

# Heart Sutra Retreat in 4 sessions

## Instructions based on advice from Lama Zopa Rinpoche

### *First session*

Start with Ganden Lha Gyema.

Incorporate strong meditation on guru devotion as the primary lam-rim meditation.

Request lots and lots of blessings. Be sure to do this!

Then do *Heart Sutra* recitation and meditation. (see Method 1 and 2 below)

### *Second through Fourth sessions*

- a) If you do not have a daily meditation practice based on a particular deity, then use *The Practice of the Prajnaparamita, the Wisdom Gone Beyond* as your practice sadhana. Do the meditation as outlined below using either *Method 1* or *Method 2* depending on your personal preference. It is best to begin each session with some form of guru yoga practice and make requests for blessings. At the end of the last session, make strong dedication prayers.
- b) If you have a practice commitment for the *Three Yogas of Purification* or have a principal deity practice, you can use these as your initial guru yoga practice to begin your session, making special effort to meditate on emptiness during the dharmakaya meditation combined with inseparability of oneself, the meditational deity, and the guru. When you have finished the sadhana, proceed with recitation and meditation on the Heart Sutra as outlined below.

### *How to meditate during the Heart Sutra retreat*

#### *Method 1*

During the first session, recite the *Heart Sutra* until you get to the first place to meditate on emptiness, beginning with “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” Spend some time (5-20 minutes) meditating on emptiness by considering the meaning of this phrase. Then when your concentration weakens, finish reciting the sutra. Begin reciting the sutra again and continue up to the next point, “form is no other than emptiness...,” pausing there. Again, spend some time (5-20 minutes) meditating on emptiness using this object; then when your concentration weakens, finish reciting the sutra. Begin again and continue up to the next point (i.e., “no feelings”), stop, meditate on emptiness focusing on this point, and then when your concentration weakens, finish the recitation. Start again, using the next point, etc. etc. until the end of the session. When you begin the second session, just begin with the recitation and continue until whatever point was your last object for meditation on emptiness in the previous session ... and continue as before ... etc., etc.

#### *Method 2*

The same as above, except you should focus on only one object or phrase for your entire meditation time. Then when you have finished your meditation on emptiness, simply recite the *Heart Sutra* until the end of the session. The second session then begins with recitation up to the next point, on which you meditate for all your meditation time ... then simply recite for the rest of the session, etc.

### *Post-meditation session*

In between sessions you should do one of the following:

- 1) Perform strict walking meditation in a concentrated fashion, similar to the walking meditation done in insight meditation retreats, thinking with every step that everything coming within your sphere of awareness “is not true”: (this sound) is not true; (that form) is not true; (this sensation) is not true; (that smell) is not true from its own side. View everything you see, hear, smell, feel, think, etc. with this awareness.
- 2) Study emptiness as much as possible
- 3) Do preliminary practices

### *Suggestions for walking meditation*

During the walking meditation you can also use other phrases such as “merely labeled” (e.g., merely labeled “I” am merely labeled “walking” on this merely labeled “path”, etc.) or “This is a dream” ... As you walk, it can also be helpful to mentally debate the existence of whatever object appears to your mind, analyzing with the various tools found in the study of emptiness.

In the words of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, if one does a *Heart Sutra* retreat like this for one month, one week, or even for one weekend, “...Your life will never be the same.”

### *Recommended reading*

*The Heart Sutra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, by Donald S. Lopez, Jr.  
Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

*Echoes of Voidness*, by Geshe Rabten. Translated and edited by Stephen Batchelor.  
London: Wisdom Publications, 1983.

*Realizing Emptiness: Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*, by Gen Lamrimpa, translated by B. Alan Wallace.  
Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1999.



*This document has been assembled on the basis of notes taken by Kendall Magnussen from an occasion in which Lama Zopa Rinpoche was explaining to a student how to do this type of retreat. It has been compiled for the use of FPMT centers and practitioners by FPMT International Office Education Services, April 2000.*

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*May all beings realize the bliss of emptiness*