



EXEGESIS

XIANYANG explores a traditional method of studying Sacred Scriptures as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of Buddhist Sutras.

When I didn't understand something in a sutra my first Teacher would tell me to sit with it, which is what he said his Teacher told him to do under the same circumstances. Sitting with it didn't mean working with it during meditation, but rather just letting its presence be felt next to me when I was on the cushion. Eventually an understanding would arise. I found that I could support this practice with another tool for working with a tough sentence or sutra, which was exegesis.

The Catholic Encyclopedia defines exegesis as the branch of theology that investigates and expresses the true sense of Sacred Scripture. We know that exegesis has long been a part of Buddhist practice since we have examples of exegesis by Nagarjuna. Exegesis, which is simply a word-by-word analysis, gives structure, for those inclined to this style of study, to the study of sutras and other sacred texts. Stimulating as an exegesis can be for some practitioners, we need to remember that study and meditation should be used to support each other; one should never replace the other, as my Teacher would remind me when I asked too many questions.

Often in exploring the meaning of a scripture in this way, the primary idea being explored leads to unexpected discoveries in the tangential and tertiary arenas that arise as part of the investigation.

Here is a lightweight, introductory look at an exegesis of the opening sentence of the *Diamond Sutra*. The exegesis could be hugely longer if all the ideas alluded to were fleshed out. But as an example of how to do an exegesis, this seems sufficient. This first sentence of the *Diamond Sutra* was chosen because it is all too often skimmed over when we read, appearing so frequently in the Pali sutras that we take it for granted.

It is worth noting, before beginning the formal part of the exegesis, that the oldest dated printed book in the world is a copy of the *Diamond Sutra*, printed in 868 AD, on May 11th as the text reads. That's nearly 600 years before the printing of the Gutenberg Bible in 1455. Part of that *Diamond Sutra*, which is housed in the British Museum Library, London, is pictured on the cover of this issue of Rightview Quarterly.

Opening line from the Diamond Sutra:

Thus I have heard, at one time the Buddha was in Shravasti at the Jeta Grove with a gathering of monks numbering 1250.

Thus I have heard.

This is the *Once upon a time* of Buddhist recitation, the literary convention with which all of the sutras in the Pali Canon begin. It is said that Buddha himself chose these words for Ananda:

In an exegesis on The Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, Nagarjuna writes about the use of the word I being there is no I. "If within the

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Buddha's Dharma it is said that all Dharmas are empty and nowhere is there a "self", why then is it declared at the very beginning of the Buddha's scriptures, "Thus 'I' have heard ...?" Here is his summary of the answer to his rhetorical question: "When in accordance with worldly convention one speaks of a self, it is not spoken from the standpoint of the supreme and actual meaning. For this reason, although Dharmas are empty and devoid of a self, there is no fault in speaking of an I simply to conform to the dictates of worldly convention." Nagarjuna accepts that we need to function, on some levels, in this mundane world. He posits that it is OK to do so, even when it appears to contradict the true Dharma, so long as we are not, in fact, distorting what actually is. This leads Nagarjuna into a discussion of the conceit of using words and of his favorite subject, emptiness. For our purposes here, we will not attempt to analyze those in this context.

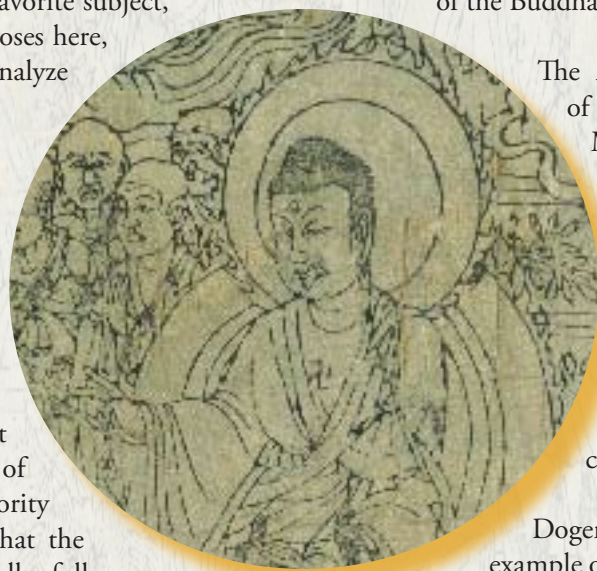
Thus I have heard.

These words can be understood on several levels, only three of which are addressed here. First in terms of the codification of the Pali sutras at the first council; then in terms of its later use to add authority to sutras by implying that the actual words of the Buddha follow; and finally as a preface of causation. According to tradition, immediately after the death of the Buddha several hundred of his most accomplished monks gathered to codify his teachings at what became known as the First Council. Ananda, who was Buddha's personal attendant for the last 25 years of the Buddha's life, was seen as the repository of the teachings. He reputedly had memorized all the teachings of the Buddha.

In a prehistoric society, like that of the Buddha, memorization of vast amounts of material was not as extraordinary a feat as it seems to us today. Back then, the style in which material was presented was conducive to memorization, with repetition

and numbered lists, as well as standardized presentation formats, used to aid in memorization of oral teachings. As the main reciter of what would eventually become the Pali Canon, Ananda began each teaching (sutta in Pali or sutra in Sanskrit) with the words: *Thus I have heard*. This indicated that what followed were the actual words of the Buddha. It demanded our attention; it asserted accuracy.

Scholars believe that the *Diamond Sutra*, from which the sentence being analyzed here is taken, was written about 350 AD, some 700 years after the death of the Buddha. It was never taught by the Buddha, nor recited by Ananda. But its author(s) appended the phrase *Thus I have heard* to the beginning of the sutra to give it the validity of the Buddha's actual words.



The *Diamond Sutra* is one of the seminal works of Mahayana Buddhism. Its validity as a teaching is without doubt. When a teaching meets all the criteria of right dharma, it has come to be understood that it can be attributed to the Buddha. That's the case here.

Dogen's *Fukanzazengi* is an example of a writing that has been elevated to the status of a sutra and is worth examining in this context. Why wasn't this catch phrase attached to the *Fukanzazengi*? Was it already too late in the 13th century to write a new sutra? Was it because it was written in Japanese, not some ancient Indic language? Was it because its author was so well known? Or that its author was seen as a Buddha within his own right, so there was no need to authenticate the words? It would seem to me that the nature of how we write about the dharma today has pretty much precluded us from writing any more sutras.

So all the sutras begin with an opening sentence or two that goes something like this: *Thus have I heard that at one time the Buddha was at this place with these people listening.*

Because we are so familiar with this standard opening, we often overlook its importance. The Buddha could only have taught if conditions were right for teaching. This simple opening establishes that all the conditions that had to arise for a sutra to be given and then recited had arisen:

1. ***Thus have I heard*** establishes that there was someone there who heard the words is repeating them.
2. ***At one time*** establishes the when of this event, that this event actually occurred at a specific time.
3. ***The Buddha*** establishes that a Buddha was there to make this teaching.
4. ***At this place*** establishes the where of the event.
5. ***With these people listening*** establishes that someone was present to hear the teachings.

Viewing this standard opening from the perspective of all phenomena being conditioned, we realize that if any one of these conditions were absent, there would not have been a talk to repeat. As the Buddha taught, only when there is this can there be that, and when there is not this, there is not that. Exploring each of the conditions in more depth tells us about the weightiness of this event.

Thus I have heard is a personal testament from one of the most respected disciples of the Buddha, and the single monk most trusted by the sangha as the repository of the authentic teachings. In this opening phrase, Ananda is putting his life's work on the line for us.

The phrase sets us up to be there, listening to the words of the Buddha, as though we were one of the 1250 monastics in attendance.

Before he even begins, Ananda has established an air of reverence for what is about to be said. How can we help but feel humble before these words?

Ananda is making it clear that this is no Saturday morning dharma talk at the local Buddhist Center.

In a simple four-word phrase, we as Buddhists are being made a reverential part of the audience for this historic event. It would be like a Christian being invited to hear the Sermon on the Mount from the mouth of Jesus!

Further, we can explore *at one time* in the context of the Buddhist meaning of the flow of time, and of life unfolding only in the present moment. We can explore the Buddha in terms of the definition of a Buddha, the role of a Buddha in our cosmology, and the sectarian differences in Buddhism about the use of the word Buddha. We can explore the importance of the place in relation and its implications for foreshadowing the importance of the teaching that is to follow. The number of listeners and their status, here all disciples of great accomplishment, and 1250 of them, also talks directly to the import of the words that are to follow, and can be examined relative to the audiences and content of other sutras.

Once we explain all this, we would do well to remember that there was nothing to be explained, as the Buddha tells us in the Diamond Sutra!

