A Brief Explanation of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra for Benevolent Kings Who Protect Their Countries

Master Wang Xianglu

Contents

Main Text

Main Text

The joyous Buddhist festival falls just as the capital has been recovered and the nation restored. The whole world rejoices as never before. The members of this association have unanimously planned a celebration of the victory and respectfully invited lay practitioner Wang Xianglu to give a brief exposition of the essential meaning of the Sūtra of the Benevolent Kings' Prajñā for the Protection of the State, thereby clarifying the excellence of the causes and conditions for protecting the nation.

In the autumn of the eighteenth year of the Republic of China (1929), our revered teacher Master Dayu transmitted the ritual of the Benevolent Kings' Dharma for Protecting the State. He directed that the practice first be performed in Hankou in the following year, and then conducted elsewhere in sequence, in hopes of averting the vast calamity. Yet because of misunderstandings in various quarters, it could not be carried out according to the Dharma, and the Master sighed deeply over this. Thereafter the nation suffered repeated troubles, calamity following disorder, down to the present day. Among all the great cities, none has suffered disasters more grievous than Hankou.

It was first struck by great floods and later by bombardment. This shows the force of sentient beings' karma: even the Buddha can do nothing about it. Now all things are being renewed, and much work remains to be done. The causes and conditions for protecting the nation lie in rectifying people's minds. Without relying on prajñā, what can we turn to for support? We respectfully pray for world peace, national prosperity, the attainment of Buddhahood by all sentient beings, and the eternal release of the loyal spirits of the fallen martyrs from the lower realms.

Respectfully recorded by the members of the Mind-Seal Viharas of Tianjin and Shanghai.

The Sūtra of the Benevolent Kings is the Dharma for protecting the nation taught by the Buddha for Indra of the three realms, human kings, and rulers of states. Therefore, it was not entrusted to the fourfold assembly of bhikṣus and others. This Dharma for protecting the nation has two approaches: the causal stage and the fruition stage. At the causal stage, emphasis is placed on one's own cultivation; at the fruition stage, one relies on offering the Dharma to others. Anyone who becomes the ruler of a nation does not do so by chance. One who lacks benevolence cannot uphold and protect a nation. Yet one who has only a benevolent heart, without the wisdom of prajñā, likewise cannot uphold and protect a nation. One must possess both benevolence and wisdom, with authority and virtue sufficient to inspire trust, guiding the people so that all return to the right path. Then the nation will naturally be as secure as a rock.

Nations differ in size, and kings likewise differ, according to differences in merit, virtue, and wisdom. The Buddha said that only those endowed with particular virtues are fit to occupy corresponding royal stations. Thus, the Great Brahmā King of the highest fourth dhyāna, ruler of the three realms, must possess the conduct and accomplishments of a tenth-bhūmi bodhisattva. Descending to the wheel-turning sage king of this world, one must still possess the majesty and virtue of a first-bhūmi bodhisattva. Even the ruler of a small country only several hundred li across must possess the three worthy stages before being able to transform sentient beings even to a limited extent.

No ruler of a nation fails to wish to cherish and protect it. Without waiting for King Prasenajit to request it, the Buddha first taught the Dharma of protecting the nation at the causal stage. Protecting the nation relies upon the Way; therefore, he first explained how to protect Buddhahood and how to protect the practices of the ten bhūmis. He expounded at length the ultimate truth of vajra prajñā and further taught the Dharma of the five forbearances, setting forth the sequence of the fourteen stages of forbearance.

1. The forbearance of subduing [afflictions] (three stages): the stage of disposition formed through practice (cultivating the forbearance of the ten abidings), the stage of innate disposition (the forbearance of the ten practices), and the stage of disposition for the Way (the forbearance of the ten dedications). These are the three worthy stages, at which regression remains possible.

2. The forbearance of faith (three stages): the forbearance of joy at the first bhūmi (guiding beings in the four continents), the forbearance of freedom from defilement at the second bhūmi (king of Trāyastriṃśa Heaven), and the forbearance of radiant

light at the third bhūmi (king of Yāma Heaven). Attainment of the first bhūmi marks entry into the bodhisattva grounds.

