The Metonymy of Transcendence: Derrida and the Diamond Sutra

DAVID W. PRITCHARD, American University

Abstract: In The Diamond Sutra, the Buddha says, "the perfection of transcendental wisdom is not really such." The Buddha continually renounces cornerstones of Buddhist thought as being merely names for otherwise inexpressible concepts. Using Derrida's discussions of the supplement in Of Grammatology, I argue for a consideration of transcendence as a metonymic rather than metaphoric operation in Buddhist thought. Ultimately, the idea of "transcendence" is not one of a one-to-one correspondence, where one person moves beyond, to meaning; rather, it is the constant excess of meaning always already exceeding its nominal manifestation—a transcendence of, not to, meaning in discourse.

In The Diamond Sutra, the Buddha tells Subhuti that the current discourse should be referred to as "the Diamond of the Perfection of Transcendental Wisdom," and goes on to explain that "the perfection of transcendental wisdom is not really such. 'Perfection of transcendental wisdom' is just the name given to it." Though it is just one of the many examples of the Buddha's warnings against reification, this particular moment raises a troubling question in that even the notion of transcendence, of moving beyond, is merely nominal. How can this be, when to transcend almost necessitates an ego-entity having a phenomenal experience of some kind, which is antithetical to the

---

teachings of the Buddha? By revisiting the Buddha's conception of transcendental wisdom in *The Diamond Sutra* and relating it to Derrida's notions of the violence of naming and the "the interminable overflowing of the whole by the part" which paradoxically allows for a multiplicity that defies the idea of "whole" by making it "part of the part [of the part]," we can reconsider "transcendence" not as a site of fixed and absolute meaning, but as an indeterminate locus for the proliferation of meaning. In this figuration, meaning is not transcended to beyond a text by a simple subject, but transcendent of the fixity and closure of a text's boundaries and frames.

Before rethinking transcendence in the Buddha's teachings, it is important to note the basis for such an investigation. Later in *The Diamond Sutra*, after the above quotation, the Buddha entitles a chapter "No One Attains Transcendental Wisdom," wherein the Buddha explains to Subhuti that "in reality there is no formula that gives rise to the consummation of incomparable enlightenment." When taken alongside one another, these notions—that transcendental wisdom is only a name for something otherwise inexpressible, and that there is no formula by which enlightenment may be attained—are striking, revealing a great deal about the Buddha's figuration of transcendence and at the same time engaging in the same linguistic play characteristic of the work of Derrida. For what does it mean to "attain" transcendental wisdom? In order for it to be attained, two conditions are necessary: first, that "transcendental wisdom" be a finite, fixed thing, an *object*; and second, that there be an attainee, a *subject* who may somehow possess that wisdom. The Buddha problematizes a simple subject/object division, which seems to explain how the idea of transcendental wisdom becomes only nominally expressible, while otherwise remaining out of the mind's reach.

It may seem this is all we may profitably say about transcendence in Buddhism. It is without a subject or an object, and therefore inexpressible beyond a finicky nominative. But such things are never quite so simple. Throughout the discourse of *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha confronts the notions of "setting forth majestic buddha-lands," "molecules," "[the] Idea of fundamental reality," "a perfectly formed body," "any truth-declaring system," "goodness," and "Cosmos," saying in one way or another that "these terms are merely figures of speech." The fundamental basis of the sutra itself, then, is grounded in an admission by the Buddha to Subhuti that "words cannot explain the real nature of a cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method." This distinction-making method seems to undermine any attempt to define "transcendence" at all, since its meaning cannot be explained by our arbitrary chains of signifiers.

But to adopt this view seems to cast aspersions on the philosophy of *The Diamond Sutra*. For if transcendence is inexpressible in words, it seems to live up to its name as being beyond what we have in front of us, suggesting an almost dangerously Platonic figuration of a transcendental experience. We may describe transcendence, but never *know* it in a way we can articulate. This raises a difficult question: how, then, can the Buddha talk of transcendence as such, using the arbitrary fetters of language, if it is something beyond "attainable" knowledge?

