**Summary**

The Heart Sutra is an example of Prajnaparamita (‘Perfection of Wisdom’) literature. This type of Mahayana literature started to appear from about 100 b.c. onwards. The Heart Sutra is thought to date from about 350 c.e.

All the Prajnaparamita Sutras explore aspects of the deeper level of wisdom (prajna) that Mahayana Buddhists claim to have discovered, and the text is quite typical in this respect.

In the sutra, Sariputra represents the Hinayana understanding of wisdom and he is guided beyond this level of understanding by the celestial bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

First of all, we are told that Avalokita ‘beheld but five heaps, and saw that in their own-being (svabhava) they were empty.’

The Five Heaps are the 5 skandhas and at first the text is simply stating that these skandhas are empty (sunya) of own-being (svabhava). In other words, Avalokita is simply paraphrasing the 3rd of the Three Marks, the Hinayana teaching of anatta. Things which have ‘own-being’ would be permanent and unchanging, like the atman of the Upanishads, and as we know the Buddha denied the existence of any such self.

At this point, the text is not controversial. It is not saying anything new. However, there had been a later trend within Hinayana Buddhism to introduce the idea of things having some kind of permanence in order to explain the process of rebirth, and so it is possible that the Heart Sutra is, at this point, reaffirming the original teaching of the Buddha over and against this trend.

However, in the next section of the text, new ideas are definitely introduced. First we get the statement, ‘form is emptiness, emptiness is form’. Here ‘form’ seems to refer to more than just the first skandha : ‘rupa’. Instead it seems to be describing reality itself. And so Avalokita seems to saying that reality itself is empty of permanence. This sounds more like the First Mark : ‘all conditioned things are impermanent (anicca)’.

But when we look more closely, we see that a noun is being used not an adjective. The text actually says, ‘form is emptiness (sunyata)’ not ‘form is empty (sunya)’. So emptiness (sunyata) must mean something more than just the idea that everything is empty of permanence as this wasn’t a new idea.

Clues as to what sunyata or ‘emptiness’ is come later in the text. First of all, it is stated that ‘in emptiness…there is no suffering, no origination, no stopping and no path.’ In other words, sunyata seems to be a term used to describe a final understanding of reality in which even the 4 Noble Truths no longer apply. This is certainly taking us beyond the Hinayana level of wisdom. But in what way?

The answer comes when we are then told that the bodhisattva ‘…dwells without thought coverings.’ What this seems to mean is that the final understanding of reality is beyond our thinking processes. If we want to understand reality we have to let go of all our ideas and theories about what reality is like, even Buddhist ideas about ‘emptiness’ and ‘form’, and things being empty of permanence. Then what we are left with is sunyata, emptiness.

Another way of putting this is that reality has its own meaning rather than ‘my’ meaning. Here ‘my’ meaning refers to *all* the conceptions the human mind can form e.g. religious beliefs, hopes, dreams, ideals, everything the mind of man uses to try to provide himself with physical or spiritual security. But, strangely, when we let go of all this, we in fact gain a deeper and final understanding of reality that is liberating. This is what Avalokitesvara seeks to demonstrate to Sariputra, and this is the message of the Heart Sutra for us all.