
Commentary to the Diamond Sutra

By Tom Shoden Hannes

Why so many repetitions in the Diamond Sutra?

Introduction

Along with the Hannya Shingyo, the Diamond Sutra is one of the most famous and condensed texts in Buddhism. Both of them are summaries of the Prajnaparamita Sutra and the Diamond Sutra is sometimes called the Prajnaparamita Sutra in 300 verses. Literally, we could translate this as: The sutra of wisdom arrived at the other shore in 300 verses. Sounds good.

That is certainly what early Chinese Zen teachers like Konin and Eno thought about it and ever since, the Diamond Sutra has been one of the most central texts in the whole Zen world; at least its title and an occasional quote. But when we, 21st-century Europeans actually try to read the whole thing, we often find ourselves bothered (if not bored to bits) by the many repetitions in this text which is supposed to be a summary. We might even wonder if we would not reach the other shore a bit quicker without the message being conveyed over and over again. But would we?

Let's have good look at those repetitions. Are they really repetitions? Upon closer inspection, the Diamond Sutra is rather like a diamond with many surfaces, indeed reflecting one reality many times over, but each time from a slightly different angle. And that makes a difference. It means for instance that the Diamond Sutra is not so much trying to hammer its content into our heads by laborious repetition.

Its multifaceted appearance seems rather to be a warning against thinking that its message is too obvious to continue considering. I once heard a nun say she thought the Diamond Sutra was too obvious to have anything to say about it. But just maybe this kind of sutra was written exactly so as not to reach such a conclusion. When I directed five-day dharma workshops on the Diamond Sutra in Maredsous and at la Gendronnière, we never even made it even halfway through. (And no, we did not waste time on idle intellectual gibberish or emo-outbursts.) The sutra is simply packed with enthusiasm for the Buddhist way and every passage glistens like a facet of a lovingly cut diamond, that never ceases to offer us yet another view of its message.

Other main Mahayana texts like the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra use folklore, poetry, stories and mythology to help us break free from a dulling sense of routine or 'common-sense' thinking. The Diamond Sutra uses rather a Cubist approach to tackle all too fixed views on what we might think is evident in our lives, on what is obvious in the Buddhist teaching and on what we think needs no more consideration in our own zazen.

It is in taking that stand that I have been looking for a possible reading structure for the Diamond Sutra. I don't claim to offer a historically or exegetically 'right' reading of the text. This article is no more than an attempt to connect the many facets of the diamond to our practice, to our lives, to our possible misleading tendencies in dealing with the dharma. That in itself is quite a claim, I realise, and indeed this article is no more than a brief outline of what definitely

needs elaboration and possibly correction. Taking all this into consideration, one way to read the sutra would be as follows:

1. Subhuti's question (section 1-2)
2. The first outline of the teaching after Subhuti's question (3-13)
Content of the teaching (3-5)
Nature of the teaching (6-13)
3. The second outline after Subhuti's enlightenment (14-16)
Subhuti formulates his insight (14)
Further elaboration of the teaching (14-16)
4. The third outline after the repeated question of Subhuti(17-31)
All things are the teaching of the Buddha (17-21)
The teaching of the Buddha is no(t)? nihilism (22-26)
The teaching of the Buddha is no(t)? physics (27-31)
5. Conclusion (32)

1. Subhuti's question (sections 1-2)

The teaching of Diamond sutra is elicited by a question of one of the Buddha's close disciples, Subhuti: "How should a bodhisattva, intent on awakening, progress or control their thoughts?" For anybody who thinks sutras are too theoretical and therefore not Zen, this is about the actual life. Our lives. Our minds and actions. At least if we are animated by the spirit of the bodhisattva, who does not use the practice to disappear in a cosy, non-committal state, but to radiate the Buddha mind into the world. 'Bodhisattva' is often translated as *enlightened being*, but it could also be translated as *enlightening being* or even *enlightening hero*. Subhuti's question is about an active life animated by *bodhisattva*, the very condition for practicing Zen as the path of liberation. Otherwise put, Subhuti asks for no less than a complete outline of the Mahayana path. The Buddha, always happy to respond to good questions, will offer him not one but three outlines, i.e. he will give the same response seen from three different angles. In the final chapters, the angles will keep on shifting, presenting the reader a dizzyingly brilliant spectacle.

