

## TRANSLATION

# The Diamond Sutra

Translated and Introduced by  
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## INTRODUCTION

### *Early Buddhism*

**B**UDDHISM was founded by the son of a local ruler of the Śākya clan in northern India in the region now known as Nepal. His personal name was Siddhārtha and his clan name was Gautama, but he is now better known by the title Śākyamuni Buddha, “the Enlightened One Śākyamuni.” The dates of his lifetime are unknown; he is usually regarded as having been active sometime around the sixth or fifth century BCE.

It is difficult to describe his teachings with any exactitude, though scholars generally accept several formulas as representative of his principal ideas. Most famous of these are the so-called Four Noble Truths, which teach that (1) all existence in the *sahā* world, the world in which we live at present, is marked by suffering; (2) that suffering is caused by craving or desire; (3) that only by doing away with craving can one gain release from suffering and reach a state of peace and enlightenment, often called nirvana; (4) that there is a method for achieving this goal, namely the discipline known as the Eightfold Path. This is a set of moral principles enjoining one to cultivate right views, right thinking, right speech, right action, right way of life, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

The Buddha formed a monastic Order, later expanding it to include women, and led its members in a life devoted to poverty, celibacy, and religious study and discipline. Thereby, it was thought, they could gradually

advance in spiritual training until, hopefully, they reached the goal of *arhat*, or worthy one, who is free of desire and will not be born again in the world of suffering.

The members of the Order did not engage in productive labor, but were supported by alms from believers in the secular community. Such lay believers, it was assumed, because of the demands of secular life, would advance more slowly toward the achievement of enlightenment, a process that would in most cases require many lifetimes of endeavor.

In order to help its followers to free themselves from desire, Buddhism placed great emphasis on the concept of impermanence. According to the Buddhist teaching, the dharmas, the things or phenomena of the world as we know it, are conditioned in nature, that is, brought into existence by certain causes and conditions, and constantly governed by them. Hence, these phenomena lack any inherent permanence or self-nature, governed as they are by external circumstances, but are in a perpetual condition of change.

Human beings, like all other phenomena, are conditioned in origin and in a state of unending change or flux, and hence are without any abiding self or soul. Buddhists are first of all instructed to divest themselves of any idea of an ego or individuality. The human being is instead to be viewed as an impersonal aggregation of what are known as the five *skandhas* or components, namely, form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness, whose workings are colored by the karma or deeds done in previous lives and, at the same time, create new karma.

From earlier Indian religion, Buddhism took over the idea of reincarnation or the cycle of rebirth that beings are destined to undergo. The nature of the deeds committed in a previous existence or existences determines whether the being's next existence will be a more or less favorable one. While accepting these earlier beliefs, Buddhism stressed that, through right action and right mindfulness, one could meliorate or wipe out the effects of bad karma from the past or even escape entirely from the cycle of rebirth, though it encountered considerable difficulty in explaining just how, if one denied the existence of a self or individual identity, these effects of karma could carry over from one lifetime to another.

The teachings of early Buddhism were, at first, not written down but transmitted orally, as was the custom in the Indian religious tradition. Later, presumably out of fear that they might become lost, they were put into written form, constituting a body of works known as the *tripiṭaka*, or "three baskets." These consisted of the sutras or texts that reflected the actual

teachings of the Buddha; texts dealing with the rules of monastic discipline and their application; and treatises or commentaries that were added later. These writings were couched in Pāli, a language closely related to Sanskrit.

The beliefs and practices described so far are representative of the Theravada school of Buddhism, “The Teaching of the Elders,” which remains the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos and has preserved the extensive Buddhist canon of works in Pāli.

### *The Mahayana Movement*

Around the beginning of the Common Era, a new school of Buddhism appears to have come into existence in India. While it took over most of the beliefs and practices of early Buddhism, it introduced some important innovations. For the earlier believers, as we have seen, the goal of those in the monastic Order was to reach the stage of *arhat*, which meant that on death the person would be freed from the cycle of rebirth and would enter the state of nirvana. But according to proponents of the new school, this goal, which envisions the salvation of the individual alone, represents too narrow and selfish an aim. Believers, it taught, should seek to achieve a goal no less than that achieved by the Buddha himself, the enlightenment of a buddha, which they termed *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* or supreme and perfect enlightenment.

Great assistance in achieving such an exalted aim would be rendered, the proponents of the new doctrine explained, by persons known as bodhisattvas, a term that refers to beings who aspire to attain buddhahood and carry out various altruistic practices in order to do so. In the *Diamond Sutra* and elsewhere they are often referred to by the term *mahāsattvas* or “great beings.” Compassion is the outstanding mark of such bodhisattvas, who postpone their own entry into nirvana in order to assist others to gain enlightenment.

In earlier Buddhism, Śākyamuni Buddha was described as a bodhisattva when, during his many previous existences, he advanced step by step toward the goal of full enlightenment. But in the new school of Buddhism, bodhisattvas were viewed as all but unlimited in number, uniformly dedicated to helping believers to attain enlightenment. These included such highly potent figures as Avalokiteśvara or “the lord who looks down,” better known in his female form as the Goddess of Mercy; or Maitreya, who is destined to become the next buddha to appear in the world; figures who, like Christian saints, can be approached through the medium of prayer and

have vowed to respond to the entreaties of the faithful. It has been suggested that this emphasis on such heroic figures of aid and compassion may have been influenced by ideas coming into India from Persia, where the Zoroastrian religion placed a similar emphasis upon "savior" figures.

This new movement in Buddhism called itself Mahayana or "the Great Vehicle," a reference to the path or undertaking of the bodhisattva, which leads in time to the attainment of buddhahood. It referred to the older form of the faith by the derogatory term Hinayana or "the Lesser Vehicle," because it led to a lesser goal, that of *arhat*. Its ideals and beliefs were set forth in a number of Mahayana sutras that appeared in the early centuries of the Common Era. Śākyamuni Buddha, it was believed, with his intuitive understanding of his listeners' individual needs and capacities, had, like a good physician adjusting the medicine to the particular ailment to be treated, taught somewhat different doctrines to different groups of believers. Thus, it was not surprising to find different doctrines or approaches set forth in different texts associated with his name. It was also suggested that the Buddha discovered, when he first began to expound his ideas, that his audience was not sufficiently mature in its thinking to understand what he was saying. He therefore had to educate them step by step, tutoring them with simple concepts at first and only later leading them into the higher and more profound realms of doctrine. According to this view, therefore, the beliefs taught later in his preaching life, namely, those revealed in the Mahayana sutras, were intended to supersede, and even cancel out, those set forth in earlier sutras.

As has been pointed out numerous times, the basic teachings of Buddhism are not metaphysical or theological in nature, but psychological. According to Buddhist doctrine, ignorance is the fundamental problem confronting human beings, their failure to recognize the true nature of reality. Because they do not see or understand the ceaselessly shifting nature of all dharmas or phenomena, they cling to ideas of self and ego, and are subjected to endless suffering when their hopes and desires are frustrated by the process of change. Buddhism hence counsels them to rid themselves of such concepts and learn to accept the impermanent nature of all phenomena. Only by doing so can they free themselves from sorrow. This goal, when it is achieved, is known as *prajñā* or wisdom.

Early Buddhism produced many works emphasizing the constantly changing nature of the dharmas and the fact that, because they lack any inherent or unchanging nature, they are essentially empty. Any attempts to cling to

or become attached to them are destined to meet with failure. The Buddhist concept of wisdom teaches us to avoid such failure by ceasing to make any attempt to cling to the dharmas by counseling us to free ourselves from desire and the suffering it brings, as the Four Noble Truths direct, through wisdom or a correct understanding of reality.

