

Translator's Preface

This book contains two sutras that record a day in the life of the Buddha when the Buddha was teaching the Prajnaparamita. This was the teaching that formed the basis of Buddhism's Mahayana, or Great Path, which began as a reaction to the teaching of certain sects that formed in the centuries following the Buddha's Nirvana. These "Hinayana," or Narrow Path, sects, as the Mahayana called them, believed that reality is made of dharmas, in much the same way people nowadays believe the world is made of atoms, and that these dharmas are somehow real, somehow they exist by themselves. In a word, they possess *sva-bhava*, or self-existence. This dharma-based conception of reality divided everything into form, sensation, perception, memory, or consciousness and subdivided these five dharmas (known as *skandhas*) into a matrix of dozens of other dharmas, to which nirvana and space were also added. Obviously, it was not a conception of reality that put much of an emphasis on what we would call "the material world." But it was a conception that nevertheless divided the world into "things." The Mahayana countered this with its own word: *sunyata*, emptiness.

Usually when we say a thing is "empty," we're negating something – something is absent that

might otherwise be present. This is how early Mahayana Buddhists used this term – to negate something, not to establish the reality of something. And they only used this term in regard to one thing: self-existence. They weren't interested in negating the existence of tables and chairs or form and consciousness only the self-existence of tables and chairs or form and consciousness. Nothing, they held, exists by itself. In fact, its very "thingness" is simply something we bestow on it. Whatever we might designate as a thing or a dharma is a convenient fiction "signifying nothing." Such an assessment may not sound like much, but if you think about it, it means that we and everything in any universe we might imagine are all of us one, or as Buddhists prefer to say "not two." How could that be a bad thing? This, then, is the underlying teaching of these two sutras. The first focuses on applying this teaching of emptiness to all that we know – or think we know, especially as it pertains to the spiritual path of a bodhisattva, or would-be buddha. The second sutra looks at what results when this teaching is combined with compassion, with the vow to liberate all beings.

Whether what is recorded in these texts actually reflects the Buddha's own words will forever remain moot. They probably weren't written down until the second or third century, and neither made their first recorded appearance until the fifth

century, when both were translated into Chinese. But in India even today there are people who can recite sacred texts that go back over two thousand years and do so for days on end. So, who is to say the teaching in these texts doesn't represent the communal memories of teachers stretching back centuries earlier? My interest, though, isn't in the historicity of these texts, but in their teaching, the Prajnaparamita.

This term that has become the hallmark of Mahayana Buddhism is made up of two words: *prajna* meaning "wisdom" or "knowing" and *paramita* meaning "highest" or "transcendent." The early teachers of the Mahayana added the adjective *paramita* to differentiate their "knowing" from that of their predecessors. Unlike the wisdom of the sects that developed after the Buddha's Nirvana, the Mahayana didn't focus on the acquisition of knowledge but on the transcendence of knowledge. From *prajna*, the Greeks got *prognosis*, or "fore-knowing." For Mahayana Buddhists, the emphasis was not on a knowledge of the future, but on what comes before knowledge, on "pre-knowing." Knowledge was viewed as delusion posing as truth. Prajnaparamita was interested in the mind before it knows – our original face, as Zen masters came to call it.

The core of the Buddha's exposition of this teaching, if not most of what has survived, is

contained in a set of sixteen texts that make up what became known as the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra*. The Chinese monk Hsuan-tsang 玄奘 (602-664) brought three copies of this sutra back from India, along with six hundred other Buddhist scriptures. Working with a staff of several dozen monks proficient in various Indic languages, he was able to translate much of what he brought back. This included the *Maha Prajnaparamita Sutra* 大般若波羅蜜多經, on which he spent the last years of his life. He finished it just before he died.

In the standard edition of the Chinese Tripitaka, or Buddhist Canon, this mammoth text takes up 3,000 pages. Of its sixteen sutras, the two I've chosen take up little more than 12 of those pages (Vol. 7, pages 974-985). Not only are they short, they're connected and read as if they span the events of a single day. In the first sutra, the Buddha's disciples question Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, on his way to town to beg for food, and he responds with the teaching of emptiness, that anything we might think of as real is illusory and its "thingness" based on nothing more than our own projections. In the second sutra, the Buddha returns from his own begging round and teaches his disciples about what results when they combine this teaching with the vow to liberate others, all others. In using the most significant events in his own career as an example, the Buddha presents one of

the earliest accounts we have of how buddhas become buddhas and the nature of the “body” that results.

The first of these texts is titled the *Eighth Occasion* 第八會 (and further subtitled the *Nagasri Chapter* 那伽室利分 – after the bodhisattva who questions Manjusri), and the second text is subtitled the *Ninth Occasion* 第九會. Before their inclusion in the *Great Prajnaparamita Sutra*, both existed as independent sutras. Two hundred years before Hsuan-tsang translated all sixteen, the *Eighth Occasion* was translated into Chinese around the year 450, give or take a dozen or so years, by a foreign monk named Hsiang-kung 翔公. The title Master Hsiang gave his text was *The Supremely Pure Begging Round of Manjusri Bodhisattva* 濡首菩薩無上清淨分衛經, and at the end of the sutra the Buddha added another title: *The Samadhi of Realizing Everything Is Illusory* 決了諸法如幻如化三昧. I’ve decided to simplify this and call it simply *The Empty Bowl Sutra*, if only to have a title to match that of the second sutra. Before it became the *Ninth Occasion*, it was titled the *Diamond Cutter (Vajracchedika)*, or *Diamond Sutra* 金剛經, for short. It was translated into Chinese half a dozen times and has been the subject of more commentaries than there are grains of sand in the Ganges. The *Empty Bowl*, meanwhile, has yet to see

its first commentary, and this would be its first complete translation into English.

Eighteen years ago, after I translated the *Diamond*, out of curiosity, I translated a few pages of the *Empty Bowl* but put them aside to work on other projects. Then, earlier this year, I was invited by Jay Garfield to give a presentation about what I was working on to a Buddhist seminar at Smith College. I wasn't really working on anything and decided this would be a good time to take another look. One thing that had inspired my earlier foray was that the famous verse at the end of the *Diamond* is the same verse that ends the *Empty Bowl*. At the time I felt it didn't really belong in the *Diamond*. It was about impermanence and thus emptiness, whereas the *Diamond* was about the opposite, namely the Buddha's real body – not to mention, our real body. This time I resolved to find out more and made a rough translation of the *Empty Bowl* to present at the seminar. In the process, I became convinced that these two sutras are part of a whole, two views of a day in the life of the Buddha.

Since returning home, I've polished my rough draft of the *Empty Bowl*, which I based on Hsuan-tsang's Chinese. His version is shorter than Hsiang-kung's, but it's clearer and not weighed down by

interminable digressions about begging and food¹ or by diversions involving billions of beings being beamed from other buddhalands.

As for the *Diamond*, I've stuck with the Sanskrit. When I published my earlier translation in 2001, I relied on the standard recension by Max Muller and Edward Conze, and the grammatical analysis of that text by the Taiwanese Buddhist nun Hsu Yang-chu.² Since then, a number of sixth and seventh-century partial copies of the Sanskrit text have come to light in Afghanistan and Pakistan where Mahayana Buddhism first rose to prominence. For the past two decades, Paul Harrison has been working with these materials³ and has kindly supplied me with those relevant to my less scholarly purpose – which has been to choose among variants to produce what I consider the reading that makes the most sense. As a result, I've made changes to

¹ A selection of paragraphs from Hsiang-kung's version were translated by Lew Lancaster and published in 1973 in Edward Conze's *The Short Prajnaparamita Sutras*, pp 192-196.

² Hsu Yang-chu 許洋主: 新譯梵文佛典般若波羅蜜經, Taiwan 1995.

³ (1) Paul Harrison: "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra;" (2) Paul Harrison: "The British Library Vajracchedikā Manuscript" in *Buddhist Manuscripts from Central Asia* Vol III/2 pp 823-866. (3) Gregory Schopen: "The Manuscript of the Vajracchedika Found at Gilgit," in *Studies in the Literature of The Great Vehicle: Three Mahayana Buddhist Texts*, ed. by L. O. Gómez and J. A. Silk pp 89-139.

my earlier translation – but only where they were supported by a majority of the fifth and sixth-century Chinese translations of Kumarajiva (401), Bodhiruci (509), Paramartha (562), and Dharmagupta (590).

Accompanying my earlier translation, I included several hundred pages of commentary, both mine and that of the luminaries of Indian and Chinese Buddhism. Since then, I've concluded that for certain people, especially practitioners, sutras interrupted by so much commentary aren't as useful as the sutras themselves. Hence, in this edition I've eliminated the interruptions. However, I have added a few footnotes to make life easier for those who might be new to such texts and to highlight elements of the teaching readers might otherwise miss.

By the time I got to the end of all this, it occurred to me that the verse at the end of the *Diamond*, whose repetition had puzzled me earlier, was simply further proof that these two sutras were connected and belonged together. It was just another way of reminding us that even the Buddha's own body, the one his disciples saw, as well as the one he experienced as a buddha, were just as impermanent as ours, and that both were mere reflections of this teaching. It turns out buddhas are no buddhas at all. Thus does the Buddha speak of 'buddhas.'

I'm not sure what else I can say, or should say. I feel that the real meaning of sutras needs to be

discovered by those who read them, and everyone finds something different. Here's hoping you find something good.

Red Pine
Port Townsend
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The Empty Bowl Sutra

Thus have I heard: Once when the Bhagavan was dwelling near Sravasti in the Anapindada Garden of Jeta Forest and expounding the Dharma to the assembly, Manjusri Bodhisattva put on his robe at dawn, picked up his bowl, and proceeded slowly toward the city.

A bodhisattva named Nagasri saw him and asked, “Where are you going, Sir?”

Manjusri answered, “I am going to Sravasti to beg for food in order to gladden and benefit others, to show compassion to all beings, and to help and comfort devas as well as people.”

Nagasri asked, “If that is so, Sir, have you not yet gotten rid of the conception of food?”

Manjusri said, “As for the conception of food, I don’t see it as existing. What is there to get rid of? And how so? The fundamental nature of all things is empty and like space, hence there is nothing to put an end to. How could I get rid of it? Neither devas, Mara, Brahma, nor the monks and priests of this world can get rid of it. And why not? Because the essential nature of all things is the same as the sky: ultimately empty, impervious, and devoid of anything to get rid of. Moreover, since everything is like space, neither devas, Mara, Brahma, monks, nor any other being can get hold of anything. And