

Becoming Samantabhadra: Part I

Vairocana



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I am the eye with which the universe
Beholds itself and knows itself divine.

(Shelley, "Hymn of Apollo")

Prefatory Note

This is the first in a series of articles intended to provide a general outline of Huayen teachings and practices. The articles are mostly based on the Tang Dynasty texts, and on three sources in particular: the writings of Fa Zang [法藏, 643-712] and Li Tungxuan [李通玄, 646-740], and of course the *Avatamsaka* or *Flower Adornment Sutra* [華嚴經] itself. All references to "the Sutra" (with a capital "S") are to the 80-fascicle translation of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* [八十華嚴].

The Huayen Trinity

It seems to be natural to the human mind to conceive of sacred truths or realities as manifesting in triune form. So Christianity has its Holy Trinity, and sets of three principal deities can be found in both Hinduism and Daoism. The practice of Buddhism also begins with taking refuge in the Triple Gem [皈依三寶], and the concept of the Trikaya [三身] or Three Bodies of the Buddha plays a central role in most forms of Mahayana Buddhism.

Huayen is no exception to this general rule. Although the Trikaya doctrine does not form part of the Huayen teachings, the Huayen School has its own trinity of sacred figures, called the Three Saints or Three Holy Ones [三聖], namely, the buddha Vairocana and the two bodhisattvas Manjushri and Samantabhadra. These three may be said to correspond, respectively, to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of the Triple Gem and to the Dharmakaya [法身], Sambhogakaya [報身] and Nirmanakaya [化身] of the Trikaya doctrine.

Vairocana

In the Huayen teachings, then, the Buddha is represented above all by the figure of Vairocana [毘盧遮那佛、盧舍那佛、大日如來]. The Sanskrit word *vairocana* means "solar", and is derived from the verb *virocate*, "to shine, be bright or radiant" like the sun. In the early Buddhist texts Shakyamuni Buddha is sometimes referred to by the epithet "kinsman of the sun" [*adityabandhu*], *aditya* being another word for the sun. In later Buddhist literature also the Buddha is often compared to the sun dispelling the darkness of primordial ignorance by the light of his wisdom. In the *Flower Adornment Sutra*, for example, we read that "just as the sun benefits countless beings in this world by dispelling the darkness and creating light [and so on], so too the light of the Tathagata's wisdom benefits beings everywhere in countless ways". [譬如日出於閻浮提，無量眾生皆得饒益，所謂彼闇作明…如來智日亦復其是以，無量事普益眾生…一如來出現品]

What, then, is the difference between Vairocana and Shakyamuni? In reality there is no difference at all and the Sutra uses the two names interchangeably. But because of our ignorance and emotional confusion we exist in the limited realm of conventional truth [*samvrti-satya*, 俗諦], a realm in which, as William Blake [1757-1827] puts it, "reality was forgot and the vanities of time and space only remembered and called reality" [*A Vision of the Last Judgement*]. So from our conventional point of view we could say that Vairocana is the enlightened awareness that is at the heart of all things and is the true nature of our own mind, while Shakyamuni is that same awareness fully manifested in the form of an individual human being who appeared at a certain time and place in our history. The Sutra tells us that in fact all the buddhas and great bodhisattvas appear to sentient beings in the forms that they can most easily relate to. For us therefore Shakyamuni is the historical form in which Vairocana appeared to human beings on this planet Earth, or the world Endurance [Sahaloka, 娑婆界] as the Buddhist scriptures call it.

So for us, as human beings in this world, Shakyamuni Buddha is our link to the omnipresent Enlightenment that is Vairocana. But how are we to understand the nature of this Enlightenment? One way is to look at the exemplary life of the Buddha himself. As every Buddhist knows, Siddhartha Gautama was inspired to set out on his quest for Enlightenment by the unexpected shock of encountering the three fundamental forms of suffering that sentient beings experience: old age, sickness and death. We generally shy away from contemplating these unpleasant realities but, paradoxically, that is precisely why we continue to suffer from them. In fact, as Siddhartha immediately understood, "the secret of life is suffering. It is what is hidden behind everything" [Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), *De Profundis*]. Accordingly, as he tells us in the "Ariyapariyesana Sutta" of the Pali Canon [*Majjhima Nikaya*, No. 26], "*So then, monks, after some time, while I was still young, my hair as black as a boy's, possessed of youth and health, at the beginning of my life – although my unwilling parents wept and wailed – I removed my hair and beard, put on brown robes, and went forth from home into homelessness.*"

