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A Reflection on Venerable Chang Wu's Lecture  
"The Diamond Sutra: How It Applies to Our Lives,"  
held on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
at the University of Calgary

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Emptiness and the Perfection of Wisdom:  
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On February 9th, 2017, the University of Calgary welcomed Venerable Chang Wu, current Abbess and Director of Dharma Drum Vancouver Center, to present her lecture, "The Diamond Sutra: How It Applies to Our Lives," as part of our Numata Speaker Series. The Numata Speaker Series at the University of Calgary is coordinated by our endowed Numata Chair, Dr. Wendi Adamek, to promote the study of Buddhism in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the Department of Religious Studies, as well as to stimulate further research into the religion across the globe. With great pleasure, we were able to host Venerable Chang Wu through this initiative.

Venerable Chang Wu is a Buddhist monastic in the Chan (Zen) tradition. She is currently the Abbess and Director of Dharma Drum Vancouver Center, a monastery in Richmond, BC, Canada. In the past 15 years, she has delivered classes in Buddhist philosophy and meditation to people of widely different backgrounds and age groups. Venerable Chang Wu also leads meditation retreats for more advanced practitioners, in countries ranging from Canada to Switzerland, and has played an active role in organizing and contributing to scholarly conferences and interfaith dialogue around the world. Her background has rendered her able to communicate the most esoteric aspects of Chan (Zen) tradition concisely and clearly, making her an extremely fitting choice to communicate the essence of the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most influential objects of devotion and study in Zen Buddhism, to our attending students.

In her lecture, Venerable Chang Wu shared with us a carefully crafted presentation, seemingly designed to pierce through the mind-associated lifestyle present in our post-secondary environment, viscerally (and dialectically) revealing the principles of Chan (Zen) Buddhism to attending students. Her pellucid style of delivering the presentation was both tranquil yet piercing, capturing the original voice of the *Diamond Sutra* itself. Aptly named, the title of the *Diamond Sutra* relies on the power of the *vajra* (diamond or thunderbolt), used as a metaphor for the type of wisdom that cuts and shatters illusions to get to ultimate reality. Venerable Chang Wu shared many personal anecdotes and metaphors in order to ensure that her teachings resonated with her audience, and our classroom quickly became acquainted with the timeless themes of the *Diamond Sutra*.

As presented by Venerable Chang Wu, the *Diamond Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*) is one of the most influential Mahayana sutras in East Asia, and is a key object of devotion and study in

Zen Buddhism. As Venerable Chang Wu warmly stated, sutra in Sanskrit means garland, indicating that the Buddha's teachings, which are "as beautiful as flowers," are collected and compiled together as such. One copy of the Chinese version of *Diamond Sutra*, dating back to May 11, 868, is, in the words of the British Library, "the earliest complete survival of a dated printed book."<sup>1</sup> The *Diamond Sutra* presents the major Chan (Zen) Buddhist themes of *anatman* (no-self), the emptiness of all phenomena and the liberation of all beings without attachment. In regards to the latter, the *Diamond Sutra* presents its most important lesson, which is the significance of spreading and teaching the *Diamond Sutra* itself.

As Venerable Chang Wu emphasized, the core teachings of the *Diamond Sutra* can be seen within the Sanskrit word "*Prajñāpāramitā*" (perfect wisdom). Venerable Chang Wu states that the concept of *Prajñāpāramitā* and the means of reaching it, can be compared to the crossing of a ferry, where one must traverse the sea of suffering in order to reach the shore of transcendence. As one crosses this sea, they may advance through three levels of spiritual wisdom, based on their own personal nature. The notion of three levels of wisdom originates from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* (*Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna*), which only survives in Chinese and is traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna of the second century.

The three wisdoms are *wenzi banruo* 文字般若 (the wisdom gained through language, which could be through listening or reading), *guanzhao banruo* 觀照般若 (the wisdom gained through contemplation) and *shixiang banruo* 實相般若 (the wisdom attained when realizing the reality or the empty nature of all phenomena). It is imperative to note

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Wood and Mark Barnard, *The Diamond Sutra: the story of the world's earliest dated printed book* (London: British Library, 2010).

that the *Buddha-Dharma* (the teachings of the Buddha) must be applied throughout the journey of progressing through these three wisdoms.

As our class learned, the most fundamental and powerful method to reach this shoreline and utilize these three wisdoms, is the practice of Six *Paramitas*: generosity, morality, forbearance, diligence, meditation and wisdom. The *Paramitas* hold an important place in all schools of Buddhism, because they are an expression of what one should strive for if one wants to live life in a skillful, realistic, enlightened and wise way. When we are clear on these steps or levels of advancement, we are able to practically apply these teachings to our own lives. As such, we may begin our practice with a nominal self, with form, and perhaps, by realizing our innate potential, proceed to the ultimate realization of no-self and no-form.

