

THE DIAMONDNESS OF THE DIAMOND SŪTRA

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Based on the study of two Indian commentaries extant in Tibetan on the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the paper investigates the significance of the title of this exceedingly popular Mahāyāna scripture. Tracing back the symbolism of the *vajra* to its origin in Vedic myth, it proceeds to show the survival of its imagery in the Buddhist idea of the *vajropama-samādhi*. This is followed by an analysis of Kamalaśīla's explanation of the meaning of the term "Diamond-Cutter", which relates it to a threefold path-structure inherent in the text itself. Then the central topic of the *sūtra*, the support of *abhisamaya* is analysed and found to be allied in meaning to *vajropama-samādhi* and *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, the "conversion of support". The next part of the paper seeks to extend this symbolism to the rest of the *āśraya* constituting the text, utilising Vasubandhu's explanation of the meaning of "non-corruption" (*mi nyams-pa*).

Finally, the essential meaning of "vajra-cutting" is found to be encapsulated in the seemingly paradoxical threefold logical pattern repeatedly employed by the *sūtra*: *X* is (spoken of as) no-*X*; *therefore* it is (called or spoken of as) *X*.

Key words: vajra, Perfection of Wisdom, enlightenment, diamond-like concentration, conversion of support, Kamalaśīla, Vasubandhu.

The topic of the present paper is the title of the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, popularly known as the "Diamond Sūtra", but more properly called "The Diamond-Cutter Perfection of Wisdom".¹ The question, simply put, is as follows: "Why is the Diamond-Cutter called the Diamond-Cutter?" To explore possible ways of answering the question, we must first of all make it clear that the word *vajra* does not actually mean either diamond or thunderbolt. They are both phenomenal manifestations of a spiritual force or agent that the word refers to. The *vajra* in classical Hindu Mythology signifies the weapon of Indra, whereby he destroyed the Dragon (or Serpent)

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¹ Professor Conze (1974, p. 8) maintains that "the title means 'the perfection of wisdom, which cuts like the thunderbolt', or, less probably, 'which could cut even a thunderbolt'." See also his remarks and associations concerning the title on the same page.

Vṛtra, the “Encloser”, who threatened the “three worlds” with extinction. The incident is related in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (6.9.1–19) in the following way:

Thereupon there arose from the southern fire a gruesome creature which was like death for the worlds at the end of the Age. From day to day he grew in all directions with the speed of an arrow. He resembled a mountain on fire with the refulgence of the armies of clouds at twilight; he had a beard like a point of molten copper and eyes like the sun at noon. He climbed the sky on a blisteringly blazing trident, dancing and bellowing and shaking the earth with his foot. His cavernous maw drank up the sky; his tongue licked the stars of the Bear, and devoured the three worlds. (...) Since he covered these worlds with darkness, this most grisly rogue got the name of *Vṛtra*, the Encloser. (...) Indra raised aloft the thunderbolt (*vajra*) crafted by Viśvakarman from the bones of a seer, and valiantly, filled with the power of the lord, surrounded by all the hosts of gods, he gloried on top of his elephant, hymned by throngs of seers, and brought joy to the three worlds. Just as an angry Rudra assailed Andhaka, O king, so Indra attacked mightily to smite *Vṛtra* amidst his leaders of Asura armies.²

The story goes on to relate that the armies of the gods and demons, headed by Indra and *Vṛtra* respectively, fought a bitter battle by the river Narmadā. The demons, however, soon fled the battlefield, and left their leader “in the thick of battle”. *Vṛtra* hurled his pike at Indra, but he cut the enemy’s weapon with his “thunderbolt” and then “sheared off the serpent-like arm of *Vṛtra*”. But the dragon attacked again, this time with a club, “and hit him on the chin while Maghavan’s mighty elephant fell and the thunderbolt dropped from his hand”. At this critical moment, *Vṛtra* could easily have won the duel, but – quite gallantly – ordered Indra to pick up his weapon and continue the fight. He did so very much to his own misfortune, since “Indra pierced both the club and the elephant trunk-like arm at the same time with his hundred-bolted joint”. Finally with no arms left, the Encloser “resting his lower jaw on the earth and his upper jaw in heaven”, swallowed Indra and his elephant “like a mighty and powerful boa constrictor devours an elephant”. The finale unfolded as follows:

But, albeit swallowed by *Vṛtra* and dropped in his belly, Indra, who was girt with Viṣṇu and the power of his Yogic illusion, did not die. The lord (...) split open *Vṛtra*’s belly with his bolt, came out and forcibly severed his enemy’s mountain like head.

From the story it is quite evident that it was only due to the force of his mighty weapon – which was actually “Viṣṇu and the power of his Yogic illusion” – that Indra finally emerged victorious. We also learn that the triumphant weapon was made from the bones of a seer (*ṛṣi*). The details are found in the *Śiva Śatarudra Purāṇa* (24.11–32):

² Dimmitt – van Buitenen (1978, pp. 303–306).

[Brahmā hears the gods lament about the threats of Vṛtra, and tells Indra:] “Long ago the mighty seer Dadhīci, a sense-controlled ascetic, propitiated Śiva and won the boon of having thunder-bolts (*vajras*) for bones. Ask him for his bones, which he will surely give to you. Then fashion a thunder-bolt out of those bones, and kill Vṛtra with it, without fear.” [So Indra went to Dadhīci to ask for his bones.] At his words, that seer, who was devoted to helping others, concentrated on his guardian Śiva and relinquished his body. The fetters of life loosened, the seer Dadhīci went at once to Brahmāloka. [...] Then Sakra summoned the cow Surabhi to lick clean the bones so he could make them into weapons with which to challenge Vṛtra. At his command, Viśvakarman fashioned weapons of various kinds out of those diamond-hard bones made out of thunderbolts by Śiva’s grace. He made a thunderbolt of cane, the arrow called Brahmasīras, and many other weapons from other bones.³

The “diamond-hard” substance of the seer’s skeleton was a “boon”, an act of grace by Śiva, whom Dadhīci had “propitiated” by his yogic sense-control. Brahmā advised Indra to ask for the ṛṣi’s bones presumably because he knew that they were of the hardest substance to be found; the highest concentration of energy, the power of which equals that of a thunderbolt. It seems that the spiritual power attained by human asceticism can be turned into and utilised as matter by the gods on a higher plane, which again manifests in the human world in different forms such as that of the diamond and the thunderbolt. So aside from these two meanings, it is this convertibility – from spirit to matter and vice versa – of the diamond-hard spiritual attainment that seems to be implied by the word *vajra*.

In the context of Buddhism – leaving for now aside *vajrayāna*, where the term, of course, is highly significant and loaded with multiple meanings – *vajra* is best known as the symbol of the highest concentration, the *vajropama-samādhi* (“diamond-like concentration”), which is the ninth path of abandoning the defilements of *Bhāvagra* and leads directly to the attainment of arhatship on the path of the *anāgāmin*.⁴ It is also the final moment on the path of the bodhisattva, where it confers on him the state of omniscience, i.e. complete enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*).⁵ This event takes place on the “diamond seat” (*vajrāsana*), which is the only place which can support the *vajropama-samādhi* of the bodhisattva.⁶ It is reported by present day Tibetan scholars that in Bodhgayā, under the diamond seat, there is a giant stūpa made of vajra, fashioned from the bones of an old-time ṛṣi who had gained them through the stability of his meditation. We can notice here an echo of the Vedic myth about

³ Dimmitt – van Buitenen (1978, pp. 306–307).

⁴ *Abhidharmakośa* vi. 44d.

⁵ *Abhidharmakośa* ii. 44a–b. See also the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (publ. Dutt, p. 82), cited by Ruegg (1989, p. 167): “The Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva, having attained the Diamond-like Concentration (*vajropama-samādhi*), immediately after the Bodhicitta, acquires the Omnimodal Gnosis of a *buddha* by means of discriminative knowledge conjoined with a single thought-moment (*ekacittakṣaṇasamāyuktayā prajñayā sarvākārajñatām anuprāpnoti*).”

⁶ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* iii. 53b–55d.

Dadhīci: though the weapon is replaced by a seat, the essence – the adamantine nature or *ultimate reliability* of spiritual attainment – is the same.

Having thus established a context for the word *vajra*, let us now turn our attention to the *Vajracchedikā-Sūtra*. The text of the sūtra itself does not contain any explicit reference to either *vajra* or cutting. Nor is *vajropama-samādhi* ever mentioned. But Kamalaśīla, in his *PSD* (extant only in Tibetan), supplies the following explanation:

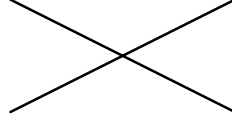
The very title of the sūtra, “The Diamond-Cutter”, indicates the topic and the purpose [of the text]. It is like that: it is a “Diamond-Cutter” in two ways. [1.] It shows that its purpose is the abandonment of the two obscurations, since it cuts the subtle obscurations of the afflictions (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*) and knowables (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*), which are as hard to destroy as a *vajra*. [2.] On the other hand, since the “cutter” is similar to the shape of a *vajra*, it is called “similar to a *vajra*” (*vajropama*); the *vajra* is divided into two thick ends and a thin middle. Likewise, this Perfection of Wisdom teaches extensively the beginning and the end, [that is] the level of activity through belief (*adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi*) and the level of the buddha (*buddha-bhūmi*). Its thin middle teaches the level of pure intention (*śuddha-adhyāśaya-bhūmi*). This is why it is similar to the form of a *vajra*; thereby the three levels are indicated to be the subject matter of this [text].⁷

This explanation shows that the simile of the *vajra* can be taken in two different ways and that the *vajra* is accordingly understood as either the object or the agent of the act of cutting. It is an object, in so far as the subtle obscurations are likened to the *vajra* which is “hard to destroy”, and it is an agent, since the sūtra itself is the “cutter” which cuts or destroys these obscurations.⁸ Kamalaśīla talks about the sūtra’s

⁷ *PSD*. 210a–b: de-la mdo-sde ’di’i ming rDo-rje gcod-pa zhes bya-ba nyid-kyis brjod-par bya-ba dang dgos-pa bstan-to | ’di-ltar rnam-pa gnyis-kyis rDo-rje gcod-pa yin-te | nyon-mongs-pa dang shes-bya’i sgrib-pa phra-ba rdo-rje-ltar gzhiḡ dka’-ba de gcod-pa’i phyir-te | ’dis ni sgrib-pa gnyis spong-ba ’di’i dgos-par bstan-pa yin-no | yang-na gcod-pa ni rdo-rje’i dbyibs dang ’dra-bas rdo-rje-lta-bu zhes bya-ste | rdo-rje ni rtse-mo gnyis sbom-la dbus phra-mor byed-do | de-bzhin-du Shes-rab-kyi pha-rol-tu phyin-pa ’di yang thog-ma dang tha-ma mos-pas spyod-pa’i sa dang | sangs-rgyas-kyi sa rgya-che-bar yongs-su bstan-to | dbus phra-mos ni lhag-pa’i bsam-pa dag-pa’i sa bstan-to | de-bas-na ’di ni rdo-rje’i rnam-pa lta-bu yin-te | ’dis ni sa gsum-po ’di’i brjod-par bya-ba yin-par bstan-to |

⁸ Kamalaśīla’s commentary is based on Vasubandhu’s explanation in his *PCSD*, ff. 194a–b. The Tibetan here is extremely obscure, which probably explains why Tucci (1956, pp. 131–171) omitted the part in question from his sketchy translation of the text. Nevertheless, I will edit it here: mtshan-gyi rgyu-mtshan gang zhe-na | rDo-rje gcod-pa zhes bya-ba’i mtshan gang yin-pa de yang don rnam-pa gnyis dang ’brel-bar rig-par bya-ste | gang ’di’i yang-dag-pa’i sgrub-pas lta-ba dang nyon-mongs-pa ’joms-pa gsungs-so | de phra-mo dang snying-po-nyid-kyis rdo-rjer gyur-la | de yang shes dka’-ba-nyid-kyis-na phra-mo yin zhiḡ | spang dka’-ba-nyid-kyis-na snying-po’o | de-la ’di ni Shes-rab-kyi pha-rol-tu phyin-pa thos-pa dang | bsam-pa dang | bsgom-pas gcod-par byed-do | rdo-rje yang ’di yin-la | gcod-pa yang ’di yin zhiḡ | yongs-su gcod-pa’i dbyibs-te rdo-rje gcod-pa’o | rdo-rje ni mtha’ gnyis rgya-che-la dbu-ma bsduḡ-te bri-bar bya-ste | de-lta-bu’i Shes-rab-kyi pha-rol-tu phyin-pa ni dbu-mar bsduḡ-pa’i phyir lhag-pa’i bsam-pa dag-pa’i sa yongs-su bstan-to |

“shape”, which is like a vajra (*vajropama*), because it has three parts: two thick ends and a thin middle, corresponding to *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi* and *buddha-bhūmi* on the one hand, and *śuddhādhyaśaya-bhūmi* on the other:



Does this mean that through the presentation of the three levels, the sūtra actually teaches *vajropama-samādhi*, since it is also “similar (in its shape) to a vajra”? In order to answer that question, we must detect whether the three levels in question have anything to do with the “Diamond-like Concentration”. According to the *Abhi-samayālaṃkāṛāloka* of Haribhadra, *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi* is synonymous with *pratyoga-mārga*, and lasts until the first *bodhisattva-bhūmi* – which is simultaneous with the attainment of *darśana-mārga* – is reached.⁹ The *śuddhādhyaśaya-bhūmi*, according to Tucci (1956, p. 140) lasts from the 1st bhūmi, *pramuditavīhāra*, “up to the 7th bhūmi included”. Also, according to the *Sūtrālaṃkāravṛttibhāṣya* of Sthiramati, *śuddhādhyaśaya* or “pure determination” is what characterises the bodhisattva’s second production of the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta-utpāda*), which takes place on the first bodhisattva ground and leads him to progress through the first seven stages.¹⁰ Although the scheme of the Diamond-Cutter Sūtra does not seem to resemble that of the five grounds and ten paths, we can accept that at least a threefold path-structure can be superimposed on the text, without any further specification. In fact, this is what is done by the commentaries. This may explain why the rest of the path – that which follows after the *śuddhādhyaśaya-bhūmi* – is simply called *buddha-bhūmi*, without mentioning the three remaining bodhisattva-bhūmis.¹¹ It seems therefore, that we should not look for exact correspondences between the scheme of the *Vajracchedikā* and the ten bodhisattva grounds, but try to work with the above threefold structure.

The commentators divide the main body of the text into eighteen sections. In the Tibetan translation of Vasubandhu’s commentary these are called “supports” (*rten*), but in Kamalaśīla’s *PSD* the word “topic” or “station” (*gnas*) is used. The original Sanskrit term, translated into Tibetan in two different ways, must have been *āśraya*; so let us call them supports, rather than simply topics.¹² The first sixteen sup-

thog-ma dang tha-ma-dag rgya-chen-pos ni mos-pa spyod-pa’i sa dang | de-bzhin-gshegs-pa dang ldan-pa’i sa yongs-su bstan-to | (See the Appendix to this paper for a tentative translation.)

⁹ Cf. Obermiller (1933, p. 37, note 1). The same is stated in Kamalaśīla’s first *Bhāvanākrama*, 24b2–25a4 (Cf. Tucci 1958, pp. 223–224).

¹⁰ Pagel (1995, p. 126). It is also said that “it is called pure because it is free from the subject/object dichotomy and because it is attained through equipoise (*upekṣā*).”

¹¹ Vasubandhu calls it *de-bzhin-gshegs-pa dang ldan-pa’i sa* (cf. note 8 above) and defines it as *sangs-rgyas-kyi sa yongs-su tshol-ba* (*PCSD* 180b): “the search for the buddha-ground”.

¹² Tucci (1956, pp. 25–27 and pp. 131–137) gives the Sanskrit equivalents *āśraya* or *ādhāra* for *rten*, and *sthiti* for *gnas*. However, *āśraya* may do for both, since the crucial term *āśraya-parāvṛtti* is translated into Tibetan as *gnas* (*yongs-su*) *gyur-pa*. This term, as we will see, is quite

ports are included within the *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi* and comprise chapters 3–17d.¹³ The seventeenth support, which is called *abhisamaya* (*mngon-par rtogs-pa*), is the *śuddhādhyāśaya-bhūmi*; the “thin middle” of the vajra. It corresponds to chapters 17e–f. The rest of the text – i.e. chapters 17g–32 – constitutes the last support, that of the search for the buddha-level. So despite the fact that it is only one of the eighteen supports, it is really a “thick end” – its length comparable to that of the *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi*.

Now we will focus our attention on the support of *abhisamaya*, since this is the central point of the vajra. The text, in Conze’s translation, reads as follows:

(*The Lord*): Suppose, Subhūti, a man were endowed with a body, a huge body.

Subhūti: That man who was spoken of by the Tathāgata as ‘endowed with a body, a huge body’, as a no-body he has been taught by the Tathāgata. Therefore is he called ‘endowed with a body, a huge body’.

The Lord: So it is, Subhūti, the Bodhisattva who would say, ‘I will lead beings to Nirvāṇa, he should not be called a ‘Bodhi-being’. And why?

Is there, Subhūti, any dharma called ‘Bodhi-being’?

Subhūti: No, indeed, O Lord, (there is not any dharma named a ‘Bodhi-being’.

The Lord: ‘Beings, beings’, Subhūti, as no-beings have been taught by the Tathāgata. Therefore are they called ‘beings’.) Because of that the Tathāgata teaches, ‘selfless are all dharmas, unsubstantial, without a living soul, without personality.’¹⁴

The corresponding section of Kamalaśīla’s commentary says:¹⁵

This [part of the text] teaches *abhisamaya* by means of the acquisition of the wisdom mind (*ye-shes thob-pa*; *jñāna-prāpti*) and the absence of conceit (*mngon-pa’i nga-rgyal med-pa*; *anabhimāna*).

