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*Mahayana Buddhist Ethics as Imperatively Religious: A Hermeneutical Study of the  
Avatamsaka Sutra*

### ABSTRACT

Through a study of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, one finds that the ethics of Mahayana Buddhism cannot be reduced to a mere intellectual movement, or be compatible with a secular philosophy as some scholars in recent years have interpreted Buddhism to be. Through this hermeneutic exercise, this essay defends the ethics of the Mahayana tradition as fundamentally grounded and inseparable from Buddhist religious doctrine.

### BIOGRAPHY

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# MAHAYANA BUDDHIST ETHICS AS IMPERATIVELY RELIGIOUS: A HERMENEUTICAL STUDY OF THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

## INTRODUCTION

This essay aims, through an interpretative study of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Ornament Scripture),<sup>i</sup> to defend the religious nature of Mahayana Buddhist ethics. Imperatively, I am asserting that if one wishes to practice the ethics of Mahayana Buddhism, one should adopt, at least to a certain extent, its religious worldview, for concepts such as *bodhicitta* and universal liberation *distinctly* hail from the Mahayana tradition and hence remain bound to it. Despite this religious discourse that is fundamental to Mahayana practice, it does not explain why Buddhist ethics of *all* traditions are being associated or harmonised with contemporary secular ethics, to the point that some writers assert that they have the potential to be *non-religious*. A reason for this may be that Buddhism's universalist teachings have found great affinity with modern spiritual seekers. This is an encouraging observation. However, the lack of study attempted on the religious worldview of the Mahayana scriptures continues to the point that many who speak of Mahayana ethics remain unaware of the fact that they are performing religiously-loaded speech-acts.<sup>ii</sup>

For the purpose of contributing to the correction of these mistakes and upholding Mahayana Buddhism's aforementioned religious spirit, this essay looks to the *Avatamsaka Sutra's* religious teachings as the ultimate authority on the religion's ethics. The basic hermeneutical device utilised for this exposition will be *neyartha*, or identification of discourse that becomes meaningful only after interpretation and must be 'guided' towards its intended meaning, or 'drawn out' from its words.<sup>iii</sup> The reason for using *neyartha* is that it must be achieved alongside the pursuit of Enlightenment with wisdom and Buddhist *bodhicitta*.<sup>iv</sup> Through this religiously grounded methodology, the *Sutra* will reveal that while the ethics of the Great Vehicle are by nature applicable to all sentient beings, one must not forget the *religiosity* this wisdom was cultivated from.

## 1. ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

In modern philosophical circles it is often claimed that ethics requires no religious grounding.<sup>v</sup> In the past few decades and in a similar trend, millennia-old Buddhist ethics have been suggested by scholars to have something in common with their non-religious counterparts. This is because Buddhism itself does not sit into several "categories" of religion, at least according to a Western methodology of the philosophy of religion. Scholars point to the fact that the early Theravada school placed emphasis on the *Dhamma* as a psychological therapy,<sup>vi</sup> and not as a religion that *depended* on the supernatural. Others have praised Buddhism as a system of philosophy comparable to a more ancient form of humanistic spirituality. Reasons abound: Buddhism does not postulate or demand belief in a creator God, and it asserts the non-existence of the soul and of a permanent and independently-existent self. Finally, Buddhism evolves and adapts, and hence is not a static revealed religion, but a living faith<sup>vii</sup> constantly developing according to sentient beings' needs. This is very different to what many would categorise as "religious," and some scholars have argued that both academia and laypeople should go one step further and reinterpret Buddhism as an agnostic culture of awakening rather than as a religion.<sup>viii</sup> By extension, this has led to the opinion that the *Dharma*, like secular ethics, needs no religious grounding.<sup>ix</sup>

