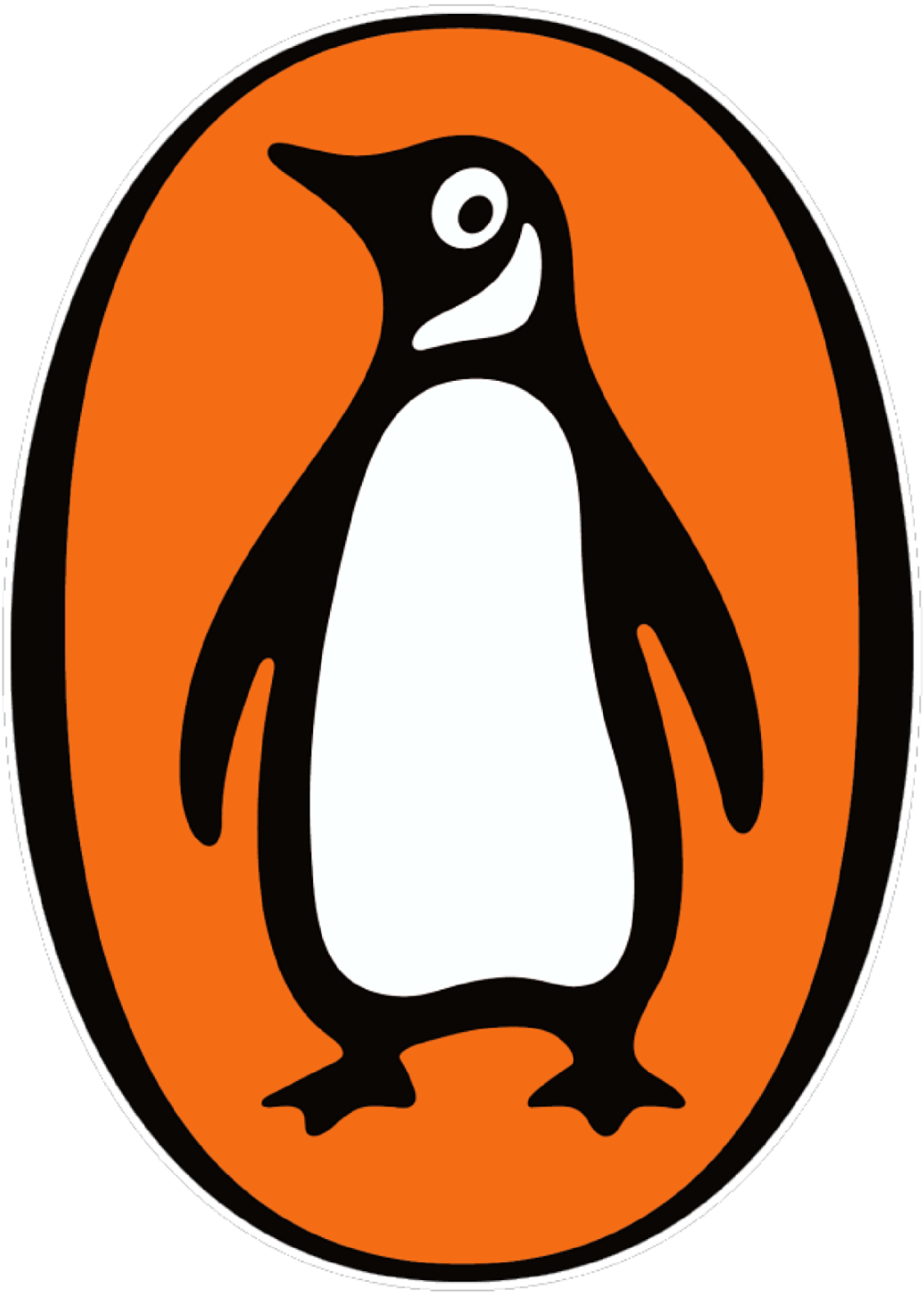

# Contents

# About the Author

Alex Kerr has spent many years living in Japan and Thailand and is passionate about the traditional arts of East Asia. His previous books include Lost Japan, winner of the Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize for the best work of non-fiction published in Japan, and Another Kyoto.

