

Diamond Sutra: Introduction

May 9, 1979 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

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0:00 start of recording

[We will look at] one of the [Mahayana](#) scriptures: [Diamond Sutra](#). This is quite different from [Vimalakirti Sutra](#) we studied that was compiled almost in the same century.

During the first and the second centuries, most of the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures were compiled. The completion of Mahayana sutras – Buddhist scriptures – is classified into three periods.

The first period ... is the period in which a group of [Prajnaparamita sutras](#), or a group of [Saddharma Puṇḍarīka sutras](#), and a group of [Avatamsaka sutras](#), or one more group is a group of [Sukhāvatīvyūha sutras](#) – were all compiled during 150 to 270 CE.

The second is a period in which a group of [Nirvana sutras](#), a group of [Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda](#) sutras, a group of [Sandhinirmocana](#) sutras were all compiled, during 210 to 400.

The third is the period in which a group of [Yogachara](#) sutras and a group of esoteric sutras were all compiled, after 480.

3:18

During the first and the second centuries, there were several great organizers and philosophers of [Mahayana](#) Buddhist scriptures and Mahayana Buddhist teaching. The first person was [Nagarjuna](#), who lived from 150 to 250. And the second person was [Aryadeva](#), who lived from 170 to 270. And the third one is [Asanga](#), who lived from 310 to 390. Particularly Asanga compiled Buddhist psychology at that time. [Fourth was] [Vasubandhu](#), who lived from 320 to 400. So, we can imagine all Buddhist scriptures were compiled by those four great organizers and philosophers.

5:24

In the first period, when a group of [Prajnaparamita Sutras](#) were compiled, at that time a group of Prajnaparamita sutras consisted of, for example, [Vimalakirti Sutra](#), and [Mahaprajnaparamita](#) sutra. These are huge Buddhist scriptures.

Mahaprajnaparamita sutra consists of 600 fascicles, 200,000 gathas in verse, and an equivalent number of syllables in prose; this is a collection of 16 sutras, the short and long [versions], which set forth the doctrine of prajna and [emptiness](#).

So, the number nine sutra, among those 16 sutras, is the [Diamond Sutra](#). It's full name is Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

This sutra sets forth the doctrine of [śūnyatā](#) and [prajna](#). It is a very popular scripture, and many commentaries have been written on it. It is highly esteemed as a basic sutra in [Zen Buddhism](#).

We don't know who wrote this [Diamond Sutra](#). We know in [Buddhism](#), strictly

speaking, no Buddhist scriptures are mentioned directly by [Buddha Shakyamuni](#). All Buddhist scriptures were compiled indirectly, by his disciples and [patriarchs](#) – so absolutely no direct [Buddha's](#) teachings are mentioned. Even the [āgamas](#), or [Nikāyas](#) – there are four kinds of āgamas, which are the oldest Buddhist scriptures, compiled by Buddha's disciples after Buddha's death. So only those āgamas were compiled by Buddha's disciples, collecting the Buddha's statements or words and phrases and lots of teachings, which Buddha's disciples had heard and had memorized.

10:17

At the first, second, and third conferences after [Buddha's](#) death, many monks and Buddha's disciples gathered at a certain place, and collected Buddha's teachings from each monk, the Buddha's teaching that they had memorized. In those days, Indian people didn't have any custom to transmit Buddha's teachings or whatever it is by written scriptures, so they transmitted teachings with the oral method, directly. So at that time after Buddha's death, they tried to compile it all; they tried to leave behind Buddha's teachings as written scriptures. [Those are the] [āgamas](#).

Within the [āgamas](#), it was based on [Buddha's](#) teaching: philosophical, psychological teachings, mentioning [impermanence](#), [suffering](#), [no-self](#), and [nirvana](#). Those four are called the [Four Dharma Seals](#), mentioned by Buddha. Or sometimes, Three Dharma Seals: impermanence, [no-self](#), and nirvana.

