

Book Review

Universal Enlightenment: An Introduction to the Teaching and Practices of Huayen Buddhism

By Tony Prince

Kongting Publishing, Taipei, 2014

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* (aka the *Hua Yen Sutra*) is one of the most daunting of the major sutras in Buddhism. Clearly a late Mahayana sutra, legend has it that it was the first sutra that the Buddha taught, to his mother Queen Maya, up in the Tushita Heaven. Various partial translations can be found online; the full English translation by Thomas Cleary is 1,464 oversize pages long, not counting an extensive introduction, appendices and commentary. Its pages are filled with hundreds of buddhas and bodhisattvas with names like Light of the Supreme Lamp of Universal Virtue, Lion Banner of Universal Light, Subtle Light of Flames of Universal Jewels (just three of the 20 listed just on p. 57 of Cleary's translation), as well as jeweled palaces, bejeweled trees, scented flowers falling from the sky (the title itself translates as *Flower Garland Sutra*), many varieties of celestial and noncelestial beings, and language so ornate and repetitive that this modern reader has a hard time not having her eyes glaze over. It is a major source of two fundamental Buddhist concepts: first, the interpenetration of all phenomena, from which follows the notion of *pratityasamutpada*, that is, dependent co-origination, or co-dependent origination, encapsulated by the image of Indra's net (which also comes from this sutra); second, the practices, path and vows of a bodhisattva. And there's more—much more. For example, it is the source of the following lines in our morning bell chant: "If you wish to understand all Buddhas of past, present and future, understand that the universe is created by mind alone"—these lines have in themselves had a profound influence on Buddhism.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* gave rise to the Huayen school of Chinese Buddhism (Huaom school in Korea), one of the more intellectually complex Buddhist schools, which almost died out in the ninth century, but whose basic concepts inform all Mahayana schools, including—and especially—Chan/Soen/Zen.

Tony Prince has written a wonderfully lucid introduction to all this complexity, clearly delineating the fundamentals of Huayen Buddhism, which, far from dying out, remains fully alive and, apparently, especially attractive to lay practitioners. His discussion is strongly based on the writings of the



eightth-century Chinese teachers Fa Zang and Li Tungxuan, as well as other classical Buddhist texts, but he also quotes a wide range of Western authors to show that the basic teachings of Huayen are not impossibly strange outside of East Asian culture. An appendix gives brief and highly informative outlines of the chapters of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. As an added bonus, when he translates from Chinese, he also gives the original Chinese in footnotes.

Basically, Huayen doctrine can be represented by three personages: Vairocana Buddha (substance), Manjushri Bodhisattva (truth), and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (function).

Vairocana is the cosmic Buddha, the Buddha who not only pervades but is coextensive with the universe, the personification of Buddha nature, of the absolute. The basis of Huayen practice, we are told, is exactly faith in the reality of Vairocana, "in our knowledge of the ultimate identity of our own minds with the mind of Vairocana."¹ (p. 6)

Manjushri is the bodhisattva of wisdom, the fundamental wisdom of deeply perceiving true nature, the universe as it actually is in all its interpenetrated glory, and hence the wisdom of realizing the necessity of practice in order to manifest our true wisdom. Manjushri is our inspiration to and our guide in practice.

Samantabhadra is the bodhisattva of action—not random action, but enlightened action, the manifestation of Buddha nature in this world. In some sense you could say that practicing Huayen is about becoming Samantabhadra.

The great theme of interpenetration of all beings leads inexorably to the great themes of emptiness, nondualism, and dependent co-origination, which have been explicated in commentaries over tens of thousands of pages (or more) for well over a thousand years. Prince does a wonderful job of summarizing much of this explication, and it would be a disservice to summarize it further in this review. He also does something quite wonderful in relating these doctrines to the ornate repetitions of the sutra. Yes, paragraphs seem to blend into each other; and yes, it is difficult to separate things out at times, but that is because that is how the universe is, and our desire to keep things separate is part of our disease that must be cured. As for the extravagance of the

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Mahayana cosmogony, with its overflowing abundance of natural and supernatural beings, different times and spaces coinciding with each other, different worlds appearing and disappearing, coinciding and separating—confronting this, absorbing it, our minds are forced to open to a vision greater than our ordinary deluded one.

