

# Avataṃsaka Sāram

## The Essential Message of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*

That Light whose smile kindles the Universe,  
 That Beauty in which all things work and move,  
 That Benediction which the eclipsing Curse  
 Of birth can quench not, that sustaining Love  
 Which through the web of being blindly wove  
 By man and beast and earth and air and sea,  
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of  
 The fire for which all thirst....

Shelley, *Adonais*

The text generally referred to as the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*<sup>1</sup> is in its Chinese translation called the *Huayen Jing* [華嚴經] or 'Flower Adornment Sutra', flowers being a common metaphor in the Sutra for spiritual virtues or accomplishments. The significance of the Sanskrit word *avataṃsaka* here is not entirely clear but it seems to imply some sort of array or display. According to at least one source, an alternative Sanskrit title for the Sutra was *Acintyavimokṣa Sūtra*, or the 'Sutra of Inconceivable Liberation'.

In China the Sutra became the basis for one of the major schools of Chinese Buddhism, the Huayen or Avatamsaka School [華嚴宗]. In accordance with the teachings revealed in the Sutra, the Huayen School claimed to represent a new Buddhist 'vehicle' [*yāna*], that is, a complete and comprehensive system of doctrine and practice. This new vehicle claimed to include but surpass the traditional teachings of the 'Great Vehicle' (Mahayana), and was sometimes distinguished from it by being called the 'Buddha Vehicle' in contrast to the latter's 'Bodhisattva Vehicle'. Most often however it was simply called the 'Ekayana', which literally means the 'One Vehicle'; but as the word 'one' in this case is meant to be understood in an inclusive rather than an exclusive sense, a more appropriate and precise translation would be 'the Universal Vehicle'.

The complete Chinese translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra by the Khotanese monk Shikshananda [*Śikṣānanada*] consists of 39 chapters [品] divided into nine 'assemblies' [會]. In literary terms the assemblies are somewhat like a change of scene or a new act in a stage drama. The chapters vary in length from quite short to extremely long. A number of the longer ones circulated in China for a while as separate sutras. Two of the longest still survive in Sanskrit: the influential text explaining the ten stages of the bodhisattva path, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, and the book-length story of the young pilgrim Sudhana's quest for Enlightenment, the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. In the Chinese translation of the Sutra these are chapters 26 and 39 respectively.

In content and style the chapters also vary considerably. Ethics, ontology, epistemology, cosmology and Dharma practice are all amply dealt with, Different chapters contain stories, dialogues, long passages of verse, dazzling displays of light, sound and colour, passionate exhortations to practise, and innumerable lists of ten items – ten qualities, virtues, names of bodhisattvas, types of practice and so forth.

1. Sanskrit words will appear with the correct diacritics only when they are italicized.

But despite its huge size and the rich variety of themes, topics and styles it contains, the Sutra is given an overall unity by its literary and doctrinal structure and the constant repetition of characteristic phrases, imagery and motifs, including the motif of repetition itself, as when a scene or event is said to be simultaneously reduplicated in many other worlds. Above all, there is an underlying message running through the entire text: that the world we have created for ourselves is ultimately an illusion, that what we call Enlightenment or Buddhahood is an all-pervasive reality, that this enlightened awareness is already fully present in our own mind, and that there is nothing more important in our lives than the effort to actualize this awareness by awakening the profound desire to do so [*bodhicittotpāda*] that also lies latent within us.

According to the Avatamsaka Sutra we are conscious entities, like all other sentient beings, and the events of our lives appear to us like shadow plays, or the images and sounds of a movie, projected onto the screen of the mind. Our senses shape the form of the world we perceive, but the physical organs themselves perceive nothing: they merely record data and pass it on to other areas of the mind for processing. The raw data is then organized as information, and in this way a coherent picture of an external world is created. The whole process is described in elaborate technical detail in the Abhidharma of the Buddhist Canon.

For this reason the Buddha compared the mind to a painter creating pictures of a universe in which individual beings live and move among physical objects and other beings which appear to exist somewhere outside their own consciousness:

"Have you ever seen a complicated painting? ... But that painting was created by the mind, so the workings of the mind are much more complicated than the picture." [Gaddulabaddha Sutta, SN<sup>2</sup> 22.100]

The same metaphor can be found in the Avatamsaka Sutra:

"The mind is like a skilful painter, painting pictures of all the worlds."  
[Ch. 20]

The external world we perceive is, then, a subjective construct. It is 'imaginary' in that the mind as artist uses its creative imagination to paint the picture of an infinitely complex world by using whatever colours (sense-data) are available on its palette. Of course this is not how we normally understand the situation, but we can see the same kind of process at work when we dream. In dreams too the mind creates entire worlds, complete with an observing 'self' and other sentient beings, which may appear to be more or less the same as our waking world, or may be something completely different. The details are generally less stable than those of the environment we perceive when we wake, but they are created by the mind in much the same way.

So where in all this is any 'objective' reality to be found? Are dream-worlds in fact any less real than the 'real' world? Is the 'self' of the dreamer any more or less real than the one who seems to be awake? For the Avatamsaka Sutra, as for most Mahayana sutras, all the worlds we experience are ultimately illusory and will remain so until the day when we become truly 'awake' [*buddha*]. Until then they will continue to be no more than fleeting impressions "like an illusion or a mirage, like the moon in the water, like a dream, a shadow,

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2. The four *nikāyas* of the *Sutta-piṭaka* of the Pali Canon are referred to by the standard abbreviations: AN, DN, MN, and SN.

an echo, a reflection, a picture drawn in the air, a wheel of fire, or the colours of the rainbow." [Ch. 20]<sup>3</sup>

In the cosmology of the Sutra there are said to be many world-systems of various types. These worlds may exist at the present time or may have existed in the remote past. They may be located somewhere in our known cosmos, or in some remote galaxy, dimension, or parallel universe. But in all cases they are no less imaginary than the world we ourselves inhabit. The Sutra<sup>4</sup>, however, knows that they are imaginary and is therefore able to treat them playfully, whereas we imagine that our own little world is the only possible reality, and we take it with (literally) deadly seriousness.

