

A Critical Study of Wisdom as Depicted in Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā with Reference to the Philosophy of Nāgārjuna

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As explained in many philosophers the wisdom is the basic component in attaining final goal. Buddha also emphasized its value in attaining nibbāna. Without wisdom one cannot understand the teaching of Buddha due to its supra-mundane nature. It has got far empirical sense in every word. That is why He said that this doctrine is not for the fools but for the wise.

“paññāvantassaayamdharmo-
nāyamdhammoduppaññassa”

With this appreciation of wisdom the Buddhist scholars wanted to explain the value of wisdom in many ways. That is why they wrote many books on this topic to clear up the idea and usage of wisdom. Especially the Mahāyāna Buddhist scholars composed a series of wisdom books. This series can be named as the literature of Prajñāpāramitā. The content of those literary works can be divided into two sections.

1. Philosophical section
2. Ritual section

In the philosophical section the teaching of emptiness can be seen. In ritual section the practical usage of wisdom which is connected to the compassion can be seen. Nāgārjuna composed Mūlamādhyamikakārikā taking into consideration of wisdom as described in Prajñāpāramitāsūtras. In Mahāyāna Vaipulyasūtras two main factors are explained.

1. Buddha, Bodhisattva and Mahāsattva (Lalithavistara, Saddharmapuṇḍarīka and so on)
2. Sūnyatā and Prajñā

In Prajñāpāramitāsūtras Sūnyatā and Mahākaraṇā are described. Acārya Sāntideva used his compositions to explain both Sūnyatā and Mahākaraṇā. The discussions of Buddha, Subhūti and Sāriputta in Prajñāpāramitāsūtras are very important to get clear cut understanding on the path to the perfect wisdom. Mostly they are composed as dialogues.

The word Pāramitā has got different meanings. Pāramitā means perfections. Prajñā is one of the perfections. In Mahāyāna tradition there are only six perceptions. They are as follows.

1. Dānapāramitā: generosity, giving of oneself
2. Śīlapāramitā: virtue, morality, discipline, proper conduct

3. Kṣāntipāramitā: patience, tolerance, forbearance, acceptance, endurance
4. Vīryapāramitā: energy, diligence, vigor, effort
5. Dhyānapāramitā: one-pointed concentration, contemplation
6. Prajñāpāramitā: wisdom, insight

But In Theravada there are 10 perfections to be fulfilled for the enlightenment. They are Dāna, Śīla, Nekkhamma, Paññā, Viriya, Khanti, Sacca, Adhitthāna, Mettā and Upekkhā.

Completeness of wisdom or Perfect wisdom is considered as Prajñāpāramitā. It is named as Sūnyatā, tathathā, dharmadhātu, paramārthasatya, anutpāda and anirodha. By all these words one of the doctrinal and philosophical sense is insisted. That is Sūnyatā or Nihilism. Āchārya Dinnāga has defined Prajñāpāramitā as follows.

“prajñāpāramitā jñānamadvayamsatathāgataḥ
sādhyaṭādarthyayogena
tāchchabdamanthamārgayoh” (prajñāpāramitā piṇḍārtha,
1 kārikā)

The primary focus of some Mahāyāna schools is Bodhicitta, the vow to strive for the awakened mind of Buddhahood for the benefit of both oneself and all other sentient beings. As Ananda Kumaraswami notes, “The most essential part of the Mahayana is its emphasis on the Bodhisattva ideal, which replaces the Arhata, or ranks before it.” According to Mahāyāna teachings, being a high-level bodhisattva involves possessing a mind of great compassion conjoined with insight (prajñā) realizing the reality of emptiness and/or the Buddhanature of all beings. Mahāyāna teaches that the practitioner will realize Buddhahood, the final goal of full awakening: an omniscient, blissful mind completely free from suffering and its causes, with which one is able to work tirelessly for the benefit of all living beings.

Many “philosophical” schools and Mahāyānasūtras have focused on the nature of enlightenment and nirvana itself.

