The Diamond Sutra — A thematic summary

The purpose of the Sutra and its pervasive teaching

At the heart of the *Diamond Sutra, setting* its direction, is Universal Liberation: the bodhisattva's extraordinary undertaking: **to bring <u>all</u> sentient beings to complete liberation, without exception**. The commitment includes friends, strangers and enemies, even those who deliberately cause suffering and revel in causing it, and beings who presently have no interest in the Dharma. No being is to be abandoned.

Yet the theme that pervades the Sutra is not Universal Liberation itself. It is the mistaken conception of an independently existing **Self**, and the extraordinary variety of ways in which that conception influences our thoughts, feelings, behaviour and spiritual practice.

The Buddha repeatedly challenges the imagined independent ***I*** who acts, gives, practises, teaches, attains and understands. This ***I*** claims and takes credit for achievements, demands recognition, defends opinions, resents injuries and congratulates itself on all spiritual progress.

The problem is particularly subtle because these habits infiltrate even genuinely compassionate actions. A bodhisattva may begin with the sincere intention of helping others, yet gradually make the work an expression of personal importance: ***my*** *generosity,* ***my*** *wisdom,* ***my*** *achievement, the beings* ***I*** *have saved*.

Two closely related habits underlie this process.

- **Self-cherishing** is the special importance we attach to this ***Self***: its happiness, opinions, achievements, reputation and superiority. **Self-cherishing** is the most pervasive expression of the imagined I and is a central theme of our study.
- **Self-grasping** is the deeply entrenched mistaken conception that we exist as independent, enduring selves, somehow separate from the changing physical and mental processes through which we live.

The Sutra develops this understanding through several recurring teachings: Ownership and Possession, Non-abiding, Patience, the Two Truths, Signlessness, wisdom and skilful means, and the transmission of the Dharma.

The Sutra has a striking two-part structure. In the first sixteen chapters, the Buddha uses a succession of questions and answers to challenge familiar assumptions about self, generosity, attainment, merit and the Dharma. In Chapter 17, Subhūti repeats the questions he first asked in Chapter 2. The remaining chapters return to many of the same subjects, but we now approach them with the understanding developed through the first half. The Buddha's earlier explanations allow us to recognise increasingly subtle forms of self-cherishing, possession and taking a stand that we might previously have overlooked, especially the possibility that even our newly acquired understanding can become another expression of the imagined ***I***. **The repetition is not simply going over old ground; it takes our understanding progressively deeper.**

These are not separate philosophical exercises. Each helps answer a central question:
What obstructs the liberation of all beings, and what makes that liberation possible?

1. The bodhisattva's resolve without grasping at being the saviour

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 17 and 25

The Sutra begins with the Buddha's ordinary activities. He dresses, takes his begging bowl, enters Śrāvastī, begs for food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly in mindfulness. Nothing extraordinary appears to happen.

Red Pine suggests that these ordinary activities express the **six perfections** of the bodhisattva path: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, perseverance, meditation and wisdom. They are performed without even a hint of self-importance. The following chapters help us understand the freedom from self-cherishing and self-grasping expressed through such ordinary conduct.

In **Chapter 2**, Subhūti asks how someone following the bodhisattva path should live, practise and govern the mind. The Buddha begins his answer in **Chapter 3** by establishing the commitment to liberate all beings. Then he immediately presents a startling paradox: having brought immeasurable beings to liberation, no being has been liberated. This is our first encounter with a distinctive paradox teaching method that will recur throughout the Sutra.

- **Conventionally**, beings exist. They suffer, learn, practise and can become free from suffering. Their liberation is meaningful.
- **Ultimately**, however, no independently existing being can be found, nor an independently existing bodhisattva who accomplishes the liberation.

The Buddha is not weakening the commitment of Universal Liberation. He is challenging the mistaken conception of an *independent liberator and independently existing beings* who become that liberator's '*achievements'*.

Chapter 17 returns to Subhūti's original questions and, in light of the understanding developed through the preceding chapters, examines the bodhisattva who undertakes the work. **Chapter 25** takes the investigation further, asking whether the Buddha himself thinks, "***I*** have set beings free." The answer is no.

A person can genuinely help another being develop towards liberation. Unfortunately, the imagined independent ***I*** may then claim: "***I*** saved you." Genuine assistance becomes ***my*** *achievement*, possibly accompanied by expectations of gratitude, recognition or obedience.

The bodhisattva must work for the liberation of all beings without grasping at being "the one who saves them."

The commitment remains unlimited. What is relinquished is the mistaken conception of an independent liberator who claims the achievement.

2. Self-cherishing and self-grasping the persistent, self-important *I*

Chapters 9, 14, 18 and 31

The Buddha's examination of ***Self*** becomes progressively more demanding. The deeply entrenched habit of self-cherishing continually proclaims “I am important”: seeking praise and admiration, claiming credit for achievements and needing to be respected. Even when we recognise intellectually that no such self exists, the **self** repeatedly reasserts itself, finding new ways to proclaim its importance, even through the very practices intended to overcome it.

Chapter 9 shows how self-cherishing can appropriate genuine spiritual attainment. The Buddha examines four recognised stages of attainment, including stream-entry and arhatship. Spiritual progress is real, but it does not involve acquiring an independently existing spiritual object belonging to an unchanged self. Nevertheless, the mind may begin to think: ***I*** *have attained this.* ***My*** *meditation has improved.* ***I*** *understand emptiness. Aren't* ***I*** *becoming an accomplished Buddhist!* ***I****’m very clever!* Genuine spiritual progress has become another source of self-importance. The very achievements intended to weaken self-grasping are now being used to reinforce it.

Chapter 18 takes the investigation deeper, examining another possible refuge for the imagined ***I***: *the mind itself*. We may recognise that our bodies and personalities are constantly changing, yet continue to imagine a permanent thinker standing behind our thoughts. The Buddha asks us to examine past, future and present mind. The past mind has passed, the future mind has not yet arisen, and what we call the present mind changes even as we try to identify it. Thoughts, perceptions and feelings genuinely occur, but none establishes *an independently existing mind or a permanent thinker who possesses them*.

The chapter's teaching on the Five Eyes also introduces an important positive dimension. Wisdom must develop the ability to recognise the different circumstances, understanding and capacities of beings. This is essential to the **skilful means** through which a bodhisattva can help them.

From hurt feelings to perfect patience

Chapter 14 provides perhaps the most extraordinary demonstration of what freedom from self-cherishing and self-grasping can mean. The Buddha recalls a former life in which King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon him. He explains that if any conception of **Self** had been present, ill will would also have arisen. But that conception was absent, and the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise.

To understand how remarkable this is, consider our ordinary reactions when we feel slighted, criticised, ignored or disrespected. Self-cherishing can turn an apparently ordinary event into a threat to our importance: *They don't respect me. How dare they treat ME like that!*

Hurt feelings like these can develop into resentment, anger and a desire for retaliation. Ordinary patience begins with recognising these feelings, restraining impulsive reactions and gradually training the mind to respond differently.

Perfect patience goes much further. It requires overcoming the mistaken conception of **self** from which this anger would otherwise arise. The Buddha was not merely suppressing anger. The self-conception that would have given rise to the ill will was completely absent. This does not mean that King Kali's cruelty did not occur. The injuries were genuine.

Further, Universal Liberation requires yet another extraordinary step: even King Kali remains among the beings whom the bodhisattva undertakes to liberate.

Even our correct understanding can become a possession

Chapter 31 exposes one of the most subtle manifestations of Self. Having developed a correct understanding of emptiness, we may begin to think: ***I*** *know the truth.* ***My*** *understanding is correct. Aren't* ***I*** *clever!*

Our understanding has become another possession, another reason for self-importance, and perhaps another position we feel compelled to defend. A teaching intended to free us from self-grasping has itself been appropriated by self-grasping.

