**The Shurangama Sutra**

**Volumn 1**

**CHAPTER3**

**The Testimony of Faith**

A10 The specific explanation of the meaning of the text.
B1 The preface.
C1 The testimony of faith.
D1 An explanation of the six fulfillments.

**Sutra:Thus I have heard.

Commentary:Thus** expresses faith. Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and the foremost in learning of all his disciples, edited and compiled the sutras. At the beginning of each sutra he says, “Thus I have heard,” indicating that the words to follow are the Buddha’s words. “Thus” means “Dharma such as this, the eight volumes of the *Shurangama Sutra*, is what I, Ananda, have heard. I, Ananda, myself heard the Buddha speak this.” Therefore, dharma that is “thus” can be believed; dharma that is not “thus” cannot be believed. “Thus,” then, refers to the text of the sutra.

”Thus” satisfies the fulfillment of faith. All sutras spoken by the Buddha begin with the six fulfillments: the fulfillment of faith; the fulfillment of hearing; the fulfillment of time; the fulfillment of a host - one who speaks the dharma; the fulfillment of a place; and, the fulfillment of an audience.

1. The fulfillment of faith.

“Why must one have faith?” someone may wonder.

Faith is the source of the Way
And the mother of merit and virtue
Because it nourishes all good dharmas.
Such is its great importance.

It is said,

The Buddhadharma is like a great sea;
Only through faith can one enter it.

There is no other way to enter the sea of dharma except by faith. Only by means of faith can one “deeply enter the sutra treasury and have wisdom like the sea.” One should have faith that the *Shurangama Sutra* is extremely fine. Believe in the sutra. That is to have faith. That is what is meant by the fulfillment of faith.

2. The fulfillment of hearing.

Those with the fulfillment of faith still must come to listen to what is said. If you have only the fulfillment of faith, then when lecture time comes you may be off in the park or at a coffee house and miss the lecture entirely. That would be a case of there being no realization of hearing. But if instead you aren’t out drinking coffee while sutras are being lectured - what is more, if you aren’t even thinking about food though you’ve skipped dinner and are thus making absolutely certain that you hear the sutra - you have achieved the fulfillment of hearing. Since you have all come to listen and have brought about the fulfillment of faith with your sincerity, I will realize the fulfillment of hearing for you.

3. The fulfillment of time.

If you have faith and hearing, but you don’t have the time, then there’s no way to hear the sutra. There must be an appropriate time. Usually, you are either going to school or going to work and have no time to come and listen to sutra lectures. But now we have found the time to assemble and investigate the sutra.

4. The fulfillment of a host.

You must also have a host to speak the dharma. If, for instance, you want to listen to sutras, you must find someone to lecture them for you. However, if you were to request one of your “do-it-yourself dharma masters” (laypeople who use this title even though they have not left the home-life in the orthodox tradition) to lecture, you would find that you might as well lecture yourself. You already understand what they lecture. Therefore you must find a host who can speak the dharma. It was for this reason that you pulled me out of the grave. Basically I’m known as the “Monk in the Grave,” but you have brought me out to lecture sutras and speak dharma for you.

”Who is the host of the sutra?”

Shakyamuni Buddha spoke the *Shurangama Sutra*; he represents the fulfillment of a host.

5. The fulfillment of a place.

“Once there is a host to speak the dharma, then everything is ready for dharma to be spoken, right?” you ask.

No, you still need a place to lecture the sutras.

”What about the park? It’s big enough. We could go there for lectures.”

That might work for a day or two, but by the third day the authorities would prevent it. “This is a public park,” they would say. “You can’t occupy it like this.” So you have to find somewhere appropriate to bring about the fulfillment of a place.

6. The fulfillment of an audience.

Finally, there must be people who come to listen. If there’s no audience for the sutra lecture, you can go ahead and lecture to the tables and chairs, but can they listen? No, an audience is necessary.

For the *Shurangama Sutra*, the place is the Jeta Grove, in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary, at the city of Shravasti, where the Buddha dwelt with his disciples.

In this sutra, the audience is composed of the great bhikshus and Bodhisattvas who came to listen.

When Ananda says, “Thus I have heard,” the “I” refers to the “hypothetical self” of the Bodhisattva. There are four kinds of self:

1. Ordinary people have an “attachment to the self” which comes from their attachment to the body.
2. Non-Buddhist religions speak of a “divine self.” They maintain that there is a God-head, or say that they themselves are God.
3. Bodhisattvas follow worldly custom and manifest a “hypothetical self.”
4. The Buddhas have the ”true self” of the dharma body.

The ordinary person is attached to his body and feels that it is his real self. Actually the body is but a temporary dwelling, like a hotel. You can live in a hotel for a while, but eventually you will have to move. You can’t stay forever. Ordinary people do not understand this principle. They think, “My body is me,” and they strive to feed it well and dress it beautifully. They look for pleasure to indulge it in. They want an elegant home and beautiful surroundings. They busy themselves dressing well, eating rich food, and living high - all only to help out their “stinking skin-bags.”

The human body is merely a stinking skin-bag. You don’t believe it? Take a look. Unclean matter oozes from your eyes. Your ears discharge wax, which is also unclean. Your nose is full of filthy mucus and your mouth is full of unclean saliva and phlegm. If you don’t bathe for four days, your body begins to stink, and if you perspire, it becomes foul in just a day or two. Feces and urine are also filthy. Impurities are constantly being discharged from the nine bodily apertures of the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, anus, and urethra – they’re all unclean. What is there to love about your body? You may dress it in finery; dab it with perfume; slave for it all day applying lipstick, rouge, and powder as some women are wont to do - all for the sake of the false shell of the body. No matter how good the food, it still turns into excrement. Decorating the body is just like decorating a toilet with beautiful material. No matter how elegant the toilet turns out, it is still a place to deposit filthy things. Would you say the insides of a human body are clean?

Tell me, what’s so good about your body? When the time comes to die, it retains no sentiment for you. It doesn’t say, “You’ve been so good to me, I’ll live a few extra days and help you out.” It can’t do it. So what good is the body after all? Nonetheless, the ordinary person is attached to his body and takes it as himself. “This is MY body,” he says. “You hit ME! I can’t allow that! How dare you insult ME!”

Ultimately, who is that “me”? He doesn’t even know who he is, and yet he says others are insulting him or hitting him. He hasn’t recognized his original face and thinks the flesh body is “me.” The spirit and the self-nature are the true self, but he has not found them. He can't see them. He doesn’t even know enough to look for them. He just assumes he’s doing the right thing by slaving for the sake of his body.

If your primary concern is to get the better half of things for yourself, you haven’t figured out life right. Anyone like that won’t be able to make things add up. He is busy for the sake of himself to the exclusion of all else. Therefore, a Bodhisattva is never busy for himself. He is busy for the sake of others. If people want his help, he will give it to them, regardless of the circumstances.

Non-Buddhist religions speak of a “divine self.” “What is the self?” they say. “It is God.” There are many varieties of this kind of self, but they will not be discussed at this time.

What is the “hypothetical self” of the Bodhisattva? Ananda says, “Thus I have heard.” However, Ananda is enlightened; at the time he recalls the Buddha’s words for us, he has already attained arhatship, and so he no longer has any “I” - any ego. In saying “I have heard,” he is simply following worldly custom and assuming a hypothetical self in order to be comprehensible to ordinary people who have an attachment to the self.

