CHAPTER I

THE AVATAMSAKA SŪTRA: AN INTRODUCTION

Buddha Sākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism in this world, lived and gave teachings in India some two and a half thousand years ago. Since then, millions of people around the world have followed the spiritual path he revealed. Buddha explained that all our problems and suffering arise from confused and negative states of mind, and that all our happiness and good fortune arise from peaceful and positive states of mind. He taught methods for gradually overcoming our negative minds such as anger, jealousy and ignorance, and developing our positive minds such as love, compassion and wisdom. Through these methods, we can come to experience lasting peace and happiness. The teachings of the Buddha reveal a step by step path to lasting happiness. By following this path, anyone can gradually transform his or her mind from its present confused and self-centered state into the blissful mind of a Buddha. These methods can work for anyone, in any country, in any age. Once we have gained experience of them for ourselves, we can pass them on to others so that they too can enjoy the same benefits.

In this way, we can help others solve their problems not just for a few days or years, but forever. We can help them find an inner peace and joy that nothing, not even death, can destroy. This unchanging inner peace is the final goal of the Buddhist path.
In accordance with this tendency, the Buddha’s teachings, generally speaking, are classified into two vehicles or Yānas that is, Theravada and Mahayana.

Theravada Buddhism focused primarily on meditation and concentration, the eighth link of the Noble Eightfold Path; as a result, it centered on a monastic life and extreme dedication to meditation. This left little room for the bulk of humanity to join in. So a schism erupted within the ranks of Buddhism in the first century AD, one that would attempt to reformulate the teachings of Buddha to accommodate a greater number of people. They called their new Buddhism, the “Greater Vehicle” (literally, “The Greater Ox-Cart”) or Mahayana, since it could accommodate more people and more believers from all walks of life. They distinguished themselves from mainstream Theravada Buddhism by contemptuously referring to Theravada as Hinayana, or “The Lesser Vehicle.”

The Mahayanists, however, did not see themselves as creating a new form for Buddhism. Instead, they claimed to be recovering the original teachings of Buddha, in much the same way that the Protestant reformers of sixteenth century Europe claimed that they were not creating a new Christianity but recovering the original one. The Mahayanists claimed that their canon of scriptures represented the final teachings of Buddha; they accounted for the non-presence of these teachings for over five hundred years by claiming that these were secret teachings entrusted only to the most faithful among the followers.
Whatever be the origins of Mahāyāna doctrines, they represent a significant
departure in terms of the basic philosophy. Like the Protestant Reformation, the
overall goal of Mahāyana was to extend religious authority to a greater number of
people rather than concentrate it in the hands of a few. The Mahayanists managed
to turn Buddhism into a more esoteric religion by developing a theory of
gradations of Buddhahood. At the top was Buddhahood itself preceded by a series
of lives, the Bodhisattvas.

This idea of the Bodhisattva was one of the most important innovations of
the Mahāyana Buddhism. The Bodhisattva, or “being of wisdom,” was originally
invented to explain the nature of the Buddha's earlier lives. Before Buddha entered
his final life as Siddhartha Gautama, he had spent many lives striving towards
attaining Buddhahood. In those previous lives, he was a Bodhisattva, a kind of
“Buddha-in-waiting,” that performed acts of incredible generosity, joy, and
compassion towards his fellow human beings. An entire group of literature grew
up around these previous lives of Buddha, called the Jātaka or “Birth Stories.”

The goal of Theravāda Buddhism is practically unattainable. In order to
make Buddhism a more esoteric religion, the Mahayanists invented two grades of
Buddhist attainment below the state of becoming a Buddha. While the Buddha
was the highest goal, one could become a Pratyeka-Buddha, that is, one who has
awakened to the truth but keeps it secret. Below the Pratyeka-Buddha is the
Arhanta, or “worthy,” the one who has learnt the truth from others and has realized
it as truth. Mahayana Buddhism establishes the Arhanta as the goal for all believers. The believer hears the truth, comes to realize it as such, and then passes into Nirvana. This doctrine of Arhanta-hood is the basis for calling Mahayana the “Greater Vehicle,” for it is meant to include everyone.

Finally, the Mahayanists completed the conversion of Buddhism from a philosophy to religion. Theravāda Buddhism holds that Buddha was a historical person who, on his death, ceased to exist. There were, however, strong tendencies among Buddhists to worship Buddha as a god of some sort; these tendencies probably began during Buddha's lifetime itself. The Mahayanists developed a theology of Buddha, called the doctrine of “The Three Bodies,” or Trikāya. The Buddha was not a human being, as he was in Theravada Buddhism, but the manifestation of a universal, spiritual being. This being had three bodies. When it occupied the earth in the form of Siddhartha Gautama, it took on the Body of Magical Transformation (Nirmanakāya). This Body of Magical Transformation was an emanation of the Body of Bliss (Sambhogakāya), which occupies the heavens in the form of a ruling and governing god of the universe. There are many forms of the Body of Bliss, but the one that rules over our world is Amitabha who lives in a paradise in the western heavens called Sukhāvatī, or “Land of Pure Bliss.” Finally, the Body of Bliss is an emanation of the Body of Essence.

The Avatamsaka Sutra or the Huayen Sutra is a wonderful thought that can make us content. Huayen jing is the Chinese name of Avatamsaka Sutra in
Sanskirt. The title of this Sutra is rendered in English as Flower Garland Sutra, Flower Adornment Sutra, or Flowers Ornament Scripture.

