

THE VAJRACCHEDIKA PRAJÑAPARAMITA SUTRA

The Diamond Sutra

The Diamond Sutra

A dharma talk presented to the CT sangha of the
Dharma Teacher Order by Craig Hannah on
Nov. 11, 2017

I tried to understand and convey the thoughts of this sutra and the thoughts of many people about this sutra. I don't have adequate words to express my gratitude to the builders of these rafts helping me to the other shore.

This sutra has the power to cut through illusion. Think about what's said, but don't be shy about going beyond thinking.

"Abiding nowhere, let the mind work."

The Sutra's Name

The vajra, a diamond or thunderbolt, is a metaphor for the type of wisdom that cuts and shatters illusions to get to ultimate reality.



It is also is a weapon won in battle which is used as a ritual object to symbolize both the properties of a diamond (indestructibility) and a thunderbolt (irresistible force).

The Family of Literature

- The Diamond Sutra is part of the Prajnaparamita (The perfection of wisdom) literature
- 'Prajna' is insight in the true nature of reality, namely:
 - primarily anicca (impermanence)
 - dukkha (dissatisfaction or suffering)
 - anattā (non-self)
 - śūnyatā (emptiness)

Prajnaparamita Themes (1)

The meaning and profundity of prajña - a deep understanding of reality born from deep thinking and meditative insight.

- Non-conceptual
 - The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines nonconceptual mental content as those mental states that “can represent the world even though the bearer of those mental states need not possess the concepts required to specify their content.”
 - Other definitions: It is direct perception of reality without the involvement of the mind.
- Non-dual
 - Nondualism primarily refers to a mature state of consciousness, in which the dichotomy of I-other is 'transcended', and awareness is described as 'centerless' and 'without dichotomies'.
- Transcendental.
 - In this context, transcendence means that the wisdom transcends not only the extremes of conceptual thinking but suffering as well.

Prajnaparamita Themes (2)

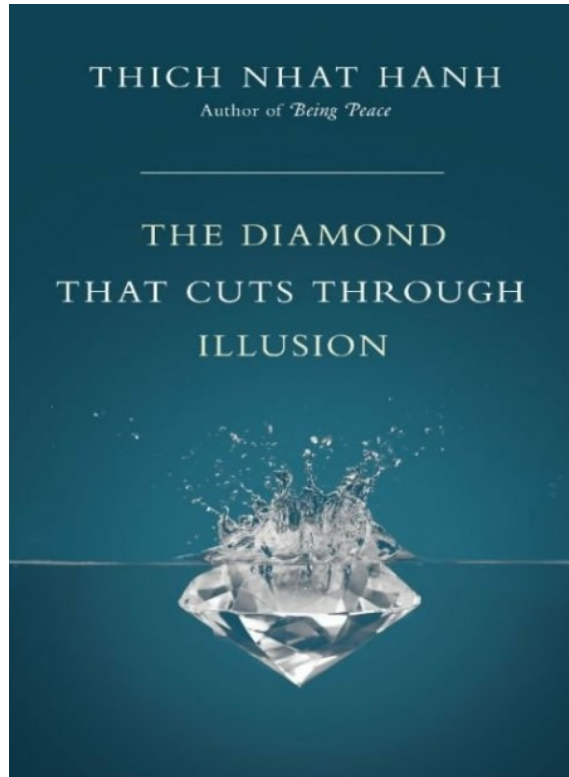
- An expression often used in the Prajñāpāramitā sutras is the negation of a previous statement in the form 'A is not A, therefore it is A'. Sometimes this is called the 'logic of not'
- Bodhisattva ideal
- Laudatory self reference – the lengthy praise of the sutra itself, the immense merits to be obtained from treating even a verse of it with reverence, and the nasty penalties which will accrue in accordance with karma to those who denigrate the scripture.

Buddhist Dialectic Format

- The format of the sutras is a dialectic
 - A discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments.
 - Dialectical methods demands the users to examine the objects in relation to other objects and to the whole system, and examine the objects within a dynamic, evolutionary environment.
 - Dialectical method is usually contrasted with metaphysical method, which examine the objects in a separated, isolated and static environment

Text and comments based on
The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion

By Thich Nhat Hanh



Part 1

THE DIALECTICS OF PRAJÑAPARAMITA

1 - THE SETTING

Comments

This is what I heard one time when the Buddha was staying in the monastery in Anathapindika's park in the Jeta Grove near Shravasti with a community of 1,250 bhikshus, fully ordained monks.

That day, when it was time to make the round for alms, the Buddha put on his sanghati robe and, holding his bowl, went into the city of Shravasti to seek alms food, going from house to house. When the almsround was completed, he returned to the monastery to eat the midday meal. Then he put away his sanghati robe and his bowl, washed his feet, arranged his cushion, and sat down.

The sutra was given in a monastery near Shravasti to 1,250 monks.

2 - SUBHUTI'S QUESTION

Comments

At that time, the Venerable Subhuti stood up, bared his right shoulder, put his knee on the ground, and, folding his palms respectfully, said to the Buddha, "World-Honored One, it is rare to find someone like you. You always support and show special confidence in the bodhisattvas.

