

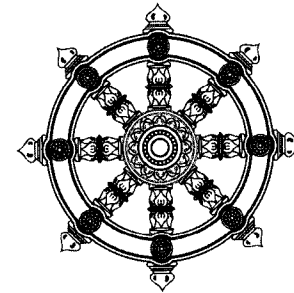
On Respecting Sacred Books

In the Buddhist tradition, sutras are understood to contain the teachings of Buddhas and greatly enlightened masters. As guidebooks to the path to awakening, sutras are treated with reverence. It is customary to keep sutra volumes in a clean place, either above or apart from secular works; to handle them with respect; and to read them only while sitting upright or standing.

The Śūraṅgama Sūtra

With Excerpts from the Commentary
by the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua

A New Translation



Buddhist Text Translation Society

The Traditional Account of Its Transmission to China

The Venerable Master Hsüan Hua has summarized the traditional account of the transmission of the Sutra from India to China as follows:

The king of one of the regions of India had proclaimed the Śūraṅgama Sūtra to be a national treasure because it was one of the Sutras that the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna had brought back from the Dragon (*nāga*) Palace.⁵³ After the proclamation, no one was permitted to take the Sutra out of the country. At that time, Bhikṣu Paramiti was intent upon getting the Sutra out of India into other countries, especially China. He set out for China carrying a copy of the Sutra, only to be stopped by customs officials who would not permit him to carry the Sutra across the border. He returned home and tried to think of a way to get the Sutra out of the country. Finally, he thought of a way. He wrote out the Sutra in minute characters on extremely fine silk, rolled it up, and sealed it with wax. Then he cut open his arm and placed the small scroll inside his flesh. Next he applied medicines to the wound and waited for it to heal. (Some people say he put the Sutra in his leg, but I think that since it would not have been respectful to place the text below the waist, he probably chose some fleshy place on the upper part of his body and put the Sutra there.) When the wound healed, he again set out for China and passed the border guards without incident. Eventually, he arrived in Guangdong, where he happened to meet the court official Fang Yong, who invited him to reside at a temple in Guangdong while he translated the Sutra.⁵⁴

11. A Brief Explanation of Some Important Technical Terms

For those who are new to Buddhist teachings, we offer here brief explanations of important terms and concepts mentioned in the Sutra.

⁵³ According to the Mahāyāna tradition, many of the major Mahāyāna sutras were initially stored in a dragon-king's palace at the bottom of the ocean. The tradition credits the Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna with bringing these sutras back to India.

⁵⁴ *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, vol. 1, 68.

No-Self

The teaching of no-self⁵⁵ is fundamental to Buddhism. The Buddha did not teach that we do not exist, but he did teach that suffering is caused by our clinging to a self, an individuality that is illusory and does not exist. What "self" is it that does not exist? It is not merely the personality, or ego, that identifies itself in terms of social roles and interactions. Buddhism denies the existence of a basic self that is identified with our physical being, including our gender, and also the existence of what is called the "soul" and other levels of spiritual self. The existence of a self of cosmic consciousness that is identified with the universe is also denied. All these "selves" are constructed, conventional designations that only contribute to our attachment to illusion. The true reality that does exist, and that is who we really are, lies beyond our attachment to a duality of self and other and a duality of existence and nonexistence.

Enlightenment or Awakening

In this volume we use the English terms "enlightenment" and "awakening" as synonyms. In Buddhism, when these terms are used in a formal sense, they do not connote a temporary experience but rather a complete and irreversible transformation of one's fundamental way of being in the world. Only the enlightenment of a Buddha is perfect and complete. Bodhisattvas, Solitary Sages,⁵⁶ and Arhats⁵⁷ have awakened but have not

⁵⁵ Skt. *anātman*. For explanations of this and many other technical terms and lists mentioned in the Sutra, the reader who is not familiar with Buddhist teachings may find the following publication a helpful aid: *Buddhism A to Z*, Ronald B. Epstein, comp. (Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003). Many excellent introductory books about Buddhism are available and can provide useful background for the teachings of this Sutra. A short selection of these is listed online under the title "A Short Introductory Reading List on Buddhism," <http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhism/introbuddhistbiblog.htm>.

⁵⁶ Skt. *pratyekabuddha*. Solitary Sages are beings who achieve enlightenment on their own without the aid of the Buddha's Dharma or who became enlightened through contemplation of the twelve-fold conditioned arising (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*). See part 4, note 18.

⁵⁷ Arhats become enlightened through contemplation of the Four Noble Truths. There are four stages of Arhat: the *śrota-āpanna* (one who has entered the stream of the sages), the *sakṛdāgāmin* (one who must be reborn only once more), the *anāgāmin* (one who does not

perfected their awakening. All enlightened beings have three accomplishments in common: they have seen through the illusion of self; they have achieved permanent release from the cycle of death and rebirth; and as a byproduct of their enlightenment, they possess spiritual powers. The Sanskrit word “bodhi,” which we have translated as “full awakening,” refers in this text to the awakening or enlightenment of a Buddha.

