomy for discussing the resultant complexity. The modern historiography of the text is still mainly based on normative sources that are unreliable guides to history. Much of the early work on the *Heart Sutra* is flawed but still treated as authoritative. *Heart Sutra* hermeneutics are dominated by either the obscurantist ‘logic of *sokuhi*’ foisted on *Prajñāpāramitā* literature by D. T. Suzuki and Edward Conze or by medieval Madhyamaka rhetoric. Many authors simply ignore the Sanskrit literature or ignore the Chinese. The result is a rather fractured and patchy secondary literature, much of which is either out of date or misleading.

Keywords: *Heart Sutra*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, Research Methods, Jan Nattier, Kumārajīva

In this article, I make several methodological points about doing research on the *Heart Sutra* using as a case study the recent paper by two Buddhist monks, Kar Lok Ng (aka Ding Quan 定泉) and Assistant Professor, Dr Phramaha Anon Ānando, in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Universities* (JIABU). Both the authors hold doctoral degrees and Ānando is involved in doctoral supervision and examination at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand.<sup>1</sup> We can reasonably expect them to understand and apply research methods. JIABU is published in English and purports to be an academic journal participating in international scholarly communication, so we reasonably expect articles published in the journal to reflect the usual academic standards for research.<sup>2</sup>

The authors make a novel proposal about the standard *Heart Sutra*, which occurs in two versions: the *Móhēbōrěbōluómìdāmíngzhòujīng* (摩訶般若波羅蜜大明呪經) (T 250; hereafter *Dāmíngzhòujīng*) and the *Bōrěbōluómìduōxīnjīng* (般若波羅蜜多心經) (T 251; hereafter *Xīnjīng*). They argue that lines present in the *Dāmíngzhòujīng* but missing from the *Xīnjīng* are the result of a rearrangement of the text in line with Yogācāra doctrine. The differences between the *Xīnjīng* and *Dāmíngzhòujīng* are certainly a problem and require an explanation but the approach the authors adopt, especially their silence on the Sanskrit texts, does not produce a convincing explanation.

The beginning and heart of most research projects is a literature review, and since Ng and Ānando skipped this entirely, I begin with a brief overview of the relevant secondary literature on the *Heart Sutra*. I will then review Nattier's method since important details often seem to be lost in the process of attempting to refute her conclusions. Lastly, I will look at some details of the argument in Ng and Ānando (2019) and comment on how attention to the primary and secondary literature could have helped them.

### The literature

The *Prajñāpāramitā* literature began to emerge in India with the first wave of what we now call Mahāyāna Buddhism. For an excellent overview of early Mahāyāna scholarship produced up to 2010, see the two articles by David Drewes (2010a, 2010b). Conze's (1978) survey of the extant *Prajñāpāramitā* texts is a little dated now but adequately conveys the broad scope and variety of the thirty or so texts of the genre. The predominant approach, following Conze, is to see *Prajñāpāramitā* as presenting a paradoxical and self-contradictory metaphysics, epitomized by the seeming negation of Buddhist doctrine in the *Heart Sutra*. Until the late twentieth century, the *Heart Sutra* was assumed to be the product of the Indian *Prajñāpāramitā* movement.

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1. Ānando was both Ng's PhD supervisor and on the examination board for his dissertation (2018).
  2. I submitted a version of this article to JIABU in August 2019 using their online submission form, which indicated that the manuscript had been received. However, the submission was never acknowledged by the editor. As far as I know it was never considered for publication, and the editor did not respond to repeated enquiries over several months. Nor did they respond to my withdrawal of the article or my request to remove it from the submission system.

The first Anglophone engagement with the *Heart Sutra* was Samuel Beal's translation from Chinese with the aid of a Tang Dynasty commentary in 1863, published in 1865. Beal's translation is interesting for being uncontaminated by conclusions drawn from studying the Sanskrit text or by the obscurantism of later scholars. A diplomatic edition of the Hōryūji manuscript was published in 1884 by Max Müller and Bunyiu Nanjio. D. T. Suzuki (1934) was the first to publish a commentary on the text in English (much of which he spends explaining away the presence of the final *dhāraṇī*). Japanese scholars were very active in the early twentieth century and from the 1980s onwards, but I do not read Japanese so I can only speak in generalities about their research except for a few important details included below.

Edward Conze published a series of articles in the journal of The Buddhist Society in 1946, which were collated and published as *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra* (1958), with a second edition in 1973. Conze published his critical edition of the Sanskrit text in 1948 and a revised edition in 1967. However, Conze's work on the Sanskrit edition was 'chaotic' (Silk 1994, 34) and contained two glaring grammatical errors (Attwood 2015; 2018a). A feature of scholarship on the *Heart Sutra* is that Sanskritists have been blind to the errors in Conze's text.<sup>3</sup>

Suzuki and Conze set the stage for a rapid expansion of interest in the *Heart Sutra* in the Anglophone world so that there are now more than sixty published translations and studies in English mostly by religious. Amongst the scholarly studies are Hurvitz (1975, 1977; with Link 1974), Wayman (1977), and Cook (1978). Modern commentaries mostly follow the lines laid down by Suzuki, which voids Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction based on his reading of the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* or *Diamond Sutra*. This anti-logic is referred to as the 'logic of *sokuhi*'.<sup>4</sup> Conze was an enthusiastic promoter of this style of irrational thinking. In this view, the *Heart Sutra* negates all the familiar doctrines of Buddhism and this is supposed to be a demonstration of the philosophy of emptiness. Paul Harrison (2006) has shown that Suzuki and Conze misunderstood the *Vajracchedikā*, while Huifeng (2014) and Attwood (2015, 2017b, 2020b) have shown that they misunderstood the *Heart Sutra*. These three authors argue that the *Heart Sutra* and *Vajracchedikā* are not concerned with negative metaphysics, rather they are concerned with the phenomenology of the deep meditative state in which sensory experience ceases. This state is known in Pali as *suññatāvihāra*, 'dwelling in [the] absence [of sense experience]' (c.f. MN 121), or in Sanskrit simply as *śūnyatā*, 'absence'. In Madhyamaka, by contrast, *śūnyatā*, 'emptiness', is not linked to the absence of sense experience but is treated as synonymous with ultimate reality (*paramārtha-sat*). This reification of absence gives rise to the various paradoxes that characterize Madhyamaka but are absent in early Buddhist texts and *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. Existing translations and exegesis of *Prajñāpāramitā* texts do not reflect this distinction.