At least on the part of the Mahayana tradition, replacing the ancient religious principles of the Great Vehicle with agnostic and "contemporary" paths to awakening seems an awkward and even unacceptable suggestion. Since their inception, Mahayana schools have always studied and interpreted religious doctrine through very systematic methodologies. Buddhism, perhaps, possesses *another* element from religion (as a physician's diagnosis to suffering),<sup>x</sup> but most Mahayanists understand that for psychological transformation to occur, the spiritual tenets of the masters are of paramount importance. Due to its complexity and history, Mahayana Buddhism must be examined not in a methodology that is a product of the Western philosophical battle between secularism and theism, but according to its own, like *Sutra* hermeneutics. Stripping the Mahayana traditions of their religious identity entirely is contrary to what the Mahayana sages intended, for the ethics of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, regarded highly by all Mahayana Buddhists,<sup>xi</sup> can be said to be directed towards a reader who is inclined to be religiously-minded, or one who is searching for a cosmic religious path. Furthermore, the same writers who expounded the ethics of the *Sutra* were also responsible for the elucidating of its metaphysics and ontology. It would be difficult not to acknowledge much of Mahayana philosophy as being derived from this sacred text.<sup>xii</sup> And if the ethics are addressed alongside these other aspects, then they must all encompass, together, the life of a practitioner. Hence my defence of the Great Vehicle's ethics as fundamentally religious doctrines, which require an acceptance of the worldview on which the ethics' presuppositions are built on.

## 2. RELIGIOUS ETHICS IN THE AVATAMSAKA SUTRA

Like all Sutras that claim authority, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* begins with the proclamation, ‘Thus have I heard.’ Like many other Mahayana scriptures, the account is of a supernatural nature, but on a grander scale. Most of its discourse is performed by transhistorical, transcendent beings representing aspects of universal enlightenment<sup>xiii</sup> in higher parallel dimensions above the material Magadha plane, giving a strong idea of the religious conceptions of its authors. In regards to the teachings that are revealed to both congregation (in the discourse) and the reader himself or herself, they attempt to unite intellectual philosophy and ethics while transmitting enlightening religious knowledge to the recipient. Throughout the *Sutra* but in particular book 39,<sup>xiv</sup> the aim of the *bodhisattva*,<sup>xv</sup> the highest Mahayana model of moral development, is to develop compassion and engagement for a diverse universe<sup>xvi</sup> that constitutes the religious life of the devotee. A passage of Asha’s teaching to the monk Sudhana includes two references to the Buddhist conception of the moral pinnacle of existence, both used in the context of practicing the highest calling of the Mahayana:

Enlightening beings do not aspire to enlightenment with the object of leading just one sentient being to perfection, nor for the sake of a hundred or a thousand or a million or a billion sentient beings, nor for any number of beings, nor for all the sentient beings in as many worlds as atoms in untold, inexpressibly vast numbers of billion-world universes. Enlightening beings aspire to enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings in all worlds, to lead them to perfection.<sup>xvii</sup>

The *Sutra* offers a cosmic and universal view of Totality which compassionately embraces all sentient beings. But there is a reason for this ethical outlook. The vow to liberate all sentient beings is fundamentally an *expansion* on the religious ideas of *samsara*, *Nirvana*, and rebirth. All sentient beings are perpetually reborn in *samsara*, or the cosmos of sense-desire and suffering, and the *bodhisattva* vows, through cultivating compassion and *bodhicitta*, to dedicate his or her life and all future lives (note the religious presupposition) to benefit and liberate these countless beings from suffering, and lead them to Nirvanic liberation.<sup>xviii</sup> Hence this universalism is based on a belief, or at least awareness, of the religious ideas of rebirth, *samsara*, and liberation. When one speaks of “liberation for all sentient beings,” one speaks of a spiritual freedom from an existentially-sundered world.