Bodhisattvas do not have the characteristic of a self. They recognize the ordinary attachment to the self as false, and they seek the true self of one’s own nature. It is from the false self that you can arrive at the true self, for only if you recognize the false can you find the true. If you don’t recognize the false as false, how can you find the truth? Why are we now investigating the Buddhadharma? It is because we are searching for true principle. Why do we seek true principle? Because we know that everything in the world is false, and we want to find the truth within falsity. What is the true self of one’s own nature that the Bodhisattva seeks? It is the Buddha. The Buddha is the true self. Before you have realized Buddhahood, your “I” is false. The Bodhisattva knows the self is false, but the ordinary person says, “You say the self is false, but as I see it, my body is excellent. It is strong, tall, well-proportioned and handsome. You may say it is false, but I think it is true.” He can’t see through it, and so he can’t put it down. Unable to put it down, he cannot become truly independent.

The phrase “I have heard” indicates the fulfillment of hearing.

”Now, basically,” you may say, “the ears hear. Why doesn’t it say, .Thus the ears heard,. instead of ‘Thus I have heard.’?” Actually, the ears cannot hear. They are merely the organ of hearing. What hears is the nature, which is eternally present. It is the mind that heard. What it heard was the dharma which is “thus.”

”Which dharma is ‘thus’?” you ask.

It is the *Shurangama Sutra* that Dharma Master Paramiti wrote out on sheer silk, placed in an incision he made in his arm, carried to China, and translated into Chinese. Now it has come to America, where it has been translated into English. It is what Ananda himself heard the Buddha speak. It is what the Buddha has transmitted to China. It is not something that Ananda as an individual put together and made. It is the dharma the Buddha spoke.

All sutras that the Buddha spoke begin with the four words “Thus I have heard.” There are four reasons for that.

1. To put the doubts of the assembly to rest.

After the Buddha had entered nirvana, and it came time to compile the sutras, Ananda ascended the high seat to speak dharma. He immediately manifested the appearance of entering samadhi and sat there for perhaps five minutes without speaking. Once he had entered samadhi, his appearance became identical with the Buddha’s. He was endowed with the thirty-two marks and eighty subtle characteristics of a Buddha; he emitted light and moved the earth. The great assembly of disciples immediately gave rise to three doubts:

1.Some thought that Shakyamuni Buddha had come back to life because they saw that Ananda had taken on the perfect features of the Buddha. The disciples had probably been thinking so much about the Buddha that their brains were a bit murky, and so they jumped to this conclusion.

2. Some thought that the reason Ananda now had such perfect features was that he, Ananda, had himself realized Buddhahood.

3. Some thought a Buddha had come from another region. “It isn’t Shakyamuni Buddha, and Ananda hasn’t become a Buddha,” they thought. “Perhaps it is a Buddha from the north, south, east, or west, from one of the ten directions.”

But as soon as Ananda said, “Thus I have heard,” the three doubts of the assembly were suddenly resolved.

2. To honor the Buddha’s instruction.

When the Buddha was about to enter nirvana, he announced his intent to his disciples, and they began to cry. Ananda, who was the Buddha’s cousin, cried hardest of them all. He sobbed and wept, probably until his tears washed his face clean. Finally the Venerable Aniruddha approached him and said, “Don’t cry. You can’t cry. Since the Buddha is about to enter nirvana, you should ask him what to do about things after he is gone.”

”What things should I ask about?” Ananda said.

The Venerable Aniruddha replied, “In the future, the sutras will be compiled. You should ask what words to begin them with. Second,” Aniruddha continued, “when the Buddha is in the world, we live with the Buddha. When the Buddha enters nirvana where will we dwell? Ask the Buddha that. Third, we now rely on the Buddha as our teacher. After the Buddha enters nirvana, whom should we take as our teacher? We have to have a teaching and transforming guide, a teaching host. Fourth, when the Buddha is in the world, he is able to discipline and subdue the bad-natured bhikshus. After the Buddha enters nirvana, how should they be dealt with? The proper thing for you to do is to go ask the Buddha these four questions.”

Ananda agreed. He went to the Buddha and asked, “When the Buddha is in the world, we take the Buddha as our master. After the Buddha enters nirvana, whom should we take as master?”

The Buddha answered, “Take the precepts as your master.” Bhikshus and bhikshunis should take the precepts as master.

”When the Buddha is in the world, we dwell with the Buddha,” Ananda said. “When the Buddha enters nirvana, where shall we dwell?”

”When the Buddha leaves the world, you should dwell in the four applications of mindfulness,” the Buddha answered. The four applications of mindfulness are: contemplate the body as impure; contemplate feelings as suffering; contemplate thoughts as impermanent; and contemplate dharmas as being without self. If you contemplate the body as impure, you won’t love the body. If you contemplate feelings as suffering, you can’t be greedy for pleasure. If you know thoughts are impermanent, you won’t become attached to the polluted thoughts that arise in your mind. The dharmas that are without a self are the five skandhas, or heaps: form, feeling, thinking, activity, and consciousness.

Third, Ananda said, “In the future when the sutras are compiled what words should we begin them with?”

The Buddha answered: “Use these four words: ‘Thus I have heard.’” These words and the six fulfillments represent the completeness of the sutra’s meaning and certify that the sutra was spoken by the Buddha.

”I have just one more question,” said Ananda. “When the Buddha is in the world he can control the bad-natured bhikshus. But when the Buddha enters nirvana, what is to be done about them?”

The Buddha said, “As to the bad-natured bhikshus, ignore them and they will go away. Pay no attention to them. Don’t talk to them. Don’t sit with them. In general, treat them as despicable; ignore them. If no one pays any attention to them, they won’t be able to do anything, no matter how evil they may be.”

Bad-natured bhikshus are people who have left the home-life and who say and do unprincipled things. When the Buddha was in the world, there were six bhikshus who were very bad. You shouldn’t think that every person who leaves the home-life is good. There are also many unruly people among the Sangha. The Buddha instructs us to “ignore them and they will go away.” Keep silent and pay no attention to them. In that way you can subdue them.

3. To resolve the assembly’s disputes.

The Buddha had many disciples who were old cultivators - senior members of the assembly who had much more Way-virtue than Ananda. Ananda had just recently attained the fourth stage of arhatship, while among the assembly were many who had long been fourth-stage arhats. If Ananda had simply spoken the sutras, most of them would not have paid him due respect. But by saying “Thus I have heard,” he made it clear that what they were about to hear was not a sutra spoken by Ananda himself, but rather a sutra he heard the Buddha speak. Therefore, no one could argue. Everyone knew that Ananda had the most excellent memory and could remember in their entirety all the sutras the Buddha had spoken during his forty-nine years of teaching without getting them confused or mixed up in any way. Ananda was born on the day of the Buddha’s enlightenment. He heard everything the Buddha taught during the last twenty-nine years of his life and remembered every single word of it.

”But how could he remember what the Buddha taught during the first twenty years?” someone may ask. “He wasn’t even there to hear the teaching.” Remember that Ananda was the Buddha’s personal attendant and never left the Buddha’s side. He used every opportunity to question the Buddha about the earlier teachings and in this way he learned all the dharma the Buddha had spoken during those first twenty years. The Buddha’s teaching was like a great river. Every drop of it flowed into the ocean of Ananda’s mind. Not a single drop escaped. That is why it is said that everything the Buddha taught during all the forty-nine years - from his enlightenment to his nirvana - was perfectly preserved in Ananda’s memory. Thus, the disputes of the assembly were quelled.