So in the [āgama](#) sutras, those [Four Dharma Seals](#) were described. And then within the development of [Buddhism](#), you know pretty well, there is a famous Buddhist psychology [text] named [Abhidharmakosha](#). Abhidharmakosha focused on analyzing and synthesizing what the āgama sutras mentioned or taught us, psychologically, philosophically. So, the monks really analyzed the āgama sutras. That is the philosophical, Buddhist psychological scripture which is called

Abhidharmakosha.

13:51

But during the first and the second centuries, lots of the [Mahayana](#) Buddhist scriptures were compiled by – no one knows. By someone. But those people were not usual (or normal?) persons, but unusual persons, sort of genuine religious persons, who understood [Buddha's](#) teachings perfectly, and who understood perfectly the stream of Buddhist thought, the religious thought of those days. They were really concerned about the Buddha's teaching, how they should compile Buddha's teaching, how they should transmit Buddha's teaching. So they were required, by tendency of very public religious thought, to compile Buddha's teachings based on the original Buddhist teachings, based on [impermanence](#), [suffering](#), [no-self](#), and [nirvana](#).

Even though those Buddhist scriptures were not mentioned directly by [Buddha](#), Indian people believe those scriptures are really Buddha's teaching. They don't have any doubt; they accept perfectly those scriptures as Buddha's teachings. That's why we don't know who wrote them. But it doesn't matter; it doesn't matter.

Even the [Vimalakirti Sutra](#), we don't know who wrote that one. Traditionally, [Vimalakirti](#) wrote it – but we are “suspicious” whether such a person existed or not. Well, anyway, we don't know who wrote them, but huge Buddhist scriptures exist.

So those authors were really genuine religious persons, who understood the religious spirit mentioned by [Buddha](#), and also the tendency of the religious and philosophical thought of those days.

17:40

I want to tell you the fundamental thought of [Diamond Sutra](#). What does the Diamond Sutra want to teach us? [There is] only one point I want to tell you.

I told you before, last week, the [Diamond Sutra](#) is quite different from the [Vimalakirti Sutra](#), because the Diamond Sutra is a little bit “dry”.... The Vimalakirti Sutra is more like literature, Buddhist literature – beautiful. But Diamond Sutra is sort of based on philosophical Buddhist teaching. So, a little “dry”.

18:58

The group of [Prajnaparamita sutras](#) were compiled in the beginning of the Common Era by Indian people. The Indian people like very much the ... conceptualizing, everything conceptualized. Their conception is extending in all directions, beyond time and beyond space. That's why if you read the Buddhist scriptures written by the Indian people, they use lots of numbers. With modern people in our days, the number billions is maybe the top, but Indian people use more than billions. That is kalpas, eons; numbers that are completely beyond the measure of human speculation. And also, they try to express, try to teach the basic nature of human being, which is called [emptiness](#). But that emptiness is exactly expressed by conscious thought. Huge.

So [Prajnaparamita](#) is what is called The Perfection of Wisdom. The Indian people try to explain what wisdom is, according to concept. So, for instance, in [Diamond Sutra](#), it says:

[Subhuti](#) asked: What then, O Lord, is this discourse on [dharma](#), and how should I bear it in mind? – The Lord replied: This discourse on dharma, Subhuti, is called “Wisdom which has gone beyond,” and as such should you bear it in mind!

(From “[Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra](#)” by [Edward Conze](#), pp. 49)

Wisdom is expressed – explained, described – by a pretty conceptualized thing.

So according to this, they understand wisdom and try to teach wisdom like this:

Prajnaparamita: Wisdom is wisdom; but, wisdom is not wisdom; *this is* really wisdom. *[He chuckles.]*

In the latest Udambara, [Professor Abe](#) explains about the three stages: mountain is mountain; but mountain is not mountain; finally, mountain is mountain. This is really the tendency of the Indian way of thinking: everything is conceptual. That is why they use lots of terms, beautiful terms, lots of huge numbers, completely beyond human speculation.