As for the other great theme of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the path to bodhisattvahood, rather than being seen as a path to changing our status, it is simply the manifestation of what we already are. As Prince puts it (p. 99): “Enlightenment is . . . returning to the source or to our original home.” The *Avatamsaka Sutra* itself has various chapters delineating the stages toward bodhisattvahood, with chapter titles such as *Ten Practices*, *Ten Dedications*, *Ten Stages*, and so on, but, as Prince quotes Fa Zang (p. 137), “One stage is all stages, one practice is all practices.” Or, as Prince says (p. 110), practice is “a way of making Enlightenment manifest in the world rather than as a means to the achievement of Enlightenment.” As Prince outlines it, Huayen practice is built on a scaffold of (1) recognition of our innate Buddha nature; (2) faith that we can manifest it; (3) nonattachment to the world of impermanence, especially to our ego-mind with its fears, desires and schemes; (4) constantly cultivating awareness of the Buddha; and (5) bodhicitta (aspiration to awaken). Practice itself is enlightenment.

Which brings me to my one small (and, given the richness and clarity of this book, it is very small) complaint—just what are these Huayen practices? As outlined, they seem to be essentially attitudinal. There is no mention of meditation, chanting, bowing or devotional practices. Yet a quick search online shows that in fact there were important ancient Chinese texts devoted to Huayen meditational practices (see Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable*²). I asked Prince about this, and he responded that “any Dharma practice can be adopted as a Huayen practice if

undertaken from the Huayen point of view.” I hope this is incorporated into any later edition of the book.

Aside from curiosity about Huayen Buddhism, there is another good reason to read *Universal Enlightenment*: Huayen had a huge influence on Chan, and therefore on our lineage of Korean Zen. As Cleary points out in the introduction to *Entry into the Inconceivable*, Linchi, Unmun and Tahui—major ancient Chinese ancestors—are just three among many Chan figures greatly influenced by Huayen. So this book is an excellent introduction to an important source of our practice and teaching. With this book, Tony Prince has given a great gift to the English-speaking Buddhist community.

And as a gift is how my husband and I stumbled across it. We received it from a shopkeeper in Seoul who had been given a bunch of free copies by a stranger. She offered us more, but we foolishly said no. You can’t get *Universal Enlightenment* through your local bookstore, nor can your local bookstore easily order it. For a long time it was effectively unobtainable. The publisher is Kongting Publishing Company in Taipei, the in-house publisher of the world-wide Huayen school that Prince studies in, and for a long time the only way to order it was through a Chinese-language website that required registration and that apparently, even if you read Chinese, is difficult to navigate.

But now you can get it through Amazon. Do yourself a favor and buy a copy. And make sure your local Zen center library has one too.

Notes

1. Vairocana is prominently invoked in our morning bell chant, where he is called Biro.
2. http://www.khamkoo.com/uploads/9/0/0/4/9004485/entry_into_the_inconceivable_-_an_introduction_to_huayen_buddhism.pdf

WHEN WORLD SOUND EQUALS POLICE SHOOTING BLACK MEN

(Continued from p. 21)

our vow in this moment and then the next moment and then the next. Fall down seven times, get up eight.

How may I help? How may I help? If you are holding your vow with all your strength when you die to this moment, you will be reborn in the next moment with a situation that improves your ability to help. Trust that if you can hear the sound of suffering in this moment, then helping will be both possible and necessary in the next. ♦

Writer and social change activist Colin Beavan is the author of the forthcoming *How to Be Alive: A Guide*



Photo: Ayla Christman

to the *Kind of Happiness that Helps the World* (Dey Street Books, January 2016). Colin attracted international attention for his year-long lifestyle redesign project described in the wildly popular book, *No Impact Man*, and Sundance-selected documentary film that it inspired. A sought-after speaker by wide-ranging audiences, he also consults with businesses on improving eco-friendly and human-centered practices. He is the founder of the No Impact Project and a dharma teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen.