

The reader is guided on a path that leads to mental balance, insight into the nature of reality, and deep commitment to work selflessly for the benefit of other beings.

### *Summary of the Text*

Like many Sūtras, the text recounts a series of questions and answers between the Buddha and his followers, or, in the case of chapter one, between two Bodhisattvas. Except for chapter four, where the Śrāvaka Subhūti questions the Buddha, all of the interlocutors are highly developed Bodhisattvas. Their questions and the Buddha's answers go to the very heart of the practice or issue being discussed, fully explicating profound and subtle meanings.

The setting in which the Buddha teaches the Sūtra is described as a vast celestial palace that fills countless worldly realms with its brilliance and surpasses all other dwellings. This wondrous palace reflects the supreme spiritual attainments of the Buddha, who created it, and the aspirations of all its inhabitants, who are Dharma practitioners of a high level of development.

The Sūtra may be divided into five main parts. The first four chapters present the ultimate and how it is to be understood by trainees. Chapter five is an analysis of consciousness; chapters six and seven discuss the relative character of phenomena and of teachings as they are illuminated by definitive understanding. The path to enlightenment is the subject of the eighth and ninth chapters, which focus on meditative practices and the methods for mastering the mental afflictions and obstacles that undermine progress on the path. Chapter ten is a discussion of the nature of a Buddha, the final goal of yogic practice.

The Bodhisattva Gambhīrārthasāṃdhinirmocana characterizes the ultimate as “ineffable and of a non-dual character” in chapter one. The ultimate pervades all reality but cannot be described in words or understood by conceptual thought. It is realized only by Āryas, those who have attained the path of seeing and are able to perceive the ultimate directly.

In chapter two the Bodhisattva Dharmodgata describes a debate on the ultimate character of phenomena that he witnessed among proponents of various Tīrthika systems. The Bodhisattva laments their divergent opinions, doubts, and misconceptions and marvels at the Buddha’s realization and actualization of the ultimate, “whose character completely transcends all argumentation.” In response, the Buddha teaches that the ultimate is realized individually, is signless, inexpressible, devoid of the conventional, and free from all dispute. Beings caught up in desire, discursiveness, and the conventions of seeing, hearing, differentiating, and perceiving, as well as beings engaged in dispute, cannot even imagine what the ultimate is like.

In chapter three, the Bodhisattva Suvisuddhamati points out that even Bodhisattvas disagree about the ultimate: Some believe the character of the ultimate and the character of the compounded are the same; others believe them to be different. Through a series of reasonings, the Buddha demonstrates that any attempt to categorize leads to error, for the ultimate is “profound and subtle, having a character completely transcending sameness and difference.”

The ultimate must be sought through meditation that moves beyond all limiting and distorting categories. In chapter four the Buddha poses two questions to Subhūti: How many people communicate their spiritual understanding under the influence of conceit? How many communicate without conceit? Subhūti recounts a time when he witnessed a large gathering of monks, all advanced in training, who

expressed their understanding based on “various forms of phenomena” such as the five aggregates, the six sense spheres, and the four noble truths. Since they did “not seek the ultimate whose character is all of one taste . . . therefore, these venerable persons have conceit.” The Buddha explains that the ultimate, which pervades all phenomena and is undifferentiated in all compounded things, is “an object of observation for purification of the aggregates.”

Using this discussion of the ultimate as a basis, chapter five provides an analysis of the nature of consciousness that indicates how we are able to progress from our present state of ignorance, desire, and hatred to the state of a Buddha. In response to questions by the Bodhisattva Viśālamati, the Buddha teaches that our present mental states and life situations result solely from our own past actions. Each action and thought creates a concordant predisposition that is deposited in our mental continuum. The Buddha points to a “basis-consciousness” which collects these predispositions and holds them until the time is ripe for them to give rise to their resultant effects. “Bodhisattvas are wise with respect to the secrets of mind, thought, and consciousness,” not only because they understand the very subtle ways that consciousness functions, but also because they have transcended even the most subtle clinging to any object of perception.

In chapter six the Buddha teaches the Bodhisattva Guṇākara that phenomena exhibit a threefold character: the imputational (*parikalpita*), the other-dependent (*paratantra*), and the thoroughly established (*pariniṣpanna*). These characters are illustrated by compelling examples that remind us that the Buddha is not introducing abstract philosophical concepts, but is instructing us in how to reorient the mind toward enlightenment.

In chapter seven, the Bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata asks the Buddha his intention in teaching that “All phenom-

ena lack own-being; all phenomena are unproduced, unceasing, quiescent from the start, and naturally in a state of nirvāṇa.” The Buddha’s response further reveals the nature of phenomena and differentiates teachings of definitive meaning from those of interpretable meaning. Just as space pervades all form, teachings of definitive meaning pervade all Sūtras of interpretable meaning. Those who understand the intention behind the Buddha’s teaching know that although beings are diverse, there is a “single purity” and “one vehicle.”

In the eighth chapter the Bodhisattva Maitreya’s questions focus on how to develop śamatha and vipaśyanā, two main bases of Buddhist meditation. Śamatha is the ability, developed through concentrated meditative practice, to focus one’s mind on an object without distraction. This is essential for more advanced meditative practice, since it prevents the afflictions from arising. Vipāśyanā involves analyzing the object to determine its true nature. This practice recalls the teachings of the first four chapters, since the true nature of phenomena is the ultimate, which is equated with suchness and emptiness. Through developing vipāśyanā, one eradicates the basis of the afflictions and is able to perceive the ultimate directly. Here the Buddha teaches that the images of people and things that we observe are “cognition-only.”

The ninth chapter maps the path to enlightenment, delineating the ten Bodhisattva stages, the levels through which Mahāyāna practitioners progress. Each stage represents a decisive advance in understanding and spiritual attainment. The questioner here is Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion. The main meditative practice is the six perfections—generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom—the essence of the Bodhisattva’s training.

Compassion motivates Bodhisattvas to work tirelessly on the spiritual path for an unimaginably long period of time. The final fruition of their efforts is the state of a Buddha, the

focus of chapter ten. It represents the apex of all spiritual qualities and the highest development of compassion and wisdom. Through the Buddha's answers to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī's questions, we learn that a Buddha's limitless compassionate action is accomplished without any manifest activity. There is no afflicted being who later becomes purified: "Afflicted phenomena and pure phenomena are all without activity and personhood." **Hearing this, the aspiring Bodhisattva is again reminded that pursuing the ultimate goal of the path of yogic practice begins and ends with a proper understanding of the nature of the ultimate.**

### *About This Translation*

As this brief summary suggests, the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra is a complex and advanced text. Translating it has proven to be a demanding task which has taken many years. I first began work on the translation as a graduate student at the University of Virginia, where it became my doctoral thesis. Later much effort was devoted to refining the translation and preparing it for publication. Throughout, my goal has been to keep the English translation faithful to the structure of the Tibetan text and to translate technical terms conservatively and consistently. While this has sometimes resulted in awkward readings, I prefer this approach to being overly speculative about the meaning of the Sūtra's many difficult passages.

Although the original Sanskrit text was probably lost by the thirteenth century, numerous translations of this Sūtra exist today in Asian languages. I chose to base this translation on the Tibetan since I had access to a number of different Tibetan editions, and also because the Tibetans are especially noted for their accurate translations of canonical texts. In my studies, I have consulted ten different Tibetan editions, as well as three Chinese editions, and have noted their variant readings.