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Diamond Sutra

The ***Diamond Sutra*** (Sanskrit: *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*) is a Mahāyāna (Buddhist) sutra from the genre of *Prajñāpāramitā* ('perfection of wisdom') sutras. Translated into a variety of languages over a broad geographic range, the *Diamond Sūtra* is one of the most influential Mahayana sutras in East Asia, and it is particularly prominent within the Chan (or Zen) tradition,^[1] along with the *Heart Sutra*.

A copy of the Tang-dynasty Chinese version of the *Diamond Sūtra* was found among the Dunhuang manuscripts in 1900 by Daoist monk Wang Yuanlu and sold to Aurel Stein in 1907.^[2] They are dated back to 11 May 868.^[3] It is, in the words of the British Library, "the earliest dated printed book".^[4]

It is also the first known creative work with an explicit public-domain dedication, as its colophon at the end states that it was created "for universal free distribution".^[5]



Front line of the Chinese *Diamond Sūtra*, the oldest known dated printed book in the world

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Title

The Sanskrit title for the sūtra is the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, which may be translated roughly as the "Vajra Cutter Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra" or "The Perfection of Wisdom Text that Cuts Like a Thunderbolt".^[1] In English, shortened forms such as *Diamond Sūtra* and *Vajra Sūtra* are common. The title relies on the power of the vajra (diamond or thunderbolt, but also an abstract term for a powerful weapon) to cut things as a metaphor for the type of wisdom that cuts and shatters illusions to get to ultimate reality.^[1] The sutra is also called by the name "Triśatikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra" (300 lines Perfection of Insight sutra).

The *Diamond Sūtra* is highly regarded in a number of Asian countries with traditions of Mahayana Buddhism.^[1] Translations of this title into the languages of some of these countries include:

- Sanskrit: वज्रच्छेदिकाप्रज्ञापारमितासूत्र, *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*
- Chinese: 金剛般若波羅蜜多經, *Jīngāng Bōrě-bōluómìduō Jīng*; shortened to 金剛經, *Jīngāng Jīng*
- Japanese: 金剛般若波羅蜜多經, *Kongō hannya haramita kyō*; shortened to 金剛經, *Kongō-kyō*
- Korean: 금강반야바라밀경, *geumgang banyabaramil gyeong*; shortened to 금강경, *geumgang gyeong*
- Classical Mongolian: *Yeke kölgen sudur*^[6]
- Vietnamese: *Kim cương bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-đa kinh*; shortened to *Kim cương kinh*
- Standard Tibetan: འཕགས་པ་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་པ་རོལ་པ་རྒྱུན་པ་རྩི་མཚན་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མངོན།, *'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*

History

The exact date of the composition of the *Diamond Sūtra* in Sanskrit is uncertain—arguments for the 2nd and 5th centuries have been made.^[1] The first Chinese translation dates to the early 5th century, but, by this point, the 4th or 5th century monks Asanga and Vasubandhu seem to have already authored authoritative commentaries on its content.^[1]

The Vajracchedika sutra was an influential work in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Early translations into a number of languages have been found in locations across Central and East Asia, suggesting that the text was widely studied and translated. In addition to Chinese

translations, translations of the text and commentaries were made into Tibetan, and translations, elaborations, and paraphrases survive in a number of Central Asian languages.^[1]

The first translation of the *Diamond Sūtra* into Chinese is thought to have been made in 401 by the venerated and prolific translator Kumārajīva.^[7] Kumārajīva's translation style is distinctive, possessing a flowing smoothness that reflects his prioritization on conveying the meaning as opposed to precise literal rendering.^[8] The Kumārajīva translation has been particularly highly regarded over the centuries, and it is this version that appears on the 868 Dunhuang scroll. It is the most widely used and chanted Chinese version.^[9]

In addition to the Kumārajīva translation, a number of later translations exist. The *Diamond Sūtra* was again translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Bodhiruci in 509, Paramārtha in 558, Dharmagupta (twice, in 590 and in 605~616), Xuanzang (twice, in 648 and in 660~663), and Yijing in 703.^[10]^[11]^[12]^[13]

