

THE DIAMOND SUTRA



Diamond Sutra

The full Sanskrit title of this text is the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (*The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra*). The Buddha said this Sutra may be known as "The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion."

Like many Buddhist sūtras, *The Diamond Sūtra* begins with the famous phrase, "Thus have I heard." The Buddha finished his daily walk with the monks to gather



offerings of food and sits down to rest. The monk Subhūti comes forth and asks the Buddha a question. What follows is a dialogue regarding the nature of perception. The Buddha often uses paradoxical phrases such as, "What is called the highest teaching is not the highest teaching". The Buddha is generally thought to be helping Subhūti unlearn his preconceived, limited notions of the nature of reality and enlightenment.

The Diamond Sūtra is a short and well-known Mahāyāna sūtra from

the Prajñāpāramitā, or "Perfection of Wisdom" genre, and it emphasizes the practice of non-abiding and non-attachment.

A list of vivid metaphors for impermanence appears in a popular four-line verse at the end of the sūtra:

All conditioned phenomena
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, or shadows;
Like drops of dew, or flashes of lightning;
Thusly should they be contemplated.

A copy of the Chinese version of *The Diamond Sūtra*, found among the Dunhuang manuscripts in the early 20th century and dating back to May 11,

868 C.E. is considered the earliest complete survival of a woodblock printing folio. This discovered text was made over 500 years before the Gutenberg printing press in 1450 C.E. (The first known movable type system was invented in [China](#) around 1040 C.E. by Bi Sheng (990-1051).)

For background history on this Sutra, refer to page 25.

The following translation is by Alex Johnson.

The Diamond Sutra

Chapter 1. Convocation of the Assembly

This is what I heard.

At one time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Grove, near the city of Sravasti.

With him there was a community of 1,250 venerable monks and devoted disciples.

One day before dawn, the Buddha clothed himself, and along with his disciples took up his alms bowl and entered the city to beg for food door to door, as was his custom.

After he had returned and eaten, he put away his bowl and cloak, bathed his feet, and then sat with his legs crossed and body upright upon the seat arranged for him.

He began mindfully fixing his attention in front of himself, while many monks approached the Buddha, and showing great reverence, seated themselves around him.



Chapter 2. Subhuti Requests the Teaching

After a time a most venerable monk named Subhuti, who was sitting in the congregation, rose from his seat. He uncovered his right shoulder, placed his right knee on the ground, and as he joined his palms together he respectfully bowed and then addressed the Buddha:

"Most Honored One, It is truly majestic how much knowledge and wisdom your monks and disciples have been given through your most inspired teachings! It is remarkable that you look after our welfare so selflessly and so completely.

"Most Honored One, I have a question to ask you. If sons and daughters of good families want to develop the highest, most fulfilled and awakened mind, if they wish to attain the Highest Perfect Wisdom, what should they do to help quiet their drifting minds and help subdue their craving thoughts?"

The Buddha then replied:

"So it is as you say, Subhuti. Monks and disciples have been favored with the highest favor by the Buddha, the monks and disciples have been instructed with the highest instruction by the Buddha. The Buddha is constantly mindful of the welfare of his followers. Listen carefully with your full attention, and I will speak to your question.

"If sons and daughters of good families want to develop the highest, most fulfilled and awakened mind, if they wish to attain the Highest Perfect Wisdom and quiet their drifting minds while subduing their craving thoughts, then they should follow what I am about to say to you. Those who follow what I am about to say here will be able to subdue their discriminative thoughts and craving desires. It is possible to attain perfect tranquility and clarity of mind by absorbing and dwelling on the teachings I am about to give."

Then the Buddha addressed the assembly.

Chapter 3. The Awareness of All Living Beings

"All living beings, whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they have form or do not have form; whether they are aware or unaware, whether they are not aware or not unaware, all living beings will eventually be led by me to the final Nirvana, the final ending of the cycle of birth and death. And when this unfathomable, infinite number of living beings have all been liberated, in truth not even a single being has actually been liberated.

"Why Subhuti? Because if a disciple still clings to the arbitrary illusions of form or phenomena such as an ego, a personality, a self, a separate person, or a universal self existing eternally, then that person is not an authentic disciple."

Chapter 4. Unattached Practice of Charity

"Furthermore, Subhuti, in the practice of compassion and charity a disciple should be detached. That is to say, he should practice compassion and charity without regard to appearances, without regard to form, without regard to sound, smell, taste, touch, or any quality of any kind. Subhuti, this is how the disciple should practice compassion and charity. Why? Because practicing compassion and charity without attachment is the way to reaching the Highest Perfect Wisdom, it is the way to becoming a living Buddha.

"Subhuti, do you think that you can measure all of the space in the Eastern Heavens?"

"No, Most Honored One. One cannot possibly measure all of the space in the Eastern Heavens."

