

The Lankavatara Sutra

Introduction

The *Lankavatara Sutra* (“Sutra on the Descent to Lanka”) is an unsystematic and partial overview of the One Path teaching of Mahayana Buddhism. Its purpose is to lead advanced bodhisattvas to final self-realization, that is, to be a tathagata (see below). It recounts a visit the Buddha is said to have made to the island of Lanka, where he explained the Dharma to Sagara, a Serpent King, and later at the invitation of Rāvana, the king of the island of Lanka, to a vast assembly of advanced monks and bodhisattvas.¹ The *Lanka* is a sacred text of Yogacara Buddhism and a key sutra in the development of Buddhist thought in China, Tibet, and Japan, especially in early Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Bodhidharma, the legendary first patriarch of Chan in China, was considered a master of the sutra to such an extent that early Chan was referred to as the Lankavatara or Lanka School.² According to legend, he gave the sutra to his most advanced student and successor, Hui-k’o, saying that everything he needed to know about the Dharma was in the sutra.

This primer summarizes the history and development of the sutra, its storyline and main teachings, and practices that follow from these teachings.

History and Development

The origins of the *Lanka* are uncertain, but it may have been composed in India in Sanskrit in the late fourth century C.E., though it first appears in historical retrospect in China in the early fifth century C.E.³ Dharmakṣema (385-433), an Indian monk, first translated the sutra into Chinese in China in the early fifth century, though his text is no longer extant. Gunabhadra (in 443), Bodhiruci (in 513), and Shikshananda (in 704) made later translations of the *Lanka* into Chinese that are extant.⁴ The various lengths of the translations indicate that the translators were working from different Sanskrit versions, a sign perhaps of the flexibility of the content of the sutra at the time. The most common format today has nine chapters of prose mixed with verse and a last chapter in verse. Scholars suggest that the introductory chapter and last two chapters were added later. Commentaries on the sutra were written during this period in China, too, but few survive. Several translations were later made into Tibetan and then other languages, such as English.

Although the sutra presents a comprehensive review of the teachings of Chan, the *Diamond Sutra* replaced it in the middle of the seventh century as a primary Chan text. A reason given is that the *Lanka* is an incredibly difficult text to understand without a teacher, so a more palatable text was sought as the first Chan monasteries with large numbers of students with different levels of understanding formed. The fourth patriarch, Tao-shin (580-651), was said to have had over 500 disciples and the fifth patriarch, Hung-jen (601-674), more than a thousand. The transition in teaching emphasis is symbolized in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* in the legendary verse competition between the eventual sixth patriarch Hui-neng (638-713), a *Diamond Sutra* supporter, and Shen-hsui (605-706), a supporter of the continued use of the *Lanka*.⁵

The Storyline

In the sutra's introductory chapter, the Buddha has just emerged from teaching the Dharma to a serpent king, Sagara, in his watery kingdom near the island of Lanka when Rāvana invites him to give similar instruction in his own island capitol. The Buddha agrees and begins to instruct the king on the Dharma. The king then asks Mahamati ("Great Wisdom"), an eloquent speaker and advanced bodhisattva, to ask the Buddha questions about his beliefs, which Mahamati does for an extended section of the sutra. In answering Mahamati's questions in a dialogue structured by the Buddha himself, the Buddha reviews the conceptual categories of Mahayana Buddhism as well as those of other paths for comparison. The conversation continues in this manner, mainly in prose, for over 200 pages in Red Pine's text. In interpretive perspective, the answers provide a comprehensive overview of a version of mind-only Yogacara Buddhism and the core Zen teaching that words alone are not adequate for the transmission of the Dharma.

Readers will search in vain for apparent pattern in the order of questions asked and for a complete explanation of the Buddha's teachings. According to Suzuki, "the whole *Lankavatara* is just a collection of notes unsystematically strung together, and, frankly speaking, it is a useless task to attempt to divide them into sections, or chapters, under some specific titles."⁶ An alternative reading of the sutra's scattered teachings (and perhaps of what Suzuki was ultimately referring to) is that a systematic and full account of the Dharma in words and thoughts is to be purposely avoided, which the *Lanka* sets out to do. To do so will most likely entrap readers in a reliance on doctrinal teachings in word and thought form, a trap the sutra repeatedly warns against. The task in practice is to place one's mind on awareness itself and forget words and thoughts, which is zazen. In the text this process of disassembling words and thoughts is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the Buddha's continued use of contradictions.⁷ In Suzuki's words, "The one most important thing that students of Buddhism have to realize at the very outset of their study is that Buddhism is not a system of philosophy, has nothing to do with speculations as such, has no intention to present a logically-coherent formula of thought. What the Buddhist teaching professes to do is to get us truthfully (*yathā-bhūtam*) acquainted with the ultimate facts of existence."⁸

The following two sections provide a sampling of the teachings in the *Lanka* and the practices they suggest.

