

# Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka) Sutra

## Introduction

A Mahayana scripture, the Flower Ornament Sutra (*Avatamsaka* in Sanskrit and *Huayan jing* in Chinese) is both one of the longest in the Buddhist canon (much longer than the bible) and one of its most picturesque, otherworldly, and magical.<sup>1</sup> Although the sutra contains many teachings, it is best known for its philosophy of interpenetration of infinite realms, all of which contain one another, a philosophy that served as the doctrinal basis for the Huayan (Hua-Yen) school of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The title (flower ornament or garland) symbolizes the Buddha's accumulated virtues by the time of his enlightenment, all of which splendidly adorn him in floristic glory. According to Buddhist lore, advanced bodhisattvas preached this long sutra in a series of nine assemblies soon after Shakyamuni's enlightenment to convey the essence of his vision. The sutra is considered the culmination of the Buddha's teaching in the Huayan school.<sup>3</sup>

This primer provides summaries of the sutra's origin and history, and main teachings.

## Origin and Brief History

Perhaps intended as a very large reader with a focus on the theme of the Bodhisattva's path to Buddhahood, the Flower Ornament Sutra is composed of a large number of both originally independent scriptures and others likely created for inclusion in the sutra. All were brought together in a number of combinations, perhaps in Khotan in Central Asia, in India, or even China itself, in the late third or fourth century CE. Three complete early translations remain extant: a translation into Chinese by Buddhahadra in 60 scrolls in 418-21 CE, a second translation into Chinese by the Khotanese monk Siksanda in 80 scrolls completed in 699 CE, and a translation into Tibetan by Jinamitra in the eighth-century. Many parts of the sutra were translated independently, especially the famous "The Ten Stages" of the bodhisattva's path to enlightenment (the *Dasabhumika Sutra*, Chapter 26 in the 80-scroll version) and "Entry Into the Realm of Reality" (the *Gandavyuka Sutra*, Chapter 39, the last of the chapters in the 80-scroll version). Since the number of chapters in the two Chinese versions differs in size (34 to 39), it is generally thought that entries were added to the text over time, perhaps as its intent and scope became clearer. Alternatively, different collections of chapters may merely reflect the intent of each version. Thomas Cleary translated the entire sutra into English from the Siksanda edition in the 1980s. No complete Sanskrit version of the text remains extant, though sections of it do.<sup>4</sup>

## Main Teachings of the Flower Ornament Sutra

For purposes of this primer, whose goal is to present a simplified introduction to the complex and lengthy Flower Ornament Sutra, the focus of the 39 chapters in the 80-scroll version of the sutra are assigned to one of four categories, though many chapters contain more than one focus. The four categories are: (1) the nature of the world as seen by Buddhas (chapters 4, 5, and 30); (2) the nature of Buddhas and their powers (chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 13, 14, 19, 20, 23, 24, 31, 33, 34, 35, and 37); (3) the qualities of bodhisattvas and their

quest (chapters 22, 25, 27, 28, 29, 32, 36, and 38); and (4) what is learned and what happens in practice and during Awakening? (chapters 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 26, and 39).<sup>5</sup> By learning to understand through meditational practice the nature of Buddhas and their powers, and the nature of the world as Buddhas see it, bodhisattvas are able to cultivate Buddha-like abilities through systematic stages of meditative practice that lead to Buddhahood.

If you are intent on reading at least parts of the sutra, be forewarned: the sutra is not written as a narrative, as many early sutras are, but in what has been called speculative mysticism. Here is an example from Chapter 26:

At that time a radiance called “light of the power of enlightening beings” emanated from the circle of hair between the eyebrows of Shakyamuni Buddha, accompanied by innumerable rays of light, illuminating all worlds in ten directions, stopping all evils and suffering, eclipsing all realms of demons, illuminating the circles of innumerable buddhas, revealing the features, occult powers, and mystic transformations in the inconceivable realms of the buddhas, illuminating the enlightening beings empowered to teach in the circles of all buddhas in all worlds in the ten directions; having shown the inconceivable mystical power of the Buddha, it formed a great tower of networks of clouds of light up in the sky ...

