

December 15, 2018 Dharma Talk on  
Chapter 37 of the Avatamsaka Sutra

Presented by Craig Hannah

# The Manifestation of the Tathagata

Buddhahood According the Avatamsaka Sutra

Introduced and translated by Cheng Chien Bhiksu



# Caveats

One could, as many have, spend a lifetime penetrating the wisdom in this sutra. I have merely spent a few days.

I take no credit for the content, but full responsibility for any misinterpretations on my part.

My sincere hope is that there will be some wisdom gleaned from this talk.

# Opening The Sutra

*The Dharma is deep and lovely.  
We now have a chance to see it,  
study it, and practice it.  
We vow to realize its true meaning.*

# The Subject

- This talk is a look at Cheng Chien Bhiksu's 1993 translation and commentary of chapter 37 (chapter 26 in some versions) of the Avatamsaka Sutra (aka Flower Ornament Sutra).
- The full title of his book is 'The Manifestation of the Tathagata' and is subtitled 'Buddhahood According the Avatamsaka Sutra'. Chapter 37 is, in itself, considered a sutra and is entitled 'The Manifestation of the Tathagata' or 'The Manifestation of Buddha'.

# The Author

- Cheng Chien Bhiksu is a name used by Mario Poceski (1964-).
- He has published extensively, including four books:
- Dr. Poceski is currently Associate Professor in the Religion Department of University of Florida.
- Before entering graduate school, Poceski left his native Macedonia and spent ten years in Asia as a Buddhist monk.

# The Author's Motivation

- Tricycle magazine explains “Cheng Chien undertook this project out of a firm belief that practice is inspired by an awakening of faith in the three refuges, and taking refuge in the Buddha is only possible if one understands precisely what Buddhahood is.”
- Cheng Chien explains his motivation as wanting to fill the void of authentic and authoritative English language texts about Buddhahood, the ultimate refuge for all Buddhists. This sutra was the best choice for this since it “is among the most comprehensive and authoritative texts on the nature of Buddhahood from the perspective of the One Vehicle\* teaching.”

# \*The Three Vehicles

1. The voice-hearer vehicle (shrāvaka-yāna or disciple), which leads one to the state of arhat
2. The cause-awakened one vehicle (pratyekabuddha-yāna, or solitary Buddha), which leads one to the state of pratyekabuddha
3. The bodhisattva vehicle (bodhisattva-yāna), which after many kalpas of practice leads one to Buddhahood.

They, in fact, are just three expedient devices (upayacausalya) for attracting beings to the One Vehicle, via which they all become buddhas.



# From The Forward

- By Ven. Sheng-Yen. Litt. D.
- Indian Mahayana sutras can be divided by the time of their emergence into three main groups: early, middle, and late.
- The two most influential works, the Prajnaparamita Sutra (100 BCE to 150 CE) and the Avatamsaka Sutra (150-250 CE), belong to the early group.

# Forward, cont

- The Prajnaparamita texts focuses on emptiness
  - All phenomena are dependently originated
  - Transient
  - Unsatisfactory
  - without inherent existence
- The Avatamsaka uses this understanding of emptiness as its foundation as it explores its many topics, e.g.
  - The Bodhisattva path
  - The interpenetration of phenomena (dharmas)
  - The visionary powers of meditation
  - The equality of things in emptiness.

# Forward, cont

- A theme consistently running through the Avatamsaka Sutra is the shift in emphasis.
  - From a karmically driven causally originated human existence
  - To a view of the world that is causally originated from Pure Mind. "Everything in the Triple Realm is due to Mind" (Desire, form, formless) and "the twelve links of conditioned origination are all dependent on the One Mind."
- The dharmadhatu is the ground of everything.
  - It's the one mind, limitless and pure.
  - It's said to be a manifestation of the celestial Buddha, Vairocana (i.e. they're used synonymously). The Triple World originates from Vairocana. The nature of dharmadhatu is dharmakaya.

# The Conception of Buddhahood

- The Three Refuges - The Buddha, the Dharma, the sangha.
- Often these are viewed as three aspects of one reality. In that instance that one reality is referred to as the "ultimate refuge."
- People will often simply use the Buddha when thinking of the ultimate refuge.
- Similarly we talk about Buddha nature and related terms. What do we actually mean when we say that?

