


A Commentary on the Diamond Sutra



DESCRIBING THE INDESCRIBABLE

TRANSLATED
BY TOM GRAHAM

MASTER HSING YUN



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Table of Contents

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE	VII
INTRODUCTION	I
TEXT OF THE DIAMOND SUTRA	5
MASTER HSING YUN'S COMMENTARY	
1 The Causes of This Dharma Meeting	31
2 Subhuti's Request	37
3 PART I: The Heart of the Mahayana	41
3 PART II: The Heart of the Mahayana (continued)	47
4 The Wonder of Behaving Without Attachment	53
5 Seeing the Truth That Lies Beneath Perception	59
6 The Rarity of True Belief	63
7 Nothing Has Been Attained and Nothing Has Been Said	69
8 Enlightenment Comes from These Teachings	73
9 The Four Fruits Are Empty	81
10 Making the Buddha Realm Magnificent	87
11 The Unconditioned Is Supreme	99
12 Honoring the True Teaching	105

13	The Name of This Sutra	109
14	Ultimate Tranquility Beyond Lakshana	117
15	The Goodness of Upholding This Sutra	123
16	Purification of Karma	127
17	Complete and Utter Selflessness	133
18	One Body Sees All	145
19	Universal Transformation Within the Dharma Realm	149
20	Beyond Form and Lakshana	155
21	Speaking the Unspeakable	157
22	The Unattainable Dharma	159
23	Perfect Equanimity	161
24	True Generosity Lies in Upholding This Sutra	163
25	Transforming That Which Cannot Be Transformed	165
26	The Dharma Body Is Without Lakshana	167
27	Nothing Is Ended and Nothing Is Extinguished	173
28	Not Receiving and Not Wanting to Receive	175
29	Awesome Tranquility	177
30	Compound Lakshana	179
31	Not Giving Rise to Belief in Lakshana	181
32	Like Shadows, Like Bubbles, Like Dreams	183
	NOTES	187
	GLOSSARY	203
	SUGGESTED FURTHER READING	209



Translator's Preface

The Buddha was a great communicator. He never hid his meaning or tried to confuse his listeners. Buddhist sutras, which are records of talks given by the Buddha, are models of clarity, insight, and intelligence. The Chinese translation of the *Diamond Sutra*, on which this commentary is based, is revered in East Asia largely because it possesses an uncanny clarity that almost makes us see through time to the Jeta Grove where the Buddha gave this famous talk.

Kumarajiva (344–413), who made the Chinese translation in 401 C.E., must have felt a very deep sense of responsibility, for though his translation is considered to be one of China's great works of literature, he is said to have commented while reading it afterward that it was so uninspired it was like "chewing on chips of wood." Indeed, his translation may really have sounded that way in 401 C.E. in Chang An, China. Time has a way of making great works of literature even greater because one generation after another studies them and absorbs them into the language they use. The Chinese language curls around Kumarajiva's translation of the *Diamond Sutra* the way the English language curls around the works of Shakespeare or Chaucer. Kumarajiva established a vocabulary and a manner of expression that is echoed in almost all other Chinese Buddhist writings. As the Buddha surely would have wanted, his work is marked by its clarity, its economy of style, and its elegance.

Kumarajiva, who was of Central Asian origin, and who was as much influenced by Kashmir as he was by China, set a tone for Chinese

Buddhism that has prevailed to this day. This tone, coupled with the visual beauty of the Chinese language, easily makes Buddhist literature in Chinese one of the world's most satisfying spiritual and intellectual traditions. Master Hsing Yun is an important modern exponent of this tradition. His life and his writings have been one of the main forces in the revitalization of Chinese Buddhism in the world today. His monastery in Taiwan is the largest Chinese Buddhist monastery in the world.

Needless to say, the job of translating his work into English is not easy, especially when that work is a commentary on a sutra that was translated from the Sanskrit by Kumarajiva. Two very influential writers separated by sixteen centuries meet in a single volume, wherein one comments at length on the work of the other. Strictly speaking this is a translation that cannot be made. But Buddhism is a profound spiritual tradition based on principles deeper than the surface features of any language or even language itself. Indeed, the wisdom teachings of the Buddha, of which the *Diamond Sutra* is a part, state very clearly that the meaning of the Buddha's teaching must always be considered on three different levels. The first is the surface level of words, the second is the meaning of the words, and the third and most important level is the deep import of the words—the oceanic depths of the Buddha's teaching that have the power to change who we are and how we interpret our worlds.

