

Lecture No. 73 : The Diamond Sutra

Mr. Chairman and friends.

Sometimes it happens that we live as it were, we dwell very much in the present. Sometimes again we let our thoughts go; we think of the future. And sometimes again we allow ourselves the luxury –if you like- of just floating back into the past, not to say drifting back into the past. So it so happens that this afternoon my mind goes floating back into the past; and I'm afraid it goes floating back many years. It goes back 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, 20 years, it goes back to the summer of 1942, or it might have been 1941, but in either case that's a pretty long time ago. And of course it was here in London and it was during the war. And I remember that I'd very recently returned from the country, from the southwest in fact, and I was at that time very deep in the study of Eastern philosophies and religions, the different systems, teachings, translations of texts; I was reading in fact at that time all the books on these Eastern teachings, these Eastern traditions, that I could possibly get hold of, especially books on Buddhism. And it was at this time, more than 20 years ago, here in London that I came across, I encountered two works which made a tremendous impression on me. In fact it wasn't just a question of an impression but even, one may say, an impact. One might go so far as to say that reading them, just going through them for the first time was even a tremendous spiritual experience. So much so that I may even affirm that the perusal of those two works then changed radically the whole course of my life; or perhaps I should say it made me realize for the first time what the course of my life really was, made me realize, in a word, that I was a Buddhist, whatever that may mean. Now, the first of these works, the first of these tremendous works was the 'Platform Scripture', which we, in our ignorance, then called the 'Sutra of Wei Lang'. The other work was the Diamond Sutra. And it is of course with the Diamond Sutra that we are concerned today.

And we are concerned with it, we're dealing with it not just as it were for biographical reasons, not just because I happened to be impressed by it and still am impressed by it today, we're dealing with it, we're concerned with it, vitally concerned with it rather because it is one of the most important, one of the best known and also one of the spiritually most valuable of all the Buddhist scriptures, of all the Buddhist texts.

It forms, it constitutes an integral, an essential part of the mainstream of Buddhist tradition, especially in the Mahayana Buddhist world, whether we turn to China, whether we turn to Tibet, whether we turn to Japan or to Mongolia, or to Korea, or to Vietnam, there we find, in one language or another, one translation or another, recited almost daily, commented upon, meditated upon, explained, expounded, there we find the Diamond Sutra; so that if we do not have some acquaintance at least with this great work, then we do not really, do not truly know Buddhism. Or at least it must be said that our knowledge of Buddhism is imperfect.

Now Western Buddhists, whether it's Buddhists in this country or Buddhists in the United States or in Germany or France, Western Buddhists have, no doubt, quite a lot to grumble about. Here in the West we've no large monasteries containing hundreds of monks, that's one great disadvantage we suffer from; we've no sympathetic employers to give us three months leave with pay when we want to go and meditate, which is what happens in Burma, we've no Buddhist processions even, just to enliven things, through the streets of London, we don't even have any public holidays on full moon days, and of course we've no Zen masters, and we've no cremation grounds to visit in the moonlight, and sometimes, sad to say it even rains during our retreats, but there is one thing at least that we can't grumble about – we can't grumble about the lack of translations of the Diamond Sutra. There are at least eight complete translations in English alone, leaving aside those in French, German, Italian, Russian and other languages. The first English translation of the Diamond Sutra, chronologically speaking, is that of Samuel Beal, which was published more than one hundred years ago, published, to be precise, in the years 1864 to 65 in a journal, and the latest translation of the Diamond Sutra is that of Charles Luk, published in 1960. So we've no excuse for not at least reading this work. Our Chairman referred to buying it and putting it on the shelf as it were, well, that's easy enough, but we've no excuse even for not reading it because the translations are there. Now the full title of the work in the original Sanskrit – it's a Sanskrit Buddhist text – is 'Vajracheddika-Prajnaparamita-Sutra'. So let's take that, it's all one word in Sanskrit, let's take it

bit by bit, backwards. First of all, what is a Sutra? S-u-t-r-a , what is a Sutra? A Sutra is simply the literary record of a discourse delivered by the Buddha or of a dialogue in which the Buddha takes a part, usually of course a leading part, and a Sutra can be either short or long, even very short or very long, some Sutras are just a few pages, even a few lines, others go on for volume after volume after volume, and of course there are hundreds of Sutras, some of them survive in the original Sanskrit or in the original Pali, others survive only in Chinese translations or Tibetan translation. So from just these few facts we can begin to see that the picture is a little complex, not to say confused, but we're not going into all that sort of literary detail today.

