

Flower Ornament Sutra  
Introduction to Book 39:  
*Entry into the Realm of Reality*

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# Introduction to Book 39: *Entry into the Realm of Reality* of the Avatamsaka Sutra – Flower Ornament Sutra

*The heart of practice is the amicable dialogue of the Personal and Universal Aspects of Mind.*

The Flower Ornament Sutra contains thirty-nine books of vast, rich, and grandiose Buddhist teaching, held in high esteem by all Buddhist schools concerned with universal liberation. It is a work of stunning imagination capable of transforming one’s perspective from concept to the immediacy of metaphorical understanding.<sup>1</sup> The function of the sutra is to affirm the infinity of the path, and to provide inspiration to take up the mission of cultivating wisdom and compassion.

It is not known when and by whom The Flower Ornament Sutra [Hua-yan in Chinese, Kegon in Japanese] was compiled. It is supposed the sutra came into form in Northern India during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, arising from recorded sermons Shakyamuni Buddha preached during the first three weeks after his enlightenment. The sutra was transmitted to China and Japan during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennia where it formed the basis of the Hua-yan and Kegon philosophical schools. D. T. Suzuki described the relationship the sutra has with the Zen schools in his assertion that, “Zen is the practical consummation of Buddhist thought in China, and the Kegon is its theoretical culmination...the philosophy of Zen is Kegon and the teaching of Kegon bears fruit in the life of Zen.”

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE MATERIAL

One day as I was browsing through Barnes & Noble bookshelf, and I came across a copy of Thomas Cleary’s translation of the Flower Ornaments Sutra. I had a passing knowledge of its importance but no real understanding of its content and place in Buddhism. I purchased it, and it sat on my shelf for ten years before I began reading it. At that time, I read most of the sutra, with Book 39 *Entry into the Realm of Reality* grabbing my attention. This is why this course is centered on Book 39.

Book 39 is the story of Sudhana and his encounter with fifty-three Benefactors. After reading Book 39, I knew that I had to do something in order to capture the teachings. The sutra itself was a difficult read, and it contained so much information that a synopsis of summary of some sort was required. Subsequently, I made a list of all of the benefactors and tried to capture what their basic teachings were in a short phrase. After completing the list, I looked at it for some time, becoming acquainted with the Benefactors. I decided to memorize the Benefactors and their basic teachings.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Metaphors in Buddhism](#) for more information on the meaning of the term “metaphorical understanding”.

Working with the table of Benefactors, I realized I needed something more. I went back to the sutra and began creating an outline. The first stage contained the name and livelihood of the Benefactor, placement on the list, where they taught, and their basic teaching. I composed a one sentence encapsulation of their basic teaching and added four or five paraphrases of what the basic teachings were from Thomas Cleary and Li Tongxuan's commentaries in the Appendix. After a while, I wrote summary statements that restated the paraphrases in three or four sentences. [2015]

After five or six years of reading, study, and memorization, Vision Statements emerged that illustrated the beauty and poetic wisdom of the benefactors and their teachings, and I added them to the outline. [2020] Two years later, phrases that attempted to communicate Desired Outcomes of the Benefactors' teaching were included. This was followed by an effort to compile a Compendium of Book 39 in order to make its essence more assessable. [2022]

Book 39 is composed of five sections of ten Benefactors, each is one of the Five Ranks of Soto Zen Buddhism. The Compendium works with these five sections, containing information about each Benefactor, with examples of Sudhana's meeting with each of them, and what he gained from the encounters. I believe the Compendium offers a simplified approach to those who wish to begin studying the Flower Ornaments Sutra. The sutra itself is so overwhelming it's hard for most practitioners to organize a course of study without a document like the Compendium.

After completion of the Compendium, the impulse arose to create a study course, and that's what we have in front of us today. The Compendium, Taigen Leighton's excellent essay on Hua-yen Buddhism, along with other background material I developed and gathered, will aid us in the course of our study.

#### BOOK 39—*ENTRY INTO THE REALM OF REALITY*

The Flower Ornament Sutra consists of thirty-nine books, the last of which is Book 39 *Entry into the Realm of Reality*. The objective of this course is to offer a way of familiarization with Book 39. This will be accomplished by studying Book 39 itself, and a group of other books that support Book 39's stories and teachings.

Book 39: *Entry into the Realm of Reality* is the final section of the sutra. It follows the spiritual seeker Sudhana during his pilgrimage starting at Buddha's Assembly. Manjushri sends him out on his journey wherein he encounters fifty-three spiritual benefactors, each one providing pertinent and unique answers to his unresolved questions about the nature of an enlightening being's place in the world.

The following exchange took place when Sudhana approached Buddha's Assembly, and was given the opportunity to ask for guidance.

