

THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

The
DIAMOND
SUTRA



TEXT AND COMMENTARIES

TRANSLATED FROM SANSKRIT AND CHINESE

By Red Pine

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THE DIAMOND SUTRA:

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ONE: Thus have I heard: Once the Bhagavan was dwelling near Shravasti at Anathapindada Garden in Jeta Forest together with the full assembly of 1250 bhikshus and a great many fearless bodhisattvas.

One day before noon, the Bhagavan put on his patched robe and picked up his bowl and entered the capital of Shravasti for offerings. After begging for food in the city and eating his meal of rice, he returned from his daily round in the afternoon, put his robe and bowl away, washed his feet, and sat down on the appointed seat. After crossing his legs and adjusting his body, he turned his awareness to what was before him.

A number of bhikshus then came up to where the Bhagavan was sitting. After touching their heads to his feet, they walked around him to the right three times and sat down to one side.

TWO: On this occasion, the venerable Subhuti was also present in the assembly. Rising from his seat, he uncovered one shoulder and touched his right knee to

the ground. Pressing his palms together and bowing to the Buddha, he said: “It is rare, Bhagavan, most rare, indeed, Sugata, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings. And it is rare, Bhagavan, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One entrusts fearless bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts.

“Even so, Bhagavan, if a noble son or daughter should set forth on the bodhisattva path, how should they stand, how should they walk, and how should they control their thoughts?”

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “Well said, Subhuti. Well said. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you say. The Tathagata blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings and entrusts fearless bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts. You should therefore truly listen, Subhuti, and consider this well. I shall tell you how those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should stand, how they should walk, and how they should control their thoughts.”

The venerable Subhuti answered, “May it be so, Bhagavan,” and gave his full attention.

THREE: The Buddha said to him, “Subhuti, those who would now set forth on the bodhisattva path should thus give birth to this thought: ‘However many beings there are in whatever realms of being might exist, whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have form or no form, whether they have perception or no perception or neither perception nor no perception, in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings, in the realm of complete

nirvana I shall liberate them all. And though I thus liberate countless beings, not a single being is liberated.’

“And why not? Subhuti, a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a being cannot be called a ‘bodhisattva.’ And why not? Subhuti, no one can be called a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a self or who creates the perception of a being, a life, or a soul.”

FOUR: “Moreover, Subhuti, when bodhisattvas give a gift, they should not be attached to a thing. When they give a gift, they should not be attached to anything at all. They should not be attached to a sight when they give a gift. Nor should they be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma when they give a gift. Thus, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object. And why? Subhuti, the body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure. What do you think, Subhuti, is the space to the east easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it is not, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “Likewise, is the space to the south, to the west, to the north, in between, above, below, or in any of the ten directions easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it is not, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “So it is, Subhuti. The body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure. Thus, Subhuti, those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object.”

FIVE: “What do you think, Subhuti, can the Tathagata be seen by means of the possession of attributes?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes. And why not? Bhagavan, what the Tathagata says is the possession of attributes is no possession of attributes.”

This having been said, the Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “Since the possession of attributes is an illusion, Subhuti, and no possession of attributes is no illusion, by means of attributes that are no attributes the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.”

SIX: This having been said, the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, “Bhagavan, will there be any beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, who give birth to a perception of the truth of the words of a sutra such as that spoken here?”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, do not ask, ‘Will there be any beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, who give birth to a perception of the truth of the words of a sutra such as that spoken here?’ Surely, Subhuti, in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, there will be fearless bodhisattvas who are capable, virtuous, and wise who give birth to a perception of the truth of the words of a sutra such as that spoken here.

“Indeed, Subhuti, such fearless bodhisattvas will have honored not just one buddha, and they will have planted auspicious roots before not just one buddha. Surely, Subhuti, such fearless bodhisattvas will have honored countless hundreds and thousands of buddhas, and they will have planted auspicious roots before

countless hundreds and thousands of buddhas. In the words of a sutra such as that spoken here, they are sure to gain perfect clarity of mind. The Tathagata knows them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha knowledge. And the Tathagata sees them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha vision. The Tathagata is aware of them, Subhuti. For they all produce and receive a measureless, infinite body of merit.

“And how so? Because, Subhuti, these fearless bodhisattvas do not create the perception of a self. Nor do they create the perception of a being, a life, or a soul. Nor, Subhuti, do these fearless bodhisattvas create the perception of a dharma, much less the perception of no dharma. Subhuti, they do not create a perception nor no perception.

“And why not? Because, Subhuti, if these fearless bodhisattvas created the perception of a dharma, they would be attached to a self, a being, a life, and a soul. Likewise, if they created the perception of no dharma, they would be attached to a self, a being, a life, and a soul.

“And why not? Because surely, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas do not cling to a dharma, much less to no dharma. This is the meaning behind the Tathagata’s saying, ‘A dharma teaching is like a raft. If you should let go of dharmas, how much more so no dharmas.’”

SEVEN: Once again, the Buddha asked the venerable Subhuti, “What do you think, Subhuti? Did the Tathagata realize any such dharma as ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment’? And does the Tathagata teach any such dharma?”

The venerable Subhuti thereupon answered, “Bhagavan, as I understand the meaning of what the Buddha

says, the Tathagata did not realize any such dharma as 'unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.' Nor does the Tathagata teach such a dharma. And why? Because this dharma realized and taught by the Tathagata is incomprehensible and inexpressible and neither a dharma nor no dharma. And why? Because sages arise from what is uncreated."

EIGHT: The Buddha said, "Subhuti, what do you think? If some noble son or daughter filled the billion worlds of this universe with the seven jewels and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, would the body of merit produced as a result by this noble son or daughter be great?"

Subhuti answered, "Great, indeed, Bhagavan. The body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter would be great, Sugata. And how so? Bhagavan, whatever is said by the Tathagata to be a body of merit is said by the Tathagata to be no body. Thus does the Tathagata speak of a body of merit as a 'body of merit.'"

The Buddha said, "Subhuti, if, instead of filling the billion worlds of this universe with the seven jewels and giving them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, this noble son or daughter grasped but one four-line gatha of this dharma teaching and made it known and explained it in detail to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And how so? Subhuti, from this is born the unexcelled, perfect enlightenment of tathagatas, arhans, and fully-enlightened ones. From this are born buddhas and bhagavans. And how so? Buddha dharmas, Subhuti, 'buddha dharmas' are spoken of by the Tathagata as no buddha dharmas. Thus are they called 'buddha dharmas.'"

NINE: “Tell me, Subhuti. Do those who find the river think, ‘I have attained the goal of finding the river?’”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. Those who find the river do not think, ‘I have attained the goal of finding the river.’ And why not? Bhagavan, they do not find any such dharma. Thus are they said to ‘find the river.’ They do not find a sight, nor do they find a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma. Thus are they said to ‘find the river.’ Bhagavan, if those who found the river should think, ‘I have attained the goal of finding the river,’ they would be attached to a self, they would be attached to a being, a life, and a soul.”

The Buddha said, “Tell me, Subhuti. Do those who return once more think, ‘I have attained the goal of returning once more?’”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. Those who return once more do not think, ‘I have attained the goal of returning once more.’ And why not? Bhagavan, they do not find any such dharma as ‘returning once more.’ Thus are they said to ‘return once more.’”

The Buddha said, “Tell me, Subhuti. Do those who return no more think, ‘I have attained the goal of returning no more.’”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. Those who return no more do not think ‘I have attained the goal of returning no more.’ And why not? Bhagavan, they do not find any such dharma as ‘returning no more.’ Thus are they said to ‘return no more.’”

The Buddha said, “Tell me, Subhuti. Do those who are free from rebirth think, ‘I have attained freedom from rebirth?’”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. Those who are free from rebirth do not think, ‘I have attained

freedom from rebirth.’ And why not? Bhagavan, there is no such dharma as ‘freedom from rebirth.’ Thus are they said to be ‘free from rebirth.’ If, Bhagavan, those who are free from rebirth should think, ‘I have attained freedom from rebirth,’ they would be attached to a self, they would be attached to a being, a life, and a soul.

“And how so? Bhagavan, the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One has declared that I am foremost among those who dwell free of passion. Bhagavan, although I am free from rebirth and without desires, I do not think, ‘I am free from rebirth and without desires.’ Bhagavan, if I thought, ‘I have attained freedom from rebirth,’ the Tathagata would not have singled me out by saying, ‘Foremost among those who dwell free of passion is the noble son Subhuti. For he dwells nowhere at all. Thus is he called one who dwells free of passion who “dwells free of passion.”’”

TEN: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Did the Tathagata obtain any such dharma in the presence of Dipankara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata did not obtain any such dharma in the presence of Dipankara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, if any bodhisattva should thus claim, ‘I shall bring about the transformation of a world,’ such a claim would be untrue. And how so? The transformation of a world, Subhuti, the ‘transformation of a world’ is said by the Tathagata to be no transformation. Thus is it called the ‘transformation of a world.’ Therefore, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should thus

give birth to a thought that is not attached and not give birth to a thought attached to anything. They should not give birth to a thought attached to a sight. Nor should they give birth to a thought attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma.

“Subhuti, imagine a person with an immense, perfect body whose self-existence is like that of Mount Sumeru. What do you think, Subhuti? Would such self-existence be great?”

Subhuti replied, “Great, indeed, Bhagavan. Such self-existence would be great, Sugata. And why? Because self-existence, Bhagavan, ‘self-existence’ is said by the Tathagata to be no existence. Thus is it called ‘self-existence.’ Because, Bhagavan, it is neither existence nor no existence. Thus is it called ‘self-existence.’”

ELEVEN: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? If there were as many rivers as there are grains of sand in the great river of the Ganges, would the number of grains of sand in all those rivers be great?”

Subhuti replied, “The number of rivers would be great, Bhagavan, how much more so their grains of sand.”

The Buddha said, “I shall tell you, Subhuti, so you shall know. If a man or woman filled as many worlds as there are grains of sand in all those rivers with the seven jewels and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, what do you think, Subhuti, would the body of merit produced as a result by that man or woman be great?”

Subhuti replied, “It would be great, Bhagavan, great, indeed, Sugata. The body of merit produced as a result by that man or woman would be immeasurable and infinite.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, if, then, a man or woman filled as many worlds as that with the seven jewels and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, and a noble son or daughter grasped but one four-line gatha of this dharma teaching and made it known and explained it to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater.”

TWELVE: “Furthermore, Subhuti, wherever but one four-line gatha of this dharma teaching is spoken or explained, that place is like a stupa in the world of devas, humans, and asuras. How much more shall they be remarkably blessed, Subhuti, who memorize, recite, and master this entire teaching and explain it in detail to others. For in that place, Subhuti, dwells a teacher or one who represents the guru of wisdom.”

THIRTEEN: This having been said, the venerable Subhuti asked, “Bhagavan, what is the name of this dharma teaching, and how should we remember it?”

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “The name of this dharma teaching, Subhuti, is the *Perfection of Wisdom*. Thus should you remember it. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata says is the perfection of wisdom, the Tathagata says is no perfection. Thus is it called the ‘perfection of wisdom.’

“Subhuti, what do you think? Is there any such dharma spoken by the Tathagata?”

Subhuti said, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. There is no such dharma spoken by the Tathagata.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Are

all the specks of dust in the billion-world-system of a universe many?”

Subhuti said, “Many, Bhagavan. The specks of dust are many, Sugata. And how so? Because, Bhagavan, what the Tathagata says is a speck of dust, Bhagavan, the Tathagata says is no speck. Thus is it called a ‘speck of dust.’ And what the Tathagata says is a world-system, the Tathagata says is no system. Thus is it called a ‘world-system.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One be seen by means of the thirty-two attributes of a perfect person?”

Subhuti said, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One cannot be seen by means of the thirty-two attributes of a perfect person. And why not? Because, Bhagavan, what the Tathagata says are the thirty-two attributes of a perfect person, Bhagavan, the Tathagata says are no attributes. Thus are they called the ‘thirty-two attributes of a perfect person.’”

The Buddha said, “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a man or woman renounced their self-existence every day as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges and renounced their self-existence in this manner for as many kalpas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and someone grasped but one four-line gatha of this dharma teaching and made it known and explained it to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater.”

FOURTEEN: By the force of this dharma, the venerable Subhuti was moved to tears. Wiping his eyes, he

said to the Buddha, “How remarkable, Bhagavan, how most remarkable, Sugata, is this dharma teaching that the Bhagavan speaks for the benefit of those beings who seek the foremost of paths, for the benefit of those who seek the best of paths, and from which my own awareness is born. Bhagavan, I have never heard such a teaching as this! They shall be the most remarkably blessed of bodhisattvas, Bhagavan, who hear what is said in this sutra and give birth to a perception of its truth. And how so? Bhagavan, a perception of its truth is no perception of its truth. Thus does the Tathagata speak of a perception of its truth as a ‘perception of its truth.’

“Hearing such a dharma teaching as this, Bhagavan, it is not remarkable that I should trust and believe it. But in the future, Bhagavan, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, Bhagavan, those beings who grasp this dharma teaching and memorize it, recite it, master it, and explain it in detail to others, they shall be most remarkably blessed. Moreover, Bhagavan, they shall not create the perception of a self, nor shall they create the perception of a being, the perception of a life, or the perception of a soul. They shall create neither a perception nor no perception. And why not? Bhagavan, the perception of a self is no perception, and the perception of a being, a life, or a soul is also no perception. And why not? Because buddhas and bhagavans are free of all perceptions.”

This having been said, the Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. Those beings shall be most remarkably blessed, Subhuti, who are not alarmed, not frightened, and not distressed by what is said in this sutra. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata proclaims as the best of perfections is, in truth, no perfection.

Moreover, Subhuti, what the Tathagata proclaims as the best of perfections is also proclaimed by countless buddhas and bhagavans. Thus is it called the ‘best of perfections.’

“So, too, Subhuti, is the Tathagata’s perfection of forbearance no perfection. And how so? Subhuti, when King Kali cut off my limbs, my ears and nose, and my flesh, at that moment I had no perception of a self, a being, a life, or a soul. I had neither a perception nor no perception. And why not? At that moment, Subhuti, if I had had the perception of a self, at that moment I would have also had the perception of anger. Or if I had had the perception of a being, the perception of a life, or the perception of a soul, at that moment I would have had the perception of anger. And how so? Subhuti, I recall the five hundred lifetimes I was the mendicant Kshanti, and during that time I had no perception of a self. Nor did I have the perception of a being, the perception of a life, or the perception of a soul.

“Therefore, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should get rid of all perceptions in giving birth to the thought of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. They should not give birth to a thought attached to a sight, nor should they give birth to a thought attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma. They should not give birth to a thought attached to a dharma, nor should they give birth to a thought attached to no dharma. They should not give birth to a thought attached to anything. And why not? Every attachment is no attachment. Thus the Tathagata says that bodhisattvas should give gifts without being attached. They should give gifts without being attached to a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma.

“Moreover, Subhuti, bodhisattvas should practice charity in this manner for the benefit of all beings. And how so? Subhuti, the perception of a being is no perception. Likewise, all the beings of whom the Tathagata speaks are thus no beings. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata says is real. What the Tathagata says is true and is as he says it is and is not other than as he says it is. What the Tathagata says is not false. Moreover, Subhuti, in the dharma realized, taught, and reflected on by the Tathagata, there is nothing true and nothing false.

“Subhuti, imagine a person who enters a dark place and who can’t see a thing. He is like a bodhisattva ruled by objects, like someone practicing charity ruled by objects. Now, Subhuti, imagine a person with eyesight at the end of the night when the sun shines forth who can see all manner of things. He is like a bodhisattva not ruled by objects, like someone practicing charity not ruled by objects.

“Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter should grasp this dharma teaching and memorize it, recite it, master it, and explain it in detail to others, the Tathagata will know them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha knowledge. And the Tathagata will see them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha vision. The Tathagata will be aware of them, Subhuti, for all such beings produce and obtain an immeasurable, infinite body of merit.”

FIFTEEN: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a man or woman renounced their self-existence during the morning as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and likewise renounced their self-existence during mid-

day as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and renounced their self-existence during the afternoon as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and renounced their self-existence in this manner for many hundreds and thousands of millions and trillions of kalpas, and someone heard this dharma teaching and did not reject it, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. How much more so if they not only wrote it down but grasped it, memorized it, recited it, mastered it, and explained it in detail to others.

“Furthermore, Subhuti, inconceivable and incomparable is this dharma teaching, this dharma teaching spoken by the Tathagata, Subhuti, for the benefit of those beings who set forth on the foremost of paths, for the benefit of those beings who set forth on the best of paths. For if someone grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters this dharma teaching and explains it in detail to others, the Tathagata will know them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha knowledge. And the Tathagata will see them, Subhuti, by means of his buddha vision. The Tathagata will be aware of them, Subhuti, for all such beings produce a body of merit that has no limits, a body of merit that is inconceivable, incomparable, immeasurable, and boundless. For all such beings as these, Subhuti, likewise wear enlightenment upon their shoulders. And how so? Subhuti, this dharma teaching cannot be heard by beings of lesser aspiration: not by those who mistakenly perceive a self, nor by those who mistakenly perceive a being, a life, or a soul. For beings who lack the bodhisattva’s aspiration cannot hear, grasp, memorize, recite, or master this dharma teaching.

“Moreover, Subhuti, wherever this sutra is explained,

that place shall be honored. Whether in the realm of devas, humans, or asuras, that place shall be honored with prostrations and circumambulations. That place shall be like a stupa.”

SIXTEEN: “Nevertheless, Subhuti, the noble son or daughter who grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters such a sutra as this and contemplates it thoroughly and explains it in detail to others will suffer their contempt, their utter contempt. And how could this be? Subhuti, the bad karma created by these beings in their past lives should result in an unfortunate rebirth. But now, by suffering such contempt, they put an end to the bad karma of their past lives and attain the enlightenment of buddhas.

“Subhuti, I recall in the past, during the countless, infinite kalpas before Dipankara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One, I served eighty-four hundred, thousand, million, trillion other buddhas and served them without fail. Nevertheless, Subhuti, although I served those buddhas and bhagavans and served them without fail, in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, the body of merit of the person who grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters such a sutra as this and explains it in detail to others will exceed my former body of merit not by a hundredfold or a thousandfold or a hundred thousandfold or a millionfold or a hundred millionfold or a thousand millionfold or a hundred-thousand millionfold, but by an amount that cannot be measured, calculated, illustrated, characterized, or even imagined. Subhuti, if I were to describe this noble son or daughter’s body of merit, the

full extent of the body of merit this noble son or daughter would thereby produce and obtain, it would bewilder or disturb people's minds. Furthermore, Subhuti, inconceivable and incomparable is this dharma teaching spoken by the Tathagata, and inconceivable is the result you should expect."

SEVENTEEN: Again the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, "Bhagavan, if someone sets forth on the bodhisattva path, how should they stand? How should they walk? And how should they control their thoughts?"

The Buddha said, "Subhuti, someone who sets forth on the bodhisattva path should give birth to the thought: 'In the realm of complete nirvana, I shall liberate all beings. And while I thus liberate beings, not a single being is liberated.' And why not? Subhuti, a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a being cannot be called a 'bodhisattva.' Neither can someone who creates the perception of a life or even the perception of a soul be called a 'bodhisattva.' And why not? Subhuti, there is no such dharma as setting forth on the bodhisattva path.

"What do you think, Subhuti? When the Tathagata was with Dipankara Tathagata, did he realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?"

To this the venerable Subhuti answered, "Bhagavan, as I understand the meaning of what the Tathagata has taught, when the Tathagata was with Dipankara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One, he did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment."

And to this the Buddha replied, "So it is, Subhuti. So it is. When the Tathagata was with Dipankara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One, he did not

realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Subhuti, if the Tathagata had realized any dharma, Dipankara Tathagata would not have prophesied, ‘Young man, in the future you shall become the tathagata, the arhan, the fully-enlightened one named Shakyamuni.’ Subhuti, it was because the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, that Dipankara Tathagata prophesied, ‘Young man, in the future you shall become the tathagata, the arhan, the fully-enlightened one named Shakyamuni.’

“And how so? ‘Tathagata,’ Subhuti, is another name for what is truly real. ‘Tathagata,’ Subhuti, is another name for the dharma with no beginning. ‘Tathagata,’ Subhuti, is another name for the end of dharmas. ‘Tathagata,’ Subhuti, is another name for what never begins. And how so? No beginning, Subhuti, is the highest truth. Subhuti, if anyone should claim, ‘The Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment,’ such a claim would be untrue. Subhuti, they would be making a false statement about me. And how so? Subhuti, the Tathagata did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Furthermore, Subhuti, in the dharma realized or taught by the Tathagata, there is nothing true and nothing false. Thus, the Tathagata says ‘all dharmas are buddha dharmas.’ And how so? ‘All dharmas,’ Subhuti, are said by the Tathagata to be no dharmas. Thus are all dharmas called ‘buddha dharmas.’

“Subhuti, imagine a perfect person with an immense, perfect body.”

The venerable Subhuti said, “Bhagavan, this perfect person whom the Tathagata says has an ‘immense, perfect

body,' Bhagavan, the Tathagata says has no body. Thus is it called an 'immense, perfect body.'"

The Buddha said, "So it is, Subhuti. And if a bodhisattva says, 'I shall liberate other beings,' that person is not called a 'bodhisattva.' And why not? Subhuti, is there any such dharma as a bodhisattva?"

The venerable Subhuti replied, "No, indeed, Bhagavan. There is no such dharma as a bodhisattva."

The Buddha said, "And beings, Subhuti, 'beings' are said by the Tathagata to be no beings. Thus are they called 'beings.' And thus does the Tathagata say 'all dharmas have no self, all dharmas have no life, no individuality, and no soul.'

"Subhuti, if a bodhisattva should thus claim, 'I shall bring about the transformation of a world,' such a claim would be untrue. And how so? The transformation of a world, Subhuti, the 'transformation of a world' is said by the Tathagata to be no transformation. Thus is it called the 'transformation of a world.'

"Subhuti, when a bodhisattva resolves on selfless dharmas as 'selfless dharmas,' the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One pronounces that person a fearless bodhisattva."

EIGHTEEN: The Buddha said, "Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a physical eye?"

Subhuti replied, "So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a physical eye."

The Buddha said, "Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a divine eye?"

Subhuti replied, "So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a divine eye."

The Buddha said, "Subhuti, what do you think? Does

the Tathagata possess a prajna eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a prajna eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a dharma eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a dharma eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a buddha eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a buddha eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? As many grains of sand as there are in the great river of the Ganges, does the Tathagata not speak of them as grains of sand?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. So he does, Sugata. The Tathagata speaks of them as grains of sand.”

The Buddha said, “What do you think, Subhuti? If there were as many rivers as all the grains of sand in the great river of the Ganges and as many worlds as there are grains of sand in all these rivers, would there be many worlds?”

Subhuti replied, “So there would, Bhagavan. So there would, Sugata. There would be many worlds.”

The Buddha said, “And as many beings as there might be in those worlds, Subhuti, I would know their myriad streams of thought. And how so? Streams of thought, Subhuti, what the Tathagata speaks of as ‘streams of thought’ are no streams. Thus are they called ‘streams of thought.’ And how so? Subhuti, a past thought cannot be found. A future thought cannot be found. Nor can a present thought be found.”

NINETEEN: “Subhuti, what do you think? If some noble son or daughter filled the billion worlds of this universe with the seven jewels and gave them all as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, would the body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter be great?”

Subhuti replied, “Great, indeed, Bhagavan. It would be great, Sugata.”

The Buddha said, “So it would, Subhuti. So it would. The body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter would be immeasurably, infinitely great. And how so? A body of merit, Subhuti, a ‘body of merit’ is spoken of by the Tathagata as no body. Thus is it called a ‘body of merit.’ Subhuti, if there were a body of merit, the Tathagata would not have spoken of a body of merit as a ‘body of merit.’”

TWENTY: “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the perfect development of the physical body?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the perfect development of the physical body. And why not? The perfect development of the physical body, Bhagavan, the ‘perfect development of the physical body’ is spoken of by the Tathagata as no development. Thus is it called a ‘the perfect development of the physical body.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the possession of attributes?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes. And why not? Bhagavan, what the Tathagata

speaks of as the possession of attributes is spoken of by the Tathagata as no possession of attributes. Thus is it called the ‘possession of attributes.’”

TWENTY-ONE: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does it occur to the Tathagata: ‘I teach a dharma?’”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. It does not occur to the Tathagata: ‘I teach a dharma.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, if someone should claim, ‘the Tathagata teaches a dharma,’ such a claim would be untrue. Such a view of me, Subhuti, would be a misconception. And how so? In the teaching of a dharma, Subhuti, in the ‘teaching of a dharma’ there is no such dharma to be found as the ‘teaching of a dharma.’”

Upon hearing this, the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, “Bhagavan, will there be any beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, who hear a dharma such as this and believe it?”

The Buddha said, “Neither beings, Subhuti, nor no beings. And how so? Beings, Subhuti, ‘beings’ are all spoken of by the Tathagata, Subhuti, as no beings. Thus are they called ‘beings.’”

TWENTY-TWO: “Subhuti, what do you think? Did the Tathagata realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?”

The venerable Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata did not realize any such dharma, Bhagavan, as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.”

The Buddha said, “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. The slightest dharma is neither obtained nor found therein.

Thus is it called ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’”

TWENTY-THREE: “Furthermore, Subhuti, undifferentiated is this dharma in which nothing is differentiated. Thus is it called ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’ Without a self, without a being, without a life, without a soul, undifferentiated is this unexcelled, perfect enlightenment by means of which all auspicious dharmas are realized. And how so? Auspicious dharmas, Subhuti, ‘auspicious dharmas’ are spoken of by the Tathagata as ‘no dharmas.’ Thus are they called ‘auspicious dharmas.’”

TWENTY-FOUR: “Moreover, Subhuti, if a man or woman brought together as many piles of the seven jewels as all the Mount Sumerus in the billion worlds of the universe and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, and a noble son or daughter grasped but a single four-line gatha of this dharma teaching of the perfection of wisdom and made it known to others, Subhuti, their body of merit would be greater by more than a hundredfold, indeed, by an amount beyond comparison.”

TWENTY-FIVE: “Subhuti, what do you think? Does it occur to the Tathagata: ‘I rescue beings?’ Surely, Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Subhuti, the being does not exist who is rescued by the Tathagata. Subhuti, if any being were rescued by the Tathagata, the Tathagata would be attached to a self. He would be attached to a being, attached to a life, and attached to a soul. ‘Attachment to a self,’ Subhuti, is said by the Tathagata to be no attachment. Yet foolish

people remain attached. And ‘foolish people,’ Subhuti, are said by the Tathagata to be no people. Thus are they called ‘foolish people.’”

TWENTY-SIX: “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the possession of attributes?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. As I understand the meaning of what the Buddha says, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes.”

The Buddha said, “Well done, Subhuti. Well done. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you claim. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes. And why not? Subhuti, if the Tathagata could be seen by means of the possession of attributes, a universal king would be a tathagata. Hence, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes.”

The venerable Subhuti said to the Buddha, “As I understand the meaning of what the Buddha says, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the possession of attributes.”

On that occasion the Buddha then spoke this gatha:

“Who looks for me in form
who seeks me in a voice
indulges in wasted effort
such people see me not.”

TWENTY-SEVEN: “Subhuti, what do you think? Was it due to the possession of attributes that the Tathagata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment? Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not?”

Subhuti, it could not have been due to the possession of attributes that the Tathagata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.

“Furthermore, Subhuti, someone may claim, ‘Those who set forth on the bodhisattva path announce the destruction or the end of some dharma.’ Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Those who set forth on the bodhisattva path do not announce the destruction or the end of any dharma.”

TWENTY-EIGHT: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter took as many worlds as there are grains of sand in the Ganges and covered them with the seven jewels and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, and a bodhisattva gained an acceptance of the selfless, birthless nature of dharmas, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And yet, Subhuti, this fearless bodhisattva would not obtain a body of merit.”

The venerable Subhuti said, “But surely, Bhagavan, this bodhisattva would obtain a body of merit!”

The Buddha replied, “They would, Subhuti, but without grasping it. Thus is it called ‘obtaining.’”

TWENTY-NINE: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if anyone should claim that the Tathagata goes or comes or stands or sits or lies on a bed, Subhuti, they do not understand the meaning of my words. And why not? Subhuti, those who are called ‘tathagatas’ do not go anywhere, nor do they come from anywhere. Thus are they called ‘tathagatas, arhans, fully-enlightened ones.’”

THIRTY: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter took as many worlds as there are specks of dust in a billion-world universe and by an expenditure of limitless energy ground them into a multitude of atoms, Subhuti, what do you think, would there be a great multitude of atoms?”

Subhuti replied, “So there would, Bhagavan. So there would, Sugata. There would be a great multitude of atoms. And why? If a great multitude of atoms existed, Bhagavan, the Tathagata would not have spoken of a ‘multitude of atoms.’ And why? Bhagavan, this multitude of atoms of which the Tathagata speaks is said by the Tathagata to be no multitude. Thus is it called a ‘multitude of atoms.’ Also, Bhagavan, this ‘billion-world universe’ of which the Tathagata speaks is said by the Tathagata to be no universe. Thus is it called a ‘billion-world universe.’ And how so? Bhagavan, if a universe existed, attachment to an entity would exist. But whenever the Tathagata speaks of attachment to an entity, the Tathagata speaks of it as no attachment. Thus is it called ‘attachment to an entity.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, attachment to an entity is inexplorable and inexpressible. For it is neither a dharma nor no dharma. Foolish people, though, are attached.”

THIRTY-ONE: “And how so? Subhuti, if someone should claim that the Tathagata speaks of a view of a self, or that the Tathagata speaks of a view of a being, a view of a life, or a view of a soul, Subhuti, would such a claim be true?”

Subhuti said, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. No, indeed, Sugata. Such a claim would not be true. And why not?”

Bhagavan, when the Tathagata speaks of a view of a self, the Tathagata speaks of it as no view. Thus is it called a ‘view of a self.’”

The Buddha said, “Indeed, Subhuti, so it is. Those who set forth on the bodhisattva path know, see, and believe all dharmas but know, see, and believe them without being attached to the perception of a dharma. And why not? The perception of a dharma, Subhuti, the ‘perception of a dharma’ is said by the Tathagata to be no perception. Thus is it called the ‘perception of a dharma.’

THIRTY-TWO: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a fearless bodhisattva filled measureless, infinite worlds with the seven jewels and gave them as an offering to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, and a noble son or daughter grasped but a single four-line gatha of this teaching on the perfection of wisdom and memorized, discussed, recited, mastered, and explained it in detail to others, the body of merit produced by that noble son or daughter as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And how should they explain it? By not explaining. Thus is it called ‘explaining.’

“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.”

