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PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ MANTRA

(THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM MANTRA)

1. Introduction

The Buddha appeared in the world for the happiness and benefits of the gods and men. The Buddha comprehended the true nature of reality. He found the way to liberation for himself and saving all sentient beings. As we know that, the Buddha was fully enlightened and compassionate one. According to the Mahāyāna idea, Buddhists have to recognize the right way in accordance to gnosis and empathy of the Enlightened One. In this point, the term “wisdom” is the important key to opening the door of the awakening, and “compassion” is the miracle power in saving of the living beings. On this topic, the perfection of the wisdom will describe through the great mantra in the Heart *Sūtra*. Then, we can study the meaning, origination, and the benefits of the mantra in the Great vehicle.

2. The definition of the term

2.1. Mantra

Mantra is the short combinations of syllables that have no direct or easy translatable meaning.¹ The meaning of the mantra is not only difficult to translating from words, but also difficult to understanding the whole principal doctrines. The method of the chanted sound is very important factor, and the most of practitioners who just chant with the melodious sound through the calm, tranquil, pure, compassionate mind. Although the meaning of mantra is very high sense, we do not know about that. On the other hand, mantra is understood the powerful language, the literal words or sounds of the Buddha; mantra is interchanged with the word heart “*hṛdaya*”, it means something like quintessence of transformation the world.

The mind is described in the time of the concentrated sitting. If you plan the seeds of unwholesome or wholesome things in the daily lives, then you will see the video with your actions, speeches and thoughts. When you dwell in the deep concentration, you look into things and see them as clearly as you see those objects that you put in the palm of your hand. In the same way, Avalokiteśvara inspected deeply the five aggregates (*skandhas*) that were visual form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formation (*saṃskāra*)

¹ Robert E. Buswell, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004, p. 512.

and consciousness (*vijñāna*). The five collections constitute and completely explain the mental and physical existence of the living beings. Bodhisattva saw the internal nature of all beings and overcame all pain. He became liberated One. The state of deep concentration, of joy, of tranquility, of mindfulness, of equanimity, of liberation, that he uttered something important. That is why his utterance is a mantra.²

2.2. *Prajñāpāramitā*

The term '*pāramitā*' can be found in the following Sanskrit literature, "*Mahavastu, Lalitavistara, Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, Sūtralaṅkara, Dasabhumikā Sūtra, Bodhisattvabhūmi and Samādhirāj Sūtra*".³ *Pāramitā* means perfection in general English. 1. *Pāramitā* = *pāram* (other shore) + *itā* (gone) 2. *Pāramitā* = *parama* (highest) > *pārama* > *pāramī* + *tā*. Hara Dayal explains, *pāramitā* means 'transcendental virtue', 'perfect virtue', 'highest perfection', 'complete attainment', etc.⁴ Thus, *pāramitā* is the way of fulfillment of all the virtues which is very important for realizing about *nirvāṇa*.

The word *prajñā* means, "direct insight into the truth thought by the Buddha as a faculty required to attain enlightenment".⁵ The term *prajñā* is a combination of '*pra*' and '*jñā*'. First part '*pra*' is a prefix, here which refers sharpness, specialty and the basic '*jñā*' which refers knowledge, consciousness. So, *prajñā* means special knowledge, highest knowledge, but typically 'wisdom' is common rendering in English. The word wisdom (*prajñā*) has also various synonyms like, "gnosis, 'insight', 'intuition', 'spiritual enlightenment', etc."⁶ Therefore, we can say the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) means the perfect way to attain enlightenment. In the same way, we also can say that the *prajñāpāramitā mantra* means the mantra of the perfection of wisdom.

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*. California: Parallax Press Berkeley, 1988, p. 49.

³ Yar War Meinda, "Concept of Paramis (=Paramita) in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism", *Nalanda*, Vol. XLVIII-XLIX, ISSN- 2320-7264, (May 2014), p.329.

⁴ Har Dayal, "The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature".

https://ahandfulofleaves.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/the-bodhisattva-doctrine-in-buddhist-sanskrit-literature_dayal.pdf, E- book p.165. Accessed: 15 Oct, 2016.

⁵ Concise Oxford English Dictionary, eleventh edition, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004).

⁶ Har Dayal, E- book p. 236. Accessed: 15 Oct, 2016.

3. The origination of the wisdom mantra

3.1. The background of the Heart Sūtra

Prince Siddhārtha, was born at Lumbini garden in Indian country, appeared about 5th or 6th century BC in this world. His name is combined the two words, “Siddha” means achievement or accomplishment, and “artha” means goal or purpose. So in a word, we can say that “Siddhārtha” is the One who has accomplished a goal. When, he renounced luxurious life in the palace, and become the mendicant. After attaining of the great enlightenment, he started to preach his sermons to gods and men. According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, Śākyamuni Buddha gave the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma. The first wheel was turned in the Deer Park at Sārnāth, he proclaimed the Four Noble Truths (*āryasatyas*) with the brief doctrine in Buddhism, such as, suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to cessation of suffering. The third turning of the wheel was at Śrāvastī, his teaching concerned the characteristics of the Buddha nature. Especially, the Buddha turned the second wheel of Dharma on Vulture’s Peak where was the name of mountain near Rajgir in the present day state of Bihar. His discourse concerned the sūtra of the Wisdom Gone Beyond (*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*), which include the Heart Sūtra. Sūtras and treatises deal with two types of subject matter – emptiness and the various levels of realization.⁷ At the end of Heart Sūtra, the Bodhisattva who relies on the Perfection of Wisdom is described as basis for the enlightenment of all Buddhas, and the well-known mantra (*Gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, Bodhi svāha!*) is recommended as a means to eliminating all suffering.⁸ Thus, the perfection of wisdom is the most prominent tenet of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This issue was recapitulated through the mantra in the Heart Sūtra, the insight of Bodhisattva and Buddha.

According to the modern scholars, they accepted that the Perfection of Wisdom discourses date to the beginning of the Common Era, and that they were among the first Buddhist texts translated into Chinese in the second century AD.⁹ On this point, we can say that, the heart of understanding is among the oldest available to the Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, the mantra has existed in the Heart Sūtra, and maintained the original values of the transcendental insight of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

⁷ Geshe Tsultim Gyeltsen, *Mirror of Wisdom: Teachings on Emptiness*, Thubten Dhargye Ling, California, 2000, p. 100.

⁸ Jan Nattier, “The journal of the international association of Buddhist studies”, *The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?* Carleton College Northfield, vol. 15, no. 2, 1992, p. 155.

⁹ Peter Della Santina, *The Tree of Enlightenment*. Chiangmai, 2012, p. 142.

3.2. The perfection of wisdom in the Mahāyāna Buddhism

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Heart of Wisdom Sūtra (*Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), the Lotus Sūtra (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*) and a large number of other scriptures always mentioned the six perfections (*pāramitās*). This is the cardinal method of bodhisattvas to cultivate for themselves and saving sentient beings to enlightenment. According to Mahāyāna idea, we all have the ability and the potential to be great Bodhisattvas. The final way of liberation ought to have the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramita*), the index of the six perfections indicate as giving (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), concentration (*dhyāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*). According to the Theravāda Buddhism, there is presented by the list of ten. Anyhow, the term “*pāramitā*” refers the enlightened quality of transcendental wisdom, insight, and the perfection of understanding. The essence of this perfection (*pāramitā*) is the supreme wisdom (*prajñā*), the highest understanding that living beings attain beyond the limited confines of intellectual and conceptual states of mind. The perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) is the supreme wisdom that knows emptiness and the interconnectedness of all things.¹⁰ Consequently, the perfection of wisdom is a result of contemplation, meditation, right understanding the nature of reality, and manifestation of the aspiration to full Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

4. The meaning of the Great Mantra

The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the main doctrine of the Heart Sūtra. “*Therefore, one should know that Perfect Understanding is a great mantra, is the highest mantra, is the unequalled mantra, the destroyer of all suffering, the incorruptible truth. This is the mantra: Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāha.*”¹¹ These sentences were described before the mantra’s introduction in the Heart Sūtra. With the perfected, excellent, unsurpassed, absolute, and ultimate meaning were tried to representing of the great wisdom or perfect understanding, and described in the general reality. Hence, let we explain and divide the phrases of the great mantra in several parts, whereby, the wisdom mantra is easy to absorb all the pure seeds which plan on the heart-mind of wise one.

