

# The Diamond Sutra

The Diamond Sutra, or "The Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts Like a Diamond" Sutra, is one of Buddhism's most significant texts. The text forms part of the Prajnaparamita (or Perfection of Wisdom) literature (38 texts in all) composed in India between 100BCE and 800CE. These scriptures are said to go back to the teachings the Buddha delivered at a place in north-eastern India called Vulture Peak, near the city of Rajgir.

## The Title and Its Meaning

The title of the Sutra in Sanskrit is "Vajra Cchedika Prajna Parmita Sutra" . . .

**Vajra** means "diamond", which is used as an analogy to describe the strength of Prajna.

*Note: A diamond is the hardest naturally occurring substance. You can't cut it, but it can cut through any substance. It's also extremely valuable and, in the way it reflects light, exceedingly beautiful. The Diamond Sutra is a precious tool that reflects the brilliance of the Buddha's teaching and enables us, if we give it the chance, to cut through what's hardest in our lives: our own self-ignorance.*

**Cchedika** means "to cut".

**Prajna** means "wisdom" and is the highest form of wisdom that living beings can attain.

**Paramita** means "reach the opposite shore", cross the sea of sufferings to reach the shore of enlightenment.

## Background and Importance

The Diamond Sutra is believed to have been composed sometime between 300 and 500 BCE. In the history of printing, the Diamond Sutra has special prominence as the first dated printed work that has been found (this date being 11th May, AD868). It was discovered in a walled-up cave in north-west China in 1907.

The Diamond Sutra is one of the most important sutras in Buddhism. Over the years of its existence, people have been studying it, reciting it in ritual assemblies and daily practices. It is believed that many people have experienced spiritual responses and other benefits by following the teaching of this Sutra.

The Diamond Sutra is a sutra beyond religion, as it penetrates inside our mind by revealing the subtle reality of nature. Perhaps not only Buddhists, but everyone should study the Diamond Sutra.

It is no small irony that the oldest extant printed book in the world -- a ninth-century block-print of the Diamond Sutra -- is a work that seeks systematically to undermine all clinging to words, and renders "unreal" all conceptual expression, including its own teachings.

The Diamond Sutra is in a sense a "medical" treatise; in this case the disease, which infects us all, is spiritual ignorance -- the misidentification of our authentic nature with our limited self. The "antidote" to this disease, prescribed by the Buddha, is the "perfection of wisdom," a seemingly colossal task that really means nothing more than "to see things as they are and to share this vision with others." In another sense, then, the sutra is a self-help book, detailing the manner in which you should conduct yourself, both in outward behavior and inward attitude, in order to "be like Buddha."

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## Three Major Aspects of the Diamond Sutra

The Sutra is a record of a dialogue between the Buddha and one of the Ten Great Disciples, Subhuti, in front of 1,250 Buddha's followers. Subhuti was known to best understand the true meaning of emptiness.

After a day collecting alms in the city of Sravasti, the Buddha retires to a garden in the Jeta Grove, a company of monks at his side. Subhuti approaches, sits down and so the dialogue begins.

**Self and Not-Self:** One of the questions Subhuti asks is what should of a person of a good family do to become fully awakened?

The Buddha replies that such a person should generate the thought of leading all beings to Nirvana (in other words, follow the Bodhisattva path -- a Bodhisattva being someone who is able to enter final Nirvana but postpones this until they have helped other beings to enter it first).

A little later in the text the Buddha makes the point that for someone to state that they have 'attained' Nirvana is a misconception because 'attaining' presupposes a person who 'attains'; in true awakening the idea of person is dissolved.

**Giving:** When giving, a Bodhisattva gives without the notion of an individual giving or of an individual receiving, unattached to the idea of self or person.

The Buddha states that there is a far great merit in demonstrating and illuminating even four lines of The Diamond Sutra than all the giving one could conceivably imagine in more conventional ways so precious is this teaching.

For example, 'suppose a woman or man were to renounce all their belongings as many times as there are grains of sands in the river Ganges; and suppose that someone else, after taking form this discourse . . . but one stanza of four lines, would demonstrate it to others. Then this latter on the strength of that would beget a greater heap of merit, immeasurable and incalculable'.

**Beyond Grasping:** Another question Subhuti asks is will any future beings, when the Buddha's teachings are in a period of decline, understand these teachings?

The Buddha replies that, even in such times, there will be Bodhisattvas who will understand. This is because they will not fall into the misapprehension of the perception of 'self', 'person', 'being' or 'soul'.

Moreover, although there is the Buddha's teaching (or dharma), they will realize that the Buddha's teaching has no inherent reality in itself but is "like unto a raft", a vehicle in fact for moving from ignorance to wisdom.

In short, conventional thinking cannot grasp the true nature of wisdom because it is beyond all concepts and 'no-one can grasp it as an object'.