2. The first outline of the teaching after Subhuti's question (sections 3-13)

The first answer to Subhuti's question comes in two parts. The first part treats the content of the teaching and the second part emphasises the nature of the teaching in the light of that content.

Content of the teaching (sections 3-5)

For those who like conciseness: sections 3, 4 and 5 contain the whole content of the sutra. Section 3 is about *muga* (non-self), section 4 deals with meritorious action (*paramitas*) and section 5 tackles *ku* (emptiness). All this is discussed in but a few pages and in a fairly straightforward language.

Section 3 on *muga* is fairly well known and is repeated often in kusens and teishos: a bodhisattva should not cherish “the image of a self (*atman*), of a person (*pudgala*), of a being (*sattva*) or of a liver of life (*jiva*).” This is a basic Buddhist theme: the notion of a substantial self creates a tension, because in our actual experiences everything is impermanent and fragile. We often react to this tension with unskillful reactions which create suffering. The unskillful reactions are self-reinforcing and tend to take over our lives and minds, chaining us into the cycle of samsara. The four terms for ‘self’ (*atman*, *pudgala*, *sattva*, *jiva*) point at to various attempts in the Buddhist community after the death of the Buddha to still try and save a specific place for some kind of permanent self or soul somewhere, somehow.

Regarding these attempts, the Diamond Sutra is very clear: it does not matter what you call your attempt to distil a substantial self from your experiences, a bodhisattva sees through them. This is the number one insight of Buddhism and therefore of all bodhisattvas.

But this stress on non-self is not only needed to avoid the trap of soul-searching. It is also there to avoid a possible bodhisattva-trap. If bodhisattvas are practitioners who are devoted to saving all beings, their activist enthusiasm might make them a little forgetful of the fact that all these beings are without self as well. Activist practice needs to go hand in hand with the contemplation of *muga* and *ku* – but *muga* and *ku* also need to go hand in hand with activist practice.

This last conclusion is the second theme, discussed in the following section 4. It mentions helpful action, in particular generosity, the first of the *paramitas*. In condensed texts like this, it is safe to assume that when one *paramita* is mentioned, the five others (ethical conduct, forbearance, energy, concentration and wisdom) are implied. They are all meritorious actions producing good karma, which is another major theme in original Buddhism. Beneficial deeds practiced with good intention have a good effect on you, just like harmful deeds with bad intentions are harmful for yourself as well. Regardless of what one thinks of the precise mechanisms of karmic retribution and reincarnation, this emphasis has always been thought of as necessary to avoid mistaking the teaching of non-self for a nihilist ethics in which ‘anything goes’.

Buddhism is about taking full responsibility of the massive amount of freedom we have to manifest our true Buddha nature and have it shine over the world for all to benefit from it.

The trouble with merits is that our clinging minds are eager to get hold of them. The liberating path of Buddhism can easily be (and often has been) reduced to a mere hunt for merits: a better afterlife, feel-good-meditation, personal development or even a new car. In fact it was exactly this kind of reducing of the dharma that was so strongly criticized in the Mahayana circles as a hinayana practice, literally a practice of ‘despicable quality’ that loses the very essence of liberation. Therefore a bodhisattva should not be attached to any merit, but still continue practicing meritorious deeds. This requires a double view on reality, which is the third theme of the sutra.