The Mahayana movement took over these earlier ideas on wisdom, expanding and adapting them to its needs and in time producing a vast corpus of wisdom literature of its own. In particular, as we see in the *Diamond Sutra*, it labored to define how the earlier ideas on wisdom applied to the bodhisattvas, who are such key figures in Mahayana thought. It is easy to understand why the followers of earlier Buddhism, whose aim was their own personal salvation through attainment of the goal of becoming an *arhat*, would want to cultivate feelings of detachment from or indifference to the phenomenal world. But the chief characteristic of bodhisattvas is their attitude of compassion, their determination to lead all other beings to enlightenment. A bodhisattva is expected to excel in the exercise of six *pāramitās* or perfections, namely, almsgiving, keeping of the precepts, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation, and wisdom. But to carry these out, particularly the first, almsgiving, which involves not only material almsgiving to others, but almsgiving of the Buddhist doctrine or faith, and that of emotional comfort and protection as well, one can hardly maintain an attitude of indifference toward the dharmas or components of the phenomenal world. As Edward Conze, an eminent Buddhist scholar and translator of many works of the wisdom literature in Sanskrit, has put it: "A bodhisattva is a being compounded of the two contradictory forces of wisdom and compassion. In his wisdom, he sees no persons; in his compassion he is resolved to save them. His ability to combine these contradictory attitudes is the source of his greatness, and of his ability to save himself and others."<sup>1</sup>

### *The Diamond Sutra*

The *Diamond Sutra* is one of the most important and influential works of the Mahayana wisdom literature, and it addresses, in particular, the question of what attitude the bodhisattvas should adopt in dealing with the world, how they should guide their thinking so that it is in accord with the dictates of Buddhist wisdom.

<sup>1</sup> Conze 1951, p. 130.

Nothing is known for certain regarding when or by whom the sutra was written. Scholars surmise that it belongs quite early in the development of the Mahayana wisdom works and date it tentatively to the period 150–200 CE. The earliest Chinese translation of the work is that done by the Indian scholar Kumārajīva in 402–403, from which the English translation presented here was made, though the sutra must have existed in Sanskrit for a considerable period prior to that date. It has been suggested that the original Sanskrit version was in verse form, though the Sanskrit texts extant today are in prose, with only two four-line verses near the end of the work.

The sutra opens with a scene in the Jetavana Monastery in the city of Śrāvastī. Śrāvastī was the capital of the state of Kosala, one of the most important states of India in the Buddha's time. The Jetavana Monastery, situated on the outskirts of the city, had been built by a wealthy lay patron of the Buddha and was dedicated to him and his disciples. The Buddha is said to have lived and taught there during the rainy season for the last twenty-five years of his life.

The sutra describes how the Buddha, having gone into the city to beg for food as was his custom, returns to the monastery and eats his midday meal. One of the monks in the assembly then asks him a question. The questioner is Subhūti, numbered among Śākyamuni's ten major disciples and famous for his mastery of the wisdom teachings. He asks the Buddha how bodhisattvas, aspiring to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment, should live their lives and “discipline their minds.” The Buddha's reply constitutes the body of the sutra. Subhūti addresses the Buddha by two of his honorary titles, World-Honored One and Thus Come One (see Glossary under “ten titles”), and the Buddha refers to himself by the latter.

The sutra, it seems to me, expounds two main ideas: or, to put it another way, its statements fall into two large categories. Kumārajīva's Chinese translation, as the sutra itself states, is entitled *Jingang bore boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經 (T no. 235), or the *Diamond Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. And the first category of statements is that which deals with the Buddhist concept of wisdom.

This teaches, as we have seen, that because the dharmas are conditioned, in a state of constant flux, and hence lacking in any inherent identity, they are empty in nature and their existence must therefore be negated so that we will not become attached to something that is not really there. As the sutra over and over stresses, this process of negation is to be applied in particular to the concepts of a self, a person, a being, or an individual. But if all

dharmas or concepts are empty, then they must all be subjected to this same negation. The sutra proceeds to do so by taking up each of the fundamental tenets of the Buddhist faith and negating them as well, so that the bodhisattvas will understand that they should no more become attached to these than they would to the concepts of a self or person.

The *Diamond Sutra*, having carried out this process of negation, then goes on to state each concept once more in affirmative form. It does this because, as we will see when we come to discuss the doctrine of emptiness in greater detail, emptiness itself, like any other concept, must also be negated. Truth resides, according to Buddhist belief, somewhere in between affirmation and negation, between "is" and "is not," in a realm that cannot be adequately expressed in words.

If the driving motive for the bodhisattvas is their compassion for others, why, one may ask, must they go through this process of negating the existence of the very beings they are endeavoring to aid? The answer is that bodhisattva compassion and succor, to be effective, must be extended to all beings in equal proportion. There can be no prize pupils or particularly favored individuals, hence the necessity for strict observance of the principles of *prajñā*. Without their guidance, compassion cannot be dispensed with absolute fairness and equality.

The second category of statements found in the *Diamond Sutra* is quite different in character from those pertaining to wisdom. These statements are scattered, apparently at random, throughout the sutra, and begin with the Buddha asking his listeners to imagine some fantastically generous act of almsgiving. In suggesting its magnitude, he employs the kind of hyperbolic language so often found in the Mahayana sutras, asking them to picture a donation of the seven treasures or precious objects that in number is comparable to the sands of countless Ganges Rivers, a conventional simile in Buddhist literature for an inconceivably large number. He asks his listeners to imagine how many blessings or how much good fortune would be won by anyone making such an astonishingly large contribution to the support and advancement of the Buddha's teachings. He proceeds then to assert that any person who accepts and upholds the teachings put forth in the sutra he is preaching, and works actively to propagate and teach them to others, will gain even greater blessings and good fortune.

In the passages on wisdom, the emphasis has been on the attitude of mind required of the bodhisattvas in their exercise of compassion, on the need for them to aid all beings equally without becoming emotionally attached

to them as individuals. These latter passages, on the other hand, focus upon what should be the particular religious endeavor of the bodhisattvas, how they can most effectively dispense their aid. And the answer is that this can best be done by propagating the message of the sutra. The point stressed again and again in these passages is that, although material wealth expended in acts of almsgiving in support of the faith and the faithful will undoubtedly win great good fortune for the donor, such largesse can never compare to the blessings gained by those who take it upon themselves to uphold and propagate the teachings of the sutra. In these passages, the sutra itself becomes the object of devotion. And, as the sutra itself states, the place where it exists is comparable to one of the stupas or memorial towers where the relics of the Buddha are enshrined, a place worthy of the alms and devotion of all beings. The foremost religious practice of bodhisattvas, therefore, the most meritorious duty that they can perform, is to strive to bring honor to the sutra and to see that its teachings are as widely and correctly disseminated as possible. In practical terms, this is the most important and worthwhile undertaking of the bodhisattvas.

That the sutra, which began by picturing Śākyamuni Buddha at a time when he was still alive and actively preaching, should, as we have seen, refer to the stupas that were erected after his entry into nirvana to house his relics, suggests a certain complexity in its conception of time. And concern for time is also reflected in questions that Subhūti at several points puts to the Buddha, asking whether he believes that his teachings will be understood by people of later ages.

It was believed that the doctrines of Buddhism, like all other things of this world, are destined to undergo change, to decay and eventually pass out of existence. In Mahayana thought, this idea is customarily treated in terms of three time periods. The first, beginning immediately following the death of Śākyamuni Buddha, is known as the era of the Correct Law, when his teachings are well understood and many persons gain enlightenment through them. This is usually said to last a thousand years, though some sources describe it as five hundred years in duration. In the second period, called the era of the Counterfeit Law, the religion becomes increasingly formalized and progressively fewer persons are able to attain salvation. This period too is described by some as lasting a thousand years, by others as five hundred years in length. The third period, known as the Latter Day of the Law, said to begin from the fifth five-hundred-year period following the Buddha's death, represents a time when the teachings of the Buddha lose



all power to lead people to enlightenment. It is said that it will last ten thousand years or more.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, this concept plays only a very minor role, as the Buddha assures Subhūti that even in those later dark eras, his teachings will be correctly understood. But in Buddhist circles in China and the other countries of eastern Asia under Mahayana influence, these predictions of an age when the Buddha's teachings would lose their effectiveness were the source of great uneasiness among believers.

In the brief narrative section with which the *Diamond Sutra* opens, the Buddha is described as being "accompanied by 1,250 major disciples." Whether this assembly includes women as well as men is not clear. When the Buddha begins to expound the doctrine, however, he repeatedly refers to what "good men and good women" should do, so his words clearly are intended for what Buddhism refers to as "the four kinds of believers," namely, monks, nuns, male lay believers, and female lay believers. And in the narrative passage with which the sutra concludes, we are told that "the monks, nuns, male and female lay believers, and the heavenly and human believers and *asuras* in all the worlds, having heard the preaching of the Buddha, were all filled with great delight and joy." The *asuras* are demons in Indian mythology who continually fight with the gods but are often depicted as listening to the Buddha's preachings.

These narrative passages that open and close the *Diamond Sutra* are markedly brief and matter-of-fact in tone, and the audience addressed is modest in comparison to the vast assembly of eminent disciples, bodhisattvas, human beings, gods, and non-human beings who are described in so many other Mahayana sutras as listening to the Buddha's words. In fact, as Mahayana sutras go, the *Diamond Sutra* is noteworthy for the absence of anything startling or miraculous in its presentation.

In form, the *Diamond Sutra* is close to the sutras of early Buddhism. Though it deals with the concept of emptiness, it nowhere employs the word for emptiness, *śūnyatā*, nor does it make clear reference to the Hinayana/Mahayana split in the religion. It seems to be deliberately avoiding doctrinal or technical language and presenting the teachings in the simplest form possible.

The *Diamond Sutra* was highly regarded in India, and Indian Buddhist scholars such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu wrote commentaries on it. It was received with equally high honor in China. Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), the eldest son of Emperor Wu 武 (464–549) of the Liang dynasty and better

known as the compiler of the *Wenxuan* 文選, or Anthology of Literature, wrote a commentary on Kumārajīva's Chinese translation of the sutra, and broke it up into numbered sections (the numbering followed in my translation) which he supplied with brief headings. Many Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scholars followed his example, writing commentaries on the sutra.

It was particularly important among the early leaders of the Chinese Chan, or Zen, school. Hongren 弘忍 (601–674), the Fifth Patriarch of Chinese Zen, was said to have highly recommended the *Diamond Sutra* to his students. And, as legend tells us, Huineng 慧能 (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch, on hearing a passage from the sutra<sup>2</sup> when he was a child, was so impressed that he determined to take up the study of Zen, and thus became a disciple of the Fifth Patriarch.

### *This Translation*

There are two excellent and authoritative English translations of the *Diamond Sutra*.<sup>3</sup> The earlier was done by Dr. Edward Conze, a specialist in the Mahayana wisdom sutras, from which he published extensive translations. His translation of the *Diamond Sutra*, done from the Sanskrit text of the work, was published in 1958 by George Allen & Unwin of London under the title *Buddhist Wisdom Books: Containing the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*. It has been reprinted several times, most recently in 2001 in the Vintage Spiritual Classics series of Random House, New York, entitled *Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra*. Dr. Conze comments extensively on the first part of the sutra, but suggests that the latter sections are not an integral part of the text but a collection of stray fragments that have been tacked onto it.

Of more recent date is *The Diamond Sutra* by Red Pine (Bill Porter), which was done from both the Sanskrit and Kumārajīva's Chinese translation and published in 2001. The Sanskrit version of the sutra is rather florid in language compared to Kumārajīva's Chinese translation and occasionally differs from it in meaning. In his commentary, Pine has considered both the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the text, and has also added extensive comments from Indian, Chinese and Japanese commentaries dating from many different periods. In fact, relying on these various commentaries, he comes to the rather startling conclusion that "the sutra isn't about empti-

<sup>2</sup> The passage in my translation that reads: "They [the bodhisattvas] should cultivate minds that are attached to nothing." See p. 21 below.

<sup>3</sup> Other English translations of the *Diamond Sutra* include: Wai-tao and Goddard 1935 and Lopez 2004, pp. 450–63.

ness. . . . It's about bodies, beginning with the Buddha's body and ending with the body of every noble son or daughter who practices this teaching."<sup>4</sup>

My own translation of the sutra is made solely on the basis of Kumārajīva's Chinese translation, though I have consulted with gratitude these earlier translations by Conze and Red Pine. I have tried as much as possible to use the same English translations of Buddhist technical terms as I used in my earlier translations of the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakīrti Sutra, both published by Columbia University Press.

As in the case of those earlier translations, the greatest difficulty I have encountered in rendering the *Diamond Sutra* into English has been how to deal with the Chinese word *fa* 法, which is used to translate the Sanskrit word dharma. Though dharma has many meanings in Sanskrit, in the Mahayana sutras it is usually used in one of two senses. Deriving from the root *dhṛ*, meaning "to grasp," it refers to things that can be perceived by the mind to be real or permanent, that is, the things or objects of the phenomenal world. Certain schools of early Buddhism believed that some such dharmas or things are conditioned in nature and hence perpetually changing, while others are permanent and unchanging. But Mahayana views all of them as impermanent and subject to constant change—in other words, as ultimately unreal or empty—hence the *Diamond Sutra*'s repeated assertions that dharmas are in fact no dharmas. The other principal usage of the word *fa* or dharma is to refer to the Law or doctrinal teachings of the Buddha, in which case it is usually written with a capital D or translated as "Law" or "teachings."

When I began translating the *Diamond Sutra*, I attempted to distinguish between these two usages of the word *fa*. It soon became apparent, however, that the sutra was observing no such distinction, but on the contrary seemed to be deliberately playing on the various meanings of the word "dharma." In section 17, for example, how is one to interpret the term "buddha dharmas"? Ordinarily one would expect it to mean the teachings of the buddhas, but here it is apparently meant to mean not the teachings of the buddhas, but what the buddhas teach with regard to the things of the phenomenal world, or both of these meanings simultaneously. So in the end I ceased trying to distinguish the different meanings of *fa* and rendered it "dharma" or "dharmas" in every case, leaving the reader to puzzle over what particular meaning or meanings it may have in any particular place.

To sum up, then, I do not believe that the *Diamond Sutra* is about bodies, and I have not discussed the concept of the three bodies of the Buddha in detail, though I have listed it in the Glossary. I believe that the principal idea

<sup>4</sup> Pine 2001, p. 34.

which the reader should take from the sutra is the concept of Buddhist wisdom, the realization that ideas of an ego or self are false and must be negated. As Professor Lopez has noted, “this tension between the notion of the person as an agent, capable of winning salvation, and the notion of the person as a fiction, indeed a dangerous fiction that is the source of all woe, would persist in one form or another throughout the development of Buddhist thought in Asia. It would be stated most powerfully in the Diamond Sutra.”<sup>5</sup>

The other important point stressed in the sutra is that bodhisattvas can render their greatest service to others and acquire the greatest amount of merit for themselves by mastering the teachings of the sutra—this sutra, the *Diamond*—and spreading them to others. The language of the sutra is deliberately startling and paradoxical, but its message, it seems to me, is relatively simple, and all the more compelling because of the somewhat disordered manner in which it is presented.

I have used the text of the sutra found in *Hannya shingyō kongō hanyakyō*, annotated by Nakamura Hajime and Kino Kazuyoshi.

## TRANSLATION

*The Diamond Sutra: Translated by the Indian Tripiṭaka Master of the Yao Qin Dynasty*

This is what I heard:

1. The Buddha was once in the Jetavana Monastery in Śrāvastī, accompanied by 1,250 major disciples. At that time the World-Honored One, when mealtime came, put on his robe, took his begging bowl in hand, and went into the city of Śrāvastī to beg for food. He then returned to the monastery, and when he had finished eating, put away his robe and begging bowl, washed his feet, spread his sitting mat and sat down.

2. At that time the elder monk Subhūti, who was among the disciples, having risen from his seat, bared his right shoulder, pressed his right knee to the ground, brought his palms together in a gesture of reverence, and addressed the Buddha in these words: “How rare and wonderful, World-Honored One, the way the Thus Come One carefully takes thought of the bodhisattvas,

<sup>5</sup> Lopez 2001, p. 48.

how he carefully gives instruction to the bodhisattvas. World-Honored One, if these good men and good women wish to set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment, how should they live, how should they discipline their minds?”

The Buddha said, “Excellent, excellent, Subhūti. It is just as you say, how the Thus Come One carefully takes thought of the bodhisattvas, how he carefully gives instruction to the bodhisattvas. Now you must listen carefully and I will explain to you how good men and good women who wish to set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment should live, and how they should discipline their minds.”

“By all means, World-Honored One! I am eager to hear it.”

