**The Shurangama Sutra**

**Volume 1**

**CHAPTER2**

**The History of the Transmission and Translation**

A9 The history of the transmission and translation.  
  
After the great Tian Tai Master Zhi Yi read the *Dharma Flower Sutra*, he divided all sutras into three sections: the preface; the body, which embodies the principle and implication of the sutra; and the propagation, which is an exhortation at the end of the sutra that it be circulated throughout the world.   
  
Later, when an Indian dharma master came to China and learned that Great Master Zhi Yi had divided all sutras into these three parts, he was amazed, and exclaimed, “That is just the same way the sutras of India are divided! The *Shurangama Sutra*, for instance is divided in exactly the same way!” When Master Zhi Yi heard of the existence of the *Shurangama Sutra*, which he had never seen, he was moved to bow to the west in the hope that he would one day see this sutra. He bowed to the west every day for eighteen years, but in the end he never had the opportunity to see the sutra. How superior must be the causes and conditions that allow us, who have never bowed to the sutra, to be able to encounter it now, to read it, and to recite it!   
  
Eventually, the king of India proclaimed the *Shurangama Sutra* a national treasure because it was one of the sutras that Nagarjuna Bodhisattva brought back from the Dragon Palace. After the proclamation, no one was permitted to take the sutra out of the country. At that time, Dharma Master Paramiti was intent upon getting the sutra out of India into other countries, especially China. He set out for China carrying a copy of the sutra, only to be stopped at the border by customs officials who would not permit him to carry the sutra across the border. Since he was unable to take the sutra out of the country, he returned and tried to think of a way to get the sutra out of the country. Finally, he thought of a way. He wrote out the sutra in minute characters on extremely fine silk, rolled it up, and sealed it with wax. Then he cut open his arm and placed the small scroll inside his flesh. Next he applied medicines to the wound and waited for it to heal. Some people say he put the sutra in his leg, but I think that since it would not have been respectful to place the text below the waist, he probably chose some fleshly place on the upper part of his body and put the sutra there. When the wound healed, he again set out for China and passed through the border guards without incident since the sutra was well concealed. Eventually, he arrived in Canton province where he happened to meet the Prime Minister Fang Yong, who invited him to reside at a temple in Canton while he translated the sutra.   
  
These were the difficulties encountered at the time the sutra was translated. How fortunate for us that the dharma master was so determined to take the sutra to China. From this account you can see how important this sutra is.

**The Translator**

B1 The translator.  
  
**Sutra:**  
**Translated during the T’ang dynasty by Shramana Paramiti from Central India.  
  
Commentary:**It was **during the Tang dynasty**, after Empress Wu Zai Tian retired, in the first year of the Shen Long reign period that Shramana Paramiti translated this sutra from Sanskrit to Chinese. He accomplished the translation very quickly, so that he could get back to India before the customs officials at the border were punished for letting him slip through with the sutra. Dharma Master Paramiti wanted to return to India and turn himself in so the guards would not be punished. After he finished his translation he went back to India, confessed to the king, and asked to receive whatever punishment the offense entailed.   
  
This dharma master’s merit with regard to this sutra is extremely great. Since it is due to his efforts at the outset that we now have the opportunity to investigate this sutra, we should first be thankful for this shramana’s meritorious work.   
  
**Shramana** is a Sanskrit word which means “diligent and putting to rest,” that is, diligently cultivating precepts, samadhi, and wisdom, and putting to rest greed, hatred, and stupidity. The Buddha is also called a shramana. Once in India, when the Buddha was in the world, the bhikshu Ashvajit (“Master of Horses”) was walking down the road carefully attired in his robes. His awesome deportment was so striking that upon seeing him Maudgalyayana was moved to say, “You are so majestic, your awesome manner so well perfected, that certainly you must have a master. Whom do you study with?”  
  