All this was spoken by the Buddha to the joy of the elder Subhuti, the monks and nuns, the laymen and laywomen, the bodhisattvas, the devas, humans, asuras and gandharvas of the world all of whom were greatly pleased with what the Buddha said.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

THE *Diamond Sutra* may look like a book, but it's really the body of the Buddha. It's also your body, my body, all possible bodies. But it's a body with nothing inside and nothing outside. It doesn't exist in space or time. Nor is it a construct of the mind. It's no mind. And yet because it's no mind, it has room for compassion. This book is the offering of no mind, born of compassion for all suffering beings. Of all the sutras that teach this teaching, this is the diamond. It cuts through all delusions, illuminates what is real, and cannot be destroyed. It is the path on which all buddhas stand and walk. And to read it is to stand and walk with buddhas.

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke this sutra one afternoon after he had returned from begging for his daily meal in one of the biggest cities of the ancient world. Instead of the shelter of a tree or a cave, he returned to a hut in a two-hundred-acre preserve that had been donated to the Buddha's order by two of the city's wealthiest and most powerful men. In addition to its forest, the preserve included enough dwellings to house more than a thousand of the Buddha's disciples. After going inside one such dwelling to put away his patched robe and stone bowl, the Buddha came back outside, washed his feet and sat down on a wooden seat just beyond his door. His disciples were standing in

the dirt courtyard in front of his hut, and some came forward to pay their respects. Then they all sat down on their mats. After they were settled, the venerable Subhuti rose and asked the Buddha how we all can become buddhas. The *Diamond Sutra* is the Buddha's answer.

No one knows precisely when this took place, but if Chih-yi's classification of the Buddha's sutras is correct, it would have been within ten years of 400 B.C., or within a decade either way of when the Buddha was sixty-five. It was during this period that the Buddha began teaching a teaching that cut through all other teachings, including his own, a teaching that refused to define itself as a teaching. Several decades earlier, following his Enlightenment, the Buddha had taught people to free themselves from suffering by realizing the impermanence and interdependence of everything upon which their suffering depended, including and especially themselves. The Buddha called this the realization of *shunyata* (emptiness), the view that because nothing exists independently of other things, it has no nature of its own, and everything is therefore *empty*, and this *emptiness* is the true nature of reality. Later, when the Buddha began teaching people to view emptiness itself as empty and to put the emptiness of emptiness to work in the liberation of all beings, few disciples grasped this new teaching, which he called the *perfection of wisdom*, the wisdom beyond wisdom. By the time of his Nirvana in 383 B.C., there were still not many members of his order who understood this teaching or its ramifications. And the sermons in which he taught this teaching were, most likely, not among those *authenticated* during the communal reading conducted a few months later in Rajagriha by the five hundred disciples who met at Buddhism's First Council.

But as word of the Buddha's Nirvana spread throughout the Gangetic plain, thousands of other disciples converged on Rajagriha. Although they arrived too late to attend the First Council,

this larger group decided to hold its own communal reading outside the same city. Under the leadership of Vashpa, one of the Buddha's first five disciples, they also repeated from memory all the sermons they had heard the Buddha speak over the previous fifty years. We can only guess what they remembered or how their recollections may have differed from what the earlier group of monks remembered, but this second group was much larger and included lay members as well as monks and nuns. And the sermons they recalled must have represented a much larger and more diverse collection. The perfection of wisdom teachings, I suggest, were part of this second collection.

None of this, though, was written down. The transmission of instruction was still oral. Some disciples memorized some teachings, and others memorized others. Then they returned to their towns and villages or the pilgrim's trail. And as time went on, they shared what they had memorized. But they did not share everything with everyone. According to Conze, over the next two centuries, "the bulk of the doctrine, except for some moral maxims, and so on, was esoteric." ("The Buddha's Bodies in the Prajnaparamita" in *Buddhist Studies 1934-1972*, Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1967, p. 115) Thus, it is not surprising to find no sign of the perfection of wisdom until the second century B.C.

Previously, in the middle of the third century B.C., contention developed over such minor rules as whether it was proper for monks and nuns to accept gold and silver or to carry a supply of salt or to drink semi-fermented rice wine or to eat past noon or to eat to excess. Such disagreements precipitated a schism, which no doubt had deeper causes and which resulted in the formation of two schools of Buddhism: the conservative Sthaviravadins (Pali: Theravadins), who considered themselves keepers of the Buddha's original teachings, and the more liberal Mahasanghikas, who considered themselves keepers of the Buddha's true teachings and who, incidentally, considered Vashpa their patriarch. By the middle

of the second century B.C., these two schools had split into at least eighteen different sects, among which were the Purvashailas and the Dharmaguptakas. While the former was a Mahasanghika sect, and the latter belonged to the Sthaviravadin branch of early Buddhism, according to Poussin (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, VIII: 335) and Nakamura (*Indian Buddhism*, Sanseido Press, 1980, p. 164), both possessed copies of the perfection of wisdom sutras, which were now being written down. And the Dharmaguptakas reportedly helped compile them into the encyclopedic *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, which contains three-fourths of all such sutras. Though we are unlikely to learn exactly when or how members of these sects came into possession of these sutras, we know that the development of what later became known as Mahayana was based on such scriptures.

As to their form, according to most scholars, the two dozen or so perfection of wisdom sutras we now have were first written down in verse and then in prose between the second century B.C. and the third century A.D. Although the issue of whether or not these sutras were compiled from preexisting materials or cut from new cloth is unlikely to be settled, except by faith, Conze and other scholars think that the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* was the first such scripture to appear and that it was followed by versions of the same basic sutra (same cast, same events, same teaching, often the same words) in 18,000, 25,000 and 100,000 lines. Conze also thought that after the expansion of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* into its longer versions, it was then contracted into 4,000 and 2,500 lines, and elements of its teaching further edited into 700 lines, 500 lines, and finally into the *Diamond Sutra* in 300 lines. But one thing such an interpretation overlooks or fails to explain is that in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* and in all the sutras based on it, Subhuti often takes the Buddha's place in teaching the perfection of wisdom, whereas in the *Diamond Sutra* he

hears this teaching for the first time and for the first time sets forth on the bodhisattva path. Thus, it makes more sense to view the *Diamond Sutra* as preceding these other texts, rather than following them. Of course, there's linear time, and then there's buddha time. And this sutra is definitely on buddha time.

As for what it means, I have worn out my copy of this sutra trying to understand it. It isn't very long and can be read in half an hour. Not long after I first read it thirty years ago, a fellow graduate student at Columbia translated it in less than a week. Still, it remained a mystery to me. Then three years later, while I was attending Taiwan's College of Chinese Culture, the curator of the college museum introduced me to an edition of the sutra that contained the commentaries of fifty-three Zen masters, and I finally began to slow down enough to understand the meaning of the words. School, however, only interfered with such an endeavor, and after one semester I moved to a Buddhist monastery in the hills south of Taipei. When I first arrived, the abbot said, "When you hear someone strike this wooden mallet, it's time to eat. If you have any questions, just ask. Otherwise, you're on your own here." I never could come up with any questions, so mostly I read and slept and ate. But I also meditated several hours a day and took long walks in the hills, and every day after dinner, while waiting for evening services to begin, I sat on the monastery steps and read this sutra and the comments of the fifty-three Zen masters. Sometimes, I would just hold the book in my hands hoping its teaching would penetrate my skin and flow into my bloodstream and awaken my sleeping dragon mind. But I only heard the dragon snoring. Finally, after more than two years on the monastery steps, I sighed and packed my bag and put the sutra away and turned to poetry. And for the next twenty years, my copy gathered dust, until three years ago, when I pulled it from my bookshelf and decided it was time to try once more.

It seems as if the only way I can understand a Chinese text is to

try to translate it. So, over the course of several months, I compared the six extant Chinese translations of the sutra and produced a composite version in English. But I still didn't understand what it meant, or how it all fit together. For years, whenever I asked anyone, I was told it was about emptiness. But such knowledge never helped. Then one day two years ago, I visited the office of the Yin-shun Foundation in Taipei. The Foundation had asked me to translate one of Master Yin-shun's publications, and while I was waiting for one of the monks to arrange a meeting with the old master, I glanced at their wall of books. A set of maroon spines caught my eye. It was a five-volume study of the *Diamond Sutra*, but a study of the Sanskrit, not the Chinese, compiled by Hsu Yang-chu. The work was entitled *Hsin-yi fan-wen fo-tien Chin-kang po-juo po-lo-mi-ching* and it was published by the Ju-Shih Publishing Company in Taipei, on Thanksgiving Day in 1995. Hsu had only printed 250 sets of the books, but a few days later I managed to track down his loft retreat and buy a set. What a find! Within days, I began to understand the mystery. The thought had never occurred to me that since the *Diamond Sutra* was originally in verse, even though it was now in prose, its meaning still depended on its poetry, which was still apparent in the Sanskrit but not in the Chinese. Without the resonance of words to hold it together, the sutra had become a collection of jewels, wonderful, radiant jewels, but a collection without any discernible order. But by reading the Sanskrit text, I was able to see how they all fit together. It turns out the sutra isn't about emptiness. Or at least, it isn't emptiness that distinguishes this sutra. 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. Our real body is what ties all these words together.

Of course, the Sanskrit texts we have today are not the original words of the Buddha. The Buddha preferred to teach in the dialect of the common people and actually avoided the archaic form of

Sanskrit in use during his day, as its complex inflections were only understood by the educated, priestly elite. Also, he encouraged his disciples to translate his teachings into the local dialect wherever they taught, and this is what they did. Ironically, during the following centuries, a less archaic form of Sanskrit, which we now call Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit (as opposed to Vedic Sanskrit), came into use in northwest India in the same region where Mahayana Buddhism developed. And when this sutra was finally written down, this is the language in which it was transmitted. And this is the language in which it arrived in China. Although how closely the texts we have today resemble those first written copies, much less their oral precursors, which were in a dialect other than Sanskrit, is something we shall never know.

In preparing this translation of the text, I have consulted two Sanskrit editions. The first is that of Max Müller, who published his edition in 1881 after making a comparison of three Sanskrit copies: an eighteenth-century copy from Japan and two sixteenth-century copies from China and Tibet. I have also consulted the edition of Edward Conze published in 1957. Conze based his edition largely on Müller's earlier work, though he differed as to his choice of variants. He also listed important differences in the Tibetan as well as in two partial copies of the text that came to light in the early part of the twentieth century. One was unearthed in Central Asia (the Aurel Stein edition) and the other in Pakistan (the Gilgit edition), and both date back to the late fifth or early sixth century. Although these two early copies omit certain phrases that occur in our later editions, they are omissions that are primarily of interest to the historian and do not constitute any significant departure from the sutra's central teaching. Also, where differences exist, we have three Chinese translations from roughly the same period and another three from the following two centuries that, together or individually, include most, if not all, of the phrases missing in the Stein and Gilgit copies. Thus, if we can

assume that a translator would have made a greater effort than whoever left these copies behind to secure the most authoritative text, we have to judge the Stein and Gilgit texts as representing something other than the main line of textual transmission. Still, since some readers will want to know the extent of variant readings, I have noted the differences among the Sanskrit editions of Conze and Müller, the Gilgit and Stein copies, and the six Chinese translations. I have also listed variants in the Tibetan and Khotanese translations, though I have had to depend on secondary sources for this and have not gone beyond passing on the work of others.

My purpose, however, in translating this sutra was not to engage in textual notation or criticism, but to thank those who have helped me along the path by helping others understand this teaching. By itself, this sutra is not easy to fathom, much less appreciate or practice. Hence, I have translated selections from other sutras that expand on the same teaching, as well as the commentaries of several dozen monks, including my old friends, the fifty-three Zen masters, the Indian pundits Asanga and Vasubandhu, and such modern masters as Chiang Wei-nung, Tao-yuan, and Sheng-yi. I have also added remarks of my own, far more than I had anticipated or would have wished. But given my interpretation, I often had no choice. At the back of the book, I have also provided a brief explanation of terms and sources and biographical information on all those whose comments have provided the insights that will hopefully make this a useful book.

The title of this book is the *Vajracchedika Prajñāparamita Sutra*. *Sutra* is Sanskrit for “string” or “something strung together,” and *prajña* means “wisdom.” But it is qualified here by *paramita*, which means “perfection.” Thus, *prajñāparamita* means the “perfection of wisdom,” “ultimate wisdom,” “wisdom beyond wisdom.” This wisdom was considered the pinnacle of a group of virtues or practices known as the Six Perfections, which also included

charity, morality, forbearance, vigor, and meditation. Wisdom here is also modified by *vajra-chedika* (diamond-cutting). Translators and commentators are divided over the meaning of this last compound. Does it mean “what cuts through diamonds” or “the diamond that cuts through”? Although the vagaries of Sanskrit grammar make both interpretations possible, in the *Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha says, “*Prajna* (wisdom) is like a diamond. While nothing is able to harm it, it can cut through all things.” Thus, the second interpretation seems inescapable. As for *chedika* (cutting), like so many translators before me, I have let it go, feeling that its meaning is implied by *vajra* (diamond), and that its ability to cut is not the only significant quality of a diamond. Its ability to cut is only the function of *prajna*. Its ability to radiate light is its appearance, and its indestructibility is its essence. All three are aspects of *prajna*, and together they also represent the three bodies of every buddha around which this sutra turns.

Hung-jen, the Fifth Patriarch of China’s Zen sect, once told his disciples that by cherishing the *Diamond Sutra* they would see their natures and become buddhas. And in his commentary to the sutra, the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, wrote, “Countless are those who have read this sutra, and numberless are those who have praised it. More than eight hundred have written commentaries to it, and each has explained its meaning according to his own perspective. But though perspectives differ, the Dharma is one and the same. This sutra is present in the nature of all beings. Those who don’t look within read only the words. While those who become aware of their own minds realize this sutra does not consist of words.”

This sutra is the finger that points to the moon. But it’s also the moon, the Tao of which we cannot speak. And like the moon and the Tao, it moves the other way, the way we’re not expecting. It moves backwards, not forwards. Most people look for enlightenment in the future. Buddhas find it in the past. In this sutra, the

Buddha says, “No beginning, this is the highest truth.” To believe such truth, you must be fearless. But why not be fearless? What do you have to lose?

Red Pine
Thanksgiving, Year of the Dragon
City of Ten Thousand Buddhas
Ukiah, California

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Chapter One: Thus have I heard: Once the Bhagavan was dwelling near Shravasti at Anathapindada Garden in Jeta Forest together with the full assembly of 1250 bhikshus and a great many fearless bodhisattvas.

One day before noon, the Bhagavan put on his patched robe and picked up his bowl and entered the capital of Shravasti for offerings. After begging for food in the city and eating his meal of rice, he returned from his daily round in the afternoon, put his robe and bowl away, washed his feet, and sat down on the appointed seat. After crossing his legs and adjusting his body, he turned his awareness to what was before him.

A number of bhikshus then came up to where the Bhagavan was sitting. After touching their heads to his feet, they walked around him to the right three times and sat down to one side.

◆ CHAPTER ONE

THE REMAINING THIRTY-ONE CHAPTERS of this sutra attempt to explain what happens in the first. Essentially, they examine the nature of buddhahood and the path that leads thereto. In the first chapter, we see what a buddha does, which is not so different from our own daily round of existence, if we could only do what

we do unhindered by attachments and see what we do unobstructed by delusions. What this sutra teaches us is how to transform attachments and delusions, how to be a buddha. And it begins with a patched robe, an empty bowl, and the Buddha's daily practice of this teaching.

The division of the text into thirty-two chapters was the work of Prince Chao-ming (501–531), who was the eldest son of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty. This was the same Emperor Wu who asked a visiting Indian monk named Bodhidharma what merit he acquired as a result of all his religious philanthropy. The Zen patriarch told him, “None.” Ironically, the acquisition and nature of merit are at the heart of this sutra. Buddhas are the manifestation of merit, not the material merit of Emperor Wu, but the merit produced by the practice of this teaching.

