

The *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*) and Religious Tolerance



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1. Religious tolerance in contemporary society

People possess various faiths in contemporary Japan. Those who live in Hokkaido, where I live, have various faiths (Mahāyāna Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity, and so on). In recent years, the number of foreign students and immigrants to Hokkaido has increased, and residents have more opportunities to meet Muslims and Hindus there. It is like this in many areas of the world: People of various faiths are living in the same places.

From the past to the present, many disputes and conflicts have occurred between those of differing religious beliefs. In Japan, conflicts sometimes occurred among Buddhists and Shinto followers, as well as between Buddhists and Christians. We know such conflicts occurred in many places around the world.

Recently, in order to avoid such confrontations among those of different faiths, many scholars and religious leaders have urged people to have religious tolerance, acknowledging others' values. However, it is not so easy to acknowledge others' values, especially if they are contrary to one's own. Then, how should we who live in the contemporary world engage with those of other faiths? We will consider this question through the cases shown in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (ASP)), which was formed in ancient India.

2. Attitudes toward non-Buddhists

In India around the beginning of the first century, where the ASP was formed, people practiced various faiths (Buddhism, Brahmanism, Jainism, etc.). The religious situation was similar to that of contemporary Japan or the broader contemporary world. In this situation, the question arose how the followers of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Mahāyāna Buddhism) should be concerned with those who believed in another religion (non-Buddhists).

Thereupon, one hundred Wanderers who have another

religion approached Buddha with a hostile intent. Śakra, Chief of Gods, perceived those Wanderers from afar, and he reflected: Surely, those Wanderers are approaching Buddha with a hostile intent. Let me then recall as much of this perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) as I have learned from Buddha, bring it to mind, repeat and spread it, so that those Wanderers cannot approach Buddha, and the preaching of this perfection of wisdom may not be interrupted.

Thereupon, Śakra, Chief of Gods, recalled as much of this perfection of wisdom as he had learned from Buddha, brought it to mind, repeated and spread it. Those Wanderers thereupon reverently saluted Buddha from afar, and went off on this way. (ASP 240.16-241.15; Cf. Conze, 1973, 110)

Here, non-Buddhists who tried to approach Buddha with a hostile intent were driven away by Śakra. Śakra was only repeating the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* from afar and did not communicate with non-Buddhists directly, not even to tell them to convert to Buddhism. This passage shows, apparently, that a Buddhist who believes in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* should avoid direct contact with non-Buddhists.

This passage may also imply that Buddhists should reverently salute the master of another religion from afar when they come across a meeting of non-Buddhists.

3. Attitudes toward those concerned with the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabudhayāna

In contemporary society, we come across not only those who practice other religions but also those who belong to another sect of the same religion. For example, Sotoshu and Jodo Shinshu in Japanese Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism in Christianity,

and Sunni and Shia in Islam are different sects of the same religion. How should we be concerned with those who belong to another sect of the same religion?

To think about this issue, it might be helpful for us to reference some passages in the ASP because of the similar situation in India when the ASP was formed. It is assumed that there were many Buddhists who learned the Śrāvakayāna or the Pratyekabudhayāna, while only a few Buddhists learned the Mahāyāna in those days. How should the followers of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Mahāyāna Buddhism) be concerned with those who learn the other two vehicles (yāna)?

3.1. Criticism of individuals learning the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabudhayāna

There are many comments criticizing the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabudhayāna in the ASP. Among them, I will introduce one example that criticizes the purpose of their study or practice.

Buddha: [...] Just as if a dog would spurn a morsel of food given to him by his master, and prefer to take a mouthful of water from a servant, just so, in the future, some persons who belong to the vehicle of the Bodhisattva will spurn this perfection of wisdom, which is the root of the cognition of the all-knowing, and decide to look for the core, for growth, for Buddhahood, in the vehicle of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha, which really corresponds to branches, leaves and foliage. This also should be known as done to them by Māra. For those people of small intelligence will not cognize that the perfection of wisdom alone nourishes the cognition of the all-knowing. They get rid of, abandon and spurn the perfection of wisdom, and decide to study, as superior to it, other sūtras, those

that welcome the stage of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha. They should be compared to branches, leaves and foliage. For a Bodhisattva should not train in the same way in which persons belonging to the vehicle of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha are trained. How then are they trained? They make up their minds that “one single self we shall tame, one single self we shall pacify, one single self we shall lead to final Nirvāṇa.” Thus, they undertake exercises which are intended to bring about wholesome roots for the sake of taming themselves, pacifying themselves, leading themselves to Nirvāṇa. A Bodhisattva should certainly not in such a way train himself. (ASP 502.15-503.19; Cf. Conze, 1973, 163)

Here, a person concerned with the Śrāvakayāna or the Pratyekabudhayāna has been criticized for thinking only of himself. The ASP suggests that the Bodhisattvas, unlike that individual, think about all sentient beings and learn the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*.

