

The Buddha Taught No Dharma

Selections from The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra
in 300 Verses Called “The Diamond Cutter”

“ This is what I heard. ”



ADVANCED COURSE
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तारका तिमिरं दीपो
मायावश्याय बुद्बुदम् ।
स्वप्नम् च विद्युदभ्रं च
एवं द्रष्टव्य संस्कृतम् ॥

tārakā timiram dīpo
māyāvaśyāya budbudam ।
svapnam ca vidyudabhram ca
evam draṣṭavya saṁskṛtam । ।

Like a star in the sky or
a speck in the eye,
A lamp, an illusion, a
dewdrop or a bubble,
Like a dream, a flash of
lightning, or a passing cloud –
So should you look upon
any caused thing.



CLASS ONE

I bow down to the Goddess, the Realized One, Who is the Perfection of Wisdom.

This is what I heard.

One time the Lord was staying in Shravasti at the grove of Prince Jeta, in the pleasure garden of Anathapindika, in the company of a great assembly of 1300 [1250??] monks and many bodhisattvas and mahasattvas. Early one morning the Lord dressed, took up his begging bowl and robes, and went to the great city of Shravasti for alms. Having made his rounds for alms through the great city of Shravasti the Lord ate his food and after returning in the afternoon put away his begging bowl and robes. He washed his feet, sat down on the seat that had been arranged for him and assumed his meditation posture, holding his body upright and watching mindfully at what was right in front of him. Then many monks drew near to the Lord. Having approached the Lord, they respectfully put their heads to his feet, circumambulated him three times, and then sat down in unison. (1)

At that time the Venerable Subhuti was seated among that assembly. And then the Venerable Subhuti rose from his seat, dropped his upper garment from one of his shoulders, knelt down on his right knee, and with his hands reverentially folded together said this to the Lord:

“Lord, it is truly wonderful how much the One Who Found Reality, the Superior One, the Fully Awakened One, has helped the bodhisattvas, the great beings, with the highest help. Lord, it is truly wonderful how much the One Who Found Reality, the Superior One, the Fully Awakened One, has benefited the bodhisattvas, the great beings, with the highest benefit. Lord, how does a son or daughter of a good family who has set out on the vehicle of the bodhisattvas – how does such a one abide? How does he or she move? How does one like that control their mind?”

When the Venerable Subhuti finished speaking, the Lord replied: “Well said, Subhuti! Well said! It really is as you say. The One Who Found Reality has helped the bodhisattvas, the great beings, with the highest help. And the One Who Found Reality

has benefited the bodhisattvas, the great beings, with the highest benefit. So listen well, Subhuti -- get it straight in your mind -- and I will tell you how someone who has set out on the vehicle of the bodhisattvas abides, moves, and controls their mind."

Venerable Subhuti said, "I will, my Lord," and listened attentively to the Lord. (2)

Then the Lord said this to him: "Subhuti, someone who has set out on the bodhisattva vehicle must have this mindset: 'As many living beings as there are in sphere of living beings, as many as are included in the category of living beings -- whether they are born from an egg, or from a womb, or from moisture, or just arise full-grown; whether they have form or are formless; whether they think conceptually or not, or neither conceptually nor non-conceptually -- as many as one can know to be in the sphere of living beings, all these I will lead to the sphere of the nirvana with no remainder.' And why is this? If, Subhuti, a conception of 'a living being' were produced in a bodhisattva, he could not be called a bodhisattva. And why is this? Because, Subhuti, someone who has a conception of 'a living being' or 'a life span' or 'a person' could not be called a bodhisattva. (3)

Exercise for Class One

Toward the end of the passage for this class, the Buddha declares that a bodhisattva must have both the intention to help free all living beings from suffering and the realization that the “living beings” one intends to help have no independent or true existence.

Each day this week pick a particular person in your life (it could be a family member, a friend, someone at work, or just an acquaintance) and practice putting this two-fold kind of compassion to work.

First, reflect on the difficulties this person seems to be facing in his or her life and try to generate a strong sense of empathy for his or her suffering and a resolution to do what you can to help them.

Then, secondly, think about how this person appears to you the way he or she does not because they *are* that way, but because of how they appear *to you*. When we see another person suffering, it is not because they really *are* suffering (whether they are or not is in any case unknowable to us) but because we *perceive* them to be suffering.

Now try to put these two reflections together. Can you maintain your compassion for another person while at the same time recognizing that all you can really know about them is merely how they *appear* to you? Does the second somehow mitigate the first for you, or are you able to hold both of these aspects without the second diminishing the first?

CLASS TWO

“Moreover, Subhuti, a gift to be given by a bodhisattva should not be one which is thought to be grounded in the idea that it is a thing that truly exists. The gift to be given should not be thought to be grounded in anything at all. The gift to be given should not be grounded in its form. The gift to be given should not be grounded in its existence in terms of its sound, smell, taste, or touch. The gift to be given by a bodhisattva should not be grounded in any conceptualization of a definitive sign at all. And why is this? Subhuti, a bodhisattva who gives a gift that is ungrounded accrues a heap of merit which is not easy to measure. What do you think, Subhuti? Is the easy to measure the space in the eastern direction?” Subhuti said, “No it isn’t, Lord.” The Lord said, “Similarly, what about the south, the west, or the north, downward, upward, the intermediate directions -- the directions on all ten sides. Is the space in these directions easy to measure?” Subhuti said, “No it isn’t, Lord.” The Lord said, “Just so, Subhuti, a bodhisattva who, ungrounded, gives a gift accrues a heap of merit that is not easy to measure. And so, Subhuti, a gift to be given by someone who has set out on the bodhisattva vehicle should not be grounded in a conceptualization of a definitive sign.” (4)

“What do you think, Subhuti? Is the One Who Found Reality recognized by the possession of distinctive physical marks?” Subhuti said, “No, Lord. The One Who Found Reality is not recognized by the possession of distinctive physical marks. And why is this? Because that which which has been spoken of by the One Who Found Reality as the possession of distinctive physical marks is really not the possession of distinctive physical marks.” When Subhuti had finished speaking, the Lord then said to the Venerable Subhuti, “To the extent that there are distinctive physical marks, Subhuti, there is deception; and to the extent that there are no distinctive physical marks, there is no deception. For the Straightforward One is recognized by having the distinctive physical marks of no physical marks that are distinctive.” (5)

When the Buddha had finished speaking, the Venerable Subhuti said the Lord, “Will there be any living beings, o Lord, in the future period, in the later times, in the latter epoch, in five hundred years from now when the destruction of the true Dharma has

begun, who when these very ultimate words of the sutra are recited will be able to have a true understanding of them?"

"Yes, Subhuti, there will still be bodhisattvas, great beings, in the future period, in the later times, in the latter epoch, in five hundred years from now when the destruction of the true Dharma has begun, who possess good qualities, morality, and wisdom, who when these very ultimate words of the sutra are recited will be able to have a true understanding of them. And indeed these bodhisattvas, great beings, will not be those who have worshipped just one Buddha; their merit will not be rooted in just one Buddha.

On the contrary, they will be bodhisattvas, great beings, who will have worshipped hundreds of thousands of Buddhas and whose merit will be rooted in hundreds of thousands of Buddhas, and who when these very ultimate words of the sutra are recited will obtain unshakeable clarity of thought. They are known, Subhuti, by the One Who Found Reality through the wisdom of a Buddha; they are seen, Subhuti, by the One Who Found Reality with the eye of a Buddha; they are fully known, Subhuti, by the One Who Found Reality. They all, Subhuti, will produce and receive an immeasurable, countless heaps of merit.

And why is this? Because, Subhuti, to these bodhisattvas, these great beings, there does not occur a conception of the self, a conception of a living being, a conception of a lifespan, or a conception of a soul. Subhuti, there also does not arise in these bodhisattvas, these great beings, a conception of the existence of things or of the non-existence of things, nor does it occur to them that there are conceptions or non-conceptions. And why is this? If there occurred a conception of existing things to these bodhisattvas, these great beings, there would be in them a grasping to the self, a grasping to a living being, a grasping to a lifespan, a grasping to a soul. And if there occurred a conception of non-existence of things, there would also be in them a grasping to a self, to a living being, to a lifespan, and to a soul.