# "Buddhahood"

- Buddha – An individual, such as the historic figure known as Gotama or Sakymuni, or other historical Buddhas, such as Kagyapa.
- Buddha – As another name for ultimate reality. whose "body is unborn" and whose "essential nature is quiescent and without any characteristics
- A way to help minimize misunderstandings caused by the overloaded meanings of this term is through the doctrine of **trikaya**:

# Trikaya

- The three bodies (kayas) of the Buddha are ways of viewing aspects of Buddhahood.
- All lack self-nature, all are just three aspects of one ineffable reality, and each body implies the other two.
- A useful analogy compares dharmakaya to vapor or atmosphere, sambhogakaya to clouds, and nirmanakaya to rain. Clouds are a manifestation of atmosphere that enables rain.

# Trikaya

- The **Dharmakāya**, Buddha nature, or Truth body which corresponds to the ultimate reality, embodies the very principle of enlightenment, and knows no limits or boundaries. It is beyond existence and non-existence.
- The **Sam̐bhogakāya**, form taken by a buddha after completing its role as a bodhisattva. It is the meeting of the dharmakaya and the nirmanakaya.
- The **Nirmāṇakāya**, Buddha incarnation. Corresponds to phenomena.

# Religious Significance

- The concept of Buddhahood is both the source of the Path, as well as the ultimate goal of the Path.
- Buddhahood is beyond the sphere of thought and language. Words and concepts are necessary to develop understandings that are conducive to liberation, but ultimately, they are inadequate. They must be joined with practice and supported by faith.



# Sutra Background

- **Origins and Transmission**
- **Distinctive Features**
- **Influence on Chinese Buddhism**
- **Position in the Avatamsaka Sutra**

# Related Doctrines

- Tathagatagarbha
  - Tathāgata "the one thus gone" (referring to Buddhahood) and garbha "root, embryo, essence".
  - While elements of the tathagatagarbha doctrine are present in early Buddhist writings, it has its most authoritative explanation in the Manifestation chapter of Avatamsaka sutra.
  - ... all sentient beings possess the true mind of emptiness and quiescence, whose nature is without inception fundamentally pure. Bright, unobscured, astute, and constantly aware, it constantly abides to the end of time.
  - There is not a single sentient being that is not fully possessed of the wisdom of the Tathagata. It is only due to their false thinking, fallacies, and attachments that beings fail to realize this.

# Related Doctrines, cont.

- Nature origination
  - All phenomena are empty precisely because their true nature is actually the Absolute, Suchness, or Buddha Mind, the Reality that transcends all dualities and descriptions.
  - It is the unobstructed interfusion of the principle and phenomena, nirvana and samsara
- Conditioned origination
  - Based on the absence of intrinsic nature in all phenomena and their dependent origination, each phenomenon is seen as being determined by the totality of all phenomena of which it is a part, while the totality is determined by each of the phenomena that comprise it.
  - Because of this, each phenomenon is determining every other phenomenon and is simultaneously being determined by each and every phenomenon.

# On Reading the Translation

- “...the profuse use of symbolism and the numerous similes found in the text might be a source of difficulty to the modern reader unaccustomed to religious literature of this genre”
- “...all sentient beings have the ability to investigate for themselves, because there is no one who is not endowed with the mind of the great ocean of the Tathagata's wisdom.”
- “...the sublime principle of Manjusri and the sublime practice of Samantabhadra are fully possessed by all sentient beings”

# The Manifestation of the Tathagata

For convenience, the translator has divided the chapter into 12 sections – an introduction, a closing, and 10 perspectives on Buddhahood

# Prologue

- The chief speaker is Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. He represents the active aspect of Buddhahood, or its "cause"—the cultivation of the myriad practices of the Bodhisattvas.
- The other main Bodhisattva is Sublime Virtue of the Nature Origination of the Tathagata Bodhisattva. He signifies the teaching that is to be expounded. His name is also interpreted to be Manjusri, who represents wisdom.
- Together, that which can reveal, and that which is revealed (dharmadhatu) become the manifestation of Vairocana, the symbol of universal Buddhahood.

