

The *Diamondsūtra*'s Logic of Not: Toward a Holistic Mode of Thinking

Shigenori Nagatomo
Temple University
Dept. of Religion

“When one side is illuminated,
the other side remains in darkness.”
—Dōgen, “*Genjōkōan*”

I Introduction

The topic of this presentation is the logic that is used in one of the Mahayana Buddhist Sutras, the *Diamondsūtra*, which belongs to the genre of literature called “the perfection of wisdom” sutra, and this logic is called the “logic of not” (Skt.; *na pṛthak*).¹ This logic is formulated as: “A is not A, therefore it is A.” Since this statement appears to be contradictory or paradoxical at best, I would like to explain the philosophical reasoning of this formulation proposed in the *Diamondsūtra*, so that we can start envisioning what it means to engage in a holistic mode of thinking. (Hereafter, the *Diamondsūtra* will be abbreviated as the *Sutra*; Skt.: *Vajraccedhikāprajñāpāramitā*.) In order to articulate the philosophical reasons for this contradictory formulation, I must first warn that as long as one understands the “logic of not” in light of Aristotelian logic by assuming a dualistic, either-or egological stance, it remains contradictory, but to understand it properly, one must read it by effecting a perspectival shift to a holistic mode of understanding that assumes a non-dualistic, neither-nor, and non-egological stance. Only then can one see that it is not contradictory, and therefore it is not nonsensical.

Before I delve into a philosophical articulation of the meaning of this “logic,” I will briefly provide the background information necessary to understand this logic. Historically, the *Sūtra* appeared in an early phase of the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and it belongs to a group of literature that Buddhologists call the “perfection of wisdom” (*prajñāpāramitā*). Wisdom in this literature is called *prajñā* and is characterized

as severing “all doubt and attachment” like a “diamond that cuts well.”² The “diamond” designates metaphorically the *transparency* of the mind, while “cutting” is a metaphor for the non-discriminatory activity of the mind. And when the non-discriminatory activity is realized as knowledge it is called wisdom (*prajñā*). In this respect, *prajñā* is demarcated from the meaning of knowledge in which a universal is singled out as its genuine form as, for example, Aristotle proposes in his *Metaphysics*.³ Because the *Sūtra* does not treat *prajñā* as a theoretical knowledge, it envisions it to be practical and experiential in nature, which is achieved through the practice of meditation. The perfection of wisdom that the *Sūtra* thematizes then is a practical ideal to be achieved and embodied for those who have not achieved it. The *Sūtra* relegates this practical goal to what it calls the “*bodhisattva*.” The *bodhisattva* is a person who is intent on the achievement of enlightenment for his/her own sake as well as for the sake of benefiting others. The *Sūtra* formulates the *bodhisattva*’s perfection of wisdom in the propositional form: “A is not A, therefore it is A.” My goal in this essay is to make this statement intellectually intelligible by philosophically reconstructing the *Sūtra*’s standpoint.

II. The Conceptual Structure of the *Sūtra*

As preparatory to making the above propositional statement intelligible, it will perhaps be informative if I briefly sketch the conceptual structure of the *Sūtra*, by contrasting the characterizations given to the *bodhisattva* to those of what the *Sūtra* identifies as the “foolish, ordinary people” (*bālapṛthag-janā*). According to the *Sūtra*, the “foolish, ordinary people” are said to “seize on the idea of the self,”⁴ whereas the *bodhisattva* does not. What demarcates the “foolish, ordinary people” from the *bodhisattva* is whether or not one *attaches* oneself to the idea of the self. This demarcation conceals a difference in their respective epistemological stance. In the case of the “foolish ordinary people” the operation of the epistemological stance is framed by a structure in which the act of grasping (*grāha*) is correlative with that which is grasped (*grāhya*) where there is a mutual, interdependent relationship between them. But the “foolish, ordinary people” do not realize this interdependency. In its ontogenesis, the idea of the self arises in the “foolish, ordinary people” in virtue of the act of grasping. In fact, this grasping-grasped correlative

relationship is operative for anything that appears in the field of consciousness in virtue of the act of grasping such as the material object, the object of sensory perception or the object of the mind,⁵ as long as it is constituted from within the everyday standpoint. Whenever any of these objects is grasped, i.e. constituted as an (intended) object of consciousness, a discriminatory and oppositional relationship is *structurally* established between that which grasps and that which is grasped. This relationship is dualistic, because the relationship is established in virtue of the separation and the opposition between the act of grasping and that which is grasped. Moreover it is egological because the act of grasping is rooted in ego-desire. The reason that people are called “foolish” and “ordinary” then is that they are *not aware* that their cognitive activity is structurally framed by the dualistic, ego-logical, epistemological structure.

