

CHAPTER NINE

Surangama Sutra and Mahayana Buddhism

Buddhist scriptures divide into *Sutras* and *Shastras*. *Sutras* are texts whose claim is that Buddha himself spoke them and thus, begin with such words and phrases as: “Thus have I heard at one time” and “The Lord dwelt at..” This “I” refers to the disciple Ananda, reputed to have recited the entire Buddha-word immediately after the death of *Buddha*, therefore, they are called the “spoken”. *Shastras*, on the contrary, are buddhist treatises written by an author who seeks to explain the *Sutras* in a more systematic way than the way they are “spoken”.

The schools of Buddhism divide along the lines of these texts into *Mahayana* Buddhism, the *Great Vehicle*, that is, the words of Buddha as spoken by Ananda and *Hinayana* Buddhism, the *Lesser Vehicle*, that is, the organized and interpreted words of Buddha. (Perhaps an analogy drawn from the Christian Catholic *New Testament*, including the *Acts of the Apostles* and letters of St. Paul might aid understanding. If one considers the four *Gospels* as the “words” of Jesus Christ, then we can compare them to the *Sutras* ascribed to *Buddha*; so, one might compare the *Acts of the Apostles* and the letters of St. Paul, indeed, and any further “explanation” of Christ’s life and words as subsequent theologians wrote and spoke about them as the explanations paralleling those of *Buddha*’s disciple Ananda and to the *Shastras*.)

Since *Mahayana* Buddhists study only the presumed words of Buddha as spoken by Ananda, *Mahayanas* dispute the authenticity of texts composed after 480 B.C. and not recited by the Council immediately after the death of *Buddha*. *Hinayana* Buddhists, on the contrary, claim that even the later *Sutras* are authentic and come from *Buddha*’s own mouth. Indeed, at the beginning of the 5th Century A.D. (Or *C.E.*, the so-called *Common Era*, whatever that means to secular historians seeking to separate “church and state”!), the Chinese monk Chih-meng visited Pataliputra and was asked by an Indian friend whether the *Mahayana* teachings existed in China? Chin-meng replied: “We all follow the *Mahayana* teachings”. The Indian friend was astonished. Many Indian *Hinayana* Buddhists refer to *Mahayana* Buddhists as “crypto-Hinus” and the chief Chinese opponent of *Mahayana* was Fa-tu who was born in India but lived in China.

Our understanding of Buddhism through the texts available to us has been and always will be fragmentary because Buddhism by its very origin and nature is

an oral tradition and has been and is transmitted by schools of Reciters. (Indeed, again a parallel exists here in relation to Catholic Christianity. The first Gospel, that of Mark is estimated to have been written about 75 A.D., so, if we correct the three year mistake in establishing the date of Christ's birth as 1 A.D., then His death occurred about 30 A.D. and some forty-five years of oral tradition preceded the first written chronology and description of Christ's words and deeds.) But, a second problem exists in the effort to understand Buddhist texts; this problem occurs because of the nature of any monastic religious life through the Middle Ages into and through the Renaissance. The fundamental virtue of all monastic, including Catholic Christian Monastic life is humility, so even when the monks' words were written down, the writings either were unsigned or a *pseudo* name was used. (We have a current example of such an unknown author in the book translated as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, currently a popular book on mystical prayer, probably written some time during the 10th to 12th Century A.D.)

The *Suragama Sutra* provides an entry into the philosophic basis of the Buddhist belief and thus, enables us to study Buddhism as a view of being (an *ontology*) of religious enlightenment through meditation. This seems the reason why Chinese and Japanese scholars show such an interest in the *Suragama Sutra*. The Chinese scholar Wei-tao compares the *Suragama Sutra* both to Hume's *Essay on Human Understanding* and the *Gospel of John* because it combines intellectual force with religious understanding. *Suragama* itself is a Japanese word used for the Chinese name of the classic, *Shou ling yen*. The author of the *Suragama* is not known, but originally it was written in Sanskrit about the first Century A.D. And is known to the Chinese as Shou-leng-yen Ching. The Hindu Master Paramartha carried this Indian classic to China and translated it with the help of an unknown Chinese scholar living in the city of Canton about A.D. 705. (Although modern occidental scholars place the death of Buddha at 483 B.C., Indian Buddhist tradition places the death at dates ranging from 852 to 252 B.C. So, given the fact that Alexander the Great reached the Indus River in 326 B.C., the possibility exists that some "occidental" influence resulted on Indian thinking as well as some "oriental" influence infiltrated the "Greco-Roman" world of Christianity.) Some fifty-six Chinese commentaries are extant on this *Suragama* alone.

Three characteristics separate Buddhism expressed through the *Suragama Sutra* from that presented through the *Gita* and the *Mahabharata*: first, the *Suragama* does not agree that the end of Buddhist practice is *Nirvana* as a loss of personal identity, a form of self-extinction as does Hinduism. Secondly, the *Suragama* rejects the view that salvation is reserved for a few *Pratyekas* and *Arahatas*, as does Hinduism. Followers of *Suragama* hold out for universal

salvation through a doctrine of the *Bodhisattvas*, beings who reach *Nirvana* and then voluntarily abstain from the cycle of re-births in order to save the world. Only when the world is saved can these *Buddhas* be at peace. Thirdly, paralleling the Protestant Christianity rooted in Luther and Calvin within the occidental world, the *Suragama* teaches that salvation comes through faith alone, not good works; the *Suragama* believe that the one way to salvation is through prayer and devotion, or bhakti, rather than by actions in this changing and mortal world.

The *Dhammapada*, translated by F. Max Muller is a *Pali* Scripture, originally written in Sanskrit and one of the *Mahayana*, or *Great Vehicle* texts. *Dhamma* is the *Pali* form of *Dharma*, a word with no fewer than six (6) meanings. The first meaning is; the *one ultimate reality*. The other five meanings in order are: an *ultimately real event*. This ultimately real event, as reflected in life is: *righteousness, virtue*; as interpreted in *Buddha's* teaching, it is *Doctrine, Scripture* as well as *Truth*; and as an object of the sixth sense-organ, it is the *mind*.

A Buddhist History

As “The Main Dates of Buddhist History” shows, some eleven major Buddhist schools developed between 480 B.C. (Or 80 A.B., After Buddha, the Buddhist time designation) and 1288 A.D.(1760 A.B.) *Hinayana* Buddhism shows the fewest, two new schools, *Sarvastivadin* and *Theravadins*; *Mahayana*, shows the most, nine new schools: *Amidism, Chinese, Madhyomika-Yogacarin, New Wisdom, Sarvastivadin, Tamira, Yogocarin, Yogacarin Logic* and *Zen*. Thus, even from this historical view of major Buddhist schools, it is clear that to speak of Buddhist is to talk about many different beliefs - of course, even before Martin Luther (the so-called Protestant revolt occurring between 1517 and 1648), but certainly after, to speak of Christian is to talk about many different beliefs, not a few of which are contradictory.

This study, however, will limit itself to five original Buddhist teachers, Chung-Kuan Lun Shu (who developed a theory of original non-being), Fa-wen (who developed the theory of mind as non-being), Seng-chao (who developed a theory of the immutability of changing reality), Chi-Tsang (who developed the theory of the emptiness of reality and the transitory nature of names) and T'ien-T'ai (who developed a theory of the perfect harmony of three levels of truth) and the *Dhammapada* as an example of the *Mahayana*, or *Great Vehicle* texts.

Chung-Kuan Lun Shu and Non-being

Chung-Kuan refers to Master Tao-an's explanation of non-being, but from the beginning we must understand that this non-being is a positive reality. An example will aid us to understand the positive meaning of non-being. Consider a table or a chair, or both standing before us. Now, consider the meaning of the word space, both the space external to the table and chair and the space which allows the table and chair to stand as they do. Now, to check the reality of the external space, move the table and the chair next to where they were standing. That unoccupied space allows the chair and table to stand and, yet, continues to exist as space, since when the table and chair move, the occupied space becomes unoccupied space. So, call the space, non-being and the table and chair beings and we realize that non-being, called *yin* allows the being, called *yang* to stand in a place!

