
**The Great Vehicle**

There is a collection of stories in the *Sūtra Pitaka* of the Pali scripture about twenty-four Buddhas who lived before Gautama Buddha. The collection entitled *Buddhavamsa* begins with Śāriputra asking Gautama Buddha when it was that he first resolved to become the Buddha and what were the virtues of perfection he achieved to attain this goal. The Buddha then relates how eons ago he was a hermit named Sumedha. One day, he heard that there was a Buddha named Dipankara teaching in a nearby town. He went to that town and saw Dipankara Buddha approaching him at the head of a long procession of monks. Sumedha was moved to deep reverence for Dipankara. He realized that while he could follow this Buddha and become an arhat, he could benefit the world more by becoming a Buddha. In that moment, he made a vow to become a Buddha in a future life.

When he did so, Sumedha noticed that Dipankara Buddha and the Saṅgha following him were approaching a patch of mud. So he lay flat on the mud and invited them to walk over him. Dipankara read Sumedha’s mind and understood that he had vowed to become a Buddha. Dipankara then predicted that Sumedha would one day attain his goal. Sumedha returned to his hermitage to reflect on how he could achieve Buddhahood. Over time, he came to understand that he would need to perfect ten virtues to achieve this goal. The Pali text lists these ten virtues, later referred to as the Ten Perfections in early Buddhism: generosity (*dāna*), moral virtue (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*pañña*), energy (*vīriya*), patience (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), determination (*adhisthāna*), loving kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Gautama Buddha concludes this story by relating to Śāriputra how he perfected these virtues life after life until his full Awakening in his present life. Here and elsewhere, Gautama refers to himself during his previous lives when he pursued the perfection of the ten virtues as being a "bodhisattva." This title here means "a being who is to become Awakened"; and the Ten Perfections became associated with the life of a bodhisattva.
This story expressed an alternative to the path to Arhatship and Nirvana, namely, what would become known as the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood. Indeed, the early schools of Buddhism that we introduced in the previous chapter all recognized this Bodhisattva Path, but taught that it is a heroic path for only a very few. It is best, they argued, to follow the shorter path leading to Nirvana than the more arduous path over eons of time leading to Buddhahood. However, some Buddhist monastics did eventually resolve to follow the Bodhisattva Path. There is very little we know for certain about how, when, and where this happened. But we do know that at some time before the first century B.C.E. there were monastics in traditional monasteries of the early Buddhist tradition who took up the bodhisattva practice of the perfection of virtues alongside their fellow monastics who preferred the original path leading to Nirvana. Scholars note that during the early growth of Buddhism, the literature began to exalt the status of the Buddha, and the worship of stūpas and later of images of the Buddha became more and more popular.

By the first century B.C.E., the experience of this bodhisattva practice was expressed in a new literature. New sūtras began to appear that claimed to be discourses of Gautama Buddha that presented the wisdom and the practice of the Bodhisattva Path. These sūtras taught that the Bodhisattva Path is superior to that of original Buddhism because it leads to a greater attainment, namely, full Buddhahood. The qualities gained in the process of further growth beyond Arhatship could be used to benefit all living beings in ways not possible for an arhat. The Bodhisattva Path was therefore referred to as the Mahāyāna, meaning “Great Vehicle,” “Great Course,” or “Great Journey.” Followers of Mahāyāna also referred to the earlier forms of Buddhism as Hinayāna, or “Lesser Vehicle,” as they do not lead all the way to full Buddhahood. This term carries a negative connotation. In fact, by 200 C.E., there was a split between Mahāyāna and the early forms of Buddhism.

The Mahāyāna sūtras were presented as teachings of Gautama Buddha, even though they were unknown from the beginning of Buddhism. One reason given for this historical fact was that the teachings in the new sūtras were deeper and more demanding than those originally taught by the Buddha. The Buddha knew that the long and arduous Bodhisattva Path would have attracted only a few followers into the Saṅgha. So he publically presented only the easier Path to Arhatship. He privately taught the Bodhisattva Path to a few followers to be passed on until the Saṅgha was ready for them to be made public. It was also claimed that the sūtras were taught to and preserved by certain spirits until the time was right. Others claimed that although the Buddha taught the sūtras, they were only “heard” by persons in their dreams when the world was ready for them.

In any case, the task for early Mahāyāna was to define their Great Vehicle from the new ideas presented in their sūtras. They considered this task as the “second turning of the wheel of the Dharma.” While the different sūtras contribute a variety of teachings, there are some fundamental ideas that have become associated with Mahāyāna. Here, we mention four that are discussed in some detail in this and in the next chapter.
THE BODHISATTVA

The first characteristic notion found in developed Mahāyāna is the view that a Buddha, rather than an arhat, is the person who can be of most help to people who are suffering and in need of liberation. To achieve this condition of Buddhahood, one needs to follow the Bodhisattva Path. This bodhisattva life begins with what is called the “arising of the thought of Awakening,” or bodhicitta. This bodhicitta is really the altruistic desire, or heartfelt aspiration, to attain Buddhahood so that one can help others gain freedom from suffering. What this means concretely is that one aspires to follow the Bodhisattva Path, or the “Great Journey,” rather than the path leading to Arhatship. In fact, Mahāyāna was called the Bodhisattvayāna, or “Bodhisattva Vehicle” bringing one to Buddhahood, in distinction from the Śrāvakayāna, or “Disciple Vehicle” bringing one to Arhatship. Early Mahāyāna taught Six Perfections that advance this bodhisattva journey to Buddhahood. Later Mahāyāna introduced Ten Stages on the Bodhisattva Path and added four other perfections so that each stage has a particular perfection associated with it. These Ten Perfections vary somewhat from those of the earlier traditions mentioned above. We introduce this path in some detail later in this chapter.