# The Diamond Sutra

## A Condensed Version of the Diamond Sutra

*Note: The complete Diamond Sutra, profound and subtle, as published by Shambhala Dragon Editions and translated by A.F. Price and Wong Mou-lam in 1947, is available for reading in our “new” library!!!*

1. This is what I have heard:

Once, the Buddha was staying at Anathapindika's retreat in the Jeta Grove near the city of Sravasti, with a gathering of 1250 monks. After dressing and making his begging rounds in the city and eating his one meal, he sat with the monks.

2. The monk Subhuti paid his respects to the Buddha and asked a question: "What should one who wants to travel the Bodhisattva path keep in mind?"

3. The Buddha answered, "A Bodhisattva should keep this in mind: All creatures, whether they are born from the womb or hatched from the egg, whether they transform like butterflies or arise miraculously, whether they have a body or are purely spirits, whether they are capable of thought or not capable of thought: All of these I vow to help enter nirvana before I rest there myself!

"But keep in mind, Subhuti, that in reality there is no such thing as an I who helps, and no such thing as an other whom I help. A Bodhisattva who does not recognize this reality is no true Bodhisattva!"

4. "A true Bodhisattva takes no pleasure in this act of compassion and has no interest in appearances. He simply helps others selflessly.

"Can you measure the east, the west, the north, and the south, Subhuti?"

"No, Lord."

"Neither can you measure the merit of someone who can help others without thought of himself."

5. "Subhuti! Can anyone tell who is a Buddha on the basis of physical characteristics?"

"No, Lord. You have taught that Buddhahood is not a matter of physical characteristics."

"So one who is concerned with appearances will never see the Buddha, but one is not concerned with appearances may."

6. Subhuti asked, "Lord, will there always be people who understand your message?"

Buddha answered, "Don't doubt it, Subhuti! There will always be people who, hearing the message, will adhere to the precepts and practice our way. Our message will reach people simply because it is true! There will come a time when many will no longer need words, but will be beyond words. We must all strive to go beyond the words, because words can be clung to, and we should not cling to things. Understand that the words of the Buddha are like a raft built to cross a river: When its purpose is completed, it must be left behind if we are to travel further!"

7. "So tell me, Subhuti. Have I taught the ultimate teaching?"

"No, Lord. The ultimate teaching is not something which can be taught, because the ultimate teaching is not a thing which can be grasped or clung to."

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8. The Buddha said, "Tell me, Subhuti. If someone gave away a universe full of treasures to help others, would he gain great merit?"

"Yes, Lord. His merit would be great. But you have taught us that, in order for this act of generosity to be genuine, he would not have thought of gaining merit. In fact, he would not have thought of himself at all!"

The Buddha said, "Now, if someone understands and passes on even four sentences of my message to another, his generosity is even greater. He is not just giving something, he is helping to create future Buddhas!"

9. "Tell me, Subhuti. Would someone who is beginning to understand my message say to himself 'I have accomplished something grand'?"

"No, Lord. Saying something like that would mean that the beginner doesn't understand that there is no ego there to take credit for anything at all!"

"And would someone who is highly advanced in his understanding of my message say to himself 'I have accomplished something grand'?"

"No, Lord. Anyone saying such a thing would also be saying that there is indeed an ego that attains something, and something to attain. These are not the thoughts of someone who understands your message. "Lord, you have said that I have been successful in achieving peace and freedom from passions. In fact, I no longer crave the status of a saint. If I did, I am sure that you would never have thought so much of me!"

10. "Subhuti, If I say, 'Bodhisattvas adorn the heavens,' would I be speaking the truth?"

"No, Lord. Adornments are illusions, and illusions have no place in the heavens."

"And so Bodhisattvas should rid their minds of ego, and cease their preferences for one odor or another, one sound or another, one sight or another. A Bodhisattva should have no attachment or aversion to anything."

The Buddha asked, "Subhuti, if a man had a body as huge as a mountain, would he be a great man?"

"No, Lord. Because "a great man" is only words, and being a great man is an illusion, created by the belief in ego."

13. Then Subhuti asked the Buddha, "Lord, what shall we call this sermon?"

The Buddha answered, "Call it 'The Diamond Sutra on the Perfection of Wisdom.' Like a diamond blade, it can cut through all delusion!"

14. Then Subhuti suddenly had a full awareness of the meaning of the sermon, and was moved to tears.

"Lord, thank you for this sermon. Anyone who hears it and understands it with a pure mind will be moved by it. Even hundreds of years into the future, its clarity will be appreciated."

32. "Subhuti, if someone gave away enough treasure to fill a universe, he would still not gain as much merit as someone who manages to understand and pass on a few lines of this sermon.

"So what should be on one's mind as one begins the Bodhisattva journey?"

"Like a falling star, like a bubble in a stream,  
Like a flame in the wind, like frost in the sun,  
Like a flash of lightning or a passing dream --  
So should you understand the world of the ego."

Subhuti and the rest of the monks were filled with joy at hearing the Buddha's sermon.

*The above was a very condensed version of the Diamond Sutra,  
a copy of the complete text is available for reading in our library.*