And why is this? Because, Subhuti, a bodhisattva, a great being, should not adhere either to the existence or non-existence of things. This, therefore, is the hidden meaning

behind the proclamation of the One Gone Thus: 'Those who know that the Dharma which has been expounded is like a raft relinquish the idea of the existence of things, let alone the non-existence of things.'" (6)

Exercise for Class Two

This week make it a practice to engage at least once a day in the “perfection of giving,” described in the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* as a gift that is not “grounded,” one connotation of which means a gift given purely selflessly.

Remember that a gift can be either material (e.g., money or things), emotional (like a gift of love or forgiveness), or spiritual (helping someone by teaching them how to live a good life – ethically, compassionately, and wisely).

Before, during, and after the offering of the gift, check to make sure you did it as selflessly as possible, without expectation of reward of any kind, including thanks or recognition.

Keep track of your acts of generosity and the feelings and motivations you noticed in yourself in a journal with daily entries.

CLASS THREE

And the Lord continued by saying this to the Venerable Subhuti: “What do you think, Subhuti? Is there any Dharma at all that the One Who Found Reality has fully realized that is highest, correct, and perfectly realized? Has the One Who Found Reality displayed any such Dharma?” Subhuti answered, “Lord, as far as I understand the meaning of what the Lord has taught, no, there is not any Dharma at all that the One Who Found Reality has fully realized that is highest, correct, and perfectly realized. And the One Who Found Reality has not displayed any such Dharma. And why is this? Because the Dharma fully realized or displayed by the One Who Found Reality cannot be conceived or articulated. It is neither Dharma or non-Dharma. And why is this? Because those persons who become Realized Ones do so as a result of something uncaused. (7)

The Lord said, “What do you think, Subhuti? If some son or daughter of a noble family should make a gift of the three thousand million planets of this world system completely filled with the seven gems and donate it to the Straightforward Ones, the Superior Ones, the Fully Awakened Ones, would such a son or daughter of a good family generate a great heap of merit as a result of that?”

Subhuti replied, “Yes, Lord, it would be great. The heap of merit a son or daughter of a good family would generate as a result of that would be great, o You Who Have Come to the Good. And why is this? Because, Lord, what the One Who Found Reality taught to be a ‘heap of merit’ was taught by the One Who Found Reality to be not a heap. Therefore, the One Who Found Reality has taught about a heap of merit using the term ‘heap of merit.’”

The Lord said, “But if, Subhuti, some son or daughter of a noble family should make a gift of the three thousand million planets of this world system completely filled with the seven gems and donate it to the Ones Who Found Reality, the Superior Ones, the Fully Awakened Ones, and if another were to extract one stanza of four lines from this teaching on the Dharma and teach and explain it fully to others, this latter would generate a still greater, immeasurable, countless heaps of merit as a result of that. And

why is this? Because from this teaching, Subhuti, issue forth the unexcelled, correct, and complete awakening of the Ones Who Found Reality, the Realized Ones, and the Fully Awakened Ones; from this issue forth the Buddhas, the Lords. And why is this? Because, Subhuti, the Ones Who Found Reality have spoken of the Buddha Dharma as the Buddha Dharma, it was not the Buddha Dharma. And that's why it is called "Buddha Dharma." (8)

"What do you think, Subhuti? Does it happen that a Stream-Enterer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Stream-Enterer?'" Subhuti replied, "No, Lord. It does not happen that a Stream-Enterer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Stream-Enterer.' And why is this? Because, Lord, such a one has not entered any existing thing at all, and that is why it is simply named 'Stream-Enterer.' One doesn't enter any existing thing: one doesn't enter something with form or something you can hear, smell, taste, or touch, and that's why it is simply named 'Stream-Enterer.' If, Lord, it would happen that a Stream-Enterer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Stream-Enterer,' then he would be grasping to a self, he would be grasping to a living being, he would be grasping to a lifespan, he would be grasping to a soul."

