

More Stories of Thien



*The Diamond
Sutra*

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Gratitudes

Buddha taught us four gratitudes.

The first one is to appreciate our parents who gave us this human life.

When I was at primary school in Vietnam, I had to help out in the family's business. I was born in a family of 7 children and I was the very middle one. My younger siblings were too young to give a hand and all the elders were too busy studying at high school or university. I was the only one who had heaps of free time because my classes did not start until 1 pm.

As a ten year old girl, my task was to keep the books. As soon as I woke up my mother told me to have breakfast then do the books. It was like a drill because exactly the same words were repeated day in and day out. Some days I felt I did not want to wake up at all as I did not want to hear those words. I imagined that if I rebelled then I wouldn't have been given breakfast. Because of these thoughts I was angry and hurt and resented my mother. Little did I realise that my mother still cared for me and she had to care for the business as well, otherwise everyone would go hungry. It took me more than 40 years to be able to understand about the nature of caring.

My father died at the end of 2004 aged 88. My mother is now 91 years old and living with me in the Sunyata temple. Since her husband's death she has let go all the past, particularly their relationship, whereas before she told me stories of how he mistreated her and her family. At her age she's still bright, she prays, reads Buddhist stories and chants the Heart Sutra every day. I remind her that if she lives with a mind in constant peace that when the moment of death comes she will be in peace also. I consider her to be a Buddhist. She might not know all of Buddha's teachings but practices

what she understands with a clear and simple mind. Some people believe themselves to be Buddhists because they pray to the Buddha, go to the temple, give donations. However, if their heart remains full of anger, hatred, thoughts of fame and fortune, due to lack of learning and practising of Buddha's words, the Buddha would not call them Buddhists.

I appreciate my parents for giving me this life. Actually, while looking after my mother and making her as comfortable as possible I have realised that the caring process has helped me grasp the notion of self (the "me") and I am slowly able to let go of that. I am more grateful to her than ever. She is really my Boddhisatva.

The second gratitude is to be grateful to the country, or the place where we live.

I grew up in Cholon, 5 km south of Saigon. My parents had a distribution shop right in the heart of Binh Tay market that was open from 5pm to 3am. The shopping complex was always busy, with traffic jams, noise of people shouting and screaming, dust and dirt. Now in retrospect I cannot imagine how we survived that environment. Nevertheless in the morning, after doing the books, I quickly ran out to the market, met with my friends, who were the children in my street, and organised the play for the day. Amongst the group I was the only one who had schooling.

When I was at school other children my age had to make money for their parents. They did all sorts of jobs i.e. delivering goods to customers, taking goods from their parents' shops, placing them on small baskets then carrying them to the other corner of the market to sell. Younger ones (5-6 years old) would carry a pot of hot tea and some cups to sell drinks to stall owners. After I finished primary school, most of my classmates had either been betrothed or ran businesses in conjunction with their parents.

Living in a market complex, I grew up witnessing scenes from extreme poverty to prosperity. Everyday I saw the practice of treachery, hatred, revenge and all sorts of manipulation. In contrast, at school I learnt all the good lessons of morality, compassion, bravery and heroes. I also realised that everybody, regardless of their status, wished to be happy, but no-one escaped from their own suffering.

I migrated to Australia in early 1975 when I was in my late 20's. The great difference I immediately noticed was the fresh air and although the streets were big with many cars, they were quiet. I was a high school teacher prior to coming here, and considered very successful in my career. I loved my students. I shared all my understanding from books and all the stories from the reality I witnessed. They regarded me as their big sister rather than a teacher whom they had to obey but may not have truly respected.

I realised that I had to start a new life here. I studied again, made new friends, and looked for a new job. Despite being a sometimes lucky and sometimes unlucky country Australia provides me with all necessities of a human life: health, sanity, certain freedom and safety.

I appreciate everywhere I live whether it's my hometown, my adopted country or any place I visit. Wherever the place, it's always more than a shelter because it provides resources to nourish its inhabitants. We are human beings, we should show our appreciation by protecting, contributing to the care and use of these resources appropriately.