3. The forbearance of accord (three stages): the forbearance of blazing wisdom at the fourth bhūmi (Tuṣita Heaven), the forbearance of difficult conquest at the fifth bhūmi (Nirmāṇarati Heaven), and the forbearance of manifestation at the sixth bhūmi (Paranirmitavaśavartin Heaven).

4. The forbearance of non-arising (three stages): the forbearance of far-going at the seventh bhūmi (king of the first dhyāna), the forbearance of immovability at the eighth bhūmi (king of the second dhyāna), and the forbearance of excellent wisdom at the ninth bhūmi (king of the third dhyāna).

5. The forbearance of quiescent extinction (two stages): the forbearance of Dharma-cloud at the tenth bhūmi (the Great Brahmā King of the fourth dhyāna), and the stage of Buddhahood, also called the forbearance of perfect awakening (ever pervading the dharma realm).

These fourteen stages of forbearance are the necessary stages from the first resolve to attain awakening through to Buddhahood. Non-retrogression begins at the first bhūmi; through the third bhūmi one can empty objects; from the fourth through the sixth bhūmi one can empty mind; from the seventh through the ninth bhūmi one can empty the remaining habitual tendencies. At the tenth bhūmi, one is equal to the Buddha above and equal to bodhisattvas below. The meaning of prajñā is so profound that words can never convey it fully. Any attempt to set it out in words would take countless verses. This belongs to personal cultivation and realization, and there is no fixed Dharma; therefore, it is only briefly outlined here.

The Buddha then taught the Dharma of protecting the nation at the fruition stage. He said that when a land is in disorder, calamities arise first, followed later by marauding enemies. For example, in the past even Indra was invaded by King Mūrdhaja, who mobilized his army against him and sought to destroy him. Indra followed the teachings of the Buddhas of the past: he set up one hundred lofty seats, invited Dharma teachers to expound the Prajñā Sūtra, and King Mūrdhaja then withdrew. The celestial assembly was peaceful and joyful.

Again, in former times King Banzu of Tianluo, having placed faith in a non-Buddhist teacher, ordered the heads of a thousand kings to be taken as an offering to celestial deities. The last was a small king named Puming. He asked for one day in which to pay reverence to the Three Jewels before dying, and Banzu granted permission. The king then set up one hundred lofty seats and invited Dharma teachers to explain verses of the Prajñāpāramitā, whose general meaning was: “Everything in the world is subject to arising and ceasing.

Even Mount Sumeru, the waters of the great ocean, Brahmā, Indra, and all sentient beings are utterly consumed in the fire at the end of the kalpa. How much more so this illusory body of mine: if my body itself is to perish, where can a nation be found? Thus birth, aging, sickness, death, joy, pleasure, sorrow, and gladness are all consequences of one's own actions, experienced firsthand. One must know that the three realms offer no security; rise and decline are like lightning; conditioned things are unreal; all is empty.

It is only because karmic consciousness is so vast and obscure, and because of the bonds of ignorance and attachment, that, before long, when karma is exhausted and consciousness returns, the body has no master. One should know that nations and lands are likewise illusory transformations." The wording and meaning of these verses are profound and solemn, and all were moved. Later, when King Banzu heard these verses, he immediately repented, acknowledging that he had been misled by an erroneous non-Buddhist teacher. He released the kings and sent them back to their countries, entrusted his own country to his younger brother, and himself left home. Therefore, in future, rulers of nations who wish to protect their countries should likewise transform and guide others according to the Dharma in this way.

Then King Prasenajit and the others addressed the Buddha again: "How should this profound and immeasurable Prajñāpāramitā be understood and explained for others?" The Buddha said, "One must rely upon a teacher and make offerings to that teacher as one would to the Buddha. Such Dharma teachers may be monastics or laymen and laywomen. Those who cultivate from the initial forbearance developed through practice up to the stage before vajra samādhi, through the thirteen gates of contemplation, and as far as the tenth bhūmi, are all Dharma teachers."