At the moment we are more concerned with a more important question, and that is 'what do we mean by Buddha?'. We say that a Sutra is a discourse or a dialogue given by the Buddha, but what do we mean by Buddha? Literally the Buddha or a Buddha is one who is wise. The word Buddha comes from a root meaning 'to know, to understand', so a Buddha is one who is wise, one who is awake, one who is, in a word, enlightened, but essentially really the word means 'one who knows, one who sees face to face Reality, or one who fully and integrally experiences Reality in the heights and the depths of his being.

So a Sutra, a discourse given by the Buddha, a dialogue in which the Buddha takes part is therefore not just a religious text in the ordinary sense. A Sutra is very much more than that. A Sutra represents the utterance, the word, the expression of an enlightened mind, if you like of the Enlightened Mind, a Sutra is as it were a communication from the heart of Reality, the heart of True Being, it's, if you like, the Truth of Existence speaking, even appealing, to the Truth in us; so that when we read the Diamond Sutra we are not just reading a book, not even a religious book, not even a scripture, when we read the Diamond Sutra, or in fact any Sutra, then, if we are receptive, and this must be stressed again and again, if we are receptive, then we are in contact, so far as the medium of words allows, so far as our own limitations of various kinds permit, in contact with a higher level of being, a higher level of consciousness.

This is what the reading of the Sutra, the Diamond Sutra really means, really represents. And we may have occasion to return to this theme a little later on.

Next, the Diamond Sutra is a Prajnaparamita-Sutra. Prajnaparamita means 'Transcendental Wisdom'. Prajna is knowledge in excelsus, or Wisdom; Paramita is 'that which goes beyond', in other words, the Transcendental or the transcending, that which crosses over to the further shore. So 'Prajnaparamita' is translated often not only as Transcendental Wisdom, but as 'The Wisdom That Goes Beyond', the Wisdom that takes the plunge into the Beyond, the plunge into the Transcendental, the higher dimension if you like.

It's the Wisdom that goes beyond all duality, that transcends all mind-made distinctions and divisions. And it is of course the fundamental thesis of Buddhism that it is by developing this Wisdom, this Transcendental Wisdom, this Wisdom that goes beyond, that we gain Nirvana, Enlightenment or Buddhahood, or whatever else one cares to term it.

So all the Buddhist scriptures, whether Sutras or other works, all the Buddhist scriptures have some bearing on the development of Transcendental Wisdom, the Wisdom that goes beyond. But there are some Sutras which deal with it directly, which deal with it almost exclusively, deal with almost nothing else, simply and solely the Perfection of Wisdom, or Transcendental Wisdom, and these Sutras or Sutras of this class are known as Prajnaparamita-Sutras, or Sutras devoted to the Perfection of Wisdom or Transcendental Wisdom.

And there are altogether some thirty five of these Sutras, devoted and dedicated to Transcendental Wisdom. Some are long, some are short, and the Diamond Sutra is one of them. It's called the 'Vajracheddika-Prajnaparamita-Sutra', to indicate that it belongs to that group, that class of Sutras dealing specifically, dealing almost exclusively with Transcendental Wisdom, dealing with different aspects, various aspects of Transcendental Wisdom.

And finally, the title of the work is the 'Vajracheddika-Prajnaparamita-Sutra'. So what does this mean?

‘Vajra’, the first part of the word means both diamond and thunderbolt. And the diamond or the thunderbolt occupies a quite important place in Buddhist symbolism. It also gives it’s name to one of the three great phases of the development of Buddhism in India; first as you know came the Hinayana, the little vehicle, then the Mahayana, the great vehicle, and then the Vajrayana, the vehicle, the path or the way of the diamond or the thunderbolt. And in Buddhist symbolism, in Buddhist thought the Vajra, the diamond or the thunderbolt connotes something of irresistible strength, irresistible potency, something capable of pulverizing, something capable of smashing, of shattering everything that stands in its way.

And ‘Cheddika’ means ‘that which cuts’, or it means ‘a cutter’.

