

Samdhinirmocana Sutra

Introduction

The *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (Skt., Arya-sandhi-nirmocana-sutra or The Scripture that Explains the Buddha's Teachings, Including Apparent Contradictions in His Early Teachings) is one of the most influential texts in Indian Mahayana Buddhist literature. First and foremost, it provides a more comprehensible and positive approach to progress along the path to enlightenment than Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajnaparamita*) literature, which denied "the validity of any conceptual understanding of doctrine, seeing such conceptual understanding as fabricated (*prapanca*). Their stress was upon the immediacy of wisdom (*prajna*) in emptiness (*sunyata*) and its validation in practice (*paramitas*) rather than analysis."¹ Yogacara masters considered this a too limited view of the Buddha's definitive understanding of emptiness and practice, and of the value of doctrine and analysis, as expressed in this sutra. The sutra addresses all of these concerns by providing a detailed course in Buddhist yoga (meditation), a course that introduces the essentials of Yogacara Buddhism, such as the storehouse consciousness, the doctrine of mind-only, and the three characteristics in which consciousness functions. It also provides an early, if not the earliest, presentation of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma theory.²

This primer provides an overview of the origins and teachings of this seminal sutra. Notes and a bibliography are included for those interested in more fully understanding the sutra and its yogic course that leads to enlightenment.

Origin and Brief History

Like early Mahayana sutras in general, the date of origin of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra remains a subject of debate. The general consensus is that it appears in India in an early form in the first or second century C.E., and that its final form was in existence no earlier than the end of the third century. By the fourth century, significant commentaries on the sutra began to appear. There is debate as well about the process of creation of the sutra, whether as an initial complete text or as a piecing together of initially independent texts.

Though no Sanskrit version of the sutra survives, there were five partial to complete translations into Chinese and one into Tibetan. At least three translations are available in English.³ In addition to these translations, a large number of commentaries on the sutra were written, most notably by Asanga (ca. 320-390) and Vasubhandu (fourth to fifth century) in India, Xuanzang (602-664) in China (in Chinese), Wonch'uk (631-696) in Korea (in Chinese), and Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) in Tibet (in Tibetan).⁴ Jnanagarbha (eighth century) wrote an important commentary on Chapter 8 of the Tibetan translation. Although not well known in America, the sutra has become of increasing interest here in recent years.⁵

The Sutra and the Course It Contains

In his summary of the text, Powers briefly describes the focus of each chapter.⁶ To partially paraphrase his summary for the eight chapter version: Chapter 1 describes the setting of the sutra; Chapter 2 focuses on the ‘ultimate,’ which is crucial for understanding the ontological (the nature of reality) and epistemological (distinguishing justified belief from opinion) assumptions of the sutra; Chapter 3 describes the nature of consciousness, which in turn is the foundation for the presentation of meditation theory and practice in chapters 6 and 7; Chapter 5 indicates how the Buddha’s teachings are to be understood and interpreted (this is crucial in the system outlined in the sutra, since correctly understanding which teachings are of definitive meaning and which are of interpretable meaning is essential for attaining enlightenment); Chapter 8, the final chapter, focuses on the nature of and attributes of Buddhahood and indicates the end result of successfully completing the program of practice outlined in the sutra.

More simply put, chapters 2-5 are about the philosophical (ontological and epistemological) foundations of this view of Buddhism, chapters 6-7 describe meditative practices that follow from these foundations, and Chapter 8 describes the results of these ideas and practices. As Cleary stresses, the sutra is a “remarkably detailed course in the philosophical and pragmatic bases of Buddhist Yoga,” one that is intended, it should be stressed, for very advanced practitioners.⁷

The course progresses in the sutra in dialogues between Gautama Buddha and eight highly developed bodhisattvas (e.g., Maitreya, Avalokitesvara, Manjusri) and Subhuti, a Sravaka (one who seeks to become an arhat rather than a bodhisattva). The intent of their questioning is to learn what the Buddha’s true (definitive) teachings are, which is essential if they are to attain enlightenment. The questioning is also directed at understanding what the Buddha had in mind when he gave earlier contradictory teachings.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 describes the vast celestial palace in which the dialogues take place. It mentions as well the immeasurable number of word-hearers (arhats), great bodhisattvas, devas (gods of the heaven realms), nagas (serpent-like beings), asuras (opponents of the gods), and diverse other kinds of sentient beings from different Buddha Lands that are present. As usual, Chapter 1 begins with the classic, “Thus have I heard.”⁸

Sample questions: When it is said, ‘All phenomena are non-dual, all phenomena are non-dual,’ how is it that all phenomena are non-dual? Why is the compounded neither compounded nor uncompounded? Why is the uncompounded neither uncompounded nor compounded?