"Although the fruition and virtues at each stage differ, all are called those who subdue all afflictions. They can teach people to attain the unborn and unceasing through the mind of arising and ceasing. When this mind ceases, ignorance ceases. Moreover, before vajra samādhi, all views and understandings cannot yet be called the Buddha's knowledge and view. Only after great bodhisattvas have relied on this, upheld it, and attained liberation are they fit to go to the lands of the ten directions, benefiting and bringing joy to sentient beings, penetrating the true reality, no different from me. If anyone says that Buddhahood can be attained apart from this dharma gate, that is the speech of Māra."

The Buddha further told King Prasenajit and the others: "After I enter parinirvāṇa, when the Dharma is about to perish, because all sentient beings create evil karma, various disasters will arise in their lands. In outline, there are seven calamities: first, the sun and moon deviate from their proper courses, the sun's appearance varies erratically, eclipses occur, or multiple suns and moons appear. Second, the stars

deviate from their proper courses, and comets appear everywhere. Third, fires of dragons, ghosts, humans, and devas burn up all things.

Fourth, the seasons change: cold and heat become abnormal, frost falls in summer, thunder sounds in winter, and great floods become disasters. Fifth, violent winds arise from time to time, uprooting trees and hurling stones. Sixth, heaven and earth are parched by drought, and the five grains do not ripen. Seventh, invaders come from all directions, wars erupt on all sides, the land is unsettled, and the people perish. Then earthquakes and natural disasters occur, and strange malign phenomena arise in abundance.

The reason for all this is that people commit evil deeds, and these calamities are brought about by the evils they evoke: first, they are not filial to their parents; second, they do not respect teachers and elders; third, they slight and disdain monastics and turn away from the wholesome path; fourth, those above and below are not in harmony, government is poor, and the true Dharma is not practiced. Therefore, sages and worthies withdraw into seclusion or are not born in that country. As it is said, the way of petty people flourishes, and disasters follow one upon another. Why is this so? The blessings of rulers and people alike have been exhausted, and evil retribution has arrived."

The Buddha said, "The Dharma called Prajñāpāramitā has inexhaustible wondrous functions. It can bring about the wisdom of Buddhahood, enable bodhisattvas to attain liberation, govern a nation, cause all people to leave behind every suffering and affliction, subdue poisonous dragons and evil spirits, bring down sweet dew-like rain to moisten the earth, and make wisdom shine over the great thousandfold world like the sun and moon."

"Therefore, this sūtra should be venerated and enshrined in an ornate jeweled case; the blessings and benefits gained thereby are beyond words. If kings of later generations establish the true Dharma and uphold the Three Jewels, I shall cause the bodhisattvas of the five directions to protect their countries: in the east, Vajrapāṇi Bodhisattva, namely Samantabhadra; in the south, Vajraratna Bodhisattva; in the west, Vajratīkṣṇa Bodhisattva, namely Mañjuśrī; in the north, Vajrayakṣa Bodhisattva; and in the center, Vajrapāramitā Bodhisattva. Each will lead his retinue, emit lights of various colors, and come to protect that country. Their images should be established and offerings made to them."

At that time Vajrapāṇi Bodhisattva and the others rose from their seats, bowed their heads at the Buddha's feet, and said to the Buddha: "By our original vows and through the Buddha's spiritual power, wherever in the lands of the ten directions this sūtra is received and upheld, we shall go there in the instant it takes for a thought to arise to guard and protect it, ensuring freedom from calamities, warfare,

and epidemics. We also uphold and protect it through the empowerment of dhāraṇī; through the power and majesty of the Dharma, we shall always ensure that the realm of that nation is forever free from all calamities." They then proclaimed a dhāraṇī, saying (the mantra is very long; its heart mantra may be recited as follows):

A-luo-nai-ka-luo-nai, A-luo-na-ka-luo-nai, Mu-ha-bu-luo-ji-shang-pa-luo-mi-da, si-wa-ha.

