

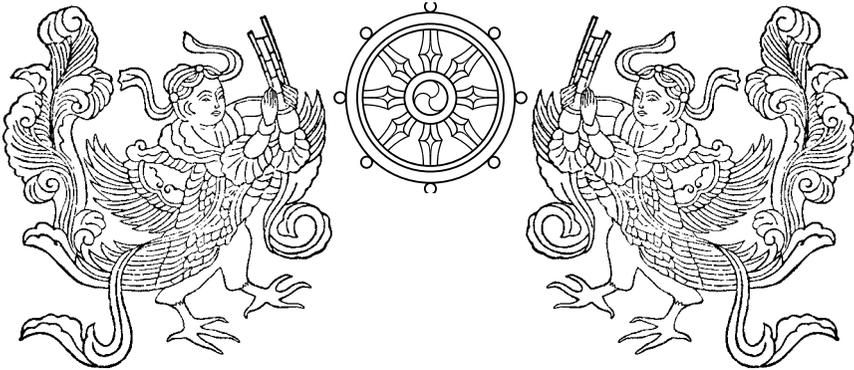
THE FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA

*The Great Expansive
Buddha's Flower Adornment Sutra*

An Annotated Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra
By Bhikshu Dharmamitra

WITH A COMMENTARIAL SYNOPSIS
OF THE FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA

VOLUME ONE



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Avataṃsaka Sūtra or 'The Great Expansive Buddha's Flower Adornment Sutra' rendered from Tripitaka Master Śikṣānanda's circa 699 CE Sanskrit-to-Chinese

80-fascicle translation as *Da Fangguang Fo Huayan Jing* (大方廣佛華嚴經 / Taisho Vol. 10, no. 279). It consists of 39 chapters that introduce an interpenetrating,

infinitely expansive, and majestically grand multiverse of countless buddha worlds while explaining in great detail the cultivation of the bodhisattva path

to buddhahood, most notably the ten highest levels of bodhisattva practice

known as 'the ten bodhisattva grounds.' To date, this is the first and only

complete English translation of the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*."-- Provided by publisher.

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

As the latest in my series of translations of bodhisattva path texts important in the history of Classic Indian and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, I present here my annotated English translation of the eighty-fascicle edition of the “Great Expansive Buddha’s Flower Adornment Sutra” (大方廣佛華嚴經)¹ together with my “Commentarial Synopsis of the Flower Adornment Sutra” which condenses the narrative story line and most important ideas of this entire sutra into less than one hundred and fifty pages.

This edition of the *Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddha Avataṃsaka Sūtra* was originally translated into Chinese from Sanskrit in 699 CE by Tripiṭaka Master Śikṣānanda from Khotan.² Beginning with its first “complete” translation into Chinese in 420 CE, the Flower Adornment Sutra gradually became one of the most influential scriptures in the history of Chinese Buddhism. It was the basis for the formation of the Avataṃsaka School of Chinese Buddhism which was founded by Dushun (杜順, 557–640), carried on by Zhiyan (智儼, 602–668), more fully systematized and developed by Fazang (法藏, 643–712), and brought to its full flowering by Chengguan (澄觀, 738–839) and Zongmi (宗密, 780–841). The Avataṃsaka School credits Nāgārjuna as its founder, principally because he is said to have recovered this sutra from the Dragon Palace library after it had become lost from the world.

Above all, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra consists of teachings intended for the training of bodhisattvas at all levels, but most especially for the training of advanced bodhisattvas who are well along on the path to the realization of buddhahood. As such, although it does speak in considerable detail on foundational teachings held in common with the *śrāvaka*-disciple vehicle such as the four truths, it does so from the standpoint of the bodhisattva while also especially emphasizing bodhisattva teachings such as limitless kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity,³ the three gates to liberation consisting of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, the resolve to attain the enlightenment of a buddha, and an expanded list of perfections consisting of ten *pāramitās*. But these are for the most part doctrinal elements already found in many Mahāyāna sutras. Beyond these, the teachings that are most especially emblematic of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra are teachings such as the interpenetration on both a microscopic and oceanically grand scale of the noumenal and the phenomenal⁴ and

