

Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.
The Diamond Perfection of Wisdom Sutra

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may all beings be happy

may all beings be free from suffering

Introduction

The Diamond Sutra is one of the most well known and beloved Mahayana Buddhist texts. It is said that hearing just a few lines from it can stir the seed of Enlightenment that is within us.

The Diamond Sutra is a Mahayana Buddhist text from the Prajnaparamita or “Perfection of Wisdom” collection. The full Sanskrit title of this text is the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

It’s sometimes called the Diamond Cutter of Wisdom or the Diamond Cutter Sutra. I prefer to call it simply the Diamond Sutra.

It’s importance to the Chan tradition can’t be overestimated. Huineng the 6th Patriarch attained Enlightenment almost exclusively because of what he learned from hearing someone recite the Diamond Sutra.

It's a series of dialogues between the Buddha and one of his students, a man named Subhuti, regarding the nature of perception. In it, the Buddha is trying to help Subhuti put down his limited preconceived notions about the nature of reality. The Buddha emphasizes that all forms, thoughts and conceptions are ultimately empty, he teaches that true enlightenment cannot be grasped through them, that we must challenge our preconceptions and subvert the dominant paradigm.

Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

This is what I heard.

At one time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta Grove.

With him there was a community of followers.

While sitting in meditation one day he became mindfully aware of his surroundings as many monks .

This might sound strange to us, but it isn't. It was normal in that time and place for spiritual teachers to beg for their food, in the same way that many ministers and priests today are paid a salary from the donations from their congregations.

This is an introduction that will put the rest of the sutra in context for us. The Buddha is surrounded by many followers and they are sitting around waiting for him to give some kind of profound teaching.

After a while a monk name Subhuti stood up.

He bowed and said to the Buddha:

"It is wonderful that you given so much knowledge and wisdom to your followers. We appreciate you."

"I have a question to ask you. If people want to develop the highest, most fulfilled and awakened mind, what should they do to help quiet their minds and manage their cravings?"

The Buddha replied:

"Listen carefully and pay attention, and I will answer your question."

"If people want to develop the highest, most fulfilled and awakened mind, if they want to quiet their minds while managing their cravings, then there is something they can do. This will help them in managing their discriminative thoughts and craving desires. It is possible to attain perfect tranquility and clarity of mind."

Then the Buddha addressed the assembly.

This is more introductory material. Subhuti has asked the Buddha to describe the essence of his teaching. These people have been following the Buddha's example for a while and Subhuti is asking him to explain in a clear way what they should do, how they can quiet their minds and control their desires.

"All living beings, whether they are human beings or other animals, will eventually come to Enlightenment. And when this infinite number of beings have all been liberated, in truth no one has actually been liberated."

"Why Subhuti? Because if a disciple still clings to notions of duality such as ego, self, or separation, that disciple won't be aware of their own Enlightenment."

The Buddha is telling Subhuti that everyone has the seed of Buddha nature within themselves. We have Enlightenment already and it's only our clouded delusions that prevent us from realizing this. The Buddha is extending this idea, not just to all humans, but to all living beings.

Enlightenment really consists of recognizing the Buddha nature that is within us already.

Our Buddha nature is our true self. It's the self that is one with everything and realizes that fact. It's the self that is fully enlightened and perfect. In reality, it's who we are right now, even if we don't realize it. It's not some goal to be achieved—each and every one of us is fully enlightened already. We just have to awaken to that fact. We just have to conquer the delusions that prevent us from realizing the fundamental truth of our being. It's not an easy goal, but there are special methods and practices that are designed to help us on the path. Few choose to be on the path and many give up.

When we have enlightening experiences that help us start to recognize our true nature, they help us stay motivated to remain on the path. As long as we don't forget and become deluded again, the motivation will remain present.

Buddha nature is a key concept in **Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism**. It simply means that we are all enlightened already. It is just because we are suffering from delusion that we don't realize it. We don't think of enlightenment as something to be achieved, like a trophy. If we contemplate this deeply, it is very significant.

I am enlightened and so are you. Stop and think about that for a minute.

If I am enlightened already, then I can celebrate my success right now. I certainly don't need to feel bad about not getting enlightened sooner. If I am enlightened already, then the Buddhist path doesn't seem nearly as daunting. If all I am doing is clearing away delusion, that seems a lot more achievable than getting some high spiritual goal.