So we can now understand the meaning of the full title of the Diamond Sutra, the ‘Vajracheddika-Prajnaparamita-Sutra’. It means the Sutra or the discourse on the Transcendental Wisdom that cuts like the thunderbolt, or cuts like the diamond. And this in turn gives us a clue to the meaning and the significance of the whole of the Sutra itself. To begin with the Sutra is, by very definition, by virtue of the fact that it is termed a Sutra it is the word of the Buddha, what we call ‘Buddha-Vachana’, the word or the utterance of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. That is to say the Diamond sutra is the expression, is an expression of the Enlightened Mind, it doesn’t come from the ordinary mind, doesn’t come from the brain, doesn’t come from the logical mind, doesn’t come from the lower consciousness, doesn’t come from any mundane, any conditioned consciousness; the Diamond sutra is the expression of the Enlightened Mind. And the Enlightened Mind is one with Reality, the Enlightened Mind knows Reality, sees Reality face to face; so the Diamond Sutra, if you like, is a revelation, an exposition of Reality itself, so that reading it, reflecting upon it, meditating upon it, bearing it in mind, we make contact, it may be through a thick veil, but we make contact, so far as we’re able, with Reality. And when we make that contact through the Diamond Sutra with Reality then the light of Reality illumines the darkness of our hearts and the darkness of our minds. And as it illumines the darkness of our hearts and the darkness of our minds, there appears in this light shining as it were from Reality through the Diamond Sutra into us, there appears Transcendental Wisdom. And though we compare this transcendental Wisdom to, as it were, light, it’s at the same time like a diamond, like a thunderbolt, this Transcendental Wisdom cuts through all our thoughts, cuts through all our ideas, all our concepts about Reality. It cuts through, it destroys, it shatters all our negative emotions, our fear, our anxiety, our anger, our jealousy, our possessiveness, our craving, our clinging, it cuts through all our negative emotions, it cuts through all our psychological conditionings, our conditionings on account of belonging to this nationality, this race, speaking this language, living in this sort of environment and so on, it cuts through all our psychological conditionings, all our prejudices, all our metaphysical assumptions, it smashes, in a word, this diamond, this thunderbolt of Transcendental Wisdom, it smashes everything conditioned, everything, that is, that stands in between us and Reality, in between us and the seeing of the Truth face to face, and above all, we may say, this thunderbolt of Transcendental Wisdom smashes us as we at present know ourselves to be.

When we as we at present experience ourselves, when we come into contact with that Transcendental Wisdom, then we feel its impact, like a thunderbolt as it were smashing and destroying us. Now this, if one begins to think about it, if one begins to feel it, now this is a very terrible thing. I remember that D.H. Lawrence in one of his poems says: ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. They are so large and they cradle so much of a man.’ Let me just read them again. ‘It is a fearful thing’, he says, ‘to fall into the hands of the living God.’ Not the dead God, the living God...’They are so large and they cradle so much of a man.’ Now Lawrence, being a poet, expresses the matter theistically, since that was his natural idiom as it were, but we can paraphrase that first line ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’, we can paraphrase it in more buddhistic terms, perhaps more truly, and we can say that it’s a fearful thing, we can say it’s a terrible thing to get caught in the grip of Reality. It’s a terrible thing to get caught in the grip of Transcendental Wisdom. It’s a terrible thing to get caught even in the grip of the Diamond Sutra. Because once you get caught, well, you’re caught, you may wriggle and wriggle, but you can’t get free.

So the question arises: is one prepared for this? The question arises: does one want to get caught? Does one want to get caught, gripped by Reality, by Transcendental Wisdom, by the Diamond

Sutra. If we don't, then it's better to leave the Diamond Sutra alone. It's even better just to leave it on the shelf, collecting dust. If we don't want to get caught by the Diamond Sutra it's even better just to walk out of the door now.

But even if we do want to get caught, even if we're happy to get caught, eager to get caught, it's better to proceed very slowly and very cautiously. 'Humankind cannot bear very much Reality'. I've quoted these words more than once before and I make no apology for quoting them again. 'Humankind cannot bear very much Reality'. And we certainly cannot bear very much of the Diamond Sutra. We can bear very little of it in fact, if any of it. And this is why we're working our way into it, working our way into the subject, working our way into the Diamond Sutra very slowly. And in fact as our chairman said, rather anticipating what I'm going to say, though he didn't know I was going to say it, there can be no question of giving a complete, a systematic exposition of the teaching of the Diamond Sutra in all it's depth, in all it's breadth, even if such an exposition could be given. Because probably there is not a single person in this room who could bear it. It would just be too much.

If some Buddha or some Bodhisattva was to come along, was to appear in mid air as it were, and start expounding the Diamond Sutra in its fullness and really telling us what it was all about, then everybody would probably collapse in their chairs, would have to be carried out, feet foremost, and if ever we were to get round, if ever we do get round to really talking about the Diamond Sutra, then I'd suggest that we need to have the St. John's Ambulance Brigade standing by. So meanwhile we're going slowly and cautiously.

We've understood the meaning of the title of the Sutra and this has given us some insight into the meaning and significance of the whole work. So we'll now have a look at the literary framework of the Sutra, and after that, if we feel brave enough and venturesome enough we may just take a quick glance at some of the major insights of the Sutra.

