

Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sūtra

Introduction

The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā (Śrīmālādevīsīmhanādasūtra, the Śrīmālā Sūtra, or simply the Śrīmālā) is an early Mahayana Buddhist text that is notable for its portrayal of “Embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine” (the embrace of this sutra and of Mahayana thought and practice more generally) and its discussion of the *tathagatagarbha* theory (the potentiality of enlightenment in all sentient beings, including women), for which it is the principal introductory scripture.¹ Among its other important teachings are the One Vehicle (*ekayana*) doctrine, the differentiation of the Arhat and Pratyekabuddhas from the Bodhisattva in their manner of attaining enlightenment, the “three bodies made of mind” theory, and the *tathagatagarbha* doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*). These and other teachings in the sutra appear to mark a transitional and revisionist attitude toward traditional Mahayana (Madhyamaka) doctrine. The Śrīmālā, which is a *tathagatagarbha* sutra, was particularly influential in East Asian Buddhism and the development of Zen (Chan) Buddhism in China and Japan.²

This primer provides an overview of the literary history of this important early Mahayana text, its structure, five of its teachings, and two characteristics of the text. Notes and a bibliography are included for those interested in more fully understanding the sutra.

Literary History

Buddhist scholars suggest that the text was likely a third-century C.E. product of the Mahasamghika Buddhist sect of the Andhra region of southeastern India.³ Although the Śrīmālā was largely ignored by monastic scholars, the presence of large numbers of citations and references to it in surviving Indic language Buddhist literature indicates that it was widely circulated at one time throughout India.⁴ The Śrīmālā is no longer extant in Sanskrit except for fragments and quotations from it.⁵ However, Dharmakṣema (d. 432), a native of central India, translated the text into Chinese in China in 420 (now lost), as did Ganabhadra (394-468), also a native of central India, in 535-36, and Bodhiruci (672-727), a native of south India, in the early eighth century. The sutra was translated into Tibetan in the early ninth century. As a result it has been preserved in both the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist canons. At least three translations are now available in English.⁶

The Śrīmālā profoundly influenced the later Lankavatara Sūtra (in part for its “embryo of the Tathagata”), is the most cited text in the Ratnagotravibhāga analysis of the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, and likely had a strong influence on the development of the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* in China.⁷ Nonetheless, the Śrīmālā began to fade in China by the early eighth century.

The reasons are likely the rising popularity of the *Awakening of Faith* and the growing popularity of the merging of Yogacara and tathagatagarbha concepts. Also in the early eight century, the evolving Chan sect began to focus more on the easier to assimilate Prajnaparamita literature than on the more difficult Lankavatara Sutra, a family member of the Śrīmālā, as the number of monks in training expanded from a few to hundreds and eventually thousands.

The Structure of the Śrīmālā Text

It appears that there were no subdivisions within the text in the original Sanskrit manuscript. However, later Chinese and eventually English translations do incorporate subdivisions to enhance ease of reading and understanding of the sutra's teachings. In their translation, Wayman and Wayman divide the sutra into four chapters bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue, which are subdivided still further into fifteen subdivisions (see the attached Appendix for the Table of Contents and a synopsis of the text).⁸

The Storyline and Selected Teachings in the Śrīmālā

The *Śrīmālā* recounts Queen Śrīmālā's explanation of the doctrine of the Tathagatagarbha in the presence of the Buddha, after her parents send her a letter requesting that she study the teaching of the Dharma. Like Mahayana sutras in general, the *Śrīmālā* is full of magical imagery (e.g., 'there descended a shower of heavenly flowers, and heavenly sounds were heard in the air') and the Buddha is a supernatural being, not an historical person as generally found in Theravada sutras. Because of the length and intricacy of the sutra, this section is restricted to an overview of five of its teachings and two of its distinctive characteristics.⁹ For convenience, the origin of quotations in this section of the primer are marked WW for Wayman and Wayman (1990), and P for Paul (2017).

The Transitional Nature of Mahayana Doctrine in the Sutra. When one first reads Buddhist sutras, a natural tendency is to regard them as definitive teachings of the Buddha outside place and time (for the Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism is eternal, outside place and time). As one acquires a deeper understanding of the sutras, one learns that Buddhist thought developed through time, often in the form of arguments between groups of adherents about the true teachings of the Buddha. The *Śrīmālā* is no different, for it contains views that seem to reflect a paradigm shift within early Mahayana. These include new views of emptiness (*sunyata*), the four noble truths, the role of faith along the path, the existence of a self, the tathagatagarbha, and the presence of a Buddha-nature within every person.

As an early paradigm shift sutra, the *Śrīmālā* contains inconsistencies and omissions, which is one of its characteristics. A few examples: If everything lacks inherent existence, what then is the status of the first noble truth? How do we account for the need for liberation given that there is in fact no real suffering? and How is one to reconcile the notion of an intrinsically pure mind with the existence of defilements? As Richard King concludes, "Perhaps this reflects the

fact that the Srimala is a relatively early text and as such is either unaware or unwilling to come to terms with some of the trickier philosophical aspects of its basic position.”¹⁰ Many of the inconsistencies and omissions are resolved (in one way or another) in later sutras like the Mahaparinirvana Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra, and especially in the Ratnagotra commentary. This shift of ideas in the Mahayana was of particular importance in East Asian Buddhism where these ideas became of increasing importance.

Classification of Persons Along the Path. Unlike some later tathagatagarbha sutras, the Śrimālā differentiates between sets of people who progress along the path at different rates. At the beginning of the path (called the ‘Great Vehicle’ in the text), a first set is made up of “Disciples and the Self-Enlightened [at this beginning stage], and Bodhisattvas newly entered in the Great Vehicle.” Another set much further advanced along the path is made up of “Arhats [the earlier Disciples], the Self-Enlightened [now called Pratyekabuddhas], and Bodhisattvas who have attained power.” These two sets represent persons in progress and then nearing fulfillment. However, the Queen regards the Bodhisattvas in each set as superior to the disciple/arhat and self-enlightened/Pratyekabuddhas, who necessarily proceed at a slower rate of progress along the path because of their particular non-bodhisattva practices.¹¹

The One Vehicle (*ekayāna*). Traditionally, it was said that Buddhist disciples seek their goal along one of three paths or vehicles, that of the arhats (*śravakas* or disciples who seek personal liberation), *pratyekabuddhas* (the self-enlightened, usually because an enlightened teacher is not present), and *bodhisattvas* (those who are committed to saving all beings, not just themselves). According to the Śrimālā, the notion of three vehicles or paths was proposed only as a skillful means to attract beings to the Buddha’s teaching. As the sutra states, “This being the case the three vehicles are one” (WW p. 92). The development of the “One Vehicle” theory takes up roughly half of Chapter Three in Wayman and Wayman, which reflects its importance in the sutra. Since the One Vehicle contains all the Buddha’s definitive teachings, all persons will arrive (if at different rates of progress) at an identical enlightenment.

The Tathagatagarbha Theory. In the sutra the tathagatagarbha and the *dharmakaya* (the Buddha’s celestial body) are considered the same ‘thing,’ although the tathagatagarbha is obscured by defilements in the unenlightened person while the *dharmakaya* is the Buddha as he really is free of defilements. As explained in the Śrimālā, the *dharmakaya* is:

beginningless, uncreated, unborn, undying, free from death; permanent, steadfast, calm, eternal; intrinsically pure, free from all the defilement-store; and accompanied by Buddha-natures more numerous than the sands of the Ganges, which are nondiscrete, knowing as liberated and inconceivable. This Dharmakaya of the Tathagata when not free from the store of defilement [i.e., the *klesas*, ‘passions’] is referred to as the Tathagatagarbha. (WW p. 98)

Some attributes of the tathagatagarbha mentioned in the sutra are: unborn and undying; permanent, steadfast, and eternal; profound and subtle; intrinsically pure, radiant consciousness; and the base, support, and foundation of all constructed [conditioned] phenomena. But because it is enmeshed within defilements, it is also the basis for samsara, the round of rebirth, and as such unenlightened persons experience suffering. And because they experience suffering, if it were not for the tathagatagarbha, “there would be neither aversion towards suffering nor longing, eagerness, and aspiration towards Nirvana.” (WW p. 105). There is a mystery here too, for how can the tathagatagarbha that appears defiled be intrinsically pure and never defiled? As the Śrīmālā states, “It is difficult to understand the meaning of the intrinsically pure consciousness in a condition of defilement ...” (WW pp. 106-07).

Although the tathagatagarbha does not receive extensive treatment in the Śrīmālā, it remains a central if somewhat ambiguous concept in the text, where it is referred to it as the base, support, and foundation of all constructed phenomena (WW pp. 104-05). As such, it is unborn and undying, and excludes the ‘constructed realm’ from itself. It is permanent, steadfast, and eternal, and yet is not to be mistaken for a personal self. It is also profound and subtle, and is the support of *samsara* (all of which needs some digesting).