On the other hand, the *Sūtra* maintains that the *bodhisattva* does not seize the object that is dualistically and egologically constituted because the *bodhisattva* is said to embody a stance of non-attachment. To explain this stance logically, the *Sūtra* states that the *bodhisattva* does not seize “either *dharma* or no-*dharma*,”⁶ where we can take *dharma* for now to mean a thing-event observed in the world. Its recommendation is derived from the following reasons. Seizing either *dharma* or no-*dharma* translates into accepting the linguistic activity of either affirming or negating *dharma* as the standard for making judgment and understanding reality. And this presupposes *either-or* logic as its *modus operandi*. Here, either-or logic is a stance that *prioritizes* one over the other by dividing the whole, usually saving the explicit *at the expense of* the implicit, hence resulting in the one-sidedness of “seizing either *dharma* or no-*dharma*.” It celebrates the exclusion. To gather together what has been observed, the *Sūtra* deems that either-or logic results in the *egological* constitution of the object, whatever the object may be, when it is tied to the dualistic standpoint of the “foolish, ordinary people.”

This is a formula for creating, and accepting as true, various kinds of dualism, such as mind vs. body (matter), good vs. evil, along with a host of others. What is troublesome is that the either-or logical structure appears “natural and reasonable” to the “foolish, ordinary people,” as long as they are not aware of the epistemological structure in which there is mutual interdependence between the act of grasping and that which is grasped

when constituting an object, for it appears to be “obvious” to their sensory perception and rational mind. By contrast, the *Sūtra* advocates the stance of neither affirming nor negating. One of the important points that deserves special attention in this connection is that the neither-nor propositional form allows a *holistic* perspective to emerge as an alternative to either-or logic, and this perspective does not admit the dichotomization of the whole as a way of experiencing and understanding reality as does either-or logic. What is important to note in this regard is that the holistic perspective follows the cardinal principle of knowing, for to know means to know the whole, however the whole may be construed to mean. The *Sūtra* characterizes this holistic perspective, when realized as a form of knowledge, as “nondiscriminatory” wisdom.

III. The Meaning of Affirmation and Negation in the *Sūtra*

What makes us judge that the statement “A is not A, therefore it is A” is contradictory or paradoxical is the presence of the syncategorematic word “not.” If it were not for the occurrence of this word, it would simply make an identity statement that reads: “A is A, therefore it is A” to the effect that “A is identical with itself” or “A is the same as itself.” There will be no problem in understanding it, or at least so it seems. However, this statement is vacuously true, since it is tautological, i.e. it does not give us any additional information about A. The *Sūtra* obviously does not want to make a statement that is vacuously true. Instead, it maintains that A is A if and only if A is not A. In light of Aristotelean logic, this would be judged to be contradictory. It is also paradoxical in that it goes counter to common opinion, which, obviously, the *Sūtra* does not share. It seems then that the intelligibility of the statement “A is not A, therefore it is A” lies in understanding the meaning of negation as it is used in the *Sūtra*. A question is here then raised: how does the *Sūtra* understand negation?