In the Sutra and in most Mahayana texts this imaginary or illusory quality is called 'emptiness' [*śūnyatā*]. Everything, including even the buddhas, is "like empty space" [如虛空], as the Sutra never tires of reminding us. None of the things we perceive possesses any objective or solid reality independent of our perception of it. Nevertheless there have always been many seekers and thinkers, including Shakyamuni Buddha himself when he was still the bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama, who have felt that there must be some kind of ultimate reality concealed behind the shifting appearances of this world. Some believed that they had found it in the mysterious powers, invisible to ordinary human perception, which animate the forces of nature. These they called gods or goddesses and supposed them to be immortal. With the global spread of monotheistic religions during the past couple of millennia, it has become common to believe in a single, universal super-deity who is said to be the creator or emanator of the whole universe. Very few have been able to see what William Blake understood: that "all deities reside within the human breast" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

More than two thousand years before Blake wrote, however, the Buddha taught that "within this very body are to be found the world, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation ." [*Rohitassa Sutta*, SN 2.3.6/107] In other words, we are all embodied entities and, as with other sentient beings, it is our physical boundaries that define our apparently separate existence as individuals in the worlds of time and space. It is in this body also that our minds appear to be contained, and for the Buddha the mind was the key. It is in fact the mind and its concomitant senses that create the world we see around us, and therefore it is only the mind that can put an end to this world and the inevitable suffering [*duḥkha*] that the Buddha regarded as its most fundamental and universal characteristic. This suffering springs from the mind's own deluded ideas and perceptions, and if we can manage to correct these, the world that we had thought was the only real one will cease to exist: "Once the Dharmakaya has been realized, not a single thing will exist" [Yung Jia, *Song of Enlightenment*; 永嘉，證道歌]. Or as *The Awakening of Faith* [起信論] explains in more detail:

The essential nature of the mind neither arises nor perishes. It is only our deluded thoughts that discriminate one phenomenon from another. If we can detach our minds from these false ideas, the distinguishing marks of the objects we perceive will no longer exist.

Blake also glimpsed the truth of this, although he expresses his insight in the language of Christian eschatology:

3. 'Ch.1', 'Ch. 2'... etc. indicate the relevant chapter in the Shikshanada translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra.

4. The phrase 'the Sutra', without further qualification, refers to the Avatamsaka Sutra.

Error is created. Truth is eternal. Error, or Creation, will be burned up, and then, and not till then, Truth or Eternity will appear. It is burnt up the moment men cease to behold it. [*A Vision of the Last Judgement*]

Of course this doesn't mean that everything we perceive will literally vanish. As long as we still have a human body and human senses, we will continue to see the world as we did before, but we will no longer perceive it as the world we thought we knew. Because our delusions have been cleared away, the world will now appear to us in a radically different light that is at present beyond our comprehension. To quote Blake again:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern. (*The marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

The result of this narrowing of our perceptions is what the Buddha called 'suffering' [*duḥkha*]. According to Buddhist tradition there are three types of suffering: the suffering of suffering (i.e. physical pain and mental anguish), the suffering of change or impermanence, and the suffering of conditioned existence [*samskāra-duḥkha*]. The first of these is easy to understand, because all beings experience it sooner or later and in one way or another. The second is also easy enough to recognize, although its deeper implications are more difficult to grasp. The third type of suffering is closely connected with the previous two, but being the most fundamental of the three, is much more subtle and tends to elude our understanding. It was on his explanation of these last two aspects of suffering that the Buddha founded his Dharma.

Close observation and careful reflection will show that everything in the universe is indeed subject to the law of impermanence. All living things will eventually die, and all inanimate objects will slowly or suddenly decay and disappear. Ultimately the entire universe, with all its planets, stars and galaxies, will implode or be overcome by entropy and fade away. Impermanence is therefore a law that governs all physical existence, and because the Buddha placed it at the centre of his teaching, the religion he founded can be said to be truly universal in its scope.

The suffering that we experience as human beings, then, comes from the inherent impermanence and contingency of our lives. This suffering is inescapable because existence as an individual person, animal, or tree is limited by definition and is therefore subject to the inexorable law mentioned above. To define something is, as it were, to draw boundaries around it, boundaries that mark it off as separate from all the other entities around it. But for the Buddha, and for the Avatamsaka Sutra, this apparent separateness is a limitation, a false and unstable delusion that is the ultimate source of all our distress.

All sentient beings, therefore will sooner or later discover the nature of suffering through their own individual experience. But it is only we human beings, on this planet at least, who possess sufficient self-awareness and linguistic sophistication to search for the real causes of our suffering, identify them, and then try to find a remedy for them. Eventually we will come to realize that we ourselves are the cause of our own problems, and that our obsession with a unique self which must be defended and preserved at all costs is in fact a pernicious delusion which is at the root of all our unhappiness and perpetual anxiety.