"World-Honored One, if sons and daughters of good families want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?"

The Buddha replied, "Well said, Subhuti! What you have said is absolutely correct. The Tathagata always supports and shows special confidence in the bodhisattvas. Please listen with all of your attention and the Tathagata will respond to your question. If daughters and sons of good families want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, they should rely on the following and master their thinking in the following way."

The Venerable Subhuti said, "Lord, we are so happy to hear your teachings."

The shortened response to Subhuti's question is that they should develop a bodhisattva mind (which is to develop the deepest understanding and the greatest ability to help others).

A way to do that is what is explained in the Diamond Sutra.

3 - THE FIRST FLASH OF LIGHTNING

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “This is how the bodhisattva mahasattvas master their thinking. However many species of living beings there are—whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they have form or do not have form; whether they have perceptions or do not have perceptions; or whether it cannot be said of them that they have perceptions or that they do not have perceptions, we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated. “Why is this so? If, Subhuti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva.”

Comments

An authentic bodhisattva is one who embodies two factors in his being:

- The great aspiration to bring all beings to the shore of liberation
- The wisdom of nondiscrimination.

A person has to get rid of the four notions of self, a person, a living being, and a life span in order to have the wisdom of nondiscrimination.

- Self
- Person
- Living being
- Life span

4 - THE GREATEST GIFT

Comments

“Moreover, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object—that is to say he does not rely on any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma—to practice generosity. That, Subhuti, is the spirit in which a bodhisattva should practice generosity, not relying on signs. Why? If a bodhisattva practices generosity without relying on signs, the happiness that results cannot be conceived of or measured. Subhuti, do you think that the space in the Eastern Quarter can be measured?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

“Subhuti, can space in the Western, Southern, and Northern Quarters, above and below be measured?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

“Subhuti, if a bodhisattva does not rely on any concept when practicing generosity, then the happiness that results from that virtuous act is as great as space. It cannot be measured. Subhuti, the bodhisattvas should let their minds dwell in the teachings I have just given.”

Using, as an example, generosity - the first paramita, the Buddha explains why the wisdom of non-discrimination must be applied.

(All six are:

1. Generosity (danaparamita),
2. Mindfulness trainings (silaparamita),
3. Endurance (kshantiparamita),
4. Diligence (viryaparamita),
5. Meditation (dhyana-paramita),
6. Wisdom (prajñaparamita)

5 - SIGNLESSNESS

“What do you think, Subhuti? Is it possible to grasp the Tathagata by means of bodily signs?”

“No, World-Honored One. When the Tathagata speaks of bodily signs, there are no signs being talked about.”

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “In a place where there is something that can be distinguished by signs, in that place there is deception. If you can see the signless nature of signs, then you can see the Tathagata.”

Comments

A sign is the object of our perception and are often inaccurate and sometimes quite erroneous.

If we look deeply into A and see that A is not A, we see A in its fullest flowering.

A Chinese Zen master once said, “Before practicing Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. While practicing Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers. After practicing, mountains are mountains again and rivers are rivers again.”

PART TWO

THE LANGUAGE OF NONATTACHMENT

6 - A ROSE IS NOT A ROSE

Comments

The Venerable Subhuti said to the Buddha, "In times to come, will there be people who, when they hear these teachings, have real faith and confidence in them?"

The Buddha replied, "Do not speak that way, Subhuti. Five hundred years after the Tathagata has passed away, there will still be people who enjoy the happiness that comes from observing the precepts. When such people hear these words, they will have faith and confidence that here is the truth. We should know that such people have sown seeds not only during the lifetime of one Buddha, or even two, three, four, or five Buddhas, but have, in truth, planted wholesome seeds during the lifetimes of tens of thousands of Buddhas. Anyone who, for only a second, gives rise to a pure and clear confidence upon hearing these words of the Tathagata, the Tathagata sees and knows that person, and he or she will attain immeasurable happiness because of this understanding. Why?

"Because that kind of person is not caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. They are not caught up in the idea of a dharma or the idea of a non-dharma. They are not caught up in the notion that this is a sign and that is not a sign. Why? If you are caught up in the idea of a dharma, you are also caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. If you are caught up in the idea that there is no dharma, you are still caught up in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. That is why we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist. This is the hidden meaning when the Tathagata says, 'Bhikshus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft.' All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings."

Subhuti is concerned that the Buddha's teachings will not be remembered in the future. The Buddha reassures him that they will because of their power to see beyond concepts. A concept is our perception of something

There are three stages: (1) A rose is (2) not a rose, therefore (3) it is a rose. The third rose is very different from the first. The notion "empty of emptiness" (shunyata) in the teaching of prajñaparamita aims at helping us be free from the concept of emptiness. True emptiness is not emptiness. True emptiness is true being.

"That is why we should not get caught up in dharmas or in the idea that dharmas do not exist. This is the hidden meaning when the Tathagata says, 'Bhikshus, you should know that all of the teachings I give to you are a raft.' All teachings must be abandoned, not to mention non-teachings."

7 - ENTERING THE OCEAN OF REALITY

“What do you think, Subhuti, has the Tathagata arrived at the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind? Does the Tathagata give any teaching?”

