

The Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra

Biography of the Translator The Reasons for the Dharma Assembly, One

with commentary by Tripitaka Master Hua

In all, there are six recognized translations of the Vajra Sutra done by different Dharma Masters. They are as follows:

1. At the time of Yau Chin (A.D. 402, during the later Chin kingdom), Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva translated this Sutra, giving it the name *Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra*.
2. Dharma Master Bodhiruci translated it during the Ywan Wei Dynasty (A.D. 509), calling it by the same title as Kumarajiva.
3. Dharma Master Paramartha translated the Sutra in the later Chen Dynasty (A.D. 562) also using the same title.
4. During the Swei Dynasty (A.D. 605), Dharma Master Dharmagupta translated the Sutra under a different title. He added the word "cutter," calling it the *Vajra Cutter Prajna Paramita Sutra*.
5. In the Tang Dynasty, during the nineteenth year of the Jen Gwan reign period (648), Dharma Master Sywan Dzang translated the Sutra and reversed Dharmagupta's title, calling it the *Cutting Vajra Prajna Paramita Sutra*. The difference in the two titles is a matter of syntax. Dharma Master Sywan Dzang has been mentioned above. He was a great and virtuous high monk who walked from Jung Gwo (China) to India via central Asia. After studying in India for fourteen years, he returned to Jung Gwo and translated many Sutras.
6. Dharma Master Yi Jing also studied in India and returned to Jung Gwo during the reign of Empress Wu Dze Tyan, who, making a great display of her patronage of Buddhism, commissioned Dharma Master Yi Jing to translate Sutras. His translation of the Vajra Sutra (done in A.D. 703) bore the same title as that by Dharma Master Sywan Dzang.

These are the six translations of the Vajra Sutra, and those who study the Buddhadharma should be aware of them. Of these six, Dharma Master Kumarajiva's is the most popular; it is the one people most like to read and memorize.

To understand why this is so, we must first look at the life of the eminent monk, Vinaya Master Dau Sywan. Because of his superb, awesome deportment, as well as his high accomplishment in holding the precepts, he was later honored with the title "Vinaya Master." In the Four Departments—walking, standing, sitting, and lying down—he was extremely proper. There is a proper way to walk, stand, sit, and lie down. If you are a proper model, then others will be able to follow you. That is why now that I've come to the United States I tell my disciples who have left the home-life that they should do everything properly and not be casual, even in their speech or in the way they walk. When you walk, you should be straight and stern and not look around from left to right as

if you were looking for things to steal. Otherwise people may say, "Oh, here comes a monk who's a thief." One's eyes should not look at improper things, and one's ears should not listen to improper sounds. However, in walking one should not be as stiff as a board. In general one should act as a person should act, but not look around at everything.

The Four Departments are walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. One should walk like the wind. That does not mean like a gale, which blows down mountains, uproots trees, and blows over buildings. It means to be like a gentle breeze that doesn't even disturb water; it does not stir up waves. This is the kind of wind that everyone likes.

Stand like a pine tree. When one stands, one should be as straight as a pine tree; a crooked pine tree is not pleasing to the eye. Sit like a bell. That does not mean like the bell's clapper, always swaying to and fro. Sit like the ancient bells which were so heavy nothing could move them. Lie like a bow—that is, in the "auspicious position," the same way that Shakyamuni Buddha lay when he entered Nirvana. In this position the right hand is placed under the right cheek, and the left arm rests on the left thigh. Thus there is a proper way to each department. In actuality there are three thousand kinds of awesome department and 84,000 different practices.

The Shurangama Sutra states: "One should rigorously regulate one's demeanor out of stern respect for the pure Dharma." Such department commands the respect of ghosts and spirits as well as of humans and gods. Vinaya Master Dau Sywan specialized in the precept Dharmas and kept them purely.

In response to Vinaya Master Dau Sywan's superb awesome department, the gods brought him offerings of food. If you wish to be a High Master, you should guard your precepts. Then the Dharma protectors and good spirits will protect you. If you break the precepts, you will not be protected. Vinaya Master Dau Sywan held the precepts purely, exemplifying a line from the Shurangama Sutra that reads: "Dignified and pure in the Pratimoksha, a great model for the Triple Realm." Pratimoksha refers to the Vinaya, the precepts. He was a model for the Triple Realm—the realm of desire, the form realm and the formless realm; and in response the gods brought him food to eat.

One day when Lu Sywan Cha, the god who brought him food, came, Vinaya Master Dau Sywan asked him, "Why does everyone like Kumarajiva's translations?"

The god replied, "Because Kumarajiva has been the Master Translator for the past seven Buddhas. The Sutras he translated are the same as the Buddhas'mind, so everyone likes to read and recite them."

