The Diamond Sutra

A working translation from Sanskrit in free verse by ChatGPT

With chapter-by-chapter commentary, translation notes and a thematic study guide

Prepared for comparative study and personal revision

October 2026

Reading this document

This study edition begins with six definitions and nine Main Teachings, followed by a matrix showing how nine recurring themes appear across the Sutra's 32 chapters. ***Universal Liberation*** is treated as the overarching purpose and therefore does not have its own matrix column. Part One presents the complete working translation in English free verse. Part Two examines each chapter individually, with commentary, explanation and translation notes where needed.

At the heart of our interpretation of the Diamond Sutra is the bodhisattva's unlimited commitment to the liberation of all beings. The Buddha repeatedly examines the mistaken conception of an independently existing ***self***, and how *self-grasping* and *self-cherishing* can distort even the most compassionate spiritual undertaking.

These deeply established habits influence almost everything we do, including our practice of the six perfections. Generosity can become ***my*** *generosity,* patience can become evidence of ***my*** *virtue*, and wisdom can become ***my*** *superior understanding*. Even genuine spiritual progress can strengthen the self-importance that our practice is intended to overcome. **The Buddha's teaching progressively exposes these habits and shows how wisdom and practice can weaken and ultimately eliminate them.**

A second great theme is the mind's continual search for somewhere to take a stand. As the Buddha examines one apparently solid foundation after another, the mind may simply move to the next. If we can no longer establish ourselves through possessions, perhaps we can do so through generosity, attainment, merit, the Dharma, or finally our correct understanding of emptiness. **The bastions change, while the underlying habit of grasping survives.** The Buddha repeatedly teaches non-abiding: to understand, practise and act without establishing the mind upon any of these apparently secure foundations.

This brings us back to the question Subhūti asks in Chapter 2: how should a bodhisattva live, practise and govern the mind? The six perfections develop the capacities needed to undertake the liberation of all beings. Wisdom progressively removes the self-grasping and self-cherishing that can distort those activities, while non-abiding prevents the mind from turning its understanding, practice or achievements into another bastion of self-importance.

The extraordinary significance of Chapter 1 now becomes clearer. Red Pine interprets the Buddha's ordinary activities in Chapter 1 as expressions of the six perfections without a hint of self-importance. The chapters that follow help us understand the profound transformation of mind that makes such conduct possible. The chapters that follow help us understand the profound transformation of mind that makes such conduct possible.

This is an AI-assisted working translation and commentary prepared for study. It is neither a definitive critical edition nor a claim to personal meditative realisation. Some interpretations may require correction, and much may remain to be discovered through further study, contemplation and guidance from qualified teachers.

Text and editorial conventions

The base is the Romanised Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon text of the Vajracchedikā. Its 32 numbered divisions are retained for comparison; the descriptive chapter headings and free-verse line breaks are editorial. Most of the Sanskrit is prose. The metrical verses in chapters 26 and 32 are noted as such.

Selected passages have also been compared with the GRETIL transcription based on Harrison and Watanabe. That transcription is fragmentary and ends during Chapter 16; it cannot independently verify the later chapters. The translation notes to Chapter 15 also examine a Gilgit Sanskrit reading published by Gregory Schopen and discussed by Paul Harrison.

Conze's printed Sanskrit edition has not been used as the base text, although his translation and commentary in Buddhist Wisdom Books have been consulted. Textual uncertainties and significant differences between readings are identified in the relevant chapter notes.

Dharma is sometimes retained because it can mean teaching, phenomenon or quality. Names and technical terms use Sanskrit diacritics. The language of intrinsic existence in the commentary is an interpretive aid and has not been silently inserted into every negative in the translation. Traditional cosmology, past-life accounts and karmic claims are presented as features of the *Sutra*, not as independently established facts.

Contents

Reading this document 1
Text and editorial conventions 2

Contents 2

Definitions 7
Emptiness / Śūnyatā 7
Suchness (tathatā) 7
The Two Truths 7
Self-grasping and Self-cherishing 8
Non-abiding — Not Taking a Stand 8
Merit (puṇya) 9

Main Teachings 10
1. Universal Liberation — No Being Left Outside the Bodhisattva's Commitment 10
The Buddha's first instruction 10
What does ALL mean when someone harms us? 11
Liberation without becoming the liberator 11
The commitment remains; the mind takes no stand 11
Why transmission matters 12
What this teaching adds to our understanding of the Sutra 12
2. The Conception of Self — The Imagined 'I' and Its Eradication 12
The self we mistakenly believe exists 13
The importance we attach to that self 13
The six perfections can be hijacked by self-cherishing 13
King Kali reveals the extraordinary culmination 14
From understanding to eradication 14

Returning to Chapter 1 15
3. The Two Truths — Understanding the Diamond Sutra through its Paradoxes 16
The three steps 16
Why the Two Truths are essential 17
The agent, the recipient and the action 18
The Middle Way — neither independent existence nor nonexistence 19
Using the formula in our study 19
4. Possession — The Imagined Owner of Attainment and Achievement 20
Attainment is transformation, not the acquisition of an object 20
The attainer changes through the attaining 20
Subhūti provides the crucial test 21
When attainment becomes a new self 21
Awakening without an awakening possessed 22
Possession and the imagined owner 22
Progress without possession 23
5. Non-abiding — Not Taking a Stand 24
Acting without taking a stand 24
The freedom of a mind that does not settle 25
6. Signlessness — Seeing Without Being Imprisoned by What We See 25
7. Wisdom, Compassion and Skilful Means: Acting Fully in an Empty World 27
Wisdom and compassion need each other 27
Why dependent arising makes liberation possible 28
The commitment requires developing our abilities 28
Developing skilful means 28
Compassion without becoming the important helper 29
Compassion that does not exclude an enemy 30
The six perfections — training for the work of liberation 30
Even the Dharma is a skilful means 30
Returning to Chapter 1 31
8. The Perfection of Patience — From Controlling Anger to Freedom from Its Causes 31
The extraordinary account of King Kali 31
The self that feels injured 32
The Buddha's extraordinary freedom in the King Kali account 32
Patience must be developed 32
Why anger is so destructive 33
From restraining anger to overcoming its causes 33
Difficult people as precious treasures 34
From freedom from ill will to compassion for all beings 34
Patience without a possessor 35
9. Transmission of the Dharma — From Hearing to Liberation 36
Why four lines can outweigh vast treasure 36
Hearing is the beginning, not the completion 36
Preserving the conditions for future understanding 37
Helping others become capable of understanding 38
Teaching without a self who possesses the Dharma 39
How should the Dharma be explained? 39
Transmission is itself part of the bodhisattva path 40
Organising the Teachings 40
Diamond Sutra — Chapter and Teaching Matrix 41

Part One The Diamond Sutra in free verse 43
1 The gathering 43
2 The question of how to live 43
3 The resolve to liberate all beings 44
4 Giving without a foothold 45
5 Seeing beyond the marks 45
6 The raft: using the teaching without grasping it 46
7 Can the Buddha’s awakening itself be grasped? 47
8 Why Transmitting Four Lines Matters 47
9 Attainment without possession 48
10 A mind that settles nowhere 49

11 Beyond the sands of the Ganges 49
12 Wherever this teaching is spoken 50
13 The name of the teaching 50
14 Beyond Self-Conception: The Perfection of Patience 51
15 Receiving and Carrying the Dharma Forward 53
16 Contempt and the exhaustion of karma 54
17 Returning to the bodhisattva resolve 55
18 The mind that cannot be found 57
19 Merit is no mass 57
20 The body and the marks 58
21 Teaching without a thing taught 58
22 Nothing acquired in awakening 59
23 Equality and wholesome practice 59
24 Mountains of treasure 59
25 No one possessed as a person saved 59
26 Seeing the Buddha through Dharma 60
27 No doctrine of annihilation 60
28 Receiving merit without grasping 61
29 Neither coming nor going 61
30 Worlds and particles 61
31 Releasing even the view 62
32 How to look upon conditioned things 62

Part Two Explanations and translation notes 64
Chapter 1 The Setting: Awakening in Ordinary Life 64
The six perfections in ordinary conduct 64
An extraordinary person doing ordinary things 65
Practice takes place in the ordinary world 65
The teaching begins before the words 66
Chapter 2 The Question: How Should the Bodhisattva Live 66
What does it mean to abide? 67
Practice without becoming passive 67
Governing the mind 67
Translation notes 68
Chapter 3 The Bodhisattva's Resolve and the First Paradox 68
The first great paradox 69
What is the being we intend to liberate? 69
The helper, the person helped and the helping 69
Returning to the compassionate resolve 70
Translation notes 70
Chapter 4 Giving Without Taking a Stand 71
Giving can become somewhere for the mind to stand 71
Taking a stand can lead directly to self-grasping. 71
What does the Buddha ask us to relinquish? 71
Why mention the senses? 72
Merit as immeasurable as space 72
Generosity without self-grasping 72
Translation notes 73
Chapter 5 Recognising the Buddha Without Imprisoning Him in Marks 73
Marks allow us to recognise, yet recognising is not knowing 73
Where deception enters 74
Marks as no marks 74
Seeing involves the mind 74
Seeing without imprisoning 75
Translation notes 75
Chapter 6 The Raft: Using the Teaching Without Grasping It 75
A new object of grasping 76
Neither Dharma nor non-Dharma 76

The raft 76
What does this mean for Buddhist practice? 77
Hearing and understanding 77
The teaching examines itself 77
Chapter 7 Can the Buddha's Awakening Itself Be Grasped? 78
What does it mean to realise awakening? 78
“Cannot be grasped and cannot be expressed” 79
Neither a dharma nor a non-dharma 79
The unconditioned 80
The developing teaching 80
Translation notes 81
Chapter 8 Why Transmitting Four Lines Matters 82
Why transmission has such extraordinary value 82
What about merit? 83
Why are Buddha dharmas no Buddha dharmas? 84
What Chapter 8 adds to the Sutra 84
Translation notes 85
Chapter 9 Spiritual Attainment Cannot Become a Possession 85
The four stages of attainment 86
What has the stream-enterer attained? 86
Entering the stream without entering anything 86
The same teaching applies to all four attainments 87
Subhūti provides the crucial test 88
Progress without possession 89
Dwelling nowhere 89
“I understand emptiness” 90
What Chapter 9 has taught us 90
Translation notes 91
Chapter 10 A mind that settles nowhere 91
Dīpaṃkara: learning without acquiring a possession 92
Buddha-fields: working to transform the world 92
Adornments are no adornments 93
Arousing a mind that settles nowhere 94
The vast body: neither an entity nor a non-entity 94
What Chapter 10 has taught us 95
Translation notes 96
Chapters 11 and 12 The Scale of Merit and the Presence of the Teaching 97
Chapter 11 — Transmission Beyond All Measure 97
Beyond the measurement of generosity 97
The greater purpose of transmission 97
Why the enormous comparison matters 98
Chapter 12 — Where the Dharma Is Transmitted 98
The Dharma continues beyond the Buddha's lifetime 99
Why does the place become a shrine? 99
In that place the Teacher dwells 100
Reverence and dependent arising 100
What Chapter 12 adds 100
Translation notes 101
Chapter 13 Even Perfection of Wisdom is a Name 101
Translation notes 102
Chapter 14 Beyond Self-Conception: The Perfection of Patience 102
Subhūti is moved to tears 103
King Kali and the perfection of patience 104
Patience is deeper than controlling anger 105
Emptiness does not deny injury 106
The perfection of patience is no perfection 107
Arouse the mind, but let it settle nowhere 107
Giving without taking a stand 108
Darkness and daylight 109
What Chapter 14 has taught us 111
Translation notes 112
Chapter 15 Receiving and Carrying the Dharma Forward 112
Hearing is the beginning 113
Who is able to receive the teaching? 113

The danger of spiritual superiority 114
The teaching continues 114
Translation notes 115
Chapter 16 When Those Who Transmit the Dharma Are Despised 115
Why promise the purification of karma? 116
The extraordinary value of transmission 116
What this teaching does not mean 116
What Chapter 16 has taught us 116
Translation notes 117
Chapter 17 Returning to the Bodhisattva's Resolve 117
The commitment remains unchanged 118
Who is the bodhisattva who undertakes this work? 119
The chapter's final statement 120
Returning to the beginning 120
Translation notes 121
Chapter 18 The Mind That Cannot Be Found 121
The Five Eyes and the liberation of beings 121
The mind as a refuge for the imagined self 122
Past mind cannot be found 122
Future mind cannot be found 122
And present mind cannot be found 122
You cannot have exactly the same thought twice 123
Thinker, thinking and thought 123
What Chapter 18 has taught us 124
Translation notes 125
Chapter 19 Merit Is No Mass 125
Translation notes 126
Chapter 20 The Body and the Marks 126
Translation notes 127
Chapter 21 Teaching Without a Thing Taught 127
Translation notes 128
Chapter 22 Nothing Acquired in Awakening 128
Translation notes 129
Chapter 23 Equality Does Not Mean Sameness 129
Translation notes 130
Chapter 24 Mountains of Treasure 130
Translation notes 131
Chapter 25 Helping Without Becoming the Saviour 131
Translation notes 132
Chapter 26 Seeing the Buddha Through Dharma 132
Translation notes 133
Chapter 27 Emptiness Is Not Annihilation 133
Translation notes 134
Chapter 28 Receiving Without Possessing 134
Translation notes 135
Chapter 29 Neither Coming Nor Going 135
Translation notes 137
Chapter 30 Worlds and Particles 137
Translation notes 138
Chapter 31 Releasing Even the Correct View 138
When even our understanding of emptiness becomes a possession 138
Why does the Buddha now turn to conceptions of Dharma? 139
Returning to Chapter 1 140
Translation notes 140
Chapter 32 Seeing the Conditioned Clearly 140
Translation notes 143
Afterword. The Teaching Held Together 143
Sources and Commentaries Consulted 144
Commentaries consulted 145
About this study edition 146

Definitions

Emptiness / Śūnyatā

In Buddhism, *emptiness* does not mean empty in the ordinary sense of "nothing there." It means **empty of intrinsic or independent existence**. Nothing exists independently, from its own side, with a fixed nature of its own. Everything arises through causes, conditions, parts, relationships and designation.

A person is therefore empty of intrinsic existence, but the person is not nonexistent. The person lives, acts, changes and experiences suffering and happiness. What cannot be found is a fixed, independent person existing separately from all the conditions through which that person arises.

Emptiness/śūnyatā means empty of independent existence—not empty of existence.

Śūnyatā (shoon-yə-TAH ə as in **a**bout, comm**a**) is the Sanskrit term translated here as *emptiness*.

To say that something is empty is to say that it is empty of independent existence. Its emptiness/śūnyatā and its dependent arising are two ways of describing the same reality.

Suchness (tathatā)

Suchness (tathatā) means reality **just as it is**, without imposing intrinsic existence upon it.

It is not a hidden reality behind the world, nor some ultimate substance beneath appearances. A person, tree or thought still appears and functions conventionally. To see its suchness is to see it without mistaking our name or conception of it for a fixed essence existing "from its own side."

When we relinquish our mistaken belief in independent existence, the phenomenon does not disappear. It is understood instead as dependently arisen, changing, functioning and empty of independent existence. **Suchness is this very reality understood without the extra intrinsic existence that our minds habitually impose upon it.**

We must be careful here. Suchness must **not become the hidden Reality behind appearances**. Otherwise we have simply invented another inherently existing thing.

The Two Truths

The Two Truths describe two ways of understanding the same reality.

Conventional truth concerns how dependently arisen phenomena exist and function. Persons live, actions have consequences, suffering occurs, rocks are hard to the touch, and practice can bring about genuine change.

Ultimate truth concerns what we discover when we examine these phenomena for independent, intrinsic existence. No such independent existence can be found.

These are not two separate worlds. The person who conventionally exists is the very person who is ultimately empty of independent existence. Emptiness does not cancel conventional reality or suggest that things and people do not exist. It describes how that reality exists: dependently, rather than independently.

The Two Truths allow us to recognise that things genuinely exist and function without re-

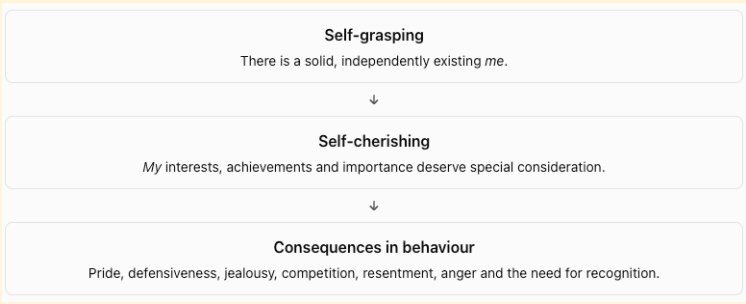
quiring them to possess an independent essence.

Self-grasping and Self-cherishing

Two closely related habits of mind are especially important for understanding the *Diamond Sutra*: **self-grasping and self-cherishing**.

Self-grasping is the deeply established tendency to apprehend ourselves as a solid, independently existing ***I***. We ordinarily experience ourselves as the one who thinks, acts, succeeds, fails, suffers and possesses this body and mind. Yet when we examine this apparently solid self, no independently existing ***I*** can be found. There is a person, but that person exists dependently through changing physical and mental processes, causes, conditions and relationships.

Self-cherishing is our tendency to give that ***I***, its happiness, interests, opinions, reputation and achievements a privileged importance, often at the expense of others. We want to protect it, promote it, defend it and receive recognition for what it has accomplished.



The distinction is important: **Self-grasping concerns what we mistakenly believe ourselves to be. Self-cherishing concerns the special importance we attach to ourselves.**

The two habits reinforce one another. Self-grasping provides the apparently solid I; self-cherishing makes its welfare and importance a central concern. Self-cherishing can then strengthen the very sense of self upon which it depends.

Together, they help explain why criticism can become humiliation, disagreement can become a personal attack, and achievement can become a reason for pride. Even genuine spiritual progress can be appropriated: *my generosity, my patience, my wisdom, my understanding of emptiness, my achievement*.

Self-cherishing should not be confused with appropriate care for our own wellbeing. Nor does relinquishing self-grasping mean that the conventional person disappears. We continue to live, make decisions, accept responsibility and care for ourselves and others.

The *Diamond Sutra* shows how wisdom can progressively weaken these habits. Understanding emptiness is not merely acquiring a correct view of self. **It is developing a different way of experiencing ourselves and relating to others, with less need to defend, promote or establish an important *I*.**

Non-abiding — Not Taking a Stand

Non-abiding means allowing the mind to engage with persons, experiences, beliefs and activities without settling upon any of them as a fixed foundation.

The Buddha repeatedly instructs the bodhisattva not to take a stand. This does not mean abandoning thought, judgement, commitment or compassionate action. It means recognising and using these things without becoming fixed upon them.

Grasping turns something we encounter into a bastion upon which the mind can establish itself. Non-abiding means not taking a stand upon that bastion.

Self-grasping and self-cherishing are especially important forms of this fixation, but non-abiding extends to everything the mind might grasp, including our understanding of the Dharma itself.

Merit (puṇya)

Merit is the beneficial karmic potential arising from wholesome intentions and actions, including generosity, ethical conduct and Buddhist practice.

Merit arises through causes and conditions. It is not a spiritual substance that accumulates somewhere, nor a possession belonging to an independently existing self. Its consequences depend upon further conditions.

The *Diamond Sutra* repeatedly praises the extraordinary merit of receiving, practising and transmitting the Dharma. That merit is closely connected with the opportunities these activities create for the development of wisdom and liberation.

Merit is genuine and consequential, yet it is not a spiritual bank account owned by a permanent self.

Main Teachings

The nine Main Teachings do not all serve the same function. Five provide the central structure of our interpretation: ***Universal Liberation*** *establishes the purpose****; Self*** *identifies the fundamental misunderstanding****; Ownership and Possession*** *expose how that misunderstanding appropriates our activities and achievements****; Non-abiding*** *prevents the mind from establishing itself upon another fixed foundation****; and Transmission*** *helps make liberating wisdom available to all beings****.***

The remaining teachings provide the understanding, methods and capacities essential to fulfilling that undertaking. They are not secondary in importance, but serve different roles within the Sutra's overall purpose.

---

1. Universal Liberation — No Being Left Outside the Bodhisattva's Commitment

The Buddha's first instruction

In Chapter 2, Subhūti asks how a bodhisattva should live, practise and govern the mind.

The Buddha begins his answer in Chapter 3 with an extraordinary instruction:
“One should give rise to this resolve:
‘I shall bring all beings to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.’”

This establishes the ultimate purpose of the bodhisattva's undertaking: **the complete liberation of every sentient being, without exception.**

The Buddha carefully describes beings born in every conceivable way, with form or without form, with perception or without perception, and beyond these familiar categories. Why such an elaborate enumeration? He is leaving no category of sentient being outside the bodhisattva's commitment. The resolve is not limited to humans, familiar beings, those whom we like, or those whom we believe deserving of help.

The important word is *all*. The implications are profound.

- The commitment includes friends, strangers and enemies.
- It includes those who have harmed us and those who have harmed others.
- It includes beings who presently have no interest in the Dharma.
- It includes beings whose suffering is not yet apparent to them.
- It extends beyond improving someone's present circumstances, towards complete liberation from saṃsāra itself.

The expression *“nirvāṇa without remainder”* describes the liberation sought. It is the word *“all”* that establishes that no being is to be excluded.

The Buddha is not saying that a beginning bodhisattva already possesses the ability to liberate everyone. He is establishing the purpose towards which the bodhisattva's understanding, practice and developing abilities must be directed.

This unlimited commitment provides the purpose against which we can examine the teachings that follow: ***What does the Buddha identify here that might obstruct the liberation of all beings, or help make that liberation possible?***

What does ALL mean when someone harms us?

Chapter 14 reveals one of the most demanding consequences of this commitment. The Buddha recalls a former life in which King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon him.

The Buddha has instructed bodhisattvas to arouse the mind of awakening and give for the benefit of all beings. **All beings includes King Kali.**

This is easy to overlook. King Kali's actions were cruel. The injuries were real. Yet King Kali is still a being subject to ignorance, suffering and the consequences of his actions. He does not possess an independently existing evil nature that permanently excludes him from the possibility of transformation.

The bodhisattva's commitment therefore extends to both the person harmed and the person responsible for the harm. This takes us far beyond the ordinary wish to relieve suffering. We can naturally feel compassion for someone who has been injured. Extending that same ultimate commitment towards the liberation of the person who inflicted the injury is much more demanding.

The Buddha's teachings on Self and Patience show how this compassion can develop. As grasping at an independent ***I*** weakens, so too can the demand for retaliation when that ***I*** feels injured. Compassionate concern can increasingly extend beyond the division between friend and enemy.

The bodhisattva does not divide beings into those worthy of liberation and those who may be abandoned.

Liberation without becoming the liberator

There is another danger. The bodhisattva may begin with a genuine commitment to liberate beings, yet gradually construct an identity around undertaking that work:
I *am a bodhisattva.*
I *am the compassionate one.*
I *understand what others need.*
I *have helped these people.*
These are the beings ***I*** *have saved.*
I *am important.*

The work may be genuine. The benefit to others may be substantial. Yet self-grasping may reappear as the conception of an independently existing ***I*** who claims the role of liberator.

Chapter 17 challenges the conception of an independently existing bodhisattva. Chapter 25 takes this further when the Buddha asks whether the Tathāgata thinks, *"I have set beings free."* The answer is no. The liberation of beings cannot become a ***possession*** through which an independently existing self establishes its importance. This connects directly with our teaching on Ownership and Possession.

The bodhisattva does not undertake the liberation of all beings in order to become the owner of the greatest possible spiritual achievement. **The purpose is the liberation of beings, not the creation of an important liberator.**

The commitment remains; the mind takes no stand

The Buddha repeatedly instructs the bodhisattva to act without taking a stand. This is particularly important when the commitment itself is unlimited. The bodhisattva must not establish the mind upon **fixed conceptions** of the beings to be liberated, the methods by which they must be

helped, or the achievements that are expected. Even the idea *"I am working for the liberation of all beings"* can become a spiritual identity upon which the mind settles.

Non-abiding does not weaken the commitment. It allows the bodhisattva to remain fully committed while ***responding to the changing circumstances and needs of beings***.

This also explains the importance of ***wisdom and skilful means***. The commitment is unlimited. Our present understanding and abilities are not. We must therefore continue learning, practising and developing the capacities needed to help others. A method useful for one person may be inappropriate for another. Someone unwilling to consider the Dharma today may become receptive under different conditions. We cannot know in advance all the ways through which beings may eventually develop towards liberation. **The commitment excludes no being, while wisdom and skilful means remain responsive to each being's circumstances.**

Why transmission matters

The bodhisattva cannot simply confer liberation upon another being. Liberating wisdom must develop through understanding, reflection, meditation and practice. The bodhisattva can help create the conditions through which that development becomes possible.

This gives the transmission of the Dharma its extraordinary importance. Even four lines may become the beginning of a process through which someone develops wisdom, overcomes ignorance and moves towards liberation. The teaching may then be transmitted to others, allowing that opportunity to continue across generations. **The merit of transmission is extraordinary. Its greater purpose is to help make the liberation of beings possible.**

What this teaching adds to our understanding of the Sutra

The Diamond Sutra does not diminish the bodhisattva's commitment when it challenges our conceptions of self, beings and liberation. It challenges the mistaken understanding through which that commitment can become limited or appropriated by an imagined independently existing ***I***. **No being is excluded from the commitment, and no independently existing liberator possesses the achievement of fulfilling it.**

The Buddha establishes an unlimited purpose, then teaches how it may be undertaken without self-grasping, self-cherishing or taking a stand.

---

2. The Conception of Self — The Imagined 'I' and Its Eradication

The Diamond Sutra opens with the Buddha going about his ordinary activities. He dresses, takes his begging bowl, walks into Śrāvastī, begs for his food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly.

Chapter 1 shows us the Buddha living without the mistaken conception of an independently existing self. At first, we see only his unassuming conduct. The succeeding chapters gradually help us recognise the extraordinary wisdom expressed through those ordinary activities, and what it means to eliminate the mistaken conception of self.

Again and again, the Buddha examines our conception of self: the person who acts, gives, receives, practises, attains, teaches and understands. Is there an independently existing ***I*** behind these activities? What happens when the mistaken conception of such a self is completely eliminated? Chapter 14 gives us an extraordinary answer. When King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon the Buddha in a former life, **no conception of self was present**, and the ill will that would other-

wise have arisen did not arise.

The Buddha had not destroyed an independently existing self. There had never been such a self to destroy. **He was free of the ignorance through which that imaginary self appeared to exist**. Our task as practitioners is to develop towards that freedom. Self-grasping and self-cherishing help us understand why this is so difficult, how the mistaken conception influences our lives, and how even our practice of the six perfections can become entangled with an apparently important ***I***.

The *Diamond Sutra* progressively exposes these two closely related habits of mind: self-grasping and self-cherishing. Its teaching points towards their complete eradication through wisdom and practice.

The self we mistakenly believe exists

Self-grasping is the deeply established tendency to experience ourselves as an independent, enduring ***I***. We ordinarily feel that behind our changing body, thoughts, emotions and experiences there is someone who possesses them.

- *This is **my** body.*
- *These are **my** thoughts.*
- *This is happening to **me**.*

Yet when we examine that apparently solid person, no independently existing ***I*** can be found. Our bodies, thoughts, memories, intentions and experiences arise *dependently*. The person we conventionally call ***I*** exists through these changing conditions, not as an independent owner standing apart from them.

The mistake is not that we recognise ourselves as persons. We need that recognition to live and practise. **The mistake is believing that there is an additional, independently existing self behind the person who conventionally exists.** There is no such independent self to discover.

The importance we attach to that self

Self-cherishing develops around this apparent ***I***. We give ***our*** happiness, opinions, wishes, reputation and achievements a special importance, often greater than the importance we give to others. We want **our** judgements respected, **our** achievements recognised and **our** dignity defended.

The two habits reinforce one another. **Self-grasping establishes the apparently solid *I*. Self-cherishing gives that *I* a privileged importance.**

Consider how readily a disagreement can become a personal attack, criticism can become humiliation, or an achievement can become a reason for pride. The event itself may be quite ordinary. The importance we attach to the ***I*** involved can make its emotional consequences enormous.

These habits influence how we experience the world, how we relate to other beings and how we respond to suffering. They can also profoundly influence our Buddhist practice.

The six perfections can be hijacked by self-cherishing

The six perfections are essential aspects of the bodhisattva path. Through *generosity, ethical discipline, patience, perseverance, meditation and wisdom*, we develop the capacities needed to work towards the liberation of all beings. Yet self-grasping and self-cherishing can appropriate our progress.

- *I am becoming generous.*
- *I am becoming an exceptionally patient person.*
- *My meditation has improved.*
- *I beginning to understand emptiness.*

These may begin as accurate observations of genuine development. Then another thought may appear: *Aren't I becoming an accomplished Buddhist! Aren't I clever!*

Our practice has become a reason for self-importance. ***The habits we are trying to overcome have found expression within the very activities intended to overcome them.***

This is why the Buddha repeatedly examines the giver, the recipient, the giving, the practitioner and the attainment. Genuine spiritual progress is possible. None of these persons, activities or achievements exists independently or establishes an important ***I*** who owns them.

The bodhisattva must cultivate the six perfections while progressively eliminating the self-grasping and self-cherishing that can distort their practice.

King Kali reveals the extraordinary culmination

Chapter 14 brings this teaching into exceptionally sharp focus. The Buddha recalls a former life in which King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon his body. He then makes a remarkable statement: *If a conception of self had been present, a conception of ill will would also have been present.*

The Buddha tells us that no conception of ***self*** was present. Consequently, the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise. **There was no anger to suppress because the mistaken conception of self from which that ill will would have arisen was absent.**

This is far more profound than exceptional self-control. Ordinarily, injury can immediately become an injury to ***me***, an apparently independent person whose importance demands defence or retaliation. In the King Kali account, there was physical injury, yet no independently existing ***I*** whose injury demanded hatred or retaliation.

The Buddha was not describing a struggle to restrain the self's angry reaction. He was describing freedom from the mistaken conception of ***self*** that could have produced that reaction.

This gives us a much clearer understanding of what the eradication of self-grasping means. The conventional person has not been annihilated. The Buddha still experienced the event and could later recount it.

Here is the apparent paradox: **the Buddha had eliminated the conception of an independently existing *self*, yet no such *self* had ever existed to be destroyed.** What can be eradicated is the ignorance that makes this imagined self appear real, together with the **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** that develop around it.

Nothing independently existing has been annihilated. What has been eliminated is the mistaken conception of something that never existed in the first place.

From understanding to eradication

For those of us still learning, the challenge is immense. We may understand intellectually that no independently existing ***self*** can be found. We may even recognise how **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** influence our thoughts and actions. Yet intellectual recognition does not immediately eliminate these deeply established habits.

The Buddha's teaching demands genuine transformation. We study the Dharma, reflect upon its meaning, meditate and practise the six perfections. We examine our reactions, particularly when our wishes, reputation or sense of importance are challenged. We learn to recognise how strongly we experience ourselves as a solid, independent ***I***, and how **self-cherishing** makes defending that ***I*** seem especially important.

Wisdom challenges our mistaken belief in an independently existing ***I***. Compassion and bodhicitta challenge the special importance we give that ***I*** by directing our concern and actions towards the welfare and liberation of all beings. Even our understanding of the Dharma may be filtered through the ***self*** we are trying to overcome. *I already know this. My understanding is correct. This teaching cannot apply to me.* Recognising these reactions is itself part of the practice. We must become willing to question the interpretations through which self-grasping and self-cherishing protect themselves from examination. Through sustained practice, understanding must become realised experience.

Chapter 14 shows us the profound freedom towards which this development points. **The goal is not merely to become better at controlling the reactions of a cherished self. It is to eradicate the mistaken *self-grasping* and *self-cherishing* from which those reactions can arise.**

There is another danger here. We may become proud of the progress we have made in overcoming self-importance.

- *I have nearly conquered my ego.*
- *I am becoming free of self-grasping.*



The imagined self has appropriated even the effort to overcome it. The Buddha's warning teaches: *our understanding and spiritual progress must not become new possessions of an important **I.***

Returning to Chapter 1

We can now return to the Buddha's ordinary conduct in Chapter 1. He dresses, takes his begging bowl, walks into Śrāvastī, begs for his food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly in mindfulness.

Red Pine interprets these ordinary activities as expressions of the six perfections. When we first encountered the scene, we recognised the Buddha's unassuming behaviour. Our understanding of **self-grasping**, **self-cherishing** and the account of King Kali now gives that scene much greater significance.

The Buddha simply goes about his daily activities, expressing the six perfections without any need to establish or demonstrate his own importance. **The extraordinary feature is not simply that the Buddha is humble. His unassuming**

conduct expresses a freedom from the mistaken *self-conception* and *self-importance* that ordinarily influence so much of our behaviour.

He continues to act, teach and benefit beings. What is absent is the imagined independent ***I*** who would turn these activities into personal achievements or possessions. The *Diamond Sutra*'s examination of **self** therefore points towards a profound transformation.

As our practice develops, *self-grasping* and *self-cherishing* must progressively weaken. In complete awakening, the ignorance and self-centredness that sustain these habits are eradicated. The person does not disappear. The bodhisattva's activities do not disappear. Wisdom and compassion continue to find expression through the ordinary world. What disappears is the mistaken conception of an independently existing and important ***I*** that claims and defends those activities as its own.

---

3. The Two Truths — Understanding the *Diamond Sutra* through its Paradoxes

Throughout the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha repeatedly makes statements that initially appear contradictory. *A being is no being; therefore it is called a being.*

- Buddha dharmas are no Buddha dharmas; therefore they are called Buddha dharmas.
- A world system is no world system; therefore it is called a world system.

We have been using a simple Three-Step Formula to understand this recurring pattern:
X → not-X → therefore X.

At first, the Buddha seems to affirm something, deny it and then affirm it again. But the Buddha is not simply returning us to where we began. **What changes is not the phenomenon itself, but our understanding of how it exists.** The key to understanding this movement is the **Two Truths**.

The Buddha's repeated paradoxes are a teaching method through which we gradually learn to distinguish conventional existence from independent existence. Their repetition is purposeful. Each new example challenges another mistaken assumption, helping us recognise that phenomena genuinely exist and function while remaining empty of intrinsic existence. **The Two Truths provide the understanding; the repeated paradoxes help us develop it.**

The Buddha's method also challenges the way we interpret what we hear. We encounter the word *being* and may automatically imagine an independently existing person. The Buddha's paradox interrupts that familiar interpretation and forces us to examine what we have assumed. He repeats this challenge with generosity, attainment, merit, the Dharma and even emptiness itself. **Each paradox invites us to recognise an assumption that our existing understanding has concealed from us.**

The three steps

Step 1 — Recognise and name the phenomenon

We begin with conventional reality. There are beings, persons, bodies, minds, actions, teachings, attainments and worlds. We recognise them, give them names and interact with them. These distinctions are meaningful and necessary. We could scarcely function without them.

The difficulty begins when we mistake our *recognition* of something for the discovery of an *independently existing* thing possessing its own *intrinsic* nature.

- We may identify a person correctly, yet imagine an independently existing self behind the changing body and mind.
- We may recognise an act of generosity, yet imagine a fixed giver who possesses the achievement.

This is where ***reification*** enters: we turn what exists dependently into something apparently solid and independently established.[1]

Step 2 — Examine its independent existence

The Buddha now challenges the apparent solidity of what we have recognised. Can this person, action, attainment or world be found existing independently of the causes, conditions, parts, relationships and designations through which it arises? **No.**

Hence the startling statement: **X is not X**.

The Buddha is not necessarily denying that the phenomenon exists. In our interpretation, he is challenging the *independent* existence we have attributed to it. When the *Sutra* speaks of a being as *no being*, we should not conclude that beings do not exist or that their suffering is unreal.

What cannot be found is an independently existing being standing apart from the changing conditions through which that person lives.

Step 3 — Return to conventional reality, now understood through wisdom

The Buddha then returns to the original designation: **Therefore it is called X.**

We return to the same world, but now understand it differently. Beings, generosity and spiritual attainment have ***not*** disappeared. They exist and function just as before, but we now recognise that they arise through causes, conditions and relationships, rather than existing independently.

This third step is crucial. If we stopped at *X is not X*, we might conclude that nothing exists, that compassion is pointless, that ethical conduct does not matter, or that spiritual development is impossible.

The Buddha's return to conventional reality prevents that misunderstanding. Beings suffer. Actions have consequences. Generosity helps. Practice transforms. Wisdom develops. All of these are meaningful precisely within the changing, dependently arisen world. **Nothing has disappeared. What has changed is our mistaken understanding of how things exist.**

Why the Two Truths are essential

The Three-Step Formula becomes intelligible when we understand it through the Two Truths.

1. **Conventionally**, we recognise and describe phenomena that genuinely exist and function.
2. **Ultimately**, when we examine these phenomena for ***independent***, ***intrinsic*** existence, none can be found.

These statements do not contradict one another because they address different questions about the same reality.

Consider a person we call *Jane*.

Conventionally, *Jane* exists. She thinks, feels, makes decisions, experiences suffering and happi-

---

[1] ***Reification:*** *Treating something that arises through causes, conditions, relationships and designation as though it possessed an independent, fixed nature of its own. 'Make it concrete'.*

ness, and changes through her experiences. But if we search for an independent, unchanging *Jane* who exists separately from her body, mind, history, relationships and other conditions, no such person can be found.

That does not make Jane nonexistent. **The conventionally existing Jane and the ultimately empty Jane are not two different people.** There is one dependently arisen Jane, understood in two ways.

The Three-Step Formula allows us to move through this understanding:
Jane exists → no independently existing Jane can be found → therefore we continue to call her Jane, understanding that she exists *dependently*.

The third step is not simply permission to use ordinary language again. *It is ordinary experience understood through wisdom.* Nor should we imagine that the three steps describe something happening to Jane: *Jane exists → Jane disappears → Jane reappears*. Jane has not disappeared and returned. Our understanding has changed.

This is why the Three-Step Formula and the Two Truths belong together. The Two Truths explain the apparent contradiction; the formula helps us follow the Buddha's reasoning.

The agent, the recipient and the action

There is a further development which is particularly important for understanding the bodhisattva path. *Dependent arising applies to both persons and objects and to the actions and relationships through which they interact.*

Consider an act of generosity. We ordinarily imagine a giver who performs an action for a recipient: **Giver → Giving → Recipient**

It is easy to picture three separate things: a giver who already exists, a recipient who already exists, and an action that subsequently connects them. But the relationship is more subtle. The giver becomes a *giver* through the act of giving. The recipient becomes a *recipient* through that same event. And the *giving* itself depends upon the participants, the gift, the intention and the circumstances.

None exists independently of the others in the roles through which we describe the event. The giver changes through the experience. The recipient may change through receiving the gift. And the giving itself arises, develops and ends through changing conditions.

The agent, the recipient and the action are all dependently arisen.[2]

This is important because we may correctly understand that the recipient has no independently existing self while continuing to regard ourselves as the solid, compassionate helper.

- ***I** helped you.*
- ***I** performed that generous action.*
- ***I** am becoming a better bodhisattva.*

Or perhaps we relinquish attachment to ourselves as the giver but continue grasping at the action: *That was **my** act of generosity. It has earned **me** merit. It proved **I** am generous.*

---

[2] ***The three spheres:*** *A traditional Buddhist analysis of action examines the agent, the object or recipient, and the action itself. All three lack independent existence. In discussions of generosity, the three spheres may also be expressed as giver, gift and recipient. The giving itself is likewise dependently arisen.*

The *Diamond* challenges all these possibilities.

There is another subtle consequence. We should not imagine a fixed self that exists first and subsequently performs its actions. The activities themselves can influence our developing sense of who we are. *I gave. I helped. I understood. I achieved.* These actions become part of the story through which we construct our identity. **The apparent self grasps the action as *mine*, while the action can reinforce the apparent self who claims to own it.**

Here the Three-Step Formula becomes more than an explanation of a philosophical paradox. It helps us examine how grasping, self-grasping and self-cherishing may arise within the practice of the six perfections: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, perseverance, meditation and wisdom. It also helps us understand how a bodhisattva can practise these perfections, guided by compassion, without turning the activities or their achievements into possessions of an important ***I***.

The Middle Way — neither independent existence nor nonexistence

The formula protects us against two opposite mistakes.

- One is **reification**: treating persons, actions and phenomena as independently existing realities. [making them concrete, unchanging, unchangeable]
- The other is **nihilism**: concluding that because they lack independent existence, they do not exist or do not matter.

The Buddha's teaching avoids both. Chapter 27 makes the warning against annihilation explicit. Chapter 30 demonstrates it through worlds and particles: neither the whole nor its smallest parts can be found existing independently, yet the world continues to exist and function.

Having understood that phenomena are empty of independent existence, we must not make the mistake of imagining that *emptiness is itself a separate, hidden, independently existing reality.* There is not a conventional world on the surface and a separate, ultimately real emptiness underneath it. **The dependently arisen world is the very world that is empty of independent existence.**

Using the formula in our study

Whenever we encounter one of the *Diamond Sutra*'s apparent paradoxes, three questions are helpful:

1. **What is being recognised?** What person, phenomenon, activity or conception are we recognising as conventionally existing?
2. **What is being denied?** What independent existence, fixed identity or mistaken conception is the Buddha challenging?
3. **What remains?** How can we continue to recognise, understand and engage with the phenomenon without grasping at it?