The Lord said, "What do you think, Subhuti? Does it happen that a Once-Returner thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Once-Returner?'" Subhuti replied, "No, Lord. It does not happened that a Once-Returner thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Once-Returner.' And why is this? Because one who is a Once-Returner has not entered any existing thing at all, and that is why it is simply named 'Once-Returner.'"

The Lord said, "What do you think, Subhuti? Does it happen that a Non-Returner thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Non-Returner?'" Subhuti replied, "No, Lord. It does not happened that a Non-Returner thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being a Non-Returner.' And why is this? Because one who is a Non-Returner has not entered any existing thing at all, and that is why it is simply named "Non-Returner.'"

The Lord said, "What do you think, Subhuti? Does it happen that an Enemy-Destroyer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being an Enemy-Destroyer.'?" Subhuti replied, "No, Lord. It does not happen that an Enemy-Destroyer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being an Enemy-Destroyer.' And why is this? Because one who is an Enemy-Destroyer has not entered any existing thing at all, and that is why it is simply named 'Enemy-Destroyer.' If, Lord, it would happen that an Enemy-Destroyer thinks, 'I have attained the goal which is the state of being an Enemy-Destroyer,' then he would be grasping to a self, he would be grasping to a living being, he would be grasping to a lifespan, he would be grasping to a soul. And why is this? Lord, I have been declared by the the Ones Who Found Reality, the Superior Ones, the Fully Awakened Ones, to be the foremost among those who abide in peace. I am, Lord, an Enemy-Destroyer, free from passion. And it does not happen that I think, 'I am an Enemy-Destroyer, free from passion.' If, Lord, it would happen that I thought, 'I have attained the state of being an Enemy-Destroyer,' then the One Who Found Reality would not have predicted made his prediction about me, saying 'Subhuti, the son of noble family, the foremost among those who abide in peace, does not abide anywhere, which is why he is simply named 'the one who abides in peace.''" (9)

The Lord said, "What do you think, Subhuti? Is there any teaching whatsoever that the One Who Found Reality has received from Dipamkara, the One Who Found Reality, the Superior One, the Fully Awakened One?" Subhuti replied, "No, Lord. There is not any teaching whatsoever that the One Who Found Reality has received from Dipamkara, the Straightforward One, the Superior One, the Fully Awakened One."

The Lord said, "If, Subhuti, some bodhisattva were to say, 'I will bring about the transformation of the world,' he would speak falsely. And why is this? Because, Subhuti, when the One Who Found Reality teaches about the transformation of the world using the term 'transformation of the world,' there is no transformation, and that's why it is simply named 'transformation of the world.'"

Exercise for Class Three

Among other topics covered in the reading for this class is an analysis of spiritual goals like “nirvana, “Awakening,” and “Buddhahood.”

Spend fifteen minutes each day this week thinking about your own conception of such goals. Do you think such high states of perfect peace are possible? If so, what do you think you would have to do to reach such an attainment?

Compare your own thoughts on this matter to what our text states and implies about “reaching” or “attaining” a goal like nirvana and what kind of a person would be able to do that.

CLASS FOUR

Therefore, in that case, Subhuti, a bodhisattva, a great being, is to bring about a state of mind that is unattached; he is to bring about a state of mind that is not attached to anything at all – a state of mind that is not attached to form, a state of mind that is not attached to sound, smell, taste, touch or to any existing object at all.

Subhuti, it is like this: Suppose there were a person whose had a body, a great body, such that his self-existence took a form the size of Sumeru, the king of mountains. What do you think, Subhuti? Would this self-existent one be great?”