... and the sutra proceeds in this manner for over 1,400 pages in Cleary’s translation. Each of the four categories is briefly described below.

**The Nature of the World as Seen by Buddhas.** Unlike a world filled with discreet objects with hard edges, as we the unenlightened see it, reality for a Buddha lacks individual objects with their own intrinsic nature separate from other objects. Their world is a universe of constant flow and flux in which individual phenomena perfectly and infinitely interpenetrate, and are contained in, each other. But while everything implies and influences, and is within, everything else, no phenomenon is confused with another. In the sutra this is called the *dharmadhātu*, the Dharma-realm (or cosmos) of emptiness. It is seen as a world of radiance, of pure luminosity with no hidden, dark corners. This is considered the way things really are and is the world as seen by Buddhas.

This imagery of interpenetration, inter-causality, and interbeing, while a theme of the sutra, was later illustrated in a more easily understood manner by Tu-shun (557-640), the First Patriarch of Hua-Yen Buddhism in the now well-known metaphor of Indra’s Jewel Net: “In the realm of the god Indra is a vast net that stretches infinitely in all directions. In each ‘eye’ of the net is a single brilliant, perfect jewel. Each jewel also reflects every other jewel, infinite in number, and each of the reflected images of the jewels bears the images of all the other jewels – infinity to infinity. Whatever affects one jewel affects them all.”<sup>6</sup> A metaphor in Chapter 39 of the sutra, *Entry into the Realm of Reality*, captures the same notion: Sudhana, a pilgrim, enters the Tower of Maitreya and sees “hundreds of thousands of other towers simultaneously arrayed; he sees those towers as infinitely vast as space, evenly arrayed in all directions, yet these towers were not mixed up with one another, being each

mutually distinct, while appearing reflected in each and every object of all the other towers.”<sup>7</sup>

The Buddha’s universe was not, however, a real world as we commonly understand the word real. It is a manifestation of the Buddha Vairocana, a world of flows and ebbs that are an expression of Mind. As expressed by Luis Gómez, “Endless action arises from the mind; from action (arises) the multifarious world. Having understood that the world’s true nature is mind, you display bodies of your own in harmony with the world. Having realized that this world is like a dream, and that all Buddhas are like mere reflections, that all principles [dharmas] are like an echo, you move unimpeded in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

**The Nature of Buddhas and Their Powers.** In contrast to most sutras, the Buddha of the Flower Ornament Sutra is the Buddha Vairocana, the Great Illuminator Buddha. Since things in the universe of Buddhas lack intrinsic existence, that is, are “empty,” the mind of Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas can enter into and through all things, move through walls since walls lack intrinsic existence, make things happen at a great distance because there is no real distance (or space), and through magical power manifest things, such as the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, who also is a mystical emanation from Vairocana. As such, the world of the Buddhas is one of magic and fabulous visions, all of which is experienced through meditation. Thus, as in Yogacara Buddhism, all reality arises out of and is a manifestation of Mind.

Although we as unenlightened beings may see this as magic and fantasy, for a Buddha this is simply the way the world is. If all is Mind, the magical transformations the Buddha creates through meditation are no less real, if not more so, than what we perceive to be real – in fact, they are according to Yogacara Buddhism the true nature of things. While a Buddha’s ability to cause change at great distances may appear again as magic, it simply reflects the fact that reality is mind-made and a continuum of consciousness.

Equally astounding is a Buddha’s knowledge, examples of which are spread throughout the sutra. Here is an example from Chapter 4 (The Formation of the Worlds): “Children of Buddha, the Buddha’s pure knowledge of the formation and disintegration of all oceans of worlds is unconceivable. Their knowledge of the oceans of actions of all sentient beings is inconceivable. Their knowledge of the oceans of structures of all elemental realms is inconceivable. Their knowledge, which can tell of the oceans of all inclinations, understandings, and faculties, is inconceivable. Their instantaneous knowledge of all the past, present, and future is inconceivable” (and so on for 21 more pages).<sup>9</sup>

While seemingly otherworldly in the sutra, the motive behind the magical interventions of Buddhas is great compassion for all beings, for Buddhas always act with the best interests of sentient beings in mind.

**The Qualities of Bodhisattvas and Their Quest.** Attention often focuses when reading the sutra on the nature of the interpenetrating world as seen by Buddhas and on the nature of Buddhas and their power. A careful reading of the text nonetheless shows a greater concentration on the qualities and attainments of bodhisattvas (referred to as enlightening beings in the sutra) and their quest, for the sutra is ultimately about the path that leads to

Awakening. Here is an example of the qualities of a bodhisattva from Chapter 22 (Ten Inexhaustible Treasures): “Then the Enlightening Being Forest of Virtue also said to the enlightening beings, ‘Children of Buddhas, great enlightening beings have ten kinds of treasury, which have been, will be, and are explained by the Buddhas of past, future, and present. What are the ten? They are the treasury of faith, the treasury of ethics, the treasury of shame, the treasury of conscience, the treasury of learning, the treasury of giving, the treasury of wisdom, the treasury of recollection, the treasury of preservation, and the treasury of elocution.”<sup>10</sup> The chapter goes on to describe each of these attainments in 12 pages.

A second example is the “Ten Dedications” in Chapter 25: “Children of Buddhas, great enlightening beings have inconceivable great vows, filling the cosmos, able to save all sentient beings. That is, to learn and practice the dedications of all Buddhas of past, present, and future. How many kinds of dedications have the great enlightenment beings? What are they? (1) Dedication to saving all sentient beings without any mental image of sentient beings. (2) Indestructible dedication. (3) Dedication equal to all Buddhas. (4) Dedication reaching all places. (5) Dedication of inexhaustible treasures of virtue. (6) Dedication causing all roots of goodness to endure. (7) Dedication equally adapting to all sentient beings. (8) Dedication with the character of true thusness. (9). Unattached, unbound, liberated dedication. (10) Boundless dedication equal to the cosmos. These are the ten kinds of dedication of great enlightening beings, which the past, future, and present Buddhas have, will, and do expound.”<sup>11</sup>

Supplementing the stages of practice, then, bodhisattvas are expected to work on and develop qualities that enhance their progress toward enlightenment and true Buddhahood.

**What is Learned and What Happens in Practice and During Awakening?** Although attention has usually focused on the sutra’s description of the world of interconnectedness and the magical powers of Buddhas, its emphasis is on promoting awakening and easing suffering, as stressed above. Direct descriptions of what is involved in this path occur most famously in Chapter 26 (The Ten Stages) and the climax of the sutra, Chapter 39 (Entry into the Realm of Reality). Chapter 26 describes ten stages a bodhisattva must traverse to attain full Enlightenment and Buddhahood. These ten stages of enlightening beings are the “stage called Extreme Joy, that called Purity, that called Refulgence, that called Blazing, that called Difficult to Conquer, that called Presence, the called Far-Going, that called Immovable, that called Good Mind, and the stage of enlightening beings called Cloud of Teaching.”<sup>12</sup> Each stage or level of training is associated with specific practices, qualities, and attainments, and must be completed before the next stage can be entered. As bodhisattvas move up through the levels they attain greater magical power and wisdom, and become more Buddha-like.

Chapter 26 describes what the accomplishments (attainments) of each of these stages are in 117 pages. In the first stage, the stage of Extreme Joy, for example, fledgling bodhisattvas have their “first direct, if still somewhat distant, perception of emptiness,” work “at the perfection of generosity” and ethical behavior, and “prepare themselves for the cultivation of mundane meditative absorption that comes on the second level”; In the fourth stage they “cultivate the perfection of effort and eliminate deeply rooted afflictions, and

cultivate the thirty-seven factors of awakening”; In the seventh stage bodhisattvas “develop the ability to contemplate signlessness uninterruptedly and enter into advanced meditative absorption for extended periods of time,” learn to “adapt their teaching tactics to the needs of audiences,” and “develop the ability to know the thoughts of others.”<sup>13</sup> In simple terms, in Stage 1 bodhisattvas affirm their faith in their innate ability to achieve Buddhahood and use concentration meditation to realize the empty nature of reality, in stages 2-7 they use meditation to purify themselves and accumulate wisdom and magical powers, and in stages 8-10 they have completely purified themselves and are completely absorbed in the dharma and are destined for full Buddhahood, though they must solidify their Buddha-like features in these later stages.

In the climax and longest section of the sutra (Entry into the Realm of Reality), Sudhana, a spiritual pilgrim, meets in sequence a wide variety of 53 wise advisers, both female and male, all of whom are bodhisattvas and deepen his understanding of the stages of the Path.<sup>14</sup> The advisers include a prostitute, a slave, a child, Gautama Buddha’s wife and his mother, a ship’s captain, a queen, a princess, and even several goddesses. At the end of his travels, Sudhana meets Maitreya and enters the Tower of Maitreya, then meets Manjusri Bodhisattva, the bodhisattva of great wisdom, and finally the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who teaches him that the magical powers and wisdom he has attained are to be only used in compassion for all beings. The message this section of the sutra conveys is “that with a subtle shift of perspective we may come to see that the enlightenment that the pilgrim so fervently sought was not only with him at every stage of his journey, but before it began as well – that enlightenment is not something to be gained, but ‘something’ the pilgrim never departed from.”<sup>15</sup>

And thus ends one of the greatest, most detailed, and most visionary of all Buddhist sutras.

#### Notes

1. For the sutra, see Cleary (1984-87, 1993). For brief recaps of each chapter in the 80-scroll version of the sutra, see the introductions in Cleary (1984-87, 1993) and Prince (2014:221-256). Avatamsaka Sutra is short for Buddhāvataṃsaka Sutra.
2. For Huayan Buddhism, see the primer of that name in this series. Contra India, it was common in East Asian Buddhism for schools to be based on the study of a particular sutra. As another example, Tiantai Buddhism was based on the Lotus Sutra.
3. Because of the difficult and other-worldly vision of the way of the world that the Buddha saw in his awakening, and as conveyed in the sutra, the Buddha initially decided not to teach his vision directly but as suited to the capacity of his audience. The result over time was a confusing array of teachings at various levels that Mahayana Buddhism later attempted to order from simplest and most watered-down to his true vision. This process of doctrinal classification became an objective of Huayan Buddhism as well.
4. See note 1 above. On the early roots of the sutra in greater India and China, see Nattier (2005), Hamar (2007) and Ōtake Susumu (2007). For the names of each chapter in the 60-scroll and 80-scroll versions of the sutra, see Cleary (2016). For a Tibetan Buddhist slant on the sutra, see Hopkins (1974). For a contemporary commentary, see Haiyun Jimeng (2006).
5. It is helpful in comparing the nature of the chapters in the 80-scroll version to know where they were spoken, for they were spoken in seven places during nine assemblies, both in the human

realm (assemblies 1, 2, and 7-9) and in the heavens (assemblies 3-6). The first assembly was held at the site of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment (chapters 1-6), the second in the hall of universal light (chapters 7-12), the third on the peak of Mount Sumeru (chapters 13-18), the fourth in the palace of the Suyama Heaven (chapters 19-22), the fifth in the palace of the Tushita Heaven (chapters 23-25), the sixth in the heaven of control of others' emanations (chapter 26), the seventh again in the hall of universal light (chapters 27-37), the eighth also in the hall of universal light (book 38), and the ninth assembly in this world at Jeta Grove (chapter 39).

6. Barbara O'Brien. 2016. "Indra's Jewel Net: A Metaphor for Interbeing." Accessed on the Web on 06/15/2-17.
7. Cleary 1987 (vol 3, p. 366).
8. Gómez (1967: lxxxi). Note that since the teachings in the sutra acknowledge that all things lack intrinsic existence (i.e., are empty) and that all things are the untainted awareness of consciousness, they combine aspects of both Madhyamika and Yogacara Buddhism.
9. Cleary 1984 (vol. 1, p. 182).
10. Cleary 1984 (vol. 1, p. 485). Specific qualities (necessary skills and understandings) are preconditions for the Buddha-like attainments acquired in each stage.
11. Cleary 1984 (vol. 1, p. 531).
12. Cleary 1986 (vol. 2, pp. 9-10).
13. Cleary 1986 (vol. 2, pp. 15-82).
14. For a short list of each Bodhisattva in sequence and their contribution to Saldana's awakening, see Li Tongxuan (1989).
15. Where?

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