The *Sutra* language in the passages supports the religiously-minded nature of this altruistic behaviour through benevolent action and other means of dedication: ‘I should be a protector for all sentient beings, to let them all be liberated from all afflictions. I should be a refuge for all sentient beings, to free them from all fears.’<sup>xix</sup> It is this background that gives Mahayana Buddhism its religious identity, while at the same time providing it with a philosophical basis to supplement what the historical Buddha intended for his movement to be: a therapeutic psychology. Through a personal transformation one can impart these inner qualities to impact positively on the very actions of others: ‘By my roots of goodness may all creatures, all sentient beings, be purified, may they be filled with virtues which cannot be ruined and are inexhaustible. May they always gain respect. May they have right mindfulness and unflinching recollection. May they attain sure discernment. May they be replete with immeasurable knowledge. May all virtues of physical, verbal and mental action fully adorn them.’<sup>xx</sup> Time and again, the religiously-loaded designation *bodhisattva* (or, in Cleary’s translation, ‘enlightening being’), is constantly used in the ethical exhortations of the scripture.

In other words, religious piety and deeds *constitute* ethical practice. As Sharma so succinctly observes, ‘... the decision to share and teach the *dharma* is by itself a *moral* choice, hence the significance of the Bodhisattva.’<sup>xxi</sup> There are certainly variations of developing this psychologically beneficial *bodhicitta*,<sup>xxii</sup> but the main emphasis of *bodhicitta* is to cultivate the motivation towards universal ethics, leading not only to religious practice, but also the knowledge of *how* it is practiced.

## 3. RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AS ETHICAL ACTS

Religious components of Mahayana Buddhism are a co-existent phenomenon with the ethical. In later Mahayana thought, devotional practice became more heavily emphasised through invocations to cosmic Buddhas. For example, philosophy and religious “faith-based” practice can be unified into one simple word of chanting. Such practices are also ritualistic, daily events that influence the practitioner intimately. Reverence of a Buddha or *bodhisattva* is prominent within the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, perhaps because of the religious mind of its authors, but at the same time highlights the respect for and faith in the teachings of the Buddhas. This is known as *saddha*, or ‘trustful confidence,’ sometimes more roughly translated as faith that is necessarily balanced by wisdom and meditation.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is well-known that Mahayana Buddhism, emphasises great devotion to not just other sentient beings but also to higher, trans-historical Buddhas. In book 39, Samantabhadra’s Seven-Limbed

Service requires prostration, making grand mental and real offerings, confession, rejoicing in the merit of oneself and others, requesting the Enlightened Beings to turn the Wheel of the Doctrine, requesting them also not to enter into the selfish type of Nirvana which would abandon sentient beings, and dedication of the merit gained through performing the Service towards the development of one's religious path to enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.<sup>xxiv</sup> All the while, it is important to understand that aside from philosophy and metaphysics, Hua-Yen traditionally placed belief in a realisation of Totality through direct experience.<sup>xxv</sup> Hence the constant practice of ethical principles could play a part in a sudden Nirvana, a realisation of the highest religious truth that by nature is beyond the reach of words.

As previously asserted, the speakers and teachers of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* lend a glimpse into the religious worldview of its authors. In all the 39<sup>xxvi</sup> books, sermons are given by several divine or transcendent beings in massive congregations of celestial entities like city gods, adoring goddesses and ghandarva kings or fantastic creatures like naga kings.<sup>xxvii</sup> These are unique in terms of a Buddhist revelatory vision of an interconnected and interdependent Totality. Hence, at least in Mahayana Buddhism, there exists a strong current of trustful devotion to external powers serving as moral, religious and practical guides for living. It is also observed that the audience of the congregations in the *Sutra* consists of *bodhisattvas* in the ranks of fruition of Buddhahood, in the 'ocean of knowledge of essence,' all of whom are on the one vehicle. According to Cleary, the humans, celestials, spirits and other beings are also all of the same comprehending faculties and enter the stream of Buddha-knowledge.<sup>xxviii</sup> By tentative extension, this means that one can engage in religious practice through a diverse myriad of methods, provided one's state of mind is centred toward this inclusive morality.