The Avatamsaka Sutra is longer than the Bible, and a single title is apt to give a misleading impression of unity. In fact, the Sutra, as it stands, is a heterogeneous work, a collection of texts some of which certainly circulated separately. Other parts were probably composed at the time of compilation in order to fill obvious gaps in the composite text. Only two sections survive in their entirety in Sanskrit, both of which were without doubt originally separate texts—

the Daśabhūmika Sūtra on the ten stages of the Bodhisattva’s path to enlightenment, and what is now the climax of the Avatamsaka, and the Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra. The Daśabhūmika Sūtra itself was first translated into Chinese during the third century CE.

No complete Sanskrit text of this Sutra remains extant, although portions of it do exist and Chih-yen of the Huayen school has left an outline of the Sanskrit text from which the translation by Śikṣānanda was produced. As many as four translations are extant, including three in Chinese and one in Tibetan. These are:

1. The translation by Buddhabhadra in 60 fascicles, completed in 420 CE. (Taisho 278);

2. The translation by Śikṣānanda in 80 fascicles, completed in 699 CE. (Taisho 279);
(3) The 40-fascicle translation of the last chapter, called the Gandavyūha, produced by Prajñā in 798 CE. (Taisho 293); and


In addition to the three complete translations (nos. 1, 2, and 4 above), many portions of this Sūtra have been translated and disseminated as self-standing works. This fact, plus the existence of autonomous sections in Sanskrit, has led scholars to conclude that this is an encyclopedic work which was augmented over the centuries as other works were added to it.

Another striking fact about the Avatamsaka Sūtra is that it is the second longest sutra in the Mahayana Canon. It consists of large important, independent sutras, namely: Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra, Daśabhūmika Suūtra, Amitāyurdyhāna Sūtra. It records the higher teaching of the Buddha to Bodhisattvas and other high spiritual beings.

Here, it is also necessary to give an explanation regarding the title of the sutra. As we know, the Gaṇḍavyūha and the Avatamsaka have been more or less indiscriminately used for the Chinese Huayan. Gaṇḍavyūha so far appears to correspond to the Chinese Huayan. Gaṇḍa means hua or flower, i,e; ordinary flower, and Vyuha means yen, i.e., chuang-yen or ornament ,array. According to Fa-tsang’s commentary on the Huayan Sutra, its original Sanskrit title is given as
chien-na- p’iao- ho, which stands as nearly as the Chinese phonetics for the transliteration of Gaṇḍavyūha. “Chien-na” is understood as “common flower” and “p’iao-ho” as “decoration”. Avatamsaka, on the other hand, means “garland”, or “flower decoration”, and may be regarded as an equivalent to Huayen.¹

Examined here is an analysis into the basics teachings contained in the English rendering of the text, which was originally composed by Sikṣānanda in eighty fascicles and divided systematically into thirty nine books.

In the first book of the scripture, entitled The Wondrous Adornments of World Rulers, a general picture of the nature of Buddhahood, major principles and scope of the teaching is presented through the descriptions by various beings of the liberations they have realized. Here, what is stressed is the universality and comprehensiveness of Buddhahood, described as both physically and metaphysically coextensive with the cosmos itself. It emphasizes that the Buddha expounds the truth by various means and teaches innumerable practices for the benefit of all beings. The “Buddha” here refers to reality or Dharma itself and to people who are awakened to the essence of Dharma. The various kinds of beings that appear in this book do not only represent their mundane aspects as such, but, more importantly, depict various facets of the Buddha’s enlightenment, while also representing the potential for enlightenment inherent in all conscious beings, a fundamental theme of universalistic Buddhism. In accordance with

Buddhabhadra’s translation, this book can be entitled as “Pure Eyes of the Worlds”, which likewise may also be read “Pure Eye of the Worlds” representing the total universal awareness of the Buddha.

The second book, entitled “Appearance of The Thus Come One”, tells about characteristics of Buddhahood, stressing the infinity and eternity of the Buddha in the cosmic sense of being reality itself. The epithet of Buddha used in the title is Tathagata, which is understood in Chinese Buddhism to mean “One who comes from “thusness”, the term “thusness” referring to being-as-it-is, unpredicted reality or Dharma. The Human Buddha is considered in one sense as someone who is aware of the fundamental continuity and identity with Dharma. In this Sutra, the term “Buddha” is commonly used for thusness or reality itself. Further, it is pointed out in this book that the Buddha reality appears everywhere to all beings, but it is seen in accordance with their perceptive capacities. It conveys the parallel messages that all experiences exist in reality according to their faculties and predilections, and that correlative to this, enlightened guides present various teachings to people in accordance with their needs, potentials and conditions. This accounts for the wide variety of doctrines in Buddhism some of which may on the surface seem so different as to be ever mutually opposed. Underlying this variety is the fact that diverse aspects of a situation or levels of truth may be discussed separately and that different ways of seeing, thinking and

2 From now on “this or the Sūtra” stands for the Hua Yen Sūtra.
acting may be recommended to different people, depending on the time and circumstances. This principle of adaptation and specific prescription is known as “skill in means” and is so basic and pervasive that it is impossible to understand Buddhism without a thorough appreciation of its premises, its purposes and implications.

The third book, called “Universal Worthy’s Smādhi”, exposes the metaphysic of the Bodhisattava or “enlightening being”, the woker for the universal enlightenment. The practical aspect of Bodhisattava is here and throughout the scripture typified by a symbolic being called Samantabhadra (Universally Good or Universal Good). The interrelatedness of all beings and the awareness of that interrelatedness on the part of the Bodhisattvas are graphically represented in this book. By being in direct contact with “thusness” or “suchness” without the distorting influence of preconceptions and partiality, Boddhisattvas are, according to this book, aware of each other through being equally focussed on reality. The unity of their purpose, universal liberation and enlightenment, which underlies diversity of method, is emphasized strongly here. Again, it is made clear that Boddhisattvas may appear in virtually any form and employ a wide variety of means, according to what is useful for the liberation of people in given conditions. Samantabhadra, representing the enlightening work as a whole, extending throughout all places and times, therefore symbolizes a central concept of this scripture.
The fourth book presents visionary descriptions of worlds as representing the consequences of aspirations and actions. Emphasized here is the relativity of world and mind, how the features of the world depend on the states of mind and corresponding deeds of the inhabitants. A considerable portion of the contents of this and the following chapter consists of a series of litanies of concentration formulae, intended to convey certain impressions to the mind and to encapsulate certain aspects of the teaching to focus attention on them. It is through transformation of the vision of the world as well as the attitudes and actions connected with that vision that the world itself is transformed. This point is also an important part of the message of the scripture.

The fifth book is entitled “The Flower Store Sea of Worlds”. This book presents a visionary cosmology describing this world system or universe as purified by the vows and deeds of Vairocana Buddha, the glorified or cosmic aspect of the historical Buddha. It represents the world system as resting on an ocean of fragrant water, which symbolizes what is called the “repository consciousness,” which is the mental repository or “storehouse” in which all experiential impressions are stored. It is from these impressions that images of the world develop. These images of the world are represented in the scripture as features of the world system. The landmasses in the world system also contain seas of fragrant water, which symbolize virtuous qualities or wholesome factors in the mind. Many varieties of adornment are described, symbolizing not only virtues but also aesthetic views of the world not contaminated by emotional judgments.
As a further dimension, the description of unthinkably many worlds over immensely vast reaches is calculated to foster a perspective in which any world is, as it were, reduced in size, like a pebble taken from the eye and returned to a mountain, no longer commanding the obsessive sense of unique significance that a narrow focus of attention invests in it. These elaborate descriptions allude also to the complexity of any realm, and try thereby to draw the consciousness into a broader awareness and detach it from restrictive preoccupations.

Book six, Vairocana, recounts illustrative tales of the development of the Buddha Vairocana in remote antiquity. The name “Vairocana” is interpreted in two senses—universal illuminator and specific illuminator, embodying both holistic and differentiating awareness. As noted, Vairocana is understood as another name for Sākyamuni in the cosmic, metaphysical sense, and also in the sense of the qualities or verities of Buddhahood that are common to all the Buddhas. This chapter describes a variety of realizations and attainments of Vairocana in the causal state, using mnemonic meditation formulae representing basic principles and praxes of Buddhist teachings. These are suggested in terms of various spells, trances, psychic powers, knowledges, lights, activities, perspectives, and so on.

The seventh book, called “Name of the Thus Come Ones”, again emphasizes that the Buddhas or enlightened people develop profound insight into mentalities and potentials, and teach people in accordance with their capacities and
needs. Thus, the Buddhas can be seen differently, according to their faculties and to the teachings which have been adapted to their situations. This chapter recites names and epithets of Buddhas to represent different perception or different facets of the qualities of enlightenment. Sometimes, these are given from the point of view of cause, sometimes from the point of view of effect; sometimes they are explicit, sometimes they are veiled in metaphor.

The eighth book, “The Four Noble Truths”, is based on the same principle is the foregoing chapter, presenting Buddhist teaching in myriad different ways to accommodate various mentalities and understandings. Following the lead of the seventh chapter, “The Four Noble Truths” gives various names and capsule descriptions of four points that are believed to have one of the original teaching frames of the historical Buddha. Basically, these tour truths refer to the fact of suffering, the origin of suffering, the extinction of suffering, and ways to the extinction of suffering. Here again, the representations of these points may be put in terms of cause or of effect. Sometimes, the mundane truths – suffering its origin – are put in terms not of conventional but of ultimate reality – inherent emptiness - to show a path of transition to the world-transcending truths within the mundane itself.

Book nine, “Light Enlightenment”, is an expanding vision unfolding within light issuing from the Buddha’s feet: the light progressively illumines greater and greater numbers of worlds as it travels further and further into space,
radiating in all directions, revealing similar structures and parallel events in each world. In every world, there are immense numbers of Buddhas each of whom attracts ten great Bodhisattvas, one from each of the ten directions, who in turn are each accompanied by countless Bodhisattvas. When the assemblies have all been arrayed, one of each group of ten great Bodhisattvas chants descriptive eulogies of the Buddha, alluding to the acts and realities of Buddhahood. Here again, the identity of the Buddha is emphasized with truth and ultimate reality, the transcendental nature of the essence of the Buddha.

The tenth book, entitled “A Bodhisattva Asks for Clarification”, follows up on the ninth, with the same interlocutors. This book goes explicitly into metaphysics, explaining the principle of the naturelessness or essencelessness of all phenomena. This means that things have no individual nature, no inherent identity or essence of their own, because they are interdependent and only exist due to causes and conditions. For this reason, it is repeatedly stated that the nature of things is natureless, that they have no being of their own. It points out that the seeming existence of things as discrete independent entities is in fact conceptual, a description projected by the mind on the flux of sense data; the real nature of things, it maintains, is insubstantial, and they die out instant to instant. In this book, it is restated that realms or conditions of being are consequences of action, but it goes on to say that action is fundamentally baseless or lacking in ultimate reality - it is the mind’s attachment to its own constructs that provides the sense of continuity. In this chapter, it is also stressed that the teachings of the Buddhas
may be manifold and different according to specific circumstances, but the essential truth is one and the various teachings and practices are all parts of a total effort.

Book eleven focuses on the interconnectedness of all beings and the training of this awareness. It details an elaborate scheme of thought-cultivation in which consciousness of daily activities is directed to specific wishes for universal well-being and liberation. In terms of format, much of it is based on entry into monastic life, and some of the specific actions and events on which the contemplations are based are of monastic life, but many others make no necessary distinction between lay and monastic life.

The twelfth book called “Worthy Leader”, eulogizes the aspiration or will for enlightenment, the monumental spiritual conversion by which an ordinary person becomes a Bodhisattva whose life and action is based on and guided by the determination for the enlightenment and liberation of all beings. The inspiration of the genuine will for enlightenment is in a sense itself transcendence of the world, as universal enlightenment becomes the reason for being, and life itself is transformed into a vehicle of enlightenment. Following this, faith is praised for its instrumental value as a means of directing the mind and focusing endeavour. The book further goes on to describe practices and their results, in terms of both self-cultivation and assistance-to-others. Versatility is again emphasized here, and
Bodhisattvas are symbolically described as presenting all sorts of displays and teachings to exert edifying and liberating influences on people.

Book thirteen is entitled “Ascending to the Summit of Mount Sumeru”. Mount Sumeru, a polar mountain of the world, is pictured as the abode of Indra (or Shakra), the mythical king of the gods of the thirty-threefold heaven, pictured as thirty-three celestial mansions on the peaks surrounding the summit of Sumeru. This book is a brief visionary welcome of the Buddha into the palace of Indra.

Book fourteen, “Praises Atop Mount Sumeru”, emphasizes the metaphysical aspect of Buddha, as being absolute truth. The thrust of this approach is to counter preoccupation with forms. The Buddha is said to be the very absence of inherent existence or intrinsic nature of all conditioned things. Conventional reality is called a description consisting of habitual conceptions and views. Defining the world through verbal and conceptual representations by its very nature limits or restricts awareness. So this book stresses the need to see through, see beyond conventional reality in order to become enlightened. When the nature of perceptual and conceptual organization of experience as a mere tool is forgotten or unknown, and a particular organization hardens into an exclusive view, the mind loses its freedom. The dependence of views on social, cultural, and psychological factors attests to their non-absoluteness; the concern of Buddhist philosophy and meditation is to see through such conditioning and restore the mind to openness and flexibility.
The fifteenth book, called “Ten Dwellings”, is a brief description of ten stations of Bodhisattvas. The first abode is that of initial determination, setting the mind on omniscience, to broaden its horizons. Second is preparing the ground, or cultivation; here the development of universal compassion is emphasized. Also involved is learning, from people and situations as well as from formal study. Third is the abode of practice, to clarify knowledge; here, various aspects of emptiness (indefiniteness, non-absoluteness) are emphasized. Fourth is the abode of “noble birth,” which means rebirth from the enlightening teachings; here knowledge – of beings, phenomena, causality, and so on – is emphasized, as well as the knowledge, practice, and realization of the teachings of Buddhas of all times, with awareness of the essence of Buddhahood, which is equal in all times. Fifth, the abode of skill in means, involves further development of knowledge and means of conveying knowledge, and working for universal salvation without attachments. Sixth, the abode of the correct state of mind, involves developing a mind that does not waver in face of apparently contradictory aspects of things; here again the inherent emptiness of things is emphasized. Seventh, the abode of non-regression means not regressing regardless of what one may hear in regard to different aspects of things, and learning the principles of reconciliation of oppositions through relativity. Eighth, the abode of youthful nature, involves development of impeccability, of psychic freedom, and vast extension of the range of study and application of the teachings. Ninth, the abode of prince of the teaching is a stage of development of discursive knowledge and the particular
sciences of teacher-hood. Tenth is the stage of coronation or anointment, referring to the accomplishment of knowledge of all sciences and means of liberation and the development of a sphere of Buddhahood.

The sixteenth book, called “Brahma Conduct”, describes detailed analytic investigations which eventually arrive at un-graspability, systematically removing the mind from fixations, dismantling the structure of a formal religious world in order to embrace formless truth. After this the book goes on to bring up the special powers of knowledge of Buddhas as realms of deep study, and concludes with exhortations to integrate compassion with the understanding of illusoriness.

The seventeenth book entitled “The Merit and Virtue from First Bringing Forth the Mind”, describes in grandiose terms the virtues of the aspiration for enlightenment. It stresses the sense of this determination transcending all limited aspirations, being directed toward omniscience science and universal liberation and enlightenment. Many points or fields of knowledge are specifically mentioned in this connection, including the “mutual containment” or mutual immanence of different quanta of being and time, alluding to the interdependence of definitions, and the interrelation of elements and structural sets. Other prominent spheres of knowledge are those involved in the study of mentalities and mental phenomena, this kind of knowledge being essential to the science of liberation. The tremendous emphasis on genuine and boundless determination for complete universal enlightenment reflects its importance as the essence of the whole enterprise of
Bodhisattvas, who do not seek enlightenment for their own personal ends. The correct orientation at the outset is deemed essential to truly transcend the limitation of self; without this transcendent resolve, the power of spiritual exercises exaggerates and bolsters the afflictions of self-seeking and can lead to harmful aberrations.

The eighteenth book called “Understanding Dharma”, presents a series of lists of elements of the Bodhisattvas’ path. First it stresses the development of the determination for omniscience, which means knowledge of all things pertinent to liberation. Then it goes on to work on non-indulgence or heedfulness, in terms of ten items; these lead to ten kinds of purity. Following this it brings up twenty things which are congenial to enlightenment, ten things whereby Bodhisattvas can rapidly enter the stages of enlightenment, ten things which purify their practices, ten results of purity of practice, ten vows, ten ways of fulfilling vows, and ten spiritual “treasuries” attained as a result fulfilling vows. This book also talks about means of purifying the ten essential ways of transcendence, or perfections of Bodhisattvas, and about specific cures of spiritual ills.

Ascending to the Suyama Heaven, the title of the book nineteenth, is much like book thirteen; here, the Buddha is welcomed into the heaven called Suyama, without, however, leaving the foot of the enlightenment tree and the peak of the polar mountain Sumeru. This introduces the following book, in which the all-pervasiveness of the Buddha is stressed.
The twentieth book is called “Praises in the Suyama Heaven”. This book emphasizes the universality of the Buddha in terms of metaphysical essence and in terms of practice. The spiritual body of Buddha is seen here as the cultivation of enlightenment potential inherent in all conscious beings in all times. The nature of the Buddha beings and phenomena are spoken of in these terms: “Sentient and non-sentient beings both have no true reality. Such is the nature of all things – in reality they are not existent.” Also, “Analyzing matter and mind, their nature is fundamentally void; because they are void they cannot be destroyed – this is the meaning of “birthlessness.” Since sentient beings are thus, so are Buddhas and Buddhas’ teachings in essence have no existence.” And “The body is not Buddha, Buddha is not the body – only reality is Buddha’s body, comprehending all things. Those who can see the Buddha-body pure as the essence of things will have no doubt about Buddha’s teaching. If you see that the fundamental nature of all things is like Nirvana, this is seeing Buddha, ultimately without abode.”

Book twenty-one is entitled “Ten Conducts”. These ten conducts, though under different names, correspond to the ten perfections, or ways of transcendence, upon which the path of Bodhisattvas is based: giving, ethical conduct, forbearance, energy, concentration, wisdom, expedient methodology, power, commitment, and knowledge. The accomplishment of these is based on the relativity (emptiness); the first six are especially based on emptiness within relative existence, while the last four are based on relative existence within emptiness.
“The Ten Inexhaustible Treasuries”, the title of the twenty-second book, deals with ten sources of the development and activity of Bodhisattvas: faith, ethics, shame, conscience, learning, giving, wisdom, recollection, preservation of enlightening teachings, and elocution. Various items from these “treasuries” are explained in detail.

- The section on faith deals with the object of faith, mostly expressed in terms of absolute truth, as well as states of mind engendered by faith.
- The section on ethics deals with general ethical principles and orientation as well as specific articles of ethical conduct. Shame refers to being ashamed of past wrongs; conscience refers to resolve not to continue to act unwisely.
- The section on learning deals with specifics of interdependent origination of conditioned states, and with analytic knowledge. Giving involves “giving up” in the sense of intellectual and emotional relinquishment, such as nonattachment to past and future, as well as the act of giving itself and the frame of mind of generosity. Giving is often put in hyperbolic or symbolic terms, and has the general sense of contributing one’s resources – including one’s very being – to the common weal rather than to purely private aims.
- The section on wisdom deals with both phenomena and principles, with
discursive knowledge being described as leading to insight into emptiness and independent understanding. The treasury of recollection involves recollection of every moment of awareness – represented as countless ages due to the density of experience – including changes undergone as well as contents of what has been learned. Preservation means preservation of Buddha-teachings and the sciences involved therein. Elocution refers to exposition and teaching.

Book twenty-three, entitled “Ascending to the Tushita Heaven”, describes in great detail the arrays of ornaments set out to welcome the Buddha to this heaven. This is on a vaster scale than the other heaven which the Buddha visits in this scripture, because the Tushita heaven, the heaven of happiness or satisfaction, represents the abode of a Buddha-to-be just before manifesting complete enlightenment in the world. The assembly of Bodhisattvas there is also depicted in terms of the practices and qualities that developed them. After this is an elaborate description of the spiritual qualities of Buddha.

The twenty-fourth book, called “Praises in the Tushita Heaven”, resembles the other comparable chapters of the scripture, eulogizing the universality of the awareness and metaphysical reality of Buddha, reconciling multiplicity and unity, emphasizing the relativity of the manifestation of Buddha to the minds of the perceivers.

Book twenty-five, entitled “Ten Transferences”, is one of the longest books
of the scripture, indicative of the great importance of dedication in the life of Bodhisattvas. Dedication particularly reflects two essential principles of Bodhisattvas’ practice: giving, or relinquishment; and vowing, or commitment. The basic orientation of dedication is the full development, liberation, and enlightenment of all beings. The scope of the ten dedications is beyond the capacity of an individual to fulfill personally; it is through dedication that the individual Bodhisattva merges with the total effort of all Bodhisattvas. Forms of giving which are not literally possible, for example, are presented at great length; these represent nonattachment, both material and spiritual, particularly in the sense of dedication to the service of all life. This book recites extensive correspondences between specific contributions and the results to which they are dedicated, representing the adaptation of Bodhisattvas’ activity to particular developmental needs. This is often presented in spiritual or psychological terms, but also it is presented in material or formal terms of glorified images of Buddha symbolizing the perfection of the human being. This book again emphasizes the integration of wisdom and compassion, acting purposefully even while knowing the ultimately unreal nature of conditional existence. This skill of acting without attachment, without impulsion, without grasping or rejecting existence or emptiness, is presented as the essence of dedication and fundamental to the path of Bodhisattvas.³

³ See Flower Ornament Scripture, Thomas Cleary, Vol., I, pp. 2-11 (from book 1 to book 25)
Vajra Banner Bodhisattva receives the spiritual power and awesome aid of Vajra Banner Buddhas and expounds upon the Ten Transferences.

1. Transference to Save Living Beings without having any marks of Living Beings
2. Transference of Indestructibility
3. Transference in the Same Way as all Buddhas
4. Transference which reaches all Places
5. Transference of Inexhaustible Treasuries
6. Transference of Entry into the Level Equality of Good Roots
7. Transference Equally According with all Living Beings
8. Transference which is characterized by True Suchness
9. Transference of Unbounded, Unfettered Liberation
10. Transference of Entry into the Limitlessness of the Dharma realm

Book twenty-six is called “The Ten Grounds”. In this book, the Buddha is in the palace in the Heaven of the Comfort from Others’ Transformations. Bodhisattvas Mahāsattvas from the other directions arrive to draw near to the Buddha. Vajra Treasury Bodhisattva receives the spiritual aid of Vajra Treasury Buddhas and expounds the names of the Ten Grounds (Stages).

1. The Ground of Happiness
2. The Ground of Leaving Filth
3. The Ground of Emitting Light
4. The Ground of Blazing Wisdom
5. The Ground of Invincibility
6. The Ground of Manifestation
7. The Ground of Travelling Far
8. The Ground of Not Moving
9. The Ground of Good Wisdom
10. The Ground of the Dharma Cloud

Moon of Liberation Bodhisattva earnestly requests the Dharma three times. The Buddha emits light from between his brows. There are sounds from the light requesting for Dharma. Vajra Treasury Bodhisattva proclaims the Ten Grounds.

Book twenty-seven is entitled “Ten Samadhis”⁴. In this book, the Buddha is in the Universal Light Palace. Universal Eyes looked everywhere. Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is in the Lion Sprint Samādhi. The assembly bows, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva manifests. The Buddha instructs him to expound the Ten Samadhi-s.

1. The Great Samādhi of Universal Light
2. The Great Samādhi of Wondrous Light
3. The Great Samādhi of Sequentially Going throughout all Buddhalands
4. The Great Samādhi of Purifying the Activities in the Depths of the Mind
5. The Great Samādhi of the Magnificent Treasury of Knowing the Past

⁴ Obviously the word “Sāmdhi” used here is quite different from that of the Yoga and Vedanta.
6. The Great Samādhi of a Treasury of Wisdom Light

7. The Great Samādhi of Fathoming the Adornments of Buddha-s in all Worlds

8. The Great Samādhi of Distinguishing the Bodies of Living Beings

9. The Great Samādhi of Ease and Comfort in the Dharma Realm

10. The Great Samādhi of the Unhindered Wheel

Following the book on The Ten Samadhis is the book on “The Ten Penetrations”. In this book, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva expounds upon the Ten Penetrations.

1. The penetration of knowing others’ minds

2. The penetration of the unobstructed heavenly eye

3. The penetration of knowing past lives throughout all former eons

4. The penetration of knowing eons to the ends of time

5. The penetration of the unobstructed heavenly ear

6. The penetration of going to all Buddhalands

7. The penetration of understanding all language

8. The penetration of perfecting countless bodies for the sake of liberating living beings

9. The penetration of knowing all phenomena

10. The penetration of Samādhi on the extinction of all things

The next book is called “The Ten Patiences”. In this book, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva expounds upon the Ten Patiences.
1. Patience with the sound of the Teaching
2. Conformative Patience
3. Patience with the Non-production of Dharmas
4. Patience with Illusoriness
5. Patience with being Mirage-Like
6. Patience with being Dreamlike
7. Patience with being Echo-like
8. Patience with being like a Reflection
9. Patience with being Illusive-Like
10. Patience with being Space-Like

Book thirty is called “Asamkheyyas”. In this book, Mind King Bodhisattva wishes to understand the meaning of Asamkheyyas, inconceivable amounts, ineffable amounts, and other numerical measures. The World Honored One elucidates them and speaks verses. The Buddha says,

What cannot be spoken is ineffable.
Everywhere is filled with the ineffable.
During eons which cannot be spoken,
The ineffable is spoken without end.

The next book is entitled “Life Spans”. In this book, Mind King Bodhisattva addresses the Bodhisattvas. One Kalpa in this land is a single day and
night in Amitabha Buddha’s Land of Ultimate Bliss. He speaks of other lands and Buddhas to reveal the differing life spans in an increasing sequence.

Book thirty-two is called “Dwelling place of Bodhisattvas”. In this book, Mind King Bodhisattva delineates the various dwelling places of Bodhisattvas and their retinues. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is at Pure and Cool Mountain proclaiming Dharma to his congregation of ten thousand Bodhisattvas.

Book thirty-three is entitled “Inconceivable Dharmas of Buddha”. In this book, the Bodhisattvas are marveling about the inconceivabilities of the Buddhas’ lands, vows, wisdom, and realm. The Buddha knows what they are wondering. Blue Lotus Flower Trove Bodhisattva relies on the Buddha’s awesome might and expounds upon the Buddhas’ dwellings, powers, virtues, compassion, expedients, Samadhi-s, liberations, and states.

When the Buddha enters Nirvāṇa, countless living beings mourn and weep. A passage from the Sutra says, “Disciples of the Buddha! When a Buddha enters Nirvana, numberless living beings sob, and wail in grief, feeling greatly distressed. They look at each other and say, ‘The Thus Come One, the World Honored One, has Great Kindness and Compassion. He sympathizes with and benefits everyone in the world. He is a savior and a refuge for all living beings. It is hard to encounter the appearance of a “Thus Come One”. Now, this unsurpassed field of blessings is gone forever.’...” That is how a Buddha causes all living beings to mourn with yearning and do the Buddha’s work.
Following is the book on Inconceivable Dharmas of Buddha entitled “The Sea of the Marks of the Ten Bodies of the Thus Come Ones”. In this book, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva expounds upon the Buddhas’ marks of Greatness and characteristics. The thirty-two marks are the rewarding result of Great Compassion. Although a universal monarch also has these marks, they are not as perfect. It is the actions of body, speech, and mind that result in these marks. The Buddha’s thirty-two marks are

1. Level feet
2. Thousand-spoke wheel sign on feet
3. Long, slender fingers
4. Pliant hands and feet
5. Toes and fingers finely webbed
6. Full-sized heels
7. Arched insteps
8. Thighs like a royal stag
9. Hands reaching below the knees
10. Well-retracted male organ
11. Height and stretch of arms equal
12. Every hair root dark colored
13. Body hair graceful and curly
14. Golden-hued body
15. A ten foot aura around him
16. Soft, smooth skin
17. Two soles, two palms, two shoulders, and crown well rounded.
18. Below the armpits well filled
19. Lion-shaped body
20. Body erect and upright
21. Full, round shoulders
22. Forty teeth
23. Teeth white, even and close
24. Four canine teeth pure white
25. Lion-jawed
26. Saliva improving the taste of all food
27. Tongue long and broad
28. Voice deep and resonant
29. Eyes deep blue
30. Eyelashes like a royal bull
31. A white urna or curl between the eyebrows emitting light.
32. A fleshy protuberance on the crown.

That does not imply that the Buddha resembles certain animals, but that, the World Honored looks majestic, magnificent, lordly and supremely adorned.

The next book is called “The Light of the Merit and Virtue of the Thus Come Ones’ Minor”. In this book, the Buddha relates, as a Bodhisattva in Tushita
Heaven, emitting light enabling hell beings to be reborn in Tushita Heaven. The celestial drum speaks and exhorts them, revealing their previous existences and paying homage to Vairocana Bodhisattva. The celestial drum urges not to pursue pleasures and repent to eradicate obstructions. How does a Great Bodhisattva repent? The celestial drum responds. Innumerable beings in the Tushita Heavens in countless worlds receive benefits.

Book thirty-six is entitled “Universal Worthy’s Conduct”. In this book, Universal Worthy Bodhisattva proclaims the great offense. If a Bodhisattva is angry with another Bodhisattva, obstructions arise. How does a Bodhisattva cultivate? What is the Buddhas’ state? What is the realm of great vows? Universal Worthy Bodhisattva elucidates them.

The thirty-seventh book is called “The Thus Come Ones’ Appearances”. In this book, the Buddha emits light from between his brows. A Bodhisattva extols and beseeches the Buddha to speak. The Buddha emits light from his mouth. What is the meaning of this auspicious portent? Universal Worthy Bodhisattva illuminates. He expounds upon the inconceivabilities and manifestations of the Thus Come One. The Sutra says,

When the sun first comes up
It shines first on the high mountains, then the others,
Then shines on the high plains, then the whole land,
Yet the sun never has any discrimination.
The light of the Buddha is also thus.
First illumining the Bodhisattvas, then the self-enlightened,
Then last the Sound Hearers and all living beings.
Yet the Buddha basically has no stirring thoughts.

Book thirty-eight is called “Leaving the World”. In this book, the Buddha is in the Universal Light Palace. Innumerable Bodhisattvas are with the Buddha. Universal Worthy Bodhisattva enters a vast Samādhi. The worlds quake in six ways. Universal Wisdom Bodhisattva requests for Dharma. What are the practices, powers, wisdom, liberations, conduct, qualities, and states of Great Bodhisattvas?

Universal Worthy Bodhisattva says:

Bodhisattvas Mahāsattvas have ten great undertakings. They think, ‘I should serve and honor all Buddhas.’

‘Bodhisattvas Mahāsattvas are full of Great Compassion and do not abandon living beings; they accept suffering in place of living beings: the sufferings of hell, the sufferings of animals, the sufferings of hungry ghosts.’

Book thirty-nine, entitled “Entering the Dharma Realm”, is the longest book of the Sutra and well known as an individual Sutra by the Sanskrit title Gaṇḍavyūha. This chapter deals with the cultivation and development of Bodhisattva. In the text, a pilgrimage undertaken by the youth Sudhana to visit

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fifty-three worthies, religious and secular is described. The object of the pilgrimage is to realize the principle of Dharmadhātu. Through Sudhana’s pilgrimage, almost whole of the profound meaning of the Sutra is uncovered, i.e., the principle of Dharmadhātu, the ideal of Bodhisattva and the thought of all things are manifestation of mind.

The title “The Journey of the Youth Sudhana” also circulates as a separate text known as the Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra. The Gaṇḍvyūha Sutra details the journey of the youth Sudhana, who undertakes a pilgrimage at the behest of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Sudhana will converse with fifty two masters in his quest for enlightenment. The ante-penultimate master of Sudhana's pilgrimage is Maitreya. It is here that Sudhana encounters “The Tower of Maitreya,” which along with “Indra's net” is one of the most startling metaphors of the infinite to emerge in the history of literature across cultures.

“In the middle of the great tower... he saw the billion-world universe... and everywhere there was Sudhana at his feet... Thus, Sudhana saw Maitreya's practices of... transcendence over countless eons, from each of the squares of the check board wall... In the same way Sudhana... saw the whole supernal manifestation, was perfectly aware it, understood it, contemplated it, used it as a means, beheld it, and saw himself there.”

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6 Dharmadhātu (Chinese: Fa Chich): the realm of dharmas. Here, Dharmadhātu refers to the realm of Totality or Infinity in the light of the highest insight and spiritual perspective of Buddhahood.
The penultimate master that Sudhana visits is the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Thus, one of the grandest and most fully loaded with perennial symbolism, of pilgrimages comes to its conclusion by first revisiting where it began. The Gaṇḍavyūha suggests that with a subtle shift of perspective we may come to see that the enlightenment that the pilgrim so fervently sought was not only with him at every stage of his journey, but as well before it kick off; that enlightenment is not 'something to be gained' since, to begin with, the pilgrim (aka all of us) never departed from "It".

The final master that Sudhana visits is the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who teaches him that wisdom is only for the sake of putting it into practice, that is, in benefiting all living beings all over the universe according to conditions.

“When this done, the world of the Gaṇḍavyūha (ceases) to be a mystery, a realm devoid of form and corporeality, for now it overlaps this earthly world; no, it becomes that ‘Thou art it’ and there is a perfect fusion of the two... Samantabhadra’s arms raised to save sentient beings become our own, which are now engaged in passing salt to a friend at the table and Maitreya’s opening the Vairocana Tower for Sudhana is our ushering a caller into the parlor for a friendly chat.”

The Avataṃsaka Sūtra is one of the richest texts of Buddhism, revered as a treasure of sensual imagery and as a vast storehouse of wisdom known in Chinese as Huayen and in Japanese as Kegon-kyo.
According to the Huayan exegesis, the Sūtra's primary goal is to show the reader how the world appears to a completely enlightened Buddha or advanced Bodhisattva. It presents a universe conceived as empty of inherent existence and as arising and fading away each moment in response to the activities of mind. The Buddha, realizing that all reality arises in dependence on mind, and having perfect control of his mind through his meditation, is able to produce effects at any distance which may appear to unenlightened beings as magic, but which to him simply manifest reality as it is—mind-made. His transformations are not different in quality from those worked by ordinary beings as they pass from life to life; the crucial difference is that the Buddha is aware of the process and can control it. This places the Buddha in a universe lacking disparate objects with solid boundaries between them. Instead, he sees a constant flow and flux in the basic transformations of mind.

As a result of this fluidity and lack of hard boundaries, all of reality is seen as perfectly interpenetrating. This interpenetration occurs at two levels. First, the ultimate nature of reality, the noumenon, is perfectly expressed in all individual phenomena. More concretely, the single Buddha Vairocana (of whom the historical Buddha Śākyamuni is said to be an emanation) is the ground of all reality. Since all individual phenomena emerge from him, he perfectly pervades all things. Second, because of this complete pervasion of noumenon (Vairocana) into all phenomena, all phenomena perfectly interpenetrate each other. Each individual thing arises out of this basic matrix of transformations, and so each implies and
influences all of the others. Everything is within everything else, and yet there is no confusion of one phenomenon with another.

The Avataṃsaka is really the consummation of Buddhist thought, Buddhist sentiment and Buddhist experience. To my mind, no religious literature in the world can ever approach the grandeur of conception, the depth of feeling and the gigantic scale of composition attained by this Sutra. Here not only deeply speculative minds find satisfaction, but humble spirits and heavily oppressed hearts, too, will have their burdens lightened. Abstract truths are so concretely, so symbolically represented here that one will finally come to a realization of the truth that even in a particle of dust the whole universe is seen reflected - not this visible universe only, but a vast system of universes, conceivable by the highest minds only.  

The sutra is also well known for its detailed description of the course of the Bodhisattva's practice through fifty-two stages. From the beginning to the end of the Flower Adornment Sutra, every phrase of the Sutra is an Unsurpassed Dharma Jewel. If we are able to actually apply and cultivate according to the principles described in the Sutra, then we are sure to become Buddhas.

The Buddha did not expound the A vataṃsaka Sūtra so that living beings can embark on an intellectual quest. He spoke it so that all living beings and Sages

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can understand and strive to embody its ineffably wonderful and boundless principles.

According to the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, one of the great mysteries, the mystery of Buddhahood can perhaps be summed up in two Words: Totality and Non-Obstruction. The former implies the all embracing and all-aware aspects of Buddhahood; the latter, the total freedom from all clingings and bindings. Ontologically speaking, it is because of Totality that Non-Obstruction can be reached, but causally speaking, it is through a realization of Non-Obstruction, the complete annihilation of all mental and spiritual impediments and “blocks”, that the realm of Totality and Non-Obstruction is reached.8

This is the essential philosophy of the Sutra that can be analyzed carefully in the following chapters.

The Great Master Hsuan Tsang praised the Avataṃsaka Sūtra in these words: “The Avataṃsaka Sūtra is such that a single door can open limitless doors, in multi-layered inexhaustibility. This Dharma is inconceivable, whereas the Great Prajñā Sutra is just a single door within the Flower Adornment Sutra.”

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