

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.3

The Diamond Sutra

This sutra appears in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Chanting from the Heart* (Parallax Press, Rev.Ed., 2006)

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, 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 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 nirvana so that they can be liberated. Yet 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 a true bodhisattva.

“Moreover, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object—any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma—to practice generosity. That, Subhuti, is the spirit in which a bodhisattva practices 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, if a bodhisattva does not rely on any concept while practicing generosity, the happiness that results from that virtuous act is as great as space. It cannot be measured.”

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 appreciate the joy and happiness that come from observing the precepts. When such people hear these words, they will have faith and confidence that this is the truth. 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 fact, planted wholesome seeds during the lifetimes of tens of thousands of Buddhas. Anyone who, for even a moment, 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 person is not caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. He or she is not caught in the idea of a dharma or the idea of a non-dharma. He or she is not caught in the notion that this is a sign and that is not a sign. Why? If you are caught in the idea of a dharma, you are also caught in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. If you are caught in the idea that there is no dharma, you are still caught in the ideas of a self, a person, a living being, and a life span. That is why we should not get caught 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.”

“So, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva gives rise to the unequaled 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 the mind that is not caught 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. She will not see anything. But when a bodhisattva does not depend on notions to practice generosity, she is like someone with good eyesight walking under the bright light of the sun. She can see all shapes and colors.

“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.”

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.”