the teaching of countless interpenetrating buddha worlds throughout all of time and space to which all buddhas and great bodhisattvas or mahāsattvas freely travel, readily penetrating the endless eons of both the past and the future. From early on, the Avataṃsaka Sutra has historically been referred to as “the bodhisattva canon” (*bodhisattva-piṭaka*), presumably not least because this immensely vast text contains such an encyclopedically complete range of bodhisattva path teachings that a student of the Mahāyāna could master this “Great Vehicle” by relying exclusively on the Avataṃsaka Sūtra as the basis for learning, practicing, and realizing the path to the complete awakening of buddhahood.

The Origins of the Text

The orthodox Buddhist view is that the Avataṃsaka Sutra was spoken in seven places in nine assemblies, mostly by great bodhisattvas who had gathered around the Buddha shortly after he had achieved his full enlightenment beneath the bodhi tree and even before the Buddha began to teach any of the individual-liberation sermons in the Deer Park near Varanasi. It is claimed that Nāgārjuna (circa 150 CE) later recovered this scripture from the library of the Dragon Palace as but one somewhat more accessible part of a much larger text which would have been too long and too abstruse for those in this world to absorb in its entirety.

Although scholarly views on the origin of this text vary, they generally hold that the scripture we now know as the “Avataṃsaka Sūtra” was not spoken as a single sutra at such an early time, but rather it is a collection of smaller sutras only later brought together into a single immense scripture. Regardless of which of these views reflects the facts of the matter, it is fairly clear that, in addition to their history as parts of this sutra, a number of this sutra’s chapters certainly *did* circulate independently as separate “sutras.” Notable examples are Chapter Twenty-six, “The Ten Grounds,” which circulated separately as the “Ten Grounds Sutra” and Chapter Thirty-nine, “Entering the Dharma Realm,” which circulated separately as the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. Others include: Chapter Eleven, “The Pure Practice”; Chapter Twelve, “The Foremost Worthy”; Chapter Thirty-seven, “The Manifestation of the Tathāgata”; and Chapter Thirty-eight, “Transcending the World.” Scholars disagree about whether or not there is adequate evidence to suppose the existence of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra as a single work in India. Others have pointed to evidence of much less complex

and elaborate proto-*avatamsaka* scriptures in India which may have served as a template of sorts for the development of the very long and complex Avatamsaka Sūtra that we know today.⁵

Early Chinese Translations from the Sanskrit

In the Chinese Buddhist canon, there are three supposedly “complete” translations from Sanskrit of works which have the title “The Great Expansive Buddha’s Flower Adornment Sūtra” (大方廣佛華嚴經). The first translation was a sixty-fascicle edition with thirty-four chapters translated by Tripiṭaka Master Buddhabhadra (T278) and completed in 420 CE. The second translation was this eighty-fascicle edition in thirty-nine chapters translated by Tripiṭaka Master Śikṣānanda (T279) and completed in 699 CE. The third translation was a forty-fascicle edition consisting of only a single chapter translated by Tripiṭaka Master Prajñā (T293) and completed in 680 CE. This chapter, which was entitled “Entering the Inconceivable Realm of Liberation of the Conduct and Vows of Samantabhadra” (入不思議解脫境界普賢行願品), corresponds in its content and story line to the “Entering the Dharma Realm” chapter found in both the sixty-fascicle edition (where it is Chapter Thirty-four) and the eighty-fascicle edition (where it is Chapter Thirty-nine). This is more or less the same scripture that also circulated independently in Sanskrit as the Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra. As it happens, the very last fascicle of Prajñā’s forty-fascicle edition has long been appended to the eighty-fascicle edition translated by Śikṣānanda, this based on the recognition that it was originally present in the Sanskrit texts of both Buddhabhadra and Śikṣānanda, but somehow inexplicably left out of their translations. Because this fascicle has for so long been considered the proper ending for the eighty-fascicle edition of the Avatamsaka sutra, I include it here as “Chapter Thirty-nine Addendum: The Conduct and Vows of Samantabhadra.”