The solution to a problem, however, is often to be found in the problem itself, and in this case the same self-consciousness that is the source of our suffering is also the key to its transcendence. It is the nature of consciousness to know, and it constantly seeks to expand the scope of its awareness. According to the Buddhadharmā, the ultimate fulfilment of this impulse, its final goal, is the universal awareness of 'omniscience' [*sarvajñatā*] – the complete understanding of the true nature of all things that is possessed by the buddhas. This same impulse is the force driving evolution, which in human beings has produced, for the first time on our planet, a fully aware and linguistically competent sentient being. It is at this point that Buddhahood starts to come within reach.

But how do we proceed to reach it? Most religions begin with an "In the beginning...". The Buddha however taught that we should start from where we are here and now, as he himself did when he was still the bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama. According to some traditional accounts, he first became aware of the universality of suffering while he was still a child, when he once slipped into a spontaneous state of meditation as he watched his father performing a ploughing ceremony in the hot sun (see e.g. MN 36, *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*). This experience eventually led him to see that old age, sickness and death were the inevitable result of having been born as an individual sentient being. He therefore set out on what he was to call a 'noble' or 'spiritual' quest [*ārya-paryeṣana*], determined to find some unchanging truth or reality which would offer an escape from the endless cycle of births and deaths:

Even though I am still subject to birth, ageing, illness, death, sorrow, and conflicting emotions, what if I were to seek that which is unborn, ageless, beyond illness and death, sorrowless, passionless, the unsurpassed freedom from all bonds, Nirvana? [MN 26, *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*]

After several years devoted to the practice of meditation and physical austerities, he eventually found what he was seeking in the 'deathless state' [*amṛtapada*, *amṛtadhātu*] which he most often referred to as 'Nirvana' [*nirvāṇa*], literally the 'extinction' of the scorching fires of ignorance and the turbulent passions that spring from it. Everything, the Buddha declares in his "Fire Sermon" [*Āditta Sutta*, SN 35.28], the senses and their objects, are all on fire:

With what are they on fire? They are on fire with greed, hatred and delusion, with birth, ageing and death, with sorrow, grief, pain, misery and distress.

In the course of his teaching career, the Buddha developed a more elaborate doctrinal structure to explain the truths that he had realized: the Four Truths, the five aggregates [*skandha*], the eighteen sense-bases (the six organs and their corresponding objects and types of consciousness), the links in the cycle of interdependent origination [*pratītya-samutpāda*] and so on. At the same time he also developed a complete system of practice based on similar lists: the Eightfold Path, the four stages of meditation [*dhyāna*], the four 'divine abodes' [*brahma-vihāra*], the five faculties [*indriyāṇi*], the seven aids to Enlightenment [*bodhi-pāṅṣika-dharmāḥ*] etc. Underlying this elaborate structure, however, there is always the fundamental contrast between the conditioned and the unconditioned, between ignorance and Enlightenment, suffering and Liberation [*vimukti*, *mokṣa*], the realm of birth and death and the "unborn, unarisen, uncreated, unconstructed" reality of Nirvana [*Udāna* 8.3]:

There is a realm where there is no earth, water, fire, wind, or infinite space,...  
 where there is neither this world nor the next, neither sun nor moon, neither  
 coming nor going nor standing still, neither passing away nor arising. It is  
 groundless, motionless and unsupported. This, I say, is the end of suffering.  
 [Udāna 8.1]

Ultimately, therefore, all the various methods of practice and mental discipline that the Buddha recommended are simply ways to bridge the gap between the conditioned worlds of Samsara and the unconditioned realm of Nirvana. At present we seem to be trapped in a realm where beings live for a short time, suffer, and die, only to repeat the process over and over again. But if we can purge our minds of the desires and attachments that keep us bound to this cycle, and instead focus all our thoughts and aspirations on the deathless state of Nirvana, it will eventually open up to us, just as it did to Shakyamuni Buddha himself. This transcendent reality appears remote and incomprehensible to us at the moment, but it is already present within us, and its realization is the only thing that will give us the peace and fulfilment that we have always been seeking. This fundamental task is seldom presented in such stark terms in the texts of the Pali Canon, but there is one passage in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN 64, *Mahāmālunkyā Sutta*), about a monk striving to break the five bonds [*saṃyojana*] that keep us all bound to samsaric existence, in which the Buddha spells it out with uncompromising clarity:

Whatever there may be that is connected with the five aggregates of form, feelings, cognition, mental activities and consciousness, he regards as impermanent, as suffering, as a sickness, a painful swelling, a poisoned arrow, an affliction, a disease, as something alien or decaying, as something empty and devoid of self. He therefore turns his mind away from such things and focuses his thoughts instead on the deathless state [*amatāya dhātu*]. This is true peace, this is supreme: that is to say, the stilling of all mental activities, the discarding of all causes that lead to rebirth, the fading away of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nirvana.

The path to Buddhahood is not an easy one, as it goes against the grain of our long-established habits and of everything that we have always taken for granted. To set out on it requires not only a clear understanding of the goal but also considerable faith, for if we have no faith in its reality or in the possibility of achieving it, how will we find the strength to follow the path right to the end? For this reason, the *Sutta Nipāta* says "By faith the flood is crossed" (SN 1.10), and "By faith you shall be free and go beyond the realm of death" (SN 5.16). The Sutra too (Ch. 12) insists that "Faith is the source of Enlightenment, and all good qualities", and Shantideva sums up the whole path of practice in the second verse of his *Compendium of Training* [*Śikṣā-samuccāya*] as follows:

If you would make an end of ill and achieve supreme happiness,  
 Strengthen your faith and practise, seeking only Enlightenment.

So the Buddhist meditator is urged in a stock phrase (e.g. in the Pali *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*) to be "ardent and fully aware" [*ātāpī sampajāno*], and the Buddha's own last words to his followers are said to have been "Strive diligently" [*appamādena sampādettha*; DN 16].

In following the path of practice, therefore, motivation is of crucial importance. According to the early sutras, the Buddha seems to have encouraged practitioners mainly by emphasizing the ills [*duḥkha*] of Samsara. About the nature of Nirvana he was more circumspect and generally defined it in negative terms, presumably fearing that more positive descriptions might be misunderstood by his audience. By and large, later tradition has followed him in this, for it has always been taught that speculation about the 'deathless state' is futile, as our dualistic minds are not capable of grasping a nondual reality that at present lies beyond their comprehension. Eventually it will appear spontaneously to us, once all the obstacles to its realization have been cleared away, so in the meantime, the argument has gone, it is better to concentrate on identifying and eliminating those obstacles and impediments from the mind; Enlightenment will then follow in due course.

Nevertheless, in the centuries that followed the Buddha's passing, diligent practitioners and scholars in the monasteries of ancient India continued to ponder the true nature of Nirvana and of the Buddha's Enlightenment, and began to explore new methods of meditation. The eventual result of this spiritual and intellectual inquiry was the emergence of a new, pan-Indian Buddhist movement which came to be known as the 'Great Vehicle' [*Mahāyāna*].

The first literary manifestation of the Mahayana was the circulation of a number of sutras expounding 'transcendental wisdom' [*prajñā-pāramitā*]. A 'sutra', in the Buddhist sense, is a text which claims to represent the direct teachings of the Buddha, or a buddha, while 'prajñā' means unerring knowledge or wisdom. The word 'pāramitā', however, is ambiguous. It could be derived from the adjective *parama*, meaning 'perfect' or 'supreme', or else from the word *pāram*, meaning the 'other shore' or 'opposite shore' of a river. In the latter case, it would be an obvious allusion to a metaphor that the Buddha himself often used, comparing the world in which most beings live to one shore, and the transcendent state of Nirvana to the opposite shore, with the powerful currents of birth and death flowing between the two.

Either way, the principal topic of this literature is what the texts refer to as 'emptiness' or 'voidness' [*śūnyatā*]. This term also carries a dual significance, in keeping with the dualistic way in which we perceive ourselves and the world around us. On the one hand, to say that something is 'empty' [*śūnya*] is to say that it is hollow, insubstantial, and devoid of independent reality or 'self-existence' [*svabhāva*]. But seen from a different point of view, that of the 'other shore', this same emptiness is also the real nature of everything that exists. In other words, the empty or illusory nature of all that we cling to in vain is both the source of our suffering and at the same time the key to complete Liberation from it. As the Avatamsaka Sutra (Ch. 1) puts it succinctly: "Emptiness of self-existence is Buddhahood" [性空即是佛]. This is a paradox that our dualistic logic is unable to resolve and that can only be understood through direct realization.

In the Sutra's long first chapter the comparison of Buddhahood [*buddhatva*] or Enlightenment [*bodhi*] to emptiness [*śūnyatā*] is elaborated in various ways. They are both said to be infinite in extent; both are utterly pure and impervious to contamination; they contain all things but cannot be contained by anything else; they are both essentially changeless and everywhere the same; they pervade and sustain all things without being perceptible as 'things' themselves; and so on. The notion of emptiness, then, provides a conceptual bridge between our turbulent world of suffering and decay and the imperturbable

realm of Nirvana. To cross that bridge, however, requires persistent and diligent practice, and for this purpose Buddhism offers many different ways of cultivating mindfulness, meditation and mental discipline, in order to cater for the diverse needs and capacities of individual sentient beings. Despite their diversity, however, all these systems and methods of practice have the same fundamental purpose: to deconstruct the mechanism of suffering in the mind, clear away karmic obstacles, and allow our innate enlightenment to emerge.

There are two basic types of obstacle [*āvaraṇa*] that impede this process: emotional obstacles [*kleśāvaraṇa*] and cognitive obstacles [*jñeyāvaraṇa*]. The first of these comes ultimately from our stubborn clinging to the idea of a changeless self [*ātmagrāha*] and from our futile attempt to preserve it in the face of the inexorable impermanence of all things. As a result of this attachment, all kinds of conflicting emotions continually disturb our minds and prevent us from cultivating the inner peace and stability that are essential for the realization of Enlightenment. But if we can accept and understand that there is no such individual self [*pudgala-nairātmya*], these passions will begin to subside and our minds will become calmer. Then we will start to see the nature of our existence and of the world around us more clearly. This understanding will also help to dissolve the false barriers [*pratigha*] that our mind erects between our 'selves' and other living beings, thereby allowing spontaneous compassion for others to arise in our hearts, for as Shantideva says in the first verse of his *Śikṣāsamuccaya*:

If fear and suffering are as distressing  
To others as they are to me,  
What is so special about this self  
That I protect it and not the others?

But our sense of self is defined, not only by our physical form, but also by the environment in which we live. Subject and object are inseparable and interdependent, and our existence as individuals is only intelligible within the spatio-temporal setting that our karma has created for it. It follows that in order to transcend our own suffering and free our minds from their self-imposed limitations, we must eliminate all attachment, not only to our self-image [*ātman*], but also to the supposedly 'objective' reality of the phenomena [*dharma*], the totality of objects and events, that we constantly perceive around us in the course of our lives.

