

Sūrangama Sutra

Introduction

The Surangama Sutra is a comprehensive Mahayana Buddhist guidebook that leads readers to spiritual enlightenment along a path described in Shakyamuni Buddha's most advanced teachings. It details at some length the understandings, practices, and pitfalls aspiring bodhisattvas must be conscious of in walking this Path.¹ Because of its practicality and thoroughness, it was often the first major text that newly ordained Chan (Zen) monks were asked to study in Medieval and early Modern China. The Sutra is less well known in the West than other Mahayana sutras because it is difficult to understand without an accomplished teacher, only partial and sub-standard translations of the text into Western languages were available until recently, it is of disputed authenticity, and it is very long and lacks the charismatic imagery of other long Mahayana sutras, such as the Avatamsaka Sutra.² Nonetheless, it was a seminal text in the formation of Chan Buddhism, especially during the Tang through Ming dynasties. Because of its influence on the development of Chan Buddhism and subsequently Zen Buddhism, it warrants critical attention by contemporary Zen practitioners.

This primer reviews the origin and history of the Sutra, its storyline, and its teachings, at least some of which are considered atypical of traditional Buddhism.

Origin and Brief History

The first mention of the Sutra occurs in two catalogues published by Zhisheng, a Chinese monk, in 730 CE. Since the two accounts of the origin and translation of the Sutra differ, it remains unclear who made the original translation and from which Sanskrit text or texts, if any, it was translated from. Both translations were said to have taken place in about 705 CE. Because an original Sanskrit copy of the Sutra has not been found and the unusual teachings in the text (what are called by some "non-Buddhist" teachings), it is the opinion of many that it is a Buddhist apocrypha.³ In contrast, Ron Epstein, a supporter of the originality of the Sutra, concludes that "it seems likely that the origin of the great bulk of material in the Sutra is Indic, though it is obvious that the text was edited in China."⁴ Regardless of the origins of the Sutra, it was widely studied and the focus of over one hundred commentaries by Chan (Zen) practitioners. The Sutra continues to be a primary text within Chan Buddhism today, though, except in Korea, it never became a particularly important text in other areas of East and Southeast Asia, perhaps because it was considered created in China by Chinese authors.

The Story and Its Teachings

The Surangama Sutra concerns the realizations, practices, and pitfalls that must be understood in walking the Path to Enlightenment, as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, in the time of the Dharma's ending.⁵ These teachings center on a dialogue between the Buddha

and his cousin Ananda. For summary purposes, the story as it unfolds is divided here into a prologue and ten parts.⁶ As advanced readers will discern, the Sutra contains doctrinal elements of Yogacara, Madhyamika, and Esoteric Buddhism, and an evolving interpretation of Buddha-nature.⁷

The Prologue: As the Sutra opens the Buddha is at a banquet hosted by King Prasenajit in the city of Sravasti at the conclusion of a summer retreat. Over a thousand great monks are in attendance, along with lay people, all of whom desire counsel with the Buddha to resolve questions about the Path to True Awakening. Only Ananda, the Buddha's cousin, is absent. He had traveled earlier thought the city to accept a special invitation and on his return, while passing a house of courtesans, becomes entrapped in a spell by a young woman who intends to seduce him. The Buddha knowing from afar that Ananda was under a spell quickly returned to his monastic grounds. Seating himself, the Buddha made appear from the crown of his head the image of a seated Buddha who recited a spiritually powerful mantra, the Surangama Mantra.⁸ The Buddha then sends Manjusri, an advanced Bodhisattva, to protect Ananda with the power of the mantra and to bring him and the young woman back to where the Buddha resides.

In the Prologue one learns that: enlightened people are free of outflows (the outflows of desire, existence, and ignorance); monks whose samadhi (deep mental absorption) is not yet strong should always travel at least in pairs to avoid temptations; monks should not accept special invitations, but accompany other members of the Sangha; how and where to accept alms during one's alms round; and that the Surangama Mantra is the king of mantras, though the content of the mantra itself is not yet revealed in the Sutra.