Our Three-Step Formula is an explanatory framework for reading the *Sutra*, not a formula the Buddha explicitly names. Nor should we assume that every negative statement in the *Sutra* is making precisely the same point. We must attend to what is being examined in each chapter.

The formula helps us see that the Buddha is not destroying the conventional world through a succession of paradoxical contradictions. He is teaching us to recognise our world without imposing independent existence upon it. This has a profoundly practical consequence for the bodhisattva.

We can recognise beings without fixing their identities, act compassionately without con-

structing a permanent helper, develop wisdom without making it a possession, and practise wholeheartedly without requiring an independently existing self to own the results.

The world remains. Our activities remain. Their consequences remain. ***What changes is how we understand them and how we relate to them. We no longer need to turn our actions and achievements into possessions of a fixed I, or reasons for considering ourselves important.***

---

4. Possession — The Imagined Owner of Attainment and Achievement

The *Diamond Sutra* repeatedly tells us that no independently existing thing has been attained, even when describing the highest spiritual achievements. This seems puzzling. A stream-enterer is different from someone who has not entered the stream. An arhat has undergone profound transformation. The Buddha's awakening represents the complete overcoming of ignorance and grasping.

So when the *Sutra* says that no dharma has been attained, it cannot simply mean that nothing has happened. **The question is not whether genuine spiritual progress occurs, but *what we mean by attainment and who, if anyone, possesses it.***

The important distinction is between **a transformation that has genuinely occurred and a separate thing that has supposedly been acquired and possessed.** The Buddha asks us to examine both the achievement and the imagined owner of that achievement.

Attainment is transformation, not the acquisition of an object

We can easily imagine attainment as acquiring something: *I → attain → something I now* ***possess****.* It resembles buying a car. Beforehand I did not possess it; afterwards I do. The car has been added to my possessions. It exists separately from me.

But spiritual **attainment** is fundamentally different. Consider learning to play the piano. After years of practice, we can truthfully say that someone has become an accomplished pianist.

What has actually happened? Through study, repeated practice and experience, the person's understanding, perception, physical coordination and ability to perform have developed. Countless causes and conditions have produced a genuine transformation. We can say that the person has acquired a *skill*, but the skill is **not** a separate object added to their possessions. It is a developed ability that has changed the person who learns. There is no independent thing called *pianist-hood* that the person now owns.

The same distinction helps us understand spiritual **attainment**. We can *attain* stream-entry, arhatship and ultimately awakening, but these are not independently existing spiritual objects acquired by an otherwise unchanged person. **They describe profound transformations arising through practice, wisdom and the overcoming of ignorance and harmful habits.**

Attainment is genuine transformation, not the acquisition of an independently existing thing that the practitioner can possess.

The attainer changes through the attaining

There is another important consequence. We should not imagine a fixed, unchanging person who begins the path, undertakes certain practices and eventually acquires enlightenment.

The practitioner is changed by the very process of practising. **Practice changes the practitioner.**

Understanding changes the one who understands. Letting go changes the one who lets go.

Ethical discipline influences behaviour. **Meditation** develops attention. **Wisdom** changes how experience is understood. As **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** weaken, our responses to other people can change. The *practitioner*, the *practising* and the resulting *transformation* arise together through changing causes and conditions. This is another application of our understanding of the *agent, action and result*. None exists independently of the others.

Even the traditional expression *fruit of attainment* is helpful. A fruit genuinely develops, but only through the conditions that produce it. It does not exist as an independent object waiting to be collected.

Spiritual attainment is not something added to an unchanged self. It is a transformation of the person through the very conditions of the path.

The objection is not to ordinary expressions such as "I have acquired wisdom" or "I possess a skill." It is to mistaking the achievement for an independently existing possession of an independently existing self.

Subhūti provides the crucial test

Chapter 9 examines four recognised stages of spiritual attainment: *stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning and arhatship*. For each, the Buddha asks whether the practitioner ***thinks***: *I have attained*.

Subhūti answers no.

Yet Subhūti himself acknowledges that he is an arhat, free from passion, while saying that the thought *"I am an arhat"* does not arise in him. How can he recognise his attainment while denying that thought? The distinction is between **recognising a genuine transformation and grasping at that transformation as something belonging to an independently existing self.**

Subhūti can truthfully recognise his arhatship. His practice has produced profound changes, and the designation is appropriate. What does not arise is the appropriating conception: *I am this independently existing person, and arhatship is the achievement I now **possess**.*

This is much more than a lesson in humility. Someone might modestly deny their accomplishments while secretly identifying strongly with being an advanced practitioner. [*"Aren't I clever"*] Another person might acknowledge genuine progress without self-importance. Words alone do not establish whether grasping is present. What matters is whether the person recognises attainment as a genuine transformation, or treats it as a possession belonging to an independently existing self. **There is genuine attainment, but no independently existing attainer who acquires it as a possession.**

When attainment becomes a new self

Our distinction between **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** now helps explain why the Buddha repeatedly returns to attainment.

Even genuine spiritual progress can become the foundation for a new identity.

- ***My** meditation has improved.*
- ***I** have developed patience.*
- ***I** understand emptiness.*

These may be perfectly accurate observations. But the mind can quietly add something more:

- *I am an advanced meditator.*
- *I am an exceptionally patient person.*
- *I understand the Dharma better than others. Aren't I clever.*

- **Self-grasping** turns the changing practitioner into an apparently solid ***I*** who owns these achievements.
- **Self-cherishing** gives that ***I*** and its achievements special importance. We may become *proud of our progress, seek recognition or feel threatened when someone questions our* understanding.

The irony is that such grasping can obstruct the very progress we are celebrating. If I need to preserve my identity as someone who understands emptiness, discovering that I have misunderstood something may become uncomfortable. Instead of examining the mistake, I may defend my reputation.

Spiritual attainment has become another bastion of self-importance. This is the danger the Buddha reveals in Chapter 9 and returns to with greater subtlety in Chapter 31. **The path intended to weaken self-grasping can itself become something that self-grasping appropriates.**

Awakening without an awakening possessed

The Buddha carries this teaching beyond the four stages of attainment.[stream-enterer, arhat, etc] In Chapter 17, he challenges the idea that even the bodhisattva possesses a fixed spiritual identity. In Chapter 22, he asks whether the Tathāgata has attained any independently existing dharma called unsurpassed complete awakening.

The answer is no.

This does not deny Buddhahood. The distinction between a mind still subject to *ignorance and grasping* and one liberated from them remains fundamental to the *Sutra*.

Even the culmination of the path cannot become a final spiritual possession. The Buddha has not remained an unchanged person who acquired an object called enlightenment. Awakening cannot be separated from the transformation of ignorance, grasping and the other conditions addressed through practice and wisdom. **There is no final spiritual trophy for an independently existing self to claim.**

Possession and the imagined owner

This examination reaches far beyond spiritual attainment. Throughout the Sutra, the Buddha challenges what we imagine ourselves to possess: ***my*** *generosity* (Chapter 4), ***my*** *understanding of the Dharma* (Chapter 6), *the teaching* ***I*** *have given* (Chapter 21), *the beings* ***I*** *have liberated* (Chapter 25), and even ***my*** *correct understanding of emptiness* (Chapter 31).

The Buddha repeatedly challenges not merely what we think we have acquired, but *the independently existing I we imagine has acquired it*.

There is a subtle process here. We undertake an activity, develop an ability or gain an understanding. We may then claim it as *mine*. That claim can reinforce the apparently solid ***I*** who possesses it. Self-cherishing gives both the owner and its achievements special importance.

The activity or achievement may be entirely genuine. What cannot be found is the independently existing owner behind it.

The more we turn our activities and achievements into possessions of an important *I,* the more we reinforce the very conception of *self* that the Buddha is teaching us to eliminate.

Possession can reinforce the mistaken conception of ***self***. When we think ***my*** *generosity,* ***my*** *understanding,* ***my*** *achievement*, the mind may treat these as evidence of a substantial owner: *I have achieved something; therefore there must be an independently existing I who has achieved it.* Yet the achievement cannot establish such a ***self***. Both the person and the achievement arise dependently.

This is closely related to Non-abiding, although the emphasis differs. **Possession concerns the imagined owner and what it claims as its own. Non-abiding concerns the mind's continual search for another bastion upon which to take a stand.**

This strengthens our central discovery: **the imagined self is not simply a mistaken conception we already possess. Our everyday thinking and behaviour can continually reinforce it.**

Progress without possession

For those of us still practising, this understanding has a very practical importance. We should recognise genuine progress. We can acknowledge that our meditation has improved, that we respond more patiently to difficulties or that our understanding of the Dharma has deepened.

Such changes matter. They encourage continued practice and can help us recognise what is beneficial. However, we need not turn them into permanent statements about who we are.

There is a considerable difference between: *My understanding has changed* and *I am someone who understands*. The first recognises a developing process. The second may become an *identity that we feel obliged to protect*.

Nor should we conclude that because attainment is empty of independent existence that spiritual development is unreal. **Generosity** can increase, **anger** can weaken, **compassion** can deepen and **wisdom** can develop. These are meaningful transformations. The bodhisattva continues to cultivate the six perfections, ***not*** *to create an increasingly important spiritual self, but to develop the wisdom and compassion needed to benefit others.* Our growing understanding should make us *less defensive, more willing to recognise our mistakes and less concerned with establishing our own importance*.

The measure of progress is not how much spiritual achievement we can claim, but how deeply practice is transforming the habits of mind that produce suffering.

This brings us back to the Buddha's unassuming conduct in Chapter 1. Someone who has attained unsurpassed awakening goes about the ordinary activities of life without making those activities expressions of personal importance.

The path genuinely transforms the practitioner. However, no spiritual achievement, however profound, becomes a possession of an independently existing I, or provides a reason for self-importance. **If we begin to take pride in our attainment, self-grasping and self-cherishing are still at work: the very habits that the path is intended to overcome. Genuine progress should be reflected in the weakening of self-grasping and self-cherishing, not in the importance we attach to having made progress. Possession may be one of the mind's most persistent ways of turning ordinary experience into evidence of an independently existing self.**

5. Non-abiding — Not Taking a Stand

The Buddha repeatedly removes one apparent foundation after another. Yet as each bastion falls, the mind searches for somewhere else to take a stand. It may relinquish one attachment only to establish itself upon another: generosity, attainment, merit, the Dharma, or finally its own understanding of emptiness. **The object changes, yet the mind's habit of seeking somewhere secure to stand remains.** Non-abiding addresses this continuing habit.

One of Subhūti's central questions in Chapter 2 is how a bodhisattva should abide, practise and govern the mind. The Buddha's answer develops throughout the *Sutra*, but Chapter 10 expresses it particularly clearly: **A bodhisattva should give rise to a mind that does not settle anywhere.**

At first this seems contradictory. How can we deliberately cultivate the profound commitment to awaken for the benefit of all beings while refusing to establish the mind anywhere? The answer lies in distinguishing **commitment from fixation**.

The bodhisattva's commitment to helping beings remains wholehearted. But the practitioner must not establish a fixed identity as the helper, a fixed conception of the people being helped, or an unchanging view of what helping must involve.

Emptiness concerns how phenomena exist: they arise dependently rather than as fixed, independent realities. **Non-abiding concerns how the mind responds to this understanding.** Because what we encounter lacks independent existence, we need not treat it as a fixed foundation upon which the mind must stand.

The Buddha's instruction not to take a stand reaches beyond our attachment to self. The mind may settle upon a judgement, a perception, a particular way of practising, or even a correct understanding of emptiness. When we turn any of these into a fixed position, we are no longer examining reality freely; we are defending the bastion upon which the mind has settled.

Non-abiding does not require us to relinquish useful knowledge, sound judgements or worthwhile commitments. It requires us not to make them fixed foundations upon which the mind must remain.

Acting without taking a stand

Consider helping someone who is suffering. We may carefully examine the circumstances and conclude: *This is what Jane needs.* That judgement may be entirely appropriate. But circumstances change. Jane's needs may change, our understanding may improve, and an action that was once helpful may cease to be so. If we become attached to our original judgement, we may resist these changes.

Non-abiding allows us to remain committed to Jane's welfare without becoming committed to defending our original understanding of her needs.

The same applies to our opinions, responsibilities and spiritual practice. We can hold a well-founded view without making it an identity. We can acknowledge genuine achievements without regarding them as possessions of an important ***I***. We can maintain our commitments without requiring that the way we fulfil them remain unchanged.

Non-abiding does not mean having no convictions. It means being able to act upon our understanding without becoming imprisoned by it.

The freedom of a mind that does not settle

Our distinction between self-grasping and self-cherishing helps explain why this matters. Self-grasping can turn our beliefs, achievements and activities into evidence of a solid ***I***. Self-cherishing makes that ***I*** and its opinions ***especially important***. When someone challenges our judgement, we may then experience the disagreement as a personal threat.

Non-abiding allows us to examine the disagreement without needing to defend our identity. We can acknowledge mistakes, change our understanding and respond to new circumstances without abandoning what genuinely matters.

- Chapter 14 takes this freedom much further. In the account of King Kali, the absence of a conception of self means that ill will does not arise. The Buddha's compassion can extend even to someone who has caused terrible suffering.
- Chapter 31 returns to the same principle at a subtler level. Even a correct understanding of the Dharma must not become a fixed position through which we establish ourselves.

The mind can know, see, practise and develop wisdom without **reifying that understanding or claiming it as a possession**. This is the freedom towards which non-abiding points.

The bodhisattva remains fully engaged in the world, committed to the welfare of beings, without trying to construct or defend a bastion out of persons, actions, understandings or achievements. These can guide our lives and practice without becoming fixed positions upon which the mind insists on taking a stand.

---

6. Signlessness — Seeing Without Being Imprisoned by What We See

The *Diamond Sutra* repeatedly speaks of **signs, marks, perceptions and conceptions**. Chapter 5 makes the issue explicit when the Buddha asks whether the Tathāgata can be seen through his physical characteristics. The answer is paradoxical: where we take signs as establishing what something really is, deception arises; yet the signs themselves do not simply disappear. Thich Nhat Hanh therefore describes the task as learning to see the **"signless nature of signs."**

A sign is anything by which we recognise, identify or classify something.

- I look through the window and recognise **a blue-faced honeyeater**.
- I see someone approaching and recognise **Jane**.
- We may recognise someone as the Buddha through his physical appearance, but those characteristics do not reveal the nature of his awakening.

These acts of recognition are useful and can be entirely correct. Signlessness does not require us to pretend that the bird is not a honeyeater, that Jane is not Jane, or that appearances cannot distinguish one person from another.

The problem begins when **successful recognition quietly becomes a claim about reality.**

Knowing that the bird is a blue-faced honeyeater tells me very little about this particular living creature: where it has been, what it has experienced, what it is seeking at this moment, or the enormous network of causes and conditions through which it presently exists.

Likewise, recognising Jane tells me which person I am talking about. It does not disclose an independently existing essence called *Jane*. Her body, thoughts, memories, relationships, experiences, dispositions and circumstances are constantly changing. "Jane" successfully identifies the person without exhausting what that person is.

Thus:

- **A sign can identify without defining.**
- **A name can refer without revealing an essence.**
- **A concept can be useful without containing reality.**

Thich Nhat Hanh stresses the danger of judging monks, nuns or the Tathāgata through outward signs: we must see through form rather than assume that the identifying marks disclose the reality. He extends this into a broader warning that conceptual knowledge can become a prison when we mistake it for reality itself.

This is closely connected with dependent arising. Perception itself is a dependent process.

There is a perceiver.
There is what is perceived.
There is the act of perceiving and recognising.

None stands independently.

Seeing depends upon sense organs, objects, consciousness, attention, previous experience, memory, language, categories and present circumstances. The perceiver is changing; the perceived object is changing; **the perceiving itself is a dependently arisen event**.

This does not mean that every perception is equally true. Calling the honeyeater a magpie may simply be mistaken. Conventional reality still permits accurate and inaccurate identification.

The deeper point is different:

Even a perfectly accurate identification does not transform its object into the fixed thing our concept appears to present to us.

Signlessness therefore does not ask us to abandon signs. We could scarcely function without them. It asks us to **see signs as signs**.

I can recognise Jane correctly without imagining that her name or my accumulated conceptions reveal everything about her. She remains a changing person whose experience, understanding and circumstances extend far beyond what I presently know.

This has profound practical consequences. We continually imprison ourselves and others within signs:

the difficult person
the successful person
the old person
the sick person
the clever person
the failure
the Buddhist
the arhat.

Such descriptions may contain conventional information. The danger lies in forgetting that they are descriptions. When we fix someone within such a description, we may cease to notice how that person is changing, or fail to recognise what they now need from us.

Signlessness therefore means **seeing and recognising the conventional world clearly while no longer mistaking our signs, names and concepts for the independently existing reality of**

what they identify.

Or more simply:

The name tells us, "That is the one I mean."
It does not tell us, "That is what this being ultimately is."

---

7. Wisdom, Compassion and Skilful Means: Acting Fully in an Empty World

In Chapter 2, Subhūti asks how someone undertaking the bodhisattva path should abide, practise and govern the mind. His question is fundamentally practical: **How should a bodhisattva live and act for the benefit of others?**

The Buddha begins his answer in Chapter 3, not with a philosophical explanation, but with an extraordinary commitment: *I will bring **all** beings to liberation.* Compassion is therefore at the very heart of the bodhisattva path. Yet the Buddha immediately warns against conceiving those beings as fixed, independently existing selves.

This presents a profound challenge. How can we work wholeheartedly for the liberation of beings without grasping at a fixed identity as the helper, fixed conceptions of those being helped, or an unchanging idea of what helping should involve?

This is where wisdom, compassion and skilful means come together. *Compassion* provides the commitment to help, ***wisdom*** guides our understanding of the people and circumstances involved, and ***skilful means*** enables us to respond appropriately. These are not three separate activities. They work together, each influencing how the others are expressed.

The Buddha is not merely asking the bodhisattva to understand suffering or feel compassion. He is asking the bodhisattva to undertake the work of liberation, and to develop the wisdom and skilful means necessary to do it.

Wisdom and compassion need each other

Compassion (karuṇā) goes beyond empathy. Empathy allows us to recognise and feel another person's suffering. Compassion adds the wish to relieve that suffering and overcome its causes. But the bodhisattva path demands something further. In Chapter 3, the Buddha instructs the bodhisattva to undertake the liberation of ***all*** beings. **Compassion becomes an unlimited commitment to act for their welfare and liberation**, not merely to wish them well. To undertake this, the bodhisattva needs to develop skilful means.

Wisdom (prajñā) develops through two closely related aspects. The first is knowledge and understanding of the Dharma: its teachings on suffering, its causes, dependent arising and the path to liberation. The second is the realisation of emptiness: understanding, ultimately through direct experience, that beings and phenomena lack independent existence. Through study, reflection and meditation, intellectual understanding can develop into wisdom that transforms how we experience the world and respond to others.

Skilful means (upāya) are the practical methods, knowledge and abilities through which wisdom and compassion become effective action. They include teaching, giving practical assistance, guiding others, protecting them from harm and finding approaches suited to their particular circumstances. A beginning bodhisattva may have few such skills and must gradually develop them

through learning, practice and experience. An experienced bodhisattva has acquired a much wider range of methods to draw upon, together with the wisdom to recognise which are appropriate in a particular situation.

Why dependent arising makes liberation possible

Understanding emptiness does not make suffering unreal or unimportant. Beings suffer, suffering has causes, and those causes can be changed.

This is one of the most important practical consequences of dependent arising. If people possessed fixed, unchanging natures, how could they overcome ignorance, develop wisdom or become free from suffering?

Because beings and their circumstances arise dependently, transformation is possible. The bodhisattva seeks to understand and change the conditions that sustain suffering, ultimately helping beings overcome its underlying causes.

But recognising that liberation is possible is only the beginning. The Buddha asks the bodhisattva to undertake the work of bringing it about.

The commitment requires developing our abilities

Universal Liberation establishes that no being lies outside the bodhisattva's commitment. The question here is practical: h**ow do we develop the knowledge, abilities and methods needed to help beings whose circumstances, understanding and readiness for the Dharma differ?** The commitment is unlimited. Our present capacities are not. This is why the cultivation of wisdom, compassion and skilful means is essential.

Developing skilful means

Skilful means (upāya) are not simply the ability to choose an appropriate response. They include the knowledge, practical methods and developed abilities through which compassionate intentions can become effective action.

A beginner may have great compassion but relatively few methods available. Experience, study, ethical discipline, meditation and practice gradually expand the range of possible responses.

An experienced bodhisattva has developed a much richer repertoire of skilful means, together with the wisdom needed to recognise which methods are appropriate.

The bodhisattva's ultimate purpose is not simply to relieve immediate suffering, but to help beings become free from saṃsāra and the ignorance and grasping that perpetuate it. This presents a much more difficult challenge. A person may enjoy wealth, comfort, good health and considerable happiness without recognising the underlying unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence. Such a person may see no reason to seek liberation. How can the bodhisattva help someone who does not yet recognise the need for help?

The Lamrim offers an important practical teaching here. Geshe Sopa concludes Volume 3 of *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment* with **the four ways to gather and cultivate disciples**: ***generosity, kind and appropriate speech, encouraging others to practise the Dharma, and demonstrating that practice through one's own conduct.***

These methods help create the conditions through which another person may become receptive to the Dharma, develop understanding and begin to practise. Material assistance may establish a beneficial relationship, but the ultimate intention is to help beings develop the wisdom through

which liberation becomes possible.

This also helps explain why the Buddha repeatedly praises the extraordinary merit of learning, understanding and transmitting even four lines of the *Diamond Sutra*. A few lines of teaching may become the beginning of a transformation that extends far beyond the immediate circumstances of someone's life.

The bodhisattva must therefore develop not only compassion and personal wisdom, but also the ability to introduce others to the Dharma, cultivate their understanding and guide them towards liberation.

These are demanding skills. They require patience, perseverance, sensitivity to the capacities of others and continual development of one's own practice. The bodhisattva must therefore continue learning, developing new capacities and responding to the needs of beings whose circumstances are continually changing.

We can express the relationship through three questions:

- **Compassion asks:** Who is suffering, and what can be done to relieve that suffering?
- **Wisdom asks:** What are the causes and conditions involved, and what mistaken assumptions about fixed persons or circumstances may be limiting my understanding?
- **Skilful means asks:** What methods and abilities are needed to help, and how can I develop and apply them effectively?

Mu Soeng emphasises the inseparability of wisdom and compassion. Skilful means gives their unity practical expression.

The commitment may be unlimited, but our present abilities are not. The bodhisattva path therefore includes the continuing development of the very capacities needed to fulfil its compassionate purpose.

Compassion without becoming the important helper

Our distinction between self-grasping and self-cherishing now becomes particularly important. Even compassionate actions can be appropriated by the self.

- ***I** am the compassionate person.*
- ***I** know what you need.*
- ***I** have helped you.*
- *You should recognise what **I** have done.*

Self-grasping can establish an apparently solid ***I*** who performs the action. Self-cherishing may then turn that person's genuine generosity and achievements into reasons for self-importance.

Chapter 25 takes this danger further. Having helped someone, we may begin to regard that assistance as creating a continuing claim upon the person helped. *I saved you. You owe me.* The original action may have been genuinely beneficial. But it has become entangled with the helper's desire for recognition, gratitude or control.

Wisdom challenges this appropriation. Neither the helper, the person helped nor the helping itself possesses independent existence. All arise through changing causes, conditions and relationships.

Non-abiding adds a practical safeguard. We can remain completely committed to another person's welfare without constructing a bastion around our identity as helper or our preferred method

of helping. **The purpose of compassionate action is to benefit beings, not to establish the importance of the person who acts.**

Compassion that does not exclude an enemy

Chapter 14 shows how demanding the bodhisattva's commitment can become. The Buddha describes the terrible suffering inflicted upon him by King Kali. Then he instructs bodhisattvas to act for the benefit of all beings. This includes King Kali himself.

Chapter 14's account of King Kali illustrates why wisdom, compassion and skilful means must work together. **Wisdom** recognises that a person who commits terrible cruelty does not possess an inherently evil nature. **Compassion** refuses to exclude that person from the commitment to liberation. **Skilful means seeks** appropriate ways to help them overcome the causes of their harmful actions, without excusing the wrongdoing.

This brings us much closer to understanding the extraordinary reach of the bodhisattva vow.

The six perfections — training for the work of liberation

The six perfections are not simply admirable qualities. They are essential aspects of the bodhisattva's training.

- **Generosity** develops our capacity to give and benefit others.
- **Ethical discipline** guides our actions and protects others from harm.
- **Patience** helps us meet provocation, injury and other difficulties without being governed by anger. Together with wisdom, it helps us recognise and gradually weaken the self-grasping and self-cherishing from which anger can arise.
- **Perseverance** sustains the work when progress is slow and difficulties seem overwhelming.
- **Meditation** develops the attention and stability needed to understand our own minds and respond wisely.
- **Wisdom** reveals the dependent nature of persons, actions and phenomena, progressively weakening the ignorance and grasping that sustain suffering.

Together, these perfections develop the capacities through which the bodhisattva's commitment can be fulfilled. And **skilful means** allows development of those capacities needed to apply appropriately in the changing circumstances of individual beings.

Throughout, the *Diamond Sutra* adds its persistent warning. We must not turn the cultivation of these perfections into achievements possessed by a self-important ***I***.

The bodhisattva practises generosity without constructing a superior giver, develops patience without claiming exceptional virtue, and cultivates wisdom without making understanding a reason for pride.

The six perfections develop the bodhisattva's ability to benefit beings while wisdom progressively weakens the self-grasping and self-cherishing that could distort that work.

Even the Dharma is a skilful means

The Buddha's teachings themselves are among the important skilful means available to the bodhisattva. The Dharma can be taught, studied, reflected upon and practised. It can help beings understand suffering, weaken ignorance and develop wisdom. But a teaching must also be appropriate to the capacities and circumstances of the person receiving it.

The familiar image of the **raft** reminds us that teachings are means towards liberation, not doctrines to be possessed or defended for their own sake.

A teacher must therefore develop both understanding of the Dharma, and also the ability to communicate and apply it effectively. A skilful means.

Returning to Chapter 1

This understanding brings us back once more to Red Pine's interpretation of the opening scene. The Buddha dresses, takes his begging bowl, walks into Śrāvastī, begs for his food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly in mindfulness.

Red Pine interprets these ordinary activities as expressions of the six perfections. The Buddha is not displaying his achievements or announcing his importance. His wisdom and compassion are expressed through the way he lives. **Extraordinary understanding is being expressed without self-importance.**

We can now appreciate something of what that example means for the bodhisattva path. The commitment to liberate ***all*** beings is unlimited. Our ability to fulfil it must be developed through study, practice, ethical conduct, perseverance, wisdom and skilful means. As our capacities develop, wisdom must also weaken the grasping that would turn those capacities into possessions of a self-important ***I***.

The bodhisattva's work is therefore both outward and inward: **developing the ability to bring beings towards liberation while transforming the mind through which that work is undertaken.**

Compassion provides the commitment. Wisdom guides our understanding and progressively overcomes ignorance. Skilful means supplies and develops the methods through which compassionate action becomes effective in liberating beings.

The *Diamond Sutra* is not merely teaching us to see a world empty of independent existence. It is teaching us to undertake the work of liberating beings within that world, without grasping at ourselves, those we help or the work itself.

---

8. The Perfection of Patience — From Controlling Anger to Freedom from Its Causes

The *Diamond Sutra*'s teaching on emptiness becomes an immediate practical challenge in Chapter 14. Through the account of King Kali, the Buddha shows what freedom from the mistaken conception of self means when someone inflicts terrible harm.

The chapter asks how such freedom is possible, and what it means for those of us still cultivating patience.

The extraordinary account of King Kali

The Buddha recalls a former life in which King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon his body. Yet he declares that no conception of self, being, living self or person was present in him.

He then makes the crucial statement: **If a conception of self had been present, ill will would also have been present.**

This is one of the most important statements in the *Diamond Sutra*. The Buddha is not describing someone who experienced overwhelming anger and successfully controlled it. He tells us that be-

cause the conception of self was absent, the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise.

There was no anger to suppress.

He then recalls five hundred former lives in which he practised patience as a sage, declaring that in those lives too, no conception of self, being, living self or person was present. The point is not simply that the Buddha demonstrated exceptional endurance on one occasion. **He is describing a profound freedom from the mistaken conception of self that can give rise to hatred.**

How can the absence of that conception of ***'self'*** have such an extraordinary consequence?

The *self* that feels injured

Our distinction between **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** helps us understand the Buddha's statement.

Consider an ordinary experience. Someone criticises us unfairly. We hear the words and recognise that the criticism is unjustified. But almost immediately another response may arise:

- How dare you speak to me like that?
- You have insulted me.
- I have been treated unfairly.

- **Self-grasping** can make the person who has been criticised appear especially solid: *me, the one who has been attacked*.
- **Self-cherishing** gives special importance to the reputation, wishes and status of that apparently solid ***I***, making them things we feel compelled to defend.

The two habits reinforce one another. The stronger the sense of a solid ***I***, and the greater the importance we attach to defending that ***I***, the more readily resentment and anger may develop.

The criticism may have lasted only a few seconds, but we can revisit it repeatedly, sometimes maintaining resentment for years. The original event has become something much larger: ***an injury to a cherished sense of self***.

The Buddha's extraordinary freedom in the King Kali account

Now return to King Kali. The Buddha describes terrible physical injury, yet the conception of an independently existing ***I*** was absent. There was no cherished self whose importance demanded defence, and therefore the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise. **The Buddha was not struggling to control anger. There was no anger to suppress.**

This is the extraordinary depth of the perfection of patience. For those of us still developing, this raises a question: **How do we develop towards such freedom when self-grasping, self-cherishing and anger remain deeply established habits of our own minds?**

Patience must be developed

The wider Mahāyāna tradition teaches that sentient beings possess Buddha-nature: the potential to attain Buddhahood. This does not mean that an already awakened Buddha exists as a hidden, independent self within us. Nor does it mean that our minds are already free from ignorance, grasping and anger.

Those obscurations must be overcome through study, meditation and practice.

Chapter 9 describes genuine spiritual attainments, including stream-entry and arhatship. The

bodhisattva path has its own stages of development, directed towards complete awakening for the benefit of **all** beings.

We cannot simply understand intellectually that no independently existing self can be found and expect our deeply established habits of self-grasping, self-cherishing and anger to disappear. Intellectual understanding is an important beginning, but the Buddha's account of King Kali and his many former lives illustrates a freedom that has become firmly established in the mind through profound practice.

The task of practice is to transform what we understand into the way we actually experience and respond to the world. Patience is essential to that transformation.

Why anger is so destructive

Buddhist teachings place extraordinary emphasis on the dangers of anger. Anger disturbs the mind, damages relationships, encourages harmful actions and can overwhelm compassion. It readily reinforces the division between an important ***I*** and the person who has offended or threatened that ***I***.

The traditional Buddhist warning is considerably more severe. Śāntideva, in his *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, warns that even a brief moment of intense anger can destroy merit accumulated through virtuous activity over an immense period of time.

This is why the perfection of patience is so important to the bodhisattva path. We may spend years cultivating generosity, ethical discipline, meditation, compassion and wisdom. Yet an episode of anger can seriously damage the beneficial results of that effort and obstruct further progress.

Patience is therefore essential to protecting and sustaining our progress along the bodhisattva path. We must first learn to restrain anger, while progressively developing the wisdom that can overcome its underlying causes.

From restraining anger to overcoming its causes

For those still developing, ethical restraint remains important. Through studying the Dharma, reflecting upon our experiences, meditation and practice, we gradually learn to recognise the role of self-grasping and self-cherishing in our reactions. We then work to develop the wisdom and compassion that can weaken these deeply established habits.

For a beginner with few skilful means available, the immediate response may be simply to suppress the impulse to speak or act angrily. Even this is valuable because it prevents further harmful behaviour. With practice, we learn to recognise anger without acting upon it. We may still feel resentment, humiliation or bitterness. Our next task is to investigate the conditions from which those feelings arise.

- Why has this criticism become so threatening?
- Who is the *I* whose reputation or importance seems to have been injured?
- Why do I feel such a strong need to defend *me*?

- Through **self-grasping**, an apparently solid ***I*** emerges as the injured person. Through **self-cherishing**, defending that ***I*** becomes especially important.
- **Wisdom** examines the mistaken independent existence we attribute to that self. As our understanding of emptiness deepens, the apparently solid ***I*** we feel compelled to defend begins to

lose its hold upon us.

- **Compassion** directs our attention towards the person whose conduct has provoked our anger. What ignorance, suffering or other conditions may have contributed to their behaviour? What further suffering might they create for themselves through their actions? How might we help them develop the understanding needed to abandon those harmful actions and move towards liberation?



Compassion motivates us to undertake that work. **Skilful means** provides the methods and abilities needed to make our efforts effective.

Wisdom weakens our need to defend an independently existing I. Compassion gives us a reason to help the other person overcome the causes of their suffering, including the harmful actions they are creating.

Difficult people as precious treasures

The Buddhist mind-training tradition offers a remarkable way of approaching people who provoke our anger. Geshe Langri Tangpa, in his *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*, encourages us to regard a person overwhelmed by harmful actions and suffering as a ***precious treasure***.

Why would someone who makes life difficult be precious? Our friends may rarely provoke anger. Someone who criticises, obstructs or offends us can reveal how much self-grasping and self-cherishing remain in our minds. Such encounters provide valuable opportunities to cultivate patience, examine our reactions and develop wisdom.

There is an additional dimension. Instead of seeing only a difficult person, we can begin to ask what suffering, ignorance or circumstances may have contributed to their behaviour. What might help them overcome those causes?

The person who challenges our patience can become an opportunity both to deepen our practice and to develop compassion for someone who may themselves be suffering.

Valuing this opportunity does not require us to accept harmful treatment or abandon appropriate boundaries.

From freedom from ill will to compassion for all beings

Immediately after describing his former lives practising patience, the Buddha instructs bodhisattvas to relinquish fixed conceptions and arouse the mind of unsurpassed awakening. He then

returns to generosity without taking a stand, undertaken for the benefit of **all beings**. Surely that includes King Kali himself.

There is something profound here. In the account of King Kali, two people meet under terrible circumstances. One inflicts cruelty; the other suffers physical injury. Both exist through dependent arising. Each has a karmic history, and their present actions and intentions contribute to the conditions of their future lives. King Kali's cruelty is real and creates harmful karma. The Buddha's physical injuries are equally real. Yet neither person possesses a fixed, independently existing nature that defines everything they are or determines everything they can become.

We can recognise that an action is cruel without concluding that the person performing it is inherently cruel. *We cannot know the complete history of causes and conditions that has brought either person to this encounter, nor can we know precisely what their future will hold.* We must not assume that the victim's suffering was deserved or that we can reconstruct someone's karma merely by observing their present circumstances.

Both are beings whose existence is conditioned. Both belong within the bodhisattva's commitment to liberation.

Here our understanding of self-grasping and self-cherishing becomes particularly valuable. We could establish fixed identities around such an encounter: *the person who has been wronged* and *the enemy who has wronged me*. We may then defend these identities, allowing them to govern our feelings and actions.

The Buddha's example shows another possibility. Without the mistaken conception of an independently existing ***I***, the ill will that would ordinarily arise did not arise. The person responsible for the injury did not thereby become someone excluded from compassion. Indeed, *within the Buddhist understanding of karma, King Kali's own harmful actions give us further reason for concern about the suffering he is creating for himself.*

Freedom from *self-grasping* removes a fundamental condition for ill will. Freedom from *self-cherishing* allows our concern to extend beyond our own interests. *Bodhicitta* directs that concern towards the liberation of every being, without exception.

The purpose of developing patience is therefore greater than achieving personal tranquillity. Patience protects our practice, wisdom weakens the conditions of anger, and compassion directs our growing capacities towards the liberation of all beings. The person who causes suffering and the person who experiences it are both within that commitment. Neither is beyond the possibility of transformation.

Patience without a possessor

The Buddha also says that the perfection of patience is no perfection of patience. Patience is genuinely developed through practice, yet it is not an independently existing achievement possessed by the practitioner. If we begin to take pride in *my patience*, the very self-grasping and self-cherishing that patience is intended to weaken have found another foothold.

The purpose of cultivating patience is to overcome the conditions from which ill will arises, protecting our spiritual progress and developing the freedom needed to undertake the liberation of all beings. The King Kali account shows the profound depth of that freedom. The bodhisattva path shows us why we must develop towards it.

9. Transmission of the Dharma — From Hearing to Liberation

Throughout the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha repeatedly returns to an extraordinary comparison. Someone may give unimaginable quantities of treasure to the Buddhas, yet a person who receives, retains and explains *even four lines of this teaching* produces still greater merit.

Why does the Buddha repeat this comparison so insistently? It is easy to miss the teaching by concentrating on the extraordinary merit. Yet in Chapter 8, the Buddha tells us why the teaching possesses such value: **from this teaching arise the conditions for unsurpassed awakening; from this arise the Buddhas.**

The deepest significance of transmitting the Dharma is therefore not the merit accumulated by the person who transmits it. It is the possibility that another being may develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.

This brings us directly back to the bodhisattva's commitment in Chapter 3: **to undertake the liberation of all beings.**

Why four lines can outweigh vast treasure

The bodhisattva has undertaken to bring **all beings to liberation from saṃsāra**. Material generosity can relieve immediate suffering and may help prepare someone to receive the Dharma. Yet the ultimate task is to help beings overcome the ignorance and grasping that keep them bound to saṃsāra.

T**ransmission of the Dharma is central to that undertaking.** Through receiving, understanding and practising the teaching, beings can develop the wisdom needed to overcome the causes of their continued suffering and progress towards liberation.

Imagine filling an entire world system with the seven treasures and offering them to the Buddhas. Such extraordinary generosity would produce immeasurable merit. Yet the Buddha declares that someone who teaches and explains even four lines of the *Diamond Sutra* to others produces still greater merit. Why should such a small amount of teaching outweigh an unimaginably valuable offering? **The Buddha gives us the answer in Chapter 8: from this teaching arises unsurpassed awakening; from this arise the Buddhas.**

Yes, an offering of treasure produces merit. Transmitting the Dharma can help another being develop the wisdom needed to overcome ignorance, eradicate self-grasping and self-cherishing, and ultimately attain liberation from saṃsāra.

Even four lines, when received, understood and practised, may become the beginning of that transformation. **The extraordinary merit reflects the extraordinary purpose of transmission: enabling beings to develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.**

Hearing is the beginning, not the completion

Chapter 15 gives us a particularly valuable account of how the Dharma is transmitted. The Buddha speaks of *hearing, taking up, retaining, reciting, mastering and explaining the teaching to others*. These activities are closely related, yet they are not identical.

Hearing begins with words reaching our ears. Reading brings written words through our eyes. Neither, by itself, constitutes understanding. Our minds must interpret those words, drawing upon what we already know (or believe we know) together with our memories, experiences, expecta-

tions and established views. **This interpretation is a crucial step that we seldom recognise.** The same words may be understood differently by different people, or by the same person at different stages of learning. Our existing understanding may help us recognise their meaning. Equally, a strongly held belief may prevent us from recognising something that challenges it.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche emphasises the importance of hearing and retaining the Dharma even when its meaning is not yet understood. He teaches that attentive engagement with sacred words can leave beneficial imprints in the mind, creating conditions for understanding to develop later. He also warns that listening with the conviction *"I already know this"* can obstruct the teaching's ability to transform our minds.

Through repeated hearing or reading, reflection, questioning, meditation and practice, our understanding can develop. We may gradually recognise meanings that our previous assumptions prevented us from seeing. **The teaching has remained the same. What has changed is our capacity to interpret and understand it.**

Our own study has demonstrated something of this process. We have returned repeatedly to the same words of the *Diamond Sutra*. The words have remained unchanged. Our ability to understand them has gradually developed. We initially recognised an extraordinary example of patience in the account of King Kali. Later, we began to understand how the complete absence of self-conception meant that ill will did not arise.

Likewise, the ordinary conduct of the Buddha in Chapter 1 acquired much greater significance after we had studied the chapters that followed. **The teaching had not changed. Our understanding had developed sufficiently to recognise more of what was being taught. The Buddha's words were not hiding the teaching. Our existing understanding was sometimes preventing us from seeing what was there.**

There is another important difficulty. **Self-grasping and self-cherishing can influence the very way we interpret the teaching.** We may reject something because it challenges our established understanding of ourselves, or reinterpret it to preserve beliefs we are unwilling to question. The words have reached us, yet the understanding they were intended to develop may have been obstructed by the habits of mind we most need to overcome.

This is why transmission involves more than simply passing information from one person to another. The words must be received and preserved, understanding must develop, and practice must bring that understanding into our lives.

Preserving the conditions for future understanding

Chapter 12 adds another dimension. The Buddha declares that wherever even four lines of the discourse are taken up and explained, that place becomes worthy of reverence, like **a shrine**.

He attributes extraordinary significance to the places and people through whom the Dharma continues to be available. Why? The Buddha acknowledges that he will not always be physically present to teach. Future generations must depend upon those who preserve, remember, practise and explain his words. A teaching that is forgotten can no longer guide those who have not heard it. Through transmission, future beings may encounter the Dharma and begin their own development of wisdom.