There is also a translation into Tibetan which corresponds more or less in content to that of the Chinese eighty-fascicle edition. Per Hamar’s “The History of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*: Shorter and Larger Texts”: “The Tibetan translation was prepared in the first quarter of the ninth century by two Indian scholars, Jinamitra and Surendrabodhi, in collaboration with the Tibetan master-editor Ye-shes-sde. The work consists of 45 chapters (*le’u*), and the bodhisattvas gather on nine occasions in seven places.”⁶

Translations into English

As for translations of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra into English, as of this writing, aside from this translation, there have as yet been no other complete translations into English of any of the editions of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, whether from the Chinese or from the Tibetan. This will certainly surprise many English-speaking Buddhists who have long known of Thomas Cleary's "Flower Ornament Scripture" which was first published in the mid-1980s and which represented itself as having been a complete translation into English from Śikṣānanda's 699 CE Chinese translation from Sanskrit. Although Thomas Cleary unequivocally claimed on page two of his introduction to have made his translation of his "Flower Ornament Scripture" from this eighty-fascicle edition produced by Śikṣānanda,⁷ that is not true. In fact, more than a third of his translation, fully five hundred pages, was most definitely *not* made from any of the Chinese editions, for it very clearly does not follow *any* of them. Anyone who looks very closely at his translation against the Chinese and Sanskrit texts will notice right away that Cleary's 117-page translation of Chapter Twenty-six is instead made from the Sanskrit text of the *Daśabhūmika-sūtram*, whereas his 384-page translation of Chapter Thirty-nine is not made from the Chinese either. Rather it is instead made from the Sanskrit text of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtram*. In the case of both of these chapters, Cleary's translation closely follows these Sanskrit texts as preserved in the relatively late Sanskrit manuscripts edited by P. L. Vaidya. Although his work certainly *did* perform a great service to English readers of the Mahāyāna Buddhist canon by revealing the general nature and storyline of this immense scripture, the fact of the matter is that his very free translation style, his consistently very relaxed approach to accuracy, and his tendency to disguise nearly all traditional Buddhist terminology with unfamiliar or unintuitive neologisms makes it a work much in need of improvement in any case.

Cleary was apparently so intent on trying to produce a new Americanized Buddhist jargon or on trying to eliminate all Buddhist terminology altogether that nowhere in his nearly fifteen hundred pages do we find the word "Dharma," or "Sangha," or "bodhisattva," or "mahāsattva," or "tathāgata," or "arhat," or "saṃsāra," or "pratyekabuddha," or "parinirvāṇa," or "perfection," or "pāramitā." He translated "māras" (somewhat demonic deva-realm sensualists) as "maniacs,"

often left out passages, and often substituted his own ideas for which there is no basis in the text.

Although, until now, there have not been any “complete” translations into English of this scripture, this is not to say that there have been no translations into English of important individual chapters of Śikṣānanda’s edition of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra. There have. For instance, in 1993, Cheng Chien Bhikshu published a very solid translation of the three-fascicle Chapter Thirty-seven as “The Manifestation of the Tathāgatha.” In 2019, I published “The Ten Bodhisattva Grounds,” a translation of Chapter Twenty-six. Rulu (如露) has translated and published Chapters Twenty-six through Thirty-eight. And for years now, the Buddhist Text Translation Society (BTTS) has produced numerous volumes of English translations of chapters of this scripture which are interwoven with the lecture commentary provided by my own spiritual teacher, the Venerable Hsuan Hua, who lectured on this sutra for something like fifteen years during which he gave thousands of lectures on it. The latest word from BTTS is that their work is ongoing and will take at least a few more years to complete. There is some question as to whether or not they plan to ever publish an edition of just the sutra text, unaccompanied by Ven. Hsuan Hua’s spoken commentary.

There have also long been a few translations into English of other individual chapters from this text, most notably translations of its traditionally appended Chapter Thirty-nine addendum, “The Conduct and vows of Samantabhadra” (普賢行願品), of which there have been at least a couple translations over the years. There is also a very recent translation from the Tibetan of the entire Gaṇḍavyūha (the equivalent of Chapter Thirty-nine) by Peter Alan Roberts which was made for the 84,000 translation project.