3. Then the Buddha said to Subhūti, “The bodhisattvas, the *mahāsattvas*, should train their minds to think in this way. All living creatures, whether born from eggs or from the womb, whether produced from moisture or from transformation, whether they have form or are without form, whether they have thought, are without thought, or are neither with or without thought—all these I will cause to pass over into the extinction of the nirvana of no remainder.<sup>6</sup> In this way I will cause an immeasurable, a countless, a boundless number of living creatures to enter extinction. And yet, in truth, no living creature will be enabled to enter extinction. Why? Because, Subhūti, if the bodhisattvas entertain any thought of something that has the marks of a self, something that has the marks of a being, something that has the marks of a living creature, or something that has the marks of an individual, then they are not bodhisattvas.”<sup>7</sup>

4. “Next, Subhūti, when the bodhisattvas carry out almsgiving, they should have no feelings of attachment to a dharma or thing.<sup>8</sup> They should have no

<sup>6</sup> Indian thought recognized four types of birth, those from eggs; from a womb; from dampness or moisture, as in the case of worms; and from transformation, as in the case of deities and beings in hell. Two types of nirvana were distinguished in early Buddhism. The first is called “the nirvana of remainder” or “incomplete nirvana,” that of the *arhat* who has eliminated all illusions but still possesses a body. The second is called “the nirvana of no remainder” or “complete nirvana,” when the *arhat* dies and both his body and mind are extinguished.

<sup>7</sup> The terms self, being, living creature, and individual are said to represent the four marks or aspects of the deluded self.

<sup>8</sup> Almsgiving or *dāna*, one of the six *pāramitās* or “perfections,” practices required of Mahayana bodhisattvas in order to attain buddhahood. See Glossary under “six *pāramitās*.”

attachment regarding the color or form of their almsgiving. They should have no attachment regarding the sound, scent, taste, feel, or dharma nature of their almsgiving. Subhūti, the bodhisattvas should carry out almsgiving in this way, paying no mind to the form it may take.”

“Why? Because if the bodhisattvas pay no mind to the form in their almsgiving, then the good fortune they receive will be beyond measuring.”

“Subhūti, what do I mean by this? The limits of the eastern sky—can they be measured?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

“Subhūti, can the limits of the sky to the south, the west, the north, the sky in the four directions, or up or down—can they be measured?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

“Subhūti, when the bodhisattvas bestow alms without thinking about the form, then the good fortune they receive will in the same way be beyond measuring. Subhūti, the bodhisattvas have only to deal with attachment in the manner that I have taught them.”

5. “And Subhūti, what do you think? Can the Thus Come One be seen in terms of his bodily marks?”<sup>9</sup>

“No, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One cannot be seen in terms of bodily marks. Why? Because the Thus Come One has said that bodily marks are in fact no bodily marks.”

The Buddha then said to Subhūti, “Wherever there are such bodily marks, in every case they are all empty falsehoods. But if one sees that bodily marks are no bodily marks, then one sees the Thus Come One.”

6. Subhūti then said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if living beings hear pronouncements and passages of scripture such as this, will they be able to believe and have faith in them?”

The Buddha said to Subhūti, “You must not speak in such a way! In the latter five-hundred-year period after the Buddha has passed into nirvana,<sup>10</sup> those who abide by the precepts and seek good fortune, encountering these passages of scripture, will be able to embrace them with a believing mind and accept them as the truth. For you should understand that these persons

<sup>9</sup> The distinctive physical features or marks believed to be associated with great beings such as buddhas and wheel-turning kings or ideal rulers. Buddhas are believed to have thirty-two such marks. See Glossary under “thirty-two marks.”

<sup>10</sup> Though the wording is vague, this probably alludes to the period known as the “Latter Day of the Law.” See Glossary under that term.

have not planted the seeds of good understanding under one buddha, two buddhas, or three, four, or five buddhas. They have already planted the seeds of good understanding under countless thousands and ten thousands of buddhas. When they hear passages of scripture such as this, they will accept them at once with the purest faith.”

“Subhūti, the Thus Come One in all cases knows and in all cases has seen how these living beings have in this way gone about gaining unlimited good fortune. How do I know this? Because they never entertained the thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual, nor the thought of a dharma, or of what is not a dharma. Why do I say this? Because if any of these living beings in their minds had seized upon such a thought, then they would be clinging to the concept of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. And if by entertaining such a thought they would be clinging to the concept of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual, then what follows? If they entertained the thought of that which is not a dharma, they would likewise be clinging to the concept of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. Therefore, one should not seize on the idea of a dharma, or on the idea of what is not a dharma. This is the reason why the Thus Come One constantly declares that you monks should understand this—that the teachings that I expound are to be likened to a raft.<sup>11</sup> The idea of a dharma must be cast aside, to say nothing of the idea of what is not a dharma.”

7. “Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One attain supreme and perfect enlightenment? Does the Thus Come One preach that it is a dharma?”

Subhūti replied in these words: “If I have understood the meaning of the Buddha’s preaching, he has never posited the existence of a particular dharma such as supreme and perfect enlightenment. The Thus Come One has never posited the existence of any particular dharma at all. Why? Because the dharmas that the Buddha expounds are in all cases not something that can be acquired, not something that can be expounded. They are not dharmas, and they are not not dharmas. Why do I say this? Because all the wise and holy ones in all cases deal in an unconditioned dharma that is expressed in terms of the conditional.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> That is, something to be discarded once one has reached the other shore, or enlightenment.

<sup>12</sup> A very obscure sentence. It seems to mean that the buddhas deal in the unconditioned or absolute, but are revealed or manifest themselves in terms of the relative or the conditioned. But many other translations or interpretations are possible.

8. “Subhūti, what do you think? If a person were to fill the thousand-millionfold world with the seven treasures<sup>13</sup> as an offering of alms, that person would gain great fortune, would he not?”

Subhūti replied, “Very great good fortune, World-Honored One. Why? Because such good fortune does not partake of the nature of good fortune. Therefore, the Thus Come One has said that such a person attains great good fortune.”

“But,” the Buddha said, “if persons accept so much as one four-line verse from this sutra and expound it to others, then the good fortune they receive is even greater. Why? Subhūti, all the dharmas of the buddhas and of the supreme and perfect enlightenment of the buddhas—all these derive from this sutra. Subhūti, what are called buddha dharmas are in fact not buddha dharmas.”

9. “Subhūti, what do you think? Can those who are stream-winners think to themselves, ‘I have attained the level of stream-winner,’ or can they not?”<sup>14</sup>

Subhūti replied, “No, they cannot, World-Honored One. Why? Because the term stream-winner means one who has entered the stream; but there is no stream to enter. Such a person does not enter the stream of forms, sounds, scents, tastes, feelings, or dharmas. This is called a stream-winner.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Can those who are once-returners think to themselves, ‘I have attained the level of once-returner,’ or can they not?”<sup>15</sup>

Subhūti replied, “No, they cannot, World-Honored One. Why? Because a once-returner is one who returns only once more. But in fact there is no returning. This is called a once-returner.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Can those who are non-returners think to themselves, ‘I have attained the level of a non-returner,’ or can they not?”<sup>16</sup>

Subhūti replied, “No, they cannot, World-Honored One. Why? Because a non-returner is one who does not return, but in fact there is no such thing as returning. This is called a non-returner.”

<sup>13</sup> See Glossary under “seven treasures” and “thousand-millionfold world.”

<sup>14</sup> *Srota-āpana*, the first of the four levels of Hinayana disciples. The stream-winner is one who has entered the Hinayana path to enlightenment.

<sup>15</sup> *Sakrid-āgāmin*, one who returns once more, the second of the four kinds of Hinayana disciples, one who has attained a stage subject to rebirth only once more in each of the human and heavenly realms before attaining final emancipation.

<sup>16</sup> *Anāgāmin*, the third of the four kinds of Hinayana disciples, one who will not be reborn again in the world of desire.



“Subhūti, what do you think? Can those who are *arhats* think to themselves, ‘I have attained the level of *arhat*,’ or can they not?”<sup>17</sup>

Subhūti replied, “No, they cannot, World-Honored One. Why? Because in fact there is no such thing called an *arhat*. World-Honored One, if *arhats* thought to themselves, ‘I have attained the level of *arhat*,’ then they would be clinging to the concept of a self, a being, a living creature, an individual.”