According to the Buddhadharmā, the ultimate source of all these attachments, and hence of all our suffering, is a primordial ignorance [*moha, avidyā*] which divides a seamless reality into an endless concatenation of opposites – existence and nonexistence, mind and body, true and false, right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. As the Buddha said [SN 12.15], the world

relies on the duality of existence and non-existence. But for those who see  
with true wisdom the arising and passing away of the world as it really is,  
there is no such thing as the 'non-existence of the world' or the 'existence of  
the world'

Our inability to see beyond these incompatible opposites is understood in the Mahayana as the result of our 'clinging to phenomena' [*dharmagrāha*], that is, perceiving every object as an independently existing reality distinct from all the rest. This is the principal cognitive obstacle which must be overcome if we are to attain to the unimpeded dualistic awareness of

the buddhas. In other words, we need to understand that our sense of selfhood is supported and continually reinforced by our unquestioning belief that we exist as independent entities within a universe of equally real entities and objects. In order to achieve complete Enlightenment, therefore, it is necessary to realize that not only is there no enduring 'self' in sentient beings [*puḍgala-nairātmya*], but also that there is no real 'self' or substance in any phenomenon whatsoever [*dharmā-nairātmya*] :

When being and nonbeing cease to appear  
As possibilities to the mind,  
Then for want of another alternative,  
It will shed its attachments and be at peace.  
[Shantideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.35]

How does one come to this realization? As mentioned above, the Buddhist scriptures contain many methods of practice that can be cultivated in order to calm and clarify the mind, so that it can be brought under control and gradually purged of the false ideas and distracted thoughts that impede its innate awareness and block the path to Enlightenment. In the Avatamsaka Sutra too there can be found a virtually endless number of such practices. The chapter on "Disengagement from the World" [Ch. 38] alone lists some 2,000 qualities or practices that a bodhisattva can develop or cultivate, and there are many similar lists in other chapters as well. There is however no set of prescribed practices that everybody is required to cultivate. Individual followers of the Ekayana are expected to investigate the many possibilities available and then commit themselves to whichever one(s) seem most likely to be effective in their own personal case.

Nevertheless there is one traditional practice that is especially recommended by the Sutra for its simplicity and effectiveness, and that is mindfulness or contemplation of the Buddha [*buddhānasmṛti*]. In the Pali texts contemplation of the Buddha's qualities is frequently said to be a beneficial form of meditation:

There is one thing which, when suitably cultivated and developed, will lead directly to detachment, dispassion, cessation, supernormal knowledge, complete awakening, Nirvana. And what is that one thing? Contemplation of the Buddha. [AN 1.16.1.1]

The mind of a noble disciple who is cultivating mindfulness of the Tathāgata will not fall prey to greed, hatred or delusion.... You should cultivate this mindfulness of the Tathagata whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, whether you are intent on your work, or relaxing at home surrounded by your children. [AN 11.2.2]

Buddhaghosa offers a detailed explanation of the practice in the seventh chapter of his *Visuddhimagga*.

The Pali Canon [*Vakkali Sutta*, SN 22.87] also contains a well-known passage in which a dying monk is said to have asked to see the Buddha in person before death deprived him of the chance to do so. The Buddha duly came to visit him but also gently rebuked him, pointing out that his physical form was of no value or importance, that the Dharma he had

realized and taught was all that really mattered, and that therefore "Those who see the Dharma see me; those who see me see the Dharma". There are many ways in which this famous statement could be interpreted, but the basic point is perfectly clear: what makes the Buddha important is not his individual identity or his physical manifestation but his buddhahood [*buddhatva*], his great Awakening [*bodhi*] to the real cause of universal suffering and to the possibility of final release from it [*vimukti*].

This point was taken up and further developed by the Mahayana and by the sutras on Transcendental Wisdom mentioned above. Seen from this point of view, the Buddha's physical form is just an 'empty' phenomenon like any other, and attempting to cling to it is pointless and futile, for there is nothing real or substantial to be clung to. As the Diamond [*vajracchedika*] Sutra says,

Those who saw me in my form  
And those who sought me in my voice  
Were wandering on a mistaken path  
And will never see the Tathagata.

The real significance of the Buddha is therefore to be found in the Truth that he discovered and realized in his own person, and as that Truth can be best described in negative terms as the 'absence of self-existence' [*svabhāva-śūnyatā*] in all things, it follows that the contemplation of this 'emptiness' [*śūnyatā*] is equivalent to the contemplation of buddhahood and therefore of the Buddha himself. (See also p.7 above.) According to the Avatamsaka Sutra, the purpose of such contemplation is twofold: to awaken the Aspiration to Enlightenment [*bodhicitt'otpāda*], and to overcome the dualistic habit of regarding our own existence as something separate from the all-pervasive reality of the enlightened awareness that is the Buddha's true nature or 'Dharma-body' [*dharmakāya*].

In Mahayana Buddhism the Aspiration to Enlightenment is generally defined as a deep and unswerving desire to achieve Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This is a recurring theme throughout the Sutra, and many pages are devoted to describing it and emphasizing its importance, as for example:

Then the bodhisattva contemplates the bodily forms assumed by all the beings of the past, present and future and, considering how they soon perish, thinks: "How strange that beings should be so foolish and so lacking in wisdom! In the constant round of birth and death they receive countless fragile and unstable bodies which quickly perish. So it has always been in the past, so it is in the present, and so it will be in the future. And yet they remain incapable of using their unstable bodies to seek an imperishable body."