But before we do that just a few words about the text, the text of the Diamond Sutra. It is quite a short work and it consists of a number of apparently unconnected paragraphs, it doesn't read smoothly and continuously, apparently, one topic leading on to the next, you get a bit of this and a bit of that without any apparent order or sequence. The Chinese versions of the Diamond Sutra are divided into two parts and altogether thirty two short, in fact very short chapters, but we find no such divisions in fact in the original Sanskrit text. Now Han Shan, who was an enlightened Ch'an master of the Ming dynasty in China makes an interesting suggestion: according to him, the Buddha's statements in the Sutra, in the Diamond Sutra are meant to resolve the unspoken doubts of the monk Subhuti whom he is addressing. So according to Han Shan the actual Sutra, the text of the Sutra gives only the Buddha's statements, but it does not give Subhuti's unspoken doubts in relation to which the statements were made by the Buddha. And this is the reason for the seeming, the apparent lack of connection and continuity. So in his commentary on the Diamond Sutra Han Shan tries to spell out, tries to make explicit Subhuti's unspoken doubts, and in this way make the whole Sutra more connected and more intelligible to the student. Now according to Han Shan there are 35 doubts which arose in Subhuti's mind as he sat in front of the Buddha, which the Buddha resolved, 17 coarse doubts which are dealt with in part one of the Sutra and 18 subtle doubts which are disposed of in part two. And, as Han Shan interprets the Sutra, when all doubts are cut off by the thunderbolt of Transcendental Wisdom, then one's Absolute Mind, which is the Mind of Supreme Enlightenment is revealed, is made manifest.

So much then for the text of the Sutra, now for its literary framework, especially the introduction. So far as form is concerned the Sutra is a dialogue, it's a dialogue between two persons. On the one hand there's the Buddha, on the other there's the monk Subhuti. But Subhuti says very little, very little indeed. If Han Shan's interpretation is correct, this is simply because the dialogue is mainly between the Buddha on the one hand and Subhuti's unspoken doubts on the other.

Now there's something worthy of notice here, and that is that the dialogue is between the Buddha and Subhuti; that is to say between Gautama the Buddha who lived 2500 years ago and Subhuti. In other words the dialogue takes place between two historical characters. No mythological Bodhisattvas or other such beings are involved. In the Heart Sutra, well, along comes the

Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Then in other Sutras, other Perfection of Wisdom or Transcendental Wisdom Sutras there's the Bodhisattva Manjushri; these are mythological, if you like, archetypal figures. They didn't exist historically speaking. But it isn't like that in the Diamond Sutra. The Diamond Sutra is a dialogue between two historical characters, Gautama the Buddha and Subhuti. And this fact suggests something of great significance. It suggests that so far as this Sutra at least is concerned we are firmly on the historical plane. We're not in some higher heavenly world, we're not in some remote Buddhafield; we're here on this earth, on the historical plane. We found ourselves in this Sutra in the midst of the everyday, one might even say workaday world. And in this Sutra we're concerned with a communication, if you like between two live human beings. The Buddha, an enlightened human being, Subhuthi, a non-enlightened, but a nearly enlightened human being on the other hand. This is not a dialogue between personified virtues or archetypes or spiritual symbols but between human beings. And this is borne out, this fact is borne out by the introduction to the Sutra.

Let me read the actual words; the Sutra begins like this: 'Thus have I heard at one time: The Lord (that is to say Gautama the Buddha) dwelled at Sravasti in the Jeta grove in the garden of Anathapindika, together with a large gathering of monks consisting of 1250 monks and with many Bodhisattvas, Great Beings. Early in the morning the Lord dressed, put on his cloak, took his bowl, and entered the great city of Sravasti to collect alms. When he'd eaten and returned from his round the Lord put away his bowl and cloak, washed his feet and sat down on the seat arranged for him, crossing his legs, holding his body upright and mindfully fixing his attention in front of him. Then many monks approached to where the Lord was, saluted his feet with their heads, thrice walked round him to the right and sat down at one side.'

So, could anything be simpler, could anything be quieter, could anything be more subdued, if you like, than this little introduction? One might say that it's almost Greek, almost Doric even in its severity, in its simplicity. And this is significant, this is meaning-ful, because after all the Diamond Sutra is a Mahayana Sutra and the Mahayana Sutras usually begin very splendidly indeed. The scene of many Mahayana Sutras as described in the introductions is very often laid in some higher heavenly world and we open with a magnificent description usually of how the Buddha sits there in all his glory on a great elaborate lotus throne, surrounded not only by monks and nuns but by millions upon millions of non-human beings in their various orders, all in attendance. And then the Mahayana Sutra at the beginning usually describes how, before the Buddha opens his mouth, how, before he preaches, all sorts of wonderful things happen, all sorts of miracles occur. They often describe how down from the sky there come falling and raining great golden flowers called Mandaravas, that are as big as a cart wheel, and thousands of these come floating down, and then we are told very often that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas start arriving from other worlds, other universes; they've heard on some sort of intergalactic Bodhisattva radio as it were, that the Buddha, Gautama the Buddha here is going to give a discourse and they come flocking in from all quarters of the universe; and then the Sutra describes this. And then it describes sometimes how a great ray of light issues from the Buddha's forehead when he's in meditation and circles all around the universe, billions and billions of miles and then comes back and hovers over the heads of every person in the assembly. So this is the usual opening of a Mahayana Sutra, very gorgeous, very splendid, very mythological, full of symbolism, full of light, full of color, full of music, full of perfume; but here in the Diamond Sutra there's absolutely nothing of all that. Absolutely nothing. Here, in the introduction to the Diamond Sutra, everything is simple, everything is natural, everything is ordinary, is even prosaic. And if we just think, if we just close our eyes we can even as it were imagine the scene. We can imagine the group of huts in somebody's garden, a few miles out of the city, in somebody's grove; and we can just see as it were the Buddha in his yellow robes, staying there with his disciples.