There is, then, some uncertainty in the Śrīmālā about just what the tathagatagarbha is. In the text, the tathagatagarbha is said to be not empty (*āśūnyata*) in so far as “it contains inconceivable Dharmas more numerous than the sands of the Ganges” (WW p. 99). This suggests that it could be used to denote a container or pure *buddha-dharma*. Earlier in the sutra, however, we find the statement that the *dharmakaya* of the Tathagata is “free” from the shell of defilements. This is a clear indicator that it was the defilements that are impure ‘shells’ essentially separate from but containing the innumerable buddha-dharmas. If that is the case, they either constitute the tathagatagarbha itself or are themselves ‘contained’ within it. Generally speaking, however, it seems that the understanding of tathagatagarbha as a ‘Buddha-womb’ only really came to the fore in an East Asian Buddhist context. So clearly there is some confusion as to the precise meaning of the term in this text.¹²

A Different View of Emptiness. Like tathagatagarbha sutras in general, the Śrīmālā views the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyata*) quite differently from the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, which posits the lack of an abiding self in all dharmas. The Śrīmālā asserts, instead, that while the tathagatagarbha *is* empty of knowledge that is not directed at salvation, it is not empty of the inconceivable virtues that characterize a Buddha. In consequence, the tathagatagarbha doctrine of emptiness conceives of emptiness as both empty and nonempty.¹³ The sutra was extremely influential in clarifying this tathagatagarbha view of emptiness.

The Importance of Faith. Given the profound meaning of concepts like the existence of tathagatagarbha and the four noble truths, the Śrīmālā insists that unenlightened followers of the

Buddha must accept these teachings on faith (*śraddhā*) alone, for their true meaning can only be understood by those who are enlightened.

Can Women Become Buddhas? Another especially interesting characteristic of the sutra is a new and open view of women in Buddhism, a spiritual tradition in which it was said at times that a woman had to transform into a man to be enlightened. According to Diana Paul (P p. 5), “The text is a unique development within the Buddhist tradition because of its egalitarian and generous view concerning women, portraying, on the one hand, the dignity and wisdom of a laywoman and her concern for all beings, and, on the other, the role of woman as philosopher and teacher “[referring here to Queen Śrīmālā]. Paul continues (P p. 6), “The text raises the question of the possibility of female buddhas. The question had continually vexed Buddhist scholars and commentators, who attempted to come to terms with the possibility of a relationship between the notion of the ultimate spiritual perfection or buddhahood and the feminine. Such a relationship was viewed with ambivalence. This question was raised only by Mahayana Buddhists, particularly those who proclaimed the one path (One Vehicle) to universal buddhahood. For these Buddhists, all men and women equally had the nature of the Buddha.”

And thus ends a key sutra that discusses the Tathagatagarbha doctrine in an early stage of its development.

Notes

1. For an overview of the sutra, see the ‘Śrīmālādevīsimhanādasūtra’ entry in Buswell and Lopez (2013: 852-53) and Wayman and Wayman (1990: 1-55). Also see Mark (2011) for an extensive commentary on the sutra by Shotōku (574-622), a renowned Japanese regent prince who is said to have been a devotee Buddhist. In contrast to Madhyamaka Mahayana Buddhism, which is a second turning of the wheel of the dharma teaching, the Śrīmālā is part of the third turning. For the difference, see ‘The Three Turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma’ in this primer series. Wayman and Wayman (1990: 7-8) also stress that the text touches “upon the basic features of Buddhism, such as faith, the path, the goal; and in rendering decisions on some of the knotty and disputed points in Buddhist history, such as the status of the Arhat, the meaning of the Dependent Origination formula, and the threshold of Enlightenment.”
2. For the tathagatagarbha set of sutras, see Radich (2015).
3. For example, Wayman and Wayman (1990: 3), Magee (2006: 451-52), Barber (2008: 153-54), and Brown (2010: 3); Williams (2009: 105) remarks, however, that, “The point remains controversial....” This is the same sect that wrote the remaining early tathagatagarbha sutras. See the Tathagatagarbha Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra in this primer series. It should be noted that the Mahasamghika sect was a so-called ‘Hinayana’ (lesser vehicle) sect and not a Mahayana sect.
4. Although the tathagatagarbha strand of Buddhism produced some tension in India, monastic scholars largely ignored the text, perhaps because of its emphasis on faith. Faith in this context reduces both scholastics and laypeople together to the unenlightened, for neither can see Reality (Thusness) as it truly is (Wayman and Wayman 1990: 92), a conclusion scholastics likely found troubling.
5. Extensive quotations from the sutra are found in the Sanskrit text of the Ratnagotravibhaga, as well as in some recently discovered fragments conserved in the Schøyen collection. Founded by Martin Schøyen in the twentieth century, the Schøyen Collection is the largest private manuscript collection in the world. It is mostly located in Oslo and London. The Ratnagotra is a fifth-century overview of tathagatagarbha theory. Over twenty Chinese commentaries on the sutra were composed, the most influential being those by Jingying Hutyuan (523-592), Jizang (549-623), and Kuiji (632-682).
6. Chang (1983), Wayman and Wayman (1990 [1974]), Paul (2017 [2004]). The Wayman and Wayman translation runs to about 11,333 words and Paul’s to 10,354 words. The sutra is divided into fourteen or fifteen chapters that translators have grouped together in various ways. While Paul’s translation separates the sutra into fifteen chapters, Wayman and Wayman bracket the main teachings with a

