The New
Heart of Wisdom
Also by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso

Meaningful to Behold
Clear Light of Bliss
Universal Compassion
Joyful Path of Good Fortune
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Heart Jewel
Great Treasury of Merit
Introduction to Buddhism
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The New Guide to Dakini Land

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The New
Heart of Wisdom

PROFOUND TEACHINGS FROM 
BUDDHA’S HEART

GESHE KELSANG GYATSO
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Buddha Shakyamuni
I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to give this commentary to the *Essence of Wisdom Sutra*, or *Heart Sutra*. Similarly, those who have the opportunity to study the meaning of this Sutra, which is the essence of Buddha’s teachings, are also extremely fortunate. Because of the profound nature of this Sutra it is possible that some people will find certain parts of this commentary difficult to understand. I will try to explain it as clearly as possible, to the limit of my ability, but because this Sutra reveals Buddha’s ultimate view and intention, we must be prepared to encounter some difficulties. Please do not become discouraged: through patient study with effort we will gain a clear understanding of the entire Sutra. As our familiarity with these teachings grows, so too will our understanding.

All Buddha’s teachings are either Sutra, the common teachings, or Tantra, the uncommon teachings; there is not a single scripture of Buddha that is not one of these two. Sutra teachings are divided into two types: Hinayana Sutras and Mahayana Sutras. Of these, the *Essence of Wisdom Sutra* belongs to the category of Mahayana Sutras. The Mahayana Sutras themselves comprise many different types of teaching, but the most precious and supreme are the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (Skt. *Prajnaparamitasutra*). Buddha’s ultimate intention is to lead each and every living being to the supreme happiness of enlightenment by showing
them the Mahayana path. For this purpose he taught the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*.

There are several *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* of varying lengths. The most extensive is the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Lines*, which in the Tibetan translation occupies twelve volumes. There is also a medium length Sutra of twenty-five thousand lines in three volumes, and a short, single-volume Sutra of eight thousand lines. In addition, there is an even shorter Sutra in eight chapters of verse known as the *Condensed Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* explain all the stages of the paths of wisdom and method. ‘Wisdom’ refers to a realization that releases our Buddha nature from obstructions, and ‘method’ refers to a realization that ripens our Buddha nature. In particular, in these Sutras Buddha reveals his ultimate view and intention, and thus among Sutras the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are held to be supreme.

The *Essence of Wisdom Sutra* is much shorter than the other *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* but it contains explicitly or implicitly the entire meaning of the longer Sutras. It is because it contains the very essence of the perfection of wisdom teachings that it is known as the *Essence of Wisdom Sutra*. Through the study and practice of this Sutra we can gain a perfect understanding of the ultimate nature of all phenomena, overcome hindrances and difficulties in our daily life, and finally overcome the obstacles preventing our full awakening and thereby attain the enlightened state of a Buddha. We are indeed fortunate to have met these essential teachings of Buddha.

The subject matter of these teachings is training in the perfection of wisdom. Wisdom is a virtuous intelligent mind whose function is to dispel the inner darkness of ignorance.
With wisdom we can know how things really are. Normally we do not understand the real nature of things; nor do we understand that suffering comes from non-virtuous actions and happiness from virtuous actions. All this is ignorance. Because of this lack of understanding, even though we do not want to suffer we create our own suffering by performing non-virtuous actions. And although we want to be happy all the time, we destroy our own happiness by developing anger, negative views and wrong intentions. We should know that this is our normal situation.

All our suffering and problems come from our ignorance, and because of ignorance we have experienced suffering and problems in life after life, since beginningless time until this life. Now is the time to abandon ignorance permanently, while we have the precious opportunity to listen to and practise Buddhadharma. The only method to abandon our ignorance and attain the supreme happiness of enlightenment is to accomplish the realization of the perfection of wisdom in general, and especially the realization of the higher perfection of wisdom.

