

The Prajna Paramita Literature

The second turning of the Wheel of the Law was centered on the Perfection of Wisdom. The first of these texts to appear was a long poem called the Ratna Samucchaya Gatha. This was soon expanded into the Ashta, the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 lines. There followed versions in 10,000; 18,000; 25,000 and finally, the Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 lines. After that, there appeared various shorter sutras, culminating in the Diamond Sutra and the Heart sutra.

These sutras presuppose a deep understanding of the emptiness of personal self, of ego, positing instead an impersonal process of 5 skandhas that rise and fall every moment. They then re-arise according to the laws of cause and effect: they are empty of essential nature. They have no 'own being'. They are empty of ego or self.

The Mahayana then goes on to posit also the emptiness of all phenomena, of all "dharmas", thus deconstructing the elaborate system of the Abhidharma. All phenomena are empty of 'own being', empty of 'essential nature'; they have no characteristics.

The works of Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti and others, another part of the second turning, use logic to defeat logic, thus arriving at emptiness. The Perfect wisdom sutras, on the other hand, are playfully illogical, and through that they

arrive at emptiness. The hyperbolic exaggerations of the Mahayana appear throughout.

The concept of emptiness is profound and subtle. Basically, it refers to the fact that everything is so interconnected that nothing in the samsaric world exists on its own, in and of itself. Everything arises each moment depending on causes and conditions, and on the previous moment of manifestation.

The actual realization of emptiness is profound and subtle, but really, nothing can be said about it. Those that fully realize emptiness are called Buddhas.

A common example illustrating the concept of emptiness is that of a pot. It is a composite structure made of clay. Some person dug up the clay. The potter fashioned it into a pot, and fired it in a kiln, which was built by someone. The merchant then sells the pot to a user; when it breaks, it is no longer a pot. The people involved with the pot are part of the human family, which is sustained by the bounty of the earth, which orbits a star, and so on. Thus it does not stand alone, in isolation; it has no 'own being'. It has no 'essential nature' of its own. It does not persist in time.

Sutras are written in the form of a dialog between the Buddha and his disciples. The disciples most often mentioned in the Perfect Wisdom sutras include: Sariputra. He was the wisest of Shakymuni's direct disciples, he had

mastered the Abhidharma: the analysis of phenomena into their basic instantaneous components, called “dharmas”. He was, however, entirely ignorant of the Mahayana; Subhuti was the disciple who was most advanced in the understanding of emptiness. The god Indra is featured in the large sutras of the Perfection of Wisdom; Others are to be found in the shorter sutras.

Usually, the Wisdom sutras begin with a question. In the Heart Sutra, Sariputra asks Avalokita. “Wishing to practice the Perfection of Wisdom, how should a son or daughter of good lineage train?” In the Diamond Sutra, Subhuti asks the Buddha “How should Bodhisattvas, who have set out in the vehicle of the Perfection of Wisdom, stand, hold and maintain themselves?” The larger sutras contain several dialogs. At the beginning of the 25,000 line sutra, Sariputra asks the Buddha the reason for his magical display. As the sutra develops, there are dialogs among the Buddha, Sariputra, Subhuti and Indra, king of the gods.

Many Western philosophic texts are written in the form of dialogs, probably because it is then easy to express several different perspectives in the same work. Examples are: Plato’s works from Socrates; Galileo’s ‘Dialogs on the Two New Sciences’; Gregory Bateson’s “Steps to an Ecology of Mind”, which is a dialog between Bateson and his daughter. In the Buddhist sutras, the different characters represent different levels of understanding. The dialogs provide the structure for the exposition of Buddha’s ideas.

The Diamond Sutra is, after the Heart Sutra, the most studied of the Wisdom Sutras, especially in East Asia. Some of its key points are expressed by metaphors. For instance, the Dharma is said to be like a raft. It is an aid to cross the river of suffering to arrive on the 'other shore', a state of peace and compassion. The raft, the Dharma is then left behind on the shore, or returns to samsara to bring others across.

The Diamond Sutra ends with a notable 4-line stanza, which could be paraphrased thusly:

All composite things are like a dream, a magic show.
They are like a lamp, like stars, like distorted vision,
A phantom, a dew drop in the sunlight.
They are like a lightning flash in a cloud.
That is how to observe them.
That is how to meditate on them.

For Nalanda Institute Feb 2017 Bob Harris