- prologue and an epilogue, and group fifteen sections of the main teaching into four chapters, each which has a distinctive focus (see the Appendix for the Wayman and Wayman table of contents).
7. The Śrīmālā's "embryo of the Tathagata" is equated in the Lankavatara Sutra with the Yogacara concept of the "storehouse consciousness" (alaya-vijnana). For the Lankavatara Sutra and the *Awakening of Faith*, see the primer series.
 8. According to Wayman and Wayman (1990: 20), "Eliminating All Doubts" (Chapter One) is the cause of "Entering the One Vehicle Path" (Chapter Three), which is the effect of that cause, and "Deciding the Cause" (Chapter Two) is the cause of "Clarifying the Final Meaning" (Chapter Four), which is the effect of that cause.
 9. Among other teachings that might be explored in presenting the sutra to a class are: the notion of Buddha-nature in the text; the question, Does a true self exist or not?; the nature of enlightenment and nirvana; reasons for the perpetuation of samsara; the "three bodies made of mind" theory; the lay Bodhisattva path; and Śrīmālā's reformulation of the Four Noble Truths. For an investigation of the nature of selfhood in the Sutra, see Zapart (2017).
 10. King (1995: 14).
 11. For the theory of the path in the Śrīmālā, see Wayman and Wayman (1990: 26-36).
 12. See Paul (1979).
 13. It should be noted that emptiness is understood here in a more characteristically Yogacara sense as the emptiness of one thing with another (i.e., of the form 'x is empty of y' rather than in the Madhyamaka sense of 'x is empty of x-ness),

Bibliography

- Barber, A. W. 2009. Two Mahayana Developments Along the Krishna River. Chapter 6 in *Buddhism in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra*, edited by Sree Padma and Anthony W. Barber. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brown, Brian Edward. 1994. *The Buddha Nature: A Study of the Tathagatagarbha and Alayavijnana*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Buswell Jr., Robert E., and Donald S. Lopez Jr. 2013. Śrīmālādevīsīmanādasūtra. In *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 852-53. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chang, Garma C. C. 2008 (1983). The True Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala. Chapter 19 in *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūta-Sūtra*. Union Park: Penn State University Press.
- Dennis, Mark W. (trans.). 2011. *Prince Shōtoku's Commentary on the Śrīmālā Sutra*. Moraga, CA: BDK America, Inc.
- Magee, W. 2006. A Tree in the West: Competing Tathagatagarbha Theories in Tibet. *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 19: 445-510.
- Paul, Diana. 1979. The Concept of Tathagatagarbha in the Śrīmālādevī Sutra (Sheng-man Ching), *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99(2): 191-203.
- Paul, Diana Y. 2017 (2004). The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā and the Lion's Roar. In *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā and the Lion's Roar, The Vimalakīrti Sutra*, pp. 3-53. dBET PDF Version. BDK English Tripiṭaka Series. Moraga, CA: BDK America, Inc.
- Radich, M. 2015. Tathāgatagarbha Sūtras. *Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 1: *Literature and Language*, J. Silk et al. (eds.), pp. 261-73. Leiden.
- Wayman, Alex, and Hideko Wayman. 1990 (1974). *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. (Originally published in 1974 by Columbia University Press)
- Williams, Paul. 2009. *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Zapart, Jaroslaw. 2017. The Buddha as I: Selfhood and Identity in Śrīmālādevī-sīmanāda-sūtra. *Studia Religiosa* 50(2): 145-61.

