

AN OUTLINE OF THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Of Mahayana sutras, the *Kegon*, the *Hokke* (*Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka*) and the *Nehan* (*Nirvāna*) sutras are the most outstanding, and among these the *Kegon* is important because it is considered to be the teaching given out by the Buddha Śākyamuni just after his enlightenment, and in consequence, his enlightenment is made the centre or pivot of the sutra's substance.

The sutra is called *Avatamsaka* in Sanskrit and in Japanese *Kegon*. The full Japanese title is *Dai-hō-kō-butsum-kegon-gyo*: *dai*=great, *hō*=normative, *kō*=all-pervading, *butsu*=enlightened one, *kegon*=adorned with flowers. The title means: "How beautiful is the Enlightened One who has grasped the great all-pervading Truth which is the normative principle of the universe."

The scope of this sutra is very grand. On the ocean of it like a mirror everything is reflected and revealed. In form it is bold and grand, yet delicate and subtle. It is one of the supreme works of the world.

There are two complete translations, one in sixty volumes translated by Buddhahadra of Northern India, in the Eastern Shin dynasty, 418–520 A.D. The *Kegon* sect uses this sixty-volume version. And one in eighty volumes was translated by Śikshananda, of the T'ang dynasty, 695–699.

The forty-volume sutra translated by Prajñā in 796–797, called the *Fugengyōgwanbon* "Practice and Vows of Samantabhadra" corresponds to the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. This forty-volume *Kegon* (*Gaṇḍavyūha*) together with the *Jūjikyō* (*Daśabhūmika*) and other sutras makes a complete *Avatamsaka*. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* occupies about a fourth of the *Avatamsaka* and is complete in itself. It is the *Nyūhokkaibon*, chapter on Entering into the Universe through the Practice and Vows of Samantabhadra, and describes the pilgrimage of a youth called Sudhana in his efforts to enter

the Dharmadhātu and his consultation with fifty-three good friends. It is the *Pilgrim's Progress* of Buddhism.¹

This sutra is not so much preached by Buddha himself, for he is for the most part silent; it is rather a dramatic description to reveal the contents of enlightenment. The Bodhisattvas and devas are active, but their activity is performed under the will of the Buddha, and the infinite varieties of activity shown are a revelation of the Buddha's power. This point must be remembered, that although he seems to be a silent participant he is in reality the true actor and preacher since all the others are performing and speaking through him. In so far as Buddha is the preacher he is Vairochana the Supreme Buddha, the Dharmakāya, rather than the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. According to this sutra, the human mind is the universe itself and identical with Buddha, and it is said that Buddha, Mind, and Beings are one and the same. This is a famous saying and expressive of Mahayana philosophy.

This sutra is said to have been spoken three weeks after Buddha's Enlightenment in a state of meditation and in the Dharmakāya form.

Samantabhadra plays a most important part. He is supposed to represent the student stage not yet in a perfect state of supreme enlightenment. But all the preaching is really the preaching of the Dharmakāya and is enlightenment or Truth itself which is personally called Vairochana. Exoterically, the Buddha in enlightenment may mean the mendicant under the Bō-tree, but esoterically he is the pervading and permanent Dharmakāya and this world is no longer an ordinary world but the universe, Dharmadhātu, consisting of interpenetrating worlds.

The action of the sutra takes place in seven places and there are nine assemblies. Of the seven places there are three on earth and four in heaven. Those on earth are:

¹ It is now being translated into English by Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki of Ōtani University, Kyoto, and Editor of *The Eastern Buddhist*.

1. under the Bo-tree, 2. the bright palace, and 3. the Jetavana grove; and those in heaven are: 1. the dwelling of Indra, 2. the dwelling of Yama, 3. Tushita, the dwelling of Maitreya, and 4. the Taketsu or Paranirmita. The eighth assembly is the Jetavana Grove repeated and this gives the story of Sudhana's pilgrimage, the subject of the forty-volume *Kegon* or *Gaṇḍavyūha*. The assemblies take place in range from earth to heaven, and then to earth, again beginning with Śākyamuni's enlightenment under the Bo-tree, and then ranging to the heavens showing the unimpeded movement of the Buddha's mind.