3. In Attwood (2020b) I make a plea for a critical reassessment of Conze's contribution to Buddhist Studies and *Prajñāpāramitā* Studies in particular.
4. A useful overview study of Suzuki and his logic in retrospect can be found in Yusa (2019). There is a general backlash against Suzuki's 'logic' amongst English-speaking scholars partly because of Suzuki's nationalism, highlighted by Robert Sharf (1993, 40–47) and his sympathies with the Nazis, detailed by Brian Victoria (2013, 1, 13–16).

Buddhist sectarianism created a number of mutually exclusive readings of the *Heart Sutra* and no commentator appears to take the point of view of the text itself (Wayman 1977, 136; Eckel, 1987, 69–70). Ng and Ānando seek to exploit this sectarianism but do not consider that Buddhist sectarianism in China is a complex topic and they cite no sources or authorities on this subject whatever. They might have usefully consulted, for example, Zürcher (1959) or Sharf (2001). Given their major proposition about the Yogācāra and their apparent fluency in Chinese we might have expected Ng and Ānando to consult the Yogācāra inspired *Heart Sutra* commentaries from the Tang Dynasty by Kuiji (T 1710) and Woncheuk (T 1711), but they do not.<sup>5</sup>

A new era of sceptical scholarship began with Fukui Fumimasa (1987), who argued that the *Heart Sutra* was not a sutra text, but a *dhāraṇī* text. A portion of this argument is cited briefly by Ng and Ānando. Although Fukui wrote in Japanese, summaries of his argument can be found in McRae (1988, 89), Nattier (1992, 175–176), Tanahashi (2014, 68–69, 77), and Ji (2017, 36–39). A watershed was reached when Nattier (1992) published her authoritative analysis of the provenance of the core part of the text. Nattier’s article continues to draw polemical responses from Asian religious scholars such as Harada (2010) and Ishii (2015). In Anglophone scholastic circles, Nattier’s article was met with ambivalence at first but began to find grudging acceptance. This situation has changed since Huifeng (2014) and Attwood (2017a; 2017b; 2018b; 2019; 2020a) confirmed and extended Nattier’s thesis through comparative studies of the *Heart Sutra* text in both Sanskrit and Chinese, paying attention to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and to Kumārajīva’s translation practices.

Ng and Ānando’s bibliography includes just six secondary sources, including two collections of Pali *suttas* in English translation, an encyclopaedia article on *dhāraṇī*, and Fukui (1987) cited once on the subject of *dhāraṇī*. On the *Heart Sutra*, they cite only Nattier (1992), which they summarily dismiss, and the error-laden book for the popular market by Zen Buddhist Tanahashi Kazuaki (2014). The bulk of their citations are to Chinese texts in the CBETA edition of the *Taishō Tripitaka*. They cite no Sanskrit sources.

Before considering the specific argument put forward by Ng and Ānando, it is important to review Nattier’s materials, methods, and conclusions since these are misrepresented in their article (and in other apologetics for the received tradition).

### Nattier’s method

Jan Nattier made the uncontroversial observation that about half the *Heart Sutra* — the ‘core passage’<sup>6</sup> — was copied from the *Large Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*.<sup>7</sup> This means

5. Also available in English translation: Shih and Lusthaus 2006; Hyun Choo 2006. The traditional commentaries preserved in Tibetan and attributed to Indian authors dating from the eighth to twelfth centuries have also been studied and translated (Eckel 1987; Lopez 1988; 1996).
6. From Nattier’s unpublished rebuttal of Fukui (1994), it appears that Fukui saw the *dhāraṇī* as the essence of the text and misunderstood Nattier’s use of ‘core’ in this context. To be clear, in Nattier’s usage ‘core passage’ means the long quote that the text was built around and does not imply any privilege. My thanks to Prof. Nattier for sharing her draft with me.
7. Known in Sanskrit as the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* or *Prajñāpāramitā Consisting of*

that the core passage exists in at least four versions as found in 1. the Sanskrit *Large Sutra* (*Pañc*), 2. the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* (*Hṛd*), 3. the Chinese *Large Sutra* (*Dàjīng*), and 4. the Chinese *Heart Sutra* (*Xīnjīng*). As exemplars, Nattier chose the Gilgit manuscript facsimile published by Raghu Vira and Lokesh Chandra (1959) transcribed for her by Gregory Schopen, the edition of *Hṛd* in Conze (1967), and — from the *Taishō Tripiṭaka* — Kumārajīva's *Móhēbōrěbōluómìjīng* (摩訶般若波羅蜜經) (T 223) and the *Xīnjīng* (T 251).<sup>8</sup>

Nattier compared the four versions of the core passage. Assuming the traditional history of the *Heart Sutra* we could make the following inference. If the core passage in *Hṛd* was copied in Sanskrit from *Pañc* then we would expect the two Sanskrit texts to be identical and the two Chinese texts, translated by different translators living 250 years apart, to be different. But this is *not* what we find. Instead, we find that the *Dàjīng* and *Xīnjīng* have very minor variations in vocabulary and are identical in syntax. By contrast, *Hṛd* appears to be a paraphrase of *Pañc* that frequently departs from expected Sanskrit idioms. This indicates that the copying, and thus the composition of the *Heart Sutra*, was done in Chinese.