Prajñāpāramitā Literature

Emphasizing the importance of wisdom the ancient scholars have composed many books using maximum 125000 granthas (grantha means 32 syllables) and minimum 01 grantha.

In Nepalese Mūlabruhatprajñāpāramitāsūtra there are 125000 granthas¹. Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramita has got 100000 granthas. Pañcaviṃsatisāhasrikā was composed with 25000 granthas. Daśasāhasrikā has got 10000 granthas. Aṣṭasāhasrikā was composed with 8000 granthas.

There are more than 50 Prajñāpāramita sutras including above given books. Vijayarājavarācharya has given a list²

Some of those books can be seen as Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese versions.

1. PañcaviṃsatisāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā (Nepalee)
2. ŚatasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā³
3. PañcaviṃsatisāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā⁴
4. AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā⁵
5. SvalpāksharīPrajñāpāramitā⁶
6. Prajñāpāramitāhruḍayasūtramvistrutam⁷
7. Prajñāpāramitāhruḍayasūtramsamkṣiptam⁸
8. KaushikaPrajñāpāramitā⁹
9. AdhyardhasatikaPrajñāpāramitā¹⁰
10. VajracchedikāPrajñāpāramitā (trimsatika)¹¹
11. SārdhadvisāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā¹²
12. SaptasahasrikāPrajñāpāramitā¹³
13. AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā¹⁴
14. Dasasāhasrikā¹⁵
15. PañcaviṃsatiPrajñāpāramitā¹⁶
16. AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā¹⁷
17. EkaviṃsatislokaPrajñāpāramitā¹⁸
18. CaturdasalokaPrajñāpāramitā¹⁹
19. EkāksharīPrajñāpāramitā (letter —A[~])²⁰
20. Prajñāpāramitanāmāstasatakam²¹
21. PrajñāpāramitaPindārtha²²
22. DevarajappravaraPrajñāpāramitā²³
23. NāgasriPrajñāpāramitā²⁴
24. Prajñāpāramitāmūlahruḍayam²⁵
25. Prajñāpāramitasūtram²⁶
26. MahāPrajñāpāramitāŚāstram²⁷
27. MahāPrajñāpāramitasūtravibhāshā²⁸
- 28.
29. AbhisamayālamkāronāmaPrajñāpāramitopadesaŚāstram²⁹
30. Abhisamayālamkāro nāmaPrajñāpāramitā³⁰
31. PrajñāpāramitāDhāraṇī³¹
32. PrajñāpāramitāMantra³²
33. PañcaśatikāPrajñāpāramitā³³

The number of Prajñāpāramitā compositions which is given by different scholars is different from each other.

Edward Conze 40³⁴
RyushoHikata 27³⁵
Hemarājasākya 45³⁶

In Tohoku catalogue there are many more works related to Prajñāpāramitā literature.

Ekaksarimātā (T no 23), Sūryagarbha (T no 26), Candragarbha (T 27), Samantabhadra (T 28), Vajrapāni (T 29), Vajraketu (T no 30)

Nanjio's catalogue of the Chinese Buddhist Tripitaka and the catalogue of Walleser's Die Vollkommenheit der Erkenninis are important to find the Literature of

Prajñāpāramitā. The latest list has prepared by Dharmadattachaturvedi.³⁷

As listed there are 48 names of the Prajñāpāramitā works.³⁸

As explained in AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā sutra the spread for Prajñāpāramitā books was occurred in order in the world starting from South direction and then Eastern direction. Finally, North direction in the world.³⁹ However, Nāgārjuna has explained the spread of this literature has occurred first in Magadha region. After the Buddha's passing away It was spread in South region of India. Then it has reached to Western direction. After five hundred years of the Buddhist era it has reached to Northern direction.⁴⁰

According to Dutt. Nthe Prajñāpāramitā is the most holyand the most valuable of all works.⁴¹

