

The Avataṃsaka Sūtra: The Tower of Vairocana

The final section of the massive Avataṃsaka Sūtra, “Entry into the Realm of Reality,” relates the pilgrimage of Sudhana, a youth who seeks highest enlightenment from a series of visits with some fifty-two bodhisattvas working in the world as ordinary human beings—men and women, laypersons and clergy, scholars, merchants, entertainers, even a prostitute—for the enlightenment of others. In the fifty-first of these encounters the bodhisattva Maitreya conjures before him the “tower of (the buddha) Vairocana,” in which Sudhana is given a vision of the totality of the dharmadhātu (all of reality) as the buddhas themselves view it. His description here encapsulates the Mahāyāna conception of a fully enlightened being.

After a long while, his being flooded by the energy of inconceivable roots of goodness, his body and mind refreshed, Sudhana rose from the doorstep of the tower, gazed with unblinking eyes at the great tower containing the adornments of Vairocana, circled it respectfully hundreds of thousands of times, and voiced these thoughts:

"This is abode of those who dwell in the state of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness; this is the abode of those who dwell in the state of nonconceptualization of all things, those who dwell in the state of the unity of the cosmos, those who dwell in the state of ungraspability of the realm of beings, those who dwell in the state of the nonorigination of all things, those who dwell in the state of nonattachment to all worlds . . .

"This is the abode of those who have dropped all attachments to the world yet appear in the abodes of all beings in order to develop them to maturity; those who are not attached to any land but travel in all lands in the service of buddhas; those who travel in all lands to encompass the arrangement of all buddha-lands, without leaving where they are; those who are in the presence of all buddhas while free from attachment to the conception of Buddha; those who continue to associate with spiritual friends, even though they have no peer in any world in terms of knowledge; those who dwell in the abodes of all demons while yet being detached from passion; those who dwell in the state of comprehension of all ideas while their minds are clear of all ideas; those who adapt to all beings without duality between self and other; those who are physically present in all worldly realms without being cut off from the realm of reality; those who vow to remain in the world for all time without dwelling on the idea of long or short periods; those who appear in all worlds without moving from one spot . . .

"This is the abode of those who dwell in the contemplation of impurity yet do not make the condition of dispassion their final realization, nor do they live with elements of passion; those who dwell in the state of love, their minds not stained by hatred; those who dwell on interdependent origination, ultimately free from delusion in regard to all things . . . those who dwell in the state of tranquility and insight, yet do not realize knowledge and liberation for themselves alone, so that they may develop all sentient beings; those who dwell in the state of universal equanimity, yet do not abandon the realm of sentient beings; those who dwell in the state of emptiness yet do not stick to it as a view; those whose sphere is not in appearances yet who confront the guidance of beings who act on appearances; those who have no wishes at all, yet do not give up the vows of enlightening beings; those who can control all active afflictions, yet for the sake of developing sentient beings appear to act under the influence of afflictions; those who have ended death and birth by perfect knowledge, yet appear to be born and die; those who are detached from all conditions of existence, yet go into all conditions of existence by the power to

guide all beings; those who dwell in love but have no emotional attachment; those who dwell in compassion but show no hesitation; those who dwell in joy but are always grieving because they watch all who are suffering; those who dwell in equanimity while working for others."

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Then the enlightening being Maitreya, entering the tower and relaxing his magical force, snapped his fingers and said to Sudhana, "Arise. This is the nature of things: characterized by nonfixity, all things are stabilized by the knowledge of enlightening beings, thus they are inherently unreal, and are like illusions, dreams, reflections."

At the snap, Sudhana emerged from that trance and Maitreya said to him, "Did you see the miraculous display of the magical power of enlightening beings? Did you see the results of the power of enlightening beings' preparations for enlightenment? Did you see the creations of the vows and knowledge of enlightening beings? Did you see the practices and attainments of enlightening beings? Did you hear the enlightening beings' ways of emancipation? . . ."

Sudhana said, "I saw, Noble One, by the empowerment and spiritual force of the benefactor. And what is this liberation called?"

Maitreya said, "This liberation is called the "sanctum of supernal manifestations of unconfused recollection entering into knowledge of all objects of past, present, and future." An enlightening being assured of enlightenment in one lifetime attains untold liberations like this."

Sudhana said, "Where has that magnificent display gone?"

Maitreya said, "Where it came from."

[translated by Thomas Cleary]