Mahāyāna Buddhism

The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras

Introduction

The rise of the movement referred to as the Mahāyāna, some four hundred years after the Buddha’s death, is sometimes marked by the appearance of new sūtras that were called the ‘perfection of wisdom’ (prajñāpāramitā). Like many other Mahāyāna sūtras, the perfection of wisdom texts were not systematic treatises that set forth philosophical points and doctrinal categories in a straightforward manner. Instead, they strike the modern reader as having something of the nature of revelations, bold pronouncements proclaimed with certainty, rather than speculative arguments developed in a linear fashion. The perfection of wisdom that the sūtras repeatedly praised was often identified as the knowledge of emptiness (śūnyatā), and it was this knowledge that was required for all who sought to become buddhas. This emptiness was often presented in a series of negations, with statements like ‘that which is a world system, that is said by the Tathāgata not to be a system. In that sense [the term] “world system” is used.’ The precise meaning of such statements would be explored by generations of commentators in India, East Asia and Tibet.

Many of the perfection of wisdom sūtras came to be known by their length, hence the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Stanzas, the Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-five Thousand Stanzas, the Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Stanzas, the Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter. Others had titles, the most famous of these being what has come to be known in the West as the Heart Sūtra and the text known as the Diamond Sūtra. Probably composed in Sanskrit sometime between the second and fourth centuries of the Common Era, the latter was to become one of the most famous, and most commented upon, of the Mahāyāna Sūtras. Yet much of its meaning remains elusive, beginning with the title. In Sanskrit, it is Vajračādikā Prajñāpāramitā. The Sanskrit term vajra refers to a kind of magical weapon, sometimes described as a thunderbolt or discus, and which is said to be hard and unbreakable, like a diamond. Thus, the title might be rendered into English as ‘The Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts like a Thunderbolt’.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor (Tathāgata) was sitting on Vulture Mountain on Rājagṛha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a samādhi on the enumerations of phenomena called “perception of the profound.” Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) and he saw that those five aggregates (skandhas) also are empty of inherent existence. Then by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, “How should a son of good lineage train who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom?

The Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara said this to the venerable Śāriputra: “Śāriputra, a son of good lineage or a daughter of good lineage who wished to practice the perfection of wisdom should view things in this way: They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent existence. Form (rūpa) is emptiness (śūnyatā); emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling (vedanā), discrimination (saññā), compositional factors (sañcikāra), and consciousness (vijñāna) are empty. Śāriputra, in that way, all phenomena are empty, that is, without characteristic, unproduced, unceased, stainless, not stainless, undiminished, unfilled. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is not form, no feeling, no discrimination, no compositional factors, no consciousness, no eye, no ear, no nose, no object of touch, no phenomenon. There is no eye constituent, no mental constituent, up to and including no mental consciousness constituent. There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, up to an including no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Similarly there are no sufferings, no origins, no cessations, no paths, no exalted wisdom, no attainment, and also no non-attainment.

Therefore, Śāriputra, because Bodhisattvas have no attainment, they depend on and abide in the perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstructions, they are without fear. Having completely passed beyond all error they go to the completion of nirvāṇa. All the Buddhas who abide in the three times have been fully awakened into unsurpassed, perfect, complete enlightenment (anuttara-samyak-sambodhi) through relying on the perfection of wisdom. Therefore, the mantra of the perfection of wisdom is the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed mantra, the mantra equal to the unequalled, the mantra that thoroughly pacifies all suffering. Because it is not false, it should be known as the true. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom is stated:

ॐ गते गते पारगते पारसङ्गते बोधि स्वाहा

ogāte gate pāragate pārasaṅgate bodhi svāhā
gone, gone, gone beyond, gone all the way beyond—awakening, aha!

Śāriputra, Bodhisattva, Mahāsattvas should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in that way.

Then the Transcendent Victor rose from that samādhi and said to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, "Well done. Well done, well done, child of good lineage, it is just so. Child of good lineage, it is like that; that profound perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you have taught it. Even the Tathāgatas admire this." The Transcendent Victor having so spoken, the venerable Śāriputra, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, and all those surrounding and those of the world, the gods, humans, demigods, and gandharvas were filled with admiration and praised the words of the Transcendent Victor.