"I should learn everything that the buddhas have learnt, accomplish omniscience, know the nature of all things, and explain to all beings the fundamental sameness of the three phases of time. I must teach them how to follow the path of stillness, so that the dharma-nature [*dharmatā*] will remain undamaged and they will be able to achieve a state of lasting peace and happiness." (Ch. 21)

The "imperishable body" mentioned here is the Dharmakaya, the 'body' of Enlightenment, and the "three phases of time" are the past, present and future.

This aspiration, this spiritual yearning, is already latent within us, and it can be

awakened by regular contemplation of the gap that appears to divide our current state of ignorance and suffering from the imperturbable serenity of the buddhas. This gap may seem at first to be unbridgeable, but the Sutra assures us that not only do we already possess the luminous wisdom of Enlightenment, it is in fact the essential nature of our own mind:

There is not a single being which is not fully endowed with the wisdom of the tathagatas, but because of their deluded thoughts, their misperceptions, and their attachments, they fail to realize it. If they could free themselves from their deluded ideas, then their innate omniscience, their spontaneous and unobstructed wisdom, would appear clearly before them.  
[*Avatamsaka Sutra*, Ch. 37]

So it is too with the Buddha's wisdom:  
It pervades the mind of every being,  
But is caught up in deluded thoughts,  
And they fail to see or notice it. [Ibid.]

So in his *Song of Realization* Yong Jia says that "the basic nature of ignorance is the buddha-nature" [無明本性即佛性], and Shakyamuni Buddha himself makes the same point in a different way when he affirms (AN I.49) that "This mind is luminous [*pabhassara*] but is stained by adventitious defilements [*āgantukehi upakkilesehi*]".

The barrier between ignorance and Enlightenment is thus an illusion, an 'adventitious defilement' fabricated by our own minds, and what we have ourselves constructed we should also be able to deconstruct. If we can accomplish this task, our innate buddha-wisdom will then emerge spontaneously. This does not mean however that the work of clearing away these obstacles can be easily completed, and for this reason the Sutra reminds us frequently that considerable effort and tireless persistence are needed:

Take pleasure only in the Buddha's Enlightenment,  
Seek the Buddha's wisdom with all your heart,  
Gather your strength and think of nothing else. (Ch. 26)

Take the Buddha as object of meditation,  
Focus your thoughts on that and never desist. (Ch. 24)

Whatever it is you are doing  
Be mindful of Buddhahood  
At all times, day and night. (Ch.9)

Nevertheless there is no doubt that these barriers and obstacles, however formidable they may appear to be, are essentially insubstantial and can therefore be dissolved. According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, all things are in reality 'unimpeded' or 'unobstructed' [*wúàì* 無礙; Skt. *apratigha*]. That is, although they appear to be ontologically distinct from one another, in reality they are all interconnected in a nondual web of awareness, reflecting one another endlessly like images in a mirror-maze. For this reason it is frequently said in the Sutra and the Huayen literature that every word in the Sutra contains the entire text, that each Dharma

practice includes all the other practices, and that there are buddhas turning the wheel of Dharma in every atom of every world:

In all the atoms of all the worlds throughout the universe  
The buddhas become manifest by means of their liberating power.  
[Ch. 2]

Just as the Buddha is present here, so it is in every atom:  
The Buddha's form neither comes nor goes, but is visible everywhere.  
[Ch. 1]

Untold, inconceivable numbers of tathagatas can be seen in the countless  
worlds within every pore of your skin. [Ch. 27]

In other words, Enlightenment is universal and omnipresent. It is present in our minds and bodies, in every particle of the physical universe. It is therefore, in principle, at all times accessible to us, for as the Sutra itself says (Ch. 1), "In every instant of time the Buddha everywhere/ Is pouring down the Dharma's boundless rain".

Contemplation of the Buddha in the light of this understanding is therefore in perfect accord with the nondual nature of all things. This is described by the Huayen masters as 'basing the cause on the result' or, as Fa Zang puts it in his commentary on the *Awakening of Faith*, "growing the branches from the root" [從本起末 - 起信論疏] – that is, basing one's practice on the constant awareness that the result we are seeking (i.e. complete Enlightenment) is already present within us as our 'buddha-nature' [*buddhatā*, 佛性]. Those who practise *buddhānusmṛti* in this way, the Sutra tells us, will become able to see buddhas everywhere and it will become clear to them that Buddhahood itself is a reality which transcends all limitations of time and place:

If you contemplate the Buddha with an unmoved mind,  
You will always see countless buddhas present before you.  
If you always see countless buddhas present before you,  
You will see that Tathagatahood is always there.  
If you see that Tathagatahood is always there,  
Then you will know that the Dharma can never perish.  
And if you know that the Dharma can never perish,  
You will obtain unimpeded eloquence. [Ch. 12]

In the distinctive cosmology of the Avatamsaka Sutra the concept of Buddhahood as a limitless field of awareness is represented by the figure of Vairocana. According to the Sutra, our physical universe consists of an infinite number of world-systems or 'buddhafiels' [*buddhakṣetra*] – island universes roughly comparable, perhaps, to our 'galaxies' – extending throughout the whole of space. These world-systems are said to be of many different varieties and shapes:

The worlds that extend in all directions are of every conceivable type:  
 Some are level and perfectly pure, and their substance is of sapphire;  
 Other worlds are inverted, or tilted, or shaped like a lotus bud,  
 While others again are round, or square – they assume many different forms.  
 [Ch. 2]

Our own world-system is said to be have the form of a gigantic lotus. It contains thousands of different worlds, one of which is the particular world in which we humans live, here called by its traditional Mahayana name of 'Sahaloka' (i.e. the world [*loka*] of endurance [*saha*]). According to the Sutra, these world-systems, in addition to being objects in physical space, are also vast fields of Enlightenment [*buddhakṣetra*] inhabited by beings at various states of awareness. Each of them is said to have a presiding buddha, whose influence pervades the entire system and is felt by beings in different ways, depending on their individual capacities and inclinations. Here in our own world, the presiding buddha is called Vairocana (the "Illuminator"), and in human history he appeared in the form of the bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama, and subsequently as the buddha Shakyamuni. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, therefore, these historical names are treated as equivalent to that of 'Vairocana' and vice versa.

Contemplation of the Buddha as either Vairocana or Shakyamuni is accordingly recommended as a way of breaking through the illusory barriers that appear to separate us from the universal awareness that is the real nature of our mind and the ultimate purpose of our existence as sentient beings. This all-embracing awareness is often referred to in the Sutra and in other Mahayana texts as 'omniscience' [*sarvajñatā*]. But the word 'omniscience' in this context is not meant to imply a pointless knowledge of everything that exists and happens in any literal sense. What it indicates is a completely unobstructed awareness of the actual *nature* of everything that exists or occurs. This is made clear by the Buddha in the "Rohitassa Sutta" [SN 2.3.6/107]:

I declare that within this very body, with its mind and its awareness, can be found the world, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.

In other words, everything that we can perceive or conceive of exists within the field of awareness created by our mind and our senses. It follows that if we fully understand the nature of our mind and 'cleanse the doors of our senses', to use Blake's phrasing, we will also understand the nature of everything that they comprehend. This is 'omniscience'. In the imagery of the Sutra, it is often described as becoming able to see buddhas everywhere; that is, becoming able to see the enlightened awareness that is the authentic and intangible nature of all things.

In addition to the buddha Vairocana, two bodhisattvas also figure prominently in the Avatamsaka Sutra: Manjushri [*Mañjuśrī*] and Samantabhadra. Manjushri appears in many other Mahayana sutras as a bodhisattva who personifies wisdom in particular, and he is frequently referred to as the instructor, or even the progenitor, of the buddhas. He is also well known for the frequency of his intervention in human affairs, and is said to have often appeared to people in different forms to advise or admonish them. Throughout the Buddhist world it was widely believed that he resided somewhere on Wutai Shan ("five-peaked mountain") in China, and many pilgrims came to this holy mountain from India and Central Asia, as well as from all over Asia, in the hope of encountering him there. In the Avatamsaka

Sutra itself Manjushri is the principal teacher in six of the thirty-nine chapters and is implicitly present throughout the story of Sudhana in the final chapter.

For the individual practitioner Manjushri also personifies bodhicitta, the urge to achieve complete Enlightenment, which is already present, albeit unrecognized, within the mind of every sentient being. It is therefore Manjushri who first awakens this impulse in us, and who then, if we pay careful attention, will guide us on the long and difficult path that leads to the final goal, so that we can at last become what we have always been from the very beginning. If therefore Vairocana represents Buddhahood in the Sutra, Manjushri can be said to stand for the Dharma. As for the Sangha, it is symbolized by the bodhisattva Samantabhadra.

Unlike Manjushri, Samantabhadra is seldom mentioned in other Mahayana sutras, but in the Avatamsaka he is an all-pervasive presence, either implicitly or explicitly. On the one hand Samantabhadra is the archetypal practitioner, the model which all followers of the Ekayana should strive to emulate. He therefore embodies the Aryasangha itself, the entire community of enlightened practitioners who are the true 'children of the Buddha':

The nature of things is always still and devoid of qualities.  
 Like empty space it cannot be distinguished or divided.  
 It eludes all attempts to grasp it and lies beyond the reach of words.  
 Utterly real, changelessly pure, it is everywhere the same.  
 If you can truly understand that this is how things are,  
 Then whether they exist or not, the mind will be unperturbed.  
 And if, in order to save the world, you practise diligently,  
 You will then be a true child of the Buddha, born from the Buddha's mouth.  
 [*Avatamsaka Sūtra*, Ch. 26]

In the deepest sense, however, Samantabhadra personifies the realization of Enlightenment itself, for according to the Sutra and the teachings of the Huayen School, committed practice is already the manifestation of Enlightenment in the world, and there can be no such thing as Enlightenment apart from practice, as Li Tungxuan [李通玄] points out in his commentary on the Sutra:

The practices are themselves Enlightenment, for they have no substantial nature of their own. If you cultivate with a view to attaining an Enlightenment beyond the practices, it will be the Enlightenment of the Disciples, of the Solitary Buddhas or of the bodhisattvas who merely contemplate emptiness, and not the sovereign Enlightenment of the Ekayana, of the authentic wisdom of Manjushri, and of the compassionate activities and vows of Samantabhadra.

According to the commentator and Huayen master Cheng Guan [澄觀, 738-840], there are four levels or degrees of awareness, which he called 'realms of perception' [法界, *dharmadhātu*], that is, images of the world as it appears to us. The first of these, the realm of appearances, is that of our ordinary, everyday perception, in which we are only aware of objects and beings as separate entities in time and space. As our awareness deepens with practice, we begin to see that there is another way of perceiving and another world, a 'realm of reality', in which all these distinct appearances are merely fleeting reflections of a

universal reality that is "unborn, unarisen, uncreated, un compounded" and is the real nature of our own mind.

