



Verse Upon Opening A Sutra

*The unsurpassed, deep, profound,
Subtle and wonderful Dharma.*

*In hundreds of millions of kalpas
Is difficult to encounter.*

*I now see and hear it,
Receive and maintain it,*

*And I vow to understand the Thus Come One's
True and actual meaning.*

THE GREAT MEANS EXPANSIVE BUDDHA FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA

Commentary by Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua

WONDROUS ADORNMENTS OF WORLD RULERS

CHAPTER ONE

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The *GREAT MEANS EXPANSIVE BUDDHA FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA* [*Maha-Vaipulya-Buddha-Avatamsaka-Sutra* in Sanskrit and *Ta Fang Kuang Fo Hua Yen Ching* in Chinese) is the king of kings among Sutras. It was spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha immediately upon his enlightenment underneath the Bodhi tree. Without rising and still immersed in deep samadhi, the Buddha spoke this Sutra with his Dharma body in seven places and nine assemblies. Three of the places were in the human realm and four of them were in different heavens. The Buddha spoke this magnificent Sutra of the Dharma-door of the Perfect and Sudden Teaching and expounded the principle of the ONE TRUE DHARMA REALM for living beings with the sharpest roots and greatest capacity for understanding. Although it covered nine different assemblies, the Sutra was spoken in a relatively short time, only twenty-one days.

Understanding the *Flower Adornment Sutra* is tantamount to obtaining the complete body of the Buddha. That is because the Sutra contains the fullest extent of the inconceivable wisdom and wondrous spiritual functioning of all Buddhas of the three periods of time.

Since the *Flower Adornment Sutra* was spoken for the mighty Bodhisattvas and beings of great faculties, many Sound Hearer disciples of the Buddha who were present at that time could not grasp the vast and infinite principles of the Sutra. Their roots were not ready for this perfect teaching. And so, after Shakyamuni Buddha spoke this Sutra, it was not preserved or circulated in the world, not even in India. The Dragon King took it to the Dragon Palace in the deep ocean to make offerings to it, waiting for the right opportunity when this inconceivable Sutra would surface in the human realm to benefit living beings.

Six hundred years after the Buddha's Nirvana, Nagarjuna (Dragon Tree) Bodhisattva went to the Dragon Palace to see it. He found that the Sutra was divided into three versions. The first version was made up of verses as many as dust motes in ten three-thousand-great thousand world systems. Now the dust motes in one universe are already uncountably many, how much more the number of dust motes in ten universes! On top of that, this version of the Sutra contained as many chapters as there are dust motes in the four continents: the southern continent of Jambudvipa, the eastern continent of Purvavideha, the western continent of Aparagodaniya, and the northern continent of Uttarakuru.

Nagarjuna Bodhisattva discovered that the middle version of the *Flower Adornment Sutra* had 498,000 verses and 1200 chapters. The last, the small version, had 100,000 verses and 48 chapters. The first two versions far exceeded the scope of understanding of people in the world, and only the third and

last version was appropriate for their capacity. Although 100,000 verses and 48 chapters was no small amount, nonetheless, Nagarjuna Bodhisattva had an excellent memory, so he memorized the entire text of this last version. And when he went back to India he wrote it out. From India it was transmitted to Zhong Kuo (China). The most complete text translated into Zhong Wen (Chinese) is made up of 39 chapters in eighty rolls, not counting Chapter 40, "The Conduct and Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva," from which this present English translation by the Buddhist Text Translation Society is based. There are also editions in forty and sixty rolls (the *Tsin*, or "Old" version) which are not as complete. This edition we are using (the *T'ang* or "New" version) is eighty rolls is also not complete. Of the original 48 chapters and 100,000 verses, 45,000 verses and 39 chapters were transmitted to Zhong Kuo, while 55,000 verses and nine chapters remained in India. Although this edition of the Sutra is not complete, the preface, main body, and conclusion are all intact. Therefore, National Master Ch'ing Liang, the Fourth Patriarch of the Hua Yen (*Avatamsaka*, *Flower Adornment*) School, a transformation body of Avatamsaka Bodhisattva himself, considered this edition a representative of the entire Sutra.