And some of the disciples no doubt were not living in the huts, they were camping out in the open air under the trees. And if we just watch, if we just imagine a bit further we can as it were see the Buddha just quietly leaving his hut, early in the morning, maybe at nine o'clock and walking all the way into the city and then in the city just going quietly from door to door with his begging bowl, just receiving whatever was given, a few handfuls of rice, a little curry and so on. And then we can imagine him retiring to a grove of trees nearby quietly eating what he had gathered, and then slowly and meditatively walking back to his hut, just lying down, resting for a while, then getting up, then

sitting outside, meditating, and then we can see, then we can imagine, in the cool of the evening, the disciples from their huts- their begging rounds also over, their meal also finished- just gathering round, just waiting and just listening. And then Subhuti speaks.

So this is the setting, this is the very simple, this is the very natural, this almost the humble setting for the astounding, for the staggering discourse that follows. There are no signs, there are no wonders, no miracles, no lights appearing in the sky, everything is so simple, so natural, so ordinary, and what does this mean? What does this simplicity mean, what does this naturalness mean, this ordinariness mean? Because it certainly means something, every word in the Sutra means something. And only too often people skip over the introduction just to get at the meat of the Sutra as it were, and they miss half the significance of the whole thing. Because as I've observed in some other connection, I think in connection with the Heart Sutra, the frame here is part of the picture, and it shouldn't be ignored. So this simplicity, this naturalness of the introduction describing the opening scene of the Sutra means that Reality is to be experienced in the midst of everyday life, ordinary life, everyday life. Because there's just nowhere else to experience it. If you experience, if you are to experience Reality anywhere, it can only be here. If you are to experience it at any time, it can only be now. So it's here and now. Don't let one's attention be diverted to higher heavenly worlds, yes, the symbolism is very beautiful, is very meaningful, but don't misunderstand it; it's here and it's now that we have to realize, that we have to see, that we have to attain. So it also means, this simple description, this opening scene of the Sutra, it means that ultimately Reality, Transcendental Reality, and everyday life are non-different. You don't have to get away from the conditioned in order to realize the unconditioned. It's the conditioned in its depths which is the Unconditioned. Or as the Heart Sutra says: 'Form is emptiness (i.e. Reality) and emptiness is form'.

Our everyday life may be whatever it may be. It may be pleasurable, it may be painful, it may be wildly ecstatic or it may be unbearably agonizing, or again it may be just plain dull and boring most of the time. But it is here, in the midst of all these experiences, good, bad and indifferent, pleasurable, painful and neutral, it's in the midst of all these experiences and nowhere else that Enlightenment, that Buddhahood is to be attained.

And this is what the introduction to the Sutra, in its own way, is trying to tell us. And in a sense this is the whole message of the Sutra, the whole message of the Diamond Sutra. And perhaps we really we need not go any further than this. If we grasp this, if we understand this, if we take this as the message that the Diamond Sutra is trying to communicate to us, or that the Buddha is trying to communicate to us in the Diamond Sutra, then perhaps it will be quite enough and we need not go, as I've said, any further.

However, for the sake at least of formal completeness, let us proceed.

Another point is that the Buddha delivers the Diamond Sutra in the open air. Now, have we ever noticed this, those of us who've read the Sutra? Have we ever considered the significance of this fact that the Buddha habitually taught in the open air? Now here are we sitting in a room and listening to a talk, listening to a discourse. But this is not what happened in the Buddha's days. The Buddha himself, habitually, as I've said, taught in the open air, he and his disciples lived in fact for the most part in the open air. For nine months of the year they wandered about from place to place, on foot of course. They wandered through forests, they took their time, they rested under trees, they meditated under trees, they climbed mountains, they crossed rivers, sometimes they went into villages, usually just once a day to collect food. Sometimes they might go in to preach and to teach, and then only for some three or four months of the year at most during the rainy season when one couldn't go round very easily, did they stay indoors. And even then, what did indoors mean? It didn't mean a house. Indoors meant in a cave or in a hut in somebody's garden or maybe on the outskirts of the forest. So how simple was life in those days. One just had, if one was a monk, one's three robes and one's bowl, and that was all you needed to get by with, perhaps also a needle and a water-strainer. There were no houses for one, there were no mortgages, no telephone or telephone bills, no television, no refrigerator, no car, no radio, no newspapers, no books, not even the Diamond Sutra.

