

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Form is Emptiness: Reading the Diamond Sutra

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THE DIAMOND SUTRA is one of the best-known and most frequently interpreted of the Mahayana sutras. It is an accessible non-esoteric discourse which at the same time seems to controvert exact or determinate meanings. It persistently draws attention to its own contradictory status, to its authority to make assertions which turn out to be no assertions at all,¹ openly displaying those oppositions upon which the conceptual order of language is based, insistently reminding the reader of its existence as text, as mere words, verbal notations, figures of speech. It employs a functional rhetoric to dissuade the reader from being seduced by the attractions of rhetoric (the raft metaphor is perhaps the *locus classicus*: it is a helpful figure of speech, yet must be seen to be merely so). It questions those verbal codes through which we structure our empirical perception of the world, challenging the reader to see them as codes, as text. Thus the Sutra serves less to 'express the inexpressible' than to 'unexpress the expressible',² to drive a wedge between language and our common-sense assumptions about its transparency on to a 'real world' of objects and essences. At the same time it proposes that this wedge or 'gap' is itself the illusory consequence of our mistaking words for qualities or things.

The Sutra is a self-deconstructive text in so far as it underscores both its own status as a discursive phenomenon and the contradictions involved in mistaking its declarations for either literal or metaphorical truth. In decoding its own procedures it enacts that detachment from codes which it seeks to induce in the

¹ Edward Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p. 1. Conze characterizes the assertions of the *Large Sutra* in this manner.

² See Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xvii where Barthes assigns this purpose to the 'task of art'.

reader. Thus in presenting language as an instrument of deception it seeks to unmask that deception and the motives which help to perpetuate it (the kinds of desire which attachment to language induces, for adaptation, settled meanings, stable identity, etc.). If language functions to structure a homogeneous 'self' and a 'world', then the Sutra functions to expose these two types of mental construct as contingent and arbitrary.

I have chosen to discuss this particular Sutra mainly for reasons of convenience. It is well-known; it is short; it is concerned among other things with its own status as text; and its fragmentary, repetitive form makes it particularly amenable to the kind of structural analysis which makes up the first section of the present essay. The second and third deal with the Sutra's devices for subverting the two central illusions upon which assumptions about the realistic functions of language are based: the referential illusion, the belief in the identity of the signified (concept) and the referent (extra-linguistic entity), in that what one names is as one names it; the semantic illusion, the belief in the natural relation between signifier (word-sound) and signified, and thus in the capacity of language to establish fixed meanings and, by extension, a stable ego and a homogeneous world-view.³ Thus my concern is less with the 'what' (the message) than with the 'how' of the Sutra, the manner through which its structural and rhetorical strategies contribute fundamentally to the articulation of its basic doctrines and outlook.

1. *The Structural Illusion*

We can start by juxtaposing two conclusions about the structure of the Sutra by two distinguished commentators on it: Edward Conze and Han Shan (d. 1623). Noting that to the casual reader the Sutra must appear as 'a jumble of disjointed pieces' strung together at random, Conze then proceeds to posit thematic connections in the opening sections which possess (at best) a weak integrative potential. Thus sections 3–5 deal with the career of a Bodhisattva; 6–8 with the Buddha's 'Dharmabody', while 9–12 play the 'same tune once again, but with some variations . . .'. After the first ending, however, Conze views the second part as 'no more than a chance medley of stray sayings' whose 'frequent repetitions and violent transitions' lead him (and other scholars) to conjecture that the scribes misplaced some of the palm leaves.⁴ Thus the Sutra

³ I have borrowed this neat formulation of the relationship between elements in the semiotic triangle (signifier, signified, referent) from Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 249.

⁴ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 17, 24, 29, 42, 51–52. All subsequent quotations from *The Diamond Sutra*, unless where otherwise stated, are from this edition.

seems to frustrate Conze's search for an organizing principle which in turn would help him to discover an architectonic unity, a structural consonance or harmony (note the musical metaphors) which would integrate all the parts. Concomitantly he is led to posit an original cohesiveness or wholeness which is now lost or displaced.