Section 5 presents the double view of the Diamond Sutra in a stock formula: “X is not x, (therefore) it is called ‘x’.” Absolutely anything can be inserted in the x-slots. As if to show how serious it is about the universal scope of this formula, the sutra fills it straight away with

nothing less than the body of the Buddha itself: a Buddha-body is not a Buddha-body, we call it a 'Buddha-body.

That's hot. Maybe not to us today, but for Indians in the first centuries of the common era, a Buddha-body was a pretty holy thing. Buddhas were thought of as having 32 special marks that showed their enlightened state. When the Diamond Sutra says that these marks aren't really marks but that they are called 'marks' is, it is not saying that these marks do not exist. Any Indian would believe they really did exist. The sutra rather says that even the most holy phenomena are empty as well: they are not more real or more solid or more substantial than anything else.

Maybe in our health-obsessed days we would rather say: "The energy and health you get from meditation is no energy and health, it is called 'energy and health'. Or: a *shiho* is not a *shiho* it is called 'a *shiho*'. This is the first view: the fact that everything, including ourselves, our merits and achievements, anything we understand about the dharma is as unsubstantial, impermanent and as totally interdependent as our illusions, our harmful deeds... This view is called 'absolute truth', emptiness, *ku*: phenomena are moments of co-dependent arising, not separate entities.

But that is not to say they don't exist. The second or 'relative' view on reality emphasises that we do indeed experience phenomena, and that we react to them. We can do this in a harmful or skilful way, leading to more or less suffering, to more or less liberation. Therefore it is useful to name them. It's practical. But when you start believing in them too much, the road to liberation is blocked straight away and practice becomes wellness-business at best, frustration-business in most cases.

The nature of the teaching (6-13)

At the end of section five, the sutra gives the content of its complete teaching. But the content of this teaching also has serious consequences for the nature of the teaching itself. Nothing escapes the scope of the Diamond Sutra, and therefore it will apply its double view on itself as well.

Section 6 refers to the teaching as a raft to carry us from the shore of attachments and suffering to the shore of detachment and liberation. Again, this is literally basic Buddha teaching. Apparently, when the sutra was written, it was necessary again to stress the 100% pragmatic nature of the teaching itself. Otherwise put: the teaching should not think of itself as a doctrine. That is the equivalent of *muga* (the first theme) for teachings. A bodhisattva should not think of the teaching as a thing that can be grasped and appropriated. As a totally interdependent phenomenon it is formless, pure pragmatics, able to adapt and respond to the circumstances of new times and grounds.

Mahayana texts were written exactly as an expression of discontentment with what was felt as rusty conservatism in the Buddhist community that lacked the original vividness of the way the Buddha taught the dharma in his days. Mahayana wanted to be traditional by being as flexible and creative as the Buddha himself. The concise conclusion of section 8 "what is called Buddhism is not Buddhism" is of course an echo of the "X is not x" formula, in an attempt to undo any kind of self-image of the dharma to avoid losing its liberating aspect. But who knows,

maybe it was also a deadpan remark on the condition of Buddhism in those days, as if the sutra says "If this is what they call Buddhism, I'm out of here..."

Section 9 inserts the second theme of merits into the discussion of nature of the teaching. What are the results of the teaching? Traditionally the results are described as the four stages of the *arhat* (stream-entrant, Once-to-be-reborn, Non-returner, Perfective Enlightenment). Interestingly, section 9 does not negate these stages at all, nor refutes them as 'hinayana'. They are merely spoken of as results that cannot be appropriated. You cannot say "I obtained the fruit of my practice." That would merely be a proof that this fruit is immediately down the drain of the grabbing mind that identifies itself with a self. The merits or results of practice, even complete enlightenment, cannot be grasped. As the often quoted verse from section 10 says: "When the mind abides on nothing, the true mind appears." Not being fixed on results is the greatest result itself, the very content of Buddhahood (section 12). This is the sentence that shocked the young Eno into the practice of sudden awakening, a practice of never appropriating results, of never locking the teaching into doctrines.