WISDOM AND EMPTINESS

A second characteristic of Mahāyāna teaching is the notion of a “higher wisdom” (prajñāpāramitā) realizing “emptiness” (śūnyatā). This notion has to do with the awakened experience of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. For Mahāyāna, what one experiences with awakened consciousness is that all the “factors of existence” (dharmas), which we have seen were so carefully analyzed in the Abhidharma Pīṭaka, are “empty” (śūnya) of existing independently, or “on their own.” In the language of Mahāyāna, all aspects of existence are “svabhava-śūnya,” that is, “empty of own-being.” This means that nothing can exist on its own. In other words, all things in the world, the elementary factors of life and the particular beings that these factors constitute, are seen by a higher wisdom to have this fundamental characteristic of emptiness.

The term śūnya, which we translate as “empty,” can mean in Sanskrit “hollow,” as in something that looks solid but is in fact hollow inside. Thus, “empty of own-being” means that although things seem to ordinary experience as if they are independent entities, deeper insight shows that they are really empty, or hollow, of that independence. This is another way of saying what the Buddha himself taught, namely, that all things arise dependently.

To experience this dependently arisen nature of things— their “emptiness” of independence—is the core of wisdom experience according to Mahāyāna. It is this profound Mahāyāna experience of penetrating insight into the emptiness of all things by the awakened consciousness that brings one freedom. It is this profound wisdom realizing emptiness that, coupled with a compassionate motivation to save all living beings, furthers one’s Great Journey to the goal of Buddhahood.
LUMINOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

A third characteristic of Mahāyāna teaching concerns the nature of consciousness. We have seen that one view of consciousness found in early Buddhist texts teaches that the mind is naturally pure and clear, having been stained by mental defilements. While in Mahāyāna there are many and sometimes conflicting notions concerning consciousness, we find a similar strand of thought. It claims that consciousness, prior to being affected by defilements, is the luminous clarity and nirvanic status of enlightened Buddhahood. This pure luminosity as the true essence of consciousness gives people the potential for Buddhahood. But ordinary conscious life generates conceptualizations and other mental formations that frustrate this potential. In the end, it is the mind that enslaves people in a life that is untrue and unsatisfying (duhkha); and it is also the mind that can set people free.

CELESTIAL BUDDHAS

Finally, the fourth characteristic notion has to do with the nature of Buddhahood, the goal of the Bodhisattva Path. While the early Buddhist texts claim that the cosmos includes realms of hells, ghosts, gods, and Brahma beings, Mahāyāna expanded this vision of the cosmos by claiming that it also contains countless Buddhas residing in Buddha realms. In following the Bodhisattva Path, one can be reborn in one of these realms, where one can progress toward Buddhahood under the guidance and with the blessings of the Buddha of that realm. When one attains Buddhahood, one will also create a Buddha realm from where one will help others throughout the cosmos. In the meantime, one can receive guidance and blessings in this world, as well as visualize these “celestial” Buddhas and their realms and the advanced bodhisattvas that abide in them in ways that are spiritually transforming. These Buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas develop special skillful means (upāya) that they use to appear in the many world systems of the cosmos in order to help other beings become free from suffering and progress in the journey to Awakening and Buddhahood.

As we noted earlier, for many centuries after the beginning of the Mahāyāna movement, indeed perhaps up until the seventh century C.E., members of this newer tradition lived in monasteries side-by-side with Buddhists who chose to follow the original teachings of the Three Piṭakas. However, as time passed and some of the sūtras became more polemical as they stressed the “superiority” of the Mahāyāna over the older tradition, Mahāyānins began to separate from the other schools. We have seen that the Theravādins spread into Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Mahāyāna flourished in various places in India from where it eventually spread into other parts of Asia, especially Central and East Asia. It became the primary form of Buddhism in such countries as Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. So, with these general comments about Mahāyāna and its teachings, we can now look at some of the individual sūtras that have been especially important in defining the Mahāyāna experience of Buddhism.

THE MAHYĀNA SŪTRAS

The Mahāyāna sūtras were written following the Bodhisattva Path, and are the major Mahāyāna sūtras that we have already outlined. We include (1) the notions of wisdom and compassion, (2) the nature of mind, and (3) the transcendent nature of reality. In the next section, we will look at some of the Mahāyāna sūtras and teachings in some detail.

Discovering the Mahāyāna: The Mahāyāna Sūtras

Among the earliest of the Mahāyāna sūtras were written in Sanskrit. Later versions were written in Chinese and Tibetan. These versions include the famousDiamond Sūtra, an exposition of the Mahāyāna Path. Among the Mahāyāna sūtras, the Heart Sūtra is the most widely distributed and often recited. The Heart Sūtra is a concise summary of the Mahāyāna path and teachings. It is often recited as a prayer for enlightenment and as a means of connecting with the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha.

FIGURE 4.1. Illuminated manuscript of a 100,000 Verses, eighteenth century.
The Mahāyāna Sūtras

The Mahāyāna sūtras were written to teach the experiences of Mahāyāna in following the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood. The following are some of the major Mahāyāna sūtras that introduce the kinds of teachings we have already outlined. We include some selections from these sūtras that present (1) the notions of wisdom and emptiness, (2) the nature of consciousness, (3) the transcendent nature of the Buddha, and (4) the existence of Buddha realms. In the next section, we introduce the Bodhisattva Path and its stages and perfections in some detail.

Discovering the Perfection of Wisdom

Among the earliest of the Mahāyāna sūtras are the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras (Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras). These sūtras began to be written in the first century C.E. Longer versions were written during the next 200 years; more condensed sūtras were written from 300 to 700 C.E. (see Figure 4.1). These condensed versions include the famous Diamond Sūtra and Heart Sūtra. Within some of the Wisdom Literature, the journey of the bodhisattva is defined by the Six Perfections (giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, and wisdom). This Bodhisattva Path is lived compassionately for the benefit of others because one’s practice of it is motivated by bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain Buddhahood to save all living beings. This altruistic attitude leads the Mahāyāna

FIGURE 4.1. Illuminated manuscript in Tibetan of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra 100,000 Verses, eighteenth century, Tibet. Library of Congress, Asian Collection.
Buddhist to renounce any personal attainment of Arhatship and Final Nirvana so as to continue to help others in need. In this regard, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras depict the arhats as selfishly leaving society behind to enjoy the quiescence of Final Nirvana after death.