Han Shan, by contrast, believes in the genuine cohesiveness of the Sutra and decodes it in terms of a unified design. He does so in three ways: first by accepting Vasubandhu's as the sole authoritative commentary (in effect legislating against further exegesis), thus fixing as he puts it the 'exact meaning' of the Sutra; then by positing a hidden plot for the Sutra, an occulted system of references to which the commentary alone holds the key; and finally, as a consequence of both these assumptions, by locating a sequential development, the soteriological 'narrative' of Subhuti's (twenty-seven) doubts, synthesized in a graded series of revelations, culminating in 'the true voidness of Prajñā'.⁵ In so doing Han Shan 'tames' the structure of the Sutra, subjugating its asymmetries, its disjunctions, its discontinuities and its repetitions to accord with the regularities of an occulted design.

Whatever their differences both commentators are united in their desire to weld the heterogeneous elements in the Sutra into a unified whole. For Conze this is a possibility beyond hope of realization; for Han Shan it is a task which Vasubandhu's commentary has once-for-all accomplished. Both men take for granted the necessity of positing a totalizing design which would bracket the apparently fortuitous or random elements in its construction. It is precisely this hidden assumption which makes it impossible for either commentator to contemplate the Sutra as a compilation, an assemblage of fragments.

Barthes once spoke of the *horror vacui* implicit in conceptions of the Book as an object 'which connects, develops, runs, and flows';⁶ in these terms the Sutra embraces the structural 'void', and might be most accurately conceived of as an open network or web momentarily assembled by the intentional activity of reading. Indeed apart from the traditional opening and closing sections it violates expectations of a progressive or developing structure (in this sense it is at one with the 'Perfect Wisdom' where 'one cannot apprehend the beginning, middle or end of form'⁷). The manner in which the individual sections interrelate with each other has a significant bearing on the doctrines articulated; they reflect each other like alternate sides of a coin. It is precisely this complicity

⁵ Lu K'uan Yü (Charles Luk), *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, Series One (London: Rider & Company, 1975), pp. 156, 160-206.

⁶ *Critical Essays*, p. 173.

⁷ See *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* as quoted in Chris Gudmundsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 49.

between this 'no-structure' and teaching that I want to explore at this point.

Perhaps the most striking structural aspect of the Sutra is that repetition of units⁸ for which there is no apparent formal or logical justification (Conze, for example, suspends his commentary on the second part of the Sutra on the grounds that this excessive repetition leaves him with nothing to say). These units display no development but are distributed irregularly throughout the text. They operate less as self-identical entities than as reciprocal units placed in active relation to all other units; they vary from each other but do not evolve. The fact that no one repetition is completely identical with another highlights its status as a mental construction, its lack of self-subsistency reinforced by that which it shares with all other units in the series. Thus the Sutra produces new combinations. It operates as a 'mobilization of recurrent units',⁹ a shifting network of forms and relations which replicates the purely differential status of the verbal elements which constitute it. As a consequence no single unit is foregrounded and thus given absolute value; rather they exist co-dependently. The semantic norm of the Sutra is primarily a contextual one. It frustrates the search for centres of reference or for consistent wholes.

Thus the reader is situated, less in hermeneutic pursuit of a core code or 'truth', than as the locus of those mutating perspectives which make up the text. He/she is teased out of his conventional assumption of a necessary relation between textual form and finalized structures in the same manner (as we shall see) as of that between word-sign and object or sound-image and concept. Alternatively one might say that the demand on the reader is less to organize the ideas of the Sutra and thus integrate them into an overall system than to circulate them in recurrent configurations, in a kaleidoscope of shifting formations and patterns. Such a demand precludes the sedimentation of a centre of observation in the reader (unified self) or the positing of loci of central significance in the Sutra (unified text) (like the Bodhisattvas of the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra the reader is left ground-less, 'without a place to stand'¹⁰). It is in the light of this conception of structure as no-structure that the quest for totalizations, whether of form or of content, undermines the soteriological effects of the discontinuous repetitive elements in the Sutra. To give these generalities a more concrete foundation it may be helpful to trace the course of two of these units as they circulate throughout the textual network.

⁸ What the term 'unit' entails will become clear in the course of the subsequent discussion. Sections are denoted by S, followed by the number.

⁹ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, p. 182.

¹⁰ Quoted from Gudmunsen, p. 73. I should add at this point that throughout the present essay I assume an 'ideal reader' for the Sutra, one who is aware of its conventions and codes, and who submits to the kind of transformation which a reading of it may elicit.