Finally, the Buddha told King Prasenajit and the others: "This sūtra is called the Sūtra of the Benevolent Kings' Prajñāpāramitā for the Protection of the State. Entrust it to the kings of all nations for protection and transmission. Let my disciples of the fourfold assembly understand its principles and explain it widely to others."

"But when the true Dharma is about to perish, kings and ministers will destroy Buddhism. They will openly enact regulations preventing faithful men and women from leaving home to cultivate the Way, and will subject them to unjust forced labor; monastic administrators of every rank will be no different from military slaves. There will also be corrupt bhikṣus who themselves violate the Buddha's regulations, associate with powerful donors, and greedily seek fame and profit.

"Moreover, before the king they will themselves speak of the faults and troubles of the Buddhist community, thereby creating causes and conditions for destroying the Dharma. The king, unable to discern the truth, will believe and accept their words, arbitrarily establish regulations, and fail to follow the Buddha's precepts. Know that at such a time the Dharma will soon perish. The people will then gradually become evil, their blessings and life spans will diminish day by day, filial children will no longer exist, families will fall into discord, and disasters will follow one after another. The nation will be ruined. All this is retribution received through one's own actions; it is not the fault of the Buddha-Dharma."

The sixteen kings and the others, having heard the Buddha teach the Dharma, each aroused the resolve and received and upheld the Buddha's words. They would refrain from imposing restrictions on renunciation and practice among the fourfold assembly, but would act in accordance with the Buddha's teaching. Thereupon all the devas, humans, asuras, and others rejoiced greatly, faithfully accepted the teaching, and put it into practice.

This is a general outline of the Sūtra of the Benevolent Kings. The Buddha taught this sūtra after teaching the Mahāprajñā, Diamond Prajñā, Prajñā Requested by the Heavenly King, and the Great Prajñā sūtras. One should know that prajñā has no fixed definition and returns to quiescent extinction; there is not a single sūtra whose essential nature differs from this. As for its wondrous function, in putting on clothes, eating meals, and every movement and action, what place is not prajñā?

Likewise, in cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the nation, and bringing peace to the world, what undertaking can be apart from prajñā? Prajñā is the wondrous functioning of the illusory mind that, after seeing one's true nature, can act with mastery. Yet before a Buddha appeared in the world, did the various nations lack benevolent kings? Although they did not possess profound prajñā, they nevertheless had unsurpassed blessings and wisdom, and thus could govern their peoples.

Even among the various Christian and Muslim religions, there are benevolent and wise rulers, as well as rulers of justice, who protect their countries. But if there is a tyrant who pursues only his own selfish desires and disregards the suffering of the people, his country will surely perish. As the saying goes, selfish desires are hard to fulfill, and the anger of the masses cannot be affronted. To understand this principle is prajñā.

As for the main purport of this sūtra: those in positions of rulership should be compassionate and love the people, understand prajñā, and thereby protect their country. The fourfold Buddhist assembly should safeguard the true Dharma and never covet fame and profit or alter the regulations established by the Buddha. The people, for their part, should each be filial to their parents, respectful toward their teachers and elders, and revere Buddhism. When rulers and people are thus united in purpose and strive to build their country, they will naturally receive the protection of devas and nāgas.

Should the nation encounter calamity, it can then turn danger into safety and defeat into victory. Thus we know that the power of the Buddha is inconceivable, and that the power of sentient beings is likewise inconceivable. When a country has a benevolent king, how can the blessings and virtues of its people be measured? Now that our country has been restored and reconstruction has begun, the road ahead is long, hardships are many, and there is as yet no cause for optimism.

I hope that our people will guard against pride and complacency and strive to renew their efforts. May they repay the kindness of the Buddha and the benevolent king and repent of their own past deeds. You should know that although the world is now at peace and there are no man-made calamities, natural disasters still remain. The wondrous function of this sūtra alone is an inexhaustible treasury. This brief explanation is now concluded.

(This article was published in the October 1945 combined issue (nos. 147–148) of the semimonthly Awakening Sentient Beings.)