"Subhuti, can space in all the Western, Southern, and Northern Heavens, both above and below, be measured?"

"No, Most Honored One. One cannot possibly measure all the space in the Western, Southern, and Northern Heavens."

"Well, Subhuti, the same is true of the merit of the disciple who practices compassion and charity without any attachment to appearances, without cherishing any idea of form. It is impossible to measure the merit they will accrue. Subhuti, my disciples should let their minds absorb and dwell in the teachings I have just given."

Chapter 5. Physical Attributes of Buddhahood is Illusive and Unreal

"Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Buddha be recognized by means of his bodily form?"

"No, Most Honored One, the Buddha cannot be recognized by means of his bodily form. Why? Because when the Buddha speaks of bodily form, it is not a real form, but only an illusion."

The Buddha then spoke to Subhuti: "All that has a form is illusive and unreal. When you see that all forms are illusive and unreal, then you will begin to perceive your true Buddha nature."

Chapter 6. Awaken Faith

Subhuti respectfully asked the Buddha, "Most Honored One! In the future, if a person hears this teaching, even if it is only a phrase or sentence, is it possible for that person to have a true faith and knowledge of Enlightenment awaken in their mind?"

"Without a doubt, Subhuti. Even 500 years after the Enlightenment of this Buddha there will be some who are virtuous and wise; and while practicing compassion and charity, they will believe in the words and phrases of this Sutra and will awaken their minds purely. After they come to hear these teachings, they will be inspired with belief. This is because, when some people hear these words, they will have understood intuitively that these words are the truth.

"But you must also remember, Subhuti, that such persons have long ago planted the seeds of goodness and merit that lead to this realization. They have planted the seeds of good deeds and charity not simply before one Buddhist temple, or two temples, or five, but before hundreds of thousands of Buddhas and temples. So when a person who hears the words and phrases of this Sutra is ready for it to happen, a pure faith and clarity can awaken within their minds.

"Subhuti, any person who awakens faith upon hearing the words or phrases of this Sutra will accumulate countless blessings and merit.

"How do I know this? Because this person must have discarded all arbitrary notions of the existence of a personal self, of other people, or of a universal self. Otherwise their minds would still grasp after such relative conceptions. Furthermore, these people must have already discarded all arbitrary notions of the non-existence of a personal self, other people, or a universal self. Otherwise, their minds would still be grasping at such notions. Therefore anyone who seeks total Enlightenment should discard not only all conceptions of their own selfhood, of other selves, or of a universal self, but they should also discard all notions of the non-existence of such concepts.

"When the Buddha explains these things using such concepts and ideas, people should remember the unreality of all such concepts and ideas. They should recall that in teaching spiritual truths the Buddha always uses these concepts and ideas in the way that a raft is used to cross a river. Once the river has been crossed over, the raft is of no more use, and should be discarded. These arbitrary concepts and ideas about spiritual things need to be explained to us as we seek to attain Enlightenment. However, ultimately these arbitrary conceptions can be discarded. Think Subhuti, isn't it even more obvious that we should also give up our conceptions of non-existent things?"

Chapter 7. No Attainment, No Teaching

Then Buddha asked Subhuti, "What do you think, Subhuti, has the Buddha arrived at the highest, most fulfilled, most awakened and enlightened mind? Does the Buddha teach any teaching?"

Subhuti replied, "As far as I have understood the Buddha's teachings, there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened or enlightened mind. Nor is there any independently existing teaching that the Buddha teaches. Why? Because the teachings that the Buddha has realized and spoken of cannot be conceived of as separate, independent things and therefore cannot be described. The truth in them is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is, nor is it not. What does this mean? What this means is that Buddhas and disciples are not enlightened by a set

method of teachings, but by an internally intuitive process which is spontaneous and is part of their own inner nature."

Chapter 8. Real Merit Has No Merit

"Let me ask you Subhuti? If a person filled over ten thousand galaxies with the seven treasures for the purpose of compassion, charity, and giving alms, would this person not gain great merit and spread much happiness?"

"Yes, Most Honored One. This person would gain great merit and spread much happiness, even though, in truth, this person does not have a separate existence to which merit could accrue. Why? Because this person's merit is characterized with the quality of not being merit."

The Buddha continued, "Then suppose another person understood only four lines of this Sutra, but nevertheless took it upon themselves to explain these lines to someone else. This person's merit would be even greater than the other person's. Why? Because all Buddhas and all the teachings and values of the highest, most fulfilled, most awakened minds arise from the teachings in this Sutra. And yet, even as I speak, Subhuti, I must take back my words as soon as they are uttered, for there are no Buddhas and there are no teachings."

Chapter 9. No Returning and Not Returning

Buddha then asked, "What do you think, Subhuti, does one who has entered the stream which flows to Enlightenment, say 'I have entered the stream'?"