In following this compassionate path, bodhisattvas can eventually be reborn in celestial Buddha realms where they can gain the powers and skillful means necessary to become Buddhas and help others do the same. As a celestial bodhisattva, and eventually as a celestial Buddha with one’s own Buddha realm in the heavens of the cosmos, one will be a more universally active source of blessings for all living beings. Mahāyāna taught that these blessings are possible because of “merit transfer.” Because karmic merit can be transferred from one person to another, celestial bodhisattvas and Buddhas—who have accumulated great merit during eons of practicing the Perfections—can transfer that merit to needy sentient beings.

Besides the compassion of the bodhisattva and its implications for religious practice, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras also expound the wisdom of the bodhisattva. Through the ordinary use of perception and language, one experiences the many things of the world as being separate and distinct entities. But the wisdom of the bodhisattva brings one to the realization that the things of the world are not independent; they lack their seeming inherent existence. Things as normally seen are said to be “like a dream.” This does not mean that they do not exist but that they exist like a dream depending on a dreamer. In other words, the many things of the world appear as if they are independent entities; but this appearance of independence depends on one’s perception of them and is not how they really exist. One term often used in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras to describe this condition of things is “non-arising” (anutpāda). That is, the things one sees as so separate from oneself and other beings have “not arisen” in such an independent manner.

When one experiences the real status of things, claims the Wisdom Literature, one beholds “emptiness.” As we mentioned earlier, emptiness is not a thing in its own right but is precisely the way all things are in their dependent arising, namely, “empty of own-being” (svabhāva-sūnya). This means that emptiness is not some ultimate reality beyond the forms of existence themselves; rather, the myriad forms of existence are emptiness—they are empty of own-being. An analogy that is used to help one understand this notion of emptiness is a flower that always needs sunlight, water, soil, nutrients, and so on to live. In a similar way, Mahāyāna is saying that each being needs the full matrix of life to be what it truly is. Wisdom is the insight of the enlightened consciousness that penetrates this matrix of life, this emptiness of things. This experience of wisdom insight into the true nature of things reveals what is called, in many Mahāyāna sūtras, “suchness” (taillatā). To experience the suchness of things means to experience things “such as they are,” without superimposing views about them. That is, while one ordinarily views things as independent entities, experiencing the suchness of things is to see the emptiness of this independence, to see things as they are dependently arisen.

With wisdom insight into emptiness, there is a liberating effect on all defilements of all things, one’s at

With these remarks in mind, let us capture in a few words some of the best known of the Sūtras is given to Śāriputra, one part of the text begins by Avalokiteśvara, while others with his perfection of wisdom. Aggregates are “empty of the Five Aggregates, the dharmas, Abhidharma texts, are also view of emptiness, the emptiness, characterizes by the category that they are all characterized.

Om! Praise to the bliss of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva’s wisdom. When he looks empty of own-being.

Here, O Śāriputra, for empty from emptiness, empty of what is emptiness is formed, formations and consciousness.

Here, O Śāriputra, all produced nor cease, the nor complete.
Arhatship and Final Nirvānas regard, the Perfection of society behind to enjoy
Buddhas can eventually be tain the powers and skill-
others do the same. As a Buddha with one’s own will be a more universally nāyāna taught that these “Because karmic merit celestial bodhisattvas and eons of practicing the ant beings.

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earlier, emptiness is not a things are in their dependent Sāṃyoga. This means that forms of existence them-
tiness—they are empty of understand this notion of ter, soil, nutrients, and so each being needs the full insight of the enlightened emptiness of things. This of things reveals what is Jata. To experience the as they are,” without the ordinarily views things things is to see the emp-
re dependently arisen.

With wisdom insight into suchness, into the empty nature of all beings, there is a liberating effect on the person of wisdom. In experiencing the emptiness of all things, one’s attachments to the things of the world are loosened, defilements are brought to an end, and delusion is dispersed. The state of mind that one realizes with this freedom is Nirvana. But because Nirvana is also experienced as empty—as not an independent state separate from the ordinary samsāric world—one is also free from attachment to this spiritual status. With freedom from the world of samsāra on the one hand and from Nirvana on the other, one “courses” in the Middle Way. This means that one is free from any attachment to either samsāra or Nirvana; and therefore one is free to embrace all things as they are in their suchness, while responding to their needs out of selfless compassion. As we shall see in the next chapter, these ideas about wisdom and emptiness presented in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras became the inspiration for Mādhyamika, one of the major schools of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, as well as many of the schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in other parts of Asia.

The Heart Sūtra

With these remarks in mind, let us now look at the Heart Sūtra, which is said to capture in a few words the “heart” of the Perfection of Wisdom. This is one of the best known of the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras in East Asia. Its teaching is given to Śāriputra, one of the Buddha’s chief disciples. Note that the first part of the text begins by saying that the famous celestial bodhisattva named Avalokiteśvara, while engaged in the Great Journey, looks down at the world with his perfection of wisdom. From that vantage point, he sees that the Five Aggregates are “empty of own-being” and that emptiness is not different from the Five Aggregates. Emptiness is their true nature. Avalokiteśvara then sees that all the dharmas, analyzed and categorized so carefully by the earlier Abhidharma texts, are also empty of own-being. Therefore, from the point of view of emptiness, the dharmas are not produced as discrete entities to be characterized by the categories of the Abhidharma—they are all the same in that they are all characterized by emptiness.

Om! Praise to the blessed and noble perfection of wisdom! The noble Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva was moving in the deep journey of the perfection of wisdom. When he looked down at the Five Aggregates, he saw that they are empty of own-being.