The perfection of wisdom is wisdom that is associated with the mind of compassion for all living beings. This wisdom enables us to gain victory over maras – the outer and inner obstructing demons – and become a fully enlightened being like Buddha Shakyamuni. How wonderful!
Commentary to the *Heart Sutra*

**PART ONE:**

*The Explanation of the Direct Meaning of the Sutra*
Great Mother Prajnaparamita
The Title and Homage

The explanation of the direct meaning of the Sutra is presented under the following three main headings:

1 The meaning of the title
2 The homage of the translators
3 The explanation of the main body of the Sutra

THE MEANING OF THE TITLE

Essence of the perfection of wisdom, the Blessed Mother

This is a translation of the title of the Sutra into English. In the Tibetan text the title is given first in Sanskrit and then in Tibetan, as follows:

Sanskrit: Bhagavatiprajnaparamitahrdaya
Tibetan: Chom den de ma she rab kyi pa rol tu jin pai nying po

The essence of the perfection of wisdom is a wisdom that realizes emptiness directly, associated with the compassionate mind of bodhichitta. With this wisdom, in one single concentration, we can accumulate a great collection of merit and a great collection of wisdom, the main causes
of Buddha’s Form Body and Truth Body, respectively. This wisdom will lead us to the attainment of full enlightenment very quickly. It is called the ‘Blessed Mother’ because all the Buddhas of the ten directions are born from this wisdom. In summary, the actual essence of the perfection of wisdom, the Blessed Mother, is a wisdom that realizes emptiness directly, associated with the compassionate mind of bodhichitta. It is known as ‘ultimate bodhichitta’.

Because this Sutra teaches us how to accomplish this wisdom it is called *Essence of the Perfection of Wisdom, the Blessed Mother*, indicating that we can accomplish the essence of the perfection of wisdom, the Blessed Mother, through the study and practice of this Sutra. This is similar to Nagarjuna’s text *Fundamental Wisdom* being called *Middle Way* (Tib. *Uma*): although the actual middle way is emptiness, this text is called *Middle Way* because it teaches us how to train in emptiness.

As mentioned before, in general, wisdom is a virtuous intelligent mind whose function is to dispel the inner darkness of ignorance. With wisdom we can understand profound objects such as how things really exist, subtle dependent-related phenomena, and karma – the relationship between the actions of our former lives and the experiences of our present life, and between the actions of our present life and the experiences of our future lives. This knowledge gives us permanent liberation from suffering and makes our human life meaningful.

Many people are very intelligent in accomplishing worldly attainments. This intelligence is not wisdom because worldly attainments such as a high position, reputation, wealth and success in business are deceptive. If we die tomorrow, they will disappear tomorrow, and nothing will be left for our
future. Wisdom, however, will never deceive us. It is our inner Spiritual Guide, who leads us to the correct path. It is the divine eye through which we can see what we should know, what we should abandon, what we should practise and what we should attain. We should know that because of lacking wisdom we have wasted our countless former lives without any meaning. When we take birth as a human being in this world, we bring nothing with us from our former lives except suffering and delusions. Out of his compassion, Buddha gave teachings on the perfection of wisdom to liberate all living beings from suffering. Of all wisdoms, the perfection of wisdom of ultimate bodhichitta is supreme. We can accomplish this wisdom through the sincere study and practice of this Sutra.

THE HOMAGE OF THE TRANSLATORS

Homage to the perfection of wisdom, the Blessed Mother.

In this context, the perfection of wisdom, the Blessed Mother, refers to the female enlightened being, Great Mother Prajnaparamita, who is the manifestation of the perfection of wisdom of all the Buddhas of the ten directions. When this Sutra was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan the translators made a special prayer to Great Mother Prajnaparamita to pacify obstacles and to spread the teachings of this precious Sutra. We should deeply rejoice in the excellent deeds of these translators and recognize their great kindness to us. Without their efforts in translating this Sutra, both Tibetans and Westerners would have no basis to listen to this precious Sutra, let alone study and practise it. How kind these
translators are for us! Perhaps they are emanations of Buddha himself. It is our responsibility to repay their kindness by sincerely studying and practising this precious holy Dharma so that we can fulfil our own as well as others’ wishes.
End of preview

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