A good example to illustrate the differences is the way the four texts express the idea that ‘form is not different from emptiness’. *Hṛd* uses the construction *sūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ*. This syntax is Sanskrit but it is not an idiom that *Prajñāpāramitā* authors ever used. *Prajñāpāramitā* texts always use the syntax found in *Pañc*, i.e. *na hi anyad rūpaṃ anyā sūnyatā*.<sup>9</sup> The *Pañc* and *Hṛd* phrases mean the same thing but *Hṛd* is not idiomatic. By contrast, both Chinese texts use the same expression, i.e. *sè bù yì kōng* 色不異空, ‘form is not different from emptiness’.

Using this same comparative method, Huifeng (2014) showed that in *Hṛd* (Section VI) the word *aprāptivāt* is a mistranslation of the Chinese *yǐwúsuǒdégù* 以無所得故. In his *Dàjīng* (T 223), Kumārajīva regularly uses this expression to translate *anupalambhayogena* ‘by the practice of non-apprehension’. Attwood (2020a) further shows that in some chapters of the *Dàjīng*, Kumārajīva translated *anupalambhayogena* using the Chinese phrase *yǐbùkědégù* 以不可得故 instead. In Kumārajīva's *Dàjīng*, both *kěde* 可得 and *suǒdé* 所得 translate verbs from the root *upavlabh* (here the verbal noun *upalambha*), whereas *dé* 得 is used to translate *pravāp* (here *prāpti*). A naïve translator looking at the end of section V and the beginning of Section VI (especially if they were using the CBETA edition with its faulty punctuation) would see two adjacent expressions:

wú zhì, yì wú dé. “yǐ wú suǒ dé gù, ...”  
無智，亦無得。「以無所得故， ...」

25,000 [Lines].

8. The characters 般若 are pronounced *bōrě* by Mandarin speakers, though separately they are transcribed *bān* and *ruò*. The reasons for this are discussed in the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* entry for 般若: <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=般若> (accessed 4th December 2020).
9. This is my edited transcript of the Gilgit manuscript in the facsimile edition by Karashima et al (2016). Kimura's (1986–2009) edition of late Nepalese manuscripts has the same syntax. Neither of these sources was available to Nattier.

*Wú dé yì wú zhì* corresponds to *na prāptir na jñānaṃ* in *Hṛd* and thus it might seem natural to also see *dé* 得 in the next expression as reflecting *prāpti*. It is only familiarity with Kumārajīva more broadly that alerts us to the shift here.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, I showed (Attwood 2018b) that the phrase ‘all the Buddhas of the three times’ in *Hṛd* is a calque from Chinese. Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* texts do use the phrase ‘the three times’ (*tryadhvaṇ*) but when referring to the buddhas they always prefer the phrase ‘past, future, and present’ (*atitānāgatapratyutpannā*). In many cases, the ‘buddhas of the three times’ (*atitānāgatapratyutpannā buddhāḥ*) is translated as *guòqù wèilái xiànzài zhū fó* 過去未來現在諸佛; but in the mid third century Chinese translators began to abbreviate this to *sān shì zhū fó* 三世諸佛. Furthermore, in Sanskrit, there is no need to specify ‘appearing in the three times’ (*tryadhva-vyavasthitā*). One can just say *atitānāgatapratyutpannā buddhāḥ* and it is apparent that one means buddhas who appear or live in those periods. If an author wants more specificity, they may use the time adjectives in the locative case, i.e. *atīte buddhāḥ* “buddhas in the past”.

Taken together, these observations leave no doubt that the *Heart Sutra* was composed in Chinese and that it is a collection of reused passages, largely from Kumārajīva’s *Dàjīng*, with a *dhāraṇī* likely copied from Atikūṭa’s *Tuóluóníjīng* (陀羅尼集經) (T 901) (McRae 1988, 107 n.10; Nattier 1992, 177). The Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* was translated from Chinese by someone with a working knowledge of Sanskrit, but not the idiom of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, resulting in an unusual text.

Furthermore, it is now apparent (Ji 2017; Attwood 2019; 2020a) that the *Heart Sutra* is a genre of text that Chinese bibliographers call *chāo jīng* 抄經 translated as ‘digest text’ or ‘condensed sutra’. This identification was first made by Robert Buswell in a letter to Nattier (1992, 210 n.48), after editing Tokuno’s (1990) classic study of how early medieval Chinese bibliographers classified indigenous Buddhist texts. Digest texts were made up of copied passages and were intended to convey the essence of the text they came from. As Tanya Storch (2014, 64–65) points out, Chinese bibliographers had some difficulty classifying such texts and became increasingly likely to categorize them as ‘fake text’ (*wěi jīng* 偽經) and never included them in the category of ‘genuine text’ (*zhèng jīng* 正經).

Chinese bibliographers adopted Indian criteria for establishing the authenticity of sutras: a genuine sutra should begin ‘Thus have I heard’; it should announce the place it was preached and the occasion (the *nidāna*); it should be spoken by the Buddha or a speaker endorsed by him; and the audience should rejoice in the teaching and resolve to practice it (Nattier 1992, 194–196). The *Heart Sutra* lacks all of these features. Ng and Ānando (2019, 170) attempt to explain this by referring to the many Pali *suttas* that lack a *nidāna*. However, the parallels of those Pali texts in the Chinese *Āgama* collections do have *nidānas*. Rules for supplying this information were codified in a *vinaya* text preserved in Chinese and studied by Gregory

10. Huifeng (2014) also showed that based on Sanskrit texts we expect *na prāptir nābhisamayam*, ‘no attainment no realisation’ and that the other Chinese translations are consistent with this phrasing. Since *Hṛd* follows the *Dàjīng* and *Xīnjīng* rather than *Pañc*, this is more evidence, if any were needed, of the Chinese origins of the *Heart Sutra*.