Subhuti answered, “Lord, it would be great; that self-existent one would be great, o One Who Has Gone to the Good. And why is this? Because, Lord, when the One Who Found Reality teaches about self-existence using the term ‘self-existence,’ there is nothing that exists, and that’s why it is called ‘self-existence.’ It is neither existing nor non-existing, Lord. And that’s why it is simply named “self-existence.”” (10)

[. . . The Lord said,] Moreover, Subhuti, the place on earth where one has extracted one stanza of four lines from this teaching on the Dharma and taught and explained it fully to others, that place on earth will become a sacred place for the whole world, with its gods, humans, and titans. Not to mention those who will completely master this teaching on the Dharma, who will recite it, analyze it, and explain it fully to others! They will be endowed with the highest blessing, and on that place on earth, Subhuti, dwells either the Teacher or a wise guru who stands in for the Teacher.” (12)

When he was finished speaking, the Venerable Subhuti said this to the Lord: “What is the name of this teaching on the Dharma? How should I grasp it?” This having been said, the Lord then replied the Venerable Subhuti: “This teaching on the Dharma is called the ‘Perfection of Wisdom,’ Subhuti, and you should grasp it as such. And why is this? Because, Subhuti, when the Straightforward one teaches about the Perfection of Wisdom, there is nothing that is a “Perfection” taught by the One Who Found Reality, and that’s why it is called ‘Perfection of Wisdom.’ . . . (13)

And then, because of the powerful effect of this Dharma teaching, the Venerable Subhuti shed tears. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he spoke to the Lord: “It is truly wonderful, Lord, most wonderful, you who have Gone to the Good, this Dharma teaching spoken by the One Who Found Reality for the purpose of leading living beings on the highest of all journeys, for the purpose of the best of all journeys, and from which, Lord, wisdom has arisen in me. Lord, I have never before heard such a Dharma teaching like this! Those bodhisattvas, Lord, who hear what is taught in this sutra and in whom arises a clear understanding of the truth will be supremely blessed. And why is this? Because, Lord, this clear understanding of the truth is not a clear understanding of the truth. And that is why the One Who Found Reality speaks of the clear understanding of the truth as “the clear understanding of the truth.” . . .

When he had finished speaking, the Lord then said this to the Venerable Subhuti: “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. Those beings who, when they hear this sutra do not become afraid, begin to tremble, or become terrified, they will be endowed with the highest blessing. And why is this? Because, Subhuti, the One Who Found Reality has taught this as the highest of the perfections, which is also not a perfection. And, Subhuti, what the One Who Found Reality has taught as the highest of the perfections has also been taught by innumerable Blessed Buddhas. Therefore it is called ‘the highest of perfections.’” . . .

(14)

. . . The Lord also at that time taught these stanzas:

Those who saw me with a form,
Those who heard me with a voice,
Engaged in mistaken efforts.
Such people will not perceive me.

The Buddha is perceived through the Dharma;
The true Guides are the Dharma Bodies.
And their true nature is not be known,
Nor can it be known. (26)

“Finally, Subhuti, if a bodhisattva, a great being, were to make a gift of immeasurable, countless world systems completely filled with the seven gems and donate it to the Ones Who Found Reality, the Superior Ones, the Fully Awakened Ones, and if a son or daughter of a noble family were to extract one stanza of four lines from this teaching on the Dharma, from this Perfection of Wisdom, and teach and explain it fully to others, this latter would generate a still greater, immeasurable, countless heaps of merit as a result of that. And how would one explain it? In this way:

Like a star in the sky or a speck in the eye,
A lamp, an illusion, a dewdrop or a bubble,
Like a dream, a flash of lightning, or a passing cloud –
So should you look upon any caused thing.

One should explain it like that, and therefore one ‘fully explains.’”

This is what the Buddha said. With great joy, the Venerable Subhuti, and all those monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, bodhisattvas, and the whole world inhabited by gods, humans, titans, and spirits, rejoiced in what the Lord had taught. (32)

Exercise for Class Four

The Buddha declares in this part of the text that “Those who saw me with form, those who heard me with a voice, engaged in mistaken efforts” and did not see the “real” Buddha.

This is one of the several places in the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* where it is indicated that what is called “the Buddha” is not a person but rather a kind of cosmic force of inspiration and guidance, available at all times to everybody.

This week, pause for fifteen minutes each day to ponder about how “the Buddha” has helped you in your own life. Review some of the major events and turning points in your personal history and see if you can’t believe it is possible that some power or force was at work aiding and teaching you – perhaps in unexpected ways.