The difficulty of translating both the commentary and the sutra forced me to search for this deeper level wherever I could, and thus I sometimes had to adjust the first and second levels of meaning to fit the English language. To do this most effectively, I did not rely exclusively on Master Hsing Yun's commentary on the sutra, but consulted all of his works—including oral teachings—to try to forge an explication of the sutra that is true to Master Hsing Yun's deepest sensibilities as well as to the deepest meaning of the sutra. This approach has the full blessing and encouragement of Master Hsing Yun, for he understands, perhaps better than anyone, that a tentative touch, or one that is too bound up in Chinese culture, will never succeed in bringing this sutra alive for readers of English. Thus notes that once referred to idiosyncrasies of the Chinese language now may refer to idiosyncrasies of the English

language, and commentary that depends on responses peculiar to a Chinese readership may now depend on responses peculiar to readers of English.

To make the commentary correspond to the sutra, I had to retranslate the sutra itself. Though several good translations of the *Diamond Sutra* already exist in English, they tend to be interpretive and to use vocabulary that drifts quite far from the Chinese. The translation of the sutra included in this volume is nearly literal. It is my hope that this will allow the commentary, which so often refers to the basic meanings of words, to make much better sense to readers of English. The notes section at the end of this volume is an integral part of the original commentary. These notes should serve to deepen appreciation of both the sutra and Master Hsing Yun's discussion of it.

Some people may wonder if a translation and commentary on the *Diamond Sutra* can be complete without including references to Sanskrit versions of the sutra. The answer to this is twofold. Firstly, Master Hsing Yun's commentary, as with most Chinese commentaries on the sutra, does not refer to a Sanskrit version. And secondly, Kumarajiva's translation into Chinese is the oldest reliable version of the sutra now extant.

The Sanskrit meanings of many words are discussed in the commentary, but these discussions are based not on a Sanskrit version of this sutra, but on the ways that these words are understood within the tradition of Chinese Buddhism. These discussions are part of the first two levels of meaning that the Buddha said were necessary to get to the third and deepest level of his teachings. The effort put into understanding how the Buddha used words and why he chose the ones he did will be repaid many times, for his use of language cuts to the very core of human awareness, as it opens before us vistas that expand beyond anything we may have experienced before.

I would like to thank Master Hsing Yun and members of Buddha's Light International Association for their support for this translation. I would also like to thank Ven. Yi Jih, without whose help this work would not have been possible. My deep thanks also to Ven. Miao Jie, Ananda W. P. Guruge, Sandra Wawrytko, David Kittelstrom, Jeff Jenkins,

Emily Hague, Carl Ewig, Robert Jones, and Maryrita Hillengas for their valuable help and encouragement.

May all merit that may accrue from this work be shared by sentient beings everywhere.

Tom Graham
San Diego, California



Introduction

Historically, Chinese Buddhism has been influenced by two streams of thought. One stream is concerned with karma, rebirth, and the many factors that condition our lives, while the other is concerned with the Buddha's teachings on wisdom and emptiness. The first stream explains life in this world and the things that condition it, while the second stream teaches us how to comprehend the mind of a buddha.

The Buddha's teachings on wisdom and emptiness are usually called his *prajna* teachings. *Prajna* is a Sanskrit word meaning "wisdom" or "discernment." There is a great deal of variety in Chinese *prajna* literature because the sutras and commentaries concerning it entered China at several different times and places; in addition to this, there are usually several translations into Chinese of each of these different works. Without question, the *Diamond Sutra* is the single best representative we have of the Buddha's *prajna* teachings. It is a small gem of great value, for to understand the *Diamond Sutra* is to understand the enlightened mind of the Buddha himself. *The Diamond Sutra* is the quintessence of the Buddha's teachings on wisdom. Though it is quite short, no other sutra or commentary within the *prajna* tradition has been discussed or written about more than the *Diamond Sutra*.

My goal for this book is to provide readers with the core of the Buddha's teachings on wisdom. I have drawn on the writings of several commentators, and particularly on those of Master P'u Wan, who lived during the early years of the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911). Prince Chao

Ming's (499–529) division of the sutra into thirty-two sections is the traditional division used in China, and I have followed this tradition.

The *Diamond Sutra* beats with two hearts: one is wisdom and the other is compassion. To be wise is to know and understand the essence of awareness. To be compassionate is to know and understand the essence of intention. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha shows us that ultimately compassion and wisdom are one. When this is fully understood, we will have understood the *Diamond Sutra*. When this is fully understood, we will know on what to “base our minds,” and we will also know that in truth there are no defilements “to be subdued.”

I hope that the reader will derive a profound and lasting comfort from the *Diamond Sutra*. It presents the single greatest solution that I know of to the trials and tribulations of life. The *Diamond Sutra* describes the very foundation of conscious life.

I know both that my understanding of the *Diamond Sutra* is flawed and that my ability to explain it to others is limited. Nevertheless, I hope that my words will in some small way lead the reader to understand what the Buddha meant by prajna. Prajna is sometimes called the “mother of all buddhas” because it elucidates the very nature of consciousness. The pure wisdom described in the *Diamond Sutra* has the power to carry us beyond life and death to the ultimate bliss of nirvana.