Part 1: The Nature and Location of the Mind. When Ananda saw the Buddha, he asked the Buddha, who still sat before the great assembly, to explain to him the steps that lead to Awakening. The Buddha then tells him about the Surangama samadhi that all Buddhas pass through on their way to Awakening.⁹ Ananda had not been able to resist the spell of the courtesan because he practiced samadhi only with his conscious mind, for he was more interested in understanding the Dharma than in meditation practice. To practice Surangama samadhi one has to base one's practice on the true mind that neither comes into being nor ceases to be. To illustrate the difference the Buddha engages in a lengthy discussion about the location of the mind and its nature to illustrate the difference between the conscious, conditioned mind that is entangled in illusory perceptions and the true mind. While the conscious mind comes into being and ceases to be, the true mind is everlasting. Since most of us are only aware of our conscious mind, we remain caught in the cycle of samsara (of endless births and deaths).

We learn in this first part of the Sutra that: Being foremost in learning the Dharma is inadequate, for one must be equally proficient in meditation; To be very learned does not mean that one is free of outflows; We fail in our practice when we confuse the conscious mind for the everlasting true mind, thus opening ourselves to deluded thinking; In deluded thinking one divides experiences into good and bad, right and wrong, but in the Matrix of the Thus-Come One (see Part 3 below) there are no such distinctions, for there is in the end

nothing at all¹⁰; By becoming aware of our true mind, we can become fully aware of the Buddha (the Buddha-nature) that is inherent in us; When we can see that the entire world of perceived objects is mind only, then mental objects will no longer come into being or cease to be. Throughout the lesson, the Buddha uses logical reasoning, rather than merely proclaiming that certain positions are true because he claims they are.¹¹ This mode of discourse is a distinguishing feature of the Surangama Sutra.

Part 2: The Nature of Visual Awareness. Then using visual awareness as an example of the six senses, the Buddha describes at length the nature of true awareness, which turns out to be true reality that itself is true emptiness. Although fundamentally there isn't anything at all out there and in here, the Buddha explains that our experience of what seems to be an external world is only the experience of images produced in our mind, what the Sutra calls "shadowy mental events." These images come into being when our concentration in samadhi falters. The first of the Sutras tetralemmas occurs in this section when the Buddha argues that on the one hand the essence of our visual awareness and visible objects are identical, while on the other that they are not identical. This style of argument is based on the assumption that humans live in two worlds, a conditioned everyday conventional world and an abstract world of emptiness. While oppositions may exist in the first world, the second world does not admit of duality for nothing exists at all.

Other teachings in Part 2 are: When you perish as a physical being, something in you does not perish (your Buddha-nature), for it goes on into another body¹²; If we listen to the Dharma only with our conditioned mind, we will fail to understand its real nature; and, While Buddhas and other advanced spiritual beings have the spiritual power of the Celestial Eye and can see (hear, etc.) everywhere without impediment, the visual awareness of the unenlightened is obstructed because they see only through the organs (the eyes, ears, nose, etc.) of their physical bodies.

Part 3: The Matrix of the Thus-Come One. In Part 3, the Buddha examines in finer detail what it means to say that our thoughts and the objects we perceive are unreal and illusory, though they remain within the essential, wondrous enlightenment.¹³ In this lengthy part the Buddha uses the five aggregates, the six faculties, the twelve sites, the eighteen constituent elements, and the seven primary elements as his subject matter.¹⁴ Still couching his discussion within the context of Buddhist logic, the Buddha concludes at the end of his discussion of each element in each category (using the aggregate of form as an example) that, "Therefore you should know that the aggregate of form is an illusion. It does not come into being from causes and conditions, nor does it come into being on its own." In this part the Buddha also addresses what seem to be inconsistencies in his teachings, explaining that they are the result of teaching people at lower levels of understanding. He concludes though that the Surangama Sutra is the ultimate teaching. He also repeats that while the physical body dies, our inherent Buddha-nature lives on, so we should investigate the nature of our Buddha-nature rather than our physical body. At the end of Part 3, Ananda vows to reach enlightenment so he can return and rescue others from the endless cycle of samsara.