The unit comprising 'the notion of a self or of a being . . . or of a living soul or of a person', which is repeated at least seven times, occurs first in S3 in the context of a Bodhisattva who is not to be called a Bodhisattva should he cherish such a notion. Thereafter it is distributed and transposed throughout the Sutra, in shifting perspectives, entering into new contextual relations and combinations. Diffused among a variety of situations and time-scales it is recontextualized in relation to Bodhisattvas of some future period in whom no perception of a self takes place (S6); to a Streamwinner's or Arhat's awareness of his attainment which would imply such a perception (S9); to beings of the last epoch who will be free from such a perception (S14); to a Bodhisattva's notion of beings to be liberated which would imply such a perception (S17); to the Tathagata's notion of all the beings he has liberated in the past which would imply such a perception (S25); to the Tathagata's teaching that such a view of self is a no-view so that the term may be freely employed as a figure of speech (S31). Thus each repetition has a prospective, a retrospective and a co-existent relation with all of the others; each modifies the others and is modified by them in its turn.

What is the effect of this distribution? For one thing it undermines the autonomy of each individual repetition, prizing it away from its particularized context, highlighting both its status as a mental construction and its 'dependent co-origination' with the other repetitions. For another it precludes the reader's attachment to any one formulation as an absolute content, the textual flux enacting precisely that detachment from particular notations or contexts that it seeks to induce in the reader. It frustrates the construction of a unified (readerly) site, the natural equation of a unified structure with a unified self.

Or take a second unit, the one which first appears in S7: 'This dharma which the Tathagata has fully known or demonstrated—it cannot be grasped, it cannot be talked about, it is neither a dharma nor a no-dharma'. Here the notion of the inaccessibility of the dharma to the discursive structures of language is recontextualized in terms of the illusion of bestowing existence on objects or essences through acts of nomination. Thus it occurs in S13 as the world-system which may be called a 'world-system' because no such system exists; in S14 in relation to those beings who will not be 'frightened or terrified' when they realize that the 'highest perfection' is merely called the 'highest perfection'; in S18 in the context of all the beings of the universe who are known through trends of thought which are merely called 'trends of thought'; on through a complex network of contexts (which it is unnecessary to record here) from S19 to S30 in which the notion of seizing on 'the world-system of 1,000 million worlds' is viewed as a matter of 'linguistic convention, a verbal expression without factual content'.

Here the effect is to dislocate the verbal sign from its conventional meaning (the reader is made to perceive that there is no necessary relation between them)

and to situate individual words (or expressions) as arbitrary counters in an open-ended interrelational game. Through its interaction with all of the others each repetition highlights both the differential and the contextual elements in the production of meaning. In effect one could extend these observations to cover all the other repetitive and formulaic units in the Sutra.

In general, repetition may serve to reinforce an idea in the manner of catechistic instruction or to exhaust all the 'pertinences' of a subject by seeming, with small variations, to cover all of its aspects.¹¹ In the Sutra it is clear that neither of these functions is relevant. On the contrary its form is designed as a kind of repetitive meditation which functions, as Conze noted in relation to the *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, 'to bring about a certain state of mind, and not merely to convince the intellect'.¹² By frustrating any absolute identification with the 'content' of any particular unit, repetition serves to block the extraction of categorical 'truths' from the Sutra (it engenders the Bodhisattva mind which, as the Sutra puts it, 'alights upon no thing whatsoever'¹³). In effect the fragmentary repetitive structure inhibits the reader's desire to insert himself into (or represent himself in) the text by committing himself to its standpoints, whether these be at the moral or intellectual or anagogical (world-view) levels. In so far as the Sutra neither explicitly judges (it develops no systematic categories of moral exclusion) nor constructs propositions nor presents a metaphysical world-view it sharpens the awareness of the potential of language to do precisely these things by depriving the reader of a position in the text as the subject of assent to such standpoints.

We may note finally the curious structure of interlocution (its organization as a sequence of questions and answers) of the Sutra. It is remarkable that the initial hierarchical donor (the Buddha)/receiver (Subhuti) roles established at the outset in which Subhuti asks for instruction and the Buddha promises to give it are not strictly adhered to. Instead the roles are constantly interchanged and reversed, the Buddha sometimes asking the questions and Subhuti replying, sometimes the Buddha being questioned by Subhuti and offering replies. In this way the absolute discrimination implicit in the donor/receiver or response/demand roles is overcome through these reciprocal exchanges, and the conception of a finalized 'truth-gift' bestowed by donor on seeker is transcended. Likewise the reader's position as passive consumer of a focalized 'message' is obviated.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 60.