Even this mode of perception, however, still retains a degree of dualism in that, although the two realms we are now aware of coexist and interpenetrate, they are nevertheless clearly distinguishable from one another. There is therefore a still deeper level of awareness, the realm of the nonduality of appearances and reality, or in traditional Buddhist terms, of Samsara and Nirvana, in which every phenomenon is seen to embody the whole of reality and the universal, transcendent reality is identical with all phenomena. This is usually as far as most Buddhist texts, as well as the great seers and mystics of other religions, are prepared to go. But according to the Avatamsaka Sutra, there is one final level of fully enlightened awareness, which is that of all the buddhas. It is referred to as the realm of the mutual nonobstruction (i.e. nonduality) of all phenomena with one another, meaning that every single phenomenon, just as it is, is ontologically identical with every other phenomenon. This is the realm of Samantabhadra, and for that reason the phrase used most often throughout the Sutra for Dharma practice in general is the "vows and deeds" or "commitments and conduct" of Samantabhadra [普賢行願]. For the same reason followers of the Ekayana are also commonly called "Samantabhadra practitioners" [普賢行者].

The entire path of practice, from the first awakening of bodhicitta to the culminating vision of Samantabhadra, is illustrated in the final chapter of the Sutra, which, as mentioned above, tells the story of a young man called Sudhana who travels the length and breadth of India in search of teachers who will help him accomplish the complete Enlightenment of Buddhahood. Then story begins when Manjushri, accompanied by a retinue of monastics, other bodhisattvas, and various deities, arrives in a village or small town called Dhanyākara to expound the Dharma. Sudhana, who lives in Dhanyākara, comes to hear him and is filled with a burning desire to achieve Enlightenment. When he asks Manjushri for further instruction, the bodhisattva sends him to a monk called Meghaśrī. After explaining the nature of his own practice and realization, Meghaśrī instructs him to seek out another guru, who in turn sends him to another, and so on. Proceeding in this way, Sudhana eventually encounters the bodhisattva Maitreya. According to universal Buddhist tradition, 'Maitreya' will be the name of the next buddha to appear in our world at some time in the distant future. That Sudhana should meet him at this stage in the story is therefore a sign that he himself will soon accomplish the Enlightenment he is seeking.

Maitreya ushers the young pilgrim into a great tower, where he sees before him a phantasmagoria of dazzling images – hallways, staircases, statues, jewellery, colourful banners and streamers, bells, incense burners and so on – signifying the infinite spiritual riches that are about to become available to him. When he emerges from the tower, he asks Maitreya a number of questions, and is then sent off in search of his original guru, Manjushri, in order to have the validity of his experience confirmed. After giving Sudhana his blessing, Manjushri tells him that he must now find Samantabhadra, who will set the seal on his long quest by initiating him into the wisdom-realm of Indra's Net, in which each phenomenon mirrors all the rest and every trace of dualism has vanished. Finally Sudhana is granted a vision in which Samantabhadra's body is seen to be coextensive with the entire universe. Within this cosmic body Sudhana sees the bodhisattva himself working for the benefit of sentient beings in every world and leading them towards Enlightenment. Now fully aware that all distinctions between buddha, bodhisattva and sentient being are no more than

insubstantial illusions, Sudhana also sees himself active everywhere within the universe that is Samantabhadra's body, in which he too is now ceaselessly active, relieving the suffering of all beings and opening their minds to the wisdom of Buddhahood.

With this climactic vision the Sutra concludes its narrative, but a long verse passage in praise of Buddhahood, attributed to Samantabhadra, has been traditionally appended to the text as a kind of summing up. The final lines of this passage read as follows:

Just as the sun, without leaving the sky,  
 Lights up the world with its thousands of rays,  
 So too the Buddha neither comes nor goes  
 Yet his light drives darkness from the world.  
 Just as the dragon king pours down rain  
 That comes from neither his body nor his mind,  
 Spreading life-giving moisture everywhere,  
 Dispelling heat and refreshing the world;  
 So too the Tathagata's Dharma-rain  
 Does not emerge from his body or mind  
 And yet it can enlighten all beings  
 And extinguish the threefold poisonous fire.  
 The Tathagata's pure, sublime Body of Truth  
 In all the cosmos has no compare.  
 Though in essence it neither is nor is not,  
 It appears in the world to teach the Path.  
 It depends on nothing and abides nowhere,  
 It never arrives and never departs,  
 Like an image in the air or perceived in a dream --  
 So should the Buddha's true nature be seen.  
 With nothing, whether existent or not,  
 Can the Tathagata ever be compared,  
 For no beast or bird of the hills and the woods  
 Could remain alone in the empty sky.  
 In the ocean there are gems of many hues;  
 So too with the Buddha's various forms;  
 Although beyond form and formlessness  
 He appears as required, but abides nowhere.  
 Empty space, Suchness, ultimate truth,  
 Nirvana, Quiescence, Reality --  
 Only such terms as these can express  
 The nature of the Tathagata.  
 It is possible to count everything that is thought,  
 Or to drink all the water in the sea,  
 To measure space, or bind the wind,  
 But the Buddha's virtues can never be told.  
 Whoever hears of these qualities  
 And is filled with joy, understanding and faith,  
 They too will obtain what has been extolled here;  
 Of that there can be not the slightest doubt.

**Sarvamangalam**



[huayenbuddhism@protonmail.com](mailto:huayenbuddhism@protonmail.com)