“World-Honored One, you, the Buddha, have declared that I deserve to be called foremost among those in strifeless concentration, that I am foremost among *arhats* free of desire. But I never think to myself, ‘I am an *arhat* free of desire.’ World-Honored One, if I thought to myself, ‘I have attained the *arhat* path,’ then the World-Honored One would not have said to me, ‘Subhūti delights in carrying out the practice of strifeless concentration. Because for Subhūti there is in fact no such practice, I declare that Subhūti delights in the practice of strifeless concentration.’”<sup>18</sup>

10. The Buddha said to Subhūti, “What do you think? Did the Thus Come One in the past gain any dharma from the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, or did he not gain any dharma?”<sup>19</sup>

“World-Honored One, when the Thus Come One was with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, in fact he did not gain any dharma.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Do the bodhisattvas adorn the buddha lands, or do they not?”<sup>20</sup>

“No, World-Honored One. Why? Because to adorn the buddha lands is not to adorn them. This is called adorning.”

“Therefore, Subhūti, the bodhisattvas, the *mahāsattvas*, should in this way cultivate minds that are pure and clear and should not cultivate minds

<sup>17</sup> *Arhat*, one who has attained the highest of the four levels or stages of Hinayana enlightenment. The term means one who is worthy of respect. It was believed that those achieving this level would not be subject to rebirth.

<sup>18</sup> A technical term, the validity of which the Buddha immediately proceeds to negate. Conze, translating from the Sanskrit, renders it as “a dweller in Peace” (Conze 1958, p. 40).

<sup>19</sup> Dīpaṃkara or Shining Lamp was one of the countless buddhas that Śākyamuni studied under in his previous existences when he was a bodhisattva making his way bit by bit toward enlightenment. Dīpaṃkara was the first to predict that he would attain buddhahood and be named Śākyamuni.

<sup>20</sup> This curious expression, “to adorn the buddha lands,” refers to the way in which the bodhisattvas, having attained enlightenment, prepare ideal realms for the beings they will lead to salvation. The Lotus Sutra in chapter 6, “Bestowal of Prophecy,” describes some of these ideal buddha lands, which are adorned with jeweled trees and flowers. The *Diamond Sutra*, having evoked the concept, in typical fashion immediately proceeds to negate it.

that are attached to forms, nor should they cultivate those that are attached to sound, scent, taste, feeling or dharmas. They should cultivate minds that are attached to nothing.”

“Subhūti, suppose there was a person whose body was the size of Sum-eru, the king of mountains. What do you think? Could such a body be called big or not?”

Subhūti replied, “Very big, World-Honored One. Why? Because the Buddha has said that what is not a body—this is called a big body.”

11. “Subhūti, suppose there were as many Ganges Rivers as there are sands in the Ganges, and suppose one counted all the grains of sand in all these Ganges. What do you think? Would the sands of these Ganges be many or not?”

Subhūti replied, “Very many, World-Honored One. The number of Ganges Rivers alone would be too many to be counted, to say nothing of the sands in them.”

“Subhūti, I will now tell you the truth of the matter. If good men and good women should take the seven treasures and, using them as alms, fill as many thousand-millionfold worlds as there are sands in the Ganges, would they gain great good fortune or would they not?”

Subhūti replied, “Very great, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha then said to Subhūti, “If good men and good women should accept and uphold just one four-line verse from this sutra and teach it to others, then the good fortune they gained would be even greater.”

12. “Moreover, Subhūti, if someone proceeds to expound even one four-line verse from this sutra, you should know that the place where this is done is one where all the heavenly beings, human beings, and *asuras* in the world should offer alms as they would to a stupa of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup> And how much more is this so if that person is fully able to accept, uphold, read, and recite the sutra. Subhūti, you should know that such a person brings to fulfillment the foremost, the most wonderful of all teachings. And that wherever this

<sup>21</sup> A stupa is a conical structure erected to enshrine the relics of Śākyamuni Buddha or an eminent monk. Famous examples are those of Bharhut and Sanchi, which are adorned with elaborate brick or stone decorations. Lay believers held stupas in deep reverence and contributed to their construction and maintenance. In the opinion of some scholars, the Mahayana movement was closely associated with lay Buddhists who gathered to pay honor to such stupas. When Buddhism entered China and the other countries of eastern Asia, the stupa evolved into the structures known as pagodas.

sutra exists, it is as though the Buddha himself were there, or his most venerable disciples.”

13. At that time Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, by what name should this sutra be known, and how should we honor and uphold it?”

The Buddha said to Subhūti, “This sutra should be called ‘The Diamond Perfection of Wisdom,’ and by that name you should honor and uphold it. And why is this? Subhūti, the perfection of wisdom that the Buddha expounds is not a perfection of wisdom. Subhūti, why do I say this? Does the Thus Come One expound the existence of dharmas, or does he not?”

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, the Thus Come One does not expound anything.”<sup>22</sup>

“Subhūti, what do you think? The dust particles in the thousand-million-fold world—are they many or not?”

Subhūti replied, “They are very many, World-Honored One.”

“Subhūti, these dust particles that the Thus Come One expounds are not dust particles. These are called dust particles. And what the Thus Come One expounds as a world is not a world. This is called a world.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Can the Thus Come One be seen in the thirty-two bodily marks?”

“No, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One cannot be seen in the thirty-two bodily marks. Why? Because the Thus Come One teaches us that the thirty-two bodily marks are not bodily marks. These are called the thirty-two bodily marks.”

“Subhūti, suppose there were good men and good women who gave their bodies and lives as a form of almsgiving for as many times as there are sands in the Ganges. Much greater would be the good fortune gained by a person who accepted and upheld one four-line verse of this sutra and taught it to others!”

14. At that time, Subhūti, hearing the Buddha speak in such a way about this sutra, achieved a profound understanding. Shedding tears of compassion, he said to the Buddha, “How rare and wonderful, World-Honored One, is the way in which you expound this most profound sutra. From times past, I have gained the eyes of wisdom, but I have never heard you

<sup>22</sup> Conze suggests that the sutra in its original form probably ended around this point, and that the remainder of the text, with the exception of the closing passage, sections 30–32, is largely a “chance medley of stray sayings” (Conze 1958, p. 50).

expound a sutra such as this. World-Honored One, if there are persons who hear this sutra and embrace it with the purity of a believing mind, then they will come to understand the true form of reality.<sup>23</sup> One should know, then, that such persons will acquire the foremost, the most wonderful blessings. World-Honored One, this true form is not a form at all. Therefore the Thus Come One expounds it, calling it the true form.”

“World-Honored One, now that I have heard you expound a sutra such as this, it is not at all difficult for me to believe, understand, accept and uphold it. But in times to come, in the latter five-hundred-year period, if there are living beings who are able to hear this sutra and believe, understand, accept and uphold it, then they will be most wonderful persons indeed. Why? Because such persons will be free of the thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. Why? Because the concept of a self is not a concept at all. The concept of a being is not a concept at all. The concept of a living creature, the concept of a soul, is no concept at all. Why? Because when one has freed oneself from all such concepts of form, then the person may be called one of the buddhas.”

The Buddha said to Subhūti, “Just so, just so! If there is a person who is able to hear this sutra without alarm, without fear, without misgivings, then you should know that this person is most wonderful. Why? Subhūti, what the Thus Come One expounds as the foremost perfection is not the foremost perfection. This is called the foremost perfection.”

“Subhūti, the *pāramitā* or perfection of forbearance as preached by the Buddha is not the perfection of forbearance.<sup>24</sup> Why? When long ago I was subjected to bodily mutilation by King Kāli, at that time I had no thought of a self, a being, a living creature, an individual.<sup>25</sup> Why? Because at that time in the distant past when I was being dismembered limb by limb, if I had had

<sup>23</sup> The true aspect or form of reality (Ch. *shixiang* 实相), a key term in Mahayana Buddhism. The famous passage in chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra states that “The true aspect of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between buddhas.”

<sup>24</sup> *Kṣānti*, forbearance or bearing up, particularly under opposition and hardship when pursuing Buddhist practice, one of the six *pāramitās*.

<sup>25</sup> According to the *Jātaka* stories or tales of the Buddha in his previous existences, King Kāli (Strife) was once hunting with his harem. While he was taking a nap, his concubines wandered into a forest and came on an ascetic named Kṣānti (Forbearance) sitting in meditation. They laid offerings of flowers before him, and he talked to them on matters of doctrine. When the king awoke and came on the group, he was furious. The ascetic explained that he had been teaching the women about forbearance. The king, enraged, decided to test him by cutting off his hands, feet, ears and nose. Kṣānti bore all this with patience, whereupon the king, regretting his cruelty, begged for forgiveness. Kṣānti said that he was not angry, and

a thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual, then I would have been filled with anger and hatred.”