The third gratitude is the appreciation of all beings.

Everything is formed by a gathering of many other things. The existence and comfort of our life is supported by the contribution of other lives. I was taught to appreciate everybody who helps our life

and to be at ease with them regardless of what position they hold.

I take this opportunity to thank all the friends who helped make this book possible. All the Dharma friends from Singapore and Australia who come to Sunyata to meditate and listen to Dharma talks and who donate money and spend their time collecting money to help towards the cost of printing. My appreciation to all brothers and sisters in the Dharma in Singapore and many other volunteers groups who once again have offered their enthusiasm and support.

Special thanks to Geelyn Lim Qiu Zhen of Qzee Creations who designed the book and also to Brother Lee Teng Yong who was again in charge of its eventual printing. Many thanks to Peter Jeffery OAM, the Chairperson of Sunyata Community and Meditation Centre Inc. for the final proof reading. I am most indebted to my best friend Luba Kambourakis for taking the time to go through the book with me, editing and making valuable suggestions. My profound gratitude goes to Nick Mills who shared the understanding of the Diamond Sutra with me and put it into writing.

After our first book “Stories of Thien” Nick and I decided to learn the Diamond Sutra. I have the text in Vietnamese translated from Kumarajiva’s Chinese version by my master the Most Venerable Thich Thanh Tu which I’ve been learning: *Kinh Kim Cang Giang Giai, Thich Thanh Tu, Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1999*. Nick had one text in English with no origin of translation. I managed to download another English version from the internet. We worked on these two English versions in conjunction with my master’s Vietnamese text to check the accuracy. I found it very hard because one was too condensed to make sense, the other had too much Buddhist terminology to be easily understood by non researchers. In addition, the use of old English style made the texts more abstract. Overall, these difficulties slowed the task and for a long time we could not move further than two chapters.

After the 4th Global Conference in Perth in 2006 I went to Vietnam for my annual retreat. In-between, I had my usual stopover in Singapore to meet with my friends in the Dharma. In one talk I mentioned that we were working on the Diamond Sutra and desperately looking for a simple English text. After the appeal Brother Peter Choo gave me the photocopies of two English texts of the Diamond Sutra. One is *The Jewel of Transcendental Wisdom (The Diamond Sutra)* translated by A.F. Price published by The Buddhist Society, London (founded 1924), 1947. The other is *The Diamond Sutra* translated by Shao Chang Lee for the Oriental Institute, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1938. Both texts were translated from Chinese based on Kumarajiva's version. I am grateful to Brother Peter Choo for sharing his knowledge of the texts with me.

I finished my retreat in my master's temple in Dalat. On the way out I paid a visit to my elders' temples in Hanoi. At Truc Lam Yen Tu monastery, the then Abbott, Venerable Thich Thong Phuong (now, the Abbott at Truc Lam Phung Hoang monastery in Dalat where our master resides) gave me his book: *Kinh Kim Cang Giang Luc*, Thich Thong Phuong, Nha Xuat Ban Ton Giao, 2004. I was so grateful to him, the book is a welcome addition to our master's as it gives more elaborations.

When I came back to Perth in September we had to start working on the book again from the beginning, but this time it went more smoothly. Working with different languages, texts and translations has made it difficult to give a reference for each chapter. I can only express my gratitude to Shao Chang Lee and A.F. Price for their valuable translations.

Once again I am indebted to Nick Mills for putting his understanding into writing. Without his skills there would be no production of *More stories of Thien: The Diamond Sutra*. I am also grateful to you, the readers, for spending the time to read, ponder, and practise and for your comments. Indeed appreciation is extended to any criticism or feedback, as there is always room to make changes. I

have done my best to convey the learning from my master, and all the elders, particularly the Venerable Thich Thong Phuong. Although the discourses on the Diamond Sutra are inspired by them it is absolutely not the sole product of the translation of their books.

The fourth gratitude is appreciation of masters, patriarchs who clarify and show us the Buddha Way. Buddha said that we all have the Buddha-nature or the diamond within. However without the teachings of patriarchs and masters we always remain in the dark.

The first time I heard my master's talk on *Why become Buddhist* in Perth in 1996, I knew that I had found my teacher. The following year I went to his monastery in Vietnam and sought admission to his school. It was granted and for the rest of that year I found myself living in the nunnery adjacent to the monks' monastery. We woke up at 3 o'clock in the morning to be ready at 3.30 for the morning meditation session. There were 3 sessions a day, the afternoon started at 2pm and the evening one at 7pm. Every session lasted for 2 hours followed by a 20 minutes massage and chanting the Heart Sutra. Other times we either worked or studied with the Head nun and elders. We did everything slowly and kept our silence as much as we could. I was always the noisiest of all as I cannot hold my laughter and if there's anything I can't understand I can't keep quiet.

After breakfast, which started at 6.15, we found some work to do before attending classes at 8am. Usually, the novices sweep the floor or the pathways. One day as I was sweeping, the oldest novice came and whispered in my ears that shortly the master would be walking by and would ask what I was doing. I was told to remember to answer that "I am herding the ox". I was struggling sweeping the yellow leaves on the ground in vain. All I could manage was to stir up the dust, while the leaves remained intact. I hardly heard what she said and quickly asked "Where is the ox?" My loud reply

took her aback!

We appreciate masters and patriarchs because without their teachings we could never realise our inner self let alone practise coming home. It is a journey every one has to walk alone. Masters can only show the way, not carry us. They don't hide anything, neither do they offer anything to anybody. Like the Buddha, after preaching for 49 years eventually said, "I did not utter a word." True indeed, you herd your own ox, don't ever herd anyone else's.

With metta
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Preface

Sutras are teachings given by the Buddha. The Diamond Sutra, along with the Heart Sutra is the very essence of the Prajnaparamita, a group of Sutras also known as the Wisdom Teachings.

The Diamond Sutra is particularly studied by followers of the Thien tradition. Thien is the Vietnamese name for the Chinese Cha'n, Japanese Zen and the Sanskrit word Dhyana, translated into English as meditation.

The purpose of this book is to use stories and commentary to convey the meaning of what is often considered a difficult and confusing work. When first coming upon the Sutra, it is usual to find that it reads like nonsense in parts, while being perfectly lucid in others. The testimony of so many enlightened men and women over more than two thousand years however, cannot be ignored.

In this book we try to clarify the teachings in the Sutra, including the parts which seem paradoxical and to offer stories where they seem to fit. No doubt there are more learned books written by more learned people on the Diamond Sutra, but we hope that this book will be of value to readers, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

It is recommended that the Sutra not be read in one sitting and that the reader takes some time to go through it slowly. We will meet Hui Neng who was profoundly changed upon hearing, accidentally, just four lines of this Sutra. Also Bodhidharma who brought Dhyana from India to China, and who described his vision of Buddhism as:

A special transmission outside the scriptures,

Not depending on words or letters,
Pointing directly at the heart of man,
And revealing his innate Buddha-hood.

Mahayana (The greater vehicle of Buddhism), says that we all have the Buddha-nature and our task is not acquisition, but realisation.

According to Mahayana tradition, the Buddha spoke these words immediately after enlightenment:

Wonder of wonders!

All beings are intrinsically Buddhas, endowed with wisdom and virtue.

But because their minds have been inverted by delusive thinking,

They fail to perceive this.

Nick Mills

The Diamond Cutter An Exalted Sutra of the Greater way on the Perfection of wisdom

In the ancient language of India this teaching is called the Arya Vajra Chedaka Nama Prajna Paramita Mahayana Sutra.

Arya = High

Vajra = Diamond

Chedaka = Cutter

Nama = Called

Prajna = Wisdom

Param = Other shore

Ita = Gone

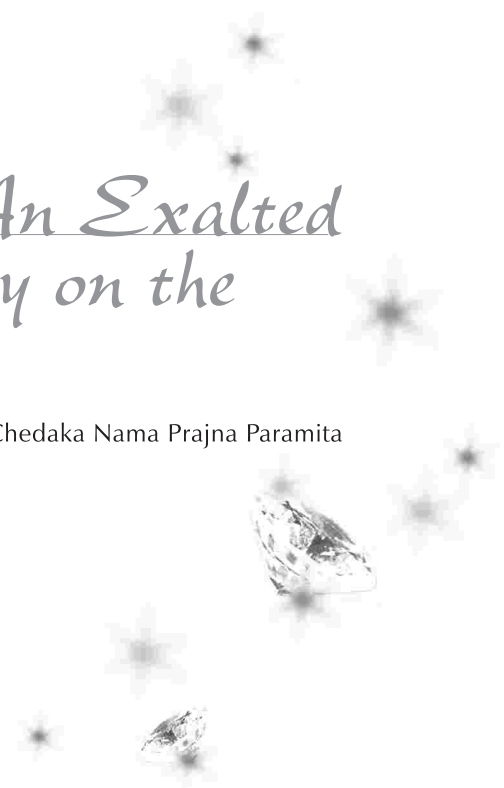
Maha = Greater

Yana = Way

Sutra = Book of Buddha's teaching

The title of this important work is usually shortened to "The Diamond Sutra" or "The Diamond Cutter," but the longer title is of great significance since it contains the essence of the whole work.

Arya Vajra Chedaka refers to the highest teaching, symbolised by the diamond. The diamond is regarded as the hardest of all materials. Nothing can destroy it. Like Buddha's teachings, the diamond is seen as eternal, solid, unchanging and indestructible.



Buddha often taught using stories or metaphors. The diamond is the nearest physical substance to that which is absolutely clear, yet solid and unbreakable. So the diamond is used as a symbol of our inner wisdom, or Prajna, that which cuts through our ignorance.

What is the nature of this ignorance? We blindly cling to the “me.” We act as if there is a “me” in this body, a “me” everywhere, a self in everything, eternal and unchanging. With our ego (the imaginary self), we project a stable, unchanging world which in truth is no more than illusion. Because of this ego, we resent criticism and crave praise and ego satisfaction. But this ego is no more than an idea, a thought, which nonetheless causes us to suffer.

So long as we don't see the emptiness and impermanence of all things, we will never break out of this ignorance – we need a diamond to cut through it. Our true nature, like a pure diamond, is not easily seen and we need to have faith that this diamond, this Buddha-nature, which is our true nature is present in us all, clouded only by ignorance.

We may understand that all is impermanent, and Buddhism insists that all is also Sunyata, emptiness, which means that nothing has any true independent existence. Moreover, Zen, Ch'an or Thien teaches us that the Dharma is not to be clung to once its meaning is understood, just as a patient, once cured, has no further need of medication.

Prajna is the innate wisdom that reveals our true nature. We sense it, we feel it. It is so clear that we do not see it.

The Arya (high) of the title does not mean 'higher' in the sense of being superior to, say, Theravada, Pure Land or any other Way of Liberation, Buddhist or not. Only that it describes the quest for our

true self, the highest ideal to which man, the highest of beings, can aspire. By 'man' of course, we refer to men and women, there being no question of superiority here either. Buddha-nature has no gender or race, and all of us are equal in this respect – we all have this diamond within.

Often, the title of this Sutra is given as “The Diamond Prajnaparamita Sutra.” Prajna is a Sanskrit word meaning wisdom. Paramita means literally “Arrived at the other shore.” So with Prajnaparamita, we have the sense of wisdom as a journey which is completed. Paramita is completion of whatever you do. If you decide to become a Buddha, then the realisation of Buddhahood is paramita. If you are hungry and want to eat, then when you are full, that's paramita.

Bodhisattvas¹ practise six paramitas, or “crossings.” They are: Giving, morality (keeping the precepts), patience, diligence, dhyana (meditation) and prajna (wisdom). Of all the practices of the Bodhisattva, giving (dana) is the greatest gift. Dana means much more than charity, the giving of material things. Dana is giving, offering or donating. Giving can be material, advice (teaching), or comfort. When practicing Dana, we should be aware that there is no clinging to the gift, the donor or the recipient. The most noble Dana is to Dana (drop or give away) resentment, judgment, jealousy, love, all the attachment to feelings. Actually we cannot provide comfort or goodwill to others unless we are comfortable or loving to ourselves. This is non-abiding, the highest Dana. The following story illustrates what is meant by attachment to feelings.

