

Translator's Introduction

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The Great Prajna Paramita Sutra, with approximately five million words in six hundred fascicles, is regarded as the largest canon in Buddhism. The present version is, so far, the only complete presentation of this great sutra in English and is the second version, translated and published unabridged, in addition to the Chinese one rendered from Sanskrit about 1,350 years ago (from 660 to 663) by Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang, c. 602–664), from which the present English translation is made. This English translation will appear as a set of hardbound volumes; an extensive glossary of the terms will be included.

The Sanskrit word *prajna* means “wisdom.” But it has a connotation beyond how that word commonly is understood. It includes wisdom of the world and beyond the world; the wisdom based on perfect knowledge; the wisdom of living daily life and viewing human life, sentient beings, and the world; and the wisdom attained through logical and experiential reasoning and intuitive contemplation of all existent beings and their phenomena.

The Sanskrit word *paramita* means “ferrying” over the ocean or the river to reach the other shore. It also means “perfection.” The cultivation of wisdom to its perfection is called *prajna paramita* because it can ferry sentient beings from their existing shore of vexations and suffering to the other shore of liberation and happiness. Therefore, such wisdom is the great superior wisdom, “the great *prajna paramita*.”

The Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* refers to ones who not only can be awakened to the truth and become enlightened themselves but also can assist others to become awakened and enlightened. The *bodhisattvas* serve as a “great vehicle” to liberate

sentient beings from suffering, vexations, and bondage so they can attain freedom, easiness, peace, and happiness in body and mind. Bodhisattvas are called *mahasattva* (great) because they are so broad-minded, loving-kind, and compassionate that they care about other sentient beings more than themselves. The great bodhisattvas are those who aspire to the unsurpassed, perfect, and universal bodhi. They have not yet become a Buddha, but they are determined and have vowed to learn and cultivate diligently and perfectly superior actions and virtuous dharmas. They walk on the road leading to the great bodhi and the Buddhahood. This is the only way the great bodhisattvas are able to set free sentient beings.

The Great Prajna Paramita Sutra is important not only because of its extensive teaching but also because it demonstrates what the great bodhisattva, the great bodhisattva path of cultivation, and the great bodhisattva vehicle are. It also demonstrates the differences between the great bodhisattva vehicle, the so-called large vehicle, and the other two vehicles for voice-hearers and self-enlightened ones, as well as how one should cultivate and learn to become a bodhisattva, reaching the state of nonregression in the pursuit of the unsurpassed, perfect, and universal bodhi and finally becoming a Buddha. This sutra depicts, manifests, and elaborates an entire learning process that can lead to attaining Buddhahood.

The dialogues and dialectic conversations between the Buddha and his senior disciples—Subhuti (Well Appearing One), Sariputra, Ananda (Joyfully Celebrating One), and Purna (Fully Loving-Kind One), as well as Bodhisattva Maitreya, Heavenly Emperor Indra, and others—manifest the essential meanings of the “large vehicle”; the cultivation and learning of the bodhisattva path; the perfect knowledge and wisdom of the Buddha; the thirty-two perfect major marks and the eighty distinguishing minor features of the Buddha; and the Buddha’s abilities, wisdom, and

powers not shared by other sentient beings. Demonic hindrances that the bodhisattvas might encounter in their cultivation also are revealed and given warning.

Additionally, the ontology of Buddhism is broadly and thoroughly discussed in this sutra through the dialogues between the Buddha and his disciples. The “Being” of the world--named realness, dharma realm, dharma nature, and so forth in this sutra--contains the characteristics of emptiness, selflessness, nonarising, nonextinction, nongoing, noncoming, nonmaking, nondoing, nondifferentiation, and formlessness. These concepts and names, along with other concepts and names, are established provisionally as indicators of all beings, namely the existents of the world, or as they are described in this sutra, the dharmas. Other establishments, either caused by mental images or other factors, are based on causes and conditions that are not real because they have no fixed “natures.” All dharmas of the world and their relationships comprise the phenomenal realm of the world, the “conditioned realm.” They are not separate from the realness or the “Being” of the world, the “unconditioned realm.” The phenomena and the realness are neither the same nor separate. They are rather the two sides of the reality of the world as well as of sentient beings. The original natures of all dharmas, resembling empty space, are like dreams, illusions, mirror images, echoes, illusory images of water under sunlight, flowers in the sky, transformed things, and mirages. These ontological discussions suggest, reasonably and step by step, a metaphysical basis for the fathomless prajna paramita, the main concern and focus of the entire sutra.