“Subhūti, when I think back to those five hundred years when I was an ascetic named Kṣāntivādin or Forbearance, at that time I had no thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. Therefore, Subhūti, bodhisattvas should free themselves from all such concepts of form, and should set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment. In their minds they should have no attachment to form. In their minds they should have no attachment to sound, scent, taste, feeling, or dharmas. They should cultivate a mind that is without attachment. If their minds have attachments, these should become non-attachments. Therefore I have said that bodhisattvas should in their minds have no attachments regarding the form of their almsgiving. Subhūti, in order for bodhisattvas to profit and enrich all living beings, they should carry out their almsgiving in this manner.”

“The Thus Come One preaches that all forms are in fact not forms. And he also preaches that all living beings are not living beings. Subhūti, the Thus Come One speaks true words, real words, words that are so, words not wild, not deviant.”

“Subhūti, the dharma that the Thus Come One has acquired—this dharma is without truth and without falsehood. Subhūti, if bodhisattvas when they carry out almsgiving should in their minds have any attachment to a dharma, they would be like persons who enter a dark place and are unable to see. But if bodhisattvas when they carry out almsgiving have in their minds no attachment to a dharma, they will be like persons whose eyes are illumined by the rays of the sun and who can distinguish all kinds of colors.”

“Subhūti, in times to come, if there are good men and good women who can accept, uphold, read, and recite this sutra, then the Thus Come One, through his buddha wisdom, will know and recognize all of them. He will see them all and all of them will attain blessings boundless and beyond measure.”

15. “Subhūti, suppose there were good men and good women who in the first part of the day gave their bodies as a kind of alms for as many times as there are sands in the Ganges, that in the middle part of the day they again gave their bodies as alms for as many times as there are sands in the

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proved it by restoring his body to its original form. Kṣānti was Śākyamuni in a previous incarnation, and King Kāli was later reborn as Kauṇḍinya, one of Śākyamuni’s first disciples.

Ganges, and that in the latter part of the day they once more gave their bodies as alms for as many times as there are sands in the Ganges, and they continued to give their bodies as alms for a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million *kalpas*. But if there were a person who, hearing this sutra, responded with a believing mind and did not question it, then that person's good fortune would surpass that of the other persons I have described. And how much more is this so if that person copies, accepts, upholds, reads, and recites this sutra and explains and preaches it to others!"

"Subhūti, I speak in all earnestness. This sutra confers unimaginable, indescribable blessings, blessings that are beyond measure. The Thus Come One preaches it for those who would set out on the great vehicle path, who would follow the greatest vehicle of all. If there are persons who can accept, uphold, read and recite it and expound it widely for the sake of others, the Thus Come One will recognize all such persons, he will see all such persons and they will all attain blessings that are boundless and beyond measure, that are unimaginable, indescribable. Persons such as these are capable of shouldering the supreme and perfect enlightenment of the Thus Come One. Why? Because, Subhūti, if one delights in a lesser dharma and is attached to the thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual, then such a person is not capable of hearing, accepting, reading and reciting this sutra and preaching and explaining it to others."

"Subhūti, whatever the place may be, if this sutra is there, then all the heavenly beings, human beings and *asuras* in the world should offer alms to it. You should know that such a spot is like a stupa, where all should reverently bow in obeisance, should circle it and shower it with flowers and incense."

16. "Furthermore, Subhūti, when good men and good women accept, uphold, read and recite this sutra, if they should be treated by others with derision and contempt, it is because in a past existence they created bad karma that would cause them to be reborn into an evil path. But because now in this existence they are treated by others with contempt, that bad karma from a past existence will be wiped out. Hence, they will attain supreme and perfect enlightenment.

"Subhūti, I recall how, countless *asaṃkhyā kalpas* in the past,<sup>26</sup> before the time of the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, I was able to encounter eight hundred,

<sup>26</sup> *Asaṃkhyā* is a numerical unit of ancient India used to indicate an unusually large number. *Nayuta* in the latter part of the sentence is an Indian numerical unit defined as equal to one hundred billion.

four thousand, ten thousand, a million *nayutas* of buddhas. To each and every one of these I gave alms and served them diligently, never daring to be remiss. But if, in a latter age, there is a person who can receive, uphold, read and recite this sutra, the blessings that person receives will be more than a hundred times the blessings I received by paying alms to all those buddhas. Those blessings will be a thousand, ten thousand, a million times greater, greater than it is even possible for numbers to be calculated or analogies to be expressed. Subhūti, if there are good men and good women in a latter age who accept, uphold, read and recite this sutra—if I were to describe in full the blessings they would receive, then people who listened to me would become confused and dumbfounded in their minds, would be doubtful and fail to believe me. Subhūti, you should understand that this sutra is indescribable in import, and the results it brings too are indescribable.”

17. At that time Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if good men and good women set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment, how should they live, how should they discipline their minds?”

The Buddha said to Subhūti, “If good men and good women hope to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment, they should cultivate minds that think in this way: ‘I must save all living beings. And when I have saved all living beings, there will not in fact be a single living being who has been saved.’”

“Why do I say this? Because, Subhūti, if the bodhisattvas have any thought of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual, then they are not bodhisattvas. Why? Because, Subhūti, there is no such dharma as the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? When the Thus Come One was with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, was there any such thing as the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment?”

“No, World-Honored One. If I have understood the meaning of the Buddha’s preachings, when the Buddha was with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, there was no such thing as the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment.”

The Buddha said, “Just so, just so! Subhūti, in truth there is no such thing as the Thus Come One’s attaining supreme and perfect enlightenment. Subhūti, if there were such a thing as the Thus Come One’s attaining supreme and perfect enlightenment, then the Buddha Dīpaṃkara would not have prophesized my attainment of enlightenment, nor would he have said to me, ‘In a future existence you will become a buddha and will be called Śākyamuni.’ But because in truth there is no such thing as the attainment of

supreme and perfect enlightenment, therefore the Buddha Dīpaṃkara gave me a prophecy of enlightenment, saying, ‘In a future existence you will become a buddha called Śākyamuni.’”

“Why do I say this? To the Thus Come One, all dharmas are ‘thus’ in nature. Suppose there should be someone who says that the Thus Come One has attained supreme and perfect enlightenment. Subhūti, in truth there is no such thing as the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment. Subhūti, the supreme and perfect enlightenment that the Thus Come One has attained—in it there is no truth and no falsehood. Therefore the Thus Come One preaches that all dharmas are all of them buddha dharmas.

Subhūti, what I speak of as ‘all dharmas’ are not ‘all dharmas.’ So one calls them ‘all dharmas.’ Subhūti, suppose I should say it is like a person who is big and tall in body.”

Subhūti said, “World-Honored One, if the Thus Come One says that a person is big and tall in body, then that means that that person is not big in body. This is called a big body.”

“Subhūti, the bodhisattvas are the same as this. If one of them were to say, ‘I am going to save a countless number of living beings,’ then one could not call that person a bodhisattva. Why? Because, Subhūti, there is no such dharma called a bodhisattva. Therefore the Buddha teaches that, with regard to all dharmas, there is no self, no being, no living creature, no individual.”

“Subhūti, if a bodhisattva were to say, ‘I will adorn the buddha lands,’ he cannot be called a bodhisattva. Why? Because the Buddha teaches that to adorn the buddha lands is not to adorn them. This is called adorning. Subhūti, if the bodhisattvas thoroughly understand that there is no such thing as a self, then the Thus Come One declares that they are truly worthy to be called bodhisattvas.”

18. “Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One possess the physical eye?”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The first of five types of eyes or five kinds of perceptive faculties. They are (1) the physical eye, that of ordinary people that distinguishes color and form. (2) The heavenly eye, which perceives things in darkness, at a distance, or beyond the physical limits of obstruction. (3) The wisdom eye, the ability of followers of Buddhism to perceive that nothing has independent existence and that all phenomena are empty. (4) The dharma eye, with which bodhisattvas perceive the nature of all teachings in order to save all people. (5) The buddha eye, which perceives the true nature of reality spanning past, present and future. The buddha eye includes all the other four eyes.