As was mentioned earlier, the *Flower Adornment Sutra* was spoken in seven places and in nine assemblies. There is a verse which facilitates remembering those places and assemblies:

The first was in the Bodhi field, the ninth in the Jeta Grove;
The third and fourth in the Trayastrimsha and Suyama Heavens;
The second, seventh, and eighth were held in the Universal Light
Palace;
The fifth and sixth took place in the Tushita and Paranirmitavashavartin
Heavens.

From beginning to end, the entire Sutra could be studied by means of the Five Totalities of Causes and Fruitions.

1. The first assembly discusses the Causes and Fruitions which are Believed In.
2. The second through seventh assemblies discuss the Causes and Fruitions which are Different.
3. The seventh assembly discusses the Causes and Fruitions as being Level and Equal
4. The eighth assembly discusses the Causes and Fruitions upon Accomplishment of Practice.
5. The ninth assembly discusses the Causes and Fruitions as Being Certified to and Entered.

Moreover, National Master Ch'ing Liang further divided the eighty rolls into Four Sections:

1. The first assembly, which consists of eleven rolls, is the Section of Joy at Postulating the Fruition and Giving Rise to Faith.
2. The second through the seventh assemblies, which consists of forty-one rolls, is the Section of Cultivating Causes, Tallying with the Fruition, and Giving Rise to Understanding.
3. The eighth assembly, which consists of seven rolls is the Section of Relying on the Dharma, Progressing in Cultivation, and Accomplishing One's Practice.

4. The ninth assembly, which covers twenty-one rolls, is the Section of Certifying to Entry Into and Accomplishment of Virtue by Relying on the Advisors.

Now we shall go into a brief analysis of each of the nine assemblies.

1. THE FIRST ASSEMBLY. The Buddha first accomplished enlightenment in the Bodhi Field, beneath the Bodhi Tree, and it was here that he spoke the first assembly of this Sutra. The Bodhi Field is situated west of Rajagriha in the country of Magadha, which is the present Bodhgaya in India. In practically every assembly of this Sutra the Buddha emits great light of wisdom when he speaks. In the first assembly, he released light from between his eyebrows as well as from his teeth. Both incidences happened in Chapter Two, "The Thus Come One's Manifestations of Marks." Whereas the light emitted from the teeth represents chewing the flavor of the Dharma Realm, the light emitted from between the eyebrows is symbolic of the One Vehicle and the Proper Middle Way.

Since the *Flower Adornment Sutra* is a Sutra that all Buddhas speak at the outset of their enlightenment, it is protected and cherished by all Buddhas of the ten directions and the three periods of time. They all send profuse light and awesome spiritual power to aid the Great Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas, Great Knights of the Dharma body, to proclaim different chapters of this Sutra. In the first assembly, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is the Dharma speaking host. Relying on all Buddhas' spiritual aid, he explains the many adornments of the proper and dependent retributions in the world to inspire faith in living beings' minds. The first assembly covers six chapters and eleven scrolls. The six chapters are:

1. Wondrous Adornments of World Rulers
2. The Thus Come One's Manifestations of Marks
3. Universal Worthy's Samadhi
4. The Coming into Being of Worlds
5. The Flower Store Sea of Worlds
6. Vairochana

These chapters fall under the Totality of Causes and Fruitions which are Believed In, and belong to the Section of Joy in Postulating the Fruition and Giving Rise to Faith.

II. THE SECOND ASSEMBLY. This assembly was convened at the Universal Light Palace, situated about one mile southeast of the Bodhi Tree by the Nairanjana River, and was constructed by the Dragon King as an offering. In this assembly, the Buddha emits light from the wheels of the soles of his feet, which is representative of the Four Aspects of Faith:

1. Most Initial Faith, which propels one from below to above.
2. The Dharma Produced from the Least Elevated Position. Thus the light emits from the feet, the lowest part of the body.

3. The Basis of Cultivation.

4. Faith Including the Sea of Results. This implied that fulfillment has already been reached.

Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Great Wisdom, acts as the Dharma speaking host in this assembly. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he propounds the virtue of the Ten Faiths. Six Chapters and four scrolls of the Sutra are spoken in this assembly:

7. The Thus Come One's Names and Titles

8. The Four Holy Truths

9. Light Enlightenment

10. Bodhisattvas Ask for Clarification

11. Pure Conduct

12. Worthy Leader

These six chapters fall under the Totality of Causes and Fruitions which are Different, and belong to the Section of Cultivating the Causes, Tallying with the Fruition, and Giving Rise to Understanding. The twelve chapters of the first and second assemblies were spoken in the human realm.

III. THE THIRD ASSEMBLY. This assembly was spoken in the Wonderfully Sublime Palace of the Trayastrimsha Heaven, also known as the Heaven of the Thirty-three. Located on the top of Mount Sumeru, it is the second-level heaven of the Six Desire Heavens. Since the Buddha spoke the *Flower Adornment Sutra* with his Dharma body, he could pervade all places at all times. Without rising from samadhi beneath the Bodhi Tree, his Dharma body ascended to the Trayastrimsha Heaven and spoke the Dharma. In this assembly the Buddha emitted light from the soles of his feet, meaning that one is secure within the Dharma, also that the Dharma arises from the lowest position. Dharma Wisdom Bodhisattva acts as the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he propounds the principles of the Ten Dwellings. Six Chapters and three scrolls were spoken:

13. Ascent to the Summit of Sumeru

14. Praises on Sumeru

15. The Ten Dwellings

16. Brahma Conduct

17. The Merit and Virtue from First Bringing Forth the Mind

18. Understanding Dharmas

These six chapters still fall under the Totality of Causes and Fruitions which are Different and belong to the Section of Cultivating the Causes, Tallying with the Fruition, and Giving Rise to Understanding.

IV. THE FOURTH ASSEMBLY. This assembly was held in the Suyama Heaven, which is located above Mount Sumeru and is considered one of the heavens located in empty space. The Suyama is the third of the Six Desire Realm Heavens. In this assembly the Buddha emits light from the soles of his feet, meaning that the Dharma progresses from below to above, and that living beings should learn it according to its proper order. Forest of Merit and Virtue Bodhisattva is the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he propounds the principles of the Ten Practices. Four Chapters in three scrolls are explained:

19. Ascent to the Suyama Heaven

20. Praises in the Suyama Heaven Palace

21. The Ten Practices

22. The Ten Inexhaustible Treasures.

This assembly falls under the Totality of Causes and Fruitions which are Different, and belongs to the Section of Cultivating Causes, Tallying with the Fruitions and Giving Rise to Understanding.

V. THE FIFTH ASSEMBLY. This assembly was held at the Tushita Heaven, in the Palace Adorned by All Wondrous Jewels. The Tushita is the heaven above the Suyama and is the fourth level heaven in the Desire Realm Heavens. In this assembly, the Buddha emitted light from his kneecaps, symbolizing turning away from self towards others, turning away from specifics towards principles; turning away from causes towards effects; in short, transference. Vajra Banner Bodhisattva acts as the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he explained the principles of the Ten Transferences. Three chapters comprising twelve scrolls are explained:

23. Ascent to the Tushita Heaven

24. Praises in the Tushita Heaven Palace

25. The Ten Transferences

These three chapters also fall under the Totality of Causes and Fruitions which are Different, and belong to the Section of Cultivating Causes, Tallying with the Fruition, and Giving Rise to Understanding.

VI. THE SIXTH ASSEMBLY. This assembly was held at the Bliss from Others' Transformations (Paranirmitavashavartin) Heaven, which is the sixth and highest level of the Heavens in the Desire Realm. In this heaven, where the Ten Grounds were explained, The Buddha emits light from between his brows, which stands for having already been certified to the principles of the Ten Suchnesses, and having perfectly perceived the ultimate meaning of the Middle Way. That is why the light radiates from the middle point between the Buddha's brows. Vajra Treasury Bodhisattva is the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he proclaims the principles of the Ten Grounds, the equivalent of one chapter in six scrolls is explained.

