

# Introduction

The commentaries on the Buddhist sutras in the list below were written to support classroom work at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC). Since MZMC is a Soto Zen center, the sutras are Mahayana sutras, with one exception (the Satipatthana Sutra). The commentaries are intended to be supplements to the study of the sutras, not stand-alone introductions to the sutras. As supplements they are rather dense and contain notes to stimulate further study. The teachers of the courses in which these supplements are used will provide more general background information. However, a brief overview of the nature of a sutra, the difference between Pali Canon and Mahayana sutras, and very brief introductions to the sutras listed here is provided for individuals not reading the commentaries in a classroom context.<sup>1</sup>

In Buddhism, a sutra is a recorded sermon of the Buddha or one of his foremost disciples. Today they are generally placed in one of two major textual traditions, the Pali Canon (Southeast Asia) or the Mahayana literary tradition (North and East Asia). In the Pali canon the central person is most often Shakyamuni Buddha as a historical person who became enlightened, the discourse takes place within an identifiable place in India, and the sutra is a straightforward narrative on some version of suffering, its causes, and how to put an end to it. Practitioners in the audience are arhats who are striving to become enlightened to put an end to their own suffering.

In the Mahayana tradition the central figure is often a cosmic Buddha, the discourse is mystical, and the assembly is meeting in one or more supernatural universes. Nonetheless, the theme may still be on suffering and its causes and release. Practitioners in the audience include bodhisattvas who are striving to become enlightened, but have taken a vow to bring all sentient beings (if not all things) to enlightenment. The audience may also include demons, snakes, and other non-human beings. The sutras generally include an emphasis on the emptiness of all things and the use of skillful means (*upaya*) to bring others to awakening. As a body of literature, Mahayana sutras do not present a unified teaching and can in places be contradictory, a reflection of its disparate origins.

A few words on the sutras in the list below: The **Heart and Diamond sutras** are part of a large collection of Prajnaparamita sutras whose teaching focuses on emptiness (*sunyata*) and the true nature of reality. In the **Vimalakirti Sutra**, the layman Vimalakirti discusses nonduality in depth with a large number of high-ranking bodhisattvas; he stresses

too that enlightenment is available to anyone, layperson or monastic. The **Platform Sutra of Hui-neng** traces the story of Hui-neng, an illiterate commoner, who eventually receives the robe of dharma transmission; a main emphasis in the sutra is the dispute in China between those who believe that enlightenment is a gradual process (the Northern School) and those who believe it occurs suddenly (the Southern school). In the **Lankavatara Sutra**, in answering questions before a large assembly, the Buddha expounds on the 'mind only' doctrine, which teaches that things, including you and me, have no existence outside the mind.

While the **Satipatthana Sutra** is generally associated with the Pali Canon, it is often studied in Zen classes, for it presents a full description of the process of mindfulness meditation. A collection of smaller sutras, the sumptuous **Avatamsaka (Flower Garland) Sutra** reveals how reality appears to an enlightened person; it emphasizes the interpenetration (inter-existence) of all things and the Absolute in its totality. One of the most venerated Mahayana sutras, the **Lotus Sutra** contains many teachings, such as 'all beings may become Buddhas,' 'all vehicles (paths to enlightenment) are (in actuality) one vehicle,' and 'the importance of faith and devotion'; it also contains many well-known parables like the Burning House, the Prodigal Son, and the Gem in the Jacket. The **Surangama Sutra** stresses the central importance of *samadhi* (one pointedness of the mind) in the realization of enlightenment; it describes 25 gates to the realization of one's true nature. Finally, the **Nirvana Sutra** is a collection of sutras that were delivered by the Buddha the night before his death; the sutras are primarily about the doctrine of Buddha-nature.

A word on reading commentaries on sutras like those in the list below: they are guides to thought about a sutra and reflect the background (social, political, cultural, and historical) of the commentator and the intended audience. They are not nor should they be thought to be the final word on the meaning of a sutra. Their purpose is to encourage critical reflection on that scripture and on what the Buddha taught. So read these commentaries with an open mind.

Enjoy your encounter with the Buddha's teachings, as expressed through these sutras.

1. For book length introductions to the Pali Canon and its contents, see Kate Crosby (2013), *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell) and Diana St. Ruth and Richard St. Ruth (2008), *Theravada Buddhism – Simple Guides* (London: Simple Guides); for Mahayana Buddhism, see Paul Williams (2009), *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge).