



THE DAWN OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The Opening Passage of *Avatamsaka Sutra* with a Commentary

By Ven. Haiyun Jimeng

Translated by Tony Prince of Australia

Chapter One: The Title of the Sutra

The full title of the “Avatamsaka” or “Flower Adornment” Sutra is, in Sanskrit, *Mahavaipulya-buddhavatamsaka-sutram*, or in Chinese, *Ta Fang-kuang Fo-hua-yen Ching*. Here the phrase “Mahavaipulya” (great, vast and extensive) indicates a particular realm. What do we mean by a realm? Suppose you go to visit a friend. Then you will be able to see from the way he has furnished and decorated his place what sort of “realm” he is living in. If his home is fairly neat and clean, we can reasonably suppose that he is the sort of person who is fond of peace and quiet. But if everything is horribly messy, it’s quite likely that he tends to do things in a casual or slapdash manner. In this way people project their inner, psychological world onto their external surroundings, and it is this visible arrangement of phenomena that we call a “realm”

The “realms” that are spoken of in the Buddhadharma are also something created by the mind. But now we know that these external phenomena are the projection of an inner world, can we work back from them in order to understand the inner, psychological realm from which they spring?

When the *Avatamsaka Sutra* describes the realm of Buddhahood as “great, vast and extensive” (*mahavaipulya*), it means that the realm of Enlightenment which the Buddha has realized in his own mind is both vast and extensive. What about the “great” then? If something has a limit or boundary, it is no longer “great”. For example, if a central point could be located somewhere in universal space, the universe would no longer be “great” in the sense we are talking about, because anything that has a centre must also have a boundary. Since, however, the universe has no boundary, it also has no before or after, left or right; and so of course it has no centre either.

Now let me ask you: are you able to live in your own inner universe? If you are, you can be as “great” as the physical universe itself, for where there are no boundaries there can be no end, and all things will be in a state of perfect equality.

All the phenomena that fill the whole of space are the projection of our own inner realm. When our consciousness discriminates between things, or produces thoughts that are not pure, our view of the universe will be a restricted one, but if we open our hearts and cease to discriminate in this way, we will be able to embrace the universe in its entirety. This is a very important point. So where is this “greatness” we have been speaking of to be found? It is to be found in purity and nondiscrimination, or as we might say nowadays, in a total absence of egocentricity.

From the point of view of practice, you use up some of your life-force every time you set up a particular goal for yourself. For example, suppose you have arranged to meet someone at a certain place. If the time you agreed on comes and goes and you still haven’t reached your destination, you will certainly be in a great hurry, and not at all inclined to take in your surroundings; whereas, if this wasn’t the case, you would be able to stroll along at your leisure, clearly perceiving everything that’s going on around you. Why do we behave like this? Because in the one case all our attention is focused on a single point, while in the other case there is no such focus. This illustrates the way in which our life-force manifests itself, and you should be quite clear about the significance of this example. It shows that if our mind is free from attachment, then our “realm” will naturally be a “great” one.

The word “great” has another meaning here, too, for it also indicates “essential reality”, something that is real in the ultimate sense, that is present everywhere, at all times and places. For example, when you came here to listen to the Dharma, you would have passed many houses on the way. You may not have been aware of their existence at the time, but they were there nevertheless! This is the kind of reality referred to here as “great”.

Our lives are seldom fully integrated with our surroundings. When we finally achieve a goal that we have struggled for, we may at the same time lose a lot of other things. If we could only understand that the true nature of the universe, its ‘original face’, is present everywhere and can never be lost, we would cease to chase after all these fleeting and elusive goals, and then we would be free from suffering.

So “great, vast and extensive” is a kind of technical description. In terms of Chinese philosophy, “great” refers to the essential nature (*ti*) of the realm with which the Sutra is concerned, “vast” refers to its appearance or manifestation (*hsiang*), and “extensive” refers to its functioning (*yung*). How are we to understand these terms here? If we take a light bulb as an example, we can say that the bulb itself is the ‘appearance’ and the light it emits is its ‘functioning’. But what is its essential nature? Its essential nature is something that we can neither see nor feel; nevertheless, it is capable of exerting an effect and assuming a perceptible form. Since the light bulb is capable of emitting light, must it not be the case that there is some force or energy enabling it to do so? This force or energy is its “essential nature”.

The words “vast” and “extensive” relate to the unfolding of wisdom, but if you want to be fully endowed with wisdom, you must first have faith and understanding. True wisdom can only come from the perfect union of these two qualities. What then must we have faith in? Before anything else we must have faith in our own Buddha-nature. Although at the moment we are still ordinary beings, confused and deluded, we have exactly the same amount of Buddha-nature as the buddhas themselves. The only difference is that in the buddhas it is fully apparent, while we have not yet become aware of its presence within us. So it is said that “sentient beings and buddhas are one: there is no difference between them at all”.

Understanding enables us to see how we should proceed along the path that leads from ignorance to Enlightenment. That is, it will allow us to perceive that our true nature has been covered over by ignorance, and that we have only to cast off this ignorance for our true nature to shine forth in all its completeness. It really is as simple as that. All that remains then is to practise. So once faith and understanding have given rise to wisdom, we have to put our wisdom into practice, and the truth (*li*) that will emerge from the essential nature of our practice is the truth of Suchness. This means that practice in Huayen cannot be

separated from the ultimate truth, and the truth itself cannot be separated from practice. In other words, if our practice takes faith, understanding and wisdom as its starting point, it will be in full accord with this truth and will be grounded in the essential nature of things. In this way the “vastness” and “extensiveness” will complete the “greatness” of its scope.

The three terms can also be explained by saying that “great” refers to the Buddha, “vast” to Samantabhadra, and “extensive” to Manjushri. The “vastness” and “extensiveness” of these two bodhisattvas thus combine to form the “greatness” of Vairocana, and in this way the phrase “great, vast and extensive” can be taken to refer to the Buddha Vairocana himself.

The word buddha in the title refers to the Enlightened One, and avatamsaka means, in Chinese, “flower adornment”. Flowers here stand for spiritual practices, which are the cause for the realization of Enlightenment. That is, the fruit is formed only after the flowers have first bloomed. So “buddha” here also indicates Buddhahood or Enlightenment as the ‘fruit’ or result of practice. The teaching of the Sutra emphasizes practice as the cause for Enlightenment, for the nature of one’s Enlightenment will be determined by the nature of one’s practice. The kind of practice I am talking about is not just a matter of words or intellectual knowledge, but real practice inspired by genuine commitment. That is the only sort of practice that will lead to Enlightenment.

We ordinary, worldly beings are burdened with habits shaped by greed, hatred and delusion, and even though we may now be studying Buddhism, such habits are not so easily got rid of. So for example, you might be walking past a steakhouse and find yourself unable to resist the temptation to go in and enjoy a hearty meal. Then when you get back home you are overcome with guilt, so you kneel before the Buddha and confess your fault, vowing never to do such a thing again. But the next day, when you go the market, you see a nice fresh fish that it would be a pity not to buy and take back home.... In this way we keep failing to exercise self-control, and keep confessing our guilt. Why are we like this? Because our practice and commitment are not strong enough.

Worldly beings have been under the sway of greed, hatred and delusion for many lifetimes, for many aeons. When they begin to study Buddhism and commit themselves to practice of the Dharma, they hope they will be able to cut through the accumulated habits of all those lifetimes at a single stroke, but all too often their goal eludes them. This is because their efforts are misapplied and they are using their minds in the wrong way. What then must we do in order to practice effectively and to use our minds properly?

First of all we have to correct our thinking, our ideas, for then much of our conduct will also be corrected automatically. So it is said that effective practice begins with the correction of our thoughts. We could compare our thoughts in this case to the trunk of a tree: if the trunk is crooked, it needs to be propped up, so that the branches will grow in the right direction. So we need to establish a proper criterion for our practice, and once we have done so we will already be on the path to Enlightenment. Then if we only practice to a tenth of our capacity in this lifetime, we will still find ourselves a tenth of the way to the goal; and if we commit ourselves totally to the practice, our accomplishment will be similarly complete. Even if we are not able to practice at all in this life, as long as we can manage to correct our thinking, we will be born into the Tathagata’s family in our next life, and the seed of Buddhahood will be planted in our hearts.

There are many ways of practicing at the causal stage. The various practices that proceed from the correction of our thinking comprise the Path to Enlightenment, but in Huayen the entire course of practice is referred to as the “Vows and Conduct of Samantabhadra” or “Samantabhadra’s Commitments”. These commitments can provide access to 84,000 teachings, an infinite number of teachings, and to put any one of these teachings into practice is like planting a tree, so if we cultivate an infinite number of such practices, we will have planted an infinite number of trees. However these trees have to be allowed to blossom and

bear fruit; they must not be cut down when they are only half-grown. In other words, whatever practice you are cultivating, you must continue to cultivate it until you have seen your own true nature: this is the flower and fruit of the tree. It is also the “jewel-tree” that the Sutra speaks of. And when you have put all these teachings into practice to the point of seeing your own nature, then there will be “rows of jewel-trees”. This is also the realm of Sukhavati, the pure land of Amitabha.

A realm such as Sukhavati is technically described as a “dependent result” of one’s karma. This term refers to the “receptacle world”, that is, the material circumstances into which one is born. The “direct result” may be the “world of inner Enlightenment”, if one has managed to achieve that level of realization, but if not, then it will be the “world of the five aggregates”, because ordinary beings are dominated by these five constituents of existence, namely, form, feeling, cognition, motivation and consciousness.

So long as we succeed in perfecting our practice here and now, we too will be able to achieve this world of inner Enlightenment, but in order to do so, we have to start with the particular type of practice we are doing. It could be reciting the scriptures, or repeating the Buddha’s name, or sitting quietly in meditation. Any of these methods can take you to the point of seeing your nature, and then we can call them ‘adornments’. When a teaching is practiced to perfection so that it becomes, as it were, a kind of ornament of Enlightenment, then we call it a “Buddha-adornment” (*buddhavatamsaka/ fo hua-yen*). What such “Buddha-adornments” reveal is the realm of “essence, manifestation and function” (*ti hsiang yung*). Or, to put it another way, it is the “flower-adornment of Buddhahood” that completes the “great, vast and extensive” realm of the Sutra, and so enables us to speak of a realm which is the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood” (*ta fang-kuang fo-hua-yen/ mahavaipulya-buddhavatamsaka*).

But the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood” is not quite the same thing as the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood Sutra”, for the former refers to the realm that the Lord Buddha realized under the Bodhi Tree at the time of his Enlightenment, while the latter refers to a communication of that realm, in speech or writing, delivered to others who have entered the same realm. In fact, when the realm of Enlightenment is expressed in words like this, there exists a certain gap between the expression and the actual realm itself. What is the nature of this gap? When you succeed in entering that realm yourself, everything will suddenly become perfectly clear, but if I were to try and explain it now, it would just be adding another gap to the one that already exists! It’s like the way we often use light as a metaphor for wisdom. Do you really know what wisdom is? I doubt that you do! So again there is a gap between the wisdom itself and the simile or metaphor we use to explain it.

So the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood” is a realm that we need to experience, while the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood Sutra” is a text that we can easily get to know. What we have to do, then, is turn knowledge into experience. When you read the Sutra, it is essential that you know how to absorb its real meaning, for otherwise you are only counting someone else’s treasure. The text of the Sutra contains a wealth of meaning, but if you don’t know how to convert it into genuine understanding, it will remain nothing more than intellectual knowledge. We have to learn from the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood Sutra” how to enter the realm of the “Great, Vast and Extensive Flower-adornment of Buddhahood”. Otherwise our reading of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* will bring us only worldly, material blessings.

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