This pragmatic attitude towards the teaching implies that also the third theme of the Diamond Sutra, the 'X is not x' formula, is applicable to the formula itself. Section 13 shows this utterly pragmatic attitude in the two ways in which the 'X is not x' formula is filled: once with 'atoms' and once with 'the characteristics of a Buddha-body'.

The formula is in either case the same: Atoms/characteristics are not atoms/characteristics and they are called 'atoms'/'characteristics'. So far nothing new. But the context of the formula is different and that has its effects on the use of it. The sutra asks whether atoms exist, and the answer is 'yes'. When it is asked whether or not a Buddha can be recognized by his characteristics the answer is 'no'. Theoretically (when you share the Indian worldview about atoms and Buddha-bodies) either question could be answered with 'yes' (on the relative level of phenomena arising and disappearing) and 'no' (on the absolute level of all phenomena not having a separate existence). But pragmatically these are two very different questions: the risk of getting attached to atoms is not all that great (even though towards the very end the sutra will have to warn that risk as well). But the characteristics of a Buddha body are quite another matter for those who aspire to become a Buddha. Today we think of these characteristics maybe more in psychological and energetic terms: always happy, feeling good, in great health, radiant, calm, witty...: These are often interpreted signs of 'being on the right track', it is what people expect from a real 'Zen' person. Therefore they can very easily become objects of attachment - or frustration and end up as little more than distractions for real practice: seeing emptiness of all phenomena and freeing ourselves from pointless grabbing or rejection. The Vimalakirti sutra warns in a similar voice: "If you look for signs, you're not looking for the dharma, but for signs."

In conclusion, when Subhuti asks the Buddha how bodhisattvas should live, the answer is a twofold triple answer: don't get attached to a self-image, don't get attached to merits, don't get attached to a false sense of being or non-being and don't get attached to a doctrine (a self-image of a teaching), results of practice (the merits of teaching) and the ontological status of these results (as if they are more substantial than anything else). After hearing this, Subhuti experiences a great enlightenment.

3. The second outline of the teaching after Subhuti's enlightenment (sections 14-16)

Even though the three themes of the Diamond sutra (self-image, meritorious action and the emptiness formula) occur throughout the whole sutra, the three outlines vary in their emphasis. The first outline, as discussed in the previous paragraph, insisted more on non-attachment to the image of a self. The second outline, which we will discuss now, highlights meritorious action. The third outline will emphasize the “x is not x” formula. So now, in the second outline, we will mainly deal with action.

Further development of the teaching (sections 14-16)

Subhuti is exalted after the first answer of the Buddha and awakens to what it means to be a bodhisattva, which he formulates as the absence of the four images of a self. The Buddha acknowledges this insight but hastens to show the other side of the coin, which is the second theme of the Sutra: the nature of merits.

The lurking danger of the teaching of non-self is hedonistic paralysis: if there is no truth or non-truth, no beings, no self, nothing to achieve, we might as well practice nothing at all and be cosily mesmerized on our zafus. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. Therefore, after denying just about everything in the first section, the fact that merits and results really exist needs to be stressed now.

For instance, the practice a bodhisattva requires an impeccable life-style (the second *paramita*), generous altruism (the first *paramita*) and far reaching tolerance and patience (the third *paramita*), in which again the other *paramitas* are implied (energy, concentration and wisdom). The way in which these sections speak about actual effort in pursuing the *paramitas* leaves no room for doubt: even when you’re torn to pieces you should practice kindness and patience. If that seems a bit far-fetched for those who won’t except (or can’t except?) to be torn to pieces in the near future, the sutra offers another domain for practicing patience indeed: receiving criticism. Maybe it is strange to see being torn to pieces and criticism thought of as two equally difficult moments of patience, but just check the next time you are criticized and value the wisdom of the sutra... Practice is to be pursued in the world of phenomena, it is not a reverie in a blissful empty state. It is also to be pursued when we are in a ‘non-Zen’ state. Neither is it limited to the hours we spend on our zafus. It is practiced in our communication, in our every move and action.