"No, Buddha", Subhuti replied. "A true disciple entering the stream would not think of themselves as a separate person that could be entering anything. Only that disciple who does not differentiate themselves from others, who has no regard for name, shape, sound, odor, taste, touch or for any quality can truly be called a disciple who has entered the stream."

Buddha continued, "Does a disciple who is subject to only one more rebirth say to himself, 'I am entitled to the honors and rewards of a Once-to-be-reborn.?'"

"No, Blessed One. 'Once-to-be-reborn' is only a name. There is no passing away, or coming into, existence. Only one who realizes this can really be called a disciple."

"Subhuti, does a venerable One who will never more be reborn as a mortal say to himself, 'I am entitled to the honor and rewards of a Non-returner.'?"

"No, Perfectly Enlightened One. A 'Non-returner' is merely a name. There is actually no one returning and no one not-returning."

"Tell me, Subhuti. Does a Buddha say to himself, 'I have obtained Perfect Enlightenment.'?"

"No, Blessed One. There is no such thing as Perfect Enlightenment to obtain. If a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha were to say to himself, 'I am enlightened' he would be admitting there is an individual person, a separate self and personality, and would therefore not be a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha."

Subhuti then said, "Most Honored One! You have said that I, Subhuti, excel amongst thy disciples in knowing the bliss of Enlightenment, in being perfectly content in seclusion, and in being free from all passions. Yet I do not say to myself that I am so, for if I ever thought of myself as such then it would not be true that I escaped ego delusion. I know that in truth there is no Subhuti and therefore Subhuti abides nowhere, that he neither knows nor does he not know bliss, and that he is neither free from nor enslaved by his passions."

Chapter 10. Purify Thoughts from All the Senses

The Buddha then continued, "What do you think, Subhuti? When I was in a previous life, with Dipankara Buddha, did I receive any definite teaching or attain any degree of self-control, whereby I later became a Buddha?"

"No, honorable one. When you were a disciple of Dipankara Buddha, in truth, you received no definite teaching, nor did you attain any definite degree of self-control."

"Subhuti, know also that, if any Buddha would say 'I will create a paradise,' he would speak falsely. Why? Because a paradise cannot be created nor can it not be uncreated.

"A disciple should develop a mind which is in no way dependent upon sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensory sensations or any mental conceptions. A disciple should develop a mind which does not rely on anything.

"Therefore, Subhuti, the minds of all disciples should be purified of all thoughts that relate to seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and discriminating. They should use their minds spontaneously and naturally, without being constrained by preconceived notions arising from the senses.

"Suppose, Subhuti, a man had an enormous body. Would the sense of personal existence he had also be enormous?"

"Yes, indeed, Buddha," Subhuti answered. "His sense of personal existence would be enormous. But the Buddha has taught that personal existence is just a name, for it is in fact neither existence nor non-existence. So it only has the name 'personal existence'."

Chapter 11. Merits of this Sutra

"Subhuti, if there were as many Ganges rivers as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges, would you say that the number of grains of sand in all those Ganges rivers would be very many?"

Subhuti answered, "Very many indeed, Most Honored One. If the number of Ganges rivers were that large, how much more so would be the number of grains of sand in all those Ganges rivers."

"Subhuti, I will declare a truth to you. If a good man or a good woman filled over ten thousand galaxies of worlds with the seven treasures for each grain of sand in all those Ganges rivers, and gave it all away for the purpose of compassion, charity and giving alms, would this man or woman not gain great merit and spread much happiness?"

Subhuti replied, "Very much so, Most Honored One."

"Subhuti, if after studying and observing even a single stanza of this Sutra, another person were to explain it to others, the happiness and merit that would result from this virtuous act would be far greater."

Chapter 12. The Most Extraordinary Merit

"Furthermore, Subhuti, if any person in any place were to teach even four lines of this Sutra, the place where they taught it would become sacred ground and would be revered by all kinds of beings. How much more sacred would the place become if that person then studied and observed the whole Sutra! Subhuti, you should know that any person who does that would surely attain something rare and profound. Wherever this Sutra is honored and revered there is a sacred site enshrining the presence of the Buddha or one of the Buddha's most venerable disciples."

Chapter 13. A Diamond that will Cut Away all Arbitrary Conceptions

Subhuti said to the Buddha, "By what name shall we know this Sutra so that it can be honored and studied?"

The Buddha replied, "This Sutra shall be known as *The Diamond that cuts through Illusion*."

"By this name it shall be revered and studied and observed. What does this name mean? It means that when the Buddha named it, he did not have in mind any definite or arbitrary conception, and so named it. This Sutra is hard and sharp, like a diamond that will cut away all arbitrary conceptions and bring one to the other shore of Enlightenment."

"What do you think, Subhuti? Has the Buddha taught any definite teaching in this Sutra?"

"No, the Buddha has not taught any definite teaching in this Sutra."