Question: How [does it teach that] by means of the acquisition of wisdom mind?

Answer: On the basis of the two kinds of wisdom minds: the wisdom of apprehending the lineage (*rigs yongs-su ’dzin-pa’i ye-shes*; *gotrapari-graha-jñāna*), and the wisdom of omni-equivalence (*mnyam-pa thams-cad-kyi ye-shes*; *sarvasamatā-jñāna*). With respect to that, whoever acquires the wisdom mind is born into the lineage of the Tathāgata, and

relevant to the meaning of the *Vajracchedikā*. With respect to the meaning of *āśraya*, see Nagao (1991, Ch. 7, pp. 75–81): Connotations of the Word *āśraya* (Basis) in the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra*.

¹³ The thirty-two chapters into which Max Müller and Edward Conze divide the text go back to the tradition of Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation and have almost nothing in common with the Indian commentators’ division of it into eighteen *āśraya*. Cf. Conze (1974, p. 1).

¹⁴ Conze (1974, p. 49 Sanskrit text. and pp. 83–84 translation). The section within brackets is not to be found in the Gilgit version and is also missing from the Tibetan translation.

¹⁵ *PSD*. ff. 263a–264a.

the ascertainment of that as the buddha-lineage is the wisdom of apprehending the lineage. Since one is born into that, one is *endowed with a body*. The word *endowed* means appropriation, and the *body* is the body of the Tathāgata. Whoever acquires that is *endowed with a body*.

Question: How does one know that that wisdom mind has been attained?

Answer: That is why [the text] says: *a huge body*. This teaches that *abhisamaya* follows after one has acquired the wisdom mind of omni-equivalence, by the fact of the equivalence of selflessness with respect to both persons and dharmas. That is how one knows that one has attained the wisdom of apprehending the lineage. Through that wisdom mind of omni-equivalence, after one has realised the selflessness of persons and dharmas, one unites all sentient beings in just oneself {*sems-can thams-cad (...) bdag kho-nar sdud-do*}. That is a *huge body*, since one has collected every sentient beings' body into oneself. (...)

The intention (*dgongs-pa; samdhi*) is the following: this clear realisation (*abhisamaya*) of a bodhisattva is distinguished merely by the arising of the superior wisdom mind (*khyad-par-du 'phags-pa'i ye-shes; *viśiṣṭa-jñāna*), which is based on true convention (*yang-dag-pa'i kun-rdzob; *samyak-saṃvṛti*), but ultimately there is no subject or object of *abhisamaya*. Therefore, in order to teach that, Subhūti says: *That man who was spoken of by the Tathāgata as 'endowed with a body' etc.*

This teaches that strong reliance (*mngon-par zhen-pa; *abhiniveśa*) on a really existing appropriated body and a huge body is a discordant factor (*mi mthun-pa'i phyogs; *vipakṣa*), and one should be based (or stand) here (viz. at this support) by the wish and aspiration to abandon it. By the mere expression “endowed with a body, a huge body”, [the text teaches that] the bodhisattva reverses strong reliance on all phenomena. This also establishes the ultimate meaning and leads one to enter into meditative equipoise on that. It also teaches the profound [meaning, viz. emptiness]. It also refutes the extreme of reification (*sgro-'dogs-pa'i mtha'; samāropānta*); while the former refuted the extreme of deprecation (*skur-ba 'debs-pa'i mtha'; apavādānta*).¹⁶

Now, others may have such a thought: If the Tathāgata says that that body does not exist (or, is a ‘no-body’), then how can those bodhisattvas who have attained *abhisamaya* think: ‘Since I have attained the *abhisamaya* of a bodhisattva, now I should set beings free.’ Having examined this [thought, the Buddha] teaches that *abhisamaya* is [also

¹⁶ This paragraph clarifies the threefold character of practice with regard to this support, as established by Subhūti in the beginning of the *sūtra*, viz. “how should someone who has set out on the bodhisattva-vehicle stand, practice, control his mind” (see Conze 1974, p. 28 for the Sanskrit). Cf. Tucci (1956, pp. 132–133). In view of the whole commentary, the sentence “Therefore is he called ‘endowed with a body, a huge body’ refers to the control of one’s mind, which is realised through the avoidance of the two extremes mentioned.

accompanied by] the absence of conceit. Therefore he says: ‘*the bodhisattva who would say*’ etc. This teaches that whoever thinks “*I will lead beings to (complete) Nirvāṇa*”, that conceited person to whom the thought ‘I am a bodhisattva’ occurs, is not a bodhi-being in any real sense (*yang-dag-pa* ‘i don-du-na; **bhūto* ‘*rthāya*).