Now, Master Tao-an states that original non-being is actually pure being, that is, as undifferentiated, namely, not cut-up or used, like the emptiness in the cup, the emptiness in the soup-spoon), so, its nature is emptiness, the void. Any being is a *dharma*, an element of existence which therefore, in its original nature is empty and void - using the prior example, any *dharma* depends upon the space, the emptiness in order to exist. *Dharma*, however, is a word with no fewer than six (6) meanings. The first meaning is; the one ultimate reality. The other five meanings in order are: an ultimately real event. This ultimately real event, as reflected in life is: righteousness, virtue; as interpreted in *Buddha's* teaching, it is Doctrine, Scripture as well as Truth; and as an object of the sixth sense-organ, it is the mind. So, this is why Chung-Kuan states (p. 339)"...Tao-an's way to realize the original non-being is through the calmness of the mind".

Fa-wen and the Non-being of Mind

Skipping over the second school (that holds the theory of matter as it is is empty), we move to the school of Fa-wen who holds the theory that the mind is non-being. Again, an example will assist our understanding. Consider the mind as a camera loaded with Kodak (or Fugi) film pointed at any number of physical objects visible through the camera's lens' finder. The camera as such is non-being, notwithstanding the various physical objects visible through the camera's lens' finder. However, when we focus the camera's lens' finder on one physical object, then "snap" the picture, the camera's film becomes that physical object. Yet, the camera remains as such non-being, otherwise no other physical object could be "snapped" on another frame of the film. In the same way, Fa-wen considered the

mind alone to be real non-being and the various “knowns” to be various *dharmas*, transitory and un-real.

Seng-chao's Doctrine of Reality

The prior two views of the real are two extreme examples of original Chinese buddhist thinking, at one extreme viewing the real as non-being at the other extreme viewing the mind as non-being, now, for the first time, Seng-chao offers a systematic Buddhist view of the real world, namely, the Three Treatise or the Middle Doctrine School. Seng-chao (384-414 A.D.), born into a poor Chinese peasant family, earned his living by repairing and copying books, so he was well read, taking a special liking to Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, however, his life changed after he read the translation of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa surtra*, literally, *The Scripture Spoken by Vimalakirti*. Seng-chao became convinced that Buddhism was a superior view of the world and he became a monk. Seng-chao believed in the Absolute or Ultimate Emptiness and used the famous Four Points of Argumentation to establish the truth of his view. His use of these four points refute: that there is an idea of being and non-being; that there are ideas of being and non-being; that there is an idea of neither being nor non-being; that there are not ideas of neither being nor non-being. His basic conviction is that only immutability exists. Rest exists in motion and unless stability underlies motion, motion would be impossible. So, to Seng-chao, motion itself is unreal, that is, things only appear to move, but in reality the one thing which exists is that which is immutable. A Greek Philosopher, Heraclitus (c 504 B.C.) seems to have paralleled Seng-chao's thoughts in this regard and may be found in what are called *Heraclitus' Fragments*, specifically, *n. 217: Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow...It scatters and...gathers...it comes together and flows away...approaches and departs*.

Seng-chao states: “It is sad that people have been deluded in their views for such a long time”:

They already know that past things cannot come (to the present) but still maintain that present things can go (pass on). As past things cannot come (to the present), where do present things go? Why? If we look for past things in the past, we find that they are never nonexistent in the past, but if we search for past things in the present, we find that they are never existent there. That they are never existent in the present shows that they never come, and that they are never

nonexistent in the past shows that they do not go away from it. If we turn our attention to investigate the present, we know that the present, too, does not go anywhere. This means that past things by their very nature exist in the past and have not gone there from the present, and present things by their nature exist in the present and have not come here from the past. (p. 346)

Of course, this argument means that both past and present are *dharmas* which are self-produced and, thus, are delusions, not realities. Again, take two examples of personal experience. First, look into a mirror; secondly, return to the camera and Kodak example.

