

Not Relying on Signs: Wisdom Lessons on Bodhisattva Values from the Diamond Sutra

By Jennifer Manlowe

“Moreover, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object—that is to say he does not rely on any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma—to practice generosity. That, Subhuti, is the spirit in which a bodhisattva should practice generosity, not relying on signs” (*Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*, 4).

The Vietnamese Zen Monk, Noble Peace Prize Nominee, and founder of the order of Inter-Being, Thich Nhat Hanh, has translated the Diamond Sutra in his book of the same name, “The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion” (*Vajracchedika* in Sanskrit). In Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, “[this sutra] is the basis for all meaningful action” (Nhat Hanh, 74). In what follows, I articulate how Thich Nhat Hanh—the inventor of the term *Engaged Buddhism*—uses the Diamond Sutra to spell out Bodhisattva values in his effort to invite his particular understanding of social engagement.

Before I begin, a brief background of the Sutra’s constellation is in order. Most twentieth-century scholars agree that there are a total of thirty-eight Perfection of Wisdom texts (in Sanskrit *Prajnaparamita*), composed between 200 BCE and 600 CE. Two of these texts, the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, have been especially important in the development of Mahayana Buddhism—that branch of Buddhism that places heavy emphasis of the compassion of the Bodhisattva and the notion of *Sunyata* or interdependence. The present form of the Diamond Sutra came into view in third or fourth century China and is thought to be one of the earliest of the Perfection of Wisdom texts (Koller & Koller, 181-183

In the genre of philosophical dialectic, the Diamond Sutra has the historical Buddha conversing with his disciple Subhuti in such a way as to advocate the “Bodhisattva way” and the “practice of mindfulness” as the way of perfect wisdom. When Subhuti asked the Buddha, “What should this sutra be called and how should we act regarding its teachings?” The Buddha replied, “This sutra should be called the *Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion*, because it has the capacity to cut through all illusions and afflictions and bring us to the shore of liberation” (Nhat Hanh, 11).

A few centuries after this sutra was circulating in China—so legend has it—upon hearing just one line of it, a poor and illiterate young man named Huineng is said to have achieved instant enlightenment. Huineng eventually became the 6th Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. For centuries, now, Chan/Zen Buddhists have chanted and meditated on the Diamond Sutra as their primary text for cultivating the wisdom beyond conceptual reality.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers a contemporary interpretation of this sutra in an effort to incite ordinary practitioners and readers to enact socially-engaged Bodhisattva values. Before I go any further, first, let me offer a brief background on Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh first came to North America in 1966 as a speaker who tried to educate Americans on the effects of U.S. policy and presence in Vietnam. A year later, Dr. Martin Luther King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize for his peace and justice work in Vietnam and beyond. Since the early 1980s both Thich Nhat Hanh and his often silent, but no less influential colleague, Sr. Chan Khong, have offered many lectures and workshops on "practicing mindfulness, practicing peace" at the site where many Vietnamese Buddhists have relocated, in the southwest of France at Plum Village.

By focusing attention on how Thich Nhat Hanh reads and understands the Diamond Sutra, I examine a key theme of not only his work in the world as a peacemaker, but how he uses the Diamond Sutra as an educational tool to facilitate Bodhisattva values wherever he speaks for social change.

First, because these two stanzas out of the thirty-two brief stanzas of the Diamond Sutra are so important to Thich Nhat Hanh's work, I will lay out them out first:

The Buddha said to Subhuti, "This is how the bodhisattva *mahasattvas* (masters) master their thinking. 'However many species of living beings there are—whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they have form or do not have form; whether they have perceptions or do not have perceptions or whether it cannot be said of them that they have perceptions or that they do not have perceptions, we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite

number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.’

“Why is this so? If, Subhuti, a Bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva.”

“Moreover, Subhuti, when a bodhisattva practices generosity, he does not rely on any object—that is to say he does not rely on any form, sound, smell, taste, tactile object, or dharma—to practice generosity. That Subhuti, is the spirit in which a bodhisattva should practice generosity, not relying on signs. Why? If a bodhisattva practices generosity without relying on signs, the happiness that results cannot be conceived or measured.... Subhuti, if a bodhisattva does not rely on any concept when practicing generosity, then the happiness that results from that virtuous act is as great as space. It cannot be measured. Subhuti, the bodhisattvas should let their minds dwell in the teachings I have just given” (Nhat Hanh, 4-5).

This past May [2001], Thich Nhat Hanh agreed to meet with me and my students to answer questions about Buddhist socio-political engagement. It is clear from his answers that the Diamond Sutra passage that I quoted (above) is a defining vehicle for him. The sutra also undergirds the order that he founded at Plum Village—the order of Interbeing. Rather than reiterate this interview word for word, I will summarize the main questions and answers from the interview as they relate to the Diamond Sutra.

One of the questions that we asked Thich Nhat Hanh to answer was, “How can one be a Buddhist meditator and a peace activist, doesn’t one preclude the other?” Nhat Hanh’s answers kept coming back to the Diamond Sutra. He invited us to break down the illusion that there are beings saved and beings doing the saving. In his writing he quotes the Diamond Sutra saying, “Virtuous acts still based on the ground of self, person, living being, an life span may bring some happiness, but compared to the happiness of true liberation, it is still quite small. When a person is absolutely free from wrong views, her or his action will greatly benefit the world” (Nhat Hanh, 74).

