

The Diamond Sutra

Introduction

The *Diamond Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*; more fully in English *The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion* or *Diamond Cutter of Perfect Wisdom*; also known as the *Prajnaparamita in Three Hundred Verses*) is a short, highly regarded Mahayana sutra that may date to an early phase of Perfection of Wisdom (Prajnaparamita) literary activity. Like the shorter *Heart Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra* is said to concisely sum up the Buddha's most important teachings, at least from a Mahayana perspective. These are essential teachings in Mahayana Buddhism for three reasons: they transform how we perceive reality; they relate how a bodhisattva who understands emptiness can awaken the un-awakened; and they present the path to true buddhahood. For these reasons, the Sutra is considered 'the most important Mahayana wisdom text to prefigure the Zen tradition.' Perhaps because it is short (it can be read in under an hour), it has been memorized and recited in Asia for over 1500 years and increasingly during the last century around the world. 'The significance of the word 'diamond' in the title is that it is the hardest and strongest of all substances, which can cut through any other. As such it is like the doctrine of emptiness, which cuts through all substantial concepts.'¹

This primer provides summaries of the Sutra's origin and history, of why it is situated where it is on the Path, of its storyline, and of the ways it has been used by Buddhists as a focus of practice.

Origin and Brief History

Like sutras in Buddhism in general the date and place of origin of the *Diamond Sutra* remain debated. According to Edward Conze, a specialist in Perfection of Wisdom literature, the Sutra dates to the fourth century CE, some 300 to 400 years after the appearance of the first sutra in that tradition.² Other, especially Japanese, scholars believe it is the earliest Perfection of Wisdom sutra, in part because the word 'Mahayana' is not found in the sutra. Regardless of its exact place and time of origin, it is assumed that this time and place were in India, and that it spread outward from there.

The sutra reached (or was in) China by the fourth century, for it was translated into Chinese by Kumarajive, a Central Asian translator, in 401-402. Interestingly, this translation predates the earliest Sanskrit fragments of the text found along the Silk Road (in Gandhara and Khotan), which date no earlier than the late fifth or early sixth century.³ Kumarajive's translation remains highly regarded, for it stresses the meaning being expressed rather than the literal meaning of the words themselves.⁴ The sutra was eventually translated into Tibetan (in the late eighth or early ninth century) and other Asian languages before the modern era.

More broadly, the Diamond Sutra is an early expression of Mahayana Buddhism, which began to diverge from the main Abhidharma tradition by the first-century BCE.⁵ In contrast to the supposedly rigid scholastic system of Abhidharma Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism stressed emptiness (*shunyata*: the empty nature of all dharmas), suchness (*tathata*: the notion that all beings inherently possess the potential to become a Buddha), and compassion (*karuna*: the desire to attain nirvana for all beings); these concepts are discussed more fully in the following section. The Perfection of Wisdom sutras are thought to represent the emergent phase of Mahayana literature.

An Overview of the Message of the *Diamond Sutra*

A straightforward way to understand the message of the Diamond Sutra is to understand its position and intent on the Path to true buddhahood, at least from a Mahayana perspective.⁶ From this perspective the Path is divided into three sequential phases.⁷ During the first phase, the unenlightened learn to see the emptiness of all things. Teachings at the beginning of this phase include the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Middle Way. A teaching near the end of this phase is Nagarjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārika* (literally *Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*, known popularly as the *karika*). A goal of this latter teaching is to show that everything, even the word 'emptiness' itself, is empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva*). According to the Buddha, it is the belief in the inherent existence of things that causes suffering (*samsara*) in human beings.

The second phase is the realm of emptiness (*sunyata*). A key distinction stressed by Nagarjuna is between conventional (relative) reality and ultimate (abstract) reality (this is called the two truths or two realities thesis). The conventional world is the taken-for-granted world around us that is created through our use of language and its concepts (tree, dog, self, you). Ultimate reality is the non-dual, non-conceptual world of emptiness. Failure to see this difference (to live unawares in the conventional world) leads to the root delusion of self and things that lies at the basis of all human suffering. To attain this second phase of the Path is nirvana (enlightenment) for an arhat.⁸

The third and final phase of the Path is, according to the *Diamond Sutra*, the way of the bodhisattva, the way that leads to true buddhahood. It differs in nature from the second phase in two fundamental ways. First, unlike the focus on enlightenment of the self by the arhat, its focus is the enlightenment (the end of suffering) of all beings. And second, rather than viewing the world as composed of two realities, the conventional and the ultimate, it understands that they are One (perhaps two sides of a coin).⁹ Thus, the famous lines in the *Heart Sutra*, "Form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form." This new way of being in the world asks us to think of 'reality' not in terms of conventional versus ultimate options, or some combination of the two, but more pragmatically as skillful ways of approaching the liberation of all beings in a world whose nature we do not truly comprehend. The task for the bodhisattva, then, is to save beings that do not actually exist, using teachings that are empty as well – while relying themselves on the six paramitas of the bodhisattva.¹⁰

This scenario provides a 'high altitude' overview of that part of the Path in which the storyline of the *Diamond Sutra* plays out. The following section fills in some of the detail involved in first freeing oneself from the allure of the realm of Emptiness as understood by an arhat and then understanding how one applies skillful means in a realm that may be nothing but a dream – but a dream nonetheless in which suffering feels very real to the unenlightened.

The Storyline

In brief introduction in the sutra the Buddha has finished his daily walk with fellow monks to gather offerings of food and sits down among his followers. Elder Subhuti, an accomplished arhat, approaches the Buddha and asks what a person on the path like himself should do to further his understanding of the dharma. The sutra is an answer to that question from the perspective of the third phase of the Path.

There are 32 sections in the sutra that have been organized in a variety of ways by commentators.¹¹ Throughout the sutra the Buddha repeatedly returns to the same material but each time from a different perspective to test Subhuti's understanding of his teachings. Subhuti's answers show a lack of understanding at first because of his attachment to an arhat's understanding of emptiness, but his answers increase in comprehension throughout the sutra. An important point in comprehending the underlying basis of the argument that runs through the sutra is that the intent of the Buddha's teaching was to alleviate the suffering of all beings rather than to expound an ideology (that is, the force of the sutra is pragmatic rather than philosophical).¹²

Since the storyline of the sutra is complex, the approach adopted in this primer is a focus on five core themes that highlight its content.¹³ The themes are: 'true' emptiness, the path of a bodhisattva, great merit, the 5 eyes and the 3 bodies of the Buddha, and the attainment of a bodhisattva.

'True' Emptiness. Some commentaries on the Diamond Sutra maintain that the sutra is mainly about the absence of inherent existence ('own-being') in all things, that is, about emptiness as understood by arhats in the second phase of the Path.¹⁴ While based on this view, the understanding of emptiness ('true' emptiness) by a bodhisattva is somewhat different. The bodhisattva sees these two views of reality (the conventional and the ultimate) as non-dual (the classic Zen understanding of non-duality is 'reality is not two'; it is the Buddha's Middle Way, relative reality). It is understanding the dynamic relationship between 'not-two' pairings (here these two views of reality) that the Buddha is teaching Subhuti in the sutra.¹⁵ This view challenges the traveler along the third phase of the Path to think of reality differently, for now 'form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form.'¹⁶ It is this non-dual, dynamic view of emptiness that bodhisattvas use like a hard diamond to 'cut away all unnecessary conceptualization' for those 'still caught in the delusion of the phenomenal world.'

The Path of the Bodhisattva. In contrast to arhats who are intent on saving themselves from suffering, bodhisattvas take a vow to save all sentient beings from suffering.¹⁷ They do this through the use of skillful means (upaya), a central concept in the Diamond Sutra. Since everything is empty of 'own-self,' it is these skillful means that 'bridge the seeming incompatibility of emptiness and compassion.' Bodhisattvas also differ from arhats, who withdraw from the world (they are 'non-returners'), in their commitment to remain in the world as long as it takes to liberate all beings. It is this vow and practice that bring a bodhisattva to true enlightenment (in contrast to the partial enlightenment of an arhat).

Great Merit. A bodhisattva attains great (or 'vast') merit by understanding and making the teaching of the third phase of the path (the 'mother of buddhas') known to others. This kind of merit is different from the merit earned through good deeds in the first phase of the path, which is closely related to karma and achievement of a higher, better rebirth. Since great merit is recognized as empty (it is no body of merit, because no body of merit exists), it is unattached to karma and leads directly to enlightenment rather than to a better life. The bodhisattva's body of merit, which is not limited by space or time, is offered wherever there are individuals caught in the delusion of conventional reality. A bodhisattva advances along the path by gathering a body of merit (a body of merit that does not exist, of course).

The 5 eyes and the 3 bodies of the Buddha. A reason why travelers along the path fail to comprehend (or even recognize) the Buddha's advanced teachings is that they have not learned to 'see' those teachings properly. This notion is addressed in the Diamond Sutra through the concept of the 5 eyes. The 5 eyes are the physical eye (that sees as ordinary people do), the divine eye (that sees great

distances and microscopically), the prajna eye (that sees that all things are empty in a second phase of the path, arhat sense), the dharma eye (that sees reality as a bodhisattva does), and the buddha eye (that is no different than the spaceless, timeless, no nothingless universe).¹⁸ In the sutra Subhuti gradually shifts from 'seeing' with the prajna eye of an arhat to the dharma eye of a bodhisattva. This is an important concept in Mahayana Buddhism, for practitioners only understand ('see') the dharma with the eye they 'see' reality with. The repeated returning to the same material in the sutra is associated with these different ways of 'seeing' that material.

