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THE MAHĀYĀNA SŪTRAS

Editor-in-Chief

Tarmo Kulmar

Editor

Märt Läänemets

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The Doctrine of Seeing the Tathāgata in the *Diamond Sutra*

YAO-MING TSAI

I. Introduction

In order to clearly present the key points and concisely offer a general understanding of the present paper, topics are listed in the categories "Thesis," "Literary Review," "Method," and "Outline" at the very beginning.

A. Thesis

Starting with an analysis of seeing, the present paper intends to discuss the functioning of seeing, including seeing through ordinary bodies and that of the Tathāgata.¹ The aim is to develop the Buddhist doctrine of seeing, to unfold the wisdom of seeing, and thus to lead an open path of life.

B. Literary Review

The inquiry into the Buddhist doctrine of seeing is based on the *Diamond Sutra* and various publications and scholarly works, notably *Empty Vision* and *Imaging Wisdom*. The latter two books are full of fascinating insights and remarkable academic achievements.² The former focuses on the visual metaphors found in a number

¹ In the Buddha's teachings, seeing is not the exclusive way leading towards wisdom and open path. The other sensory organs can follow the similar fashion proposed in this paper to achieve the same goal. Next, the verb "see" can refer literally to the action of eyes or metaphorically to the understanding derived from seeing. This paper starts from the action of seeing and then unfolds the process from seeing to understanding, or if possible, wisdom.

² McMahan, David L. *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002; Kinnard, Jacob N. *Im-*

of the Mahāyāna sutras; the latter places emphasis on the visual images of Buddhist art works. Both are devoted to imparting Buddhist wisdom in visualization and seeing. There are, however, two inadequacies that should be noted. First, though both made several references to the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra in Eight Thousand Lines*, the *Diamond Sutra* was hardly cited. Second, it seems that they have placed too much emphasis on the symbolic role of sight and visual images. David McMahan even highlighted the “devaluation of language” and “privileging of perception” as the key points of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. His analysis might be helpful in understanding the principle or mechanism of visualization or recollection of the Buddha, but it may not hold true in comprehending and observing emptiness by seeing. Thus the present study departs from the two above-mentioned points, exposes problems with seeing, and presents a unique analysis.

C. Method

Philosophical thinking comprises a major part of the *Diamond Sutra*, and this philosophical dimension is heuristically necessary in the present study. The six steps of the research method are as follows. Step One is to emphasise seeing and expose the problems related therewith. Step Two is to regard seeing as “an interface for spiritual cultivation,” a multi-structured surface interweaved with several connected or overlapping parts or sections. Such a multi-structured interface allows spiritual cultivation to take place or, at least, permits seeing to be deconstructed, deepened, strengthened, reconstructed, or reformed. Let us take seeing, for example. The interface of seeing is, in fact, interweaved with what is seen, what is capable of being seen, and the action of seeing. If seeing is deconstructed, further reflected, and strictly scrutinized as aforementioned, seeing will be able to be an interface for spiritual cultivation. Step three subjects seeing to close scrutiny and divides seeing into two types, in terms of seeing as an interface for spiritual cultivation: “entrapped seeing” and “non-entrapped seeing.” The former is always entrapped in what is seen or the interface of see-

ing, and the latter is not entrapped. Entrapped seeing emphasizes what is seen or the surface of seeing, so the paths, if any, will be mostly confined within the surface of seeing. On the contrary, non-entrapped seeing does not stick to any surfaces, parts, or sections, but is devoted to broadening seeing and clearing an open path for seeing. As a result, seeing itself can be seen as "leading over or beyond" or "oriented toward an open path." Strictly speaking, a closed path cannot be called a path but a dead end, since a path, to be so called, must be open to a certain extent. Next, in entrapped seeing, there is either no path or there are closed paths. In contrast, paths in non-entrapped seeing are open. Step Four takes non-entrapped seeing as the keynote, collects and analyzes scriptural evidence, and clarifies complicated ideas and makes them easier to understand. Step Five is to discuss the underlying significance of the wisdom of seeing in non-entrapped seeing and its orientation toward an open path. Step Six focuses on the openness and orientation of the open path in non-entrapped seeing.