Here, it may not be inappropriate to review the idea of contradiction and the excluded middle which Aristotle formulates in his *Metaphysics*,⁷ along with his correspondence theory of truth. In this book, he maintains that A cannot be both A and not A at the same time. He says that otherwise contradiction would occur. When he makes this assertion, we must keep in mind that the contradiction in the statement arises

through our linguistic activity. A as a thing-event and A' as realized in the statement, according to Aristotle, must "correspond" to each other. That is, A' as a sign in the statement must refer to A as a thing-event. This is the reason that Aristotle maintains the correspondence theory of truth. When he proposes this theory of truth, he makes a very important move, namely to assume that A as a thing-event stays the same in spite of the passage of time. However, when A is realized as linguistic sign (A') in the statement, A as thing-event becomes frozen into an atemporal conceptual space. A question we need to raise here is: does A' so realized continue to "refer" to A in spite of the temporal change extralinguistically, that is, outside of language, while maintaining the idea of self-sameness. Suppose, for example, I leave my brief case in a garden for five thousand years, does the brief case remain the same brief case? Obviously, it cannot. It will decay and will decompose. This raises the question of the scope and status of Aristotle's correspondence theory of truth. While he wants to maintain this theory of truth as the correspondence between a thing-event and its linguistic sign, he severs this tie when he introduces the idea of self-sameness into the discourse. He does this by invoking the idea of substance (*ousia*) in order to guarantee the idea of self-sameness in spite of the temporal changes. To legitimate the validity of the law of the excluded middle then Aristotle flees into language. Accordingly, he advocates the idea of substance in a thing-event that is captured through the linguistic sign. This is an *intellectual* or *theoretical* move, for to use the previous example, if the brief case is left in an open field for five thousands years, no substance remains except only as an intellectual *abstraction*. According to Aristotle, the primary substance remains the same in spite of the temporal changes we observe in nature. What changes is only attributes of the substance, in his language, the secondary substance. He assumes that nature, including everything in it, does not change in its essential characterization. This may be true only in a linguistic space, only within a certain language-game, as long as the speaker's interest remains. What this analysis suggests about Aristotle's correspondance theory of truth is that Aristotle takes a *homocentric* view in understanding reality. To borrow Nietzsche's phrase, it is "human, and all too human."

Insofar as the *Sūtra* makes the contradictory statement in the form of: "A is not A, therefore it is A," it must provisionally accept either-or logic. Otherwise, we cannot

understand the practical and logical necessity of the *Sūtra*'s negation of A. On the other hand, insofar as it makes a contradictory statement in understanding what A is, we must also recognize that it does not take either-or logic as the proper way of expressing what A is. This is clear by the insertion of “not” in the identity statement “A is A, therefore it is A.” This suggests that the *Sūtra* does not accept the idea of self-sameness as its essential characterization in recognizing what A is. Here, we need to question why the *Sūtra* does not accept the idea of self-sameness. According to the *Sūtra*, this is because the idea of self-sameness arises due to attachment as a mode of the *substantialization* of A. The “foolish, ordinary people” *attach* themselves to it. It maintains that the idea of A as being self-same arises from out of the epistemological stance inherent in the grasping-grasped relationship when constituting an object.

Here we need to examine the structure out of which A is singled out as A. A occurs in a domain, i.e. natural environment, and in order for A to be singled out as A in this domain, there must be not-A. Moreover, it suggests that A can occur without reference to a context, e.g. a domain of discourse. This implies that A can “stand on its own” without dependence on anything else. The *Sūtra* takes this to be unreasonable, because there is no A apart from not-A and conversely there is no not-A apart from A. For both A and not-A to occur, there must be a place or a domain for them to appear. Contrary to Aristotle's position then, they are intra-linguistically defined when they are realized as linguistic signs. In other words, the being of A is established only in *opposition* to the non-being of A, where the meaning of the being of A is defined relative to the meaning of the non-being of A. That is, both A and not-A logically presuppose each other in their being and meaning. Therefore, the *Sūtra* reasons that it is a mistake to ascribe to A an absolute meaning of its self-sameness, where the absolute meaning of A connotes that A is self-contained and self-sufficient in and of itself. However, as the preceding analysis shows, A cannot “stand on its own” in its being and meaning, and so the *Sūtra* concludes that if the self-sameness is ascribed to A it must be relative but not absolute. A must be understood in relational terms. (This analysis would also apply to A' as a linguistic sign.)

