

THE DIAMOND SUTRA

TRANSFORMING THE WAY
WE PERCEIVE THE WORLD

Mu Soeng



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

The Role of the *Diamond Sutra* in the Zen Tradition

THROUGHOUT A LONG HISTORY of encounters with indigenous religious cultures, different schools of Buddhism developed a great variety of methods and approaches in response to specific historical, cultural, and geographical needs. In medieval India, in an age of great scholastic activity, there was the school of Madhyamaka philosophy for the intellectually inclined. Madhyamaka points to the limitations of the intellect by rejecting and refuting all points of view. When all views are abandoned, one enters the experiential realm of shunyata.

The Madhyamaka School failed to provide a methodological framework for deepening its own penetrating intellectual insights. It was left to the Yogachara tradition in India, as the self-appointed corrective successor to Madhyamaka, to provide the methodologies to bring to fruition the insights of Madhyamaka. In China and Tibet, the most creative impulses of the Yogachara-Madhyamaka interaction gave rise to Zen and tantra, respectively, to provide meditational and doctrinal context for deepening the experience of shunyata, while remaining true to the paradoxical nature of the Madhyamaka insights.

Bodhidharma, the legendary Indian founder of Zen in China, is said to have given his robes, bowls, and a copy of the *Lankavatara Sutra* to Hui-ko, the second patriarch, as symbols of transmission of the lineage. Thus, it would seem that the *Lankavatara*, a Yogachara text, ought to be most closely associated with the later philosophical developments in Zen; instead we find that over centuries, the *Diamond* and the *Heart Sutras* have become the two most revered, influential, and commonly recited texts in Zen monasteries throughout east Asia.

Brevity may have been a decisive factor in the adoption of these texts by the Zen sect. In the case of the *Diamond Sutra*, the verse at the end:

So you should see [view] all of the fleeting world:
 A star at dawn, a bubble in the stream,
 A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
 A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

has been an inspiration for countless generations of Zen Buddhists. A similar place of honor is accorded the final verse of the *Heart Sutra: Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*. In both cases, while the influence of mantra religiosity is quite clear, it nonetheless highlights the Mahayana inclination to replace a thousand sermons with a single poem, an inclination still more pronounced in the Zen tradition where the distrust of language is so explicit.

The first noteworthy association we have of the *Diamond Sutra* with the Zen tradition is through the life of Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch, considered the real founder of the distinctly Chinese Zen tradition.⁴³ Whether legend or fact, the story of Hui-neng says that as a young boy he lived in extreme poverty and gathered wood to sell in the market to support himself and his mother. One day, in the marketplace, he heard a monk chant a phrase from the *Diamond Sutra* that said, "Let your mind function freely, without abiding anywhere or in anything." Upon hearing this phrase, the young boy was suddenly enlightened!

The *Diamond Sutra* figures again prominently in the Hui-neng legend when it is said that the fifth patriarch, Hung-jen (600–74) of the northern Zen school, expounded the sutra to Hui-neng and brought him to fuller awakening at the time of giving him transmission in the school and the robe of the patriarchate. The rest of Hui-neng's story is inseparable from the development of Zen in China and the history of Buddhism in east Asia. Among other things, Hui-neng's "awakening" experience, used by his student Shen-hui as a wedge in the rivalry between the "northern" and "southern" schools of Zen, began the controversy in the Zen tradition between sudden and gradual awakening, which has persisted to this day.

The second intersection of the Zen tradition with the *Diamond Sutra* is through the early career of Te-shan Hsuan-chien (782–865), one of the most celebrated Chinese Zen masters. Te-shan began his clerical career in Sichuan Province, in the southwest, and even as a young man attained mastery of the Prajnaparamita texts, especially the *Diamond Sutra*. He spent some twenty years reflecting upon and writing commentaries on the *Diamond Sutra*. Then he heard reports of a new cult in the far southeast where followers of the "sudden awakening teaching" sat facing a bare wall

in order to see directly into their own buddha nature! Te-shan was full of righteous indignation—how could these people who neglect the study of the sutras aspire to buddhahood simply by seeing into their own nature?

