

The Value of the Diamond Sutra to the Aesthetics of Modern China

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Abstract: The aesthetic ideology in the Diamond Sutra and its value of it for modern Chinese society is empty in current research and is open to further discussion. Excavating the embodiment of the teachings of mindfulness in life, living, nature, and almsgiving in the Diamond Sutra is a step toward studying the aesthetic ideas in the Diamond Sutra. Mindfulness in Diamond Sutra is the way to correctly observe the outward world and thus correctly observe the inward self. In addition to righteousness, the Diamond Sutra also implies the dharma of seeing reality, which is the dharma of Vipassana. Chinese-localized Vipassana has long become the most popular Buddhist teaching in modern Chinese society because of its compatibility with traditional Chinese culture. For modern Chinese society, the way to change the status quo may be to shift from practicing the Chineseized Vipassana that focuses on inward reflection to practicing the original mindfulness method of the Diamond Sutra.

Keywords: Diamond Sutra, Buddhist aesthetics, Mindfulness, Vipassana

1. Introduction

The Diamond Sutra is one of the most widely influential of the Mahayana Buddhist classics, and its philosophical value within and beyond religion has long been studied by scholars from various countries. However, there is a relative gap in scholars' research on the aesthetic ideas in the Diamond Sutra. There are only two extant discussions by Chinese scholars focusing on aesthetics in the Diamond Sutra, while scholars from other countries have hardly discussed the topic. Aesthetics has not been systematically developed in China for long, using a modern Chinese aesthetic angle to study the aesthetic values in the Diamond Sutra, which came from India but had a profound influence in China, can help modern Chinese better understand the global and intergenerational significance of this classic. There is also a lack of discussion about the changes the ancient Sutra can bring to modern Chinese society. Studying the value of the aesthetic ideas in the Diamond Sutra for modern Chinese society can help modern Chinese people better understand how this millennia-old classic affects their lives today and can help them discover some inspiration from the original words of Sakyamuni for solving existing social problems.

This article is developed in two main parts. In the first part, the author introduces four aesthetic ideas in the Diamond Sutra and their revelations for beings to get rid of troubles and sufferings. In the second part, the author explains the current state of Chinese Buddhism in the context of history, namely the esteem for Vipassana, and the differences between the current state of Chinese society

due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture and that of other countries. Finally, the author suggests that modern Chinese people return to the original positive teachings of the Diamond Sutra to find opportunities to improve the current state of society.

2. The Aesthetics of Life in the Diamond Sutra

The teachings of the Buddha in the Diamond Sutra are all about the aesthetic question of how one should live. The Buddha's disciple Subhodhi asked him the first and the most critical question throughout the whole sutra if men and women want to become enlightened, "how should they stand, how should they walk, and how should they control their thoughts" [1]? The question of Subhodhi can be understood as how one should control one's thoughts to become a Buddha-like person. The Buddha's initial answer was very brief, "I shall tell you how those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should stand, how they should walk, and how they should control their thoughts" [1]. At first glance, the Buddha did not seem to answer the question. However, we must pay attention to the idea of "controlling one's thoughts." The Buddha affirmed Subhodhi's question that one must control one's thoughts to be liberated. This reflects the Buddhist emphasis on the cultivation of mindfulness or Samma Sati. Buddhism, unlike other religions, believes that all beings can become Buddhas, and there is no single highest god, but people must control their thoughts and practice mindfulness to become Buddhas. According to Buddhist interpretation, every person's mind has eighty-four thousand unhappy troubles. This is the same aesthetics explored by Dewey. A Dewey-style perfect aesthetic experience means, according to Chen, a perceptual and direct understanding of the meaning of existence and the embodiment of the harmonious relationship between man and the world [2]. The eighty-four thousand troubles are the obstacle for a man to feel the Dewey-style perfect aesthetic experience because the unhappy troubles block beings from a direct sense of existence and connection to the world.

After responding to Subhodhi's question, Sakyamuni then began to teach Subhodhi a series of things to do to become a Buddha, all of which were inseparable from mindfulness. The Buddha said, "however many beings there are in whatever realms of being might exist, whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have a form or no form, whether they have perception or no perception or neither perception nor no perception, in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings, in the realm of complete nirvana I shall liberate them all" [1]. This time the Buddha gave Subhodhi a much more precise answer and an exposition of the Buddhist view of life. The Buddha divided beings into ten categories and told Subhodhi that all these beings inside and outside your cognitive range would be transmuted. In the Diamond Sutra, humans and all other beings possess equal conditions for liberation. These words of the Buddha reveal the concept of equality for all beings. According to Buddhism, humans have no special status in the world. Equality exists universally. The aesthetic thought of "beings and I have no difference" is reflected: "I" is the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object. Yixuan Wang believed that the generation of human aesthetic feeling is based on the dissolution of the relationship between subject and object and the forgetting of things and "I" [3]. Mindfulness is the aesthetic ideal in the Diamond Sutra. The beauty of human life is defined by "not birth or destruction, purity or defilement, completeness or deficiency" so that dependent lives can achieve aesthetic independence [4].