Right after that message, the coin is flipped again: in order to allow these meritorious actions to be truly liberating, the path consists of practicing the *paramitas* without further ado and with all our energy, but not in order to make progress on the path. That is the only way to make progress on the path. Progress is implied, but the only way to have it is not to grab it. By way of conclusion it is said that “the principle of this sutra is unimaginable”: it cannot be grasped. Its rewards are also said to be “unimaginable”: they exceed our wildest dreams, so we better not waste time dreaming about them. Or as the famous saying has it: a clenched fist can hold but a few drops of water, an open hand can have a river pass through it.

4 Third outline of the teaching after the repeated question of Subhuti (sections 17-31)

After the second outline given by the (truly patient) Buddha, Subhuti almost idiotically repeats his question of in section 2. Reading this is a bit like attending our mondos, in which we so often ask the same questions, to hear the same content just a little bit different, and suddenly realize something we have known for years without really doing it. And yes, also here the

Buddha repeats his answer from section 3 almost literally. But the context of the answer (the absence of the four self-images) is different again. The lack of self-image is immediately linked to a whole series of negations: there is no state of inspiration (*bodaishin*), no state of enlightenment, not Buddha, no truth. In other words: in his third outline of the path of the bodhisattva, the Diamond Sutra will deal with its content from the angle of the “x is not x” formula, jumping from and to the relative and absolute viewpoint with, at times, a maddening pace, flipping the coin time and again.

All things are the teaching of the Buddha (sections 17-21)

The “X is not x” formula does not negate the existence of any phenomenon. The back of our foot is called a ‘heel’ and that is clearly something that really exists. If you doubt that, take a thumbnail, put it on the ground and firmly push you heel in it. The empty thumbnail will cause quite an empty pain in your empty heel. Your heel exists enough for you to suffer from it – and that is the very start of the Buddhist path. “A heel is not a heel” means that the heel is not separate from the rest of your foot, your leg, the blood that runs through it, the atmospheric pressure that prevents it from exploding, the distance from the sun that keeps it warm enough without bursting into flames, the food we eat to keep its cells regenerating, the people that make our food, their parents, the food their parents ate in order to survive... in fact there is nothing we could mention that is not connected to your heel. In that way there is no such thing as a separate heel. But in the way that we can suffer from it, and in the way we can use our heels to help damage or heal the world, these heels do exist and that makes it worth the while to talk about ‘a heel’.

Applied to the life of the bodhisattva this means that a bodhisattva is impregnated with the selfless nature of himself (the first theme) and his beneficial actions in the world (the second theme, here presented as ‘adorning Buddha lands’), without disappearing or quitting his active life. The “x is not x” formula (the third theme) is applied to the mind (expressed as the five eyes), leading to the conclusion that in the end the mind is “ungraspable”, “without substance”, as are merits and the body of a Buddha.

Amidst the speeding repetitions, Subhuti’s somewhat sheepish question: “Can people actually believe all this?” is answered with phlegmatic simplicity: “Yes, because beings are not beings.” That is to say: all beings can feel this reality for themselves, because they are nothing but this empty reality. This is what we practice in zazen and in the whole of our daily lives, while sitting still and while radiating with action to help all beings. This is not an article of faith, it is the content of any experience we can possibly have when we don’t shut it into substantiating conclusions. Reality is here for all to experience for themselves and awaken to it. There is simply no experience, no phenomenon that says something else. All things, all beings preach the dharma in the way they exist: impermanent, without self, empty and conditioned.