4. To distinguish Buddhist sutras from the writings of other religions.

Non-Buddhist texts begin either with the word *O*, “existence,” or the word *E*, “non-existence.” They say that all phenomena are either existent or non-existent. But Buddhist sutras speak of true emptiness and wonderful existence, the doctrine of the Middle Way. They avoid the extreme doctrines of existence and non-existence, being and non-being. They begin with “Thus I have heard” to distinguish them from non-Buddhist texts.

Sutra:**At one time the Buddha dwelt at the city of Shravasti in the sublime abode of the Jeta Grove.**

**Commentary:
At one time** refers to the time when the *Shurangama Sutra* was spoken. It was the appropriate time to speak the sutra.

”Why wasn’t the specific year, month, day, and time recorded?” you ask.

Since the calendars of India and China did not coincide, there was no way to fix the time the *Shurangama Sutra* was spoken, so the simple phrase “At one time” was chosen. Of the six fulfillments, “At one time” brings about the fulfillment of time, and **the Buddha** as the host who speaks the dharma is the fulfillment of a host.

If you want to become a Buddha, you must learn what a Buddha is like.

”What is a Buddha like?”

A Buddha is happy from morning to night. He doesn’t worry. He doesn’t give rise to afflictions. He sees all living beings as Buddhas, and so he himself has realized Buddhahood. If you can see all living beings as Buddhas, you too are a Buddha.

”What does the word Buddha mean?”

The word Buddha means “enlightened.” The Buddha has perfected the three kinds of enlightenment: enlightenment of self, enlightenment of others, and the perfection of enlightenment and practice. This has been explained above.

In this sutra the terms for the three kinds of enlightenment are called basic enlightenment, initial enlightenment, and ultimate enlightenment, but these are simply different names for the enlightenment of self, the enlightenment of others, and the perfection of enlightenment and practice. In Buddhist sutras there are many places where the names vary but the meaning is the same. You should not fail to recognize something just because the name is different. If someone changes his name, you won’t know he is being referred to when someone mentions him by his new name, but when you meet him face to face, you’ll say, ”Oh, it’s you!” The three kinds of enlightenment of the Buddha are the same way. If you haven’t investigated the Buddhadharma deeply, then you won’t know what basic enlightenment, initial enlightenment, and ultimate enlightenment are, but if you have studied the Buddhadharma you know that they are the same as the three enlightenments.

That is a general explanation of the word Buddha. If the word Buddha were discussed in detail, it could not be completely explained in three years, let alone three months. Now I have no alternative but to explain it for three minutes and let it go at that. That is because Americans like speed. They want everything to be done fast. So now in lecturing the sutra I will do it fast, like a rocket going to the moon. In a rocket, Zut! – you’re there. Although basically I hold to the old ways, I can’t use antiquated methods.

The Buddha **dwelt at the City of Shravasti**. Shravasti, a Sanskrit word, was the name of the capital city in which King Prasenajit lived. The Buddha taught and transformed many living beings there while he dwelt in the sublime abode of the Jeta Grove; which was near the city. Shravasti was different from other cities, in that it was unusually full of pleasures involving the five objects of desire: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and objects of touch. All were extremely fine. As to forms, there were probably many beautiful women, and the city itself was undoubtedly very colorful. As to sounds, the music was probably extremely beautiful. As to smells, there was Indian curry, for instance, which we also have in this country and which can be smelled for quite a distance when it is cooking. As to flavors, there was ghee, a delicious milk product. As to objects of touch, they probably had the finest silks - the epitome of elegance - in Shravasti.

The city had abundance and affluence, and the people had the virtues of education and freedom; thus Shravasti is interpreted as meaning “Abundance and Virtue.” The people were well-educated, well-read, and experienced. They were endowed with intelligence, penetrating insight, and scholarship. They were also a free people; they were not bound by others.

Once there was a dharma master who went to seek instruction from an elder dharma master. When he arrived, he put on his robe and sash, opened his kneeling cloth, knelt before the elder dharma master, and asked for instruction.

”What instruction do you want from me?” asked the old master.

”I am seeking freedom,” came the reply.

”Who’s binding you up?” the old master asked.

As soon as he heard the question, the young dharma master realized that no one was binding him, and he immediately became enlightened. “I am already free,” he realized. “What am I doing seeking further freedom?” That realization brought about his enlightenment.

”If I were to seek instruction in how to obtain freedom, and someone were to tell me that I’m not bound up, would I become enlightened?” you ask.

That’s different. Your time has not yet arrived. Your potential has not yet matured. When it does, one sentence will cause you to awaken, to connect suddenly and penetrate through to enlightenment.

The people of Shravasti were free, which means that their cultivation made it easy for them to realize the Way. Because Shravasti was so well-endowed with abundance and virtue, the Buddha dwelt there.

**The sublime abode of the Jeta Grove** is the “Jeta Grove in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary” mentioned at the beginning of the *Vajra Sutra*.

In Shravasti there lived a great elder named Sudatta, who was endowed with many blessings. No one knew the extent of his wealth. One day a friend said to Sudatta, “The Buddha is at such-and-such a place speaking dharma.” The moment Sudatta heard the word “Buddha,”. his hair stood on end and he was beside himself.

”I want to go see the Buddha right now,” he said; ”Immediately!” Because of his wish to see the Buddha, the Buddha shone his light on Sudatta, although he was a good distance away. It was the middle of the night, but because the Buddha’s light was shining on him, Sudatta thought it was already dawn, so he arose and set out to see the Buddha. Since it was actually the middle of the night, the city gates were still locked, but by means of the power of the Buddha’s spiritual penetrations, the gates opened of themselves when Sudatta arrived and closed behind him again as he went out. He reached his destination, saw the Buddha, and, hearing the Buddha speak dharma, was inexpressibly happy. Then he asked the Buddha, “You have so many disciples; where do they live?”

At that time there wasn’t any sublime abode in the Jeta Grove. The Buddha said, “I haven’t any permanent residence.”

”I will build you a monastery!” said the elder. “I will make a place for you.” Since he was wealthy, he could speak with authority. “As soon as I return I will find a place and begin construction.”

When he got back to Shravasti he looked everywhere until he eventually found Prince Jeta’s garden, which was about a mile and a half outside the city. He saw that the garden was the most appropriate place to give the Buddha. But it belonged to the prince, so he went to negotiate.

”Why do you want to buy my garden?” Prince Jeta asked.

“I’m going to build a place to invite the Buddha to live in,” replied the elder.

”All right,” Prince Jeta said in jest, “cover the grounds of the garden completely with gold coins, and I will sell it to you.”

It never occurred to the prince that Sudatta would actually do it. Who would have guessed that Sudatta would return and take all the gold coins from the family storehouses to the gardens to be laid out on the grounds?

”I was just kidding!” cried the prince when he saw the gold-laden ground. “How could I sell you my garden? You shouldn’t have taken me seriously!”

”You are a prince now,” replied the elder Sudatta. “In the future you will be the king. A king does not speak in jest. You can’t joke with me. Whatever you say should be just as it is. You can’t refuse to sell.”