“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One possesses the physical eye.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One possess the heavenly eye?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One possesses the heavenly eye.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One possess the wisdom eye?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One possesses the wisdom eye.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One possess the dharma eye?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One possesses the dharma eye.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Does the Thus Come One possess the buddha eye?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One possesses the buddha eye.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Regarding the sands of the Ganges, does the Buddha teach that they are sands or not?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One teaches that they are sands.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Suppose there were as many Ganges Rivers as there are sands in the Ganges. And suppose there were as many buddha worlds as there are sands in all these Ganges Rivers. Would they be many or would they not?”

“They would be very many, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha then said to Subhūti, “The different types of minds possessed by the living beings in these various lands—the Thus Come One knows them all. Why? Because the Thus Come One teaches that these various types of minds are all of them not minds. So they are called minds. Why do I say this? Subhūti, past mind cannot be gotten hold of, present mind cannot be gotten hold of, future mind cannot be gotten hold of.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> You can never get hold of a past mind because it no longer exists. You can never get hold of a present mind because it is constantly changing. You can never get hold of a future mind because it does not yet exist. One of the most famous passages in the *Diamond Sutra*.

19. “Subhūti, what do you think? If a person were to fill the thousand-millionfold world with the seven treasures as an offering, would that person as a consequence gain much good fortune, or would he not?”

“Just so, World-Honored One. That person would in consequence of this gain very much good fortune.”

“Subhūti, if the good fortune were true good fortune, then the Thus Come One would not teach that the amount of fortune gained is great. Because there is no such thing as good fortune. Therefore, the Thus Come One teaches that the amount of good fortune is great.”

20. “Subhūti, what do you think? Can the fully-formed material body of the Buddha be seen or not?”

“No, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One does not think it proper for his fully-formed material body to be seen. Why? Because the Thus Come One teaches that the fully-formed material body is not a fully-formed material body. This is called the fully-formed material body.”

“Subhūti, what do you think? Can the fully-formed bodily marks of the Thus Come One be seen or not?”

“No, World-Honored One. The Thus Come One does not think it proper for his fully-formed bodily marks to be seen. Why? Because the Thus Come One teaches that his bodily marks when fully-formed are not fully-formed. This is called bodily marks fully-formed.”

21. “Subhūti, you must not say that the Thus Come One entertains any such thought as the following. If someone should assert that I teach something that is a dharma, I reply that he should have no such thought. Why? Because if someone claims that the Thus Come One teaches the existence of a dharma, then he is slandering the Buddha. He is unable to understand my teachings, that is the reason. Subhūti, to teach a dharma is to teach that there is no dharma that can be taught—that is the proper teaching. This is called the teaching of a dharma.”

At that time the venerable Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if the living beings of a future age hear this preaching of a dharma, will they respond with a believing mind, or will they not?”

The Buddha said, “Subhūti, these are not living beings, and they are not not living beings. Why? Subhūti, living beings, living beings—the Thus Come One teaches that they are not living beings. These are called living beings.”

22. Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, when the Buddha attained supreme and perfect enlightenment, did he attain nothing at all?”

“Just so, just so, Subhūti. When I attained supreme and perfect enlightenment, there was not even the smallest dharma for me to attain. This is called the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment.”

23. “Furthermore, Subhūti, this dharma is uniform in nature—it has no higher or lower degree. So it is called supreme and perfect enlightenment. This is because it knows no self, no being, no living creature, no individual. When one cultivates all good dharmas, then one will attain supreme and perfect enlightenment. And what are called good dharmas the Thus Come One teaches are not good dharmas. These are called good dharmas.”

24. “Subhūti, suppose a person were to gather together the seven treasures in an amount equal to all the Mount Sumerus, king of mountains, that exist in the thousand-millionfold world and offer them as alms. And suppose that another person took this Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, or even just one four-line verse from it, accepted, upheld, read, recited, and taught it to others. The good fortune gained by the former person would not amount to one part in a hundred of that gained by the latter. That gained by the latter could not be measured in hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, or millions: it would be beyond the possibility of numbers to be calculated or analogies to be expressed.”

25. “Subhūti, what do you think? You should never say of the Thus Come One that he thinks to himself, ‘I will save living beings.’ Subhūti you must not think any such thing. Why? Because in truth there are no living beings for the Thus Come One to save. If there were any living beings for the Thus Come One to save, then the Thus Come One would have thoughts of a self, a being, a living creature, an individual. But, Subhūti, the Thus Come One teaches that what has a self does not have a self. All ordinary persons believe that they have a self.<sup>29</sup> But, Subhūti, the Thus Come One teaches that ordinary persons are not ordinary persons.”

26. “Subhūti, what do you think? Can one use the thirty-two bodily marks as a means to view the Thus Come One, or can one not?”

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “Just so, just so. Through the thirty-two bodily marks one may view the Thus Come One.”

<sup>29</sup> Ordinary unenlightened persons.

The Buddha said, “If one could see the Thus Come One through the thirty-two bodily marks, then a wheel-turning king would be a Thus Come One!”<sup>30</sup>

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “Then if I understand the Buddha’s teachings correctly, one should not be able to view the Thus Come One through the thirty-two bodily marks.”

At that time, the World-Honored One recited this verse:

Those who look for me in forms,  
 who seek me in the sound of a voice—  
 those persons walk an erroneous way,  
 they can never see the Thus Come One.

27. “Subhūti, suppose you were to think, ‘It is not because the Thus Come One was fully endowed with the bodily marks that he was able to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment!’<sup>31</sup> Subhūti, you should never think, ‘It was not because the Thus Come One was fully endowed with the bodily marks that he was able to gain supreme and perfect enlightenment!’ Or, Subhūti, suppose you were to think that those who wish to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment teach that one should assume the marks of one

<sup>30</sup> A wheel-turning king is an ideal ruler in early Indian thought, one who governs with justice rather than force. He was believed to possess the same thirty-two bodily marks as a buddha.

<sup>31</sup> Probably the most troubling passage in all the Kumārajīva translation of the *Diamond Sutra*. Red Pine’s translation of the Sanskrit text of this section (Pine 2001, pp. 24–25) reads: “Subhūti, what do you think? Was it due to the possession of attributes that the Tathāgata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment? Subhūti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Subhūti, it could not have been due to the possession of attributes that the Tathāgata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.” In other words, one should not suppose that the fact that the Buddha, through his meritorious acts, acquired the special attributes or bodily marks that pertain to a buddha or a great man, was the reason why he gained enlightenment. That is, attributes and enlightenment are not causally related.

But Kumārajīva has inserted an extra *bu* 不 or a negative in the sentence, making it mean that the two are not not related, and the same negative is repeated in the following sentence, so it appears to be deliberate and not just a copyist’s error. The sutra up to this point, with its repeated negations, has strongly suggested that the acquisition of special bodily marks is accompanied with, but not the cause of, the attainment of enlightenment. But Kumārajīva apparently wants us now to go a step further and negate that view as well, so that we are not tempted to cling to it. In other words, as in the case of the doctrine of emptiness, all views, including that of emptiness, must in the end be negated, leaving us in a neither/nor locale or one that is beyond the power of words to define or express—only there can all clinging be eliminated.

who cuts off and annihilates all dharmas. You should not think such a thought. Why? Because those who have set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment do not teach that, with regard to dharmas, one should assume the marks of one who cuts off or annihilates them.”

28. “Subhūti, suppose a bodhisattva were to fill as many worlds as there are sands in the Ganges with the seven treasures and offer them as alms. And suppose there were a person who understood that all dharmas are without a self and thus were able to carry out the *pāramitā* of forbearance. The blessings gained by this person would exceed those of the bodhisattva just described. Subhūti, this is because the bodhisattvas do not receive good fortune.”

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, why do the bodhisattvas not receive good fortune?”

“Subhūti, the bodhisattvas must not be greedy to receive good fortune for their actions. That is why I teach that they do not receive good fortune.”

29. “Subhūti, if there is a person who says, ‘The Thus Come One<sup>32</sup>—he comes, he goes, he sits, he lies down,’ then that person does not understand the meaning of my teachings. Why? Because the Thus Come One has nowhere he comes from and nowhere he goes to. Therefore he is called the Thus Come One.”

30. “Subhūti, suppose good men and good women were to take the thousand-millionfold world and pound it into fine dust. What do you think? Would the fine dust particles be many or not?”

“Very many, World-Honored One. Why? Because, if these many dust particles really existed, then the Buddha would not teach that they are dust particles. Why do I say this? The Buddha teaches that dust particles are not dust particles. These are called dust particles.”