The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang visited a Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda monastery at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in the 7th century. Using Xuanzang's travel accounts, modern archaeologists have identified the site of this monastery.^[14] Birchbark manuscript fragments of several Mahāyāna sūtras have been discovered at the site, including the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (MS 2385), and these are now part of the Schøyen Collection.^[14] This manuscript was written in the Sanskrit language, and written in an ornate form of the Gupta script.^[14] This same Sanskrit manuscript also contains the *Medicine Buddha Sūtra* (*Bhaiṣajyaguruvaiḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra*).^[14]

The *Diamond Sūtra* gave rise to a culture of artwork, sūtra veneration, and commentaries in East Asian Buddhism. By the end of the Tang Dynasty (907) in China there were over 80 commentaries written on it (only 32 survive), such as those by prominent Chinese Buddhists like Sengzhao, Xie Lingyun, Zhiyi, Jizang, Kuiji and Zongmi.^[15]^[1] Copying and recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* was a widespread devotional practice, and stories attributing miraculous powers to these acts are recorded in Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Mongolian sources.^[1]

One of the best known commentaries is the *Exegesis on the Diamond Sutra* by Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School.^[16] The *Diamond Sutra* features prominently in the 1st chapter of the Platform Sutra, the religious biography of Huineng, where hearing its recitation is supposed to have triggered the enlightening insight that led Huineng to abandon his life as a woodcutter to become a Buddhist monk.^[1]

Contents

The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* contains the discourse of the Buddha to a senior monk, Subhuti.^[17] Its major themes are



Statue of Kumārajīva in front of the Kizil Caves in Kuqa, Xinjiang province, China

anatman (not-self), the emptiness of all phenomena (though the term 'sūnyatā' itself does not appear in the text),^[18] the liberation of all beings without attachment and the importance of spreading and teaching the *Diamond Sūtra* itself. In his commentary on the *Diamond Sūtra*, Hsing Yun describes the four main points from the sūtra as giving without attachment to self, liberating beings without notions of self and other, living without attachment, and cultivating without attainment.^[19] According to Shigenori Nagamoto, the major goal of the *Diamond Sūtra* is: "an existential project aiming at achieving and embodying a non-discriminatory basis for knowledge" or "the emancipation from the fundamental ignorance of not knowing how to experience reality as it is".^[20]



A traditional pocket-sized folding edition of the *Diamond Sūtra* in Chinese

In the sūtra, the Buddha has finished his daily walk to Sravasti with the monks to gather offerings of food, and he sits down to rest. Elder Subhūti comes forth and asks the Buddha: "How, Lord, should one who has set out on the bodhisattva path take his stand, how should he proceed, how should he control the mind?"^[21] What follows is a dialogue regarding the nature of the "perfection of insight" (*Prajñāpāramitā*) and the nature of ultimate reality (which is illusory and empty). The Buddha begins by answering Subhuti by stating that he will bring all living beings to final nirvana, but that after this "no living being whatsoever has been brought to extinction".^[21] This is because a bodhisattva does not see beings through reified concepts such as "person", "soul" or "self", but sees them through the lens of perfect understanding, as empty of inherent, unchanging self.

The Buddha continues his exposition with similar statements which use negation to point out the emptiness of phenomena, merit, the Dharma (Buddha's teaching), the stages of enlightenment and the Buddha himself. Japanese Buddhologist Hajime Nakamura calls this negation the "logic of not" (*na prthak*).^[20] Further examples of the *Diamond Sūtra*'s via negativa include statements such as:^[21]

- "As far as 'all dharmas' are concerned, Subhuti, all of them are dharma-less. That is why they are called 'all dharmas'."
- "Those so-called 'streams of thought', Subhuti, have been preached by the Tathagata as streamless. That is why they are called 'streams of thought'."
- "'All beings', Subhuti, have been preached by the Tathagata as beingless. That is why they are called 'all beings'."



A Nepalese sculpture of a vajra

The Buddha is generally thought to be trying to help Subhūti unlearn his preconceived, limited notions of the nature of reality. Emphasizing that all phenomena are ultimately illusory, he teaches that true enlightenment cannot be grasped until one has set aside attachment to them in any form.

