

Celestial Music
Sutras of Emptiness

by Tai Sheridan

Published by Tai Sheridan at Smashwords
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Dedication

To the rhythm and beat of things

Nor do I hear in my imagination the parts successively, I hear them all at once. What a delight this is! All this inventing, this producing, takes place in a pleasing, lively dream.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

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Introduction to the Sutras

The Buddhist sutras present a path of enlightened living based on curiosity, good will, wisdom, and compassion. They offer the reader a journey through mountains and valleys of human experience: living and dying, love and loss, anguish and peace.

Each sutra is unique: The Lotus Sutra represents the Bodhisattva path and is a lengthy compilation of parables in an archaic style. The Diamond Sutra is a short, but dense, treatise on non-dual dialectics, which illuminate the ground of Being. The Heart Wisdom Sutra expresses the balance of form and emptiness, and the Loving Kindness Sutra models a compassionate life.

I made significant changes to the English translation of the sutras. The ancient monks and nuns were steeped in altruistic spiritual attitudes, whereas most contemporary readers are unfamiliar with the life of vow. I have condensed, re-structured, and amplified the texts with an eye to modernizing them and to adding a universal appeal. In order to clarify and invoke the spiritual intentions of the sutras, I begin each one with a set spiritual intention.

The preludes to each Sutra, “Beating the Celestial Drum”, are an old Zen device, a challenge to the reader that hints of meanings in the writing that follows. I hope these contemporary Sutra versions invite wonder, loving kindness, and peace.

The Lotus Sutra: The Bodhisattva Path

Introduction

The Lotus Sutra calls itself “the King of Sutras”. This Sutra is the foundation of the Bodhisattva ideal that encourages spiritual awakening for the benefit of all beings. It contains parables that illuminate dharma teachings, practices, realization, and the transmission of truth.

The Lotus Sutra is an exploration of attitudes which create suffering, and it awakens the path of healing and transformation. It states that if someone truly hears one word or verse of the sutra then cosmic light will become their own body and they will become a Buddha.

The Buddhist concept of “no-self” is central to the Lotus Sutras, an idea that easily confuses people. “No-self” is a non-dualistic viewpoint in which there is no such thing as “a person” existing apart from the myriad phenomena of the universe. Buddha emphasizes this reality by insisting that even the concept of enlightenment is an illusion, for there is no “self” that can be enlightened. In other words, awakening is not something one attains, but is the dropping away of all conceptualizations of identity.

The challenge in transforming the book length Lotus Sutra into a brief poem and chant was to preserve the wisdom while eliminating redundancies, esoteric knowledge, archaic references, and the stylized writing of the original. I hope the reader discovers the beauty and majesty of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law in this modern version.

Beating the Celestial Drum

The Lotus Sutra is the King of Sutras, the celestial drum parting heavens and a thunderous reality splitting the earth asunder. Your house is burning down! The path up the mountain of selflessness is steep. You will stumble while grasping at the illusion of a Self. Can you hear the call of the Lotus Sutra to awaken in the great commingling? Can you hear the cries of the world? Is your heart moved to embrace the totality of existence? When the lotus opens you will find happiness by nourishing the world. Once you hear the music, practice with your heart on fire. After realizing the way, wander the earth with gift bestowing hands.

The Lotus Sutra

In this brief life
May I treasure and liberate
All beings with wisdom and love

Thus have I heard of the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Flower Sutra
of Wondrous Reality
Frees all from misery
Awakens joy and peace

Buddhas beat celestial drums
Shaking all things
A fragrant breeze
All things commingled

Dharma Rain
Subtle and mysterious
Free of twigs and leaves
The Seal of Reality

From the beginning
All things complete
With nothing to attain
Buddhas realize the Lotus Way

Thus have I heard of Practicing the Way

Your house is burning down
Fueled by flames of desire
Listen with a unified mind
To Dharma beyond words

With a soft mind
And respectful heart
Pay homage to all Buddhas
Have faith in the Way

Delight in silent contemplation
Motionless in body and mind
Devote yourself to quiet places
Enjoy real nourishment

Stabilize in bodhisattva realms
Of action and intimacy
Harmonize with inter-being
Contemplate no self nature

With a pure loving heart
live the Undivided Way
Study Realize Teach
for the benefit of all beings

Thus have I heard

of Realizing the Way

Dharma rains pour on everything
Trees plants herbs flourishing
Sprinkled with sweet dew
Joyfully enter the Buddha-way

In mountains a bird song
Ear sound song without gap
All senses originally non-dual
Pure as lapis lazuli

People attach to shapes colors
The bodhisattva sees luminosity
The infinite boundless body
Revealed in the clay body

Hear the sound of spaciousness
The snap of buddhas fingers
echoes throughout the universe
Earth trembles with Realization

Practice endlessly
Realize instantaneously
All things impermanent
Without self nature