In fact, the *Sūtra* wants to make a stronger claim, namely that the idea of A as self-same is a linguistic illusion or fiction and as such is not real. In order to see if this claim

holds true or not, we need to look at the logical structure inherent in the act of affirming A. The *Sūtra* asks us to examine how the act of affirmation is established when recognizing A as A, as a thing-event of the world that is realized as a grammatical subject in the subject-predicate structure of language. When one performs an act of affirming A, whatever A may be, the *Sūtra* maintains that it cannot do so unless it simultaneously and logically presupposes an act of negation. When one affirms A, the act of affirmation implicitly negates all that is not-A in order for it to be realized as an act of affirmation. In other words, the act of affirmation is an affirmation *qua* negation. There is no affirmation pure and simple. Both affirmation and negation presuppose each other; they are interdependent on and relative to each other. In other words, the act of affirmation is an identity of contradiction.

But then why do the “foolish, ordinary people,” the *Sūtra* questions, think that there is an affirmation pure and simple? The *Sūtra* reasons that it is due to the either-or logic that is embedded in the act of affirmation. Either-or logic states that one must either affirm or negate A, and hence there can be no “middle” between them. According to Aristotle’s either-or logic, this is recognized as the law of the excluded middle. Here we can see that the *Sūtra* goes against the common opinion. It criticizes this stance, because it falls into one-sidedness. When it is used in making a knowledge claim, it is bound to be partial and becomes even prejudiced. It *prioritizes* either affirmation or negation in virtue of its intrinsic feature of exclusion. Prioritization dichotomizes the whole, and the *Sūtra*’s criticism comes from its observation that reality cannot be discerned unless the whole is understood. That is to say, it violates a cardinal principle of knowing, for to know is to know the whole.

By rejecting either-or logic, what does the *Sūtra* offer in its place? It recommends adopting a neither-nor propositional form. This alternative is advanced to avoid the two extremes of any kind which arise in virtue of the “foolish, ordinary people” accepting either-or logic as *the* standard of experiencing and judging the thing-events of the world. Furthermore, the “neither-nor” propositional form offers a *third* alternative that either-or logic fails to recognize. It is offered as a way of achieving a *holistic* perspective by avoiding the substantialization of A, whether in eternalism or nihilism, in favor of the non-

substantialization of A. The purpose is to see A holistically as a relational term by means of the knowledge of the context or place in which A occurs. This leads us to an examination of the standpoint of non-attachment.

The *Sūtra* is aware, however, that this stance cannot be embodied by logically or intellectually negating either-or logic, or for that matter by taking a neither-nor attitude. Suppose that we attempt to logically negate either-or logic in order to arrive at the stance of non-attachment. When we attempt to negate it as an object of negation, there remains the affirmation of what is being negated. That is to say, there arises an affirmative judgment in the mind of us who have negated either-or logic, and this affirmation becomes an object of attachment. In order to embody the stance of non-attachment, we must also negate this act of affirmation. However, this process creates an infinite regress, and therefore the process of logical negation does not enable us to embody the stance of non-attachment. The same problem arises when intellectually *taking* the neither-nor propositional attitude in order to embody the stance of non-attachment, because by taking this attitude, there remains the affirmation of this act, and consequently this act must be negated. This also can go on *ad infinitum*. The *Sūtra* reasons that this infinite regress occurs because there is a positing of an *ego* in consciousness. In other words, in order to embody the stance of non-attachment, the *ego* that posits the act of grasping must disappear. For this reason, the *Sūtra* states that the *bodhisattva* must “depart from all thought”⁸ by realizing that “all things are without a self.”⁹ This is a non-egological stance.

“Departing from all thought” is an existential project that is carried out through the practice of meditation. The *Sūtra* mentions a meditative state that is identified as “neither image nor no-image” as the initial experiential foundation for advancing the neither-nor propositional form. This meditative state is the standpoint of the “middle” in which “A is not A, and it is neither A nor not A.” It suggests a practical transcendence *vis-à-vis* the meditational experience that effects a de-substantialization of A contrary to the way the “foolish, ordinary people” want to have it. De-substantialization means that A is *empty* of any conceptually fabricated substance. That is, when there is no act of grasping, there is no A as that which is grasped. Insofar as both A and not-A are empty of substance, they are one. Because they are one in this respect, they are non-dualistic; A is nondualistically

related to not-A. Hence, this oneness is not an undifferentiated indistinguishability. To indicate where this oneness occurs, i.e., its experiential correlate, the *Sūtra* states that “A is neither A nor not A.” This is a description of the context or the place in which both A and not-A occur. As such it transcends both A and not-A without, however, departing from either A or not-A, because it is the ground upon and in which both A and not-A occur.