"What do you think, Subhuti? Are there many particles of dust in this vast universe?"

Subhuti replied: "Yes, many, Most Honored One!"

"Subhuti, when the Buddha speaks of particles of dust, it does not mean I am thinking of any definite or arbitrary thought, I am merely using these words as a figure of speech. They are not real, only illusion. It is just the same with the word universe; these words do not assert any definite or arbitrary idea, I am only using the words as words.

"Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Buddha be perceived by means of his thirty-two physical characteristics?"

"No, Most Honored One. The Buddha cannot be perceived by his thirty-two physical characteristics. Why? Because the Buddha teaches that they are not real but are merely called the thirty-two physical characteristics."

"Subhuti, if a good and faithful person, whether male or female, has, for the sake of compassion and charity, been sacrificing their life for generation upon generation, for as many generations as the grains of sands in 3,000 universes; and another follower has been studying and observing even a single section of this Sutra and explains it to others, that person's blessings and merit would be far greater."

Chapter 14. A Mind without Attachments

At that time, after listening to this Sutra, Subhuti had understood its profound meaning and was moved to tears.

He said, "What a rare and precious thing it is that you should deliver such a deeply profound teaching. Since the day I attained the eyes of understanding, thanks to the guidance of the Buddha, I have never before heard teachings so deep and wonderful as these. Most Honored One, if someone hears this Sutra, and has pure and clear confidence in it they will have a profound insight into the truth. Having perceived that profound insight, that person will realize the

rarest kind of virtue. Most Honored One, that insight into the truth is essentially not insight into the truth, but is what the Buddha calls insight into the truth."

"Most Honored One, having listened to this Sutra, I am able to receive and retain it with faith and understanding. This is not difficult for me, but in ages to come - in the last five hundred years, if there is a person who hears this Sutra, who receives and retains it with faith and understanding, then that person will be a rare one, a person of most remarkable achievement. Such a person will be able to awaken pure faith because they have ceased to cherish any arbitrary notions of their own selfhood, other selves, living beings, or a universal self. Why? Because if they continue to hold onto arbitrary conceptions as to their own selfhood, they will be holding onto something that is non-existent. It is the same with all arbitrary conceptions of other selves, living beings, or a universal self. These are all expressions of non-existent things. Buddhas are Buddhas because they have been able to discard all arbitrary conceptions of form and phenomena, they have transcended all perceptions, and have penetrated the illusion of all forms."

The Buddha replied:

"So it is, Subhuti. Most wonderfully blest will be those beings who, on hearing this Sutra, will not tremble, nor be frightened, or terrified in any way. And why? The Buddha has taught this Sutra as the highest perfection. And what the Buddha teaches as the highest perfection, that also the innumerable Blessed Buddhas do teach. Therefore is it called the 'highest perfection'.

"Subhuti, when I talk about the practice of transcendent patience, I do not hold onto any arbitrary conceptions about the phenomena of patience, I merely refer to it as the practice of transcendent patience. And why is that? Because when, thousands of lifetimes ago, the Prince of Kalinga severed the flesh from my limbs and my body I had no perception of a self, a being, a soul, or a universal self. If I had cherished any of these arbitrary notions at the time my limbs were being torn away, I would have fallen into anger and hatred.

"I also remember Subhuti that during my five hundred previous lives I had used life after life to practice patience and to look upon my life humbly, as though I were a saint called upon to suffer humility. Even then my mind was free of arbitrary conceptions of the phenomena of myself, a being, a soul, or a universal self.

"Therefore, Subhuti, disciples should leave behind all distinctions of phenomena and awaken the thought of the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. A disciple should do this by not allowing their mind to depend upon ideas evoked by the world of the senses - by not allowing their mind to depend upon ideas stirred by sounds, odors, flavors, sensory touch, or any other qualities. The disciple's mind should be kept independent of any thoughts that might arise within it. If the disciple's mind depends upon anything in the sensory realm it will have no solid foundation in any reality. This is why Buddha teaches that the mind of a disciple should not accept the appearances of things as a basis when exercising charity. Subhuti, as disciples practice compassion and charity for the welfare of all living beings they should do it without relying on appearances, and without attachment. Just as the Buddha declares that form is not form, so he also declares that all living beings are, in fact, not living beings."

Chapter 15. The Sutra Is a Supreme Vehicle

"Subhuti, if on the one hand, a son or daughter of a good family gives up his or her life in the morning as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges river as an act of generosity, and gives as many again in the afternoon and as many again in the evening, and continues doing so for countless ages; and if, on the other hand, another person listens to this Sutra with complete confidence and without contention, that person's happiness will be far greater. But the happiness of one who writes this Sutra down, receives, recites, and explains it to others cannot even be compared it is so great.

