Comments on the Explanation of the Diamond Sūtra

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Contents

Main Text

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Comments on Interpreting the Diamond Sūtra

In this tumultuous world, afflictions arise in people's minds. Deluded by external circumstances, they make themselves slaves. Thus they are deluded by sensual attractions, wealth and profit, military force, and pernicious doctrines; all are forms of blind belief. Yet the insistence that “I am right” is the root of all these delusions. The Buddha seeks humanity's awakening and asks people fundamentally to break through their own blind beliefs; yet people instead dismiss his teaching as superstition. Is this not strange?

A sūtra is a text compiled by Ānanda and others from the Buddha's discussions with his great disciples concerning the roots of sentient beings' delusion and awakening. Later generations rely on it to examine their own mind-ground: how to pass from ordinary life to sagehood, and how to cross to the shore of awakening. Its principle is clear, while its meaning reaches depths that words can scarcely express. Therefore, that which is expressed through written words and language is called “exoteric,” while that which confirms one’s awakening to the mind-ground yet is difficult to articulate is called “esoteric.”

The Diamond Sūtra is the gateway through which all ordinary beings and sages awaken to the mind. To realize that the deluded mind of ignorance is precisely the true mind of wondrous wisdom is called awakening to the mind. The three realms are governed by mind, and mind is called the ground. Those able to contemplate the mind attain ultimate liberation. Therefore, it is also called the dharma gate of sudden awakening by which all ordinary beings enter the ground of the Tathāgata.

Yet the meaning of this sūtra is profound. If one does not understand the meaning taught by the Tathāgata, there is no way to realize and enter the mind-ground. Thus reading, reciting, and expounding it must not be neglected. The people of China

possess Mahāyāna capacities and have especially strong affinities with this sūtra, yet they struggle to understand its meaning. Those who lecture on it mostly interpret characters according to the text, dividing it into passages and chapters. This is explaining words, not explaining meaning.

Listeners, moreover, rely on the written words while mixing in their own views and reading erroneous doctrines into the text. Thus they grow ever more distant from the dharma gate of the mind-ground. As for women practitioners and bhikṣuṇīs cultivating in inland regions, they do not even have the opportunity to hear such explanations of the text. Since this concerns the wisdom-life, it is truly of utmost importance. Only those who trust a teaching so profound and difficult to believe can hear it without alarm or fear; this is what is meant by saying, “The meaning of this sūtra is inconceivable.” Otherwise, one becomes attached to names and appearances, repeatedly gives rise to doubt, and the profound import is instead obscured. This is because one lacks true wisdom to break through external appearances.

The Diamond Sūtra takes non-abiding as its principle and focuses on seeing through appearances. When appearances are broken through, there is no discrimination; this is called subduing one's mind. There are more than twenty explanations of non-discriminating wisdom—profound indeed, profoundly so—and they cannot all be fully set forth. Yet foremost is to be free of the mark of self, for the mark of self is the root of discrimination and also the root of the unrest in people's minds today.

The wise understand the true nature of mind and recognize that all kinds of discrimination are merely illusory, conditioned shadows; they are not deluded by them. When truth becomes clear, all doubts are dispelled, and only then does one gain a handle on one's own mind. This handle is what the Chan school calls babi, a footing in practice. With that footing, one can experience the benefit of practice. Purity and peace, constant and unchanging—this is permanence, bliss, self, and purity.

The word “self” here refers to that unchanging footing, distinct from the self posited by the mark of self; it is also called an abiding place. The word “abiding” here means establishing, not attachment. If the mind clings to anything, it does not truly abide; to say that there is something to which one is attached is to say that one does not abide in bodhi. Thus, one is for dispelling doubts and the other for abiding securely. This is why Vasubandhu divided the Diamond Sūtra into twenty-seven doubts.

Asaṅga, moreover, established eighteen abidings. Lecturers who depart from these two treatises do not accord with the meaning of the sūtra as taught by the compassionate Maitreya; their teaching is tantamount to the words of Māra, and the dharma gate of the mind-ground will ultimately have no basis. With my limited

understanding, I, Xianglu, would like to share what I have learned with fellow practitioners and set out the following sequence for expounding the sūtra:

I. Explaining the Text

One should consult the annotations of various commentators. Explain the vocabulary and annotations throughout the sūtra, item by item, deriving the meaning from the text so that listeners may readily understand it directly. This is explaining the text; what follows is explaining its meaning.

II. Resolving Doubts

One should consult Vasubandhu's twenty-seven doubts. Analyze and explain the text in sections, preparing a separate table to outline the essentials and clarify the key points, with explanations in plain language, so that at crucial junctures readers will not let ambiguities pass unchecked. The aim is to read earlier and later passages together until their meaning is clear. For, with regard to the subtle points of doubt in this sūtra, the sūtra leaves their causes unstated and shows only where the doubts are resolved. One must therefore seek their roots in the text and discover where and how the causes of doubt arise; only then can one reach the ultimate understanding. The Diamond Sūtra contains many repeated passages and sentences, yet their meanings differ in each case. It cannot be explained merely by following the words directly.

III. Explaining Abiding

Asaṅga established eighteen abidings, whose meaning is subtle indeed; what is especially wonderful is the lucidity of their principle and purport. The word “abiding” here means abiding in bodhi. One should likewise make a table, as above, and investigate its refined subtleties. Yet one must resolve the doubts before the abidings can be understood, so this exposition should come afterward.

IV. Explaining the Purport

The central purport of the entire sūtra is nothing other than giving rise to mind without abiding anywhere, yet countless words cannot exhaust this subtle wonder. The twenty-seven doubts and the eighteen abidings analyze the text differently while expressing the same underlying principle. A single abiding may contain two or three doubts, or a single doubt may contain three or four abidings. These should again be identified one by one, and the central purport of the whole sūtra should be explained by comparing the two tables, narrowing the scope in order to clarify the reader's understanding. At crucial and hidden points, even if one cannot wholly accord with the sūtra's purport and with what the two great bodhisattvas taught, one must take as primary the principle of not departing from one's original mind-

ground. In this way, one may perhaps come to a firsthand understanding of a point or two.

V. Explaining the Mind

The preceding four modes of exposition remain at the level of intellectual understanding and knowledge; they do not yet constitute direct realization or direct knowledge of the mind-ground. Without beginning from cultivation and realization, one cannot see true reality. Talk alone, however clear and thorough, does not bring about that realization. It cannot lead to realization of the Pure Land, the gate of attainment.

The sūtra says: “Those who delight in lesser teachings cannot hear and accept this sūtra, read and recite it, or explain it to others.” It is thus clear that those who hear and receive it must also recognize how prajñā manifests before they can take the teaching to heart.

When expounding this point, one cannot follow the sūtra word by word, dividing it into chapters and sections for detailed explanation. One must directly leave words behind and repeatedly investigate the word “mind,” mutually examining and confirming it: How does one contemplate the mind? How does one cultivate? When all circumstances arise before one, how can one remain unmoved by the eight worldly winds? How does one sustain awareness and contemplate the emptiness of the aggregates, and discern how the deluded mind arises through conditions? How does one thoroughly awaken to the unborn? And so forth. One must use the sūtra to confirm the mind, use the mind to confirm emptiness, return to practical application, and reach the Vajra Ground.

This shared inquiry benefits the listeners and the lecturer alike. Thus, to explain the mind means to explain that the mind cannot be grasped, using repeated discussion as the method for expounding the Diamond Sūtra.

Such is my humble view. I hope that those of greater insight will kindly offer their guidance.