Diamond Sutra
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The Diamond Sūtra is a Mahāyāna sūtra from the Prajñāpāramitā, or "Perfection of Wisdom" genre, and emphasizes the practice of non-abiding and non-attachment.

A copy of the Chinese version of Diamond Sūtra, found among the Dunhuang manuscripts in the early 20th century and dated back to May 11, 868,[1] is, in the words of the British Library, "the earliest complete survival of a dated printed book."[2]

The full Sanskrit title of this text is the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

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Title

The earliest known Sanskrit title for the sūtra is the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, which may be translated roughly as the "Vajra Cutter Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra." In English, shortened forms such as Diamond Sūtra and Vajra Sūtra are common. The Diamond Sūtra has also been highly regarded in a number of Asian countries where Mahāyāna Buddhism has been traditionally practiced. Translations of this title into the languages of some of these countries include:

- Sanskrit: वज्रचेदीकाप्रज्ञापारमितासूत्र, Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra
- Chinese: 金剛般若波羅蜜多經, jīngāng bōrēbōlóméduō jīng, shortened to 金剛經, jīngāng jīng
- Japanese: 金剛般若波羅蜜多経, Kongō hannya haramitsu kyō, shortened to 金剛経, Kongō-kyō
- Korean: 금강반야바라밀경, geumgang banyabaramil gyeong, shortened to 금강경, geumgang gyeong
- Vietnamese Kim cương bát-nhã-ba-la-mật-da kinh, shortened to Kim cương kinh
- Tibetan (Wylie): 'phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa rdo rje gcod pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

History

The full history of the text remains unknown, but Japanese scholars generally consider the Diamond Sūtra to be
The Chinese Diamond Sūtra, the oldest known dated printed book in the world.  

Some western scholars also believe that the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra was adapted from the earlier Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. Early western scholarship on the Diamond Sūtra is summarized by Müller.

The first translation of the Diamond Sūtra into Chinese is thought to have been made in 401 CE by the venerated and prolific translator Kumārajīva. Kumārajīva's translation style is distinctive, possessing a flowing smoothness that reflects his prioritization on conveying the meaning as opposed to precise literal rendering. The Kumārajīva translation has been particularly highly regarded over the centuries, and it is this version that appears on the 868 CE Dunhuang scroll. In addition to the Kumārajīva translation, a number of later translations exist. The Diamond Sūtra was again translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Bodhiruci in 509 CE, Paramārtha in 558 CE, Xuanzang in 648 CE, and Yijing in 703 CE. The Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang visited a Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda monastery at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in the 7th century CE. Using Xuanzang's travel accounts, modern archaeologists have identified the site of this monastery. Birchbark manuscript fragments of several Mahāyāna sūtras have been discovered at the site, including the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (MS 2385), and these are now part of the Schøyen Collection. These manuscript fragments are in a Sanskritized Gāndhārī language, and written in the Kharoṣṭhī script.

Contents and teachings

The Diamond Sūtra, like many Buddhist sūtras, begins with the phrase "Thus have I heard" (Skt. evaṃ mayā śrutam). In the sūtra, the Buddha has finished his daily walk with the monks to gather offerings of food, and he sits down to rest. Elder Subhūti comes forth and asks the Buddha a question. What follows is a dialogue regarding the nature of perception. The Buddha often uses paradoxical phrases such as, "What is called the highest teaching is not the highest teaching". The Buddha is generally thought to be trying to help Subhūti unlearn his preconceived, limited notions of the nature of reality and enlightenment. Emphasizing that all forms, thoughts and conceptions are ultimately illusory, he teaches that true enlightenment cannot be grasped through them; they must be set aside.

A four-line verse about impermanence appears at the end of the sūtra.

Dunhuang block print

There is a wood block printed copy in the British Library which, although not the earliest example of block printing, is the earliest example which bears an actual date. The book displays a great maturity of design and layout and speaks of a considerable ancestry for woodblock printing.

The extant copy has the form of a scroll, about 16 feet long. The archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein purchased it in 1907 in the walled-up Mogao Caves near Dunhuang in northwest China from a monk guarding the caves -

from a very early date in the development of Prajñāpāramitā literature. Some western scholars also believe that the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra was adapted from the earlier Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra. Early western scholarship on the Diamond Sūtra is summarized by Müller.
known as the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas".

The colophon, at the inner end, reads:

Reverently made for universal free distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the 15th of the 4th moon of the 9th year of Xiantong [11 May 868].

This is approximately 587 years before the Gutenberg Bible was first printed.

In 2010 UK writer and historian Frances Wood, head of the Chinese section at the British Library, was involved in the restoration of its copy of the book.[16] The British Library website allows readers to view the Diamond Sutra and turn the pages.[17]

See also

- Science and technology of the Tang Dynasty

References

14. ^ Diamond Sutra, Sec. 8, Subsec. 5 金刚經，依法出生分第八，五：結歸離相
15. ^ "The Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra"
Bibliography

- For a close reading of the text's rhetoric, see chapter 4 of Alan Cole's *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahayana Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley: U Cal Press, 2005) entitled "Be All You Can't Be, and Other Gainful Losses in the Diamond Sutra."

External links

- Diamond Sutra: English Translation (http://www.gblt.site50.net/index.php?main=main04.03&library=library06.02) , by A. F. Price and Wong Mou-Lam

Categories: Mahayana sutras | British Library oriental manuscripts | Chinese manuscripts

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