It is also ironic that while the father was busy emptying his treasury to support the Buddhist order, the son was compiling China's great literary anthology known as the *Wen Hsuan* and devoting himself to the *Diamond Sutra*, which he is said to have recited ten thousand times before his early death. In dividing this sutra into thirty-two chapters, Chao-ming was acknowledging what will become clearer in the chapters that follow: this sutra is not only about the body of the Buddha, which was said to be marked by thirty-two unique attributes, it *is* the body of the Buddha. In addition, Chao-ming gave each chapter a title. This first one he called “The Cause and Reason for the Dharma Assembly.” The aptness of his titles led a number of commentators, including the T'ang-dynasty prime minister, Chang Wu-chin, and the Sixth Zen Patriarch, Hui-neng, to begin each chapter with an explanation of these titles.

Hui-neng says, “The lay prime minister Chang Wu-chin said, ‘If not for dharmas, there would be no way to discuss emptiness. If not for wisdom, there would be no way to speak about dharmas.’ The multiplicity of the myriad dharmas is what is meant by

‘cause.’ And the responsiveness of the one mind is what is meant by ‘reason.’ Thus, at the beginning is a chapter on the cause and reason for this dharma assembly.”

Thus have I heard:

The voice that begins all sutras is that of Ananda, Shakyamuni’s cousin, who was born on the day of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. As a child, Ananda impressed others with his perfect memory, and when he joined the Buddha’s order, Shakyamuni repeated all the sermons he had missed in the intervening years. As it happened, Ananda’s entry into the homeless life also marked the beginning of the Buddha’s *prajna* period when this and other teachings on the perfection of wisdom were spoken. Nearly thirty years later, as the Buddha approached the time of his Nirvana, Ananda asked what words to place at the beginning of each sutra. The Buddha answered, “*Evan maya shrutan*” (Thus have I heard). Later, Ananda used this phrase to preface the hundreds of discourses he repeated from memory at Buddhism’s First Council, held shortly after the Buddha’s Nirvana in 383 B.C. However, what immediately follows is not a verbatim account but a summary of events, while the portion that Ananda quotes from memory does not begin until the second chapter. Despite this traditional attribution, it is also possible that this sutra was recalled from memory by Vashpa or some other disciple at the meeting held immediately after the First Council. Vashpa was the First Patriarch of the Mahasanghikas, and it was the Mahasanghikas that gave rise to the Mahayana sects that taught and revered this and other scriptures on the perfection of wisdom. Thus, at the end of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, when Ananda is enjoined not to forget this teaching, this could be interpreted as evidence that he didn’t forget or evidence that he did.

Commentators have written volumes on the profundity of *evan*

(thus). Does it mean “like so,” or does it mean “just so”? And what is the difference? Is this sutra the finger that points to the moon, or is it the moon itself?

Li Wen-hui says, “‘Thus’ is another word for our nature. Outside of our nature, nothing else is real.”

Tao-ch’uan says, “The Way of the ancients was said to be ‘just so.’ For by the time they talked about it, it had already changed. But when the Way changes, where does it go? Spit it out! It doesn’t run off just anywhere. Where does it actually go? Speak! Words won’t burn your mouth. *Just*: on a clear still night the moon shines alone. *So*: water doesn’t exist apart from waves. The waves are water.”

Chiang Wei-nung says, “When people believe something, they say ‘it is thus.’ When they don’t believe something, they say, ‘it is not thus.’ The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, ‘Belief marks the beginning of the Path. It is the mother of virtues and protector of all good dharmas.’ (6) Belief is the first gate on the Path. Hence, this expression is placed at the very beginning.”

*Once the Bhagavan was dwelling near Shravasti
at Anathapindada Garden in Jeta Forest*

Once: According to the system established by Chih-yi (530–597) for ordering the Buddha’s sutras, from the time of his Enlightenment the Buddha’s teachings progressed through five periods: the *Avatamsaka* period of interpenetration of unity and multiplicity, which lasted three weeks and which comprised the teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*; the *Agama* period of mental analysis, which lasted twelve years; the *Vaipulya* period of harmony and balance, which lasted eight years; the *Prajna* period of radical wisdom, which lasted twenty-two years and which included this and other perfection of wisdom sutras; and the *Saddharma* period of the full lotus, which lasted eight years and

which concluded with the *Lotus* and *Nirvana* sutras. Since the Buddha's Enlightenment is said to have occurred in 432 B.C., this sutra would have been spoken around 400 B.C. (Note: I have followed Hajime Nakamura's dating of the Buddha, which is based on sources of the Northern tradition rather than the Southern tradition of Sri Lanka.)

Buddhist scholars, however, consider such an attribution dubious and insist that, given the nature of this teaching, the scriptures of the prajna period could not have been composed much earlier than a century or two before the Christian Era when the first signs of Mahayana Buddhism appeared in India. However, the "sudden appearance" of such sutras as this several centuries after the Buddha's Nirvana can also be seen as a reflection of the changing receptivity of their audience rather than proof of *de novo* compilation. Edward Conze, one of the first Westerners to devote himself to the study of these teachings and the teacher of many of those who now write on the subject, wrote, "What seems to be doctrinal innovation may really be nothing but the gradual shifting of the line between esoteric and exoteric teachings. At first, even up to Ashoka (304-232 B.C.), the bulk of the doctrine, except for some moral maxims, and so on, was esoteric." (*Buddhist Studies 1934-1972*, p. 115) In the months that followed the authentication of scriptures at Buddhism's First Council in 383 B.C., at least one other meeting was convened to consider additional sermons. Obviously, different groups of disciples honored different teachings, and such a sutra as this surely could not have been widely accepted by an audience that preferred asceticism and monastic discipline, which this sutra holds up to gentle rebuke.

Bhagavan: The term *bhagavan* was derived from *bhaga* (vulva) and originally meant "like a vulva," and hence "fecund" or "prosperous." Eventually, it was applied to "one whose presence bestows prosperity." It is usually translated as "Blessed One" or "World-Honored One" and is one of every buddha's ten titles.

Others that appear in this sutra include *tathagata*, *sugata*, and *arhan*.

Dwelling: It was the Buddha's custom to wander from town to town and forest to forest during most of the year but to spend the summer monsoon season at one location. One such place was the retreat built for the Buddha and his order outside Shravasti.

Shravasti: This was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kaushala. In his *Maha Prajna-paramita Shastra*, Nagarjuna says the city had a population of 900,000, and it overshadowed even Magadha's capital of Rajagriha during the fifth century B.C. Today, its ruins can be visited twenty kilometers west of the town of Balrampur on the train line between Lucknow and Gorakhpur. Some commentators say the city's name came from that of its founder, King Shravasta. Others say the name was derived from the sage Savattha, who lived there before the city was built.

Anathapindada Garden in Jeta Forest: During the Buddha's day, there was a wealthy merchant in Shravasti named Sudatta. Since he often helped the unfortunate, he was called *Anathapindada* (the Benefactor). One day, while visiting his son's prospective in-laws in Rajagriha, Sudatta had the good fortune of hearing the Buddha speak and was so affected by what he heard that he invited the Bhagavan to Shravasti. But when Sudatta returned to find a suitable residence for the Buddha and his disciples, the only place that seemed to him sufficiently spacious and serene was the forested preserve of Crown Prince Jeta, two kilometers southwest of the city. When Sudatta inquired about buying it, the prince joked, "I'll sell you whatever portion you can cover with gold." Taking the prince at his word, Sudatta went home and brought back enough gold to cover an area of two hundred acres that became known as Anathapindada Garden. Overcome by Sudatta's sincerity, the prince donated the entire forest to the Buddha's congregation, and together the two men built a *vihara*, or monastery, where the Buddha could live and preach whenever he visited.

These events are said to have occurred in the fourth year of the Buddha's ministry, or in 428 B.C. Altogether, the Buddha spent twenty-five rainy seasons at Jeta Vihara and delivered many of his most important sermons there. He also performed a series of miracles in Shravasti that were unique in his career, and it was also in Shravasti that he refuted the teachings of the leaders of other spiritual sects.

Although it remains in the background, the Buddha's retreat represents the outcome of charity and forbearance, the two perfections, which, together with the perfection of wisdom, are extolled in this sutra as leading to buddhahood. The word *anatha* means "without reliance," and *pinda-dada* means "to give offerings." Normally, this compound is interpreted, as above, to mean "benefactor" or "to give offerings to those without means." But it can also mean "to give offerings without attachment," which is the practice praised throughout this sutra. Thus, the place where this sutra was spoken is more than an example of its teaching. It is the teaching.

Textual note: Some Sanskrit scholars prefer to add *ekasmin samaye* (one time) to the previous phrase, which is how the Tibetan punctuates this and also how Conze translates it: "Thus have I heard at one time."

*together with the full assembly of 1250 bhikshus
and a great many fearless bodhisattvas.*

1250: The number of bhikshus was made up primarily of the three Kashyapa brothers and their disciples, who totaled 1,000 members. Hence, it was quite natural for the elder of the three, Uruvilva, or Maha Kashyapa, to assume leadership of the First Council after the Buddha's Nirvana. In addition, the assembly also included Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Yashas, and their disciples. Thus, by converting these six men, the Buddha attracted a group of 1250 disciples who were present at many of his sermons

and who were known collectively as the *mahata bhikshu-samgha* (full assembly of monks). Commentators suggest the reason the Buddha's first five disciples were not included in this number is that the figure was rounded off.

Bhikshu: Although this Sanskrit term means "one who begs" (for instruction from buddhas and for food from others), it also means "one who eliminates evil." In this form, it applies only to monks. The term for nuns is *bhikshuni*. Although monks alone are mentioned at the beginning of this sutra, nuns, as well as laymen and laywomen, are listed among those present at the end of the sutra, and nuns are also present at other assemblies that make up the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*. Hence, their omission here is curious and perhaps was intended to present the monks in isolation and in contrast to the noble sons and daughters who are seen outdoing them in the practice of this teaching.

Bodhisattva: Depending on the interpretation one gives *sattva*, this term means "spiritual warrior" (see Hardayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, p. 9) or "spiritual being," which is the more common, if less interesting, interpretation. The term originally referred to ascetics of various religious traditions but was eventually taken over by Buddhists and was extended not only to monks but to nuns as well as to male and female householders who devoted themselves to achieving enlightenment for others as well as for themselves. Thus, the term was used to represent the Mahayana ideal with its emphasis on compassion and wisdom as opposed to the Hinayana ideal of the *arhan* with its emphasis on morality and meditation.

Throughout this sutra, *bodhisattva* is modified by *mahasattva*, which I have translated as "fearless." Normally, *mahasattva* is interpreted quite literally as "great being," as Purna does in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, when he says to the Buddha, "One who is called a *mahasattva* puts on the great armor, sets forth on the great path, and rides the great vehicle.

Such a being is called a *mahasattva*.” (1) However, this term was first applied not to humans but to lions and only later to those who had the courage of the king of beasts. Hence, it was used to suggest the difficulties facing those who set forth on the bodhisattva path as well as to praise them for such aspiration. Also, without fearlessness, no progress on this path is possible.

This initial section lists the six things necessary for a sermon on the Dharma: belief (thus), a witness (I have heard), a time (once), a speaker, (the Buddha), a place (Shravasti), and an audience (bhikshus and bodhisattvas). A sutra cannot exist without the presence of all six. Hence, they are placed at the beginning.

Textual note: Among Chinese editions, the presence of the Sanskrit *sambahulais ca bodhisattvais mahasattvais* (and a great number of fearless bodhisattvas) is reflected only in the translation of Yi-ching. A number of commentators suggest this was added to our extant Sanskrit editions (as well as to the one that formed the basis of Yi-ching’s translation) by followers of the Mahayana. However, in Chapter Two Subhuti says that fearless bodhisattvas are blessed by the Buddha’s daily example. Hence, bodhisattvas must be in the audience. At the end of the sutra, they also appear in the translations of Bodhiruci and Yi-ching, while laymen and laywomen are present in Chapter Thirty-two in all Chinese translations. Also, since “fearless bodhisattvas” and “noble sons and daughters” are referred to interchangeably throughout this sutra, their omission here must be either a reflection of the standard sutra opening or a device to focus attention on the monastics, who have become attached to the Hinayana ideal of the passionless arhan and indifferent to the welfare of others.

*One day before noon, the Bhagavan put on his
patched robe and picked up his bowl and entered
the capital of Shravasti for offerings.*

Before noon: Dawn is when gods eat; noon is when buddhas eat; dusk is when animals eat; and midnight is when spirits eat.

Thus, it was the Buddha's custom to eat his one daily meal at midday, after which he ate nothing until the following day. Although this custom is still followed by the Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia, it has been relaxed, if not ignored, by those in colder climates. Seng-chao comments, "When food is cooked, this is when everyone has something and when thoughts of giving easily arise." Thus, monks begged for food when householders were preparing their midday meal.

Patched robe: The Buddha designated three robes for monks: one of five patches for daily activities, for sitting and for sleeping; one of seven patches worn on top of the one of five patches for preaching the Dharma; and one of nine (sometimes twenty-five) patches for going about in public or entering a private residence. Here, this last kind of robe, called a *civara*, is meant. Thus, when the Buddha later takes this robe off and puts it away, he is still wearing his other garments. These two simpler robes were usually made of plain, undyed cloth, while the *civara* was invariably saffron-yellow—thus it was also called a *kashaya* (saffron-yellow). The sight that finally prompted Shakyamuni to leave home was that of an ascetic wearing such a robe. Also, the night of his flight from the palace, he is said to have met a hunter trying to deceive deer by wearing a similar robe, for which Shakyamuni gladly exchanged his princely garments.

Bowl: The bowl, or *patra*, was called "the vessel of humility," and the *Vinaya*, or rules of the Buddhist order, established limits as to its size, material, and color. In the Buddha's day, most bowls were made of iron in order to withstand being banged about during the constant wandering of the monks. However, bowls of clay and stone were also used, and the Buddha's own bowl was made of purple stone. It was said to have been the bowl used by Vipashyin, the first buddha of the present *kalpa*, and was given to Shakyamuni by the Guardians of the Four Quarters following his Enlightenment.

Offerings: The Sanskrit term used here for “offering” is *pinda*, which refers to any lump, but especially a lump of food. In ancient India, the main staple was glutinous rice, which was eaten with the hands by forming it into balls. The term *pinda* occurs again at the end of the sutra in Chapter Thirty, where it includes the biggest of all lumps: a universe of a billion worlds. This is not accidental, for the practice of charity and the concept of an entity, either compounded of smaller entities or compounding a greater entity, run throughout this sutra. In the chapters that follow, the Buddha takes us through a series of synonyms for the entities of reality and compares the results of offering such things as a ball of rice, a universe of jewels, numberless existences, or a four-line poem.

Whereas most sutras begin with some miraculous event, such as the quaking of the earth or the radiation of light from the Buddha’s brow, the *Diamond Sutra* begins with the Buddha’s everyday routine and stresses the importance of charity, along with its counterpart of forbearance, and the perspective of prajna wisdom in the practice of both. Thus, the Buddha begins his instruction with his own example and uses an example that involves benefit to others as well as oneself.

Textual note: Kumarajiva and Bodhiruci give the time as *shih-shih* (when it was time to eat).

After begging for food in the city and eating his meal of rice, he returned from his daily round in the afternoon, put his robe and bowl away, washed his feet, and sat down on the appointed seat. After crossing his legs and adjusting his body, he turned his awareness to what was before him.