When the prince heard that, there was nothing he could do. “Very well,” he said. “You have covered the ground with gold coins, but you didn’t cover the trees. Here’s what we will do. We will divide it. The ground you covered is yours, but the trees are mine. However, I don’t want them for myself. I’ll make a gift of them so you can provide a place for the Buddha.”

The elder Sudatta had no choice but to accept Prince Jeta’s conditions. So the place was named the “Jeta Grove in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary.” Sudatta was also known as Anathapindaka, “the benefactor of orphans and the solitary,” because he took pleasure in helping widows, widowers, orphans, and the solitary, that is elderly couples who had no children. His virtuous deeds earned him a title awarded to elders of great virtue.

”How is Prince Jeta’s name explained?”

Prince Jeta was born on the day his father, King Prasenajit, returned victorious from a battle with a neighboring country, so the child was given the name Jeta, “Victorious in War,” by his father, the king.

This is the history of the “sublime abode of the Jeta Grove”. Sudatta invested large additional sums of money in the construction of the sublime abode.

D2 A broad explanation of the fulfillment of an audience.
E1 Sound-hearers.
F1 Listing their number.

**Sutra:With a gathering of great bhikshus, twelve hundred fifty in all.

Commentary:**The **gathering** of great bhikshus, together with the great Arhats and the Bodhisattvas of the ten directions mentioned below, bring about the fulfillment of an audience.

The sutras spoken by the Buddha are not confused or disconnected. They weren’t spoken casually. Every sutra has its six fulfillments at the beginning, because only when these six are brought about can a dharma assembly be established and the dharma be spoken.

**Great bhikshus** are different from small bhikshus. Great bhikshus are at the stage in their cultivation where they are just about to attain enlightenment. “Bhikshu” is a Sanskrit word that has three meanings: mendicant, frightener of Mara, and destroyer of evil.

A bhikshu is a mendicant who takes his bowl out into the streets to collect alms. He does not go only to the wealthy and avoid the poor, or vice-versa. A bhikshu must practice equality in his alms-rounds, which means he must go strictly from door to door, and to no more than seven houses. So it is said, “One should not avoid the poor and go to the rich, nor ignore the lowly and seek out the honorable.”

When someone ascends the precept platform to receive the bhikshu precepts, he faces three masters and seven certifiers. The three masters are the precept transmitter, the karmadana, and the teaching transmitter. The seven certifiers act as guarantors that, as a monk, the bhikshu will not violate the rules of pure eating or break the precepts. When the precepts are transmitted, the karmadana asks, “Have you already resolved to attain Bodhi?”

The answer is, “I have already resolved to attain Bodhi.”

He also says, “Are you a great hero?”

The answer to be given by the preceptee is, “Yes, I am a great hero.” When the questions have been answered in this way, an earth-traveling rakshasa ghost, a being of our world who records good and evil, says, “Now the Buddha’s retinue has increased by one, and Mara’s retinue has decreased by one.” The earth-traveling rakshasa transmits this news to a space-traveling yaksha ghost, who in turn transmits the news through space to the sixth desire heaven, where Mara dwells. When Mara, who is king of the heavenly demons, hears the news, he is terrified. That is why the second meaning of bhikshu is frightener of Mara.

A bhikshu is also a destroyer of evil, because he breaks up the evils of ignorance and afflictions.

Since the word bhikshu has three meanings, it falls in the category of “terms not translated because they contain many meanings,” and, according to the rules of translation as set down by Dharma Master Xuan Zang during the Tang dynasty in China, it is left in Sanskrit.

Actually, there were twelve hundred fifty-five great bhikshus in the Jeta Grove assembly, but the number is rounded off to **twelve hundred fifty in all**. These disciples comprised the Buddha’s constant following. Formerly most of them had adhered to non- Buddhist paths, but, upon receiving the Buddha’s teaching, they were transformed. Moved by the Buddha’s deep kindness, they constantly dwelt with him thereafter.

Of the twelve hundred fifty, the Buddha first took across Ajnatakaundinya and the other four of the five bhikshus in the Deer Park. Next he converted the three Kashyapa brothers, who had been fire-worshipers. When they took refuge with the Buddha, they brought their thousand disciples along with them to also take refuge. That makes one thousand five disciples. Maudgalyayana and Shariputra each had a hundred disciples: they brought the total to one thousand two hundred and five. Then Yashas, the son of an elder, and his disciples took refuge for a total of fifty people, which makes one thousand two hundred fifty-five disciples in all.

What is meant by a “gathering”? One person cannot be called a gathering, nor can two, nor three. It takes four or more to form an assembly. In this case, however, the gathering consisted of more than twelve hundred fifty.

This is how Ajnatakaundinya became the first of Shakyamuni Buddha’s disciples. In a former life, the Buddha was a patient immortal cultivating the Way in the mountains. He cultivated the practice of patience in the face of insult. One day the king of Kalinga went to the mountain on a hunting expedition, bringing with him a party of concubines, palace girls, ministers, and officials. While the king hunted, the concubines went for a stroll on the mountain and encountered the old bhikshu, the patient immortal. The concubines, who rarely left the palace, had never before seen a person with such a long beard and such hair as his. Although he was a cultivator, the concubines thought he was a freak, and so they crept closer and asked him, “What are you doing?”

”I am working at cultivating the Way. I am practicing the Buddhadharma,” replied the old cultivator. The concubines had never heard of the Buddhadharma or even of the Buddha and were completely puzzled by his answer. Their curiosity got the better of them, and each one had to come closer for a peek at the old cultivator. They crowded around him in a circle.

By then the king of Kalinga had returned from his hunting, only to find that his beautiful concubines had disappeared. He went looking for them and found them standing in a circle around a long-haired, bearded man. The sight ignited the king’s jealousy. He thought to himself, “This man has seduced my beautiful women! They won’t pay any attention to me, and yet he’s managed to seduce them.” Aloud he asked, “What are you doing?”

”I am cultivating patience,” replied the old cultivator.

”What do you mean by patience?”

”Patience means that no matter what you do to me, no matter how impolite you are to me, no matter how badly you treat me, I can bear it.”

”Really?” said the king of Kalinga. “Is that truly the way you are? I don’t believe you can do it. If you truly have patience, why did you seduce my women? Now that they have become so involved with you and have fallen in love with you, in the future they will certainly run away from the palace.”

”No, I wouldn’t seduce your women. I have been speaking dharma for them, teaching them to be patient.”

”Patient!” spit back the king. “So you can be patient, eh? All right, I’ll try you out. Let’s see if you can be patient...” and he chopped off the old cultivator’s ear. “Can you bear it?” he shouted. “Are you angry?”

”I’m not angry,” replied the old cultivator.

Next the king sliced off the cultivator’s nose. “Are you angry?” he asked. “Are your afflictions welling up? Don’t you hate me?”

”I haven’t given rise to affliction,” replied the old cultivator, “nor am I angry with you.”

”Is that true? Are you really not angry?” screamed the king. “Very well, I’ll cut off your hand,” which he did in one blow. “You still don’t hate me?”

The old cultivator, this previous incarnation of Shakyamuni Buddha, said to the king of Kalinga, “I don’t hate you.”

”Then I will cut off the other hand!” and the king brought his sword down once again on the old cultivator. “Are you angry?”

”I’m still not angry,” replied the old cultivator.