Key Teachings

Teachings within the *Lanka* cover a wide range of Mahayana concepts cast within a Yogacara ("mind-only") and tathagata-garbha (buddha-nature) context. Throughout the stress is on attaining the inner enlightenment that thoroughly understands the illusory nature of all duality and distinctions. The many teachings include: the major teachings that a bodhisattva is expected to be conversant with, the nature of the purification of the mind, the bodhisattva path and its ten stages, the meaning of emptiness, the teaching method of a buddha, the nature of consciousness, the nature of the path to liberation, the difference between nirvana and enlightenment, the cultivation of buddha knowledge, the three bodies of the buddha, what mind-only means, the two kinds of no-self, what bodhisattvas are to teach others, the nature of causation, the three means of knowledge, the two modes of reality, the meaning of silence when teaching, the use of skillful means, the nature of the ten delusions, the use of words and phrases, the One Path teaching, and the goals of practice. This section expands on ten of these teachings.

The **One Path** is the path that points directly to the mind, which is the hallmark of Chan (Zen).⁹

The **Mind-Only Doctrine** of Yogacara Buddhism teaches that the world and its contents are but manifestations of the mind or more exactly only mind. If a correct doctrine, it changes our perception of the dharmas, which include all things we think are real, whether tangible, intangible, or imaginary, and our everyday common sense duality of observer and observed. They are all nothing but manifestations of the mind or only mind, and a source of ignorance.¹⁰ According to the sutra: “our mind is the world and the world is our mind. If the world were a manifestation of the mind, they would be different. But they are neither one nor different.” Nonetheless, the sutra uses the word ‘manifestation’ (projection) to facilitate the teaching. Liberation consists of becoming aware that the world and our mind are “neither one nor different.”¹¹ As in Zen, the sutra points directly at the mind, for mind itself is the only reality. The *Lanka* describes as well the eight layers of consciousness that consist of six sense consciousnesses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and conceptual consciousness) and two sub-conscious consciousnesses (a *manas* and a repository). The eighth or repository consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*) acts like a receptacle into which the latent karmic energy of past and present habitual tendencies or ingrained dispositions (*bijas*) are deposited into, stored, and at times reactivated.

The Tathagata-garbha Doctrine. The concept of tathagata-garbha (buddha-nature) is a key Mahayana doctrine that holds that all sentient beings, as soiled as they may be, contain the potential to become a Buddha within them, though in a hidden, non-manifest form. In this form it represents the germ of liberation that we all innately have. While tathagata-garbha is said for expedient reasons to be a real essence that is eternal and immutable, it is at base equivalent to emptiness and the nature of the mind itself.

The Three Bodies of the Buddha (Trikaaya) Doctrine. This doctrine proposes that the Buddha like all Buddhas exists in three forms. In his true nature, known as the Truth Body (*dharma-kaya*), he is the eternal essence of the universe, which is equivalent in Buddhist lore to ultimate truth or absolute reality. When teaching the Dharma he takes on one of two forms appropriate to his audience. In his Enjoyment Body (*sambhoga-kaya*), he manifests in a sublime celestial form in which he teaches vast numbers of Bodhisattvas and supernatural beings in settings of exquisite splendor in multiple buddhalands. When he teaches human beings, he manifests himself as his Emanation or earthly Body (*nirmana-kaya*) in order to not frighten his audience. In contrast, in Theravada Buddhism the Buddha is regarded as a human being, though remarkable in his achievements.

The Non-Self (Anatman) Doctrine. According to this doctrine, neither sentient beings nor objects have an independent self-nature, for they are but manifestations of the mind or mind itself. Clinging to the concept of an ego is considered the cause of all suffering and a belief that must be overcome.

The Use of Words and Letters in Teaching the Dharma. A distinguishing stress in Zen is the uselessness of the intellectual analysis of sutras alone for the attainment of liberation, for the transmission of the Dharma between master and student ultimately takes place outside words and letters. The rationale is that words themselves cannot exhaust meaning inherent in truth. Nonetheless, the use of words and letters plays an essential role in rudimentary phases of the teaching. Once they have fulfilled their purpose, they are put aside.