Sudhana said [to Manjushri], "Noble One, please give me a full explanation of how an enlightening being is to study the practice of enlightening beings, how an enlightening being is to accomplish it? How is an enlightening being to initiate the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to fulfill the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to purify the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to enter into the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to comprehend the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to effect the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to follow the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to keep to the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to expand the practice of enlightening beings? How is an enlightening being to fulfill the sphere of the universally good practice?" [1178]

Then Manjushri ... said to Sudhana, "It is good that you think, having set your heart on supreme enlightenment, that you should find out the practice of enlightening beings. It is hard to find beings who set their hearts on supreme enlightenment. It is even harder to find beings who, once they have set their minds on enlightenment, seek the practice of enlightening beings. An enlightening being is to obtain certainty through true spiritual friends, spiritual benefactors, for the realization of omniscience. One should indefatigably seek spiritual benefactors and be tireless in seeing spiritual benefactors. One should respectfully follow the appropriate instructions of spiritual benefactors, without interruption. South of here is a country called Ramavaranta; there is a mountain there called Sugriva, where a monk named Meghashri lives. Go to him and ask how and enlightening beings should learn the conduct of enlightening beings and how to apply it; how is to fulfill, purify, carry out, follow, keep to, and expand the practice enlightening beings, and how an enlightening being is to fulfill the sphere of universally good action. That spiritual friend will tell you about the sphere of universally good conduct." [1179]

The balance of the text of the sutra documents Sudhana's encounters with fifty spiritual benefactors and the three guiding principles of Maitreya, Manjushri, and Samantabhadra with whom he visits one after the other.

The fifty benefactors are presented in five groups of ten introducing in succession The Ten Abodes, The Ten Practices, The Ten Dedications, The Ten Stages, and The Ten Steps of the Eleventh Stage. *Entry into the Realm of Reality* describes in detail the teachings of the Five Ranks,

with each group of ten expounding on an individual rank, with The Ten Abodes chronicling the first rank and so on. Each benefactor provides a basic teaching, that when taken as whole, evokes a profound explanation of what Hakuin calls “the great matter.” A diligent and committed study of the material offers a remarkable opportunity for practitioners to follow Sudhana on his spiritual journey and, like him, awaken this vast array of teachings within themselves.

## HOW TO STUDY BOOK 39

From early on, with great effort, our Western teachers have imprinted a conceptual style of study upon us. The core of that style emphasizes a logical understanding that is closely aligned with our left-brain dominance. For a conclusion to be accepted it must concur [or come mighty close] with acknowledgement and judgment on how the world seems to exist by “common sense” standards. In other words, if a cognitive perception [the personal] does not conform to customary understanding, it is held to have minimum or no connection with defining the nature of reality. The world of intuitive perception [the universal] is only grudgingly given the light of day, to say nothing of any validation of the truth of its process and information it provides. Study of The Flower Ornament Sutra requires a perspective that includes both the cognitive and intuitive, and insists on their equal standing and value. The personal [*shū*] and universal [*li*] interpenetrate and are of equal concern.

The sutra text is written from the perspective of the interpenetration of the Personal and Universal Aspects of Mind, giving it its dream-like feeling. In reading the text, we must deliver ourselves into the intuitive world and attempt to understand and engage with the information, much like we would seek to grasp the meaning of a dream or a metaphor. But this metaphor is not a comparison.

The usual understanding of a metaphor is that it is a poetic tool by which meaning is conveyed through comparison of one thing to another. The sutra text describes the mutually beneficial interaction of the personal and universal aspects of reality. Here, the metaphor contains both the symbol and what is symbolized. In order to grasp its meaning, it is necessary to transcend the notion that metaphors in Buddhism convey only a kind of likeness standing apart from “reality as it is.” Dogen wrote, “*Being like* does not express resemblance, *being like* is concrete existence.”

Hence the sutra text invites the reader/practitioner into the world of concrete existence, not a “nothing but,” “just your imagination,” or impenetrable gibberish. This view is consistent with how “*it is like*” is used in Master Tung-Shan’s *The Song of the Jewel Mirror Awareness*. “*It is like*” is not pointing out an idea or concept. Rather, “*it is like*” is thusness itself. When Master Tung-Shan

uses the phrase “*it is like*”, he is expressing the direct realization of the intimacy of the Personal and Universal Aspects of Mind. Intimacy here is used in the way Taizan Maezumi Roshi means it when he taught, “... intimacy is simply realizing that your true nature and the phenomenal world are meeting right here, now, as your life.” Maezumi Roshi’s statement points out that the study of the Flower Ornament Sutra is not philosophical but experiential in nature, offering familiarity with the Benefactors’ efforts and teachings so that they come alive in our understanding, being, and behavior.