
The Hannya Shingyo, upside down

By Konrad Maquestieau – gyoji weeks – March 2026

The *Hannya Shingyo* in a single sentence

If one were to summarise the *Hannya Shingyo* in a single sentence, one might say: 'The Hannya Shingyo Sutra is the sutra that opens the heart-mind through the practice of great wisdom, which leads to seeing things "as they are", and thereby resolves the problem of suffering by helping all beings to awaken.'

The Heart

Maka Hannya Haramita Shingyo means 'Sutra of the heart of perfect (or supreme) great wisdom'. This text is part of a vast corpus of *Prajnaparamita* sutras, some versions of which contain up to 100,000 verses, all of which deal with the 'true nature' of things: their profound and natural elusiveness. The *Hannya Shingyo* forms its summary, its 'heart'. The sutra features two main characters: Avalokiteshvara (Kannon in Japanese), the bodhisattva of compassion who delivers the teaching, and Shariputra, a historical disciple of the Buddha renowned for his wisdom; yet in this sutra he remains silent and listens. What is remarkable here is that it is the bodhisattva of compassion, and not the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri, who delivers this teaching on great wisdom, creating an interesting dynamic in which the wise one receives a teaching from the compassionate one. A highly significant shift in perspective!

The sutra consists of three parts: the introduction featuring Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra and the fundamental theme of the 'vacuity of all phenomena'; the middle section, which deconstructs all our concepts relating to ourselves (form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness) and from there, everything we think we know about the Buddha's teachings themselves; and the conclusion: this wisdom relieves suffering and helps all beings.

Empty of substance and meaning

The famous series of negations in the middle section does not in any way imply that these elements do not exist, but rather that they are *interdependent* (they have no existence in themselves), *impermanent* (in a state of constant transformation) and *devoid of fixed substance* (there is nothing fixed within them). In themselves, they have no meaning! This is why they are described as 'vacuity'. There is nothing within them that is truly tangible, graspable or measurable. Even today, in science, this concept is increasingly being observed and applied. Echoes of this concept are, moreover, beginning to emerge in certain interpretations of quantum physics, which studies the infinitely small particles of matter: one perceives something of this interplay of profound interdependence where the 'boundaries' between particles seem to dissolve. Something of great wisdom is finding its way into the sciences!

This central concept of emptiness, KU, 空, appears seven times in the sutra. The kanji MU, 無 (negation, neither, not) appears twenty times! Nevertheless, the sutra is not nihilistic. It pushes us to rethink our existence by letting go all the points of reference we have constructed for ourselves.

The famous series of negations in the sutra—MŪ GEN NĪ BĪ… 無眼耳鼻 'no eyes, no ears, no nose…'—helps us to understand that everything that is named is merely an intellectual concept and not a reality. Even the Buddha's teachings are no exception: MŪ KŪ SHŪ METSU DŌ… 無苦集滅道 'there is no suffering, no cause, no cessation, no path'… In other words: even the Four Noble Truths have no substantial existence! This is profoundly liberating: SHIN MU KEI GĒ MU KEI GĒ 心無罣礙無罣礙故 'the mind is unhindered'. The sutra helps us to live without fear, even in this difficult world, which gives us unprecedented freedom of action: in this world, we can live in peace[1]. It is no surprise that, in popular belief across many countries in South-East Asia, the sutra is also used 'to drive away evil spirits'. And with good reason!

Practice

This wisdom is not a form of knowledge but a genuine practice, as stated at the very beginning of the sutra: GYO JIN HAN NYĀ 行深般若, literally: 'practise, deeply, intuitive wisdom'. How to do this? How to practise this great wisdom?

An example: what constitutes us? Our existence is due to an innumerable number of causes and conditions: first, our parents who conceived us (and our parents' parents, and so on), then the chain of total interdependence with the so-called 'outer' world: energy – food – light – heat – which ensures that, here and now, we remain alive. We are not separate from the entirety of the universe. In this practice, the notions of 'outside' and 'inside' are of no use to us. This realisation will permeate all our actions, words and thoughts in daily life.

Another example: to the question 'who are we?' great wisdom replies: not what we can grasp and think. In the West, ever since Plato and Descartes, we have lumped together 'thought' with 'identity'. It is rather the opposite: 'I am, therefore I think'. Being comes first — and not 'the Word', as Saint John says in his Gospel. Great wisdom is to observe how we actually function, rather than identifying with and clinging to what we feel and think.

What is interesting is that nowhere does the sutra mention zazen or meditation. It is therefore a practice of each moment, everywhere, in all of life's circumstances. It is certainly true that the experience of zazen helps us to intuitively address this great wisdom — but this wisdom must be expressed and realised everywhere and at every moment within daily life itself, within the body.

It is a continuous back-and-forth between: reciting aloud, reading and rereading the sutra, and concrete practice in and through the body — this is how the transformation that the sutra leads us to live will take place.

Prosody

The text has come down to us via the Chinese translation by the monk Xuanzang in the 7th century, and we recite it in Kanbun, which is a language that bridges Chinese and Japanese. It contains 260 kanji. One must listen and be receptive to the prosody of this sutra: the accent, the tone, the intonation, the rhythm, the pace, and the pauses. Reciting this sutra is a profoundly poetic act. It contains sounds that reach us from times long past and with which, even today, we can 'vibrate'; sounds that are deeply meaningful. For example, towards the end of the sutra: HĀN NYĀ HĀ RĀ MĪ TĀ ZĒ DAI JIN SHŪ ZĒ DAI MYŌ SHŪ ZĒ MŪ JŌ SHŪ ZĒ MŪ TŌ DŌ SHŪ… 故知般若波羅蜜多是大神咏是大明咏是無上咏是無等等咏… literally, these kanji

read: ‘wisdom, transcendent, that, great, sacred, mantra, thus, great, luminous, mantra, thus, not, above, mantra, thus, none, to compare, mantra’ — in translation: ‘That is why we know that the *Prajñāpāramitā* is the great mantra, the mantra of great light, the supreme mantra, the mantra without equal. ’ All these stressed, short, sharp vowels create a rhythm that quickens, leading to the final, joyful conclusion: NŌ JŌ IS SAI KŪ 能除一切苦 ‘able to remove all suffering’ and also: SHŪ SOKU SETSU SHŪ WATSU: GYĀ TEI GYĀ TEI HĀ RĀ GYĀ TEI HĀ RĀ SO GYĀ TEI BŌ JĪ SO WA KĀ, 咏即說咏曰: 揭説・揭説・波羅揭説 波羅僧揭説・菩提薩婆訶. This so-called ‘magical’ formula (a mantra) is beyond all intellectual understanding and is therefore strictly untranslatable!

In the Sotoshu version, the mantra is not translated but is retained in its Sanskrit form: ‘*Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha*’. One must look for the meaning within the sounds and rhythm themselves. It is hardly surprising that there are hip-hop versions of this sutra. Perhaps we should dance to this final part!

We must repeat

The *Hannya Shingyo* is a living sutra that can transform our life, making it more open by transcending the limits of our ego and turning more fully towards ‘all beings’. It is here that we realise that wisdom and compassion are one and the same, and that therefore only Kannon is able to articulate this dazzling teaching! This sutra, the fruit of many years of maturation through the genius of numerous (anonymous!) awakened beings of the Mahayana school, was finally put down on paper at the beginning of our era and translated into various languages so as to offer it to us as a universal gift. To be repeated. Tirelessly.

[1] This was the theme of the three-week *gyoji* at La Gendronnière in March 2026, organised and led by the teachers of the ABZE.