The concept of the 3 bodies of the Buddha is similar to the concept of the 5 eyes in that the conception of the Buddha by a traveler along the path shifts from first seeing him as a materially visible body (the nirmanakaya body), to seeing him as a manifestation of emptiness as understood by a compassionate bodhisattva (the sammbogakaya body), to finally seeing him with the buddha eye as he really is (the dharma body).¹⁹ In many ways the Diamond Sutra is about the bodies of the Buddha and these different ways of seeing those bodies, for the Buddha continually asks Subhuti throughout the sutra, "Can you see my body?" For Subhuti, this is the final mystery, for he must experience and accept the selfless, birthless nature of all dharmas – an understanding that only bodhisattvas near the end of their training can endure (for one finally comprehends that there is nothing at all to 'stand on').

The Attainment of a Bodhisattva. As should be apparent by now, Subhuti eventually understands that there is nothing to be realized at the end of path, for enlightenment turns out to be something one is never without – so how can it be obtained?²⁰ There is no world transformed, no truth gained. So what does a buddha do: he or she gets up in the morning, picks up the begging bowl ... – just as the Buddha does at the beginning of the sutra.

Practicing with the Diamond Sutra

The use of the Diamond Sutra in practice has varied somewhat through time. With the appearance of written texts, the sutra became one of the most important texts in the development of a 'cult of the book.'²¹ Since a sutra was considered the word of the Buddha himself, a reverence for the written word grew in Mahayana Buddhism with increasing access to texts. Merit was generated by copying the text, hearing the sutra recited, augmenting the text with added prayers and mantras, and memorizing the sutra.²² The merit generated might be dedicated to the emperor, ones' parents or family, or to other individuals. Today, the sutra is mainly chanted in ritual contexts. In contemporary practice the chanting (intoning) of the words of the sutra are more important than thinking about the meaning of the words while chanting. In this practice chanting is a form of meditative concentration (and in this way the meaning of the sutra is absorbed). In the West the sutra is increasingly treated as an essay whose study deepens one's understanding of the Dharma.

Notes

1. Huineng, the 7th-century sixth patriarch of Zen, is said to have had his first enlightenment experience on hearing a stranger recite verses from this 'diamond cutter.' For commentaries on the sutra, see the 'further reading and other resources' section at the end of the primer.
2. Conze (1958) 2001. In Conze's reconstruction, the Perfection of Wisdom sutra in eight thousand verses appears first between the first century BCE and first century CE. It was followed during the next two centuries

by versions in 8,000, 25,000, and 100,000 verses. A trend toward short versions, which includes the *Heart* and *Diamond* sutras, occurs in the fourth century CE.