Here, O Śāriputra, form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. What is form is emptiness, what is emptiness is form. The same is true for sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

Here, O Śāriputra, all dharmas are characterized by emptiness; they are neither produced nor cease, they are neither defined nor pure, they are neither deficient nor complete.
In the next part of the text, it is said that the perfection of wisdom realizing emptiness looks over the Five Aggregates, the six senses and their objects, the eighteen elements that constitute conscious experience, the twelve links of dependent arising, the Four Noble Truths, and the knowledge and attainment, or lack thereof, associated with the arhat. In fact, these factors and processes of existence are the ones that Buddhaghosa says are the “soil” to be “turned over” with knowledge and insight to become an arhat. However, the Heart Sūtra says that when Avalokiteśvara looks at these factors of existence with his higher bodhisattva wisdom, he sees that they do not exist as ordinarily conceived because they are all empty of own-being.

Therefore, O Śāriputra, in emptiness, there is no form, sensation, perception, mental formation, or consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind; no forms, sounds, odors, tastes, objects of touch, or objects of the mind; no eye-element and so on up to no mind-consciousness element; there is neither ignorance nor cessation of ignorance and so on up to neither old age and death nor cessation of old age and death. There is no dukkha, no origination of dukkha, no cessation of dukkha, no path to the cessation of dukkha. There is no knowledge, no attainment, no nonattainment.

The text goes on to say that with this higher insight into the emptiness of all things, including the attainment of Nirvana, the bodhisattva is indifferent not only to worldly things but also to any attainment of Final Nirvana apart from this world. Instead, like all the Buddhas of all periods of time, he or she relies on the perfection of wisdom to be free of any obstacles to becoming a Buddha, and in the end actually realizes Nirvana in this world. The text ends with the great mantra that is spoken, as it were, by a personification of the perfection of wisdom. It is implied that while ordinary mantras can soothe some dukkha, the perfection of wisdom, like a great mantra, conveys the power to bring about a cessation of all dukkha through Awakening inspiring joyfulness. The text concludes with an actual mantra in praise of the perfection of wisdom that goes beyond everything to the full Awakening of Buddhahood.

Therefore, O Śāriputra, because of being indifferent to attainment, a bodhisattva relies on the perfection of wisdom and remains thereby free from mental hindrances. Being free from mental hindrances, he or she is not afraid, overcomes erroneous views, and in the end attains Nirvana. All Buddhas of all times have attained the highest and perfect Awakening by relying on the perfection of wisdom.

Therefore, one should know the great mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the unsurpassed and unequaled mantra, the mantra that allays all dukkha—it is true, for there is nothing lacking in it. By the perfection of wisdom is this mantra spoken. It is the following: Gone, gone, gone beyond, utterly gone beyond; Awakening: O joy! (Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya-Sūtra)

Another important Mahāparinirvāṇa (Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra), tells the story of Vimalakīrti, a rich man of the Buddha’s teaching who went to see the Buddha. Indeed, Vimalakīrti’s wisdom is that of the arhats, but he has come down to visit from those realms of wisdom so as to show the Buddha’s teaching to all beings. He has made that the attainment of enlightenment is not only for monks, but also for the nuns and the laity. Thus, he is not only for monks, but also for all beings.

In this sūtra, as in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, we see that the Buddhist teaching is not an imperceptible causal reality that one perceives. Emptiness is in ordinary experience with the Bodhisattva. Emptiness is the “baseless base” of suchness, or baseless base of the discriminating mind. Emptiness is between self and other, between purity and defilement, and the nondual is all. This nondual reality of emptiness is the full Awakening.

In the sūtra, there is an episode in which Vimalakīrti, and Śāriputra, and the other disciples. This discussion is in that earlier tradition, because things cannot capture the emptiness of the self or see the reality that is.

A goddess . . . listening to the Buddha who were present and onto the ground. But the Buddha did not fall off despite this. Then the goddess asked what the non-dual of suchness is because of the status of suchness . . . because of the status of suchness . . . because of the status of suchness . . . because of the status of suchness. Look at the Buddha. That is because they have the

(Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya-Sūtra, VIII)
A Layperson's Śūtra

Another important Mahāyāna śūtra is the Śūra Expounded by Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Śūtra). Composed in the first century C.E., this śūtra tells the story of Vimalakīrti, a rich layman living in Vaiśāli, whose understanding of the Buddha’s teaching was so deep that he was accepted as a bodhisattva. Indeed, Vimalakīrti’s wisdom was so profound that it surpassed not only the insight of the arhats, but even of some of the great bodhisattvas who had come down to visit from their celestial realms. Thus, the Mahāyāna point is made that the attainment of the bodhisattva is greater than that of the arhat, and it is not only for monastics but is also open to laypersons.

In this śūtra, as in the Wisdom Literature, the doctrine of the emptiness of things is presented. Here, it is said that because of emptiness, the world appears in ordinary experience. However, this does not mean that emptiness is an imperceptible causal force—like a God—that is apart from the things one perceives. Emptiness is instead the hidden “suchness” of all the things one ordinarily experiences with a discriminating mind. In the words of the śūtra, emptiness is the “baseless base” of all discriminated things. This emptiness, or suchness, or baseless base of existence is hidden from view by the “dualities” of the discriminating mind. By dualities are meant the perceived differences between self and other, between the senses and objects of sense, between purity and defilement, and, ultimately, between saṃsāra and Nirvana. When asked what the nondual condition of life is like, Vimalakīrti “kept silent without saying a word,” because words cannot describe it. True understanding of this nondual reality of emptiness must be realized in the direct experience of full Awakening.

In the śūtra, there is an instructive dialogue between a goddess taught by Vimalakīrti, and Śāriputra, who represents those who follow the older path of the disciples. This discussion is about how the discriminations emphasized in that earlier tradition, between, for example, wholesome and unwholesome things, cannot capture the real suchness of things. The discriminating mind cannot see the reality that lies beyond its discriminations:

A goddess...listening to the Dharma in Vimalakīrti’s room, appeared in bodily form and showered flowers on the bodhisattvas and chief disciples of the Buddha who were present. The flowers that landed on the bodhisattvas fell off and onto the ground. But those that landed on the disciples stuck to their bodies and did not fall off despite all their efforts to shake them off.