So what did Venerable Chang Wu mean by “no-self?” Let’s say that you are your brain. If every atom in your brain is periodically replaced, maybe every seven years or so, does this suggest that you are no longer yourself after seven years? One might reason perhaps, that we are not our physical brains, but rather, what they contain: memories, preferences, skills etc. But memories too, are soon altered, forgotten and replaced. Similarly, preferences ebb and flow, and skills come and go. The Buddha’s teachings implored his students to understand that there is no single unchanging element that comprises the self. The self is similar to a wave in the ocean; clearly visible, but lacking a specific and enduring identity. Waves move, change, merge, split, and one day dissolve completely, however the totality of the ocean remains. The true form is no-form, and yet, it can produce all kinds of forms. We tend to believe that the form of things that we can see, hear, and touch, is their real form, and from then on, become attached to that form. Those who are free from all notions (of self, person, sentient beings, and life-span) are called Buddhas.

As such, Venerable Chang Wu informed our class that the *Diamond Sutra* contains two sections of teachings that emphasize the true nature of reality; the former relates to the emptiness of sentient beings, and the latter relates to the emptiness of all phenomena. In union, these sections seek to describe the ultimate nature of reality. To adequately explain these two sections, it is important to highlight a central thought of the Chan (Zen) school of Buddhism; emptiness in sentient beings is inherently endowed with the qualities of an awakened mind; a mind of *Buddha Nature* (also known as *Self Nature* within the Chan/Zen school). This *Buddha Nature* is the true underlying nature of all sentient beings; the ability to awaken other sentient beings is the ultimate goal of the practice.

Emptiness is universal. By this, it is meant that all things, although experienced, are devoid of a permanent and independent substance. This simply implies that one cannot identify any phenomena as one's own self or having anything pertaining to one's self.

Moving aside from the definitions of emptiness, Venerable Chang Wu turned to our class to ask a cardinal question presented at the beginning of the *Diamond Sutra*:

"When one resolves to attain emptiness, or unsurpassed complete enlightenment, in what should one abide and how should one subdue one's thoughts?"

The answers to this question are explored during the *Bodhisattva's Vow*, when the Buddha says to his disciple, *Subhūti*:

The bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas should subdue their thoughts like this: All the different types of sentient beings, whether they be born from eggs, born from a womb, born from moisture or by transformation; whether or not they have form; whether they abide in perceptions or no perceptions; or without either percep-

tions or non-perceptions; I save them by causing them to enter nirvana without remainder.<sup>2</sup>

Upon reading the above passage, Venerable Chang Wu paused. Perhaps, I thought, she could sense the energy of the room as we hung on her every word, our curiosity rising to a palpable peak as we wondered what the final takeaway would be for *Subhūti*. Venerable Chang Wu continued with one of the *Diamond Sutra*'s most famous revelations, as transmitted by the Buddha:

“When these immeasurable, countless, infinite number of sentient beings have been liberated, in actuality, no sentient being has attained liberation.”<sup>3</sup>

“Aha!” our class thought. There we go. A paradox. A reason for us to allow our minds to seek reprieve from the mental and spiritual gymnastics required to keep up with the roller-coaster ride of awakening that Venerable Chang Wu had presented. Finally, a reason for our clinging minds to poke a hole in the logical fabric of the teaching. As our class raced to come up with an explanation for the seemingly paradoxical passage upon prompting, Venerable Chang Wu gracefully provided us with the key to understanding the passage, and in whole, the essence of the *Diamond Sutra*:

If a bodhisattva (bodhisattva is the Sanskrit term for anyone who, motivated by great compassion, has generated bodhicitta, which is a spontaneous wish to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all

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<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The diamond that cuts through illusion*, translation (Parallax Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Hanh, *Diamond*.



sentient beings) abides in the signs of self, person, sentient being, or life-span, she or he is not a bodhisattva.<sup>4</sup>

With this revelation, Venerable Chang Wu had successfully communicated to our classroom not only the importance, but the very essence of a core teaching by the Buddha; to be free from the notions of personhood, and thus, to be non-abiding, as established in Chapter 3 of the *Diamond Sutra*. When the mind misleadingly abides in, or identifies with, the mental constructs of self-image, one is far from perfect enlightenment. When wandering thoughts are subdued, the supreme Bodhi-mind and its resolve to attain full awakening for the benefit of all beings, arises. As such, non-abiding is what gives rise to the pure mind, to *Buddha Nature*.

This concept of non-abiding can be linked to the unattached practice of charity. As the Buddha said to *Subhūti*, “when bodhisattvas practice charity, they should not abide in the notion that they are practicing charity.”<sup>5</sup> That is, to practice charity without attachment to form, the five senses, nor to mental conceptions. As long as the mind abides in something, it is not secure or stable. Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, mental conceptions and, *dharma*s; they are all impermanent. Once you make a sound, it is no longer there; it is no longer yours. If one does not abide in anything, and instead transcends all things, they will be abiding in *prajna* (true wisdom), for it is something else entirely that transcends this world.

Venerable Chang Wu’s lecture communicated a wealth of information on the *Diamond Sutra*, but more importantly, akin to a piercing diamond herself, she conveyed its very essence by stressing how it can be applied to our own lives. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank-you

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<sup>4</sup> Hanh, *Diamond*.

<sup>5</sup> Hanh, *Diamond*, 79.

to Venerable Chang Wu for visiting our department and acquainting us with the *Diamond Sutra*. For those readers who are interested in further exploring her teachings, please visit the [Dharma Drum Vancouver Center website](#).

I look forward to providing reflections on future lectures during the 2017 academic year, and am thankful for this opportunity, as made possible by the University of Calgary Numata Chair.

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