"Subhuti, we can summarize by saying that the merit and virtue of this Sutra is inconceivable, incalculable and boundless. The Buddha has declared this teaching for the benefit of initiates on the path to Enlightenment; he has declared it for the benefit of initiates on the path to Nirvana. If there is someone capable of receiving, practicing, reciting, and sharing this Sutra with others, the Buddha will see and know that person, and he or she will receive immeasurable, incalculable, and boundless merit and virtue. Such a person is known to be carrying the Supreme Enlightenment attained by the Buddha. Why? Subhuti, if a person is satisfied with lesser teachings than those I present here, if he or she is still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self,

then that person would not be able to listen to, receive, recite, or explain this Sutra to others.

"Subhuti, wherever this Sutra shall be observed, studied and explained, that place will become sacred ground to which countless spiritually advanced beings will bring offerings. Such places, however humble they may be, will be revered as though they were famous temples, and countless pilgrims will come there to worship. Such a place is a shrine and should be venerated with formal ceremonies, and offerings of flowers and incense. That is the power of this Sutra."

Chapter 16. Purgation of Bad Karma

"Furthermore, Subhuti, if a good man or good woman who accepts, upholds, reads or recites this Sutra is disdained or slandered, if they are despised or insulted, it means that in prior lives they committed evil acts and as a result are now suffering the fruits of their actions. When their prior life's evil acts have finally been dissolved and extinguished, he or she will attain the supreme clarity of the most fulfilled, and awakened mind.

"Subhuti, in ancient times before I met Dipankara Buddha, I had made offerings to and had been attendant of all 84,000 million Buddhas. If someone is able to receive, recite, study, and practice this Sutra in a later, more distant age, then the happiness and merit brought about by this virtuous act would be hundreds of thousands of times greater than that which I brought about by my service to the Buddhas in ancient times. In fact, such happiness and merit cannot be conceived or compared with anything, even mathematically. If I were to explain all this in detail now some people might become suspicious and disbelieving, and their minds may even become disoriented or confused. Subhuti, you should know that the meaning of this Sutra is beyond conception and discussion. Likewise, the fruit resulting from receiving and practicing this Sutra is beyond conception and discussion."

Chapter 17. All Dharmas Are Non-Dharmas

At that time, the venerable Subhuti then asked the Buddha, "World-Honored One, may I ask you a question again? If sons or daughters of a good family want to develop the highest, most fulfilled and awakened mind, if they wish to attain the Highest Perfect Wisdom, what should they do to help quiet their drifting minds and master their thinking?"

The Buddha replied:

"Subhuti, a good son or daughter who wants to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind must create this resolved attitude of mind: 'I must help to lead all beings to the shore of awakening, but, after these beings have become liberated, in truth I know that not even a single being has been liberated.' Why is this so? If a disciple cherishes the idea of a self, a person, a living being or a universal self, then that person is not an authentic disciple. Why? Because in fact there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind.

"What do you think, Subhuti? In ancient times, when the Buddha was living with Dipankara Buddha, did he attain anything called the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind?"

"No, Most Honored One. According to what I understand from the teachings of the Buddha, there is no attaining of anything called the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind."

The Buddha said:

"You are correct, Subhuti. In fact, there does not exist any so-called highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind that the Buddha attains. Because if there had been any such thing, Dipankara Buddha would not have predicted of me, 'In the future, you will come to be a Buddha known as The Most Honored One'. This prediction was made because there is, in fact, nothing to be attained. Someone would be mistaken to say that the Buddha has attained the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind because there is no such thing as a highest, most fulfilled, or awakened mind to be attained."

"Subhuti, a comparison can be made with the idea of a large human body. What would you understand me to mean if I spoke of a 'large human body'?"

"I would understand that the Buddha was speaking of a 'large human body' not as an arbitrary conception of its being, but as a series of words only. I would understand that the words carried merely an imaginary meaning. When the Buddha speaks of a large human body, he uses the words only as words."

"Subhuti, it is just the same when a disciple speaks of liberating numberless sentient beings. If they have in mind any arbitrary conception of sentient beings or of definite numbers, then they are unworthy of being called a disciple. Subhuti, my teachings reveal that even such a thing as is called a 'disciple' is non-existent. Furthermore, there is really nothing for a disciple to liberate."

"A true disciple knows that there is no such thing as a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self. A true disciple knows that all things are devoid of selfhood, devoid of any separate individuality."

To make this teaching even more emphatic, the Buddha continued,

"If a disciple were to speak as follows, 'I have to create a serene and beautiful Buddha field', that person is not yet truly a disciple. Why? What the Buddha calls a 'serene and beautiful Buddha field' is not in fact a serene and beautiful Buddha field. And that is why it is called a serene and beautiful Buddha field. Subhuti, only a disciple who is wholly devoid of any conception of separate selfhood is worthy of being called a disciple."

Chapter 18. All Thoughts Are Intangible

The Buddha then asked Subhuti, "What do you think? Does the Buddha have human eyes?"