Dharma and Dharmas

In Buddhism, “Dharma” no longer has its Hindu meaning of religious duty according to one’s class. In Buddhist usage the word has several meanings, as follows:

1) It is a general term for the Buddha’s teachings as a whole (the Dharma, or the Buddha’s Dharma), and it also may designate a particular teaching, usually a method of practice leading to enlightenment.

2) It signifies the reality that one realizes upon one’s enlightenment — that is, the fundamental reality that is immanent in the entire universe (the Dharma-Realm⁵⁸).

3) It is a term for the individual components of a teaching, often as an item in a list. Among them are the lists of the various divisions of the mental and physical world. We sometimes translate “dharmas” in this sense as “phenomena.”

4) It is also a term both for the sense-data that enter our minds through our faculties of perception and for the thoughts and emotions that arise in our minds and are identified by the faculty of cognition. We translate “dharmas” in this sense as “mental objects” or “objects of cognition.”⁵⁹

need to be reborn again); and the Arhat (one who has ended all outflows and needs no further instruction). The term “Arhat” may refer to all four stages or only to the fourth stage. At the outset of this Sutra, Ānanda is an Arhat at the first stage.

⁵⁸ *Dharmadhātu*, Ch. *fa jie* 法界. In a related usage, the “ten Dharma-Realms” consist of the four levels of the sage (Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Solitary Sages, and Arhats) together with six destinies of the unenlightened (gods, asuras, humans, animals, ghosts, and denizens of the hells).

⁵⁹ In the present translation, we capitalize “Dharma” when it represents the first and second of these meanings and do not capitalize it when it carries the other two meanings.

Samādhi

Samādhi is “a concentrated, self-collected, intent state of mind and meditation, which, concomitant with right living, is a necessary condition to the attainment of higher wisdom and emancipation.”⁵⁹

There are four distinct senses in which the word “samādhi” is used. First, it designates the correct mental focus or concentration that is a necessary preliminary to the deeper meditative states. Second, samādhi indicates those deeper levels of mental concentration and stability which may be reached through correct practice. These levels include the four *dhyānas*, which correspond to the states of mind of the gods in the heavens of the realm of form, and the four *samāpattis*, which correspond to the states of mind of gods who abide on the planes of formlessness. Third, there are even more profound levels of samādhi that are experienced by enlightened beings. Fourth, “samādhi” may also refer specifically to the Śūraṅgama (Indestructible) Samādhi, which is the state of mind of all Buddhas and which is discussed at length in this Sutra.

Emptiness

There are at least three ways in which the idea of emptiness can be understood: on the intellectual level, in practice, and as a description of enlightenment.

On the intellectual level, it can be said that emptiness⁶¹ means that all dharmas — all phenomena, mental and physical — lack an independent existence of their own and exist only through reliance on other phenomena. All dharmas lack real, permanent, essential attributes that distinguish them from all other phenomena. In other words, everything in the world, both physical and mental, is interdependent. Nothing exists entirely on its own, separate, and with no causal relation to anything else. Thus all dharmas are empty of any individual, inherent being.⁶²

⁶⁰ T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, eds., *Pali Text Society’s Pali-English Dictionary* (London: Pali Text Society, 1972).

⁶¹ Skt. *śūnyatā*, Ch. *kong* 空.

⁶² Skt. *svabhāva*, Ch. *zixing* 自性.

An intellectual understanding of emptiness can be extended into a method of practice and a way of life that empties our experience in every moment. To “empty our experience” means, first, to remove “me” and “mine” from every thought that arises in our consciousness. Sustained contemplation of the emptiness of the self can extricate us from ego-centered experience and liberate us from the prison of selfishness. We learn to see ourselves and our concerns, our desires and fears, as empty — like a mirage or a dream, as ephemeral as a bubble or a flash of lightning. The Diamond Sūtra says,

As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp,
A mock show, dew-drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning-flash or cloud,
So should one view what is conditioned.⁶³

Emptying ourselves opens us up to the fullness of the world.

Emptying experience also entails eliminating the boundaries that we have drawn to cope with the world — the walls we erect to protect ourselves, the turf we stake out to rule, and the fantasies of future conquests that we map in our minds. Emptying ourselves must lead to the emptying of the “other,” the “no-self,” so that self and other are no longer two. When the line that divides them is erased, then there is no conflict, no longer anything to fear or to gain.

With enlightenment comes the realization that true emptiness is identical to the fullness of wondrous existence. It can be reached through the hard work of becoming aware of every single thought and emptying them one by one.

The Five Aggregates

The word “aggregate” renders the Sanskrit word “skandha,” which means “heap,” “pile,” or “aggregation.” (The Buddha once illustrated his teaching about the aggregates with five small piles of different grains.)