A student went regularly to his master for instruction so that he might gain insight and enlightenment. But during every interview, the master only swore violently at him.

¹Bodhisattva – Enlightened being who remains in the world to help others.

The student became more and more upset. Eventually he decided that he would confront his teacher concerning his strange behaviour.

During the next interview, the master as usual began to abuse the student, who complained bitterly, "Please master, I come to you to ask for instruction, not for insults and swearing!"

*The master grabbed him, and thrusting his face close into the face of his student, shouted, "You call **this** swearing?"*

The student was enlightened at once.

The master used words to demonstrate that words, like all things are completely without characteristics. Clinging to the "good" and rejecting the "bad," the ego is constantly hurt. We want praise and kind words. But still, these are all only words. So long as he continued to cling to the swearing, the student constantly lost himself in duality and a bruised ego.

What did the master give to the student? It was Dana, the greatest of the paramitas. Understanding Dana can give us insight into the duality – good and bad, attack and defence, **samsara** and **nirvana**. Dana is not simply giving and taking. In the "click" of understanding, the duality of giving and taking disappeared. Giver, gift and recipient became one and returned to the emptiness which it has been since the very beginning.

Prajna Param Ita means the wisdom which has "Gone to the other shore." However, "other shore" implies that there is a movement from one place to another, and that something is gained thereby. This goes against the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism which, as we shall see, teaches the emptiness of all things, despite the use of words and symbols which are used solely to guide us to that which lies

beyond all words. Hui Neng said: "From the first, no thing exists!" Ultimately, there is no other shore. This side or the other side is only a notion.

'Maha' is translated as Greater, 'Yana' as way, together this is Mahayana, meaning the greater way. As with Arya, this is not a claim to superiority. 'Greater' is used because Mahayana Buddhism has a wider world view than early Buddhism, going beyond the way of individual salvation and teaching the Bodhisattva ideal of universal compassion and the concept of an innate diamond or Buddha-nature within all living beings. In the following story, from the Lotus Sutra, a man found this great gift through the help of another.

There was once a man who had fallen on hard times, and was reduced to begging on the street. One day he was seen by an old friend, who had known him in happier times. This kindly man at once invited the poor man home.

After eating well in the warm home, the beggar fell into a deep sleep.

His host was called away on urgent business, and, not knowing if he would see his old friend again, he carefully sewed a precious diamond into the hem of the beggar's ragged robe while he slept. When he returned, the beggar had gone.

Many years passed. One day the man who had treated the beggar so kindly saw his old friend again and was shocked to see him still begging on the street. He asked him why he had not used the diamond to create an easier life for himself, only to hear that the poor man had never found the diamond which he had been carrying around with him for so long.

Once he knew of the wealth he possessed, the man was overjoyed and his life was transformed from that day.

The kindly man may be regarded as the Buddha. The beggar is any one of us who is not aware of the diamond that we all have. Once we recognise the wealth that is ours, we can take it out and use it. It will bring us to equanimity which is the state of enlightenment beyond all duality. Otherwise we live on in a state of ignorance. In the Buddhist sense, ignorance does not mean a lack of knowledge or a poor education. It means that we are not aware of our inner wealth, the fact that we are all intrinsically Buddha. Enlightenment comes when this belief becomes certain knowledge and ignorance is cut off at the root. In the dialogue which follows, between master and student, a sword takes the place of a diamond. Remember these are only words and symbols for Prajna Paramita, which cuts through and destroys ignorance.

Q *What may be said of a sword with no sharp edge or point?*

A ***This sword is not forged or fashioned. It is unborn and eternal.***

Q *What is the use of such a sword?*

A ***All who meet this sword are killed by it.***

Q *What of those who do not meet it?*

A ***They too are beheaded.***

Q *Why is this so?*

A ***Because everything is cleared away by this sword.***

Q *What is the result?*

A ***Awareness of the sword.***

