

24 *The Incomparable Merit of this Teaching*

“O Subhuti, suppose there is a man who has gathered the seven treasures from the myriad worlds in the universe and piled them up as high as Sumeru, the king of all mountains, and used them to perform acts of charity. Suppose the same person also accepted this Prajna-paramita Sutra, even one of the four-line gathas, and studied it and explained it to others, the blessings he would receive would be one hundred, one thousand, one million, one billion times greater than those he would have received from the performance of the act of charity. Indeed, his blessings could not be counted in terms of numbers or figures.”

When Buddha speaks of mountains and galaxies, he refers to the cosmology of his time. Mt Sumeru was considered the centre of the world with four oceans at the cardinal points of the compass. The sun and the moon above completes the galaxy. Buddha's reference to thousands of galaxies suggests that he had an idea of the vastness of the universe.

Although he repeatedly describes these tremendous numbers, it should be noted that theoretically at least, it would still be possible to count these galaxies, rivers and grains of sand. It is still possible to consider these amounts. By comparison, Buddha tells his listeners, the value of understanding or teaching even a small part of the Sutra can in no way be measured or counted.

Bodhidharma was a Prince in India, one of three brothers. One day, their father the king, rewarded their teacher, Prajnatra, who was the twenty-seventh Patriarch, with a diamond.

Prajnatra showed the diamond to them and asked, “What is its value?”

The first two brothers replied, "Greater than all the seven treasures in the world, because it came from our father."

"This diamond is indeed a treasure," said Bodhidharma, "But we cannot say that it is the greatest of treasures. The Dharma is the greatest treasure of all. This diamond's clarity is clarity of the world only, it is not the clarity of the mind."

The diamond sparkles, but it can't see itself. The clarity of wisdom is needed to see it and to place a value upon it. Wisdom tells us that it is a diamond – without wisdom we cannot know. It is a treasure but it doesn't know that it is a treasure. When we have true mind as well as the discriminating, or mundane mind, then we have the treasure of incomparable value.

Also the word "treasure" is only conventional. Suppose a child is given a big diamond. What's he going to do with it? Play with it like a marble!

Recently in a remote part of Vietnam a peasant, while ploughing his land suddenly dug up an iron box. He struggled to open it but was disappointed not to find diamonds, gold or copper as anticipated. It contained strange notes which he believed to be "horse papers"⁹. Indeed he was happy to burn them at his ancestors' tombs as well as calling his neighbours to do the same. Little did he know that they were real US\$20 notes and the amount in the box could add up to 17billion Vietnamese dong! He would be lucky to see 1million dong in a year.

Are we like that child and that peasant?

⁹Horse papers are notes that look like currency. It is a Tao custom for the living to burn them so that their dead relatives can use them in hell and avoid starvation. All the necessities for a person are made in paper replicas for the dead and may costs more than the real thing (such a belief is not Buddhist).