

The Diamond Sutra

The Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra

(The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion)

Condensed Version with Commentary

Notes to this condensed version

1. Not every verse is included in this condensed version. Most verses have been shortened or paraphrased to focus on their main message.
2. Text from the sutra is in regular type. Commentary is in italics. Reflection questions are in bold and are from Eishin.
3. Words in brackets “[]” have been added for paraphrasing or identifying the source of the text.
4. All commentary is from Thich Nhat Hanh unless otherwise indicated in brackets.

Definitions

“Suchness” – The nature of no coming and no going. [From commentary to verse 29]: The Buddha teaches about equality, non-duality, attachment to the view of permanence, and attachment to the view of annihilation. He also tells us that reality is neither coming nor going. Reality is suchness. [Suchness is suchness]. This truth applies to all dharmas, all objects of mind.

The commentary to verse 7 suggests that suchness is beyond conception.

[Eishin]: The Dalai Lama’s book “Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature” defines suchness as “emptiness.”

“Tathagata” – One who manifests suchness. The Buddha says in verse 29; “The meaning of Tathagata is ‘does not come from anywhere and does not go anywhere.’ That is why he is called a Tathagata.” He also says in verse 17; “Tathagata means the suchness of all things.”

From verse 26 - The World-Honored One spoke this verse:

“Someone who looks for me in form
or seeks me in sound
is on a mistaken path
and cannot see the Tathagata.”

Part One

The Dialectics of Prajnaparamita

2.

Subhuti’s Question

“World-Honored One, if [we] want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should [we] rely on and what should [we] do to master [our] thinking?”

3.

The First Flash of Lightning

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “This is how the bodhisattva mahasattvas master their thinking:

- ‘We must lead all beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated.
 - When we read this phrase, we must look at ourselves and ask, “Is this vow at all related to my life and my community? Are we practicing for ourselves or for others? Do we only want to uproot our own afflictions, or is our determination to bring happiness to other living beings?”

- And when this infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.’ Why is this so?
 - *This is the first flash of lightning. The Buddha goes directly to the heart of the prajnaparamita, presenting the idea of formlessness. Thich Nhat Hanh says it would be wonderful if everyone who studies Buddhism could understand this one sentence.*
 - *A true practitioner helps all living beings in a natural and spontaneous way, without distinguishing between the one who is helping and the one being helped. This is the principle of interbeing.*
- If a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva.”
 - *Self:*
 - *Refers to a permanent, changeless identity, but since, according to Buddhism, nothing is permanent and what we normally call a self is made up of non-self elements, there is really no such entity as a self. Our concept of self arises when we have concepts about things that are non-self. Using the sword of conceptualization, we cut reality into pieces, we call one part “I”, and the rest “not I.”*
 - *[Eishin]: The distinction between “me” and “you,” “self” and “other.”*
 - *Person:*
 - *Like the concept of self, is made up of non-person elements. For example, if we give rise to the idea that animals, plants, the moon, the stars, and so forth, exist to serve humankind, we are caught up in the idea of a person. The concept separates person from non-person, and it is erroneous.*
 - *[Eishin]: The distinction between a person and other living things, e.g. plants, animals.*
 - *Living beings:*
 - *Arises when we separate living from non-living. What we call non-living makes living beings possible. If we destroy one, we destroy the other.*
 - *[Eishin]: The distinction between living things and non-living things, e.g. rocks, stars, the moon.*
 - *Life span:*
 - *This idea is the separation of life and death. To think that we begin our life when we are born and end it at the moment we die is called the idea of life span, and it is erroneous. According to prajnaparamita, life and death are one. Death is necessary for life to be.*
 - *The Buddha teaches that these four erroneous perceptions are at the root of our suffering.*

4.

The Greatest Gift

Moreover, when a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object – that is to say he does not rely on any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma – to practice generosity. That is the spirit in which a bodhisattva should practice generosity, not relying on signs. If a bodhisattva does not rely on any concept when practicing generosity, then the happiness that results from that virtuous act is as great as space. It cannot be measured.

