

NOTES ON THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

TO understand the Avatamsaka Sutra, the following remarks will be found useful.

Besides the general Mahāyāna notions, the Avatamsaka has its own philosophy or world-conception constituting the fundamental tenets of the Kegon School of Buddhism, which is regarded by some to be the culmination of the Buddhist experience of life.

First, the Buddha as the central figure naturally occupies the most important position throughout the discourse. Unlike in the other sutras, the Buddha himself does not deliver a sermon, or a series of sermons; all the lecturing whatever there is done by the attending Bodhisattvas: not only the lecturing but the praising of the Buddha's holy merits, of which there is a great deal in this sutra, in fact more than in other sutras,—all this is the doing of the Bodhisattvas. The part played by the Buddha is just to show himself in radiance, and this is the important point in the understanding of the Avatamsaka. The Buddha here is not the historical Buddha, but one in the Sagara-mūdra Samādhi, which means "Ocean-Seal Samādhi." According to Kegon scholars, the Buddha in this Samādhi keeps his mind so serene and transparent as the ocean in which all things are sealed or impressed, that is, reflected as they are in themselves; the world thus appearing to him is not a world of the senses, but one of light and spirit. This world is called the Dharmadhātu, that is a world of pure beings, or simply a spiritual world, and is technically known as the "World of the Lotus Treasure."

When the world is contemplated by the Buddha in this Samādhi, it is radiant with light; for the light issues from

his body, from every part of his body, in fact from every pore in his skin, illuminating the ten quarters of the universe and revealing the past, the present, and the future. The Buddha himself is reflected in every object on which his light falls. His gaze turns towards the east, and all the holy lands of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their innumerable attendants in that quarter are manifested; when it is directed to the west, or south, or north, the same miracle takes place. This applies not only to space but to time as well.

In the heaven of Sakrendra it is said that there hangs a network of pearls which is so arranged as to make each one of them reflect the light of another, so that when one of the pearls is picked, every one else is seen mirrored in it. In a similar manner, the Dharmadhatu of the Avatamasaka Sutra is a network of lights, where when you take up any one of them, in it you will see the whole world reflected. In other words,

“ In every particle of dust there are present Buddhas innumerable,
Revealing innumerable worlds of indescribable sublimity;
And they are perceived in one thought,
And all the kalpas past, present, and future are also manifested
in one thought.”*

or,

“ 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 perceivable.”**

When Genju Daishi (賢首大師, 643-712) of the T'ang Dynasty discoursed on the philosophy of Kegon, his disciples found it difficult to follow up this theory of interpenetration. Thereupon, the Buddhist scholar had a number of mirrors

* *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. I, p. 149.

** *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. I, p. 152.

stand all around a light so that the latter would be reflected in them all and each of them in turn would reflect all the others. This apt practical demonstration greatly helped to enlighten his disciples on the subject.

Interpenetration or inter-mutuality sums up the doctrine of Kegon. This may be hard to comprehend when this world is observed in its gross sense-provoking aspect as we do in our ordinary life; but let us once be introduced into the spiritual light of Vairocana Buddha (盧舍那佛), and everything in the world will assume a totally different aspect, full of radiance, not only in itself but reflecting in it the whole world with all its multitudinous objects. The Sutra depicts this world of pure light, which is the world as it appears to those who have attained to the Perfect Wisdom (*prajñā*).

This Kegon conception of the world is not pantheism; for what it teaches is that each object is not only itself but every other object, and that all things are mutually conditioning to such an extent as the withdrawal of one of them means the disturbance of the whole system, which is to say, the world grows imperfect to that extent. When this theory is pushed to its logical conclusion, the complete network of inter-relationships of all things rests on the point of a single hair. As this pen moves along the lines of this ruled paper, the triple chiliocosm moves with it, and as I think out my thought, in it are reflected all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the past, present, and future, even as the moon and stars and all other heavenly bodies are mirrored in the ocean, eternally serene and undisturbed. This is what is known as the spiritual freedom, thoroughly unfettered, of an enlightened being.

The world of Kegon is thus known as the world of interpenetration, which is regarded as one step gone further than the idea of the oneness of the phenomenal and the noumenal world,—this latter being the doctrine of “imperfect” Mahāyāna Buddhism.

So long as this insight is not attained, our world remains sense-bound, and untold misery dogs our steps wherever they are directed. This the Buddha pities, and with his overflowing love he embraces the world and all creatures in it; his activity which is called the "Deeds of Samantabhadra" (普賢行) never ceases until every being is delivered; he will go to Hell, even to the lowest one, Avīci (阿鼻地獄), in order to get the suffering souls out of it. The Bodhisattva follows the example of the Buddha, for he strictly observes the Six Virtues of Perfection (*pāramitā*). Indeed these Virtues are what constitutes the essence of Bodhisattvahood. By strength of the merits a Bodhisattva accumulates through countless ages by the practice of these Six Virtues, he finally attains to Buddhahood.

The Six Virtues called the "Bodhisattvacarya" (菩薩行) are: 1. Almsgiving (*dāna*, 布施) which is not only giving away material things but preaching the truth and sacrificing one's life for the cause; 2. Observance of the precepts (*sīla*, 持戒); 3. Untiring in work (*virya*, 精進); 4. Long-suffering (*kṣanti*, 忍辱); 5. Wisdom (*prajñā*, 智慧) which is not mere accumulation of knowledge, but a penetrating insight into the very nature of things; and 6. Meditation (*dhyaṇa*, 禪定). As to this last subject, Meditation, a special treatment will be required, as this, together with Wisdom (*prajñā*) and Precepts (*sīla*), constitutes the three branches (三學) of Buddhist discipline.

There are many other points in the Keron Sutra requiring enlightenment, but this short introduction I hope will be of some help to those who are not quite familiar with the Mahāyāna in its various aspects of development.

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