"Also, in the practice of kindness and generosity, a disciple should not be attached. Give for the sake of giving, not for the sake of appearances or for any merit you might receive in return. Be compassionate because being compassionate is good, not for some external reward. Why? Because practicing kindness and generosity without attachment is the way to reaching the Highest Perfect Wisdom, it is the way to becoming a Buddha."

"Subhuti, do you think that you can measure all of space?"

"No, Most Honored One. One cannot possibly measure all of space."

"Well, Subhuti, the same is true of the merit of the disciple who practices kindness and generosity without any attachment to appearances, without cherishing any idea of form. It is impossible to measure the merit gained by this. Subhuti, my disciples should let their minds absorb and dwell in these teachings."

The Buddha is telling Subhuti (and us) that what we should do is give for the sake of giving, not to create a good reputation. Generosity is the first of the Six Perfections in Mahayana Buddhism. The perfection of generosity represents more than just giving material things. Obviously, it does represent giving money or items to the needy. It also represents giving your time, things like helping a friend move or spending time comforting someone who is suffering from a loss.

We can also give someone less tangible things, like our love, respect, or patience. We can offer stability, being reliable. If we make plans with someone and keep those plans, we are giving them stability. We can give someone space when they want to be alone, or quiet when they are being bothered by too much noise.

The practice of generosity is beneficial to us. It increases our confidence and self-esteem. It also helps lessen our attachments. If we give material things, it helps us lessen our attachment to material things. Cultivating generosity is helpful in developing love, joy, and compassion.

"Subhuti, what do you think? Can I be recognized by my appearance?"

"No, you cannot be recognized by means of your appearance. Why? Because when you speak of appearance, it is not a real form, but only an illusion."

The Buddha then spoke to Subhuti: "All that has a form is illusive and unreal. When you see that all forms are illusive and unreal, then you will begin to perceive your true Buddha nature. The truth is that the Buddha you should follow is your own Buddha nature, neither me nor anyone else."

The Buddha is teaching that the boundaries and labels we put on things are artificial. Our minds create an image of reality and convince us that that self-created image is real on a fundamental level. We say all things are illusory because nothing exists on it's own. Everything is dependent upon everything else and that's what we mean when we say things are empty of self nature.

One of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism is that our sense of individuality is delusional.

The Buddha taught that we aren't really individual beings in the way that we tend to think. We are really just part of everything else, like how waves are part of the ocean. A wave can be described as an individual, but it isn't really separate from the rest of the ocean.

The Buddha taught that what we think of as our self is actually not an individual being, but a combination of things.

He called these the five aggregates. They are: physical form, consciousness, feelings, perceptions and mental habits.

If we are just a collection of things, like parts of a car, then our self is less significant than we think it is.

So, what are the implications of this?

Well, feelings of greed and jealousy become insignificant if we aren't so focused on ourselves. I think everyone agrees that the world would be a better place with less selfishness. Recognizing ourselves as part of a context rather than thinking we are some separate independent being can go a long way toward fixing many of the problems in the world.

Selfishness is a big problem. Because of selfishness we are greedy. Because of selfishness we are jealous of others and we tend to get upset if we don't have everything that we think we deserve. Because of selfishness we take others for granted, which can greatly damage our relationships. Selfishness is at the root of most of our human problems.

A lot of our anger is motivated by selfishness as well. When we get mad or upset that things aren't the way we want them to be, or that others aren't behaving in the way we think they should.

If we recognize others as ourselves then we are certainly less likely to harm them.

It can make us want to help them instead—and ultimately, helping others is really important in Buddhism.

When we recognize that we are everything, it can be easy to forgive everything—or at least accept everything.

Subhuti asked the Buddha, "In the future, if a person hears this teaching is it possible for that person to have Enlightenment awaken in their mind?"

"Yes. Even many years in the future there will be some who are virtuous and wise, and while practicing kindness and generosity, will believe in the words of this Sutra and will awaken their minds. After they hear these teachings, they will be inspired. This is because when some people learn this sutra they will understand it intuitively."

"But you must also remember, Subhuti, that such individuals have planted the seeds of Awakening that lead to this realization long ago. They have planted the seeds of virtue and generosity. So when a person who hears the words of this Sutra is ready for it to happen, clarity can awaken within their minds."

"Subhuti, any person who awakens upon hearing the words or phrases of this Sutra will accumulate a lot of merit."