# The Characteristics of the Manifestation of the Tathagata

- Fulfilling the intrinsic causes
  - The untiring cultivation of the Bodhisattva's attitudes and practices
  - Cultivation of compassion, kindness, wisdom, virtue, samadhi, taking of vows, etc.
- The main external conditions are:
  - The influences from the Buddhas, especially their skillful teaching of the Dharma

# The Characteristics . . . , cont

- When the innumerable and infinite Dharma-teachings, such as the following, are consummated, one becomes a Tathagata.
  1. Boundless bodhicitta
  2. Pure superior aspiration
  3. Great kindness and great compassion
  4. Continual practices and vows
  5. Untiring cultivation of all blessings and wisdom
  6. Offerings to the Buddhas and edification of sentient beings
  7. Pure ways of wisdom and methods
  8. Pure stores of merit
  9. Wisdom of the ways of adornment
  10. Realization of the meaning of the Dharma



# The Body of the Tathagata

1. Is both immaterial and present everywhere. It should not be perceived in just one dharma, one phenomenon, one body, one land, one sentient being.
2. Is completely illuminated by the light of wisdom. It causes all karma of the mundane and supramundane wholesome roots of all sentient beings to be consummated. And yet, the body of the Tathagata does not discriminate, does not engage in false differentiation
3. The sun of the wisdom of the Tathagata universally benefits sentient beings in limitless ways
4. It shines equally on everyone, without obstruction, without hindrance, without discrimination
5. Helps all beings, even those unaware of the path

# The Body of the Tathagata

6. Elucidates the Dharma to all according to their needs
7. Without diminishing itself, can appear as needed to all sentient beings
8. Has reached the other shore and overcome all illnesses and afflictions. When sentient beings see the Tathagata, they too overcome theirs
9. Seeing the wisdom from the body of the Tathagata causes all sentient beings to be freed from the suffering of poverty, and finally to fully obtain the joy of the Buddha's Bodhi
10. Is able to be perceived by those who plant wholesome roots and mature them

# The Voice of the Tathagata

1. The virtuous qualities of Buddha produce four great voices.
  1. All conditioned states are miserable
  2. Conditioned states are impermanent and pass away.
  3. The knowledge and wisdom gained by those who follow the words of another is narrow and inferior. There is a higher vehicle called the vehicle of the individually awakened, whose enlightenment does not depend on a teacher.
  4. There is an even higher path beyond the ranks of these two vehicles. Going beyond the two vehicles of individual liberation , it is called the Great Vehicle, The Mind of the Tathagata
2. Just as an echo is produced by the mountains, valley, and voice, the voice of the Tathagata is produced in accord with the predilections and understandings of sentient beings.
3. The voice of the Tathagata is uncreated yet produces infinite dharma voices of non-attachment, restraint, impermanence, suffering, non-self, purity, quiescence, nirvana, wisdom, ...

# The Voice of the Tathagata

4. The Tathagata, with a single voice, produces numberless sounds according to the mental disposition of the listeners.
5. The [highest] voice of the Tathagata can only be heard by those mature enough to hear it
6. The Tathagata's voice has a single taste – that of liberation yet shows differently to all because of their differences.
7. The voice of the Dharma rains down on all, yet it does not come from outside or from inside.
8. The voice of the Tathagata reveals the Dharma slowly, so that the hearer is not frightened.
9. The voices of the Buddhas can reveal the Dharma with infinite distinct voices.
10. The Dharma rains down impartially and not parsimoniously, it only appears that way because of sentient beings capacities.

# The Mind of the Tathagata

- The wisdom of the Tathagata unattainable <sup>110</sup> and yet because it is boundless, one can know it. It is the support for all wisdom, yet it has nothing as its support.
- It affects all mundane and transmundane wisdom yet is never augmented nor diminished.
- The wisdom of the Tathagata is equal, non-dual, without discrimination and is available to all.
- The attainment of these four jewels can cause all Bodhisattvas to attain the wisdom of the Tathagata:
  - That which destroys waves of scattered virtue
  - That which removes all spiritual desires
  - That which shines the universal refulgence of the light of wisdom causing them to renounce the power they have aroused
  - That which is equal to the infinite and effortless wisdom of the Tathagata causing them to renounce the effectual cultivation of comprehensive understanding they have taken up so they will arrive at the impartial stage of the Tathagata