22:51

But when [Buddhism](#) is transmitted into China, [it becomes] a little bit practical. Buddhism becomes “practical” in order to explain [Prajnaparamita](#) not conceptually, but very practically.

For instance, you know the koan – [Zen Buddhists](#) always use a koan, but this koan is really based on Buddhist philosophy mentioned by Prajnaparamita sutra: “Mountain is mountain, mountain is not mountain, but mountain is mountain.” Very practically they explain [it using the example of] Zen monks, just like this, for instance...

A [Zen Master](#) said to his assembly: “One day,” he said, “a hundred years after my death, I will be reborn as a cow at one of the farmers’ houses in my village, down far from my temple. And then if you go there to see the cow, first look at his underarm. And then,” it says, “You can find my name there.” *[The group laughs.]* That is called [Isan](#) ; his name was Isan.

So if you see that, immediately you say, “Oh, this is Isan!” But it is not Isan. You have made a mistake if you say so, because it is not Isan; it is a cow. So you say, “Oh, that is a cow, not Isan.” But it’s not a cow; it’s Isan. *[Laughter.]* And then, Isan said to the assembly: “How do you call it?”

Do you understand? Very practical, very practical. *[Laughter.]* How do you call it?

For instance, there is a [Katagiri](#). But this is not Katagiri, this is a cow. *[He laughs.]* But you say “cow”; it’s not a cow.

Or, for instance, everything is [Buddha](#): human beings are buddha, floors are Buddha, trees are Buddha, Dan is Buddha. If so, a monk says, “Shall I call you Dan?” *[The group laughs.]* So: [Katagiri](#), Buddha, Dan. It’s not Katagiri, or it’s Dan. But it’s not Dan; it’s Katagiri. How do you call it?

(Note: He might be saying “Dainin” not “Dan”, but it doesn’t sound like it.)

That’s sort of a [Zen](#) puzzle; but this is really based on Buddhist philosophy. ‘A’ is ‘A’, but ‘A’ is not ‘A’. But ‘A’ is really ‘A’.

27:05

This philosophy is not a matter of the ‘A’ itself, or the buffalo or cow itself. It doesn’t matter. But, the matter of existential fact or reality, that is the point. [Katagiri](#) is one of the beings which is always floating in the stream of change. So, there is nothing to get. We are always chasing after something, but we cannot get it.

The important point is the existential reality. What is the existential reality? If you say [Katagiri](#), it is what his existential fact or reality is. That is a point. But usually we don’t believe that; we don’t say that, we don’t understand it in that way. If you

see Katagiri, immediately you say “Katagiri.” This is very understandable – but it’s a very shallow understanding.

28:40

Existential fact is vast, very vast, which is never limited by a certain thing called [Katagiri](#), or buffalo, or ‘A’, or ‘B’, or ‘C’, or mountain, or river. That is existential fact or reality. Because, completely – well, what would you say – nothing to say. Nothing to say. It is vastness. Nothing to touch, nothing to ignore, nothing to dichotomize; this is the basic nature of being.

In the very basic nature of existence, Katagiri really is interdependent, interpenetrated, interconnected with others and all existence. But according to our consciousness, we really understand Katagiri separate from others. That is characteristic of consciousness: separation. That is why, first of all, we have to deny your understanding. But – to deny is not to destroy existence. To deny is to enable you to realize something else around the subject you have understood.

31:11

For instance, here is a paper, white paper. At that time you say immediately, “This is white paper.” But, we don’t say “white paper.” If we say “this is white paper,” you understand only white paper. [Buddhism](#) immediately says, “This is not white.” “Not white” means to bring the other colors into your mind. “Not white” doesn’t mean to destroy white; “not white” means to bring other colors into your mind. So, black, or yellow, or red – immediately. That means white paper, white color, doesn’t exist alone. White color exists with the rest of the colors: black, yellow, red, and other colors.