Determined to put a stop to this heresy, he put all his commentaries on the *Diamond Sutra* in a backpack and set out on foot on a long journey to the far south. Arriving there, he stopped at a roadside tea shop and asked for some refreshments. These refreshments were, and still are, known as *mou mou*. As a play of words, the characters for *mou mou* can also mean "mind fresheners." The old lady who was the proprietor of the teashop playfully asked the monk what great treasure he was carrying in his backpack. Pridefully, Te-shan mentioned that he had spent twenty years writing these commentaries on the *Diamond Sutra* and that he was now on his way to teach the southern barbarians the true way to understand the Buddha's teaching. The old lady became reflective and said to Te-shan, "I have a question for you concerning the *Diamond Sutra*. If your answer can convince me, I will serve you the *mou mou* without any charge. But if you cannot, you may not be served."

Needless to say Te-shan was quite delighted to have this chance to prove his great scholarship. The old lady asked him, "In the *Diamond Sutra*, it says that one cannot get hold of the past mind, one cannot get hold of the future mind, and one cannot even get hold of the present mind. So, my question to you is which mind are you going to refresh?"

Te-shan was completely stunned. All his scholarship could not help him, and he was unable to answer the old lady. The chastened Te-shan did not eat his refreshments after all but asked for directions to the nearest Zen temple. This part of Te-shan's first encounter with Zen ends with him publicly burning his twenty years worth of scholarly writings on the *Diamond Sutra* in the temple courtyard the next morning. Te-shan went on to become one of the most celebrated masters in Zen history, and his life story remains one of the tradition's great anecdotes.

Te-shan's encounter with the old lady is one of the earliest examples of koan development in Zen. The hallmark of this development is a no-holds-barred approach, largely verbal but sometimes physical, which forces the listener to find meaning in his or her own inner experience, where an understanding of the situational context no longer depends on a textual or conceptual framework.

The Zen tradition has tried to comprehend this wisdom through the now formalized teaching of not-knowing. Not-knowing is the intuitive wisdom where one understands information to be just that—mere information—

and tries to penetrate to the heart of the mystery that language and information are trying to convey. All we have, in normal human conditioning, is second-, third-, or fourthhand information. In our ignorance, we treat these units of information as self-evident truths and fail to investigate our own experience directly. The not-knowing approach is not a philosophical or intellectual entertainment; it is a doorway to liberation.

The framework of not-knowing with which the Zen tradition works has *theopathy* but no theology (to restate the uneasy relationship between a spiritual experience and religious dogma). We find the same organizing principle at work in the *Diamond Sutra*. The paradoxical sayings of the *Diamond Sutra* presage the development of the koan method of practice in the Zen tradition. Developed in east Asia as a distinctly Chinese form of Buddhist meditation, the koan is an intentionally absurd formula whose purpose is to produce a liberating breakthrough in the mind of the meditator, that is, to shake the mind out of its linear, conceptualized ways of thinking. The puzzling, paradoxical sayings of the *Diamond Sutra* serve the same function and force listeners and readers to rearrange their conceptual framework.

Literary and Social Conventions in the *Diamond Sutra*

JUST AS IN OTHER Buddhist sutras, the *Diamond Sutra* contains an abundance of Indian literary conventions of respect embedded in the hierarchical structure of Indian religiosity, such as how to address the Buddha and how to request his teaching. We also find numerous repetitive phrases, indicative of the remnants of the oral culture of ancient Buddhism. In looking at the sutras as archeological treasures, we have to keep in mind that even when they were written down, a Mahayana person, whether a monastic or a lay practitioner, did not have access to more than one or two sutras in his or her lifetime. Hence the practitioner's responsibility was to memorize the sutra by heart and literally worship it as the body of the Buddha. The repetitive phrases undoubtedly helped this memorization process.

In keeping with the literary genres of its time, the linguistic formulations in the Mahayana sutras are rhetorical and exhortatory, baroque and grandiloquent. No one has ever accused the Mahayana sutras of precision, and the *Diamond Sutra* is no exception.

The style and the setting of the sutra are static, immobile, like a Noh play. The tableau is set stiffly with no room for variation, but where a rich exploration of nuances is possible. If we stretch our imagination, we may even find a hint of *Waiting for Godot*, with Subhuti playing the straight man!

The *Diamond Sutra* generally follows the basic structure and linguistic style of other Mahayana sutras:

In fact, their [sutras'] style is a major defining characteristic of the [Mahayana] movement. Their surrealistic locales, measured in mind-boggling dimensions and filled with dazzling apparitions; their immense, all-star cast of characters; and the sheer extravagance of their language all serve to reassert the primacy of the visionary, shamanic side of Buddhism that had been generally