The teaching of the Buddha is no nihilism (sections 22-28)

The coin is flipped again. After a good deal of negating in the previous sections, the sutra again sings the praise of the great merit of the altruistic and generous practice of the *paramitas*. A bodhisattva is not paralysed by the thought of the empty nature of all phenomena, beings and practices. Every time the sutra expounds its core-insight (all-pervading emptiness) it straightaway continues with a rhapsody on the benefits of its core-business: helping all beings. This compensation for the dangers of an erroneous view on/fear of attachment to emptiness or activism is constantly going to and fro the two levels of reality. Reading this section is almost

dizzying. The coin is flipping so much by now that it is spinning. The sutra leaves us not one moment to get stuck on one position.

The teaching of the Buddha is no physics (29-31)

Finally, the 'x is not x' formula is not only a way to avoid mistaking emptiness for nihilism, it also wants to avoid using Buddhism for anything other than liberation. These last chapters in the sutra are about what has often been called 'the silence of the Buddha'. In the Pali canon, the Buddha insists that his teaching is only about suffering and the liberation from suffering. All questions or considerations that did not contribute to this liberation were pushed aside as irrelevant. Is the universe eternal or not? What was the first cause of suffering? What happens with an enlightened being after it dies? How does reincarnation work? Nor did the Buddha develop a systematic philosophy or psychology. After his death, Abidharmist philosophers did try to do so, as did Mahayana philosophers and esoteric theorists later on. Even today some Buddhist schools like to present Buddhism as 'a science of the mind', but I wonder whether the Buddha would have liked that phrase. Apparently the human mind has a very hard time devoting itself to a practice that is just about liberation and not so much a special cosmology, psychology or esoteric knowledge.

Of course we have to take into consideration that in the pre-modern world, religions were supposed to offer some kind of world view. Human beings need a view on themselves, society and the world to feel at ease. When Buddhism became a culturally important movement, it was pressed to develop more than just a practice for liberating the human mind from its self-imposed suffering. In the various Buddhist countries this has led to various views. Understandable though all that may be, the Diamond Sutra is a purist in this matter: the teaching of the Buddha is no special theory about the structure of reality.

This is yet again cast into the formula "X is not x," and applied again atoms, that are called 'compounds'. Compound is not a neutral word in Buddhist discourse. It was one of the ways in which the Buddha explained emptiness: a cart has no car-self, it is a compound consisting of wheels an axis and so on. When these parts are assembled, we call the assemblage a cart.

But strangely enough this thinking led Buddhist philosophers in later centuries to try and find the elemental particles of these compounds. Lists were drawn up of characteristics of basic experiential particles, which were divided into lists belonging to nirvana (liberated life) and lists belonging to samsara (life of suffering). At times this thinking indeed bears a impressively striking resemblance to modern science, but that resemblance is not necessarily all that relevant to Buddhist practice.

At least the Diamond Sutra feels that way and it categorically dispels people who spend time and energy on such attempts as "greedily heading for their affairs". That is strong language when you take into consideration that greed is bonno number one. The Buddha did not teach the dharma to offer an alternative to physics, psychology, mythology, cosmology, medicine,... When in our bookshops today we still find books on Buddhism in between books on quantum-healing processes and astrology, the message indeed seems in need of repetition.

So what is Buddhism? It is what encourages a bodhisattva life. And what is that life then? That was Subhuti's question to begin with. The sutra concludes with an answer on the two levels of reality, the two sides of the coin. On the relative level of the phenomena and action it is "not

grasping for forms". Instead of living an appropriating life, we live a generous life, with good actions without grasping for their merits. On the level of absolute reality, practice is matter of "not separating from thusness", of constantly refreshing our contact with the empty nature of ourselves, the beings we help and every phenomenon we encounter.

A bodhisattva apparently has to live like a constantly flipping coin, never fixed on one standpoint, always ready to see both sides at the same time. Living as a bodhisattva is doing the right thing while seeing the empty nature of all, pursuing active compassion and penetrating wisdom. Dogen once asked Nyojo what the mind of a bodhisattva should be. Nyojo's short answer merely repeats the message of the Diamond Sutra: "Just softness and flexibility."