Begging for food in the city: It was the Buddha’s custom to go from one door to the next and not to visit more than seven households on any given day. Nor did he pass up the doors of the poor

and lowly in order to receive food from the wealthy and noble. For the Buddha's compassion was even-handed and free from bias. In his final *Testament Sutra*, the Buddha said, "You monks should cultivate with diligence. Renounce fashion and beauty, put on the faded robe, take up the vessel of humility, and support yourselves by begging. And when you do so, should feelings of pride arise, get rid of them at once. To become inflated by pride is unfitting for white-robed worldly people. How much more so for those who have left home and set forth on the Path. For the sake of liberation, humble yourselves and practice begging."

Chiang Wei-nung says, "The purpose of begging is to conquer egotism and arrogance, to overcome attachment to flavor and taste, to concentrate the mind on cultivating the Way, and to cause others to be embarrassed. A monk leaves home to liberate others. But to liberate others, he must first put an end to their delusions. And to put an end to their delusions, he must practice austerities so that those who see him think to themselves, 'Here is someone who takes on hardships to liberate others. How can I continue indulging in food and comfort?' And as thoughts of the Way increase, worldly thoughts decrease. Thus does begging greatly benefit others."

Returned: The abode to which the Buddha returned was the monastic retreat of Jeta Vihara built for him and his followers several decades earlier by Prince Jeta and Sudatta for the order's use during the monsoon season.

In the afternoon: The text is ambiguous here. The Sanskrit *pashcad bhakta-pinda-pata*, literally means "after eating food." However, since this is already expressed in the previous phrase by *krta-bhakta-krtyas* (eating his meal of rice), this second expression, according to Edgerton, simply indicates time and was often used as a stock term to indicate the period after the noon meal. Whereas both Conze and Müller agree with this interpretation of the text, all Chinese translations, except that of Dharmagupta,

have the Buddha eating his meal after he returns, which remains the practice called for in the *Vinaya* for monks and nuns. However, as the Buddha's reputation grew, he and his disciples were often invited to take their noon meal in the homes of wealthy householders, and perhaps this was such an occasion.

Put his robe and bowl away: The robe and bowl are the two most important possessions of a monk or nun. Hence, they were put away after use. They also represent the spirit of one's teacher, and in the Zen sect they became the symbols by which transmission of the patriarchship was established and, for a while, maintained.

Washed his feet: Neither the Buddha nor his disciples wore shoes or sandals. Thus, the Buddha washed off the dust of the road before ascending the teacher's seat.

Sat down on the appointed seat: There is some difference of opinion concerning the Buddha's seat. Most translators and commentators interpret *prajnapta* (arranged) to mean that the Buddha arranged his own seat. But *prajnapta* is not used as a verb here but as an adjective modifying *asane* (seat). Still, it is unclear whether the Buddha did the arranging or simply sat down on a seat that had been arranged for him. I have decided in favor of the latter and translated *prajnapta* as "appointed." Conze has "arranged for him," while Müller has "intended for him." Also, according to the *Perfection of Wisdom in Seven Hundred Lines*, the seat on which the Buddha delivered his discourses was just outside his cell or dwelling.

When the Buddha sat down, he often did so on freshly cut kusha grass over which he spread out a mat. And it was this custom that probably influenced the interpretations of other translators here. But an *asane* was not this sort of seat. Elsewhere in the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, it is called the "Lion Seat." While sitting on this seat, which was more like a large stool, the Buddha delivered many of his sermons. Also, the Buddha did not always

instruct his disciples after the noon meal. But by sitting down on this seat, he indicated to them that he was now prepared to do so.

Crossed his legs: To sit cross-legged is to assume the meditation posture whereby one's circulation of energy is more easily and more powerfully focused. In addition to crossing one's legs, one's back is also aligned and one's gaze is fixed on the space before one's body. According to the *Maha Prajnaparamita Shastra*, "There are five reasons to sit cross-legged. First, it is the best way to relax the body. Second, it prevents the body from becoming tired. Third, it is not discussed in the texts of heretics. Fourth, it instills respect from others. And fifth, it is praised by all sages." (30)

Chiang Wei-nung says, "Unfortunate suffering beings, the rich as well as the poor, spend their lives working for food and clothes. No matter what kind of job they do, they all work for food. They get up in the morning and hurry into the city to work. Working for food is important. But when your work is done, you should return to your own place. The problem with most people is that for the sake of food and clothes they run around like beggars and eventually forget who they are and no longer return to their own place. When your work is done, don't involve yourself in what doesn't concern you. Thus, the Buddha sits down and focuses on the thought before him."

Hsu-fa says, "The Buddha puts on his robe and takes up his bowl to uphold the precepts of morality. He washes his feet and takes his seat to enter meditation. Thus does morality give birth to meditation and meditation to wisdom. Also, by entering the city with his robe and bowl, he goes from the noumenal into the phenomenal. By washing his feet and taking his seat, he goes from the phenomenal into the noumenal. It is only by remaining unattached to the noumenal as well as the phenomenal that undifferentiated prajna can be realized."

Turned his awareness to what was before him: Elsewhere in the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, the Buddha begins his discourses

after entering what is called the King of Samadhis, or Deepest of Trances. Here, in keeping with the tenor of this more down-to-earth discourse, the Buddha simply practices mindfulness. Normally four subjects of mindfulness are distinguished as an essential part of meditation. The first of these is *kaya-smirti-upasthana* (mindfulness of the body). The others are mindfulness regarding *vedana* (sensations), *citta* (thoughts), and *dharma* (dharmas). All of these are dealt with in the chapters that follow, but here the text specifies *pratimukhim-smirtim-upasthapyā*, where *pratimukhi* simply refers to whatever is present, whatever one is facing. Since the primary subject of this sutra is the nature of the buddha's body, this can be viewed as the beginning of a meditation on the body of reality, which is the Buddha's true body, his dharma body. Kumarajiva alone among translators omits any mention of the Buddha's practice of mindfulness here.

Taken together, the Buddha's actions in this first chapter represent the Six Paramitas, or Perfections. Picking up his begging bowl, the Buddha practices the perfection of charity. Donning his monk's robe, he practices the perfection of morality. Begging in the city, he practices the perfection of forbearance. Eating his meal, returning to his abode, putting away his robe and bowl, and washing his feet, he practices the perfection of vigor. Sitting down and focusing on what is before him, he practices the perfection of meditation. And remaining unattached throughout the practice of these five perfections, the Buddha practices the perfection of wisdom. Thus, the first chapter contains a brief but practical introduction to the teaching of all six perfections.

A newly arrived monk once asked the Zen master Chao-chou to instruct him in the Dharma. Chao-chou asked, "Have you finished your gruel?" The monk said, "Yes, I have." Chao-chou said, "Then go wash your bowl." Upon hearing this, the monk was enlightened." (*Chuantenglu*: 10)

Nan Huai-chin says, "In Beijing's White Cloud Temple there is

this couplet that has been there since the Ming dynasty: ‘Nothing in the world is better than practicing / nothing in the world is harder than eating.’”

Textual note: Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, Paramartha, and Yi-ching have the Buddha begging *tz'u-ti* (from door to door). After bringing the Buddha back from town to eat his meal, Paramartha adds *yu chung-hou shih* (at the end of the noon hour), as if to account for his earlier omission of *bhakta-pinda-pata* (in the afternoon). Kumarajiva omits the last sentence of this section.

A number of bhikshus then came up to where the Bhagavan was sitting. After touching their heads to his feet, they walked around him to the right three times and sat down to one side.

It was the Indian custom to honor holy persons and sacred sites by touching the head to the feet or ground and then walking around in a clockwise direction with the right shoulder facing the object of veneration. In the case of monks, they adjusted their robes and bared their right shoulder during this ceremony. Since such circumambulation began in front of the person or site being venerated, pilgrims first faced left and then walked around to the right. Three circumambulations represent a devotee's veneration of Buddhism's Three Treasures: the Teacher (the Buddha), the Teaching (the Dharma), and the Taught (the Sangha).

Again, in this first chapter, we see in outline form how the cultivation of the perfections takes place, as charity gives birth to meditation and meditation gives birth to wisdom. These three represent an earlier formulation of what later became the Six Perfections of charity, morality, forbearance, vigor, meditation, and wisdom. Thus, we not only see the essence of Buddhist practice, we also see the essence of wisdom, whereby our everyday activities become the focus of our spiritual cultivation.

Here, too, there is no recourse to such crowd-pleasers as the radiation of light from the Buddha's body or the appearance of deities and other worlds. This is because this sutra is directed toward those who seek and are ready to accept instruction in the highest wisdom, shorn of all spiritual accessories.

Textual note: Kumarajiva doesn't include the final section of this chapter.



Chapter Two: On this occasion, the venerable Subhuti was also present in the assembly. Rising from his seat, he uncovered one shoulder and touched his right knee to the ground. Pressing his palms together and bowing to the Buddha, he said: "It is rare, Bhagavan, most rare, indeed, Sugata, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings. And it is rare, Bhagavan, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One entrusts fearless bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts.

"Even so, Bhagavan, if a noble son or daughter should set forth on the bodhisattva path, how should they stand, how should they walk, and how should they control their thoughts?"

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, "Well said, Subhuti. Well said. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you say. The Tathagata blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings and entrusts fearless bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts. You should therefore truly listen, Subhuti, and consider this well. I shall tell you how those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should stand, how they should walk, and how they should control their thoughts."

The venerable Subhuti answered, "May it be so, Bhagavan," and gave his full attention.

◆ CHAPTER TWO

MOST BUDDHIST SUTRAS begin with a question. Subhuti has just witnessed the compassion and detachment with which the Buddha performed his daily round of giving and receiving offerings, and he is moved to ask how others might do the same. Among the Buddha's disciples, Subhuti was foremost in his freedom from passion, for he was the one who best understood the doctrine of emptiness. On this occasion, he saw in the Buddha's actions the perfect realization of that doctrine. Thus, he expresses his gratitude for such instruction by example and asks how others, not only monks but anyone who seeks to live an enlightened life, can follow in the Buddha's footsteps. The wording of his questions, however, reflects the understanding of someone on the Hinayana, or Lesser Path. But this is a Mahayana sutra.

Chao-ming titles this: "Subhuti Asks for Instruction."

Hui-neng says, "From emptiness comes wisdom [Subhuti's name means 'born of emptiness']. Question and answer both are worthy. Thus follows a chapter in which Subhuti asks for instruction."

On this occasion, the venerable Subhuti was also present in the assembly.

Depending on how the word *subhuti* is parsed, it can mean "born of emptiness" or "auspicious sight." Although Subhuti's family possessed great wealth, on the day he was born all the gold and silver in his family's storeroom disappeared. Thus, he was born of emptiness. Then, seven days later, his family's gold and silver reappeared. Thus, his birth was also an auspicious sight. Looking back on this event, commentators muse that the disappearance of his family's wealth demonstrated the truth of emptiness, while its reappearance demonstrated that true emptiness is empty of emptiness.

Subhuti was born in the city of Shravasti and became one of the

Buddha's ten most prominent disciples. As his name foretold, he was known for his understanding of the doctrine of emptiness. Thus, it was appropriate that he assumed the role of interlocutor for the assembly on this occasion. He was, however, quite elderly and was not always present when the Buddha spoke. According to a later tradition recorded in Hsuan-tsang's *Hsiyuchi* (Buddhist Records of the Western World), Subhuti was the Blue Dragon Buddha of the East and joined the Buddha's assembly in this form to assist in instructing others about prajna.

Chiang Wei-nung says, "The Bhagavan put on his robe and begged for food every day. He did not always speak afterwards. He only spoke when the time was ripe. This, in truth, was a rare occasion. It was the ninth time the Tathagata spoke about prajna. Thus, it was 'on this occasion.'"

Hui-neng says, "Why was he called venerable? Because he was esteemed for virtue and also advanced in years."

Rising from his seat, he uncovered one shoulder and touched his right knee to the ground. Pressing his palms together and bowing to the Buddha, he said:

Chiang Wei-nung says, "When the Buddha sat down, the whole assembly followed suit. Hence, Subhuti rose from his seat. The robe was normally worn over both shoulders, except when it was necessary to demonstrate reverence or respect. To bare one's shoulder shows that one is prepared to carry something, in this case the Buddha's teaching concerning prajna. When people act, they normally use their right hand. And when they walk, they usually lead with their right foot. Here, these gestures indicate that there is some matter about which a disciple wishes to ask. Also, the palms are pressed together to indicate that they hold nothing else. Together, these physical gestures indicate that the body is pure, while the reverence they express indicates that the

mind is pure. Finally, Subhuti speaks and thereby indicates that his mouth is pure. These three: body, mind, and mouth are the three sources of karma. Up to this point, the words are those of Ananda [or Vashpa?], the compiler of this sutra.”

Hui-neng says, “When disciples ask a question, they demonstrate their sincerity in five ways. First, they rise from their seat. Second, they put their clothes in order. Third, with their right shoulder bared, they touch their right knee to the ground. Fourth, they put their palms together and look up without averting their eyes. Fifth, they focus their mind in reverence. Thus prepared, they ask their question.”

Seng-chao says, “Although a great bell is impressive, it makes no sound unless it is rung. Nor does a sage respond in isolation.”

Textual note: In his translation, Yi-ching has *ch'eng fo shen-li, chi ts'ung tso ch'i* (by the Buddha's miraculous power, Subhuti rose from his seat). Although the *Diamond Sutra* is free of recourse to such devices, elsewhere in the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, Subhuti is, in fact, often portrayed as speaking to others about prajna by means of the Buddha's might. Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, Paramartha, and Yi-ching specify the *yu-chien* (right shoulder).

“It is rare, Bhagavan, most rare, indeed, Sugata, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One blesses fearless bodhisattvas with the best of blessings. And it is rare, Bhagavan, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully-Enlightened One entrusts fearless bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts.”

Here and elsewhere in this sutra, Subhuti normally addresses the Buddha by this series of titles, which are among the ten titles of every buddha. The Buddha is an *arhan* because he is free of passion and will not be reborn, a *sugata* because he has gone beyond this mundane world, a *tathagata* because he has come

back to teach others, and a *fully-enlightened one* because there is nothing of which he is not aware.

Wang Jih-hsiu says, “*Tatha* means ‘suchness.’ *Gata* means ‘to appear.’ *Tatha* is the basic essence of our true nature. *Gata* is the appearance of our true nature. Thus, *tathagata* refers to both the essence and appearance of a buddha, which is why it is used throughout this sutra.”

Also, no blessing could be greater than a buddha’s example. And no trust could be greater than to follow such an example. The blessing and trust that Subhuti has perceived is the Buddha’s practice of the three perfections: the perfection of forbearance, in begging for his living; the perfection of charity, in teaching others through example; and the perfection of wisdom, in remaining mindful in all he does. Together, these perfections make up the offering of buddhahood, which the Buddha bestows on all those present as a blessing and as a trust. Subhuti also perceives that the Buddha’s blessing and trust extend beyond his fellow bhikshus to the larger audience of bodhisattvas. Though he represents the pinnacle of Hinayana practice, Subhuti realizes that this is a Mahayana assembly.

Chiang Wei-nung says, “Subhuti sighs in admiration that such a rare occasion arises from everyday actions. The Buddha is not attached to the appearance of buddhahood but manifests a buddha’s lack of self. The purpose of this entire sutra is to break through the self, which the Buddha does without saying a word and which Subhuti perceives. *Bhagavan* is a general expression used as a form of address. To call a person a buddha, or enlightened one, is to indicate his attainment. To call him a tathagata, or one who appears as he truly is, is to indicate his nature. As the Buddha put on his robe and ate his meal and so forth, Subhuti was able to see his appearance as no appearance. Thus, he called him ‘Tathagata.’ And why did the Buddha appear as a human being? Because he cherished others and did not abandon them. This is

great compassion. But by letting his dharma body appear as a human being, he also demonstrated lack of attachment to form, which is the essence of the *Diamond Sutra*. Thus, he instructed others without words. And while wordless instruction represents the greatest wisdom, it arises from great compassion.”