The Buddha's statement about a place becoming a shrine expresses the sacred importance of this continuing presence of the Dharma. Such reverence need not depend upon the place acquir-

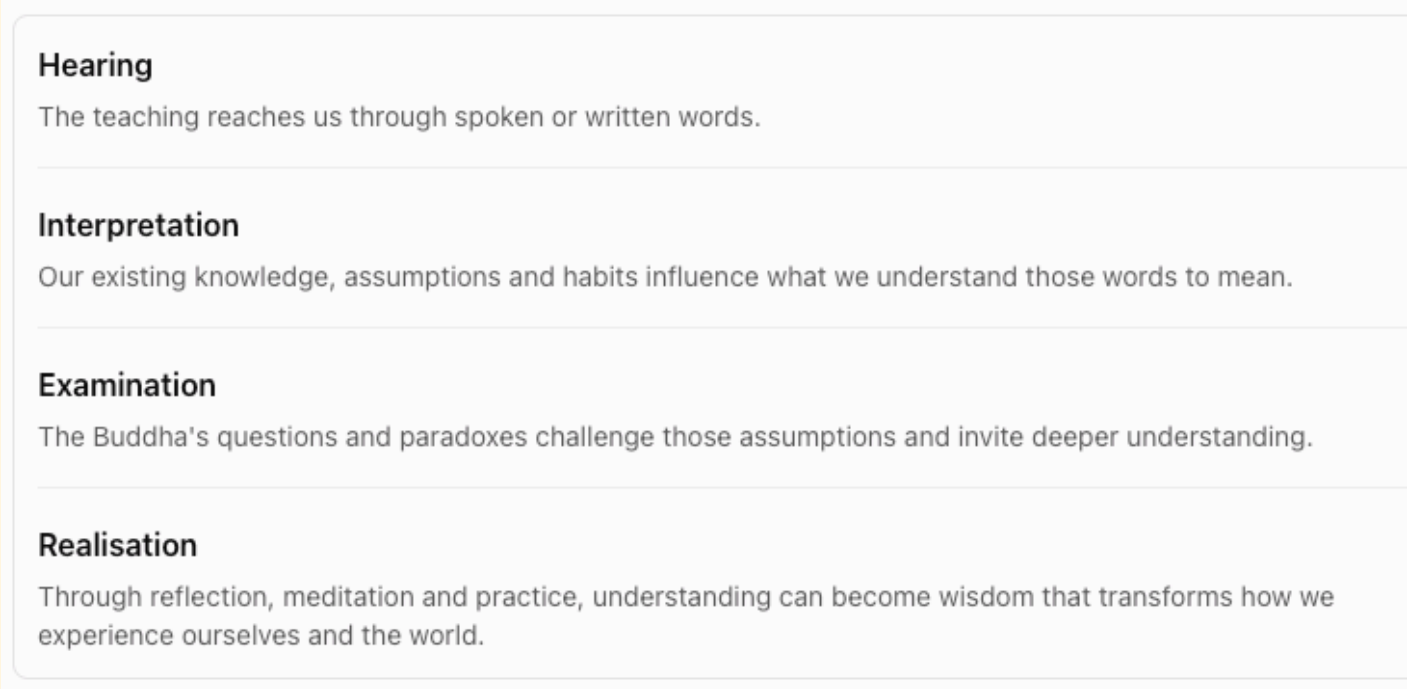
ing some independently existing sacred essence.

Chapter 16 adds an uncomfortable qualification. Those who preserve and explain the teaching may encounter contempt rather than respect. The Buddha explains this experience within the framework of karma and its purification. The value of transmitting the Dharma does not depend upon the social recognition received by the person doing so. **The teaching is preserved and transmitted for the benefit of beings, not to establish the status or importance of its custodians.**

Helping others become capable of understanding

Hearing a teaching does not guarantee understanding. Chapter 15 makes this particularly clear when the Buddha speaks of beings whose aspirations and fixed views of ***'self'*** prevent them from receiving the teaching.

The *Diamond Sutra* challenges some of our most deeply established convictions. A person may admire compassion while remaining unwilling to examine the ***self*** that wishes to be admired as compassionate. Someone else may be intellectually interested in emptiness without yet being willing to examine what it means for their own identity, opinions and achievements. Receptivity therefore matters.



Insight into how the Buddha teaches and how we learn.

The wider Lamrim tradition offers practical guidance through the **four ways of gathering and cultivating disciples**: generosity, appropriate and kind speech, encouraging beneficial practice, and demonstrating the teaching through one's own conduct. These methods help create the conditions in which another person may become receptive to the Dharma, understand its meaning and begin to practise. They are important examples of ***skilful means***.

The bodhisattva must develop the ability to recognise what a person is ready to understand, explain the teaching appropriately and help that understanding mature. This requires patience, experience, ethical discipline and the continuing development of wisdom.

The purpose is not simply to persuade someone to accept Buddhist ideas. It is to help another

being develop the understanding and practice through which liberation becomes possible.

Teaching without a *self* who possesses the Dharma

Chapter 21 brings the examination to the act of teaching itself. The Buddha asks whether the thought *"I have taught the Dharma"* arises in the Tathāgata. He denies that any independently existing thing called the teaching of Dharma can be found. Yet teaching plainly occurs. The Buddha has been teaching throughout the Sutra.

How are we to understand this? A teacher speaks. A student interprets the words through their existing knowledge, experiences and circumstances. Questions arise. Explanations are given. Understanding may gradually develop.

The teacher, teaching and listener all exist and function dependently. None stands apart from the conditions through which teaching and understanding occur. And there is a particular danger here. The person transmitting the Dharma may begin to think:

- ***I** understand this teaching.*
- ***I** have taught these people.*
- *Their progress is* my *achievement.*

Self-grasping establishes an apparently solid teacher. **Self-cherishing** may then turn the teacher's understanding and achievements into reasons for self-importance.

The same danger arises for the student, who may turn developing understanding into a new identity: ***I** am someone who understands the highest teaching.* Another opportunity for the thought *Aren't I clever.*

This is precisely what the Dharma is intended to overcome. **The Dharma can be transmitted without becoming the possession of an important teacher, and understanding can develop without becoming the possession of an important student.**

The value of transmission lies in the transformation it can make possible, rather than the identities or achievements it may appear to establish.

How should the Dharma be explained?

The *Diamond Sutra* ends with a particularly important question. In Chapter 32, the Buddha once again praises the extraordinary merit of transmitting even four lines of the teaching. Then he asks: *How should it be explained?*

His answer is the famous series of images: a star, a fault of vision, a lamp, an illusion, dew, a bubble, a dream, lightning and a cloud. *So should you look upon the conditioned.* These images do not simply tell us that things are short-lived. They direct us towards the dependent, changing and sometimes deceptive nature of appearances. *A bubble exists while it lasts. A cloud forms and can bring rain. A dream occurs, even though the things experienced within it do not exist in the way they appear to.*

The conditioned world exists and functions. What cannot be found is the independent, enduring existence that our minds habitually attribute to it. This is the wisdom the Buddha wants transmitted. He does not end by asking us merely to preserve a sacred text. He tells us how to look upon reality, and therefore what understanding the teaching is intended to develop.

The question *"How should it be explained?"* connects the work of transmitting the Dharma with the wisdom of emptiness. **The Dharma is transmitted to help beings understand dependent**

arising, overcome the self-grasping and ignorance that keep them bound to saṃsāra, and ultimately attain liberation.

Transmission is itself part of the bodhisattva path

We can now understand why the Buddha repeatedly returns to this theme. The bodhisattva undertakes the liberation of all beings. To fulfil that commitment, beings must have opportunities to encounter the Dharma, develop understanding, practise and eventually realise the wisdom through which ignorance can be overcome.

Merit arises through these wholesome activities, and the Buddha repeatedly praises its extraordinary magnitude. Yet merit is not the ultimate purpose of transmission. Nor is the transmission of the Dharma an achievement through which the teacher establishes an important ***I***. The purpose is the liberation of beings.

This brings together several of our Main Teachings.

- **Wisdom** reveals the mistaken independent existence attributed to persons and phenomena. **Compassion and bodhicitta** provide the commitment to liberate beings. **Skilful means** develops the methods through which we can help others receive and understand the Dharma.
- **Non-abiding** allows that work to continue without establishing ourselves upon the identity of teacher, the possession of a teaching, or the achievements of those we have helped.
- And the repeated warning against **self-grasping** and **self-cherishing** applies as strongly to transmitting the Dharma as to every other perfection.

The bodhisattva receives the Dharma, develops understanding, practises it and helps make it available to others: without turning any of these activities into possessions of an important self. A few lines may begin a process that eventually transforms a life. Through those who receive, practise and transmit the teaching, the opportunity for liberation can continue from generation to generation. That is why transmission has such extraordinary value in the *Diamond Sutra.*

Organising the Teachings

Role	Teaching
The ultimate purpose	Universal Liberation — the commitment to liberate ALL beings
The fundamental misunderstanding	Self — the mistaken conception of an independently existing I
A principal expression of that misunderstanding	Ownership and Possession — I, me and mine
An essential means of fulfilling the commitment	Transmission — making the Dharma available so beings can develop liberating wisdom
The central practical instruction	Non-abiding — undertaking the work without establishing the mind upon a fixed position
Method of teaching	Three-Step Formula
Philosophical understanding	Two Truths
Understanding appearances and designations	Signlessness
The capacities developed through practice	Wisdom, Compassion, Skilful Means and Patience

Diamond Sutra — Chapter and Teaching Matrix

The matrix identifies the principal themes present in each chapter. Some are developed as separate Main Teachings, while others are introduced in the Definitions or explained in the chapter commentaries. The columns therefore need not correspond one-to-one with the Main Teachings.

Code	Key to the Nine Themes
S	Concept of an independently existing self, especially self-grasping and self-cherishing
3S	Three-Step Formula
2T	Two Truths, emptiness and dependent arising
OP	Ownership and possession
N	Non-abiding; not taking a stand
Si	Signlessness; appearances and conceptions
W	Wisdom, compassion and skilful means
P	Patience and inner freedom
T	Transmission of Dharma

Legend: ● Central, ○ Important supporting, — Not prominent. **S** — Self: The Buddha's examination of the conception of an independently existing self, its presence in our understanding and conduct, and the freedom that comes from eliminating that mistaken conception.

Universal Liberation is the overarching purpose of the bodhisattva path. The present matrix records nine recurring teachings and methods through which the Sutra explains and develops that undertaking.

This matrix records the teachings recognised after studying the entire *Sutra*. Dots indicate prominence, not whether the teaching is named explicitly.

Chapters 1–16

No.	Principal subject	S	3S	2T	OP	N	Si	W	P	T
1	The Buddha’s ordinary conduct	●	—	—	—	—	—	○	—	—
2	How the bodhisattva should live	—	—	—	—	●	—	●	—	—
3	The resolve to liberate all beings	●	●	●	—	○	○	●	—	—
4	Giving without taking a stand	○	—	—	●	●	○	○	—	—
5	Beyond the Buddha’s identifying marks	—	○	○	—	—	●	—	—	—
6	The Dharma as a raft	●	○	●	●	●	○	○	—	●
7	Can the Buddha's Awakening Itself Be Grasped?	●	○	●	●	●	○	○	—	○
8	Why Transmitting Four Lines Matters	○	●	●	—	○	—	○	—	●
9	The four spiritual attainments	●	○	●	●	●	○	—	—	—

No.	Principal subject	S	3S	2T	OP	N	Si	W	P	T
10	A mind that settles nowhere	—	●	●	●	●	○	○	—	—
11	Four lines outweigh vast treasure	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	●
12	Where the teaching is present	—	—	○	—	—	—	—	—	●
13	Even Perfection of Wisdom is a name	—	●	●	—	—	●	—	—	●
14	Beyond Self-Conception: The Perfection of Patience	●	●	●	—	●	○	●	●	●
15	Receiving and Carrying the Dharma Forward	●	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	●
16	Contempt and the ripening of karma	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	●

Chapters 17–32

No.	Principal subject	S	3S	2T	OP	N	Si	W	P	T
17	Returning to the Bodhisattva's Resolve	●	●	●	●	●	○	—	—	—
18	The Mind That Cannot Be Found	●	○	●	—	○	—	○	—	—
19	Merit is no mass	—	○	●	●	—	—	—	—	—
20	The Buddha’s body and marks	—	○	○	—	—	●	—	—	—
21	Teaching without an “I who taught”	○	○	●	●	○	—	—	—	●
22	Nothing acquired in awakening	—	○	○	●	—	—	—	—	—
23	Equality and wholesome practice	○	○	●	—	—	—	○	—	—
24	Treasure and four lines	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	●
25	Helping without becoming a saviour	●	○	●	●	○	○	—	—	—
26	Seeing the Buddha through Dharma	—	—	○	—	●	●	—	—	—
27	Emptiness is not annihilation	—	—	●	—	○	○	—	—	—
28	Receiving merit without possessing	—	—	○	●	●	—	○	—	—
29	Neither coming nor going	●	○	●	—	—	—	—	—	—
30	Worlds, particles and wholes	—	●	●	—	○	○	—	—	—
31	Releasing even the correct view	●	○	○	●	●	—	—	—	—
32	Seeing the conditioned clearly	—	—	○	—	○	○	—	—	●

Part One *The Diamond Sutra in free verse*

1 The gathering

Homage to the blessed, noble perfection of wisdom.

Thus have I heard.

Once, the Blessed One was staying at Śrāvastī,
in Jeta's Grove, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada,
with a great community of thirteen hundred monks
and many bodhisattvas, great beings.

Then, in the morning, the Blessed One dressed,
took his bowl and robe,
and entered the great city of Śrāvastī to gather alms.

Having walked the city for alms and finished his meal,
he returned, put away his bowl and robe,
washed his feet,
and sat upon the seat prepared for him.

Crossing his legs, holding his body upright,
he established mindfulness before him.

Then a number of monks approached.
They bowed their heads at his feet,
walked around him three times, keeping him to their right,
and sat to one side.

2 The question of how to live

The venerable Subhūti was seated in that gathering.
He rose, arranged his upper robe over one shoulder,
and placed his right knee on the earth.
Joining his palms toward the Blessed One, he said:

"Wonderful, Blessed One—most wonderful, Well-Gone One[3]—
how the Tathāgata, the worthy, fully awakened one,
has supported the bodhisattvas, the great beings,
with the highest care.

---

[3] ***"Well-Gone One"*** *translates the Sanskrit* ***Sugata****, one of the traditional epithets of a Buddha. It is quite literal:* ***su*** *= "well/good/excellent" and* ***gata*** *= "gone." Encyclopedia of Buddhism*

But "gone" has more depth than simply gone somewhere. Traditional explanations give several related senses: the Buddha has ***gone well along the path****, has* ***gone to the good destination of nirvāṇa****, has gone* ***without returning to the defilements****, and has gone* ***completely****, leaving the causes of suffering behind.*

For our Diamond Sutra reading, the most useful sense is:
The Well-Gone One is one who has travelled the path completely and irreversibly beyond the grasping that produces suffering.

There is an interesting connection with our analysis. "Gone" need not imply that some permanent Buddha-self has travelled from ***A*** *to* ***B*** *and now resides somewhere called nirvāṇa. The Buddha himself is dependently arisen and empty of inherent existence.* ***The path has been completed; the causes of suffering have ceased; but no permanent traveller needs to be posited.***

So when you encounter ***"Well-Gone One"*** *in our translation, I would hear something closer to "****the one who has gone completely and rightly through the path to liberation"*** *than simply "someone who has departed."*

It also explains why Sugata works nicely alongside ***Tathāgata****: both use gata ("gone"), but Sugata particularly emphasises the* ***excellent and complete character of the Buddha's going.***

“Wonderful, Blessed One,
how he has entrusted them with the highest trust.

“How, then, should a son or daughter of good family
who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle abide?
How should they practise?
How should they govern their mind?”

The Blessed One said:
“Well said, well said, Subhūti.
It is so. It is just as you say.
The Tathāgata has supported the bodhisattvas
with the highest care
and entrusted them with the highest trust.

“Listen, then, Subhūti. Attend carefully and well.
I will tell you how one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle should abide,
how they should practise,
and how they should govern their mind.”

“Yes, Blessed One,” the venerable Subhūti answered.

---

3 The resolve to liberate all beings

The Blessed One said:
“Here, Subhūti, one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle should give rise to this resolve:

“Whatever beings there are—
all who are included within the realm of beings—
born from eggs, born from wombs,
born from moisture, or appearing spontaneously;
with form or without form;
with perception or without perception,
or with neither perception nor absence of perception—
however the realm of beings may be designated:

“All these I shall bring to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.

“Yet, having brought even immeasurable beings
to complete liberation,
no being at all has been brought to complete liberation.

“Why is this?
If the conception of a being were to arise in a bodhisattva,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.

“Why?
One in whom there arises the conception of a being,
a living self, or a person,
should not be called a bodhisattva.”

4 Giving without a foothold

"Moreover, Subhūti,
a bodhisattva should give without taking a stand on anything,
without taking a stand anywhere.

"One should give without taking a stand on form,
or on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.
A bodhisattva, a great being, should give in this way,
without settling even in the conception of a sign.

"Why?
The measure of the merit of a bodhisattva
who gives without taking a stand
is not easily grasped.

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the measure of space to the east easily grasped?"
"No, Blessed One."

"And to the south, west and north,
below, above and between,
throughout the ten directions—
is the measure of space easily grasped?"
"No, Blessed One."

"So it is with the merit of a bodhisattva
who gives without taking a stand:
its measure is not easily grasped.

"Thus should one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle give,
without settling even in the conception of a sign."

5 Seeing beyond the marks

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?"

Subhūti said:
"No, Blessed One.
The Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks.
What the Tathāgata has called the possession of marks
he has called no possession of marks."

The Blessed One said:
"Where there is possession of marks, there is deception.
Where there is no possession of marks, there is no deception.
Thus the Tathāgata is to be seen
through marks as no marks."

6 The raft: using the teaching without grasping it

Subhūti asked:
“Blessed One, will there be beings in the future,
in the last time, in the last period,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who will recognise truth
in words of a discourse such as these?”

The Blessed One answered:
“Indeed, Subhūti, there will be bodhisattvas, great beings,
in that future time, in that final period,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
possessed of good qualities, ethical discipline and wisdom,
who will recognise truth in such words.

“Those who gain even a single moment of clear confidence
on hearing these words
will not have attended only one Buddha,
nor planted roots of goodness under only one Buddha.
They will have attended many hundreds of thousands of Buddhas
and planted roots of goodness in their presence.

“The Tathāgata knows them with Buddha knowledge,
sees them with the Buddha eye,
and understands them.
They will all produce and receive
an immeasurable, incalculable mass of merit.

“Why?
In those bodhisattvas no conception of a self arises,
nor of a being, a living self, or a person.
Neither a conception of dharmas
nor a conception of non-dharmas arises in them;
neither conception nor absence of conception.

“If a conception of dharmas arose in them,
that would itself be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.
If a conception of non-dharmas arose,
that too would be such grasping.

“A bodhisattva, a great being,
should grasp neither a dharma nor a non-dharma.

“It was with this intention that the Tathāgata said:
Those who understand the teaching as a raft
must relinquish even dharmas—
how much more non-dharmas.”

7 Can the Buddha's awakening itself be grasped?

The Blessed One asked:
"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma that the Tathāgata has fully realised
as 'complete, unsurpassed awakening'?
Is there any such dharma that the Tathāgata has taught?"

Subhūti answered:
"As I understand the meaning of your words,
there is no such dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as 'complete, unsurpassed awakening',
and no such dharma the Tathāgata has taught.

"Why?
What the Tathāgata has realised or taught
cannot be grasped and cannot be expressed.
It is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma.

"For it is through realisation of the unconditioned that noble persons are distinguished."

8 Why Transmitting Four Lines Matters

The Blessed One asked:
"If a son or daughter of good family
filled this great threefold thousandfold world system
with the seven treasures
and gave it to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would that produce a great mass of merit?"

"A great mass, Blessed One—a great mass, Well-Gone One.
For the mass of merit spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no mass.
That is why it is called a mass of merit."

The Blessed One said:
"Yet if another took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse
and taught and explained it fully to others,
the merit would be greater still,
immeasurable and incalculable,
than that of filling this world system with the seven treasures
and giving it to the Tathāgatas.

"Why?
From this arises the unsurpassed complete awakening
of the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened;
from this arise the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones.

"Why?
What are called Buddha dharmas, Subhūti,
the Tathāgata has spoken of as no Buddha dharmas.
That is why they are called Buddha dharmas."

9 Attainment without possession

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Does a stream-enterer think,
‘I have attained the fruit of stream-entry’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A stream-enterer does not think that.
For no dharma has been entered into:
not form, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.
That is why one is called a stream-enterer.

“If a stream-enterer thought,
‘I have attained the fruit of stream-entry,’
that would be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.”

The Blessed One asked:
“Does a once-returner think,
‘I have attained the fruit of once-returning’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A once-returner does not think that.
For no dharma can be found as once-returning.
That is why one is called a once-returner.”

“Does a non-returner think,
‘I have attained the fruit of non-returning’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A non-returner does not think that.
For no dharma can be found as non-returning.
That is why one is called a non-returner.”

“Does an arhat think,
‘I have attained arhatship’?”

“No, Blessed One.
An arhat does not think that.
There is no dharma called an arhat.
That is why one is called an arhat.

“If an arhat thought, ‘I have attained arhatship,’
that would be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.

“Blessed One, the Tathāgata has named me foremost
among those who dwell without conflict.
I am an arhat, free from passion.
Yet the thought does not arise in me,
‘I am an arhat, free from passion.’

“If I thought, ‘I have attained arhatship,’
the Tathāgata would not have declared:
‘Subhūti is foremost among those who dwell without conflict.
This son of good family dwells nowhere;
therefore he is called one who dwells without conflict.’”

10 A mind that settles nowhere

The Blessed One asked:
“Was there any dharma that the Tathāgata took up
from Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened?”

“No, Blessed One.
There was no dharma the Tathāgata took up from Dīpaṃkara.”

The Blessed One said:
“A bodhisattva who said,
‘I shall bring about the adornments of Buddha fields,’
would speak falsely.
For the adornments of fields spoken of by the Tathāgata
have been spoken of as no adornments.
That is why they are called adornments of fields.

“Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
should give rise to a mind that does not settle,
a mind that does not settle anywhere:
not on form,
not on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.

“Suppose a person had a vast body,
an embodiment as great as Sumeru, king of mountains.
Would that embodiment be great?”

“Great, Blessed One—great, Well-Gone One.
For what the Tathāgata calls an embodiment
he has spoken of as no entity.
That is why it is called an embodiment.
It is neither an entity nor a non-entity;
that is why it is called an embodiment.”

11 Beyond the sands of the Ganges

The Blessed One asked:
“Suppose there were as many Ganges rivers
as there are grains of sand in the great river Ganges.
Would the sands of all those rivers be many?”

“Even those rivers would be many, Blessed One;
how much more the sands within them.”

“I tell you, Subhūti; I make this known to you.
If a woman or man filled as many world systems
as there were sands in those rivers
with the seven treasures,
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would the resulting merit be great?”

“Great, Blessed One—great, Well-Gone One,
immeasurable and incalculable.”

“Yet a son or daughter of good family
who took up even a four-line verse from this discourse
and taught and explained it to others
would produce a still greater mass of merit,
immeasurable and incalculable,
than one who made that gift of worlds filled with treasures.”

---

12 Wherever this teaching is spoken

“Moreover, Subhūti,
wherever even a four-line verse from this discourse
is taken up, spoken or explained,
that place becomes a shrine
for the world with its gods, human beings and asuras.

“How much more is this so
for those who retain the whole discourse,
recite it, master it,
and explain it fully to others.
They will possess something supremely wonderful.

“In that place the Teacher dwells,
or a discerning person worthy of a teacher’s place.”

---

13 The name of the teaching

Subhūti asked:
“What is the name of this discourse, Blessed One?
How should I retain it?”

The Blessed One said:
“This discourse is called the Perfection of Wisdom.
Retain it by that name.
For what the Tathāgata has called the perfection of wisdom
he has spoken of as no perfection.
That is why it is called the perfection of wisdom.

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma the Tathāgata has spoken?”
“No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma.”

“Would the dust of the earth
in this great threefold thousandfold world system be much?”

“Much, Blessed One—much, Well-Gone One.
For the dust of the earth spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no dust.
That is why it is called the dust of the earth.
The world system he has spoken of is no system;
that is why it is called a world system.”

“Is the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
to be seen through the thirty-two marks of a great person?”

“No, Blessed One.
The Tathāgata is not to be seen through those marks.
For the thirty-two marks spoken of by the Tathāgata
have been spoken of as no marks.
That is why they are called the thirty-two marks.”

The Blessed One said:
“If a woman or man gave up bodies
as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, day after day,
and continued for ages as numerous as those sands,
and another took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse and taught and explained it to others,
the latter would produce greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.”

---

14 Beyond Self-Conception: The Perfection of Patience

Then the force of the Dharma moved Subhūti to tears.
Wiping them away, he said:

“Wonderful, Blessed One—most wonderful, Well-Gone One—
that the Tathāgata has spoken this discourse
for beings setting out in the foremost vehicle,
the most excellent vehicle.
Since understanding arose in me,
I have never before heard such a discourse.

“Those bodhisattvas will possess something supremely wonderful
who hear this *sutra* and give rise to a conception of truth.
For that conception of truth is no conception of truth.
That is why the Tathāgata speaks of a conception of truth.

“It is no wonder that I understand and trust this teaching.
But those beings in the future, in the last time,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who take it up, retain it, recite it, master it,
and explain it fully to others—
they will be supremely wonderful.

“No conception of a self, a being, a living self,
or a person will arise in them;
neither any conception nor absence of conception.
For a conception of self is no conception;
a conception of a being, a living self or a person
is no conception.
The Buddhas, the Blessed Ones,
have gone beyond all conceptions.”

The Blessed One said:
“So it is, Subhūti.
Those who hear this *sutra*
without trembling, alarm or terror
will possess something supremely wonderful.

“For the supreme perfection spoken of by the Tathāgata
is no perfection.
What he calls the supreme perfection
is spoken of by immeasurable Buddhas, Blessed Ones.
That is why it is called the supreme perfection.

“Moreover, the Tathāgata’s perfection of patience
is no perfection.
When King Kali cut the flesh from my limbs,
no conception of a self, a being, a living self
or a person was present in me;
neither any conception nor absence of conception.

“If a conception of self had been present,
a conception of ill will would also have been present.
If a conception of a being, a living self or a person
had been present, ill will would also have been present.

“I remember five hundred former lives
when I was the sage who taught patience.
Then too, no conception of self, being, living self
or person was present in me.

“Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
should relinquish all conceptions
and arouse the mind of unsurpassed complete awakening.

“That mind should not settle on form,
or on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind;
not on dharmas, not on non-dharmas,
not anywhere.
For what is settled is itself unsettled.

“That is why the Tathāgata says:
A bodhisattva should give without taking a stand,
without taking a stand on form, sounds, smells,
tastes, touch or objects of mind.

“Such giving should be undertaken
for the benefit of all beings.
For the conception of a being is no conception,
and all those beings spoken of by the Tathāgata
are no beings.

“The Tathāgata speaks what is real, speaks what is true,
speaks of things as they are, not otherwise;
the Tathāgata does not speak falsely.

“Yet in the dharma the Tathāgata has realised,
taught and contemplated,
there is neither truth nor falsehood.

“A bodhisattva who gives while caught in things
is like a person who has entered darkness
and can see nothing.
A bodhisattva who gives without being caught in things
is like a person with eyes,
when night has ended and the sun has risen,
seeing the many forms around them.

“Those sons and daughters of good family
who take up this discourse, retain it, recite it,
master it and explain it fully to others
are known by the Tathāgata with Buddha knowledge,
seen with the Buddha eye, and understood.
They will all produce and receive
an immeasurable, incalculable mass of merit.”

---

15 Receiving and Carrying the Dharma Forward

“Suppose, Subhūti, a woman or man
gave up bodies as numerous as the sands of the Ganges
in the morning, at midday and in the evening,
and continued in this way
for many hundreds of thousands of koṭis of niyutas of ages.

“Someone who heard this discourse and did not reject it
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.
How much more one who copied it, took it up,
retained it, recited it, mastered it,
and explained it fully to others.

“This discourse is inconceivable and incomparable.
The Tathāgata has spoken it for beings setting out
in the foremost vehicle, the most excellent vehicle.

“Those who take it up, retain it, recite it,
master it and explain it fully to others
are known by the Tathāgata with Buddha knowledge,
seen with the Buddha eye, and understood.
They will possess immeasurable merit:
inconceivable, incomparable, unmeasurable, boundless.
They will all bear my awakening upon their shoulders.

“This discourse cannot be heard
by beings of limited aspiration,
or by those holding views of a self, a being,
a living self or a person.
Beings who have not undertaken the bodhisattva commitment
cannot hear it, take it up, retain it, recite it or master it.
That possibility does not exist.

“Wherever this *sutra* is made known,
that place will be worthy of offerings
from the world with its gods, human beings and asuras,
worthy of homage and of circumambulation.
It will be a shrine.”

---

16 Contempt and the exhaustion of karma

“Moreover, Subhūti,
sons and daughters of good family who take up such sutras,
retain, recite and master them,
attend to them thoroughly,
and explain them fully to others,
will be despised, deeply despised.

“Why?
Through being despised in this very life,
they will exhaust the unwholesome deeds of former lives
that would have led to unfortunate rebirths,
and they will attain a Buddha’s awakening.

“I remember the past, Subhūti,
immeasurable ages beyond immeasurable ages,
long before Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata.
There were eighty-four hundred thousand koṭis of niyutas of Buddhas.
I served them faithfully and did not fail in that service.

“Yet the merit of that service
does not approach the merit of those
who, in the last time, in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
take up such sutras, retain them, recite them,
master them and explain them fully to others.

“It does not approach a hundredth part,
a thousandth, a hundred-thousandth,
a koṭi-th, a hundred-koṭi-th,
a hundred-thousand-koṭi-th,
or a hundred-thousand-koṭi-niyuta-th part.
No reckoning, fraction, calculation,
analogy or comparison can express it.

“Were I to describe the merit
those sons and daughters of good family
will produce and receive,
beings might become deranged or their minds bewildered.

“This discourse taught by the Tathāgata
is inconceivable and incomparable.
Its ripening, too, must be understood as inconceivable.”

---

17 Returning to the bodhisattva resolve

Subhūti asked:
“How, Blessed One, should one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle abide?
How should they practise?
How should they govern their mind?”

The Blessed One said:
“One should give rise to this resolve:
‘I shall bring all beings to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.’
Yet, having liberated them,
no being has been liberated.

“If a conception of a being arises in a bodhisattva,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.
If a conception of a living self or a person arises,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.

“Why?
There is no such dharma as
‘one who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle.’

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Was there any such dharma the Tathāgata fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening
in the presence of Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata?”

“As I understand your words, Blessed One,
there was no such dharma.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
There was no such dharma the Tathāgata fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening
in the presence of Dīpaṃkara, worthy and fully awakened.

“Had there been such a dharma,
Dīpaṃkara would not have predicted:
‘Young man, in a future time you will become
the Tathāgata called Śākyamuni,
worthy and fully awakened.’

“Because there was no such dharma,
Dīpaṃkara made that prediction.

“Why?
‘Tathāgata’ is a name for true suchness;
a name for the nature of dharmas as unarisen;
a name for the cessation of dharmas;
a name for what is utterly unarisen.
For this non-arising is the ultimate meaning.

“If someone said,
‘The Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
has fully realised unsurpassed complete awakening,’
they would speak falsely,
misrepresenting me through a mistaken grasp.
There is no such dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening.

“In the dharma he has realised or taught
there is neither truth nor falsehood.
That is why the Tathāgata says:
‘All dharmas are Buddha dharmas.’
For all dharmas have been spoken of as no dharmas;
that is why all dharmas are called Buddha dharmas.

“Suppose there were a person with a great, full body.”

Subhūti said:
“What the Tathāgata has called a great, full body
he has spoken of as no body.
That is why it is called a great, full body.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
A bodhisattva who said, ‘I shall liberate beings,’
should not be called a bodhisattva.
Is there any such dharma called a bodhisattva?”

“No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma.”

“Those called beings have been spoken of as no beings;
that is why they are called beings.
Thus the Tathāgata says:
‘All dharmas are without self,
without a living self, without an individual, without a person.’

“A bodhisattva who said,
‘I shall bring about the adornments of Buddha fields,’
would speak falsely.
Those adornments have been spoken of as no adornments;
that is why they are called adornments of fields.

“But a bodhisattva who trusts and understands
that dharmas are without self
is declared by the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
to be a bodhisattva, a great being.”

18 The mind that cannot be found

The Blessed One asked:
“Does the Tathāgata possess the fleshly eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the fleshly eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the divine eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the divine eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the eye of wisdom?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the eye of wisdom.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the Dharma eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the Dharma eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the Buddha eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the Buddha eye.”

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Has the Tathāgata spoken of the grains of sand
in the great river Ganges as grains of sand?”
“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One.”

“Suppose there were as many Ganges rivers
as there are grains of sand in that river,
and as many world systems as grains of sand in them all.
Would those world systems be many?”
“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One. They would be many.”

“Whatever beings there are in those world systems,
I know their streams of mind in all their diversity.
For what the Tathāgata calls a stream of mind
he has spoken of as no stream.
That is why it is called a stream of mind.

“Why?
Past mind cannot be found.
Future mind cannot be found.
Present mind cannot be found.”

19 Merit is no mass

“What do you think, Subhūti?
If a son or daughter of good family filled
this great threefold thousandfold world system
with the seven treasures
and gave it to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would the resulting merit be great?”

“Great, Blessed One. Great, Well-Gone One.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
The merit would be great, immeasurable and incalculable.
For the mass of merit spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no mass.
That is why it is called a mass of merit.

“If there were a mass of merit,
the Tathāgata would not speak of a mass of merit.”

---

20 The body and the marks

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen
through the perfection of his body of form?”

“No, Blessed One.
The perfection of the body of form
has been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no perfection.
That is why it is called the perfection of the body of form.”

“Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?”

“No, Blessed One.
The possession of marks spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no possession of marks.
That is why it is called the possession of marks.”

---

21 Teaching without a thing taught

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Does it occur to the Tathāgata, ‘I have taught the Dharma’?”

“No, Blessed One. It does not occur to him in that way.”

The Blessed One said:
“Someone who said, ‘The Tathāgata has taught a dharma,’
would speak falsely,
misunderstanding me through grasping.
For there is no dharma to be found
called ‘the teaching of Dharma.’”

Subhūti asked:
“Will there be beings in the future, in the last time,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who hear such teachings and have faith in them?”

The Blessed One said:
“They are neither beings nor non-beings, Subhūti.
For all those called beings
have been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no beings.
That is why they are called beings.”

22 Nothing acquired in awakening

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening?"

"No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma."

"So it is, Subhūti.
Not even the slightest dharma exists there or is found.
That is why it is called unsurpassed complete awakening."

23 Equality and wholesome practice

"Moreover, Subhūti, that dharma is equal;
there is no inequality in it.
That is why it is called unsurpassed complete awakening.

"Equal in being without a self, a being,
a living self or a person,
unsurpassed complete awakening
is realised through cultivating wholesome qualities.

"For what are called wholesome dharmas
the Tathāgata has spoken of as no dharmas.
That is why they are called wholesome dharmas."

24 Mountains of treasure

"Suppose, Subhūti, a woman or man
gathered heaps of the seven treasures
as many as the Sumerus, the kings of mountains,
in this great threefold thousandfold world system,
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

"If another son or daughter of good family
took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse on the perfection of wisdom
and taught it to others,
the former merit would not approach
even a hundredth part of this merit.
No comparison would reach it."

25 No one possessed as a person saved

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Does the Tathāgata think, 'I have set beings free'?
You should not see it in that way.

"There is no being whom the Tathāgata has set free.
If there were such a being,
that would be the Tathāgata's grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.

“What is called grasping at self
has been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no grasping;
yet foolish ordinary people grasp it.

“Those called foolish ordinary people
have been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no people.
That is why they are called foolish ordinary people.”

---

26 Seeing the Buddha through Dharma

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?”

“No, Blessed One.
As I understand your words,
the Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks.”

“Well said, well said, Subhūti.
It is just as you say.
If the Tathāgata were to be seen through those marks,
a wheel-turning king would also be a Tathāgata.
Therefore the Tathāgata is not to be seen through them.”

Subhūti said:
“As I understand your words,
the Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks.”

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

“Those who saw me through form,
those who followed me through sound,
have set out in mistaken striving.
Those people will not see me.

“A Buddha is to be seen through Dharma;
the guides have Dharma as their body.
Yet the nature of Dharma is not to be cognised;
it cannot be cognised.”

---

27 No doctrine of annihilation

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Has the Tathāgata fully realised unsurpassed complete awakening
through the possession of marks?
You should not see it in that way.
For it is not through the possession of marks
that the Tathāgata has fully realised awakening.

“Nor should anyone say to you:
‘Those who have set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
teach the destruction or annihilation of any dharma.’

“You should not see it in that way.
Those who have set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
do not teach the destruction of any dharma,
nor its annihilation.”

28 Receiving merit without grasping

“Suppose a son or daughter of good family
filled worlds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges
with the seven treasures
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

“A bodhisattva who gained acceptance
of dharmas as selfless and unarisen
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.

“Yet a bodhisattva, a great being,
should not take possession of a mass of merit.”

Subhūti asked:
“Should a bodhisattva not receive a mass of merit, Blessed One?”

The Blessed One said:
“It should be received, Subhūti,
but not grasped.
That is why it is said to be received.”

29 Neither coming nor going

“Moreover, Subhūti,
if someone says, ‘The Tathāgata goes, comes,
stands, sits or lies down,’
that person does not understand the meaning of my words.

“For one is called Tathāgata
who has gone nowhere and come from nowhere.
That is why he is called the Tathāgata,
worthy and fully awakened.”

30 Worlds and particles

“Suppose a son or daughter of good family
took as many worlds as there are particles of earth
in this great threefold thousandfold world system,
and with immeasurable effort reduced them to powder,
to a collection of minute particles.

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Would that collection of minute particles be great?”

“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One.
That collection would be great.
If it were a great collection of minute particles,
the Blessed One would not call it a collection of minute particles.

“For the collection spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no collection.
That is why it is called a collection of minute particles.

“The great threefold thousandfold world system
spoken of by the Tathāgata has been spoken of as no system.
That is why it is called a great threefold thousandfold world system.

“If there were a world system,
that would itself be a grasping at a whole.
What the Tathāgata has called grasping at a whole
he has spoken of as no grasping.
That is why it is called grasping at a whole.”

The Blessed One said:
“That grasping at a whole is beyond ordinary expression,
inexpressible.
It is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma;
yet foolish ordinary people grasp it.”

---

31 Releasing even the view

“Why is this, Subhūti?
If someone said, ‘The Tathāgata has taught a view of self,
a view of a being, a living self, a person,’
would that person be speaking correctly?”

“No, Blessed One. No, Well-Gone One.
That person would not be speaking correctly.
For the view of self spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no view.
That is why it is called a view of self.”

The Blessed One said:
“Thus should one who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
know, see and trust all dharmas:
without settling even in a conception of dharmas
or in a conception of non-dharmas.

“For the conception of dharmas spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no conception.
That is why it is called a conception of dharmas.”

---

32 How to look upon conditioned things

“Suppose, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
filled immeasurable, incalculable worlds
with the seven treasures
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

“A son or daughter of good family
who took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse on the perfection of wisdom,
retained it, taught it, recited it, mastered it,
and explained it fully to others
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.

“And how should it be explained?
As with an appearance in the sky:

“A star, a fault of vision, a lamp,
an illusion, dew, a bubble,
a dream, a flash of lightning, a cloud—
so should you look upon the conditioned.

“Thus should it be explained;
that is what is called explaining it.”

The Blessed One spoke these words.
The elder Subhūti, the monks and nuns,
the laymen and laywomen, the bodhisattvas,
and the world with its gods, human beings,
asuras and gandharvas,
rejoiced in what the Blessed One had said.

Here ends the noble Vajra Cutter,
the blessed Perfection of Wisdom.

Part Two *Explanations and translation notes*

This commentary reads the *sutra* chiefly through the relationship between emptiness/śūnyatā, non-grasping and compassionate practice. It is an explanatory synthesis for study, not a commentary attributed to the Dalai Lama, Mu Soeng, Red Pine or Thich Nhat Hanh. Where it uses the language of conventional and ultimate truth, it is making an interpretive framework explicit; it is not claiming that those words occur in every passage of the Sanskrit.

The central question is how to undertake the bodhisattva path without turning its participants, teachings or results into fixed realities. The *sutra* preserves generosity, ethical practice, wisdom and liberation while repeatedly unsettling the idea that any of them can be independently possessed. Its negatives require attention to context: the same English formula can address a person, a concept, a spiritual attainment or the inadequacy of language.

Chapter 1 The Setting: Awakening in Ordinary Life

Chapter 1 The Setting

Thus have I heard.

Once, the Blessed One was staying at Śrāvastī,
in Jeta's Grove, in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍada,
with a great community of thirteen hundred monks
and many bodhisattvas, great beings.

Then, in the morning, the Blessed One dressed,
took his bowl and robe,
and entered the great city of Śrāvastī to gather alms.

Having walked the city for alms and finished his meal,
he returned, put away his bowl and robe,
washed his feet,
and sat upon the seat prepared for him.

Crossing his legs, holding his body upright,
he established mindfulness before him.

Then a number of monks approached.
They bowed their heads at his feet,
walked around him three times, keeping him to their right,
and sat to one side.