D. Outline of the Sections

"Introduction" presents the topics and structure of this paper. Section Two, "Seeing into the Surface of Seeing," examines seeing, exposes its problems, highlights the importance of seeing, and addresses why and how seeing can be closely examined. With the potentiality of seeing into the surface, one is able to adjust one's mindset, which is the fundamental step in spiritual cultivation and the main point of the *Diamond Sutra*. Hence Section Three will be a brief but standard introduction to the sutra. Section Four draws a distinction between entrapped seeing and non-entrapped seeing, and further proposes that non-entrapped seeing can blaze a path for seeing, life, spiritual cultivation and the world. Section Five is focused on the topic of "How the Tathāgata should be seen," examining five dialogues in the *Diamond Sutra* and explaining why "the possession of characteristic marks," "the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person," "the perfect development of the physical body," and the like are not sufficient to permit one to see the Tathāgata in its reality. Section Six demonstrates that with the open path of seeing and the wisdom of seeing, spiritual cultivation can be fully realized, reaching *dharmakāya* and *dharmatā*. When the

Tathāgata is fully realized by seeing, the Tathāgata in spiritual cultivation can be anticipated. The final section is the Conclusion.

II. "Seeing into the Surface of Seeing"

Most people firmly believe that "What you see is what you get," and that the object one sees is exactly the same as what is seen. Thus they tend to explain the object by what they see. In this way, both the object that is seen and the action of seeing remain at a superficial level. If this can be termed "seeing on the surface," then "seeing into the surface" is likely to provide a different way of seeing, challenge ordinary people's way of seeing, propel one to closely examine the elements involved in seeing, and come up with theoretical accounts.

The present section, which has been divided into two parts, will expose the problems of the ordinary way of seeing: "seeing as a subject matter needs examining," and "the examination of seeing should be put in the context of progress in spiritual cultivation."

A. Seeing as Subject Matter Must Be Examined

As manifested in the *Diamond Sutra*, seeing an object does not focus on the object being seen, nor does it remain on the surface of seeing. If this teaching is workable, then the premise, instead of taking any kind of seeing as granted, is that ordinary seeing is a subject matter worth re-evaluating.

Seeing can generally be divided into three types. Type One is skimming quickly or just for fun. This type of seeing is characterized by finished products, their appearance, everyday vocabulary, and a lack of in-depth thinking. Type Two is seeing from or within a specialized discipline, such as physics, biology, art, science or art history. It is characterized by academic insights and relevant terminology. Type Three refers to seeing and examining the features and multi-structured relationship between what is seen and what is capable of being seen. This is characterized by reflection on the action of seeing and metalanguage, in the hope of fully understanding what is really going on in the process of seeing.

The reason why seeing should be treated as a subject matter worth examination is that ordinary seeing and specialized seeing cannot be taken for granted. The examination of seeing can start with an examination of what is seen, what is capable of being seen, and the action of seeing. These three portions constitute the "three-fold wheel or circle" of seeing, the three wheel axles that make possible the action of seeing, or the "interface" of seeing, a multi-structured interface that is interweaved by the constituents of seeing. Such an analysis undertakes at least two serious tasks. One is to urge people not to hastily assert seeing or habitually accept seeing as what they see. After the three major portions of seeing are elicited, people will be able to examine seeing and understand its mechanism. The other is further to carry out rectification in each portion, make seeing more qualified, deepen seeing, and, if possible, bring about a revolution in seeing.

B. The Examination of Seeing Should Be Placed in the Context of Progress in Spiritual Cultivation

After realizing that seeing is a subject matter worth examining and that seeing can be scrutinized from the three portions of what is seen, what is capable of being seen, and the action of seeing, one can further adjust one's way of seeing and initiate one's spiritual cultivation. Analytically speaking, the multi-structured surface of seeing or the "interface" of seeing treats seeing as a "phase" connected or interweaved by several sections. If the interface or phase is oversimplified, attention is focused on a certain dharma, and this portion is further confined, it follows that the so-called "object being seen," "the seer, or the seeing subject," and "seeing itself" are formed. However, things are recognized or grasped in a compact mess or in a situation that is like an interface, and seeing is in a folded, static or fixed state. This is "seeing on the surface." Conversely, if the folded is unfolded, the static is activated, the fixed is set in motion, seeing move away from the clustered, flat, or compressed mould into a multi-faceted, multi-directional openness. In other words, if a "three-fold wheel or circle" of seeing can be opened up, the three connected wheel axles will not be static or fixed as they seem to be, and the processes of their accumulation, arrangement, organization, alternation or transformation

in seeing can thus be unfolded. In Buddhism, it is designated as the "complete purification of the three-fold wheel," which is used to defy the fixed definitions and emotional understanding of the three major constituent portions.