So, life being simpler, thinking was simpler, too. Minds in those days were uncluttered, they were undistracted, and great truths were more easily, surely, apprehended. So, we ought to be aware of all this, aware of the great part that life in the open air played in the lives of the Buddha and his disciples. Now, we should be aware of this not so as to discourage ourselves, of course, not so as to make us think that it was easy then to develop Transcendental Wisdom, but difficult, if not impossible now. No, we should be aware of this so that we can realize perhaps, how many factors have arisen between us and Enlightenment since the Buddha's day, factors which are not part of the normal human existence but rather of a highly artificial way of life.

Now let us come on to Subhuti. He's the other person in the dialogue, but we haven't said much about him. The introduction represents him, as we've seen as rising from his seat, putting his upper robe over one shoulder, kneeling on his right knee, bending forth his folded hands towards the Buddha; in other words, Subhuti shows the Buddha the most profound respect. And what does this mean? It means that Subhuti is receptive. And receptivity is the first requisite of the disciple, indeed of anyone who would learn anything. You can be anything else you like, you can be wicked, you can be stupid, you can be full of faults, full of weaknesses, you may backslide, you may make mistakes, but in a sense it doesn't matter. But one must be spiritually receptive, one must be willing and ready to learn, one must know that one does not know, and then everything is possible. So Subhuti had this great quality, this great quality of receptivity, and perhaps it's for this reason that the Diamond Sutra is addressed to him.

Subhuti was also highly appreciative of the Buddha, and the first words that Subhuti speaks in the Sutra to the Buddha are, significantly, words of praise. Subhuti says: 'It is wonderful, oh Lord, it is exceedingly wonderful oh Well-Gone, how much the Bodhisattvas, the Great Beings, have been helped with the greatest help by the Tathagata, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One. It is wonderful, oh Lord, how much the Bodhisattvas, the Great Beings, have been favored with the highest favor by the Tathagata, the Arahant, the Fully Enlightened One.' These are Subhuti's first words to the Buddha, words of praise, words of appreciation. Subhuti appreciates what the Buddha has done for his disciples, especially for the great Bodhisattvas. He appreciates the help that the Buddha has given them, and he realizes that the disciples have been favored. There's no question of giving them what they deserve. Nothing conditioned can deserve the Unconditioned; it's simply that the Buddha's compassion overflows without any consideration of merit.

So it is of the utmost importance that we should preserve this sense of wonder at the gift of the teaching. It's so easy, we may say, for the wrong sort of familiarity, to breed contempt. We might for instance have heard of some wonderful Sutra that had never been translated before. And then suddenly you hear there's a new, there's an English translation out, you can read it. So you're very happy and very eager, with great interest, with great enthusiasm, with great faith you get hold of that, and you read it, and you're so pleased to have it, because this is your first chance to go through it. But if you're not careful, after a while you'll become careless. The wonder of it will wear off, the enthusiasm will die down, you'll no longer be so interested or so appreciative, you'll no longer value so highly the opportunity that you have of reading that newly translated Sutra. So, we should watch this, we should be careful of this, and make sure that the wrong sort of familiarity does not breed, even if not contempt, at least not breed even indifference and carelessness.

Now having praised the Buddha, and only after having praised the Buddha, Subhuti puts to the Buddha his first question, and he asks: 'How then, oh Lord, should a son or daughter of good family, who have set out in the Bodhisattva vehicle stand, how progress, how control their thoughts?'

And it's with the Buddha's reply to this question that the main body of the Sutra begins. And it's here that we encounter the first of the great Insights that the Sutra contains. So let's see what the Buddha says in reply to Subhuti's first question.

'The Lord said: 'Here Subhuti: Someone who has set out in the vehicle of a Bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner: as many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term 'beings', egg-born, born from a womb, moisture-born or miraculously born, with or without form, with perception, without perception, and with neither perception nor non-perception, as far as any conceivable form of beings is conceived, all these I must lead to

Nirvana, into the realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana. And why? If in a Bodhisattva the notion of a being should take place he could not be called a Bodhi-being. And why? He is not to be called a Bodhi-being in whom the notion of a self or of a being should take place, or the notion of a living soul or of a person.'