The *Diamond Sutra* begins in a remarkably ordinary way. The Buddha dresses, takes his bowl and robe, walks into Śrāvastī to beg for his food, eats his meal, returns, puts his things away, washes his feet and sits down. He establishes mindfulness before him. The monks approach, pay their respects and sit nearby. Nothing extraordinary appears to happen.

Yet Red Pine suggests that **the remaining thirty-one chapters explain what happens in this first chapter**. This is a surprising claim. How can a morning spent begging for food, eating and washing one's feet contain the teaching of one of Buddhism's most profound sutras?

The six perfections in ordinary conduct

Red Pine finds the answer partly in the six perfections (*pāramitās*) of the bodhisattva path. Red Pine interprets the Buddha's ordinary actions as expressions of these perfections:

- **Generosity:** Taking up the begging bowl and entering the city creates an opportunity for others to practise giving. The Buddha participates in a relationship of generosity.
- **Ethical discipline:** Wearing his monk's robe expresses his commitment to the discipline and conduct of the monastic life.
- **Patience:** Begging requires accepting what is offered, waiting upon others and meeting people without demanding favourable treatment.
- **Perseverance:** Completing the daily routine, including returning, putting things away and washing his feet, expresses steady attention to the responsibilities of practice.
- **Meditation:** Sitting upright and establishing mindfulness makes the cultivation of attention explicit.
- **Wisdom:** Throughout these activities, the Buddha remains unattached. The other five perfections are practised without grasping at the person practising them or the activities themselves.

This is Red Pine's interpretation rather than an explicit explanation given in Chapter 1. The text

does not assign a perfection to each action. Nevertheless, his reading becomes more convincing when we recognise that the perfections are ways of living and practising, not simply subjects to be studied.

The connection with wisdom is especially important. Generosity, ethical conduct, patience, perseverance and meditation can all be practised while we remain attached to them; grasping at them. We may become proud of our generosity, impatient with our progress or pleased with our spiritual achievements. The teachings in this *Sutra* change the way these activities are undertaken. They remain valuable, but need not become possessions or evidence of a particularly important self.

An extraordinary person doing ordinary things

There is another striking feature of this opening. The Buddha is someone who has attained unsurpassed awakening. Yet nothing in his behaviour suggests that ordinary responsibilities are beneath him.

He goes into the city himself. He begs for himself with his own bowl. He eats, puts away his belongings and washes his own feet. There is nothing to announce his importance. There is no display of supernatural powers or attempt to impress his disciples.

He is respected, certainly. The monks bow and walk around him before sitting down. But the respect they show does not turn the scene into a display of the Buddha's personal importance. He is not holding ‘court’. He simply goes about his day. And today he is teaching.

This is a useful contrast with something we readily recognise in ourselves. Achievement can bring pride. Knowledge can bring a feeling of superiority. Even spiritual practice can become an occasion for thinking, *Look what I have accomplished. Aren’t I clever.*

The Buddha's conduct suggests a different possibility: **extraordinary understanding expressed without self-importance.**

We should not read more into the brief account than it tells us. It does not describe the Buddha's private thoughts or explicitly declare that he is free from pride. But his unassuming conduct is consistent with the freedom from self-grasping that appears as a theme of the remaining chapters.

Practice takes place in the ordinary world

Thich Nhat Hanh draws attention to the practice of going from house to house on the alms round without favouring the wealthy and avoiding the poor. This gives the ordinary activity another dimension. Receiving food becomes an opportunity to cultivate a mind that does not discriminate according to wealth or status.

There is also a simple but important fact about the Buddha's dependence upon others. He needs food, he begs and other people provide it. His body requires care. His daily life takes place within relationships with the community around him. Awakening has not removed him from the ordinary world of bodies, needs, actions and consequences.

This matters because the *Diamond* will soon begin making statements that can sound as though people, actions and even the Buddha do not really exist. Chapter 1 provides a safeguard against such a misunderstanding.

The Buddha walks into the city, begs and eats. He returns and washes. Other people give him food. All these things happen. Later, when the *Sutra* says that the Tathāgata neither comes nor goes, we will need to remember that it has already shown him coming and going. The later teach-

ing cannot simply mean that movement never occurs. It must be asking us to examine more carefully how the person who moves, the movement itself and the places involved actually exist.

The teaching begins before the words

The last action before the monks approach is particularly important. The Buddha sits upright and establishes mindfulness before him. He attends to what is present.

Then, in Chapter 2, Subhūti will ask *how someone undertaking the bodhisattva path should abide, practise and govern the mind*.

Red Pine sees a direct connection between these questions and what Subhūti has just witnessed. He has seen the Buddha walking, acting and attending to his mind. Now he wants to understand how a bodhisattva can live and practise in that way.

This gives us a useful way to approach the chapters that follow. The Buddha has already demonstrated something through his conduct. Subhūti's questions invite him to explain it. The explanation will be difficult. It will challenge our familiar ideas about persons, beings, giving, merit, attainment, wisdom and the Buddha himself. But we should remember where it began.

Not with a miraculous display or an abstract philosophical argument. With a man putting on his robe, taking up his bowl, going into town to beg for his food, eating his meal, washing his feet and sitting quietly in mindfulness.

The teaching has already begun.

Chapter 2 The Question: How Should the Bodhisattva Live

Chapter 2 The Question

The venerable Subhūti was seated in that gathering.
He rose, arranged his upper robe over one shoulder,
and placed his right knee on the earth.
Joining his palms toward the Blessed One, he said:

"Wonderful, Blessed One—most wonderful, Well-Gone One—
how the Tathāgata, the worthy, fully awakened one,
has supported the bodhisattvas, the great beings,
with the highest care.

"Wonderful, Blessed One,
how he has entrusted them with the highest trust.

"How, then, should a son or daughter of good family
who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle abide?
How should they practise?
How should they govern their mind?"

The Blessed One said:
"Well said, well said, Subhūti.
It is so. It is just as you say.
The Tathāgata has supported the bodhisattvas
with the highest care
and entrusted them with the highest trust.

"Listen, then, Subhūti. Attend carefully and well.
I will tell you how one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle should abide,
how they should practise,
and how they should govern their mind."

"Yes, Blessed One," the venerable Subhūti answered.

Chapter 1 showed the Buddha going about his ordinary activities. Now Subhūti rises from the assembly and asks the question that will guide the rest of the *Sutra*.

He begins by praising the Buddha for the care and trust he has shown towards bodhisattvas. Then he asks: ***How should someone who has entered the bodhisattva path abide? How should they practise? How should they govern their mind?***

These are not three unrelated questions. Together they concern the whole life of someone undertaking the path. *How should I live? What should I do? How should I work with the mind through which I experience the world and carry out my actions?*

The Buddha recognises the importance of the question. He tells Subhūti to listen carefully and promises to explain.

What does it mean to abide?

The word *abide* deserves attention because it will become one of the central concerns of the *Diamond Sutra*. In ordinary language, abiding means dwelling or remaining somewhere. We can also use it figuratively. We might say that someone stands firmly upon a principle, rests in a belief or finds security in a particular identity. These expressions suggest that the mind has found somewhere dependable to settle.

When Subhūti asks how a bodhisattva should *abide*, we might expect the Buddha to identify the proper place for the mind to rest: a correct teaching, a purified state of mind or perhaps a place built by an accomplished practitioner.

Instead, the Buddha will repeatedly examine the very things upon which the mind tries to establish itself.

A person may decide upon being generous, upon possessing wisdom or upon making spiritual progress. These are valuable achievements and qualities. The difficulty begins when the mind treats them as fixed foundations and then grasps at them. Self-grasping can follow almost unnoticed: *This is what I have achieved. This is the kind of person I am. This understanding belongs to me. Aren't I clever.*

The mind has then taken something that arose through causes and conditions and used it to establish a more solid conception of itself. The *Diamond* will gradually show why none of these foundations can ultimately support the ***independent*** existence we attribute to them.

Practice without becoming passive

It would be easy to misunderstand the direction of this teaching. If the bodhisattva should not abide in anything, does that mean having no commitments, no convictions and no purpose?

The Buddha's answer in the next chapter makes clear that it does not. The bodhisattva will be asked to undertake the most demanding commitment imaginable: working for the liberation of every being.

Therefore the issue is not whether to act, but how to act without turning the activity into something onto which the self grasps.

In the practical sense, we can hold a commitment firmly while recognising that the person making the commitment, the circumstances and the means of fulfilling it are all changing.

Governing the mind

Subhūti's third question brings us directly to the work of practice. **How should the bodhisattva govern the mind?**

The Buddha does not begin by giving a technique for stopping thoughts. Instead, he asks Subhūti to listen carefully and attend to what follows. This is significant. The Buddha is preparing Subhūti to examine the way the mind understands the world, responds to other beings and approaches its own spiritual development. The chapters that follow will explore several closely connected aspects of this training.

The bodhisattva must cultivate compassion for all beings, while developing the wisdom to understand that beings do not exist independently of causes and conditions. Generosity and ethical conduct must be practised wholeheartedly, without attachment to recognition or reward. The mind must learn to recognise appearances without mistaking them for fixed realities. Even the Buddha's

teachings must be understood and used without becoming objects of attachment.

Governing the mind therefore involves more than controlling unwanted thoughts. It means gradually transforming the understanding, intentions and habits from which our actions arise.

The Buddha's method will also be seen as important. He does not simply present a series of conclusions for Subhūti to accept. He repeatedly asks questions, invites answers and challenges assumptions that initially appear reasonable. Subhūti is encouraged to investigate for himself. The paradoxes are not puzzles designed merely to confuse him. They invite him to recognise the limitations of familiar ways of thinking and to develop a deeper understanding.

Chapter 2 has posed the three questions that guide the *Sutra*: How should we live? How should we practise? How should we govern the mind? Chapter 3 begins the Buddha's answer with the compassionate resolve to liberate all beings.

Translation notes

Chapter 1 follows DSBC's trayodaśabhir bhikṣuśataiḥ, thirteen hundred monks. GRETIL reads ardhatrayodaśabhir bhikṣuśataiḥ, twelve hundred and fifty. DSBC also includes bodhisattvas in the opening assembly. These are source differences, not different English renderings of identical Sanskrit.

Bhagavān is "Blessed One"; sugata is "Well-Gone One"; arhat is "worthy"; samyaksaṃbuddha is "fully awakened." Tathāgata is retained because its traditional explanations include both "Thus-Gone" and "Thus-Come." All refer here to the Buddha. "Established mindfulness before him" follows pratimukhīṃ smṛtim upasthāpya without specifying an object of meditation not named in the passage.

In chapter 2, parīndita and parīndanā concern entrusting or committing to care. "Entrusted them with the highest trust" preserves the compact, somewhat open expression. Sthātavyam, pratipattavyam and cittaṃ pragrahītavyam are rendered "abide," "practise" and "govern their mind." "Son or daughter of good family" retains a conventional address, not a requirement of wealth or aristocratic birth. "Vehicle" translates yāna, a means of travelling the path.

Chapter 3 The Bodhisattva's Resolve and the First Paradox

The Blessed One said:
"Here, Subhūti, one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle should give rise to this resolve:

"Whatever beings there are—
all who are included within the realm of beings—
born from eggs, born from wombs,
born from moisture, or appearing spontaneously;
with form or without form;
with perception or without perception,
or with neither perception nor absence of perception—
however the realm of beings may be designated:

"All these I shall bring to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.

"Yet, having brought even immeasurable beings
to complete liberation,
no being at all has been brought to complete liberation.

"Why is this?
If the conception of a being were to arise in a bodhisattva,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.

"Why?
One in whom there arises the conception of a being,
a living self, or a person,
should not be called a bodhisattva."

The Buddha begins his answer to Subhūti in a surprising way. Asked how a bodhisattva should govern the mind, he does not instruct the practitioner to withdraw from the world or empty the mind of all thoughts. He says to give rise to a particular resolve: ***I shall bring <u>all</u> beings to complete liberation.***

The scope of this commitment is deliberately unlimited. The *Sutra* lists beings born in different ways, with form or without form, with perception or without perception, and beings beyond these familiar categories. The ancient classification is not intended as modern biology. Its purpose is to leave no being outside the bodhisattva's concern.

The first instruction for governing the mind is therefore to direct it towards the welfare and liberation of ***every*** being. Notice how carefully the Buddha has defined the scope of this commitment.

By enumerating different forms of birth and existence, he prevents us from quietly interpreting all beings as merely *all human beings*. The bodhisattva's undertaking extends to every sentient being, however unfamiliar its form of existence may be. This is the compassionate resolve of *bodhicitta*, *the intention to attain awakening for the benefit of all beings*.

The first great paradox

Having established this extraordinary commitment, the Buddha immediately says something that seems to contradict it: ***Although immeasurable beings have been brought to liberation, no being whatsoever has been brought to liberation.***

How can both statements be true? The first says that every being is to be liberated. The second appears to deny that any being has been liberated. We need to understand what the Buddha is asking us to examine. He is not withdrawing the compassionate resolve. Nor is he suggesting that suffering does not matter or that helping others is pointless. He is questioning what we mean when we speak of a *being*.

What is the being we intend to liberate?

Consider someone who is suffering through fear, anger or confusion. We recognise that person. We know their name, perhaps their history and circumstances. We can speak with them, offer help and observe changes in their condition.

There is a person, and that person's suffering matters. But what exactly is the person?

Their body changes. Their thoughts, feelings, memories and understanding change. Their circumstances and relationships change. Even the way they understand themselves changes. Everything about them has constantly changed and will continue to change.

Can we find, somewhere within or apart from all these changing conditions, an independent and unchanging being who possesses them? We cannot. The person exists through the changing conditions of body, mind, relationships and designation. There is no additional, independently existing person hidden behind them.

This is what emptiness means here: ***empty of independent existence, not empty of existence.***

And it is precisely because a person's condition is not fixed that transformation is possible. Fear can diminish. Understanding can grow. Harmful habits can weaken. Liberation can be approached through changing causes and conditions. Dependent arising makes compassionate action meaningful.

The helper, the person helped and the helping

There is more. We might understand that the person we help is not a fixed, independent being, yet continue to think of ourselves as the solid helper: *I am the compassionate one. I am the person who will save you.*

However, you are also a changing, dependently arisen person, and your knowledge, compassion and ability to help is also changing through causes and conditions.

Consider helping someone learn a difficult skill. At first they may need detailed instructions. Later they may need encouragement to try independently. Eventually the most helpful action may be to stand aside.

The helper changes through the experience. The learner changes through practice. What counts

as helpful action changes as their relationship develops. There is no fixed helper applying an unchanging thing called *help* to a fixed recipient.

Returning to the compassionate resolve

We can now understand the Buddha's two apparently contradictory statements together.

First: Beings suffer, and the bodhisattva resolves to help liberate them.

Second: No independently existing being can be found who stands apart from the changing causes and conditions of suffering and liberation.

Therefore: Continue to work for the liberation of beings, understanding that they exist dependently rather than as fixed, independent selves.

The second statement does not cancel the first. It corrects our understanding of what a being is. This is an important application of the Two Truths. **Conventionally**, beings exist, experience suffering and can be helped. **Ultimately**, when we examine how they exist, we cannot find an independent, unchanging self underlying their body, mind and experiences. These are not two different kinds of beings. They are two ways of understanding the same beings.

Indeed, dependent arising helps explain why compassionate action is possible. If a person's suffering and circumstances were fixed by an independent nature, they could not change through the influence of new conditions. But suffering arises dependently, and the conditions that sustain it can be altered. The bodhisattva's task is to understand these conditions and respond wisely.

Compassion provides the intention to help. **Wisdom** provides an understanding of the situation, including the absence of fixed selves. **Skilful means** puts that understanding into practice by finding what may actually benefit this person in these circumstances.

This also applies to the bodhisattva. The person offering help is not a permanent rescuer standing outside dependent arising. Their understanding, abilities and actions also develop through causes and conditions. Helping others can change the helper as well as the person being helped.

The Buddha's warning that someone holding fixed conceptions of beings is **not** a bodhisattva expresses the depth of understanding required by the path. It does not mean that beginners must already be free of every mistaken conception before they can practise. Rather, the bodhisattva begins with compassion and progressively develops the wisdom and skilful means needed to practise it.

Chapter 3 therefore establishes a relationship that will remain important throughout the *Sutra*:
Compassion commits us to the welfare and liberation of beings. Wisdom enables us to understand their dependent existence. Together, they guide effective action without attachment to fixed conceptions of those involved.

The next chapter takes this understanding into one of the central practices of the bodhisattva path: generosity and its pitfalls.

Translation notes

Saṃjñā means conception, recognition or perception. It does not literally include the words “intrinsically existing.” Those belong to the explanation and have not been inserted into the Buddha’s speech.

DSBC chapter 3 names sattva, jīva and pudgala, rendered “being,” “living self” and “person.” It does not add ātman as a fourth term here, though four terms occur elsewhere in this text. Jīva can also be rendered

“life principle” or “soul”; “living self” keeps its personal implication without importing all the associations of an English theological term.

Anupadhiśeṣe nirvāṇadhātau is translated “in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.” Upadhi concerns the remaining basis or acquisitions of conditioned existence. This technical expression is not a vow to kill beings or extinguish a permanent soul. Cittam utpādayitavyam, literally a mind or thought to be aroused, becomes “give rise to this resolve” where the following words state an intention.

Chapter 4 Giving Without Taking a Stand

“Moreover, Subhūti,
a bodhisattva should give without taking a stand on anything,
without taking a stand anywhere.

“One should give without taking a stand on form,
or on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.
A bodhisattva, a great being, should give in this way,
without settling even in the conception of a sign.

“Why?
The measure of the merit of a bodhisattva
who gives without taking a stand
is not easily grasped.

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the measure of space to the east easily grasped?”
“No, Blessed One.”

“And to the south, west and north,
below, above and between,
throughout the ten directions—
is the measure of space easily grasped?”
“No, Blessed One.”

“So it is with the merit of a bodhisattva
who gives without taking a stand:
its measure is not easily grasped.

“Thus should one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle give,
without settling even in the conception of a sign.”

Chapter 3 established the bodhisattva's resolve to help all beings. Chapter 4 begins to show how that resolve is to be practised.

The Buddha chooses *generosity*.

He tells Subhūti that a bodhisattva should give without taking a stand on anything: not on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things or objects of mind, and not even upon the conception of a sign. What does it mean to give without taking a stand?

Giving can become somewhere for the mind to stand

Suppose I give money to someone who needs help. The action may be genuinely beneficial. The recipient receives something useful, and I have acted with generosity.

But several things can happen in my mind. *I may hope to be thanked. I may want other people to know what I have done. I may feel disappointed if the recipient does not respond as I expected.*

In each case, I have begun to take a stand upon some feature of the giving. Perhaps I am relying upon gratitude to confirm that my action was worthwhile. Perhaps I am relying upon recognition to confirm that I am a generous person.

Even when none of these expectations is obvious, a quieter thought may remain: *I did that. I am generous. I am becoming a better Buddhist.*

The giving has become a foundation upon which I establish something about myself.

Taking a stand can lead directly to self-grasping.

The action becomes *my generosity*. The virtue becomes *my achievement*. *Aren’t I good.* I begin to construct a more substantial sense of myself around what I have done.

This need not be deliberate vanity. It can happen while our intention to help is entirely sincere. That is what makes it worth examining.

What does the Buddha ask us to relinquish?

The Buddha is not telling us to stop giving, to become indifferent to the recipient or to disregard

the consequences of our actions. He is asking us to give without making any part of the experience into a fixed foundation.

The giver is not an independently existing self. The recipient is not an independently existing self. The gift and the act of giving arise through causes and conditions. All remain conventionally real and capable of producing consequences.

Consider again the person receiving help. What is useful may depend upon their circumstances. Money may help, but advice, companionship or practical assistance may be more valuable. Giving money may actually cause harm.

If I am attached to my identity as the generous giver, I may insist on providing what *I* want to give rather than discovering what the other person needs. When I am less concerned with establishing myself through the action, I can attend more carefully to the person and the changing situation.

Thus giving without taking a stand is not merely avoiding pride. It can make generosity more responsive and skilful.

Why mention the senses?

The Buddha's instruction includes forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things and objects of mind. These cover the experiences through which we ordinarily recognise and evaluate the world. A beautiful object may attract us. Praise may please us. An idea about ourselves may become especially precious.

Giving can become entangled with any of these experiences. For example, I may become attached to the visible result of my gift, to the words of gratitude I receive or to my own thought that I have done something admirable. The Buddha's instruction is comprehensive: *do not establish your giving upon any of these as something independently real that must support your identity or expectations*. The experiences do not have to disappear. *The grasping surrounding them is what practice seeks to loosen.*

Merit as immeasurable as space

The Buddha then compares the merit of giving without taking a stand to the vastness of space in every direction. He is not denying that generosity produces merit. In Buddhist teaching, *merit* refers to the beneficial consequences and spiritual potential of wholesome action.

The comparison emphasises that the merit of such giving cannot readily be measured.

But there is also a danger here. The mind that has stopped seeking ordinary praise may begin to seek spiritual reward instead: *I gave generously. How much merit have I accumulated?*

Merit has become a new possession, something that might be counted, compared or claimed. The Buddha's teaching invites us to recognise the value of wholesome action without turning its merit into ***a spiritual bank account*** belonging to a fixed self.

The beneficial consequences remain. *The need to possess them can be relinquished.*

Generosity without self-grasping

Chapter 4 brings the teaching of emptiness into an ordinary activity.

We give because others have needs, because generosity is wholesome and because our actions can make a difference. The question is whether we are taking a stand upon the giving and constructing a self around it. This is a demanding practice. We may begin with the obvious forms of

attachment, such as wanting thanks or recognition. As those weaken, we may discover subtler forms, including private satisfaction in our own goodness. And even gather merit into our spiritual bank account.

The Buddha is not asking us to become suspicious of every generous impulse. He is showing us how generosity can become freer. Give fully. Care about the recipient and the consequences. But do not require the act of giving to establish who you are.

Chapter 3 examined grasping within our compassionate resolve. Chapter 4 shows how grasping can arise within compassionate action.

Chapter 5 will turn to something even more immediate: the way we see and recognise things.

Translation notes

Apratiṣṭhita means not established, not resting or not abiding. The translation alternates “without taking a stand” and “does not settle” according to the sentence. Neither means dissociation or inattentiveness.

Nimitta is a sign or identifying feature. “Conception of a sign” is more literal than “attachment to appearances”; the latter already interprets how the sign is functioning. Puṇya is merit, the beneficial efficacy of wholesome action. Puṇyaskandha, “mass of merit,” is intentionally retained because later chapters question the apparent solidity of that very mass.

Chapter 5 Recognising the Buddha Without Imprisoning Him in Marks

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?”

Subhūti said:
“No, Blessed One.
The Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks.
What the Tathāgata has called the possession of marks
he has called no possession of marks.”

The Blessed One said:
“Where there is possession of marks, there is deception.
Where there is no possession of marks, there is no deception.
Thus the Tathāgata is to be seen
through marks as no marks.”

The Buddha now asks Subhūti whether the Tathāgata can be seen (recognised?) through the possession of marks.

In Buddhist tradition, a Buddha is associated with distinctive physical characteristics, often called the marks of a great person. Surely these marks would allow us to recognise a Buddha?

Subhūti answers that the Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks. The Buddha then gives a difficult instruction: *The Tathāgata is to be seen through marks as no marks.*

To understand this, we need to distinguish between recognising something and understanding what it is.

Marks allow us to recognise, yet recognising is not knowing

We use identifying characteristics constantly. We recognise people by their faces and voices. We recognise birds by their shape, colour and calls. We recognise familiar places by their buildings and surroundings. These characteristics are useful. Without them, much of ordinary life would be difficult.



A simple example helps.

Looking through a window, I see a bird and recognise it: **“A blue-faced honeyeater.”**

The identification may be completely correct. But it tells me remarkably little about this particular bird: its history, relationships, present experience, or the causes and conditions

that have brought it to my window.

Likewise, I may look across a room and say: **“That is Jane.”**

The name identifies her correctly. It does not disclose everything Jane is. Jane is a changing, dependently arisen person whose body, thoughts, memories, relationships and circumstances cannot be contained within my conception of “Jane.”

A sign can identify without defining. The name or mark tells us, “That is the one I mean.” It does not tell us, “That is what this being ultimately is.”

Where deception enters

The same distinction applies to the Buddha. Marks may allow conventional recognition without revealing an independently existing essence.

The Buddha says that where there is possession of marks, there is deception. This does not mean that appearances are worthless or that our senses always deceive us. The deception arises when we take appearances to establish more than they can. We see certain characteristics and assume that they reveal an independently existing essence.

In the case of the Buddha, we might think that the physical marks somehow contain or establish Buddhahood itself. But a mark depends upon the body in which it appears, the conditions that produced that body and the way it is recognised.

It does not exist independently. Nor can an independently existing Buddha be found hidden within a collection of physical characteristics. The marks may have conventional significance, but they cannot establish what the Tathāgata ultimately is.

Marks as no marks

We can now follow the Buddha's instruction more carefully.

- First, the marks appear. They can be seen, recognised and described.
- Second, when examined, they cannot be found to possess an independent nature that establishes Buddhahood.
- Third, we return to the marks, recognising their conventional usefulness without mistaking them for an independently existing essence.

This is another application of the Three-Step Formula:

Recognise the marks → understand that they lack independent existence → continue to recognise them without imprisoning the being we have identified.

It asks us to see without adding an imagined independent reality to what appears. The Buddha's body, characteristics, activities and our recognition of them all arise dependently.

Also we should not now suppose that the real Buddha must be some invisible, permanent essence hidden behind his physical appearance. That would simply move our grasping from the visible marks to something imagined beyond them.

Seeing involves the mind

There is another reason this teaching matters. We often assume that seeing is a simple matter of looking at something that is already fully defined. But recognition involves more than eyesight.

When I recognise the honeyeater, my perception depends upon the visible bird, my eyes, attention, memory and knowledge of birds.

The name I give it is useful. It helps me communicate about what I am seeing. But the name is not the bird, and my conception of the bird does not contain its reality.

The same applies to our ideas about people. We may think we know someone because we have formed a familiar picture of them. Then, when they behave differently, we are surprised or disappointed. The problem may not be that the person has become inconsistent. It is that we have mistaken our conception of them for something fixed.

This is one way grasping at signs can lead to suffering.

Seeing without imprisoning

Chapter 3 asked us not to grasp at beings as fixed selves.

Chapter 4 asked us not to take a stand upon giving.

Now Chapter 5 asks us not to mistake the characteristics by which we recognise something for its independently existing nature.

The practical lesson is broad. We can use names, appearances and concepts without allowing them to imprison the people and things they help us recognise. A name can identify without revealing an essence. A concept can be useful without containing reality. The Buddha's marks remain meaningful. What changes is our understanding of what they can establish.

Chapter 6 will now turn this same examination upon the Buddhist teaching itself.

Translation notes

Lakṣaṇasaṃpad is the possession, fullness or endowment of marks. Chapter 13 makes the connection to the thirty-two marks of a great person explicit. The final compound lakṣaṇālakṣaṇataḥ is compressed; “through marks as no marks” is a working rendering of the relation between marks and their absence. It should not be treated as an uncontested grammatical expansion.

Mṛṣā means false, deceptive or unreal. “Deception” fits the contrast with amṛṣā while avoiding the suggestion that all conventional appearances are simply nonexistent.

Chapter 6 The Raft: Using the Teaching Without Grasping It

Chapter 6
Subhūti asked:
“Blessed One, will there be beings in the future,
in the last time, in the last period,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who will recognise truth
in words of a discourse such as these?”

The Blessed One answered:
“Indeed, Subhūti, there will be bodhisattvas, great beings,
in that future time, in that final period,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
possessed of good qualities, ethical discipline and wisdom,
who will recognise truth in such words.

“Those who gain even a single moment of clear confidence
on hearing these words
will not have attended only one Buddha,
nor planted roots of goodness under only one Buddha.
They will have attended many hundreds of thousands of Buddhas
and planted roots of goodness in their presence.

“The Tathāgata knows them with Buddha knowledge,
sees them with the Buddha eye,
and understands them.
They will all produce and receive
an immeasurable, incalculable mass of merit.

“Why?
In those bodhisattvas no conception of a self arises,
nor of a being, a living self, or a person.
Neither a conception of dharmas
nor a conception of non-dharmas arises in them;
neither conception nor absence of conception.

“If a conception of dharmas arose in them,
that would itself be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.
If a conception of non-dharmas arose,
that too would be such grasping.

“A bodhisattva, a great being,
should grasp neither a dharma nor a non-dharma.

“It was with this intention that the Tathāgata said:
Those who understand the teaching as a raft
must relinquish even dharmas—
how much more non-dharmas.”

Subhūti now raises a concern about the future. The Buddha is present to explain this (and other) difficult teachings. But what will happen when he is no longer present and the true Dharma is de-

clining? Will people still hear these words and recognise their truth?

The Buddha answers that they will.

He describes future practitioners who possess good qualities, ethical discipline and wisdom, and who have cultivated roots of goodness through many encounters with the Dharma. Even a single moment of clear understanding upon hearing the teaching is treated as significant.

This is worth noticing. The Buddha does not present understanding as something that appears without preparation. It arises through conditions: hearing teachings, being able and ready to understand them, developing ethical conduct, cultivating wholesome qualities and gradually deepening wisdom. The teaching must be received and worked with.

And then the Buddha immediately adds a warning about how teaching is received.

A new object of grasping

So far the *Sutra* has examined grasping at beings, actions and appearances. Now the danger becomes more subtle. We may begin to understand that persons and phenomena lack independent existence. We may even become quite skilled at explaining emptiness.

Then a thought arises: *Now **I** understand. This is the correct teaching. **I** know how things really exist.* Something has changed, but the old habit of grasping may still be operating. The mind has found a new place to stand (grasp): the Dharma itself. The teaching that was meant to loosen our grasping has become something we possess.

And self-grasping can follow: ***My** understanding. **My** knowledge of emptiness. **My** superior view. **My** cleverness in understanding.*

This is why the Buddha says that bodhisattvas should grasp neither dharmas nor non-dharmas.

Neither Dharma nor non-Dharma

The word *dharma* has several meanings in Buddhist writing. It can refer to the Buddha's teaching, to a phenomenon or to a quality or element of experience.

In this passage, the contrast between dharmas and non-dharmas warns against grasping at either an assertion or its negation.

Suppose I conclude: *The Dharma is the ultimate truth. I must hold onto it.* I have turned the teaching into something fixed.

But suppose I react by saying: *Then there is no Dharma. Nothing really exists, and no teaching is necessary.* I have taken another stand, this time upon rejection.

The positions appear opposite, but the grasping can be much the same. In the first case, I cling to the existence of something fixed. In the second, I cling to its non-existence. Neither position understands dependent arising.

The Buddha is not asking us to choose between a permanently existing Dharma and no Dharma at all. He is asking us to use the teaching without turning it into an **independently existing thing**.

The raft

The Buddha makes this practical through the image of a raft.

Imagine someone who needs to cross a river. The water is dangerous, and there is no bridge. The person gathers materials, constructs a raft and uses it to reach the other bank. The raft has been

extremely valuable. Without it, the crossing might not have been possible.

But what should happen next?

It would be foolish to carry the raft everywhere simply because it had been useful. This raft saved me. ‘Therefore I must never let it go’ has turned a useful means of crossing into a burden.

It would be equally foolish to reject the raft before crossing: *Rafts are only temporary constructions. They have no independent existence. Therefore I shall not use one.*

The sensible course is to use the raft for its purpose, then relinquish the need to carry it.

What does this mean for Buddhist practice?

Teachings are like the raft. We need them. We study them, reflect upon them, test them against experience and practise what they explain. The teaching of emptiness is especially valuable because it helps expose the mistaken way we grasp at ourselves and the world.

But understanding emptiness does not require us to possess a fixed doctrine called *my understanding of emptiness*.

Thich Nhat Hanh warns that even teachings such as emptiness, impermanence and selflessness can cause harm when grasped without sufficient understanding.

Hsing Yun likewise emphasises that freedom from attachment to the Dharma does not mean rejecting the Dharma. Attachment to the teaching and attachment to rejecting it can both become obstacles.

The raft must be used, but it need not become a possession.

Hearing and understanding

There is another important lesson in Subhūti's concern about future practitioners.

A teaching can be heard before it is fully understood. Lama Zopa Rinpoche places great value on hearing the Dharma, even when its meaning is difficult and not understood. In his explanation, hearing creates conditions for understanding to develop later. Understanding may grow or be incremental and require many ‘hearings’.

This helps us appreciate why the *Diamond* repeatedly praises hearing, receiving, remembering and transmitting its words.

Understanding cannot simply be handed from teacher to student. But a teaching can create the conditions from which understanding grows. We hear something difficult. We remember it. We return to it. We reflect, question and practise. Gradually, something that once seemed contradictory may become clear. The value of hearing is therefore not limited to immediately understanding every sentence.

At the same time, the raft reminds us that the words are a means. Merely possessing, reciting or defending them is not the same as realising what they teach.

The teaching examines itself

Chapter 6 makes a remarkable move. The *Diamond Sutra* has begun examining the things upon which the mind takes a stand. Now it refuses to exempt its own teaching from that examination. If we grasp at the Dharma as something fixed, the teaching has become another object of attachment. If we reject the Dharma because it is empty, we have misunderstood the very emptiness it teaches.

The proper response is to continue using the teaching while gradually relinquishing the grasping that can surround it.

Use the teaching. Let it change your understanding and conduct. Do not require it to become something that establishes who you are.

This prepares us for Chapter 7, where the Buddha will ask an even more challenging question. If the teaching itself cannot be grasped as an independently existing thing, what about the Buddha's awakening? Can that be grasped?

Chapter 7 Can the Buddha's Awakening Itself Be Grasped?

Chapter 7
The Blessed One asked:
"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma that the Tathāgata has fully realised
as 'complete, unsurpassed awakening'?
Is there any such dharma that the Tathāgata has taught?"

Subhūti answered:
"As I understand the meaning of your words,
there is no such dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as 'complete, unsurpassed awakening',
and no such dharma the Tathāgata has taught.

"Why?
What the Tathāgata has realised or taught
cannot be grasped and cannot be expressed.
It is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma.

"For it is through realisation of the unconditioned that noble persons are distinguished."

Chapter 6 taught us that the Dharma is not *an independently existing thing to be possessed*. Chapter 7 now asks whether the Buddha's own awakening and teaching might be such things.

The word such is important. Subhūti is not denying that the Buddha attained awakening or taught the Dharma. He is denying that there is an independently existing dharma that the Buddha acquired through awakening or possessed as a teaching. **The Buddha has awakened and has taught. What cannot be found is a separate, independently existing thing called awakening or Dharma.**

What does it mean to realise awakening?

We ordinarily speak of achievement as something we acquire. A student gains a qualification. A musician develops a skill. Someone learns a new language. We say that they have *gained* something they did not previously possess.

This is a useful way of speaking. But consider what actually happens when someone learns a language. Through study, practice and experience, their understanding and abilities gradually change. They become able to understand and communicate in ways that were previously impossible. Something genuine has been achieved. Yet there is no separate object called *knowledge of the language* that has been added to an otherwise unchanged person. The achievement consists in the *transformation* of that person's abilities and understanding.

The same distinction becomes important when we speak of awakening.

We might imagine enlightenment as a particular spiritual thing, existing independently, which the practitioner eventually ***acquires***. The Buddha's question challenges that picture. Awakening is genuine, but it is **not** *a separate object that can be isolated from the transformation of understanding and then possessed by an independently existing person*.

Consider someone who gradually overcomes a deeply rooted prejudice. Through experience, reflection and honest examination, their understanding changes. They begin to see other people differently and respond to them differently. We can properly say that this person has become freer from prejudice. But what has actually changed? Their assumptions, perceptions, judgements and

responses have changed. We cannot isolate a separate object called *freedom from prejudice* and place it alongside the person as a ***possession***. The transformation is real. It is expressed in how the person now understands and lives.

Awakening is, of course, far more profound than learning a language or overcoming a prejudice. These examples simply help us recognise the distinction the Buddha is making.

Awakening is a genuine transformation in the way a person understands and experiences reality. Ignorance and grasping are overcome through practice and development of wisdom and compassion. We can rightly say that the person has attained awakening. But *awakening is not a separate thing that has been acquired, nor is there an unchanging self who now possesses it. The person has changed. That transformation is what we call attainment.*

The Buddha is not questioning whether awakening occurs. He is questioning the way we imagine its existence. Perhaps we imagine *an independently existing I who acquires and possesses it with its self-grasping "Aren't I clever."*

"Cannot be grasped and cannot be expressed"

The word grasped has two closely related meanings here. **First**, what the Buddha realised cannot be fully captured in words or concepts. We may understand and accurately explain that there is no independently existing self, yet still experience ourselves as a solid I who needs defending. **Knowing and explaining the teaching is not the same as realising it**.

Second, awakening cannot be grasped as an independently existing thing that the Buddha has acquired and now possesses.

"Cannot be expressed" follows naturally. Language works through distinctions and designations:
self vs other
existence vs non-existence
dharma vs non-dharma
awakening vs ignorance.

These distinctions are extraordinarily useful. The Buddha himself teaches through them. But the words and concepts remain dependently arisen tools. This is another version of the distinction we encountered with Jane and the blue-faced honeyeater in Chapter 5. Correctly identifying and naming something can be extremely useful while still falling far short of understanding what that thing is.

The same caution now applies to the Dharma itself. We may correctly name **emptiness/śūnyatā, dependent arising, awakening and nirvāṇa**. Correct names do not place the realities they designate inside our understanding.

Neither a dharma nor a non-dharma

The Buddha now closes both apparent alternatives. If we imagine awakening as an independently existing dharma, we have turned it into a spiritual object that can be acquired and possessed. If we conclude that there is therefore no awakening or Dharma, we have denied the very teaching and transformation taking place. Hence: **neither a dharma nor a non-dharma**.

The Buddha's awakening is genuine. His teaching occurs, can be understood and can lead beings towards liberation. What does not exist is the kind of independently established dharma that his question challenges. **The word 'such' helps us recognise that the Buddha is questioning <u>how</u>**

awakening and teaching exist, not whether they occur.

The unconditioned

The chapter ends with a remarkable statement: *"For it is through realisation of the unconditioned that noble persons are distinguished."*

What does Subhūti mean?

The conditioned is everything that arises and continues through causes and conditions. A fire burns because fuel and oxygen are present. A plant grows because it receives water, light and nutrients. Our bodies, thoughts, emotions and habits also arise and continue through conditions.

Ignorance and craving are conditioned too. They arise through causes, continue while those causes sustain them, and can cease when those causes are eliminated. This is important: if ignorance and craving were permanent, independently existing realities, liberation from them would be impossible.

Buddhist practice works upon chnaging these conditions. Through study, meditation and the development of wisdom, we gradually eliminate the ignorance and craving that keep us bound to saṃsāra.

The unconditioned (asaṃskṛta) refers here to *nirvāṇa*. It is called unconditioned because liberation is **not** another experience constructed and sustained by causes and conditions. Consider a fire. When its fuel is exhausted, the fire goes out. We have not manufactured a new object called ***extinguishment***. We have brought the conditions sustaining the fire to an end. Similarly, Buddhist practice brings the causes of bondage to an end. It does not manufacture a separate thing called nirvāṇa. Nor is nirvāṇa some hidden, independently existing substance waiting to be discovered.

The distinction between conditioned and unconditioned does not mean that nirvāṇa has an independently existing essence. Our previous discussion of the Two Truths remains relevant.

This can help us understand Subhūti's statement. ***Noble persons are distinguished by their realisation of the unconditioned.*** What distinguishes them is not the possession of some special spiritual object, but their direct realisation of liberation. Chapter 9 will examine the different stages of that realisation.

This also explains the Buddha's question at the beginning of Chapter 7. *Awakening is genuine, yet it is not a separately existing thing that the Tathāgata has acquired and now possesses. The Dharma and the practice it guides provide the means through which ignorance and craving can be brought to an end. They do* ***not*** *produce a new possession called nirvāṇa.*

Conditioned ignorance and craving can cease → practice develops the wisdom necessary for their cessation → liberation is realised, not acquired as a possession.

Here the raft image from Chapter 6 becomes particularly helpful. The Dharma provides the means of crossing beyond the ignorance and craving that keep us bound to saṃsāra. **The raft can help us reach the farther shore. It is not itself the shore.**

The developing teaching

We can now see why Chapter 7 follows Chapter 6. In Chapter 6, the Buddha taught that the Dharma is like a raft. We need the teaching to develop understanding, but we must not turn it into something fixed that we ***possess***. We might accept that readily enough. After all, the teaching is a

means to awakening. But then another thought arises: *Surely awakening itself must be the final, independently existing reality towards which all this practice leads.*

Chapter 7 challenges that assumption too.

This is the next step in a progression that has been developing since Chapter 3. The Buddha has examined our understanding of self, beings, compassionate action, appearances and the Dharma. Now he examines awakening itself.

There are actually two questions here: **What has the Buddha attained, and what has he taught?** Both challenge our assumption that there must be a separately existing thing that has been acquired or transmitted. The Buddha's awakening is genuine, and the Dharma is genuinely taught. Neither requires an independently existing object or an independently existing self who possesses it.

These questions anticipate two important later teachings. Chapter 9 examines attainment without an independently existing attainer, while Chapter 21 examines how the Dharma can be taught without an independently existing teacher possessing the teaching.

Red Pine makes an illuminating observation: *having relinquished the raft, we may try to make the other shore into another raft.* In other words, **we may relinquish attachment to the teaching while *continuing to grasp* at the awakening towards which it points.**

The Buddha's questions prevent us from doing that. Yet something important remains throughout this examination. Beings still suffer and can be helped. Generosity remains valuable. Names allow us to recognise and respond to the world. The Dharma guides practice. And awakening remains possible.

The *Sutra* is not progressively removing these things from existence. It is changing our understanding of how they exist and how we should relate to them. There is no need for something to exist independently in order for it to be real, meaningful or effective.

Chapter 7 therefore leaves us with a demanding but liberating understanding: we can practise wholeheartedly towards awakening without turning even awakening into something to grasp.

The next chapter asks why a teaching that cannot itself be grasped can nevertheless possess such extraordinary value.

Translation notes

Dharma has several senses: teaching, phenomenon, quality or an item discerned in experience. In these chapters the overlap is important, so the translation retains “dharma” instead of forcing a single English equivalent. Adharma can mean non-dharma, not a phenomenon, or what is contrary to Dharma. Its exact force depends on the sentence; “non-dharma” preserves that openness. The word *such* is supplied in English to connect the second question with the preceding description of awakening. It does not represent a separate demonstrative in the Sanskrit question. (Red Pine makes this connection explicit in both question and answer. Paul Harrison uses “any dharma whatsoever” in his translation.)

Bhūtasaṃjñā is rendered “recognise truth” in chapter 6 and “conception of truth” where chapter 14 examines the expression itself. Prasāda suggests clarity and confidence, not merely agreement with a proposition. The final five hundred years belongs to the text’s account of the decline of the Dharma; it is not used here to date a modern deadline.

DSBC chapter 6 lacks an explicit speaker label at the transition to the answer. “The Blessed One answered” is supplied from the dialogue’s sense; GRETIL explicitly names him there. In chapter 7, asaṃskṛ-

taprabhāvitā is rendered “distinguished by the unconditioned.” The expression does not, by itself, explain the entire relation between noble persons and the unconditioned.

Chapter 8 Why Transmitting Four Lines Matters

The Blessed One asked:
“If a son or daughter of good family
filled this great threefold thousandfold world system
with the seven treasures
and gave it to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would that produce a great mass of merit?”

“A great mass, Blessed One—a great mass, Well-Gone One.
For the mass of merit spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no mass.
That is why it is called a mass of merit.”

The Blessed One said:
“Yet if another took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse
and taught and explained it fully to others,
the merit would be greater still,
immeasurable and incalculable,
than that of filling this world system with the seven treasures
and giving it to the Tathāgatas.

“Why?
From this arises the unsurpassed complete awakening
of the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened;
from this arise the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones.

“Why?
What are called Buddha dharmas, Subhūti,
the Tathāgata has spoken of as no Buddha dharmas.
That is why they are called Buddha dharmas.”

Chapter 8 introduces a comparison that the Buddha will return to repeatedly throughout the *Sutra*. Imagine filling an immense world system with the seven treasures and offering them to the Buddhas. Such an extraordinary gift would produce an immeasurable mass of merit. Subhūti readily acknowledges this.

The Buddha then declares that someone who takes up even four lines of the Diamond Sutra and teaches and explains them to others produces still greater merit. **Why should transmitting such a small part of the teaching outweigh an unimaginably valuable offering to the Buddhas?**

The Buddha gives us the answer immediately:
“From this arises the unsurpassed complete awakening
of the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened;
from this arise the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones.”

These lines contain the central teaching of Chapter 8.

Why transmission has such extraordinary value

In Chapter 3, the Buddha instructed the bodhisattva to undertake the liberation of all beings. We have since discovered that fulfilling this commitment requires much more than generosity and good intentions. Beings must develop the wisdom through which they can overcome the ignorance that keeps them bound to saṃsāra.

Transmission of the Dharma makes that development possible. Someone who has never encountered the teaching may have no understanding of the mistaken conception of an independently existing self. They may recognise suffering only as obvious pain or distress, without recognising the deeper suffering inherent in saṃsāra, even when life appears comfortable and satisfying. They may experience self-grasping and self-cherishing without recognising either. They may

practise generosity or patience while unknowingly reinforcing the very conception of self that the bodhisattva path seeks to eliminate.

Encountering the Dharma provides an opportunity to begin examining these assumptions. The teaching may initially be heard without being understood. The listener interprets it through existing knowledge, experiences and deeply established beliefs. Some of those beliefs may prevent its meaning from being recognised.

Through further hearing, reading, reflection, meditation and practice, understanding can gradually develop. What was initially accepted as only an interesting idea may eventually become realised wisdom that transforms the person's experience of self and the world. This wisdom can progressively weaken and ultimately eradicate the ignorance through which an independently existing self appears real.

That is the significance of the Buddha's comparison. **A few lines of Dharma may provide the beginning of a path that leads towards liberation.**

The four lines do not automatically produce awakening merely because they have been heard recited or explained. Their extraordinary value lies in the opportunity they create for development of understanding and practice. Nor does transmission necessarily end with the first recipient. Someone who develops understanding may eventually become capable of explaining the Dharma to others. In this way, the conditions for liberation can continue across generations.

We can now appreciate the force of the Buddha's declaration: *"From this arise the Buddhas."* The Diamond Sutra is one means through which the Dharma is transmitted, enabling beings to recognise and ultimately overcome the ignorance that keeps them bound to saṃsāra. Through its transmission, beings can encounter the path, cultivate wisdom and ultimately realise awakening. The Buddha is directing our attention beyond the immediate act of teaching to its extraordinary potential consequences.

What about merit?

There is another important detail in Subhūti's reply.

He acknowledges that offering the seven treasures produces a great mass of merit. Then he adds:
"For the mass of merit spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no mass.
That is why it is called a mass of merit."

Why does Subhūti introduce this paradox about merit? At first, it appears to be another example of the Three-Step Formula and Two Truths. Yet it has a further purpose. **Even merit can become something we claim to own, reinforcing the mistaken conception of an independently existing *I* and the self-cherishing that develops around it.**

Merit is the beneficial karmic potential arising from wholesome intentions and actions. The Buddha is ***not*** denying that generosity or that transmitting the Dharma produces merit. He is challenging the conception of merit as an independently existing substance that can be accumulated and possessed. A generous action occurs through intentions, people, circumstances and conditions. Its beneficial karmic potential arises dependently. There is no separate, independently existing mass of merit waiting to be collected.

This becomes particularly important when we remember our discovery about **ownership and possession**. We may think: ***I*** *have been generous.* ***I*** *have accumulated enormous merit. These are*

my spiritual achievements. The mind has turned the results of wholesome activity into evidence of an independently existing ***I*** who owns them. Self-cherishing may then make those achievements a reason for pride: *Aren't I clever!*

The Buddha's paradox prevents us from turning even merit into another possession of an important self. **Merit is genuine and valuable. Its value does not require an independently existing mass of merit or an independently existing owner.** We can therefore recognise the extraordinary merit of transmitting the Dharma without losing sight of its greater purpose: *helping beings towards liberation.*

Why are Buddha dharmas no Buddha dharmas?

The chapter ends with another paradox:
"What are called Buddha dharmas, Subhūti,
the Tathāgata has spoken of as no Buddha dharmas.
That is why they are called Buddha dharmas."

Why does the Buddha introduce this immediately after telling us that the Buddhas arise from the teaching? **Buddha dharmas** can refer to the teachings, qualities and realisations associated with Buddhahood. They include the wisdom and other extraordinary qualities developed through the path.

The Buddha has just declared the immense value of the Dharma because it provides the conditions through which awakening becomes possible. Now he prevents us from misunderstanding what he has praised. We might imagine that the Dharma transmits certain independently existing spiritual qualities, which the practitioner gradually acquires until finally possessing everything required for Buddhahood. ***That would repeat the very mistake the Sutra has been exposing.***

The qualities of a Buddha are not separately existing spiritual objects. **Wisdom** develops through the path. **Compassion** and the other perfections are cultivated and expressed through practice. Nor is there an independently existing ***I*** that accumulates these qualities as possessions.

Yet the qualities and their development are genuine. The Three-Step Formula helps us understand the Buddha's words:
Buddha dharmas → no independently existing Buddha dharmas → therefore conventionally called Buddha dharmas.

The second step does not cancel the first. It corrects the mistaken *independent* existence that we may attribute to these extraordinary qualities. The Two Truths allow us to recognise that the qualities associated with Buddhahood are meaningful and that the path can genuinely transform the practitioner, *without requiring either the qualities or the practitioner to possess independent existence.*

The Buddha is teaching us to value the Dharma without turning its teachings, qualities or realisations into independently existing things.

What Chapter 8 adds to the Sutra

We can now see a progression through these early chapters.

- **Chapter 6** asks whether people in future generations will be able to receive and understand the Dharma. The Buddha assures Subhūti that they will, while warning them against making the teaching something fixed that they possess.

- **Chapter 7** examines the Buddha's own awakening and teaching. Neither can be found as an independently existing thing that has been acquired or possessed.
- **Chapter 8** *now explains why transmitting that very Dharma has extraordinary value*.

The teaching does not have to exist independently to be effective. It can be received, studied, understood, practised and transmitted. Through these activities, beings may develop the wisdom needed to overcome ignorance and move towards liberation.

This is why the Buddha continually returns to the extraordinary merit of teaching even four lines. **The merit is immense. The greater purpose of transmission is to help beings develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.**

Chapter 8 establishes an essential part of the bodhisattva's undertaking: **the Dharma must remain available so that beings can encounter the teaching, develop wisdom and ultimately attain liberation.**

The next chapter asks what happens when that path produces genuine spiritual attainment. Does the practitioner now possess something called stream-entry, arhatship or awakening? And is there an independently existing **I** who has attained it?

Translation notes

Trisāhasramahāsāhasra is retained as “great threefold thousandfold.” It denotes a cosmological system formed through repeated thousandfold groupings, not simply three thousand nearby worlds. The seven treasures are a traditional enumeration of precious substances; the translation does not substitute a modern monetary value.

Catuṣpādikā gāthā is a verse of four metrical quarters, rendered “four-line verse.” It does not identify any four lines created by this free-verse layout, nor necessarily only the final stanza. Buddhadharmāḥ can mean Buddha qualities or Buddha teachings; the Sanskrit term is retained where both matter.

Chapter 9 Spiritual Attainment Cannot Become a Possession

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Does a stream-enterer think,
‘I have attained the fruit of stream-entry’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A stream-enterer does not think that.
For no dharma has been entered into:
not form, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.
That is why one is called a stream-enterer.

“If a stream-enterer thought,
‘I have attained the fruit of stream-entry,’
that would be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.”

The Blessed One asked:
“Does a once-returner think,
‘I have attained the fruit of once-returning’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A once-returner does not think that.
For no dharma can be found as once-returning.
That is why one is called a once-returner.”

“Does a non-returner think,
‘I have attained the fruit of non-returning’?”

“No, Blessed One.
A non-returner does not think that.
For no dharma can be found as non-returning.
That is why one is called a non-returner.”

“Does an arhat think,
‘I have attained arhatship’?”

“No, Blessed One.
An arhat does not think that.
There is no dharma called an arhat.
That is why one is called an arhat.

“If an arhat thought, ‘I have attained arhatship,’
that would be grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.

“Blessed One, the Tathāgata has named me foremost
among those who dwell without conflict.
I am an arhat, free from passion.
Yet the thought does not arise in me,
‘I am an arhat, free from passion.’

“If I thought, ‘I have attained arhatship,’
the Tathāgata would not have declared:
‘Subhūti is foremost among those who dwell without conflict.
This son of good family dwells nowhere;
therefore he is called one who dwells without conflict.’”

Chapter 9 turns from the value of the teaching to the person who has followed the path. The Buddha asks Subhūti whether a stream-enterer thinks, *“I have attained the fruit of stream-entry.”* Subhūti answers no. The Buddha repeats the question for a once-returner, a non-returner and an

arhat. Each time, Subhūti gives the same answer.

This may initially sound like a lesson in humility. A genuinely accomplished practitioner does not boast about their achievements. That is certainly consistent with the teaching, however the Buddha is asking something more profound:

What does it mean to attain something on the spiritual path, and what happens when that attainment becomes "*mine*"?

The four stages of attainment

The Buddha names four recognised stages of the early Buddhist path to liberation:
Stream-enterer: Someone who has reached the first of four stages of awakening on the śrāvaka path. Having directly realised the Dharma and overcome the mistaken view of an independently existing self, this person has entered irreversibly upon the path to nirvāṇa. Traditionally, complete liberation is assured within at most seven further rebirths, all in favourable realms.
Once-returner: Someone who has progressed beyond stream-entry, further weakening sensual desire, aversion and ignorance. Traditionally, this person has *at most one further rebirth* before attaining complete liberation.
Non-returner: Someone who will no longer be reborn in the desire realm.
Arhat: Someone who has completed this path to liberation, overcoming the ignorance and mental afflictions that sustain rebirth.

These are genuine distinctions in Buddhist practice. They describe profound changes in understanding and freedom from suffering. The *Sutra* does not dismiss these attainments or suggest that spiritual progress is an illusion. Rather, it asks us to examine what has actually happened when someone reaches one of these stages.

What has the stream-enterer attained?

Consider the statement: *"I have attained stream-entry."* It appears to involve three things: a person who attains, the process of attaining, and something called stream-entry that has been acquired. But when we examine them, we find that each depends upon causes and conditions.

The **practitioner** develops through ethical conduct, study, meditation, previous experience, teachers and many other influences. **Attainment** occurs through this process of learning and practice. And **stream-entry** is not a separate spiritual object waiting somewhere to be acquired.

There is no unchanged person who has acquired an independently existing thing called stream-entry. The person has genuinely changed. Their understanding has developed, and certain obstacles to liberation have been overcome. This is why the distinction matters.

Attainment is genuine, but it does not require either a permanent attainer or a separate spiritual object that has been attained.

We encountered something similar in Chapter 7 when examining the Buddha's awakening. Chapter 9 now applies that understanding to the recognised stages of Buddhist practice.

Entering the stream without entering anything

There is an interesting wordplay in the Buddha's first question: *"Does a stream-enterer think, 'I have attained the fruit of stream-entry'?"*

Subhūti answers no, explaining: *"For no dharma has been entered into: not form, sounds, smells,*

tastes, tangible things, or objects of mind."

A stream-enterer has entered the stream, yet Subhūti says that nothing has been entered into. How does this explain why the thought *"I have attained"* does not arise?

Consider what that thought might mean to the practitioner.

I have attained stream-entry could simply be a conventional recognition that genuine progress has occurred. But it could also express something more: *I am the person who has acquired this spiritual attainment. It is now something I possess. Aren't I clever!*

That second understanding is what the Buddha is questioning.

Subhūti explains that no independently existing dharma has been entered into. He specifically names the six fields of sensory and mental experience. The stream-enterer has not discovered some ultimate object or experience and taken ***possession*** of it. Rather, stream-entry describes a genuine *transformation* in the practitioner's understanding. Through practice, mistaken views and obstacles to liberation have been overcome. The practitioner has changed. *There is no separate, independently existing thing called stream-entry that has been added to an unchanged person.*

A stream-enterer can recognise that genuine progress has occurred. His/her understanding has changed, and they have reached an important stage of the path. But here our old friend, **self-grasping**, can quietly reappear. The thought *"I have attained stream-entry"* may begin as a correct recognition of progress. But the mind can subtly turn it into something more: *"**I** am the person who has achieved this. It is **my** attainment. Aren't I clever."*

Notice what has happened. The conventional ***I*** can genuinely learn, practise and attain. Yet the mind may now imagine an independently existing ***I*** who owns the achievement. **This is self-grasping and ownership/possession at work. It takes a genuine transformation and turns it into evidence of a fixed self who has attained something.**

The Buddha is not denying the person's progress or the possibility of recognising it. He is questioning the additional sense of *I* and *mine* that can arise around that progress.

In Chapters 6 and 7, we learned not to grasp the Dharma or awakening as independent possessions. Chapter 9 takes the investigation further: **the mind may construct an independently existing *I* who claims the attainment as *mine*.** The achievement becomes another possession, and the imagined owner another bastion upon which the mind attempts to take a stand.

The same teaching applies to all four attainments

The Buddha repeats his question for the once-returner, non-returner and arhat. The repetition is important. We might accept that stream-entry is not an independently existing thing acquired by the practitioner, while imagining that the higher attainments must surely be different. After all, the arhat has completed the path to liberation.

But the Buddha applies the same reasoning to every stage. The once-returner has genuinely progressed. The non-returner has progressed further. The arhat has attained profound liberation. Yet none of these transformations creates a permanent spiritual identity.

And at every stage, the Buddha asks what the practitioner *thinks*: does the thought arise, *"I have attained"*?

This brings us back to our developing understanding of self-grasping. Consider someone pro-

gressing along the Buddhist path. Their ordinary attachments may gradually weaken. They may become less concerned with material possessions, reputation or recognition. Their understanding and conduct may genuinely improve.

But the mind can begin to construct a new identity around these very improvements:
- I am becoming a better Buddhist.
- My meditation has developed.
- I understand emptiness.
- I have made considerable spiritual progress.

These thoughts can simply acknowledge changes that have occurred. The difficulty begins when they become evidence of a more substantial *me*: someone who now possesses wisdom, virtue or attainment and subtly thinks '*Aren't I clever'*. **The object of grasping has changed, but the habit of constructing "me" and "mine" can remain.** This is particularly subtle because the spiritual progress may be entirely genuine. Self-grasping does not need to invent an achievement. It can appropriate something that has actually happened.

The Buddha's questions show why no stage of the path, however advanced, can be understood as an attainment possessed by an independently existing self.

Subhūti provides the crucial test

Subhūti now makes the teaching concrete. The Buddha has identified him as foremost among those who dwell without conflict. Subhūti acknowledges this and says: *"I am an arhat, free from passion."* Yet he immediately adds: *"The thought does not arise in me, 'I am an arhat, free from passion.'"*

This is the crucial apparent contradiction in Chapter 9. It becomes clearer if we read it through the same three-step pattern we have already met elsewhere in the *Sutra*.
First, conventionally, Subhūti is an arhat. His practice has brought about genuine liberation, and the designation is appropriate.
Second, when we examine that attainment ultimately, no independently existing self can be found who has acquired an independently existing thing called arhatship.
Third, precisely because this is so, the conventional designation remains usable. Subhūti can still be called an arhat, and can even say so himself, without turning that designation into a fixed identity.

So the teaching does **not** mean that an accomplished practitioner must be unaware of attainment or unable to speak about it. Nor does it mean that attainment is unreal.

The question concerns the **thought**: *"I have attained."* The problem lies in the way such a thought can be held. It can become the thought of a self who now possesses attainment as something belonging to it and be proud of:
This is what I have achieved.
This is what I now am. Aren't I clever.

That is where self-grasping can enter.

A genuine spiritual transformation may have occurred. But self-grasping can immediately try to claim it. The mind that once grasped at possessions, status or knowledge may now grasp at spiritual achievement. The vocabulary changes; the habit of appropriation can remain.

This is why the passage goes deeper than a warning against boasting. Someone might say, *"I am*

only a humble beginner," and still be quietly constructing a spiritual identity out of humility. Another person might acknowledge a real attainment without pride or self-grasping.

So the words by themselves do not settle the matter. What matters is the understanding behind them. Subhūti can recognise his attainment without constructing a self who possesses it. That is why the two statements can both be true:
Conventionally: *"I am an arhat."*
Ultimately: no independently existing self possesses arhatship.
Therefore: the appropriating thought *"I am an arhat"* does not arise in the grasping way the Buddha is examining.

This also explains why Subhūti is described as one who dwells without conflict. He does not dwell in the identity of *arhat*. He does not take up residence there and make it into something to defend.

So Chapter 9 is teaching several things together. Attainment is genuine. The designation is valid. But the designation must not harden into a self. That is how the chapter brings together attainment, emptiness and non-abiding in one of the *Sutra*'s clearest examples.

Progress without possession

This understanding protects us from two opposite mistakes.
The **first** is spiritual appropriation: *I have understood this. I have reached this level. My attainment establishes who I am.*
The **second** is concluding that because attainment is empty of independent existence, no genuine spiritual development occurs.

That would be equally mistaken.

Practice changes people. Understanding deepens. Harmful habits weaken. Compassion develops. Ignorance and grasping can be overcome. These are genuine changes arising through causes and conditions. Indeed, dependent arising helps explain why such transformation is possible. If the practitioner possessed an unchanging, independent nature, how could learning and practice fundamentally change them?

The process is much more dynamic: **Practice changes understanding. Changed understanding influences conduct. New actions and experiences create further conditions for change. The practitioner develops through the very process of practising.**

There is no unchanged person standing outside this process, accumulating spiritual achievements like possessions.

Conventionally, attainment is genuine: the practitioner has changed through practice. Ultimately, neither an independently existing attainment nor an unchanging self who possesses it can be found. These are not contradictory statements, but two ways of understanding the same transformation.

Dwelling nowhere

Subhūti concludes by saying that the Buddha calls him one who *dwells without conflict* precisely because he *dwells nowhere*. This takes us back to non-abiding and the instruction not to take a stand.

Dwelling nowhere does not mean having no home, no understanding or no commitments. It means that the mind does not establish itself upon a fixed identity or conception and make that

somewhere it must defend.

Subhūti does not need to establish himself as *the person who has attained arhatship*. His attainment is genuine, and he does not turn it into a permanent spiritual identity. We can see a practical connection between this freedom and the absence of conflict. Much of our ordinary conflict arises when something we regard as *mine* is threatened. Someone questions *my* judgement, challenges *my* opinions or criticises *my* achievements. If these have become important parts of my identity, I may experience the challenge as an attack upon myself.

I now have something to defend. The original disagreement may have been about a perfectly ordinary matter. But taking a stand and self-grasping have made it personal.

When we no longer need to defend a fixed conception of ourselves, some of the conditions from which anger and conflict arise are weakened. This does not mean abandoning our opinions or refusing to correct someone who is mistaken. The difference is that our understanding need not become an identity that must be protected.

Subhūti's freedom from conflict is therefore closely connected with his freedom from taking a stand and self-grasping.

“I understand emptiness”

There is a particularly subtle example of this in our own study of the Dharma. Suppose that through reading, discussion, reflection and meditation, I begin to understand emptiness more clearly. I can correctly recognise that my understanding has improved.

But a change can occur: *“I understand emptiness”* becomes *“I am a clever someone who understands emptiness.”*

There is nothing necessarily wrong with either statement. The difficulty begins when I make that understanding part of a fixed identity which I feel obliged to defend.

Suppose someone challenges my explanation or shows me that I have misunderstood something. If I am attached to my identity as someone who understands the Dharma, admitting an error may become uncomfortable. Instead of examining the criticism, I may defend my position.

An understanding that should help free the mind from grasping has now become an obstacle to further understanding.

This brings together two important teachings of the *Diamond Sutra*.
First, self-grasping can quietly appropriate even our genuine progress in wisdom.
Second, non-abiding requires us not to settle permanently upon what we have understood. Our present understanding may be valuable and correct as far as it goes, but it remains open to further examination and development.

We need not deny our progress or abandon confidence in what we have learned. **We can recognise what we know, while remaining willing to discover what we have not yet understood.**

What Chapter 9 has taught us

The Buddha's repeated questions about the four stages of attainment are not intended to deny spiritual progress. Nor are they simply lessons in humility. They ask us to examine what attainment means and how the practitioner understands it.

The chapter brings several of our Main Teachings together.

Ownership and Possession: The practitioner undergoes genuine transformation, but does not acquire an independently existing spiritual object.

Dependent arising and the Two Truths: Practice changes understanding, conduct and the conditions that sustain suffering. Conventionally, attainment is real. Ultimately, neither a fixed attainer nor an independently existing attainment can be found.

The Three-Step Formula: We can recognise someone as an arhat, discover that no inherently existing arhat can be found, and still correctly call that person an arhat. What changes is our understanding of the designation, not the reality of spiritual progress.

Self-grasping: Even genuine progress can become the basis for constructing a more substantial *I*: *my wisdom, my achievement, my attainment*.

Non-abiding: The practitioner can recognise attainment without making it a permanent identity or somewhere for the mind to stand.

Subhūti brings these teachings together in his apparently contradictory statements. He acknowledges that he is an arhat, yet the appropriating thought *"I am an arhat"* does not arise in him. There can be genuine spiritual attainment without an independently existing attainer, and progress without turning that progress into a possession.

The Buddha does not simply say that the practitioner has no independent existence. He goes further and examines how a genuine transformation can be appropriated as ***mine***.

That gives us a clear progression: *Genuine attainment → my attainment → an imagined independently existing owner → the need to defend that identity.*

Chapter 10 continues the investigation, turning to what we receive from teachers, the creation of Buddha-fields and the instruction to arouse a mind that settles nowhere.

Translation notes

Srotaāpanna, sakṛdāgāmin, anāgāmin and arhat are rendered stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner and arhat. Phala is "fruit," preserving the language of maturation. The brief definitions here do not replace the detailed traditional accounts of each stage.

Araṇāvihārin is rendered "one who dwells without conflict." Other translations may emphasise peace or freedom from contention. Ātmagrāha is "grasping at self," a stronger expression than merely employing a personal pronoun.

DSBC prints sa where the once-returner's repeated answer requires na, "not." The translation corrects this apparent transcription error; GRETIL's corresponding passage explicitly has the negative. This is an editorial correction, not a claim that the uncorrected wording says the same thing.

Chapter 10 A mind that settles nowhere

The Blessed One asked:
"Was there any dharma that the Tathāgata took up
from Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened?"

"No, Blessed One.
There was no dharma the Tathāgata took up from Dīpaṃkara."

The Blessed One said:
"A bodhisattva who said,
'I shall bring about the adornments of Buddha fields,'
would speak falsely.
For the adornments of fields spoken of by the Tathāgata
have been spoken of as no adornments.
That is why they are called adornments of fields.

"Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
should give rise to a mind that does not settle,
a mind that does not settle anywhere:
not on form,
not on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind.

"Suppose a person had a vast body,
an embodiment as great as Sumeru, king of mountains.
Would that embodiment be great?"

“Great, Blessed One—great, Well-Gone One.
For what the Tathāgata calls an embodiment
he has spoken of as no entity.
That is why it is called an embodiment.
It is neither an entity nor a non-entity;
that is why it is called an embodiment.”

Chapter 9 examined the danger of turning spiritual attainment into something **possessed** by a **fixed self**. Chapter 10 carries the investigation further. The Buddha considers three things: what we receive from a teacher, what we undertake to accomplish for others, and the nature of an apparently enormous embodiment.

Between these examples comes the chapter's central instruction: *“A bodhisattva, a great being, **should give rise to a mind that does not settle, a mind that does not settle anywhere**.”*

This is a remarkable instruction. The bodhisattva is asked to develop a powerful intention while refusing to make that intention into something fixed upon which the mind can stand. To understand it, we need to follow the Buddha's questions.

Dīpaṃkara: learning without acquiring a possession

The Buddha begins by asking whether he took up any dharma from the earlier Buddha Dīpaṃkara. Subhūti answers ***no***.

Why would the Buddha ask this? Surely learning from a Buddha is one of the most valuable things a practitioner can do. The answer becomes clearer if we distinguish between **receiving a teaching** and **acquiring an <u>independently</u> existing thing**.

A teacher can explain the Dharma, demonstrate how to practise, challenge mistaken views and guide a student's understanding. The student listens, reflects, meditates and gradually develops wisdom. Something genuine has happened. The student's understanding changes. There is *no separate object called awakening that the teacher possesses and transfers to the student.*

Consider learning a skill from an accomplished teacher. At first, we may be unable to recognise what the teacher is doing. With guidance and practice, our perception, understanding and abilities develop. The teacher has helped bring about that transformation. Yet *what has changed cannot be reduced to a possession handed from one person to another.*

The Buddha's question about Dīpaṃkara directs us towards this distinction. *The Dharma can be taught and learned. Wisdom can develop. The teacher's contribution can be indispensable*. **What cannot be found is an independently existing attainment transferred from teacher to student <u>as a ‘possession’</u>**.

This continues Chapter 9's teaching about genuine transformation. Chapter 10 now extends it to the relationship through which understanding is developed. *The teacher, the student, the teaching and the process of learning all arise <u>dependently</u>. None stands outside the conditions through which the others function.*

Buddha-fields: working to transform the world

The Buddha next considers a bodhisattva who says: *“I shall bring about the adornments of Buddha fields.”* He says that such a bodhisattva would speak falsely. At first this seems surprising. *Isn't creating conditions favourable to awakening exactly what a bodhisattva should do?* A Buddha-field is traditionally understood as a realm or environment associated with a Buddha and conducive to spiritual development.

We can approach the meaning through a more familiar example. Imagine a group of people establishing a Buddhist study and practice community. They arrange a suitable place to meet, organise

teaching, support meditation and encourage ethical conduct and compassion. They are creating conditions in which people can learn and develop wisdom. Thich Nhat Hanh uses this kind of example in his commentary. A teacher may establish a peaceful practice community but eventually become attached to the institution itself.

There are two important questions here.

First, how does the community come into existence? It depends upon the people involved, their intentions, their knowledge and abilities, the resources available, the circumstances in which they work and the continuing relationships between them. The founder does not stand outside this process as an independent creator. Indeed, the founder's own understanding and abilities may change through the work. *The community is a dependently arisen undertaking*.

Second, what happens when the work becomes something the founder 'possesses'?

A person may begin with the sincere intention of helping others. But gradually the thought may arise: *I created this community. It is my achievement. I know how it should operate.* Now the project may begin to support a **fixed identity *I***.

If circumstances change, or other people suggest improvements, the founder may resist because changing the community threatens the achievement with which he/she is identify. An institution originally established to help people can become something that people are expected to protect. Now *self-grasping* and *possession* may have entered a genuinely compassionate activity. The Buddha's warning does not mean that creating beneficial environments is mistaken. Rather, it challenges the idea of *an independently existing creator bringing about independently existing results*.

There is a deeper lesson here than simply avoiding *pride and ownership* in our achievements. **Compassion** gives the work its purpose: helping people develop towards awakening. **Wisdom** recognises the people involved, their needs and the circumstances in which they practise are continually changing. **Skilful means** allows us to adapt our actions to those changing conditions. Understanding *dependent arising* does more than loosen our attachment to what we have created. It can make our compassionate action more responsive and effective. We remain committed to helping others without *becoming attached to a fixed idea of what that help must look like or taking possesson of our achievement*.

Adornments are no adornments

The Buddha makes his meaning clearer through another application of the Three-Step Formula: *"For the adornments of fields spoken of by the Tathāgata have been spoken of as no adornments. That is why they are called adornments of fields."*

We can now examine the three steps.

- **First — Adornments:** A bodhisattva can genuinely help create conditions favourable to awakening. Such work is valuable and meaningful.
- **Second — No adornments:** *No independently existing adornments can be found*. The qualities of a Buddha-field depend upon causes, conditions, relationships, actions and the way those conditions are experienced and understood.
- **Third — Therefore called adornments:** We can continue to speak of creating or adorning Buddha-fields, recognising that these activities and their results exist dependently.

The Three-Step Formula does not destroy the bodhisattva's work. It changes our understanding

of what that work is.

The result is not less commitment, but a more responsive form of commitment. **The bodhisattva works to transform conditions *without treating either the work or its results* as independently existing possessions.**

Arousing a mind that settles nowhere

We now come to the central instruction of Chapter 10: *"Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being, should **give rise to a mind that does not settle, a mind that does not settle anywhere**."*

There is an apparent contradiction here. How can we deliberately cultivate a mind directed towards awakening while ensuring that it does not settle anywhere? Two parts of this instruction deserve equal attention.

A. Give rise to a mind.

The bodhisattva *must actively cultivate the intention to awaken for the benefit of beings*. This is not a passive state. It involves commitment, generosity, ethical conduct, meditation, wisdom skilful means and sustained compassionate action.

B. Do not settle *anywhere*.

The mind must not establish itself upon some fixed conception of the practitioner, the beings being helped, the action undertaken or the expected result. Nor should it settle upon forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things or objects of mind, which together encompass our sensory and mental experience.

This does not mean abandoning thought, judgement or commitment. Rather, it concerns how we relate to them. *We can hold a commitment firmly without turning it into an unchanging position. We can act decisively without becoming attached to our particular methods or expectations. We can recognise achievements without constructing an identity around them.*

This is ***non-abiding* in practice**. The distinction is important. The Buddha is not telling the bodhisattva to give up the intention to help others. Nor is he suggesting that the mind should become empty of purpose. Instead, the mind remains fully engaged in **compassionate** action without ***grasping*** at the people, concepts and experiences involved. The relationship with **wisdom** and **skilful means** now becomes clear. Because people and circumstances arise dependently, our understanding and responses must remain open to change. *Non-abiding allows compassion to respond to what is actually needed rather than what our fixed expectations demand*.

The bodhisattva's commitment remains wholehearted. What is relinquished is the *grasping* that would turn that commitment into somewhere for the mind to *stand*. Thus answering Subhūti's question in Chapter 2 about how the bodhisattva should abide: **the bodhisattva can be completely committed to the path *without needing any fixed foundation upon which to establish the mind*.**

The vast body: neither an entity nor a non-entity

The chapter ends with another apparently puzzling question. The Buddha asks us to imagine an embodiment as vast as Mount Sumeru, the great mountain at the centre of traditional Buddhist cosmology. Would such an embodiment be great?

Subhūti answers yes. But he immediately applies the ***Three-Step Formula***: *"For what the Tathāgata calls an embodiment he has spoken of as no entity. That is why it is called an embodiment."*

And then comes an important addition: *"It is neither an entity nor a non-entity."*

Why introduce this enormous body after the discussion of learning, Buddha-fields and non-abiding? I think the example widens the investigation. *Something may be unimaginably great, yet its magnitude does not change the way it exists.*

Consider an ordinary human body. It depends upon organs, tissues, biological processes, food, air, environment, other people and countless other causes and conditions. None of these, taken independently, constitutes the whole person or embodiment. Nor can we find a separate, independently existing body apart from all the conditions through which it exists and functions.

Making the body as vast as Mount Sumeru does not alter this relationship. It may be enormous, yet it is *dependently arisen*. The additional words *"neither an entity nor a non-entity"* are particularly important because they protect us from two opposite errors.

- If we regard the embodiment as an independently existing entity, we attribute to it a fixed nature that cannot be found.
- But if we conclude that the embodiment does not exist at all, we deny the conventional reality that Subhūti has just acknowledged.

The Buddha rejects both extremes. **An *embodiment exists conventionally, but not independently. Its emptiness does not make it nonexistent.***

This is the Middle Way expressed through the ***Two Truth***s.

- **Conventionally**, the embodiment can be identified and described. Its size can be compared with other things.
- **Ultimately**, when examined for an independent essence, no such essence can be found.

These are not contradictory claims. They concern the same dependently arisen embodiment understood in two different ways.

Nor does the Buddha propose some mysterious third kind of existence between existence and non-existence. Rather, he shows that the alternatives have been framed incorrectly. We may assume that something must either exist independently or not exist at all. Dependent arising gives us another understanding: *something can exist and function without existing independently.*

This is why the *Sutra* can continue to call it an embodiment.

And the lesson applies just as readily to the bodhisattva's undertakings. *A vast achievement does **not** become **independently real simply because it is vast**.* The greater the achievement, the more important it may be to remember its dependence upon causes and conditions.

What Chapter 10 has taught us

Chapter 10 brings together several of our Main Teachings.

- The exchange about Dīpaṃkara shows that wisdom can develop through learning *without awakening becoming an independently existing object transferred from teacher to student*.
- The Buddha-field example shows how **wisdom**, *compassionate action and skilful means* can transform the world.
- While the **Three-Step Formula** prevents us from treating the work, its results or its creator as *independently existing*.
- The instruction to arouse a mind that settles nowhere brings **non-abiding** into the centre of the bodhisattva's practice. Commitment does not require attachment to fixed concepts, methods or identities.

- The vast-body example returns us to dependent arising and the **Two Truths**. Even something unimaginably great can exist conventionally without possessing an independent nature.
- **Self-grasping** remains a danger throughout these activities. We can identify ourselves with what we have learned, what we have created or what we have become.

The Buddha does not ask us to abandon any of these activities. *Learn from teachers. Cultivate wisdom. Work for the welfare of beings. Create beneficial conditions. Recognise genuine progress.* Do all of this ***without requiring anything received, created or achieved to become an independently existing possession or a permanent foundation for the self***. That is the force of the chapter's central instruction: **Arouse the mind of awakening, but do not let that mind settle anywhere**.

The next chapters return to the extraordinary value of receiving, understanding and transmitting the Dharma. They ask why a teaching that must not be grasped can nevertheless produce such immeasurable merit.

Translation notes

Kṣetravyūha is the arrangement, splendour or adornment of a field, understood here as a Buddha field. “Buddha” is explanatory in the English expression; the compound itself says “field.” Dīpaṃkara is the name of an earlier Buddha.

Ātmabhāva here means embodiment or bodily individuality, not an assertion of an eternal ātman. The phrase “neither an entity nor a non-entity” follows DSBC’s na ... bhāvo nābhāvaḥ. It prevents “no entity” from being too quickly translated into sheer nonexistence.

Why does the Buddha repeatedly praise even four lines of the Dharma?

Because their transmission can help beings develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.

Chapters 11–16 repeatedly return to an extraordinary claim: ***receiving, understanding and transmitting*** even a small part of the *Diamond Sutra* produces greater merit than unimaginably vast acts of material generosity. Even worlds filled with treasure, or the repeated sacrifice of one's own body, are said to be outweighed by transmitting this teaching.

Why does the Buddha place such exceptional value upon it?

Chapter 8 has already provided the central answer. **Transmission of the Dharma enables beings to encounter the teaching, develop wisdom and ultimately overcome the ignorance that keeps them bound to saṃsāra.** The extraordinary value of transmitting even four lines lies in the possibility of helping beings towards liberation.

These chapters do more than repeat that comparison.

- **Chapters 11 and 12** emphasise the merit of transmitting the Dharma and the reverence due to places where it is taught.
- **Chapter 15** emphasises the importance of receiving, preserving and transmitting the teaching, without allowing that responsibility to become an identity of spiritual superiority.
- **Chapter 16** again praises the immeasurable merit of receiving, preserving and transmitting the Dharma, while warning that those who undertake this work may encounter contempt and hardship. The value of transmitting the teaching is not measured by the worldly rewards received by those who practise it.

Chapters 11 and 12 The Scale of Merit and the Presence of the Teaching

Chapter 11.
The Blessed One asked:
"Suppose there were as many Ganges rivers
as there are grains of sand in the great river Ganges.
Would the sands of all those rivers be many?"

"Even those rivers would be many, Blessed One;
how much more the sands within them."

"I tell you, Subhūti; I make this known to you.
If a woman or man filled as many world systems
as there were sands in those rivers
with the seven treasures,
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would the resulting merit be great?"

"Great, Blessed One—great, Well-Gone One,
immeasurable and incalculable."

"Yet a son or daughter of good family
who took up even a four-line verse from this discourse
and taught and explained it to others
would produce a still greater mass of merit,
immeasurable and incalculable,
than one who made that gift of worlds filled with treasures."

Chapter 11 — Transmission Beyond All Measure

Chapter 11 returns to the extraordinary comparison introduced in Chapter 8. The Buddha has already declared that transmitting even four lines of the Dharma produces greater merit than offering an immense quantity of treasure to the Buddhas.

Now he makes the comparison almost unimaginably large. Imagine as many Ganges rivers as there are grains of sand in the Ganges itself. Then imagine counting every grain of sand in all those rivers. Suppose there were that many world systems, each filled with the seven treasures, and someone offered all that treasure to the Buddhas.

Subhūti acknowledges that the resulting merit would be immeasurable and incalculable. Y***et the Buddha again declares that someone who receives even four lines of the Diamond Sutra and teaches and explains them to others produces still greater merit.*** Why repeat the comparison, and why increase the quantities to such extraordinary proportions?

Beyond the measurement of generosity

The Buddha is extending the comparison beyond anything we can meaningfully calculate. We can imagine doubling the value of a gift, or multiplying it a thousandfold. We cannot meaningfully comprehend the quantity of treasure he now describes. And the comparison concerns offerings to the Buddhas themselves, acts of extraordinary merit within Buddhist practice.

The Buddha does not deny the value of these offerings. Subhūti has explicitly acknowledged their immeasurable merit. **The Buddha is directing our attention towards something whose importance cannot be measured by the quantity or value of what is given.** Chapter 8 has already helped us understand why.

The greater purpose of transmission

The bodhisattva undertakes the liberation of ***all*** beings. To fulfil that commitment, beings must have opportunities to encounter the Dharma and develop the wisdom through which ignorance can be overcome. The teaching must therefore be communicated, preserved and made available to future generations.

Consider what may happen when someone first encounters four lines of the Diamond Sutra. Those few lines may initially make little sense. The listener interprets them through existing knowledge, experiences, expectations and deeply established beliefs. Some of those beliefs may even prevent their meaning from being recognised.

Yet the teaching has been encountered. It may be remembered, reflected upon and examined

again. With further study, meditation and practice, understanding can gradually develop. Eventually, what was initially only an unfamiliar idea may contribute to the wisdom through which the mistaken conception of an independently existing self is weakened and ultimately eliminated.

That transformation is not guaranteed by merely hearing four lines. **The transmission creates an opportunity for wisdom to develop**.