*By the Same Author*

*Lost Japan* (1996)
*Dogs and Demons* (2001)
*Living in Japan* (2006)
*Another Kyoto* (2016)
*Another Bangkok* (2021)

# List of Calligraphies

1. Heart 心 (*shin*)
2. Emptiness 空 (*ku*).
3. Heart 心 (*shin*).
4. Emptiness 空 (*ku*).
5. Colour/the material world 色 (*shiki*).
6. Not 不 (*fu*).
7. Nothingness 無 (*mu*).
8. And the rest 乃至 (*naishi*).
9. Cessation 滅 (*metsu*).
10. Obstruction 罣 (*ke*).
11. Nirvana 涅槃 (*nehan*).
12. Mantra 呪 (*shu*).
13. *Gyatei* (chant) 諦羯.
14. Bright 明 (*myo*).
15. Truth 真 (*shin*).
16. Noble Way 道 (*do*).
17. Therefore 故 (*ko*).
18. Perfection 波羅蜜多 (*haramita*).

# Preface

Buddhist lore tells the story of a young seeker after wisdom who, after many adventures, climbs to the top of the Tower of Maitreya. To his disappointment, he finds there just one small room. But when he pushes open the door, inside is revealed a vast interior, a delirious vision of gleaming halls adorned with shining gems and crowned with radiant pinnacles bathed in showers of gold dust. Beyond that stretch other halls, an infinity of them, each more glorious than the last, all reflecting each other, yet all contained within Maitreya's Tower.

The Heart Sutra is such a room. Consisting of less than sixty lines, this brief poem on emptiness reveals itself to be the storehouse of a universe of thought.

Since I first learned about the Heart Sutra forty years ago, I have come to see it as one of the most thought-provoking and emotionally intense works produced by humankind. Measured by its influence across Asia since the seventh century – from Japan, Korea and China, to India, Mongolia, Tibet and Vietnam – no other work today comes close to the popularity of the Heart Sutra.

It is believed to contain the condensed essence of all Buddhist wisdom. Yet despite this, the Heart Sutra remains barely known in the West, even though it rivals the teachings of Laozi and Confucius in importance. Examine any word in the text and out spills a shower of gems, concepts that have inspired thinkers in East Asia for over thirteen hundred years.

Those thinkers range from the Chinese magician-philosopher Fazang in the seventh/eighth century to the sharp-tongued Japanese Zen master Hakuin in the eighteenth and, in our time, the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh. Augmenting these are many books and articles in English, Japanese and other languages published in modern times, as well as hundreds of internet sites and blogs about specialist aspects. Together these make up a vibrant international community, linked over continents and time.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that I am not a monk, and nor am I a Buddhist scholar. That makes me poorly equipped for taking up a topic as monumental as the Heart Sutra. In my defence, I plead sheer length of time spent with this text – decades of involvement since I was very young. Even great masters of Buddhism have felt humbled when they tried to explain the Heart Sutra. The Mongolian lama Dendarla Rampa, on completing his commentary *Jewel Light Illuminating the Meaning of the Heart Sutra* around the year 1800, expressed a similar sense of inadequacy, imploring the reader to be understanding:

> Like the barley collected by a beggar,[1]
> This is a mixture into one of a variety of texts.
> It is not filled with profound statements.
> But because it was done with a mind not black,
> I don't think I am to be blamed.

# Introduction

## *First Encounter*

It was a hot July day in Kobe in 1978, and we had gathered to watch a world collapse. My mentor, art collector David Kidd, lived in the eighteenth-century palace of a Japanese feudal lord, which had been moved around 1900 from the grounds of a castle on the island of Shikoku to Ashiya, near Kobe. Since then, every other palace of its type had been destroyed, and this was the only one that was still lived in. Filled with David's incomparable collection of Japanese ink paintings, Chinese furniture and golden Tibetan Buddhas, the house was a precious survival of something long lost in China and Japan.

But the palace's time was up. The landlord had sold the plot on which it stood to a developer to build apartments. David had decided to dismantle the palace, as is often done with old wooden buildings in Japan, by removing the plaster walls and taking apart the columns and beams, which are fitted together without nails, like a giant balsa-wood puzzle. The structure can then be moved and reassembled in a new location. David planned to store the pieces of the palace in a warehouse, where they would lie until someone could raise the money to put them back together again.

I joined a group of David's friends who had assembled to bid farewell to the palace's silver-leafed doors and wide-columned halls. We each took a symbolic swing with a big wooden mallet to break down the earthen walls before the carpenters arrived to take apart the rest of building. Then off we drove to the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto where David had booked rooms to live in until he found a new home.

As we sat in David's hotel suite sipping restorative gin and tonics, the mood was glum. We all knew that this was the end of an era and we would never see anything like this in Japan again. Suddenly Urata, a high-spirited Zen monk from Kyoto, whipped out his blue-and-gold fan and begin whirling around the room. He was laughing, and in between bouts of laughter, he was chanting something, over and over again, in a thunderous voice. It was the Heart Sutra.

## *Kabuki*

Years passed. The pieces of the palace were transferred from one storehouse to another until finally they disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to the columns and silver doors.

Meanwhile, I moved on. I became interested in kabuki. Smitten by the talent of Tamasaburo, kabuki's leading *onnagata* (male player of female roles), I went to see every play he appeared in, including *Dojoji*. It's about a dancing girl who gains entrance to a forbidden temple precinct, but once inside reveals herself as the spirit of a wrathful serpent. At the opening of the play, the girl engages in a Zen-style debate with a group of monks who are trying to bar her entry.

In the end she stumps them, quoting the core lines of the Heart Sutra. Everyone watching in the audience knew the words by heart: *Shiki soku ze ku, ku soku ze shiki* ('The material world is itself emptiness. Emptiness is itself the material world'). Beaten in

the debate, the monks allow her into the temple grounds, to their later great regret when the spirit-serpent wraps itself around the temple's great bronze bell and melts it with its scorching body heat.

That was my second encounter with the Heart Sutra. In my ensuing decades in Japan, I came across it repeatedly, as it seeped into every part of the culture. Politicians quoted it; shops printed it as a design on fans, handbags and neckties.

## *Marguerite Yourcenar's Fan*

One day sometime in the early 1980s, Tamasaburo, who had by then become a friend, asked me to come round to his backstage room at the Kabukiza Theatre in Tokyo to interpret for a visitor from France. She was an elderly writer who was fascinated by the cult of evanescence in Japan – the idea that all things exist just for a precious moment, like cherry blossom petals that bloom only for a week and then scatter in the wind – and wanted to ask Tamasaburo some questions about kabuki. Entering the room, my heart skipped a beat as I realized that this was no ordinary visitor but the renowned French author Marguerite Yourcenar.

When I was a teenager, I used to go up into the dusty attic in our house in Alexandria, Virginia, to read books that my parents had stored there, and one of them was Yourcenar's grand historical novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* about the Roman emperor Hadrian. In real life, she turned out to be even grander than I had imagined. Swathed in what looked like layers of grey rags, her craggy figure towered over us like an imperious Rodin bronze.

Later Yourcenar came to Kyoto, where I was living, and we struck up a friendship. I would take her to my favourite temples, and she in turn told me stories about Emperor Hadrian and the Académie Française. One day we were walking through Kyoto and I found a fan inscribed with the Heart Sutra in gold on a blue background, like the one that Zen monk Urata had waved around at the Miyako Hotel. I bought it and gave it to her, and she tucked it away among her trademark great swag of grey draperies.

Yourcenar was intrigued. She was drawn to the philosophy behind the sutra, but she was also curious about the delicate calligraphy on the fan. That led me to talk with her about calligraphy, which has been a passion since I was first introduced to Chinese characters in primary school at the age of nine. Eventually Yourcenar suggested that we do a book together about the Heart Sutra: I would brush calligraphy for it, and she would write. But it never happened. She returned to France, and not long afterwards I heard she had died. They told me that the object she kept with her until the very end was the fan inscribed with the Heart Sutra.

That was 1987. Over thirty years have passed since then, and now the time has come to finally write the book. But without Yourcenar, I have to do the writing myself.

## *The Sutras of Perfection of Wisdom*

A sutra is a Buddhist scripture. Emphasis should be on the word 'a'. Hundreds of sutras exist, some long and some short, and from different periods, some appearing long after the death of the historical Buddha. Arising first in India, they travelled outwards to Tibet, China, Thailand and beyond, to what became the Buddhist world.

The Heart Sutra belongs to a category known as the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. At least three versions of this category of sutra exist, with 100,000 lines being considered 'long', 25,000 lines 'medium' and 8,000 lines 'short'.

In India, where the sutras come from, brevity had never been the soul of wit. The earliest works, believed to have been spoken by Buddha Shakyamuni himself in the sixth to fifth century BC and then transcribed in Sanskrit, are conveyed in a clear-cut, direct language. But by the time the later sutras came to be written down, they had acquired added colour, repetition and more detail, until Buddha's stark meditation mat had metamorphosed into a soaring Gothic cathedral. Over the centuries, the words piled up higher and higher into magnificent vaults and spires.