This is all rather practical, because the Mahayana masters understood that the countless sentient beings of the cosmos have different levels of understanding. 'As the understanding of sentient beings is not the same /And their inclinations and actions are different / He [the Buddha] teaches them according to their needs.'<sup>xxix</sup> Now if the Buddha teaches according to sentient beings' requirements, then the practitioner must also practice according to others' various needs—even to the extent that one has to dispense with language or speech-acts that might not be appropriate to the situation, such as talk about *karma* or *samsara*. So from the perspective of a Buddha, any means of benefiting a sentient being is acceptable in accordance with the sentient being's own preferences. Buddhist ideas may not be explained as they are within Buddhism itself in the case of those who do not understand, or do not want to understand, the Buddhist message. On a higher level, the historical Buddha's sermons cater to the understandings of the laypeople and monastics of his time, and the zenith of Buddhist doctrine (according to Mahayana Buddhists) that which was revealed during the epoch of the Great Vehicle. Regardless of the level of understanding, religious liberation can be achieved: consider this passage which permits the sermonizing of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths through diverse means:

The four truths may be explained in local magical language,  
 Or the four truths may be told in skillful esoteric language,  
 Or the four truths may be spoken in direct human speech,  
 Or the four truths may be spoken in the language of divine mystery;

The four truths may be explained in several languages,  
 Or they may be explained in all languages.  
 In whatever languages beings understand  
 The four truths are explained for them, to liberate them.<sup>xxx</sup>

This passage is an affirmation that even the most basic teachings of Buddhism, at least in Mahayana tradition, are grounded in religious origin. It now seems clear that the authors possessed a religious agenda. But this was *not* a justification to covertly preach their religion to unsuspecting non-Buddhists or to dishonestly masquerade missionary activity as a religious vow to save all beings. Rather, the early masters hoped to retain the explanation and practice of religious ideas like the Four Noble Truths as ethical instruments for the benefit of others, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, on all levels of understanding. To abandon their original intentions seems nothing less than a betrayal of this ancient movement, whether on part of ignorance or malice.

## UPHOLDING RELIGIOUS MAHAYANA ETHICS

I wish to conclude with a chapter in book 39 which narrates Sudhana's encounter with the night goddess Vasanti. She is a golden-complexioned, black-haired beauty<sup>xxxi</sup> and among the many grandmasters who teach Sudhana that the moral life *is* religious practice. She aims to teach all sentient beings doctrines such as impermanence, no-self, and the precepts of those who undertake the *Bodhisattva* vows. It is commonly claimed in Buddhist circles that those in *samsara* are suffering because of their ignorance and delusions. By extension,

her objectives are to correct incorrect and deluded views and to help beings see reality in its *suchness*, as it is. This is a bridging of the gulf between morality and religion. She labours to:

destroy the darkness of ignorance of those ... who are perverted in concepts, thoughts, and views, who think the impermanent is permanent, who think the painful is painless, who think the selfless has a self, who think the impure is pure ... who do what is not good, who take life, who steal, who abuse sexuality, who tell lies, who slander others, who speak harshly, who damage the relics of saints and the goods of the religious community ... by the Great Vehicle of universal good ... I shall show them the stage of the enlightened, the realm of the enlightened ...<sup>xxxii</sup>

Vasanti, along with the entirety of the teachers in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, has revealed that practicing Mahayana Buddhist ethics fundamentally grounds a practitioner in religious ideals. The idea of Mahayana Buddhist ethics as potentially non-religious is symptomatic of the misinterpretations of Buddhism as a non-religion because of *some* aspects that do not correspond to common understandings of religion. It must be emphasised that to support the religious nature of Mahayana ethics is *not* to deny any sentient being the chance of practising them. Nor is it the intention to force anyone to convert to Buddhism before they can even speak of its ethics. Rather, it is sufficient for those who would speak of Mahayana ethics to be mindful of the fact that, like Vasanti, they are uttering religiously-motivated language. If this motivation is not preserved and Mahayana Buddhism's ethics lose their religious context, the practice of this religion will slowly but surely lose its purpose and meaning.