3. The Aesthetics of Plain Living in the Diamond Sutra

The first part of the Diamond Sutra focuses on the Buddha's daily life of begging, eating, washing, and sitting rather than on his teaching of dharma. The Buddha's life was simple and ordinary. The Buddha did not use any magic or perform any miracles. He was even a beggar. Sakyamuni's life in

the Diamond Sutra was not religious. In many other classics, the Buddha appeared, as most people think of him as a deity, with heaven's flowers and drums' music. However, the Buddha's appearance in the Diamond Sutra showed his most ordinary side. The Buddha needed to eat, wash and sit like a person who has not been relieved. Many Buddhists would probably be disillusioned to see the Buddha in the Diamond Sutra. These Buddhists thought the Buddha would always shine golden and be too perfect to be human. The Buddha was fully capable of performing magic and could have ordered his disciples to beg for him but he did not do so. In the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha emphasized that he was an ordinary person and lived an ordinary life, which was the highest state of his liberation and revealed an aesthetic of living - every moment of life is practiced, and practice is to be an ordinary person. The Buddha's actions point out the importance of experiencing real life for liberation. Just as Jones said, "Buddha Sakyamuni attained enlightenment because he had a direct experience of reality, a reality that was beyond the reality delivered by the deceptive overlay of concepts" [5]. Through the explanation of the Diamond Sutra, one can understand that the simple life is the life beyond the "deceptive overlay of concepts." The consistent emphasis on mindfulness in the Diamond Sutra teaches precisely that one must achieve the state of breaking illusions by controlling thoughts.

Schopenhauer believed that "all striving comes from lack, from a dissatisfaction with one's condition, and is thus suffering as long as it is not satisfied; but no satisfaction is lasting; instead, it is only the beginning of a new striving. We see striving everywhere inhibited in many ways, struggling everywhere; and thus always suffering; there is no final goal of striving, and therefore no bounds or end to suffering" [6]. In Diamond Sutra, the Buddha strived for nothing and desired nothing. The Schopenhauer-style aesthetic experience is people's liberation from the tragedy of reality and the abandonment of desire. It can be said that this aesthetic theory of Schopenhauer coincides with the description of the first chapter of the Diamond Sutra - Buddhism also believes that liberation from suffering requires one to detach from illusory strivings. People can only feel true happiness if they manage to cut off their desires through mindfulness.

4. Ecological Aesthetics in the Diamond Sutra

The teachings of the Diamond Sutra on the equality of all beings can be analyzed from the perspective of ecological aesthetics. The Diamond Sutra calls for a view of life in which all things are equal to help people eliminate their separateness and break the illusion of anthropocentrism [7]. Once humans have eliminated their separateness, they naturally raise a sense of awe in their lives and treat all beings as themselves.

The beings closest to human life must be nature. Buddhism provided the first fully developed ecological philosophy through the mutual existence of selves in the intersubjective world of stones, plants, insects, and animals. In the Buddhist world, nothing is independent; everything is subject to everything else [5]. It is the fault of humans to think too highly of humans. In the Buddhist understanding, humans are as much a part of the world as all other beings. People always think that "I" is the first. However, the Diamond Sutra tells people that everything is changing because all the conditioned phenomena are illusions, and "self" is one of the illusions. To break "self" is to practice mindfulness and dissolve ego continuously. In the Buddhist aesthetic, the aesthetic subject should "forgets oneself" to face the aesthetic object, embracing and blending the unbroken aesthetic object to realize liberation [8]. This Buddhist teaching does not mean that Buddha told people to deny their existence, instead, people should view themselves as a dependent part of society, nature, and even the universe to achieve aesthetic completeness and live the fullest of their lives through the correct interpretation of the outward world.

5. The Aesthetics of Almsgiving in the Diamond Sutra

One of the most famous verses in the Diamond Sutra is "fearless bodhisattvas should thus give birth to a thought that is not attached and not give birth to a thought attached to anything" [1]. "A thought that is not attached" results from mindfulness. The Buddha used almsgiving as an angle to explain how to break self-obsession. The Buddha warned his disciples that true almsgiving should forget "what I can get in return." A person with such a thought can never become a Buddha because his mind is attached. However, we must note that clinging to "I am not attached" is also clinging. Only the most natural state of almsgiving is unattached and beautiful. What the Buddha said here can be explained by the idea of "quality" from Dewey's aesthetics. Jia Chen said in her paper on Dewey aesthetics that this "non-attached" aesthetic emotion is not some mysterious entity that exists by instinct, but is suggested by the situation, born out of action, and created by natural emotion through change [9]. The "natural emotion" here can be interpreted as the "not attached" state in the Diamond Sutra. Human beings create many illusions and desires for themselves because they are unable to let go of their separateness and ego. This ignorance ultimately creates arrogant individuals that separate themselves from others and result in an inability to feel connections.