”Ah, you don’t know truth from falsehood. Here, I’ll cut off your foot. Now, are you angry?”

”I’m not angry.”

”The king cut off his other foot, which meant that he had severed all four of the old cultivator’s limbs. “You still don’t hate me?” he asked.

The old cultivator replied, “I still don’t hate you.” “You’re lying!” cried the king. “There isn’t a person in the world who wouldn’t get angry upon having all four limbs sliced off his body. I don’t believe you really can be this way.”

At that time the old cultivator made a vow. “If I have not given rise to any anger,” he told the king, “then my four limbs will grow back and my body will be whole once more. But if I have gotten angry, my hands and feet won’t rejoin my body, and my nose and ear won’t grow back.” As soon as he finished speaking, his hands, feet, ear, and nose, which had been completely severed, grew back again.

”What kind of weird monster are you?” the king of Kalinga cried. “What kind of freak can make his hands and feet grow back on his body? A demon!” the king concluded, addressing his party of ministers and concubines. But as soon as these thoughts arose, the dharma protectors and beneficent gods let loose a hail-storm that came beating down on the king.

Then the old cultivator made another vow. “Please, dharma protectors and good spirits, don’t punish him. I forgive him,” he said. Then he told the king, “In the future, when I realize Buddhahood, I will take you across to Buddhahood first.” As a result of that vow, when Shakyamuni Buddha realized Buddhahood, the first person he took across was Ajnatakaundinya, who was none other than the former king of Kalinga.

Upon realizing Buddhahood, the power of his vow led him immediately to the Deer Park to save the five bhikshus, of whom the first was Ajnatakaundinya. When someone makes a vow, a connection is created. Therefore you should make vows to be good to people and to rescue them, and you should be careful not to make vows to kill people. If you vow to kill people, in the future, people will vow to kill you, and there will be no end to the cycle of killing. If you make vows to take living beings across to Buddhahood, then we can all realize Buddhahood together, and everyone will obtain the bliss of the eternally still, bright, Pure Land. Be good to people, even if they are not good to you. We should have the kind of vitality that the patient immortal had when, far from getting angry, he vowed to save his attacker who was cutting off his limbs. Students of the Buddhadharma should imitate this spirit of magnanimity.

F2 Praising their virtues

**Sutra:All were great Arhats without outflows, disciples of the Buddha, dwellers and maintainers. They had fully transcended all existence, and were able to travel everywhere, and to accomplish the awesome deportment.

Commentary:** These great bhikshus were not just great bhikshus; they were Bodhisattvas appearing in the bodies of bhikshus. So it is said, “Inwardly they secretly practiced the Bodhisattva-conduct. Outwardly, they appeared in the bodies of sound-hearers.” Though all were Bodhisattvas at heart, though the fundamental nature of the great vehicle was contained in their hearts, they outwardly practiced the dharmas of the small vehicle and appeared as **great Arhats without outflows**. A person who has attained the first fruition of enlightenment is called a “small” arhat, while one who has attained the fourth fruition is called a “great” arhat. However, if an arhat who has attained the fourth fruition does not continue to progress in his investigation, does not advance in his cultivation, he is called a “fixed-nature sound-hearer”; he remains fixed on that level. He obtains a little and is satisfied. Although what he has is not much, he thinks it is sufficient and does not consider making any further progress. If he continues to advance in his cultivation, he can attain the position of a Bodhisattva. This was the case with the great Arhats of the Shurangama assembly.

As explained above, “Arhat” is a Sanskrit word with three meanings: worthy of offerings, without birth, and killer of thieves. While bhikshus can receive the offerings only of people, small arhats are worthy of the offerings of people and gods, such as kings of countries or of heavens. Great Arhats are worthy of receiving the offerings not only of people and gods, but also of those who have transcended the world - that is of those who have reached states beyond the six desire heavens. Great Arhats can receive the offerings of Bodhisattvas, because they have cut off afflictions beyond the triple realm, whereas small arhats have cut off only the afflictions within the triple realm. So great Arhats can be said to be Bodhisattvas. Although they manifest as bhikshus and do not practice the Bodhisattva-Way, within their hearts they have the magnanimity of Bodhisattvas, and they can gradually attain the level of Bodhisattvahood. In past lives, they had already realized Buddhahood. Wishing to help Shakyamuni Buddha propagate the Buddhadharma, they appeared in the bodies of bhikshus to act as arhats. Basically, these arhats are great Bodhisattvas.

An arhat also is said to be without outflows. This means he has already attained the state of being patient with the non-production of dharmas. An arhat is also called a “killer of thieves,” because he has completely killed the thieves of ignorance.

People who have attained the fruition of the Way have no outflows; no outflows of desire, no outflows of existence, and no outflows of ignorance. Being “without outflows,” they do not fall into the three realms: the realm of desire, the realm of form, and the formless realm. We people all now dwell in the realm of desire; although we live on earth, we are actually a part of the heavens of the desire-realm. It is called the desire-realm because the people in it have thoughts of desire and longing, which they are unable to stop. There are two kinds of desire: the desire for material objects and the desire for sex. By the desire for material objects is meant greed for all enjoyable things. For instance, if you don’t have a house, you want to buy a house. Once you have a house, you think about buying a better one. That is the desire for houses. Or perhaps you want a good car. At first, perhaps you buy a beat-up car, but when you drive it around, people look down on you so you decide to buy a better car, but you still do not invest in the latest model. Once you compare your car to the newest model, however, you feel your present car isn’t good enough, so you invest in a new one. That is the desire for cars. Eventually your desire reaches the point that once you have the latest model car, you decide to buy an airplane. Once you have an airplane, you decide to invest in ships. The desire for material objects never ends. You never say, “I’ve had enough; I’m satisfied. I don’t want any more. I’m not greedy for any more things.”

”Where does desire come from?”

It comes from ignorance.

Desire for sex is something you would probably understand without my speaking about it. It refers to being greedy for beauty. It, too, cannot be satisfied. One wife is not sufficient; he has to have two. Then two are not enough; he needs three. Some men keep ten or twenty wives. How do you suppose one person can respond to so many? Emperors often had several hundred or several thousand women gathered in the palace. Wouldn’t you say that was extremely unfair? Now in democratic countries men are allowed only one wife. The practice of polygamy is prohibited, but there are still many people who sneak out and become involved in illicit affairs. Driven by their desire for sex, many men and women sneak out to carry on wanton relationships; they do not follow the rules.

Besides the outflow of desire there is the outflow of existence. This outflow occurs in the heavens of the form-realm, which are beyond desire. By existence is meant the existence of everything and anything. People who are greedy for existence and cannot maintain control have outflows whenever there is a lot of something.

The greatest of the three kinds of outflows is the outflow of ignorance; ignorance is the basic root of affliction. With the outflow of ignorance, the outflows of existence and of desire arise. If ignorance disappears the other two are also cut off.

**Disciples of the Buddha**. The Chinese word for disciple can also mean son, but here it refers not to Rahula, the Buddha’s son, but to the great bhikshus, the great Arhats spoken about above. The *Brahma Net Sutra* says:

When living beings receive the Buddha’s precepts,
They enter the Buddha’s position,
When their state is identical to great enlightenment,
They are truly the Buddha’s disciples.