Understanding emptiness is not simply an intellectual achievement. It must progressively transform our deeply established habits of self-cherishing and self-grasping, weakening the persistent sense of **self** that demands recognition, superiority and ownership of our achievements. Even this transformation must not become another reason for thinking, "*Aren't* ***I*** *becoming an accomplished Buddhist!*"

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3. Practising without grasping at achievement or taking a stand

Chapters 4, 6, 7, 10, 19, 22, 23 and 28

The Sutra exposes two closely related ways in which self-cherishing and self-grasping can interfere with practice.

The first is **Ownership and Possession**. The self claims each achievement as ***mine***: ***my*** *generosity,* ***my*** *patience,* ***my*** *merit,* ***my*** *understanding,* ***my*** *attainment.*

The second is **Taking a Stand**. The mind turns an achievement, understanding or belief into a fixed position from which it refuses to move: ***I*** *have achieved this.* ***My*** *understanding is correct.* ***I*** *have arrived. There is nothing more for* ***me*** *to learn.*

Possession claims the achievement. *Taking a Stand* makes it into a bastion to defend. The Buddha systematically challenges both habits.

Generosity without grasping

In Chapter 4, the Buddha instructs the bodhisattva to give without taking a stand. We can give generously without seeking gratitude, recognition or proof of our own goodness. We should attend to what the recipient actually needs, without turning our generosity into an achievement claimed by an important *Self*.

The generosity remains genuine. Its beneficial consequences remain. What can be relinquished is the self-grasping that seeks to establish our identity through the act. This freedom can make generosity more skilful, because we become less concerned with proving our goodness and more attentive to the changing circumstances of the person receiving help.

The mind's successive footholds

One of the striking features of the *Diamond Sutra* is the way the Buddha repeatedly challenges successive foundations upon which the mind attempts to establish itself.

- If generosity cannot provide a secure foundation, perhaps spiritual attainment can.
- If attainment cannot, perhaps merit can.
- If merit cannot, perhaps the Dharma itself can.
- If the Dharma cannot, perhaps our correct understanding of emptiness can.

- **Chapter 6** uses the image of a raft. The Dharma is needed to cross the river, but it must not become another possession or fixed belief to which we cling.
- **Chapters 7 and 22** examine the Buddha's awakening. Awakening genuinely occurs, but it is not an independently existing object acquired by an independently existing person. It is the culmination of profound transformation through wisdom and practice.
- **Chapter 10** applies the same reasoning to the bodhisattva's work of creating conditions favourable to awakening, including Buddha-fields. We can remain wholeheartedly committed to helping beings without turning our role, methods or achievements into something the mind grasps and defends.

This is **Non-abiding**. Non-abiding does not mean abandoning commitments, refusing to make decisions or becoming indifferent to the consequences of our actions. It means practising and acting wholeheartedly without establishing the mind upon a fixed foundation.

Merit and wholesome practice remain meaningful

Chapters 19 and 28 examine merit. Generosity, ethical conduct and wholesome actions produce beneficial karmic potential. But the imagined ***I*** can treat that merit as a growing spiritual bank account: *Look how much merit **I** have accumulated!* The Buddha challenges the conception of merit as an independently existing substance possessed by an independently existing owner.

Chapter 28 makes the distinction especially practical: we can receive the beneficial results of generosity and wholesome practice without claiming them as *mine*. The absence of independent existence does not make spiritual practice unnecessary.

Chapter 23 explains that all beings and qualities are equally empty of independent existence, but this does not make their consequences equivalent. Wisdom and kindness help reduce suffering; ignorance and cruelty increase it. The bodhisattva must therefore continue cultivating wholesome qualities. Emptiness does not remove the need for practice. It helps explain how genuine transformation through practice is possible.

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4. Seeing appearances and the conditioned world

Chapters 5, 20, 26, 27, 29, 30 and 32

The Buddha repeatedly challenges our tendency to mistake recognising something for understanding its nature. We may correctly identify a person as Jane, or a bird as a blue-faced honeyeater, yet know remarkably little about that particular individual's history, experiences, relationships or circumstances. Names and identifying features are useful. They allow us to recognise things and communicate about them. But they do not reveal an independently existing essence. This is the teaching of **Signlessness**.