Schopen (2006). Ng and Ānando accuse Nattier of being ‘obstinate’ in ‘insisting’ on these criteria (2019, 170) but there is no need for her to insist, let alone to *obstinately require* that these criteria apply since they are Chinese Buddhists’ own *well-attested* criteria. That the *Heart Sutra* failed to meet these criteria is a point made by Chinese Buddhists of the day in, for example, the early (Yogācāra inspired) commentaries by Kuijī and Woncheuk (Nattier 1992, 206–207 n.33; and Attwood 2020c).

Having clarified Nattier’s method and conclusion, we can now take up Ng and Ānando’s argument as it proceeds. Their first point is about the attribution of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* to Kumārajīva.

### Kumārajīva and the *Dà míngzhòu jīng*

As we have seen, the core passage of the *Heart Sutra* was copied from Kumārajīva’s *Dà jīng* (T 223). A simple comparison confirms that the core passage in the *Xīn jīng* is not nearly so like the translation by Mokṣala (T 221 VIII 6a6–13) or that by Xuánzàng (T 220 VII 14a11–a26). The core passage in the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* contains two phrases that are absent in the *Xīn jīng* (T 251). Since these lines are present in Kumārajīva’s *Dà jīng*, we assume that *Dà míngzhòu jīng* is closer to the ‘original’ and earlier, but this assumption has long been challenged.

Matsumoto Tokumyo (1932) questioned the attribution of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* to Kumārajīva because there is no record of the text or the attribution before the *Kāiyuán Catalogue* was published in 730 CE.<sup>11</sup> Conze repeats Matsumoto’s argument and also notes that the *Xīn jīng* is not mentioned in a sixth century list of Kumārajīva’s translations (1948, 154 n.2). Watanabe Shōgo extended this argument and concluded that the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* was a ‘fake text’ (Jap. *gikyō* 偽經; Ch. *wěi jīng* 偽經; 1991, 58). This conclusion is echoed by McRae (1988, 89) and reviewed at length and accepted by Nattier (1992, 184–189). By contrast, drawing solely on the flawed popular book by Tanahashi (2014, 75), which itself draws heavily on Fukui, Ng and Ānando summarily dismiss doubts about the attribution of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* found in Tanahashi as ‘a very weak argument’ (167).<sup>12</sup> While a scholarly consensus is no guarantee of accuracy, especially in the case of the *Heart Sutra*, it cannot simply be ignored. Moreover, the argument here is much stronger than Ng and Ānando realize because Tanahashi does not go in depth into all the relevant detail.

Kumārajīva (344–413 CE), arrived in Chang’an and began to translate Buddhist texts in 401. His translations proved to be popular and enduring and, because of this, we have good records of them. Some of his translations, such as his *Lotus Sutra* and *Dà jīng*, are still in use today. His method of translation was to give lectures to several hundred monks at a time. Dozens of highly skilled collaborators took notes, composed drafts, wrote out fair copies, and checked them against the source text, previous translations, and Kumārajīva’s oral explanations. A Kumārajīva translation was a very public affair and the chances of one being lost or ignored for 300

11. *Dà táng kāiyuán shìjiào lù* (大唐開元釋教錄) ‘Catalogue of Śākyamuṇi’s Teachings of the Kaiyuan Era of the Great Tang Era’ (T 2154).

12. Note that their citation is to page 103 of Tanahashi but the argument is in fact on page 75.

years are negligible. And yet, the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* is not mentioned by Kumārajīva himself nor any of his collaborators, disciples, or contemporaries; nor any Chinese Buddhist author for the following three centuries including several expert bibliographers. Nor do the three earliest and most influential *Heart Sutra* commentaries mention the existence of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* (i.e. T 1710, 1711, and 1712). No Chinese commentary of any kind has been preserved for the *Dà míng zhòu jīng*. To the extraordinary absence of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* in Chinese history, we can add the absence of any Sanskrit or Tibetan text of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* even amongst the Dunhuang cache. Indeed, we can say that the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* is unknown outside China and even within China is it unknown outside the bibliographies composed after 730 CE. The first physical evidence for it appears to be a Chinese stele from the eleventh century.<sup>13</sup>

Arguments from absence do tend to be weak, but in this case the total absence of evidence for the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* before 730 CE is striking because there is a strong presumption of presence if the text were authentic. For a Kumārajīva translation to completely escape notice for over three centuries would be extraordinary. The scholarly consensus is soundly based.

The main argument in Ng and Ānando (2019) is predicated on the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* being a translation by Kumārajīva. It is certainly not a translation and very unlikely to have involved Kumārajīva or even to have existed until centuries after his death. This means that Ng and Ānando's argument is already refuted, but it will be instructive to continue.

## Zhòu

Ng and Ānando (187–188) go on to discuss the fact that the title of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* contains the phrase *dà míng zhòu* 大明呪, which leads to a discussion of the Chinese character *zhòu* 呪.<sup>14</sup> They offer an elaborate commentary on this character focusing on its uses as a translation of *dhāraṇī*. This is supposed to prove that Kumārajīva could have used it and thus could be the translator of *Dà míng zhòu jīng*. They do not reference any of the secondary literature on how *dhāraṇī* were used in China (e.g. McBride 2005; Copp 2014).

Based on initial work by Jan Nattier and Yamabe Nobuyoshi (Nattier 1992, 211–213 n.54a), I showed (Attwood 2017b) that the epithets passage of the *Heart Sutra* (whence the Chinese phrase *dà míng zhòu* 大明呪) comes from another chapter in Kumārajīva's *Dà jīng* (T 223 VIII 286b28–c7). As with the core passage, the *Xīnjīng* and *Dà jīng* are identical but *Hṛd* is phrased very differently from *Pañc*:

Hṛd: *tasmā j jñātavyam prajñāpāramitā mahāmantra mahāvīdyā-mantra 'nuttaramantro 'samasama-mantraḥ.* (Conze 1948, 36–37; 1967, 152)

13. This is an informal observation made by Jason Protass, who discovered the stele in a book of inscriptions found at Fangshan (on which see Attwood 2019). To the best of my knowledge no thorough investigation of this issue has been conducted.