"Subhuti replied, "Yes, he has human eyes."

"Does he have the eyes of Enlightenment?"

"Of course, the Buddha has the eyes of Enlightenment, otherwise he would not be the Buddha."

"Does the Buddha have the eyes of transcendent intelligence?"

"Yes, the Buddha has the eyes of transcendent intelligence."

"Does the Buddha have the eyes of spiritual intuition?"

"Yes, Blessed One, the Buddha has the eyes of spiritual intuition."

"Does the Buddha have the eyes of love and compassion for all sentient beings?"

Subhuti agreed and said, "You love all sentient life."

"What do you think, Subhuti? When I referred to the grains of sand in the river Ganges, did I assert that they were truly grains of sand?"

"No blessed One, you only spoke of them as grains of sand."

"Subhuti, if there were as many Ganges rivers as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges, and if there were as many buddhalands as there are grains of sand in all those innumerable rivers, would these buddhalands be considered numerous?"

"Very numerous indeed."

"Subhuti, I know the mind of every sentient being in all the host of universes, regardless of any modes of thought, conceptions or tendencies. For all modes, conceptions and tendencies of thought are not mind. And yet they are called 'mind'. Why? It is impossible to retain a past thought, to seize a future thought, and even to hold onto a present thought."

Chapter 19. No Merit Is Great Merit

The Buddha continued:

"What do you think Subhuti? If a follower were to give away enough treasures to fill 3,000 universes, would a great blessing and merit incur to him or her?"

Subhuti replied, "Honored one, such a follower would acquire considerable blessings and merit."

The Buddha said:

"Subhuti, if such a blessing had any substantiality, if it were anything other than a figure of speech, the Most Honored One would not have used the words 'blessings and merit'."

Chapter 20. Transcending Physical Attributes

"Subhuti, what do you think, should one look for Buddha in his perfect physical body?"

"No, Perfectly Enlightened One, one should not look for Buddha in his perfect physical body. Why? The Buddha has said that the perfect physical body is not the perfect physical body. Therefore it is called the perfect physical body."

"Subhuti, what do you think, should one look for Buddha in all his perfect appearances?"

"No Most Honored One, one should not look for Buddha in all his perfect appearances. Why? The Buddha has said perfect appearances are not perfect appearances. Therefore they are called perfect appearances."

Chapter 21. No Truth Can be Spoken

"Subhuti, do not maintain that the Buddha has this thought: 'I have spoken spiritual truths.' Do not think that way. Why? If someone says the Buddha has spoken spiritual truths, he slanders the Buddha due to his inability to understand what the Buddha teaches. Subhuti, as to speaking truth, no truth can be spoken. Therefore it is called 'speaking truth'."

At that time Subhuti, the wise elder, addressed the Buddha, "Most Honored One, will there be living beings in the future who believe in this Sutra when they hear it?"

The Buddha said:

"The living beings to whom you refer are neither living beings nor not living beings. Why? Subhuti, all the different kinds of living beings the Buddha speaks of are not living beings. But they are referred to as living beings."

Chapter 22. No Attainment Is Supreme Enlightenment

Subhuti again asked, "Blessed One, when you attained complete Enlightenment, did you feel in your mind that nothing had been acquired?"

The Buddha replied:

"That is it exactly, Subhuti. When I attained total Enlightenment, I did not feel, as the mind feels, any arbitrary conception of spiritual truth, not even the slightest. Even the words 'total Enlightenment' are merely words, they are used merely as a figure of speech."

Chapter 23. All Dharmas Are Equal

"Furthermore Subhuti, what I have attained in total Enlightenment is the same as what all others have attained. It is undifferentiated, regarded neither as a high state, nor a low state. It is wholly independent of any definite or arbitrary conceptions of an individual self, other selves, living beings, or a universal self."

"Subhuti, when someone is selflessly charitable, they should also practice being ethical by remembering that there is no distinction between one's self and the selfhood of others. Thus one practices charity by giving not only gifts, but through kindness and sympathy. Practice kindness and charity without attachment and you can become fully enlightened."

"Subhuti, what I just said about kindness does not mean that when someone is being charitable they should hold onto arbitrary conceptions about kindness, for kindness is, after all, only a word and charity needs to be spontaneous and selfless, done without regard for appearances."

Chapter 24. The Merits of Transmitting the Sutra

The Buddha continued:

"Subhuti, if a person collected treasures as high as 3,000 of the highest mountains and gave them all to others, their merit would be less than what would accrue to another person who simply observed and studied this Sutra and, out of kindness, explained it to others. The latter person would accumulate hundreds of times the merit, hundreds of thousands of millions of times the merit. There is no conceivable comparison."