The Heart Sutra cuts through all of that. It's a digest, a drastic abridgement. Consisting of only 272 characters, it can be organized into fifty or sixty lines, depending on where phrases are cut – just the right length for fans and neckties. It has been revered since the time it first appeared as containing the essence of Buddhist wisdom.

We don't really know how it came into being. In some cloudy way in the seventh century AD, the sutra fell into the hands of Xuanzang, the monk who travelled from Chang'an, the capital of Tang dynasty China, to India in search of Buddhist scriptures, as recounted in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. After sixteen years in India, he returned to Chang'an in 645 with hundreds of scrolls, among which was the Heart Sutra.

Xuanzang devoted the later part of his life to translating into Chinese the entire Perfection of Wisdom corpus, including the full texts of the 'long', 'medium' and 'short' versions. In the process, he also translated the Heart Sutra, and he and his disciple Kuiji wrote the first commentaries. Other translators followed. Almost immediately the sutra gained wide popularity, and by the eighth century it had spread throughout the Buddhist world. Today, millions of people recite it daily, from Japan to Korea and Mongolia, down through China to Vietnam, and across to Tibet and India.

The Heart Sutra appeals at a deep emotional level like no other Buddhist writing. As to why this should be, a big part of its charm lies in the language. With other sutras you feel you're listening to a lecture by a pedantic professor; with the Heart Sutra you're hearing mischievously clever remarks from someone very wise. The style is concise and the phrasing elegant. The repetitious cadence haunts the brain like the words to an old song.

The content of the sutra – the emptiness of life – is deep to the point of darkness, and therein lies its intense appeal. Strong tentacles reach out from this text, gripping us and pulling us into its black impenetrable waters. It's cool and quiet down there. The emptiness is irresistible.

The sutra is about achieving wisdom, but this wisdom is a little boat adrift on a sea of decline and loss. That's why it made sense for Urata to chant it as David Kidd's palace was coming down, and for Marguerite Yourcenar to hold it as she lay dying in her hospital bed in France.

## *A Thumbnail History of Buddhist Thought*

The Heart Sutra is a primer of Buddhism, providing an easy-to-remember digest of the key ideas, and this has been another reason for its enduring popularity. So before we begin, let's take a brief look at those key ideas.

In India in the sixth century BC, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni (better known in the West by his birth name Siddhartha Gautama) began with the concept that life is about suffering and impermanence. He preached that we can escape from suffering by following the 'Noble Way', a life of good practice, through which we can reach a transcendent state called nirvana.

It's as simple as that in theory, and the Heart Sutra is saying more or less what the Buddha said right at the beginning. But of course, it's not so simple. Around roughly

the first century AD, Buddhism began to split into the two big divisions that we see today: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada, the more conservative strain, focuses on Shakyamuni's early teachings.

Mahayana, basing itself on later sutras, added the concept of the bodhisattva – someone who has achieved the enlightenment of a buddha, is ready to enter nirvana, but who turns back, making a vow to wait until all sentient beings have been saved. Theravada remains strong in South East Asia and Sri Lanka. Mahayana spread north-east into Tibet, China, Korea and Japan.

The Heart Sutra belongs to Mahayana Buddhism. It focuses on one key Mahayana idea, *sunyata* or 'emptiness', propounded most forcefully by the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna in the second/third century AD. Nagarjuna stressed that not only are the things of this world transient (as Shakyamuni had taught), they are completely empty. Nothing can be said to truly exist.

And yet clearly *something* does exist, since we live in a physical world. Nagarjuna's solution was to argue that there are 'Two Truths': physical reality as we experience it is a 'lower truth', not the ultimate truth, which is emptiness. He preached accepting existence and emptiness – the lower and higher truths – at the same time. So they named his school the 'Middle Way'.

'Middle Way' sounds moderate and manageable. But Nagarjuna's 'to be and not to be' contains within it an ineradicable paradox. Generations of Buddhists, from anchorites immured in caves in Tibet, to Zen monks meditating in Kyoto, have devoted their lives to solving it. *Sunyata* proved to be one of the richest concepts in human history. The vast forest of Perfection of Wisdom sutras, and countless courtyards of empty Zen gardens, grew from this single seed.