The earth splits open
Everything springs forth
Let the lamp blow out
Welcome infinite happiness

Be like the world-honored One
with wise and pure eyes
All nets of doubts gone
A heart peaceful as the sea

Thus have I heard of Teaching the Way

Walk the Bodhisattva Path
With enthusiasm and courage
Awaken all Beings
from self centered activity

Buddha entrusts you with Reality
Wholeheartedly teach the Way
End the sorrows of
birth age disease death

All Buddhas past present future
Dispel darkness disperse gloom
Use infinite tactful means
Lead beings from attachments

Beating the Drum of Truth
Patiently reveal the essence
Teach according to each nature

Expect nothing in return

Be at ease and confident
Responsive and kind
Never anticipate
Never disparage

Be like a great cloud
Rise above the world
full of beneficial moisture
Pouring rain abundantly

Never weary of teaching
This King of Sutras
The Lotus of Wondrous Reality
Bringing gladness to all

The Diamond Sutra:Lightening in an Empty Sky

Introduction

The Diamond Sutra offers insight into the world of emptiness (*shunyata*) and the luminous transcendent Buddha body (*dharmakaya*). Diamond light symbolizes the universe as one's own being, often referred to in Zen as “the ten-thousand things” arising simultaneously and commingled in the present moment. Lightening is a Zen metaphor for *Satori*, the moment of awakening, which in reality is all moments of clear awareness.

The Sutra explores and expresses the ground of Being. All sutras strike a balance between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds of emptiness and form, but it is the Diamond Sutra that most directly expresses the reality of emptiness.

The Diamond Sutra is brief, so my restructurings will be obvious to those familiar with it. I have changed the flow of the text to better integrate and present the meanings. I hope you enjoy the brilliance of the sutra as you might the morning star at dawn.

Beating the Celestial Drum

A flash of lightning in the midnight sky. Buddha roars yet you sleep through the night. The luminous diamond of reality penetrates to the farthest corners of the universe and yet is as close as your nose. It is the sound of your footsteps on moss and the breathing that supports your life. Do you still seek outside yourself as if there is an outside? How could there be anything to attain, you are already complete! Still your mind jumps about and passions drive you. If you would like to know Undivided Reality, sit down and be still, listen to the black crows of dawn. Give up trying and self-importance. Who is the doer and what is done? This diamond shines even in a cup made of clay. Are you ready to become truly human? Listen to the Diamond Sutra.

The Diamond Sutra

In this brief life
May I treasure and liberate all beings
With wisdom and love

Thus have I heard of the Diamond Body

A dewdrop a cloud a star
a flash of lightening in empty sky
without a fixed self anywhere
the Diamond Body includes all things

Thus have I heard of Calm Sitting

Countless truth seekers
sincere and fearless
clarify the Diamond Body
wishing benefit for all beings

Sitting upright and calm
with courage balance detachment
self centered intentions wane
the miracle of inter-being arises

Thus have I heard of Awakening

Grasping a cloud or star an impossibility
be one with spacious presence
Give freely - awaken!
Let go of identity – awaken!

Self centered foolishness
creates attachments disturbs harmony
See conditioned views as illusory
awaken the Diamond Body

With nothing to eliminate
Awakening not attaining a state
the Diamond Body without substance
actualizes true selflessness

Without attaining mind
subjects objects merge
no gap between things
everyone awakening simultaneously

Without attachment
all things brilliant unique
all things the luminous total dynamic
things and no-things instantaneous

All things arise in the present
beyond thinking and not thinking
beyond beginning end true false
beyond ignorance enlightenment self other

All things a confluence
of the world-cosmos
within spacious presence
each place sacred

Seeing things precisely
without self or attachment
the Diamond Body of No Body
beyond coming going birth death

Auspicious beyond name or concept
Present within shapes and colors
An incomprehensible subtle totality
The unconditioned unified world

Thus have I heard of Wise Living

Love awakens in an empty sky
patience tolerance grow
be awake in the Diamond Body
ordinary without special traits

Wise people treasure awakening
calm minds rest in the present totality
without gain or self inflated pride
live for the benefit of everything

Wise people renounce self centeredness
honor truth wherever spoken
clothe themselves in spacious presence
receive and manifest the great blessing

Wise people continually renew
the liberation of no liberation
intuitive wisdom recognizes no self
within Diamond Body no self to save

Wise people keep aspiration alive
All things clear light lacking substantiality
Without a promise of attainment
Diamond Body the original blessing

The Heart Wisdom Sutra: The Commingling of Things

Introduction

The Heart Wisdom Sutra is recited daily in Zen temples as the essential buddha-dharma reality in which there is no gap between self and other, and where all things arise simultaneously out of emptiness in the moment (co-dependent arising).