Part 4: The Coming into Being of the World of Illusion. Then Prūna, an advanced Bodhisattva, rises among the great assembly and asks, “If the Matrix of the Thus-Come One is fundamentally pure, how is it that mountains and all other things we falsely perceive on this earth come into being, ... (and) why are they subject to a succession of changes that end and then begin again?”¹⁵ The Buddha answers that once an understanding is added to our true enlightenment that understanding must understand something. Furthermore, once the category of ‘something understood’ is mistakenly established in the mind, the category ‘that which understands’ is mistakenly established as well. All of these are aspects of delusion. As objects are established, the sense of self as a false subject comes into being in reaction. The Buddha then illustrates and elaborates on these teachings at some length with examples.

The Buddha also teaches in this part that every Buddhas’ enlightenment is irreversible, how it is that the primary elements (earth, water, fire, and wind) in their fundamental nature can completely interfuse with each other (the reason being that they are unreal in the absolute world), and (repeats again) that true emptiness is what gives rise to wondrous existence using an argument cast in the form of a tetralemma. At the end of Part 4, the Buddha begins to describe a few of the basic practices that are needed to eliminate the making of distinctions that create our conventional world and our protracted confusion.

Part 5: Instructions for Practice. Ananda and the great assembly then ask the Buddha to show them the road that leads from their original resolve to the Thus-Come One’s bodiless nirvana. The Buddha replies that to become enlightened you must first understand two principles concerning your resolve. First, your resolve must not be concentrated on the mind that comes into being and ceases to be (the conscious mind), but on where there is nothing that comes into being and ceases to be (the true mind). Second, in practicing in accord with the Bodhisattva Vehicle, you must let go of your afflictions by examining the source of the delusions that have conditioned them. On setting out on this practice you must select one sense-faculty to concentrate on in order to liberate all six. The Buddha goes on to explain how each of the six sense-faculties function and describes two pathways that lead each faculty back to the true mind. The first is the five turbidities that come about as a result of concentrating the faculty on the phenomena world. For example, when space and visual awareness become entangled with each other, the turbidity of time comes into being. Likewise, when awareness and the primary elements become entangled with each other, the turbidity of perception comes into being. He also tells the great assembly that in working toward enlightenment do not allow your attention to be diverted by any of the Twelve Conditioned attributes, such as sound and silence or contact and separation, but extricate one of your sense-faculties by detaching it from its object and redirecting it inward toward the true reality.

Part 6: Twenty-Five Sages Speak of Enlightenment. Ananda then responds to the Buddha that they now understand what it means to say that when one sense-faculty is used to penetrate to true reality the others will vanish as well. But the great assembly still does not know which of the sense-faculties will best lead them to break through to enlightenment. So the Buddha asks the assembled sages to speak about how they broke through all

obstructions and became enlightened. Twenty-five sages then testify to the efficacy of twenty-five constituents or the seven primary elements.¹⁶ While some praise the efficacy of sound, others praise the efficacy of contemplating visual objects, flavors, tangible objects, objects of cognition, and so on. Finally, Avalokitesvare stands up and says a practice of hearing and contemplation was the most efficacious for him. He then describes this practice at some length. The Buddha then asks Manjusri for his recommendation for Ananda and others at Ananda's level of attainment. Manjusri says hearing or listening within, as described by Avalokitesvare, was most appropriate for people at Ananda's level.

Part 7: On Purity. Having now understood how to practice, Ananda asks the Buddha how he can teach others how to guard and focus their mind so that they too can enter samadhi, though he is still practicing himself. The Buddha answers that they should be taught the value of the four precepts: not to harbor sexual desire, not to kill, not to steal, and not to make false claims. He emphasizes that no matter how much people may practice they will never transcend the stress of the world until they free themselves from these immoral behaviors and even thoughts of them. The Buddha then gives clear overviews of each of the four precepts and their value during practice, again at great length.

Part 8: The Surangama Mantra. The first paragraphs of Part 8 of the Sutra spell out the power the recitation of the mantra has: "Ananda, all Buddhas throughout the ten directions are born from the esoteric lines of this Mantra of the White Canopy... (and) By means of this mantra of the mind, the Thus-Come Ones of the ten directions have gained supreme, right, and universal wisdom." (and) "Wielding this mantra of the mind, the Thus-Come Ones of the ten directions subdue all demons and show the right way to all who are on the wrong path." The first four lines of this 554 line mantra are: *na mo sa dan tuo/su qie duo ye/ e la he di/ san miao san pu tuo xie*. The Surangama Mantra is broken into main divisions and sub-sections, each of which has its own function.¹⁷

Part 8 describes at some length how to establish a place of practice, how many times the mantra is to be recited there and when, and the power of the mantra itself, such as the protection of reciters from disasters, to accomplish something, to subdue demons, and to summon weird beings, demons, and ghosts and to capture them no matter how far away from the reciter they may be.

Part 9: Levels of Being. Ananda then asks the Buddha what stages someone who has cultivated the Buddha's mantra in this way but who has not yet reached nirvana must still go through. The Buddha then reminds Ananda at length what the wondrous enlightened nature (true reality) is endowed with and what it takes for this nature to appear. He goes on to describe the twelve classes of beings that exist in this world as a result of illusion. Examples are: beings who are born of eggs; beings who are born from wombs; beings who are born in the presence of moisture; and beings who are called forth by mantras, spells, and curses. He then tells Ananda that in proceeding in his practice he should take the following three gradual steps in order to eradicate the fundamental forces that are the source of disordered mental activity: the first is the practice that eliminates contributing

factors, the second is the practice of truly ending any violation of the fundamental rule of behavior, and the third is the practice of vigorously turning away from intended engagement with perceived factors. The three practices are described at length.

The Buddha then describes at length the fifty-seven stages of the Bodhisattva Path, what their qualities are, and how they are achieved. Some stages are described alone, while others are described in groups, such as the ten stages of stabilizing the mind, the ten abodes, and the ten dedications. Ananda then asks why if the essential nature of all Buddhas is the true reality, why there are still the destinies of hells, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, and gods. The Buddha then describes again at length why beings enter these destinies and, in some cases, their complex characteristics. The Buddha ends Part 9 by saying: “What has been spoke here is the right teaching. To teach otherwise is the work of the demon-king.”

Part 10. Fifty Demonic States of Mind: Dangers May Arise with Advanced Practice. As the Buddha’s teaching nears its end, the Buddha says that though you have been taught the right method for practice, you still need instruction, for there are subtle demonic events that can occur when you undertake the practice of calming the mind and contemplative insight. If you don’t recognize when demonic states arise, you will fall into the err of wrong views.¹⁸ The Buddha then explains at length that different demonic states occur at different stages of the Bodhisattva path, how to recognize them and defend yourself against them, and what the consequences are if you do not. He describes fifty demonic states as examples, which he organizes into ten demonic states of mind each for the aggregates of form, sense-perception, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness. He then explains that the five aggregates arise from the deluded activities of the mind. The Sutra ends with the Buddha stressing the supreme importance of the Surangama samadhi and of the merit one gains from teaching the practice to others. He adds that these are his final instructions. The great assembly bows in reverence and departs.

And thus ends what is said to be (because dimly recognized in the West) one of the world’s religious masterpieces.

Notes

1. The 2009 translation of the Sutra by the Surangama Sutra Translation Committee of the Buddhist Text Translation Society is considered the best and most improved translation in English currently available. A long sutra, the Chinese language text consists of some 63,000 characters in ten rolls. For a sampling of discussions about the Sutra from different perspectives, see Low (2000), Fischer (2001), Epstein (1975), and the “Surangama Sutra” entry in the Wikipedia. Also see the “Shurangama Sutra: Text, Commentaries, and Articles” Web site compiled by Ron Epstein.
2. Though obscure in the West, Surangama Sutra scholar David Rounds (2007:75) refers to the Sutra as one of “the world’s religious masterpieces” and extolls the beauty of its language in Chinese.
3. Chinese Buddhist apocrypha are text composed in China by Chinese authors. See Bushwell (1990). For details in the Sutra that make it an apocrypha for some, see Benn (2008).
4. Epstein (1976).
5. According to the Sutra, Buddhism has gone through three periods of declining vitality: the time of the *right Dharma* when the Buddha was in the world to 1,000 years afterward (c. 500 BCE –

500 CE); the time of the *semblance of the Dharma* then began, which lasted 1,000 years as well (c. 500 – 1500 CE); and the time of *the Dharma's ending*, which we are in now and during which people devote themselves to fighting. However, when we sit in meditation and study the sutras, we make the time of the right Dharma appear within the time of the Dharma's ending. Despite the problem of math here, the point is that in these difficult times the right and true practice must be followed, which is the Surangama samadhi, as taught in the Surangama Sutra.