- *[Commentary from verse 17] The Buddha says that **all** objects of mind are concepts, even the object of mind called bodhisattva. The existence of these objects of mind (dharmas) gives the impression that the self exists. Mahayana Buddhism opens a different door and proclaims that even what we call objects of mind or dharmas are of a selfless nature. Self and dharma are just concepts.*
- *[Eishin]: In Katagiri’s commentary on Dogen’s Four Methods of Guidance of a Bodhisattva, when commenting on giving, Katagiri says Buddhism teaches there are three kinds of gifts: material gifts, the gift of the teachings, and the gift of fearlessness. Thich Nhat Hahn mentions these also. He says the Heart Sutra offers us the gift of fearlessness (“and the mind is no hindrance. Without any hindrance, no fears exist.”). When we think of generosity, we should try to remember that generosity includes the giving of fearlessness. And I think Thich Nhat Hahn is suggesting here that fearlessness is actually the greatest gift.*
- *When we are not bound by the four erroneous perceptions, we are already in the world of fearlessness. This is the base from which a bodhisattva’s generosity comes forth.*
- **What are some ideas about how we can give the gift of fearlessness to others in our everyday lives?**

Signlessness

“What do you think, Subhuti? Is it possible to grasp the Tathagata by means of bodily signs?”

“No, World-Honored One. When the Tathagata speaks of bodily signs, there are no signs being talked about.”

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “In a place where there is something that can be distinguished by signs, in that place there is deception. If you can see the signless nature of signs, then you can see the Tathagata.”

- *The word “sign” is used throughout the sutra. It refers to concepts and conceptualization.*
- *Here we first encounter the dialectics of prajnaparamita, which will re-occur many times throughout the rest of the sutra. Our usual way of perceiving something is that ‘A is A, and A is not B or C.’ But when A is looked at in light of dependent co-arising, we see that A is actually made up of non-A elements. A is actually made up of B, C, and all other elements in the universe. A can never exist by itself alone. So then we say ‘A is not A.’ But once we understand this true nature of A, its dependence and make-up of non-A elements, then we see A in its fullest flowering and can once again say, ‘A is A,’ but this is different than the first time we said it.*

This is the basis for the famous Zen phrase, “Before practicing Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. While practicing Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. After practicing, mountains are mountains again and rivers are rivers again.”

- *[From verse 31]: Tortoise hair and rabbit horns do not really exist, but the ideas of them do. All concepts are dharmas, objects of mind, signs. The Buddha tells us that whenever there is a sign, there is deception.*
- *All concepts co-arise and are empty of a separate self. The ideas of self, person, living being, and life span give rise to the ideas of non-self, non-person, non-living being, non-life span. We should not let go of one set of concepts just to be caught by another. See verse 27.*
- *Once we understand that a concept is just a concept, we can go beyond that concept and be free of the dharma that concept represents. Then we can begin to have a direct experience of the wondrous reality that is beyond concepts.*
- *See the commentary to verse 22.*
- ***What about the enjoyment we sometimes take in playing with ideas in our minds? Is this bad? If we know what we are doing, i.e. if we know that we are enjoying something that is an empty fabrication, does it really hurt us? Or, does the teaching say we should stop doing this? How is this related, if at all, to imagination? (e.g. a writer)***

[From verse 32]

*“All composed things are like a dream,
a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightening.
That is how to meditate on them,
that is how to observe them.”*

- ***Talk about these first five sections in the context of the four bodhisattva vows.***
 - *Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.*
 - *This is directly related to the answer given in verse 3.*
 - *Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them.*
 - *This is directly related to the selfless nature of signs.*
 - *The dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them.*
 - *In verse 18, the Buddha says he understands the innumerable mentalities of all sentient beings. In a similar way, this can apply to mastering the boundless dharmas.*
 - *The Buddha’s way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it.*
 - *This is directly related to giving rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.*

Part Two
The Language of Non-Attachment

6.

A Rose Is Not a Rose

The Buddha said, “Five hundred years after the Tathagata has passed away, there will still be people who enjoy the happiness that comes from observing the precepts. When such people hear these words, they will have faith and confidence that here is the truth. We should know that such people have sown seeds not only during the lifetime of one Buddha, but have, in truth, planted wholesome seeds during the lifetimes of tens of thousands of Buddhas. Anyone who, for only a second, gives rise to a pure and clear confidence upon hearing these words of the Tathagata, the Tathagata sees and knows that person, and he or she will attain immeasurable happiness because of this understanding.”

Why? Because that kind of person is not caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. They are not caught up in the idea of a dharma or the idea of a non-dharma. If you are caught up in the idea of a dharma, you are also caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. If you are caught up in the idea that there is no dharma, you are still caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span.

That is why we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist. This is the hidden meaning when the Tathagata says, ‘Bhiksus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft.’ All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings.”

- ***Have we ever thought that the Buddha’s teachings resonate with us because we have sown good seeds in past lives?***
- ***Does anyone ever reach the other shore where the teachings can be abandoned? What does ‘abandoning the teachings’ mean?***

7.