The Venerable Subhuti replied, “As far as I have understood the Lord Buddha’s teachings, there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, nor is there any independently existing teaching that the Tathagata gives. Why? The teachings that the Tathagata has realized and spoken of cannot be conceived of as separate, independent existences and therefore cannot be described. The Tathagata’s teaching is not self-existent nor is it nonself-existent. Why? Because the noble teachers are only distinguished from others in terms of the unconditioned.”

Comments

The teaching of the Buddha cannot be found outside of daily life. No dharma—not “the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind,” suchness, nirvana, Tathagata, a rose, eating a meal, washing the dishes, Subhuti, a friend, a house, a horse, or the teachings the Tathagata has realized—can be grasped or described. These things are merely concepts pointing to a non-conceptual truth.

It is not correct to call the Tathagata’s teaching a dharma, since by doing so we put it into a box, a pattern, and isolate it from other things. But saying it is not a dharma is also not correct, because it really is a dharma—not one that can be isolated but one that transcends all perceptions.

Meditation aims at breaking through all conceptual limitations and barriers so that we can move freely in the boundless ocean of reality.

8 - NONATTACHMENT

“What do you think, Subhuti? If someone were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with the seven precious treasures as an act of generosity, would that person bring much happiness by this virtuous act?”

The Venerable Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One. It is because the very natures of virtue and happiness are not virtue and happiness that the Tathagata is able to speak about virtue and happiness.”

The Buddha said, “On the other hand, if there is someone who accepts these teachings and puts them into practice, even if only a gatha of four lines, and explains them to someone else, the happiness brought about by this virtuous act far exceeds the happiness brought about by giving the seven precious treasures. Why? Because, Subhuti, all Buddhas and the dharma of the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind of all Buddhas arise from these teachings. Subhuti, what is called Buddhadharma is everything that is not Buddhadharma.”

Comments

Using concepts, such as “virtue” or “happiness”, that have already been shown to not be separate entities Subhuti is no longer imprisoned by words and therefore can use them without any harm. But the concepts must be seen with the implied nature of interbeing in each word, or the words can enslave us. This is why the Buddha is giving us The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion.

The virtue of these teachings is great because “all Buddhas and the dharma of the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind of all Buddhas arise from these teachings.” Prajña, understanding, is the mother of all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

PART THREE

THE ANSWER IS IN THE QUESTION

9 - DWELLING IN PEACE

Comments

“What do you think, Subhuti? Does a Stream-Enterer think, ‘I have attained the fruit of Stream-Entry.’?”

Subhuti replied, “No, World-Honored One. Why? Stream-Enterer means to enter the stream, but in fact there is no stream to enter. One does not enter a stream that is form, nor a stream that is sound, smell, taste, touch, or object of mind. That is what we mean when we say entering a stream.”

“What do you think, Subhuti? Does a Once-Returner think, ‘I have attained the fruit of Once-Returning.’?”

Subhuti replied, “No, World-Honored One. Why? Once-Returner means to go and return once more, but in truth there is no going just as there is no returning. That is what we mean when we say Once-Returner.”

“What do you think, Subhuti? Does a Non-Returner think like this, ‘I have attained the fruit of No-Return.’?”

Subhuti replied, “No, World-Honored One. Why? No-Return means not to return to this world, but in fact there cannot be any Non-Returning. That is what we mean when we say Non-Returner.”

“What do you think, Subhuti? Does an Arhat think like this, ‘I have attained the fruit of Arhatship.’?”

Subhuti replied, “No, World-Honored One. Why? There is no separately existing thing that can be called Arhat. If an Arhat gives rise to the thought that he has attained the fruit of Arhatship, then he is still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. World-Honored One, you have often said that I have attained the concentration of peaceful abiding and that in the community, I am the Arhat who has most transformed need and desire. World-Honored One, if I were to think that I had attained the fruit of Arhatship, you certainly would not have said that I love to dwell in the concentration of peaceful abiding.”

These concepts, such as ‘Stream-Enterer’ and ‘Arhat’, lose much of their significance in light of what has been discussed.

10 - CREATING A FORMLESS PURE LAND

Comments

The Buddha asked Subhuti, "In ancient times when the Tathagata practiced under Buddha Dipankara, did he attain anything?"

Subhuti answered, "No, World-Honored One. In ancient times when the Tathagata was practicing under Buddha Dipankara, he did not attain anything."

"What do you think, Subhuti? Does a bodhisattva create a serene and beautiful Buddha field?"

"No, World-Honored One. Why? To create a serene and beautiful Buddha field is not in fact creating a serene and beautiful Buddha field. That is why it is called creating a serene and beautiful Buddha field."

The Buddha said, "So, Subhuti, all the bodhisattva mahasattvas should give rise to a pure and clear intention in this spirit. When they give rise to this intention, they should not rely on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. They should give rise to an intention with their minds not dwelling anywhere."

"Subhuti, if there were someone with a body as big as Mount Sumeru, would you say that his was a large body?"

Subhuti answered, "Yes, World-Honored One, very large. Why? What the Tathagata says is not a large body, that is known as a large body."

Here there is more discussion about not being bound by concepts. A teacher is important, but the idea of importance should not be an obstacle for the teaching and practice.