That is negation. That is why we have to negate first: white is white, but white is not white. And then at that time, you can understand this white in the broad vision. At that time, this white is really white.

33:04

Do you understand? This is a very simple explanation. Usually we don't understand in that way, because we understand negation as negation. But negation is not merely negation, destroying something. "No eyes, no ears, no mouth, no body, no mind" doesn't mean to destroy your eyes, your nose. If you say "no eyes," that means pay careful attention to the rest of the physical parts: nose, mouth, ears, head, heart, and consciousness; lots of things. And also, circumstances, and the nature of all beings.

That's why eyes are eyes, but eyes are not eyes. That means, eyes are supported by ... nose, mouth, ears, body, mind – all natures. That is why at that time, no eyes can emphasize their own existence based on egoistic sense. "I am eye," they cannot say. So completely, eyes keep their own mouth shut. *[He chortles, then the group laughs.]*

Actually, practically or actually, eyes function or eyes try to communicate with nose, mouth, ears – practically. This is the function of eyes. But if you say eyes, that is really the idea of eyes, separate from nose, mouth, ears, body, heart.

If you understand eyes are eyes, this is the first stage; this is very conceptualized. Everything is separate. This is not enough. So you should animate your eyes as they are. *How?* You should understand nose, mouth, ears – anyway, everything. And then at that time, eyes really work, pretty well.

35:44

I told you always: Zen practice is very simple. I told you, very practically, the compassionate attention penetrates from the top of the head to the tip of the toes. That means what?

... If you want to play the guitar, you cannot play the guitar with two hands, actually. Strictly speaking, you cannot play it with two hands: you have to play the

guitar with two hands, your nose, your ears, your mouth, your consciousness, your head, your knowledge, your heart, your emotions, your past life, present life, future life; with composers, and audience, everything. And then, at that time, you can really play guitar. That is called playing guitar. Don't think that "Oh, I can play guitar." **Buddhism** says, "No. You cannot play the guitar." – "But I can play the guitar!" – "It's not good enough." [*He chuckles.*] Try to practice until the playing guitar is completely tuning in the rhythm of the universe, including trees, birds, and your mouth, your eyes, your heart, your emotions, audience, and composer; everything. And then at that time, you are called a guitar player.

Do you understand? So you say, "I am a guitar player", "I am a musician." You say it very simply: "I am a guitar player." "I am a painter." "I am a poet." Of course, you are a poet. You are a guitar player, you are a musician, you are a painter. I understand. But it's not good *enough*. You are *not* a poet. "How come?" A simple question: "How come? I am a poet. I am a writer." Of course you are a writer, you are a musician. But, *watch out* – okay? You are not a musician; you are not a writer. That means, you have to write something with all sentient beings.

How? Practice. Continue to write, beyond like or dislike, until your writing is completely flowing, just like water. If you see the pen, pencils, and your hands, and also your mind, your heart, your emotions, and your past life, present life, future life – all are going on, moving. All the [*unintelligible*] that your pen and hands move to write, very naturally. It is pretty hard. But at that time, you are called a great writer, great painter.

That's why we have to practice. We have to [do] fundamental practice: as a writer, as a painter, as a poet. If you really want to support your life, as a poet, or painter, or musician, you have to practice. Not for a certain period of time – for long. From the beginning to end, you have to do it.

And then, at that time, you can say, "I am a guitar player, I am a musician." Even

though you don't think so, people call you; you are a guitar player. And then, people don't tell you, but very naturally, people hire you. And people ask you to play guitar in public, very naturally, before they put a certain name on you. So, that's pretty good. Sometimes you don't know when I became a writer, or when I am a great musician – you don't know. But it's not necessary. People ask you to play the guitar, to write something.

That is a great chance for you to practice, to continue to do it.