Appendix

Contents of The Lion's Road of Queen Śrīmālā

Prologue

Chapter One

Eliminating All Doubts

1. Praises of the Infinite Merit of the Tathāgata
2. Ten Great Vows

Chapter Two

Deciding the Cause

3. Three All-inclusive Aspirations
4. Embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine
 - a. Teaching in the Scope of the Great Aspirations
 - b. Teaching the Far-ranging Meaning
 - c. Teaching the Great Meaning

Chapter Three

Clarifying the Final Meaning

5. One Vehicle
6. The Boundless Noble Truths
7. The Tathāgatagarbha
- 8-9. The Dharmakaya and the Meaning of Voidness
10. The One Truth
- 11-12. The One Refuge and Wayward Stage
13. Intrinsic Purity of the Mind

Chapter Four

Entering the One Vehicle Path

14. The True Son of the Tathāgata
15. The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā

Epilogue

(from Wayman and Wayman 1990: 20)

The following description of these divisions of the text uses quotes from Wayman and Wayman's 'Synopsis of the Scripture' in the introduction to their book (Wayman and Wayman 1990: 21-23).

Prologue: "The scripture opens in Śrāvastī. King Prasenajit and his Queen Mallikā move to interest their daughter Queen Śrīmālā in the Buddha's Doctrine."

Chapter One. Eliminating All Doubts. 1. "Śrīmālā evokes the Buddha, who approaches in his inconceivable body. She praises his two bodies which are the bodily form and the knowledge body. The Lord prophesies that Queen Śrīmālā will attain the incomparable right perfect enlightenment. 2. Queen Śrīmālā takes ten great vows, the first five constituting Hīnayāna ethics, the second five, Mahāyāna ethics. The most important one is the tenth vow, to embrace the Illustrious Doctrine and never to forget it. By performance of a Truth Act, the retinue is relieved of all doubts."

Chapter Two. Decoding the Cause. 3. "Queen Śrīmālā forms three great aspirations: to always comprehend the Illustrious Doctrine; to teach unweariedly the Illustrious Doctrine; and to protect and uphold the Illustrious Doctrine without regard to body, life force, or possessions. These three comprise all Bodhisattva aspirations." 4. "She prays for the Tathagata's power to make her eloquent when teaching in

the scope of the great aspirations.” “With her first scope of eloquence, she teaches that the embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine gives rise to the Great vehicle.” “With the scope of her second eloquence, she teaches that the embrace and the embracer of the Illustrious Doctrine are the same.” [and] “With the scope of her third eloquence, she teaches that the embracer and the embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine are the same.”

Chapter Three. Clarifying the Final Meaning. 5. “The queen eloquently preaches the embrace of the Illustrious Doctrine that was held by all the Buddhas. The ‘Illustrious Doctrine’ is a term for the Great Vehicle.” [This subdivision discusses the differences in potential achievement between Arhats [disciples] and Pratyekabuddhas [self-enlightened], and Bodhisattvas.] 6. “The four Noble Truths do not belong to the Disciples and the Self-Enlightened, for these persons do not have the supramundane knowledge of the nonprogressive Noble Truths. The four Noble Truths belong to the Tathāgatas, who eliminate the store of all defilements by inconceivable Voidness knowledge. 7. The Tathāgatagarbha is covered by the defilement store; when liberated from this store it is the Dharmakaya of the Tathāgata. Accordingly, there are both the Create and the Uncreate explanations of the Noble Truths. The Create explanation has intellectual limitations by reason of the defilements; the Uncreate explanation is without intellectual limitations by reason of elimination of all defilements. 8-9. The cessation of suffering is the Tathāgata’s Dharmakāya, or Tathāgatagarbha freed from defilements by the two kinds of Voidness knowledge of the Tathāgata, namely, the Tathāgatagarbha is void of the stores of defilement, and the Tathāgatagarbha is not void of the Buddha nature. 10. The Noble Truth ‘cessation of Suffering’ is the true refuge. The other three Noble Truths, namely, ‘suffering,’ ‘source of Suffering,’ and ‘Path,’ are not the true refuge. 11-12. Immature ordinary persons have the wayward views of two extremes. When they think, ‘The constructions are impermanent,’ it is their nihilistic view and when they think, ‘Nirvāna is permanent,’ it is their eternalistic view.” 13. “The Tathāgatagarbha is the base either of nondiscrete constructed Buddha nature or of discrete constructed defilements.”

Chapter Four. Entering the One Vehicle Path. 14. “By two discipleship levels, a third with a knowledge in the precincts of the Dharma involving five visions, and a fourth reaching certainty in the two doctrines, the Disciples [Arhats] can enroll others in the Great Vehicle. 15. The queen gains eloquence for further explanation of the faultless meaning. She explains tree kinds of good son or daughter of the family.”

Epilogue. “The Lord arrives at the Jetavana in Śtāvastī and explains the scripture to Ānanda and to Indra. The Lord instructs them on remembering the scripture by fifteen titles and on remembering the entire scripture under four headings. He entrusts the scripture to Indra. All assembled rejoice.”