Chapter 25. There Are No Beings to Liberate

"Subhuti, do not say that the Buddha has the idea, 'I will lead all sentient beings to Nirvana.' Do not think that way, Subhuti. Why? In truth there is not one single being for the Buddha to lead to Enlightenment. If the Buddha were to think there was, he would be caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a universal self. Subhuti, what the Buddha calls a self essentially has no self in the way that ordinary persons think there is a self. Subhuti, the Buddha does not regard anyone as an ordinary person. That is why he can speak of them as ordinary persons."

Chapter 26. Seek the Buddha Not in Form or Sound

Then the Buddha inquired of Subhuti:

"What do you think Subhuti? Is it possible to recognize the Buddha by the 32 physical marks?"

Subhuti replied, "Yes, Most Honored One, the Buddha may thus be recognized."

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"Subhuti, if that were true then Chakravartin, the mythological king who also had the 32 marks, would be called a Buddha."

Then Subhuti, realizing his error, said, "Most Honored One, now I realize that the Buddha cannot be recognized merely by his 32 physical marks of excellence."

The Buddha then said:

"Should anyone, looking at an image or likeness of the Buddha, claim to know the Buddha and worship him, that person would be mistaken, not knowing the true Buddha."

Chapter 27. Avoid Nihilistic Views

"However, Subhuti, if you think that the Buddha realizes the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind and does not need to have all the marks, you are mistaken. Subhuti, do not think in that way. Do not think that when one gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind, one needs to see all objects of mind as nonexistent, cut off from life. Please do not think in that way. One who gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, and awakened mind does not contend that all objects of mind are nonexistent and cut off from life. That is not what I say."

Chapter 28. Bodhisattvas Do Not Accumulate Merits

The Buddha continued:

"Subhuti, if someone gives treasures equal to the number of sands on the shores of the Ganges river, and if another, having realized the egolessness of all things, thereby understands selflessness, the latter would be more blessed than the one who practiced external charity. Why? Because great disciples do not see blessings and merit as a private possession, as something to be gained."

Subhuti inquired of the Buddha, "What do you mean 'great disciples do not see blessings and merit as a private possession'?"

The Buddha replied:

"Because those blessings and merit have never been sought after by those great disciples, they do not see them as private possessions, but they see them as the common possession of all beings."

Chapter 29. *Thata-gata* and *Tatha-agata*

The Buddha said:

"Subhuti, if any person were to say that the Buddha is now coming or going, or sitting up or lying down, they would not have understood the principle I have been teaching. Why? Because while the expression 'Buddha' means 'he who has thus come, thus gone,' the true Buddha is never coming from anywhere or going anywhere. The name 'Buddha' is merely an expression, a figure of speech."

One who has thus gone (tathā-gata) and one who has thus come (tathā-āgata).

Chapter 30. The Nature of the World

The Buddha resumed:

"Subhuti, if any good person, either man or woman, were to take 3,000 galaxies and grind them into microscopic powder and blow it into space, what do you think, would this powder have any individual existence?"

"Subhuti replied, "Yes, as a microscopic powder blown into space, it might be said to have a relative existence, but as you use words, it has no existence. The words are used only as a figure of speech. Otherwise the words would imply a belief in the existence of matter as an independent and self-existent thing, which it is not."

"Furthermore, when the Most Honored One refers to the '3,000 galaxies,' he could only do so as a figure of speech. Why? Because if the 3,000 galaxies really existed, their only reality would consist in their cosmic unity. Whether as microscopic powder or as galaxies, what does it matter? Only in the sense of the cosmic unity of ultimate being can the Buddha rightfully refer to it."

The Buddha was very pleased with this reply and said:

"Subhuti, although ordinary people have always grasped after an arbitrary conception of matter and galaxies, the concept has no true basis; it is an illusion of the mortal mind. Even when it is referred to as 'cosmic unity' it is unthinkable and unknowable."

Chapter 31. Extinction of the Four Views

The Buddha continued:

"If any person were to say that the Buddha, in his teachings, has constantly referred to himself, to other selves, to living beings, or to a universal self, what do you think, would that person have understood my meaning?"

Subhuti replied, "No, blessed One. That person would not have understood the meaning of your teachings. For when you refer to those things, you are not referring to their actual existence; you only use the words as figures of speech, as symbols. Only in that sense can words be used, for (1) conceptions, (2) ideas, (3) limited truths, and (4) spiritual truths have no more reality than have matter or phenomena."

Then the Buddha made his meaning even more emphatic by saying:

"Subhuti, when people begin their practice of seeking to attaining total Enlightenment, they ought to see, to perceive, to know, to understand, and to realize that all things and all spiritual truths are no-things; and, therefore, they ought not to conceive within their minds any arbitrary conceptions whatsoever."

Chapter 32. All Phenomena Are Illusions

Buddha continued:

"Subhuti, if anyone gave to the Buddha an immeasurable quantity of the seven treasures sufficient to fill the whole universe; and if another person, whether a man or woman, in seeking to attain complete Enlightenment were to earnestly and faithfully observe and study even a single section of this Sutra and explain it to others, the accumulated blessing and merit of that latter person would be far greater.