Another reason why the Buddha makes use of negation is that language reifies concepts and this can lead to attachment to those concepts, but true wisdom is seeing that nothing is fixed or stable, hence according to the *Diamond Sūtra* thoughts such as "I have obtained the state

of an Arhat" or "I will bring living beings to nirvana" do not even occur in an enlightened one's mind because this would be "seizing upon a self ... seizing upon a living being, seizing upon a soul, seizing upon a person".^[21] Indeed, the sutra goes on to state that anyone who says such things should not be called a bodhisattva. According to David Kalupahana the goal of the *Diamond Sūtra* is "one colossal attempt to avoid the extremist use of language, that is, to eliminate any ontological commitment to concepts while at the same time retaining their pragmatic value, so as not to render them totally empty of meaning".^[18] Kalupahana explains the negation of the *Diamond Sūtra* by seeing an initial statement as an erroneous affirmation of substance or selfhood, which is then critiqued ("all dharmas' are dharmaless"), and then finally reconstructed ("that is why they are called 'all dharmas'") as being conventional and dependently originated. Kalupahana explains this final reconstruction as meaning: "that each concept, instead of either representing a unique entity or being an empty term, is a substitute for a human experience which is conditioned by a variety of factors. As such, it has pragmatic meaning and communicative power without being absolute in any way."^[18] According to Paul Harrison, the *Diamond Sūtra*'s central argument here is that "all dharmas lack a self or essence, or to put it in other words, they have no core ontologically, they only appear to exist separately and independently by the power of conventional language, even though they are in fact dependently originated".^[22]

The mind of someone who practices the *Prajñāpāramitā* or "perfection of insight" is then a mind free from fixed substantialist or "self" concepts:

However, Lord, the idea of a self will not occur to them, nor will the idea of a living being, the idea of a soul, or the idea of a person occur. Why is that? Any such idea of a self is indeed idealess, any idea of a living being, idea of a soul, or idea of a person is indeed idealess. Why is that? Because the Buddhas and Lords are free of all ideas.^[21]

Throughout the teaching, the Buddha repeats that successful memorization and elucidation of even a four-line extract of it is of incalculable merit, better than giving an entire world system filled with gifts and can bring about enlightenment. Section 32 (of the Chinese version) also ends with a four-line gatha:

All conditioned phenomena Are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, Like dew or a flash of lightning;

Thus we shall perceive them.^[23]

Paul Harrison's translation of the Sanskrit version states:^[21]

A shooting star, a clouding of the sight, a lamp, An illusion, a drop of dew, a bubble, A dream, a lightning's flash, a thunder cloud—

This is the way one should see the conditioned.

Dunhuang block print

There is a woodblock-printed copy of the *Diamond Sutra* in the British Library which, although not the earliest example of block printing, is the earliest example which bears an actual date.

The extant copy is in the form of a scroll about five metres (16 ft) long. The archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein purchased it in 1907 in the walled-up Mogao Caves near Dunhuang in northwest China from a monk guarding the caves – known as the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas".

The colophon, at the inner end, reads:

Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 15th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong [11 May 868].

In 2010 UK writer and historian Frances Wood, head of the Chinese section at the British Library, Mark Barnard, conservator at the British Library, and Ken Seddon, professor of chemistry at Queen's University, Belfast, were involved in the restoration of its copy of the book.^{[24][25][26]} The British Library website allows readers to view the *Diamond Sūtra* in its entirety.^[27]