6. The divisions of the storyline used here are from the Synopsis in the 2009 translation of the Sutra by the Surangama Sutra Translation Committee of the Buddhist Text Translation Society. For other overviews of the Sutra, see Suzuki (2010) and especially Rounds (2007).
7. For Yogacara and Madhyamika Buddhism, see the primers in this series. Esoteric Buddhism is a general term for certain practices originally developed in parallel with Hindu tantra. Among other things, practice involves the establishment and spiritual fortification of a special place of practice and the use of ritual formulae (mantras), gestures (mudras), and visualization techniques. For overviews, see Payne (2006) and Orzech (2011). In early Buddhist thought, Buddha-nature refers to the potential to become a Buddha through study and religious practice. After the rise of Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha-nature came to be seen as the inherent Buddhahood of any sentient being. In this setting, the task is not to achieve Buddhahood, but to uncover it, for each being is already a Buddha. Under the influence of Tathagata-garbha teachings, Buddha-nature came to be seen further as a more substantial presence endowed with positive attributes, often termed 'atman' (self or soul), as in sutras like the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra. In the Surangama Sutra, it is from the Matrix of the Thus-Come One (thus in Sanskrit Tathagata-garbha, the "womb of the Buddha") that the world and the mind come forth; it has no self, intention, or personality – it is, at least in this Sutra empty, though Buddha-nature passes through successive life forms. See King (1991).
8. Mantras are sacred sounds believed to be imbued with supernatural powers. In the Surangama Sutra, the recitation of the Surangama Mantra is a means of protecting and empowering the mind of oneself or others. This is an aspect of esoteric Buddhism in the Sutra.
9. In Mahayana Buddhism, states of deep trance (forms of samadhi) occur at a vast number of levels. According to the Sutra, the Surangama samadhi is the highest of these levels. Its attainment gives those who attain it the ability to manifest specific miracles. Again, another aspect of esoteric Buddhism in the Sutra. For a general overview, see Shankman (2008).
10. Synonyms of the Matrix of the Thus-Come One are the Thus-Come One, true reality, our true mind, the suchness of reality, the reality of the universe, the awakened nature of our awareness, and the Tathagata-garbha, among others, all of which are epithets of the Buddha.
11. For a brief introduction to Buddhist logic in the context of this Sutra see Rounds (2007:276-279). For the tetralemma, see the Madhyamika Buddhist primer in this series. It is important in reading the Sutra to keep in mind that the discussion is a series of logical arguments. Confusion for Western readers often occurs when encountering a tetralemma, for it allows the presence of both something and its absence (both A and not-A), for something may be present in the conditioned world (A) but not in the Absolute world which is empty of dualities (not-A).
12. This notion of an ever-lasting 'self' (a Buddha-nature) that moves from one body to another is a controversial teaching of some Chinese Buddhist sutras, as mentioned in footnote 7 above.
13. Another expression for the Matrix of the Thus-Come One or true reality.
14. The five aggregates consist of form, sense-perception, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness. The six faculties are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and cognitive faculty. The twelve sites are the eye faculty and visual objects, the ear faculty and sounds (etc.). In the eighteen constituents the six faculties are matched to the six sense-objects, and between them are produced the six consciousnesses (the eye consciousness, etc.). The consciousnesses are what make distinctions.
15. From the first two paragraphs of the "The Powers of the Mantra" subsection of this part. The Buddha is a general practitioner intent on identifying your illness and curing it; he is less concerned, as here, with answering your why questions.
16. As explained in Rounds (2014:8), "In each case, the sages understand the emptiness of one of the primary elements and then contemplate the identity of that primary element with their own

bodies, with their own minds, and finally with the universe, and this contemplation leads them to awakening.”

17. For more detail about the Surangama Mantra, see ven. Master Hsuan Hua (1981). The mantra is left un-translated in the Chinese text. According to Rounds (2007:94), “the mantra [in this un-translated form]” is still recited every morning in certain Monasteries in the Chinese tradition.”
18. For more on the demon-states, see ven. Master Hsuan Hua (1996).

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