In terms of various pathways of Buddhist cultivation, seeing not only rids one of ordinary confines but also brings advancement in at least two respects. First, with the advancement of seeing, one can make overall progress in the development of pathways of spiritual cultivation. Second, with the advancement of pathways of spiritual cultivation, practical experiences will be enhanced, and progress in seeing can be made.

III. The Keynotes of the Diamond Sutra: Spiritual Cultivation and "Open-Path-Oriented" Salvation

The *Diamond Sutra* is famous for its teachings about the Bodhisattva Vehicle or the Buddhist Pathway to Enlightenment, including the wisdom of seeing. Before going on to discuss the wisdom of seeing, a general understanding of the gist of the sutra is required. This section then intends to offer a succinct but quintessential introduction of the sutra to prepare the reader for later analysis.

A Buddhist can choose either the Bodhisattva Vehicle or Buddhist Pathway to Enlightenment as his or her own way of spiritual cultivation. Regardless of which way he or she chooses, spiritual cultivation is the fundamental step to take. If one is determined to get on the Bodhisattva Vehicle, one must guide all sentient beings in cyclic existence toward Nirvāṇa. Then, the spiritual cultivation and salvation of all sentient beings is combined. Knowing this, however, is not enough. If the task is performed using ordinary people's confined ways of thinking, it is not likely that the aim will be achieved. The sutra teaches that the adjustment of the mind is the *sine qua non* of spiritual cultivation. It is only by the continuous adjustment of the mind that one's spiritual cultivation can advance. Thus spiritual cultivation and the salvation of others are inseparable with the adjustment of the mind.

Furthermore, the "open-path orientation" is one of the themes of the sutra. On the one hand, in guiding a variety of sentient beings, the teachings in the sutra are not to create idol admiration, to con-

fine the experiences of sentient beings, or to maintain any dualistic relationship, but to open up a path for life processes leading toward Nirvana. On the other hand, regarding the operation of the Bodhisattva Vehicle, the teaching aims neither to create myths about the Bodhisattva Vehicle nor to formulate any closed theory, but to make the most of the Bodhisattva Vehicle to clear an open path for continuous spiritual cultivation. Thus by virtue of the Bodhisattva Vehicle, pathways of spiritual cultivation can be opened.

IV. Non-entrapped Seeing Makes a Difference in Seeing Ordinary Bodies

In terms of seeing, the unfolding and advancement of spiritual cultivation and salvation lies in whether or not seeing is entrapped in the interface of spiritual cultivation and salvation. As explained in the previous section, the interface of seeing is a multi-structured surface, a "three-fold wheel or circle" of seeing: what is seen, what is capable of being seen, and the action of seeing. One can see "on the surface" or "into the surface." The choice one makes decides whether or not one's seeing is trapped not. Thus this section will first make a distinction between entrapped (*vastupatita*) and non-entrapped (*avastupatita*) seeings, and then illustrate that non-entrapped seeing constitutes ordinary bodies, reforms the performance of seeing, makes skilful use of negative terms, and thus manifests the wisdom of seeing.

A. Vastupatita vs. Avastupatita

From the very beginning, the *Diamond Sutra* emphasizes that the process of composing thoughts should be placed under strict scrutiny; otherwise, the ideas will bring about concepts of the existence of things, and/or figures and things are only seen using formulated concepts. Seeing in this way is termed *vastupatita*, "entrapped seeing." *Vastupatita*, or to have fallen among things,³ means being entrapped in the concepts of existence of or the surface of things

³ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, pp. 982c-983a; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 42; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 81.

and/or figures. This technical term is used to point out that if one has fallen among things, one sees nothing, and what has been done is in reality almost a waste of time. On the contrary, this sutra endorses *avastupatita*, or not to get fallen among things. This is a more likely way to see through the contexts and causality of things, and to do things correctly.

B. Non-entrapped Seeing on the Constitution of Ordinary Bodies

After showing the possible defects of entrapped seeing, this section demonstrates how to see the constitution of ordinary bodies with non-trapped seeing. According to the *Diamond Sutra*, the constitution of ordinary bodies refers to physical features of worldly sentient beings in contrast with the Tathāgata's body constitution. Two passages are summarized in this part, and in both of them the constitution of ordinary bodies is like being endowed with a body (*upetakāya*) or even with a huge body (*mahākāya*).

In the first passage, the constitution of ordinary bodies is compared to the huge personal existence (*ātmabhāva* or "one's own existence") of the Sumeru, king of mountains. Though such a personal existence is recognized as huge, the point does not lie in the description of how "huge" it is or the endorsement of the idea of "huge," but in examining "personal existence":

"Personal existence, personal existence," as non-existence that has been taught by the Tathāgata; for that is not existence or non-existence. Therefore is it called "personal existence."⁴

In the second passage, the same simile is used and is also not further elaborated. It scrutinizes the saying of being endowed with a body, or a huge body:

"That which the Tathāgata has called a man endowed with a body, a huge body – it is said to be a non-body by the Tathāgata. In that sense "endowed with a body, a huge body" is used."⁵

Three points are brought up from the above passages that help illustrate the idea of non-entrapped seeing. The first point is seeing *from the outer layer to the inner layer*. In terms of conception, the items

⁴ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 981c; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 36; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 78.

⁵ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 984a; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 49; *Vajracchedikā-Schopen*, p. 102; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 84.

of the outer layer include a huge body, an endowed body, and the person. The representative item in the middle layer is the existence of the self. The items of the inner layer include the existence and the body. That is to say, examination should not focus or remain on the items of the outer layer, but must move toward the inner layer. It follows that making a lengthy discussion of items of the outer layer is shallow. Hence, moving from the outer layer toward the inner layer is one of the salient features of non-entrapped seeing.

The second point is seeing *from phrases to deeper meanings*. With the appearances, features, and characteristic marks captured in confined areas or certain layers, related phrases can thus be composed or put into use. However, seeing from the viewpoint of phrases or words often causes entrapped seeing; that is, seeing will be dominated or confined by phrases or words. Instead of being confined by phrases or words, viewers should try to see into the deeper meanings of things or the principle of transformation. Thus, moving from phrases toward deeper meanings is another notable feature of non-entrapped seeing.

The third point is seeing *from finiteness to infiniteness*. If seeing only changes from phrases to deeper meanings, but the meanings are still confined by basic concepts such as existence, the self, appearances, features or characteristic signs, seeing will still be entrapped. In other words, however numerous and specific meanings have been made, the accepted meanings are still literal, and seeing is still entrapped in the frames built up by phrases and words. On the other hand, in the above two cited passages, there are terms such as "*non-existence*" and "*non-body*." The prefix "non-" is very significant here. Literally, "non-" is a negative term, used to negate something. When something is negated, it presupposes that something has been affirmed. In this case, it seems that the Buddha negates existence and the body, concepts which have long been affirmed to be facts or reality. However, such use of negation is not employed to propose the opposing counterpart. If the negation here is regarded as such, what the Buddha teaches is nothing insightful, for such a perspective is still trapped in the dual or oppositional thinking of affirmation and negation and remains on the surface of words or phrases. Whatever is discussed cannot then be released from the finitude of duality and language. In fact, the negation here cannot be seen or read on the surface of the negation.

It must be seen or read along with the aforementioned way of seeing into the surface. Thus one does not have to affirm any phrases or to assert that which is negated. Instead, this seeing opens up a thought of infinitude. In other words, the affirmation or negation of things or phrases creates confinement, whereas infiniteness neither affirms nor negates any finite things or phrases in terms of reality.⁶ Consequently, converting one's seeing from finiteness to infiniteness is also an outstanding feature of non-entrapped seeing, which allows seeing to be performed out of confinement.

V. *The Wisdom of Seeing the Tathāgata's Body Constitution in the Diamond Sutra*

The *Diamond Sutra* uses at least five paragraphs in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and his disciple Subhūti to present the perspective and thoughts on seeing through the Tathāgata's body constitution. These dialogues are so important that they deserve in-depth discussion.

A. Should the Tathāgata be Seen by "the Possession of Characteristic Marks"?

This question is concerned with how to see the Tathāgata or "How is the Tathāgata to be seen?" The point to be discussed is whether the Tathāgata should be seen "by means of the possession of characteristic marks" (*lakṣaṇa-saṃpadā*). The answer appears to be yes. The correct answer, however, is quite the opposite. The reason why "the Tathāgata is not to be seen by means of the possession of characteristic marks" is that the means by which the Tathāgata is seen should be examined closely.

The *Diamond Sutra* states: "What has been taught by the Tathāgata as the possession of characteristic marks is truly not the possession of characteristic marks." If the Tathāgata is seen by means of the so-

⁶ cf. Nagatomo, Shigenori. *The Diamond Sutra's Logic of Not and A Critique of Katz's Contextualism: Toward a Non-dualist Philosophy*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006, 1-54.

⁷ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 980b-c; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 30; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 76.

called "possession of characteristic marks" (*lakṣaṇasaṃpat*), then it is "not the possession of characteristic marks" (*alākṣaṇasaṃpat*) in reality. In other words, the means by which the Tathāgata is seen is just physical features created by a conventional signification; the features are not identical with what has been signified in its reality.

This statement reveals an insightful thought: "Wherever there is the possession of characteristic marks, there is fraud; wherever there is not the possession of characteristic marks, there is no fraud."

Taking "the possession of characteristic marks" as the criterion of seeing, the Tathāgata brings about either affirmation or negation. To be more specific, if one identifies the possession of characteristic marks with the Tathāgata, one's recognition of the Tathāgata is distorted, and one will fail to see the reality of the Tathāgata. One only sees on the surface, namely the characteristic marks, failing to see into the surface. On the contrary, if one sees into the possession of characteristic marks or does not identify it with the Tathāgata in its reality, what has been seen will not depart from the reality, nor will it be "false."

After the examination of the means by which the Tathāgata is seen, a conclusion can thus be drawn regarding how the Tathāgata is to be seen:

"The Tathāgata is to be seen by means of or from (the viewpoint of) the possession of characteristic marks as the non-possession of characteristic marks in reality."

In other words, one should see the Tathāgata from (the viewpoint of) characteristic marks as non-characteristic marks in themselves.

B. Should the Tathāgata be Seen on the basis of "the Thirty-two Characteristic Marks of a Great Person"?⁸

The question raised here once again puts emphasis on how to see the Tathāgata, or "How is the Tathāgata to be seen?" The point to be discussed is whether the Tathāgata should be seen "by means of the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person (*mahāpuruṣa*)."⁸ The answer is again negative. That is, "the Tathāgata should be seen by means of the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person."

⁸ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 982a; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 38; *Vajracchedikā-Schopen*, p. 99; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, pp. 79–80.

Since the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person are means by which the Tathāgata is to be seen, their qualification as means must be re-evaluated. The result shows that they are not qualified. The reason is that "each of the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person is said not to be a characteristic mark on the basis of the Tathāgata." It can be understood in this way: the thirty-two characteristic marks are not the only factors responsible for the failure, since they cannot only be manifested by the Tathāgata but also be perceived by viewers under certain circumstances. Hence, seeing merely with the perception of the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person is not enough. It is necessary and crucial to develop non-trapped ways of seeing these characteristic marks. In addition, the Tathāgata should not be reduced only to these perceived characteristic marks. Instead, one should endeavour to see into these characteristic marks to understand the Tathāgata in reality.

The following conclusion can be reached: the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person serve only as an interface. If visions, phrases or cognition stick to the surface, a hasty conclusion or prejudice will be made on or by this surface. In fact, as shown in the previous section, the surface is multi-structured and serves simply as an interface. On this account, the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person are just a borrowed signification, by which the Tathāgata is seen with an absence of reality. Therefore the argument that the Tathāgata is to be seen by means of the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person does not hold true.

C. Should the Tathāgata be Seen in Accordance with "the Perfect Development of the Physical Body"?

The question raised here is once again related to how to see the Tathāgata, or "How is the Tathāgata to be seen?" The point to be discussed is whether the Tathāgata should be seen "by means of the perfect development of the physical body or form-body" (*rūpakāyapariniṣpattiyā*). The answer is again negative. That is, "the Tathāgata should not be seen by means of the perfect development of the physical body." The reason is as follows:

⁹ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 984b; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 52; *Vajracchedikā-Schopen*, pp. 103-104; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 86.

“A perfect development of the physical body, a perfect development of the physical body,’ that is said by the Tathāgata to be an imperfect development of the physical body. In that sense ‘perfect development of the physical body’ is used.”

What the Buddha teaches here is not to be confined by words or to self-contradicted by the method of affirming, negating, and re-affirming. In addition, it exemplifies how one should take advantage of words without the finiteness of words. That is, ordinary language can still lead one to places linguistic rules cannot reach, to the reality of infiniteness, and thus to bringing up non-entrapped seeing.

To sum up, there are at least three main points. First, the phrase of “the physical body developed,” a result of eyes’ contact with the image, is only a momentary designation, and what one sees, likewise, is only a transient appearance. Both can vary depending on context. Second, since sight is the result of eyes’ contacts with the image, what one sees does not constantly exist. In a similar fashion, since phrases and words are just borrowed temporarily to signify what one sees at the moment, they do not have sovereignty or value in themselves. As a result, “the physical body developed” lacks reality of its own in either images or phrases, and is not enough to act as means by which the Tathāgata is to be seen. Third, to the question of “What kind of means is enough by which the Tathāgata is to be seen?”, “the physical body developed” is an incorrect answer, but it is not that far from the truth. The key is that “the physical body developed” is only a phrase used to signify things, and that the so-called “physical body developed” is in reality unable to be expressed or confined by the phrase “the physical body developed.”

D. Should the Tathāgata be Seen by “the Possession of Characteristic Marks”?¹⁰

Again, the question raised here is connected with how to see the Tathāgata or “How is the Tathāgata to be seen?” The point to be discussed is whether the Tathāgata should be seen “by means of

¹⁰ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 984c; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, pp. 52–53; *Vajracchedikā-Schopen*, p. 104; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 86.

the possession of characteristic marks." The answer is again negative. That is, "the Tathāgata should not be seen by means of the possession of characteristic marks." The reason is as follows:

"What has been taught by the Tathāgata as the possession of characteristic marks is not actually the possession of characteristic marks. In that sense 'possession of characteristic marks' is used."

This dialogue is similar to the third one, with two minor differences. The first distinction concerns the item to be examined. The item in this dialogue is "the possession of characteristic marks," and "the perfect development of the physical body" in the third one. The other lies in the Tathāgata's teaching: in this dialogue, "not the possession of characteristic marks" includes action (the possession) and the feature related to the action (characteristic marks), but "not a perfect development" in the third contains the action part (a perfect development) without the feature related to the action (the physical body). Since the structures are quite similar, the subjects, statements, and reasons of the third dialogue can also be applied to the fourth.

E. Should the Tathāgata be Seen on the basis of "the Possession of Characteristic Marks"?¹¹

The question raised here once again deals with how to see the Tathāgata or "How is the Tathāgata to be seen?" The issue is whether the Tathāgata should be seen "by means of the possession of characteristic marks." The Buddha's answer to this question is as follows:

"If the Tathāgata were to be seen by means of the possession of characteristic marks, a wheel-turning king would also be a Tathāgata."

It is reiterated that "the Tathāgata should not be seen by means of the possession of characteristic marks." That is, if the possession of characteristic marks is the only criterion, the Tathāgata will be reduced to a wheel-turning king (*rājā cakravartī*), or a wheel-turning king could then be seen as a Tathāgata. This will cause confusion and cannot be treated as a means by which the Tathāgata is to be seen.

¹¹ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 985a; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, p. 56; *Vajracchedikā-Schopen*, p. 105; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 87.

The question is answered, but it is answered indirectly and negatively by ruling out unsuitable items. How can the question be answered in a direct and positive fashion? The *Diamond Sutra* offers the following statement:

“The Tathāgata is to be seen from the viewpoint of characteristic marks as not characteristic marks.”

In other words, the direct and positive answer is located along the major axis of the *Diamond Sutra*, or even the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, namely, the wisdom of observing emptiness. It can be looked at and further explained from two angles. First, if one chooses “the possession of characteristic marks” as the perspective, one will confuse the Tathāgata with a wheel-turning king. Despite this problem, other items will not provide a better-qualified viewpoint. Second, “the possession of characteristic marks” has something to do with the Tathāgata, since under certain conditions the Tathāgata could manifest it to some extent. Moreover, it is also concerned with seeing, since under certain conditions one can still see and name it.

The main theme of the above two viewpoints is “*na abhinipātena, na abhinipātam anāgamyā,*” or “neither by means of being synthesized into a whole nor being independent of it.” “Not by means of being synthesized into a whole” means that to know reality, one has more things to be done than remaining on certain items and waiting to be synthesized into the areas of thus confined items. “Not being independent of” means that to know reality, there is more to be done than knowing certain items and then remaining outside of the confined items. The purported idea of “neither by means of being synthesized into a whole nor being independent of” is to teach one to know reality as it truly is and to show that no items should be confined in the very beginning. To confine oneself to a certain item, treat it as an accepted premise, and then debate over it heatedly are far from being the right path toward reality.

If the idea of “neither by means of being synthesized into a whole nor being independent of” – whose main point is not to become confined within certain items – makes sense, then one asks: what is its basis? The answer is obvious: “characteristic marks as not characteristic marks.” However, if “characteristic marks as not characteristic marks” is recognized as a certain item and is firmly clung to or cut off and kept a distance from, one’s efforts will be exhausted

and deviated from the path toward reality as it truly is, namely, opening up the so-called characteristic marks and seeing them as not characteristic marks.

If "penetrating wisdom" (*nirvedhikā prajñā*), the main theme of the *Diamond Sutra* or even of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, is taken into account, the above two angles will not be too difficult to understand. "Penetrating wisdom" can be presented vertically and horizontally. When presented vertically, if the process of variation with correlated conditions is sufficiently understood, there will be no fixed things or creatures that do not change, or any confinement that cannot be broken. Horizontally, if one sets aside sensations such as hearing or smelling, and focuses on seeing, the object that is seen will not be circumscribed in the ideas that "the mode of existence is merely the object being seen" or that "the labels identified are exactly the same as the object being seen." As such, the process of seeing will not be confined to such a short distance between seers and the object being seen, and the projected visions will not be pictures that are put into the package of words or discourses. In other words, vertically, seeing does not depart from the context of the entire process of seeing or pick out such items as the seers, the objects being seen, and the respective projected visions. Instead, it will reveal the context of the entire process of seeing, for one to fully understand in what kind of seeing process, in what kind of correlated condition, the cognitive constructs of the so-called seers, objects being seen, and projected visions are set up. Owing to the fact that most of these constructive items are products of the setting up of the seeing process, if the survey starts from examining the conditions correlated with setting and performs a thorough layer by layer analysis, it follows an in-depth understanding of how the projected visions are assembled and collocated with phrases or words. In so doing, the context of the entire process of seeing will be revealed, and then penetrating wisdom will thus come forth.

VI. The Penetrating Wisdom of Seeing Brings about the Advancement of Spiritual Cultivation

If seeing the Tathāgata's body constitution remains on the surface of seeing, such as the possession of characteristic marks, the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person, the perfect development of the physical body, the seeing, will nevertheless eventually be very limited. Devoting oneself to such confined seeing, with the emphasis put on different areas, one may be able to make remarkable contributions to specialized art, like seeing people, physiognomy, aesthetics, art science, art history, or museology. Nevertheless, the teachings in the *Diamond Sutra* intend to lead one not to any specialized learning but to reveal penetrating wisdom and the advancement of spiritual cultivation upon seeing.

A very important reminder of teachings follows right after the fifth dialogue in the previous section.¹² If what is seen is the form of a body constitution, what is heard is the sound of the object, and the understanding gained from the sensory organs remains on the surface of contact, the efforts, however engaged, are misdirected, and the Tathāgata in its reality will not be seen. Since the Tathāgata is the guide (*nāyaka*) of Buddhist teachings and manifests from the *dharmakāya* ("Dharma-body"; or "the Dharma as the body"), the Tathāgata should be seen as a reflection of the *dharmatā* (the state of being the Dharma). In other words, "the Tathāgata should be seen from the viewpoint of the Dharma (*dharmataḥ*), and the *dharmatā* can be fully realized by this way of seeing." Since the *dharmatā* is not to be discerned, it is impossible for the *dharmatā* to be discerned.

From the above statement, three levels of seeing are thus distinguished. The outermost is "Seeing on the Surface" – seeing the possession of characteristic marks, the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person, or the perfect development of the physical body. This seeing is composed of varying correlated conditions, and observes or recognizes certain visions from the composed results and applies words or concepts to signify or speak

¹² T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 985a-b; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, pp. 56–57; *Vajracchedikā-Scho-pen*, pp. 105–106; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, pp. 87–88.

of them. At this level, seeing can be called *vastupatita*, or “to have fallen among things.”

The middle is “Seeing into the Surface” – seeing into the constituents, such as the form of a body constitution or the sound of an object. However, if one sees into the constituents and treats them as fixed with identifiable features, what is seen will be false and will not function at all. For the open path or the right way to be taken, one must see not only the correlated conditions that make constituents form the visions on the surface, but also the reality of correlated conditions through the process of variation.

The innermost of these is “In-depth Seeing” – seeing the reality of correlated conditions through the process of variation is seeing constituents as the *dharmakāya* (Dharma-body; or the Dharma as the body) or the *dharmatā* (the state of being the Dharma). This level is not a level isolated from the other two, but one that opens up access to the previous levels. In this way, seeing the process of variation with correlated conditions penetrates all levels. That is to say that, although the three levels of seeing differ in the depths, insightfulness, and thoroughness, there are no three fixed levels in reality, and none of them can be independent of the other two and exist alone.

With the advancement of penetrative seeing, seeing will not remain on the surface of vision or linger on constituents of the middle level, nor will it branch out into numerous sets of dualistic differences. Instead, practitioners should devote themselves to seeing into the mechanism of assembling and disassembling and what the projected visions and constituents really are, through the process of variation with correlated conditions.