Chapter 2: Characteristics of Ultimate Truth

Chapter 2 restates the Perfection of Wisdom doctrine that contrasts ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), which involves no conceptualization, with conventional or relative truth of the phenomenal world that depends on conceptualization.⁹ Characteristics of this conception of absolute truth are: the nonduality of all things; a truth neither created nor uncreated, nor accessible in words, thought, and deliberation; a truth that transcends sameness with and difference from practice, and one that is beyond all representation and controversy; and a truth that is everywhere one. The implication is that all words and ideas are nothing but inventions that cannot authenticate anything real because they are empty of an intrinsic nature. This restatement ends what is presented in Chapter 2.

In reaction early Yogacarins felt that there was a need for explicit doctrine and the verbal discussion of that doctrine, for pedagogically it aids practitioners' journey along the path to enlightenment and is, according to Yogacarins, the true teaching of the Buddha. Their task in the rest of the sutra, then, is to present a discourse that both affirms the emptiness of all things as expressed in the chapter but still preserves a place for explicit doctrine and its verbal discussion.

Sample question: When it is said that all things are nondual, what are all things, and what is nonduality?

Chapter 3: The Nature of Consciousness

Chapter 3 is a short chapter that lays out the classic Yogacara conception of eight consciousnesses, which the sutra uses as a basis of orientation in Buddhist yoga. This conception of eight consciousnesses was a reaction to troubling problems with the Abhidharma scheme of six consciousnesses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and a mode of thinking that relies on language and mental images) that the Abhidharma takes as a model of how the mind constructs the reality we experience.¹⁰ Yogacarins response to these problems was to add a subconscious layer to our mind composed of a seventh and an eighth consciousness. The added seventh consciousness (*manas*) attaches to the base eighth consciousness and assumes it to be an actual self, with the consequences that that assumption is the source of self-centeredness and selfishness, the cause Yogacarins believed of human suffering (*samsara*). It is as well that “aspect of the mind which synthesizes perceptual forms derived from the six modes of perceptual awareness (sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and mental awareness) into conceptual images.”¹¹ The eighth (storehouse or basis) consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*) acts as a receptacle into which the impressions (*bijas*) of experience and karmic actions are stored. “From it the remaining seven consciousnesses arise and produce all present and future modes of experience in *samsara* [suffering]. At the moment of enlightenment (*bodhi*), the *alaya-vijnana* is transformed into the

Mirror-like Awareness or perfect discrimination of a Buddha.”¹² The *alaya-vijnana* and its predispositions are what is transferred from one rebirth to another of a sentient being.

As the sutra states at the end of the chapter, bodhisattvas who thoroughly understand ultimate truth as described in Chapter 2 are said to be “skilled in the secrets of mind, thought, and sense consciousness” because they realize the ‘things’ seen in consciousness are empty of real existence.

Sample question: You speak of enlightening beings that are versed in the mysteries of mind, intellect, and consciousness. What does this refer to, and how is such an enlightening being defined?

Chapter 4: The Three Characteristics of All Phenomena

The focus of Chapter 4 is the three characteristics (*tri-svabhāva*) in which consciousness functions, a key Yogacara theory first mentioned in this sutra. The concept is important for it explains the relationship between enlightenment and everyday experience, a relationship absent in the Madhyamaka theory of the Two Truths. The first characteristic, called the constructed or conceptualized characteristic (*parikalpita*), is the realm of words and the falsifying activity of language that attributes intrinsic existence to things (*dharmas*). This is the world of the everyday unenlightened, but a false view, according to the sutra, for phenomena (‘things’) exist only in the mind (are mind-only). The second characteristic, called the dependent characteristic (*paratantra*), is the flow of perceptions or experiences out of which the conceptualized things of the first characteristic are erroneously formed. In contrast to the conceptualized characteristic, the dependent characteristic does exist, for, the sutra maintains, something must exist, otherwise there would only be nonexistence.

The third characteristic, called the perfected characteristic (*parinispāna*), is, again according to the sutra, the ‘Suchness’ or true nature of things. Through meditation we come to realize that there is only a flow of experiences, and that there is neither subject nor object as perceived by the unenlightened. The flow *is* empty of the erroneously partitioned objects of the first characteristic. All that exists is the flow. In understanding this we make progress along the path. Furthermore, it is in this view that, because of the presence of the dependent characteristic, emptiness can be seen both correctly and as an antidote to the nihilism often associated with Perfection of Wisdom interpretations of emptiness.¹³

Sample question: You speak of an enlightening being familiar with the characteristics of phenomena. To what does this refer, and how is such an enlightening being defined?