Living beings who have received the Buddha’s precepts have the qualifications necessary to realize Buddhahood. When their enlightenment comes, they are called disciples of the Buddha.

The *Dharma Flower Sutra* says,

“Because they come forth from the Buddha’s mouth and are born by transformation from the dharma, they are called disciples of the Buddha.”

”What does it mean to be born by transformation from the Buddha’s mouth?” you ask.

As a result of being taught and transformed by the Buddha, they became enlightened and thus were born from the Buddhadharma. For example, the day you took refuge with the Triple Jewel was your new birthday, the beginning of a new life. Those of you who have taken refuge with the Triple Jewel are the Buddha’s disciples.

As **dwellers** they dwelt within the Buddhadharma, and as **maintainers** they relied on the Buddhadharma in their cultivation. Specifically, in terms of the *Shurangama Sutra*, they dwelt in the treasury of the Tathagata and maintained the Ultimately Firm Samadhi. You should protect and maintain the Firm Samadhi and not allow it to become scattered or lost.

The term “Abbot,” one who heads a monastery, literally refers to someone who dwelt in and maintained the Buddhadharma, because it is his work to cause the Buddhadharma to continue and not to be cut off, to hand it down and to allow it to spread; to perpetuate the Buddha’s wisdom-life, like the great Arhats of the Shurangama assembly.

The arhats **had fully transcended all existence**, that is, the twenty-five realms of existence found in the triple realm, **and were able to travel everywhere, and to accomplish the awesome deportment**. They had the ability to live in any land in the ten directions, not just in our Saha world. Because they were arhats and had spiritual penetrations and transformations, they could fly or walk as they pleased.

”If they could go anywhere, why haven’t I ever seen any in America?” you may ask.

Even if they had come to America you wouldn’t have been able to see them or know of it, because at the time the Buddha was in the world you hadn’t even been born yet!

They were able **to perfect the awesome deportment** wherever they went; they had an awesomeness that people feared and a deportment that people wished to imitate. They were deserving of respect because they differed from the ordinary in every way, and they were respected by everyone they met. “Ah, that person is truly fine, truly deserving of respect and admiration!” Wherever the great bhikshus went, they did not look at improper things. They wouldn’t peer around like someone intent upon stealing something. Their eyes constantly regarded their noses, their noses regarded their mouths, and their mouths regarded their hearts. When they walked, their gaze did not extend beyond three feet in front of them. In this way they returned the light to illumine within. So awesome was their bearing that they never indulged in rowdiness or horseplay, never giggled or joked. They were very refined and stern.

**Sutra:They followed the Buddha in turning the wheel and were wonderfully worthy of the bequest. Stern and pure in the vinaya, they were great exemplars in the three realms. Their limitless response-bodies took living beings across and liberated them, pulling out and rescuing those of the future so they could transcend all the bonds of dust.

Commentary:** These four sentences praise four kinds of admirable virtues that characterize the practice of the arhats. The first sentence praises the arhat’s virtue of wisdom; the second praises the maintenance of the precepts and rules; the third praises the virtue of kindness; and the fourth, the virtue of compassion.

**They followed the Buddha in turning the wheel**. The arhats constantly followed the Buddha, not just to serve the Buddha or provide for him; not just to offer the Buddha a towel or to bring the Buddha a cup of tea in order to be filial to the Buddha. It’s not simply that they attended upon the Buddha. They helped him turn the Wheel. This does not refer to the turning wheel of the six paths, but rather to the great dharma wheel.

”Why is it called a wheel?” you ask.

For one thing, a wheel can grind; a mill-wheel grinds rice and other grains. The dharma wheel grinds up all the “dead-end sects and externalist paths” and pulverizes and destroys their erroneous and improper teachings.

A wheel also transports. Just as a boat transports cargo from Europe to America, so, too, the turning dharma wheel transports living beings from this shore of birth and death to the other shore of nirvana. The speaking of dharma is like a ship that transports living beings from this shore of birth and death to the other shore of nirvana. The speaking of dharma is like a ship that transports people from one place to another.

They **were wonderfully worthy of the bequest**. They had all attained inconceivable states and so were wonderfully worthy. “Worthy” means that, because of the inconceivable states they had accomplished, they were capable of receiving and had the authority to receive the Buddha’s final bequest, that is, the last instructions he gave everyone about what to do after his nirvana. It is like an ordinary family; when the father is about to die, he tells his sons and daughters what they should do in the future, how they should cultivate and handle matters. The Buddha also commands his disciples, telling them, “You should work in this way; you should go to that place and turn the dharma wheel to teach and transform living beings.” That is called the bequest.

The great bhikshus were worthy to receive the Buddha’s final instructions because they all had an inconceivable wisdom and could turn the dharma wheel to benefit themselves and benefit others. This sentence praises the wisdom that enabled them to teach and transform other people and cause them also to have wisdom. This sentence praises the arhat’s virtue of wisdom.

**Stern and pure in the vinaya, they were great exemplars in the three realms**. “Stern” means severe in demeanor, exacting, and not the least bit haphazard. It means they were honorable and awesome; they were forbidding, so that when you were in their presence you dared not laugh or be rambunctious or disobedient. You also did not dare let your eyes wander around, because the great Arhats were so severe.

They were clear and pure because they had ended evil and had rid themselves of all bad habits. “Pure” can also mean that they had severed the delusions arising from views, the delusions arising from thoughts, and the myriad subtle delusions like dust and sand, and it means the were also without ignorance. Pure and clear, clear and pure, they had no filth left; they were devoid of evil.

”How can one become devoid of evil?” you wonder.

”Cut off evil,” it is said. However, the purity referred to here is free even of the concept of cutting off evil. If you still remember how you cut off evil, then you are not yet pure. If you remember that on such and such a day you cut off a certain amount of evil, and at such and such a time you also cut off a certain amount of evil, then you are not yet pure. Why? You still have dirty things in your mind. If you are pure, all these things are forgotten. When they are absolutely non-existent, you have attained purity.

”Vinaya” is a Sanskrit word which means “good healing.” It is fully able to cure your faults. “Stern and pure in the vinaya” means the great Arhats, through actual practice, had perfected and attained the dharma which cures faults.

”They were great exemplars,” unsurpassable standards in the three realms: the desire realm, the realm of form, and the formless realm. They were guides and masters of gods and people. And so this sentence praises the great Arhats’ virtue of maintaining the precepts.

**Their limitless response-bodies took living beings across and liberated them**. “Response-bodies” are also called transformation- bodies. Originally the great Arhats didn’t have response-bodies, but they created them by transformation in infinite amounts. There might be three thousand of them, then at another time five thousand, or ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million, a billion. Why are response-bodies brought forth? Is it so that the great Arhats can go about displaying spiritual penetrations to let people know that they have them? No. The great Arhats create the response-bodies to teach and transform living beings who need to be taken across to enlightenment. For living beings who should be taken across by a Buddha, they manifest the body of a Buddha and speak dharma for their sake. For living beings who should be taken across by a pratyekabuddha, or by a Brahma king or by Shakra, or by a bhikshu or a bhikshuni, they manifest those response-bodies to take those beings across. Like Guan Shi Yin Bodhisattva, who is extremely kind to those with whom he has karmic ties, and greatly compassionate toward those who are at one with him, great Arhats manifest numberless response-bodies to cause beings to leave suffering and to obtain bliss. They enable them to be at peace and to experience the bliss of obtaining what they like. Kindness can bestow happiness, and the great Arhats were extremely kind and compassionate.

