



The Diamond Sūtra at the British Library is the world's earliest dated printed book, and was made in AD 868. It was discovered by accident in the early twentieth century along with tens of thousands of other scrolls in a hidden cave at the Buddhist Mogao cave site in Dunhuang, northwest China.



The Diamond Sūtra. Or.8210/P.2.
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What is a sūtra?

The text printed on this scroll is one of the most important sūtras in Buddhism. ‘Sūtra’ is a Sanskrit (or ancient Indian) word meaning a ‘classic text’, and in Buddhism came to mean the words, sermons and lectures of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. Buddhism originated in north India and spread all over Asia, and thus Buddhist sūtras were translated into many local languages so that people could understand the word of the Buddha more clearly. This copy of the *Diamond Sūtra* is in Chinese.

How and why was it made?

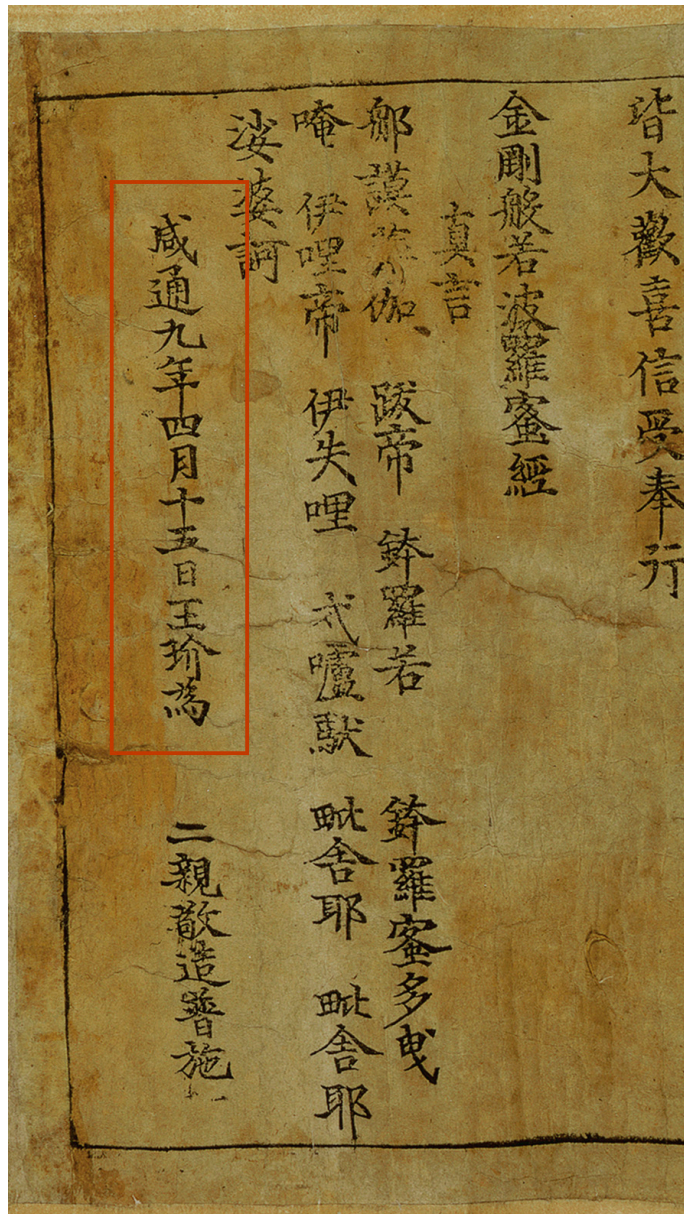
This copy of the *Diamond Sūtra* was printed using wood blocks. Buddhists in China began to use printing technology from the eighth century onwards. An

essential part of Buddhist teaching stresses the importance of doing good deeds and spreading the word of the Buddha. Printing was an ideal way to distribute Buddhist knowledge as widely as possible, benefiting society, and attaining merit for the sponsor of the work, diminishing his karmic debt in a bid to ensure a better rebirth in the next life.

This *Diamond Sūtra* was printed on seven sections of fine paper made from hemp and mulberry. Paper had first been invented in China in the second century BC, and so by AD 868 had become very refined and beautiful. It was often coloured yellow with a dye called huangbo, which repelled both insects and water. Yellow was the colour of the emperor in Imperial China, and was also taken on by the Buddhists as a sacred colour.

How do we know the date of this copy?

The date of this item is printed in a colophon. The colophon is a note printed at the end of the scroll, giving information about the date and the sponsor of the sūtra. The colophon here reads, 'Reverently made for universal distribution by Wang Jie on behalf of his two parents on the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the ninth year of the Xiantong reign.' This is the Chinese calendar equivalent of 11 May 868.



咸通九年四月十五日王玠為

二親歡造普施

咸通九年四月十五日
xiántōng jiù nián sì yuè shíwù rì
The fifteenth day of the fourth month of the ninth
year of the Xiantong reign.

What does the sūtra tell us?

Look at the image of the *Diamond Sūtra* shown overleaf. The picture before the main text of the *Diamond Sūtra* is called a frontispiece. It shows the Buddha preaching to his followers, and in particular to Subhuti, his elderly disciple who asks the Buddha questions throughout. Before the main text of the sūtra, there is an invocation to those who may chant the sūtra aloud advising them first to recite the mantra for purifying the karma of the mouth. Sūtras were often recited or chanted as another means of gaining merit, and the *Diamond Sūtra* was popular because it was relatively short and easy to remember for this purpose. The text encourages disciples to recognise and reject the material illusions of the world around them as human constructs. The recognition of this, along with the practice of the Buddhist path, leads to Enlightenment.



Take a closer look at this scroll and listen to a recording of the *Diamond Sūtra* being chanted by monks from a temple in Taiwan on the British Library website:
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/ttpbooks.html>