The Buddha's identifying marks

Chapter 5 shows that the Buddha’s identifying marks do not reveal his ultimate nature. **Chapter 20** extends this to his entire physical body: even its perfection cannot establish an independently existing Buddha.

Chapter 26 takes the argument further. We cannot understand the Buddha simply by looking at his appearance or hearing his voice. He is to be understood through the Dharma, yet even the Dharma must not become something independently existing that we grasp.

The lesson extends far beyond recognising a Buddha. Our names, descriptions and familiar conceptions of people are necessarily limited. When we mistake them for complete knowledge of someone, we risk imprisoning that person within an identity we have constructed.

The Two Truths and the Three-Step Formula

Our study has used the Two Truths to understand the Buddha's repeated paradoxes.

- **Conventional truth** concerns the world of dependently arisen persons, objects, actions and consequences. These genuinely exist and function.
- **Ultimate truth** concerns the absence of independent, intrinsic existence in those same phenomena.

These are not two separate worlds. The person who conventionally exists is the very person who is empty of independent existence.

The Buddha repeatedly expresses this through a pattern we have called the **Three-Step Formula**: A phenomenon is recognised → its independent existence is denied → it is conventionally named again.

A being is **not** an independently existing being; therefore it is called a being. The formula does not describe a phenomenon disappearing and reappearing. It describes a change in our understanding of how that phenomenon exists.

Chapter 27 makes the essential distinction explicit: **emptiness is not annihilation**. When the Buddha denies independent existence, he is not saying that beings, actions, merit or awakening are nonexistent. They arise through causes and conditions and have real consequences. The dependently arisen world remains.

Neither coming nor going

Chapter 29 brings us back to the opening scene. In **Chapter 1**, the Buddha walks into Śrāvastī, begs for food, eats and returns. Yet in Chapter 29, he tells Subhūti that the Tathāgata neither comes nor goes. The Two Truths allow us to understand the apparent contradiction.

- **Conventionally**, the Buddha's movements genuinely occur.
- **Ultimately**, no independently existing Buddha can be found standing behind those activities as an unchanging mover.

There is movement without an independently existing mover. This also illuminates ***suchness — reality as it is***, without imposing independent existence upon it. Suchness is **not** *a hidden, permanent reality behind the changing world*.

Worlds and particles

Chapter 30 extends the examination to the physical world. A car exists through its parts, their arrangement and relationships. The same applies to a world. But perhaps the smallest particles themselves exist independently? The Buddha challenges that possibility too. Neither the whole nor its constituent parts can be found possessing *independent existence*. The world continues to exist and function. What is relinquished is our *mistaken conception of an independently existing foundation beneath it*.

Seeing the conditioned clearly

Chapter 32 concludes with nine images of conditioned existence, including dreams, dew, bubbles, lightning and clouds. These images remind us that appearances are changing, dependent upon conditions and sometimes deceptive. But the teaching is more subtle than simply recognising impermanence. The bubble is empty of independent existence even before it bursts. Conditioned phenomena arise, function and pass away. Their emptiness concerns how they exist even while they are present, not merely at their eventual disappearance. This understanding allows the bodhisattva to engage fully with the world without grasping at it as something independently established.

5. Transmitting wisdom across generations

Chapters 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 21 and 24

The Buddha repeatedly praises the extraordinary value of receiving, preserving, practising and transmitting even four lines of the Dharma. Why should such a small amount of teaching be valued above unimaginably vast gifts of treasure? Because the bodhisattva's undertaking is not merely to improve the immediate circumstances of beings. It is to help all of them achieve complete liberation from suffering and its causes.

That requires the development of liberating wisdom. The Dharma provides opportunities through which beings can recognise ignorance, examine their mistaken conceptions, develop understanding and eventually transform their experience of themselves and the world.

A few lines may begin that process. Hearing the words does not automatically confer liberation, like a gift. Understanding must develop through listening, reflection, questioning, meditation and practice.

Chapter 8 introduces this extraordinary significance of Transmission. **Chapter 11** extends the comparison with material generosity beyond anything that can be meaningfully measured.