11 - THE SAND IN THE GANGES

Comments

“Subhuti, if there were as many Ganges Rivers as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges, would you say that the number of grains of sand in all those Ganges Rivers is very many?”

Subhuti answered, “Very many indeed, World-Honored One. If the number of Ganges Rivers were huge, how much more so the number of grains of sand in all those Ganges Rivers.”

“Subhuti, now I want to ask you this: if a daughter or son of good family were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with as many precious jewels as the number of grains of sand in all the Ganges Rivers as an act of generosity, would that person bring much happiness by her virtuous act?”

Subhuti replied, “Very much, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “If a daughter or son of a good family knows how to accept, practice, and explain this sutra to others, even if it is a gatha of four lines, the happiness that results from this virtuous act would be far greater.”

This section and the next are examples of what Paul Williams call “Laudatory self reference – the lengthy praise of the sutra itself, the immense merits to be obtained from treating even a verse of it with reverence,…”

12 - EVERY LAND IS A HOLY LAND

Comments

“Furthermore, Subhuti, any plot of land on which this sutra is proclaimed, even if only one gatha of four lines, will be a land where gods, men, and ashuras will come to make offerings just as they make offerings to a stupa of the Buddha. If the plot of land is regarded as that sacred, how much more so the person who practices and recites this sutra. Subhuti, you should know that that person attains something rare and profound. Wherever this sutra is kept is a sacred site enshrining the presence of the Buddha or one of the Buddha’s great disciples.”

See section 11

13 - THE DIAMOND THAT CUTS THROUGH ILLUSION

Comments

After that, Subhuti asked the Buddha, "What should this sutra be called and how should we act regarding its teachings?"

The Buddha replied, "This sutra should be called The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion because it has the capacity to cut through all illusions and afflictions and bring us to the shore of liberation. Please use this title and practice according to its deepest meaning. Why? What the Tathagata has called the highest, transcendent understanding is not, in fact, the highest, transcendent understanding. That is why it is truly the highest, transcendent understanding."

The Buddha asked, "What do you think, Subhuti? Is there any dharma that the Tathagata teaches?"

Subhuti replied, "The Tathagata has nothing to teach, World-Honored One."

"What do you think, Subhuti? Are there many particles of dust in the 3,000 chiliocosms?"

"Very many, World-Honored One."

"Subhuti, the Tathagata says that these particles of dust are not particles of dust. That is why they are truly particles of dust. And what the Tathagata calls chiliocosms are not in fact chiliocosms. That is why they are called chiliocosms."

"What do you think, Subhuti? Can the Tathagata be recognized by the possession of the thirty-two marks?"

The Venerable Subhuti replied, "No, World-Honored One. Why? Because what the Tathagata calls the thirty-two marks are not essentially marks and that is why the Tathagata calls them the thirty-two marks."

"Subhuti, if as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges a son or daughter of a good family gives up his or her life as an act of generosity and if another daughter or son of a good family knows how to accept, practice, and explain this sutra to others, even if only a gatha of four lines, the happiness resulting from explaining this sutra is far greater."

The name is chosen because the teachings are like a diamond which has the capacity to cut through all ignorance and afflictions.

The Buddha also says that we should practice in an intelligent way. We should learn to look deeply so that we will realize that even transcendent understanding is not an independently existing dharma and that his teaching has no separate nature. That is why Subhuti says, "The Tathagata has nothing to teach."

When a person is absolutely free from wrong views, his or her actions will greatly benefit the world. The practice of The Diamond That Cuts through Illusion is thus the basis for all meaningful action.

14 - ABIDING IN NON-ABIDING ⁽¹⁾

Comments

When he had heard this much and penetrated deeply into its significance, the Venerable Subhuti was moved to tears. He said, "World-Honored One, you are truly rare in this world. Since the day I attained the eyes of understanding, thanks to the guidance of the Buddha, I have never before heard teachings so deep and wonderful as these. World-Honored One, if someone hears this sutra, has pure and clear confidence in it, and arrives at insight into the truth, that person will realize the rarest kind of virtue. World-Honored One, that insight into the truth is essentially not insight. That is what the Tathagata calls insight into the truth.

"World-Honored One, today it is not difficult for me to hear this wonderful sutra, have confidence in it, understand it, accept it, and put it into practice. But in the future, in five hundred years, if there is someone who can hear this sutra, have confidence in it, understand it, accept it, and put it into practice, then certainly the existence of someone like that will be great and rare. Why? That person will not be dominated by the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. Why? The idea of a self is not an idea, and the ideas of a person, a living being, and a life span are not ideas either. Why? Buddhas are called Buddhas because they are free of ideas."

The Buddha said to Subhuti, "That is quite right. If someone hears this sutra and is not terrified or afraid, he or she is rare. Why? Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls paramaparamita, the highest transcendence, is not essentially the highest transcendence, and that is why it is called the highest transcendence.

"Subhuti, the Tathagata has said that what is called transcendent endurance is not transcendent endurance. That is why it is called transcendent endurance. Why? Subhuti, thousands of lifetimes ago when my body was cut into pieces by King Kalinga, I was not caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. If, at that time, I had been caught up in any of those ideas, I would have felt anger and ill will against the king.