Introduction to Asian Philosophy

Mahāyāna Buddhism

Selections from
The Diamond Sūtra

Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra

The Perfection of Wisdom that Cuts like a Thunderbolt Sūtra

. . . He said: ‘How, Blessed One, should one who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva stand? How should he actually practise? How should he direct his thought?’

The Blessed One said: ‘Here, Subhūti, one who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner: “All living beings should be led by me to final nirvāṇa in the realm of nirvāṇa which leaves nothing behind. But after having led living beings thus to final nirvāṇa, there is no living being whatsoever who has been led to final nirvāṇa.” And why is that? If, [8a] Subhūti, a conception of a living being were to occur to a bodhisattva, a conception of a personal soul, or a conception of a person, he is not to be called “a bodhisattva”. And why is that? Subhūti, that which is called “one who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva”, that is not a thing.

‘What do you think, Subhūti? Is that some thing which was awakened to by the Tathāgata, in the presence of the tathāgata Dépañkarā, as the utmost, full and perfect awakening?’

He said: ‘Blessed One, that which was awakened to by the Tathāgata, in the presence of the tathāgata Dépañkarā, as the utmost, full and perfect awakening is not some thing.’

He said: ‘Because of that was I assured by the tathāgata Dépañkarā: “You, young man, will be at a future time a tathāgata, arhat, fully and perfectly awakened one named Çākyamuni.” And why is that? “Tathāgata”, Subhūti, that is a designation for thusness (tathā). Subhūti, someone might speak thus, “The utmost, full and perfect awakening is fully and perfectly awakened to by the Tathāgata.” But that which is the utmost, full and perfect awakening fully and perfectly awakened to by the Tathāgata is not some thing. Subhūti, the thing which is fully and perfectly awakened to by the Tathāgata — in that there is neither truth nor falsehood. On that account the Tathāgata says “all characteristics are the characteristics of a buddha.” “All characteristics”, Subhūti, all those are not characteristics. In that sense “all characteristics” is used. Suppose, for example, Subhūti, there would be a man endowed with a body, a great body.

Subhūti said: ‘That which [8b] the Tathāgata has called a man endowed with a body, a great body — he, Blessed One, is said to be without a body by the Tathāgata. In that sense “endowed with a body, a great body” is used.’

The Blessed One said: ‘Just so, Subhūti, the bodhisattva who would speak thus: “I will bring about wonderful arrangements in [my] sphere of activity” — he is not to be called a bodhisattva. And why is that? Is there, Subhūti, something which is named “bodhisattva”?’

He said: ‘No indeed, Blessed One.’

The Blessed One said: ‘On that account the Tathāgata says “all things are without living being, without personal soul, without person”. Subhūti, a bodhisattva who would speak thus: “I will bring about wonderful arrangements in [my] sphere of activity” — he too is not to be called a bodhisattva. And why is that? “Wonderful arrangements in [one’s] sphere of activity, wonderful arrangements in [one’s] sphere of activity”, Subhūti, those have been said by the Tathāgata not to be wonderful arrangements. In that sense “wonderful arrangements in [one’s] sphere of activity” is used. Subhūti, that bodhisattva who is intent on saying “without a self are things, without a self are things” — he is declared "a bodhisattva, a bodhisattva" by the Tathāgata, arhat, fully and perfectly Awakened One. . . .

. . . ‘If, again, Subhūti, it should occur thus: “by someone set out on the way of a bodhisattva the destruction of some thing is taught, or its annihilation”, again, Subhūti, it is not to be seen thus. The destruction of some thing, or its annihilation, is not taught by someone who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva.

‘If, again, Subhūti, a son or daughter of good family, after filling world-systems similar in number to the sands of the Ganges with the seven precious things, were to give them as a gift to the Tathāgata, arhat, fully and perfectly Awakened One; and if a bodhisattva were to achieve composure in the midst of things that have no self — the latter would indeed produce much greater merit than the former. However, Subhūti, a quantity of merit is not to be acquired by a bodhisattva.’

He said: ‘A quantity of merit, Blessed One, is to be acquired, surely?’
The Blessed One said: “‘Is to be acquired’, Subhūti, not ‘is to be held on to’. In that sense ‘is to be acquired’ is used.

[11b]

‘But once again, Subhūti, if someone were to speak thus: “The Tathāgata goes, or he comes, or he stands, or he sits, or he lies down” — he does not understand the meaning of what I said. Why is that? A “tathāgata”, Subhūti, has not come from anywhere, has not gone anywhere. In that sense “tathāgata, arhat, “fully and perfect awakened one” is used.