⁶³ “The Diamond Sūtra,” in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956), 68.

The five aggregates — form, sense-perception, cognition, mental formations, and consciousness — are general categories that together include everything that we experience in the psycho-physical world. Thus they can be an effective tool for understanding the teaching of no-self. If one analyzes all aspects of what one feels to be one’s self, one finds that all fall within the scope of the five aggregates.

More specifically, the aggregate of form comprises what we perceive as our bodies and the rest of the physical world. The aggregate of sense-perception comprises the first five faculties of perception — eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body — and their intake of the five corresponding categories of sense-data — visible objects, sounds, odors, flavors, and tactile objects. We respond to these perceptions as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

The aggregate of cognition includes the function of identifying sense-data and making distinctions concerning the data. It also involves differentiating between mental contents; thus it includes the higher perceptual functions and thinking processes, for example the use of language.

The aggregate of mental formations refers to both conscious and non-conscious volitional forces, including conscious intentions or acts of will; innate predispositions resulting from karma created during previous lives; and unconscious forces having to do with basic life functions, nourishment, and growth.

The aggregate of consciousness is the subtle basis of the aggregates of sense-perception, cognition, and mental formations. It consists of a subtle distinction-making awareness that distinguishes awareness from the objects of awareness.

The Eighteen Constituents

The eighteen constituents are the six faculties, the six kinds of perceived objects, and the six consciousnesses. The six faculties are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The six kinds of perceived objects are visible objects, sounds, odors, flavors, tactile objects, and objects of cognition. The six faculties and the six kinds of perceived objects are together known as the “twelve sites.” They are the sites for the coming into being of the six consciousnesses. That is, contact between the facul-

ties and their objects is a necessary condition for the coming into being of eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, tactile sensation, and cognition).

Like the five aggregates, the eighteen constituents provide an analysis of the entire psycho-physical world and an aid to breaking attachments to that world. Everything that we experience can also be subsumed within the eighteen constituents. The first five groups of perceived objects — visible objects, sounds, odors, flavors, and tactile objects — together with the first five faculties that perceive these objects comprise the entire physical world. The faculty of cognition and objects of cognition in the mind, together with the six consciousnesses, comprise the world of mind. All mental experience and the entire physical world lie within these eighteen; therefore, no notion of a permanent soul or self is needed to describe and account for any experience.

Seven Primary Elements

The seven primary elements are earth, which represents solidity; water, which represents what is liquid; fire, which represents warmth; wind, which represents motion; space; visual awareness; and consciousness. These primary elements are the qualities of matter-energy as they are distinguished in the mind. It may be helpful to think about the primary elements on three different levels: first, their identity with the Matrix of the Thus-Come One, which is the enlightened mind and the primary elements' true nature; second, their pure and essential qualities, which we do not usually experience directly; and third, the primary elements as we experience them in their state of mixture with each other in various proportions in our bodies and in the world.

12. Notes on This Translation

We have already mentioned⁶⁴ some of the challenges involved in undertaking to translate into modern English the formal eighth-century Chinese of

⁶⁴ See p. xv.

the *Sūraṅgama Sūtra*. Perhaps the most difficult challenge came from the constraints the Chinese translators imposed upon themselves in choosing the pattern of four-character phrases in which the greater part of the Chinese translation is written. Not infrequently, in order to preserve the four-character meter, the translators found it necessary to omit one or more characters even though the characters to be omitted were essential to the meaning. An example that the reader of the Chinese text frequently encounters involves the list of the six faculties of perception, or the list of their six objects. Although in each case all six are clearly meant, two are routinely omitted so that the remaining four fit the four-character meter. (A further complication is that the same two are not always omitted.) In general, wherever such terseness might inhibit understanding, we have either added clarifying words, included an explanatory excerpt from the commentary of the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua, or identified the missing meanings in a footnote.

Second, the Chinese text often proceeds in patterned paragraphs, and the resulting repetition sometimes tempted the Chinese translators to enliven the repeated text with a variety of synonyms. The opposite is also true: the Chinese translators often used one character to indicate quite different meanings — sometimes in the same sentence or even in the same four-character phrase. In both cases we have chosen clarity over literary flourish. Several characters that mean the same thing we have generally rendered with one English word, and single characters with multiple meanings we have generally translated into several English words.

Third, the abundance of Sanskrit terms, represented in the text by specialized transliteration characters, is one of the features that most challenges the reader of the Chinese text. We chose not to pass on this difficulty to readers of the English version. We have, in general, left in the Sanskrit only those words that are already familiar to English readers (such words as “Dharma,” “karma,” “nirvana,” and “Bodhisattva”) or those words that we expect will become English words as Buddhist texts become more and more familiar to Westerners. When we have translated Sanskrit terms that the Chinese text merely transliterates, we have noted the Sanskrit original in the footnotes.