Although the first seven assemblies make Vairocana the master, each assembly has its own central personality who unfolds the brightness of his wisdom through the power of the Buddha. Of all the Bodhisattvas, Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra are the chief ones, Mañjuśrī representing Wisdom (*prajñā*) and Samantabhadra Practice (*caryā*). These two attributes are two aspects of the Buddha's enlightenment, for the contents of the Dharmakāya, Wisdom and Practice, complete the attainment of Enlightenment. Wisdom is necessary for the first step, but Practice completes the stride, so as Samantabhadra represents Practice, the stress of this sutra is put upon this Bodhisattva.

There are forty steps of Practice and among these are ten stages or Bhūmis. These ten stages are significant. The chapter on them is circulated as an independent sutra known as the *Jūjikyō* or *Daśabhūmika*. The last assembly is called the *Nyuhokkaibon* or "Entering the Dharmadhātu," and this is the chapter which also became independent bearing the title *Gaṇḍavyūha*.

The fifteenth chapter is the *Jūjuhōn* on the ten States and describes the stages of the Bodhisattva from "the cherishing the first thought for enlightenment" to the attainment of full Buddhahood.

In the sixteenth chapter the pure deeds of the Bodhisattva are described. Succeeding chapters enlarge upon

this theme. The twenty-fifth chapter is interesting because it preaches the doctrine of *Pariṇāmana* (*ekō*), the turning of merit for the salvation of others. Chapter Twenty-seven deals with the Vows of Samantabhadra. But the most illuminating chapter of all is the thirty-ninth describing the ninth assembly, "Entering into the Universe," and it is this chapter which makes up the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. It deals with belief, understanding, practice, and enlightenment, which are after all nothing but one's own mind, and this one mind enters into universality and becomes enlightenment itself.

Interpenetration is the doctrine taught in the *Kegon*. When we look at the world in the spiritual light of Vairochana Buddha, we see it full of radiance, indeed a world of pure light. Everything in this world is interpenetrating, everything is mutually conditioned and conditioning. All things are one and that one is the Supreme Reality which embraces them.

- "All the Buddha-lands and all the Buddhas themselves,
 Are manifested in my own being, freely and without
 hindrance,
 And even at the point of a single hair a Buddha-land
 is perceived.
 The Buddha-lands as innumerable as particles of dust,
 Are raised from one thought cherished in the mind of
 the Bodhihattva of Mercy (Samantabhadra),
 Who, practising meritorious deeds in numberless
 kalpas, hath led all beings to the Truth;
 A Buddha-land resteth in every particle of dust,
 And the spirit of the Buddha like a cloud covereth
 and protecteth it.
- "All lands are interpenetrating in the Buddha-land,
 And they are countless in number,—a phenomenon
 beyond our understanding:
 There is nothing that does not fill up every quarter
 of the universe,
 And things are inexhaustible and immeasurable and
 move with perfect spontaneity.
 All the Buddha-lands are embraced in one Buddha-
 land,

And each one of the Buddha-lands embraces in itself
 all the other lands;
 But the land is neither extended nor compressed.
 One land fills up all the ten quarters of the universe,
 And in turn the universe with all its contents is
 embraced in one land,
 And yet the world as it is suffers no damage.
 "In every particle of dust throughout the Buddha-
 world,
 The creative power of Vairochana Buddha is per-
 ceivable;
 His voice resoundeth over the ocean of universal
 salvation,
 And wherein all beings are brought under his
 control."¹

When we do not see this radiant world of the Buddha's enlightenment in which Pure World everything is interpenetrating, the Buddha feels sorrow for beings and puts forth his activity to help all these beings to attain enlightenment. The Bodhisattvas follow him and through their own practice of the six virtues of perfection (*pāramitā*) help suffering beings to attain supreme enlightenment.

"The Buddha is our refuge, unsurpassed and peerless,
 He removeth the sufferings of all beings;
 If they desire to see him face to face,
 He appeareth to them like the full moon over the
 mountain high."²

Now let us consider the *Gaṇḍavyūha*.

Once Buddha dwelt at Śrāvastī in the grove of Jetavana in the garden of Anāthapiṇḍika. In that assembly there were five hundred Bodhisattvas headed by Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī. All the members of the assembly were waiting for the Buddha to preach. Then he entered Samādhi (deep meditation) and as soon as he did so the forests of Jevatana suddenly became so wide that they became filled with an inexpressible number of worlds and many Bodhisattvas from the ten quarters came and worshipped the Bud-

¹ *Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated by D. T. Suzuki.

² *Ibid.*

dha, composing verses of praise. Buddha issued a ray of light from between his eyebrows and illumined the Bodhisattvas and all the ten quarters and thereby the Bodhisattvas were filled with compassion to benefit all beings.

Mañjuśrī went out from the Pratisthana to the human world going south and preached the Mahayana doctrine to many people. While he was staying in the city of Dhanyakara, among his audience of listeners was a handsome youth of a noble family, Sudhana. While Sudhana was listening with the desire to learn, lead, and perfect the life of a Bodhisattva, Mañjuśrī looking over the audience perceived the young Sudhana and knew his aspiration, so he advised him thus: "You must find a true friend to help you in your search. Go to Myōhō Mountain in the country of Shoraku and there you will find a Bikhshu Sagaramegha (Tokuun). He will give you good advice."

Sudhana set out on his journey, visited Sagaramegha who taught him wisely and then sent him on to another friend. In this way he was sent to one friend after another until fifty-two friends in all had been visited, and at last he came to Samantabhadra, under whose teaching he perfected his vow and entered into the Dharmadhātu (Supreme Reality).

In this story of Sudhana we can see that Samantabhadra plays the chief part as master and Mañjuśrī as the guest, and the activity of both of them is represented by the youth Sudhana who visits fifty-three good friends seeking advice and finally attains entrance to the Dharmadhātu. It is the story of Enlightenment of "entering into the universe" by means of the practice and vows of the religious life of Samantabhadra.

In regard to the good friends whom Sudhana visited besides Mañjuśrī who appeared three times and Samantabhadra and first and the last, there were fifty in all. What kind of persons were they? If we classify them we will find that there were five Bodhisattvas, five monks, one nun,

eight householders, a physician, a perfume seller, a sailor, two kings, two laymen, four laywomen three of whom were ladies and one a heavenly maiden, several children, a number of deities, a mendicant, a hermit, and two Brahmins.

In the *Gandavyūha*, we find the Mahayana tendency to lay stress upon lay people rather than upon monks, and among all the friends we find only five monks. Not all of the friends were aristocratic and wealthy. One was a perfume seller, one a sailor, and one woman a courtesan.

Sudhana during his pilgrimage was seeking without by asking help of others and he passed through many experiences mental and spiritual, but later he realised that true knowledge must come from within. The fifty-third friend was Maitreya who directed Sudhana to go to Mañjuśrī to ask about the law by which he could enter into Samantabhadra's religious life.

The last volume of the sutra is devoted to Samantabhadra's Ten Vows and the desire to be born into Sukhāvātīvyūha (that is, Pure Land).

The Ten Vows of Samantabhadra are:

1. To worship the Buddhas;
2. To praise the Tathagatas;
3. To make offerings to all the Buddhas;
4. To confess past sins;
5. To rejoice in the virtues and happiness of others;
6. To request Buddha to preach the Law;
7. To request Buddha to live in this world;
8. To study Buddhism in order to teach it;
9. Always to benefit all beings;
10. To turn the stock of merit to others.

These vows are the basis of the Bodhisattva's life in Mahayana Buddhism. This last part concerning Samantabhadra's Vows has been issued separately, and is known as the *Fugengyōgwanbon* ("Practice and Vow of Samantabhadra").

The story of Sudhana is ultimately an epitome of the

entire *Kegon* sutra. In the background is always the Dharmakāya. Every activity depicted is really the activity of Dharmakāya. It is a sutra of Enlightenment and emphasises the fact that all beings can be reborn in the house of the Buddha if they obtain enlightenment. The previous portions of the *Avatamsaka* emphasise this and the Sudhana chapter states it practically.

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