‘And if again, Subhūti, a son or daughter of good family were to grind into powder as many world-systems as there are particles of dust in this three thousand great-thousand world-system so that there would be just a pile of the finest atoms — what do you think, Subhūti? Would that pile of atoms be huge?’

He said: ‘That is so, Blessed One, that would be a huge pile of atoms. And why is that? If, Blessed One, there would have been a pile, the Blessed One would not have said “a pile of atoms”. Why is that? That which is said to be a pile of atoms, that is said by the Blessed One not to be a pile. In that sense “a pile of atoms” is used. That which the Tathāgata calls “three thousand great-thousand world-system”, that is said by the Tathāgata not to be a system. In that sense “three thousand great-thousand world-system” is used. Why is that? If, Blessed One, there would have been a system, just that, blessed One, ‘would have been the holding on to a solid mass. And that which is said by the Tathāgata [12a] to be the holding on to a solid mass is said to not holding on. In that sense “holding on to a solid mass” is used.’

The Blessed One said: ‘And holding on to a solid mass is itself, Subhūti, a thing not open to verbal expression; it cannot be put into words. It, however, has been held on to by simply ordinary people. Why is that? If, Subhūti, someone were to speak thus, “A view of a self was taught by the Tathāgata, a view of a living being, a view of a personal soul, a view of a person” — would he indeed, Subhūti, speak correctly?’

He said: ‘No, Blessed One. And why is that? Blessed One, that which is said by the Tathāgata to be a view of a self, that is said by the Tathāgata to be not a view. In that sense “a view of a self” is used.’

The Blessed One said: ‘In this way, Subhūti, one who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva should know all things, should be intent on them. And he should be intent on them in such a way that even the conception of a thing would not be present. Why is that? “Conception of a thing, conception of a thing”, Subhūti, that is said by the Tathāgata not to be a conception. In that sense “conception of a thing” is used.

‘And again, Subhūti, if a bodhisattva, mahāsattva, having filled immeasurable, incalculable world-systems with the seven precious things, were to give them as a gift; and if a son or daughter of good family, having taken up from this perfection of wisdom a verse of even four lines, were to preserve it, were to teach it, were to master it [12b] — the latter certainly would produce immeasurable, incalculable merit, much greater than the first.

‘And how would he fully cause it to appear? In such a way that he would not cause it to appear. In that sense “fully cause it to appear” is used.’

A shooting star, a fault of vision, a lamp;
An illusion and dew and a bubble;
A dream, a flash of lightning, a thundercloud —
In this way is the conditioned to be seen.

The Blessed One said this.

Delighted, the elder Subhūti, and the monks and nuns, the laymen and women, and the world with its devas, men, asuras and gandharvas rejoiced in that spoken by the Blessed One.

The Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā is concluded.

The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way

Introduction

The most important and influential Mahāyāna Buddhist philosopher is Nāgārjuna who lived in southern India around the second century of the common era. Nāgārjuna’s most important text is the Mūlamādhyamakakārikā (literally Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way). In this text Nāgārjuna is attempting to elucidate how the fundamental teaching of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras is consistent with the Middle Way taught by the Buddha. In terse, cryptic verses Nāgārjuna responds to various misunderstandings concerning the Prajñāpāramitā doctrine of śūnyatā. The most important parts of the text are Chapters 24 and 25 reproduced here. Chapter 24 is significant for its distinctions between two types of truth, a truth of worldly convention (saṃvṛti-satya) and an ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya) and for its explanation of śūnyatā. Nāgārjuna argues that śūnyatā is consistent with the Buddha’s teaching of pratītyasamutpāda. Chapter 25 is famous for its astonishing teaching that there is really no difference between samsāra and nīrūpa, an insight which has perhaps revolutionary implications for the Buddhist conception of enlightenment.

Mūlamādhyamaka-kārikā

Stanzas on the Middle Path

Chapter XXIV
Examination of the Four Noble Truths

1. If all of this is empty (śūnyatā),
   Neither arising nor ceasing,
   Then for you, it follows that
   The Four Noble Truths do not exist.

2. If the Four Noble Truths do not exist,
   Then Knowledge, abandonment,
   Meditation and manifestation
   Will be completely impossible.

3. If these things do not exist,
   The four fruits will not arise.
   Without the four fruits, there will be no attainers
   of the fruits.
   Nor will there be the faithful.