The Contents of This Scripture

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to provide a synopsis of all of the chapters of this immense scripture. Suffice it to say that this sutra consists of thirty-nine chapters varying in length from just a few pages to seven hundred pages, all of which are linked together as a series of wide-ranging and often extremely complex orations on the bodhisattva path and the nature of both ultimate and conventional reality in discourses delivered by the Buddha and by the great bodhisattvas. Embedded within its chapters, there

is the sequential presentation of an ascending set of stages on the path to buddhahood followed by the immense “Entering the Dharma Realm” chapter which chronicles the traversing of this entire sequence of stages by a single protagonist, Sudhana the Youth, as he goes from one teacher to another, receiving teachings on each of these stages from fifty-three teachers, each of whom represents one of the stages of the bodhisattva path. In concluding this introduction, to provide a map of the structural architecture of this scripture, I include directly below a section of Śramaṇa Yongguang’s “Condensed Outline of the Avataṃsaka Sutra”⁸ which shows how the chapters relate to the seven places and nine assemblies that comprise this Great Expansive Buddha’s Flower Adornment Sutra:

The first assembly was at the site of enlightenment where Samantabhadra Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Tathāgata’s dharmas of dependent and direct [spheres of karmic rewards]. The Buddha emanated light from his mouth and light from between his brows and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva entered the Vairocana treasury body samādhi. Altogether there were six chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 01 – The Wondrous Adornments of the Leaders of the Worlds;
- Ch. 02 – The Appearances of the Tathāgata;
- Ch. 03 – The Samādhis of Samantabhadra;
- Ch. 04 – The Formation of the Worlds;
- Ch. 05 – The Flower Treasury [Ocean of] World[s]; and
- Ch. 06 – The Vairocana Chapter.

The second assembly was in the Hall of Universal Light where Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of the ten faiths. The Buddha emanated light from the wheel signs on the bottom of his two feet. In this assembly, he did not enter meditative absorption. Altogether there were six chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 07 – The Names of the Tathāgatas;
- Ch. 08 – The Four Truths of the Āryas;
- Ch. 09 – The Radiant Enlightenment;
- Ch. 10 – The Bodhisattvas Ask for Clarification;
- Ch. 11 – Pure Conduct; and
- Ch. 12 – The Foremost Worthy.

The third assembly was in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven Palace where Dharma Wisdom Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of the ten abodes. The

Buddha emanated light from the toes of his two feet. Dharma Wisdom Bodhisattva entered the samādhi of measureless skillful means. Altogether there were six chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 13 – Ascent to the Summit of Mount Sumeru;
- Ch. 14 – The Praise Verses on the Summit of Mount Sumeru;
- Ch. 15 – The Ten Abodes;
- Ch. 16 – The Brahman Conduct;
- Ch. 17 – The Merit of the Initial Resolve; and
- Ch. 18 – Clarifying the Dharma.

The fourth assembly was in the Suyāma Heaven Palace where Forest of Meritorious Qualities Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of the ten practices. The Buddha emanated light from the top of his two feet. Forest of Meritorious Qualities Bodhisattva entered the bodhisattva's skillful reflection samādhi. Altogether there were four chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 19 – Ascent to the Suyāma Heaven Palace;
- Ch. 20 – Praise Verses in the Suyāma Heaven Palace;
- Ch. 21 – The Ten Practices; and
- Ch. 22 – The Ten Inexhaustible Treasuries.

The fifth assembly was in the Tuṣita Heaven Palace where Vajra Banner Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of the ten dedications. The Buddha emanated light from his two knees. Vajra Banner Bodhisattva entered the bodhisattva wisdom light samādhi. Altogether there were three chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 23 – The Ascent to the Tuṣita Heaven Palace;
- Ch. 24 – The Tuṣita Heaven Palace Praise Verses; and
- Ch. 25 – The Ten Dedications.

The sixth assembly was in the Paranirmita-vaśavartin Heaven Palace where Vajragarbha Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of the ten grounds. The Buddha emanated light from the hair mark between his brows. Vajragarbha Bodhisattva entered the wisdom light samādhi. Here there is a single chapter, the Ten Grounds Chapter, number twenty-six.