# The Mind of the Tathagata

- The healing tree of the wisdom of the Tathagata covers all realms of sentient being and obliterates all suffering of the evil paths.
  - Its roots are great compassion
  - Its stems are skillful methods
  - Its branches are the wisdom of dharmadhatu and all paramitas
  - Its leaves are meditation, liberation, and samadhis
  - Its flowers are control over good and evil, eloquence, and the conditions leading to enlightenment
  - Its fruit is the ultimate liberation of all Buddhas
- The wisdom of the Tathagata penetrates everything
- The wind of wisdom of the Tathagata can obliterate all afflictions and habits, but it also can skillfully block this wind so that bodhisattvas can go beyond the two vehicles and dwell in the ultimate stage of the Tathagata
- The wisdom of the Tathagata is boundless, unobstructed, and is fully present in the bodies of sentient beings

# The Realm of the Tathagata\*

\* See footnote 119

1. All worlds
2. The three times
3. All lands
4. All dharmas
5. All sentient beings
6. Undifferentiated realm of suchness
7. Unobstructed realm of the dharmadhatu
8. Limitless realm of the region of reality
9. Non-quantitative realm of space
10. Objectless realm

All of the above are boundless or objectless, as is the realm of the Tathagata

# The Activity of the Tathagata

- Unobstructed
- Unborn in the past, unmoving in the future, non-arising in the present
- Neither measurable nor measureless (because it is formless)
- Unlimited



# The Accomplishment of Perfect Enlightenment of the Tathagata

- The enlightenment of the Buddha reaches everywhere, including in every thought of every sentient being.
- The Buddha's enlightenment is not taking place apart from the ordinary mind.
- Has no perception of any object
- Is Equanimeous toward all dharmas
- Has no doubts
- Is non-dual
- Is formless
- Inactive
- Has no stoppage, measure, nor limitations
- Abides in the middle way
- Transcends all words and letters
- Knows the minds and activities of all sentient beings
- It knows all dharmas of the three times (past, present, future)
- It universally manifests in all aspects of sentient beings without manifesting anything
- The Bodhi of all Buddhas cannot be described, only expediently explained in response to necessity
- Inside the minds of all sentient beings is the Buddha's accomplishment of perfect enlightenment

# The Turning of the Dharma-wheel

- By the Tathagata's mental power, without arising or turning
- By using the three turnings <sup>125</sup>
- Leaving the limit and limitlessness of desire
- Without speech because all dharmas are ineffable
- ...
- By entering everything without abiding anywhere

# The Parinirvina of the Tathagata

(Parinirvina is commonly used to refer to nirvana-after-death, which occurs upon the death of the body of someone who has attained nirvana during his or her lifetime. )

- Tathagatas manifest in the world, but in reality they do not manifest in the world nor enter Nirvana. Instead they eternally abide in the pure dharmadhatu, manifesting Nirvana in response to the mentalities of sentient beings

## The Wholesome Roots Planted by Seeing, Hearing, and Associating with the Tathagata

- “...like a man who swallows a little diamond, in the end he will be incapable to digest it, and it will have to pass through his body to get outside. Wherefore? Because diamonds do not coexist with the various impurities within the physical body.  
Likewise, small wholesome roots planted with the Tathagata will have to pass through the body of all conditioned formations and afflictions, and reach the abode of unconditioned final wisdom. Wherefore? These small wholesome roots do not coexist with conditional formations and afflictions.”
- These roots will inevitably consume all afflictions... because the nature of these roots is ultimate

# Epilogue

Using miraculous language, describes the universal significance of the teaching expounded

# A Closing Verse

The acts of all Tathagatas  
All similes in the world do not reach;  
For the sake of enabling being to attain enlightenment,  
Non-similes are taken as similes in order to demonstrate them.

Such subtle, arcane Dharma,  
Is difficult to hear in a billion kalpas;  
Those with vigor, wisdom, and restraint,  
Are able to hear this recondite principle.

Those who delight when they hear this Dharma  
Have already made offerings to boundless Buddhas;  
Protected by the powers of the Buddhas,  
Humans and gods praise them and make offerings to them.

This is the supreme treasure which transcends the world,  
This can save all living beings,  
This can engender the pure path---  
You should upkeep it without slackening!