"How do I know this? Because this person must have discarded all dualistic illusions of a personal self or of a universal self. Otherwise their minds would still grasp after such things. Therefore anyone who seeks total Enlightenment should discard not only all conceptions of their own selfhood or of a universal self, but they should also discard all notions of the non-existence of such concepts."

"When I explain these things using such concepts and ideas, people should remember the unreality of all such concepts and ideas. They should recall that in teaching spiritual truths I always use these concepts and ideas in the way that a raft is used to cross a river. Once the river has been crossed over, the raft is no longer needed. These arbitrary concepts and ideas about spiritual things need to be explained to us as we seek to attain Enlightenment. However, ultimately they can be discarded. Think Subhuti, isn't it even more obvious that we should also give up our conceptions?"

There is a deep meaning to this section. The Buddha starts by telling Subhuti that this teaching he is giving is so great that just hearing it can bring us to Enlightenment. This was a favorite Sutra of the 6th Ch'an Patriarch, Huineng. According to his autobiography that is exactly what awakened the seed of Enlightenment within him. So, it's right there in the Sutra, telling us to pay close attention to it and study it closely.

And the Buddha tells us again to lay down our dualistic thinking. The concepts and ideas that we cling to, the labels that we put on reality, are the things that are keeping us from Realization.

He goes on to tell us that even the spiritual journey can become an attachment. Remember that the Dharma is just a tool we are using to come to Awakening. It is not an end in itself.

Then Buddha asked, "What do you think, Subhuti, have I attained the most awakened and enlightened mind? Do I teach anything?"

Subhuti replied, "As far as I have understood you, there is no independently existing object of mind called the most awakened or enlightened mind. Nor is there any teaching that you teach. Why? Because the teachings that you have realized and spoken of cannot be conceived of as separate, independent things and so cannot be described. The truth in them is inexpressible. What does this mean? What this means is that Buddhas and disciples are not enlightened by a set method of teachings, but by an internally intuitive process that is part of their own inner nature."

The message is clear. We awaken ourselves. Buddhas and teachers do not awaken us. A teacher can only point the way or set an example. It's important to remember this. Sometimes students want the teacher to walk the path for them and that is simply not how the path works. I've argued in the past that the Buddha didn't intend to leave behind a Master/Disciple system, but rather a Teacher/Student system. A great teacher could have many wonderful things to teach you, but we must remember that we all have Buddha nature. Although we may not have the same knowledge, all human beings have the same ability to engage the Dharma.

"Subhuti, if a person filled the universe with treasure for the purpose of generosity, would this person gain great merit?"

"Yes. This person would gain great merit, even though, in truth, this person does not have a separate existence that could gain merit."

The Buddha continued, "Then suppose another person understood only four lines of this Sutra, but nevertheless took it upon themselves to explain these lines to someone else. This person's merit would be even greater than the first person. Why? Because this Sutra contains the highest and most excelled teachings."

The Buddha is saying that understanding and teaching this sutra is more beneficial to the world than almost anything an individual can do. This sutra is a door to Awakening. The teachings contained in this Sutra can led anyone to immediate Enlightenment. This Sutra is described by the Buddha as the most important Sutra.

Buddha then asked, "Does someone who has started the path, a Stream-Enterer, say 'I have entered the stream'?"

"No," Subhuti replied. "A true disciple entering the stream would not think of themselves as an individual that could be entering anything. Only that disciple who can themselves from others and others in themselves can truly be called a Stream-Enterer."

Buddha continued, "Does a disciple who is at the second stage, a once-returned, say, 'I am entitled to the rewards of a Once-Returned.?'"

"No. 'Once-Returned' is only a name. There is no passing away, or coming into, existence. Only one who realizes this can really be called a Once-Returned."

"Subhuti, does a venerable One who will never more be reborn, a Non-Returned say to himself, 'I am entitled to the rewards of a Non-returned.?'"

"No. A 'Non-returned' is merely a name. There is actually no one returning and no one not-returning."

"Does a Buddha say to himself, 'I have obtained Enlightenment.?'"

"No. There is no such thing as Perfect Enlightenment to obtain. If a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha were to say to himself, 'I am enlightened' he would be admitting there is an individual person. Enlightenment consists of transcending the Self and realizing that individuality is an illusion."

Subhuti then said, "You have said that I, Subhuti, excel among your disciples in knowing the bliss of Enlightenment. But I do not say to myself that I am so, for if I ever thought of myself as such then it would not be true that I escaped ego delusion. I know that in truth there is no Subhuti and so Subhuti abides nowhere."

The Buddha is essentially saying that if we go around saying, "I am Enlightened," it probably isn't true. Stream-enterer and the other are considered the levels of Enlightenment. In Ch'an Buddhism Enlightenment is divided into stages that the practitioner enters over time.

I'm going to describe the stages of attainment, as defined by the Buddha. It's important to note that we don't self-identify on maps of attainment, though. It's generally thought that a teacher of some path or another is the one tracking your levels, not you. There can be a big tendency for individuals to say, "Hey, I'm Enlightened!" And that might not be good. It should also be noted that some branches of Buddhism think that maps of the path aren't useful and they don't use them at all.

The Buddha talked about levels of attainment.

He described the path in terms of four levels. Really, it could be said that there are five. The first level is the ordinary person who has not entered the stream. The ordinary person would simply be someone who has not decided to start following the Eightfold Path.

The four levels of attainment are:

Stream-Enterer:

The Stream Enterer has grasped an intuitive understanding of Buddhist doctrine and has confidence in the Three Jewels, the Buddha, dharma and sangha. The Stream Enterer is said to have “opened the eye of the Dharma.”

Stream entry begins when a person learns about the teachings of the Buddha and decides to try to pursue the Eightfold Path. At this level there is an understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path; there is some contemplation and quieting of the mind. And refuge is usually taken in an official way.

A Stream Enterer has had a glimpse of their true nature. They have had an experience of selflessness that has given them insight. For a Stream Enterer the path isn't something they've learned about or feel an interest in. It's something they are doing. Self doubt about success on the path has faded away and slowly delusions disappear. Because the Stream Enterer has had an experience, they have motivation to follow a spiritual path to awakening.

Once-Returner:

The Once-Returner has had great success at weakening the strength of the three poisons: greed, aversion and delusion. These poisons are still present, but to a great degree each has been weakened and this is relatively obvious. They have gained an ability to really start noticing the parts of their life that are the most marked by the three poisons. Their concentrations and insights are stronger. They will have a few other, possibly stronger, experiences of recognizing their true nature. Emotions like hatred and greed begin softening, becoming replaced with lesser versions like irritation and preference.

Non-Returner:

The Non-Returner experiences the dropping away of attachment and aversion. There has been a significant reduction in their experience of these emotions.

Although dissatisfaction remains on some level, this person seems very content and peaceful a majority of the time and it is noticeable. They have had several experiences of recognizing their true nature and bring a little back with them each time.

Arhat:

The Arhat dwells in inner peace. They are free of clinging and hatred. They are also free of restlessness and anxiety. This person radiates compassion and inner peace everywhere they go. This person recognizes their true nature in an ongoing way on an intuitive level. This person is love.

When the Buddha became Enlightened he looked up at the sky and saw a star twinkling. And he thought to himself, "I am twinkling."

That's what we're talking about here.

The Buddha continued, "When I was in a previous life did I receive any teaching or attain any degree of self-control that later helped me become a Buddha?"

"No. You didn't receive any teaching or attain any degree of self-control in a previous life that helped you become a Buddha."

The Buddha said, "A disciple should develop a mind which is not dependent on the senses or mental conceptions. A disciple should develop a mind that doesn't rely on anything."

"So the minds of disciples should be purified. They should use their minds naturally, without being constrained by preconceived notions that arise from the senses."

The Buddha is repeated the point that Awakening doesn't come from someone else, it comes from within. It's been said that in a previous life the Buddha learned from someone named Dipankara. Even if this is true, that doesn't mean that Dipankara led the Buddha to Awakening. Dipankara only pointed the way, just as teachers do for the rest of us.

This is how Ch'an history is described.

It's said that there were six Buddhas before Siddhartha Gautama. Actually, it's said that there were many many Buddhas before him, but for our purposes I will discuss the last six. All of the ones before Vipasyin are neither named nor described.

The purpose of learning about these Buddhas is, I think, to remind us that the Buddha's teaching isn't really new. He described it many times as a path he discovered, rather than a path he created. This is important because without this concept the path is limited, we are followers of the way of the Buddha. The truth is that the way is beyond the Buddha. It is the true nature of reality and therefore can't be limited by being described as the creation of one man, even a really great and enlightened one like Siddhartha Gautama.

There is a tendency to put the Buddha on such a high pedestal, to almost come to the point of worshiping him and forget that what's really important is practicing the Dharma.

The teaching is more important than the teacher.

The Buddha goes on to say that our minds shouldn't be imprisoned by having to rely on our preconceived notions. Nor should they be imprisoned by delusions arising from our senses which, if we are honest with ourselves, have a tendency to deceive us sometimes. A disciple should strive to interact with the world without attaching to any particular paradigm.

"Subhuti, if there were as many galaxies as there are stars in this galaxy, would you say they are many?"

Subhuti answered, "Yes."

"Subhuti, If a good person gave away that many treasures, would they gain great merit?"

Subhuti replied, "Yes."

"Subhuti, if after studying even a single stanza of this Sutra, one were to explain it to others, the merit that would result from this act would be much greater."

"If any person in any place were to teach even four lines of this Sutra, the place where they taught it would become sacred ground. Any student who studies this Sutra will attain something deep and profound. Any place in which this Sutra is honored is holy ground, the abode of venerable Buddhas."

This happens a few times in this Sutra. The Buddha is reminding Subhuti that what he is teaching is very important. The text of this Sutra goes to great lengths to let us know that it is important and can lead us to Enlightenment. This is why many students spend a lifetime studying it.

Subhuti said to the Buddha, “What should we call this teaching?”

The Buddha replied, “This Sutra shall be known as ‘The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion’.

By this name it should be read and studied. What does this name mean? This Sutra is hard and sharp, like a diamond that will cut away all delusions and bring one to the other shore of Enlightenment.”

This is the point at which the Buddha describes what this teaching is called. It is called the Diamond Sutra because of its power. Diamonds are powerful and cannot be broken. They are also very valuable.

At that time, after listening to this Sutra, Subhuti understood its profound meaning and was moved to tears.

He said, “Thank you for this deeply profound teaching. Since the day I entered the stream, thanks to the guidance of the Buddha, I have never before heard teachings so deep and powerful as these. Venerable One, if someone hears this Sutra, and has confidence in it they will have a profound insight into the truth. Having perceived that profound insight, that person will realize great virtue.”

“Having listened to this Sutra, I am able to receive it with faith and understanding. This is not difficult for me, but in ages to come if there is a person who hears this Sutra, who receives it with faith and understanding, then that person will be an individual of remarkable achievement. Such a person will be able to awaken pure faith because they have ceased to cherish the boundaries between self and others. Why? Because if they continue to hold onto boundaries between self and other, they will be holding onto something that is non-existent. Buddhas are Buddhas because they have been able to discard all arbitrary conceptions, they have transcended all perceptions, and have penetrated the illusion of all forms.”

The Buddha replied:

“Yes, Subhuti. Those that hear this Sutra will be blessed. The Buddha has taught this Sutra as the highest perfection.”

“Subhuti, when I talk about the practice of transcendent patience, I do not hold preconceptions about it. And why is that? Because when I was killed in previous lives, I didn’t hold onto anger and hatred. I practiced transcendent patience instead.”

“Therefore disciples should leave behind all distinctions and awaken the thought of the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. A disciple should do this by not allowing their mind to attach to ideas. The disciple’s mind should be kept independent of any thoughts that might arise. If the disciple’s mind depends upon anything in the sensory realm it will have no solid foundation in reality. This is why Buddha teaches that the mind of a disciple should not accept the appearances of things as a basis when exercising generosity.”

“Subhuti, as disciples practice kindness and generosity for the welfare of all living beings they should do it without relying on appearances and without attachment. Just as the Buddha declares that form is not form, so he also declares that all living beings are, in fact, not living beings.”

Subhuti thanks the Buddha for his teachings. Students should be grateful to their teachers and Subhuti is setting a good example for us. Two other things are discussed here. One is non-duality. Understanding the unity of things is the essence of Enlightenment. When we understand this intuitively, we are dwelling in a state of Enlightenment.

Buddhist teachings express the true nature of things in two different ways. These ways seem to be different, but really, they're two sides of the same coin.

One is Shunyata, usually translated as Emptiness.

Emptiness is sometimes misinterpreted as nihilism. It is the concept that nothing has inherent existence. Everything in the universe, including you, is dependent upon everything else. Everything is just a collection of things that are influencing other things.

If we really think about this, we know it's true. Of course everything is interdependent. But, we tend to not live this way. We tend to think of the world as separate from ourselves, and that can lead us to all kinds of trouble. Selfishness and greed come from not recognizing that we are simply part of a whole.

The other concept is Tathagatagarbha, usually translated as Buddha Nature. It's the concept that we are one with everything because any separation that we perceive is a result of delusion. Most importantly, the concept of Buddha Nature indicates that we already know this.

At the core of our being, we are already enlightened. We don't always realize it, because our minds are often clouded by delusion. We cling to the idea that we are an independent self. If we can realize our interdependence, or as I like to say, Unleash our Buddha Nature, we will be happier and suffer less.

Why are there two concepts for this?

I think it's because what we are trying to grasp is something deep, something that is hard (or impossible) to grasp with words. We try to grasp it with concepts like these, but the truth is we have to experience it ourselves with our own spiritual insights. Our minds are wired to label things—that's why these labels were created, but ultimately, the labels aren't sufficient.

One of my friends once said to me, "I don't believe we become nothing when we die... I believe we become everything." I asked if there's really any difference.

Sometimes when I am deep in insight meditation, I feel the truth of Shunyata. Sometimes in compassion meditation, I feel the truth of Tathatagarbha.

Wisdom tells me that I am nothing and compassion tells me that I am everything.

It seems like a paradox, but it is the truth.

The other teaching in this section is on the importance of patience. Patience is one of the six perfections. Practicing patience is important because it helps us to deal with the truth of impermanence. Patience is also an effective antidote to anger, which is one of the three poisons.

The perfection of patience is the enlightened quality of patience, tolerance, forbearance, and acceptance. The essence of this perfection of patience is the strength of mind and heart that enables us to face the challenges and difficulties of life without losing our composure and inner tranquility. We embrace and forbear adversity, insult, distress, and the wrongs of others with patience and tolerance, free of resentment, irritation, emotional reactivity, or retaliation. We cultivate the ability to be loving and compassionate in the face of criticism, misunderstanding, or aggression.

The ability to endure, to have forbearance, is an important part of the path. In practicing this perfection of patience and forbearance, we never give up on or abandon others—we help them cross over the sea of suffering. We maintain our inner peace, calmness, and equanimity under all circumstances, having enduring patience and tolerance for ourselves and others.

With the strength of patience, we maintain our effort and enthusiasm in our Dharma practice.

“Subhuti, in a previous life I met Dipankara Buddha, I had made many offerings and been very virtuous. If someone is able to receive, study, and practice this Sutra in a later, more distant age, then the happiness and merit brought about by this virtuous act would be much greater than that which I brought about by my previous virtue. In fact, such happiness and merit is incomparable. I know this might be hard to believe. Subhuti, you should know that the meaning of this Sutra is beyond understanding.”

As we went over before, it's said that Siddhartha Gautama, the one we call the Buddha, wasn't the first Buddha. They say that he studied with previous Buddhas from other ages in prior lives. That's what this section is referencing. There are many stories about the Buddha doing good things in previous lives, sometimes as a human and sometimes as an animal. These are called Jataka tales and bear some similarity to fables in the western world. They are stories designed to teach children lessons about things like kindness, paying attention, etc. The Buddha in this section is saying that the merit of studying the Diamond Sutra is greater than merit that he generated in his previous lives.

Subhuti then asked the Buddha, “May I ask you a question again? If virtuous individuals wish to attain the Highest Perfect Wisdom, what should they do to help quiet their minds and master their thoughts?”

The Buddha replied:

“Subhuti, a virtuous individual who wants to give rise to the highest awakened mind must create this resolved attitude: ‘I must help to lead all beings to awakening, but, after these beings have become liberated, in truth I know that not even a single being has been liberated.’ Why is this the case? If a disciple is attached to the idea of a separate self or a universal self, then that person is not awakened because in fact there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest awakened mind.”

“In ancient times, when I was living with Dipankara Buddha, did I attain anything called the highest awakened mind?”

“No.”

The Buddha said:

“You are correct.

“A true disciple knows that there is no such thing as a separate self or a universal self. A true disciple knows that all things are one with all other things, not separate.”