4. If so, the spiritual community will not exist.
  Nor will the eight kinds of person.
   If the Four Noble truths do not exist,
   There will be no true Dharma.

5. If there is no doctrine and spiritual community,
   How can there be a Buddha?
   If emptiness is conceived in this way,
   The three jewels are contradicted.

6. Hence you assert that there are no real fruits.
   And no Dharma. The Dharma itself
   And the conventional truth
   Will be contradicted.

7. We say that this understanding of yours
   Of emptiness and the purpose of emptiness
   And of the significance of emptiness is incorrect.
   As a consequence you are harmed by it.

8. The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma
   Is based on two truths:
   A truth of worldly convention
   And an ultimate truth.

9. Those who do not understand
   The distinction drawn between these two truths
   Do not understand
   The Buddha’s profound truth.

10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
    The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
    Without understanding the significance of the
    ultimate,
    Liberation is not achieved.

11. By a misperception of emptiness
    A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
    Like a snake incorrectly seized
    Or like a spell incorrectly cast.
12 For that reason—that the Dharma is
Deep and difficult to understand and to learn—
The Buddha's mind despaired of
Being able to teach it.

13 You have presented fallacious refutations
That are not relevant to emptiness.
Your confusion about emptiness
Does not belong to me.

14 For him to whom emptiness is clear,
Everything becomes clear.
For him to whom emptiness is not clear,
Nothing becomes clear.

15 When you foist on us
All of your errors
You are like a man who has mounted his horse
And has forgotten that very horse.

16 If you perceive the existence of all things
In terms of their essence,
Then this perception of all things
Will be without the perception of causes and conditions.

17 Effects and causes
And agent and action
And conditions and arising and ceasing
And effects will be rendered impossible.

18 Whatever is dependently arisen
(\textit{pratītyasamutpāda})
That is explained to be emptiness (\textit{sānyatā}).
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

19 Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.

20 If all this were nonempty, as in your view,
There would be no arising and ceasing.
Then the Four Noble Truths
Would become nonexistent.

21 If it is not dependently arisen,
How could suffering come to be?
Suffering has been taught to be impermanent,
And so cannot come from its own essence.

22 If something comes from its own essence,
How could it ever be arisen?
It follows that if one denies emptiness
There can be no arising (of suffering).

23 If suffering had an essence,
Its cessation would not exist.
So if an essence is posited,
One denies cessation.

24 If the path had an essence,
Cultivation would not be appropriate.
If this path is indeed cultivated,
It cannot have an essence.

25 If suffering, arising, and
Ceasing are nonexistent,
By what path could one seek
To obtain the cessation of suffering?

26 If non understanding comes to be
Through its essence,
How will understanding arise?
Isn't essence stable?

27 In the same way, the activities of
Relinquishing, realizing, and meditating
And the four fruits
Would not be possible.

28 For an essentialist,
Since the fruits through their essence
Are already unrealized,
In what way could one attain them?

29 Without the fruits,
there are no attainers of the fruits, or enterers.
From this it follows that
The eight kinds of persons do not exist.
If these don't exist, there is no spiritual community.
From the nonexistence of the Noble Truths
Would follow the nonexistence of the true
doctrine. If there is no doctrine and no spiritual
community, How could a Buddha arise?

For you, it would follow that a Buddha
Arides independent of enlightenment.
And for you, enlightenment would arise
Independent of a Buddha.

For you, one who through his essence
Was unenlightened,
Even by practicing the path to enlightenment
Could not achieve enlightenment.

Moreover, one could never perform
Right or wrong actions.
If this were all nonempty what could one do?
That with an essence cannot be produced.

For you, from neither right nor wrong actions
Would the fruit arise.
If the fruit arose from right or wrong actions,
According to you, it wouldn’t exist.

If, for you, a fruit arose
From right or wrong actions,
Then, having arisen from right or wrong actions,
How could that fruit be nonempty?

If dependent arising is denied,
Emptiness itself is rejected.
This would contradict
All of the worldly conventions.

If emptiness itself is rejected,
No action will be appropriate.
There would be action which did not begin,
And there would be agent without action.

If there is essence, the whole world
Will be unarising, unceasing,
And static. The entire phenomenal world
Would be immutable.

If it (the world) were not empty,
Then action would be without profit.
The act of ending suffering and
Abandoning misery and defilement would not
exist.