3.2. A description making light of the stages of the Śrāvaka and the Pratyekabuddha

There is a description in the ASP that makes light of the stages of the Śrāvaka and the Pratyekabuddha.

One can be sure that such a Bodhisattva has but lately set out in the [Great] vehicle. Come but lately to the vehicle, he will lose his faith in it, his serene confidence in it, his urge for it; in other words, he will no further take up this deep perfection of wisdom and pursue it. One must expect that he will move on either of two levels: on the stage of the Śrāvaka, or on the stage of the Pratyekabuddha. (ASP 584.4-10; Cf. Conze, 1973, 185)

This passage implies that the stages of the Śrāvaka and the Pratyekabuddha are lower than the stage of Buddha, which is a goal to attain in Mahāyāna. And it is said that even a Mahāyāna Buddhist who does not accept the *prajñāpāramitā* will fall down in those lower stages.

3.3. Placing the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna in a positive light

Despite the previous negative ASP excerpts concerning the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna, there is a comment that indicate acceptance of these sects in the following passage.

Buddha: So it is, Kauśika. And those sons or daughters of good families who have rejoiced in the productions of the thought [of enlightenment of Bodhisattvas] they shall—whether they belong to the vehicle of the Bodhisattva, or that of the Pratyekabuddha, or that of the Śrāvaka—soon please the Tathāgatas, and not displease them. (ASP 834.6-9; Cf. Conze, 1973, 255)

In this passage, those who belong to the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna are not criticized. On the contrary, they are accepted by Tathāgatas, by rejoicing in the productions of the thought of enlightenment of Bodhisattvas.

3.4. Two teachings that might recommend inducing those who belong to the two vehicles to convert to the Mahāyāna

In the ASP, there is a description that highlights something that the three vehicles (*yāna*) have in common. In the following passage, it is implied that there is ultimately no distinction among the three vehicles.

Subhūti: Since thus, in ultimate truth and as things stand,

such a dharma which could constitute a Bodhisattva cannot be apprehended, where do you get the idea that “this one belongs to the vehicle of the Śrāvaka, that one to the vehicle of the Pratyekabuddha, that one to the great vehicle”? (ASP 659.15-18; Cf. Conze, 1973, 199)

The following passage states that the *prajñāpāramitā* is also beneficial to the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna.

Subhūti: The perfection of wisdom, beneficial to all the [three] vehicles, is also the perfection which [allows them] not to lean on any dharma, because [it shows that] all dharmas have no support [and can therefore give none]. (ASP 124.16-18; Cf. Conze, 1973, 94)

In the first two citations in this chapter (3-1, 3-2), the superiority of the Mahāyāna over the other two vehicles is shown. However, here, it is said that the *prajñāpāramitā* is common to all three vehicles, which is similar to the previous citation, which showed that there is ultimately no distinction among three vehicles. From these teachings, one may say that although the ASP criticizes those who learn other doctrines of Buddhism, it does acknowledge their value to some extent, and several teachings within it suggest learning the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*.

Then, should those living in the contemporary world accept this suggestion in the ASP and invite the followers of another sect into our sect?

4. The condemnation of certain individuals in the ASP

As mentioned above, the ASP acknowledges the values of the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna to some extent, but it does not always acknowledge different faiths. It sometimes condemns those who insist on a doctrine that differs from that of the ASP.

4.1. Criticism of one who recommends sūtras associated with the stage of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha

In one case, a person concerned with the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabudhayāna was condemned.

Buddha: [...] Furthermore, Māra, the Evil One, will come in the guise of a monk to where Bodhisattvas demonstrate this perfection of wisdom, explain, expound, recite and write it and he will bring along the very deep sūtras that are associated with the stage of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha. He will advise them that they should “train in this, write, expound, and repeat this, for from it all-knowledge will be created.” (ASP 513.18-24; Cf. Conze, 1973, 167)

Here, a monk (*Bhikṣu*) who recommends sūtras associated with the stage of the Śrāvaka and that of the Pratyekabuddha is regarded as a guise of Māra. Recommending other sūtras is strongly criticized as an action of Māra. Considering the examples shown below (4-3, 4-4), this action is criticized here not because it introduces other doctrines but because it disturbs Bodhisattvas from transcribing *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*.

4.2. Criticism of one who preaches a false *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*

A person who preaches a false *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* is also a target of criticism.