26. The Ten Grounds

The fourteen chapters spoken from Assemblies Three to Six were spoken in the various heavens.

VII. THE SEVENTH ASSEMBLY. This assembly was held again in the Universal Light Palace, back in the human realm. In the Appearances Chapter the Buddha emits two kinds of light, from between his eyebrows and from his mouth. Light from the eyebrows represents not dwelling in birth and death and also not dwelling in Nirvana--not dwelling in the two extremes. Light from his mouth represents that all true disciples of the Buddhas are born from the Buddhas' mouths, transformationally born from the Dharma. Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he proclaims the positions of Equal and Wonderful Enlightenment, the Dharma of Causes Becoming Perfected and the Fruition Being Fulfilled. Within a total of eleven chapters of this assembly, the first six chapters describe the Causes Becoming Perfected while the last five describe the Fruition Being Fulfilled. These eleven chapters in thirteen scrolls are:

27. The Ten Samadhis

28. The Ten Penetrations

29. The Ten Patiences

30. Asamkhyeyas

31. Lifespans

32. Bodhisattvas' Dwelling Places

33. Inconceivable Dharmas

34. The Sea of the Marks of the Ten Bodies

35. Light of the Minor Characteristics

36. Universal Worthy's Conduct

37. The Thus Come Ones' Appearances

These eleven chapters fall into the Totality of Causes and Fruitions Being Level and Equal and belong to the section of Cultivating Causes, Tallying with Fruitions, and Giving Rise to Understanding.

VIII. THE EIGHTH ASSEMBLY. This assembly was again held at the Universal Light Palace. No light is released in this assembly because it is convened at the same place. Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is the Dharma speaking host. Relying on the Buddhas' spiritual aid, he explains the two thousand doors of conduct. At the beginning of the one chapter that comprises this assembly, Universal Wisdom Bodhisattva asks Universal Worthy Bodhisattva two hundred questions concerning the Dharmas of conduct and Universal Worthy Bodhisattva responds to each question with ten answers, thus making two thousand perfect answers in all. A single chapter in seven scrolls comprises this assembly:

38. Leaving the World.

This assembly falls into the Totality of Causes and Fruitions Upon Accomplishment of Practice and belongs to the Section of Relying on the Dharma, Progressing in Cultivation, and Accomplishing the Practice.

IX. THE NINTH ASSEMBLY. This last assembly was held at the Jeta Grove in Shravasti. This Bodhimanda, again in the human realm, was also called the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary because it was presented to the Buddha as a joint gift by Elder Anathapindaka and Prince Jeta. In this assembly the lecture hall is referred to as the Multi-Storied Jeweled Tower. Although at the time of the Buddha's enlightenment, when this assembly was spoken, the Jeweled Tower had not yet been constructed, still, the Buddha was able to speak part of this Sutra in it. Isn't that a wonderful and inconceivable state? The Buddha can move the past to the present and move the present to the future. He can move around limitless aeons within the entire range of the three periods of time with complete ease and mastery. Therefore, there is no past, present, or future in the realm of the *Avatamsaka*, the *Flower Adornment*. Time is perfectly fused and unobstructed. It is as the *Vajra Sutra* says, "The three minds cannot be got at," meaning the mind of the past cannot be got at, the mind of the present cannot be got at, and the mind of the future cannot be got at. To insist that any of those periods of time exists is to have an attachment. If you put down your attachments, you will see that none of them can be grasped. The past is past, the present doesn't stay, and the future has not come yet.