Chi-fo says, “The reason Subhuti asked these questions was because he realized that in the Buddha’s everyday actions of wearing his robe, eating, washing his feet, and sitting down, he never stopped manifesting the marvelous workings of his true mind and that all such instruction contained the essence of perfect prajna. Hence, Subhuti’s words of praise are not meant to be superficial, for they arise from realization. In fact, the whole sutra can be summed up by these words.”

Tao-ch’uan says, “Before the Tathagata has spoken a single word, why is Subhuti singing his praises? When you see horns above a fence, you know there’s an ox on the other side. When you see smoke above a mountain, you know there’s a fire behind the ridge.”

Textual note: Neither Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, Paramartha, Dharmagupta, nor Hsuan-tsang has *parama-ashcaryan sugata* (it is rare, indeed, Sugata). In addition, neither Kumarajiva nor Bodhiruci has *paramena anugrahena* (the best of blessings) or *paramaya parindanaya* (the greatest of trusts). Also, for *anugraha* (bless), Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, and Paramartha have *hu-nien* (care for), Dharmagupta has *shun-she* (favor), Hsuan-tsang has *she-shou* (assist), and Yi-ching has *li-yi* (benefit). But for *parindana* (entrust), all Chinese translations have *fu-chu* (enjoin/ instruct).

*“Even so, Bhagavan, if a noble son or daughter
should set forth on the bodhisattva path,*

The blessing and trust of the Buddha’s example are not enough. Hence, Subhuti begins with *tat* (even so), as he inquires further into the basis of buddhahood. Although Subhuti understands the

doctrine of emptiness expressed in the Buddha's everyday actions, he senses there is something more to buddhahood than emptiness and asks for instruction in this matter on his own behalf, as well as that of others. The noble sons and daughters on whose behalf he asks include those who acknowledge the Buddha's teaching, regardless of whether they have left home as monks and nuns or are lay bodhisattvas. The Sanskrit here is *kula*, which means "of noble family." To be born into a noble family is the result of karma. Likewise, to encounter the Buddha's teaching and to possess the capacity to understand it are also made possible by one's karma. If, however, someone should hear this teaching and not practice it, such a person would waste an opportunity that might not come again for many lifetimes.

The path Subhuti asks about is the path of the bodhisattva, and not that of the arhan, the Mahayana path, and not the Hinayana path. Although those who emphasize "other power" prefer to interpret *yana* as "vehicle," as in the "Great Vehicle," the word's original meaning was "path." It was not the Buddha's custom nor that of his disciples to ride when they could walk. For the path is the destination. Subhuti has just seen the Buddha stand and walk on this path. Hence, he now asks how he and others can do so.

As for those who set forth on this path, the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra* says a bodhisattva is "anyone who ceaselessly seeks unexcelled, perfect enlightenment as well as the happiness and welfare of all beings." This concept underlies the Buddha's teaching throughout this sutra, which only a bodhisattva can understand and only a bodhisattva dares put into practice, for only a bodhisattva possesses the courage to liberate all beings. The importance of this will become clearer in the next chapter.

Hui-neng says, "A 'noble son' refers to an even-tempered mind, a perfectly concentrated mind, which can practice all virtues while remaining unobstructed wherever it goes. A 'noble daughter' refers to a truly wise mind, from which all conditioned and uncon-

ditioned virtues are produced.”

Chiang Wei-nung says, “In Buddhist sutras, it is sometimes said that women experience such great distractions that they cannot become buddhas but must first be reborn as men. The Dharma, however, is shared by all. If women first had to be reborn as men, this would be less than all. Still, the distractions of women are great. First is the distraction of motherhood. Second, they frequently confuse love for compassion. Compassion is impartial. It knows neither direction nor degree. Love, meanwhile, is a river of life and death, of endless rebirth. In the eyes of the Buddha there is neither male nor female. The reason he says the distractions of women are greater is because they need to take greater care. Yet, if they can make the great resolve to set forth on such a path, they, too, will become buddhas. This is why Subhuti asks on behalf of both men and women.”

Textual note: Neither Bodhiruci, Dharmagupta, Hsuan-tsang, Yi-ching nor the Tibetan has *kula-putra va kula-duhita va* (noble son or daughter). Kumarajiva has *fa-a-nou-to-lo san-mao san-p'u-t'i hsin* (give birth to the thought of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment) in place of *bodhisattvayana sanprasthitena* (set forth on the bodhisattva path), while Bodhiruci and Paramartha have both! Bodhiruci also turns this into a question in anticipation of the questions that follow.

*how should they stand, how should they walk,
and how should they control their thoughts?”*

Subhuti’s questions were prompted by seeing the Buddha going about his daily round, standing and walking in the city, returning and sitting down and meditating on what was before him. And they reflect his desire to learn how he and others might conduct themselves in the same manner. But they also betray the concerns of a follower of the Lesser Path. Subhuti seeks the way to restrict karma-producing actions and thoughts rather than the way to

transform them. Sometime later in his career, after he has realized the teaching of this sutra, he tells his fellow disciple Shariputra, “Thus should bodhisattvas stand and walk: they should resolve that ‘as the Tathagata does not stand anywhere and does not not stand anywhere and does not stand apart and does not not stand apart, so will I stand. And as the Tathagata stands, so will I stand and walk, my feet well placed without a place to stand.’ Thus should bodhisattvas stand and walk. When they walk in this manner, they conform with the perfection of wisdom.” (*Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*: 2) Such actions as standing and walking were as much as Subhuti saw of the Buddha’s practice of wisdom. He could not see how the Buddha controlled his mind. And yet how the Buddha stood and walked was a function of his mind. Hence, Subhuti asked how to control his mind in the same way.

Kamalashila says, “These questions ask what fruit should the mind focus on, what method should be practiced to obtain the fruit, and what thoughts should be controlled in order that the seed will be pure. Here the fruit is praised first so that people will cultivate the seed.”

Hui-neng says, “Subhuti saw everyone incessantly busy like so much dust in the air, their minds in turmoil as if blown about by the wind, going from one thought to the next and never resting. And so he asked how they should control their minds in order to practice.”

Hsu-fa says, “Essentially Subhuti is saying, ‘We have set out to attain the bodhisattva mind, but we do not know how to travel the bodhisattva path.’”

Ting Fu-pao says, “According to Vasubandhu’s *Bodhicitta Utpadana Shastra*, ‘In order to cultivate good karma and seek enlightenment, bodhisattvas do not renounce the phenomenal world. And in order to cultivate compassion for all beings, they do not stand in the noumenal world. In order to realize the marvelous

wisdom of all buddhas, they do not renounce sansara [life and death]. And in order to liberate countless beings and save them from further rebirth, they do not stand in nirvana. Such persons are bodhisattvas who thus embark on the bodhisattva path.’ (12) But if bodhisattvas should stand in neither the phenomenal nor the noumenal, in neither sansara nor nirvana, where should they stand. Hence, Subhuti’s question.”

Tao-ch’uan says, “When you’re happy, I’m not / when you’re sad, I’m not / a crane thinks of flying north or south / a swallow thinks of its old nest / autumn moon and spring flower thoughts never end / you only need to know yourself right now.”

Textual note: All Chinese translations interpret *sthatavya* (stand) by *chu* (dwell). Kumarajiva does not include *kathan pratipattavyan* (how should they walk), nor does the Khotanese. The other Chinese translations that include it render it as *hsiu-hsing* (practice). When used in reference to a path, however, *pratipad* means “walk.” Note, too, the similarity between the Sanskrit *pratipad* and the Greek *peripate* (walk), which was also an integral part of the manner in which Aristotle and his followers went about seeking the truth. In place of *kathan cittan pragrahitavyan* (how should they control their thoughts/mind), Paramartha has *yun-ho fa-ch’i p’u-sa-hsin* (how should they give birth to the thought of enlightenment). In the same phrase, Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, and Dharmagupta interpret *pragraha* (control) as *chiang-fu* (subdue), while Hsuan-tsang and Yi-ching read it as *she-fu* (bring under control). Müller gives “restrain,” while Conze has “control.” Edgerton, however, suggests “exercises.”

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “Well said, Subhuti. Well said. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you say. The Tathagata blesses bodhisattvas with the best of blessings and entrusts bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts.

The Buddha never stops teaching. When asked, he teaches through words. Otherwise, he relies on his example. Confucius

once said, “Do you disciples think I conceal something? I conceal nothing. I have no practice I do not share with you. This is my way.” (*Lunyu*: 7.23)

Asanga says, “Surely the best of blessings is his body and its properties. And this greatest of trusts is shared by all, mature or not.” (1) Vasubandhu comments, “The ‘best of blessings’ is directed at those bodhisattvas who are already mature, while the ‘greatest of trusts’ is directed at those who are not yet mature. Still, the ‘greatest of trusts’ is shared by those who are already *prapta* (mature) in the Mahayana and who are thus encouraged not to let go as well as by those who are *aprapta* (not yet mature) and who are now encouraged to turn toward the Mahayana.”

Hui-neng says, “The Buddha praises Subhuti, for he has penetrated the Buddha’s mind and fathomed his thoughts.”

Chiang Wei-nung says, “The first ‘well said’ is in praise of Subhuti’s ability to ask what no one else was able to ask. The second ‘well said’ is in praise of his ability to ask for the sake of others rather than himself. For the assembly does not fathom such blessings or instructions. Only Subhuti is able to point out their existence. Thus, the Buddha agrees that it is as Subhuti says, that the Tathagata’s greatest blessing and instruction consists of his everyday acts of wearing his robe and carrying his bowl and not only of his discourses.”

You should therefore truly listen, Subhuti, and consider this well. I shall tell you how those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should stand, how they should walk, and how they should control their thoughts.”

The Buddha always answers the questions asked of him, but his answers invariably transcend the limitations of the questions. Hence, he asks Subhuti to listen with care.

Li Wen-hui says, “To truly listen means to understand. The Buddha wants Subhuti to understand that the sensation of sound is not real and that he should not chase words.”

Huang-po says, “Most people allow their mind to be obstructed by the world and then try to escape from the world. They don’t realize that their mind obstructs the world. If they could only let their minds be empty, the world would be empty. Don’t misuse the mind. If you want to be free of the world, you should forget the mind. Once you forget the mind, the world becomes empty. And when the world becomes empty, the mind disappears. If you don’t forget the mind and only get rid of the world, you only succeed in becoming more confused. Thus, it is said, ‘all things are only mind.’ But the mind cannot be found. When you can’t find a thing, you have reached the final goal. Why bother running around looking for liberation? This is how you should control the mind. Once you see your own nature, you won’t have any deluded thoughts. Once you have no deluded thoughts, you have controlled your mind.”

T’ai-neng says, “A fool’s mind is active and dark. A sage’s mind is still and bright. It is also said, ‘When an ordinary person’s mind is pure, it becomes the land of buddhas. When an ordinary person’s mind is confused, it becomes the realm of demons.’”

Tao-ch’uan says, “Multiple limbs and demon faces / impervious to clubs and knives / we leave the world millions of times / but never the palace of the King of Nothing.” [Note: the King of Nothing is the Buddha.]

Textual note: Kumarajiva has *shan-nan-tzu shan-nu-jen* (noble son or daughter) in place of “those who,” which is implied by the verb *san-prastha* ([those who]set forth). Kumarajiva follows this with *fa a-nou-to-lo san-mao san-p’u-t’i-hsin* (give birth to the thought of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment), while to this Bodhiruci and Paramartha again add *hsing p’u-sa-sheng* (and travel on the bodhisattva vehicle). As he does earlier, Kumarajiva omits *kathan pratipattavyan* (how they should walk).

The venerable Subhuti answered, “May it be so, Bhagavan,” and gave his full attention.

Chiang Wei-nung says, “Listening here is connected with ‘thus have I heard’ at the beginning of the sutra. If Subhuti did not wish to listen to this, Ananda would not have heard it. There are three kinds of listening. First, we listen to the words. Second, we listen to the meaning. Third, we listen to the truth. As we listen to these words about controlling the mind, we must grasp the truth and forget the words and their meaning. By turning our attention within, we can then rediscover our own nature. For we all possess this perfectly still nature. But it is obstructed by ignorance and delusions that rise and fall without cease. Thus, students should concentrate on turning their hearing within. And they should keep listening until they realize that the Buddha, all beings, and the mind are not three different things.”

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, “Like thinking of cool water when you’re thirsty, like thinking of fine food when you’re hungry, like thinking of a magic pill when you’re sick, or like a hive of bees that depends on honey, we, too, are like this, hoping to taste the sweet dew of the Dharma.” (26)

Textual note: While *pratyashraushit* (give one’s full attention) is present in all Sanskrit editions—as well as the Khotanese—Kumarajiva, Bodhiruci, Dharmagupta, Hsuan-tsang, and Yi-ching have Subhuti saying *yan-lo yu-wen* (with joy we long to hear). Paramartha does not include the phrase.



Chapter Three: The Buddha said to him, “Subhuti, those who would now set forth on the bodhisattva path should thus give birth to this thought: ‘However many beings there are in whatever realms of being might exist, whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have form or no form, whether they have perception or no perception or neither perception nor no perception, in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings, in the realm of complete nirvana I shall liberate them all. And though I thus liberate countless beings, not a single being is liberated.’

“And why not? Subhuti, a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a being cannot be called a ‘bodhisattva.’ And why not? Subhuti, no one can be called a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a self or who creates the perception of a being, a life, or a soul.”

◆ CHAPTER THREE

THIS THEN IS WHAT BODHISATTVAS DO, which is also what buddhas do. They give the gift of liberation, which some accept, while others don't. Their resolution, however, is to liberate all beings. Hence, bodhisattvas are patient in this practice, which is not limited by time or space or by perceptions of the mind. Here,

the Buddha summarizes how bodhisattvas stand, walk, and control their thoughts, which they do by giving birth to a thought so completely altruistic it includes neither self nor other. Subhuti expected something different. Although he asked on behalf of those who would travel the bodhisattva path, his questions were those we might expect of a shravaka of the Lesser Path interested in moral discipline and meditation. But instead of telling us how to conduct our lives and our practice or how to control our thoughts, the Buddha tells us to give birth to a thought. The Buddha's approach is homeopathic. He uses a thought to put an end to all thoughts. But to effect such a cure not just any thought will do. Only a thought directed towards the liberation of all beings will work. Thus, bodhisattvas turn their thoughts into offerings.

Chao-ming titles this: "The True Teaching of the Great Path."

Hui-neng says, "This teaching is neither true nor false. This path is neither great nor small. Salvation and liberation depend on abilities. Choose among the different doctrines and hold up one for veneration. Thus follows a chapter on the true teaching of the Great Path."

The Buddha said to him, "Subhuti, those who would now set forth on the bodhisattva path should thus give birth to this thought:

The bodhisattva path is the path of active, rather than passive, practice. Rather than advising us to suppress our thoughts, the Buddha preempts them. He advises bodhisattvas not to wait for thoughts to arise but to give birth to a thought that puts all other thoughts to flight, a thought like the morning sun that chases the myriad stars from the sky. The language used here suggests that this thought has been gestating within us for many lifetimes and it is now time to bring it forth, to give it life. Thus, this is the most

important event in a bodhisattva's career and what makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva.

According to the *Nirvana Sutra*, "The mind that sets forth and the one that arrives are not different. But of the two, the former is beset by difficulties." (38)

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Lines*, Subhuti asks the same question, and the Buddha answers, "Toward all beings maintain unbiased thoughts and speak unbiased words. Toward all beings give birth to thoughts and words of kindness instead of anger, compassion instead of harm, joy instead of jealousy, equanimity instead of prejudice, humility instead of arrogance, sincerity instead of deceit, compromise instead of stubbornness, assistance instead of avoidance, liberation instead of obstruction, kinship instead of animosity." (48)

Tao-ch'uan says, "The Buddha answers, 'To control your thoughts focus on the Mahayana.'"

Seng-chao says, "In the question, 'control' was mentioned last. Why then is it dealt with first? To 'stand' is more profound and to 'control' more superficial. Thus, although the more profound question is placed first, since control is more superficial and easier to practice, it is answered first. Questions and answers have a purpose and are not meaningless."

Textual note: In place of this, Kumarajiva has *chu-p'u-sa mo-ho-sa ying ju-shih Chiang-fu ch'i-hsin* (bodhisattvas should thus control their thoughts). Bodhiruci has *chu-p'u-sa sheng ju-shih-hsin* (bodhisattvas thus beget the thought), and Paramartha has *juo shan-nan-tzu shan-nu-jen fa p'u-t'i-hsin, hsing p'u-sa-sheng, ying ju-shih fa hsin* (if a noble son or daughter sets their mind on enlightenment and travels on the bodhisattva vehicle, they should thus beget the thought).

*'However many beings there are in whatever realms
of being might exist,*

The bodhisattva's journey does not end until all beings are

liberated. But if this is to work, the category *sattva* (being) must be expanded to include all beings. The Buddha realizes that those who would travel the bodhisattva path have no way of knowing the full range of beings they have vowed to liberate. Hence, he lists the following categories to provide some useful parameters for such great resolve. These categories, however, are merely provisional and not meant to establish any real differences among the beings they characterize. Meanwhile, no matter how great their number, no matter how diverse they might be, the *bodhi-sattva* (bodhi-being) resolves to liberate them all.

Tzu-hsuan says, “The bodhisattva path is the greatest of all paths. If even one being is not liberated, it cannot be called great. Hence, this sutra includes all beings.”

Wang Jih-hsiu says, “A being is anything that lives, from the devas in the sky to the smallest insects. And though they are numberless and limitless, they are all included in the following nine categories.”

The *Maha Prajñāparamita Śāstra* says, “Those who are created by the combination of the *skandhas* [form, sensation, perception, volition, and cognition] are called beings.”

Textual note: Kumarajiva, Paramartha, and Yi-ching have *suo-yu yi-ch`ieh chung-sheng-chih-lei* (however many kinds of beings exist).

whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have form or no form, whether they have perception or no perception or neither perception nor no perception,

In categorizing the myriad beings that result from ignorance and the operation of karma, the Buddha (and he was following traditional conceptions of his day) divides them according to their mode of birth as well as their possession or lack of any form or

perception. In terms of birth, first are those who come from eggs. These range from great winged birds to lice. Next are those who are born from the womb. These include creatures as big as elephants and as small as mice. Next are those who are born from the water. These range from fishes and turtles to the tiniest pond creatures. And last are those who are born from the air. Ting Fu-pao says, "Those who are born from the air depend on nothing. The only thing they require for their birth is the force of karma. They include the devas of the various heavens and the sinners of the myriad hells as well as the beings at the beginning of every kalpa." To this category also belong bodhisattvas.

Not only do these four means of birth remind us how life begins, they also remind us how ignorance and delusion begin, and they can also be seen as having a special relationship with the four perceptions mentioned at the end of this chapter. Viewed from this perspective, our self is born from an egg, our being from a womb, our life from water, and our soul from air. The four modes of birth are also related to the four stages of liberation discussed in Chapter Nine, which begin with the srota-apanna, who breaks out of the egg of the ego, and end with the arhan, whose soul is no longer subject to rebirth. Tsung-mi says, "The beginning of life is called birth. When it first begins, it is by one of these four means. But it is ignorance that is reborn. Thus, the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* says, 'Break through the shell of ignorance.'"

There is some difference of opinion among commentators as to the relationship of these four modes of birth to the categories of form and perception that follow. Some commentators think that all nine categories represent a single sequence in what Buddhists call the Three Realms, with the first four categories of birth belonging to the Realm of Desire and the two categories of form and the three categories of perception representing a progressive ascension through the meditative states of the realms of Form and Formlessness. Chiang Wei-nung, for example, says, "When Buddhist

sutras divide beings into the Six States of Existence, it is to show their position on the wheel of rebirth. When they divide beings into the Three Realms, it is to show their position on the hierarchy of attainment as well as their dependence on desire and form. Here the Three Realms are not mentioned per se but are meant. And the Realm of Formlessness is given prominence because of its special characteristics.”

However, such an interpretation fails to mention or explain that while the first three modes of birth occur in the Realm of Desire, the fourth mode of birth includes beings in the Realm of Formlessness, such as certain devas and bodhisattvas. Hence, a hierarchy cannot be what the Buddha had in mind here. A simpler and more sensible reading is to see the Buddha’s presentation as three separate, all-inclusive schemes for the characterization of beings. Thus, beings can be distinguished not only as to their mode of birth but also as to whether or not they possess any *rūpa* (form) or *sañña* (perception). The Buddha, I suggest, was simply creating a definition that would be all-inclusive from any of these three perspectives. All beings are born in one of these four manners, all beings either have a bodily form or do not have a bodily form, and all beings perceive an external world or do not perceive an external world or neither perceive nor do not perceive an external world. The last two categories, of which we admittedly have little or no knowledge, were the subjects of discussions in the Buddha’s day and were added here to suggest the size of the Sea of Being in which the bodhisattva swims.

Tzu-hsuan says, “The karma of our thoughts is the seed, while the egg, the womb, the water, and the air are the causal conditions. Thus, beings are the result of karma.”

Te-ch’ing says, “These four kinds of birth can be characterized by appearance as well as by perception. But the birth, the appearance, and the perception of all beings are a fiction. Since they are fictions, beings do not really exist. Only our delusions exist.”

Textual note: My choice of “air” for the Sanskrit *upapaduka* (to depend on nothing) is meant to describe the appearance of such birth as if from “thin air.” Chinese translators prefer *hua-sheng* (born by means of transformation). However, “transformation” is somewhat misleading, as the term does not apply to butterflies or cicadas but to such beings in the Formless Realm as devas, sinners, the first creatures of any universe, and certain bodhisattvas. “Miraculously” would also be a mistake as it suggests creation beyond the laws of karma, which, again, is not the case. The only Buddhist scholar I know of to offer a solution to this confusion is Garma Chang, who uses “ethereally” in his translation of the sutras that make up the *Maha Ratnakuta*.

*in whatever conceivable realm of being one might
conceive of beings, in the realm of complete nirvana
I shall liberate them all. And though I thus liberate
countless beings, not a single being is liberated.*

The term *nirvana* originally referred to an extinguished fire. In Buddhism, it is used to describe the condition that exists when the Three Fires of delusion, desire, and anger are extinguished. This is also called “incomplete nirvana,” because a being who achieves this state still has a body and is still subject to the laws of karma, and thus suffering. When the Buddha attained Enlightenment under the pippala (*Ficus religiosa*) tree at Bodhgaya, he achieved incomplete nirvana. When he expired between the twin shala trees (*Shorea robusta*) and his body was cremated at Kushinagara, he achieved complete nirvana. Thus, complete nirvana rises from the ashes of being. In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha says, “To eliminate the perception of nirvana is to liberate all beings.”

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, the Buddha says, “With his divine eye, a bodhisattva sees countless beings, and what he sees disturbs him greatly: so many beings bound for rebirth in the hells or an unfortunate existence or suffering afflictions or

beset by false views or oblivious to the path. All such beings arouse the thought: 'I shall liberate all these beings and rescue them from their sufferings.' But a bodhisattva does not do this or anything else with bias." (22)

Vasubandhu says, "How should those who set forth on the bodhisattva path stand? The following verse answers this question."

Asanga says, "Their thoughts are vast and noble, deep and not mistaken. Standing on good works, their path is filled with virtue." (2) Summarizing Vasubandhu's comments on this verse, Tao-ch'uan says, "Because they concern all beings, the thoughts of bodhisattvas are 'vast.' Because they are dedicated to liberating others, their thoughts are 'noble.' Because they understand that both beings and buddhas are the same as themselves and that they liberate no one, their thoughts are 'deep.' And because they aren't attached to any of the four perceptions, their thoughts are 'not mistaken.'"

Wang Jih-hsiu says, "Nirvana is the place where we put an end to the round of birth and death and escape the wheel of endless rebirth. It is truly the greatest and most wonderful of places. But it does not mean death. Ordinary people do not understand this and mistakenly think it means death. They are wrong. By complete nirvana is meant ultimate liberation beyond which there is nothing else."

The *Maha Prajnaparamita Shastra* says, "Nirvana is the ultimate dharma beyond which there is no other dharma. But there are two kinds. The first is incomplete nirvana. The second is complete nirvana. When all our passions are eliminated, this is incomplete or provisional nirvana. When the five skandhas that make up an individual are no longer reborn, this is complete or final nirvana." (31)

Hui-neng says, "If you want a metaphor for incomplete nirvana, look at the ashes in a stove. If you want a metaphor for

complete nirvana, what do you see when the ashes have been blown away?”

Seng-chao says, “Nothing arises on its own. Everything is the result of karma. All it is is karma. It possesses no self-nature. According to the Middle Path, since nothing possesses any self-nature, it does not exist. Yet we give things a name, hence they do not not exist. Because we do not not give them names, we keep liberating beings. But because their natures are empty, we do not actually liberate anyone. And why don’t we liberate anyone? If the concept of a self existed, we could say that somebody is liberated. But since neither a self nor an other exist, who is liberated? It is only a fiction.”

Ch’en Hsiung says, “Manjushri once asked the Buddha, ‘What do you mean when you say not a single being is liberated?’ And the Buddha replied, ‘Our nature is ultimately pure and subject to neither rebirth nor nirvana. Thus, there are no beings to be liberated, and there is no nirvana to be attained. It is simply that all beings revert to their own nature.’”

Juo-na says, “According to the highest truth, no beings can be liberated. Since all beings are essentially buddhas, what beings are there to liberate? In the perfect realm of the true Dharma, buddhas do not liberate beings.”

Tseng Feng-yi says, “Someone once asked Tsung-mi, ‘The sutras tell us to liberate beings. But if beings are not beings, why should we make an effort to liberate them?’ Tsung-mi replied, ‘If beings were real, liberating them would require an effort. But as you say they are not beings, so why not get rid of liberating and not liberating?’ The questioner then asked, ‘The sutras tell us that the Buddha is eternal, but they also say he entered nirvana. If he is eternal, why did he enter nirvana? And if he entered nirvana, he is not eternal. Is this not a contradiction?’ Again, Tsung-mi answered, ‘Buddhas are not attached to appearances. How could their appearing in the world and entering nirvana be real? Pure water

has no mind, and yet there is no image that does not appear in it. Nor does the image have a self.' These two questions and answers explain the profound meaning in this section."

Han Ch'ing-ching says, "All those who set out on the bodhisattva path should not perceive a dharma much less a being. Bodhisattvas do not see anything called sansara, thus they do not cling to the perception of a being subject to sansara. Nor do they see anything called nirvana. Thus, they do not cling to the perception of a being subject to nirvana. Neither sansara nor nirvana is real. So how could bodhisattvas lead beings from one to the other?"

In his *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, Ashvagoshā says, "Space is infinite, therefore worlds are infinite. Worlds are infinite, therefore beings are infinite. Beings are infinite, therefore mental distinctions are also infinite." (3.3)

Textual note: Kumarajīva does not include the phrase *sattva-dhātavaḥ sattva-sangraheṇa saṅgrhīta* (in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings).

"And why not? Subhūti, a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a being cannot be called a 'bodhisattva.' And why not? Subhūti, no one can be called a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a self or who creates the perception of a being, a life, or a soul."

The Buddha tells Subhūti that the bodhisattva's practice only succeeds if it is devoted to the liberation of all beings and at the same time detached from the perception of being. Like fish in the ocean, bodhisattvas swim in the sattva sea. Free of the perception of being, bodhi-beings free all beings. Thus, we have been liberated countless times. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* says, "All beings have already been liberated. They do not need to be liberated again." (4) Every time someone is enlightened, we are all liberated again.

And yet we continue to drown in the sea of being. Meanwhile, the enlightened-beings who liberate us are not only free of the perception of being, they are also free of the perception of self. Not only is no one liberated, no one liberates. Moreover, there is no liberation. For bodhisattvas are also free of the perceptions of life and rebirth around which liberation turns. Thus, bodhisattvas control thoughts that are no thoughts.

Throughout the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*, the Buddha lists sixteen such perceptions that represent the different views common in his day concerning the element of our existence believed to be permanent or real. The four included here focus on the dimensions of space and time. *Atma* (self) refers to an inner reality, *sattva* (being) to an outer reality, *jiva* (life) to a present reality, and *puḍgala* (soul) to a future (or past) reality. Thus, bodhisattvas stand without being attached to the spatial dimension of self and being, they walk without being attached to the temporal dimension of life and soul, and they control their thoughts without being attached to the perceptual dimension of objects and dharmas.

Throughout this sutra, the Buddha and Subhuti often repeat the phrase *tat kasya hetoh* (and why [not]). When they do, the second occurrence does not necessarily introduce an explanation of the first answer but often adds another answer to the first question. In such cases, the phrase could easily be replaced by the word “moreover.”

Te-ch'ing says, “The primary method taught by the Buddha to liberate beings is to realize that there is no self. Once there is a self, the other concepts follow. In liberating beings, a bodhisattva should realize that there is no self. Once there is no self, there are no beings. And if there are no beings, then all beings are naturally liberated. And once all beings are liberated, the fruit of buddhahood is not far off.”

Tzu-hsuan says, “Belief in a self is the most basic of all beliefs. All other perceptions arise from this. Once there is no perception

of a self, there is no perception of other beings. When there is no perception of other beings, self and other beings become the same.”

Ting Fu-pao says, “The perception of a self refers to the mistaken apprehension of something that focuses within and controls the five skandhas of form, sensation, perception, volition, and cognition. The perception of a being refers to the mistaken apprehension that the combination of the skandhas creates a separate entity. The perception of a life refers to the mistaken belief that the self possesses a lifespan of a definite length. Finally, the perception of a soul refers to the mistaken apprehension of something that is reborn, either as a human or as one of the other forms of existence.”

Ch'en Hsiung says, “The *Complete Enlightenment Sutra* says, ‘Until you get rid of these four perceptions, you can’t attain enlightenment.’ When bodhisattvas resolve on attaining perfect enlightenment and accept the Tathagata’s perceptionless teaching, how can they still harbor these four perceptions. If even but one of these remain, they will think they are liberating someone. A person who harbors the perception of a being is not a bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas and beings do not possess different natures. When they are awake, beings are bodhisattvas. When they are deluded, bodhisattvas are beings.”

Hui-neng says, “The nature of buddhas and beings is not different. But because beings suffer from these four perceptions, they cannot achieve complete liberation. To employ these four perceptions is to be a being. Not to employ them is to be a buddha. When they’re deluded, buddhas become beings. When they’re awake, beings become buddhas.”

Lin-chi says, “In this body of five skandhas is the true person of no title. He’s standing right there in plain sight. Why don’t you recognize him?”

Meng-ts’an says, “The Buddha is telling Subhuti, ‘If you want

to still and control your mind, this is what you must do. You must vow to free all beings without becoming attached to the perception of a being. This is how you should vow to free all beings.’ To do this, you need to make use of wisdom, not intelligence. Intelligence differentiates, wisdom does not.”

Tao-ch’uan says, “The spacious great way is so gloriously clear / what everyone possesses is already perfect / but due to a single divisive thought / ten-thousand forms appear before us.”