He has mentioned that the earliest Prajñāpāramitā work is Daśasāhasrikā. It has written by Lokarakshā about 148 A. D. The Sanskrit versions cannot be found. We have only Chinese translation. Due to the non-reference of this work by Indian scholars It may have a non-Indian Origin. If we depend on Tibetan tradition Aṣṭasāhasrikā is the earliest one which was preached by Maitreya. However, Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra which is written by Nāgārjuna has followed Aṣṭasāhasrikā, daśasāhasrikā and Pañcaviṃsati, but he has not mentioned the source. Japanese scholars believe that Nagarjuna's work has followed the Chinese Prajñāpāramitā called Ta-Min-Tu-Ching. According to Nanjio's information this is a version of Aṣṭa or DaśasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā.⁴² Nepalese tradition refers that the earliest one was in verses. Then it was elaborated as Aṣṭasāhasrikā and daśasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā. When we consider the other literal works the early texts were in Verses. In the same manner Prajñāpāramitā literature also started in verses. Therefore, we can accept the Nepalese concept.

Some scholars believe that the Aṣṭasāhasrikā has written by Nāgārjuna. Then he wrote himself a commentary named as MahāPrajñāpāramitāśāstra (sūtrabhāṣya). In the meantime ĀryaMaitreya wrote Prajñāpāramitopadesaśāstra including 8 chapters and 274 verses. It was further named as Abhisamayālakāra. It was the brief treatise of Aṣṭasāhasrikā and Pañcaviṃsati. Then Dinnāga wrote Prajñāpāramitāpiṇḍārtha as a brief note on Aṣṭasāhasrikā. He wrote a tīkā including 58 verses. In the same way kambalapāda wrote a tīkā using 9 verses. Vassubandhu (paddhati), ĀryaVimuktisena (vrutti), BhadantaVimuktisena (vārtika) and Haribhadra (āloka) also wrote commentaries on Aṣṭasāhasrikā.

Perfect Wisdom in Aṣṭasāhasrikā

In this work Ven. Subhuti explains Mahāprajñā with the power or influence of the Buddha. Here perfect understanding of the theory of nihilism is considered as the final goal.

In the second chapter which is named as SakraParivarta it is explained that the Lord of god and Other Devas and

Brahmas came to this great assembly and joined for a discussion with Buddha, Subhūti, Sariputta and other great monks.

“imānyāryasubhūtesambahulānidevaputrasahasrāniasyāmp arśadisannipātāsannisannāniāryasyasubhūterantikātprajñāp āramitāmśrotukāmānibodhisatvānāmmahāsātvanāmupadeś amāvavādānuśāsanīmca”⁴³

According to this passage Thousands of gods came to Ven. Subhūti to listen Prajñāpāramitā which was preached to Bodhisattvas. He was preaching through the Buddha’s might (buddhānubhāvena, Buddha tejasā, buddhādhisthānena).

For perfect wisdom one should follow Prajñāpāramitā and teaching of nihilism

(bhāsisyehamteyathābodhisattvenamahāsātvenaprajñāpāramitāyāmsthātavyam. sūnyatāyāmkausikatiṣṭhātibodhisattvenamahāsātvenaprajñāpāramitāyāmsthātavyam.)⁴⁴

Through standing on emptiness one should stand in perfect wisdom. In other facts he should not stand.

“narūpesthātavyam. navedanayām. nasajñāyām, nasamskāresu, navijñānesthātavyam, na caksusi..... na pruthividhātausthātavyam..... naindriyabalabodhyangesu, namārgamgesusthātavyam, nasrotāpattiphale..... nārhatvesthātavyam. napratyekabuddhatve stātavyam. na buddhatvesthātavyam”⁴⁵

He does not stand on any of these. Not on eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. Not on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchable things, mind objects..... not on the elements. Not on the pillars of mindfulness, write efforts, roads to psychic power, faculties, powers limbs of enlightenment, limbs of the path, not on the stream winner, once returner, never-returner, or arhatship; not on pratyeka Buddhahood, nor on Buddhahood.