Buddha: [...] Māra, the Evil One, will, moreover, come along in the guise of a Śramaṇa, and cause dissension. In order to dissuade the sons of good families who have but recently set out in the [Great] vehicle, he will say, “It is not the perfection of wisdom that your Honors listen to. As it has been handed down in my sūtra, as it is included

in my sūtra, that is the perfection of wisdom.” Thus he will sow doubts in the minds of Bodhisattvas who have but recently set out in the [Great] vehicle, whose intelligence is small, sluggish and limited, who are blind, and whose future enlightenment has not yet been predicted. (ASP 524.6-15; Cf. Conze, 1973, 170)

Here, a Śramaṇa who teaches a false *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* as the true *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* is regarded as a guise of Māra. His action is strongly criticized because it makes those who have just started learning Mahāyāna doubtful of the true *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

4.3. Condemnation of one who slanders the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*

A person who slanders the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* is the most criticized individual in the ASP. This sin is assumed to be even more serious than the five heinous sins (killing one’s mother, killing one’s father, killing an arhat, making Buddha bleed, and destroying Saṃga).

Buddha: But by rejecting this perfection of wisdom, they reject the all-knowledge of the Buddhas, in the past, present and future. Not content with having vitiated their own mentality, they will, as if all aflame, deter, dissuade, turn away others also—persons of small intelligence, wisdom, merit and wholesome roots, endowed with but a little faith, affection, serenity, and desire-to-do, beginners, essentially unqualified—trying to take away even that little faith, affection, serenity and desire-to-do. They will say that one should not train in it; they will declare that it is not the Buddha’s word. They first vitiate their own mentalities, and then estrange those of others. Thereby, they will calumniate the perfection of wisdom. To calumniate the perfection

of wisdom means to calumny all-knowledge, and therewith the past, future and present Buddhas. They will be removed from the presence of the Buddhas, deprived of the Dharma, expelled from the Saṃgha. In each and every way, they will be shut out from the Triple Jewel. Their activities cut down the welfare and happiness of beings, and they will collect from them karma conducive to the great hells. Because they have raised these karma-formations, they will be reborn in the great hells, for many hundreds of years, etc. for many hundreds of thousands of niyuta of kotis of aeons... They will therefore, experience a karma which involves many painful feelings. And why? Because their teachings are so bad.

Śāriputra: Even the aftereffect of the five heinous sins bears no proportion to this misconduct of mind and speech?

Buddha: It does not... How can one become intimate with them; how can they gain wealth, honor and position? (ASP 395.11-398.16; Cf. Conze, 1973, 139-140)

Here, a person who opposes the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and dissuades others from believing it is condemned. His sin is said to be heavier than the five heinous sins. And here, the idea that he should be expelled from the group of Buddhists is implied.

Then, should we who live in the contemporary world accept this suggestion in the ASP, condemning one who criticizes our religion and compels us to stop believing it? Should we exile him or her from our group?

5. Allowing those who believe in the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* to engage in a variety of religious practices

Given what has been said, it follows that the ASP sometimes takes a strong stance against persons of different faiths. Today, we

might need to decide how assertive our stance should be on matters of religious difference.

By the way, in contemporary society, we may come across those who have different religious practices than we do even though they belong to the same sect of the same religion. How should we relate to them? To think about this, referencing some passages in the ASP might be helpful for us.

5.1. Meditation

In the ASP, meditation concerning the *prajñāpāramitā* is explained in various ways, such as in the following quote:

Subhūti: [...] When a person does not fulfil perfect wisdom, he cannot go forth to all-knowledge, so long as he remains one who tries to appropriate things which are not appropriated. For in perfect wisdom, form is not appropriated. But the non-appropriation of form, etc., is not form, etc. And perfect wisdom also cannot be appropriated. It is thus that a Bodhisattva should course in this perfect wisdom. This concentrated insight (samādhi) of a Bodhisattva is called “the non-appropriation of all dharmas.” It is vast, noble, unlimited and steady, not shared by any of the Śrāvakas or Pratyekabuddhas. (ASP 48.16-50.6; Cf. Conze, 1973, 85)

5.2. Reciting the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*

The ASP also teaches the practice of reciting the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, with real-world benefits.

Buddha: And further, Kausika, if a son or daughter of good families who learns perfect wisdom, bears it in mind, recites and studies it, spreads, demonstrates,

explains, expounds and repeats it were to go into battle, to the very front of it, he could not possibly lose his life in it. It is impossible that he should lose his life from the attack of somebody else. If someone strikes at him—with a sword, or a stick, or a clod of earth, or anything else—his body cannot be hit. Because a great lore is this, the perfection of wisdom; a lore without measure, a quite measureless lore, an unsurpassed lore, a lore which equals the unequalled is this, the perfection of wisdom. (ASP 201.5-203.15; Cf. Conze, 1973, 104)

You might think that this practice is incompatible with the meditation mentioned above. But in the ASP, reciting the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* is also appreciated as a good action and is not criticized.

5.3. Transcribing the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*

The merit of transcribing the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* is also taught in the ASP.

Buddha: So it is. If all the beings in Jambūdāvīpa were endowed with [the ability to observe] the ten ways of wholesome action, would they on the strength of that beget much merit?

Śakra: They would, O Lord.

Buddha: A person who hears, studies, spreads and writes this perfection of wisdom begets greater merit than they. (ASP 803.25-804.6; Cf. Conze, 1973, 242)

This passage explains the merit gained by reciting and transcribing (i.e., writing) sūtras. Those who carry out these practices obtain more merit than all sentient beings who are endowed with the ability to observe the ten ways of wholesome

action. There is also an acknowledgement of the transcription of sūtras without pursuing their ultimate meaning, as follows:

Buddha: ...If they only just write the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, bear it in mind, recite and study it, demonstrate, explain, expound and repeat it, without progressively training in Thusness, they will not stand poised in Suchness in the supreme enlightenment; but nevertheless, they also are known to the Tathāgata, sustained and seen by the Tathāgata, and the Tathāgata beholds them with his Buddha-eye. (ASP 486.2-11; Cf. Conze, 1973, 159)

5.4. Worshipping the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* instead of worshipping the relics of Buddha

And it is said that worshipping the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* is more worthy than worshipping the relics of Buddha.

Buddha: ...Therefore, then, Kauśika, if someone would build, for the worship of the Tathāgata, who has disappeared into final Nirvāṇa, many kotis of stūpas made of the seven precious things, enshrining therein the relics of the Tathāgata, and all his life honor them with heavenly flowers, etc., would he then, on the strength of that, beget a great deal of merit?

Śakra: He would, O Lord.

Buddha: Greater would be the merit of someone who would truly believe in this perfection of wisdom; who would, trustingly, confiding in it, resolutely intent on it, serene in his faith, his thoughts raised to enlightenment, in earnest intent, hear it, learn it, bear it in mind, recite and study it, spread, demonstrate, explain, expound and repeat it, illuminate it in detail to others, uncover its meaning, investigate it with his mind; who, using his

wisdom to the fullest extent, would thoroughly examine it; who would copy it, and preserve and store away the copy—so that the good dharma might last long, so that the guide of the Buddhas might not be annihilated, so that the good dharma might not disappear, so that the Bodhisattvas who are the great beings might continue to be assisted, since their guide will not give out—and who, finally, would honor and worship this perfection of wisdom with flowers, etc., on the strength of that, would beget a great deal of merit. (ASP 217.5-219.9; Cf. Conze, 1973, 107)

Here, Buddha explained that “sūtra worship” is more effective than “relics worship.” However, Buddha also acknowledged that people receive many merits from “relics worship,” and that the manner of “relics worship” is successive to “sūtra worship.” It was recommended that individuals honor sūtra with flowers, perfumes, etc., just as those who honor the relics of Buddha do.

As stated above, various types of religious practices are acknowledged in the ASP. It might be said that the ASP has tolerance for a diversity of practices. However, there is a restriction: All practices must be attached to the *prajñāpāramitā*.

6. How should we interact with those who believe in another religion and those who belong to another sect of the same religion?

How should we be concerned with those whose faiths differ from our own? So far, we have pondered this problem by referencing some passages in the ASP. Here, I will explain what we have considered in the previous chapters.

First, in regard to attitudes toward those who practice other religions, we could accept the message from the ASP that it is better not to communicate with those who practice another religion

as far as possible. Though it is difficult for us not to communicate with individuals of other faiths directly, it might be a good practice to evade discussions about opposing religious values as often as we can in order to avoid conflicts.

Second, in terms of attitudes toward those who belong to another sect of the same religion, the ASP shows several teachings that induce those who belong to the Śrāvakayāna and the Pratyekabuddhayāna to convert to another sect (Mahāyāna in the ASP). Yet, should we accept the ASP's suggestion and induce these individuals to become converts to our sect? This point might be difficult for us. In this case, the better option might also be to evade discussions about mutual religious values between those who belong to different sects to the greatest possible extent.

Third, the ASP acknowledges various types of religious practices in the same sect (Mahāyāna) of the same religion (Buddhism), adding one restriction: All practices must be connected to the *prajñāpāramitā*. From this, one could argue that those living in the contemporary world should accept different practices in the same sect as long as they are attached to whatever is the most important in that sect.



People make history.
History gives fame to people.

—Source: *The Everlasting Light:
Dharma Thoughts of Master Hsing Yun*