Chapter 12 shows why preservation is essential. The Buddha's physical lifetime is limited, but his teaching can remain available through those who preserve, practise and transmit it. Future generations may encounter the Dharma through people who were never themselves taught by the historical Buddha.

Chapter 13 challenges a possible misunderstanding. Even the *Perfection of Wisdom* is a name, not an independently existing object. We can value, preserve and transmit the Dharma without turning the teaching itself into something upon which the mind takes a stand.

Receiving and understanding

Chapter 15 distinguishes hearing the Dharma from understanding it. Our existing beliefs may prevent us from recognising the meaning of what we hear. In particular, the deeply entrenched conception of **Self** may resist a teaching that challenges its importance and independent existence.

However, present unreadiness is not permanent incapacity. Understanding develops through causes and conditions. Study, reflection, practice and skilful guidance can gradually make someone receptive to teachings they previously could not understand. This has a direct connection with Universal Liberation. A being is not to be excluded because they are not currently ready to receive the Dharma.

Teaching without possessing

Chapter 21 challenges the conception of an independently existing teacher who possesses an independently existing teaching and hands it, like a parcel, to an independently existing learner. Teaching genuinely occurs. But the learner must develop understanding through a process of listening, questioning, reflection and practice. The teacher can help create the conditions for that transformation. Wisdom cannot simply be handed over as a possession.

Nor should teaching become an achievement claimed by an important ***I***: ***I*** *taught these people. They understand because of* ***me****.* The Dharma is transmitted most effectively when the teacher remains concerned with the learner's developing understanding, rather than with possessing the teaching or claiming the results.

Transmission despite hostility

Chapter 16 introduces another difficulty: those who preserve and transmit the Dharma may encounter contempt rather than appreciation. Within the Sutra's teaching on karma, the Buddha explains that such experiences can contribute to purification and progress towards awakening. This is not a justification for mistreatment. Nor does suffering prove that someone deserves it or is spiritually advanced. The chapter nevertheless makes a significant point: the extraordinary value of transmitting the Dharma does not depend upon worldly recognition or praise.

Finally, **Chapter 24** returns to the importance of transmitting even four lines of Dharma after the Buddha has repeatedly shown that neither awakening nor the Dharma itself possesses independent existence. Does that make practising and teaching pointless? Certainly not. The Dharma can still help beings overcome ignorance and develop liberating wisdom. Its lack of independent existence does not diminish its capacity to function.

Transmission is therefore an essential part of fulfilling the bodhisattva's unlimited commitment. It helps make liberating wisdom available, both to those presently receptive to the teaching, and to beings who may encounter it in generations yet to come.

The teaching held together

Our thematic study has revealed a striking consistency beneath the *Diamond Sutra's* many paradoxes and repetitions.

The Buddha establishes an unlimited purpose: the liberation of all beings.

He then repeatedly exposes the mistaken conception of *Self* that can obstruct that undertaking. That *Self* claims spiritual achievements as possessions, takes a stand upon each new understanding, demands recognition, becomes injured and angry, and may even congratulate itself on its supposed freedom from self-cherishing and self-grasping.

The Buddha challenges these habits without denying the reality or value of generosity, ethical conduct, patience, wisdom, spiritual attainment or the Dharma itself.

Through the Two Truths, the Three-Step Formula and dependent arising, he shows how persons and phenomena can genuinely exist and function without possessing independent existence.

Through the six perfections, compassion and skilful means, the bodhisattva develops the capabilities needed to help beings.

Through Transmission, the opportunity to develop liberating wisdom continues beyond the lifetime of any particular teacher.

And through Non-abiding, the bodhisattva learns to undertake this work without turning its methods, achievements or even correct understanding into another bastion of Self.

We can now return to the Buddha's ordinary activities in Chapter 1 with a deeper appreciation of their significance. The Buddha walks, begs for food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly. He continues to act in the ordinary world, without requiring an imagined *Self* to establish its importance through what it does.

The commitment to liberate ***all*** beings remains unlimited. The practice continues. What must be relinquished is the self-cherishing that repeatedly turns the path into an achievement of an important *Self*.