14. 咒 is a graphical variant with the same semantic and phonetic value. The two are used interchangeably in canonical texts.



Pañc: *mahāvīdyeyaṃ kauśika yad uta prajñāpāramitā, anuttareyaṃ kauśika vidyā yad uta prajñāpāramitā, asamameyaṃ kauśika vidyā yad uta prajñāpāramitā.*<sup>15</sup>

Kumārajīva consistently translates *vidyā* as *míngzhòu* 明呪 in his *Large Sutra* translation. Moreover in his oeuvre *dàmíngzhòu* 大明呪 translates *mahāvīdyā*, rather than *dhāraṇī*.<sup>16</sup> However, by the time of Xuanzang, *míngzhòu* 明呪 in this context was read as two words, something like ‘bright *dhāraṇī*’. The redactor of *Dàmíngzhòujīng* restored Kumārajīva’s wording of the epithets passage, which tells us that they knew where the passage had come from.

Ng and Ānando’s analysis of *zhòu* 呪 overlooks the Sanskrit words that Kumārajīva was translating with the terms *míngzhòu* 明呪 and *dàmíngzhòu* 大明呪, i.e. *vidyā* and *mahāvīdyā* respectively. Without this important contextualizing information it is all too easy to misread and misinterpret the Chinese text. In fact, the epithet passage in the *Large Sutra* does not mention either *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* but refers to *Prajñāpāramitā* as ‘a great *vidyā*, an unexcelled *vidyā*, and an unequalled *vidyā*.’ Later, *vidyā* is used to mean a kind of mantra-like spell, but here it probably refers to the knowledge gained from applying the yoga of nonapprehension and dwelling in the absence of sensory experience.

### Chronology

We know that the *Heart Sutra* had to be composed (in Chinese) after 404 CE when Kumārajīva completed his *Dājīng* (T 223) along with his translation of the commentary on it, the *Dàzhìdù lùn* (大智度論) (T 1509). The text of the *Xīnjīng* is largely Kumārajīva’s but some words have been changed to variants introduced by Xuánzàng after his return from India, hence the *Xīnjīng* must have been composed after 645 CE. A traditional story of the text being translated in 649 CE is first found in 730 CE along with the first mention of the *Dàmíngzhòujīng* in the *Kāiyuán Catalogue* and must be considered fanciful if only because we know that *the Heart Sutra is not a translation*.

The first reliable date we have for the *Xīnjīng* is from the Fangshan Stele, dated 661 CE (Attwood 2019) and we cannot place the *Dàmíngzhòujīng* earlier than 730 CE. How then, do we make sense of this? We need to return to the Chinese bibliographers and their criteria for judging the authenticity of a text. We have already mentioned four features which they expected a sutra to have. Tanya Storch (2014, 62–64) describes three other criteria that were used by bibliographers: 1) a genuine sutra must have some *bona fide* connection with India; 2) it should have a named translator of good repute; 3) it should not contain language inconsistent with Buddhism. As a digest text made in China, the *Xīnjīng* does not have the expected features of a sutra (‘thus have I heard’ and so on) but it is considered to be a sutra for two reasons: firstly, the existence of a Sanskrit text is taken to prove

15. My transcription of the Gilgit manuscript facsimile in Karashima et al. (2016: 141v line 8–10)

16. It is very likely that *dà shén zhòu* 大神呪 in *Xīnjīng* also simply means *mahāvīdyā* but because the compiler of the text was reading *zhòu* 呪/呪 as a standalone word they misunderstood it (Attwood 2017b).

the connection with India; and secondly, the attribution of the Chinese text as a translation by Xuánzàng.

Nattier speculated that Xuánzàng *might* have been involved in the creation of the Sanskrit text, being careful to avoid committing herself, i.e. ‘The role of [Xuánzàng] himself in the back-translation of the *Heart Sutra* into Sanskrit *cannot, of course, be definitively proven...* [Xuánzàng] must remain the *most likely* candidate for the transmission of this Chinese creation to India’ (1992, 181. Emphasis added). Curiously, Ng and Ānando attribute a much stronger claim to Nattier (2019, 170) and then dispose of the straw man argument easily.

Jeffrey Kotyk (2019) has brought to light evidence for attributing the composition of the *Xīnjīng* to Xuánzàng. The *Biography* by Huìlì 慧立 and Yàncóng 彦棕 (T 2053)<sup>17</sup> records Xuánzàng presenting ‘a gold-lettered Prajñā Heart Text’ (*jīn zì bōrěxīnjīng* 金字般若心經. T 2053 L 272b12) to the Emperor Gāozōng 高宗 (649–683) in 656 CE to mark the birth of a son to him and his consort Wǔ Zhào 武曌 (624–705 CE). The memorial in which this is noted is also preserved in Japan, which Kotyk considers makes it more authentic than most of the *Biography*, a typical Buddhist hagiography. One could imagine Gāozōng or Wǔ Zhào mistakenly thinking that the newly composed digest text was an authentic sutra. Given Wǔ Zhào’s reputation and her patronage of Buddhism, we can imagine Buddhist monks being motivated to provide the necessary evidence to support such an assertion. This might explain how an unidiomatic Sanskrit translation of a Chinese digest text came to be produced in China and passed off as an Indian ‘original’, and how the ‘translation’ of this fictitious sutra was attributed to Xuánzàng. Other details of this myth continued to be added, with the *Kāiyuán Catalogue* stating a specific date of translation, 649 CE, linking Xuánzàng closely with the famously anti-religious Emperor Tàizōng 太宗 (626–649 CE), and providing evidence of an ‘earlier translation’ in the form of the *Dàmíngzhòujīng*.

Unfortunately, the traditional chronology of the *Heart Sutra* is a fiction and any argument that relies on it is unsound. I wish to make one more observation about approaching research on the *Heart Sutra* before concluding.

