

3. Perfection of Wisdom School (Madhyamaka)

Introduction

The Perfection of Wisdom literature (the Prajnaparamita) was an early Mahayana development that greatly influenced later schools. Its literature has more than 30 central scriptures (sutras), some very long and others short. [In one case the scripture is just a single letter—the letter "A".] Among these scriptures three are of particular spiritual and historical importance:

- the diamond sutra (vajracchedika),
- the perfection of wisdom in 8000 lines (ashtasahasrika sutra), and
- the heart sutra (hridaya sutra),.

Often these scriptures are recited in a devotional way. All these works emphasise, from many different points of view, that beings and things are “sunyata”.

What is meant by the term Sunyata?

In some books sunyata is spoken of as a philosophical doctrine, but really it is a word that describes a profound perception of the nature of existence. It points to an experience that goes beyond words and ideas.

[Edited excerpts from Sangharakshita's seminar on the Manjughosa stuti sadhana]

The translator Herbert Guenther sometimes renders "sunyata" as "open dimension of being". This probably gives a better sort of feeling of what it is all about than a purely conceptual rendering like “voidness” or “emptiness”. The danger with reading about sunyata is that it all remains merely conceptual. The purpose of the perfection of wisdom (prajnaparamita) teaching is to loosen up one's rigid categories of thinking and modes of being in a very radical way.

An analogy that may help convey a sense of sunyata is that of a magical display. It is as if all things are like an old fashioned Indian magical display in which the magician conjures up a sort of collective hypnosis. People in the magician's presence see horses, elephants, towers, palaces, men and women and all sorts of other things; but they are not really there. It is just a magical show. Although one might explain this as collective hypnosis, this is beside the point. The point of the illustration is that you see the magician's magical display, but it isn't really there. You perceive it vividly, but it has no substance. It is "empty".

The teaching of sunyata does not deny the relative validity of your experience, but it denies the ultimate validity of that perception. It is as though there are two extreme positions. One extreme denies you have any experience of perceiving things, while the other says that what you perceive is ultimately real. The sunyata teaching is a sort of “middle ground” or middle way between regarding the things of this world as completely illusory and completely real. [This is why a major school associated with this teaching is known as the *Madhyamaka*. ‘Madhyamaka’ means the middle way.]

If someone is spiritually mature, their heart is on Enlightenment for the sake of all, so they will not get entangled in the appearances of this world. They will see the world in accordance with the sunyata teaching.

[Edited excerpt from Sangharakshita's lecture: “the Diamond Sutra”]

On the psychological level the teaching of "emptiness" (sunyata) means we should not be attached anywhere, should not settle down anywhere, should not completely depend on anything. On the psychological level people want to settle down. We want to find some cosy corner where they can be warm and secure and think: ‘Well, here I am, nothing can shake me’. But of course this is not possible. Sooner or later, secure as we fancy ourselves to be, our supports are rudely pulled out from underneath us, and then we have to suffer.

Another way of approaching sunyata is to reflect that everything is conditioned, inter-connected, and impermanent, so no such thing as a separate entity exists. There is nothing which is really separate in itself. Habitually we see the world as chopped up into discrete bits. We distinguish one thing from another. Instead we should try to see things, not as one (you don't reduce all difference to unity, blotting out the difference), but as sort of somehow interfused.

About the Diamond Sutra

(Edited excerpt from Sangharakshita's lecture: "the Diamond Sutra")

Introduction

The scripture is popular in mahayana Buddhist countries such as China, Tibet, Japan, Mongolia, Korea and Vietnam. It is frequently recited, meditated upon and expounded.

The term "diamond sutra" is a rendition of 'vajracheddika sutra'. The word "sutra" means a scripture that purports to be a record of the Buddha and his teachings. Even though the mahayana sutras cannot be regarded as historically accurate account of what the Buddha said and did, they convey a sense of the essence of the Buddha.