So this is perhaps the Sutra's fundamental Insight. The Insight that is to say, that beings do not exist, in other words, that we do not exist. That's a rather staggering idea to come up against, isn't it? That our present mode of perception, our present mode of consciousness, even of being that tells us 'I am I' is false, is wrong. Now the question arises: Do we take this statement seriously? We hear that beings do not exist, that we do not exist, so do we take this statement seriously? Can we even take it seriously? Are we prepared, in other words, for this, as it were, blotting out, as it would appear to be, of our present existence? Are we prepared for what is sometimes called 'The Spiritual Death'?

Because if there's no Spiritual Death, then there's no Spiritual Birth or Rebirth.

Now in the passage quoted the Buddha goes even beyond this, the Buddha makes a highly paradoxical statement, and incidentally the whole Prajnaparamita literature, the whole literature dealing with Transcendental Wisdom is full of paradoxes. And this paradoxical statement of the Buddha's is about the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva represents of course, as those who attended our last course of lectures will remember, represents the spiritual ideal of Buddhism in general and of the Mahayana in particular.

A Bodhisattva is one who seeks to gain Enlightenment, not for his own sake merely, but for the good and the benefit of all. So what is it that the Buddha says? He says that the Bodhisattva should resolve to lead all beings to Nirvana, to help them, to guide them, to teach them, to lead them in such a way that they all reach Nirvana, they all reach Enlightenment or Buddhahood. And second, the Buddha says, the Bodhisattva should realize that in reality no being exists. First one is exhorted to lead all beings to Enlightenment, to Nirvana, then you're told to see that no beings exist. So obviously there's a contradiction here, and there's meant to be a contradiction here, and this contradiction is meant to express the very essence of the Bodhisattva ideal.

Usually we think of compassion as directed towards individuals, you see individual so and so suffering perhaps, and then your compassion or your pity at least arises. But the Bodhisattva does not perceive individuals. The Bodhisattva perceives the truth of selflessness, he perceives the truth of non-individuality, the truth of emptiness, that is to say Sunyata. And it is out of this perception, this perception of non-individuality, selflessness, emptiness, out of this perception, this realization, if you like, that his compassion arises, a compassion which we perceive, which we interpret as compassion for individuals.

Now this fundamental insight of the Sutra, that beings do not exist, this insight into the truth of selflessness or emptiness is worked out in the Sutra in various ways, has various fields of application. And we shall now turn to some of them, and then conclude.

Following Dr. Conze, we may say, that in the Diamond Sutra the Buddha establishes the doctrine or the teaching, or the realization rather, of selflessness or emptiness in an ontological, a psychological and a logical perspective. So let us take each one of these in turn.

Ontologically the doctrine of selflessness or emptiness means that no such thing as a separate entity exists. There's nothing which is really and truly and absolutely separate in itself. In pre-Mahayana Buddhist thought the alleged separate real entities were technically known as dharmas. And we therefore have the Mahayana counterteaching, as we may call it, of Sarvadharmasunyata, or 'all dharmas are empty' and this means, or this statement means, that separate entities do not really exist. Habitually of course we chop reality up into bits. We split it up, we divide it, we distinguish one thing from another, this is this, that is that, then we start preferring this to that, liking this more than that, choosing this rather than that, sticking to this and not to that. But this, according not only to the Diamond Sutra, but to the whole Buddhist tradition, is wrong. One should try instead to see things, not exactly as one, you don't reduce all difference to unity, blotting out the difference, but

one should try to see things as sort of somehow interfused. And in this connection there's the very beautiful simile of the Gandavyuha-Sutra of the intersecting beams of light. It's said that in Reality things are like beams of light that mutually intersect. You've got beams of light as it were flashing in all directions, shining in all directions, beams of light of different colors, red light, blue light, green light, yellow light, a ray of this color, a beam of that color, in all directions, crossing and criss-crossing. Now what happens? One ray of light, one beam of light, does not obstruct any of the others, they all shine through one another, they're not lost or merged in one great light, no, they all maintain, as it were, their separate individualities, but their separate individualities offer no obstruction to interpenetration by other individualities, so that they're all mutually interpenetrating. So we should see things, we should see Reality like that, not chopped up, as it were, into mutually exclusive bits, but see all things as interfusing and interpenetrating one another, with neither individuality-final nor unity-final, but both there, without obstruction to each other, at the same time.