## Translations

Writing in English when it is not your first language is difficult and I have refrained from commenting on the ubiquitous grammatical and idiomatic errors in the article by Ng and Ānando since in most cases one can see quite well what they intended to convey. However, one of their translations of a line from *Dàmíngzhòujīng* is particularly problematic and illustrates the importance of taking the Sanskrit texts into account (2019, 173). The line I wish to examine is:

色空故無惱壞相，受空故無受相，想空故無知相，行空故無作相，識空故無覺相。(T 250 VIII 847c11–13 as formatted in CBETA)<sup>18</sup>

17. i.e. *Dà Táng dà Cí'ēnsī sānzàng fǎshī chuán xù* 《大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳序》 *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Cī'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty* (T 2053). Translated into English by Li Rongxi (1995).

18. Note that Ng and Ānando’s critical apparatus suggest that they are citing directly from the

Here is the corresponding Sanskrit passage from the Gilgit *Large Sutra* manuscript, in my edited transcription:

*tathā hi śāradvatīputra<sup>19</sup> yā rūpaśūnyatā na sā rūpayati | yā vedanāśūnyatā na sā vedayati | yā saṃjñāśūnyatā na sā saṃjñāti | yā saṃskāraśūnyatā na sābhisamskaroti | yā vijñānaśūnyatā na sā vijñāti.* | (Karashima et al. 2016, 21r-v)<sup>20</sup>

The Sanskrit text reveals what is intended here and, importantly, highlights a problem with the first phrase that is lost on anyone who does not read Sanskrit. The passage says that in the absence of the *pañcā skandhāḥ* (*rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāra*, and *vijñāna*) we cannot carry out the actions associated with them (*rūpayati*, *vedayati*, *saṃjñāti*, *abhisamskaroti*, and *vijñāti*). In other words, translating the Sanskrit:

Therefore Śāriputra, that absence of form does not form; that absence of feeling does not feel; that absence of perception does not perceive; that absence of willing does not will; and that absence of cognition does not cognize.

In English, we can largely capture the same play on words using nouns and verbs from the same verbal root, but Kumārajīva is only able to pun using *shòu* 受 for both *vedanā* and *vedayati*. I want to draw attention to the verb *rūpayati*. Most commentators and translators assume it is from the root  $\sqrt{rup}$  ‘to break, to suffer pain’. However, the expected third person singular indicative of the class IV verb  $\sqrt{rup}$  is *rupyati* and the causative is *ropayati* (Whitney 1885, 143).<sup>21</sup> Morphology, syntax, and context tell us that we must read *rūpayati* as a *denominative* verb from the noun *rūpa* ‘form’. Thus *rūpayati* means ‘to form, to appear’ which we take to be the action of the *rūpaskandha*.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that this refers to *rūpaskandha* and its action in the perceptual process rather than *rūpa* as the object of the eye-sense.

Turning to the same passage in the *Dà míng zhòu jīng*, Ng and Ānando translate *sè kōng gù wú nǎohuài xiāng* 色空故無惱壞相 as ‘Form is empty and therefore no conception of ill will towards its destruction [sic.]’ (173). There are several problems

*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, but the punctuation in their quotes tells us that they are citing from the CBETA version. In most cases the text is identical, but the punctuation of the CBETA edition is notoriously unreliable. If they are citing CBETA then they should say so.

19. The name *Śāradvatīputra* is a frequent substitution for *Śāriputra* in Sanskrit Mahāyāna texts.
20. The late Nepalese mss. are very similar: *tathā hi yā rūpaśūnyatā na sā rūpayati, yā vedanāśūnyatā na sā vedayati, yā saṃjñāśūnyatā na sā saṃjñāti, yā saṃskāraśūnyatā na sābhisamskaroti, yā vijñānaśūnyatā na sā vijñāti*, (Kimura 1986–2009, 1–1, 64)
21. Class IV verbs make a stem by affixing *-ya-*, i.e. *rupya-*; while the causative is formed by affixing *-aya-* to the *guṇa* grade root  $\sqrt{rup}$  (the root vowel *u* has *guṇa* grade *o*; and *vṛddhi* grade *au*) giving *ropaya-*. The noun *rūpa* is not thought to be related to  $\sqrt{rup}$  at all. The etymology of *rūpa* has been linked to *varpa* ‘assumed form, phantom’ and to  $\sqrt{vl}$  (Mayrhofer 1976, 70–71), though the latter means much the same as  $\sqrt{rup}$  and is *prima facie* unlikely. In fact, this is an ancient mistake. For example in Pāli we see: ‘And why, monks, is *rūpa* so called? Monks, it harms (*ruppati*), therefore it is called *rūpa*’. (*Kiñca, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ vadetha? Ruppattī kho, bhikkhave, tasmā rūpanti vuccati.* SN III.86). Cf. the *Pali Text Society Dictionary*: 573 s.v. *ruppatti* (= Sanskrit *rupyati*) ‘the root has nothing to do with *rūpa*’; and 575 s.v. *rūpeti*, ‘causal denominative from *rūpa*’.
22. Stefano Zacchetti came to the same conclusion via slightly different reasoning (2005, 342 n.99). He took the meaning of *rūpayati* to be ‘it does not act as *rūpa*’. I think we can be more specific and say that context restricts the meaning to “it does not act as *rūpa-skandha*”.

here: 1) In Middle Chinese *gù* 故 qualifies the preceding statement, i.e. ‘since form is emptiness,’ not ‘form is emptiness, therefore...’; 2) Ng and Ānando read *nǎohuài* 惱壞 as two words when in fact it is a binomial verb meaning ‘damage’<sup>23</sup> and this is consistent with misreading *rupyati* for *rūpayati*; 3) ‘conception’ is a possible reading of *xiāng* 相, but it makes no sense in this context. The other reading as ‘mark’ or ‘characteristic’ is also problematic, but we need to see it in relation to the next phrases, e.g. *shòu kōng gù wú shòu xiāng* 受空故無受相. It appears that *shòu xiāng* 受相 is an attempt to convey the contribution of the *skandha* ‘feeling’ (*xiāng* 受) to sense experience and, given the text of *Pañc*, the same logic must apply to the other phrases. Compare the phrase, *shòu xiāngyìng* 受相應, which means ‘associated with sensation’ (Skt. *saṃprāyogavedanīyatā*).<sup>24</sup> Nattier’s English translation of the Chinese is better: ‘Because form is empty, it is without the mark of disfiguring’ (1992, 185).