The word vajracheddika has two parts: (1) vajra, and (2) cheddika. 'Vajra' means both diamond and thunderbolt. In Buddhist thought the vajra, the diamond or the thunderbolt, connotes something of irresistible strength, irresistible potency, something capable of shattering everything that stands in its way. And 'cheddika' means 'that which cuts', or 'a cutter'. So the vajracheddika is that which is tremendously powerful like the thunderbolt, or that which cuts like the diamond.

The name vajracheddika gives us a clue to the significance of the scripture. The transcendental wisdom that the text points us to is like a diamond because it completely cuts through all our ideas, all our concepts about reality. It is like a thunderbolt because it shatters all our negative emotions: our fear, our anxiety, our anger, our jealousy, our possessiveness, our craving, our clinging. It cuts through all the prejudices we experience on account of our conditionings: on account of belonging to a certain nationality, speaking a certain language, living in a particular environment and so on. It smashes all our metaphysical assumptions. It smashes everything that stands in between us and Reality. Above all, this thunderbolt of transcendental wisdom smashes us as we at present know ourselves to be.

Human kind cannot bear very much reality

The poet T S Eliot says "*humankind cannot bear very much reality*". Certainly we cannot bear very much of the diamond sutra. If a bodhisattva was to appear in mid-air and start expounding the diamond sutra, and we were really to understand something of its profundity, then we would probably collapse in our chairs, and would have to be carried out, feet foremost.

Reality is to be experienced here and now

The sutra is in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and the monk Subhuti. But Subhuti says very little. It is mainly a dialogue between the Buddha on the one hand and Subhuti's unspoken doubts on the other. Now there is something worthy of notice here: the dialogue is between two historical characters. No mythological bodhisattvas or other such beings are involved. It suggests that so far as this sutra is concerned we are firmly on the historical plane. We are not in some higher heavenly world or some remote Buddhafield, but here on this earth, in the midst of the everyday world. And this is borne out by the introduction to the sutra, whose words are:

"Thus have I heard at one time: The Lord (that is to say Gautama the Buddha) dwelled at Sravasti in the Jeta grove in the garden of Anathapindika, together with a large gathering of monks consisting of 1250 monks and with many bodhisattvas, Great Beings. Early in the morning the Lord dressed, put on his cloak, took his bowl, and entered the great city of Sravasti to collect alms. When he'd eaten and returned from his round the Lord put away his bowl and cloak, washed his feet and sat down on the seat arranged for him, crossing his legs, holding his body upright and mindfully fixing his attention in front of him. Then many monks approached to where the Lord was, saluted his feet with their heads, thrice walked round him to the right and sat down at one side."

Could anything be simpler, more subdued, than this introduction? It is almost Greek in its severity and simplicity. And this is significant because the diamond sutra is a mahayana sutra and generally mahayana sutras begin very splendidly; often in some higher heavenly world with a magnificent description of how the Buddha sits there in all his glory on an elaborate lotus throne, surrounded by millions upon millions of non-human beings in their various orders. At the beginning of mahayana sutras they often describe all sorts of miracles, prior to the Buddha teaching. For example they often describe how thousands of great golden flowers come raining down from the sky, and how various Buddhas and bodhisattvas arrive from other universes. This is the usual sort of opening for a Mahayana Sutra: gorgeous, splendid, mythological; full of light, colour, music and perfume.

The simplicity and naturalness of the diamond sutra's introduction means that Reality is to be experienced in the midst of everyday, ordinary life. There is nowhere else to experience it. If you are to experience Reality anywhere, it can only be here. If you are to experience it at any time, it can only be now. It is here and now. So the opening scene means that ultimately Reality and everyday life are non-different. You do not have to get away from the conditioned in order to realize the unconditioned. ...Or as the heart sutra says: "*Form is emptiness (i.e. Reality) and emptiness is form*". Our everyday life may be whatever it may be. It may be pleasurable, it may be painful, it may be wildly ecstatic or it may be unbearably agonizing. It may be just plain dull and boring most of the time. But it is here, in the midst of all these experiences, good, bad and indifferent, and nowhere else, that Buddhahood is to be attained.

Incidentally both in the diamond sutra and in earlier (pali) scriptures the Buddha gives his teachings in the open air. In fact the Buddha and his disciples lived for the most part in the open air. For nine months of the year they wandered about from place to place on foot. They wandered through forests, they rested under trees, they meditated under trees, they climbed mountains, they crossed rivers, sometimes they went into villages but usually just once a day to collect food. And then for three or four months of the year, during the rainy season when one could not go round very easily, they were in a cave or hut or some other form of shelter. How simple the life of wanderers was in those days! They only had three robes, one bowl and perhaps also a needle and water-strainer. That was all they needed to get by. They had no house to maintain, or mortgages, telephone or telephone bills. No television, no refrigerator, no car, no radio, no newspapers, no books; not even the diamond sutra.

The importance of receptivity

In the introduction, Subhuti rises from his seat, puts his upper robe over one shoulder, kneels on his right knee and bends his folded hands towards the Buddha. In other words, Subhuti shows the Buddha profound respect. It means that Subhuti was receptive. Receptivity is the first requisite of the disciple, indeed it is necessary for anyone who wants to learn anything. Whatever else you may or may not be the most fundamental thing is a deep willingness to learn. So Subhuti had this great quality of receptivity, and perhaps it is for this reason that the diamond sutra is addressed to him.

The bodhisattva does not perceive beings as real (fixed) entities

Having praised the Buddha, Subhuti puts to him his first question. He asks:

'How then, oh Lord, should a son or daughter of good family, who have set out in the bodhisattva vehicle stand, how progress, how control their thoughts?'

With the Buddha's reply to this question we encounter the first of the great insights of the Sutra. The Buddha's reply is: *"Someone who has set out in the vehicle of a bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner: as many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term 'beings', egg-born, born from a womb, moisture-born or miraculously born, with or without form, with perception, without perception, and with neither perception nor non-perception, as far as any conceivable form of beings is conceived, all these I must lead to Nirvana, into the realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana. And why? If in a bodhisattva the notion of a being should take place he could not be called a Bodhi-being. And why? He is not to be called a Bodhi-being in whom the notion of a self or of a being should take place, or the notion of a living soul or of a person.'*

A bodhisattva is one who seeks to gain Enlightenment, not merely for his or her own sake, but for the benefit of all. So it is perhaps understandable that the Buddha should start off by saying that someone wishing to train themselves in the bodhisattva way should endeavour to guide all beings to Enlightenment. But the Buddha also says that the would be bodhisattva should realise that in reality no being exists. First one is exhorted to lead all beings to Enlightenment, then one is told to see that no beings exist. So this is a paradox. This intentional contradiction expresses the essence of the bodhisattva's spirit. Usually we think of compassion as directed towards individuals. Perhaps you see individual so and so suffering, and then your compassion arises. But the bodhisattva does not perceive individuals. The bodhisattva perceives the truth of "emptiness" (sunyata), and it is out of this perception of emptiness that his or her compassion arises.

Quotes from Sangharakshita's seminar on the Diamond Sutra:

- “We begin to understand the diamond sutra not when we imagine we have worked out what it means, but when, as we contemplate it, we are moved - even to tears - by a sense of the sublime.”
- “You could say the diamond sutra is a sort of elaborate koan designed to stretch the mind to breaking point.”

Some questions to think about

- Is it possible to take even good ideas too seriously?
- Does having words (ie. verbal labels) for things like a tree, the heat of the sun, or a cloud in the sky, somehow limit your experience of them?
- It is said that clarifying ideas, especially Buddhist ideas, is a pre-requisite to experiencing "the wisdom beyond words". Is this true, and if so why?