Here it is explained that the form is not an object which is to be considered as permanent or impermanent, ease or ill, lovely or impulsive, empty or apprehended as something.⁴⁶

Not only the personal and material things but also the doctrinal factors and supra-mundane qualities should be considered as mentioned above. He should not take his stand on the notion that the fruit of the holy life derives its dignity from the unconditioned or that a stream winner is worthy of gifts.... arahat.....Pratyekabuddha.... Buddha worthy of gifts.⁴⁷

Furthermore, it is explained that the tathāgata nowhere stand, because his mind sought no support. He stood neither in what is conditioned, nor in what is unconditioned, nor did he emerge from.⁴⁸

This is the way of attaining perfect wisdom. “evamevaāyusmānSāriputrabodhisattvenamahāsātvenasthāt

avyam. evamsikṣitavyam” (even so should a Bodhisattva stand and train himself).⁴⁹ Understanding and working in this manner is called perfection of wisdom or Prajñāpāramitā.

“evam hi sikṣamānebodhisattvovihāraṭvohāratyanenaPrajñāpāramitāvihārenaavirahitaścānenamanasikarenāti”

In this passage the words ‘avirahitaścānenamanasikārena’ means live without having any thoughts of bondages (avirahita). He lives free from the cravings and full of detachments. When he trains thus, he adjusts himself to perfect wisdom, and will never cease from taking it to heart.

The author has tried to explain the emptiness of all dharmas or phenomena by the statements such as “sarvadharmāpidevaputrāḥmāyopamāḥsvapnopamāḥ, srotāpānāpimāyopamāḥsvapnopamāḥ.....” The meaning of this statement is “all objective facts also are like a magical illusion, like a dream. The various classes of saints..... from stream-winner to Buddhahood.....also are like a magical illusion, like a dream”.

The amazing point is that he maintains the idea of illusory liberation (nirvana).

“nirvānamapimāyopamāḥsvapnopamāmitivadeyam” (even Nirvāna is like an illusion, is like a dream).

In this dialogue the monks such as Sāriputra, Punna, Maitrāyanīputra, Mahākosthila, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākāsyapa, Ananda and the other disciples asked a question from Subhūti.

“Who Subhūti will be those who grasp this perfect wisdom as here explained?”

As in NirvānaParīkṣā (chapter 25 of MūlamādhyamikaKārikā) opponents argued with Nāgārjuna here also asked a question referring to the person of liberated. If there is no person or Dharma who and what will be understood? Due to the theory of selflessness of Pudgala and Dharma taught in this philosophy one will understand that there will not be a person who attain final goal.

Answer of Subhūti:-No one will grasp this perfect wisdom as here explained. For no dharma at all has been indicated, lit up, or communicated, so there will be no one who can grasp it.

In Theravāda teaching also it is explained that the dharma is only for the liberation. No need to cling on it. As a raft which was helped to cross the river one should think on Dharma. It should not carry keeping on the shoulders as a respect to the raft.

When we consider the answer of Subhūti detachment of dharma and personal matters can be seen.

But as Nāgārjuna explained there is liberation and liberated one. Absence of cause nothing is there, no one is there. Here we cannot see the negative idea or nothingness. They wanted to explain the detachment of personal and doctrinal matters in the background of emptiness and they said that there is no dharma and no person.

“atranakaścītdharmāḥnasūcyate. nakaścītdharmāḥ
paridīpyate. Na
kaścītdharmāḥprajñāpāramite.....tathavāsyāḥprajñā
pāramitāevamnirdisyaṃānāyānakaścītpṛatyēśakobhaviṣyat
ḥ”⁵⁰

By this paragraph it is clearly expressed that idea. He doesn't train himself to get hold of any dharma-even of all knowledge-nor to produce one, or make one disappear.

The word 'parigraha' has used to give the meaning of attachment in this context.