We can see that Kumārajīva has either misread *rūpayati* as *rupyati* or his source had mixed them up. Because they did not consult the Sanskrit texts or consider the morphology of *rūpayati*, Ng and Ānando proceed as if *nǎohuài* 惱壞 is unproblematic. They continue to the crux of their argument, i.e. how Xuánzàng translates the same passage (2019, 174):

諸色空，彼非變礙相；諸受空，彼非領納相；諸想空，彼非取像相；諸行空，彼非造作相；諸識空，彼非了別相。(T 220 VII 14a9–11)

Taking the first expression as our exemplar again, Ng and Ānando translate *zhū sè kōng, bǐ fēi biàn ài xiāng* 諸色空，彼非變礙相 as ‘the emptiness of all forms, that is not a changing and hindering conception’. For the same reasons, this translation also misses the mark. They want to argue that there is a substantial difference between this and the Kumārajīva translation. The two passages, without the extraneous punctuation added by the CEBTA editors, are:

Kj: *sè kōng gù wú nǎo huài xiāng* 色空故無惱壞相

Since forms are empty, they lack the characteristic of harming.

Xz: *zhū sè kōng, bǐ fēi biàn ài xiāng* 諸色空彼非變礙相

All forms are empty, which lack the characteristic of change and obstruction.

Xuánzàng specifies ‘all forms’ (*zhū sè* 諸色) but this does not change the sentence. Both state that ‘forms are empty’ (*sè kōng* 色空). Kumārajīva uses ‘forms are empty’ *sè kōng* 色空, as a qualifier (indicated by *gù* 故) whereas Xuánzàng connects the two clauses with a pronoun, *bǐ* 彼, reflecting the relative-correlative (*yā/sā*) syntax of the Sanskrit. Both translators choose a negating particle to represent Sanskrit *na*. Kumārajīva uses the more general *wú* 無, whereas Xuánzàng selects *fēi* 非 suggesting that he was cognizant of translating a verbal phrase (*na sā rūpayati*). Finally, where Kumārajīva has the binomial verb *nǎohuài* 惱壞 ‘damage, harm’, Xuánzàng selects

23. *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. 惱壞. <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=惱壞> (Accessed 4th December 2020).

24. *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, s.v. 受相應. <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=受相應> (accessed 4th December 2020).

what appears to be a two-word phrase, i.e. *biàn* 變 ‘change’ and *ài* 礙 ‘obstruction’ although this too could be a binomial. Thus, it appears that Xuánzàng has also incorrectly translated *rupyati*, rather than *rūpayati*.

The difference that Ng and Ānando insist on is not at all obvious. I do not see, for example, how Kumārajīva is focussed on ‘the relationship between emptiness of every aggregate with its conception’ and Xuánzàng ‘keeps focussing on the subject [sic.]’ (Ng and Ānando 2019, 174). Kumārajīva and Xuánzàng are both (mis) translating the same Sanskrit source text, i.e. *yā rūpaśūnyatā na sā rūpayati* ‘the absence of form does not form’. Xuánzàng has been (typically) more pedantic in conveying the sense of the Sanskrit but is otherwise saying the same thing. And this is what we would expect. Of course, the Gilgit manuscript is closer in time to Xuánzàng, and we have no witness to the Sanskrit text Kumārajīva was working on. However, we do have two other early witnesses in Chinese: Mokṣala’s underutilized *Large Sutra* translation of 291 CE (T 221) and Dharmarakṣa’s partial translation of 286 CE (T 222) studied in detail by Zacchetti (2005). Let us now consult these witnesses. Mokṣala’s translation of this passage reads:

用色空故為非色，用痛想行識空故為非識。色空故無所見，痛空故無所覺，想空故無所念，行空故無所行，識空故不見識。(T 221 VIII 6a3–6)

Because form is absent, it does not form; because feeling, perception, volition, and cognition are absent, they do not [perceive, will, or] cognize. Since form is absent there is nothing to see; since feeling is absent there is nothing to feel; since perception is absent there is nothing to perceive; since volition is absent there is no will; since cognition is absent it does not cognize.

Mokṣala is evidently translating much the same passage in Sanskrit but unlike the others, he is attuned to the punning nature of the Sanskrit and has attempted to preserve it by using the *same character* for both noun and verb. Compare Dharmarakṣa’s text with Zacchetti’s translation:

設使色空則不有見，設痛痒空則無所患，設思想空則無所念，設使行空則無：所造，設識空者無所分別。(T 222 VIII 153c6–8)

If form is emptiness, then it has no manifestation; if feeling is emptiness, then there is nothing it suffers from; if ideation is emptiness, then there is nothing it conceives; if impulses are emptiness, then there is nothing they produce, if consciousness is emptiness then there is nothing it discerns (Zacchetti 2005, 342–343).

Note that both Mokṣala and Dharmarakṣa incorrectly link *rūpa-skandha* to seeing (*jiàn* 見) conflating *rūpa* as *skandha* and as sense object. The extant Sanskrit texts contain only the first part of this passage and, missing out ‘Since form is absent there is nothing to see...’, they go straight on to say *rūpa* and *śūnyatā* are not different.<sup>25</sup>

25. ‘And why is that? Because, Śāriputra, form is not one thing and absence another; absence is not one thing and form another. Form just is absence, absence just is form’. *Tat kasya hetoḥ na hi śāradvatīputrānyad rūpaṃ anyā śūnyatā nānyā śūnyatānyad rūpaṃ rūpaṃ eva śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ* (Karashima et al. 2016, folio 21, recto). On interpreting this passage see Attwood 2017b.