And why? – This is a question [about] the reason how this is known. A so-called *dharma* is anything that has the character of form and the rest, or the character of a person and the rest. Since the noble Subhūti has either examined it by reason or has seen it, he says: “*No indeed*.” Since that reasoning [applies] to everything in the same way, the Bhagavan says, in order to apprehend both selflessnesses: “*Therefore*”, etc. [The expressions] *no-beings* and the rest are merely [different] words; they all refer to unsubstantiality (*rang-bzhin med-pa*; *niḥt svabhāva*). This teaches how to cut out distractions. This finishes the explanation of *abhisamaya*.

This explanation fits in very well with Sthiramati’s remark about the *śuddhā-dhyāśaya-bhūmi*.¹⁷ What is more remarkable, however, is that this level is associated with the acquisition of a body which includes all sentient beings, whereby one is born into the lineage of the Tathāgata. Asaṅga, in his *Trīṣatikāyāḥ prajñāpāramitāyāḥ kārikāsaptatiḥ* (vss. 45–46), identifies this body with the *dharmakāya*, and says that it is “huge, because of the absence of the obscurations, its all-pervasiveness and its great qualities.”¹⁸ In the tenth chapter of the *Mahāyānasaṅgraha*, Asaṅga describes the acquisition of the *dharmakāya* in terms of the *vajropama-samādhi* and the conversion of support (*āśraya-parāvṛtti*):

[The Dharma Body is acquired] by the diamond-like concentration, since [that concentration] destroys the subtle obstacles that are difficult to destroy. Because it is separated from all obstacles immediately after [obtaining] that concentration, [Dharma Body] is thus acquired through the conversion of support.¹⁹

Therefore it seems that there is a good reason for calling the Diamond-Cutter Sūtra as such, since its central topic is the *śuddhā-dhyāśaya-bhūmi*, which is the level where the “conversion of support” takes place through the diamond-like concentration that “cuts” or destroys the most subtle obscurations obstructing enlightenment. This is the level where the *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi* – the path of the novice bodhisattva, who is still an ordinary being (*prthagjana*) – is “turned over” or “converted”, through yogic equipoise (*yogī-samāpatti*) on the emptiness of both persons and phenomena, into the path of an *ārya* bodhisattva, who is already a member of the buddha-lineage. Since the *Vajracchedikā* is well known to represent a very early stage of the Mahāyāna, we expect to find here rudimentary material concerning the bodhisattva

¹⁷ Cf. note 10 above.

¹⁸ Tucci (1956, p. 76 and p. 114).

¹⁹ Griffiths et al. (1989, p. 50; pp. 93–97; pp. 289–290).

path; ideas that were later considerably refined and developed. A central conception seems to be that of the conversion of support – even though it is not yet called by that name.

So far we have established that the title of the “Diamond-Cutter Sūtra” contains a reference to the *vajropama-samādhi*, which implies the acquisition of a “huge body” that belongs to the lineage of the Tathāgata. But the symbol of the vajra is present in the sūtra on many different levels. We have seen that the commentaries divide the body of the text into eighteen supports, *āśraya*. Each support contains a three-fold structure: (1) desire and vow established on the conventional level; (2) yogic equipoise – realisation of the ultimate level, viz. the emptiness of the support, and (3) suppression of distractions by avoiding the two extremes.²⁰ This is the exegetical method the commentators have devised in order to deal with the most peculiar distinguishing feature of the sūtra, namely its paradoxical logic, which in a general way can be formulated as follows: *X* is (spoken of as) no-*X*; *therefore* it is (called or spoken of as) *X*.²¹ The first and second parts of this three-term statement present no difficulty for the commentators: they say that the first one represents conventional truth (the “vast”), while the second one establishes ultimate truth (“the profound”). It is the third step which is decisive, since it must somehow account for the very unconventional use of *therefore*. Vasubandhu treats the subject as follows:²²

Question: What is non-corruption (*mi-nyams-pa*; **akhaṇḍanā*)?

Answer: It is the abandonment of the two extremes.

Question: What are these extremes?