Chapter 5: The Teachings as Illuminated by a Definitive Understanding

Chapter 5 begins by defining emptiness in three ways: as the emptiness of characteristics (Chapter 4), of birth (which refers to the emptiness of the dependent characteristic of phenomena discussed in Chapter 3), and of emptiness itself (which refers to the emptiness of all things, which is the ultimate truth of Chapter 2). The sutra emphasizes that these realizations are also essential for progress along the path. It closes with a description of the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma, which is intended to explain apparent discrepancies in the Buddha's earlier teachings. The first turning occurred in the Buddha's first sermon, which focused on the four noble truths. It was given to arhats (Sravaka) for their benefit, but it was not the Buddha's complete thought. The second turning was given to a specific group of Mahayanists. It taught that all phenomena are empty, but it too does not fully explain the Buddha's definitive teaching of emptiness. The third turning is the teaching in this sutra, which emphasizes both emptiness and existence. The sutra stresses that this is the Buddha's final thought and is intended for all trainees, not for a specific group with particular needs.¹⁴

Sample question: What is the inner intent based on which you say all things have no essence, no origin or extinction, that they are fundamentally quiescent and inherently nirvanic? Please be so compassionate as to explain the hidden meaning of this.

Chapter 6: A Program of Meditation

According to Cleary, Chapter 6 "consists of an extraordinary detailed discussion of the principles and practices of Buddhist yogic meditation. The procedures, problems, resolutions, and results of meditation are analyzed with great precision in this section [chapter], enabling the practitioner to avoid the pitfalls and hazards of ignorant and misguided concentration."¹⁵ Practitioners are taught in the chapter how to develop the two main bases of Buddhist meditation, samatha (also spelled shamatha) and vipassana meditation. "Samatha is the ability, developed through concentrated meditation practice, to focus one's mind on an object without distraction. This is essential for more advanced meditation practice, since it prevents the afflictions from arising. Vipassana involves analyzing the object to determine its true nature. This practice recalls the teachings on ultimate truth in [Chapter 2], since the true nature of phenomena is the ultimate, which is equated with suchness and emptiness. Through developing vipassana, one eradicates the basis of the afflictions and is able to perceive the ultimate directly. Here the Buddha teaches [once again] that the images of people and things that we observe are 'cognitive-only' [mind-only]."¹⁶ The intent of the chapter is to inform people in detail how to practice the true forms of meditation and to stress that the use of these forms is necessary if one's aim is to attain enlightenment.

Sample questions: Based on what, abiding in what, do enlightening beings practice tranquility (samatha meditation) and observation (vipassana meditation) in the great vehicle? Should the path of tranquility and the path of observation be said to be different, or to have no

difference? How many kinds of tranquility are there? How many kinds of observations are there? How do enlightening beings cultivate practice based on tranquility and observation so as to realize supreme perfect enlightenment?

Chapter 7: A Path to Enlightenment

Chapter 7 discusses methods for mastering the mental afflictions and obstacles that undermine progress on the path. It delineates “the ten Bodhisattva stages, the levels through which Mahayana practitioners progress. Each stage represents a decisive advance in understanding and spiritual attainment of compassion. The main meditative practice is the six perfections – generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom – the essence of the Bodhisattva’s training.”¹⁷

Sample questions: The Buddha speaks of ten stages of enlightening beings ... (and) You also speak of Buddhahood, making eleven stages. How many kinds of purity, in how many portions, are these stages contained in? How many things should enlightening beings learn? How many different kinds of each of the six transcendent ways are there?

Chapter 8: The Nature of a Buddha

“The final chapter of the sutra’s course on Buddhist Yoga ... presents a typically detailed analysis of the qualities, capacities, and domains of operation that characterize a Buddha, or a fully enlightened mind. Here the critical distinction is drawn between liberation and enlightenment, the latter referring to the total sublimation and completion of the individual. The completion is made possible by liberation, but liberation alone does not of itself bring completion. Thus the scripture concludes the course with an intensive recapitulation of the sphere of knowledge and action of the enlightened.”¹⁸

Sample questions: You speak of the reality body of the enlightened who have arrived at Thusness. What are the characteristics of the reality body? How should we know the characteristics of the origination of the enlightened? How many aspects of the specific prohibitions for enlightening beings are there?

And thus ends the sutra that initiated the third turning of the wheel of the dharma and that (according to the sutra) explains in detail the definitive teachings of the Buddha.

Notes

1. Keenan (1995: 1). The word *prapanca* in the quotation refers in Yogacara thought to the “false dualistic concepts that involve the erroneous division into perceiving subject and perceived object” (Keown 2003: 220). The sutra is romanticized in English as either Sandhinirmocana Sutra with an ‘n’ or Samdhinirmocana Sutra with an ‘m.’ The word ‘*Arya*’ means noble or excellent in Sanskrit. The title has been translated as ‘Scripture Unlocking the Mysteries’ (Cleary), ‘The Scripture on the

Explication of Underlying Meaning’ (Keenan), and ‘Elucidation of the Intention’ (Keown, 2003: 251; also see Powers 1992b, 2004). For a commentary on the translation of the title of the sutra, see Powers (1992b, 1993: 28-40). Note: the author of this primer has taken liberties in rewriting titles in the sutra to make them more understandable for MZMC readers.