Bhikshu Ashvajit said, “All dharmas arise from conditions, all dharmas cease because of conditions. The Buddha, the Great Shramana, often spoke of this.” When Maudgalyayana heard those words, he accompanied the monk back to the Jeta Grove in the Garden of Anathapindaka, bowed to the Buddha as his master, and left the home-life.   
  
Each of us should study the conduct of a shramana. In order to cultivate precepts, samadhi, and wisdom diligently like the shramana, we should first take refuge with the Triple Jewel and then receive the five precepts: to refrain from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from lying, and from taking intoxicants. After receiving these precepts, we should actually put them into practice, which means we should never violate them. The five precepts are extremely important. Strict adherence to them will ensure rebirth in the realm of humans. If you cultivate the five precepts, you won’t lose the opportunity to be born a person.   
  
Someone may say, however, “I understand why one should not kill. After all, all living beings have the Buddha-nature, all can become Buddhas, so every living being’s life should be spared. I also understand why stealing is not good and that it is important to refrain from indulging in sexual misconduct and lying, but why are intoxicants included within the five precepts? I’ve always enjoyed drinking and smoking. Everybody drinks. Everybody smokes. What’s wrong with it? In fact, I’m seriously considering dropping my study of the Buddhadharma just because of this prohibition against intoxicants.”  
  
You should stop and think about it instead of just following the crowd. Others enjoy smoking and so you join them; others enjoy drinking and so you drink, too. You get caught up in such company and do the things they do until eventually you get the habit as well. Most people don’t have great faults, but rather just slight faults and little problems. But just on account of these slight problems you would consider cutting short your study of the Buddhadharma. How stupid that would be! Do you want to know why there is a prohibition against wine? I’ll tell you a true story to clarify this point.   
  
There was once a man who liked to drink. He took the five precepts, but afterwards he didn’t keep them. How did this happen? One day he thought, “Perhaps I’ll have a little drink of wine.” He took out a bottle and had a few swallows. He was accustomed to having something to eat with his drink, so he set the bottle down and went outside to look for something to eat. He noticed that his neighbor’s chicken had strayed over into his yard. “Good,” he thought, “it will make a good chaser,” and he snatched up the pullet. At that point, he broke the precept against stealing. Once he.d stolen it, he had to kill it before he could eat it, and so he broke the precept against killing. Once the chicken was cooked he used it to chase down his wine, and soon he was roaring drunk, thus breaking once again the precept against the use of intoxicants. About that time, there was a knock at his door. It was the neighbor woman in search of her chicken. “I haven’t seen it,” he blurted out, thereby breaking the precept against lying. A second glance at the neighbor woman revealed her beauty to him, and, aroused by an overwhelming sexual desire, he raped her. Afterwards he was sued. Now all this came about because he wanted to drink. Just because he had a few drinks, he subsequently broke the other four precepts and got into a lot of trouble. Intoxicants cause one to become confused and scattered, and so they are the object of one of the Buddhist prohibitions. A person who is drunk lacks self-control. With no forewarning he can find himself suddenly in the heavens, suddenly on earth. He “mounts the clouds and drives the fog.” He’ll do anything. Because it causes one to lose all inhibitions, it is included among the five precepts.  
  
If you receive the five precepts and do not violate them, then you are protected by good dharma-protecting spirits who are connected with each precept. If you break the precepts, the good spirits leave and no longer protect you. This is why receiving the precepts is extremely important in Buddhism.  
  
”How does one receive the precepts?” someone may want to know.   
  
Merely reading in a book that one must not kill, steal, commit acts of sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants does not count as taking precepts. Nor is it possible to go before the Buddhas, light some incense, and make some incense-burns on your body and receive the precepts in that way. No, it is not done that way. If a layperson wishes to receive the five precepts, he must certainly find a high Sangha member of great virtue to certify that he, the Sangha member, has transmitted the substance of the precepts to the layperson. The Sangha member tells the layperson that from now on he or she is one who has received the precepts. The merit gained by receiving and maintaining the precepts is inconceivably great and wonderful. But in order for it to be in accord with dharma, one must go before a Sangha member to seek and receive the precepts.  
  
