



Alex Kerr: Finding the Heart Sutra

A book review by Jutta Klement

***The material world does not differ from emptiness.
Emptiness does not differ from the material world.
The material world is itself emptiness.
Emptiness is itself the material world.***

('ku' (emptiness) - calligraphy by Alex Kerr)



Powerful, mystical and concise, the *Heart Sutra* is believed to contain the condensed essence of all Buddhist wisdom. Only 56 lines long, this poem on emptiness has exerted immense influence throughout Asia since the seventh century CE and is woven into the fabric of daily life. Yet, even though it rivals the teachings of Laozi and Confucius in importance, this ancient Buddhist scripture remains little known in the West.

Alex Kerr's new book ***Finding the Heart Sutra*** is the perfect introduction for readers unfamiliar with this scripture. The author brings together Buddhist teachings, talks with friends and mentors as well as important cultural insights which enable the reader to explore the world of thoughts contained within the *Heart Sutra*. Travelling from Japan, Korea and China to India, Mongolia, Tibet and Vietnam, the book weaves together memory, history and calligraphy. Kerr reveals how the *Heart Sutra* continues to influence today's Japanese culture and its global relevance.

Forty years ago, after learning of the *Heart Sutra* in Japan, Alex Kerr embarked to explore the wisdom that lies

what a treasure trove of thoughts and wisdom this brief poem on emptiness is. While Alex Kerr acknowledges that he is neither a Buddhist monk nor scholar, he manages to extract multiple meanings from the stanzas, in a manner that is thoroughly enjoyable.

The book begins with a brief introduction to Buddhism, an English and Japanese transcription of the *Heart Sutra* and ends with the mystical chant itself. In ten parts, Kerr offers word-by-word critical interpretations and commentaries.

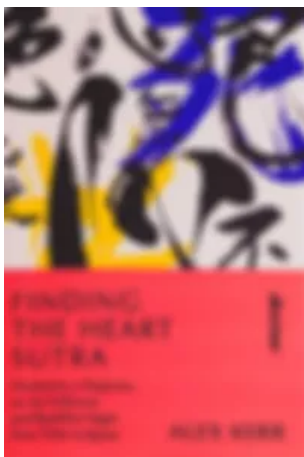
The author remembers his first encounter with the *sutra*, which took place at a gathering of friends to bid farewell to the 'palace' of art collector David Kidd, and the introduction to people who would play a major role in helping him to understand the *Heart Sutra*. According to Kerr, most people turn to the *Heart Sutra* because "*We just need something small, a useful idea or two to help us in our daily lives.*" Furthermore, "*The Heart Sutra is so short you can recite the whole thing in about a minute. It is a haiku of wisdom, wisdom you can carry in your back pocket.*" The shortness of the *sutra* is why it has survived for so long and influenced so many people, despite being intense and covering a lot of ground in what it scrutinises, especially emptiness. However, the author admits and accepts the duality of the *sutra*: the aim for perfection in an imperfect world.

Events in Kerr's life become short samples of wisdom, wisdom that has been passed down to him through the years. The fundamental message is that we all learn from others, be it from mentors, elders, parents, friends, or writers. The questions are whether we allow them to guide us and how we make use of these teachings.

Kerr's literary style makes the book an absolute pleasure to read. Though he interweaves scholarly passages with anecdotes from his life, the volume remains instructional and informative at its core. The brevity of each section suggests that you can read just one chapter; comparable to a small pocket guide where you dip in and out of for a morsel of ancient wisdom. This approach gives the reader plenty of 'resting places', time to reflect and digest. Furthermore, the author reminds us of how Kannon calls out twice to Shariputra in the *sutra*: it is "not an essay written down on paper, but words spoken from one person to another."

The text feels more like a refreshing chat about serious matters rather than an academic discourse, while at the same time offering an approach to understand the *Heart Sutra*. Along with comments, Kerr has provided notes, references, glossary, and a Who's Who.

The book can be borrowed from the NMV library.



***Finding the Heart Sutra:
Guided by a Magician, an Art Collector and Buddhist Sages from Tibet to Japan***
Alex Kerr

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