The Emptiness (Sunyata) Doctrine. In a Yogacara context, emptiness is the realization of the non-existence of observer and observed. The concept recognizes that all composite things are devoid of a self-nature or independent substance (*svabhava*). They are nothing more than appearances in the mind.

The No-Birth View of Existence (Anatpāda). If human beings, like dogs and cats, are just projections of Mind or only mind, it makes no sense to talk about their birth and death as if they were physical beings. As expressed in the sutra, “O Mahamati, it is taught by the Tathagatas of the past, future, and present that all things are unborn. Why? All things are unborn because they are the manifestations of our own mind and have no reality of their own.”¹² While birth and death are well-known features of the relative, discriminative world, they do not exist in the absolute world, a realm beyond the senses that is supreme wisdom (*āryajnāna*).¹³

The Nature of a Tathagata. Since the nature of the Buddha as the Tathagata is stressed throughout the *Lanka*, practitioners should have some understanding of what is emphasized by this title for the Buddha. Rather than using words like I, me, or myself, the Buddha often refers to himself as the Tathagata (“One who has the nature of thusness in his comings and goings”). While the Tathagata has attained enlightenment (Bodhi) and awakened to the nature of reality, he importantly also has the will and compassion to liberate all beings by leading them to the direct experience of reality. This attitude separates the Tathagata from arhats and other practitioners who focus on liberation for themselves. He does this in part by taking different forms so as to be able to teach a wide variety of beings most effectively, as mentioned above. While he is known by many names in these diverse settings, there is only one Tathagata – or so it is said as an expedient means in teaching. According to Suzuki, when we have mastered this phase of Buddhist teaching, “we have mastered more than half of its secrets.”¹⁴

The Lanka’s Influence on Diet in China. The *Lanka* also influenced the attitude of the Chinese toward the eating of meat. Among the many reasons offered in the sutra for why one should not eat meat are: as humans go through cycles of transmigration, a close relative, such as one’s deceased mother, could have been reborn in an animal form, so eating meat could mean eating one’s mother; since the essence of bodhisattvaship is great compassion for all sentient beings, a bodhisattva should not eat the flesh of another sentient being; the eating of meat causes terror among animals, so people will turn away from a teacher who contributes to the terrorization of animals by eating meat; since animal flesh is considered filled with pollutants, a person on the spiritual path should not eat meat to avoid possible contagion; likewise, meat-eating not only pollutes a meat-eater, but their descendants. The proper food for a bodhisattva is rice, barley, wheat, all kinds of beans, clarified butter, oil, honey, molasses, and sugar prepared in proscribed ways. The Buddha in his dharmakaya body is said to be fed by the food of truth (*dharmāhāra*).

Practice

Since the *Lanka* was pivotal in the development of early Zen, its emphasis on the all-importance of putting the teachings into practice “beyond words and letters” to acquire final self-realization is not unexpected. According to Suzuki, “this side of the sutra [the mind-only teaching] is incidental, its chief theme being the doctrine of self-realisation. Whatever psychology, or logic, or metaphysics it may contain, is to prove the main doctrine.”¹⁵ Red Pine presents the same idea using the Zen metaphor of the difference between a cup of tea (the teachings) and tasting the tea

(the practice).¹⁶ It is not sufficient to have the cup of tea in your hand, you must taste the tea. It is useful to think of the elements that makeup the cup itself as the myriad concepts of Mahayana Buddhism, many of which are mentioned above. If the elements that make up the cup do not congeal smoothly into the form of a useable cup, the jumble of elements will not hold tea. Of course, most practitioners find that understanding this myriad of concepts in depth without the guidance of a master is extremely difficult. For the less accomplished, their “cup” might never hold tea, at least in their present lifetime.

As bodhisattvas advance in their training they find that tasting the tea is more difficult than molding the cup. In the *Lanka* tea comes in ten different graded flavors that become increasingly difficult to discern as one moves from the first to the tenth flavor. These are the ten stages (*bhūmis*) of the bodhisattva path. From first to tenth, the stages are: (1) Perfect Joy (*pramudita-bhumi*), the initial stage in which a Bodhisattva embarks on the path toward enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) and has their first perception of the truth of reality (emptiness); (2) the Stainless (*vimala-bhumi*) in which one becomes free of all defilements (3) the Luminous (*prabhakari-bhumi*) in which one strengthens and deepens their insight and patience through meditation; (4) the Radiant Intellect (*arcismati-bhumi*), during which all good qualities are pursued and laziness eradicated; (5) the Hard to Conquer (*sudurjaya-bhumi*) is an arduous stage in which a bodhisattva devotes himself to his own development and to the welfare of others; (6) Facing Forward (*abhimukhi-bhumi*) in which great wisdom is attained and insight into the true nature of all phenomena is gained; (7) Going far (*duramgama-bhumi*), during which one gains the power of skillful means (*upaya-kausalya*) and there is nothing but mind; (8) Immovable (*acala-bhumi*), during which it is no longer possible to fall back and one is free of projections; (9) the Good (*sadhupati-bhumi*) is the stage in which a bodhisattva begins to preach the doctrine and convert other beings; (10) Cloud of the Dharma (*dharmamegha-bhumi*) or tathagata stage of self-realization, during which a bodhisattva reaches full perfection and becomes a fully enlightened Buddha.¹⁷ Each stage has its own practice and is a different strength of tea whose flavor may take ever increasing numbers of years (if not kalpas) to fully discern. Thus Bodhidharma’s nine years facing the wall.¹⁸

So in the middle of the seventh century in came the more easily understandable *Diamond Sutra* as the number of practitioners rose from one (Hui-k’o) to hundreds and thousands. It seems just possible, however, that when a master met with his most advanced students, he handed him or her a copy of the *Lanka* saying, “all that you need to know now about the Dharma is in this sutra.”

Notes

1. For translations of the *Lanka* into English with commentary, see Suzuki (1930, 1932, 1934) and Red Pine (2012). *Lanka* is popularly thought to be Sri Lanka, though it could refer to an imaginary island south of India (Suzuki 1930:3). Red Pine (2012:282) identifies it with Sri Lanka.
2. As recorded in *Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Lankavatara Sutra*, an early history of the school.
3. See Lindtner (1992) for its context in India. Since the Buddha stressed that the Dharma should be taught in local languages, it is possible that the *Lanka* like other sutras was only later translated into Sanskrit both to legitimize it and to record it in a more universally understood written language.

4. Red Pine (2012:5-13). Those in power in China financed sutra translations in order to acquire their presumed capacities for magic and prophecy, for these capacities were thought to have political and military uses (Red Pine 2012:6).
5. See the primers on the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Platform Sutra* in this series.
6. Suzuki (1930:17). On p. 41 of the same book Suzuki refers to “the irrationality of the *Lankavatara*.”
7. As Red Pine (2012:110) phrases it in his commentary on the tathagata-garbha doctrine, “The Buddha varies his description of the tathagata-garbha depending on the attachment of his audience. For those attached to existence, the tathagata-garbha is empty, formless, or intentionless. For those attached to nonexistence, the tathagata-garbha is the realm of reality, the dharma nature, or the dharma body. For those attached to existence and nonexistence, it is nirvana, the absence of self-existence, or what neither arises nor ceases. And for those attached to neither existence nor nonexistence, it is original quiescence or intrinsic nirvana.” At base, “There is no seer or anything seen/ no speaker or anything spoken/ the appearance of buddhas and also their teachings/ are merely what we imagine” (Red Pine 2012:29).
8. Suzuki (1930:14).
9. For the One Path teaching, see Red Pine (2012:160-165). But as the Buddha says, “Sometimes I teach three paths/sometimes one and sometimes none/ for fools and those of little wisdom/ and the wise who dwell apart [the pratyeka-buddha]” (Red Pine, 2012:97).
10. See the *Yogacara Buddhism* primer in this series for detail. The appearance of the Yogacara doctrine was considered a third turning of the wheel of the Dharma by its adherents.
11. Red Pine (2012:182).
12. For “being unborn” (*anutpannah sarvabhavah*), see Suzuki (1930:122-127).
13. This is an expression of the two levels of truth or reality (*satya-dvaya*) doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, a doctrine more clearly developed in later writings. The truth of the two-levels is realized through meditative intuition, not through intellectual analysis. It should be noted in passing that the doctrines no-birth, emptiness, non-duality, and no-self are merely different aspects of the same thing.
14. Suzuki (1930:340). For Suzuki’s overview of the nature of a tathagata, see (1930:339-386).
15. Suzuki (1930:89).
16. Red Pine (2012:14).
17. The ten stages are described in detail in the *Dasabhumika Sutra*. Since the *Lanka* is a sutra for advanced Bodhisattvas, only the last three stages are discussed in any detail.
18. The expression “nine years facing the wall” seems more likely a metaphor for the intense effort required on the Bodhisattva path, not to someone actually sitting in a cave facing a wall for nine years. So sit unflaggingly on your cushion in the meditation hall (*zendo*) with full attention on awareness.

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