

The ZerO

Excerpt from AVATAMSAKA SUTRA, "PRAISES IN THE TUSHITA HEAVEN PALACE," CHAPTER 24

translated by Shramamerika Heng Chia

reviewed by Bhikshuni Heng Tao

edited by Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih

*FROM BEGINNINGLESS TIME ONWARD,
LIVING BEINGS HAVE LONG REVOLVED IN BIRTH AND DEATH.
BECAUSE THEY FAIL TO UNDERSTAND THE TRUE AND ACTUAL
DHARMA,
ALL BUDDHAS COME INTO THE WORLD.
ALL DHARMAS ARE INDESTRUCTIBLE,
NOR IS THERE ANYONE WHO CAN DESTROY THEM.
THIS COMFORTABLE, GREAT BRIGHT LIGHT
UNIVERSALLY APPEARS IN THE WORLD.*

COMMENTARY:

FROM BEGINNINGLESS TIME ONWARD, LIVING BEINGS HAVE LONG REVOLVED IN BIRTH AND DEATH. Living beings revolve in birth and death within the six paths without a beginning or an end. In this beginningless and endless time, living beings spin back and forth, going around and around. They are just like a mote of dust--suddenly in the heavens; suddenly on the ground; suddenly they are in the paths of people; suddenly in the paths of hungry ghosts; suddenly they become an animal; suddenly they fall into the hells; and all of a sudden they are asuras. This is what is meant by no time when it begins and no time when it ends. At whatever time you are able to certify to the fruit and accomplish Buddhahood, at that point, you will be able to stop the wheel of birth and death. But before you become a Buddha, you are still turning on the revolving wheel. Even Bodhisattvas experience a kind of delusion during transmigration and moving in a skandha body, and Arhats become confused from dwelling in the womb. So even when great lords of the Dharma body appear in the human world, sometimes they find themselves caught up in the flow of birth and death, to the extent that their brains are addled and their heads are bewildered and they don't know how they can cut off the flow of birth and death. Birth and death means being born and dying, dying and being born again. You can speak of major births and deaths and there are also minor births and deaths. On the day that you are born, although there's birth, there's also a kind of death. Because on the day that you're born, you bring along with you the day of your death. This life that we live is a major birth and death, and every single thought that goes by is a minor death. The day that we're born is also the day that we die. Because when there is birth there is also a death, and if there were no births, then there would be no death.

To speak about "beginningless," most people explain beginningless by saying that it has no start and no end. "Without a beginning" means the time from beginningless kalpas in the past. There's no

beginning to kalpas and no end to kalpas. But if you talk about it back and forth, exactly what is it? What does it mean to have no beginning and no end? It's what we call "O"--a zero. In Chinese, it's called a ling (零). This zero has no beginning and no end. There's no point where it starts and no point where it ends. It's a complete, round circle and it represents the beginningless and endless. The beginningless is represented by the zero. If you break this zero, then it becomes a one, and that is called a beginning.

Last night I told each of you to pay special attention to this passage, and today I'm going to tell you about the zero, which is very important. Once you cut it open, there's a one--that which has a beginning. Add a one to it and you have two. Add another one to it and you've got three. Add another one and you've got four, then five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten. Once there are ten it multiplies into one hundred, and one hundred multiplies into a thousand, and one thousand multiplies into ten thousand, one hundred thousand, a million, a billion, ten billion, up to a figure that can't be reckoned. Now in the Scientific Age, we've made rockets which orbit in space. They can orbit around in space without ever stopping. This is a product of these numbers. The beginning of numbers makes it possible for rockets to venture into space. Physics is just a function of the myriad transformations and changes of numbers. That's the beginning.

Well, what about the end? Right now we don't know when the end will be. The end refers to the fourth of the four stages of: formation, existing, decay, and emptiness. The end refers to the period of going empty. Right now we are in the beginning. There are twenty small kalpas of formation, twenty small kalpas of existing, twenty small kalpas of decay, and twenty small kalpas of emptiness. You could speak of this in terms of a beginning and an end. So now we are speaking of all living beings from beginningless time onward. Where do all these living beings come from? Let's investigate it. Let's talk about the human race. Would you say men came first or women came first? If you say men came first, without any women, how did the men get here? And if you say women came first, if there weren't any men, how could there be women? This is also the beginningless because no one knows where it began.