There is no need to invoke changes in the source text to account for the differences in the translations. This complex relationship between Sanskrit source and Chinese translation is not new or novel. It is the *norm* when working with such texts.<sup>26</sup> The problem here is not simply a poor translation; rather there is a general failure to appreciate the nature of Chinese Buddhist translations and the importance of Indic source texts.

## Conclusions

The conjecture by Ng and Ānando is that the *Xīnjīng* was a version of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* deliberately altered to be more consistent with Yogācāra. This conjecture rests on two propositions. The first is that the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* is a translation of the *Heart Sutra* by the fifth-century translator Kumārajīva. The attribution and associated chronology of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* has come under sustained criticism beginning with Matsumoto (1932) and culminating with Watanabe (1991) whose work established the scholarly consensus against the attribution. Contrary to popular opinion, we can now see that the *Heart Sutra* is a Chinese digest text composed in the seventh century and translated into unidiomatic Sanskrit late in that century in China. The attribution to Xuánzàng, the creation of the Sanskrit translation, and the composition of the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* are all part of successful post hoc efforts to authenticate the *Heart Sutra* as a genuine Buddhist sutra. The second proposition is that their reading of the passage in question reflects a difference in the Sanskrit *Large Sutra* source texts. A comparative reading of the various Chinese *Large Sutra* translations alongside the extant Sanskrit sources showed that there was no need to invoke changes in the source texts. It was apparent that Mokṣala, Dharmarakṣa, Kumārajīva, and Xuánzàng were all translating substantially the same passage, and this is reflected in the extant Sanskrit manuscripts.

The Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and the secondary literature on the *Heart Sutra* provide a straightforward refutation of this conjecture and a more plausible alternative explanation: lines excised from the quoted passage during the creation of the *Xīnjīng* — an indigenous digest text — were restored directly from the source — Kumārajīva's *Large Sutra* translation (T 223) — when the *Dà míngzhòu jīng* was created at a later date as part of attempts to authenticate the *digest text* we know as the *Heart Sutra*.

In Buddhist Studies generally, we are by no means slaves to research methodology or interpretative theories. We often combine approaches from history, philology, philosophy, anthropology, and other disciplines. But there is usually some method in our madness. We do use primary texts (or editions of them), we do read the literature and consider existing views, and we do pay attention to history and chronology (where possible). We do apply critical thinking. Unfortunately, in the sub-speciality of *Heart Sutra* research, our *laissez-faire* approach to research methods all too often comes unstuck. Ng and Ānando (2019) may be an egregious

26. For a discussion of this issue see, for example, Bucknell 2010. It is also discussed by Zacchetti in the preamble of his study of Dharmarakṣa's *Large Sutra* translation (2005, 2-3).

example, but it is by no means an oddity.<sup>27</sup> From Conze onwards this field has been beset by poor scholarship, often by good scholars. Too often, basic research has been neglected in favour of apologetics, mystical hermeneutics, and fringe interpretations. And because of this, misunderstandings and simple mistakes are not only passed on but multiplied. Of course, there are stand-out contributions. Jonathan Silk's critical edition of the Tibetan canonical texts is a model application of the methods of philology. Watanabe's exposure of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng* as a fake is an important result for understanding the history of the *Heart Sutra*. Huifeng's application of Nattier's comparative method produced vital insights for *Heart Sutra* hermeneutics. Uniquely, Jan Nattier completely steps outside the emic view, defines a simple but effective method, applies it to the appropriate source texts, and produces a genuinely novel insight of the greatest importance. Most contributions crowd the other end of the spectrum and this makes critically evaluating the secondary literature all the more important.

Scholarship is the product of a culture of inquiry and critical thinking. Buddhist Studies scholars often work alone, but in publishing we participate in a collective process. Human beings all fall prone to bias and to vagueness at times, even those with doctorates. This is a given. This is the very reason that we submit our work to the scrutiny of friendly colleagues, editorial oversight, anonymous peer review, and to the public scrutiny of peers.<sup>28</sup> Ng and Ānando seem to have been let down by colleagues, editors, and reviewers alike. Nonetheless, as authors, we take ultimate responsibility for our work. When these issues are not dealt with prior to publication then they must be dealt with in public. Current academic politics often means that such criticisms are suppressed, but if these issues are not dealt with at all then all of our work is diminished, and our field falls into disrepute.

In the last year, we have lost two of our finest modern *Prajñāpāramitā* scholars — Seishi Karashima and Stefano Zacchetti. We can all learn a lot from their legacy of published research. As far as the *Heart Sutra* goes, we have to get the basics right and be systematic. We need to revisit all the existing work and re-examine it in the light of recent discoveries, particularly those of Nattier. There are many unanswered questions. Why was a digest text passed off as genuine at a time when thousands of genuine texts were already available? Who composed the Sanskrit text? Did the *Heart Sutra* ever make it to India? When was the extended version created and by whom? Where do the commonly cited translation dates for the extended version come from? Do the two different recensions of the extended version mean it was extended twice? When is the earliest physical evidence of the *Dà míng zhòu jīng*? When were the commentaries by Kuījī and Woncheuk composed? What can we tell from the many *Heart Sutra* manuscripts in the Dunhuang collec-

27. Unfortunately, the same kinds of faults are also apparent in Ng's dissertation (2018) on the *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, in which he makes a similar claim for sectarian influence on the development of the *sūtra*.

28. And here I wish to thank my friends (particularly Jeffrey Kotyk and Eivind Kahrs), the journal editor and sub-editors, and the anonymous reviewers for cordially pointing out any number of errors in early drafts. The final copy is much better for their feedback, although the responsibility for any remaining errors and infelicities is mine.

tions? And so on. Without the application of appropriate methods to the appropriate materials, we cannot have confidence in any answers that are forthcoming.

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