Buddhas are called Buddhas because they are free of ideas. (The English word "view" is actually closer to the Chinese character used here than the word "idea," although views themselves are ideas or perceptions.)

Prajñaparamita (known as the "Mother of all Buddhas") is the foundation of all the other paramitas. It is the clay pot that contains all the other paramitas. If the clay has not been fired properly, liquids stored in it will gradually leak out.

There are many stable things we can rely on—the earth, the air, the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha. It is always best to take refuge in something that is stable. Otherwise, if the object of our refuge changes or falls apart, we too may fall apart. It's most stable to abide in non-abiding.

14 - ABIDING IN NON-ABIDING ⁽²⁾

Comments

"I also remember in ancient times, for five hundred lifetimes, I practiced transcendent endurance by not being caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. So, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva gives rise to the unequalled mind of awakening, he has to give up all ideas. He cannot rely on forms when he gives rise to that mind, nor on sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, or objects of mind. He can only give rise to that mind that is not caught up in anything.

"The Tathagata has said that all notions are not notions and that all living beings are not living beings. Subhuti, the Tathagata is one who speaks of things as they are, speaks what is true, and speaks in accord with reality. He does not speak deceptively or to please people. Subhuti, if we say that the Tathagata has realized a teaching, that teaching is neither graspable nor deceptive.

"Subhuti, a bodhisattva who still depends on notions to practice generosity is like someone walking in the dark. He will not see anything. But when a bodhisattva does not depend on notions to practice generosity, he is like someone with good eyesight walking under the bright light of the sun. He can see all shapes and colors.

"Subhuti, if in the future there is any daughter or son of good family who has the capacity to accept, read, and put into practice this sutra, the Tathagata will see that person with his eyes of understanding. The Tathagata will know that person, and that person will realize the measureless, limitless fruit of her or his virtuous act."

"Abiding nowhere, let the mind work."

The truth lies in the middle way, it is beyond the idea of graspable and the idea of deceptive.

The raft is a necessary tool to get us to the other shore, but we should not cling to it or carry it on our back after we are done with it. The finger that is pointing to the moon is not the moon. We need the finger to see the moon. The finger is not deceiving us, but if we cling to it, we may miss the moon and feel that we have been deceived by the finger.

15 - GREAT DETERMINATION

Comments

“Subhuti, if on the one hand, a daughter or son of a good family gives up her or his life in the morning as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges as an act of generosity, and gives as many again in the afternoon and as many again in the evening, and continues doing so for countless ages; and if, on the other hand, another person listens to this sutra with complete confidence and without contention, that person’s happiness will be far greater. But the happiness of one who writes this sutra down, receives, recites, and explains it to others cannot be compared.

“In summary, Subhuti, this sutra brings about boundless virtue and happiness that cannot be conceived or measured. If there is someone capable of receiving, practicing, reciting, and sharing this sutra with others, the Tathagata will see and know that person, and he or she will have inconceivable, indescribable, and incomparable virtue. Such a person will be able to shoulder the highest, most fulfilled, awakened career of the Tathagata. Why? Subhuti, if one is content with the small teachings, if he or she is still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span, he or she will not be able to listen, receive, recite, and explain this sutra to others. Subhuti, any place this sutra is found is a place where gods, men, and ashuras will come to make offerings. Such a place is a shrine and should be venerated with formal ceremonies, circumambulations, and offerings of flowers and incense.”

More “self-laudatory” prose.

An interesting distinction about small teachings and teachings that are “great Dharma.” Is made. Both are authentic to the Buddha, but the small will only afford small teachings. The teachings are likened to a “house with an outer room and many inner rooms. If we stay in the outer room, we may only benefit from a table, a chair, and a few other small comforts. We may have come to the Buddha with the intention of relieving our most profound suffering, but if we are content to stay in this outer room, we will obtain only minimal relief.”

16 - THE LAST EPOCH

Comments

More “self-laudatory” prose

“Furthermore, Subhuti, if a son or daughter of good family, while reciting and practicing this sutra, is disdained or slandered, his or her misdeeds committed in past lives, including those that could bring about an evil destiny, will be eradicated, and he or she will attain the fruit of the most fulfilled, awakened mind. Subhuti, in ancient times before I met Buddha Dipankara, I had made offerings to and had been attendant of all 84,000 multi-millions of buddhas. If someone is able to receive, recite, study, and practice this sutra in the last epoch, the happiness brought about by this virtuous act is hundreds of thousands times greater than that which I brought about in ancient times. In fact, such happiness cannot be conceived or compared with anything, even mathematically. Such happiness is immeasurable.

“Subhuti, the happiness resulting from the virtuous act of a son or daughter of good family who receives, recites, studies, and practices this sutra in the last epoch will be so great that if I were to explain it now in detail, some people would become suspicious and disbelieving, and their minds might become disoriented. Subhuti, you should know that the meaning of this sutra is beyond conception and discussion. Likewise, the fruit resulting from receiving and practicing this sutra is beyond conception and discussion.”

17 - THE ANSWER IS IN THE QUESTION

(1)

Comments

At that time, the Venerable Subhuti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, may I ask you again that if daughters or sons of good family want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?”

The Buddha replied, “Subhuti, a good son or daughter who wants to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind should do it in this way: ‘We must lead all beings to the shore of awakening, but, after these beings have become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.’ Why is this so? Subhuti, if a bodhisattva is still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being or a life span, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva. Why is that?”

“Subhuti, in fact, there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind. What do you think, Subhuti? In ancient times, when the Tathagata was living with Buddha Dipankara, did he attain anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind?”

“No, World-Honored One. According to what I understand from the teachings of the Buddha, there is no attaining of anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

“No, World-Honored One. According to what I understand from the teachings of the Buddha, there is no attaining of anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

This section starts with a fair bit of repetition of earlier teachings.

Tathagata means suchness, the suchness of all objects of mind, of all dharmas. All objects of mind have their outer appearance which is called “illusory sign.”, e.g. the concepts of birth and death, high and low. Suchness is penetrating these erroneous perceptions and seeing the true nature of all objects of mind.

“Someone would be mistaken to say that the Tathagata has attained the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind since there is not any highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind to be attained.”

17 - THE ANSWER IS IN THE QUESTION

(2)

Comments

The Buddha said, "Right you are, Subhuti. In fact, there does not exist the so-called highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Tathagata attains. Because if there had been any such thing, Buddha Dipankara would not have predicted of me, 'In the future, you will come to be a Buddha called Shakyamuni.' This prediction was made because there is, in fact, nothing that can be attained that is called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind. Why? Tathagata means the suchness of all things (dharmas). Someone would be mistaken to say that the Tathagata has attained the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind since there is not any highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind to be attained. Subhuti, the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Tathagata has attained is neither graspable nor elusive. This is why the Tathagata has said, 'All dharmas are Buddhadharma.' What are called all dharmas are, in fact, not all dharmas. That is why they are called all dharmas.

"Subhuti, a comparison can be made with the idea of a great human body."

Subhuti said, "What the Tathagata calls a great human body is, in fact, not a great human body."

"Subhuti, it is the same concerning bodhisattvas. If a bodhisattva thinks that she has to liberate all living beings, then she is not yet a bodhisattva. Why? Subhuti, there is no independently existing object of mind called bodhisattva. Therefore, the Buddha has said that all dharmas are without a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. Subhuti, if a bodhisattva thinks, 'I have to create a serene and beautiful Buddha field,' that person is not yet a bodhisattva. Why? What the Tathagata calls a serene and beautiful Buddha field is not in fact a serene and beautiful Buddha field. And that is why it is called a serene and beautiful Buddha field. Subhuti, any bodhisattva who thoroughly understands the principle of nonself and non-dharma is called by the Tathagata an authentic bodhisattva.

If we say that other objects of mind are deceptive but that suchness is not deceptive, that too is a mistake. Like all concepts, deceptive and not deceptive are wrong perceptions and are not at all related to suchness. This is why the Tathagata can say, "All dharmas are Buddhadharma."

PART FOUR

MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS ARE OUR OWN BODY

18 - REALITY IS A STEADILY FLOWING STREAM ⁽¹⁾

Comments

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata have the human eye?”

Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One, the Tathagata does have the human eye.”

The Buddha asked, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata have the divine eye?”

Subhuti said, “Yes, World-Honored One, the Tathagata does have the divine eye.”

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata have the eye of insight?”

Subhuti replied, “Yes, World-Honored One, the Tathagata does have the eye of insight.”

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata have the eye of transcendent wisdom?”

“Yes, World-Honored One, the Tathagata does have the eye of transcendent wisdom.”

The Buddha asked, “Does the Tathagata have the Buddha eye?”

In this section the Buddha begins to discuss the mind.

In Buddhism, the study of the mind begins at the roots, so the Buddha sees both the phenomenal aspect of the different mentalities and also their true nature. The Tathagata understands all these different mentalities because what we call different mentalities are not, in fact, only different mentalities.

18 - REALITY IS A STEADILY FLOWING STREAM ⁽²⁾

Comments

“Yes, World-Honored One, the Tathagata does have the Buddha eye.”

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Buddha see the sand in the Ganges as sand?”

Subhuti said, “World-Honored One, the Tathagata also calls it sand.”

“Subhuti, if there were as many Ganges Rivers as the number of grains of sand of the Ganges and there was a Buddha land for each grain of sand in all those Ganges Rivers, would those Buddha lands be many?”

“Yes, World-Honored One, very many.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, however many living beings there are in all these Buddha lands, though they each have a different mentality, the Tathagata understands them all. Why is that? Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls different mentalities are not in fact different mentalities. That is why they are called different mentalities.

“Why? Subhuti, the past mind cannot be grasped, neither can the present mind or the future mind.”

19 - GREAT HAPPINESS

Comments

“What do you think, Subhuti? If someone were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with precious treasures as an act of generosity, would that person bring great happiness by his virtuous act?”

“Yes, very much, World-Honored One.”

“Subhuti, if such happiness were conceived as an entity separate from everything else, the Tathagata would not have said it to be great, but because it is ungraspable, the Tathagata has said that the virtuous act of that person brought about great happiness.”

To see the interbeing in phenomenon allows you to avoid being caught by words and concepts.

20 - THIRTY-TWO MARKS

Comments

“Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be perceived by his perfectly formed body?”

“No, World-Honored One. What the Tathagata calls a perfectly formed body is not in fact a perfectly formed body. That is why it is called a perfectly formed body.”

“What do you think, Subhuti? Can the Tathagata be perceived by his perfectly formed physiognomy?”

“No, World-Honored One. It is impossible to perceive the Tathagata by any perfectly formed physiognomy. Why? Because what the Tathagata calls perfectly formed physiognomy is not in fact perfectly formed physiognomy. That is why it is called perfectly formed physiognomy.”

Formlessness, emptiness, non-discrimination....

21 - INSIGHT-LIFE

Comments

“Subhuti, do not say that the Tathagata conceives the idea ‘I will give a teaching.’ Do not think that way. Why? If anyone says that the Tathagata has something to teach, that person slanders the Buddha because he does not understand what I say. Subhuti, giving a Dharma talk in fact means that no talk is given. This is truly a Dharma talk.”

Then, Insight-Life Subhuti said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, in the future, will there be living beings who will feel complete confidence when they hear these words?” The Buddha said, “Subhuti, those living beings are neither living beings nor non-living beings. Why is that? Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls non-living beings are truly living beings.”

When we look at A and see that A is not A, we know that A is truly A. Then A is no longer a dangerous obstacle for us.

22 - THE SUNFLOWER

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “World-Honored One, is the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Buddha attained the unattainable?”

The Buddha said, “That is right, Subhuti. Regarding the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

Comments

The moment the concept of highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind arises, the essence of highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind vanishes. This is why the Buddha says, “I have not attained anything.”

23 - THE MOON IS JUST THE MOON

“Furthermore, Subhuti, that mind is everywhere equally. Because it is neither high nor low, it is called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind. The fruit of the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind is realized through the practice of all wholesome actions in the spirit of nonself, non-person, non-living being, and non-life span. Subhuti, what are called wholesome actions are in fact not wholesome actions. That is why they are called wholesome actions.”

Comments

Equality means “neither this nor that,” neither liberating nor being liberated, neither I nor others, neither many nor few, neither high nor low. All objects of mind are equal and share the same nature of interbeing.

In our thoughts, the moon may be full or new, bright or dim, present or not present, but the moon itself has none of those characteristics. The moon is just the moon. All objects of the mind are equal.

24 - THE MOST VIRTUOUS ACT

Comments

“Subhuti, if someone were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with piles of the seven precious treasures as high as Mount Sumeru as an act of generosity, the happiness resulting from this is much less than that of another person who knows how to accept, practice, and explain the Vajracchedika Prajñāparamita Sutra to others. The happiness resulting from the virtue of a person who practices this sutra, even if it is only a gatha of four lines, cannot be described by using examples or mathematics.”

More “self-laudatory” prose

25 - ORGANIC LOVE

Comments

“Subhuti, do not say that the Tathagata has the idea, ‘I will bring living beings to the shore of liberation.’ Do not think that way, Subhuti. Why? In truth there is not one single being for the Tathagata to bring to the other shore. If the Tathagata were to think there was, he would be caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls a self essentially has no self in the way that ordinary persons think there is a self. Subhuti, the Tathagata does not regard anyone as an ordinary person. That is why he can call them ordinary persons.”

TNH comments on the reason why the sutra is repetitive. “the more we chant or read this sutra, the more deeply we penetrate its profound significance.”

In Buddhism, nonduality is the essential characteristic of love. In love, the person who loves and the person being loved are not two.

26 - A BASKET FILLED WITH WORDS

Comments

“What do you think, Subhuti? Can someone meditate on the Tathagata by means of the thirty-two marks?”

Subhuti said, “Yes, World-Honored One. We should use the thirty-two marks to meditate on the Tathagata.”

The Buddha said, “If you say that you can use the thirty-two marks to see the Tathagata, then the Cakravartin is also a Tathagata?”

Subhuti said, “World-Honored One, I understand your teaching. One should not use the thirty-two marks to meditate on the Tathagata.”

Then the World-Honored One spoke this verse:

Someone who looks for me in form
or seeks me in sound
is on a mistaken path
and cannot see the Tathagata.

While going through difficult moments in life, if we contemplate the Buddha with the thirty-two marks, we feel fresh and relaxed. The Diamond Sutra does not tell us not to do that. It just teaches us to look more deeply and to also meditate on the Buddha outside of the thirty-two marks. The Buddha will suffocate if we grasp him too firmly.

27 - NOT CUT OFF FROM LIFE

Comments

“Subhuti, if you think that the Tathagata realizes the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind and does not need to have all the marks, you are wrong. Subhuti, do not think in that way. Do not think that when one gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, one needs to see all objects of mind as nonexistent, cut off from life. Please do not think in that way. One who gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind does not contend that all objects of mind are nonexistent and cut off from life.”

The middle way taught by the Buddha is a way free of these two views (permanence and annihilation). Liberation is not to cut ourselves off from life or to try to reach nonbeing.

