

Comments on the Explanation of the Diamond Sūtra

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Comments on Interpreting the Diamond Sūtra

In this tumultuous world of dust, afflictions arise in people's minds. Deluded by external circumstances, they make themselves slaves. Thus they are deluded by sensual attractions, wealth and profit, military force, and pernicious doctrines; all are forms of blind belief. Yet the belief in a self is the root of all these delusions. The Buddha seeks humanity's awakening and asks people fundamentally to break through their own blind beliefs; yet people instead label him superstitious. Is this not strange?

A sūtra is a text compiled by Ānanda and others from the Buddha's discussions with his great disciples concerning the roots of sentient beings' delusion and awakening. Later generations rely on it to examine their own mind-ground: how to emerge from the ordinary and enter the sagehood of the noble ones, and how to transcend to the shore of awakening. Its principle is most evident, yet its meaning is also most esoteric. Therefore, that which is expressed through written words and language is called "exoteric," while that which confirms the mind-ground's spiritual awakening yet is difficult to articulate is called "esoteric."

The Diamond Sūtra is the gateway through which all ordinary beings and sages awaken to the mind. To realize that the deluded mind of ignorance is precisely the true mind of wondrous wisdom is called awakening to the mind. The three realms are governed by mind, and mind is called the ground. Those able to contemplate the mind attain ultimate liberation. Therefore, it is also called the Dharma gate of sudden awakening by which all ordinary beings enter the ground of the Tathāgata.

Yet the meaning of this sūtra is profound. If one does not understand the meaning taught by the Tathāgata, there is no way to realize and enter the mind-ground. Thus reading, reciting, and expounding it must not be neglected. The people of China

possess Mahāyāna capacities and have especially strong affinities with this sūtra, but they alone suffer from not understanding its meaning. Those who lecture on it mostly interpret characters according to the text, dividing it into passages and chapters. This is explaining words, not explaining meaning.

Listeners, moreover, rely on the written words while mixing in views of self and forcing associations with pernicious doctrines. Thus they grow ever more distant from the Dharma gate of the mind-ground. As for women practitioners and bhikṣuṇīs cultivating in inland regions, they do not even have the opportunity to hear such explanations of the text. Since this concerns the wisdom-life, it is truly of utmost importance. Only those whose faith does not resist a Dharma so profound and difficult to believe can remain unalarmed and unafraid; this is what is meant by saying, “The meaning of this sūtra is inconceivable.” Otherwise, one becomes attached to names and appearances, repeatedly gives rise to doubt, and the profound import is instead obscured. This is because one lacks true wisdom to break through external appearances.

The Diamond Sūtra takes non-abiding as its principle and speaks exclusively of breaking through appearances. When appearances are broken through, there is no discrimination; this is called subduing one's mind. There are more than twenty explanations of non-discriminating wisdom—profound indeed, profoundly so—and they cannot all be fully set forth. Yet foremost is to be free of the appearance of self, for the appearance of self is the root of discrimination and also the root of the unrest in people's minds today.

The wise understand the true nature of mind and recognize that all kinds of discrimination are merely illusory, conditioned shadows; they are not deluded by them. When truth becomes clear, all doubts are dispelled, and only then does one gain a handle on one's own mind. This handle is what the Chan school calls a baba, a point of grasp. Having such a point of grasp, one is able to make use of it. Purity and peace, constant and unchanging—this is permanence, bliss, self, and purity.

The word “self” here refers to the unchanging point of grasp, not the self of the appearance of self; it is also called an abiding place. The word “abiding” here means establishing, not attachment. If the mind has somewhere it abides, that is not abiding; to say that there is something to which one is attached is to say that one does not abide in bodhi. Thus, one is for dispelling doubts and the other for abiding securely. This is why Vasubandhu divided the Diamond Sūtra into twenty-seven doubts.