People who have not yet become Buddha cannot achieve aesthetic observation without interest as pursued by Kant either. The Buddhist almsgiving aesthetic is to abandon self-obsession. Gender, appearance, and wealth are all known as barriers to one person embracing another as an entity. One's life is always filled with individuals who are utterly different, and because of the ego, we develop separateness. All the thoughts that arise from the separateness bring troubles. Leaving aside the religious nature of Nirvana, one can perceive Nirvana as the attainment of a healthy, inclusive, and beautiful state of mind that is independent of interests.

6. The Contemporary Value of the Aesthetic Thoughts of the Diamond Sutra in China

Traditional Chinese aesthetic ideology, represented by Confucianism, advocates a series of moderate and inclusive concepts such as "harmony is precious" and "tolerance is great". One of the major components of Confucian aesthetics is the belief in harmony. Chinese people have been deeply influenced by Confucian aesthetic thought, so many social problems will inevitably arise from the unconvincing path toward Marxist socialism away from the feudal Chinese society. As China moves toward a modernized society, instrumental rationality becomes dominant. Zhang concluded that since China's Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, China moved toward reform and opening up [10]. It is a policy that boosted economic development but brought a huge change in values in China: the erosion of human nature by the pursuit of economic profit [10]. The Confucian aesthetics that the Chinese carry in their bones allow them to maintain a moderate and tolerant attitude in the face of modern social problems which would never appear in Chinese feudal society. The modern Chinese take more of a whitewash approach to social problems, as they advocate "peace is precious" so the Chinese reflect on themselves but do not make substantial changes for the sake of social harmony. Although most of the social problems in modern Chinese society also exist in Western societies, modern Chinese people are not even willing to talk about the problems in public. They like to reflect on the problems privately. It is unrealistic to expect that modern Chinese people and modern Chinese society can have autonomous problem-solving. In this social environment, it is almost impossible for modern Chinese people to feel the aesthetics mentioned in the previous article.

The Diamond Sutra contains the main ideas of Mahayana Buddhism's Prajna wisdom of "equality of all beings," "breaking down the ego," and "eliminating the separateness," as introduced in the previous passages. These are the dharma of mindfulness. It is easy to see that these teachings in the Diamond Sutra are all about teaching people to observe and think about their relationship

with the world around them. The path to Buddhahood is the process of constantly cultivating one's mind to view the world with equality, humility, and tolerance. Mindfulness is a way to achieve liberation by correctly understanding the outward world. It can be said that the teachings in the Diamond Sutra focus more on how one should look at the outward world to achieve inward peace and see the inward reality within oneself.

The most prevalent Buddhist sect in modern China is Zen Buddhism. Bodhidharma transmitted the original Zen Buddhism from India, but the main ideas of contemporary Zen Buddhism were born in China and shaped by China. Contemporary Zen Buddhism is the result of the fusion of Buddhist theory with the traditional Chinese doctrines of Confucianism and Taoism. The emergence of Zen Buddhism determined the direction of Chinese Buddhism, which gradually broke away from the constraints of Indian Buddhism and established a new system of Buddhist thoughts without violating the basic positions, views, and methods of Buddhism [11]. The core of modern Chinese Zen Buddhism is "seeing your inward nature clearly," which means that all beings must understand that they have an eternal Buddha nature and they can liberate themselves. Modern Chinese Zen Buddhism promotes Vipassana as the discovery of one's true Buddha nature in self-reflection due to Zen's localization with Confucianism.

Although the main theme of the Diamond Sutra is teaching the dharma of mindfulness, it is inevitable that in its verses it talks about how one should have an observation and understanding of one's inner self, which is called Vipassana. The meaning of this Indian word Vipassana is to see the truth. Parts seventeen and eighteen of the Diamond Sutra explain the idea without mentioning the word Vipassana. In part seventeen of the Sutra, Sakyamuni enlightened that there is no dharma for becoming a Buddha. After becoming a Buddha, one should observe that one has not followed any path, any dharma to become a Buddha. There is no such thing as enlightenment and Buddhahood. If a Buddha holds that he has become a Buddha through a certain method, then he is clinging to an illusory appearance and cannot be called a Buddha. This section describes how one should observe oneself after becoming a Buddha, which is the correct Vipassana. In Part eighteen, the Buddha further explains why the Vipassana in part seventeen is the correct way to observe oneself. The explanation given in this chapter is "A past thought cannot be found. A future thought cannot be found. Nor can a present thought be found" [1]. All beings are in a state of change every second, and all thoughts and feelings are changing at the same time. There is no single thing or thought that beings can grasp, including any dharma, so in the previous chapter Buddha said that if a person becomes a Buddha he will not think that it is a certain method that makes him a Buddha. Because of this, a person who has attained Buddhahood should know that all troubles are not real, because even the "I" is constantly changing as there is no real "I" so there is no subject to be troubled. This is what Zen Buddhism calls "Buddha Nature". This original description of Vipassana in the Diamond Sutra is rooted in the fact that beings can observe their true selves once they have become Buddha through mindfulness. The explanation of Vipassana in the Diamond Sutra is developed as the result of becoming a Buddha through mindfulness.