As you look into the mirror, do you see yourself, or, do you see an image of yourself? But, is not the “image” really yourself as projected, but not real? Remove yourself from the mirror and your image also disappears. So, the image is merely an appearance of you as real, but the appearance has no existence of itself, separate from you as real! Thus, you, as the underlying reality is the only reality because the image is only an appearance of that underlying reality. Now, look at a number of pictures of yourself, as newly born, as crawling, as standing, as walking, as having a fifth birthday (oh, yes, I remember that truck; I had so much fun at that party!), as being married, as nursing the first child, as holding the first child, as watching the first child’s high school graduation, as being present to that first child’s marriage, and so forth. Yet, as you look at the pictures, are you present to those past pictures, or are you absent from them, until the past comes into your present looking at them? No, you are present to them, so as past, they do not exist - since you are present to that experience, or, rather, that experience is present to you as you view the “past picture”. Again, therefore, the past is merely an appearance of you as present, but the past has no existence of its own, so the present go into the past, nor does the present come from the past! All that exists is the present to which you are the witness.

What I mean by rest is that, similarly, because things of the past do not reach the present, therefore they may be said to be at rest and have not moved.(p. 346)

Things seem to move but are really at rest, and they seem to go away but really remain. Such things can only be understood by the spirit and cannot be discovered in ordinary facts. (p. 347)

If Seng-chao is correct about the immutability principle, then human language is superfluous, but worse, is irrelevant. Human language, like the picture taken by the camera tries to “fix” the immutable in time so the “snap-shot” has the appearance of reality. Yet, the “snap-shot”, like the word, designating an item within time, or time itself, such as it is “7:15 P.M.” is false - after all, as we reflect upon such “time designations”, we realize that the time specified is arbitrary and relative, relative to a village in England, namely, Greenwich, in the southeast borough of London where the Royal Observatory is located from the meridian of which both geographers and navigators of almost all nations count their longitude. The problem is that other ways exist of computing time, solar time being one, lunar time being another.

The problem with Greenwich time is that people have taken it to be an absolute, but the fact is that it is purely relative. So, Seng-chao is correct, even Greenwich time designations are arbitrary and, therefore, relative. In effect, they exist only because we have made them real as a result of our decision to live by them, not because they are “real”. A specific case in point is the “American work ethic” viewpoint which we live by, namely, “it is lunch time” - when “lunch time” depends upon the shift one works and the business for which one works. This “lunch time” has replaced the natural “biological time”, that is, the body notifying us of “hunger”. Yet, this arbitrary Greenwich mean time, “lunch time” has replaced our biological clock time of hunger. The net result is that Americans are overweight and are out of rhythm with nature’s biological clock. This Greenwich mean time is a world which Americans have created, but one which does not exist in the world of nature. Our language has made this relative world absolute, so when we ask “what time is it”, we are told “it is lunch time” and we then act on the basis of a language which has no correspondence to nature or reality!

Chi-tsang’s Philosophy of Emptiness

Chi-tsang (549-623 A.D.) had a Parthian father and a Chinese mother and became a buddhist at the age of seven, developing into the greatest commentator on Buddhist texts and synthesizer of Chinese Buddhist thought and being the greatest teacher within the *Three-Treatise School*. Chi-tsang roots in the tradition of *Mahayana*, namely, his goal of *emptiness*, however, the unique quality he brings to Buddhism in China is his teaching of the *Two Levels of Truth* and the *Eight fold Negation*. The *Two Levels of Truth* are those of worldly truths enunciated in language and absolute truth holding that all *dharmas* are empty. Chi-tsang states that both are unreal and the true view of truth stands in the middle, that

is, *emptiness* which is both “inexplicable in speech and un-realizable in thought”. So his school is called *Madhyamika*, or the Middle School. The method whereby Chi-tsang arrives at this middle view is called the Eight fold Negation, a dialectical process which denies each of the elements within four statements: that *dharma*s come into existence or go out of existence, that they are permanent or come to an end, that they are the same or different and that they come or go away.

T'ien-t'ai's Philosophy of Perfect Harmony

This school began with Chih-i (538-597 A.D.) who lived and taught at the T'ien-t'ai (Heavenly Terrace) Mountain in Chekiang and takes its name from the mountain where it was located. The central theses of the T'ien-t'ai school come from three common sayings: “the true nature of all *dharma*s (elements of existence)”; “the perfect harmony of the Three Levels of Truth”; and “the three thousand worlds immanent in an instance of thought”. The perfect harmony of the Three Levels of Truth means: that all *dharma*s are empty because they have no nature of their own but depend on causes for their production and is the Truth of Emptiness level; but, *dharma*s are produced and do possess temporary and dependent existence and is the Temporary Truth level; being both empty and temporary is the very nature of *dharma*s and this is the Truth of the Mean level. Consequently, these three are one and this one is three and this mutual identity with this threefold distinction is the true state of real being!

In addition, the world of Temporary Truth, that is, the world in which we live, contains ten realms: 1. Buddhas, 2. Bodhisattvas, those with a strong determination to seek enlightenment and salvation for self and others, 3. buddhas-for-themselves, those who attain to personal enlightenment by their own exertion in an age in which there is no Buddha, 4. direct disciples of the Buddha, those who attain to their own salvation by hearing the Buddha's preaching, 5. heavenly beings, 6. spirits, 7. human beings, 8. departed beings, 9. beasts and 10. depraved men. But, since each of these ten involves the others, there are one hundred realms. Each of these one hundred also possesses the Ten Characters of Thusness: 1. Character; 2. Nature; 3. Substance; 4. Energy; 5. Activity; 6. Cause; 7. Condition; 8. Effect; 9. Retribution; 10. Being ultimate from beginning to end, that is, each is “thus-caused”, “thus-natured” and so forth. Each of these consists of living beings, of space and of aggregates, such as matter, sensation, thought, disposition and consciousness, so the result is three thousand worlds which manifest the totality of reality. But, this is still only one universe in which this one is all and these all are one. These worlds are so inter-related that they are “immanent in a

single instant of thought”, in other words, all these appearances are manifestations of the Mind of Pure Nature and each appearance is the Mind in its totality. This world is a manifestation of Mind and thus results in universal salvation, since all of the ten realms possess *Buddha*-nature.

Dhammapada

Dhammapada might be compared to the *Sermon on the Mount* as the only remnant of the New Testament, as if it were the only extant thing which Christians had from the New Testament. As such, the *Dhammapada* stands as a “handbook” according to which a Buddhist might live his or her life in this world. The name means the path of Dharma, that is, the way of truth, the way of righteousness, the way of the central law that all of life’s happenings are one, the way of perfection to the highest good.

Dharma is a Sanskrit word coming from *dhri*, meaning to bear or to hold the essence of a thing. So, *dharma* expresses a central law of life: that all things and events are part of a unified but invisible whole. To act according to *dharma*, therefore, means to act in harmony with this unity - as the Greeks and Romans would say, to act according to nature. If the Buddhist so acts, then many names may be used to designate his or her actions or even him or her: just, righteous, fair; noble, truthful, loyal, compassionate. Indeed, an ancient Sanskrit saying is: *ahimsa paramo dharma*, paraphrasing, the essence of life’s law is do no harm to any living creature.

Given this Buddhist view of the world and of human actions within this world, two things follow: first, nothing happens by chance within this world; secondly, given this unity, no action any human does can escape the human actor’s responsibility - literally, what goes around will come around. Thus, *karma* is a Sanskrit word, meaning something done, whether as cause of effect, so actions in harmony with *dharma* bring good *karma*, but actions done in violation of *dharma*, bring bad *karma* - again, using the Greek or Roman model, actions performed according to nature are virtuous and self-constructive, but actions performed in violation of nature are vicious and self-destructive. Such a view dispenses with any “external punisher” or “external rewarder”; both punishment and reward are self-administered. Yet, such is not a new view, nor is such a non-New Testament view, since Luke’s portrayal of Christ records him as saying that punishment or reward is self-bestowed:

Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned. Give and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back. (Luke: 6: 36-38).

Then, Matthew's record of the Our Father specifies "...and forgive us our debts as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us..." (Matt. 6:12-13).