Thereupon, the goddess asked Śāriputra why he tried to shake off the flowers. Śāriputra replied, “I want to shake off these flowers because they are not of the status of suchness.” The goddess said, “Do not say that these flowers are not of the status of suchness... because it is you who gives rise to such a discrimination.... But if you no longer make such discriminations, this all will be of the status of suchness. Look at the bodhisattvas whose bodies do not hold the flowers. That is because they have put an end to such discrimination.” (Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Śūtra, VIII)
As is said in the *Heart Sūtra*, it is by going beyond the discriminations of ordinary experience that one finds emptiness, and the freedom it brings from things “sticking” to one in ways that hinder one’s spiritual journey to Awakening. However, it seems that Sāriputra did not understand the goddess’s words because later he asks her to change her female body into the form of a man. He is discriminating a man’s body as superior to a woman’s. The goddess again teaches that in their suchness, all forms are the same in that they are in reality empty of their discriminated characteristics, including those of gender. The goddess points out Sāriputra’s attachment to the male gender and chides him for not realizing that the suchness of all forms is the same. Awakening to this truth about the ultimate “sameness” of all things is—the story implies—open to everyone, male and female, lay and monastic.

Sāriputra asked, “Why do not you change your female form?” The goddess replied, “For the last twelve years, I have been looking in vain for a female form. So, what is it that you want me to change?”

Thereupon, she used her supernatural powers to change Sāriputra into a celestial goddess, and to change herself into a man similar to Sāriputra. She then asked him, “Why do not you change your female form?”

The goddess said, “Like Sāriputra, who is not a woman but only appears in female form, all women are the same. Though they appear in female form, they are ultimately not women. Hence the Buddha said, ‘All things [ultimately] are neither male or female.’” (*Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa-Sūtra*, VIII)

**Exploring Consciousness**

Whereas the previous two sūtras focus more on emptiness, the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* examines the nature of consciousness, its production of ordinary experience, and its potential for Awakening and Buddhahood. The *Sūtra on the Descent into Lanka* (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*) is said by scholars to have been composed around the fourth century C.E. We have seen in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* and *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* that ordinary consciousness has a role in discriminating people’s mistaken experience of independent selfhood and independent objects. The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* explores how the mind creates this false dualistic experience of self and world and how the mind can also escape this misperception of things and attain Awakening and Buddhahood.

The *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* stresses the need for an inward journey of meditation to overcome the ordinary workings of the mind, which produce mental discriminations that result in an unsatisfactory life. One’s ordinary mental functioning dualistically objectifies an independent self and a world of independent objects in a fashion that leads to unwholesome attachment to things and, thereby, unhappiness. By turning one’s meditative attention into the inner field of consciousness itself, one discovers that one’s misperception of reality is based in a deeper mental phenomenon, what the sūtra calls the “storehouse-consciousness” (*ālaya-vijñāna*). It is this foundation of consciousness that is the ultimate cause of both one’s subjective experience of selfhood and one’s objective experience of the world—one’s mind creates waves on the storehouse-ocean—like waves produced by the force of the storehouse consciousness.

At that time, the Buddha explained that the storehouse-ocean when stirred by the wind produces waves. The storehouse-ocean is composed of the multiple waves of consciousness.

As the waves in all their variety arise in the mind and its [variety of consciousness], there is no distinction between them, so no evolution of the variety.

“The visible world is divided into species with characteristics and so forth as they are seen as evolving.”

Whereas the Wisdom King [*Buddhasattva*] to experience emptiness in this ocean of consciousness; this experience of the verity of the mind, that its storehouse-production [of consciousness] is that one realizes a “reversion” to the clear, pure luminosity that is consciousness when it arises in the womb [garbha]. The term *Tathāgata* is given to Gautama Buddha and a series of Buddhas who have realized this experience. This means either “womb” or “embryo” or the embryo of the *Tathāgata*. A Buddha because each period of Enlightenment holds the embryo of the Buddha.

Nirvana is the storehouse-ocean, the realization . . . When a Buddha [varieties of consciousness] are realized as the storehouse-ocean, the mind attains the realization of nonexistence, thought of existence or nonexistence, is a reality. . . . [This is] the storehouse-ocean in which waves . . .
and the discriminations of the freedom it brings from spiritual journey to Awaken-nderstand the goddess’s role body into the form of a man to a woman’s. The goddess are the same in that they are attributes, including those of gender to the male gender of all forms is the same. “Masculinity” of all things is—the lay and monastic.

“Male form?” The goddess in vain for a female form.

“Why change Śāriputra into a woman?”

“Woman but only appears in female form, they do all things [ultimately] are"

emptiness, the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra on the Perfection of Wisdom teaches to have been common in the Perfection of Wisdom tradition, has a role in dis-in the Perfection of Wisdom tradition, has a role in dis-embodiment and inde-embodiment and inde-embodiment and inde-

the mind creates this, the mind can also escape and Buddhism, for the journey of meditation, which produce mental.

One’s ordinary mental self and a world of indulgence attachment to things, the attention into the nature of our misperception of what the sūtra calls the foundation of consciousness, experience of selfhood and one’s objective experience of the world. This depth of consciousness is said to create both one’s subjective and objective experience like the deep ocean creates waves on its surface. One’s experience of oneself and the world—like waves produced by the force of the ocean—is created by the force of the storehouse consciousness. As the sūtra says,

At that time, the [Buddha] recited these verses: “Like waves that rise on the ocean when stirred by the wind, dancing without interruption, in a similar way the storehouse-ocean is constantly stirred by the winds of objectivity such that the multiple waves of consciousness are seen dancing about.

As the waves in all their variety are stirred on the surface of the ocean, so in the storehouse the variety of what is known as consciousness is produced. The mind and its [variety of] consciousness are discriminated as regards their form; [but] the [variety of] consciousness is not separate from the mind. . . . Just as there is no distinction between the ocean and its waves, so in the mind there is no evolution of the variety of consciousness.

“The visible world is discriminated by the [variety of] consciousness. . . . Form with characteristics and status are presented to our consciousnesses as such; they are seen as evolving in the same way as waves.” (Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, 46-47)

Whereas the Wisdom Literature and the Vimalakīrti Sūtra call for the bodhisattva to experience emptiness, the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra calls for an experience of this ocean of consciousness below the waves of experience. The sūtra proposes this experience of the very foundation of consciousness because it recognizes that its storehouse produces the experience not only of selfhood and the world but of Buddhahood as well. How is this possible? The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra says that if one realizes a “reversion of the foundation of the mind,” one can discover its clear, pure luminosity that is the very essence of Buddhahood. Therefore, the storehouse-consciousness is also called the “Womb of the Tathāgata” (tathāgata-garbhā). The term Tathāgata—meaning “Thus born” or “Thus gone”—is a title given to Gautama Buddha. It indicates that the historical Buddha was one in a series of Buddhas who have come into the world and gone. The word garbha means either “womb” or “embryo.” So to say that consciousness is like a womb or embryo of the Tathāgata means that all people can be part of this series of Buddhas because each person’s innermost consciousness is like a womb that holds the embryo of Buddhahood. Here again are the words of the sūtra:

Nirvana is the storehouse-consciousness where a reversion takes place by self-realization. . . . When a reversion takes place in the practitioner of yoga, the [varieties of] consciousness cast off discrimination between [subject and object] in what is realized as the [nature of] mind itself. Here, one enters the Tathāgata stage, attaining the realization of noble wisdom; and in this stage, there is no thought of existence or nonexistence. . . . When all these [varieties of consciousness] go through a reversion, I and all the other Buddhas declare that there is Nirvana. The mode and nature of this Nirvana is emptiness, which is the status of reality. . . . [This is because the storehouse-consciousness] is like a great ocean in which waves roll on constantly, but the [depths] subsist unaffected,
free from the faults of impermanence... thoroughly pure in its essence... The storehouse-consciousness is [thus] known by the name of the Tathāgata-garbha. (Lavikavatāra Sūtra, 62, 93, 99, 220–221)

This inner essence of the mind is the original pure, luminous, and nirvanic nature of the storehouse-consciousness that is beyond the dualistic discrimination of its ordinary mental functioning. With this inner realization, the embryo of Buddhahood begins to develop. In the light of the wisdom of developing Buddhahood, one experiences that all forms in emptiness display this luminous essence of the consciousness that produces them like an ocean producing waves. As we shall see in the next chapter, this understanding of consciousness is developed in the Indian Yogācāra School of Buddhist philosophy, which in turn influences many Mahāyāna schools in East Asia.

**The Lotus**

Another sūtra that is one of the most revered in East Asia is the Sūtra on the Lotus of the True Dharma (Saddharmapundarika-Sūtra) written around 200 C.E. (see Figure 4.2). Like other Mahāyāna texts, the Lotus Sūtra, as it is better known, emphasizes the Bodhisattva Path entailing the practice of the Six Perfections leading in the Great Journey to Buddhahood. It also presents the perfection of wisdom’s vision of the entire universe, “the world of the triple sphere in all its ten directions,” as empty of own-being. In lauding this Mahāyāna experience, the Lotus Sūtra also holds out hope that eventually even the arhats will reach this higher goal of Buddhahood.

The Lotus Sūtra has a special teaching about what it considers the transcendent Buddha. The sūtra claims to have been preached at Vulture Peak by a dramatically transfigured Gautama Buddha, who reveals that in reality he had attained his Awakening incalculable, limitless, myriads of eons ago, and resides forever present to the world like a father preaching the Dharma. His human form as Gautama Buddha is a skillful means (upāyā) to give people confidence that they can attain Nirvana. To display his transcendent power, as the sūtra opens, Gautama Buddha enters deep meditation and produces the following effect on his listeners that fills them with awe:

At that moment, a ray issued from within the circle of hair between the Lord’s eyebrows. It extended over eighteen-hundred thousand Buddha realms... so that all those Buddha realms were illuminated by its radiance... Likewise, the noble Buddhas staying and living in those Buddha realms all became visible, and the Dharma being preached by them could be entirely heard by all beings. The monks, nuns and men and women lay devotees, practitioners of yoga, those who had attained fruition and those who had not, all became visible. The bodhisattvas, the great beings, in those Buddha realms who follow the bodhisattva’s journey with ability due to their earnest faith in many kinds of lessons and ideas became visible too... Then there arose this thought in the mind of the great being, Maitreya Bodhisattva, “O how great a wonder does the Tathāgata display!” (Saddharmapundarika-Sūtra, I)

Let us suppose the follow householders, old... and all of a sudden it is

Let us suppose that the

Let us suppose that the

With this resolution, the


Gautama Buddha goes... kinds of people in various use different skillful means being taught, that of the a follow these will eventually explain skillful means, Ga... In it, he uses the analogy of...
The Mahāyāna Sūtras


Gautama Buddha goes on in the sûtra to say that all Buddhas preach the Dharma of one Buddha-vehicle (Buddha-yāna). But because there are different kinds of people in various states of openness to this Buddha-vehicle, Buddhas use different skillful means to reach them. Therefore, there are three vehicles being taught, that of the arhat, the pratyekabuddha, and the bodhisattva. All who follow these will eventually attain supreme Awakening and become Buddhas. To explain skillful means, Gautama Buddha tells the following parable to Śāriputra. In it, he uses the analogy of three carts for the three vehicles of Buddhism.

Let us suppose the following, Śāriputra. In a certain village... there was a great householder, old... and yet wealthy... with a grand house that is high and spacious, but built along time ago and now old... The house has but one door... and all of a sudden it is being consumed on all sides by a mass of fire.

Let us suppose that the man had many children... and that he had come out of the house. Now, Śāriputra, that man upon seeing the house being enveloped in fire became greatly concerned... and made the following reflection, “I myself am able to come out from the burning house through the door... but my children are staying in the burning house absorbed in their playing and amusing themselves... They do not perceive that the house is on fire... so they are not afraid and have no wish to escape... Therefore, I will warn them.”