And that opportunity need not end with the first recipient. Someone who has received and understood the Dharma may eventually become capable of teaching it to others. The teaching can then reach beings who would otherwise have had no opportunity to encounter it. In this way, transmission can continue across generations, providing the conditions through which increasing numbers of beings may develop towards liberation.

Why the enormous comparison matters

The Buddha's imagined treasure has been multiplied beyond anything we can calculate. Yet it remains a comparison based upon quantity. The extraordinary significance of transmitting the Dharma lies elsewhere. An offering of treasure is an immensely meritorious act. *The transmission of wisdom can contribute to the elimination of the ignorance through which beings remain bound to saṃsāra.*

The Buddha is not asking us to calculate how many future beings might benefit from four lines, or how much merit each might produce. He is showing us that *the value of opening a path towards liberation cannot be understood simply by measuring what has been given.*

This also explains why he repeatedly praises the merit of receiving, preserving and transmitting the teaching. That merit is genuine and extraordinary. Its significance is closely connected with the possibility of helping beings develop the wisdom necessary for liberation.

Chapter 11 therefore reinforces the central teaching of Chapter 8: transmitting even a small part of the Dharma can have consequences extending far beyond the immediate act of teaching.

Chapter 12 takes the discussion further. If transmission is so important, what significance should we attach to the people and places through which the Dharma continues to be taught?

> ***Chapter 12.***
> *“Moreover, Subhūti,*
> *wherever even a four-line verse from this discourse*
> *is taken up, spoken or explained,*
> *that place becomes a shrine*
> *for the world with its gods, human beings and asuras.*
>
> *“How much more is this so*
> *for those who retain the whole discourse,*
> *recite it, master it,*
> *and explain it fully to others.*
> *They will possess something supremely wonderful.*
>
> *“In that place the Teacher dwells,*
> *or a discerning person worthy of a teacher’s place.”*

Chapter 12 — Where the Dharma Is Transmitted

Chapter 12 introduces another remarkable development in the Buddha's teaching. He repeatedly explain the extraordinary value of receiving and transmitting even four lines of the Diamond Sutra. Now he declares that ***wherever those lines are taken up, spoken or explained, that place becomes a shrine, worthy of reverence from gods, human beings and asuras.***

He goes further. Where the entire discourse is retained, recited, mastered and explained, something supremely wonderful is present.
“In that place the Teacher dwells,
or a discerning person worthy of a teacher's place.”

Why should transmitting the Dharma make a place worthy of such extraordinary reverence?

The Dharma continues beyond the Buddha's lifetime

Chapter 6 raised an important question: will beings in future generations still be capable of recognising the truth of the Dharma? The Buddha assured Subhūti that they would.

Yet those future generations will not have the opportunity to sit before the historical Buddha and listen to him explain his teaching. They must receive it through those who have preserved, practised and transmitted it.

*The Dharma **must** continue beyond the lifetime of the teacher.* A teaching that disappears cannot guide future practitioners. A teaching that is preserved and passed on can continue to provide the conditions through which wisdom develops. This helps us understand the Buddha's emphasis upon receiving, retaining, reciting, mastering and explaining the Dharma.

These activities are related, yet they are not identical. Hearing or reading makes the teaching available to the mind. Retaining and reciting preserve its words. Reflection and study develop understanding. Meditation and practice can eventually transform intellectual understanding into realised wisdom. *Explaining the teaching to others allows this process to begin again.*

In the Buddha's time, when teachings were transmitted orally, remembering, reciting and explaining were especially important. Without the continuing work of practitioners, the teaching could disappear. The Buddha is therefore identifying something essential to the bodhisattva's undertaking: ***the Dharma must be preserved and transmitted so that future beings can encounter the path towards liberation***.

Why does the place become a shrine?

A shrine is not simply a convenient place to assemble. In Buddhist practice, it is a place worthy of reverence, offerings and devotion.

The Buddha's statement therefore goes beyond saying that a meeting place is useful. He declares that wherever the Dharma is taught, something worthy of profound reverence is present. To understand this, consider an ordinary room in which a teacher explains the Diamond Sutra to a group of practitioners. The room itself may be unremarkable. Yet within it, people may encounter teachings that challenge their most deeply established assumptions about themselves and the world.

Some may hear those teachings without understanding them. Others may recognise something they have previously overlooked. For some, the encounter may become an important condition for developing the wisdom through which ignorance is eventually overcome. The room has become a place where the Dharma is transmitted and the possibility of liberation is made available to beings.

This helps explain its extraordinary significance. The Buddha is not merely identifying a useful meeting place. ***He is asking us to recognise and honour the presence of the Dharma wherever it is genuinely preserved and taught.***

In that place the Teacher dwells

The final statement takes this teaching further:
“In that place the Teacher dwells,
or a discerning person worthy of a teacher's place.”

The Buddha's physical life will end. Yet his teaching can continue to be heard, understood and practised. A later teacher does not need to be a Buddha to help others develop understanding. Through knowledge, experience, wisdom and skilful means, that teacher may make the Dharma available to people who would otherwise have no opportunity to encounter it.

Nor does the teaching pass from one person to another like an independently existing object. The teacher explains, the listener interprets, questions and reflects, and understanding may gradually develop through those relationships. We examined this distinction in Chapter 10, when the Buddha asked whether he had acquired any dharma from Dīpaṃkara.

The Buddha now shows us another aspect of the same process: the teaching can continue to perform its liberating work long after the original teacher is no longer physically present. The statement that the Teacher dwells wherever the Dharma is taught also carries a profound devotional meaning. The Buddha is declaring that such places deserve the reverence normally associated with his presence.

We should not reduce this declaration to a casual metaphor. Nor does it require us to conclude that every person who recites the Sutra has become a Buddha. ***The extraordinary value lies in the continuing presence and availability of the Buddha's teaching, through which beings may develop towards liberation.***

Reverence and dependent arising

There is one further point to consider. A place where the Dharma is transmitted does not thereby acquire an independently existing sacred essence. Its significance arises through its relationship with the teaching, the people who preserve and communicate it, those who receive it, and the possibilities for spiritual development that these activities create.

The ***Two Truths*** help us understand this.

- **Conventionally**, a place associated with the transmission of the Dharma can genuinely be worthy of reverence.
- **Ultimately**, no independently existing sacredness can be found in the place itself.

These understandings do not contradict one another. The Buddha can encourage profound reverence for the place without implying that its sacredness exists independently.

What Chapter 12 adds

Chapter 11 explained why transmitting even a small part of the Dharma has extraordinary value.

Chapter 12 shows how that transmission enables the Buddha's teaching to remain present in the world. The people who receive, preserve, practise and explain the Dharma become part of a continuing process through which future beings can encounter the path. The places where this occurs are therefore worthy of profound respect.

And the Buddha's statement that the Teacher dwells there expresses the extraordinary importance of that continuing transmission. The Buddha's physical presence is temporary. Through the transmission of the Dharma, his teaching can continue to guide beings towards liberation.

This is an interesting progression: Chapter 8 establishes why transmission matters, Chapter 11 reinforces its extraordinary value, and Chapter 12 explains how the teaching remains available through the people and places that preserve it.

Translation notes

Gaṅgā is the Ganges. The multiplying comparison is retained in its successive stages; it is not converted into a precise astronomical count. “Immeasurable and incalculable” renders aprameya and asaṃkhyeya as qualitative descriptions here.

Caitya is a shrine or sacred monument. “Becomes a shrine” retains the text’s devotional claim rather than reducing it to a metaphor for a pleasant study space. The final phrase of chapter 12 describes a discerning person worthy of a teacher’s position; it does not necessarily mean that any reader becomes a Buddha. Dhārayati, vācayati and paryavāpnoti are rendered “retain,” “recite” and “master,” retaining their oral and educational setting.

Chapter 13 Even Perfection of Wisdom is a Name

Subhūti asked:
“What is the name of this discourse, Blessed One?
How should I retain it?”

The Blessed One said:
“This discourse is called the Perfection of Wisdom.
Retain it by that name.
For what the Tathāgata has called the perfection of wisdom
he has spoken of as no perfection.
That is why it is called the perfection of wisdom.

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma the Tathāgata has spoken?”
“No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma.”

“Would the dust of the earth
in this great threefold thousandfold world system be much?”

“Much, Blessed One—much, Well-Gone One.
For the dust of the earth spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no dust.
That is why it is called the dust of the earth.
The world system he has spoken of is no system;
that is why it is called a world system.”

“Is the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
to be seen through the thirty-two marks of a great person?”

“No, Blessed One.
The Tathāgata is not to be seen through those marks.
For the thirty-two marks spoken of by the Tathāgata
have been spoken of as no marks.
That is why they are called the thirty-two marks.”

The Blessed One said:
“If a woman or man gave up bodies
as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, day after day,
and continued for ages as numerous as those sands,
and another took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse and taught and explained it to others,
the latter would produce greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.”

Having established the extraordinary value of transmitting the Dharma in Chapters 11 and 12, the Buddha now turns his examination upon the teaching itself.

Subhūti asks what the discourse should be called. The Buddha answers: *“This discourse is called the Perfection of Wisdom.”* He immediately adds: *“For what the Tathāgata has called the perfection of wisdom he has spoken of as no perfection. That is why it is called the perfection of wisdom.”*

Here is our familiar Three-Step Formula:
Perfection of Wisdom → no independently existing perfection → therefore called the Perfection of Wisdom.

The *Diamond* is profoundly valuable, but its value does not establish it as something with an independent, inherent nature. We can name it, study it, practise it and transmit it without turning it into something fixed upon which the mind takes a stand.

The Buddha then asks whether he has taught any dharma. Subhūti replies that there is no **such** dharma. As in Chapter 7, this does not deny that the Buddha teaches. Rather, no independently existing thing called the teaching can be isolated from the teacher, the listener, the words and the conditions through which understanding develops. We will examine this again in Chapter 21.

The Buddha next applies the Three-Step Formula to dust, world systems and the thirty-two marks of a Buddha. The marks introduce the teaching of signlessness that we examined in Chapter 5. They may allow us to recognise the Buddha, but they cannot establish what the Buddha ultimately is. **A sign can identify something without revealing an independently existing essence. It may tell us what to call the thing, but not what the thing is in its full reality.**

The range is striking. From the smallest particles to an immense world system, from the Buddha's physical appearance to the Perfection of Wisdom itself, nothing is exempt from dependent arising and emptiness.

Finally, the Buddha returns to the extraordinary value of transmitting even four lines of the Dharma. He now compares this with sacrificing one's own body repeatedly over an immense period of time. Even such extraordinary sacrifice is said to produce less merit than transmitting the teaching. As we discovered in Chapter 8, the significance lies in the Dharma's capacity to help beings develop the wisdom necessary for liberation. The Buddha is again directing our attention beyond the magnitude of what is sacrificed to the extraordinary consequences that transmitting the Dharma can make possible.

Chapter 13 therefore brings us back to a central distinction: we can recognise the extraordinary value of the Dharma without treating it (or our understanding of it) as independently existing. Nothing receives special exemption from emptiness: not even the Buddha's marks, the smallest or largest phenomena, or the Perfection of Wisdom itself.

Translation notes

The title given within this chapter is prajñāpāramitā, “perfection of wisdom.” The DSBC heading and closing colophon additionally identify the Vajra Cutter. Chapter titles in this document are editorial aids, not ancient Sanskrit chapter headings.

The negative is apāramitā, “no perfection,” not explicitly “no wisdom.” This matters when comparing the wording of translations. In the reply about the thirty-two marks, DSBC appears to omit na before its repeated assertion. A negative has been supplied, consistent with the opening “No,” the explanation and GRETIL’s parallel denial. Ātmabhāva in the giving passage refers to bodies or embodied lives.

Chapter 14 Beyond Self-Conception: The Perfection of Patience

Then the force of the Dharma moved Subhūti to tears.
Wiping them away, he said:

“Wonderful, Blessed One—most wonderful, Well-Gone One—
that the Tathāgata has spoken this discourse
for beings setting out in the foremost vehicle,
the most excellent vehicle.
Since understanding arose in me,
I have never before heard such a discourse.

“Those bodhisattvas will possess something supremely wonderful
who hear this sutra and give rise to a conception of truth.
For that conception of truth is no conception of truth.
That is why the Tathāgata speaks of a conception of truth.

“It is no wonder that I understand and trust this teaching.
But those beings in the future, in the last time,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who take it up, retain it, recite it, master it,
and explain it fully to others—
they will be supremely wonderful.

“No conception of a self, a being, a living self,
or a person will arise in them;
neither any conception nor absence of conception.
For a conception of self is no conception;
a conception of a being, a living self or a person
is no conception.
The Buddhas, the Blessed Ones,
have gone beyond all conceptions.”

The Blessed One said:
“So it is, Subhūti.
Those who hear this sutra
without trembling, alarm or terror
will possess something supremely wonderful.

“For the supreme perfection spoken of by the Tathāgata
is no perfection.
What he calls the supreme perfection
is spoken of by immeasurable Buddhas, Blessed Ones.
That is why it is called the supreme perfection.

"Moreover, the Tathāgata's perfection of patience
is no perfection.
When King Kali cut the flesh from my limbs,
no conception of a self, a being, a living self
or a person was present in me;
neither any conception nor absence of conception.

"If a conception of self had been present,
a conception of ill will would also have been present.
If a conception of a being, a living self or a person
had been present, ill will would also have been present.

"I remember five hundred former lives
when I was the sage who taught patience.
Then too, no conception of self, being, living self
or person was present in me.

"Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
should relinquish all conceptions
and arouse the mind of unsurpassed complete awakening.

"That mind should not settle on form,
or on sounds, smells, tastes, tangible things,
or objects of mind;
not on dharmas, not on non-dharmas,
not anywhere.
For what is settled is itself unsettled.

"That is why the Tathāgata says:
A bodhisattva should give without taking a stand,
without taking a stand on form, sounds, smells,
tastes, touch or objects of mind.

"Such giving should be undertaken
for the benefit of all beings.
For the conception of a being is no conception,
and all those beings spoken of by the Tathāgata
are no beings.

"The Tathāgata speaks what is real, speaks what is true,
speaks of things as they are, not otherwise;
the Tathāgata does not speak falsely.

"Yet in the dharma the Tathāgata has realised,
taught and contemplated,
there is neither truth nor falsehood.

"A bodhisattva who gives while caught in things
is like a person who has entered darkness
and can see nothing.
A bodhisattva who gives without being caught in things
is like a person with eyes,
when night has ended and the sun has risen,
seeing the many forms around them.

"Those sons and daughters of good family
who take up this discourse, retain it, recite it,
master it and explain it fully to others
are known by the Tathāgata with Buddha knowledge,
seen with the Buddha eye, and understood.
They will all produce and receive
an immeasurable, incalculable mass of merit."

Chapter 14 marks an important development in the *Diamond Sutra*. Until now, much of our investigation has concerned how we understand beings, appearances, generosity, the Dharma and spiritual attainment. Now the Buddha brings these teachings into one of the most difficult areas of human experience: **what happens when we are hurt by another person?**

The chapter shows that emptiness is not simply a philosophical understanding. It can change how we experience suffering, anger and conflict, and how we respond to others.

Subhūti is moved to tears

Chapter 14 begins unusually. Subhūti is so deeply moved by the teaching that he weeps. Something has affected him beyond ordinary intellectual agreement. He recognises the extraordinary significance of what the Buddha has taught and praises those who will understand and preserve it in future generations.

Yet Subhūti immediately introduces another paradox: *"For that conception of truth is no conception of truth. That is why the Tathāgata speaks of a conception of truth."*

Here is our **Three-Step Formula** applied to understanding itself.

A practitioner may genuinely recognise the truth of the Dharma. Such understanding is valuable and can transform their practice. But a *conception of truth* is still a conception. It arises through hearing, reflection, language, experience and other conditions. It must not be mistaken for an independently existing truth captured completely within an idea. We can therefore recognise a conception as useful and meaningful without grasping it as an ultimate possession.

This is especially important when we begin to understand emptiness. The thought *"Now I understand the truth"* can become another place for the mind to stand *(or gloat)*. Wisdom must therefore include the willingness to release even the concepts through which wisdom has developed.

When Subhūti speaks of going beyond conceptions, he is not asking us to stop thinking or abandon discernment. Nor does the phrase *"neither conception nor absence of conception"* mean that

awakening is unconsciousness. Rather, the practitioner learns to use concepts without mistaking them for independent realities or grasping at their absence as another fixed position.

The Buddha then turns to the perfection of patience.

King Kali and the perfection of patience

The Buddha recalls a former life in which King Kali cut the flesh from his limbs. The story describes an act of extraordinary cruelty, yet the Buddha says that no conception of a self, a being, a living self or a person was present in him.

He then makes a remarkable statement: *"If a conception of self had been present, a conception of ill will would also have been present."*

This is one of the most important statements in the Diamond Sutra. **The Buddha is saying that the mistaken conception of an independently existing self was completely absent.** *Consequently, the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise.*

For those of us still learning, self-grasping and self-cherishing help explain why this is so significant. They show how the mistaken conception of ***self*** influences our experience of injury, our reactions to others and the anger that may arise.

Self-grasping is our deeply rooted tendency to experience ourselves as a solid, independently existing *I*. We ordinarily feel that there is a definite *me* at the centre of our experiences: the one who thinks, acts, succeeds, fails, suffers and possesses this body and mind.

Yet when Buddhist wisdom examines this apparently solid self, no such independently existing *I* can be found. There is a person who thinks, acts and experiences suffering, but that person exists dependently, through changing physical and mental processes and countless other conditions.

The mistake lies in grasping at the person as though there were an additional, independent self behind these processes.

Self-cherishing is something different. It is our tendency to regard this *me* and its interests as especially important. We protect our happiness, defend our reputation, value our achievements and resist whatever threatens our sense of ourselves. Self-cherishing is closely connected with selfishness, jealousy, competitiveness, boasting, pride and resentment. It can also make criticism or disappointment feel like personal injury.

The distinction becomes clearer through an ordinary example. Suppose someone criticises me unfairly. I hear the words and recognise that they are unkind or mistaken.

But almost immediately another response may arise:

- *How dare you speak to me like that?*
- *You have insulted me.*
- *I have been treated unfairly.*

Notice what is happening.

- Through **self-grasping**, the *I* can appear as something particularly solid and real: *me*, the person who has been attacked.
- Through **self-cherishing**, the attack becomes especially important because it threatens someone whose dignity, reputation and happiness I place at the centre of my concern.

The two tendencies can reinforce one another. The stronger the sense of a solid *me*, and the more importance I attach to defending that *me*, the more readily resentment and anger may arise. I may

then repeat the criticism in my mind over and over and strengthen my judgement of the other person. The original words may have lasted only a few seconds, but the resentment can continue for days or even years.

We can now return to King Kali.

The Buddha describes a former life in which his body suffered terrible torture, but the conception of self was absent. He did not grasp at the experience as an injury inflicted upon a solid, independently existing *me*. Consequently, in the account he gives, the ill will that would have arisen from that conception did not arise. **There was physical injury, but no grasping at a solid self whose injury demanded hatred or retaliation.**

The Buddha then extends this teaching beyond the single encounter with King Kali:
"I remember five hundred former lives
when I was the sage who taught patience.
Then too, no conception of self, being, living self
or person was present in me."

"Then too, no conception of self … was present in me." These are the crucial words. The Buddha is not describing a single extraordinary occasion when he managed to control his anger. He recalls many former lives devoted to patience, in which all conception of self was likewise absent.

The significance is profound. He was not repeatedly enduring anger on behalf of a cherished *I* and struggling to suppress it. The very conception of a self that could feel personally insulted, threatened or wronged was absent.

The absence of self-conception, rather than extraordinary self-control, is what makes this perfection of patience possible.

Self-cherishing helps us appreciate the significance of this. Ordinarily, we are deeply concerned with protecting ourselves from any form of harm, insult or humiliation. If that concern becomes entangled with the mistaken sense of an independently existing self, the conditions for anger can become especially powerful.

But the Buddha's example describes a mind in which that mistaken conception was absent.

This is why the King Kali story takes us far beyond the ordinary cultivation of patience. Usually, patience means controlling anger after it has arisen. We may remain outwardly calm, but inwardly continue to feel hurt, resentful or humiliated.

The Buddha describes something fundamentally different. ***The mistaken conception of an independently existing I was absent.*** There was no imagined ***self*** whose importance had been violated and demanded defence. The terrible physical injuries occurred, yet the ill will that would ordinarily arise around a threatened and cherished sense of self did not arise.

This is the extraordinary depth of the perfection of patience. The Buddha was not struggling to control anger. There was no anger to suppress.

Patience is deeper than controlling anger

In ordinary life, patience often means restraining anger after it has arisen. Someone insults us, we feel angry, but we control our response. We do not retaliate or say something we may later regret.

This is an important early stage of ethical discipline. It prevents us from acting harmfully while anger is present, but it does not necessarily diminish the anger itself. We may have controlled our

behaviour without changing the state of mind that produced it. We may remain outwardly calm while inwardly feeling resentment, humiliation or bitterness. We may continue to revisit the incident, sometimes for years.

The *Diamond Sutra* points towards something much deeper.

Wisdom is not simply another technique for managing unpleasant emotions. By overcoming self-grasping, it can remove one of the fundamental conditions from which anger and hatred arise.

This is the significance of the Buddha's experience with King Kali. His patience was not simply an extraordinary ability to endure anger without expressing it. The mistaken conception of a solid *I* that would have given rise to ill will was absent.

For those of us still practising, this suggests a gradual development.

We begin by restraining harmful reactions. We then learn to examine the anger itself: the threatened sense of *me*, the importance we attach to defending that *me*, and the resentment that develops around it. As our understanding of emptiness deepens, self-grasping and self-cherishing can weaken.

For those of us still learning, patience begins with restraining harmful reactions and develops as wisdom progressively weakens the conditions from which anger arises. **The Buddha's experience with King Kali reveals its extraordinary culmination: the mistaken conception of *self* was completely absent, and the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise.**

Emptiness does not deny injury

There is an important danger in misunderstanding the King Kali story. If the Buddha had no conception of self, does that mean there was nobody to injure, no pain and no wrongdoing? Certainly not. Here the Two Truths help us understand what the Buddha is teaching.

- **Conventionally**, King Kali inflicted terrible injuries upon the Buddha's body. The injuries were real, and the actions were cruel. King Kali's actions were cruel, the Buddha's injuries were real, and those actions carried karmic consequences.
- **Ultimately**, when we examine the person for a solid, independently existing self (who was harmed), no such self can be found. The absence of that imagined self does not mean the conventional person disappears.

The distinction is between **experiencing injury and grasping at a solid self who has been injured**. In ordinary circumstances, physical pain or emotional hurt may be followed by anger. Self-grasping can make the injured *I* appear particularly solid, while self-cherishing makes the threat to *me* seem especially important.

In the King Kali account, the Buddha tells us that the mistaken conception of ***self*** was absent. The injuries therefore did not give rise to the ill will that would ordinarily develop around a threatened and cherished sense of ***self***.

King Kali's harmful actions did not exclude him from the Buddha's concern. Like the person who suffers injury, the person who inflicts it remains a being whose existence arises dependently and whose actions have karmic consequences. Both remain within the bodhisattva's commitment to liberate all beings.

The perfection of patience is no perfection

The Buddha makes another important statement: *“The Tathāgata's perfection of patience is no perfection.”*

We have reached the Three-Step Formula again.

- **First — The perfection of patience:** Patience is a genuine and essential quality cultivated along the bodhisattva path.
- **Second — No perfection of patience:** Patience does not possess an independent, unchanging nature. It develops through understanding, practice and the conditions in which difficulties are encountered.
- **Third — Therefore called the perfection of patience:** We can continue to recognise and cultivate patience without turning it into an independently existing spiritual possession.

If I begin to think “I am extraordinarily patient”, even this virtue may become a source of pride and self-cherishing; “Aren’t I clever”. We have already encountered similar dangers with generosity, merit and spiritual attainment.

The teaching goes further than warning us against pride. Because patience arises dependently, it can genuinely develop through practice. Difficult experiences, reflection and ethical restraint provide opportunities to develop patience. Wisdom gradually weakens **self-grasping** by revealing the absence of an independently existing self; and wisdom and compassion help overcome **self-cherishing** by extending our concern beyond ourselves to others. Together, these practices allow patience to deepen, eventually reaching beyond the restraint of anger to the removal of its underlying causes.

The perfection of patience is therefore neither a fixed possession nor an imaginary virtue. It is a quality that develops as our understanding and practice develop.

Arouse the mind, but let it settle nowhere

Immediately after recalling his former lives practising patience without a conception of self, the Buddha says:
“Therefore, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
should relinquish all conceptions
and arouse the mind of unsurpassed complete awakening.”

The word *therefore* is important. The Buddha is drawing a conclusion from the understanding illustrated by the King Kali story and his former lives as a sage practising patience without concept of ‘self’. He has shown that freedom from the conception of self is connected with freedom from ill will. Now he extends the instruction beyond patience to the whole bodhisattva path.

But why does he say *“relinquish all conceptions”*?

The instruction does not mean that a bodhisattva should stop thinking, recognising people or making judgements. It means relinquishing the grasping that treats our conceptions as fixed realities: a solid self, independently existing beings, or things possessing an unchanging nature of their own.

And the Buddha immediately adds the positive instruction: **arouse the mind of unsurpassed complete awakening**.

The bodhisattva is not being asked to empty the mind of purpose. The mistaken conceptions that

sustain self-grasping are to be relinquished, while bodhicitta (the intention to attain awakening for the benefit of all beings) is actively cultivated.

The movement is from relinquishing the mistaken conception of self to developing a mind directed towards the liberation of all beings.

There are two closely related forms of non-grasping in this instruction.

- **First, the bodhisattva must eliminate the mistaken conception of an independently existing *self*.** The Buddha's experience with King Kali demonstrates the freedom that accompanies its complete absence.
- **Second**, the bodhisattva must not grasp at the objects of the mind. Even the compassionate intention to help all beings must not become fixed upon particular conceptions of those beings, the actions undertaken or the results expected. This is **non-abiding**.

Compassion and bodhicitta also work against self-cherishing, the habit of placing our own happiness and interests above those of others. They direct our concern towards the welfare of all beings. The bodhisattva therefore cultivates both wisdom and compassion, while avoiding attachment even to the compassionate activity itself. “I shall help all beings” must not harden into “I am the compassionate one who helps others. Aren’t I clever.”

The intention to help remains wholehearted. What is relinquished is the grasping at a fixed self, fixed beings or fixed ways of helping them.

The Buddha adds another striking statement: *“For what is settled is itself unsettled.”* Anything upon which we try to establish a permanent mental foothold is itself dependently arisen. It cannot provide the fixed foundation we imagine it to be. This does not make our compassionate commitment uncertain or weak. We can remain firmly committed to the welfare of beings while allowing wisdom to guide how that commitment is expressed.

The bodhisattva cultivates a mind of unwavering compassion without grasping at a fixed self, fixed beings or fixed ways of helping them.

This is **non-abiding**, now understood in the light of the perfection of patience. The mind is no longer governed by the need to defend a cherished self. It becomes freer to respond to suffering with wisdom and compassion.

Giving without taking a stand

After describing the cruelty of King Kali and his own freedom from ill will, the Buddha returns to an instruction we encountered in Chapter 4: **“A bodhisattva should give without taking a stand … Such giving should be undertaken for the benefit of <u>all</u> beings.”**

Why return to generosity immediately after such an extraordinary example of cruelty? I think the words **“all beings”** are especially important here.

The Buddha has just described someone who inflicted terrible suffering upon him. Yet he now instructs bodhisattvas to cultivate the mind of awakening and act for the benefit of **every** being.

Surely that includes King Kali himself. And it includes everyone who commits terrible acts: those who murder, abuse, exploit or inflict suffering upon others.

This is a demanding consequence of the bodhisattva's commitment. **Compassion is not reserved for those who have treated us well, nor even for those whose conduct we admire.**

The Buddha is not asking us to approve of cruelty or deny the suffering it causes. He is asking us to distinguish between a person's harmful actions and the person who has performed them.

Here we can see why the instruction *not to take a stand* matters. When someone harms us, the mind may settle upon two apparently fixed identities:

- *I am the person you have wronged.*
- *You are the person who has wronged me.*

These descriptions may refer to something that genuinely happened. But when we grasp at them as permanent truths about ourselves and the other person, the relationship can become dominated by injury, resentment and hatred.

In the King Kali story, the Buddha tells us that the conception of self was absent. There was no grasping at a solid *I* whose injury demanded hatred. Now the teaching moves a step further. The bodhisattva must also avoid grasping at the other person as a fixed being whose harmful actions exhaust everything that person is or could become.

This helps explain the Buddha's next words: *"For the conception of a being is no conception, and all those beings spoken of by the Tathāgata are no beings."*

The Buddha is not withdrawing the instruction to benefit all beings. He is correcting the way we understand those beings. **Conventionally**, beings exist. They act, experience suffering and can cause suffering to others. Their actions have consequences. But **ultimately**, no independently existing being can be found. There is no fixed essence that makes someone permanently good, evil, compassionate or cruel.

This is our Three-Step Formula and Two Truths applied to the very beings whom the bodhisattva has undertaken to help.

The absence of an inherently existing evil person does not mean the absence of evil actions. The distinction allows us to recognise wrongdoing while maintaining the possibility of transformation and universal compassion.

The absence of a fixed self does not remove anyone from our compassion. It is one reason we can recognise the possibility of change, even in someone who has caused terrible harm.

The bodhisattva therefore gives without taking a stand upon fixed conceptions of self and other, friend and enemy, giver and recipient.

The commitment to benefit all beings remains. What is relinquished is the grasping that would make some beings inherently worthy of compassion and others inherently excluded from it.

The King Kali story has thus taken us from the absence of ill will towards someone who caused terrible suffering to something even more demanding: **a compassionate commitment that includes that person among all the beings we seek to liberate.**

This also gives self-cherishing a clearer place in our analysis. Overcoming self-grasping weakens the mistaken solid *I*; overcoming self-cherishing opens our concern beyond that *I*. Bodhicitta extends that concern without limit.

Darkness and daylight

Towards the end of Chapter 14, the Buddha gives us a vivid comparison:
"A bodhisattva who gives while caught in things is like a person who has entered darkness and can

see nothing.
A bodhisattva who gives <u>without</u> being caught in things is like a person with eyes, when night has ended and the sun has risen, seeing the many forms around them."

What is the darkness, and what becomes visible when the sun rises? The image applies to the way we understand all phenomena, and the King Kali account gives us a particularly powerful example of its meaning.

When someone harms us, our experience may become dominated by anger, resentment and a powerful sense of having been wronged. Self-grasping makes the injured *I* appear especially solid, while self-cherishing gives enormous importance to defending that *I*.

We may come to see the other person almost entirely through what they have done to us.

This is my enemy. This is a cruel person. This is someone who deserves my hatred.

The harm may be entirely real. But our conception of the person can become so fixed that we are unable to see anything beyond it. Our vision is obscured by our confused self-grasping.

This is one way grasping can leave us in darkness. We mistake our conception of someone for the whole reality of that person.

The Buddha's teaching does not ask us to overlook wrongdoing. It asks us to recognise that no person, even someone who has committed terrible cruelty, possesses an independently existing nature that permanently defines them. King Kali's actions were cruel. Yet King Kali was not an inherently existing evil being, incapable of change or beyond the concern of a bodhisattva.

We can now appreciate why the Buddha has just instructed us to give for the benefit of **all beings**. If our compassion depends upon dividing the world into fixed categories of those who deserve it and those who do not, it remains limited by our conceptions.

The bodhisattva's compassion is different. It includes those who have caused suffering, because they too are beings subject to ignorance, craving and the consequences of their actions.

The daylight in the Buddha's comparison is the clarity that comes from wisdom. When grasping loosens, we can recognise both the reality of harmful conduct and the absence of a fixed, independently existing wrongdoer. This is not blindness to moral distinctions. It allows us to see them without making them permanent identities.

That clearer understanding changes how we can act. **Wisdom** reveals the mistaken conception of a solid, independent self. **Freedom from conception of 'self'** removes a fundamental condition for the arising of ill will. **Compassion** extends our concern to all beings, including those who have harmed us. **Skilful means** allows that concern to find appropriate expression.

The Buddha's comparison takes us far beyond the simple instruction not to become attached when giving. **Giving without taking a stand means acting for the welfare of beings without allowing fixed conceptions of self and other, friend and enemy, worthy and unworthy, to limit our compassion.**

The person in darkness is trapped by grasping. The person in daylight can see with wisdom. The King Kali story shows us just how far that clarity can extend: even in the face of terrible cruelty, wisdom can prevent hatred from arising, leaving the bodhisattva's compassionate concern for **all** beings intact.

What Chapter 14 has taught us

Chapter 14 brings together many of the Sutra's principal themes, with the mistaken conception of ***Self*** and the perfection of ***Patience*** at its centre. The story of King Kali shows us what can happen when the wisdom of emptiness is no longer merely an intellectual understanding but has become a profound transformation of the mind.

The conception of *Self*: The Buddha's account reveals the extraordinary consequences of the mistaken conception of an independent ***I***. Self-grasping and self-cherishing help us understand how that conception shapes our ordinary reactions.

The perfection of patience: The Buddha's experience with King Kali reveals something far beyond the ordinary restraint of anger. Because all conception of self was absent, the ill will that would have arisen from it did not arise. There was no anger to suppress because the mistaken conception of an independently existing self was absent. Wisdom had removed a fundamental condition for its arising.

This may be the chapter's most important discovery: wisdom is not simply another technique for managing unpleasant emotions. It can transform the mistaken understanding from which those emotions arise.

Dependent arising and the Two Truths: King Kali's cruelty and the Buddha's physical injury were conventionally real. But neither person possessed an independently existing self. Emptiness does not deny the injury or Kali's actions; it changes our understanding of the people and experiences involved. Because mental states arise dependently, their causes can be weakened and genuine transformation is possible.

The Three-Step Formula: The perfection of patience is no independently existing perfection. Its cultivation is a journey in which wisdom progressively weakens our grasping at a solid, independently existing self. At its deepest level, the conception of such a self is eliminated, as the Buddha illustrates in the King Kali story. Likewise, beings are not independently existing beings, yet they exist conventionally and remain the objects of the bodhisattva's compassion.

Non-abiding: The bodhisattva must not take a stand upon fixed conceptions of self, other people, injury, friend or enemy. Even a compassionate intention must not become a permanent identity or possession.

Wisdom, compassion and skilful means: The absence of hatred does not lead to indifference. The Buddha immediately instructs bodhisattvas to arouse the mind of awakening and give for the benefit of *all beings*.

Here we have another important aspect.

All beings includes King Kali.

The bodhisattva's compassion does not exclude those who have committed terrible acts. Their actions have consequences, but they do not possess an inherently existing evil nature that permanently defines them. Because they too exist dependently, the possibility of transformation remains.

This helps explain the Buddha's final image of darkness and daylight.

When we grasp at fixed conceptions of ourselves and others, our understanding becomes restricted. We may see only injury, enemy or need to defend ourselves.

As wisdom dispels those mistaken conceptions, we can see more clearly. We can recognise wrongdoing without hatred, suffering without an independently existing sufferer, and the possibility of change even in those who have caused great harm.

The perfection of patience is not merely patiently enduring suffering without retaliation. At its deepest level, it is the mind free of self-grasping and self-cherishing as illustrated by the Buddha's response to King Kali. The ultimate purpose of that freedom is not simply our own peace of mind. It is to continue the bodhisattva's work of helping all beings towards liberation.

Transmission: Subhūti begins by recognising the extraordinary significance of those who will receive, understand and transmit the Dharma in future generations. The Buddha returns to this at the chapter's conclusion, praising those who preserve and explain the teaching to others. The wisdom illustrated by King Kali must remain available to beings who have not yet developed it.

The movement through Chapter 14 is therefore extraordinary: **Freedom from the conception of self makes freedom from ill will possible. Freedom from ill will opens the way for compassion that excludes no being. Non-abiding allows that compassion to find expression in wise and skilful action.**

Translation notes

Kṣānti means patience, forbearance or acceptance. Here the narrative foregrounds endurance without ill will; chapter 28 uses the same family of meaning for acceptance of a difficult truth. King Kali follows DSBC's kalirājā; GRETIL has kaliṃgarājā. The story is retained as the sutra's past-life account, not presented as independently verified history.

DSBC reads bhūtasaṃjñā ... abhūtasaṃjñā, whereas GRETIL's corresponding passage has asaṃjñā. The former is rendered "conception of truth ... no conception of truth." "Neither conception nor absence of conception" has not been reduced to unconsciousness.

Yat pratiṣṭhitaṃ tad evāpratiṣṭhitam is "what is settled is itself unsettled." The explanation understands this as the failure of any supposed fixed support, while the translation preserves the paradox. The two descriptions of truth use different constructions: truthful speech is affirmed; na tatra satyaṃ na mṛṣā says that there is neither truth nor falsehood "there," in what is realised or taught.

Chapter 15 Receiving and Carrying the Dharma Forward

"Suppose, Subhūti, a woman or man
gave up bodies as numerous as the sands of the Ganges
in the morning, at midday and in the evening,
and continued in this way
for many hundreds of thousands of koṭis of niyutas of ages.

"Someone who heard this discourse and did not reject it
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.
How much more one who copied it, took it up,
retained it, recited it, mastered it,
and explained it fully to others.

"This discourse is inconceivable and incomparable.
The Tathāgata has spoken it for beings setting out
in the foremost vehicle, the most excellent vehicle.

"Those who take it up, retain it, recite it,
master it and explain it fully to others
are known by the Tathāgata with Buddha knowledge,
seen with the Buddha eye, and understood.
They will possess immeasurable merit:
inconceivable, incomparable, unmeasurable, boundless.
They will all bear my awakening upon their shoulders.

"This discourse cannot be heard
by beings of limited aspiration,
or by those holding views of a self, a being,
a living self or a person.
Beings who have not undertaken the bodhisattva commitment
cannot hear it, take it up, retain it, recite it or master it.
That possibility does not exist.

"Wherever this sutra is made known,
that place will be worthy of offerings
from the world with its gods, human beings and asuras,
worthy of homage and of circumambulation.
It will be a shrine."

Chapter 15 returns to the extraordinary merit of receiving and transmitting the *Diamond Sutra*. The Buddha again compares this merit with an almost unimaginable sacrifice: giving up one's body repeatedly, morning, midday and evening, over countless ages. Yet he says that even someone who hears this discourse without rejecting it produces greater merit. How much greater, then, is the merit of someone who copies it, retains it, recites it, masters it and explains it to others?

Chapters 8, 11 and 12 have already established why transmitting the Dharma has extraordinary value. Chapter 15 now develops two important questions: **What makes someone capable of receiving this teaching, and how can it be preserved and carried forward for future generations?**

Hearing is the beginning

Notice the sequence in the Buddha's words. First, someone hears the teaching without rejecting it. Then comes taking it up, remembering it, reciting it, mastering it and explaining it to others.

These are not all the same activity. We may hear a teaching without understanding it fully. What we hear is immediately interpreted through our existing knowledge, experiences and beliefs. Those assumptions may help us understand the teaching, or prevent us from recognising what it is saying. We may return to it repeatedly, reflect upon its meaning and gradually develop a clearer understanding. Through practice, that understanding can begin to transform how we experience ourselves and respond to others. Eventually, we may become able to explain the teaching in ways that help other people develop their own understanding.

The Dharma is therefore not merely information being passed from one person to another. **Transmission involves preserving the words, developing understanding and creating conditions through which that understanding can arise in others.**

This also helps explain why the Buddha places such value upon the teaching's preservation. Without people willing to receive, remember and communicate it, the conditions for future generations to encounter the Dharma would diminish.

Who is able to receive the teaching?

The Buddha then makes a challenging statement. He says that this teaching cannot be received by people of limited aspiration or by those who hold fixed views of a self, a being, a living self or a person. He describes it as a teaching for those who have undertaken the bodhisattva path.

Why should that be? Consider what the *Diamond Sutra* asks of us. It challenges our most familiar understanding of ourselves. It questions the apparently solid *I* around which we organise so much of our experience, achievement and suffering. It asks us to act compassionately without making that action a possession of the self. It even challenges our attachment to the Dharma and to our own progress towards awakening.

A person may hear these words yet resist what they imply.

We may welcome the teaching of compassion while remaining unwilling to question the self that wants to be recognised as compassionate. We may admire the wisdom of emptiness while resisting its application to our own identity, opinions and achievements. **Hearing the words is not necessarily the same as allowing their meaning to challenge us.**

The Buddha's language is uncompromising: he says that those of limited aspiration cannot receive this teaching. We should not simply turn that statement into a claim that some people are

permanently incapable of understanding it. A useful way to approach it is to distinguish the present conditions for understanding from an unchanging judgement about a person. Understanding develops through dependent arising. Aspiration, ethical conduct, reflection, study and practice can all create conditions for greater receptivity.

The bodhisattva's universal commitment remains unchanged. Those who are not presently receptive to the Dharma are not excluded from it. Rather, helping them develop the conditions through which understanding may eventually become possible is itself part of the bodhisattva's undertaking. The question for us is therefore not whether we belong to a spiritually superior group, but whether we are willing to examine the assumptions that the teaching challenges.

The danger of spiritual superiority

There is a subtle irony in this chapter. The Buddha describes the teaching as *inconceivable and incomparable*, intended for those following the foremost vehicle. It would be easy for someone who studies it to conclude: *I belong to those who understand the highest teaching. My understanding is more advanced than that of others. I am especially qualified to receive the Dharma. Aren't I clever.*

*The danger is that the very teaching intended to eliminate the mistaken conception of self can instead become evidence of an important **I** who possesses superior understanding.* And **self-cherishing** could give our supposed spiritual superiority even greater importance.

The distinction is important. We can value our study, recognise genuine understanding and accept responsibility for transmitting the Dharma without making any of these into a fixed spiritual identity. Nor should we use the Buddha's words about limited aspiration to look down upon others. That would contradict the universal compassion we have just examined in Chapter 14.

The Dharma is not something we possess in order to distinguish ourselves from others. It is a teaching we receive, practise and preserve so that others may benefit from it.

The teaching continues

Chapter 15 ends by returning to the sacred significance of places where the Dharma is made known. Such places are worthy of offerings, homage and reverence. We encountered this in Chapter 12. Here the repetition reinforces the importance of continuing transmission.

The Buddha describes those who preserve and transmit the Dharma as bearing his awakening upon their shoulders. This striking image suggests both reverence for the teaching and responsibility for carrying it forward. It may also recall the physical carrying of sacred texts. Those who receive the Dharma do more than benefit from it themselves: they help preserve the conditions through which others may encounter and understand it.

The Buddha's immediate audience will eventually disappear. Future practitioners must receive the teaching through others who have preserved it. That creates both an opportunity and a responsibility. We can study the words carefully, reflect upon their meaning, practise what we understand and make the teaching available to others. But carrying the Dharma should not become a new source of pride.

The measure of our relationship with the teaching is not the spiritual status we acquire from knowing it, but the wisdom and compassion that develop through practising it, and the opportunities we create for others to do likewise.

Chapter 15 shows that the transmission of the Dharma depends upon beings who are capable of receiving it, willing to develop their understanding, and prepared to preserve and explain it to others. In carrying the teaching forward, they help make the path towards liberation available to future generations.

Translation notes

The immense numerical expression retains koṭi and niyuta rather than assigning an unwarrantedly exact modern value. These are traditional large-number units, and their combined use here conveys an almost unthinkable duration.

Agra-yāna and śreṣṭha-yāna are rendered “foremost vehicle” and “most excellent vehicle.” Hīnādhimuktika is “of limited aspiration”; it has not been turned into the name of a modern Buddhist school.

Textual variant: DSBC reads *samāṃśena bodhiṃ dhārayiṣyanti vācayiṣyanti paryavāpsyanti*, giving rise to the problematic interpretation “bear an equal share of awakening, recite it and master it.” The earlier Gilgit manuscript instead reads *mamāṃsena bodhiṃ dhārayiṣyanti*, supporting “bear my awakening upon their shoulders.” This reading is also supported by other Sanskrit witnesses and by the Chinese and Tibetan translations. See Gregory Schopen (1989), pp. 113 and 124, and Paul Harrison (2006), p. 151, note 73. The sentence is absent from the Schøyen manuscript translated by Harrison, but its broader attestation supports retaining it. The Gilgit reading is adopted here, without the additional verbs found in DSBC. The image may refer to honouring and preserving the Dharma, possibly including the physical carrying of sacred manuscripts.

Chapter 16 When Those Who Transmit the Dharma Are Despised

“Moreover, Subhūti,
sons and daughters of good family who take up such sutras,
retain, recite and master them,
attend to them thoroughly,
and explain them fully to others,
will be despised, deeply despised.

“Why?
Through being despised in this very life,
they will exhaust the unwholesome deeds of former lives
that would have led to unfortunate rebirths,
and they will attain a Buddha’s awakening.

“I remember the past, Subhūti,
immeasurable ages beyond immeasurable ages,
long before Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata.
There were eighty-four hundred thousand koṭis of niyutas of Buddhas.
I served them faithfully and did not fail in that service.

“Yet the merit of that service
does not approach the merit of those
who, in the last time, in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
take up such sutras, retain them, recite them,
master them and explain them fully to others.

“It does not approach a hundredth part,
a thousandth, a hundred-thousandth,
a koṭi-th, a hundred-koṭi-th,
a hundred-thousand-koṭi-th,
or a hundred-thousand-koṭi-niyuta-th part.
No reckoning, fraction, calculation,
analogy or comparison can express it.

“Were I to describe the merit
those sons and daughters of good family
will produce and receive,
beings might become deranged or their minds bewildered.

“This discourse taught by the Tathāgata
is inconceivable and incomparable.
Its ripening, too, must be understood as inconceivable.”

Chapter 16 begins with a surprising statement. The Buddha says that those who receive, preserve and explain the Dharma will be despised, deeply despised. He immediately asks: “Why?”

We might expect him to explain why other people would treat practitioners with such contempt. Yet he does not describe the motives or actions of those who despise them. Instead, he explains what being despised means within the Buddhist understanding of karma.

He says that through experiencing contempt in this life, practitioners will exhaust unwholesome deeds from former lives that would otherwise have led to unfortunate rebirths. They will also attain a Buddha's awakening. This is an extraordinary claim. The Buddha is attributing a purifying consequence to an experience that would ordinarily appear entirely negative.

Why promise the purification of karma?

Why introduce this promise here? The transmission of the Dharma is essential if future generations are to have the opportunity to develop wisdom and move towards liberation. Yet those who undertake that work may encounter hostility rather than appreciation. The Buddha appears to anticipate the danger that such treatment could discourage them from continuing.

His response is to give contempt an entirely different significance. Within the karmic framework he describes, the experience is not evidence that their work lacks value. On the contrary, he declares that it will exhaust past unwholesome karma and contribute to their progress towards awakening.

The contrast is striking: those undertaking work of extraordinary spiritual value will be treated with contempt by others. Yet the Buddha assures them that the work remains profoundly valuable and that even their experience of contempt can contribute to their liberation.

This seems to be the purpose of the promise. It encourages those who transmit the Dharma to continue, even when their efforts are met with hostility.

The extraordinary value of transmission

The Buddha then recalls serving an inconceivable number of Buddhas over immense periods of time. Yet he declares that the merit of that service cannot compare with the merit of those who preserve and transmit the Dharma in a future period when the teaching is declining. His comparison is deliberately beyond calculation.

Here he returns to a teaching we have encountered repeatedly since Chapter 8: the extraordinary value of transmitting the Dharma so that future beings have the opportunity to encounter it, develop wisdom and move towards liberation. The comparison is particularly striking because it immediately follows the Buddha's statement that those engaged in this work will be despised. The extraordinary value of transmitting the Dharma is not measured by the worldly recognition received by those who undertake it.

What this teaching does *not* mean

We must be careful how we understand this passage. It does not follow that everyone who is despised is exhausting negative karma from previous lives. Nor can we look at another person's suffering and conclude that they must have done something wrong in the past. We do not know the particular causes and conditions that have produced another person's suffering. Nor does experiencing contempt prove that someone is spiritually advanced or that their critics are mistaken.

The Buddha is not instructing us to seek humiliation, accept mistreatment as deserved or regard suffering as inherently beneficial. Rather, he is explaining, within the *Sutra*'s karmic framework, how an experience that appears entirely negative may nevertheless form part of a process of purification.

This is a difficult teaching, but an important distinction remains: **the possibility that suffering may become a condition for purification does not make the suffering good or the person causing it innocent of wrongdoing.**

What Chapter 16 has taught us

Chapter 16 returns to the extraordinary importance of transmitting the Dharma, now introducing a difficulty that earlier chapters have not considered. The Buddha declares that those who preserve

and communicate the teaching ***will*** be despised. The Buddha does not explain why others will despise them. Instead, he declares that their experience of contempt will exhaust unwholesome karma from former lives and that they will attain awakening.

He then makes one of his most extraordinary comparisons of merit, placing the transmission of the Dharma above his own immense service to countless earlier Buddhas.

The message appears to be one of encouragement. The Dharma must continue to be transmitted, even when those undertaking that work encounter hostility. The Buddha assures them that their efforts have extraordinary value, and that the contempt they experience need not obstruct their progress towards liberation.

Translation notes

Paribhūta is despised or treated with contempt; suparibhūta intensifies it. Apāya refers to an unfortunate state of rebirth. Kṣapayiṣyanti is the exhausting or bringing to an end of those unwholesome actions in their karmic efficacy.

The escalating fractions retain the large-number units koṭi and niyuta. Their strange English appearance is deliberate: it avoids replacing the source with an invented precise arithmetic. Vipāka is “ripening,” the fruition of action. The warning about derangement describes the imagined effect of hearing the merit fully stated; it is not offered as a medical claim or a recommended meditative experience.

Chapter 17 Returning to the Bodhisattva's Resolve

Subhūti asked:
“How, Blessed One, should one who has set out
in the bodhisattva vehicle abide?
How should they practise?
How should they govern their mind?”

The Blessed One said:
“One should give rise to this resolve:
‘I shall bring all beings to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.’
Yet, having liberated them,
no being has been liberated.

“If a conception of a being arises in a bodhisattva,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.
If a conception of a living self or a person arises,
that one should not be called a bodhisattva.

“Why?
There is no such dharma as
‘one who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle.’

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Was there any such dharma the Tathāgata fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening
in the presence of Dīpaṃkara, the Tathāgata?”

“As I understand your words, Blessed One,
there was no such dharma.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
There was no such dharma the Tathāgata fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening
in the presence of Dīpaṃkara, worthy and fully awakened.

“Had there been such a dharma,
Dīpaṃkara would not have predicted:
‘Young man, in a future time you will become
the Tathāgata called Śākyamuni,
worthy and fully awakened.’

“Because there was no such dharma,
Dīpaṃkara made that prediction.

“Why?
‘Tathāgata’ is a name for true suchness;
a name for the nature of dharmas as unarisen;
a name for the cessation of dharmas;
a name for what is utterly unarisen.
For this non-arising is the ultimate meaning.

“If someone said,
‘The Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
has fully realised unsurpassed complete awakening,’
they would speak falsely,
misrepresenting me through a mistaken grasp.
There is no such dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening.

“In the dharma he has realised or taught
there is neither truth nor falsehood.
That is why the Tathāgata says:
‘All dharmas are Buddha dharmas.’
For all dharmas have been spoken of as no dharmas;
that is why all dharmas are called Buddha dharmas.

“Suppose there were a person with a great, full body.”

Subhūti said:
“What the Tathāgata has called a great, full body
he has spoken of as no body.
That is why it is called a great, full body.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
A bodhisattva who said, ‘I shall liberate beings,’
should not be called a bodhisattva.
Is there any such dharma called a bodhisattva?”

“No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma.”

“Those called beings have been spoken of as no beings;
that is why they are called beings.
Thus the Tathāgata says:
‘All dharmas are without self,
without a living self, without an individual, without a person.’

“A bodhisattva who said,
‘I shall bring about the adornments of Buddha fields,’
would speak falsely.
Those adornments have been spoken of as no adornments;
that is why they are called adornments of fields.

“But a bodhisattva who trusts and understands
that dharmas are without self
is declared by the Tathāgata, worthy and fully awakened,
to be a bodhisattva, a great being.”

Chapter 17 begins unexpectedly. Subhūti repeats almost exactly the questions he asked in Chapter 2:
How should a bodhisattva abide?
How should they practise?
How should they govern their mind?

Why does the Sutra return to its beginning? The questions are familiar, yet much has happened since they were first asked. During the preceding sixteen chapters, the Buddha has progressively examined the bodhisattva's understanding of ***self, beings, practice, awakening and the Dharma itself***. We have learned that the bodhisattva's commitment extends to the liberation of **all beings, without exception**. Yet no independently existing being can be found.

We have seen how the mistaken conception of an independently existing *I* can appropriate genuine achievements as ***mine***. Even *generosity, wisdom, spiritual attainment and awakening can become* ***possessions*** through which the imagined ***self*** establishes its importance. The Buddha has repeatedly instructed us *not to take a stand* upon these achievements, or even upon our understanding of the Dharma.

Chapter 14 revealed something especially profound. In the account of King Kali, the mistaken conception of ***self*** was absent, and the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise. This challenges our usual understanding of patience as merely restraining anger, and also reveals that the bodhisattva's commitment to liberate all beings extends even to someone who inflicts terrible harm.

We have also learned why the transmission of the Dharma has extraordinary value: it enables future beings to encounter the teaching and develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.

These teachings have substantially changed how we understand Subhūti's original questions.

How can a bodhisattva undertake the greatest possible compassionate commitment without constructing an independently existing ***self*** around that undertaking?

Chapter 17 now addresses this question directly.

Red Pine sees Chapter 17 as marking a shift in emphasis. The Buddha has already challenged our grasping at self and beings. He now places increasing emphasis on another danger: **grasping at the bodhisattva path itself, its practices and its ultimate goal.** Even the undertaking to liberate all beings can become another **possession or a bastion** upon which the mind attempts to take a stand.

The commitment remains unchanged

The Buddha begins by repeating his instruction from Chapter 3:
“I shall bring all beings to complete liberation
in the realm of nirvāṇa without remainder.”

After everything we have learned, this is significant. The Buddha has not reduced the scope of the bodhisattva's undertaking. Every being remains included. The commitment to complete liberation

is unchanged. Then comes the familiar apparent contradiction:
“Yet, having liberated them,
no being has been liberated.”

Chapter 3 explained why these statements are compatible. Beings exist conventionally and can attain liberation. ***No independently existing*** being can be found. We need not repeat that explanation here. What matters now is that the Buddha reaffirms the ***unlimited commitment*** after sixteen chapters devoted to examining the mistaken conceptions through which we ordinarily understand ourselves and others.

Who is the bodhisattva who undertakes this work?

Chapter 17 now takes the investigation further. The Buddha declares:
“There is no such dharma as
‘one who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle.’”

This presents another challenge to our understanding of ***Self***. A person may genuinely undertake the bodhisattva commitment, cultivate the six perfections, develop wisdom and compassion, and help others towards liberation. Yet there is ***no independently existing bodhisattva*** behind those activities. The designation ***bodhisattva*** does not establish a new spiritual ***self***.

It would be remarkably easy for the mistaken conception of ***self*** to find a new, attractive identity:
I am a bodhisattva.
I am following the highest path.
I understand emptiness.
I have undertaken the liberation of all beings. Aren’t I good.

These statements may describe genuine intentions and progress. The difficulty begins when the imagined independent ***I*** appropriates them as evidence of its own spiritual importance.

The Buddha then makes an even more striking statement:
“A bodhisattva who said,
‘I shall liberate beings,’
should not be called a bodhisattva.”

At first, this appears to contradict the very resolve the Buddha has just instructed us to cultivate. By themselves, the words *“I shall liberate beings”* are not the problem. They express the commitment that the Buddha requires.

The distinction concerns the understanding with which they are held. A conventional person can genuinely undertake the liberation of beings. The problem arises when that person conceives of an independently existing ***I*** who is the liberator, and independently existing beings who become the objects of that ***I***'s achievement. The undertaking becomes ***my*** undertaking, and the liberation of beings becomes ***my*** achievement. The imagined independent ***I*** now claims ***ownership*** of even the greatest possible compassionate undertaking.

The commitment has then been appropriated by the very mistaken conception of ***self*** that the Dharma seeks to eradicate. The purpose is to liberate beings, not to establish an important liberator. This adds something important to our teaching of Universal Liberation. The bodhisattva's commitment must exclude no being, while the bodhisattva must not construct an independent self around fulfilling that commitment. **The commitment to liberate all beings remains unlimited. The methods by which it is pursued must never become fixed possessions or founda-**

tions for the mind.

The Buddha's warning extends beyond the imagined independent ***I*** who claims to be the liberator. The mind can also take a stand upon the bodhisattva path itself: ***I*** *have undertaken the highest path.* ***I*** *know the correct practice.* ***I*** *am progressing towards awakening.*

Chapter 17 challenges the idea of an independently existing dharma called *setting forth on the bodhisattva path*. Even the path and its goal cannot become fixed foundations upon which the mind establishes itself. The bodhisattva continues the undertaking without making the undertaking itself another *possession* or *bastion*.

The chapter's final statement

After revisiting several familiar teachings, the Buddha returns to the identity of the bodhisattva and concludes:

> *"A bodhisattva who trusts and understands*
> *that dharmas are* ***without self***
> *is declared by the Tathāgata*
> *to be a bodhisattva, a great being."*

Notice what has happened. The Buddha has denied that there is an independently existing thing called a bodhisattva. Then he declares that someone who understands the absence of ***self*** is a bodhisattva.

This is not a contradiction. The designation remains meaningful. The practitioner genuinely undertakes the path. Wisdom removes the mistaken conception of an independently existing ***self*** who ***possesses*** that path.

> **The name remains useful.**
> **The independent identity is not established.**
> **The practice continues.**

The Buddha has not merely repeated the teaching of Chapter 3. He has now applied the understanding developed throughout the preceding chapters to the very person who undertakes the bodhisattva's universal commitment. The person who undertakes Universal Liberation must not construct the mistaken conception of an independently existing ***I*** who is the liberator.

Returning to the beginning

Therefore, Chapter 17 marks a turning point in the Sutra.

- In Chapter 2, Subhūti asked how a bodhisattva should live, practise and govern the mind.
- Chapters 3–16 have shown how easily the mind can turn almost anything into something to **grasp**: ***the self, other beings, generosity, merit, wisdom, attainment, the Dharma and even awakening.***

Now the original questions are asked again. We no longer expect an answer that will provide something solid upon which to stand. The questions have remained. Our understanding of them has changed. The Buddha's answer can now be appreciated more deeply:

Undertake the liberation of all beings wholeheartedly, without imagining an *independently existing* bodhisattva who *owns* that undertaking, *independently existing* beings who are *liberated*, or an *independently existing* awakening that can be *possessed*.

The purpose of the path remains unchanged. The bodhisattva continues to *practise, develop wis-*

dom, cultivate compassion and work for the liberation of every being. What changes is the understanding of how those activities are undertaken.

Translation notes

Bhūtatathatā is “true suchness.” Anutpādadharmatā is the nature of dharmas as unarisen; atyantānutpanna means utterly unarisen. Paramārtha is rendered “ultimate meaning” here, with “ultimate truth” a familiar interpretive equivalent.

In the repeated questions and denials concerning bodhisattvas and awakening, “such” reflects the contextual force of the Sanskrit demonstrative sa. It helps distinguish the denial of an independently existing dharma from the denial of conventional practice or awakening.

The DSBC text also reads dharmocchedasya, literally the cutting off or cessation of dharmas, among the explanations of Tathāgata. This difficult reading has been retained as “cessation of dharmas,” not silently changed to “non-cessation.” It requires textual verification in a critical edition, particularly in relation to the explicit rejection of annihilation in chapter 27. It should not be made the basis for saying the sutra teaches destruction of the world. The GRETIL fragmentary transcription used here ends during chapter 16 and cannot settle this reading.

Nirātman, nirjīva, niṣpoṣa and niṣpudgala are rendered “without self, without a living self, without an individual, without a person.” The overlapping negatives resist several ways of locating an enduring personal entity. They do not give four separate modern psychological theories.

Chapter 18 The Mind That Cannot Be Found

The Blessed One asked:
“Does the Tathāgata possess the fleshly eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the fleshly eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the divine eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the divine eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the eye of wisdom?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the eye of wisdom.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the Dharma eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the Dharma eye.”

“Does the Tathāgata possess the Buddha eye?”
“Yes, Blessed One, the Tathāgata possesses the Buddha eye.”

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Has the Tathāgata spoken of the grains of sand
in the great river Ganges as grains of sand?”
“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One.”

“Suppose there were as many Ganges rivers
as there are grains of sand in that river,
and as many world systems as grains of sand in them all.
Would those world systems be many?”
“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One. They would be many.”

“Whatever beings there are in those world systems,
I know their streams of mind in all their diversity.
For what the Tathāgata calls a stream of mind
he has spoken of as no stream.
That is why it is called a stream of mind.

“Why?
Past mind cannot be found.
Future mind cannot be found.
Present mind cannot be found.”

Chapter 17 returned to the bodhisattva's resolve: the commitment to liberate all beings remains, *without imagining an independently existing liberator who owns the path or its attainment*.

Chapter 18 now examines the mind inself. We may accept that the body changes, that our personality develops and that no independent self can be found behind our activities. **Having challenged the conception of an independently existing bodhisattva, the Buddha now examines the mind in which we might still imagine finding an independent *I*.** Is that where the independently existing ***I*** is finally to be found?

And also **how can the bodhisattva understand and help liberate beings?** Recognise the emptiness and changing conditions of their minds, while using wisdom and skilful means appropriate to their differing needs.

The Five Eyes and the liberation of beings

Red Pine draws attention to an important reason why the Buddha begins with the Five Eyes. The eye of wisdom (*prajñā*) recognises that beings and their minds are empty of independent existence. The Dharma eye recognises their differing circumstances, capacities and needs, including

the methods through which they may develop towards liberation. The Buddha eye brings these understandings together in complete awakened vision.

This helps us understand why the Buddha speaks of knowing the streams of mind of innumerable beings. On Red Pine's interpretation, ***the purpose is not simply to know those minds, but to understand beings so that they may be helped towards liberation.*** The Five Eyes therefore connect wisdom with skilful means and the bodhisattva's universal commitment.

The mind as a refuge for the imagined self

The Buddha begins by describing his five forms of seeing and then extends his vision across an unimaginable number of worlds and beings. He declares that he knows their streams of mind in all their diversity. Yet he immediately applies the Three-Step Formula to those streams:
Stream of mind → no independently existing stream → therefore called a stream of mind.

The Buddha does not deny the existence of mental activity. He challenges our tendency to imagine that the continuity of t*hinking, feeling, remembering and experiencing* requires an enduring *mind existing independently* behind those activities.

Thoughts, perceptions, intentions, feelings and memories arise through causes and conditions. They influence subsequent mental events, creating the continuity that we recognise as a stream of mind. **The continuity is genuine. What cannot be found is an independently existing mind-substance travelling unchanged through it.** The imagined ***I*** cannot find its permanent home in the mind any more than it can in the body.

The Buddha now examines that stream across past, future and present.

Past mind cannot be found

The thought I had yesterday is gone. Its effects may remain. I may remember it. It may have changed what I believe or what I do today. It may have contributed to the conditions from which my present thought arises. But the past thought itself is no longer here.

What exists now is a present memory of a past thought: and that memory is itself a new mental event occurring under new conditions. So: **Past mind cannot be found.**

Future mind cannot be found

The future mind is equally elusive. Conditions are developing from which future thoughts will arise. What I am thinking now may contribute to them. What happens around me will contribute. My body, memories, emotions and innumerable other conditions will contribute.

But the future thought does not yet exist somewhere waiting for me to arrive at it. It will arise when its conditions arise. So: **Future mind cannot be found.**

And present mind cannot be found

This is the most challenging statement. Surely I can find my mind now. I am thinking, feeling and experiencing this very moment. Yet what happens when I try to examine that present mind?

By the time I recognise and identify a particular thought, the moment I intended to examine is already passing into the past. My act of noticing is itself another mental event, arising under new conditions. I cannot hold the present thought still and examine it as an unchanging object. *It has become a past thought.*

Yet this is more than a problem of trying to catch something that moves too quickly. Even while a

thought is occurring, it *arises through causes and conditions*. It depends upon *previous experiences, attention, memory, perception and other mental processes*. Nothing ***independently existing*** can be isolated from these conditions and identified as the present mind.

There is present **experience**, yet no independently existing mind can be found within or behind that experience.The Buddha is not denying thinking occurs. He is challenging the imagined *permanence and independence* of the mind through which we ordinarily experience ourselves as ***I***.

You cannot have exactly the same thought twice

There is a simple way of bringing this into ordinary experience.

Suppose in the morning I think: **"I must phone Jane today."**

An hour later the same words come into my mind: **"I must phone Jane today."**

It seems to be the same thought. But it cannot be exactly the same mental event.

The first thought has already occurred. Perhaps I have since wondered what I need to discuss with Jane. Perhaps I have noticed the time. Perhaps there is a little guilt at forgetting until now. Perhaps something else has reminded me of her. Even if none of these things has happened consciously, one important condition has certainly changed: **I have already had the first thought.**

That first thought is now part of my history and part of the conditions from which the second thought arises. Indeed, the second occurrence may partly be a **remembering of the first**.

When I recognise that **"I had this thought before"**, that recognition is itself a new mental event. Even if the words and content are identical, the two occurrences are different events arising at different times and under different conditions. In that sense, we cannot have exactly the same thought twice.[4]

There is continuity: the intention to phone Jane may persist throughout the day. But that continuity does not require an identical thought (or an unchanging thinker) to persist from one moment to the next.

The thought changes. The thinker changes. The conditions change. Yet the causal continuity remains.

Thinker, thinking and thought

This takes us back to something we have encountered throughout the *Sutra*.

We have examined: **giver → giving → recipient**

and: **practitioner → practising → transformation.**

---

[4] Modern research on autobiographical memory provides an interesting parallel. We do not store and later replay complete record ings of our past experiences. Remembering is reconstructive: fragments of past experience are assembled in the present, influenced by later experiences, present circumstances and the narratives we have developed about our lives. Even a frequently repeated memory may therefore change through repeated remembering. What persists is not an unchanged mental record, but a continuing and changing relationship between past and present. This provides a useful modern illustration of the Sutra's distinction between continuity and an unchanging mind.

*There is an intriguing connection with our "**same thought twice**"discussion as well: **remembering an event becomes another event in the history of that memory**. The next time we remember it, we are remembering from a mind that has already been changed by the previous act of remembering.*

*That is almost a perfect everyday example of **continuity without an unchanged something continuing**.*

Now we can see the same dependent relationship within our most intimate experience:
thinker → thinking → thought.

It is tempting to imagine an already existing thinker standing behind the process:
First there is me. Then I have thoughts.

But Chapter 18 invites a subtler understanding. The person thinking is already a dependently arisen, changing person. The activity of thinking arises through conditions. The thought itself arises through conditions. And what is thought becomes one of the conditions affecting the thinker and whatever thought follows.

So we might express the process more accurately as:
thinker → thinking → changed thinker → further thinking …

There is no need to insert an unchanging **"me"** behind the process to explain its continuity.

There is something particularly important here for our understanding of ***Self***. We may have relinquished the belief in an independently existing person behind the body, yet continue to imagine an independent thinker behind our thoughts. The mistaken ***I*** has simply found another place to hide.

Chapter 18 removes that refuge. The person who thinks exists conventionally, and thinking genuinely occurs. No additional, independently existing thinker is required to explain either the thinking or its continuity.

What Chapter 18 has taught us

The Buddha knows the streams of mind of innumerable beings. Yet no independently existing stream of mind can be found. This is not a contradiction. The minds of beings genuinely function. Memories, perceptions, intentions and habits influence what happens then. Understanding can develop, harmful habits can weaken, and wisdom can grow through study, meditation and practice. No unchanging mind is required for any of this to occur.

Chapter 18 therefore makes an important contribution to our understanding of ***Self***. Even the apparently continuous mind cannot provide the independent ***I*** that we habitually imagine exists.

It also deepens ***Non-abiding***. We may still take a stand upon the apparent continuity of our own mind: *At least my mind persists*. Chapter 18 challenges even this final refuge for the imagined independent ***I***.

And it helps us understand *Universal Liberation*. The minds of beings are not fixed in ignorance or permanently limited by their present understanding. Because mental life arises dependently, transformation remains possible. The bodhisattva can work with those changing conditions, helping beings develop the wisdom through which liberation becomes possible.

The Three-Step Formula and Two Truths explain why this is consistent: **The mind exists and functions conventionally. Ultimately, no independently existing mind can be found.**

Chapter 18 does not abolish the mind. It removes another place in which we might imagine finding an independently existing self. **There is mental continuity without a permanent mind, and there is thinking without an independently existing thinker.**

Translation notes

The five eyes are māṃsacakṣus, divyacakṣus, prajñācakṣus, dharmacakṣus and buddhacakṣus: the fleshly, divine, wisdom, Dharma and Buddha eyes. The chapter names them without offering a systematic account of their individual functions; a complete hierarchy should not be read out of this passage alone.

Cittadhārā is “stream of mind.” Its negation adhārā becomes “no stream.” Nopalabhyate means is not found, apprehended or obtained. “Cannot be found” preserves the difference between non-apprehension and a simple claim of nonexistence. The temporal terms are atīta, anāgata and pratyutpanna: past, future and present.

Chapter 19 Merit Is No Mass

“What do you think, Subhūti?
If a son or daughter of good family filled
this great threefold thousandfold world system
with the seven treasures
and gave it to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened,
would the resulting merit be great?”

“Great, Blessed One. Great, Well-Gone One.”

“So it is, Subhūti.
The merit would be great, immeasurable and incalculable.
For the mass of merit spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no mass.
That is why it is called a mass of merit.

“If there were a mass of merit,
the Tathāgata would not speak of a mass of merit.”

Chapter 19 returns to a familiar example. The Buddha asks whether offering an immense quantity of treasure to the Tathāgatas would produce great merit. Subhūti agrees, and the Buddha confirms that the merit would be immeasurable and incalculable. Yet he immediately challenges the *conception of merit as an independently existing mass*.

Why return to this subject? After everything we have learned about emptiness, we must not conclude that beneficial action has no consequences. Generosity genuinely produces merit. Actions influence future conditions and can support the development of wisdom and progress towards liberation. Red Pine draws attention to this distinction: ***although merit is empty of independent existence, it can still contribute to conditions through which liberation becomes possible.***

Yet another danger remains. The bodhisattva may have learned to give without clinging to the gift, the recipient or the identity of being a generous person. Still, another thought can quietly arise: ***At least the merit produced by my actions is mine.***[5]

Here ***Ownership and Possession*** return. Merit becomes an imagined spiritual accumulation, something claimed by an independently existing ***I***. The Buddha's final statement is therefore particularly pointed:
“If there were a mass of merit,

---

[5] ***Merit, karma and dedication***
Merit (puṇya) is closely related to good karma. It is the beneficial potential arising from wholesome intentions and actions, including generosity, ethical conduct and mental cultivation. Buddhist traditions therefore quite legitimately speak of accumulating merit. Such actions have consequences and can create favourable conditions for future practice and liberation.

In Tibetan Buddhism, meditation and study sessions commonly conclude with a dedication of merit (pariṇāmanā). The practitioner directs the beneficial potential of the activity towards enlightenment and the welfare of all sentient beings. Dedication may invoke the gurus, bodhisattvas and Buddhas, and include rejoicing in the merit of others.

Traditional teachings also speak of multiplying merit, sometimes by extraordinary amounts, through pure motivation, devotion, rejoicing or particular practices. These are religious claims about karmic consequences, not measurable quantities governed by an established arithmetic. The language can nevertheless suggest a spiritual bank account. If dedicating my merit to the Buddhas increases my balance tenfold, am I simply making a profitable transaction?

*Lama Zopa Rinpoche provides an important corrective. He teaches that dedication should weaken self-cherishing rather than strengthen the desire for personal benefit. Its purpose is to direct our practice towards the liberation of beings. The distinction is between increasing the beneficial potential of practice and claiming that potential as a possession of an important **I**.*

Chapter 19 does not deny the accumulation of merit. It challenges the conception of an independently existing mass of merit, together with the imagined independent self who claims to own it.

the Tathāgata would not speak of a mass of merit."

Merit is genuinely produced through causes and conditions. It is not a separate, independently existing substance that can be accumulated in a ***spiritual bank account***. ***The consequences of generosity remain real. What cannot be found is an independently existing mass of merit or an independent owner who possesses it.***

Translation notes

The repeated skandha in puṇyaskandha means heap, mass or collection. It is not a separate reference here to the five aggregates, though the Sanskrit word is the same. Askandha is "no mass."

Chapter 20 The Body and the Marks

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen
through the perfection of his body of form?"

"No, Blessed One.
The perfection of the body of form
has been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no perfection.
That is why it is called the perfection of the body of form."

"Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?"

"No, Blessed One.
The possession of marks spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no possession of marks.
That is why it is called the possession of marks."

Chapter 20 returns to the question first raised in Chapter 5: can the Tathāgata be recognised through physical appearance and distinguishing marks? The Buddha now asks about both the perfection of his body of form and the possession of marks. Subhūti answers that neither establishes the Tathāgata.

Why return to this familiar teaching? The preceding chapters have examined the bodhisattva, the mind and the merit produced through practice. *None can be found as an independently existing entity.* Chapter 20 now applies the same examination to the *Buddha's perfected form*.

Red Pine interprets this passage through the traditional teaching of the Buddha's bodies. His concern is that ***even the extraordinary embodiment associated with Buddhahood could be mistaken for an independently existing spiritual reality***.

That is a useful extension of our earlier understanding. We must not imagine that, having eliminated the mistaken conception of self and progressed through the bodhisattva path, ***we finally arrive at an independently existing Buddha whose perfected body reveals his ultimate nature.***

The Buddha's physical form and characteristics exist conventionally. They can be perceived and described. Yet the presence of remarkable characteristics does not establish awakening, nor does their appearance reveal an ***independently existing essence called Buddha.***

The teaching is therefore more than a warning about appearances. ***Even the Buddha's perfected body and extraordinary identifying marks cannot establish an independently existing Buddha. The marks may be recognised, yet they do not reveal the ultimate nature of the Tathāgata.*** The bodhisattva's task remains to *cultivate the wisdom, compassion and skilful means* necessary to help liberate beings, not to mistake the visible signs of Buddhahood for the realisation towards which the path leads.

No independent bodhisattva → no independent mind → no independently existing mass of merit → no independent Buddha identifiable through perfected form.

Translation notes

Rūpakāyaparinișpatti is the perfection or completion of the body of form. It should not automatically be expanded into a detailed later doctrine of the Buddha's bodies. Lakṣaṇasaṃpad again denotes possession of marks. The chapter's two questions are related but distinct, and both have been retained.

Chapter 21 Teaching Without a Thing Taught

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Does it occur to the Tathāgata, 'I have taught the Dharma'?"

"No, Blessed One. It does not occur to him in that way."

The Blessed One said:
"Someone who said, 'The Tathāgata has taught a dharma,'
would speak falsely,
misunderstanding me through grasping.

For there is no dharma to be found
called 'the teaching of Dharma.'"

Subhūti asked:
"Will there be beings in the future, in the last time,
in the final five hundred years,
when the true Dharma is passing away,
who hear such teachings and have faith in them?"

The Blessed One said:
"They are neither beings nor non-beings, Subhūti.

For all those called beings
have been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no beings.
That is why they are called beings."

Chapter 21 returns to a question we encountered in Chapter 13. The Buddha has plainly been teaching throughout the *Sutra*, yet he denies that any independently existing dharma called *the teaching of Dharma* can be found. But this time he asks something more pointed: **does the thought *"I have taught the Dharma"* arise in him?**

The Buddha is not denying that teaching occurs or that listeners can develop understanding. He is challenging the conception of ***an independently existing teacher who possesses something called the Dharma and passes it to others.*** He is questioning the grasping that would turn teaching into something possessed by a teacher: ***I am the teacher. This is my teaching. I have given it to you.***

This adds another dimension to non-abiding. The teacher must not establish a fixed identity through the act of teaching, just as the student must not turn understanding into a possession.

Teaching is much more dependent than that. Words are spoken. A listener hears them through previous experience, language and understanding. Questions arise. Explanations are given. Understanding may develop. The same words may be heard quite differently by different people, or by the same person at different stages of practice.

This is also our familiar agent–action–object analysis, now applied directly to the Dharma:
teacher → teaching → student

Conventionally, a teacher explains, a student listens, and understanding may develop. But none of the three exists independently of the process.

- **Grasping** can arise when the teacher regards the Dharma as something they possess and have handed to another person, or when the student regards their new understanding as something they now own.
- **Non-abiding** allows both to fulfil their roles without turning those roles, or the knowledge involved, into fixed identities or possessions.

This does not diminish the value of teaching. It helps explain how teaching actually works. Understanding cannot simply be handed from an unchanged teacher to an unchanged student. Through hearing, questioning, reflection and practice, the student's understanding can develop and change.

The significance of this process extends beyond the teacher and student. T**ransmission is one of the essential means through which the bodhisattva's commitment to Universal Liberation**

can be fulfilled. Beings cannot simply be given liberating wisdom as something transferred from one mind to another. Through hearing, questioning, reflection and practice, their own understanding can develop.

The Buddha's teaching therefore retains its extraordinary value even though ***no independently existing teaching, teacher or hearer can be found***.

The second half of the chapter applies the same reasoning to the listener. Future people who hear the Dharma are described as **"neither beings nor non-beings."**

We recognise the Three-Step Formula and the Two Truths.

- **Conventionally**, these people exist. They hear the teaching, reflect upon it and may develop wisdom through practice.
- **Ultimately**, no independently existing person can be found who stands apart from those changing experiences and processes.

The Buddha is therefore rejecting both extremes. He is not saying that independently existing beings receive the teaching, nor that no beings exist and nobody receives anything.

People hear. People understand. People change. But there is no fixed, independently existing hearer behind that changing process.

Chapter 13 examined whether an independently existing teaching could be found. Chapter 21 goes further by examining the teacher's relationship to teaching and the student's relationship to understanding. That is why the Buddha's return to the subject is not simply repetition.

Translation notes

Dharmadeśanā is teaching or exposition of Dharma. The English distinguishes "the Dharma" as a teaching from "a dharma" where the sentence questions a findable item; this is a contextual translation choice, not a distinction marked by Sanskrit capital letters.

Chapter 22 Nothing Acquired in Awakening

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is there any dharma the Tathāgata has fully realised
as unsurpassed complete awakening?"

"No, Blessed One. There is no such dharma."

"So it is, Subhūti.

Not even the slightest dharma exists there or is found.

That is why it is called unsurpassed complete awakening."

This is one of the shortest chapters in the *Sutra*. Chapter 9 has already shown us why spiritual attainment should not be understood according to the model: **person → acquires → spiritual possession**.

Chapter 22 takes that reasoning all the way to Buddhahood.

There is not even the slightest independently existing dharma that the Buddha finally acquired and can now point to as: **"This is my awakening."**

That does not mean that awakening did not occur. The entire *Sutra* depends upon the distinction between awakening and confusion.

What disappears is **possession**. The Buddha did not remain an unchanged person and acquire an object called enlightenment. Awakening names the culmination of transformation through causes, conditions, practice and wisdom. The distinction we developed earlier therefore applies at the highest point of the path:

Awakening is genuine transformation, *not an independently existing thing acquired and*

***possessed by an unchanged I*.**

The *Diamond Sutra* allows no final spiritual trophy to remain.

Translation notes

Chapter 22's *aṇur api dharmaḥ* is rendered **"not even the slightest dharma,"** with *aṇu* carrying the sense of minute or tiny.

Chapter 23 Equality Does Not Mean Sameness

"Moreover, Subhūti, that dharma is equal;
there is no inequality in it.
That is why it is called unsurpassed complete awakening.

"Equal in being without a self, a being,
a living self or a person,
unsurpassed complete awakening
is realised through cultivating wholesome qualities.

"For what are called wholesome dharmas
the Tathāgata has spoken of as no dharmas.
That is why they are called wholesome dharmas."

Chapter 23 extends our understanding of emptiness/śūnyatā. **Equal in emptiness does not mean identical.**

All phenomena are equally empty of independent existence. There is no inherently existing self in the Buddha, the bodhisattva, the beginner or the confused person. But that does not mean that all people have identical understanding, conduct or freedom from suffering.

- A doctor and patient are equally empty. They are not interchangeable in the operating theatre.
- Kindness and cruelty are equally empty of independent existence. They have very different consequences.
- Wisdom and confusion are equally empty. They are not the same mental state.

The Two Truths help us understand this distinction. Ultimately, none of these people or qualities possesses an independent nature. **Conventionally**, their differences are genuine and have consequences.

This brings us to the Buddha's next statement: **"unsurpassed complete awakening is realised through cultivating wholesome qualities."**

For the bodhisattva, cultivating wholesome qualities is not simply a matter of becoming a better person or accumulating merit. It is the *development of the wisdom, compassion and abilities necessary to help beings towards liberation*. **The commitment to liberate all beings requires the development of the capacities through which that commitment can be fulfilled.**

Why is this important? The Buddha has just explained that awakening is empty of any fixed, independent essence. But that does not mean awakening simply happens, or that there is nothing to practise. **Awakening is not a thing to be *acquired*. It develops through what we cultivate.**

Our understanding, habits and behaviour develop through causes and conditions. Cultivating generosity, patience, ethical conduct, attention and wisdom changes us. Repeatedly cultivating anger, selfishness and grasping also changes us, but in ways that increase suffering.

There is no fixed self standing apart from these processes. The person is continually being shaped through them. **This is why emptiness makes genuine transformation possible.** If we possessed an unchanging nature that existed independently, how could learning, wisdom or practice fundamentally change us?

But the wholesome qualities we cultivate are not fixed things either. Patience, for example, develops through difficult experiences, reflection, understanding, intention and repeated practice. It is

not an independently existing virtue that we gradually accumulate as a *possession*. Nor should developing such qualities become another basis for self-grasping: *I am now an exceptionally wise or virtuous person.*

This brings us to the Three-Step Formula:
Wholesome dharmas → no independently existing wholesome dharmas → therefore called wholesome dharmas.

The Buddha is not denying the value of wholesome qualities. He is showing us that they can genuinely develop through practice, without possessing fixed, independent natures. We can now understand the chapter's opening statement that awakening is "equal". *Everything is **equally** empty of independent existence, but everything is not the same.* Wisdom and confusion differ. Kindness and cruelty differ. Their causes and consequences differ.