¹² Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, p. 5.

¹³ This phrase which is particularly suited to the present context is taken from the translation of the Sutra by A. F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam (Berkeley: Shambhala Publications, 1975), p. 37.

2. *The Referential Illusion*

I use the term 'referential' here to denote not only the belief in the identity of the signified with the referent but also the tendency of the signifier (sound-image) to sweep on 'beyond the signified towards the pure materiality of the referent'.¹⁴ The realistic illusion is generated precisely by this bypassing of the signified through which the impression of a natural bond between word-sound and object is established. Through their rhetorical strategies certain sections of the Sutra work to undermine this impression; they create contexts in which the referent is destabilized and made finally inaccessible to the reader.

The Sutra opens deceptively with language called on to authenticate a particular historical occasion (in the traditional manner of Sutras). Initially a sequence of 'realistic effects' serves primarily to reinforce the referential illusion, the capacity of language to transcribe a 'real' place and event. Thus the exact location of the park where the Buddha sojourned is specified, the precise number of monks, the manner of his visit to Shrāvastī to beg and of his washing and sitting down to eat and of his initiating the discourse (S1). Even the pronoun 'I' (presumed to denote Ānanda) functions as an authentication of personal presence and witness (these 'realistic effects' are themselves compromised by their overtly fictional status, the Sutra being written seven or eight centuries after the death of the Buddha and Ānanda). The description of Subhuti's mode of address to the Buddha is the last instance of this mimetic employment of language to represent 'real events' in the Sutra.

What Nāgārjuna demonstrated through his use of the negative dialectic, the Sutra enacts through its rhetorical strategies: that words take on meaning from their relationship to other words in the system and not from any intrinsic relationship to extra-linguistic entities. I choose for discussion one out of half a dozen similar sections which appear at first sight to operate referentially; S11 goes as follows:

The Lord asked: What do you think, Subhuti, if there were as many Ganges rivers as there are grains of sand in the large river Ganges, would the grains of sand in them be many?—Subhuti replied: Those Ganges rivers would indeed be many, much more so the grains of sand in them.—The Lord said: This is what I announce to you, Subhuti, this is what I make known to you,—if some woman or man had filled with the seven precious things as many world systems as there are grains of sand in those Ganges rivers, and would give them as a gift to the Tathagatas, Arhats, fully Enlightened Ones—what do you think, Subhuti, would that woman or man on the strength of that beget a great heap of merit?

¹⁴ Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, p. 62.

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Even though these references to the Ganges river and to its sand-grains have a certain conventional status, in effect they serve to fracture the sense of a natural fidelity between word-image and referent. For example the literal river-image is so multiplied and transposed as to form one mere link in a chain of perspectives which stretches to vanishing point. Whatever claim to a referential validity the image-complex sand-grains/rivers/world systems initially possessed is subsumed in a dizzying multiplication of indices which obliterates any imaginable relationship of the words to an objective reality. This technique of vertiginous hyperbolic expansion is repeated in a variety of spatio-temporal contexts throughout the Sutra.

Thus the term 'Ganges river' is clearly not some object represented by language but purely a means of signification, one of a 'galaxy of signifiers' which connote nothing but the absolute indeterminacy of their objects of reference. We are witnessing a language-game whose primary goal is to suspend the referent and to set up a chain of reactions among a network of signifiers (other sections show language stretched to its extreme limits of spatio-temporal representation, thus highlighting these categories as mental constructions with no existence outside the linguistic signs that produce them). The cumulative effect of these sections is to transform the impossibilities of the referent into the impossibilities of the discourse itself¹⁵ in which the signifieds seem to slide and evaporate beyond any capacity of the signifiers to stabilize or arrest them.