**Pulling out and rescuing those of the future so they could transcend all the bonds of dust**. What is meant by “pulling out”? Say, for example, that someone gets both feet stuck in the mud so that each time he pulls one foot out, the other foot gets stuck deeper, until eventually he can’t take another step. Then you extend your hand and pull him out of the mud. Or someone may be caught in flood waters, unable to get out until you go in and rescue him. The great Arhats extricate and rescue “those of the future,” and so we now have hope, because we are those of the future. If you can but believe the dharma the arhats speak for you to hear, you can be rescued and crossed over. You and I are numbered among those of the future.

”Why can’t you fly now? Why can’t you go into empty space? You have too many burden, that’s why. They weigh you down and make your body very heavy. That is to speak of the earth’s gravitational pull. But if you are free of burdens, then the force of gravity does not bind you, and you can gain your independence. The transient dust burdens us. It is because your burdens pull at you and cling to your clothing that you can no longer fly, although originally you could. However, the great Arhats can think of ways to enable all living beings to transcend their troublesome burdens so they can no longer be tied down, so the earth’s gravitational force can no longer hold them. Once free, you can drift off into space like a balloon, you can go wherever you wish - to the moon, to the stars. It’s not easy to travel this way. This kind of travel is very convenient. There’s no need to buy a plane ticket. Wherever you want to go, you can just go there. If you can reach that level, you are said to have transcended your troublesome burdens.

Just as the previous sentence praises the great Arhats’ virtue of kindness, which brings happiness, this last sentence praises their virtue of compassion, which can rescue living beings from their distress.

F3 Listing the names of the leaders.

**Sutra:The names of the leaders were: the greatly wise Shariputra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakaushthila, Purnamaitreyaniputra, Subhuti, Upanishad, and others.

Commentary:Shariputra**’s name may be translated in three ways: “Son of the Body,” because his mother’s body was extremely beautiful; “Son of the Pelican,” because his mother’s eyes were as beautiful as a pelican’s; and “Son of Jewels,” because his mother’s eyes shone like jewels, and Shariputra’s eyes were like his mother’s. Shariputra was foremost in wisdom among the sound-hearers. In fact, **greatly wise** Shariputra’s wisdom was evident even before he was born. **Mahakaushthila**, Shariputra’s uncle used to debate with his sister, Sharika. He never had any trouble defeating her until she became pregnant with Shariputra, and then she outwitted him every time. Realizing that his sister’s newly acquired skill in debate must be due to the presence of an exceptional child in her womb, Mahakaushtila set out to school himself in all the dharmas of all the non-Buddhist religions in preparation for the day when he would meet his nephew in debate. He spent many years in southern India pursuing his studies, and when he returned to seek out his nephew, he learned that the greatly wise Shariputra had left the home life to follow the Buddha after having defeated all the master-debators from the five parts of India in debate when he was only eight years old.

Mahakaushthila was displeased to learn that his nephew was a disciple of the Buddha, because he had naturally hoped that after all his years of study and with his unsurpassed debating-powers, he would win the respect and loyalty of the child. He decided to challenge the Buddha, proposing that if he won a debate with the Buddha, the Buddha would relinquish Shariputra to him. And just to show his confidence, he blatantly added that he would chop off his head as an offering to the Buddha if he lost the debate.

Once he went before the Buddha, however, his confidence wavered and he searched frantically through his dharmas for a tenet of doctrine to form the basis of this all-important debate. Finally the Buddha said, “Well, speak up. Establish your principle and I will consider your request.”

”Basically, I do not accept any principle,” said Kaushthila finally and a bit triumphantly, thinking that this would render the Buddha speechless.

”Oh?” replied the Buddha without hesitation. “Do you accept that position?”

Bewildered, Shariputra’s uncle thought, “If I say I don’t accept the position of having no position, I will have destroyed my own doctrine and will lose the debate. But if I say I do accept it, my acceptance will be in direct opposition to my basic tenet.” Caught in the horns of this dilemma, Kaushthila hesitated a fraction of a second and then, without a word, turned on his heels and ran as fast as he could out of the room, out of the Buddha’s Way-place, out of the gardens, and down the road for several miles without stopping. Eventually, he regained some self-control, recalled that he was a man of his word, and realized that he must return to the Buddha and offer him his head. When he arrived and asked the Buddha for a knife, however, the Buddha explained that in the Buddhadharma things are not done that way. Then the Buddha spoke dharma for Mahakaushthila and enabled him to open his dharma eye. Once his dharma eye was opened, he could see clearly the fallacies in the dharmas of the non-Buddhist paths that he had studied so rigorously, and he requested permission to leave the home life and follow the Buddha. Mahakaushthila’s name means “big knees.” Some say his ancestors’ kneecaps were big, and some say that Kaushthila’s own kneecaps were big. In general, large kneecaps were a family trait. Mahakaushthila was first among the Buddha’s disciples in debate.

**Mahamaudgalyayana’**s name means “kolita tree” because his father and mother prayed to the spirit of that tree for a son. He was foremost among the disciples in spiritual penetrations.

**Purnamaitreyaniputra**, another Sanskrit name, means “son of fullness and compassion.” “Purna,” which means “full,” refers to his father’s name, which meant “Fulfilled Vows.” “Maitreyani,” which means “compassionate woman,” was his mother’s name. “Putra” means “son.” What was his particular talent? Whereas Shariputra was foremost in wisdom, and Mahamaudgalyayana was foremost in spiritual penetrations, Purnamaitreyaniputra was foremost in speaking dharma. No one else could explain the sutras with such subtlety and in such a deep and moving way. When Purna spoke the sutras, heavenly maidens scattered flowers, and golden lotuses welled up from the earth. Whoever would like to be foremost in speaking dharma can recite “Namo Venerable Purna,” over and over, and Purna will use his wisdom and eloquence to aid you in speaking dharma so that you will be able to move people. How will they be moved? They won’t doze off when you are lecturing sutras. When Purna spoke dharma, no one was able to go to sleep. He expressed the characteristics of all dharmas well and so was said to have unobstructed eloquence.

**Subhuti**, another of the ten great disciples, was foremost in understanding emptiness. His name has three meanings: “Born to Emptiness,” “Splendid Apparition,” and “Good Luck.” When Subhuti was born, all the wealth in his household - all the gold, silver, and precious gems - disappeared. The treasuries stood empty. No one knew where it had all gone, but since the disappearance of the wealth coincided with the birth, the infant was given the name “Born to Emptiness.”

Seven days after his birth, all the riches reappeared, and so the child was renamed “Splendid Apparition.” His parents wanted to find out whether their child was good or bad, so they went to a diviner soon after his birth. In India there was no *Book of Changes* (I Ching). Instead they used the diviner to figure out whether their child was good or bad. He came up with “good” and “lucky,” so the child was renamed “Good Luck.”

Subhuti was foremost in understanding, and so in the *Vajra Sutra* he is the Buddha’s interlocutor; that is, it was he who asked Shakyamuni Buddha to explain the doctrine of prajna.

**Upanishad**, also Sanskrit, means “dust-nature.” Upanishad awakened to the Way when he saw that the nature of all external objects is fundamentally empty; he awakened to the doctrine of impermanence as it is embodied in the nature of external objects.

