Buddhist Scripture as a Template for Maturation in Spiritual Cultivation

A Presentation to
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Master Hsuan Hua was trained in the Tiantai tradition of scriptural exegesis. He presented the voice of the Buddha in the sutras directly, unmediated by written commentaries, and accessible to contemporary, critical analysis.
Master Hua critiqued the traditional Chinese conventions regarding the place and use of sutras:
- as ritual objects
- as vehicles for merit-making
- as library cases & shelves
- as archaic philosophy
Traditionally, practitioners, to relate to a sutra could:

- read and recite it
- memorize it
- copy it out
- reprint and distribute it
- bow to it
- decorate it
- translate it
Sangha Members (and the occasional lay practitioner or scholar) could lecture on sutras, but rarely.

Lecturing came with cautions: there were certain risks and conditions which by and large limited the number of sutras being lectured on, with the result that the value of sutras is largely unknown outside of Chinese Buddhist circles. Their use was limited to reciting and ritual use.

The Buddha’s voice was seldom heard.
Attitudes that limited lecturing on Mahayana Sutras:

- Exegesis is too dangerous. Explain one word incorrectly and you risk falling into the hells.
- Sutras are full of Sanskrit and difficult to read (so don’t lecture on them).
- This is the Dharma-ending Age, lecturing is wrong.
We lack the wisdom that the ancients had; we have to rely on their commentaries; the Buddha’s words aren’t accessible without commentary (so don’t lecture on them).

In the case of the Avatamsaka, it is lofty philosophy, abstract and irrelevant to contemporary life (so don’t lecture on the Avatamsaka).
Master Hua explained the Sutras every night for over 30 years.

He didn’t rely on historical commentaries required his students (us) to explain them as well and to translate them into the world’s languages.

He called them “handbooks to wisdom,” guidelines for daily conduct, instructions for living one can’t do without for even a day.
For example: the *Flower Garland Sutra*

Master Hua lectured on it daily for nine years, from 1973 to 1982 in California.
Mahavaipulya Buddha
Avatamsaka Sutra

The Flower Adornment

The Flower Ornament

The Garland Sutra

Huayenjing

Kegonkyo
The Buddha Vairochana
The “host” of the text
Bodhisattva Samantabhadra host” of the Avatamsaka Assembly
Bodhisattva Manjushri, “co-host” of the Avatamsaka Assembly
Sudhana, the pilgrim, the “Youth Good Wealth”
Sudhana is a seeker of wisdom, faceless and generic, so that any reader can envision him/herself on his journey.
He is portrayed as docile, easily taught and eager to learn.
The pilgrimage of Sudhana can be considered as an epic tale in Mahayana Buddhist literature. It occurs in the final chapter of the *Avatamsaka (Flower Garland) Sutra.*
Structure of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

- Description of the Dharma Realm
- Presentation of the Bodhisattva Path first in theory, then
- A pilgrim (Sudhana) appears to walk the path, and to put the theories into practice.
Part One: Theory/Principles
Chapters 1-38

Part Two: Application/Practice
Chapters 39-40
Chapters 39-40 “Entering the Dharma Realm”
Sudhana’s pilgrimage

- The Gandhavyuha chapter
- The Avatamsaka Sutra’s epic literature
Manjushri’s Instructions to Sudhana:

Make the Great Resolve For Bodhi (bodhicitta)

Draw near to, make offerings to and pay respects to true Good Spiritual Friends (kalyanamitra)
The Bodhi Resolve

The thought for enlightenment

The wish to wake up

The Bodhicitta

Known to tradition as “the king of all goodness”
The Bodhi Resolve, as traditionally expressed:

- ultimately, I resolve to become a Buddha (上成佛道)
- immediately I resolve to teach living beings and to "take them across" (下化眾生)
The criteria required for success

- Make a resolve (發心)
- Make vows (立願)
- Actually practice (實行)
Define the Bodhi Resolve

Who are those living beings I need to teach?

They are internal, not external living beings, i.e., my own flawed habits and faulty viewpoints.
Define what it means to “take living beings across”

To teach them viewpoints that accord with the Dharma

To inspire them to want to change and to cultivate Dharma practices
Who does Sudhana meet?

Monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, Bodhisattvas, a prostitute, a ship captain, incense makers, doctors, Brahmans, spirits, children, hermits, and kings.
Sudhana hears teachings from Sages:

- Manjushri Bodhisattva
- Guan Yin Bodhisattva
- Maitreya Bodhisattva
- Gopa, a Lady of the Shakya Clan
Sudhana asks two questions, 53 times:

“How does one walk the Bodhisattva Path?”

“How does one cultivate Bodhisattva Practices?”
He hears a question in reply from each teacher:

“Good Man, have you made the Great Resolve for Bodhi?”

Sudhana says “Yes, I have,” and the teachings begin to flow.
Sudhana’s Teachers include:

- 21 women
- including ten “Spirits Who Rule the Night”
- Three men who frighten him
Integrating the Anima

Sudhana integrates his own femininity by absorbing the lessons of the anima.
The Shadow

Sudhana overcomes his fear of death by facing and learning from (formerly) threatening male teachers.
He encounters, symbolically, in his journey, the feminine aspects of his character (anima) and the unconscious, hidden aspects (shadow).

By meeting and integrating these aspects into conscious awareness, using the Dharma, and having made the resolve for Bodhi (*bodhicitta*) he brings his mind to maturity, and to light.
Symbols of light and darkness abound in the narrative.

By integrating the anima and the shadow, Sudhana brings his mind to light; he transforms *avidya*, ignorance, until only the light of his nature remains.
Which mirrors the Buddha’s experience beneath the Bodhi Tree as he encountered:

- Mara’s daughters (anima)
- Mara’s legions (shadow)
Buddha Dharma does not merely confirm Western analytical psychological theory.

The Buddha’s vision of the healthy human mind, once fully brought to light and awakened, displays elements that Western psychotherapy is also exploring.
In Chapter 40, the final chapter of the sutra, Sudhana gets the ultimate answer to his questions from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.
A useful, contemporary rendering of the Buddha’s scriptural voice

Translated for only the second time into Western languages, after 2500 years.
Master Hua’s reforms:

- Interpret the scripture directly, without reliance on commentaries.
- Ask contemporary questions of the ancient texts; they will respond.
- Translate and circulate the Buddha’s wisdom texts; they are relevant.
Questions for small groups:

- How has your early exposure to scripture informed your spiritual practice?
- Are cultural attitudes limiting your approach?
Dharma Realm
Buddhist University

www.drbu.org
YouTube Channel: *Dharmarealm Live*

- For lectures on the Avatamsaka Sutra in English
- Live Webcast: Saturday nights, 7:30 PM Pacific Time
For Buddhist books and materials

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