To realize the truth of the phenomena of the world accurately and as it really is can awaken one to the reality of the world. But knowledge alone is not sufficient for the realization and attainment of the unsurpassed, perfect, and universal enlightenment. The perfect knowledge of all perfect knowledge that assimilates the

perfect knowledge of everything, the perfect knowledge of the forms of all paths, and the perfect knowledge of all phenomena can be fulfilled in its ultimate state not only through the learning and absorption of all dharmas and their principles, but also through the cultivation of virtuous roots. This process appears at the outset to be on a dual track based on accurate cognition and the cultivation of the virtuous roots, but it will not become nondualistic and a single form until all virtues gained here and produced elsewhere, and initiated by the holy ones, are transferred joyfully by bodhisattvas along with sentient beings equally toward the unsurpassed, perfect, and universal bodhi.

This is the “large vehicle,” in contrast to smaller ones in which only self-interest is concerned. The great bodhisattva path thus is formed in the progress of cultivation. It is based on emptiness, selflessness, nonattainment, nonattachment, nondifferentiation, nonaspiration, and formlessness; that is, it adopts nonattainment as a secure expedient not to stop at the self-interest stages of the voice-hearer and the self-enlightened one in order to enter correctly onto the bodhisattva path of nonarising, which is the only access to attaining Buddhahood. According to the sutra, it is because of prajna paramita that all the Buddhas in the past, future, and present in the worlds of the ten directions are able to understand and attain the unsurpassed, perfect, and universal bodhi and become the Buddha. Thus, prajna paramita is the mother of all Buddhas.

But why do the great bodhisattvas work so hard to pursue the unsurpassed bodhi when they realize that all dharmas are empty, and, as with dreams and so forth, nothing really can be attained? Because the great bodhisattvas develop great loving-kindness, great compassion, great joy, and great equanimity when seeing that sentient beings suffer severely in the reincarnation of birth and death because of their incorrect

knowledge and views of the world. The only way the great bodhisattvas can relieve sentient beings from suffering and bring them freedom, peace, and happiness is to help them cultivate the bodhisattva path and become Buddhas themselves.

The bodhisattva path is difficult because one needs to cultivate many virtuous dharmas, learn to be patient when teaching sentient beings, and be accepted by them. Bodhisattvas should take great vows, learn everything to its perfection, and get to know how to teach sentient beings expediently and skillfully. The armors that bodhisattvas must wear for this purpose are the six paramitas: giving, pure precept, forbearance, diligence, meditation, and prajna paramitas.

The perfect fulfillment of these six ways is named *paramita* because it serves to ferry sentient beings from one shore to the other. The first five practices are based on prajna paramita, the perfect knowledge and wisdom, since no one really can be free from attachment and attainment in their cultivation without it. The expedient skillfulness of prajna paramita always plays the most important role for the correct cultivation of all virtuous dharmas. Realizing that all dharmas are empty in the final analysis, without arising and extinction and without differentiation and forms, the great bodhisattvas joyfully refrain from turning away from sentient beings and persevere in pursuing the great bodhi in order to benefit and bring happiness to all sentient beings. They thus practice all virtuous dharmas without being attached to them by adopting nonattainment as skillful means.

In addition to the cultivation of the six paramitas, the great bodhisattvas also learn to dwell peacefully in all kinds of emptiness: internal emptiness, external emptiness, internal-external emptiness, and so forth, and emptiness of selfless self-nature. They will dwell peacefully in realness, dharma realm, dharma nature, the nature of equality, and so forth, and the realm of the inconceivable. They also will

dwell peacefully in the four noble truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path for the cessation of suffering. They will cultivate the thirty-seven factors for enlightenment: the four bases of mindfulness, four correct endeavors, four bases of power, five roots, five powers, seven factors for enlightenment, and the noble eightfold path; the four meditations, four immeasurable minds, and four formless concentrations; the eight liberations, eight vexation-overcoming meditations, nine concentrations in sequence, and the ten universal contemplations; the liberation gates of emptiness, formlessness, and nonaspiration; all dharani gates and all samadhi gates; the ten stages of bodhisattva; the five eyes and the six supernatural powers; staying in correct mindfulness and dwelling in equanimity at all times; the Buddha's ten abilities, four kinds of fearlessness, four unhindered understandings, great loving-kindness, great compassion, great joy, and great equanimity, and eighteen distinctive features of Buddha's wisdom and power; the perfect knowledge of everything, the perfect knowledge of the forms of the paths, and the perfect knowledge of all phenomena; and the rest of innumerable and boundless Buddha dharma. These are all virtuous dharmas that the great bodhisattvas will learn and cultivate to their perfection before they become perfectly and universally enlightened.