Moreover, when Kumarajiva was about to die he said, "I personally don't know if there are mistakes in the Sutras I have translated; but if there are none, when I am cremated, my tongue will not burn. If I have made mistakes and the translations are not in accord with the Buddhas'mind, then my tongue will burn." After Kumarajiva passed on, his body burned, but his tongue remained the same as ours, red and full without any changes. This also proves that the Sutras that Dharma Master Kumarajiva translated were totally correct.

II. BIOGRAPHY OF THE TRANSLATOR

Translated by Tripitaka Dharma Master Kumarajiva of Yau Chin

"**Tripitaka**" is the three treasuries of the Buddhist canon:

1. Sutras, spoken for the study of samadhi
2. Vinaya, spoken for the study of morality
3. Shastras, spoken for the study of wisdom

Together these include the threefold study of morality, samadhi and wisdom.

Dharma Master. Dharma Master has two meanings:

1. One gives the Dharma to others
2. One takes the Dharma as one's master

In addition there are four different kinds of Dharma Masters:

1. Those who lecture the Dharma for others.
2. Those who read and recite the Sutras for others. The difference between "read" and "recite" is that "read" means "to read from the Sutra text," and "recite" means "to recite the Sutra from memory."
3. Those who write out the Sutras for others. This means to write out Sutras for different people.
4. Those who keep Sutras to themselves. These Dharma Masters recite the Sutras for themselves and do not dedicate the merit to living beings.

All of these four can be considered Dharma Masters, but not all of them are Tripitaka Masters. Some may specialize in studying the Sutras, or some may specialize in studying the vinaya, or some may specialize in investigating the shastras. A Dharma Master who only investigates one of the Three Treasuries cannot be considered a Tripitaka Master. As a Tripitaka Dharma Master, Kumarajiva had penetrated all three Treasuries of the canon.

Kumarajiva. Kumarajiva (344-413) was the son of Kumarayana, who, in order to leave the home-life and cultivate the Way, refused to inherit his father's high position. During his travels as a mendicant, Kumarayana was received by the King of Kucha, a small country in central Asia, and invited to be a National Master there. Later by imperial command he was forced to marry the king's sister, Jiva. While she carried their son Kumarajiva, her wisdom and power of learning increased remarkably, a phenomenon which also occurred when the Buddha's disciple Shariputra was in his mother's womb.

Later Kumarajiva's mother wished to leave the home-life. Finally, after a period of fasting, she received permission from her reluctant husband, who, although formerly a Bhikshu, had by then developed a strong attachment to his beautiful wife. After Jiva became a Bhikshuni, she quickly certified to the first stage of Arhatship.

His Sanskrit name was "Kumarajiva," which means "mature youth," because even as a youth he had the virtuous conduct of an elder. In one day he could memorize one thousand verses, and each verse contained thirty-six words. Thus he could memorize 36,000 words a day. In two days he was able to memorize the entire Dharma Flower Sutra. At age seven Kumarajiva left the home-life. One day while visiting a temple in Kashgar with his mother, he picked up a huge censer from one of the altars and lifted it over his head as an offering to the Buddhas. With the censer above his head, he thought, "This is too heavy for me to lift," and because of that thought he was incapable of holding the censer any longer. Then he called out to his mother for help. From that experience he came to the sudden realization that everything is made from the mind alone.

During the Fu Chin Kingdom in Jung Gwo, an astrologer predicted that a great sage would come. The Emperor Fu Jyan recognized the sage to be Kumarajiva, and so he sent a massive army commanded by General Lyu Gwang (died 399) to escort the Dharma Master to Jung Gwo. The King of Kucha, disregarding Kumarajiva's advice that the advancing troops were not hostile, countered the "invasion." In the ensuing battle, Kucha's king was killed and his army defeated. Many political changes followed which delayed Kumarajiva's arrival in Jung Gwo until the Yau Chin kingdom was in power. Finally in 401 Kumarajiva founded a translation center in Chang An, the capital city, where he translated over three hundred volumes.

Yau Chin is the period of the Later Chin kingdom (385-413). It is not the same as the Ying Chin reign period of Emperor Shr of the Chin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) or the Fu Chin period of the ruler Fu Jyan (died 386). When Fu Jyan was assassinated by Yau Chang, the kingdom was renamed Yau Chin in honor of the new ruler. Yau Chang in time was succeeded by his nephew Yau Syng, and the name Yau Chin was retained. The Yau Chin kingdom was located at Chang An at the same time as the Later Jin Dynasty of Sz Ma-yi (ruled from 366-371).

As mentioned above, the Vajra Sutra is the 577th roll in the Great Prajna Sutra. Moreover, concerning the four locations and sixteen assemblies also mentioned above, it was lectured at the second location during the third assembly.

III. DETAILED EXPLANATION OF THE TEXT

The Reasons for the Dharma Assembly, One

Sutra:

Thus I have heard, at one time the Buddha dwelt in Shravasti at the Jeta Grove in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Forlorn, together with a gathering of great Bhikshus, twelve hundred fifty in all. At meal time the World Honored One put on his robe, took up his bowl and entered the great city of Shravasti to collect alms. After he had finished his sequential alms-round, he returned to his original dwelling. When his meal

was completed, he put his robe and bowl away. After he washed his feet, he arranged his seat and sat down.

Commentary:

This first section, the Reasons for the Dharma Assembly, and the second section, Subhuti's Request, were not in the original Sutra text but were added later to make the Sutra easier to understand. This first section discusses the reasons behind convening this Dharma assembly at which Shakyamuni Buddha spoke.

Thus I have heard fulfills one of the Six Requirements found at the beginning of every Sutra. A person cannot adequately lecture on the Sutras without knowing what these six are. Once someone came here to lecture, but when I asked him about these Six Requirements, he couldn't come up with even one. If one does not know the Six Requirements, then one does not have the knowledge to lecture on the Sutras. The six are:

1. Authenticity
2. Hearer
3. Time
4. Host
5. Location
6. Assembly

"Thus" fulfills the requirement for authenticity. "I have heard" satisfies the requirement for a hearer. "At one time" takes care of the requirement for time. "Buddha" fulfills the requirement for a host. "In Shravasti at the Jeta Grove in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Forlorn" satisfies the requirement for a location, and "together with a gathering of great Bhikshus, twelve hundred fifty in all" answers the requirement for an assembly.

These Six Requirements are found at the beginning of every Sutra, and they comprise what is called the "general preface." Following the general preface is the "specific preface": **At meal time the World Honored One put on his robe, took up his bowl and entered the great city of Shravasti to collect alms. After he had finished his sequential alms-round, he returned to his original dwelling. When his meal was completed, he put his robe and bowl away. After he washed his feet, he arranged his seat and sat down.**

The general preface is the same in all Sutras, but the specific preface is tailor-made for each individual Sutra. These Six Requirements certify that a Sutra is authentic and was spoken by the Buddha.

The general preface is also called a "foreword" because it is found at the beginning of the Sutra text. Further it may be called a "postscript," because when the Buddha lectured this Sutra he didn't say, "Thus I have heard." Ananda added this later when the Sutras were being compiled. Moreover, this beginning part of the Sutra may be called a "prologue."

Whatever you call it, you have to know what it means, or you'll wonder why the preface can come later. If you don't know the meaning behind the terms, then you won't know how to explain them correctly. To summarize, it is called a "foreword" because it is placed at the beginning of the Sutra, and it is called a "postscript" because it was not spoken by the Buddha but was added when the Venerable Ananda compiled the Sutras.

When you lecture Sutras you may call it a preface or a postscript. "Well then is nothing fixed about it?" you might ask. Of course. If it was fixed then it would not be the Buddhadharma. You will know this when we get to the section in the text that reads: "There is no fixed dharma called Anuttarasamyaksambodhi."

If you have something that is fixed, then you become attached. This attachment brings about an obstruction, from which comes affliction. When there is no attachment, that state is emptiness, and in emptiness there is no affliction. If everything is empty, what is important enough to worry about? Why have afflictions? Yet, you have afflictions because you haven't seen everything as empty. You haven't seen through everything, and you haven't put everything down. So you are always getting stuck by thorns and running into difficulty. What does it mean to run into difficulty? Wherever you go you run into obstructions. Why does it hurt to be stuck by thorns? Because you don't see your body as empty; you haven't put it down. Therefore, when you walk into a briar patch and get stuck, it hurts. If you have absolutely no self, no others, no living beings, and no life—nothing at all—what pain is there? Who has pain? When there is not even a person who feels pain, what affliction can there be? Where could the affliction come from? This is easy to talk about but difficult to do.

Thus I have heard. The Buddha instructed that all Sutras he spoke should begin with the four words "Thus I have heard." The reasons behind his choosing these words are very important. We should know them and their history well.

When the Buddha spoke the Sutras, he did not say, "Thus I have heard." Having spoken the Dharma Flower Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, the Buddha Bequeaths the Teaching Sutra, the Earth Treasury Sutra and others, the Buddha was ready to enter Nirvana. All his disciples cried. Bodhisattvas cried, Arhats cried, and the common Bhikshus cried even harder. Why were they crying? Why did Arhats and Bodhisattvas still have emotions? Because the profound, kind teaching of the Buddha was like the milk of Dharma. The Buddha was like a mother cow to the Bodhisattvas, Arhats, Sound Hearers and Those Enlightened by Conditions, providing them with a steady supply of milk. Because they had received the deep kindness of the milk of Dharma, there was no way they could not be affected. So gods and humans both cried when they heard that the Buddha was going to enter Nirvana.

Ananda cried the hardest. He was grief-stricken, with tears running down his face. He cried so hard he forgot everything. The Venerable Aniruddha, though blind, had the Heavenly Eye and the Heavenly Ear, and he was probably a little clearer than the rest of the assembly. When he heard everyone crying as though they had gone mad, he took Ananda aside and asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Ahh," wailed Ananda, "the Buddha is going to enter Nirvana, and we will never get to see him again. What do you mean, 'Why am I crying?'"

The Venerable Aniruddha said, "Don't cry. You still have important things to do. Try to straighten up a little."

Ananda said, "What important things? The Buddha is going to enter Nirvana. What is there left for me to do? I want to go with the Buddha."

"That won't do. It's a mistake to talk like that."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

The Venerable Aniruddha said, "There are four questions you should ask the Buddha."

"Four questions? Now that the Buddha is going to enter Nirvana, how can there still be questions? Can I tell the Buddha not to enter Nirvana?"

"No."

"What are the four questions?"

The Venerable Aniruddha said, "The first question is, after the Buddha enters Nirvana, the Sutras should be compiled: what words should we use at the beginning of the Sutras? What guidelines should there be?"

Ananda heard that and said, "That's really important. As soon as I heard you say it, I knew I should ask about it. What other questions are there?"

"The second question is, when the Buddha was in the world we lived with him: after the Buddha enters the quiescence of Nirvana, where should we dwell?"

Ananda dried his eyes, wiped his nose, and said, "That's right. That's also very important. When the Buddha was in the world the entire group of twelve-hundred-and-fifty Bhikshus lived together with him. Now that he is going to enter Nirvana, where will we live? I should ask him that. What's the next question? Answer quickly." Now Ananda was getting anxious because he could see that the questions were important.

"The third question is, when the Buddha was in the world he was our Teacher: now that he is entering Nirvana, who should we take as our Teacher? Should we select one person from among us? We can't manage without a Teacher."

Ananda said, "Right, right. That also should be asked. What is the fourth question?"

Aniruddha said, "Don't be nervous. Of course I'll tell you. Wait just a second."

Ananda pleaded, "I can't wait. Hurry up and tell me. I'm really nervous. How can I wait?"

Aniruddha said, "Well if you don't wait then I won't tell you."

Ananda said, "Ahh, be compassionate and tell me. Don't scare me to death."

Aniruddha said, "Before you said you wanted to go off and die with the Buddha. Now you're afraid of dying?"

Ananda said, "Quit joking. Hurry up and tell me."

Aniruddha finally told him, "The fourth question is extremely important. When the Buddha was in the world, he could discipline the evil-natured Bhikshus." Evil-natured Bhikshus are those who have left the home life and do not follow the rules. They are really rotten. "After the Buddha enters Nirvana who will discipline them?"

Ananda said, "This question really is the most important. Now the evil-natured Bhikshus will consider us their equals, and we will not be able to discipline them. This is the biggest headache. Okay, I will go ask the Buddha's advice on these."

Ananda hurried off to the Buddha's room. Although he had not washed his face, his eyes were dry and his nose was not running, so he was not nearly as unsightly as he had been when he was crying. The Buddha was on the verge of entering samadhi, but Ananda couldn't wait. He said, "Buddha, World Honored One, I have some very important questions to ask. Can you answer me now?"

When the Buddha heard this immature child, his little cousin, his young disciple who had come to ask questions in such a way, he replied, "Of course I can answer you. What are your questions?"

Ananda replied, "These are not my questions; they are the Buddha's questions; questions of the Buddhadharma; questions for the monks. I can't solve them, so I have come seeking the Buddha's compassionate instruction. I have heard many teachings and gained much wisdom, but now faced with this momentous event, I cannot bear it. I need the Buddha's advice."

"All right, speak," said the Buddha.

"The first question is, after the Buddha enters Nirvana we will want to compile the Sutras. How should we begin them to show that they were spoken by the Buddha?"

The Buddha said, "Is that your first question?"

Ananda replied, "Yes."

The Buddha said, "Use the four words, 'Thus I have heard.'"

"Thus I have heard.' Okay, I'll remember," said Ananda,"and what is the answer to the second question?"

"What is the second question? You haven't asked it yet, Ananda."

"I haven't asked? Oh. The next question is, where should we live? There are so many of us. How will we get along? Where will we dwell?"

"That's a minor question," said the Buddha.

Ananda replied, "I thought this was a major question; how can you think it is a minor one?"

To be continued...