You can also talk about chickens. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? From beginningless kalpas onward, there were no chickens. Where did they come from? They came from eggs. Now if there were not chickens, how could there be eggs? So this isn't something you can solve with research. This principle is just a principle of the beginningless. People also came from this no beginning, from this zero. Because they came from this zero, there's no beginning, no end, no inside, no outside, no big, and no small. In terms of the small, this zero represents a small mote of dust, an atom. If you speak about it in larger terms, it includes the entire Dharma Realm. To the end of space and pervading the Dharma Realm, nothing gets left outside of the zero. To the end of space and the end of the Dharma Realm, if you pound it all into fine motes of dust, into tiniest motes of dust, nothing is left outside of the zero.

So this zero is the source of all creation. It has no beginning and no end. It's the principle of True Emptiness and Wonderful Existence. The zero, if spoken of in large terms, includes all of space and the Dharma Realm. This is True Emptiness. If you shrink it way down, it turns into a single atom. And although those atoms are small, they make up Wonderful Existence. The zero is True Emptiness and Wonderful Existence. All of you should think this over. If you want to understand this doctrine, you have to understand the true Dharma. If you don't understand this doctrine, then you're still a confused, muddled person and you have no real wisdom. If you're enlightened, the zero is a great, bright, wisdom light. If you haven't become enlightened, then it is a kind of no-light, in other words,

ignorance. This ignorance is also the zero. Wisdom light also makes up the zero. The zero is beginningless, endless; it has no inside, no outside; it is neither small nor large. The zero is so large that nothing gets outside of it. You can draw it as large as you'd like. If you want to shrink it down you can shrink it down as small as you want. It's so big there's nothing outside of it, and so small you can't fit anything inside. If you draw it really large, then it is the pure basic source of the wonderful suchness nature. If you shrink it way down, make it very, very small, it becomes your very first thought of ignorance. So when I speak of the "beginningless" that's the way I explain it.

Living beings have long revolved in birth and death. In the six paths of rebirth, the revolving wheel is included in the zero. Not being able to smash through the zero, one is born and dies, dies and then is born again. And nobody knows for how many great kalpas one turns in the six paths. This is called turning in the six paths of birth and death for a long time. Isn't this really terrifying--turning around and around in the revolving wheel?

I'll present another topic for you. This turning for a long time refers to what you have created through your continual thought processes. If you produce a defiled thought, then when that thought matures you may become an animal, a hungry ghost or fall to become a hell-dweller. However, if you become just a little bit good, you can be born as a human being or an asura, or perhaps get born in the heavens. These different paths of rebirth all come about from thoughts. The revolving wheel is created by your thoughts alone. We undergo the retribution of the six paths because of the karma which our thoughts create, and then we receive retribution. It's not that we receive the retribution immediately, but in the distant past, say if you had false thoughts about the heavens, then you were born in the heavens. If you had false thoughts about asuras, then you became an asura. If you had false thoughts about human beings, then you became a human being. Or if you had false thoughts of animals, you became an animal. Having hungry-ghost thoughts, you became a hungry ghost. Having hellish thoughts, you fell into the hells. If you mainly did offensive things and created evil karma, then you fell into the three evil paths. If you did good things which gained merit and virtue, you were born in the three good paths. This is speaking in very general terms. If one were to speak of it in detail one couldn't finish explaining it until the end of time.

So the world is the creation of false thinking of living beings. If people didn't have false thinking, the whole world would be empty. But living beings continue to get born and die. NOT UNDERSTANDING THE TRUE AND ACTUAL DHARMA. Living beings fail to understand the principle of the Dharma of True Emptiness and Wonderful Existence--the Real Mark of True Suchness, which is the true and actual Dharma. The Dharma of True Emptiness and Wonderful Existence is what I have just explained as the zero. It is through the zero that this huge heaven and huge earth were created. And this huge world was also born from the zero. The myriad living beings also came out from the zero. Everything has come forth from the zero. This is because the zero is not included in numbers--it transcends numbers. It has no beginning, no end, nothing inside of it, nor outside of it; it's neither big, nor small. If you let it go, it expands to fill the entire universe--all of creation. If you shrink it down, then it hides away; it would seem to disappear. This Dharma is just the Dharma of True Emptiness and Won-derful Existence.

True Emptiness is not empty. Why isn't it empty? Because it has Wonderful Existence. And Wonderful Existence is not existence. Why is it not-existence? Because it still has True Emptiness. True Emptiness doesn't obstruct Wonderful Existence, and Wonderful Existence doesn't obstruct True Emptiness. This principle solves the problem of "which came first, the men or the women?" It also

solves the problem of "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" In fact, all of the questions can be solved by using the zero.

Why is this? The zero *is* True Emptiness. And within True Emptiness, Wonderful Existence manifests. All creation can manifest. Although there is Wonderful Existence, it is not separate from True Emptiness. If you haven't attained the Mind-Seal Dharma of all Buddhas, you won't be able to understand this. If you understand the "using the mind to seal the mind" Dharma of all Buddhas, then you'll understand this Dharma. So it says, "not understanding the true and actual Dharma," living beings put a head on top of a head; they run around on a donkey looking for a donkey; they look outside, grasping outwardly, and they don't know to return the light and reverse the illumination, to recognize the true and actual Dharma inherent within their original self-nature. They don't know that it is forever complete within their own self-nature, that they don't have to go out looking for it. If you look outside, you can look for 84,000 aeons, but you'll never find it. But if you can return the light and reverse the illumination, then you'll immediately realize it.

So it says,

The sea of suffering is boundless,
But a turn of the head is the other shore.

This means, if you look outside, the sea of suffering is boundless. But if you turn around and look inside, if you look in your self-nature, then that is to turn your head and arrive at the other shore.

BECAUSE living beings don't understand the true and actual Dharma, ALL BUDDHAS COME INTO THE WORLD. We living beings are so upside-down and confused. All day long we seek after false conditions. We get caught up in the six sense organs and the six sense objects and run after them. Originally all Buddhas abide in the Pure Land of Constant Stillness and Light, sitting in full lotus and wrapt in samadhi. But now they enter the world. Why is this? Because they see that you and I--all these stupid creatures--are really pitiful. All day long we forget about what is true and all we know how to do is get attached to what is false. People don't know to turn away from their confusion and head for enlightenment; to turn away from the false and head for the true; to borrow what is false in order to cultivate what is true; to turn around and look for it inside. This is really pitiful. So, all Buddhas, in their samadhi, produce a mind of great compassion and come into the world to show living beings how to get out of the path of confusion. But we people get caught up pursuing false conditions and don't recognize the true Dharma. The Buddha speaks the Dharma for us and the more the Buddha speaks, the more we try to run away. We try to turn back; we don't listen. The Buddha gets so nervous he starts shaking his head! What are we going to do? We turn around and come back, the Buddha is right in front of our faces, and he teaches us again.

ALL DHARMAS ARE INDESTRUCTIBLE. True and actual Dharma cannot be destroyed by any outside ways, NOR IS THERE ANY ONE WHO CAN DESTROY THEM. If you understand and recognize the true and actual Dharma, then you are included in this real Dharma which exhausts the Dharma Realm and empty space. No matter whether it's the Buddha, or a heavenly demon, or one of outside ways--they are all included in this true and actual Dharma; they can't get out of the Dharma Realm. So the heavenly demons and those of outside ways eventually have to comply with the Proper Dharma. Why? Because they can't destroy it. The Proper Dharma is indestructible. Nobody can

destroy the true Dharma. If it can be destroyed, then it's not the true and actual Dharma. Because the true and actual Dharma can't be ruined.

THIS COMFORTABLE, GREAT BRIGHT LIGHT UNIVERSALLY APPEARS IN THE WORLD. This refers to the perfect cultivation of the zero, which then manifests as the great storehouse of brilliant light.

The storehouse of great bright light exhausts empty space and the Dharma Realm. It universally shines throughout the world in order to instruct all living beings to end birth and be free of death. It is just the Dharma door of returning the light and reversing the illumination; returning to the root and going back to the source. This is your great, wisdom light which destroys all your ignorance so that your original Dharma nature can shine. Even if you don't believe this, go ahead and try it out, and then when the time comes, when it happens to you, there will be no way that you won't believe it. If you don't believe it, you'll still have to believe it, because that's the way it is, and what method would you have for not believing?

The great, brilliant storehouse is your own. It's not something other people give to you. It's not something that the Buddhas can give you. It's your own; it's inherent within yourself.