The Sakyamuni Buddha became perfectly and universally enlightened at the age of twenty-nine. Within the first three weeks, he taught directly about his own inner mental process of realizing perfect enlightenment, as recorded in *Hua Yen Sutra* (*The Magnificent and Dignified Flowers Sutra*). It was the view of the world as viewed from a Buddha's eye. His inner experience was subtle, glorious, and exquisite, but when he was teaching at that time, only a few highly enlightened bodhisattvas could understand him, and most in the audience were like the dumb and the deaf.

They could not understand what the Buddha said.

From the fourth week on, the Buddha turned to teach the *Agamas*, which were more suitable for voice-hearing practitioners. The teachings during this period, given at Deer Park, focused on but were not limited to the four noble truths, twelve chains of dependent origination, and the precepts for monks and nuns. This period of teaching lasted for twelve years until he knew that most of his disciples were well equipped and ready to expand beyond the cultivation and learning for self-interest and could assist sentient beings to cultivate, learn, and attain the perfect enlightenment. These self-benefactors would learn to be a teacher and a counselor and then signified the dawn of the path of the bodhisattva for the voice-hearers.

Then came a period for the larger-vehicle sutras that lasted for eight years. The Buddha taught more sutras in accord with the large vehicle to turn the voice-hearers into great bodhisattvas and teachings such as *Vimalakirti*, *Golden Light*, *Srimala*, *Lañkavatara*, and *Suramgama* were given.

Next came the Prajna Period. The Buddha spent the next twenty-two years teaching prajna paramita, the foundation of the bodhisattva path for attaining the unsurpassed, universal, and perfect bodhi of the Buddha. The *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, which became very popular in later days, were taught as parts of *The Great Prajna Paramita Sutra*. These teachings were given in sixteen assemblies at four places: Vulture Peak at Rajagrha, Jetavana Vihara at Sravasti, the Heaven of Enjoying Other-Made Changes, and Kalandaka Veṇuvana (Bamboo Grove) at Rajagrha.

In his last eight years, the Buddha taught the *Lotus Sutra* (*Wonderful Dharma Lotus Sutra*) at Vulture Peak and then the *Nirvana Sutra* on the last day before entering nirvana.

The Buddha developed efficient methods and models for teaching. On the one hand, he conversed with his disciples, and they challenged each other. In their conversations, truth was revealed through logical reasoning and clarification. On the other hand, he used similes and analogies to make abstract ideas understandable, vivid, and easy to remember. Because of his supernatural powers, the Buddha could read his disciples' minds and guide them according to their individual differences. He suggested the method of dharani for incorporating various ideas into a few crucial words and sentences so that learners could memorize and retain what they had learned. He always was tranquil and graceful in demeanor when speaking with students and others. He guided students by adopting nonattainment as skillful means out of the fathomless and pure wisdom based on perfect knowledge. Prajna paramita thus should also be regarded as the most superior philosophy of education for all educators in this regard.

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The texts from Fascicles 1 through 400, known as *Larger Prajna*, are divided into 79 chapters and include the teachings given by the Buddha during the first assembly.

Fascicles 401 to 487, called *Medium Prajna*, contain Buddha's teachings from the second assembly. In Xuanzang's rendition, dialogues from this assembly are found in 85 chapters across 78 fascicles (401 to 478) out of 600, equating to 25,000 Sanskrit verses. An earlier Chinese translation by Kumarajiva (344-413 CE), made between

660 and 663 CE, includes these teachings in 90 chapters across 27 fascicles titled *Mahaprajna Paramita Sutra*.

Fascicles 488 through 537, also called *Medium Prajna*, contain the Buddha's teachings during the third assembly, equivalent to 18,000 Sanskrit version.

Fascicles 538-565, called *Small Prajna*, cover the Buddha's teachings from the fourth and fifth assemblies.

Fascicles 566 through 573, called *Heavenly Kings Prajna*, cover the Buddha's teachings from the sixth assembly.

Fascicles 574 through 575, called *Manjusri (Manjusri Bodhisattva) Prajna*, cover the Buddha's teachings from the seventh assembly.

Fascicle 576, called *Nagasri Prajna*, covers the Buddha's teachings from the eighth assembly.

Fascicle 577, called *Diamond Prajna*, regarded as the prototype of the well-known *Diamond Sutra*, covers the Buddha's teachings in the ninth assembly.

Fascicle 578, called *The Essential Meanings of Prajna*, covers the Buddha's teachings from the tenth assembly.

Fascicles 579 through 600, called *The Six Divisions of Prajna*, cover the Buddha's teachings from the eleventh to sixteenth assemblies.