Now the fact that separate entities do not really exist also negates the traditional categories of Buddhist thought. Buddhist thought uses various terms, it speaks, say, of the Buddha-, the Bodhisattva-merit, Wisdom, and so on. But the Sutra says one should not think that these terms refer to any fixed or absolute or final entities; all these terms, which Buddhism itself uses are just devices, 'Upayas', to help us on our way; they've a provisional value only, not an ultimate value, not an absolute value, and this of course brings us right back to the famous parable of the raft, in which the Dharma, the teaching, is compared to a raft, it's something to carry you across to the other shore, and then to be abandoned. It also brings us back to Zen. There is a story, some of you no doubt know it, that a disciple asked a Zen master: 'If I met the Buddha, what should I do?' No doubt the disciple had thought the master would say 'Well, you should bow down and worship him'. But the master said: 'If you meet the Buddha, kill him!' So what does this mean? It means: if you're really set on Enlightenment, on Buddhahood, as we call it, don't let even the concept of Buddha stand between you and Enlightenment. We might even go so far as to say 'there's nothing which stands between people and realization of Reality so much as religion. Because it's meant to help them, and then they get stuck in their helps and don't go beyond. So there's nothing which hinders you so much in your search for Reality as those things that help you. So Buddhism is probably unique in seeing this so clearly, and trying to sweep out of the way, to clear the path leading to Enlightenment even of Buddhism itself. No doubt you need Buddhism for a long time, you need your prayers and your meditations and your scriptures and your chanting, and you need even your social gatherings and your retreats, and you need to use Buddhist terms and Buddhist ideas and to think buddhistically, but in the end you have to go beyond it all, in the end you have to sweep it all aside and just be left as it were on your own, without even Buddhism to guide you and to help you, before you can fully encounter Reality. So this is just another aspect of this ontological application of the doctrine of selflessness or emptiness or Sunyata.

Now psychologically the doctrine of selflessness means that we should not be attached anywhere, should not stand or settle down anywhere, should not depend on anything, should not lean on anything or take anything as a support. Because after all, if entities do not really exist, there's nothing for us to depend on anyway. But it's very hard for us to realize this, we usually, we nearly all the time want to depend on something, settle down somewhere, anywhere; so often you hear people say, especially later on in life: 'I'd like to settle down'. It's not just material, it's psychological, it's even spiritual, they want to find some cozy corner, some little nest, where they can be all warm and secure and safe and think: 'Well, here I am, nothing can shake me', just like a little bird in its nest on a bough, thinking 'well, this is absolutely fixed'. But of course it isn't quite like this, it isn't possible, but sooner or later, secure as we fancy ourselves, safe as we fancy ourselves, our supports are rudely pulled out from underneath us, and then of course we have to suffer. So the Diamond Sutra says or suggests, that we develop an attitude which is detached, which doesn't settle down anywhere, which doesn't try to establish itself anywhere, which is free, which is as it were flowing, which is completely spontaneous. Not spontaneous in the sense of impulsive or irresponsible, it should be a sort of spiritual spontaneity, arising out of, freely and creatively arising out of our realization of the truth of selflessness and emptiness.

Now thirdly and lastly, logically the doctrine of selflessness means, that rational thought is transcended. The basis of traditional logic, we may say, both in the West and in the East, is the law of contradiction, that a thing cannot be both A and not-A at the same time in the same sense. It

can't be both, say, black and not black at the same time. But the Sutra says 'oh yes, it can'. The Sutra says 'a thing is itself, it is what it is, because it is not itself, it is not what it is. It is A because it is not-A. It is A because it is not-A. In other words, according to the Sutra, logic is abrogated, reason breaks down. Not that reason is of no use at all. It's very useful indeed in the affairs of everyday life, but it's of no use at all where Ultimate Reality is concerned. If we want to soar in the Void, if we want to wing our way through the Void, we must leave reason, leave logic far behind. And this is not easy to accept. It's even easy to misunderstand. There's no question of submerging, there's no question of a descent into irrationality, we must rise above reason, above logic, not fall, not sink below, and only then will Transcendental Wisdom develop, only then shall we really apprehend the message of the Diamond Sutra.

Now much more could be said, but we must close now. We've touched, I'm afraid, we can touch in fact, only the fringes of a vast subject. We simply cannot do more than this. To employ a simile we may say that the Diamond Sutra is like the sun, like the great sun shining in the sky. We know that if we approach too near the sun, even by a few miles, we shall be blinded, we shall be scorched, we shall be consumed; but if we're receptive, if we keep as it were respectful distance, then, even from a distance, we can perceive the light of the sun, we can feel the warmth of the sun. And the Diamond Sutra is like this. If we keep a sort of respectful distance from it, don't go too near, we can feel the warmth of that teaching, the Compassion, as it were, we can see, we can perceive the light, the Wisdom, as it were, the Transcendental Wisdom. And one day perhaps we shall be ready to plunge right into the heart of this sun, to become one with this sun; because then we shall be spiritually dead and at the same time never more spiritually alive. And then we shall have fulfilled the word of the Buddha in the Diamond Sutra.