Master Hsing Yun



The Diamond Sutra



The Diamond Sutra

1. The Causes of This Dharma Meeting

Thus have I heard. At one time, the Buddha was in the state of Shravasti at the Jeta Grove with a gathering of monks numbering 1,250. At mealtime, the World-honored One put on his robe, picked up his bowl, and went into the city of Shravasti to beg for food. After he had gone from house to house, he returned to the grove. When he had finished eating, he put away his robe and bowl, washed his feet, straightened his mat, and sat down.

2. Subhuti's Request

At that time the elder monk Subhuti was among the gathering of monks. He rose from his seat, bared his right shoulder, kneeled on his right knee, and with palms pressed together before him, respectfully spoke to the Buddha saying, "Rare One, World-honored One, the Tathagata protects and is concerned about all bodhisattvas, and he instructs all bodhisattvas. World-honored One, when good men and good women commit themselves to highest complete enlightenment, on what should they base themselves, and how should they subdue their minds?"

The Buddha said, “Wonderful! Wonderful! Subhuti, you said that the Tathagata protects and is concerned about all bodhisattvas, and that he instructs all bodhisattvas. Now listen carefully while I tell you, when good men and good women commit themselves to highest complete enlightenment, on what they should base themselves, and how they should subdue their minds.”

“Excellent, World-honored One. I eagerly await your answer.”

3. *The Heart of the Mahayana*

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “All great bodhisattvas should subdue their minds in the following manner: they should realize as they vow to save all sentient beings that in truth there are no sentient beings to be saved. And they should realize as they vow to save all of the infinite, innumerable, illimitable sentient beings that in reality there are no sentient beings to be saved. When they vow to lead them all to nirvana without remainder—be they born of eggs, wombs, moisture, or transformation, or whether they have form, or no form, or whether they are able to perceive, or do not perceive, or cannot perceive, or will not perceive—they should realize that in truth there are no sentient beings to be led to nirvana.

“And why is this? Subhuti, if a bodhisattva has *lakshana* of self, *lakshana* of human beings, *lakshana* of sentient beings, or *lakshana* of a soul, then he is not a bodhisattva.”

4. *The Wonder of Behaving Without Attachment*

“Moreover, Subhuti, within this phenomenal world, a bodhisattva ought to practice generosity without basing it on anything. This

means that he should not base his generosity on form, and he should not base his generosity on sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought. Subhuti, the generosity of a bodhisattva should be like this and should not be based on any lakshana whatsoever. And why is this? If the generosity of a bodhisattva is not based on any lakshana whatsoever, then his goodness will be immeasurable.

"Subhuti, what do you say, can the vastness of space to the east of us be measured?"

"No, it cannot, World-honored One."

"Subhuti, can the vastness of space in any direction be measured? Can the vastness of space to the south, west, north, up, or down be measured?"

"No, it cannot, World-honored One."

"Subhuti, when the generosity of a bodhisattva is not based on lakshana, his goodness is just as immeasurable as that. Subhuti, a bodhisattva should base himself on this teaching and this teaching alone."

5. Seeing the Truth That Lies Beneath Perception

"Subhuti, what do you say, can you see the Tathagata in his bodily lakshana?"

"No, World-honored One, no one can see the Tathagata in his bodily lakshana. And why is this? The bodily lakshana that the Tathagata is talking about are not bodily lakshana."

The Buddha said to Subhuti, "All lakshana are delusive. If you can see that all lakshana are not lakshana, then you will see the Tathagata."

6. *The Rarity of True Belief*

Subhuti said to the Buddha, "World-honored One, can sentient beings, upon hearing these words, really be expected to believe them?"

The Buddha told Subhuti, "Don't talk like that. Even after I have been gone for five hundred years, there will still be people who are moral and who cultivate goodness. If they can believe this teaching and accept it as the truth, you can be sure that they will have planted good roots not just with one buddha, or two buddhas, or three, or four, or five buddhas, but that they will have planted good roots with tens of millions of buddhas. And if someone has so much as a single pure moment of belief concerning this teaching, Subhuti, they will be intimately known and seen by the Tathagata. And what is the reason that these sentient beings will attain such infinite goodness? These sentient beings will not return to the lakshana of self, the lakshana of human beings, the lakshana of sentient beings, the lakshana of souls, the lakshana of laws, or the lakshana of non-laws.

"And why is this? If a sentient being clings to lakshana in his mind, then he will cling to self, human beings, sentient beings, or souls. If he clings to the lakshana of a law, then he will also cling to self, human beings, sentient beings, or souls. And why is this? If he clings to even so little as the lakshana of a non-law, then he will also cling to self, human beings, sentient beings, or souls. Thus, he must not cling to laws or non-laws, and this is why I have often said to you monks that even my teachings should be understood to be like a raft; if even the Dharma must be let go of, then how much more must everything else be let go of?"