In order for this to occur, the mind of the “foolish, ordinary people” must become, to use a Zen Buddhist terminology, no-mind. No-mind does not mean a mindless state, much less losing the mind. Nor does it mean a disappearance of the mind. Rather it means a disappearance of the *discriminatory* activity of the mind *vis-à-vis* the practical transcendence, wherein there is no operation of the dualistic, either-or ego-logical activity of the mind. In the state of no-mind, the named is nameless and the discriminated is nondiscriminatory, for in this case the object alone shines forth. That is to say, there is no longer the belief that there is a “real” object corresponding to a linguistic activity, because there is no concern with no-mind to substantialize or ontologize it. Nonetheless, no-mind *mirrors* desires, ideas, and/or images *as* they are, for there is in no-mind no superimposition of categories, concepts, nor is there a projection from the unconscious. They are mirrored against the background that is nothing, which is the no-mind. Yet, each individual thing that is mirrored is acknowledged to be an individual thing *qua* individual thing with the sense of *equality* that is due of other individual things. No-mind is a free mind that is not delimited by any idea, desire, or image. Moreover, no-mind is no-place in which both A and not-A occur. It is nothing, but this nothing is not a relative nothing. It is *absolutely* nothing in the sense that it cuts off any polar concept. Where there is absolutely nothing, there is no determination whatsoever except its own self-determination *via* negation. Here we can have a glimpse of what it means to achieve “perfection of wisdom” in which discernment occurs *vis-à-vis* non-discernment, i.e. non-discriminatory knowledge.

IV Concluding Remarks

To conclude this short essay, I would like to make a *brief* observation of how the “logic of not” assists us to reevaluate the dualistic, either-or egological epistemological structure,

when it is applied to the self's understanding of itself, its interpersonal relationship to others, as well as its ecological relationship, because it offers a *holistic* perspective on these issues based on its non-dualistic, non-egological stance.

Take as an example the Socratic dictum, "know thyself." In attempting to know "one's self," we ordinarily appeal to reflection. In a reflective mode of reasoning when knowing oneself, there occurs a consciousness that does the reflecting and a consciousness that is reflected on. It is performed within an epistemological structure between the reflecting consciousness and the reflected consciousness, wherein one can readily discern a dualistic structure. We may pose questions regarding this activity. Is the reflecting consciousness the same as the reflected consciousness? Can we know one's self *in toto* by appealing to this method? The goal of "knowing one's self" is to capture the reflecting consciousness in its act, but not the reflected consciousness, because the reflected consciousness is a shadow or a second image of the reflecting consciousness. This cannot be achieved *in toto* because in the dualistic structure, the reflecting consciousness is distanced from, and opposed to, the reflected consciousness. More importantly, reflection experientially renders opaque the reflecting consciousness when attempting to know the ground of one's self, because the consciousness that performs reflection is rooted psychologically in the unconscious, and physiologically in the body. The reflection is incapable of addressing the *ground* of a person. Unless we capture the self in its act and its ground, there occurs no genuine and authentic knowing of one's self.

The preceding analysis can be extended in knowing others from the perspective of an "I." When we accept the dualistic, either-or egological epistemological standpoint as the standard for knowing others and apply it in understanding the relationship between "I" and "others," "I" and "others" are distanced from, and are opposed to, each other, as is the case with the "I" knowing its self. This may occur either ideally or really, or both. For this reason, the problem of other minds occurs. To approach it by introducing empathy, as Husserl does for example in his *Cartesian Meditations*,¹⁰ does not constitute a solution. The problem of other minds is a *quasi*-problem that surfaces when accepting the dualistic, either-or egological epistemological standpoint. Or we might say that it has arisen in such a way that it *responds* to the structure of this epistemological standpoint. By contrast, if

we assume a holistic perspective, which the “logic of not” exhorts us to employ, this problem does not occur, for it demands a holistic knowledge of a *grounding place* in which both “I” and “others” occur, wherein “I” is “others” and vice versa, and wherein both are held in “betweenness”¹¹ in terms of their intersubjectivity and inter-corporeality.