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## REFERENCES

<sup>i</sup> A 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century harmonization of all Buddhist teachings within one titanic Mahayana scripture. Even the older school of Theravada is, in principle, encompassed in this text. Revered most by the now-extinct Hua-Yen school.

<sup>ii</sup> John Makransky, "Mahayana Buddhist Ritual and Ethical Activity in the World," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 20 (2000): 54–59. Makransky suggests the ritualistic-religious dimension of Mahayana Buddhism is complimentary to its ethics, which many scholars with secular sympathies seem to have disregarded. This is an unnecessary complication, because the ethics themselves are religious by nature.

<sup>iii</sup> Harold Coward (ed.), *Experiencing Scripture in World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 146

<sup>iv</sup> As elucidated by Kamalashila (8<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.). Coward, *Experiencing Scripture in World Religions*, 146.

<sup>v</sup> J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 232

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 47. To end the cycle of suffering, or dissatisfaction, is akin to healing an illness. In several Buddhist scriptures the Buddha is referred to as the Supreme Physician for this reason.

<sup>vii</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 14–15, 23.

<sup>viii</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), 114–15.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>x</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 47. The Buddha himself described his teaching as such, and not as a "religion" in the modern Western sense.

<sup>xi</sup> Ikeda rightly observes that not all schools held the *Avatamsaka* on the same level, although all paid it due respect. Daisaku Ikeda, *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Weatherhill, 1989), 66–67.

<sup>xii</sup> The basic teaching of the school is the theory of causation by the universal principle or the *dharmadhatu* (Totality). A more in-depth and elucidating summary can be found in Kenneth Ch'en, *Schools of Buddhism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), 316–317.

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications), 1.

<sup>xiv</sup> The monk Sudhana makes a pilgrimage to see the *bodhisattva* Samantabhadra. Prior to this he undertakes a journey through fifty-two grandmasters of the Mahayana faith.

<sup>xv</sup> A *bodhisattva* is a being who has made it his or her objective to be reborn countlessly to guide all sentient beings to Nirvana before himself/herself. While any being can be a Bodhisattva, there are some beings who are recognized to be Bodhisattvas on a very high level, such as Avalokiteshvara.

<sup>xvi</sup> Bhikkhuni Gioi Huong, *Bodhisattva and Sunyata (in the Early and Developed Buddhist Traditions)*. (Dalhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2004), 103.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 39: "Entry into the Realm of Reality," 1211.

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- <sup>xviii</sup> Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddhist Heart: Cultivating Love and Spiritual Intelligence in your life* (Manhattan: Bantam, 2001), 34
- <sup>xix</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 25: “Ten Dedications,” 531–532.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 25: “Ten Dedications,” 533.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Arvind Sharma, *The Philosophy of Religion: A Buddhist Perspective* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 19,
- <sup>xxii</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 126–127.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid*, 170
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 126.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Garma C.C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa-Yen Buddhism*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1971), 26
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Originally this text was a separate Sutra called the *Gandhavyuha* until it was included in the *Avatamsaka* canon.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book one: “The Wonderful Adornments of the Leaders of the Worlds,” 55–149.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, 23
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book one: “The Wonderful Adornments of the Leaders of the Worlds,” 144
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 12: “Chief in Goodness,” 345–346.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 39: “Entry into the Realm of Reality,” 1284–1285.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Avatamsaka Sutra*, book 39: “Entry into the Realm of Reality,” 1287–1288. In this passage Vasanti specifically addresses the mental affliction of delusion, impermanence (*anicca*), the truth of *anatta*, the first four of the Five Precepts, and a list of prohibitions against certain religious and social crimes. In typical religious fashion, she resolves to liberate all beings who do not understand these ideas.