40:46

This is the very important point [Diamond Sutra](#) says. There are lots of ... contradictory expressions. “‘A’ is ‘A’, but ‘A’ is not ‘A’, that’s why we say ‘A’ is ‘A’.” We don’t understand exactly. “‘A’ is ‘A’” – why is it we have to think that? It makes us confused.

But *who* makes you confused? *You* make yourself confused, already; because we originally are completely vastness; no confusion. But we are always [saying], “I like this,” “I don’t like this,” or [*unintelligible*]. Even though you don’t like your life, or you like your life; a certain period of time, you like your life very much, but a certain period of time you don’t like it. But whatever you say – you don’t like, or you like – what is life? What are you? You are still you, and your life is existent. How can you judge?

So, who protects your life? Who makes it possible for your life to exist for twenty years? You? No. Something else. That is really vastness. This is called [emptiness](#), philosophically speaking, and if you experience that emptiness it is called [Buddha Nature](#). Or, plainly speaking, that is universal consciousness, or truth, or sometimes, vastness.

And sometimes, vastness is personalized, and it’s called [Buddha](#). We realize the

vastness of the universe, your life, where there is no distraction, no dichotomies, no discrimination. Completely peace; perfectly peace and harmony.

43:50

So, who makes you confused? ... We make ourselves confused, that's all. Why? Because we have a consciousness already. So, immediately, consciousness starts to pick. This is the intellectual understanding of human existence. Immediately we analyze an existential fact. If we analyze the existential fact, we are at two contradictory [aspects]. 'A' is 'A,' but 'A' is not 'A.' [Katagiri](#) is Katagiri; of course Katagiri is Katagiri. But Katagiri is not Katagiri; Katagiri is [Minnesota Zen Meditation Center](#). Katagiri cannot exist alone, separate from Zen Center. Katagiri must be supported, must be [one], must be alive, with Zen Center. It is true, Katagiri is not Katagiri. And then, I understand myself in all [features].

45:23

This is very important. That's why we have to explain [ourselves] – because consciousness already analyzes existential fact. Existential fact itself is nothing; no waves, very calm. [Katagiri](#) is just Katagiri; that's all. That's enough. If I say Katagiri is just Katagiri, that Katagiri is broad scale of Katagiri, interconnected, interpenetrated with Zen Center, the people, Minnesota, Japan, and the universe.

This is very natural. If you understand in that way, it's not necessary to have a complicated system of understanding: “‘A’ is ‘A’; ‘A’ is not ‘A’; that's why ‘A’ is ‘A’” – it's not necessary to say so. But we have to do so, because consciousness is already complicated. That's why we have to explain. That's it.

That is characteristic of a human being. Birds or dogs don't think in that way. When they feel hungry, they just bite, just eat. *[Laughter.]*

Dogs, they bark at you. When you pass a certain home, immediately they appear and bark at you. I don't like the dog barking at me. But, nothing to do. Sometimes, well, just one word, a very simple word, you can stop it; don't give a gentle word, just a simple word: "*shut up*". [*Laughter.*]

[*Tape change.*]

... stop them barking, you say, "shut up." That's enough.

A dog ... just barks at you. This is a dog. No problem. But can you bark at people like that? [*Laughter.*] Of course, you can do it. I can bark at you like this. But immediately I say, "Why do you bark at them? What do you mean? What do you mean by barking?" You start to think. Don't you think so?

48:27

You should enjoy your life, of course. Let's enjoy our life, as you like. Of course, let's enjoy it.

But immediately you think, "What is the purpose of life? Why is it we have to work hard every day? Why is it that we have to practice with pain?"

Obviously we have to think like this. This is a beautiful, beautiful aspect of human life. Because you are human, not dog, not bird, that's why you can realize a universe in a broad [region], and ... understand people. We can figure out ways to live in peace and harmony with people – not only under certain circumstances, under *all* circumstances, we can live, because we think always like this. That's why we have to think like this.