2. For brief introductions to Yogacara Buddhism, the prajnaparamita literature, and the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma, see the primer section of the Resources column on the MZMC Web site (the Prajnaparamita literature is discussed in the Madhyamaka primer). For a more extended scholarly overview of the Prajnaparamita literature, Madhyamaka, and Yogacara, see Williams (2009: 45-102). Yogacara was the second of the two main philosophical traditions in Indian Mahayana Buddhism (the first being Madhyamaka). In Buddhism, a definitive statement or understanding is one that does not need interpretation and is the Buddha’s true teaching (see below).
3. Cleary (2005 [1995]), Powers (1995), and Keenan (2000). These three translations were used in developing this primer. Powers’ translation is of the Tibetan text, which has ten chapters of unequal length. The translations by Cleary and Keenan are from Chinese texts and have eight chapters, also of unequal length. The eight-chapter version is used to structure the overview in this primer. The subject of the chapters in the two versions are the same, except Chapter 2 in the Chinese text has been expanded into three chapters (2-4) in the ten chapter Tibetan text (thus Chapter 3 in the Chinese version covers the same material as Chapter 5 in the Tibetan version, and so on). Powers’ translation runs to roughly 300 pages, Keenan’s to 100 pages, and Cleary’s to 85 pages, which indicates that some versions contain more detail than others. Also see the review of the sutra in Wikipedia (Anon. in the bibliography).
4. Two influential commentaries are attributed to Asanga, the Compendium of Ascertainments (Viniscaya-samgrahani) and the Commentary on the Superior Sutra Samdhinirmocana (Arya-samdhinirmocana-bhasya) (see Powers (1992a, 1993: 15-22). Tsongkhapa’s commentary is titled ‘Essence of Good Explanations.’ Asanga, the older brother of Vasubhandu, is usually credited with founding the Yogacara school.
5. For example, Anderson (2012).
6. Powers (1993: 10).
7. Although most often considered a philosophical text in the West today, Cleary (2005: 749) considers the sutra “a complete classical sourcebook of Buddhist Yoga,” one that “provides a remarkably detailed course in the philosophical and pragmatic bases of Buddhist Yoga,” including “the subtle metaphysics and refined methods of spiritual development.” He goes on to say, “This is a text that is meant to be read and reread many times as essential preparation by those who are thinking of undertaking meditation exercises of any sort. This procedure was the classical way” Thus the title of his translation, *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course*. Here the word yoga should be understood as a form of meditative practice.
8. Cleary (2005: 749) stresses that, “As in the case of all universalist Buddhist scriptures, the introduction to this text is an important part of the work, making preliminary presentation of key principles and practices in a highly concentrated setting, partly symbolic and partly literal.” The differences in attainment between the Buddha, the great bodhisattvas, and the word-hearers (arhats) are represented by the attainments each is described as having achieved. Likewise, the description of the Buddha’s dwelling place (e.g., seven gems, emitting a great light, limitless regions) provides a glimpse into the transcendent realm of Buddhas. The grandeur of its setting and the presence of high-ranking Bodhisattvas are two of the many ways in which the sutra attempts to establish its authority as a definitive text.
9. Keown (2003: 212). This is the two truths doctrine of Mahayana philosophy, relative truth and absolute truth. See Powers (1993: 41-77) for an informative commentary on this chapter.
10. See page 2 of the Yogacara primer for a list of some of the more perplexing of these problems.
11. Keown (2003: 171).
12. Keown (2003: 9).
13. For a short definition of the tri-svabhāva theory, see Keown (2003: 310). The theory is more generally called the three natures theory.
14. For two useful commentaries on Chapter 5, see Powers (1993: 78-137). The commentaries are titled ‘Hermeneutics and Tradition’ and “‘The Three Wheels of Doctrine.’”
15. Cleary (2005: 751).
16. Powers (1995: xix).
17. Powers (1995: xix). Cleary (2005: 751-52) suggests that this chapter “should be read in conjunction with the *Ten Stages* in the comprehensive Buddhist sutra known as *The Flower Ornament*

Scripture [Avatamsaka Sutra], for an in-depth perspective on the transcendent ways and the stages in which they are practiced.”

18. Cleary (2005: 752). As Powers (1995: xx) comments, in the chapter “the aspiring Bodhisattva is again reminded that pursuing the ultimate goal of the path of yoga practice begins and ends with a proper understanding of the nature of the ultimate.”

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