In addition to cultivating the precepts, a shramana cultivates samadhi. There are many kinds of samadhi that could be discussed, but in general, if you are not moved by any external experience, you are in samadhi.  
  
”How can one obtain samadhi?”  
  
First you must become quiet by sitting in meditation and investigating dhyana. The reason most people go restlessly back and forth, east today and west tomorrow, is that they have no samadhi. In the morning to the gate of *Qin*, in the evening to the court of *Chu*: they run all over, because they don’t have any samadhi. To obtain samadhi, you must work hard, and as you do, you may have many different experiences. But in the midst of these experiences, you should take care not to let them turn you around. That is samadhi. If an experience changes your state of mind, you have no samadhi. For instance, if you receive a letter containing bad news and it makes you worry, you have no samadhi. You don’t pass the test. Or if you encounter some happy situation and you go chasing after it, you have no samadhi. If you are faced with a displeasing experience and you get angry, you also have no samadhi. You should be neither happy nor sad, neither exhilarated nor mournful. To have samadhi is to do things without getting emotional, but to use your Way mind instead.   
  
By cultivating samadhi, you can open your wisdom. If you have no samadhi-power then you have no wisdom-power. Without the strength of wisdom, how can you study and practice the Buddhadharma?   
  
”Where do samadhi-power and wisdom-power come from?” you ask.   
  
They come from precepts. Every day you must protect and keep the precepts until eventually there comes to be a mutual response between the dharma and your cultivation of it. When you have established this kind of relationship with the dharma you can obtain the nourishment of dharma-water.   
  
A shramana diligently cultivates precepts, samadhi, and wisdom and puts to rest greed, anger, and stupidity. These three poisons, greed, anger, and stupidity, are precisely the reason you have not realized Buddhahood. If you can put a stop to the three poisons you will quickly become Buddhas.   
  
Greed is the feeling of “the more the better” whenever you encounter something you like. Anger is the feeling that arises when you encounter a situation that doesn’t please you. Stupidity is the polluted thoughts of the stupid mind that cause you to go about things in a confused way. If you can simply put an end to those three poisons, you can be in mutual response with the Way. Then it is very easy to accomplish your work in the Way.   
  
There are four kinds of shramanas:

1. A shramana victorious in the Way. He has cultivated and accomplished either Arhatship or Bodhisattvahood.
2. A shramana who speaks of the Way. He propagates the dharma for the benefit of living beings.
3. A shramana who lives the Way. He maintains the precepts with purity and great vigor and is careful never to break them.
4. A shramana who defiles the Way. He doesn’t eat pure food and he breaks the precepts; he turns his back on them. Not only does he defile himself, but he defiles the Buddh’s teaching. He makes a bad impression on people. When they see a person who has left the home life but does not keep the precepts, they lose their faith in the Buddhadharma. Since he causes others to lose faith, he is said to defile the Buddha’s teaching.

**Paramiti**, the shramana who translated the *Shurangama Sutra*, represents the first three kinds of shramana: he is victorious in the Way, he speaks of the Way, and he lives the Way. Paramiti in Sanskrit means “extreme amount,” indicating that his talent and his wisdom were both extremely ample and full. Dharma Master Paramiti translated the *Shurangama Sutra*, and as director of translation, he stood at the head of more than two hundred dharma masters who had assembled to work on the translation. The work was done at Zhi Zhi monastery, a large monastery in the city of Canton. Because of the great merit and virtue involved in directing the translation of the sutra, the translator and the history of transmission and translation are discussed as the ninth door, before the text itself is explained.

**The Reviewer, Certifier and Editor**

B2 The reviewer.  
  