“yaāyusmānsāriputrabodhisattvomaḥāsavonakasyacītdhar
masyaparigrahāyasikṣate, notpādāyanāntardhānāyasikṣate,
sanasarvajnatāyāparigrahāyasikṣate.
notpādāyanaantardhānāyasikṣate.
evamcāyusmansāriputrasikṣasamanobodhisattvomaḥāsavah
sarvajnatāyāmsikṣate. sarvajnatāyāmniryāsyati”⁵¹

Here it is explained that the bodhisattva should not cling on even in Buddhahood. Without clinging he has to train on Prajñāpāramitā.

Hearing these explanations Śakra asked a question from Subhūti.

Question:-Where should a Bodhisattva search for perfect wisdom?

Answer:-He should not search for it in form, nor in any other skandha; nor in that which is other than form, or than any other skandha, because perfect wisdom is not one of the skandhas, no yet other than they.

The Importance of Perfect Wisdom

As earlier discussed the wisdom is the most necessary fact in attaining final goal. In both schools Theravāda and Mahāyāna the wisdom is highly appreciated and it is the basic component of reaching final emancipation. In Prajñāpāramitā literature the perfect wisdom is a valuable component to achieve the Buddhahood. Therefore the Bodhisattvas should necessarily practice it with a great effort.

The greatness and the nature of Prajñāpāramitā are explained as follows.

“mahāpāramiteyamāryasubhūteyadutaprajñāpāramitā.
apramānapāramiteyamāryasubhūteyadutaprajñāpāramitā.
aparimānapāramiteyamāryasubhūteyadutaprajñāpāramitā
nantapāramiteyamāryasubhūteyadutaprajñāpāramitā”⁵²

‘This perfection of wisdom, Subhūti, is a great perfection, unlimited, measureless, and infinite’

Perfect wisdom is an infinite perfection because objects as well as (individual) beings are infinite. Perfect wisdom is an infinite perfection because one cannot get at the beginning, middle, or end of any objective fact. Further it is explained that dharma has no own-being. Moreover, perfect wisdom is an infinite perfection because all objective facts are endless and boundless, and their beginning, middle or end is not apprehended. Perfect wisdom is an infinite perfection by reason of the infinitude of beings?

When Śakra asked a question from Subhūti as

How is it Holy Subhūti, that perfect wisdom is an infinite perfection by of the infinitude of beings?
Subhūti answered

“It is not so because of their exceedingly great number and abundance with this answer Śakra wanted to ask few questions.

Śakra:-How then, Holy Subhūti, is perfect wisdom an infinite perfection by reason of the infinitude of beings?

Subhūti:-What factual entity does the word ‘being’ denote?

Śakra:-The word ‘being’ has been added on (to what is really there) as something adventitious, groundless, as nothing in itself, un-founded in objective fact.

At the end of this discussion Subhūti said ‘the infinitude of perfect wisdom should be known from the infinitude of beings’

So the knowledge of Buddha is infinite due to the immeasurable nature. Bodhisattva should try to attain this perfect wisdom without delay.

Sūnyatā in Prajñāpāramitā

In 18th and 20th chapters emptiness is discussed in details and it is very connected to the teaching of Nāgārjuna.

Subhūti asked from the Buddha:

How should a Bodhisattva, who causes in perfect wisdom, achieve the complete conquest of emptiness, or how should he enter into the concentration on emptiness?⁵³

Buddha answered to Subhūti

He should contemplate on form, etc. , as empty, but he should contemplate that with an undisturbed series of thoughts in such a way that, when he contemplates that with an undisturbed series of thoughts in such a way that, when he contemplates the fact that ‘form’, etc. , is empty, he does not regard that true nature of dharmas (i. e. emptiness) as something which, as a result of its own true nature (i. e. emptiness) is a real entity, but when he does not regard that true nature of dharmas, as a real thing, then he cannot realize the reality-limit.⁵⁴

By this dialogue the concept of emptiness can be seen as depicted in Prajñāpāramitā. It is very similar to the philosophy of Nāgārjuna and not contrast with Theravāda tradition.

Wisdom is a necessary factor in attaining final goal. According to Prajñāpāramitā literature and Nāgārjuna's teaching understanding the emptiness and selflessness is called perfect wisdom. To attain this perfect wisdom one should follow the Prajñāpāramitā, understanding the reality or emptiness of Pudgala and dharma (pudgalanairātmya and dharma nairātmya) without attachments.

Conclusion

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¹Grantha is a group of syllables. It is about 32 letters.

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⁶T. T. P. 258, tohoku, 22

⁷Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Bhaga 1, T. T. P No. 250

⁸Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Bhaga 1 samgruhiitaa

⁹Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 19, T. T. P No. 249

¹⁰Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 10, T. T. P No. 220

¹¹Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 17, T. T. P No. 220

¹²Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. Bhaga 1 samgruhiitaa, 16, T. T. P No. 220

¹³Manjuśrīparivarta, Tohoku. 7, T. T. P No. 220

¹⁴Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 3, T. T. P No. 220 (chinese)

¹⁵Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 11, T. T. P No. 220

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²⁰Do

²¹Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 15, T. T. P No. 220

²²Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. (darabhaga Edition)

²³Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 5, T. T. P No. 220

²⁴Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. 8, T. T. P No. 220 (chinese)

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²⁶Sanskrit seva sādhanā, 2006, edit. Dharmadatta chaturvedi, Kendriya Tibetan Institute, Saranath-Varanasi, India, pp 354-355 (list of the books)

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²⁸Mahāyāna sūtrasaṃgraha, Tohoku. T. T. P No. 1509

²⁹Darabhanga Edition, 1961

³⁰DarabhangaEdition, Buddhist Sanskrit Series- 4

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- ⁴⁰Mahaprajñāpāramitāśāstram, Nāgārjuna, P. 334, pada tippanī, 126
- ⁴¹Aspect of Mahayana Buddhism and its relation to hīnayāna, N. Dutt, Luzac and Co. , London, 1930,, Appendix, P. 341
- ⁴²Aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its relation to hīnayāna, N. Dutt, Luzac and Co. , London, 1930,, Appendix, P. 343-44
- ⁴³AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 2, P 17
- ⁴⁴Do
- ⁴⁵Do, p. 18
- ⁴⁶Rūpamṇyamanityamitinasthātavyam, rūpamsukhamdukkhamitinasthātavyam, rūpamsubhāmasubhamitinasthātavyam, rūpamsūnyamupalabhyatevetinasthātavyam”. P. 18
- ⁴⁷Sakrudāgāmiphalamanāgāmiphalarhatvamasamskrutaprabhāvamitinasthātavyam. pratyekabuddhatvamasamskrutaprabhāvamitinasthātavyam. śrotāpannodakṣinīyamitinasthātavyam..... buddhodakṣinīyamitinasthātavyam”. p. 18
- ⁴⁸Apratiṣṭhitamānasohitathāgatorhansamyak sambuddhaḥ. sa naivasamskrutedhātausthitonapyasamskrutedhatausthitonatatovuyutthitaḥ. p. 18
- ⁴⁹AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 2, p. 18
- ⁵⁰AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 2, p. 18
- ⁵¹AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 2, p. 18
- ⁵²AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 2, p. 20
- ⁵³“Athakhalvāyusmānsuhūtirbhagavantametadavocat-prajñāpāramitāyāmbhagavamscaratābodhisattvenamahāsatvenakathamsūnyatāyāmparicayaḥkartavyaḥ, kathamvāsūnyatāsamadhiḥsamāpannaḥ?” AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 20, p. 183
- ⁵⁴“bhagavānāha-ihasubhūtebodhisattvenamahāsatvenaprajñāpāramitāyāmscaratārūpamsūnyamitipratyaveksitavyam”. AṣṭasāhasrikāPrajñāpāramitā, Chapter 20, p. 183