## *Debate and Logic*

You could call the spirit of argument a core principle of Buddhism. In other religions, when rabbis argue over what constitutes the Sabbath, or mullahs pronounce on what's lawful under Islam, there's plenty of debate. But it's all based on sacred texts and divine revelation. It comes down to what was written in the holy book.

For the Buddhists, there never was just one book – they had only an amorphous body of sutras that kept growing as people added to it. There is no Pope, no final authority to decide everything. So they drew instead on the rules of logic. The Buddha and his followers tried to show how every concept followed logically from the previous one and led inexorably to the next. A implies B, and B results in C, D and E. But it doesn't stop there. Looking at it more closely, we see that there are five types of A, and six steps in the process of B, and on it goes.

To study Buddhism, therefore, is to study lists. The earliest lists originated in the words of the Buddha himself: the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, the Six Sensory Bases and so on. Monks honed their skills in monastic debates of the sort that Xuanzang so enjoyed when he was in India, and in the process they came up with more lists.

As the lists proliferated, so did the sutras. The records show that in China over a thousand years from the third to the thirteenth century, 173 translators rendered more than 1,700 Buddhist sutras in well over 6,000 scrolls.[1] The sutras, the lists and the fine points of argument mounted up until finally nobody could keep track of it any longer. That's when the Heart Sutra came into its own.

## *Gods, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*

So far, we have been talking about Buddhism as philosophy. But it's also a religion. Shakyamuni Buddha's focus was on impermanence and its logical results. He didn't talk much about spirits or the afterlife. At the same time, his thought embraced the existence of Hindu gods and goddesses, just as Christianity cocoons within it Judaism in the Old Testament.

After the historical Buddha died, there grew up the belief that earlier buddhas had lived before him, and others would come later, notably Maitreya, Buddha of the Future. So in fact there are many buddhas, not just one. After the first century AD, a gorgeous firework display of divinities exploded into being with the advent of Mahayana Buddhism. It was sparked by the concept of the bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva path, as people had originally conceived it, was one that could be pursued by anyone; it was a thoroughly human ideal. However, it was a short step from there to the idea that bodhisattvas have attained divine superpowers in order to save us. Popular bodhisattvas include Avalokiteshvara (known as Kannon in Japan), god of compassion, who features as the speaker of the Heart Sutra. Another important bodhisattva is Manjusri, god of wisdom; and there are numerous others. Kannon has a thousand arms to save us; Manjusri carries a flaming sword to cut through ignorance.

## *Mantras*

Older than the bodhisattvas, and even older than the Buddha, are mantras, magical words or syllables that have a four-thousand-year history in India. It was believed that each syllable of the old Sanskrit alphabet had occult power.

Mantras were there at the start and still feature in Theravada Buddhism in South East Asia, such as the Thai incantation *Namo Buddhaya* ('Homage to the Buddha'). In that case the intent is clear, but often mantras consist of just a string of sounds without meaning. The eighteenth-century Zen monk Hakuin used to exclaim '*Onsoro!*' when he was making an important point, though nobody knows what this mantra actually means.

Mantras became a big feature of Buddhism in China, Tibet and Japan, and in time the syllables came to be seen as divine in and of themselves, 'seeds' from which buddhas spring into being as we speak them. The last lines of the Heart Sutra consist of a mantra, described as the supreme mantra of all. In fact the whole sutra was seen as a sort of mantra. It's believed that even if you don't understand a word of the sutra, reciting it or copying it out as calligraphy brings power.

## *The Heart of It All*

The intense brevity of the Heart Sutra appealed even to those who had denied sutras, the followers of Zen. At the centre of it is the ideal of wisdom that is proclaimed in the full title, 'Heart of Perfected Wisdom Sutra'. The Heart Sutra condenses all the teachings about wisdom into a string of epigrams, a necklace of jewels, each one containing a world of thought. You could expand any one of them into a sutra of 100,000 lines.

Kukai, eighth/ninth-century founder of Japanese Shingon Buddhism, wrote in his commentary on the Heart Sutra: 'A discussion of each sound and letter would take eons of time and still not be complete, and buddhas equal in numbers to the motes of dust in the universe or drops of water in the oceans would still not be able to finish explaining each word and the reality it teaches.'[2]

So condensed is the sutra that generations of thinkers have felt drawn to unpack it all over again. Like diamond merchants in Antwerp examining the lustre of a gem against the background of a scrap of pale blue paper, they pick up each jewel-phrase