"Subhuti, how can one explain this Sutra to others without holding in mind any arbitrary conception of forms or phenomena or spiritual truths? It can only be done, Subhuti, by keeping the mind in perfect tranquility and free from any attachment to appearances.

"So I say to you—This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;
Like a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
Or a flickering lamp, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.

"So is all conditioned existence to be seen."

Thus spoke Buddha.

Another translation on "How to contemplate our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

All conditioned phenomena
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, or shadows;
Like drops of dew, or flashes of lightning.
Thusly should they be contemplated.

A Brief History of The Diamond Sutra

The World's Earliest Dated Printed Book



Diamond Sutra. Cave 17, Dunhuang, ink on paper
British Library from "Landmarks in Printing: Diamond Sutra"

The first translation of the *Diamond Sūtra* into Chinese is thought to have been made in 401 C.E. by the venerated and prolific translator Kumarajīva. His translation style is distinctive, possessing a flowing smoothness that reflects his prioritization on conveying the meaning as opposed to precise literal rendering. The Kumārajīva translation has been particularly highly regarded over the centuries, and it is this version that appears on the 868 C.E. Dunhuang scroll. In addition to the Kumārajīva translation, a number of later translations exist. The *Diamond Sūtra* was again translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Bodhiruci in 509 C.E., Paramartha in 558 C.E., Xuanzangin in 648 C.E., and Yijing in 703 C.E.

"Hidden for centuries in a sealed-up cave in north-west China, this copy of the 'Diamond Sutra' is the world's earliest complete survival of a dated printed book. Seven strips of yellow-stained paper were printed from carved wooden blocks and pasted together to form a scroll over 5m long.

Though written in Chinese, the text is one of the most important sacred works of the Buddhist faith, which was founded in India. Although not the earliest example of a printed book, it is the oldest we have bearing a date. By the time it

was made, block-printing had been practiced in the Far East for more than a century. The quality of the illustration at the opening of this Sutra' shows the carver of the printing blocks to have been a man of considerable experience and skill.

The colophon, at the inner end, reads: 'Reverently [caused to be] made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 13th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong [i.e. 11th May, AD 868]'. " The scroll, some sixteen feet long, 17 an half feet long and 10 and half inches wide.

In 1900, the secret library (Cave 17) was discovered by Abbot Wang when he was sweeping out sand and dust from a cave (Cave 16). The secret library is a small stone room contained well over 10,000 manuscripts and silk paintings, many of which were Hsuan-tsang's own translations of Buddhist texts, patiently copied and preserved by Buddhist monks. No one knows when or who bricked over and whitewashed the door and painted murals on it.

This scroll was requisitioned from a walled-up cave at the 'Caves of the Thousand Buddhas', near Dunhuang, in North-West China in March 1907 by a British expedition under the archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein. It was one of a small number of printed items among many thousands of manuscripts, comprising a library which must have been sealed up around 1000 C.E. Although not the earliest example of block printing, it is the earliest which bears an actual date.

Sir Aurel Stein visited Wang in his cave. Stein took away total of twenty-four cases, heavy with manuscripts, and five boxes of paintings, embroideries and art relics, which all had only cost him 130 pounds.

According to National Library of Peking in 1961, the *Diamond Sutra* is described as: "The Diamond Sutra, printed in the year 868....is the world's earliest printed book, made of seven strips of paper joined together with an illustration on the first sheet which is cut with great skill." The writer adds: "This famous scroll was stolen over fifty years ago by the Englishman Ssu-t'an-yin [Stein] which causes people to gnash their teeth in bitter hatred."

The walled city of Dunhuang (Sha-chou) was an outpost on the northwestern frontier, whose importance was due primarily to its location for it was a military base on the Silk Road connecting China with Central Asia and the Western

world. More recently it has attracted attention because of the Thousand Buddha caves and the Diamond Sutra.

In the 840s, with the resurgence of the old Confucian and Taoist ideas, China turned against foreign religions. Buddhism, always criticized by the Confucianists, came under an imperial ban in 845; over 4,600 temples and monasteries were shut down and their devotees barred from the religious life. Two decades later the new emperor rescinded the ban, however Buddhism never revived in quite the same form. In 1127, the Hsi-hsia, a nomadic tribe from the north, invaded Dunhuang. The caves, however, retained their importance as a religious site for several centuries more. The site fell into general neglect during the late Ming era and lay buried in the desert sands for many years.

At the time of the Hsi-hsia invasion, some person or persons unknown chose one of the caves as a hiding-place for thousands of Buddhist sutras and other manuscripts. In the centuries that followed, all memory of this vast storehouse seems to have been lost, but the precious artifacts survived in safety until the 20th century, when they were rediscovered by an appreciating world.