Textual note: In place of this section, Kumarajiva has a single sentence: *juo p’u-sa yu wo-hsiang, jen-hsiang, chung-sheng-hsiang, shou-che-hsiang, chi fei p’u-sa* (a bodhisattva who possesses the perception of a self, the perception of a person [i.e., something reborn], the perception of a being, or the perception of a life is no bodhisattva). Kumarajiva takes *sanjna* to mean “perception” in this chapter and “appearance” in the next chapter. Also, while Kumarajiva, Paramartha, and Yi-ching include *atma* (self), Bodhiruci and Dharmagupta do not. Among Sanskrit editions, Conze includes it, as does the Stein edition, while Müller does not. Paramartha replaces Kumarajiva’s *jen* (person) with *shou-che* (recipient [of karma and, hence, a soul]) and places it at the end of the list, as do the Sanskrit editions of Conze and Müller. Yi-ching does the same with *keng-ch’iu-ch’u* (what seeks another existence). Finally, Hsuan-tsang has an altogether different list: *yu-ch’ing* (being), *ming-che* (life), *shih-fu* (person), *pudgala* (soul), *yi-sheng* (projected creature), *manavaka* (man), *tso-che* (actor), *shou-che* (recipient). And at the end of this section, he has *ho-yi-ku, shan-hsien, wu-yu shao-fa ming-wei fa-ch’u p’u-sa-sheng-che* (and why not, Subhuti, because there is nothing whatsoever that sets forth on the bodhisattva vehicle).



Chapter Four: “Moreover, Subhuti, when bodhisattvas give a gift, they should not be attached to a thing. When they give a gift, they should not be attached to anything at all. They should not be attached to a sight when they give a gift. Nor should they be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma when they give a gift. Thus, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object. And why? Subhuti, the body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure. What do you think, Subhuti, is the space to the east easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it is not, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “Likewise, is the space to the south, to the west, to the north, in between, above, below, or in any of the ten directions easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it is not, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “So it is, Subhuti. The body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure. Thus, Subhuti, those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object.”

◆ CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, the Buddha told Subhuti that bodhisattvas give birth to the thought of liberating others but without creating the perception of a self, a being, a life, or a soul. What they give birth to is the gift of liberation. But it is only liberation if it is given without attachment, without attachment to any object of the senses, including the mind. The previous chapter focused on the giver and the recipient. This chapter focuses on the gift. The Buddha also anticipates our doubts about what merit can possibly result from such practice. For it is only by means of merit that spiritual progress is possible. This is the law of karma, which also applies to bodhisattvas. Every fruit grows from a seed. But if we practice without being attached to our practice, what sort of merit can we expect? The fruit from a seed without limits turns out to be a fruit without limits, which prompts the question answered in the next chapter: what kind of fruit could possibly have no limits?

Chao-ming titles this: “The Wonderful Practice of No Attachment.”

Hui-neng says, “Those able to practice according to the true meaning are not attached to form. Thus follows a chapter on the wonderful practice of no attachment.”

“Moreover, Subhuti, when bodhisattvas give a gift they should not be attached to a thing. When they give a gift, they should not be attached to anything at all.

Having stepped onto the bodhisattva path without such baggage as a self, a being, a life, or a soul, noble sons and daughters are now advised how to walk that path, which they do by practicing the perfection of charity, for the compassionate aspiration

to save other beings is essentially an act of charity, and charity is the only member of the six perfections that by itself results in merit. For it is the only member directed exclusively at liberating others. Thus, it is the first step on the bodhisattva path. It is also the last step. For by liberating others, bodhisattvas liberate themselves. But liberation is only possible if there is no attachment of any kind, including attachment to the gift of liberation.

In the practice of charity, Buddhists distinguish three kinds of gifts: material, emotional, and spiritual. Material gifts include such things as food and clothes and medicine. Emotional gifts include comfort and protection. And spiritual gifts include guidance and instruction. In terms of their benefits, material gifts put an end to greed; emotional gifts put an end to anger; and spiritual gifts put an end to delusion. It was the combination of all three in the Buddha's daily life that prompted Subhuti's questions and resulted in these further instructions on the nature of the practice that results in buddhahood.

In practicing charity, or any of the perfections, the Buddha warns against attachment to three things: the practitioner (in this case, the person who gives); the beneficiary (the recipient); and the practice (the giving of the gift). In his "Outline of Practice," Bodhidharma says, "Since what is real includes nothing worth begrudging, we give our bodies, our lives, and our property in charity, without regret, without the vanity of giver, gift, or recipient, and without bias or attachment. To get rid of obstructions, we teach others, but without becoming attached to appearances. Thus, while we ourselves practice, we are able to help others as well as to glorify the Path to Enlightenment. And as with charity, so do we also practice the other five paramitas. But while practicing the six paramitas to eliminate delusion, we practice nothing at all. This is what is meant by practicing the Dharma." (*The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, p. 7)

Vasubandhu says, "What follows explains how those who set

forth on the bodhisattva path should practice and how they should control their thoughts.”

Asanga says, “All six perfections rest on giving goods, protection, and the truth. One, two, three, respectively, we cultivate without attachment.” (3) According to Vasubandhu, this sutra focuses on charity because all six perfections are marked by charity. He also says that Asanga’s *eka-dyaya-trayeneha* (one, two, three, respectively) refers to all six perfections, with the giving of material goods representing the *one* practice of charity, the giving of protection representing the *two* practices of morality and forbearance, and the giving of the truth representing the *three* practices of vigor (which results in acquisition of special powers), meditation, and wisdom. However, detachment is essential in the practice of all six.

Lin-chi says, “To practice charity is to give everything away. This means to get rid of perceptions of self, being, life, and soul, sorrow and delusion, possession and renunciation, love and hate. The Buddha teaches us to practice charity, to rid ourselves of all attachments within, and to benefit all beings without. By not dwelling on anything, bodhisattvas do not see the self that gives, nor do they see the other that receives, nor do they see anything given. For all three are essentially empty. By concentrating without concentrating on anything, their practice of charity remains pure. They do not desire what they do not have. Nor do they long for some future reward. When ordinary people practice charity, they hope for some blessing or benefit. This is to practice charity while attached to something.”

Chiang Wei-nung says, “By ‘thing’ is meant the objects of our six senses, including what is seen or heard or perceived as well as what is not seen, not heard, not perceived. Charity is but one of the six *paramitas*, or perfections. The *Maha Prajnaparamita Shashtra* discusses all six. This sutra only mentions charity to avoid being verbose and for the sake of simplicity. Charity here repre-

sents all other dharmas, all of which must be practiced without attachment. In the previous section, the Buddha mentions the bodhisattva's resolution; here he mentions the bodhisattva's practice. Resolution and practice cannot be separated from one another, nor does one precede the other. Also, previously the Buddha says that bodhisattvas save limitless beings, but he does not say how they save them. Here he tells us how. All the Buddha's teachings can be summarized by the word "renunciation." But renunciation is another word for charity. By renouncing attachment to a self, we become arhans. By renouncing attachment to dharmas, we become bodhisattvas. By renouncing renouncing, we become buddhas. Thus, charity is the ultimate practice."

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, the Buddha asks Ananda somewhat rhetorically, "Can we call giving that is not dedicated to the realization of omniscience the perfection of giving?" (3)

Textual note: For the first two lines, Kumarajiva has *p'u-sa yu fa ying wu-suo-chu hsing yu pu-shih* (bodhisattvas should practice charity without attachment to a thought), which is more or less how the Tibetan reads. Meanwhile, Paramartha has *p'u-sa pu-cho chi-lei erh hsing pu-shih, pu-cho suo-yu hsiang yu pu-shih* (bodhisattvas practice charity without attachment to a self, they practice charity without attachment to anything at all).

They should not be attached to a sight when they give a gift. Nor should they be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma when they give a gift.

The sights of charity include the color and shape of what is given as well as the physical characteristics of the donor and recipient. The sounds of charity include musical instruments and the human voice. The smells of charity include the fragrance of flowers and incense. The tastes of charity include all kinds of food and

drink. The touches of charity include the softness and warmth of garments as well as the feel of the human body. And the dharmas of charity include the myriad teachings that free the mind from delusion, greed, hate, and thus from suffering.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* is derived from the root *dhri*, meaning “to grasp,” and refers to anything perceived to be real or permanent. Thus, dharmas are the objects of the sixth organ of sense, the mind, and roughly equivalent to what we call “thoughts.” But because they constitute our perception of reality, dharmas also refer to certain teachings and practices. Thus, dharmas are “truths.” And because such teachings and practices often seem permanent or right, dharmas also refer to norms of behavior and thus are “duties.”

Asanga says, “Cling not to self-existence, reward or karmic fruit. Guard against not giving or giving for a lesser goal.” (4) Vasubandhu comments, “This explains the nature of detachment and why we should practice detachment when we give. ‘Self-existence’ refers to the sutra’s statement that we should not be attached to a ‘thing’; ‘reward’ refers to the sutra’s statement that we should not be attached to ‘anything at all’; and ‘karmic fruit’ refers to the sutra’s statement that we should not be attached to ‘a sight,’ etc. Also, why warn against selfishness? Because if we are attached to ourselves, we won’t be able to give. Or if we seek some reward or result, it will lead us to abandon the bodhisattva path. This is what is meant by ‘lesser.’”

Huang-po says, “Eyes combine with form, ears combine with sound, the nose combines with smell, the tongue combines with taste, the body combines with touch, and the mind combines with dharmas. These twelve give birth to six forms of consciousness and together make up the Eighteen Domains. If someone understands that the Eighteen Domains contain nothing, that they are all empty, such a person truly understands the nature of the senses.”

Chiang Wei-nung says, “The Buddha says we should not be

attached to the six senses. He does not tell us to eliminate the six senses. Cultivation takes place in the world. It does not deny the world. We have to depend on the world to practice. Charity and merit show us where to begin our practice.”

Textual note: Among the list of objects of the senses, Müller does not include “dharma,” nor does the Stein edition. Müller does the same in Chapter Nine, for which the relevant portion of the Stein and Gilgit editions is missing. The Stein and Müller editions also do not include objects of mind in the same list in Chapter Ten. In Chapter Fourteen, however, Müller includes “dharma” in the first occurrence of this list but not in the second occurrence. The Stein edition does not include “dharma” in either occurrence and limits the list to *rūpa* (sight/form) for the second occurrence. All Chinese translations have *fa* (dharma) for all occurrences, and Conze has “dharma.”

Thus, Subhuti, fearless bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached to the perception of an object.

Objects are manifestations, mirages, or signs of things that never quite appear in their entirety, because none of them is ultimately real but only perceived to be real. When we perceive a person or a thing, we perceive something that exists in space and time as a combination of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and cognitive elements. But upon closer analysis, each of these elements turns out to be constantly changing and impossible to isolate from other elements. Thus, nothing is real. Still, we can't let go of the larger, supposedly unchanging entity that we imagine exists somewhere beyond the horizon of our sensory faculties. And yet such an entity never quite appears. But the reason that it never quite appears is because it is an illusion whose reality we extrapolate by combining elements that are themselves no more real than the illusion to which they contribute. Thus, a perception of an object is a delusion of an illusion. For if the object itself is not real, how can the perception of it be real? On the other

hand, if we can keep from becoming attached to the perception, we cannot be obstructed or restricted by the object.

Vasubandhu says, “The following verse explains how to control our thoughts.”

Asanga says, “Rein in these three concerns, restrain the thought of objects, and cut off doubts when they arise.” (5) The three concerns (*mandale tredha*) of which Asanga speaks are the giver, the gift, and the recipient, and the “doubts” are those likely to arise when practitioners hear these three are empty, and they wonder why they should continue their practice. Thus, Vasubandhu comments, “What follows explains the benefits of charity, for the Buddha tells us the merit from such practice is great. But why did the Buddha not extol merit after telling us how to stand and walk and only mention it after telling us how to control our thoughts? He does so because only if people are detached from perceptions of objects can they practice charity without attachment.”

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Seven Hundred Lines*, the Buddha asked Manjushri, “How should you stand when practicing the perfection of wisdom?” And Manjushri replied, “Not standing on any dharma is to stand on the perfection of wisdom.” The Buddha asked again, “How is it that not standing on any dharma is called standing on the perfection of wisdom?” Manjushri replied, “To have no perception of standing is to stand on the perfection of wisdom.”

Seng-chao says, “Thoughts of charity that begrudge nothing is what is meant by giving. If no object remains, what is there to begrudge? Giving is the first of the six perfections, and sensations are the basis from which dharmas arise.”

Chi-fo says, “All objects are illusions. To be attached to an object is to be attached to an illusion. Once you stop being attached to objects, you will not be affected by illusions. And once you are not affected by illusions, you will no longer be subject to *sansara* [life and death], and your pure original body will appear by itself.

This non-attachment to attachment is a most wonderful practice. As for how it works, don't be attached to a self within or to others without or to any gift that passes between. View things as you would in a mirror. When things appear, reflect them. When things disappear, let them go."

Hsu-fa says, "A person who is attached to objects is like a bird that walks on the sand, while a person who is not attached to objects is like a bird that flies through the sky. The one leaves tracks, while the other leaves none."

In his *Song of Enlightenment*, Yung-chia says, "Practicing charity while attached to something may result in heavenly blessings. But it's like an arrow shot into the sky. Eventually, it falls to the ground."

Meng-ts'an says, "When we practice charity, we invariably think about reaping some merit. At most temples, they hand out merit schedules and give a receipt. If people give enough, they even expect a temple to carve a stone memorial with their name on it. This is what is meant by being attached to something while practicing charity."

Te-ch'ing says, "If a person practices charity without being attached to anything, how can there be any merit? In the next sentence, the Buddha answers that not only will there be merit, it will be immeasurably greater than that reaped by someone who is attached to something."

Textual note: In place of *nimitta-sanjna* (perception of an object) Kumārajīva has *hsiang* (appearance), a variation he maintains throughout his translation. Here and elsewhere, Müller translates this phrase as "perception of a cause," while Conze has "notion of a sign."

And why? Subhuti, the body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached is not easy to measure.

Every action of the body, mouth, and mind is like a seed that sooner or later bears the fruit appropriate to it. Good actions result in blessings; bad actions result in tribulations. Just as a melon seed gives birth to a melon and not to an apple, so does an action free of limitations give birth to a fruit free of limitations. No gift is greater than liberation. Hence, no merit is greater. Thus, those who practice this teaching without being attached to it are said to be like fish that enter the sea.

The term the Buddha uses to express this is *punya-skandha*. The word *punya* includes such meanings as “pure,” “holy,” “auspicious,” and “meritorious.” It is this last meaning that Buddhists usually associate with the word, and it certainly has that sense here, since it refers to the karmic results of the practice of charity, which is the only practice that by itself results in merit. But merit refers to more than what we normally think of as “good karma.” It refers to karma that is in some sense selfless and thus no karma. It is not simply good karma but the bodhi seed from which the tree of enlightenment grows.

Skandha also has a long history of usage and a number of meanings. Most translators render it by “aggregate,” “heap,” or “store.” This is how it is usually translated when it refers to the five skandhas of form, sensation, perception, volition, and cognition in which we search for a self in vain. But such renderings hardly do *skandha* justice. The primary meaning of *skandha* is not a “pile” but a “body minus its appendages.” The word is derived from the root *skand*, meaning “to ejaculate (semen),” and it originally referred to such things as a tree trunk or a human torso. This, for example, is how the Jains used the word, which, ironically, they used interchangeably with a word we encountered in the first chapter, *pinda* (ball of rice/offering/entity). Thus, it would be more appropriate to call these skandhas “bodies,” as we do when we speak of an artist’s “body of work.” Their unity is not an accidental agglomeration of disparate stuff. Nor do they only