Answer: The extreme of reification and the extreme of deprecation. The extreme of reification is strong adherence to a not-just-imputed nature (*kun-brtags ma yin-pa'i ngo-bo-nyid*; **aparikalpita-svabhāva*) of dharmas as they are expressed literally. The extreme of deprecation is adherence to the non-real existence of even the basis of these non-substantial dharmas. For example [when it says in the sūtra]: “*What [was taught by] the Tathāgata as ‘heap of merit’, as no-heap that has been [taught by the Tathāgata]*”²³ – it is said in order to refute the extreme of reification. That the heap of merit does not exist means that its manner of existence as expressed literally is its existence in the manner of the imputed nature. Then, [when the sūtra says:] “*therefore the Tathāgata teaches ‘heap of merit’*”²⁴ – it serves to refute the extreme of deprecation. The nature which does not accord with the verbal expression exists somewhat (*sgra ji-bzhin-pa ma yin-pa'i ngo-bo-nyid de cung-zad cig yod-de*); it is the inexpressible thing. This explains why the Tathāgata has taught heap of merit.

²⁰ See note 16 above and Tucci (1956, pp. 145–146).

²¹ See Conze (1974, pp. 11–12) for a list of items treated by this seemingly strange logic.

²² PCSD ff. 183b–184a

²³ Cf. Conze (1974, p. 70).

²⁴ Ibid.

In the same way, [when the sūtra says] “‘The Buddha’s own and special dharmas (*buddhadharma*), the Buddha’s own and special dharmas’ *Subhūti*, just as not the Buddha’s own and special dharmas have they been taught by the Tathāgata.”²⁵ – this serves to refute the extreme of reification. *Therefore are they called ‘the Buddha’s own and special dharmas’* – this serves to refute the extreme of deprecation. With respect to that, [the sentence: “the Buddha’s own and special dharmas] have been taught by the Tathāgata as not the Buddha’s own and special dharmas” – this clarifies the uncommon meaning (*thun-mong ma yin-pa’i don-nyid*; **asādhāranārthatā*). “Therefore are they called ‘the Buddha’s own and special dharmas’” – this is the extra meaning (*don dang ’byor-ba-nyid-do*). Inasmuch as ‘the Buddha’s own and special dharmas’ do not exist in the manner [or nature] in which they are expressed [i.e. literally], the Tathāgata must say that they are non-existent. Otherwise, even if he did not say: “the Buddha’s own and special dharmas”, they would be realised accordingly. Since their nature is non-existent, therefore the Tathāgata, on the level of conventional meaning, says: “the Buddha’s own and special dharmas”. Just like that, one should know that this [principle of] uncommon and extra meaning is to be applied at all other [such places in the sūtra].

To summarise, Vasubandhu treats the final conclusion of the threefold logical structure in terms of the path of “non-corruption”, which means to abandon the two extremes.²⁶ The first extreme is to adhere to the conventional nature of the teaching in question, its literal meaning, which is of the imputed (or imagined, *parikalpita*) nature – viz. the first term. The other extreme would be to adhere to its emptiness as utter non-existence – viz. the second term. But the “basis” (*gzhi*) of these non-substantial dharmas still exists, even though it cannot be expressed. To say that it exists “somewhat” is perhaps an awkward way of referring to the consummated (or perfected, *pariniṣpanna*) nature of these dharmas, which is realised by meditating on their being empty of their imputed nature. So, in terms of Yogācāra philosophy, this explanation suggests that the path of non-corruption is related to the conversion of the support, and the word *therefore* means: “so that the conversion of support – from the imagined into the consummate nature – take place.”

The second part of the explanation, which concerns the essential reality of *buddhadharma*, makes a distinction between the literal, the uncommon and the extra meanings of the Buddha’s teaching. The literal meaning is taught on the relative level, the uncommon meaning on the ultimate level, while the extra meaning is realised by avoiding the two extremes attaching to those two levels respectively. In this case, the word *therefore* seems to suggest: “it is meant conventionally, because the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Tucci (1956, p. 133), where he translates it as “not abandoning that path”: In terms of this structure, the first two members of the relation correspond to “a firm grasping of the path” (*lam yongs-su ’dzin-pa*) and “its accomplishment” (*lam rdzogs-par byed*), respectively. (Cf. PCSD 179a.)

ultimate nature is inexpressible.”²⁷ We are faced with the paradox that *buddhadharma* do not exist ultimately, but are still spoken of with a secret intention (*dgongs-pa*) in mind, which is even beyond the “uncommon meaning”.