Entering the Ocean of Reality

“What do you think, Subhuti, has the Tathagata arrived at the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind? Does the Tathagata give any teaching?”

The Venerable Subhuti replied, “As far as I have understood the Lord Buddha’s teachings, there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, nor is there any independently existing teaching that the Tathagata gives. Why? The teachings that the Tathagata has realized and spoken of cannot be conceived of as separate, independent existences and therefore cannot be described. The Tathagata’s teaching is not self-existent nor is it non-self-existent. Why? Because the noble teachers are only distinguished from others in terms of the unconditioned.”

- *Each one of us is a ‘river of reality;’ in every moment, things that are not ourselves enter and leave us.*
- *This section of the sutra shows that all dharmas are without form and transcend conceptual knowledge. When we realize the suchness of all dharmas, we are freed from our conceptual prisons.*
- *In daily life, we use our conceptual knowledge to grasp reality. But this is impossible. Meditation aims at breaking through all conceptual limitations and barriers so that we can move freely in the boundless ocean of reality.*

8.

Non-Attachment

“What do you think, Subhuti? If someone were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with the seven precious treasures as an act of generosity, would that person bring much happiness by this virtuous act?”

The Venerable Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One. It is because the very natures of virtue and happiness are not virtue and happiness that the Tathagata is able to speak about virtue and happiness.”

The Buddha said, “On the other hand, if there is someone who accepts these teachings and puts them into practice, even if only a gatha of four lines, and explains them to someone else, the happiness brought about by this virtuous act far exceeds the happiness brought about by giving the seven precious treasures.

Why? Because all Buddhas and the dharma of the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind of all Buddhas arise from these teachings.

Subhuti, what is called Buddhadharmas is everything that is not Buddhadharmas.” [In verse 17, the Buddha says], “All dharmas are Buddhadharmas.”

- *The spirit in which Buddhist practice should be brought to and practiced in the West:*
 - *Because Buddhadharmas are made of non-Buddhadharmas elements, Buddhadharmas cannot be found outside of non-Buddhadharmas. Those who bring [and practice] Buddhism to the West should understand this well. They should be able to go into the world of Western culture and see many values of the West as elements of Buddhadharmas.*
 - *If those who teach [and practice] Buddhism in the West keep in mind that all dharmas are Buddhadharmas, they will not feel like oil in a glass of water. If Westerners bring into their society an exotic expression of Buddhism, thinking that this particular form of Buddhism is the only true Buddhism, the oil will never dissolve in the water. Buddhism will only succeed here if it is built from your own experiences and with your own cultural ingredients. If you practice in exactly the same way we practice in Vietnam, Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Japan, or Korea, the oil drops will always remain separate from the water. As Western Buddhists, please use the many elements of your own culture to weave the fabric of Buddhadharmas.*
 - *The essence of Buddhism won't have much chance to blossom in the West if the teachings emphasize form too much. If you think that the teachings of Buddhism are completely separate from the other teachings in your society, that is a big mistake. When you look deeply into your own culture and traditions, you will discover many spiritual values. They are not called Buddhadharmas, but they are really Buddhadharmas in their content.*

Part Three

The Answer Is In The Question

9.

Dwelling in Peace

[Subhuti said], “If an Arhat gives rise to the thought that he has attained the fruit of Arhatship, then he is still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. World-Honored One, you have often said that I have attained the concentration of peaceful abiding and that in the community, I am the Arhat who has most transformed need and desire. World-Honored One, if I were to think that I had attained the fruit of Arhatship, you certainly would not have said that I love to dwell in the concentration of peaceful abiding.”

- *“Arana” means absence of struggle. Practicing arana is to dwell in peaceful abiding.*
- ***Looking at our individual lives, are we living in peaceful abiding, with absence of struggle? If not, with what are we struggling?***

10.

Creating a Formless Pure Land

“What do you think, Subhuti? Does a bodhisattva create a serene and beautiful Buddha field?”

“No, World-Honored One. Why? To create a serene and beautiful Buddha field is not in fact creating a serene and beautiful Buddha field. That is why it is called creating a serene and beautiful Buddha field.”

The Buddha said, “So, Subhuti, all the bodhisattva mahasattvas should give rise to a pure and clear intention in this spirit. When they give rise to this intention, they should not rely on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. They should give rise to an intention with their minds not dwelling anywhere.”

- *Not dwelling anywhere means not relying on anything. Relying on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and objects of mind means being caught by perceptions, ideas, and concepts. (See also the commentary to verse 14 “Non-Abiding”).*

13.