The seventh assembly was in the Hall of Universal Light where the Tathāgata served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of the Dharma gateway of equal enlightenment and sublime

enlightenment. The Buddha emanated light from between his brows and light from his mouth. The Buddha entered the *kṣaṇa* samādhi. Altogether there were eleven chapters [in this assembly], as follows:

- Ch. 27 – The Ten Samādhis;
- Ch. 28 – The Ten Superknowledges;
- Ch. 29 – The Ten Patiences;
- Ch. 30 – Asaṃkhyeyas;
- Ch. 31 – Life Spans;
- Ch. 32 – The Bodhisattva Abodes;
- Ch. 33 – The Inconceivable Dharmas of the Buddhas;
- Ch. 34 – The Ocean of Major Marks of the Tathāgata’s Ten Bodies;
- Ch. 35 – The Qualities of the Light of the Tathāgata’s Subsidiary Signs;
- Ch. 36 – The Practices of Samantabhadra; and
- Ch. 37 – The Manifestation of the Tathāgata.

The eighth assembly was in the Hall of Universal Light where Samantabhadra Bodhisattva served as the host of that assembly for the discussion of two thousand practice gateways. In this assembly, he did not emanate light. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva entered the flower adornment of the Buddha samādhi. Here there is a single chapter, the Transcending the World Chapter, number thirty-eight.

The ninth assembly was in the Jeta Grove where the good spiritual friends of the Tathāgata served as the hosts of that assembly in the discussion of the Dharma realm of fruition. [Here, “the good spiritual friends of the Tathāgata” were Mañjuśrī, Samantabhadra, and Maitreya.] The Buddha emanated light from the white hair mark between his brows. This was the Entering the Dharma Realm Chapter, number thirty-nine.

A Synopsis with Comments on the Flower Adornment Sutra

In conclusion, I should note that, at the end of this translation, I have appended my “A Commentarial Synopsis of the Flower Adornment Sutra” to provide the reader with a means to easily preview or review any or all of these chapters in which, ranging in length up to seven hundred pages, it would otherwise be easy to lose one’s place. Thus, if one were to become disoriented in the course of reading this 2,400-page scripture, this “synopsis with comments” may serve as a compass with which to regain one’s bearings and continue one’s studies.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra,
Seattle, Sept. 26th, 2022

Introduction Endnotes

- 1 BCSD records two Sanskrit titles of this sutra: “*buddhāvataṃsake mahāvaiṣṭhāyā-sūtre*” and “*buddhāvataṃsaka*.”
- 2 I have made this translation from the Śikṣānanda edition preserved in Cbeta’s digital version of the Taisho Canon (T0279).
- 3 These are the “four immeasurable minds” (四無量心 / *catvāri-apramāṇa-citta*) which are identical to “the four abodes of Brahma” (四梵住 / *catvāro brahma-vihāra*).
- 4 The permutations of the interpenetration of the noumenal and the phenomenal are summed up in what is usually referred to as “the four Dharma realms” (四法界), consisting of: 1) the dharma realm of the phenomenal (事法界); 2) the dharma realm of the “noumenal” (理法界) which corresponds to the metaphysical emptiness of inherent existence of all phenomena; 3) the dharma realm of the unimpeded relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal (理事無礙法界); and 4) the dharma realm of the unimpeded relationship between any phenomenon with all other phenomena (事事無礙法界).
- 5 See Jan Nattier’s “Indian Antecedents of Huayan Thought: New Light from Chinese Sources” and “The Proto-History of the Buddhāvataṃsaka: The Pusa benye jing 菩薩本業經 and the Dousha jing 兜沙經.”
- 6 See Imre Hamar’s “Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism,” 166, in his paper entitled: “The History of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*: Shorter and Larger Texts.”
- 7 See Thomas Cleary’s “Flower Ornament Scripture,” Boston and London: Shambhala, 1993, 2.
- 8 This section of the “Condensed Outline of the Avataṃsaka Sutra” (大方廣佛華嚴經綱目貫攝) by Śramaṇa Yongguang (沙門永光) is found in Cbeta as X09n0241, 301a16–c02.