Asaṅga, moreover, established eighteen abidings. Their meaning is subtle, and their excellence lies especially in the clarity with which their principle and purport are expressed. Lecturers who depart from these two treatises do not accord with the

meaning of the sūtra as taught by the compassionate Maitreya; they are no different from those who speak like Māras, and the Dharma gate of the mind-ground will ultimately have no basis. Though dull-witted, Xianglu wishes to offer this partial understanding to fellow practitioners, and to set forth the following sequence for expounding the sūtra:

I. Explaining the Text

One should consult the annotations of various commentators. Explain the words and notes throughout the entire sūtra separately, deriving the meaning from the text so that listeners may readily understand it directly. This is explaining the text; what follows is explaining its meaning.

II. Explaining Doubts

One should consult Vasubandhu's twenty-seven doubts. Analyze and explain the text in sections, preparing a separate table to outline the essentials and clarify the key points, with explanations in plain language, so that at crucial junctures readers will not let ambiguities pass unchecked. The aim is for the preceding and following passages to interconnect and become thoroughly clear. For, with regard to the subtle points of doubt in this sūtra, the cause of their arising is not stated; only the point at which they are cut off is made clear. One must therefore seek their roots in the text and discover where and how the causes of doubt arise; only then can one reach the ultimate understanding. The Diamond Sūtra contains many repeated passages and sentences, yet their meanings differ in each case. It cannot be explained merely by following the words directly.

III. Explaining Abiding

Asaṅga established eighteen abidings, whose meaning is subtle indeed; what is especially wonderful is the lucidity of their principle and purport. The word "abiding" here means abiding in bodhi. One should likewise make a table, as above, and investigate its refined subtleties. Yet one must explain the doubts before the abidings can be understood, so this exposition should come afterward.

IV. Explaining the Purport

The central purport of the entire sūtra is nothing other than giving rise to mind without abiding anywhere, yet countless words cannot exhaust this subtle wonder. The twenty-seven doubts and the eighteen abidings appear different in their analyses, but in principle they are not different. A single abiding may contain two or three doubts, or a single doubt may contain three or four abidings. These should again be identified one by one, and the central purport of the whole sūtra should be explained by comparing the two tables, narrowing the scope in order to clarify the

reader's understanding. At crucial and hidden points, even if one cannot wholly accord with the sūtra's purport and with what the two great bodhisattvas taught, one must take as primary the principle of not departing from one's original mind-ground. In this way, one may perhaps gain one or two intimate points of understanding.

V. Explaining the Mind

The preceding four modes of exposition remain understanding and knowledge at the level of appearances; they are not realization and knowledge verified in the mind-ground. Without beginning from cultivation and realization, one does not see the true aspect. Empty verbal lectures, however lucid and penetrating, are ultimately entirely irrelevant; they can never lead one to realization in the gate of accomplishment in the Pure Land.

The sūtra says: "If those who delight in lesser dharmas cannot hear, receive, read, recite, or explain this sūtra to others." It is thus clear that those who hear and receive it must also understand the features of prajñā before they can inwardly comprehend it.

When expounding this point, one cannot follow the sūtra word by word, dividing it into chapters and sections for detailed explanation. One must directly leave words behind and repeatedly investigate the word "mind," mutually examining and confirming it: How does one contemplate the mind? How does one cultivate? When all circumstances arise before one, how can one remain unmoved by the eight worldly winds? How does one sustain awareness and contemplate the emptiness of the aggregates, even to the arising of conditions in the deluded mind? How does one thoroughly awaken to the unborn? And so forth. One must use the sūtra to confirm the mind, use the mind to confirm emptiness, return to practical application, and reach the Vajra Ground.

Through such mutual investigation, not only do the listeners benefit; the lecturer also receives no slight benefit. Thus, to explain the mind means to explain that mind cannot be obtained, using repeated discussion as the method for expounding the Diamond Sūtra.

Such is my humble view. I hope that those of greater insight will favor me with their instruction.