**Sutra:**

**Reviewed by Shramana Meghashikara from Uddiyana.   
  
Commentary:**Dharma Master Paramiti was assisted by a shramana from Uddiyana, a place in India. Before it was converted to housing, Uddiyana had been the imperial flower garden, so in transliterating the word into Chinese, the character for carambola, a kind of flower, was used. Meghashika means “able to subdue,” which indicates that he could subdue afflictions, demon-obstacles, or anything of the sort. Having left Uddiyana for China, Meghashika revised the translation, paying particular attention to what expressions in Chinese would be used. He was one of the highest dharma masters to take part in the work.   
  
B3 The certifier.  
  
**Sutra:Certified by Shramana Huai Di from Nan Luo Monastery on Luo Fu Mountain.   
  
Commentary:**Often copies of the sutra text do not list this dharma master’s name, but his name is listed in earlier editions and should be added to later ones if it has been omitted. **Luo Fu Mountain** is a famous mountain in Canton province. **Nan Luo Monastery** is the place where **Shramana Huai Di** (“Cherishing Progress”) dwelt. Probably when Huai Di’s master gave him that name, it was in the hope that he would work hard and vigorously. The “Di” of his name means to “progress,” the meaning being that he should continually be vigorous in his cultivation, that he should not rest, that he should not be lazy. This dharma master was extremely well-educated. He concentrated on the study of the teachings of the sutras, so he was very clear about the doctrines contained in them. Because he also understood Sanskrit, he was the dharma master appointed to certify the translation. Since both Dharma Master Paramiti and Dharma Master Meghashika understood Sanskrit thoroughly, why did someone else from China certify the translation? Although these two dharma masters had mastered both Sanskrit and Chinese, they had just come to China, and it was to be feared that they did not completely understand Chinese, so someone from China was called upon to certify the translation. This was Dharma Master Huai Di.   
  
I haven’t looked into why contemporary editions of the sutra don’t list Dharma Master Huai Di, although former editions all do. But I wanted to mention him so that it would be known who certified the translation.   
  
B4 The editor.  
  
**Sutra:Edited by Bodhisattva-precepts Disciple Fang Yong of Qing He, former Censor of State, and concurrently Attendant and Minister, and Court Regulator.   
  
Commentary:**The **Bodhisattva precepts** should be taken by both people who have left the home-life and laypeople. The sutra that sets forth the Bodhisattva precepts, the *Brahma Net Sutra*, says, “Whether as king of a country or as a great official, when one is initiated into one’s position, one should take the Bodhisattva precepts.” Because Fang Yong understood the Buddhadharma, he took the Buddha as his father and the Bodhisattvas as his brothers, and took the ten major and forty-eight minor Bodhisattva precepts. Afterwards, he referred to himself as a **disciple**.   
  
He received the Bodhisattva precepts and then he became the **Censor of State**, which means whenever the country was in error he reported it. He criticized. “Of State” indicates his official capacity within the government. The text says **former**, indicating that at the time he edited the *Shurangama Sutra* translation, he was no longer in that position. **Concurrently** means that he held two positions: **Attendant and Minister**. As attendant, he looked after the emperor’s affairs and carried out imperial commands. As minister, he was involved in the government of the country and in that capacity issued his own commands. His duty as **Court Regulator** was to make sure the affairs of court were in equilibrium.   
  
His family name was Fang; his given name was Yong. Yong means “perfectly fused.” He was from Qing He.   
  
**Edited by** means he used his brush to write out the text. He polished the language, making it even more eloquent, so that the style and technical perfection of the writing is of unsurpassed excellence. Why? Official Fang Yong was a great writer, an extremely well-educated man. That he himself, with his own brush, polished this text makes the *Shurangama Sutra* text particularly fine. If you wish to study Chinese, you can memorize the *Shurangama Sutra*; it is a paragon of Chinese composition. Even many Chinese are unable to read and understand it.   
  
Now that the first nine doors of explanation are complete, the specific explanation of the meaning of the text follows.