¹⁰ “The Six Paramitas”, Web. 16 Oct. 2016,

< <http://www.prisonmindfulness.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SixParamitas.pdf>>.

¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*. California: Parallax Press Berkeley, 1988, p. 49.

4.1. *Gate gate*

The term “*gate*” means “go” or “gone”, we can see the diversity of illustration for the term “*gate*”, if the word was translated by the meaning “go” that is an exhortation to do something. there are the five paths to liberation and enlightenment, the path of accumulation (*sambhāramārga*), the path of preparation (*prayogamārga*), the path of seeing (*darśanamārga*), the path of meditation (*bhāvanāmārga*), the path of no more learning (*aśaikṣamārga*).¹² According to Dalai Lama master, that means, the first “*gate*” means “go” as an exhortation to enter the path of accumulating merit, and the second as an exhortation to the path of preparing the mind to deeply perceive emptiness.¹³ According to Nhat Hanh master, he explains “*gate*” means gone, gone from suffering to the liberation of suffering, gone from forgetfulness to mindfulness, gone from duality into non-duality.¹⁴ Nonetheless, practitioners who have the mind of awakening (*bodhicitta*) or who have not entered the Great Vehicle yet, but they are cultivating loving-kindness and understanding. That means those peoples have already gone to the path of accumulation of the Mahāyāna path, and of course they have heard and comprehended the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The emptiness is just another name for interdependent origination or dependent co-arisen; the interdependent existence of the factors is empty, it does not have any essence, substance, own being, self-existence, inherent existence, substantial existence, intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Besides, the “emptiness” is also called the Middle Way; it is beyond existence and non-existence. On this points, we can say that, the term “*gate, gate*” was represented by the path of accumulating and preparing to liberation; it refers “go, gone or entered” to the first and second path of Enlightenment in the Great Vehicle.

4.2. *Pāragate pārasaṃgate*

If the mantra “*gate gate*” had not considered to the path of accumulation (*sambhāra mārga*) and preparation (*prayoga mārga*), the mantra “*pāragate pārasaṃgate*” would not have been stated. “Go beyond” was translated by the term “*pāragate*”, and referred to the path of seeing (*darśana mārga*) reality and direct and unmediated realization of emptiness. In the same way, “Go totally beyond” was translated by the term “*pārasaṃgate*”, and dedicated

¹² These five paths incorporate the entire spiritual journey, as described in the Mahāyāna, from its very beginnings with the taking of the bodhisattva vow and the generation of Relative Bodhicitta (awakening or enlightenment heart-mind), up until its culmination at the stage of complete enlightenment.

¹³ Tenzin Gyatso, Trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa, *Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama’s Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, Wisdom Publications, 2002, p. 131.

¹⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*. California: Parallax Press Berkeley, 1988, p. 51.

the path of meditation (*bhāvanā mārga*).¹⁵ When, we hear the mantra “*pāragate pārasaṃgate*” which means “go beyond” and “go thoroughly beyond”, then we are no clear in these senses, and should ask “go beyond what?” To go beyond one’s expectations; beyond one’s habitual tendencies of elaboration; beyond a linear perspective; beyond agendas and ambitions, even spiritual, nirvanic ambitions.¹⁶ According to Thich Nhat Hanh Master, he is very open to exegesis the mantra is said in a very strong way, “*pāragate*” means gone all the way to other shore; and “*pārasaṃgate*” in which “*saṃ*” means everyone, the Buddhist Orders, the entire community of beings, that means everyone gone over to the other shore. As we know, Śākyamuni or Gautama Buddha who appeared in this world in order to bring the welfare and happiness for gods and men. The Buddha always preached the two important things, that is the suffering (*duḥkha*) and the path to cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering. He was also called the best talented guide and excellent physician in order to help all sentient beings who are really want to free from the cycle of birth and death, the cycle of existence (*samsāra*). Thus, if practitioners just see the way to liberation, it is not enough, they have to cultivate through the true doctrine until the achievement of the full enlightenment. It is very similar with the third and the fourth path of the seeing and meditation of the Great Vehicle. Whereby, practitioners should be gone all the way to over shore, from the shore belong to the sea of suffering to shore of happiness that is the highest blissing (*nirvāṇa*). This is the manifestation of the Bodhisattvas’ method to practice in their style, even Buddhists also can do in this life, and this is also the important power toward the next mantra.