Emptiness does not erase these differences. It explains how change from one condition to another is possible. And that is why there is still a path to practise.

Translation notes

Sama and *viṣama* are equal and unequal. *Kuśala dharma* is rendered "wholesome qualities" where the emphasis is upon what is cultivated on the path, while "wholesome dharmas" is retained in the following Three-Step formulation so that the recurring dharma/no-dharma language remains visible.

Chapter 24 Mountains of Treasure

"Suppose, Subhūti, a woman or man
gathered heaps of the seven treasures
as many as the Sumerus, the kings of mountains,
in this great threefold thousandfold world system,
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

"If another son or daughter of good family
took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse on the perfection of wisdom
and taught it to others,
the former merit would not approach
even a hundredth part of this merit.

No comparison would reach it."

Chapter 24 returns to the extraordinary merit of transmitting the Dharma. We encountered this comparison in Chapters 11 and 12, but its repetition now has a further purpose. Since then, the Buddha has explained that merit is no independently existing mass, that there is no fixed thing called *the teaching of Dharma*, that awakening is not something acquired, and that even wholesome qualities have no independent existence.

Could we misunderstand all this to mean that there is nothing worth cultivating, and that practising or transmitting the Dharma is unnecessary? **Chapter 24 corrects that misunderstanding.**

The absence of independent existence does *not* make merit, wisdom or practice meaningless. Understanding the Dharma can transform our minds, weaken ignorance and help us towards liberation. Transmitting that understanding creates opportunities for others to develop wisdom and become free from suffering.

This is why even a few lines of the teaching can have a value beyond comparison with mountains of treasure. Material generosity remains valuable, but wisdom can address the ignorance and grasping that sustain suffering. Now the Buddha reminds us that we must still cultivate wholesome qualities and make the teaching available to others.

Emptiness does not make practice pointless. It is because understanding and behaviour can change that practising and transmitting wisdom remain so important.

Translation notes

Chapter 24 contains the abbreviation *yāvat*, "up to," in its escalating comparison. The translation renders its movement as **"No comparison would reach it,"** rather than reproducing a missing list as though every item were written out there.

Chapter 25 Helping Without Becoming the Saviour

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Does the Tathāgata think, 'I have set beings free'?

You should not see it in that way.
"There is no being whom the Tathāgata has set free.

If there were such a being,
that would be the Tathāgata's grasping at a self,
a being, a living self, a person.

"What is called grasping at self
has been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no grasping;
yet foolish ordinary people grasp it.

"Those called foolish ordinary people
have been spoken of by the Tathāgata as no people.

That is why they are called foolish ordinary people."

Chapter 25 returns to the great resolve of Chapter 3: the commitment to liberate ***all*** beings without grasping at independently existing beings who are liberated. Chapter 17 challenged the imagined independent bodhisattva who undertakes this work. Chapter 25 now applies the same examination to the Buddha himself, who has completed the path.

Does the Tathāgata think, *"I have set beings free"*?

The Buddha rejects that conception. *Even the complete fulfilment of the path must not produce an* ***imagined independent liberator who claims the liberation of others as an achievement.***

This brings our agent–action–object analysis into particularly sharp focus:
helper → helping → person helped.

All three arise dependently. The person helping changes through the interaction. The person receiving help changes. What constitutes helpful action changes as circumstances change. Yet another danger appears after the help has occurred: **the helper can take possession of the story. "I saved you."** That can quietly turn genuine help into a continuing claim upon another person: **a claim to gratitude, loyalty, obedience or recognition.**

The *Diamond Sutra* cuts through that claim. The help can have been genuine. Its consequences can continue. There is also a practical limit to what one person can do for another. The Buddha can teach, guide and help create the conditions for liberation. Another being must develop the understanding through which liberation becomes possible. Awakening cannot simply be handed from one person to another like a possession. But neither the person helped nor the helping itself becomes the property of the helper. This gives a very practical meaning to non-abiding: **Do what helps. Care about the consequences. Then do not build a permanent identity around being the one who helped.**

The chapter even applies the same reasoning to **"foolish ordinary people."** That label must not become another fixed identity. Confusion occurs. Ignorance occurs. People grasp at selves. But there is no intrinsically foolish kind of person whose nature has been permanently established.

The *Sutra* therefore refuses to divide the world into inherently wise people and inherently deluded people. The possibility of transformation remains open precisely because neither identity is fixed. **Wisdom** recognises that confusion is not a permanent identity. **Compassion** remains concerned for those caught in it, and **skilful means** seeks ways to help them develop understanding.

Translation notes

Parimocita means released or set free. Chapter 25's *bālapṛthagjana* is rendered "foolish ordinary people," not to dehumanise anyone; the commentary explains how the same critique of fixed identity applies to the category itself.

Chapter 26 Seeing the Buddha Through Dharma

"What do you think, Subhūti?
Is the Tathāgata to be seen through the possession of marks?"

"No, Blessed One.
As I understand your words,
the Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks."

"Well said, well said, Subhūti.
It is just as you say.
If the Tathāgata were to be seen through those marks,
a wheel-turning king would also be a Tathāgata.
Therefore the Tathāgata is not to be seen through them."

Subhūti said:
"As I understand your words,
the Tathāgata is not to be seen through the possession of marks."

Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:
"Those who saw me through form,
those who followed me through sound,
have set out in mistaken striving.

Those people will not see me.
"A Buddha is to be seen through Dharma;
the guides have Dharma as their body.

Yet the nature of Dharma is not to be cognised;
it cannot be cognised."

Chapter 26 returns once more to the question of how the Buddha is to be seen, but this time it sharpens the argument. A wheel-turning monarch can possess the traditional marks of a great person. Therefore the marks cannot, by themselves, establish Buddhahood.

Then the *Sutra* extends the warning:

"Those who saw me through form,
those who followed me through sound …
will not see me."

Red Pine suggests that these verses may summarise more than Chapter 26. They return us to Subhūti's admiration of the Buddha's ordinary actions in Chapter 1. Those actions could be seen, yet their appearance alone could not reveal the wisdom expressed through them.

We should be careful not to turn this into a rejection of Buddha images, chanting, ritual or devotion. Forms and sounds can function as conditions for practice. The problem is **mistaking the sign for what it signifies.** We have already learned that names and identifying marks can be useful without revealing an independently existing essence. Chapter 26 now takes the investigation further. **Even when the Buddha directs our attention towards Dharma, we must not turn Dharma itself into another independently existing reality upon which the mind takes a stand.**

Then comes the more difficult statement: **"A Buddha is to be seen through Dharma."**

We might think we have finally been told where the real Buddha is.

- Not in his body.
- Not in his voice.
- **In Dharma.**

But the *Sutra* immediately removes that resting place too:

"Yet the nature of Dharma is not to be cognised;
it cannot be cognised."

We are not being offered an invisible Buddha-essence to replace the visible one.

- Form cannot contain the Buddha.
- Sound cannot contain the Buddha.
- And Dharma must not become the hidden substance in which the Buddha finally resides.

This is another example of the *Diamond* following the mind to its next foothold. Each time we think, **“Ah, now I have found where reality really is,**” the *Diamond* cuts again.

Translation notes

Chapter 26 contains actual metrical verses, unlike most of the discourse, which is Sanskrit prose presented here in free verse.

Dharmakāyā hi nāyakāḥ is rendered **“the guides have Dharma as their body.”** *Dharmakāya* should not here be assumed to name a permanent universal substance.

Dharmatā is the nature of Dharma or of phenomena. *Na vijñeyā ... na ... vijānitum* gives the strong negation translated “not to be cognised ... cannot be cognised.”

Textual variants: Red Pine omits the second verse concerning seeing the Buddha through Dharma. It is absent from Kumārajīva's translation and the Stein Sanskrit manuscript, but present in other textual witnesses, including the Sanskrit tradition followed here. The present translation retains it.

Red Pine also notes versions in which Subhūti initially affirms that the Buddha can be seen through marks, before correcting his answer. The present translation follows the negative-answer reading.

Chapter 27 Emptiness Is Not Annihilation

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Has the Tathāgata fully realised unsurpassed complete awakening
through the possession of marks?

You should not see it in that way.

For it is not through the possession of marks
that the Tathāgata has fully realised awakening.

“Nor should anyone say to you:
‘Those who have set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
teach the destruction or annihilation of any dharma.’

“You should not see it in that way.

Those who have set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
do not teach the destruction of any dharma,
nor its annihilation.”

Chapter 26 established that the Buddha cannot be recognised through physical marks. Chapter 27 adds that the possession of such marks is not what constitutes the realisation of awakening. Yet we must not misunderstand this denial. Rejecting the independent existence of marks, attainments or other dharmas does not mean abolishing the phenomena themselves. **The Buddha now explicitly rejects the interpretation of emptiness as annihilation.**

- When the *Sutra* says: **being → no being → therefore called a being,** it has not destroyed the being.
- When it says: **merit → no merit → therefore called merit,** it has not destroyed merit.
- When it cannot find a fixed mind, it has not abolished thinking.
- When it cannot find an independently existing Buddha within his marks, it has not abolished the Buddha.
- *What has been removed is **independent existence**, not the dependently arisen phenomenon.*

This is why the third step of our Three-Step Formula is indispensable:
Name it → empty it of independent existence → return to its dependent, conventional existence without grasping.

If we stopped at Step 2, we could easily misunderstand the *Sutra*:

- **No beings.**
- **No mind.**
- **No merit.**
- **No attainment.**
- **No Buddha.**
- **Nothing matters.**

Chapter 27 tells us explicitly that this is wrong. The bodhisattva does **not** teach the destruction or annihilation of dharmas. This does not deny ordinary cessation. People die. Thoughts cease. A flame goes out. Conditions arise and pass. What Chapter 27 rejects is the idea that emptiness means that reality has been philosophically erased.

- The dependently arisen world remains.
- Beings suffer.
- Actions have consequences.
- Generosity helps.
- Practice changes the practitioner.
- Awakening occurs.

In terms of our developing theme, nihilism can itself become a form of grasping. Having relinquished solid phenomena, the mind may seize upon "nothing really exists" as its new secure position. The *Diamond* refuses that foothold as firmly as it refuses inherent existence.

So Chapter 27 gives us perhaps the clearest protection in the entire *Sutra* against a nihilistic reading: **Empty of <u>independent</u> existence does <u>not</u> mean empty of existence.**

Or, in the language we have used throughout:

Understanding emptiness does not annihilate the world. What must cease is *our mistaken conception that things exist independently of causes and conditions*.

Translation notes

Chapter 27 follows the DSBC wording that awakening is not realised through possession of marks. Other source traditions can frame this exchange differently; those differences should be checked before treating divergent English versions as errors.

Vināśa and *uccheda* are destruction and annihilation, rather than simply the ordinary recognition that conditioned events cease.

Chapter 28 Receiving Without Possessing

"Suppose a son or daughter of good family
filled worlds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges
with the seven treasures
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

"A bodhisattva who gained acceptance
of dharmas as selfless and unarisen
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.

"Yet a bodhisattva, a great being,
should not take possession of a mass of merit."

Subhūti asked:
"Should a bodhisattva not receive a mass of merit, Blessed One?"

The Blessed One said:
"It should be received, Subhūti,
but not grasped.
That is why it is said to be received."

Chapter 28 begins with an important statement: a bodhisattva who accepts dharmas as *selfless* and *unarisen* produces extraordinary merit. *Unarisen* does not mean that nothing occurs. Things arise through causes and conditions, but nothing arises as an independently existing thing. This is the **Two Truths** at work. **Conventionally**, generosity and the development of wisdom have genuine consequences. Merit can arise and can be received. **Ultimately**, no independently existing mass of merit, or separate self who owns it, can be found.

Red Pine draws attention to the depth of this acceptance (*kṣānti*). It is more than intellectually agreeing that things lack independent existence. The bodhisattva develops the capacity to understand and accept this directly, without retreating into the security of an independent self or the opposite misconception that nothing exists. This is wisdom becoming a profound change in understanding, rather than remaining an interesting philosophical proposition.

This makes the Buddha's next distinction especially important: **receiving is not the same as**

possessing.

The bodhisattva does not need to reject beneficial consequences in order to practise non-attachment. What is relinquished is the additional movement of mind: ***This is mine. This establishes me. This is what I have accumulated.***

The distinction reaches beyond merit.

- We can receive praise without constructing an identity from it.
- We can acknowledge progress in practice without turning it into spiritual property.
- We can receive affection without trying to possess the person who gives it.
- We can receive knowledge without needing to become **"the person who knows."**

For a bodhisattva, this non-grasping also has a compassionate purpose. **Wisdom** recognises that merit is not an independently existing possession. **Compassion** keeps the welfare of beings in view. **Skilful means** makes use of beneficial conditions to help others.

The purpose is not to hoard merit, nor to refuse it, but to allow beneficial actions to have their effects without claiming those effects as possessions of a fixed self.

Receive what arises. Use what helps. Do not require it to establish an owner.

This is non-abiding expressed in a remarkably practical form.

Translation notes

Kṣānti here is **"acceptance,"** complementing the "patience" of Chapter 14. *Nirātmaka* and *anutpattika* are selfless and unarisen.

The play between *parigrahītavya* and *grahītavya* is difficult to preserve in English. **"Received, but not grasped"** makes the contrast intelligible, while "take possession" in the preceding sentence reflects its negative use.

Chapter 29 Neither Coming Nor Going

> *"Moreover, Subhūti,*
>
> *if someone says, 'The Tathāgata goes, comes,*
> *stands, sits or lies down,'*
> *that person does not understand the meaning of my words.*
>
> *"For one is called Tathāgata*
> *who has gone nowhere and come from nowhere.*
>
> *That is why he is called the Tathāgata,*
> *worthy and fully awakened."*

Chapter 29 brings us back to the opening scene of the *Diamond Sutra*. In Chapter 1, the Buddha dresses, takes his bowl, walks into Śrāvastī, begs for his food, eats, returns, washes his feet and sits down. Now, twenty-eight chapters later, he tells Subhūti that the Tathāgata neither comes nor goes. Why return to those ordinary actions?

Red Pine suggests that the remaining thirty-one chapters explain what happens in Chapter 1. We can now appreciate the force of his observation. In that opening scene, we saw the Buddha expressing the six perfections through ordinary conduct. We also noticed his unassuming behaviour. Here was someone who had attained unsurpassed awakening, yet **nothing in his actions suggested a need to display his importance. Extraordinary understanding was being expressed without self-importance.**

The intervening chapters have helped us understand how this is possible. The Buddha has re-

peatedly shown that beings, actions, attainments, teachings and even Buddhahood itself cannot be found as independently existing things. Chapter 29 now applies that understanding to the Buddha's own conduct.

The **Two Truths** explain the apparent contradiction.

- **Conventionally**, the Buddha walks, eats, washes and sits. These actions genuinely occur through causes and conditions.
- **Ultimately**, no independently existing Buddha can be found standing apart from those changing activities, remaining unchanged while moving from one independently existing place to another.

There is movement, but no independently existing mover. Red Pine connects this with the meaning of *Tathāgata* and with *suchness* (*tathatā*). The Buddha's ordinary movements genuinely occur, without establishing an independently existing essence that comes or goes. Suchness is reality as it is, not a hidden, permanent reality behind the changing world.

But Chapter 29 now allows us to understand something more than the *absence of an independently existing traveller*. The Buddha's ordinary conduct shows how the path can be lived without turning our practice or achievements into reasons for thinking, *"I am someone special. Look what I have accomplished."*

Here we can recognise the distinction between **self-grasping and self-cherishing**. ***Self-grasping*** is the mistaken conception of an apparently solid, independently existing ***I*** who performs these actions and possesses their achievements. ***Self-cherishing*** gives that ***I***, its interests and its importance a privileged place in our thinking.

This distinction now helps us understand the six perfections expressed in the Buddha's ordinary conduct. Generosity, ethical discipline, patience, perseverance, meditation and wisdom can all be practised without grasping at them as achievements belonging to a solid ***I***, or making those achievements a reason for considering ourselves especially important.

This does not mean that a Buddha has no identity, responsibilities or actions. The Buddha continues to live, teach and benefit others. What is absent is the grasping that would turn these activities into expressions of a fixed and important ***I***. **The six perfections are being lived without an independently existing self who possesses them.**

Red Pine's interpretation of Chapter 1 helps us recognise **what the Buddha is doing**: expressing the six perfections through ordinary activities. The intervening chapters help us understand **how those activities can be undertaken** without self-grasping, self-cherishing or attachment to the results. There is a remarkable circularity here. Chapter 1 shows us the Buddha acting, before we understand the depth of wisdom expressed in those actions. Chapter 29 returns us to the same activities, now with an understanding of the mind that makes such conduct possible. **We can now see how the wisdom developed throughout the *Sutra* finds expression in the Buddha's ordinary behaviour.**

Wisdom does not remove the Buddha from ordinary life. It transforms the way that life is lived.

The Buddha still walks into Śrāvastī, begs for food and washes his feet. What has changed is our understanding of the person who performs those actions.

Translation notes

Chapter 29 uses the title *Tathāgata* in relation to *gata* and *āgata*, gone and come. **“Gone nowhere and come from nowhere”** follows the stated explanation without claiming to settle the title's historical derivation.

Chapter 30 Worlds and Particles

“Suppose a son or daughter of good family
took as many worlds as there are particles of earth
in this great threefold thousandfold world system,
and with immeasurable effort reduced them to powder,
to a collection of minute particles.

“What do you think, Subhūti?
Would that collection of minute particles be great?”

“Yes, Blessed One. Yes, Well-Gone One.
That collection would be great.

If it were a great collection of minute particles,
the Blessed One would not call it a collection of minute particles.

“For the collection spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no collection.
That is why it is called a collection of minute particles.

“The great threefold thousandfold world system
spoken of by the Tathāgata has been spoken of as no system.

That is why it is called a great threefold thousandfold world system.

“If there were a world system,
that would itself be a grasping at a whole.

What the Tathāgata has called grasping at a whole
he has spoken of as no grasping.

That is why it is called grasping at a whole.”

The Blessed One said:

“That grasping at a whole is beyond ordinary expression,
inexpressible.

It is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma;
yet foolish ordinary people grasp it.”

Chapter 30 gives us one of the most concrete demonstrations of dependent arising in the *Sutra*. If the whole does not exist independently, perhaps its smallest parts do. The *Diamond* blocks that escape.

Breaking a world into particles does not reveal the independently existing foundations we were looking for. The particles themselves depend upon causes and conditions, while the world exists through its constituent parts and their relationships. Neither the whole nor its parts can be found existing independently.

A car provides an everyday example. We can identify: engine, battery, wheels, seats, doors, body panels, electronics and thousands of other components.

Which one is **the car**? None.

Perhaps the car is simply all the parts together. But what counts as “together”? The same components scattered across a workshop floor would not normally constitute a functioning car.

- Their arrangement matters.
- Their relationships matter.
- Their functioning matters.
- Their history matters.
- And our designation **“car”** matters.

Yet it would be absurd to conclude: **“Therefore there is no car.”** We can get into it and drive away. The car exists dependently rather than independently. The same reasoning applies to a person, a forest, a community, and the *Sutra*'s world system. Thus, particles do not individually constitute “the world,” yet there is no separately existing world apart from constituents, relationships and designation.

This is why Chapter 30 is particularly helpful for understanding the relationship between emptiness/śūnyatā and dependent arising. The whole cannot be found independently of its parts and relationships. The parts do not provide independent little essences from which the whole is mechanically constructed. Both whole and parts exist through dependence.

So when the *Sutra* says that a world would amount to **“grasping at a whole,”** the problem is not

that we use the word *world*. The problem is imagining that because the designation successfully identifies something, therefore **there must be a self-existing unity corresponding to the name**.

Chapter 30 takes the Three-Step Formula into the physical world:
The world exists.
The independently existing world cannot be found.
Therefore we can continue to call it a world.

The conventionally existing world has not been denied. What we have relinquished is the mistaken conception that a whole must exist independently, from its own side, in order to be real.

Translation notes

Paramāṇusaṃcaya is a collection of minute or ultimate particles. **"Minute particles"** avoids identifying the term with a modern scientific atom. This passage should not be presented as an ancient prediction of modern atomic or quantum physics.

Piṇḍagrāha combines a whole, lump or compact mass with grasping. It can emphasise either the grasping of unity or unity as grasped. The following wording concerning what is beyond ordinary expression is compressed, and this remains a passage worth further philological comparison.

Red Pine notes that the expression concerning what can be communicated has been interpreted differently, including as something beyond ordinary explanation and as a linguistic convention. The present rendering retains its strong sense of inexpressibility without treating the independently existing whole as a mysterious hidden reality.

Chapter 31 Releasing Even the Correct View

"Why is this, Subhūti?
If someone said, 'The Tathāgata has taught a view of self,
a view of a being, a living self, a person,'
would that person be speaking correctly?"

"No, Blessed One. No, Well-Gone One.
That person would not be speaking correctly.

For the view of self spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no view.
That is why it is called a view of self."

The Blessed One said:
"Thus should one who has set out in the bodhisattva vehicle
know, see and trust all dharmas:

without settling even in a conception of dharmas
or in a conception of non-dharmas.

"For the conception of dharmas spoken of by the Tathāgata
has been spoken of as no conception.

That is why it is called a conception of dharmas."

Chapter 31 brings us close to the end of the *Diamond Sutra*. Yet the Buddha begins by returning to the conception that has been central to the teaching from the beginning: **The view of self.**

Why return to it now, after thirty chapters examining beings, generosity, merit, attainment, wisdom and even Buddhahood itself? Because the mistaken conception of self has been at the heart of so much of the grasping we have examined. And the Buddha is now asking us to recognise how deeply that conception can persist, even within our understanding of the Dharma.

When even our understanding of emptiness becomes a possession

Throughout the *Sutra*, we have learned that no independently existing self can be found. But understanding this intellectually does not necessarily mean that our deeply established sense of *I* has disappeared. We encountered this distinction most powerfully in Chapter 14.

Self-grasping gives the *I* an apparent solidity and independent existence. **Self-cherishing** gives that *I*, its interests and its importance a privileged place in our thinking. The Buddha's account of King Kali showed how freedom from the conception of self could remove a fundamental condition for anger and hatred. There was no solid *me* whose importance demanded defence or retaliation.

But Chapter 31 is concerned with a much subtler manifestation of the same problem. Suppose that after years of study and practice I have developed a sound understanding of emptiness. I can

explain dependent arising, recognise mistaken conceptions and understand why no independently existing self can be found. All of this is genuine progress. Yet something else may have happened, almost unnoticed.

- ***I** understand emptiness.*
- ***I** know what the Buddha was teaching.*
- ***I** have developed the correct Buddhist view.*
- *This is who **I** am.*
- ***I** am clever. **I** am superior.*

The mistaken conception of an independent *I* has found a new possession: the very understanding that was intended to free us from self-grasping.

This resembles what we discovered in Chapter 9, *when spiritual attainment could become a new identity*. But Chapter 31 takes the examination further. It is not simply our attainment that may become a *possession*. Our entire understanding of the Dharma can become something *through which we establish and defend a sense of who we are*.

Red Pine makes an interesting distinction here. Earlier chapters challenge our *conceptions* of self. Chapter 31 speaks of *views*. Conceptions can become deeply entrenched beliefs, so familiar and convincing that we no longer recognise them as something to be questioned.

We may have learned to reject the idea of an independently existing self while continuing to think, judge and behave as though that self were firmly established.

Why does the Buddha now turn to conceptions of Dharma?

The second half of Chapter 31 is closely connected with the first. The Buddha instructs bodhisattvas to know, see and trust all dharmas, but *without settling in conceptions* of either dharmas or non-dharmas.

Why introduce this warning immediately after returning to the view of self? Because **our understanding of the Dharma can become another means through which self-grasping survives.**

The teaching has helped us recognise our mistaken conceptions. But we may now regard the teaching, or our understanding of it, as something firmly established that belongs to us.

Self-cherishing may become involved as well. The more importance we attach to being someone who understands, the more uncomfortable it becomes when that understanding is questioned.

Suppose another student challenges my explanation of emptiness or shows me that I have misunderstood something. Do I welcome the opportunity to examine my understanding? Or do I immediately begin defending my position because admitting a mistake would threaten my sense of myself?

For the bodhisattva, this has consequences beyond personal pride. If I become attached to the correctness of my own understanding, I may become less willing to recognise what another person actually needs or is capable of understanding. *The Dharma can then become something I insist upon, rather than something I use skilfully to help another being towards liberation.*

The problem is not that I have developed an understanding of the Dharma. It is that self-grasping may have made that understanding its latest possession.

This is why the Buddha does not instruct us to abandon knowledge or stop using concepts. We

still need to study, reflect, distinguish truth from error and develop wisdom. But we must not turn our concepts into fixed realities. Nor should we grasp at *non-dharmas*, making the rejection of concepts into another position we feel obliged to defend.

The Buddha's familiar paradox now serves a particularly important purpose. Even a *conception of Dharma* is not an independently existing conception that captures reality completely. We can use our understanding without imagining that it is final, complete or something we possess.

The insight that releases grasping must not itself become what we grasp.

Returning to Chapter 1

This brings us back again to the Buddha's unassuming conduct at the beginning of the *Sutra*.

After studying the Dharma, are we becoming less defensive, less concerned with our own importance and more willing to acknowledge our mistakes? Is our understanding making us wiser and more compassionate? Or have we simply acquired a more sophisticated set of beliefs around which to construct and protect our sense of self?

The real test of our understanding is not merely whether we can explain the absence of an independently existing self, but whether that understanding is weakening the self-grasping and self-cherishing that influence how we live.

This is why the Buddha's return to the view of self is so important. The *Diamond Sutra* has repeatedly challenged what we grasp. Now, near the end, it asks whether we have recognised the grasping mind itself, and whether even our understanding of the teaching has become another expression of it.

The Buddha's instruction remains wonderfully practical: **Know. See. Practise. Don't grasp.**

We can study and practise the Dharma wholeheartedly, without requiring our understanding to establish someone who is especially wise, accomplished or important.

The return to Chapter 1 is no longer incidental. It brings us back to Subhūti's practical question that has guided our entire study: **How does the wisdom of emptiness change the way a bodhisattva actually lives?**

This is the **raft** once more. We have used the teaching to develop wisdom. Now we must not turn that very wisdom into another burden to carry. The Buddha's instruction remains wonderfully practical: ***Know. See. Practise. Don't grasp.*** We can study and practise the Dharma wholeheartedly, without requiring our understanding to establish someone who is especially wise, accomplished or important. **The insight that releases grasping must not itself become what we grasp.**

Translation notes

Chapter 31 uses *dṛṣṭi*, **view**, where earlier passages often use *saṃjñā*, **conception**.

Jñātavya, draṣṭavya and *adhimoktavya* concern knowing, seeing and trusting or resolutely understanding. None is an instruction to stop examining experience.

Chapter 32 Seeing the Conditioned Clearly

"Suppose, Subhūti, a bodhisattva, a great being,
filled immeasurable, incalculable worlds
with the seven treasures
and gave them to the Tathāgatas, worthy and fully awakened.

"A son or daughter of good family
who took up even a four-line verse
from this discourse on the perfection of wisdom,
retained it, taught it, recited it, mastered it,

and explained it fully to others
would produce still greater merit,
immeasurable and incalculable.

"And how should it be explained?

As with an appearance in the sky:

"A star, a fault of vision, a lamp,
an illusion, dew, a bubble,
a dream, a flash of lightning, a cloud—
so should you look upon the conditioned.

"Thus should it be explained;
that is what is called explaining it."

The Blessed One spoke these words.

The elder Subhūti, the monks and nuns,
the laymen and laywomen, the bodhisattvas,
and the world with its gods, human beings,
asuras and gandharvas,
rejoiced in what the Blessed One had said.

Here ends the noble Vajra Cutter,
the blessed Perfection of Wisdom.

The *Diamond Sutra* ends by telling us **how to look**. The Buddha again praises the extraordinary merit of learning, practising and transmitting even four lines of the *Sutra*. But this time he adds a question: **How should it be explained?** His answer is a series of images that teach us how to look upon the *conditioned* world. The value of transmitting the Dharma lies not simply in preserving its words, but in helping others develop the wisdom through which they can see reality more clearly and loosen their grasping.

The nine images should not all be forced to mean exactly the same thing.

- Dew, bubbles and lightning make transience vivid.
- A lamp burns only while supporting conditions continue.
- A cloud forms, changes and disperses.
- A fault of vision reminds us that appearance need not disclose things exactly as they are.
- A dream can seem utterly convincing while it is occurring.
- An illusion appears and can affect us even though what appears does not exist in the way it seems to exist.

Together the images bring together three themes that have run throughout the *Sutra*:
impermanence, dependent arising and deceptive appearance.

Chapter 27 has already established that emptiness does not mean annihilation. These images concern phenomena that genuinely arise and function, although none exists independently of causes and conditions. Conditioned phenomena arise and function. What is unreliable is the independent, lasting existence they appear to possess.

So the verse is more subtle than simply: **"Everything passes away."**

Impermanence is certainly present. But the *Diamond* has spent thirty-one chapters examining something deeper: **how things exist even while they are present.**

- The bubble is empty before it bursts.
- The cloud is dependently arisen while it fills the sky.
- The dream lacks the independent objects it seems to contain while the dream is being experienced.

This is the perspective the *Sutra* asks us to bring to conditioned existence. And then the discourse ends. That ending brings us unexpectedly close to Chapter 1.

There the Buddha dressed, took his bowl, walked into Śrāvastī, begged for his food, ate, washed his feet and sat down.

Nothing in Chapter 32 cancels that world. After hearing that conditioned things are like dreams, bubbles, dew and lightning, the assembly does not disappear.

They rejoice.

Their rejoicing follows the entire teaching, not merely the final images. The Buddha has shown

them how to understand and live in the conditioned world (in which suffering, generosity, wisdom and compassionate action remain meaningful) without grasping at it as something solid and permanent. Far from making life meaningless, this understanding opens the possibility of freedom from the grasping that causes so much suffering.

There are still monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, bodhisattvas and other beings. They have listened to a teaching. Something has happened. The world remains. But perhaps it can now be seen differently.

- We can walk, eat, wash, think, remember, teach, learn, give, receive, help and practise while understanding that none of these requires a fixed self standing behind it.
- We can recognise self-grasping in the apparently solid ***I*** we feel obliged to defend, and self-cherishing in the special importance we give that ***I***, its interests and achievements. Through wisdom and compassion, we can gradually loosen both.
- We can care deeply about beings without imprisoning them within our conception of what they are.
- We can practise wholeheartedly without turning practice into something possessed.
- We can recognise appearances without demanding that they contain an independent essence.
- We can experience continuity without requiring something unchanging to continue.
- And we can use the teaching itself without needing to make it somewhere permanent for the mind to stand.

The significance of self has become clearer throughout our study. Chapter 14 showed how the absence of self-grasping could remove a fundamental condition for hatred. Chapters 29 and 31 brought us back to the Buddha's unassuming conduct in Chapter 1 and warned that even our understanding of the Dharma could become a new possession of the self.

The wisdom of emptiness does more than reveal that a fixed self cannot be found. It can transform the self-grasping and self-cherishing that influence how we think, feel and act towards others.

That brings us back to Subhūti's question in Chapter 2:
How should a bodhisattva abide?
How should a bodhisattva practise?
How should a bodhisattva govern the mind?

After thirty chapters of dismantling one bastion of grasping after another, the answer has become clearer.

Practise fully.
Respond to the world as it arises.
And do not require anything within it (including yourself, your practice, your understanding or even emptiness/śūnyatā) to exist independently in order for it to matter.

The *Diamond Sutra* does not finish by asking us to leave the conditioned world.

The *Diamond Sutra* is not merely teaching us that things are empty. It is teaching us how wisdom can transform the deeply entrenched sense of self around which so much of our suffering is organised. It teaches us how to see and live in that world without grasping at what arises, turning our experiences and achievements into me or mine, or making them reasons for self-importance.

Translation notes

Saṃskṛta is **"the conditioned"**: what is put together or arises through conditions. The verse does not literally say that all things whatsoever are nonexistent.

Timira can mean darkness or a visual disorder; **"fault of vision"** adopts the latter sense. *Avāśyāya*, represented within the compound in the DSBC text, is dew. *Māyā* is illusion; *abhra* is cloud.

DSBC introduces the verse with tadyathākāśe, a terse "as, for example, in the sky." "As with an appearance in the sky" supplies "appearance" to make the English readable; that noun is not explicit in the Sanskrit. This connective remains provisional and should be checked in a fuller textual comparison.

The Sanskrit source used for this working translation contains nine images. Versions with a shorter list may reflect a different transmitted text rather than careless translation.

Red Pine follows a textual reading in which the Dharma is explained "without explaining," and regards the closing verse as a possible final offering rather than necessarily an instruction for explaining the Sutra. The Sanskrit text followed here instead connects the question about explanation with the nine images and concludes that the conditioned should be explained in this way. The present translation follows that arrangement. Red Pine also notes parallels with another Prajñāpāramitā text; these do not establish that the verse was necessarily added later.

Afterword. The Teaching Held Together

The *Diamond Sutra* establishes an extraordinary purpose: ***the bodhisattva undertakes the complete liberation of all beings, without exception.*** The commitment includes friends, strangers and enemies; those who have suffered and those who have caused suffering; those who are receptive to the Dharma and those who presently have no interest in it. No being is to be left outside the undertaking.

As our study progressed, one question increasingly brought the teachings together: ***What does the Buddha identify here that might obstruct the liberation of all beings, or help make that liberation possible?***

Self. The fundamental obstruction is the mistaken conception of an independently existing ***I***. We ordinarily experience ourselves as independent persons who think, act, achieve and possess. **Self-cherishing** gives that imagined ***I*** special importance. These deeply established habits can distort even our most compassionate activities. The Buddha repeatedly exposes how this happens. Generosity becomes ***my*** *generosity*. Merit becomes ***my*** *accumulation*. Wisdom becomes ***my*** *superior understanding*. Awakening becomes ***my*** *attainment*. Even the commitment to liberate all beings can become ***my*** *great spiritual achievement*. The Buddha is not denying the activities or their consequences. He challenges the imagined independent owner who appropriates them.

Another danger is the *mind's continual search for somewhere to* ***take a stand***. Having relinquished one apparent foundation, it seeks another: generosity, merit, spiritual attainment, the Dharma, or finally its own correct understanding of emptiness. Non-abiding means continuing to understand, practise and act without establishing the mind upon any of these bastions.

The **Three-Step Formula** and **Two Truths** have helped us understand the Buddha's repeated paradoxes. Persons, actions and their consequences exist conventionally, while none possesses independent existence. The Buddha is not abolishing the world through his denials. He is challenging our mistaken understanding of how that world exists.

Because beings and their minds arise dependently, transformation is possible. Ignorance can

be overcome, wisdom can develop, and the conditions sustaining suffering can cease. This is what makes the bodhisattva's undertaking meaningful and possible.

The **six perfections** cultivate the capacities required for that work. **Wisdom** recognises emptiness; **compassion** sustains the commitment to every being; **skilful means** responds to their differing circumstances and abilities.

Chapter 14 reveals the extraordinary depth of this transformation. In the account of King Kali, the mistaken conception of self was absent, and the ill will that would otherwise have arisen did not arise. *The account changes our understanding of **patience***. It also reminds us that even King Kali remains among the beings whom the bodhisattva has undertaken to liberate.

The repeated praise of **transmitting even four lines** now assumes its full significance. Liberation cannot simply be handed from one person to another. Beings must develop their own wisdom through hearing, reflection, meditation and practice. Transmission helps create and preserve the conditions through which that development becomes possible, across generations.

And we return to Chapter 1.

The Buddha dresses, takes his bowl, walks into Śrāvastī, begs for food, eats, washes his feet and sits quietly in mindfulness. What initially appeared to be unremarkable conduct can now be understood, as Red Pine suggests, as an expression of the six perfections without a hint of self-importance. The Buddha continues to live and act in the ordinary world. Nothing requires an independently existing ***I*** to own those activities.

Throughout our study, returning to familiar passages has repeatedly revealed meanings and connections we had overlooked. The text has challenged not merely our original assumptions about Buddhism, but also interpretations we developed while studying it. That process must continue. Our understanding remains incomplete, and even interpretations that presently seem convincing may require correction. Study, reflection, meditation and the guidance of experienced teachers remain essential.

The *Diamond Sutra* does not ask us to stop with an explanation of emptiness. It asks us to develop the wisdom, compassion and abilities through which the liberation of all beings becomes possible, without turning our practice or its achievements into possessions of an imagined independent self. And even as we develop that understanding, we must remain willing to discover how much we have yet to learn. ***The commitment remains unlimited. The work continues. The mind takes no stand.***

Sources and Commentaries Consulted

Sanskrit base text

Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon Vajracchedikā nāma triśatikā prajñāpāramitā

Romanised electronic text, input by DSBC staff in 2004, proofreader Miroj Shakya, supplied by the Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, sponsored by the University of the West. The section numbers cited in the notes refer to this text. Accessed 9 September 2026. The ancient sutra is the source of the translation; modern site metadata is not part of the sutra.

Supplementary Sanskrit comparison

GRETIL Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā fragmentary transcription

Electronic transcription entered by Klaus Wille, based on Paul Harrison and Shōgo Watanabe in Buddhist Manuscripts, volume 3, edited by Jens Braarvig, Oslo, 2006, pages 89–132. The displayed transcription contains restored passages and ends during section 16. Accessed 9 September 2026. Variant comparisons in this document refer to the displayed transcription, not to independent examination of the physical manuscripts.

Additional Sanskrit and translation comparisons

Gregory Schopen. "The Manuscript of the Vajracchedikā Found at Gilgit: An Annotated Transcription and Translation." In Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts, edited by Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan A. Silk, Ann Arbor, 1989. The Gilgit Sanskrit transcription is also available through GRETIL. Consulted particularly for the textual variant in Chapter 15.

Paul Harrison. "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra." In Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, Volume 3, edited by Jens Braarvig, Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2006, pp. 133–159. Consulted particularly for the textual discussion on page 151, note 73.

Commentaries consulted

Red Pine. *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom*.
Consulted throughout as a translation and commentary, particularly for the structure of the Sutra, its repetitions, signlessness, non-abiding, and the relationship between the opening chapter and the teaching that follows.

Mu Soeng. *The Diamond Sutra: Transforming the Way We Perceive the World*.
Consulted throughout as a modern commentary, particularly for the development of the bodhisattva path, skilful means, the relationship between wisdom and compassion, and the way the later chapters revisit increasingly subtle forms of grasping.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajñaparamita Diamond Sutra*.
Consulted particularly for signlessness, non-discrimination, no-coming and no-going, dependent arising, and the practical implications of the *Sutra* for perception and everyday life.

Khenpo Sodargye. The *Diamond* Cutter Sutra.
Consulted particularly for attachment and grasping, the danger of attachment to emptiness, the three spheres of agent, object and action, and the relation between conventional bodhisattva activity and ultimate analysis.

Hui-neng. Commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*.
Consulted particularly for non-abiding, freedom from fixation upon subject and object, the practical transformation of mind, and the relinquishing of attachment to conceptual distinctions.

Hsing Yun. Describing the Indescribable A Commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*.
Consulted particularly for non-attachment to Dharma and non-Dharma, the rejection of nihilistic interpretations of emptiness, and the continuing importance of compassionate activity within conventional reality.

Edward Conze. Buddhist Wisdom Books (Containing The *Diamond Sutra* and The *Heart Sutra*).
London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958. Consulted particularly for the technical interpretation of Prajñāpāramitā, non-possession of attainment and merit, selflessness in patience, and the recurring negations of the Sutra.

Additional Buddhist teachings referred to

Teacher or text	Contribution to our study
Geshe Lhundub Sopa, Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 3	The four ways to gather and cultivate disciples, central to our understanding of skilful means
Śāntideva, Bodhicaryāvatāra, Chapter 6	The destructive consequences of anger and the cultivation of patience
Geshe Langri Tangpa, Eight Verses of Thought Transformation	Difficult people as precious opportunities for patience practice
Lama Zopa Rinpoche, teachings on hearing the Dharma	The value of receiving teachings even before they are fully understood

Lama Zopa Rinpoche. "How to Listen to the Teachings." Teaching given at Kopan Monastery, Nepal, during Kopan Course No. 7, November–December 1974. Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive. Discusses the obstacles to receiving, remembering and properly understanding the Dharma, particularly the importance of examining our own minds rather than simply judging the teacher.

https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/how-listen-teachings

Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Tonglen and Emptiness. Kopan Monastery, Nepal, 1 April 2020. Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Explains that attentive recitation of Dharma teachings, even when their meaning is not yet understood, can leave beneficial imprints that support later understanding.

https://fpmt.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/03/lama-zopa-rinpoche-on-tonglen-and-emptiness/LZR_05_Tonglen-and-Emptiness.pdf

About this study edition

This working translation and commentary has been developed through repeated reading, examination and reflection upon the *Diamond Sutra*, assisted by ChatGPT and informed by the Buddhist commentaries and teachings listed above.

The explanations seek to clarify meanings and relationships within the Buddha's teaching, including those that became apparent only after returning to earlier passages with a deeper understanding gained from later chapters.

The English translation, explanatory language and interpretations remain open to further checking and revision. Particular care has been taken to distinguish the Sanskrit wording from the terminology used to explain it.

The edition records a developing understanding of the *Sutra*, not a claim to have exhausted its meaning. Further comparison with traditional commentaries, guidance from qualified teachers and continued study and meditation may reveal important omissions, misunderstandings or opportunities for improvement.