Zen Buddhism has a great affinity with the Diamond Sutra. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng took his hearing of the Diamond Sutra's scripture about "the emptiness" as evidence of his attainment of Buddhahood and enshrined the Diamond Sutra as the foundation of Zen enlightenment since the Tang Dynasty. Although the Diamond Sutra has greatly influenced Zen Buddhism, it does not mean there is no difference between the two. Since Huineng became enlightened immediately upon hearing a verse in the Diamond Sutra, later Zen Buddhism began to promote "sudden enlightenment". Modern Chinese Zen Buddhism also advocates this epiphany method, which propagates realizing Vipassana through a word, an action, or even a cup of tea and suddenly seeing the reality of all dharma. Modern Chinese Zen Buddhism believes that one can naturally achieve mindfulness after attaining epiphany. Nowadays, Chinese Zen talks about epiphany and Vipassana

with more emphasis on form and process rather than explaining what is proper Vipassana and the reason behind it as in the Diamond Sutra. In modern Chinese society, the meaning of the word Vipassana has changed to inward-reflection and is widely exposed. Even in modern Japan, which is also very much influenced by Chinese Zen Buddhism, Kendo and Hanamichi emphasize Vipassana. But like modern China, modern Japan also interprets Vipassana as self-reflection. This is certainly a reading that deviates from the Diamond Sutra.

The teachings of the Diamond Sutra focus on hard and "not sudden" mindfulness practices and introduce Vipassana as a beauty that can be realized after enlightenment. With the evolution and localization of Buddhism in China, modern Chinese society has accepted Vipassana more than mindfulness. Focusing on the social problems in Chinese society, the epiphany advocated by modern Chinese Zen Buddhism might not be an effective solution. Buddha nature is hard to find. For modern Chinese, the pursuit of epiphany is much easier than the mental practices advocated in the Diamond Sutra. But if one follows the modern Zen interpretation of Vipassana as equal to inward reflection, then one can easily fall into self-obsession. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng did not liberate himself from good inward reflection but his recognition of illusions and troubles. The teachings and goals of modern Chinese Zen Buddhism do not deviate from Buddhist philosophy, but its approach might not be the optimum proposal to help modern Chinese people who are already alienated. In the context of modern Chinese society, it is a more effective educational tool to stop relying on ineffective inward-reflection and to discover one's problems through proper observation of the outward world, which can have the effect of cutting through troubles that are as hard as diamonds.

7. Conclusion

"Looking inward" and "looking outward" are two different dharma. The Buddha once said that there are eighty-four thousand teachings in Buddhism so mindfulness and Vipassana are only two drops in the ocean. All sentient beings can be liberated through any dharma. The Buddha also said in the Diamond Sutra that all Buddhism is like a boat that carries sentient beings to the other shore and should be discarded after they are liberated. In Buddhism, there is no superiority or inferiority of dharma, because they are all just tools. But in the human world, people have a preference for dharma because of arrogance and vulnerability. Although the Buddha said there is no best dharma, the teachings of mindfulness in the Diamond Sutra may be more helpful to modern Chinese in finding a balance between instrumental rationality and traditional culture. For modern Chinese people, the boat of mindfulness can direct them to achieve enlightenment from another angle, while the epiphany advocated by modern Chinese Zen Buddhism would still tell them to keep the old route. Of course, we cannot blame modern Chinese Zen or Confucianism entirely for the formation of the current state of modern Chinese society. It is also difficult to turn a society upside down with just one Buddhist text, religion, or philosophy. But the intergenerational significance of the Diamond Sutra is undeniable, even when viewed in the context of today's aesthetic system and the theories of aestheticians from various countries. The Diamond Sutra certainly contains many more aesthetic ideas and modern values that are discussed in this article, notably the explanation of emptiness, the explanation of karma, and the comparison of Punya and Guna. The lack of research by Chinese scholars on the aesthetics and modern value of the Diamond Sutra is regrettable.

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