Accordingly, the idea that what has been seen is just the accumulated result of the variation of correlated conditions carries three remarkable messages. First, the so-called visions have no fixed existence in themselves, as is taught in the *Diamond Sutra*: “‘Personal existence, personal existence,’ as non-existence that has been taught by the Tathāgata”; “That which the Tathāgata has called a man endowed with a body, a huge body – it is said to be a non-body by the Tathāgata”; “‘A perfect development of the physical body, a perfect development of the physical body,’ that is said by the Tathāgata to be an imperfect development of the physical body”; and “What has been taught by the Tathāgata as the possession of

characteristic marks is truly not the possession of characteristic marks."

Second, constituents have no fixed existence of their own, so "constituents are not constituents." What this message seeks to convey is not that "there are no constituents" or that "constituents do not exist." Nor does it "negate" things. Instead, it presents *dharmatā*. "Constituents are not constituents" can also be expressed by *dharmaniḥsvabhāvatā* ("the lack of own-being concerning constituent items") and *dharmasūnyatā* ("the emptiness of constituent items").

Third, though "constituents are not constituents," "dharmas" and "not-dharmas" are not in opposition to each other. Instead, by acutely seeing throughout the process of variation with correlated conditions and taking advantage of borrowed words and phrases, one can dismiss the substantialistic notion of "dharmas" and "not-dharmas." That is "*na sa dharmo na-a-dharmaḥ*" or "it is neither a dharma nor a non-dharma."¹³

Seeing the Tathāgata's body constitution is an opportunity to lead seeing from an experienced interface to an interface of spiritual cultivation. Since seeing comes before spiritual cultivation, it helps to open up from the surface, through the inner layer, to the bottom layer, and to offer a path from the experienced vision, through constituents, then to *dharmatā*. First-hand experiences are to be gained on the way of seeing into objects layer by layer. This demonstrates the wisdom of seeing in a universally accessible way. Therefore, if seeing is confined to a closed area, paths will undoubtedly be blocked and seriously limited from within. On the contrary, if seeing is opened up, the pathways of spiritual cultivation will naturally lead to more open areas.

VII. Conclusion

In the *Diamond Sutra*, seeing is very important because it raises the advancement of spiritual cultivation to such sublime spheres as *dharma-kāya*, *dharmatā*, and the Tathāgata. The related discussions in this paper can be summarized as follows:

¹³ T. 220 (9), vol. 7, p. 981a; *Vajracchedikā-Conze*, pp. 32-33; *Vajracchedikā-Vaidya*, p. 77.

First, in the *Diamond Sutra*, "seeing" is regarded as one of the most significant topics in Buddhist teaching. The bodies that are seen can be classified into the constitution of ordinary bodies and that of the Tathāgata.

Second, the *Diamond Sutra* includes at least five dialogues that discuss the topic of "how the Tathāgata should be seen," and shed light on the viewpoints that the Tathāgata should not be seen by means of "the possession of characteristic marks," "the thirty-two characteristic marks of a great person," or "the perfect development of the physical body," and that the means by which the Tathāgata be seen should be "non-entrapped," or "open-path-oriented."

Third, the *Diamond Sutra* is open-path-oriented not only in seeing but also in the spiritual cultivation leading toward the Bodhisattva Vehicle and the salvation of all sentient beings from cyclic existence. As a result, seeing is not used to prove the existence of the seer or the object being seen, nor is it used to open an unbridgeable gap between the seer and the object being seen. On the contrary, it is through seeing, which is capable of penetrating or being advanced, that the path of seeing is thus opened. Then, what is seen and what is capable of being seen will be equal and non-dual.

Finally, the *Diamond Sutra* presents penetrating wisdom concerning the path of seeing. From "Seeing on the Surface" which is formed by initially experienced visions, "Seeing into the Surface" by seeing into constituents, to "In-depth Seeing," where constituents in the flow of variation with correlated conditions is elicited, a path of seeing leading toward *dharmakāya*, "*dharmatā*," and the Tathāgata is thus opened.

Abbreviations

T – *Taishō shinshūdaizōkyō*

Vajracchedikā-Conze – Conze, Edward (ed. & tr.). *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1957.

Vajracchedikā-Schopen – Schopen, Gregory. The Manuscript of the *Vajracchedikā* Found at Gilgit: An Annotated Transcription and Translation. – *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three*

Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts. Edited by Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan A. Silk. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1989, 89–139.

Vajracchedikā-Vaidya – Vaidya, P. L. (ed.). Chapter 2: *Vajracchedikā Nāma Trīṣatikā Prajñāpāramitā*, *Mahāyānasūtra-saṃgraha*. Part I. – *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts*. No. 17. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1961, 75–89.