49:42

But finally, the final practice is very simple: 'A' is just 'A.' Mountain is just mountain. River is just river. And until this, you have to *do*. When you are a ballerina, you are a ballerina, and just a ballerina – that's enough. But this ballerina is exactly interconnected, interpenetrated – [components], everything; nothing to separate from her or him. At that time, this ballerina is called a great ballerina. So what is that? Ballerina is ballerina; that's enough. River is green; flower is red.

That's why a [Zen Master](#) says, "When you feel hungry, eat. When you feel [sleepy], sleep." But this is the third stage; this is the very profound, highest level of understanding. Not just like a dog, not just like a [cat](#). We misunderstand the Zen saying, "When you feel hungry, eat. When you feel sleepy, sleep." This is not the first stage, the first level of understanding; this is the very profound, highest level of understanding.

51:30

Okay. Next time, we will study [the chapters of the [Diamond Sutra](#)] one by one.

Do you have some questions?

The textbook is the combined textbook, Buddhist Wisdom Books, [compiling] two sutras: [Diamond Sutra](#) and Heart Sutra, translated by Doctor Conze. You can find a cheaper ... paperback. ("[Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra](#)" by [Edward Conze](#).)

He also [added] his commentary [to the translations]. Those commentaries will be very helpful for you to understand the [Diamond Sutra](#). Without the commentary, it's very difficult to understand, because often you can see very contradictory expressions of the Buddhist teaching.

Okay, do you have any questions?

53:00

Question: [Roshi](#)? Do you *[unintelligible]* when you gave the year when the sutras were written, do those years correspond with the Christian years that we use *[unintelligible]* or are they Buddhist years?

[There is some confusing discussion.]

Another person: Is it by the *[unintelligible]* calendar?

Katagiri: Oh, oh, yes - of course. I am talking about that.

54:13

Question: [Roshi](#), two or three weeks ago in a lecture, you said that if we are sitting in order to help ourselves, that we should stop sitting. This came up while you were gone this week, and we talked about it a little bit. It seemed that, if we took your words literally, almost everybody in the room would have to stop sitting. Uh, can you...

[Laughter.]

Katagiri: *[Quietly:]* Uh, before that, what did I say?

Same person: Well, you were talking – I think it was about sitting [zazen](#) just to sit zazen, and not to have expectations or goals, or... I'm not sure... *[unintelligible]* But that sentence really struck me.

Katagiri: *[Quietly:]* Yeah. *[Laughter.]*

Maybe it's connected with a previous statement. *[Laughter.]* ... from one sentence, before, previous *[unintelligible]*

[Laughter.]

Because we have to understand something as a whole. “‘A’ is ‘A’; ‘A’ is not ‘A’.”
[Laughter.] “‘A’ is ‘A’.”

55:48

It makes you sometimes confused, but this is very nice practice for you.
[Laughter.] But practically, it's very simple, very simple. Because you have to return home, and settle in peace and harmony. Where is home? *[unintelligible]*
That's all. This is [zazen](#).

But when you expect something, you completely go away from your home, seeking for something. But actually not; there is nothing to get. And finally you have to return. So, if you seek something going out of yourself, out of your home, well it's fine, but it makes you dizzy, that's all. Running here and there, always. But the more you are busy, the more you are exhausted. And finally you have to return home and settle yourself in peace and harmony. And then you say, “Oh, this is [alright].” This is our point. That's all. The basic practice is very simple, very simple, really.

But before, it takes time. It takes time, returning to home and settling in the self. Until you understand this, penetrating from skin, muscle, bone, and marrow, it takes time. But intellectually, we understand pretty well: “Oh yes, I want to go back to my home.” Everyone understands. But it takes time, because until it's penetrated, it becomes one with your skin, muscle, bone, and marrow, it takes time.

That's why we have to continue to sit. I don't know why. *[He chuckles.]* But you are a lucky man, anyway. You are a lucky person.

58:09 end of recording

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