The more important question here is not whether or not we can talk about transcendence but about its relation to the text. How does "transcendence" relate to the rest of the Buddha's text, and how is it that we can understand its position? This seems simple: we know the difference between "the perfection of transcendental wisdom" and the "Idea of fundamental reality" through

---

3 *Diamond Sutra* 37.
4 ibid.
5 *Diamond Sutra* 28; 31; 32; 41; 42; 44; 51; 52.
6 *Diamond Sutra* 51.
7 I use attainable here merely as placeholder, to suggest the beyondness of transcendence in this model rather than to fall back to a straw man with whom I have already dealt.
language. The names are different, and thus through differentiation we understand these terms. We know "transcendence" since it is not "reality" and not "cosmos." Again, this seems self-explanatory. But it leads the way to a discussion of the name that will eventually help clarify and expound the Buddhist text and its depiction of transcendence.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida takes up the question of the significance of names, concluding that names themselves are extremely problematic. "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute." The act of naming entails an act of violence that insists on difference, the separation of one thing from another in an attempt to ascribe identity. Without language, we do not have a way to articulate difference and thereby lose a distinct sense of "identity" as a fixed concept or "ego-entity"; without identity, we no longer need to separate cosmos from fundamental reality, and the arbitrary chains of language fall away. But for Derrida—and, as we shall see, for Buddha—it is much more complicated. The violence of differentiation, of "think[ing] the unique within the system," gives way to a violence "that is reparatory, protective, instituting the 'moral,' prescribing the concealment of writing and thus the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name which was already dividing the proper." In other words, the violence of naming allows for the violence of institutionalization, of codified value-systems of morality and truth—the very reified systems the Buddha firmly disavows in *The Diamond Sutra* as "merely figures of speech."

But in a Derridean framework, what more are there than these figures of speech, these tropes comprising the text that extends beyond its literal meaning and persists as the system of signifying relations in which everything interrelates? The key in this discourse and our discussion of transcendence comes in the form of what Derrida calls the supplement. The supplement "adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence." A discussion of both the supplement and presence seems necessary in our consideration of Buddha's transcendental wisdom.

For what does transcendence imply if not a certain movement beyond what is at hand to a greater presence? The dictionary definition is one of going "above and beyond the limits of material experience"; it follows that such a thing would problematize the Buddha's teaching, that one could move closer to some extant thing. However, since *The Diamond Sutra* vehemently disavows such reliance on any kind of presence, relegating it all to the realm of names, we are still left with a question of how transcendence is functioning in the Buddha's discourse.

The Buddha's particular treatment of "states" to which one might "transcend" becomes vital to this inquiry (the quoted words will lose their sting momentarily, and indeed their significance as frightening concepts). In the ninth chapter of *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha asks Subhuti about various "levels of matriculation" (again those pernicious quotes!) in the pursuit of enlightenment. The catch, with each, is that the state itself is characterized by its own lack. Thus the following exchange, making perfect sense, takes place:

Subhuti, what do you think? Does a disciple who has entered the stream of the holy life say within himself, I obtain the fruit of a stream entrant?
Subhuti said: No, World-Honored One. Wherefore? Because "stream entrant" is merely a name. There is no stream entering. The disciple who pays no regard to form, sound, odor, taste, touch, or any quality is called a stream entrant.  

---

9 Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 112.
10 Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 144.
Variations on this theme comprise the rest of the section: there is an absence of fixity in the conditions constituting a person's enlightenment. The condition itself is marked by its absence. This present absence, or presence by virtue of an absence, can be said to connect the Buddha's discussion of enlightenment with the Derridean supplement, which "occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence."\(^1\) We now see a significant and important connection: enlightenment entails not the *obtainment* of something, but the "fill[ing] and mark[ing] of a determined lack," just as Derrida describes the working of the play of substitution.\(^1\) The discourse of the Buddha, the question of enlightenment at all, thus becomes not concerned with gaining anything, with a kind of absolute presence, but with an absence, a void opened up by the lack of regard for form and all the other phenomenal experiences that are themselves merely illusions.