The dualistic, either-or egological stance is a *theoretical* stance, as is exemplified for example by Aristotle’s move into language. This stance defines the human being as a “being-outside-of-nature,”¹² for it enables the human being to observe (*theōria*) nature from the outside by assuming the discursive mode of reasoning. It ignores, however, the fact that the human being is also a “being-in-nature”—he/she is born from it and returns to it—for he/she is an *incarnate* being. The various environmental problems we face today on the global scale are consequences of accepting the view that human beings are simply “beings-outside-of nature.” The theoretical stance *objectifies* nature, turning it into a thing of manipulation and control for the purpose of gratifying the capitalistic ego-desire, instead of considering it as a place of co-habitation and co-existence. We stand today helpless, unable to solve the environmental problems that have arisen from the contradiction between the “being-outside-of nature” and “being-in-nature”—the contradiction framed by the dualistic, either-or egological epistemological structure. The former (“being-outside-of-nature”) is represented by the methodological stance of natural science, particularly when it is tied, as accomplished in the contemporary period, to technology as scientific technology, while the latter (“being-in-nature”) is represented by the everyday experiential standpoint. No solution is forthcoming however as long as we adhere to this epistemological stance as *the* standard for understanding reality, whether it pertains to knowing one’s self or dealing with others and nature. For it is an unfailing formula for creating oppositions and conflicts. That is, even if a “solution” is proposed from out of this stance, it will create another problem or conflict because it arises out of the *oppositional* stance presupposed by this structure.

As the preceding cursory observations make clear, the dualistic, either-or egological stance presents us with theoretical difficulties and contradictions when we attempt to understand one’s self, the relationship between “I” and “other,” and our

ecological relation with nature. A sketch of the *Diamondsūtra*'s "logic of not" has been provided to envision a way out of such problems and contradictions.¹³

Endnotes

¹ For a little more extended discussion on this logic, see Shigenori Nagatomo, "The Logic of the *Diamond Sutra*: A is not A, Therefore it is A," *Journal of Asian Philosophy*, 10 (2000); 213-244.

² NAKAMURA Hajime and KINO Kazuyoshi, tr. and ed., *Hannyashinkyō, Kongōhannyakyō* [The *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sūtra*] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996); 195. Since doubt and attachment are depth-psychological issues for the ego-consciousness, I shall not deal with them in this essay.

³ Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941); Chapter One.

⁴ Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1958); 34.

⁵ Conze; 53.

⁶ Conze; 34.

⁷ McKeon; Chapter One.

⁸ Conze; 53.

⁹ Conze; 59.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *The Cartesian Meditation* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); 104.

¹¹ WATSUJI Tetsurō, *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, tr. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (New York, Albany: the State University of New York Press, 1996).

¹² YUASA Yasuo, "Wasurerareta Dekaruto" [Forgotten Descartes] in *YUASA Yasuo's Complete Works*, Vol. 4 (Tokyo: Hakuha shobō, 2003); p. 263

¹³ I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. John Krummel of Temple University for repairing my English and his insightful comments.

Suggested Readings

Conze, Edward, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1958).

McKeon, Richard, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

Nagatomo, Shigenori. "The Logic of the *Diamond Sutra*: A is not A, Therefore it is A," *Journal of Asian Philosophy*, 10 (2000); 213-244.

Edmund Husserl, *The Cartesian Meditation* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

YUASA Yasuo, "Wasurerareta Dekaruto" [Forgotten Descartes] in *YUASA Yasuo's Complete Works*, Vol. 4 (Tokyo: Hakuha shobō, 2003); p. 263

Watsuji Tetsurō. *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, tr. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (New York, Albany: the State University of New York Press, 1996).