4.3. Bodhi svāha

The mantra continue to show the vision of reality, the term “Bodhi” means the awakening, enlightenment or the light inside. The Bodhisattva uttered this mantra in observing the five aggregates (*skandhas*), looking at the real of empty doctrine, bringing back the heart-mind into that state of attention, of concentration. In that movement, all the darkness destroyed, the light of wisdom, of insight, of gnosis arose. With the understanding of the true nature of reality, of the world, human beings, then, Avalokiteśvara had received the light of the understanding. What the mantra had uttered in the deeply meditation? Actually, practitioners also can receive the great mantra “*bodhi*”, if you say the mantra with the sound, heart, mind, tranquility, mindfulness, equanimity, concentration, and wisdom. With our merit and compassion, we can transform the strength and welfare to all living

¹⁵ Gyatso, p. 131.

¹⁶ Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche, “An Introduction to the Heart Sutra”, Web. 16 Oct. 2016.

< <http://www.khandrorinpoche.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/JKR-Introduction-to-the-Heart-Sutra.pdf>>

beings; as long as the loving-kindness and understanding, the delight of liberation, we are a cry or excitement as manifestation in the mantra “*svāha!*”. This joy was described Dharmapada, with the verse number 103 of chapter “The Thousands”, it is quoted that, “Thought one may conquer a thousand times a thousand men in battle, yet he indeed is the noblest victor who conquers himself.”¹⁷ The highest blissing was manifested the struggling to all defilements and attaining of awakening in cultivation. It is very similar with the happiness of victory and power of insight as welcome, blessings “*svāha*” in the last mantra in the perfection of wisdom. A practitioner who sees the right viewpoints or the true natures of reality, then one has become the Noble One (*ārya*).

5. The benefits of wisdom mantra

Perfect wisdom has no limit; it is infinite, indestructible, measureless, and incomprehensible. For this reason, in sūtra venerable Subhūti spoke thus to the Buddha, “Deep, O Lord, is perfect wisdom. Certainly as a great enterprise has this perfection of wisdom been set up, as an unthinkable, incomparable, immeasurable, incalculable enterprise, as an enterprise which equals the unequalled”.¹⁸ Venerable Subhūti’s this comment is also familiar as five attributes of perfect wisdom. It is also protector of his followers. “Who is devoted to this perfection of wisdom Māra and his hosts, men and ghosts will be unable to harm them. Nor will they die an untimely death; he will certainly never be stiff with fright.”¹⁹ Śakra, Brahman and other Gods promised to protect the follower of perfect wisdom, except as bad results of past defilement.

¹⁷ Gautama Buddha, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, Trans. Acharya Buddhārakkhita. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985, p. 39.

¹⁸ Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1970, p. 101.

¹⁹ Conze, p. 22.

6. Conclusion

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva comprehended the true nature of reality during the deep meditation, and uttered the mantra of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). But, how about us, we learn the meaning of the mantra; after that, practitioners cultivate in the right views of the heart of understanding. From this point, Buddhists can get principal doctrines in general of the Mahāyāna Buddhism, and also can compare the Theravāda tenets. Both of them explain the term “*prajñāpāramitā*” in different manners but the meaning of insight is same. Finally, the Buddha’s teaching should be applied in the practitioners’ learning and practicing; in this way, we have already followed the path of the perfected enlightenment, and things is possible to attain like the Bodhisattva, the Buddha, as the mantra “*gate, gate, pāragate, pārasaṃgate, Bodhi, svāha!*” in the meaning gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completed beyond, awakening, blessings! Last but not least, practitioners gone from the shore of suffering (*samsāra*) to the shore of the perfect happiness (*nirvāṇa*), what we have to be done, have should be done, bring the benefits and welfares for ourselves and others.

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<http://www.khandrorinpoche.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/JKR-Introduction-to-the-Heart-Sutra.pdf>>
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