It is interesting to note also that the preceding discussion focuses on the section in *The Diamond Sutra* where the Buddha addresses and dismisses the hierarchy of enlightenment. By denouncing the utterance of presence, the "such am I" of states of enlightenment, the Buddha radically calls into question his own notions of transcendence. How can one transcend if the state to which one might transcend is itself an illusion, constituted by an absence of itself? We must defer answering this question and instead look briefly to Derrida for further fortification. Derrida, like the Buddha in *The Diamond Sutra*, is wary of reason, saying that "[it] is incapable of thinking this double infringement upon Nature: that there is lack in Nature and that because of that very fact something is added to it."\(^1\) The fundamental presence of absence, that is, the way the supplement functions through a logic of paradoxical nothingness as the contingent for something at all, the utterance which brings the not-there into the fold: this is also the logic of enlightenment. For as the Buddha says, the "unformulated principle is the foundation of the different systems of all the ages."\(^1\) The inexpressible utterance is comprised of its being uttered, just as the very lack of a thing is its constitution: we see clearly that enlightenment takes on the same character as the supplement, and that it operates through the void rather than the voice, the absence rather than the presence, the no-self rather than the self.

If the principle of enlightenment is the logic of the supplement, how does transcendence fit into the Buddha's teaching? The answer comes in *The Diamond Sutra* chapter entitled "The Incomparable Merit of this Teaching,"\(^1\) wherein the Buddha touts his own teachings in a seemingly innocuous way, characterizing his discourse as being more meritorious than innumerable material donations:

> [I]f there be one who gives away in gifts of alms a mass of the seven treasures equal in extent to as many mighty Mount Sumerus as there would be in three thousand galaxies of worlds, and if there be another who *selects even only four lines from this discourse* upon the perfection of the transcendental wisdom, receiving and retaining them, and clearly expounding them to others, the merit of the latter will be so far greater than that of the former that no conceivable comparison can be made between them.\(^1\) (emphasis mine)

---

14 Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 149.
15 *Diamond Sutra* 24.
16 Though the titles of the sutra's chapters come from the translator, I still feel it fit to include them here, and including them does not affect the point I am making about the sutra itself.
17 *Diamond Sutra* 45.
But it is the way the Buddha touts his text that gives us pause and cause for closer analysis. He compares immeasurable plenitude to the minutiae of four lines of text, but his specificity is key. It is not a particular four lines of discourse; he leaves open the question of which four lines, as if to say that any four lines from the discourse would suffice to be received and retained. The Buddha suggests that any four of his lines add up to more than an overflowing of finite, material wealth. A wealth that can be present versus a few sentences from a text that effaces itself, refusing to be reified. But not just refusing to be reified. By leaving open the question of which four lines, the Buddha suggests that the first sentence and last sentence, paired with two sentences drawn at random from the rest of the sutra, would indeed be more valuable than a measurable quantity of material wealth. Similarly, a section plucked from the middle of a chapter is equally viable. The Buddha places merit on his discourse not simply because he's expounding it, but because its merit is not bound by a certain hierarchy or order that requires the presence of the whole text in order to generate meaning. To single out a small portion of the discourse is important, too; the Buddha avoids instituting the entirety of the sutra as a determined school, suggesting that a small part of it will suffice. It makes sense, then, that he says elsewhere "the buddha-teaching must be relinquished; how much more so misteaching!" Relinquishing the teachings, retaining only four of the many lines of the sutra, serves to undermine a fully present schematic for a path to enlightenment, a path whose hierarchy already is undermined by the Buddha's declaration of its arbitrariness. Transcendence, the transcendental wisdom, is only present by virtue of its absence, marked by the very gesture that concedes to its never having been there in the first place.