With this resolution, he calls to his children, “Come, my children, the house is burning with a mass of fire...” But the ignorant children do not believe him... for they are not afraid... nor understand the word “burning.” On the contrary, they run around, walk about, and repeatedly glance out at their father, all because they are so ignorant.
Then the man reflects... “Let me use some skillful means to get my children out of the house.” The man knows the disposition of the children, and... the man says to them, “My children, your toys which are so pretty and precious... goat carts, deer carts, and bullock carts... are outside the door of the house for you to play with. So, come out of the house, and I will give each of you what you want.” And the children, upon hearing the names of the playthings they like, because they suit their desires, eagerly, pushing and running against each other, quickly rush out from the burning house...

The children each go up to their father and say, “Father, give us those toys to play with that you promised, those goat carts, deer carts, and bullock carts.” Then, Śāriputra, the man gives each of his children equally... bullock carts only. They are made of seven precious substances, provided with benches, hung with many bells, adorned with rare and wonderful jewels, covered with jewel wreaths and garlands of flowers... led by a multitude of servants... The children climb up on the carts with feelings of astonishment and wonder.

So too, Śāriputra... the Tathāgata, endowed with boundless and perfect Buddha-knowledge... is the father of all worlds, who has attained the highest perfection in knowing skillful means, and who is most merciful, patient, benevolent, and compassionate. He appears in this world, which is like a house... burning with a mass of misery, in order to free from affliction, hatred and delusion, all beings who are subject to birth, old age, disease, death... and the dark and enveloping mist of ignorance. He does so to rouse them to supreme, perfect Awakening... to bestow on them the immense and inconceivable joy of Buddha-knowledge...

Thus, Śāriputra... in order to save all living beings from this world which is like a burning house... [the Buddha] shows them by his knowledge of skillful means, three vehicles: that of the disciples, the pratya‰ka‰dha, and the bodhisattvas. By means of these three, he attracts all beings forth... so that all beings, who are his children, are led to no other vehicle than the One Buddha-vehicle. (Saddharma-pundarika-Sûtra, III)

One is reminded here of the Second Sermon of the Buddha in which he says that the condition of the world of the Five Aggregates is “burning” with “a whole mass of du‰jkha”—a burning about which humankind is ordinarily unaware. In the Lotus Sûtra, it is being said that a Buddha, who is outside and free from the world, uses skillful means to bring people out of this condition by offering different ideals, that of the arhat, the pratya‰ka‰dha, and the bodhisattva. But in the end all persons escape this condition through one doorway and find one ideal, that of Buddhahood, which is more wonderful than anyone could imagine.

The Land of Bliss

A devotional side of Mahayâna was also enriched by another set of early sûtras, called the Larger and Smaller Land of Bliss Sûtras (Sukhâvatī-Vyûha-Sûtras), which began to be written in the late second century C.E. The main intent of the Larger Land of Bliss Sûtra is to tell the story about Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light. In the sûtra, Gautama Buddha tells how in
The Dragon King's Daughter

The Lotus Sūtra has two meanings for me: its surface meaning and its deeper "experienced" meaning. Years ago, I decided to practice Nichiren Buddhism, a Buddhist school founded centuries ago in Japan that focuses on the Lotus Sūtra. When I first began reciting the Lotus Sūtra and chanting its title, Nam-myōhōrenge-kyō, I insisted on learning its literal meaning, though I was encouraged to experience it through sound, too.

Since the ancient Chinese characters are complex, there are many translations of the sūtra's title. The more suggestive one I particularly liked was "fusion with the mystic law of simultaneous cause and effect through vibration." I was assured I could draw infinite energy from such dynamic fusion for alleviating my own suffering and the sufferings of others. I tucked that away in the back of my mind and began to chant. But, I wondered, what about the rest of the Lotus Sūtra recited by Nichiren Buddhists?

The short explanation given to me at the time was that the sūtra had two parts. The first part makes the point that all human beings have the potential to attain enlightenment. Buddhahood is latent in the depths of their lives. The second part explains in parables and similes what enlightenment is. This rough sketch was a good start, but I still painstakingly wrote the literal meaning in pencil above each ancient character in my liturgy book.

Before long, as I undertook the daily practice and witnessed exciting changes in my life, the pencil scribing receded from my radar screen. Living the Lotus Sūtra and experiencing what my Nichiren society, Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), calls "human revolution" took on the greater importance. It is only now after eighteen years that I've returned again to the surface meaning. SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, through a series of recently published dialogues on the Lotus Sūtra, led me back to it.

To me, the most moving part of these dialogues concerned the Devadatta Chapter. In that chapter, Devadatta, who tried to kill Sākyamuni Buddha, receives the assurance that he, too, will attain a great enlightenment. This occurs before a huge assemblage of living beings from all directions of the universe. Perhaps more shocking to the assembly is what happens next.

The Dragon King's daughter, an eight-year-old girl with the body of a dragon, is said to have reached enlightenment in an instant upon hearing the teaching of the Lotus Sūtra. Yet Śāriputra, a learned disciple of the Buddha, does not accept the authenticity of her attainment, and cites reasons why women cannot gain enlightenment. Through dramatic acts reflecting wisdom and compassion, the dragon girl refutes all these reasons. This incident affirms the absolute spiritual equality of women.

As a little girl, my biggest fear was to be left out of or put down by a social group. When I reached adolescence, this fear intensified and became a major preoccupation. My mother, trying to help, advised me that whenever I felt left out, I should find someone else on the sidelines and go talk with them. Well, this was good as far as it went, but it didn't change the whole group dynamic: the sad and seemingly inevitable tendency of human beings to cluster and, in the process, exclude others. The Lotus Sūtra sets forth a totally different group dynamic, and it does so on a cosmic scale. No one is excluded from Buddhahood.

