



13 How Should this Teaching Be Understood and Practised?

Subhuti then asked, “What is this teaching called and how should I practise it?”

“This teaching is called The Wisdom of Liberation (Prajnaparamita), and it is for the purpose of liberation that it should be practised. But, Subhuti, these words “The Wisdom of Liberation” are not in themselves liberation. What do you think, Subhuti, has the Tathagata taught anything?”

“No Lord.”

“Subhuti, does the Tathagata have anything to say?”

“No Lord, the Tathagata has nothing to say.”

“Subhuti, are there many atoms of dust in this world system?”

“Yes, Lord, many. But the Tathagata would say that the words “atoms of dust” are not dust, and the words “world system are not a system.”

“Is the Tathagata to be recognised by his thirty-two physical marks?”

“No Lord, because the Tathagata has taught that he is without marks”

“If a man or woman were to sacrifice all they have and all they are for as many aeons as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges, and another were to teach and explain just one verse of this Sutra, then he or she would gain the greater merit.”

Subhuti asks the name of the teaching and how it should be practised. Buddha gives the name to the teaching expounded in the Sutra; it is Prajnaparamita, the Wisdom of Liberation. At once he points out that these words are not liberation in themselves, they are just words. Sometimes people hold on to words only. They may revere a holy book, or mechanically repeat a mantra or a familiar prayer. A hymn or a Sanskrit chant may be performed beautifully, but if it is not done mindfully, and practised with pure intent, it remains simply a performance. Buddha did not set down any creed to blindly believe and follow. He never claimed to be divine or that he alone was the way, the truth and the light.

Once a senior nun was appointed as a teacher at a nunnery. To everyone’s dismay her first talk was about how teaching is not easy and that not anyone can be a teacher. That comment showed that not only did she lack pedagogy but also that she held firm onto the characterising attributes of the self.

We learn in order to practise, not to show off knowledge. Our aim should be to practise according to our true nature. We may be learned, but when we react to everyday life in a dualistic way, with anger or hostility for instance, then we reveal where we really are in our practice!

There were two monasteries close by each other. Both of them had an Abbott and one acolyte who was a bright child. One child, on his way to market to buy vegetables, met the other and asked him: “Where are you going?” “I am going wherever my feet take me,” replied the other. The first child

returned to his Abbot and told him of his question and the other child's reply. "Go back and ask him the same question. After his reply then ask 'What if you have no feet?'" said the Abbot. So the first child asked again where the other was going, but this time the unexpected answer was, "I am going wherever the wind takes me." Back he went to the Abbot. This time the Abbot's instructions were, "Ask 'What if there is no wind?'" Once again the child asked the other child where he was going. "I'm going shopping," said the boy.

Buddha now continues in the same vein as earlier, asking if the Tathagata has anything at all to say, and the answer once again is no. Names are only names and words are just words. Nothing is absolute or permanent.

There are many particles of dust in this world system, says Buddha, but the words "particles of dust" and "world system" are not dust and not the world system.

Again he tells Subhuti that whatever a person donates or sacrifices, even if they possess wealth beyond all possible understanding, this would not be equal to being able to explain just one verse of the Sutra.

The reader will be aware of the repetition as Buddha begins to draw the threads of the Sutra together. His intention is for us to understand. Nothing is secret and nothing is held back. The truth is not handed down from guru to privileged student, there is no hidden teaching obscured by mysticism requiring special initiation. There is no such thing as esoteric Buddhism. The only secret is ours to penetrate, that Buddha is within, not out there, not to be found in Buddha's words, or in any particular

place, but in the everyday mind and our everyday life. A Japanese poem runs:

*A clash of thunder, the mind doors burst open,
And there sits the old man in all his homeliness.*

Who is this homely (very ordinary) old man?

Basho said to the assembled monks, "If you have a staff, I will give you one. If you have no staff, I will take it away from you."

Zen master Basho gives us another paradox. Normally, it would make more sense to give a staff to he who had none and to take away a staff from someone who did have one. If we try to explain Basho's words with more words, it is like explaining a joke – we are left with very little. The master meant that if you have some idea of Dharma you can build on that; if you haven't a clue, then just drop any notions of gain/loss and any other illusions you may have.

It is interesting to read the later, but very similar words of Jesus in the Christian Bible:

*"For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath."
Matthew Ch13, v12.*