“World-Honored One, the Thus Come One teaches that the thousand-millionfold world is not a world. This is called a world. Why? If one believed that the world really existed, this would be the mark of an attachment to an entity. But the Thus Come One teaches that the mark of an attachment to an entity is not the mark of an attachment to an entity. This is called the mark of an attachment to an entity.”

<sup>32</sup> Tathāgata or Thus Come One is one of the ten honorable titles of a buddha. Tathāgata can mean either Thus Come One or Thus Gone One. The word Thus indicates “Suchness” or the true nature of reality from which a buddha comes and into which he goes. Here, the Buddha himself comments on the meaning of the title.

“Subhūti, the mark of an attachment to an entity must not be taught. But ordinary people in their greed are attached to such a mark.”

31. “Subhūti, suppose someone were to say that the Buddha teaches views such as a view of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. Subhūti, what do you think? Has this person understood the meaning of my teachings, or has he not?”

“World-Honored One, this person has not understood the meaning of the Thus Come One’s teachings. Why? The World-Honored One teaches that views such as those of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual are not views of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual. These are called views of a self, a being, a living creature, or an individual.”

“Subhūti, those who have set their minds on the attainment of supreme and perfect enlightenment should, with regard to all dharmas, understand them in this way, view them in this way, believe and interpret them in this way and not suppose there is something that has ‘the appearance of a dharma.’ Subhūti, what I have termed the appearance of a dharma—the Thus Come One teaches that it is not the appearance of a dharma. This is called the appearance of a dharma.”

32. “Subhūti, suppose there were a person who filled the worlds, countless *asaṃkhyā* in number, with the seven treasures, and took them and offered them as alms. And suppose that good men and good women, having set their minds on becoming bodhisattvas, took this sutra, even just one four-line verse of it, accepted, upheld, read, and recited it and preached and expounded it to others. The good fortune they received would exceed that of that other person.”

“And how should they preach and expound it to others? Never troubling about appearances, in accordance with suchness, unmoving. Why?

Because all conditioned dharmas  
are like dreams, phantoms, bubbles, shadows,  
like dew, or again like lightning—  
in this way should you view them.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The Sanskrit version of this verse is slightly different. In Red Pine’s translation, it reads:  
As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space  
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble  
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning  
view all created things like this (Pine 2001, p. 27).

When the Buddha had finished preaching this sutra, the elder monk Subhūti, along with the monks, nuns, male and female lay believers, and the heavenly and human beings and *asuras* in all the worlds, having heard the preaching of the Buddha, were all filled with great delight and joy. They believed, accepted, honored and carried out this *Diamond Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.<sup>34</sup>

## GLOSSARY

**Emptiness or Nondualism (*sūnyatā*):** The Buddhist doctrine that declares that, because all things are conditioned in nature, brought into existence and governed by specific causes and conditions and hence in a constant state of flux, they lack any inherent or abiding identity. The only thing that can be said of them is that they are empty of fixed characteristics. By this, Buddhism does not mean that they do not exist, but simply that they are unworthy of becoming the object of clinging or attachment. And because they all share this one quality of emptiness, Mahayana goes on to assert that seemingly opposing concepts such as *samsāra*, the world of suffering and cyclical birth and death, and the world of nirvana, are in the end identical, and that, if we would only realize this fact, earthly desires are identical with the state of enlightenment.

**Latter Day of the Law:** The last of the three periods which the teachings of the Buddha pass through after his death. There, the teachings of the Buddha lose their power to lead people to enlightenment. It is said to last for ten thousand years or more.

**Seven treasures:** Seven precious substances mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures. The list varies from text to text, but is often given as gold, silver, lapis lazuli, seashell, agate, pearl, and carnelian.

<sup>34</sup> Kumārajīva's Chinese translation concludes with a brief mantra written in Chinese characters. The exact pronunciation of the characters in Kumārajīva's time can only be roughly guessed at. Here, I give a transcription of it as it is read in Japanese Buddhist pronunciation, which probably preserves something of the original sound of the mantra. *Namo bhagyabatei haraja haramitaei on irite ishiri shurota bishaya bishaya sowaka*. Red Pine (2001, p. 435) gives it in this Sanskrit version but offers no translation, presumably because mantras are believed to be untranslatable: *Namo bhagavate prajna-paraitaye om iriti ishri shrota vishaya svaha*.

**Six *pāramitās* or perfections:** Six practices required of Mahayana bodhisattvas in order to attain buddhahood. The Sanskrit word *pāramitā* means “perfection” or “having reached the other shore,” that is, having crossed over from the shore of delusion to that of enlightenment.

The six practices are (1) almsgiving, which includes material almsgiving, almsgiving of the Law or doctrine, and almsgiving of fearlessness; (2) keeping of the precepts; (3) forbearance or bearing up patiently under opposition and hardship; (4) assiduousness or diligence in practice; (5) meditation; and (6) wisdom.

***Skandhas:*** Often referred to as “heaps” or aggregates, these are the five components that, according to Buddhist thought, constitute the make-up of all living beings. The first of the five is form, the physical aspect of the living being. The second is perception, the function that receives external information through the senses. The third is conception, the function of creating mental images and concepts out of what has been perceived. The fourth is volition, the will that acts on conceptions and motivates action. The fifth is consciousness, the function of discernment that interprets the components of perception, conception, and volition. The English translations of the five Sanskrit terms are not standardized, and other translators render them variously as form, feeling, perception, impulse, and consciousness; form, feeling, discrimination, conditioning factor, and consciousness; or form, sensation, perception, memory, and consciousness.

**Ten titles of a buddha:** Ten epithets traditionally applied to a buddha. (1) Thus Come One; (2) worthy of offerings; (3) of right and universal knowledge; (4) perfect clarity and conduct; (5) well gone; (6) understanding the world; (7) unexcelled worthy; (8) trainer of people; (9) teacher of heavenly and human beings; and (10) Buddha, World-Honored One.

**Thirty-two marks:** Remarkable physical characteristics possessed by great beings such as buddhas and wheel-turning kings. They are: flat soles; markings of the wheel of the Law on the soles; long slender fingers; broad flat heels; webbed feet and hands; extremely flexible limbs; protuberant insteps; slender legs like those of a deer; hands that extend past the knees even when standing; concealed genitals; body height equal to an arm span; body hair that turns upward; one hair growing from each pore; golden skin; light radiating from the body; thin pliant skin; well-developed muscles in hands,



feet, shoulders, nape of neck; well-developed muscles below armpits; dignified torso like that of a lion; large straight body; substantial shoulders; forty teeth; even teeth; four white fangs; full cheeks like those of a lion; unexcelled sense of taste; long broad tongue; voice that can reach to the Brahma heaven; eyes the color of blue lotus blossoms; long eyelashes like those of a cow; protuberant knot of flesh like a topknot on crown of head; tuft of white hair between the eyebrows curling to the right.

**Thousand-millionfold world:** A major world system in ancient Indian cosmology. A world consists of a Mount Sumeru, its surrounding seas and mountains, heavenly bodies, etc., extending upward to the first meditation heaven in the world of form and downward to the circle of wind that forms the basis of a world. One thousand such worlds make up a minor world system, one thousand minor world systems constitute an intermediate world system, and one thousand intermediate world systems form a major world system. One major world system therefore comprises one billion worlds. There were thought to be countless world systems in the universe.

**Three bodies of a buddha:** A concept set forth in Mahayana Buddhism to organize different views of the buddha appearing in the sutras. These are (1) the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*) or body of the Law, the fundamental truth or Law to which a buddha is enlightened. (2) The reward body (*sambhogakāya*) obtained as the reward for completing bodhisattva practices and acquiring the buddha wisdom. Unlike the Dharma body, which is immaterial, the reward body is thought of as an actual body, but one that is transcendent and imperceptible to ordinary people. (3) The manifested body (*nirmāṇakāya*) or the physical form that a buddha assumes in this world in order to save people. Generally, a buddha was believed to possess one of the three bodies.

**Wisdom (*prajñā*):** The “wise” way of looking at the nature of all things. Because it sees them as conditioned in nature, constantly changing and hence empty of any abiding nature, it regards them as unworthy of any craving or attachment. Possession of such wisdom leads to a state of enlightenment, and hence is regarded as the source of all buddhas.

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