This is a serious and profound teaching. We perceive ourselves to be individual beings that are separate from our environment. This is a delusion. We don't come into the world. We come out of it. We are connected to other beings and to the world around us in countless ways. Everything contains everything else and everything is connected to everything else. If I buy a carrot at the grocery store, it didn't really come from the grocery store. A person put labor into it to pull it out of the ground and it was transported there. But, before that it was a seed. That seed was planted in the ground. Rain and sunlight caused it to grow. And, of course, before that it came from a previous carrot. So, when I eat a carrot, it could be said that I am eating the sky. This is what we mean when we say that everything is connected

The Buddha then asked Subhuti, "Do I have human eyes?"

"Subhuti replied, "Yes, you have human eyes."

"Does I have the eyes of Enlightenment?"

"Yes."

"Do I have the eyes of transcendent intelligence?"

"Yes."

"Do I have the eyes of spiritual intuition?"

“Yes.”

“Do I have the eyes of love and compassion for all sentient beings?”

Subhuti said, “Yes, you love all sentient life.”

Here the Buddha is trying to understand Subhuti's level of devotion. He wants to make sure Subhuti is worthy of this teaching, although I'm sure he already knows the truth. Subhuti makes clear with his answers that he has fully and completely accepted the Buddha as his Guru. Subhuti's faith in the Buddha's teaching is absolute.

The Buddha continued:

“If a follower were to give away many treasures, would a great blessing and merit be generated?”

Subhuti replied, “Yes they would acquire considerable blessings and merit.”

The Buddha said:

“Subhuti, if such a blessing had any substantiality, if it were anything other than a figure of speech, I would not have used the words ‘blessings and merit’.”

The Buddha is challenging public ideas about karma. Karma is a complicated matter in Buddhism. Many people then, and now, thought of it as ‘if you do good things, then good things will happen to you’. The point is we should practice virtue because we want to practice virtue, not because we believe it will generate good karma for us.

“Should one look for a teacher with a perfect physical body?”

“No, we should not be attached to appearances. Like everything else, appearances are temporary and illusionary.”

We shouldn’t be attached to things like appearance. It’s said that the Buddha had a very striking appearance. He is making sure Subhuti is not attached to him because of this.

“Subhuti, I do not have this thought: ‘I have spoken spiritual truths.’

If someone says I have spoken spiritual truths they are mistaken.”

The Buddha is telling us not to be attached to words and letters, which is an important teaching that the Ch'an Patriarch Bodhidharma would later give. It might be a little hard to understand but the point is that we should actualize the teaching in our lives, rather than just studying it and learning it. The teaching is something we study, but it's also something that we do.

Subhuti asked, "When you attained complete Enlightenment, did you feel in your mind that you had gained nothing?"

The Buddha replied:

"That is it exactly, Subhuti. When I attained total Enlightenment, I did not feel, as the mind feels, any form of spiritual truth. Even the words 'total Enlightenment' are just words, they are used as a figure of speech."

The Truth is beyond words. We describe it as attaining Enlightenment, but thinking of it as something we 'gain' can be a problem. We sometimes tend to think of it as finding spiritual truth, but it can more accurately be describe as getting rid of untruth. We aren't creating our true nature, it's our true nature. How could we? We are digging through the layers of delusion that keep us from seeing our true nature.

“Subhuti, when someone is selflessly generous, they should also practice being ethical by remembering that there is no distinction between one's self others. Thus one practices generosity by giving not only gifts, but also through kindness and sympathy. Practice kindness and charity without attachment and you can become fully enlightened.”

Practice kindness but don't be attached to results. When we understand that the boundaries between self and other are illusory, being generous, kind, and compassionate comes very naturally to us.

The Buddha continued, “Subhuti, explaining this Sutra to others out of kindness and generosity generates enormous amounts of merit.”

Teaching the Diamond Sutra to others is, in itself, very helpful on the path to Enlightenment.

“I don’t have the idea that I will lead all beings to Awakening. Do not think that way, Subhuti. In truth there is no one for me to lead to Awakening. If I thought that there was, I would be caught in the ideas of self and other. Subhuti, what I call a self essentially has no self in the way that ordinary people think there is a self.”

For the Buddha, the boundaries that separate self from other are dissolved. The Buddha doesn’t lead others to Awakening because the truth is there are no others. The Buddha teaches us that the essential truth is that we are one.

The Buddha then said:

“If anyone, looking at an image of me, claims to know me and worship me, that person is mistaken. They don’t really know me.”

The Buddha is telling us not to worship him, not to put him on a pedestal or make him our god. A famous Zen Master named Lin Chi once said, “If you find the Buddha on the side of the road, kill him. This sounds terrible to us at first, of course. Why would we kill the Buddha? But Lin Chi is trying to make an important point. Lin Chi is giving us a metaphorical argument for the rejection of dogmatism. It can be easy for us to accidentally put our teachers on a pedestal.

Placing leaders and teachers on pedestals is dangerous. Throughout history we have repeatedly seen what can happen when religious leaders have too much authority. This is true in Buddhism as well as in every other religion. Teachers are just people. And teachers don’t take us to enlightenment—even the Buddha doesn’t. Teachers only point the way—we have to walk the path ourselves.

It seems that the Buddha didn’t want that kind of religious devotion anyway. When asked if he was a god, the Buddha said no. When asked who he was, the Buddha only replied, “I am awake.”

The Buddha continued:

“Subhuti, one should realize the egolessness of all things and understand selflessness. Why? because great disciples do not see merit as a personal possession, as something to be gained.”

Subhuti asked, “What do you mean?”

The Buddha replied:

“Because great disciples do not seek merit, they do not see them as personal possessions, but they see them as the common possession of all beings.”

It's important to remember that we are practicing the six perfections: generosity, patience, virtue, diligence, concentration and wisdom, not for ourselves and our own generation of merit, but for the good of all beings. When one being becomes Awakened, it truly helps all beings and makes the world a better place.

“Subhuti, if any person were to say that the Buddha is now coming or going, they would not have understood the principle I have been teaching. Why? Because the true Buddha is never coming from anywhere or going anywhere. The name ‘Buddha’ is merely an expression. The true Buddha, the true Awakened one, is within you and never comes or goes.”

In this section the Buddha is using the word Buddha but he isn't referring to himself at this point. He's referring to our Buddha nature, the seed of Enlightenment that is present in every being. He's telling us to not be distracted by thinking about him and his Awakening. He is telling us to instead think about our own.

“Subhuti, if a being could take the Universe and grind into powder and blow it away, would this powder have any individual existence?”

“Subhuti replied, “Yes, this powder might be said to have a relative existence, but the truth is that it has no existence. The words are used only as a figure of speech. Matter is not an independent and self-existent thing.”

“Also, when you refer to the Universe, you are also simply using a figure of speech. The only reality of the Universe is a cosmic unity.”

The Buddha was happy with this reply and said:

“Subhuti, although ordinary people have always held onto arbitrary ideas about the Universe, the concept has no real basis; it is an illusion of the our minds. Even when it is referred to as ‘cosmic unity’ it is unthinkable and unknowable.”

There is a cosmic unity. Everything exists in connection to and relation to everything else. Even the Universe itself is fundamentally the sum of all of the things in it, no more and no less. The only reality is this cosmic unity. And even the cosmic unity isn't really something we can describe.

“If any person were to say that I have constantly referred to myself, or to a universal self, do you think they would have understood my meaning?”

Subhuti replied, “No. They would not have understood the meaning of your teachings. Because when you refer to those things, you are not referring to them literally, you only symbolically. Only in that sense can words be used to explain spiritual truths.”

The Buddha said,

“Subhuti, those who follow the path should put down arbitrary conceptions.”

The Buddha is telling us that we can't cling to words and concepts on our journey to Awakening. Clinging gets in the way. Words are used as expedient means in the teaching, but really seeing Enlightenment, following the path, is the only way to Awakening. It can't really be captured in words.

Buddha continued:

“Studying this sutra and explaining it to others generates enormous merit.”

“Subhuti, how can one explain this Sutra to others without holding in mind arbitrary conception of forms or spiritual truths? It can only be done by keeping the mind tranquil and free from attachment to appearances.”

“This is how to contemplate our conditioned existence in this world:”

“Like a tiny drop of dew, or a bubble floating in a stream;

Like a flash of lightning in a cloud,

Or a flickering flame, an illusion, a phantom, or a dream.”

“This is how you should see all of existence.”

In the end, the Buddha tells us not to be attached to existence. I am reminded of a very similar quote by Zen Master Ikkyu: 'Like vanishing dew, a passing apparition or the sudden flash of lightning — already gone — thus should one regard one's self.'

Our self, our identity as independent beings, is hard to let go of. It's something we have our whole lives. It is the source of all egotism and greed. We think of ourselves as separate from the world around us. But that's not how anything in the world works. We didn't come into the world. We came out of it. We are one with everything.