And yet this call to relinquish teachings comes only halfway through *The Diamond Sutra*. There is still more discourse to hear, still more fodder from which four lines may be plucked. The text announces the disappearance of concepts even as it invokes those concepts by naming them. The Buddha's discourse works as "a sequence of supplements," announcing the "necessity" of "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception." The supplement defers, insisting in the space between absence and presence, or subject and object. A snippet of the sutra holds more clout than infinite material gifts precisely because it defers the assertion of any kind of ego-entity. Someone gives something to someone else—that is the structure of the gift. It requires two subjects and an object, or a subject, a direct object, and an indirect object, grammatically speaking. But it asserts that there is identity and distinction between different people and things, and moreover that a hierarchy exists in those distinctions (the giver being the subject of the sentence, and the recipient the indirect object).

Transcendence does not have a material basis; it depends not on the achievement of a certain rank, but rather on a series of relations, most importantly the relating of the discourse to others. This very gesture, the explanation of a few lines of *The Diamond Sutra*, necessarily entails the relinquishment of reified concepts and identity, or at least a discussion thereof, and it is that very discussion that forces us to explain—in words—the inadequacy of words and the danger of hypostatizing or fixating on concepts or identities. We need words to expound their own failures; only through the system of distinctions and hierarchies can we describe the problematic nature of distinctions and hierarchies. For "the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system. Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is presented as the irreducible stratum of the signified." Transcendence takes place not at

---

18 *Diamond Sutra* 23.
the site where language is transcended and meaning, the signified, can be known, but rather within the textual system. It is a movement within language, not beyond or above it.

The Buddha's valorization of someone who retains four lines of his discourse and expounds them to others is not simply a faith in his own teaching. It is a testament to the power of language itself, for language is the realm in which meaning occurs, where there is an overflow of meaning beyond the sites at which names seemingly fix signification. Language is inadequate, but it itself tells the story of its own inadequacy; by explaining and analyzing the sutra, a person comes to realize that transcendence itself marks not a single, fixed moment of presence—for such a moment is indeed antithetical to the Buddha's teachings—but the very exorbitance of the supplement itself. Transcendence describes "the indefinite process" that is "always already inscribed [in] the space of repetition and the splitting of the self."21 That is, the moment one articulates the teachings of the Buddha, one also effaces it, for the significance of even four lines is their relation to the whole, that they can generate meaning—signify—beyond their own limited capacity to name.

Transcendence, then, as articulated in The Diamond Sutra, functions by metonymy. It is a constant series of associations marking the overflow of meaning from its boundaries in a discourse rather than a finite moment in which one is capable of stepping outside the text. This transcendence defies a simple subject-object split in that it effaces the ego-entity, the subjecthood of the Buddha, and as well disrupts the "object" of the text by making it a permeable, associative system, four lines from which can signify more than innumerable material donations. It defies the presence of meaning by forcing us to articulate its absence, giving us merely a trace which has always already defied the hierarchical violence of the naming act. Language's failure is its very success: to know our fetters we must write them, use them to articulate their own limitation.

The Buddha's idea of transcendence is not merely a word game, though. He marks a radical departure from the logic of the transcendental by gesturing toward an alternative to phenomenal and trans-phenomenal experiential data. The Diamond Sutra demonstrates what Derrida learns from his reading of Rousseau: that "there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc."22 Transcendence is the textuality of a text: meaning is always already happening, spilling out beyond its confines in the movement from signifier to signifier, between them, an unending chain by which we articulate meaning through our very inability to fix it in a particular site. Four lines of text from The Diamond Sutra are related ad infinitum from person to person, and we realize limitlessness only in the limitations language affords. Language is not itself meaning: it "opens meaning" by removing the notion of some kind of present meaning which may be at all attained.23 Meaning is relational, not final, and so transcendence comes to describe the ceaseless process by which that meaning is constituted, the endlessness of the signifying chain, and ultimately the way meaning itself continues far beyond our ability to articulate it in a discourse.

Works Cited


21 Derrida, Of Grammatology 163.
22 Derrida, Of Grammatology 159.
23 ibid.