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another world eons ago, there was a bodhisattva named Dharmākara, who knew that Buddhas have the power to create Buddha realms in the heavens of the cosmos in which they can reside. With the aid of a Buddha who was living at that time, Dharmākara learned about the excellent characteristics of these realms. He then resolved to generate a Buddha realm that would combine these excellent qualities into the purest of Buddha realms. With this possible pure Buddha realm in mind, Dharmākara expressed his bodhisattva resolve for Buddhahood in forty-eight vows. One of the main points of these vows is that Dharmākara promised that he would not become a Buddha until he had gained the powers needed to produce such a pure Buddha realm and to bring all who want to be reborn there to his Land of Bliss. After telling this story in the sūtra, Gautama Buddha then commented that this is exactly what happened: Dharmākara Bodhisattva is now Amitābha Buddha (see Figure 4.3) living in a Buddha realm called the “Land of Bliss” (Sukhāvatī). In the Smaller Land of Bliss Sūtra, this “Pure Land” is then described in some detail.

An important part of this story for Buddhist devotional practice and experience has to do with the power of Dharmākara’s bodhisattva resolve to bring to this Land of Bliss all those who seek to be born there. There are differing explanations as to how one can be born in the Land of Bliss. But in general it requires faith in Amitābha Buddha and a sincere desire to be born in his Buddha realm. In some verses, it is said that one must generate the thought of becoming a Buddha (bodhicitta), cultivate certain virtues, and chant homage to Amitābha Buddha. As we shall see later, the Mahāyāna schools in East Asia that base themselves on these sūtras emphasize the saving grace of Amitābha for their adherents. Although there is no Amitābha’s presence and power, it will be easier to attain Awakening and understand more of the path to Enlightenment. One will not even have to be reborn in the Pure Land.

This Land of Bliss, Ānanda, is a place where all who wish to hear teachings, enter the Ten Stages of Practice, have a loving kindness, great compassion, and the wish to help others. This brings about the state of Awakening. Also, nowhere in the realms of the Tathāgatas is there an unwholesome, nowhere are magic and rituals needed. And that, Ānanda, is the reason for this land. Beings who have been born in this realm are all fixed on the practices of the Pure Land.

If any beings, Ānanda, who enter the Pure Land of the Tathāgata, if they plant a little faith in the Buddha’s name (buddhāna) in the Pure Land, if they vow to enter the path to the Noble Path and then adds the name of the Buddha’s name to the vow, the Tathāgata’s light approaches, Amitābha Buddha attracts the beings by hosts of monks. Then religious insight will be born in their hearts, they will be born in the Pure Land.

Finally, it is important to note how the name of the Buddha’s name comes about. In this practice, one begins by chanting the name of the Buddha. This develops in East Asia, Ānanda. (Chinese: “Namo Amitābha” is quite popular. With a sincere devotion, one hopes to be born in the Pure Land.”

THE GREAT VEHICLE

In Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle, the Dharma of the Buddha is realized in the practice of the bodhisattva. The great bodhisattva must not only cultivate the wisdom of the Tathāgatas but also must have compassion for all beings. The great bodhisattva must be able to help all beings and must not be afraid of the suffering they must endure to help others.

FIGURE 4.3. Statue of Amida (Amitābha) Buddha at Kōto-ji Temple, Kamakura, Japan, known as the Great Buddha dated 1252 C.E.
The Great Journey of the Bodhisattva

The Great Journey of the Bodhisattva, who has been born in the heavens of a Buddha who was born in the heaven realms of the Dharmākara, was a Sage who was born in the heaven realms of the Dharmākara. This Sage was a Buddha who was born in the heaven realms of the Dharmākara. With this postulate, the Sage has been born in the heaven realms of the Dharmākara. The main points of these postulates are that this is exactly what a Buddha (see Figure 4.3) in the Smaller Sūtras. In some detail.

This Land of Bliss, Ānanda, which is the realm of Lord Amitābha, is rich and prosperous, comfortable, fertile, delightful and full of many gods and people. In this realm, Ānanda, there are no hells, no animals, no ghosts or asuras—no inauspicious places to be reborn. That realm of the Land of Bliss, Ānanda, produces many fragrant odors, is rich in the variety of flowers and fruits, adorned with jewel trees, which are visited by flocks of different kinds of birds conjured up by the Buddha’s miraculous power. . . . On all sides it is surrounded by golden nets, and covered by lotus flowers made of precious things. . . . And everyone hears the pleasant sound that they wish to hear. If they just wish it, they may hear about the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the Six Perfections, the Ten Stages . . . emptiness . . . calmness . . . quietude and peace . . . great loving kindness . . . great compassion . . . great sympathetic joy . . . and great equanimity . . . This brings about the state of mind that leads to the attainment of Awakening. Also, nowhere in the realm of the Land of Bliss does anyone hear of anything unwholesome, nowhere are there any hindrances or states of punishment. . . . And that, Ānanda, is the reason for this realm called the Land of Bliss. . . . All the beings who have been born, who are born, and who will be born in this Buddha realm are all fixed on the right method of salvation until they have attained Nirvana. . . .

If any beings, Ānanda, over and over reverently devote themselves to this Buddha, if they plant a large . . . root of goodness, having raised their thoughts to Awakening, if they vow to be born in that realm, then, when the hour of their death approaches, Amitābha Buddha . . . will stand before them, surrounded by hosts of monks. Then having seen that lord, and having died with serene hearts, they will be born in precisely that realm of the Land of Bliss. (Sukhavati-Vyūha-Sūtra, 15-16, 18, 24, 27)

Finally, it is important to note that the practice of “remembering the Buddha’s name” (buddhanamamrti) was popular in early Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this practice, one begins with saying the word nāmaḥ, meaning “hail to,” and then adds the name of a Buddha. As we shall see later, when Mahāyāna develops in East Asia, the actual chanting of “Hail to Amitābha Buddha” (Chinese: “Namo Amituofo”; Japanese: “Namu Amida Butsu”) becomes quite popular. With a sincere faith in the power of Amitābha’s vow, these devotees hope to be born in his Land of Bliss, or what they refer to as the “Pure Land.”

THE GREAT JOURNEY OF THE BODHISATTVA

In Mahāyāna, the Great Journey of the bodhisattva begins with hearing the Dharma of the Buddha and taking up the practice of the Six Perfections.