3. As an aside, a copy of Kumarajiva's translation that dates to 868 CE was among the Dunhuang manuscripts discovered in a cave in the early 20th century. According to the British Library, this is "the earliest complete survival of a dated printed book" (note that this is 587 years before the Gutenberg Bible was first printed). See Wood and Barnard's (2010) *The Diamond Sutra: the Story of the World's Earliest Dated Printed Book*.
4. Of course, this has resulted in some difficulties in reconstructing the content and structure of the earlier fourth-century Sanskrit version.
5. In quick review, in the 200-year period after the death of the Buddha Buddhism was an oral culture with no central authority located primarily in monasteries. This period is called Early Buddhism (as well as Pali Buddhism and Nikaya Buddhism). This period was followed by what may be called Abhidharma Buddhism, which focused on categorizing the teachings of the Buddha. A number of Mahayana schools eventually emerged, including the Madhyamaka, Yogacara, Hua-yen, Pure Land, and Vajrayana.
6. However, the message of the Sutra is often obscured by the way the Buddha presents his teaching. For example, the Buddha taught beginners that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own and is, thus, empty. To a more knowledgeable crowd he taught that emptiness itself is empty. It is difficult, then, to determine what is a 'true' teaching and what is an expedient teaching, even in the Diamond Sutra. See note 16 below.
7. These three phases are present by implication in a well-known comment by an old master (Before I sought enlightenment, the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers. While I sought enlightenment, the mountains were not mountains and the rivers were not rivers. After I attained enlightenment, the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers) and in the ten ox-herding pictures (phases 1-7 in the picture are equivalent to the first phase used in the text, phase 8 to the second phase, and phases 9-10 to the third phase).
8. An arhat is an enlightened one in the Theravada (Hinayana) tradition. Also, of the three phases, the second phase is the one with the least literature, though it is very important in yoga.
9. More fundamentally, the notion of these realities is understood in the end as only skillful means.
10. The six paramitas are generosity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. An important point here is that the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, whose goal is to relieve all beings of suffering, are teachings of the first phase of the Path; according to this scenario, individuals in phase two and three are free of suffering.
11. For example, Hahn in his *The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion* (1992) groups the first 5 sections into "the Dialectics of Prajnaparamita" (Part 1), sections 6-8 into "The Language of Non-Attachment" (Part 2), sections 9-17 into "The Answer is in the Question" (Part 3), and sections 18-32 into "Mountains and Rivers Are Our Own Body" (Part 4). Many commentators consider the end of Chapter 16 the end of the body of teaching. Conze (2001 [1958]), for example, considers the last 16 chapters add-ons about a mixture of topics and does not comment on them in his review. On the other hand the notion that the second half of the sutra is just 'add-on' may reflect our own lack of understanding of the teaching, which becomes more subtle throughout the sutra.
12. More formally, this basis is about the ontological commitments the Buddha makes about concepts like emptiness, compassion, and skillful means. Since his concern is pragmatic (the relief of suffering), he is not concerned with the nature of these commitments, a characteristic of his teachings in general. See note 16 below.
13. These themes are also commonly found in other Perfection of Wisdom sutras, too.
14. In this understanding of emptiness all things lack inherent existence because they exist only on the basis of causes and conditions (the doctrine of dependent origination). Therefore, the naming of things as if they are real is just a linguistic convention that is a necessary fiction in the conventional realm. It is this view of emptiness that Nagarjuna is intent on establishing in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārika*.
15. It is the bodhisattva's understanding of the unity of all things (in their emptiness) that is the source of her or his compassion for all beings. For the impact of this non-dual conception of reality in western Zen practice situations, see Leesa S. Davis (2009) 'The View from the Cushion: Zen Challenges to Duality in the Contemporary Practice Situation,' *Contemporary Buddhism* 10(2):260-272.

16. This is where the pragmatic approach of the Buddha comes into play, for he is unconcerned with resulting paradoxes, such as 'saving all beings knowing full well that there is no one to save.' In the sutra the Buddha repeatedly makes contradictory statements located in this paradox. For example, while celebrating the virtuous path of bodhisattvas, he denies at the same time that they exist. In commentaries this is called the 'logic of not,' a logic that is deliberately used as a teaching method in Mahayana Buddhism. In contrast to the West, which embraces Aristotelian logic, paradox is embraced 'joyfully' in Asian religious traditions. Underlying this paradox is the understanding in Perfection of Wisdom literature that concepts like emptiness, non-duality, practice, compassion, and path are only skillful means used to 'save all beings'; these terms are not to be reified or objectified (that is, made real) in any way. Bodhisattvas use the seventh perfection, the perfection of skillful means, 'to work their way through this subtleness.' It should be noted that the term 'emptiness' itself is not used in the sutra, perhaps because its meaning here may be confused with the arhat's understanding of the term.
17. Of course, nothing is as simple as it sounds in a brief review like this. Since arhats believe that it takes many lifetimes of karmic existence to expect buddhahood (enlightenment), they aim at liberation from suffering (which makes sense). In contrast bodhisattvas adopt the new Mahayana view that by practicing the teaching of the third phase of the Path one can eliminate those lifetimes of karmic existence. Consequently, they aim at attaining true buddhahood in this lifetime.
18. This is an overly simple review of what 'seeing' through each of these eyes means. The notion of 'seeing' in an increasingly insightful, spiritual manner by advanced practitioners is a feature of most religious traditions.
19. Again, this is an overly simple review of the 3 bodies of the Buddha, which is a very important concept in Mahayana Buddhism. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, which considers the Buddha an ordinary man, Mahayana Buddhism gives him magical, supernatural powers.
20. The gatha that closes the sutra is well worth memorizing:

As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space
 an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
 a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightening
 view all created things like this.

21. Gregory Shopen (2005), *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India* (University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu). The Perfection of Wisdom phase in the Mahayana tradition was devotional, compared to later more philosophical phases (think Nagarjuna).
22. The presence of hundreds of copies of the sutra in the library cave in Dunhuang (mostly in Chinese) attests to the practice of generating merit by copying the sutra. The 868 CE printed copy of the sutra mentioned in note 3 begins with a mantra intended to purify ones mouth before recitation. Hongren, the fifth Chan patriarch, is said to have told an audience of monks and laypeople that by memorizing the sutra they would see their true nature and become a buddha.

Further Reading and Other Resources

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GG, last updated 9/24/14