

The Avatamsaka Realm

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* is one of the most beautiful Buddhist scriptures. Avatamsaka means “flower ornament, garland, or wreath,” or “decorating the Buddha with flowers.” Isn’t the Buddha beautiful enough? Why do we have to decorate him with flowers? The Buddha in this sutra is not just a person. He is more than a person.

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was born 2,600 years ago in Kapilavastu, got married, had a child, left his family to practice, got enlightened, became a well-known teacher, helped many people, and died in Kushinagara at the age of eighty. One day, a disciple of his named Aniruddha was walking along the streets of Shravasti, when he was stopped by a group of monks from another sect. The monks asked him, “Will the Buddha exist after his death or cease to exist after his death?” During the lifetime of the Buddha, many people made efforts like that to try to understand the real Buddha. Aniruddha told them he did not know. Then, when he returned to the Jeta Grove and reported to the Buddha what had happened, the Buddha told him, “It is difficult to grasp the Buddha. When you see the Buddha in form, feelings, and percep-

tions, can you identify the Buddha through these things?" Aniruddha replied, "No, Lord." Then the Buddha asked, "Can you find the Buddha apart from form, perceptions, mental formations?" "No, Lord," he responded. The Buddha said, "I am in front of you and yet you cannot grasp me. How do you expect to get hold of me after I pass away?" The Buddha called himself *Tathagata*, "coming from suchness (reality as it is)," "going to suchness," or "one who comes from nowhere and goes nowhere," because suchness cannot be confined to coming or going.

When the monk Vakkali was dying in the home of a potter, the Buddha went to see him. When he arrived, Vakkali did his best to sit up, but the Buddha said, "No, Vakkali, please stay where you are." Then the Buddha asked him how he felt, how intense was his pain, and Vakkali said, "I have a lot of pain, Lord." The Buddha asked whether there was anything he regretted, and Vakkali said, "Lord, I only regret that I cannot come to see you more." The Buddha said, "Vakkali, if you practice my teaching, you are with me all the time. This body is not me." There are many stories like this in the scriptures. The Buddha is more than form. He is the living teaching. When you practice the way of the Buddha, you are transformed, and you are with the Buddha all the time.

Before passing away, the Buddha told his monks, "My friends, this is only my physical body. My Dharma body will be with you for as long as you continue to practice. Take refuge in the Dharma. Take refuge in the island of self. The Buddha is there." His statement was very clear.

If you touch the living Dharma body (*Dharmakaya*), you will not complain that you were born more than two thousand five hundred years after the Buddha and have no chance to see him or study with him. The *Dharmakaya* of the Buddha is always present, always alive. Wherever there is compassion and understanding, the Buddha is there, and we can see and touch him. Buddha as the living Dharma is sometimes called *Vairochana*. He is made of light, flowers, joy, and peace, and we can walk with him, sit with him, and take his hand. As we enter the realm of Avatamsaka, it is Vairochana Buddha we encounter.

In the Avatamsaka realm there is a lot of light. The Buddha and the bodhisattvas are all made of light. Let yourself be touched by the light, which is the enlightenment of the Buddha. Beams of light shining in every direction are pouring out from the pores of every enlightened being there. In the Avatamsaka realm, you become light, and you begin to emit light also. Allow yourself to be transformed by the light. Mindfulness is light. When you practice walking meditation alone, enjoying each step deeply, you emit the light of mindfulness, joy, and peace. Every time I see you walking like that, I am struck by one of the beams of light you are emitting, and suddenly I come back to the present moment. Then I, too, begin to walk slowly and deeply, enjoying each step. In the same way, you can allow yourself to be touched by the beams of light that are everywhere in the Avatamsaka realm. When you do, you will become a bodhisattva emanating light also. Let us en-

ter the Avatamsaka realm together and enjoy it. Later, we can open the door for others to come, too.

Entering the Avatamsaka realm, we encounter a lot of space. The Avatamsaka realm is immense, without boundaries. There is enough space—inside and outside—for everyone, as the merit accumulated by the practice is enormous. Beings in the Avatamsaka realm never run out of space or time. That is why they have so much freedom. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas there welcome us and offer us infinite space. We feel very free and very much at ease in the Avatamsaka realm.

The third thing we see are flowers. Flowers are everywhere. Looking up, down, ahead, behind, to the left, and to the right, we see flowers. In fact, the eyes we see with become flowers, the ears we hear with are flowers, the lips we speak with become flowers, and the hands we receive tea with become flowers in the Avatamsaka realm. There are enormous lotus flowers—big enough for three or four people to sit on! Each of these lotus flowers has more than one thousand petals, and when we look deeply at one petal, we see that it, in itself, is another lotus flower with one thousand petals. And each of those petals is also a lotus of one thousand petals, and those lotuses are not smaller than the first lotus flower. It continues on like that forever. This may sound strange, but it is exactly what happens in the Avatamsaka realm. Here, we cannot say that one thing is bigger or smaller than another. The ideas of bigger and smaller are just not present, nor are the ideas of one and many. When we look into the second lotus and

see one thousand petals, each of which is also a full lotus of one thousand petals, we see the many in the one and the one in the many, the miracle of interbeing.

What else do we see? We see vast oceans. The merit we acquire, the joy we savor, and the peace we experience are so vast that there is no other way to describe them. The word “ocean” is used many times in the Avatamsaka realm—ocean of merit, ocean of happiness, ocean of insight, ocean of vows. We vow to bring happiness to many people, and our vows are so huge that only an ocean can contain them. We experience peace and joy so large and intense that they can only be described in terms of oceans.

The Avatamsaka realm is also filled with precious gems—jewels of insight, understanding, and happiness. Everything we touch becomes a jewel for our enjoyment. We do not have to possess them, because every jewel is available for our delight. Everyone and everything here is a jewel. Every minute is a precious jewel, and in every jewel is a multitude of other jewels. We do not have to accumulate them. One jewel is enough, because in that world, each one contains all. The image of Indra’s jeweled net is used in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* to illustrate the infinite variety of interactions and intersections of all things. The net is woven of an infinite variety of brilliant gems, each with countless facets. Each gem reflects in itself every other gem in the net, and its image is reflected in each other gem. In this vision, each gem contains all other gems. We do not need to be greedy here. One small jewel can satisfy us completely.

There are many beautiful clouds of different colors in the Avatamsaka world. In Buddhist sutras, clouds represent rain, and rain represents happiness. Without rain, nothing can grow. That is why we speak of Dharma rain, the rain of the colorful Dharma. Colorful rain and colorful clouds protect us and bring us a lot of joy and happiness. One of the ten stages a bodhisattva goes through is the “Dharma cloud stage,” in which the bodhisattva makes many people happy with his or her Dharma rain.

In the Avatamsaka realm, we also find beautiful lion seats. Imagine beautiful, comfortable seats, fit for a lion, a great being that walks slowly with majesty, strength, and confidence. When we enter the Avatamsaka realm and see a bodhisattva walking like that, we feel inspired. Whenever we want to sit down, we find a lion seat beautifully crafted for us. We only have to sit there. There is nothing else to do. Our joy, peace, and happiness in the Avatamsaka realm are boundless.

There is also a beautiful parasol in the Avatamsaka realm that represents the warmth and enjoyment of the mindfulness we are dwelling in. When we are in mindfulness, at peace with ourselves, we dwell in warmth and enjoyment. Protected by mindfulness, we have deep insight and real peace. Entering the Avatamsaka realm, we encounter all these wonderful things.

When we arrive, we may wish to pay our respects to the Buddha. Let us enter chapter twenty of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and look for the Buddha Shakyamuni. When we inquire about his whereabouts, someone tells us that he is in

Suyama Heaven in the palace, so we ask how to get there. But after we make just one or two steps in that direction, someone else points out to us that the Buddha is already here. We don't have to go to Suyama Heaven. And, indeed, we see Shakyamuni Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree right in front of us. We may have thought that Uruvela village was in India, on the planet Earth, but here in the Avatamsaka realm we also see the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree with the children of Uruvela village.

Then someone from Suyama Heaven comes and tells us that the Buddha is in the Suyama Palace. This is confusing. How can a person be in two places at once? How can he be under the bodhi tree and in the Suyama Palace at the same time? But this is what happens in the Avatamsaka realm. Then another friend tells us that the Buddha is on Gridhrakuta, Vulture Peak, preaching the *Lotus Sutra* right now, not just 2,500 years ago. How can the Buddha be in three places at once? But soon we find that the Buddha is everywhere, at the same time! Things like that happen in the Avatamsaka realm. Because there is so much light, so much happiness, and so many jewels, it is possible for Shakyamuni to be everywhere at the same time.

In fact, not only Shakyamuni can perform that kind of miracle. Anyone in the Avatamsaka realm can do the same. We, too, can be everywhere at once. From any point in the cosmos, people can touch us wherever we are and wherever they are. We are not at all confined by time and space. We penetrate everywhere; we are everywhere. Whenever someone touches something with deep mind-

fulness, deep looking, he or she will touch us. It may sound strange, but in the Avatamsaka world, it is always that way.

Whenever I touch a flower, I touch the the sun and yet I do not get burned. When I touch the flower, I touch a cloud without flying to the sky. When I touch the flower, I touch my consciousness, your consciousness, and the great planet Earth at the same time. This is the Avatamsaka realm. The miracle is possible because of insight into the nature of interbeing. If you really touch one flower deeply, you touch the whole cosmos. The cosmos is neither one nor many. When you touch one, you touch many, and when you touch many, you touch one. Like Shakyamuni Buddha, you can be everywhere at the same time. Think of your child or your beloved touching you now. Look more deeply, and you will see yourself as multitudes, penetrating everywhere, interbeing with everyone and everything.

I have not been in Vietnam for more than twenty-five years, but several generations of young monks, nuns, and laypeople there have been touching me through my books and tapes, which are handwritten and circulated underground, and also through the practices of walking meditation and looking deeply. Through these things, I have been able to stay in touch with the people, the flowers, the trees, and the waters of Vietnam while touching the people, the flowers, the trees, and the waters of Europe and North America. In fact, just a clap of your hands is enough to touch myriad galaxies. The effect of one sound cannot

be measured. Your every look, smile, and word reaches far-away universes and influences every living and non-living being in the cosmos. Everything is touching everything else. Everything is penetrating everything else. That is the world of Avatamsaka, and it is also our world. With deep looking and deep touching, we can transform this world into the world of Avatamsaka. The more we practice looking deeply, the more light is present, the more flowers there are, the more oceans, space, parasols, jewels, and clouds there are. It depends on us.

When the Buddha emanates great light,
the ten directions shine.
Everyone in Heaven and Earth
can see him freely, without obstruction.

When you emit light, you help people see, because your light wakes them up. The Buddha emanates great light, illuminating the ten directions. Everyone sees the Buddha freely, without obstruction.

The Buddha is sitting in the Suyama Palace
and yet he pervades all worlds in the cosmos.
This is an extraordinary event,
a cause of wonder to the whole world.

How can the Buddha sitting in the Suyama Palace be present everywhere in the cosmos? It is a miracle. But not only the Buddha can perform that miracle. All of us can

also. We sit here, but our being, our presence pervades the whole cosmos. People with some insight and mindfulness can touch us wherever they find themselves. Just touch and you see. You feel what you want to touch, right there from where you are. Listen and recognize it within you. You do not have to read any text.

All things have no provenance
and no one can create them.
There is nowhere whence they are born.
They cannot be discriminated.

All things have no provenance. They have not come from anywhere, because they are free from the ideas of being and non-being. They do not have to be born. They cannot be grasped by our notions, or discriminated by our mental categories. They have come from nowhere; they will go nowhere. There is no author or creator. That is the true nature of reality. We can only touch and experience things when we are free from the concepts of birth and death, creator and created. All things have no provenance, therefore they have no birth. Because they have no birth, extinction cannot be found either. That is the way things are in the realm of Avatamsaka.

All things are birthless and have no
extinction either.
Those who understand in this way
will see and touch the Buddha.

If you penetrate the reality of no-birth and no-death, of the Dharma, of things, of reality, it is not difficult for you to touch the Buddha.

These verses are from chapter twenty. There are many equally beautiful verses to enjoy in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, but since we know that touching one thing deeply, we touch the whole cosmos, we do not have to quote them all.

When we walk in the Avatamsaka realm, breathing in the Buddha, breathing out the Buddha, walking on the Buddha, and sitting on the Buddha, we are aware that the Buddha here is Vairochana, the living Dharma, reality as it is, suchness, and we are one with him. The Avatamsaka realm is so pleasant, and it is within our reach. It is a place we can step into the moment we want to, a world of light, oceans, Dharma clouds, jewels, lion seats, and flowers. It is available to us here and now. We need not waste a single moment of our life. We only have to step into the Avatamsaka realm to enjoy life thoroughly.

The Avatamsaka land is a product of our mind. Whether we live in the *saha* world filled with suffering, discrimination, and war, or whether we live in the Avatamsaka world filled with flowers, birds, love, peace, and understanding is up to us. The cosmos is a mental construction. Everything comes from our mind. If our mind is filled with afflictions and delusions, we live in a world of afflictions and delusions. If our mind is pure and filled with mindfulness, compassion, and love, we live in the Avatamsaka world.

In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the cosmos is described as a lotus flower with many petals, each of which is also a full lotus, the petals of which are also a full lotus, and so on. Whenever we see one thing in the Avatamsaka realm, we always find everything in the cosmos in it. The notions small and large do not exist here. When we stand facing the ocean, we may feel small and insignificant compared with the ocean. When we contemplate a sky filled with stars, we may have the impression we are nothing at all. But the thought that the cosmos is big and we are small is just an idea. It belongs to our mind and not to reality. When we look deeply at a flower, we can see the whole cosmos contained in it. One petal is the whole of the flower and the whole of the universe. In one speck of dust are many Buddha lands. When we practice that kind of meditation, our ideas about small, large, one and many will vanish.

The image of a flower representing the cosmos can teach us a lot. In the *Diamond Sutra*, we removed the distinction between self and non-self, person and non-person, living being and non-living being, and life span and non-life span. Now in the *Avatamsaka* realm, we discover that the so-called animate things are no different from inanimate things, that living things are made of non-living elements. Scientists are beginning to understand that what we thought to be inanimate actually contains life. We cannot draw a line between living things and non-living things. When we look at the Earth in that way, we see the whole planet as a living organism, and we can no longer

distinguish between man and non-man, animals and vegetables, vegetables and minerals. We simply see the Earth as the beautiful body of a living being, and we know that any harm done to one part of that organism can harm the whole organism. It is like a flower or a human being. Anything done to one cell will affect the whole being. If you know that the Earth is a living organism, you will know how to protect her, because to protect the Earth and the air around the Earth is to protect ourselves. Everything is linked to everything else. To save our planet is to save ourselves, our children, and grandchildren. This idea is deep within the teaching of the Buddha. Buddhist monks and nuns are prohibited from burning vegetation, cutting down trees, or even cutting grass without a good motive.

In their daily chanting, Buddhist novices recite, "I will practice for the enlightenment of both living and non-living beings." This is a teaching from the *Diamond Sutra*. We protect the Earth because we are motivated by compassion and respect for all things, animate and inanimate. Those who have a desire to protect the Earth should study the *Diamond* and *Avatamsaka Sutras*. Seeing the cosmos as a flower is a wonderful image. In each flower, there are many petals, and in each petal, you can see the whole flower. The one is in the many and the many are in the one.

As a sixteen-year-old novice, I memorized the last verses of "Eulogies in the Palace of Suyama Heaven," from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

If people want to know
all Buddhas of all times,
they should contemplate the nature of the
cosmos:

All is but mental construction.

It's like a painter
spreading various colors.
Delusion grasps different forms,
but the elements have no distinctions.

In the elements, there is no form,
and no form in the elements.
And yet apart from the elements,
no form can be found.

In the mind is no painting.
In painting there is no mind.
Yet not apart from mind
is any painting to be found.

It depends on the way we see. The mind invents countless forms and ideas, and our world is a product of that kind of grasping. The elements—water, fire, earth, and space—and the form in your mind seem to be two different things. But if you look deeply, you see there is no form in your mind unless the elements are there, and there are no elements unless the forms are there. Forms and elements inter-are. One cannot be without the other.

That mind never stops
 manifesting all forms,
 countless, inconceivably many,
 unknown to one another.

Just as a painter
 can't know his own mind,
 yet paints due to the mind,
 so is the nature of all things.

A master painter may not know his own mind, but he draws from his own mind. The nature of phenomena in the world is like that. The nature of things (dharmas) is that they are born from our own mind. The world as it presents itself to us is a mental construction.

Mind is like an artist,
 able to paint the worlds:
 The five skandhas are born from the same
 kind of functioning of the mind.
 There is nothing it doesn't make.

If people know the way the mind functions
 to create all kinds of worlds,
 they will be able to see the Buddha
 and understand the true nature of a Buddha.

This is a suggestion for us to find the best way to touch the Buddha—not to look for a person, a non-person, a

name, a characteristic, prestige, or a tradition, but to observe our own mind and see how it functions.

The mind creates everything—our fear, our sorrow, birth, death, winning and losing, hell, love, hatred, despair, and discrimination. If we practice, we will understand the way the mind constructs things, and we will touch the Buddha.

When I was a young monk, I learned these verses by heart and chanted them every evening. Even though I practiced by rote, it helped water the seed of understanding, and slowly I began to understand. If you want to touch the Buddhas in the ten directions, the Buddhas of the three times, you have to look into the nature of the cosmos and discover that everything is a mental construction. The first teaching of the *Avatamsaka* is that everything is mind. Mind here does not mean mind consciousness, the intellect. It means something deeper, something individual and collective. Don't worry if you do not understand. You don't have to understand anything. Just enjoy the words of this beautiful sutra. If they make you feel lighter, that is enough. It is not necessary to feel a heavy weight on your shoulders. Someday, with no effort at all, you will understand. You only have to allow yourself to be there, to touch deeply each thing you encounter, to walk mindfully, and to help others with the whole of your being. This is the practice of non-practice. Straining your intellect only creates more obstacles. Listen deeply without using your intellect, and you will find yourself in

the Avatamsaka world, touching light, jewels, and lotuses. When you are there, you only have to touch and be touched, and one day you will penetrate the truth of inter-being, and it will penetrate you.