I have made significant changes to current versions of the sutra. The most famous phrase of the sutra, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form”, expresses the dynamic relationship between phenomena and noumena, the commingling of things. I have changed this sacred verse to read “form and emptiness are one”, a far easier concept to understand. I have changed the reference to the *skandhas* which reads “no eye, no ear, no nose, no body, no mind”, to a more easily understood expression that “senses-sensing-sensed are one”. I have used the meaning of Shariputra's name, “beautiful eyes”, instead of his name itself.

The sutra ends in the transcendent and elegant line “Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!”: beyond beyond always going beyond yes! I hope this version of the sutra helps clarify the non-dual world of the Buddha-Dharma.

Beating the Celestial Drum

Do not be fooled by the earth and sky. Things will seduce you with their apparent solidity. Emptiness will seduce you with apparent luminosity. Things and no-things dance eternally in the present moment. If you cultivate great curiosity and manage not to be blinded by what you see, perhaps you can settle down and watch clouds drifting over green mountains. Trying to understand form and emptiness with your mind is like putting your pants on backwards. You can't figure it out! Still, you think there is a horizon that you can know. Go drown in the arising and co-mingling of existence! This is nothing other than sweeping the path and making tea. If you think it is something special you are truly lost. Just keep walking until you die.

Heart Wisdom Sutra

In this brief life may I treasure
And liberate all beings
With wisdom and love

With open and beautiful eyes
Invoke the compassionate wisdom of Avalokiteshvara
Clarify that all things have no fixed identity

Form and emptiness do not differ
Shape and spaciousness are one
Clarify everything as unique yet commingled

See clearly with a calm balanced view
Senses sensing sensed flowing undifferentiated
Clarify phenomena arising from unconditioned emptiness

With open and beautiful eyes
Everything unique interconnected
Dissipate the anguish of separation

Before emotions senses thoughts ideas
Before habits judgments views consciousness
Enter warm spaciousness the total dynamic

With open and beautiful eyes
Everything emanating from spaciousness
Enter the luminous realm of now

View things with complete acceptance
Old age death anguish knowing
Enter the infinite realm within beyond

Troubles and fears calmed
Trust rely on spacious wisdom
No special experience to attain

Throughout time people have awakened
By no longer viewing things as separate
Resting in spaciousness awakens complete being

The wisdom of spaciousness is the truthful
Incomparable mysterious light of existence
Each moment continuously going beyond the known

Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha

The Loving Kindness Sutra: Arms Open Wide

Introduction

The Loving Kindness Sutra is a blueprint for living a kind and wholesome life. The Sutra is founded on the wish for all beings to be happy, and describes the spiritual terrain of non-harming. For the meditation student, it is a confirmation of things seen and heard with a pure heart and clear mind.

I have changed some time honored phrases in the sutra, such as “a mother protects her only child”, to “a parent protects”. Although I appreciate the original phrase, I think that all care takers must be included as providers of true nurturing. I also changed the significant yet esoteric statement about wishing love toward “all beings in low, middle, and high realms of existence” by openly mentioning people of all races, colors, creeds, and capacities. I prefer specifics in this case rather than generalizations, for we must continually remind ourselves that prejudice is at the heart of pandemic disease, warfare, and threats to the earth's ecology.

Even though the sentiments of the sutra are easy to understand, it takes a lifetime to actualize Big Love in ourselves and our families, communities, work places, nations, and world. May all beings indeed be happy!

Beating the Celestial Drum

Everybody preaches love but who dares examine their own shadow? Ill will is hard to root out. And what of your grief and the unloved places that call out to you on a lonely night? When you go to bed full, how do you think about those who are hungry! When you go to bed hungry, how do you think about those who are full! When the playing field is leveled we are all brothers and sisters in a rocky boat. Let's row in cadence. Better yet, let us embrace and whisper what we already know. Love is all there is, love is all there is, love is all there is

Loving Kindness Sutra

In this brief life
May I treasure and liberate
All beings with wisdom and kindness

May I Live
kindly toward all
content and competent
honest with integrity
gentle and humble
speaking directly and truthfully
willing to learn

May I Treasure
living simply without overextending
neither denying the senses nor overindulging
respecting all without self inflation
nourishing and supporting my life

May I not act in ways wise people might question

May all beings be happy
all genders races creeds
all bodies personalities roles
all capacities incapacities
all known unknown
all past present future beings

May all beings be happy
May I not deceive nor despise anyone
May I maintain good will and wish no harm

Like a parent protecting children
I open my boundless heart to all
Releasing all ill will
Never betraying loving kindness

May I practice mindful kindness in all activities
May Love here-now be my spiritual foundation

With an open mind I am whole
With senses in balance I am healthy
With oneness I am peaceful
With an alert spacious mind I am free

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About the Author

Tai Sheridan is a poet, philosopher, and Zen priest. He transforms ancient Buddhist and Zen texts into accessible and inspirational verse. His *Buddha in Blue Jeans* series offers a contemporary approach to Buddhist philosophy and awakening.

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