

An Indian Source for the Opening Verse of the Tibetan version of the *Heart Sūtra*

James B. Apple, University of Calgary

jbapple@ucalgary.ca

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The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (T. *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po*; C. *Bore boluomiduo xin jing*; J. *Hannya haramitta shingyō*; 般若波羅蜜多心經), known simply as the *Heart Sūtra*, is one of the most famous and widely commented upon *sūtras* in Mahāyāna Buddhist cultures. The scripture is preserved in at least seven Asian languages in two versions. The longer version preserved in Tibetan, and recited on a daily basis in Tibetan monasteries, contains a famous preliminary opening verse. The poetic verse praises the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*prajñāpāramitā*) and describes it, in part, as “ineffable, inconceivable...the essence of space.” Tibetan commentators often attribute the verse to either the Buddha’s son Rāhula or to the *Prajñāpāramitāstrotra* by Rāhulabhadra. The former attribution is an untraceable oral tradition and the verse is not found in the latter work as recent scholarship has documented. Is there a textual source for this verse? When did Tibetans begin to recite this verse in their monastic institutions? This paper documents an Indian source for this verse and provides evidence for its recitation in Indian Buddhist monasteries. The paper argues that Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982-1054 CE) brought the practice of reciting this poetic verse prior to recitation of the *Heart Sūtra* based on new evidence from recently recovered Tibetan manuscripts. The paper concludes that the opening verse of the long Tibetan version of the *Heart Sūtra* originates in India and was ritually recited in at least one major Indian monastery during the late Pāla period.

།སྐྱེ་བསམ་བརྗོད་མེད་ཤེས་རབ་པ་རོལ་ཕྱིན།།

།མ་སྐྱེས་མི་འགག་ནམ་མཁའི་ངོ་བོ་ཉིད།།

།སོ་སོ་རང་རིག་ཡེ་ཤེས་སྣོད་ཡུལ་བ།།

།དུས་གསུམ་རྒྱལ་བའི་ཡུམ་ལ་ཕྱག་འཚལ་ལོ།།

//smras bsam brjod med shes rab pha rol phyin//

//ma skyes mi 'gags nam mkha'i ngo bo nyid//

//so so rang rig ye shes spyod yul ba//

//dus gsum rgyal pa'i yum la phyag 'tshal lo//

Homage to unutterable, inconceivable, inexpressible Perfect
Wisdom,

Unborn, unceasing, essence of space,

The sphere of self-aware gnosis,

The Mother of the Victorious Ones of the three times!