But why did he feel it necessary to take such a drastic step? Was it because his sudden awareness of suffering had led him to despair of the world altogether? On the contrary, his real motive was not despair but hope, for he had glimpsed in his own shocked reaction to suffering a deeper truth: that suffering was not an unavoidable affliction that could only be endured but rather a problem that could be solved, an obstacle that could be overcome. Somewhere in the depths of his mind he knew that there had to be another way of living and relating to the world, another realm of experience that transcended the relentless cycle of suffering, and he set out to find it. In another famous passage from the Pali Canon he sums up this basic insight as follows:

There is something that is unborn, not become, not created, uncompounded; for if there were not, it would not be possible to find a way of escape from what is born, become, created and compounded. But since there is that which is unborn, not become, not created, uncompounded, we know that a way of escape from what is born, become, created and compounded is possible. [*Udana*, VIII.3]

Eventually the Buddha found the unborn reality of Nirvana beneath the Bodhi-tree, simply by looking into his own mind and perceiving its true nature. The Christian writer known as St. Hesychios the Priest, who lived in the 8th or 9th century, says in his notes *On Watchfulness and Holiness* [Section 108] that "just as he who looks at the sun cannot but fill his eyes with light, so he who always gazes intently into his heart cannot fail to be illumined". In the same way Shakyamuni Buddha, by gazing intently into his own heart, discovered the illuminating sun of Vairocana's wisdom and was able to make it available to all beings through his teaching.

Vairocana, then, is the Buddha within us, our buddha-nature [佛性]. As Li Tungxuan says, "The essential nature of consciousness is nothing but True Wisdom, just as the waves created by a cataract are not separate from their essential nature as water." [識體本為真智…如彼瀑流不離水體而生波浪。] We ordinary worldlings [*prthagjana*, 凡夫] are not yet able to see this clearly, for as the Sutra points out in a well-known passage, "The wisdom of the Tathagata is also like this. It is unimpeded and beyond all measure, and can benefit all beings everywhere. It is present in its entirety within the body of every being, but ordinary people are ignorant and cling to their delusions, so they are not aware of its presence and derive no benefit from it." [如來智慧亦復如是，無量無礙，普能利益一切眾生，具足在於眾生心中，但諸凡愚妄想執著，不知不覺，不得利益。—如來出現品]

Nevertheless, as Huayen practitioners we should have faith in the reality of our buddha-nature and always try to be mindful of it, for Huayen practice is primarily based on this. There is a saying that only buddhas can become buddhas, and unless we ground our practice in awareness of our innate Enlightenment [本覺], in our knowledge of the ultimate identity of our own minds with the mind of Vairocana, our practice will bear only karmic fruit within the cycle of birth and death, and Shakyamuni's final illumination will continue to elude us.

But there is another thing that needs to be borne in mind as well. For Huayen the opposition that our dualistic thinking creates between self and world, between subject and object, is also an illusion. Vairocana is therefore as much the ultimate reality of the physical universe in which we live as he is the essential nature of our own minds:

The Dharmakaya of the Tathagata is inconceivable :
It is formless, without attributes, incomparable,
And yet manifests forms and attributes for the sake of living beings,
Appearing everywhere throughout the universe.
In all the atoms of all buddharealms
Vairocana displays his sovereign power.

[如來法身不思議，無色無相無倫匹，
示現色相為眾生，十方受化靡不現，
一切佛刹微塵中，盧舍那現自在力。
—杜順《華嚴五教止觀》]



The Sutra itself repeatedly claims that there are buddhas teaching within every atom, and Fa Zang also points out that "Vairocana pervades worlds as numerous as motes of dust, responding to beings according to their capacities everywhere throughout the universe". [盧舍那周遍塵方，普應法界一切群機]

We could say, then, that Vairocana is equally the gap between our thoughts and the gap between electron shells, the radiant space in which both subconscious and quantum events occur. If Enlightenment often seems impossibly difficult to achieve, Huayen practitioners can at least take comfort in the assurance that it is constantly present and accessible in its fullness, both within our own minds and in the world around us. All we have to do is open our eyes, the eye of Apollo that we have always been endowed with, and then we will discover our true nature as Vairocana.



(Next: Manjushri - to be published in the winter issue)