In the context of gift-giving the Sutra declares that the Bodhisattva should not be 'supported by sight-objects, nor by sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or mind-objects'; not even by the 'notion of a sign' (S4). In an analogous manner these sections of the Sutra show language as 'unsupported', as empty of those entities which in its conventional usage it is supposed to reflect. In so doing they expose the 'absent' dimension of language, that ontological voidness or lack which the play of signification in its power to make what is absent seem present to consciousness seeks to conceal. In indicating this lack they also expose the roots of those movements of desire (which are also movements of language) for those absent objects through which the dialectical interplay between need and demand

¹⁵ Barthes, *Sade Fourier Loyola*, p. 36. It is worth recording that Conze's commentary on one of these vertiginous spatio-cosmological trips in the Sutra (S30: 'this great world system of 1,000 million worlds') replicates the operation of the section itself by substituting for the referential function of the words one of empty signification. Thus initially Conze experiences the 'oppression' of the referent, the despair at the 'senseless bulk' of matter and the concomitant 'nightmare of meaninglessness', an oppression, however, dissipated by perceiving the words as empty signifiers, and thus the world-system as 'no-system'. There is 'no bulk of matter at all, but only thoughts and words' in our minds (p. 65).

is perpetuated. In the soteriological sense the greed for names, and by extension for the objects they represent, is cut off, so to speak, at the roots.

3. *The Semantic Illusion*

In a wide variety of contexts the Sutra declares that the 'view of a self, . . . the view of a being, the view of a living soul, the view of a person' is a 'no-view', and that therefore by way of conventional linguistic usage it may be called a 'view of a self' (S31). The implication is that the 'I' of speech (the subject of enunciating) is a semantic and syntactic fiction, the designation of a subject which can be represented conventionally in language but which has neither self-subsistency nor ontological status; the self, like the language through which it is fabricated, is empty. The proposal is a radical one in so far as it touches on the semantic illusion, the belief in the necessary relationship between signifier and signified which produces stable meanings in language and the sense of a permanent ego. Upon what assumptions is such a belief based?

The most important perhaps is that of the transparency of the signifier as sign which permits 'the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence'.¹⁶ In this manner meaning becomes transparent to consciousness, the mode of its production is obscured, and the foundations of self-hood as present-to-itself are established. Thus the constitution of the self through division from itself, in the empty 'space' between signifier and signified, is repressed. The ego, as it were, withdraws its gaze from the process through which it was constituted. The Sutra operates precisely by focusing the gaze on this process.¹⁷

It does so first of all through its ceaseless mobilization of its 'view of a self' through which the notion of the self-existence of self-hood is thrown into question, and through successive recontextualizations, effectively desubstantivized (it is unnecessary at this point to follow this distribution of units). The effect is to represent the structure (or view) of the self in ceaseless transition, in transit from context to context. In so doing the concept itself is decentred and its dependence on the unstable structures of language and context exposed. Thus the self is 'displayed', framed by a succession of contexts, perpetually different

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p. 22. Derrida goes on to remark that there is 'no subject who is agent, author and master of *différance* . . . the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral . . .' (pp. 28–29).

¹⁷ For an account which does full justice to the complexities of the process of ego-formation, the construction and positioning of the subject in language, see Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), especially Ch. 6.

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from itself, inhabited by a 'gap' (or empty space) out of which the notion, not of a fixed subject, but of one in the process of formation is generated.

In addition the Sutra concentrates the gaze of the reader by locating him/her *within* each particular section in a position of acute self-contradiction (difference from himself) for which the text provides no resolution. The strategy turns on the formalized three-stage sequence, employed throughout the Sutra and contextualized in relation to selves, persons, marks, dharmas, etc.: this is A; this is no-A; therefore it is called A. For example a 'view of self' is presented; this 'view' is negated; then represented in the limited functional guise of a conventional figure of speech. In this way the text openly deconstructs its own declarations, violating the process of logic through which universal propositions are constructed, subverting the basic paradigms through which meaning in language is generated. Thus the reader is located at the point of a repeated division or split, at the axis of oscillation between modes of presence and absence (this is A; this is no-A), required to hold two contradictory views simultaneously in sight. He becomes the site of the active production of meaning and its simultaneous annulment, at that point of contradiction at which the mechanics of the fabrication of meaning come into view. It is (among other things) to this purely mechanical or functional aspect of the production of meaning in language that the third item (therefore it is called A) draws attention.

To sum up: one might say that the Sutra shows up the pretensions of language as a means of analysing or describing the world on the three central fronts that this essay has considered: by liberating the conception of form from expectations of an enclosed and enclosing order, of origins, middles and ends; by fracturing the link between the word and its referent, the traditional guarantee of its 'truth' or 'reality' value; and, most radically, by openly indicating the inadequacy of language to generate anything other than purely provisional and functional semantic systems. Soteriologically the Sutra persistently underscores the ontological dimension of *absence* in language, that final lack of being which the persuasive force of its rhetorical and conceptual structures conventionally operates to conceal.