In this assembly the Buddha emits light from the white hairmark (*urna*) between his brows, meaning that this light illumines the three thousand great thousand worlds--the entire universe--and causes all living beings to attain the nourishment of the Dharma rain and to bring forth good roots. This assembly is divided into an initial assembly and a final assembly. In the initial assembly, the Buddha himself acts as host, and enters the Lion Sprint Samadhi and speaks the wonderful Dharma, enabling the great assembly to instantaneously be certified to entry into the Dharma Realm. In the final assembly, all the Good Knowing Advisors (*kalyanamitras*) act as hosts. Universal Worthy Bodhisattva, Manjushri Bodhisattva, and the other Good Knowing Advisors of the Hundred Cities successfully lead the Youth Good Wealth (*Sudhana*) through the stages of the Bodhisattva path as he gradually becomes certified to and enters the Dharma Realm, that is, all Buddhas' ultimate enlightenment and wisdom. Only a single chapter in twenty-one scrolls comprises this assembly.

39. Entering the Dharma Realm

This assembly falls into the Totality of Causes and Fruition of Certification to Entry, and belongs to the Section of Relying on the Advisors to be Certified, to Enter, and to Accomplish Virtue.

The last thirteen chapters of this Sutra, spoken during the seventh to ninth assemblies, took place again in the human realm. Now that we have done a brief analysis of the seven places and nine assemblies and the titles of each of the thirty-nine chapters, it's hoped that everyone of you will have gotten a general impression of the Sutra. Later on, the details of each chapter will unfold as you study them one by one. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* was spoken for beings with the capacity for the Great Vehicle, and is completely dedicated to outlining the cultivation of the Bodhisattva resolve and practicing the Bodhisattva Way. Only the Great Knights of the Dharma Body could fully hear and see the Buddha speaking this Sutra. The average-grade Bodhisattvas failed to "leap the dragon's gate" and transform from carp to dragons. The Shravakas and Pratyekabuddhas, those of the Small Vehicle, simply could

not hear or see any of the wonderful changes and transformations that were transpiring when the Buddha spoke this Sutra. Therefore National Master Ch'ing Liang says in his *Preface* to this Sutra,

Too high it is for gazing,
So Bodhisattva of accumulated practice
Are dried-up gills and scales
Before the Dragon's Gate.

Too deep to be surveyed,
So Sound Hearers of superior virtue
Stop seeing and hearing
In the fine assembly.

Those of the Sound Hearer multitude

Had eyes but could not see Nishyanda Buddha (the Reward Body
Buddha);
They had ears but could not hear the Perfect, Sudden Teaching.

Why is that? It is because on the cause ground they did not cultivate Great Vehicle Dharmas and so they missed out on the opportunity to obtain this immense benefit. Then why is it the case that we, as ordinary people who are not Bodhisattva or Arhats, can get to hear the title of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* as well as to listen to its wonderful Dharma? It's because in the past we planted good roots of the Great Vehicle Dharma and on this day those causes have ripened. This is an opportunity hard to encounter in hundreds of thousands of years! It is my hope that all of you will work hard to study and investigate this Sutra. Of the 45,000 verses that have been transmitted, if you can remember but one verse, the benefit you will attain will be infinite.

Here's an illustration of what I mean. In the T'ang dynasty there was a monk called Wang Ming Kan. Although he had left the home-life, he was lazy and did not cultivate. One day, the ghost of impermanence came to him with a summons from King Yama and he was spirited off to the hells. While in the hells he met Earth Store Bodhisattva (*Kshitigarbha*) Bodhisattva who taught him a verse:

If people wish to know
All Buddhas of the three periods of time,
They should contemplate the Dharma Realm:
Everything is made from mind alone.

When Wang Ming Kan saw King Yama, he recited this verse, whereupon he was immediately released and allowed to return to the human realm. That single verse alone saved his life. Later, upon questioning others, he discovered that the verse had come from Chapter Twenty, Praises in the *Suyama*. Not only did that verse save his life, at the same time, it also saved the lives of limitless beings in the hells. They were all released at once when that verse was sounded in the hells. From this account, you can see the magical and indescribable workings of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. If you resolve to read and recite the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, bow to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, make offerings to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and write out the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, then you will accrue infinite merit and virtue.

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