The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “What should this sutra be called and how should we act regarding its teachings?”

The Buddha replied, “This sutra should be called *The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion* because it has the capacity to cut through all illusions and afflictions and bring us to the shore of liberation. What the Tathagata has called the highest, transcendent understanding is not, in fact, the highest, transcendent understanding. That is why it is truly the highest, transcendent understanding.”

The Buddha asked, “What do you think, Subhuti? Is there any dharma that the Tathagata teaches?”

Subhuti replied, “The Tathagata has nothing to teach, World-Honored One.”

- *The practice of non-attachment can liberate us completely from wrong views. When a person is absolutely free from wrong views, his or her actions will greatly benefit the world. The practice of The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion is thus the basis for all meaningful action.*

14.

Abiding in Non-Abiding

{Subhuti said}, “World-Honored One, if someone hears this sutra, has pure and clear confidence in it, and arrives at insight into the truth, that person will realize the rarest kind of virtue. Why? That person will not be dominated by the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. Buddhas are called Buddhas because they are free of ideas.”

- *This sutra is difficult to understand because what is said is contrary to the common perceptions of people. Therefore, anyone who can understand the Diamond Sutra, at any time, should know that he or she is of a very rare nature.*
 - ***Have we ever thought of ourselves as being rare because we have some resonance with the Buddha’s teachings?***
- *Any perception has two parts: a viewer (subject) and that which is being viewed (object). A self view, a person view, a living being view, and a life span view are all objects of perception. They are neither independently existing or permanent. Like everything else, they are of the nature of inter-being. The last line is a powerful statement: “Buddhas are called Buddhas because they are free of ideas.”*
 - ***When we look at ourselves, what is the viewer (subject) and what is being viewed (object)?***

[The Buddha said], “Subhuti, the Tathagata has said what is called transcendent endurance is not transcendent endurance. That is why it is called transcendent endurance.

- *The Buddha uses transcendent endurance, one of the six paramitas, as an example of the spirit of deep understanding. According to the Prajnaparamita (known as the “Mother of all Buddhas”) Sutras, prajnaparamita is the clay pot that contains all the other paramitas. If the clay has not been fired properly, liquids stored in it will gradually leak out. That is why prajnaparamita is the very foundation.*
- *Just as a rose is not just a rose, transcendent endurance cannot exist independently of the other five paramitas.*

When a bodhisattva gives rise to the unequalled mind of awakening, he has to give up all ideas. He cannot rely on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. He can only give rise to that mind that is not caught up in anything.

- *When we take refuge in something that is changing, we can never have peace. We need to abide in what is stable. All objects of our six senses are conditioned and continuously changing. If we abide in them, we will not have stability. (See also the commentary to verse 10, “not relying on anything.”)*
- *There are many stable things we can rely on – the earth, the air, the Triple Treasures of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. It is always best to take refuge in something that is stable. Otherwise, if our object of refuge changes or falls apart, we too may fall apart.*
- *The most stable is to abide in the non-abiding. A mind that abides in anything, ultimately, cannot have peace.*

If we say that the Tathagata has realized a teaching, that teaching is neither graspable nor deceptive. [Furthermore], a bodhisattva who still depends on notions to practice generosity is like someone walking in the dark. He will not see anything. But when a bodhisattva does not depend on notions to practice generosity, he is like someone with good eyesight walking under the bright light of the sun. He can see all shapes and colors.”

- *The Buddha is saying that the truth he has realized lies in the middle way, which is beyond the idea of graspable and the idea of deceptive.*
- *The teaching is to help us, not to be possessed by us. It is not meant to deceive us, but we may be deceived by it by our own way of clinging to it.*
- *As long as we are caught up in ideas and signs (concepts), we are blinded by them, and cannot see reality as it is. We cannot see the “indescribable nature of all things” (from verse 30). But when we are free of the concepts of signs, we are like those with perfect vision walking in the midday sun. We can see directly into the world of “wondrous reality,” where everything reveals its true nature.*

16.

The Last Epoch

[The Buddha said], “You should know that the meaning of this sutra is beyond conception and discussion. Likewise, the fruit resulting from receiving and practicing this sutra is beyond conception and discussion.”

- *Studying and practicing the Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion will result in the kind of peace, joy, and action that will have the power to change the world. The happiness it produces is beyond all conception and discussion.*
- *Even if we are only washing dishes, the peace and joy experienced from the practice of the sutra while washing the dishes cannot be described – they are beyond conception and discussion. The merit produced by washing dishes will be immeasurable.*

Part Four

Mountains and Rivers Are Our Own Body

18.

Reality is a Steadily Flowing Stream

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, however many living beings there are in all these Buddha lands, though they each have a different mentality, the Tathagata understands them all. Why is that? Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls different mentalities are not in fact different mentalities. That is why they are called different mentalities. Why? Subhuti, the past mind cannot be grasped, neither can the present mind or the future mind.”

- *“May I have something to point my mind” is a Chinese expression for breakfast. The idea that the past mind, present mind, and future mind cannot be grasped is an excellent idea, but it is still just an idea. We need to eat. This is a living reality.*
 - *In case #4 in the Blue Cliff Record, a monk carrying a copy of the Diamond Sutra encounters an old woman selling rice cakes. He asks for one for breakfast. The old woman says she will give him one if he can answer this question: “Past mind cannot be grasped, present mind can’t be grasped, future mind*

cannot be grasped. Which mind does the learned monk wish to refresh?” How would you answer this question?

- *Words are used to name or describe concepts, but as soon as we see things as they are, we understand that both words and concepts are not the things themselves. Words and concepts are rigid and motionless, but reality is a steadily flowing stream. It is impossible to contain a living reality in a rigid framework. We should always bear this in mind when we are trying to describe anything. There is always some distance between our words or concepts and that which is being described.*
- *[From the commentary to verse 19] It is possible to use words and concepts for true communication, as long as you are not caught by words and concepts. The way to avoid being caught by words and concepts is to see the nature of interbeing in everything.*
- *Reality is a steadily flowing stream, a “wondrous reality.” And each one of us is a river of reality.*

22.

The Sunflower

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “World-Honored One, is the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Buddha attained the unattainable?”

The Buddha said, “That is right, Subhuti. Regarding the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, I have not attained anything. That is why it is called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

- *Here we come to the notion of non-attainment. If we think that the Buddha has achieved an independently existing attainment, this attainment cannot be called the highest, most fulfilled awakened mind. The moment the concept of highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind arises, the essence of highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind vanishes.*

23.

The Moon is Just the Moon

“Furthermore, Subhuti, that mind is everywhere equally. Because it is neither high nor low, it is called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind. The fruit of the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind is realized through the practice of all wholesome actions in the spirit of non-self, non-person, non-living beings, and non-life span. Subhuti, what are called wholesome actions are in fact not wholesome actions. That is why they are called wholesome actions.”

- *Now we come to the nature of equality. All objects of mind are equal and share the same nature of interbeing.*
- *The “highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind” cannot exist independently of what is not the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind. There is no teapot that exists independently of non-teapot elements.*

27.

Not Cut Off from Life

“Subhuti, if you think that the Tathagata realizes the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind and does not need to have all the marks, you are wrong. Subhuti, do not think in that way. Do not think that when one gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, one needs to see all objects of mind as nonexistent, cut off from life. Please do not think in that way. One who gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind does not contend that all objects of mind are nonexistent and cut off from life.”

- *“Nonexistent” and “cut off from life” are also attachments. When we look at a table, a flower, or the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, if we see that they exist independently of other objects of mind, we are caught in the view of permanence. On the other hand, if we think that everything is nonexistent, we are caught in the view of annihilation. The middle way taught by the Buddha is a way free of these two views. Liberation is not to cut ourselves off from life or to try to reach nonbeing.*

Virtue and Happiness

[The Buddha said], “The happiness and virtue brought about by someone who has understood and wholeheartedly accepted the truth that all dharmas are of selfless nature and is able to live and bear fully this truth is immeasurable. A bodhisattva does not need to build up virtue and happiness. A bodhisattva gives rise to virtue and happiness but is not caught in the idea of virtue and happiness. That is why the Tathagata has said that a bodhisattva does not need to build up virtue and happiness.”

- *When we volunteer to wash the dishes, if we think that our work will bring us some happiness or merit in the future, we are not true bodhisattvas. We only need to live joyfully in each moment while we wash them. After they are washed, we don't need to tell everyone that we have just finished washing the dishes. Washing the dishes just to wash the dishes, on the other hand, brings us inestimable virtue and happiness. (Eishin: This can be applied to anything.)*
- *We all know people who cannot bear great suffering, but we do not realize that to fully enjoy great happiness also requires great strength and endurance. The Sanskrit word for endurance is “ksanti.” It is one of the six paramitas. Only those who can bear great truth and great happiness are called mahasattvas.*
- ***Flipping the emphasis around from bearing great suffering to bearing great happiness is interesting. How do we understand the need for great strength and endurance to enjoy great happiness?***