28 - VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS

Comments

“Subhuti, if a bodhisattva were to fill the 3,000 chiliocosms with the seven precious treasures as many as the number of sand grains in the Ganges as an act of generosity, the happiness brought about by his or her virtue is less than that brought about by someone who has understood and wholeheartedly accepted the truth that all dharmas are of selfless nature and are able to live and bear fully this truth. Why is that, Subhuti? Because a bodhisattva does not need to build up virtue and happiness.”

Subhuti asked the Buddha, “What do you mean, World-Honored One, when you say that a bodhisattva does not need to build up virtue and happiness?”

“Subhuti, a bodhisattva gives rise to virtue and happiness but is not caught in the idea of virtue and happiness. That is why the Tathagata has said that a bodhisattva does not need to build up virtue and happiness.”

Whatever a bodhisattva thinks, says, and does can give rise to limitless virtue and happiness, but he or she is not caught in this. This is why the Buddha says that the bodhisattvas do not need to accumulate virtue and happiness. If we think that our work will bring us some happiness or merit in the future, we are not true bodhisattvas.

29 - NEITHER COMING NOR GOING

Comments

“Subhuti, if someone says that the World-Honored One comes, goes, sits, and lies down, that person has not understood what I have said. Why? The meaning of Tathagata is ‘does not come from anywhere and does not go anywhere.’ That is why he is called a Tathagata.”

So far the Buddha has talked about equality, nonduality, attachment to the view of permanence, and attachment to the view of annihilation. Now he tells us that reality is neither coming nor going. This truth does not apply only to the Tathagata. It applies also to all dharmas, all objects of mind.

30 - THE INDESCRIBABLE NATURE OF ALL THINGS

Comments

“Subhuti, if a daughter or son of a good family were to grind the 3,000 chiliocosms to particles of dust, do you think there would be many particles?”

Subhuti replied, “World-Honored One, there would be many indeed. Why? If particles of dust had a real self-existence, the Buddha would not have called them particles of dust. What the Buddha calls particles of dust are not, in essence, particles of dust. That is why they can be called particles of dust. World-Honored One, what the Tathagata calls the 3,000 chiliocosms are not chiliocosms. That is why they are called chiliocosms. Why? If chiliocosms are real, they are a compound of particles under the conditions of being assembled into an object. That which the Tathagata calls a compound is not essentially a compound. That is why it is called a compound.”

“Subhuti, what is called a compound is just a conventional way of speaking. It has no real basis. Only ordinary people are caught up in conventional terms.”

We cannot make any statement about the true nature of reality. Words and ideas can never convey reality. ...We must go beyond all concepts if we want to be in touch with the true nature of things.

31 - TORTOISE HAIR AND RABBIT HORNS

Comments

“Subhuti, if anyone says that the Buddha has spoken of a self view, a person view, a living-being view, or a life span view, has that person understood my meaning?”

“No, World-Honored One. Such a person has not understood the Tathagata. Why? What the Tathagata calls a self view, a person view, a living-being view, or a life span view is not in essence a self view, a person view, a living-being view, or a life span view. That is why he or she is called a self view, a person view, a living-being view, or a life span view.”

“Subhuti, someone who gives rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind should know that this is true of all dharmas, should see that all dharmas are like this, should have confidence in the understanding of all dharmas without any conceptions about dharmas. Subhuti, what is called a conception of dharmas, the Tathagata has said is not a conception of dharmas. That is why it is called a conception of dharmas.”

All dharmas—including self, person, living being, life span, nonself, non-person, non-living being, and non-life span—are concepts. We should not let go of one set of concepts just to be caught by another. Once we understand that a concept is just a concept, we can go beyond that concept and be free of the dharma that concept represents. Then we can begin to have a direct experience of the wondrous reality that is beyond concepts.

32 - TEACHING THE DHARMA

Comments

“Subhuti, if someone were to offer an immeasurable quantity of the seven treasures to fill the worlds as infinite as space as an act of generosity, the happiness resulting from that virtuous act would not equal the happiness resulting from a son or daughter of a good family who gives rise to the awakened mind and reads, recites, accepts, and puts into practice this sutra, and explains it to others, even if only a gatha of four lines. In what spirit is this explanation given? Without being caught up in signs, just according to things as they are, without agitation. Why is this?

**All composed things are like a dream,
a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning.
That is how to meditate on them,
that is how to observe them.**

After they heard the Lord Buddha deliver this sutra, the Venerable Subhuti, the bhikshus and bhikshunis, laymen and laywomen, and gods and ashuras, filled with joy and confidence, undertook to put these teachings into practice.

This sutra should be explained according to the way things are, without encouraging the listeners to be caught up in signs.

A teacher must be in touch with suchness, the nature of nonduality, the truth that cannot be described. Being in touch with suchness is like digging a well and reaching the point where the water forces its way up. Once we can drink directly from the well of understanding, we are no longer caught by the signs of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. When we see that someone is free of those signs, even if it is not yet complete, we know his or her teaching is authentic.

After reading the verse, we may think that the Buddha is saying that all dharmas are impermanent—like clouds, smoke, or a flash of lightning. The Buddha is saying, “All dharmas are impermanent,” but he is not saying that they are not here.