Selected English translations



Elder Subhūti addresses the Buddha. Detail from the Dunhuang block print

Author	Title	Publisher	Notes	Year	ISBN
<u>Max Müller</u>	<i>The Vagrakkhedika or diamond-cutter</i> , in <i>Buddhist Mahayana Texts (Sacred Books of the East)</i> , F. Max Muller et al.	Oxford University Press	Translation of the Vajracchedikā prajñāpāramitā from Sanskrit. Based on Muller's edition, the first Sanskrit edition published in the West, based on four Sanskrit manuscripts, one from Tibet, one from China, and two from Japan.	1894	
William Gemmell	<i>The Diamond Sutra (Chin-kang-ching)</i> , or, <i>Prajna-paramita</i> (https://archive.org/stream/cu31924022914588)	Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sutra</i> from Chinese with an introduction and notes	1912	
<u>Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki</u>	<i>The Diamond Sutra</i>	Various	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i>	1934	
Gregory Schopen	<i>The Manuscript of the Vajracchedikā Found at Gilgit</i> , in <i>Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts</i> , ed. by L. O. Gómez and J. A. Silk	Centers for South and Southeast Asia	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> from the <u>Sanskrit Gilgit manuscript</u>	1989	<u>ISBN 978-0891480549</u>
<u>Thich Nhat Hanh</u>	<i>The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion</i>	Parallax Press	The <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> with a Vietnamese Thiền commentary	1992	<u>ISBN 0-938077-51-1</u>
Mu Soeng	<i>The Diamond Sutra: Transforming the Way We Perceive the World</i>	Wisdom Publications	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> with commentary	2000	<u>ISBN 978-0861711604</u>
<u>Edward Conze</u>	<i>Buddhist Wisdom: The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra</i>	Random House	The <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> and The Heart Sutra, along with commentaries on the texts and practices of Buddhism	2001	<u>ISBN 978-0375726002</u>
<u>Michael Roach</u>	<i>The Diamond Cutter, An Exalted Sutra of the Greater Way on the Perfection of Wisdom</i> (http://www.fodian.net/world/dcutter.pdf)		Tibetan-English edition, translated from the Tibetan translation of Shilendra Bodhi.	2001	
<u>Red Pine</u>	<i>The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom; Text and Commentaries Translated from Sanskrit and Chinese</i>	Counterpoint	The <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> , translated from the Sanskrit (mostly from the editions by Max Muller and Edward Conze) with selections of Indian and Chán commentary from figures such as Asaṅgā, Vasubandhu, Huineng, Linji and Chiang Wei-nung (1871–1938).	2001	<u>ISBN 1-58243-256-2</u>
<u>Hsuan Hua</u>	<i>A General Explanation: The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra</i> (https://web.archive.org/	Buddhist Text Translation		2002	<u>ISBN 0881394300</u>

	web/20140520233206/http://www.buddhisttexts.org/uploads/6/3/3/1/6331706/_vajra_prajna_paramita_sutra.pdf	Society			
Nan Huai-Chin	<i>The Diamond Sutra Explained</i>	Primodia Media		2004	ISBN 0-9716561-2-6
A.F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam	<i>Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-neng</i>	Shambhala Classics	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> and <i>Platform Sutra</i>	2005	ISBN 978-1590301371
Paul Harrison	<i>Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra</i> (https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta/index.php?page=volume&vid=1133)	Hermes Publishing	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> from the Sanskrit (compiled from Gilgit and the Schøyen collection manuscripts)	2006	
Burton Watson	<i>The Diamond Sutra</i> (https://www.jstor.org/stable/26289589)	<i>The Eastern Buddhist NEW SERIES</i> , Vol. 41, No. 1	Translated and introduced by Watson, based on the modern Japanese annotated translation by NAKAMURA Hajime 中村元 and KINO Kazuyoshi 紀野一義 <i>Hannya shingyō; Kongō hanyakyō</i> (Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1960).	2010	
Young San Seong Do	<i>The Diamond Sutra</i> (https://international-zen-temple.de/book.htm)	Angkor Verlag	Translation of the <i>Diamond Sūtra</i> based on the Chinese text by Kumarajiva, including a glossary of Chinese and Sanskrit terms	2010	ISBN 978-3-936018-64-6

See also

- Science and technology of the Tang Dynasty

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External links

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- *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*: English Translation (http://lapislazulitexts.com/vajracchedika_prajnaparamita_sutra.html), Lapis Lazuli Texts
- *Diamond Sutra*: English Translation (http://zen-ua.org/wp-content/uploads/the_diamond_sutra_english.pdf), by A. F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam
- *The Diamond of Perfect Wisdom Sutra*: English Translation (https://web.archive.org/web/20150430223200/http://ctzen.org/sunnyvale/enUS/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=141&Itemid=57), by Chung Tai Translation Committee
- Romanized Sanskrit (<https://web.archive.org/web/20100613031623/http://www.uwest.edu/sanskritcanon/dp/index.php?q=node%2F35>) and Devanagari (<https://web.archive.org/web/20100613031623/http://www.uwest.edu/sanskritcanon/dp/index.php?q=node%2F35>) of the *Diamond Sutra* in the Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon.
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