My students pressed him further. Their questions intimated that thinking, seeing, and acting non-dualistically seemed like a good idea for one’s personal meditation (practice) but what about acting in the world? One of their questions follows:

“What role might cultivating great compassion [like a Bodhisattva] have in fostering a large-scale social movement for political change? Or do you think private practices of mindfulness meditation are lasting activities for tangible change? Many of us worry that individualism is part of the problem as to why there is so much alienation and conflict in our world. What do you think the core problems are?”

Nhat Hanh seemed quite comfortable with their questions as he had heard them before by other westerners steeped in the individualist and dualistic language of human rights. He responded with a generous spirit by saying,

Personal practices of mindfulness need to be cultivated in all our interactions. If we work on clearing our own mind of distorting anger and harmful desires, we contribute positively to whatever context we are in. If we approach anything with an intention to solve conflict and we have not yet addressed the conflicts in our own hearts and minds, we may actually make matters worse.

In many of his answers he conveyed the message that there is no personal act that is separate from a collective act. There is no subject acting on objects in the world—we all affect each other by the qualities we cultivate—in his words, “we inter-are.”

In other writings on this question regarding core problems in the world, he writes:

Before I used to say our enemy is ambition, hatred, discrimination and violence but for the past twenty years or more I have no longer wanted to call these negative mental formations enemies which need to be destroyed. I have seen that they can be transformed into positive energies such as understanding and love, just like a gardener can transform rubbish into green manure which can be used to grow flowers and vegetables. For the last thirty years I have been practicing and teaching Buddhism in the West from this perspective called the insight of interbeing which is explained in the [Diamond] Sutra. Interbeing can be translated into French as *interêtre* and into German as *intersein*. My friends in the West who

have been able to learn and practice according to this insight have been able to transform greatly and have found much happiness.

The message of non-duality is one the Buddha's disciple, Subhuti, also struggled with. This is an age-old struggle for those who wish to cultivate Bodhisattva qualities in their own being and thereby see signs of such transformation in themselves and others. And yet the true bodhisattva does not look for nor does she rely on signs at all. For that would betray her own stuckness in the conceptual trap of self and other.

Over and over again the Diamond Sutra reminds readers that concepts are incapable of capturing reality; they only function as signs that point to reality. Things are conceived, therefore, should never be mistaken for things themselves. Early on in the Sutra, Subhuti questions how a person wanting to become a Bodhisattva should practice, the Buddha explains how a Bodhisattva thinks: "However many species of living beings there are...we must lead all these beings to ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated." "And when," the text continues, "this infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated."

Why, if all these beings have been liberated, would a bodhisattva think that not even one being had been liberated? The text anticipates this question and gives the Buddha's answer: "If, Subhuti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not an authentic bodhisattva." The Bodhisattva is an enlightened being, and enlightened beings do not see existence in terms of separate, independent entities; enlightened beings see everything in terms of interdependence. Again, this is what Nhat Hanh calls Interbeing.

Like Subhuti, my students struggle with understanding conventional and enlightened (or what is often called perfect or absolute) understanding of the Bodhisattva way of seeing. In

another question that my students asked Nhat Hanh, one can see they are operating within a framework that Nhat Hanh would say is “mistaken” or dualistic. To quote them,

Years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said you were a man who had radical and transformative ideas for peace. He said, and I quote, "Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood (kinship), to humanity." Yet, after attending several of your lectures on mindfulness meditation, one is tempted to think the entire aim of practicing peace through mindfulness meditation is a personal one, an individual project. How can we link our micropolitical project of peacefulness work with practices that facilitate macropolitical change?

Thich Nhat Hanh’s answer to their question, again, draws upon the Diamond Sutra. The central teaching of the Diamond Sutra is that the understanding of things in terms of separate, independent existence is limited and imperfect. Conceiving of the world this objectifying way fosters the ignorance that separates us from others, leading to the grasping and hatred that give rise to all the various forms of *duhkha*—anguish. By understanding things in terms of Thich Nhat Hanh’s *interbeing*—or more commonly, “interdependent arising,” we can see how ordinary conceptual understanding of something is actually a misunderstanding. To quote Thich Nhat Hanh on what this *interbeing* might look like in modern day practice,

If the 20th century was the century of humans conquering Nature, the 21st century should be one in which we conquer the root causes of the suffering in human beings—our fears, ego, hatred, greed, etc. If the 20th century was characterized by individualism and consumption, the 21st century can be characterized by the insights of interbeing. In the 21st century, humans can live together in true harmony with each other and with nature, as bees live together in their bee hive or as cells live together in the same body, all in a real spirit of democracy and equality. Freedom will no longer be just a kind of liberty for self-destruction, or destruction of the environment, but the kind of freedom that protects us from being overwhelmed and carried away by craving, hatred, and pain.

So the full meaning of the dialectic of the Diamond Sutra is that for something to be what it is, it cannot be just what it is by itself; to be what it is it must interexist with everything else. Another example he gives to illustrate this interdependence is as follows:

If you wish to have the insight of Interbeing you only need to look at a basket of fresh green vegetables which you have just picked. Looking deeply you will see the sunshine, clouds, compost, gardener and hundreds of thousands of elements

more. Vegetables cannot arise on their own, they can only arise when there is sun, clouds, earth etc. If you take the sun out of the basket of vegetables the vegetables will no longer be there. If you take the clouds away it is the same.

My students fancied themselves like Subhuti. They left our meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh contemplating this centuries-old dialectic first spun in the Diamond Sutra: “Only when a basket of vegetables is understood to not be just a basket of vegetables is it really understood to be a basket of vegetables.”

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