It is quite surprising that Vasubandhu does not expressly mention the conversion of support in this context, even though it seems to be the most appropriate tool for dealing with the paradoxical formula.²⁸ The *Mahāyānasāṅgraha* (IX.1) defines the *parāvṛtti* as follows:

The conversion [of the support] means that, when the antidote for it arises, the afflicted division of the other-dependent is reversed and the pure division comes to the fore.²⁹

In our paradoxical formula, the literal teaching corresponds to the afflicted division, i.e. the imputed nature of the dharma in question. The antidote is yogic equipoise, i.e. the realisation of its emptiness, the other-dependent nature. As a result “the pure division comes to the fore”, i.e. the true, consummated meaning (or intention) of the teaching becomes clear to the bodhisattva. Thus the word *therefore* implies that the real meaning of the dharma is understood only when one has realised its emptiness, and has “converted” its basis from the imputed into the consummated nature. Each of the eighteen *āśraya* is to be converted or “reversed” in order for the bodhisattva path to be traversed and consummated. As we have seen, Vasubandhu hints at such an idea, but he does not make it quite clear. The reason for this is uncertain; maybe it was just much too evident for him and his disciples. There is, however, at least one place in his commentary where he explicitly mentions the conversion. The sentence reads as follows:

[The fourth reason why Subhūti asks the Buddha the threefold question is to express that] those who comprehend the conversions attain a lot of merit, so they will not revert (or fall back) [from the bodhisattva path].³⁰

²⁷ It appears that this conventionality, which has an “extra meaning” added to it, is referred to by Kamalaśīla as “true conventionality” (*yang-dag-pa'i kun-rdzob*; **samyak-samvṛtti*), as opposed to an “untrue” (*yang-dag-pa ma yin-pa'i*) one. The distinction, however, is not always made clear. Cf. *PSD*. 236a, where he explains the passage about the “heap of merit” in the following way: “If a heap of merit existed ultimately, then, since the ultimate is not the object of words, [the Tathāgata] would not have spoken about it. Since one would know it like that [i.e. ultimately] even if he did not speak about it, its [ultimate] expression would be meaningless; so [the word *therefore*] means that it is just a conventional [expression].” Such an explanation, however, fails to explain why such a conventional expression was used at all.

²⁸ For an excellent exposition of the theory of *āśraya-parāvṛtti*, see Nagao (1991) Ch.11. (pp. 123–153): “Logic of Convertibility”, and especially pp. 140–147, which is particularly relevant to our discussion.

²⁹ Cited by Nagao (1991, p. 144, translation slightly modified). Earlier it is established by the author that the “afflicted division” refers to the imputed, and the “pure division” to the consummated nature.

³⁰ *PCSD* 185b: *yongs-su gyur-ba-rnams de-dag rjes-su 'dzin-pa-la bsod-nams mang-po-nyid thob-pas ma log-pa'i don*. Cf. Tucci (1956, p. 143), where he translates it as: “that they be so changed that they may not revert.”

So the topic of the conversion comes up already in Subhūti's question which sparks off the whole conversation. As we have seen in the course of our discussion of the *śuddhādhyaśaya-bhūmi*, *vajra* is essentially a symbol for the conversion of support which takes place through the "diamond-like *samādhi*". Now we have shown that such conversion takes place at each support. It is therefore not unreasonable to propose that the title *Vajracchedikā* refers to this very method of conversion, whereby a bodhisattva "cuts through" the obstructions represented by the eighteen supports which, at the same time, constitute the path itself.

Appendix

A Tentative Translation of Vasubandhu's Explanation of the Title of the *Vajracchedikā*. (Cf. note 8.)

Question: What is the reason for the title [being *Vajracchedikā*]?

Answer: It must be understood that the title *Vajracchedikā* is associated with two kinds of meanings, by the proper practice of which the views and the afflictions are asserted to be conquered. [The text] is like a vajra through [its] subtleness and [its] being the very essence. Since it is difficult to understand, it is very subtle. And since it is hard to abandon [the views and the afflictions], it is essential. By listening to, thinking about and meditating on the Perfection of Wisdom, this [subtle teaching] cuts those [afflictions which are hard to abandon]. This [text] being a vajra as well as a cutter, is of the shape of a thorough cutter; [so it is called] a vajra-cutter. The vajra is to be depicted with two thick ends and a concentrated middle. Since this Perfection of Wisdom, which is similar to [the vajra], is concentrated in the middle, it teaches *śuddhādhyaśaya-bhūmi*. By its thick beginning and end, it teaches *adhimukti-caryā-bhūmi* and "the level where one is endowed with the Tathāgata", (respectively).

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