

開經偈 The Verse on Opening a Sūtra

開經偈

kāi jīng jì // hōi gīng gāih

開 opening, starting; 經 sūtra; 偈 verse (gāthā)

The Verse on Opening a Sūtra

無上甚深微妙法

wú shàng shèn shēn wéi miào fǎ // mōuh seuhng sahm sām mèih miuh faat

無上 unsurpassed; 甚深 profound; 微 subtle; 妙 marvelous; 法 Dharma, Buddha's teaching

The Buddha's teachings, which are unsurpassed, profound, and wonderful,

百千萬劫難遭遇

bǎi qiān wàn jié nán zāo yù // baak chīn maahn gip nàahn jōu yuh

百 hundred; 千 thousand; 萬 ten thousand; 劫 kalpas; 難 difficult; 遭遇 to encounter

Are difficult to encounter even in millions of eons

我今見聞得受持

wǒ jīn jiàn wén dé shòu chí // ngóh gām gin mahn dāk sauh chih

我 I; 今 now; 見 see; 聞 hear; 得 obtain; 受 receive; 持 hold

Now that I am (finally) able to hear and practice it

願解如來真實義

yuàn jiě rú lái zhēn shí yì // yuhn gáai yùh lòih jān saht yih

願 to wish, to yearn; 解 to understand; 如來 the Buddha (Tathāgatha); 真 true; 實 real; 義 meaning

I aspire to understand the real message of the Buddha.

Open any Chinese Buddhist sūtra, and you will find this verse in the front matter. 開經偈 was composed by Empress Wǔ Zétiān 武則天 (625-705) after reading the Huáyán Sūtra (華嚴經,

Avataṃsaka Sūtra) for the first time. The poem encapsulates the Empress' humility upon encountering the Buddha's teaching, which is rare, subtle, profound, and wonderful. As a reader of the poem, we join in the Empress' appreciation of the precious Dharma, cultivating an attitude of gravity and gratitude for this opportunity.

Notes on the transcription, romanization, and translation:

The first line is the Chinese character text, which is printed in traditional script (繁體字), and unless otherwise noted, the text is drawn from the CBETA website.

The second line consists of two different romanizations of the Chinese text, first the Mandarin pronunciation in pīnyīn (拼音), followed by the Cantonese pronunciation in Yale romanization, separated by the double slashes.

The third line is a basic gloss for each Chinese character.

And the fourth line is my draft translation of the Chinese text, mostly literal, but also at times conforming more to the nuances of contemporary English. By providing the Chinese text and the basic gloss, I am inviting others to read the Chinese on their own, and create their own translation—one that makes the most sense to them, one that they can more readily apply to their own lives.