Whoever sees dependent arising
Also sees suffering
And its arising
And its cessation as well as the path.

If all this is empty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.
By the relinquishing of ceasing of what
Does one wish nirvāṇa to arise?

If all this is nonempty,
Then there is no arising or passing away.
By the relinquishing or ceasing of what
Does one wish nirvāṇa to arise?

Unrelinquished, unattained,
Unannihilated, not permanent,
Unarisen, unceased:
This is how nirvāṇa is described.

Nirvāṇa is not existent.
It would then have the characteristics of age and
death.
There is no existent entity
Without age and death.

If nirvāṇa were existent,
Nirvāṇa would be compounded.
A noncompounded existent
Does not exist anywhere.

If nirvāṇa were existent,
How could nirvāṇa be nondependent?
A nondependent existent
Does not exist anywhere.

If nirvāṇa were not existent,
How could it be appropriate for it to be non-
existent?
Where nirvāṇa is not existent,
It cannot be a nonexistent.

If nirvāṇa were not existent,
How could nirvāṇa be nondependent?
Whatever is nondependent
Is not nonexistent.
9 That which comes and goes
Is dependent and changing.
That, when it is not dependent and changing,
Is taught to be nirvāṇa.

10 The teacher has spoken of relinquishing
Becoming and dissolution.
Therefore, it makes sense that
Nirvāṇa is neither existent nor non-existent.

11 If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and non-existent,
passing beyond would, impossibly,
Be both existent and non-existent.

12 If nirvāṇa were both
Existent and non-existent,
Nirvāṇa would not be non-dependent.
Since it would depend on both of these.

13 How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and non-existent?
Nirvāṇa is uncompounded.
Both existents and nonexistents are compounded.

14 How could nirvāṇa
Be both existent and non-existent?
These two cannot be in the same place.
Like light and darkness.

15 Nirvāṇa is said to be
Neither existent nor non-existent.
If the existent and the non-existent were
established,
This would be established.

16 If nirvāṇa is
Neither existent nor non-existent,
Then by whom is it expounded?
"Neither existent nor non-existent"?

19 There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence (samsāra) and nirvāṇa.
There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence.

20 Whatever is the limit of nirvāṇa,
That is the limit of cyclic existence.
There is not even the slightest difference between
them,
Or even the subtlest thing.

21 Views that after cessation there is a limit, etc.,
And that it is permanent, etc.,
Depend upon nirvāṇa, the final limit,
And the prior limit.

22 Since all existents are empty,
What is finite or infinite?
What is finite and infinite?
What is neither finite nor infinite?

23 What is identical and what is different?
What is permanent and what is permanent?
What is both permanent and impermanent?
What is neither?

24 The pacification of all objectification
And the pacification of illusion:
No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
At any time, in any place, to any person.

KEY TERMS

बोधिसत्त्व 

bodhisattva

the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism: the one who vows to save all sentient beings

Bodhisattva

प्रज्ञापरमिता 

prajñāpāramitā

the perfection of wisdom

Prajñaparamita

शून्यता 

śūnyatā

"emptiness," the central teaching of the Prajñaparamita Sutras

Shunyata

तथता 

tathatā

"suchness," "thusness"

seeing things as they are in their "emptiness"

Tathata

त्रिकाय 

trikāya

literally "Three bodies"

the Mahayana doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha

Trikaya

निर्माणकाय 

nirmānakāya

"Manifestation Body"

the Buddha manifested in a particular body

the historical Buddha

Nirmanakaya

संभोगकाय 

sambhogakāya

"Enjoyment Body"

the celestial Buddhas that are the object of devotion in Mahayana Buddhism

Sambhogakaya

धर्मकाय 

dharmakāya

"Dharma Body"

the Buddha nature in all things

Dharmakaya
Questions

1. What are some of the basic differences between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism?

2. How does the nature of Shakyamuni Buddha change from Theravāda to Mahāyāna? Explain the Trikāya doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

3. What is a bodhisattva? How does the Mahāyānist bodhisattva differ from the Theravādin arhat?

4. What is the central teaching of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras?

5. How does Nāgārjuna explain the central teaching of the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras as being consistent with the fundamental teachings of the Buddha? How does Nāgārjuna’s conception of nirvāṇa perhaps suggests a departure from the Theravāda notion of enlightenment?