**And others** means that these six bhikshus were not the only ones in the assembly. There were at least twelve hundred fifty disciples in the assembly, but these six held seniority and sat in the highest positions. Thus, they are mentioned by name to represent the assembly of great Arhats and great bhikshus.

E2 Those enlightened to conditions.

**Sutra: Moreover limitless Pratyekas who were beyond learning and those with initial resolve came to where the Buddha was to join the bhikshus’ Pravarana at the close of the summer retreat.

Commentary:**The **numberless Pratyekas** were the pratyekabuddhas, who belong to the vehicle of those enlightened by conditions. This vehicle and the sound-hearer vehicle of the great Arhats mentioned above are often referred to together as the two vehicles.

They had reached a level of being **beyond learning**. Upon attainment of the fourth fruit of arhatship, cultivators reach a position of being beyond learning. The term “pratyekabuddha” can be interpreted as meaning “solitary enlightened ones,” referring to those who were enlightened by themselves at a time when no Buddha was in the world, but it also has come to refer to “those enlightened by conditions” during a time when a Buddha is in the world.

Those enlightened by conditions follow the Buddha in cultivating the twelve links of conditioned causation and thus awaken to the Way. The twelve links of conditioned causation are:

1. Ignorance, which conditions activity;
2. Activity, which conditions consciousness;
3. Consciousness, which conditions name and form;
4. Name and form, which condition the six sense organs;
5. The six sense organs, which condition contact;
6. Contact, which conditions feeling;
7. Feeling, which conditions love;
8. Love, which conditions grasping;
9. Grasping, which conditions existence;
10. Existence, which conditions birth;
11. Birth, which conditions;
12. Old age and death.

When ignorance is extinguished, activity is extinguished; when activity is extinguished, consciousness is extinguished; when consciousness is extinguished, name and form are extinguished; when name and form are extinguished, contact is extinguished; when contact is extinguished, feeling is extinguished; when feeling is extinguished, love is extinguished; when love is extinguished, grasping is extinguished; when grasping is extinguished, existence is extinguished; when existence is extinguished, birth is extinguished; when birth is extinguished, old age and death are extinguished. Thus the twelve links of conditioned causation can be extinguished.

Pratyekabuddhas who live at the time when a Buddha is in the world are called “those enlightened by conditions”; nevertheless, in the Shurangama assembly there were cultivators who are properly called “solitary enlightened ones.” How can that be? There were sages who had cultivated the Way in the mountains before Shakyamuni Buddha had realized Buddhahood, when there was no Buddha in the world. In the springtime, they watched the many flowers blossom. In the autumn, they saw the yellow leaves fall. They observed the myriad things being born and dying; and by themselves, they awakened to the Way. Then after Shakyamuni Buddha realized Buddhahood, they left their caves in the crags deep in the mountains and desolate valleys, and came forth to help Shakyamuni Buddha propagate the Buddhadharma. Limitless numbers of them became part of that influential assembly.

Besides pratyekabuddhas who were beyond learning, there were also pratyekabuddhas **with initial resolve**, arhats with initial resolve, and bhikshus with initial resolve, who had not yet become mature in the Way. All **came to where the Buddha was to join the bhikshu’s Pravarana at the close of the summer retreat**. In Buddhism, there is a rule that those who have left the home-life must pass the summer in retreat. This rule came about because for a period of ninety days, from the fifteenth of the fourth lunar month to the fifteenth of the seventh lunar month, the members of the Sangha lived in one place and did not go anywhere; they didn’t go traveling or take a vacation. There were two reasons for this. First, the weather was very hot and made for especially uncomfortable traveling. That was particularly true in India. Second, insects and other small creatures are particularly abundant on the earth in summer. To avoid stepping on them and squashing them to death, to nurture compassion for all living beings and to protect them, the bhikshus, the bhikshunis, and the Buddha lived in one place and did not go out.

At the close of the summer retreat refers to the end of the ninety-day period of seclusion. During the three month retreat, people might have committed offenses and broken rules, and so at the close of the retreat, at the end of the ninety days, it was necessary to hold a communal examination during which everyone was encouraged to confess his offenses frankly. This was the “Pravarana.” If anyone had committed offenses without realizing it, then others in the assembly were expected to question him and help him see his mistakes. Nothing was held back, and everyone was expected to answer the questions he was asked and to admit his faults without argument. This discussion was carried on in an open, orderly fashion without anyone giving rise to afflictions or becoming angry when his errors and faults were pointed out. In this way they rid each other of their faults. This kind of communal examination was designed to cause people to change their errors and move toward the good. Everything that had happened before became a dead issue, and everything that happened from that day onward was like a new life. People were encouraged to do things that benefit body and mind and not to do things that do not benefit body and mind.

E3 Bodhisattvas.
F1 First, the pravarana assembly gathers.

**Sutra: Bodhisattvas from the ten directions who desired counsel in order to resolve the doubts in their minds were respectful and obedient to the Awesome but Compassionate One as they prepared to seek the Secret Meaning.

Commentary:**Besides the two vehicles of sound-hearers and those enlightened by conditions, there were also **Bodhisattvas from the ten directions** in the Shurangama assembly. The “ten directions” are north, south, east, west, northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest, and above and below.

”I would expect there to be Bodhisattvas from the eight directions and from above,” you may say, “but do Bodhisattvas also come from below?”

Yes, Earth Store Bodhisattva, for example, watches exclusively over things below us.

I discussed the word “Bodhisattva” in the introduction, so now the explanation will be brief. Bodhisattva is a Sanskrit word; “Bodhi” means “enlightenment” and “Sattva” means “sentient being.” A Bodhisattva is one who enlightens those with sentience. He himself is a sentient being who was originally just like ordinary people, but who afterward became enlightened.

Bodhisattvas have attained the enlightenment of self and can enlighten others. They can benefit themselves and benefit others. But their enlightenment is not yet perfect, so they are called Bodhisattvas.

”How many Bodhisattvas came from the ten directions?” you ask.

An incalculable number.

“What did they get together for? Did they come together to cause a commotion? To see a play? To go to a fair?”

No, they came because there were some things they did not understand. They **desired counsel in order to resolve their doubts in their minds**. They had questions. They wanted to ask about doctrines they could not understand.

“What doctrines in particular?”

The doctrine of the **Secret Meaning**, which refers to the “secret cause” spoken of in this sutra.

They **were respectful and obedient to the Awesome but Compassionate One as they prepared to seek the** secret meaning. The Bodhisattvas did not understand the doctrine of the secret cause. Therefore they came wishing to learn of the dharma-door of the secret cause that leads to the complete meaning.

“Do you mean that the *Shurangama Sutra* that is now being explained is a sutra which even Bodhisattvas don’t understand?” you ask.

It is true that the Bodhisattvas desired counsel to resolve their doubts because they did not understand the doctrines of the sutra but if you now understand and become enlightened, then you are Bodhisattvas, too. Don’t disdain yourselves. Don’t say, “How can I understand doctrines which Bodhisattvas didn’t understand? I’d better quit now.” It is just because these are doctrines that Bodhisattvas don’t understand that you are now being taught to understand. We have karmic connections with Shakyamuni Buddha and with the dharma that he proclaimed and that remains in the world. So we now have the opportunity to come to understand doctrines that even the Bodhisattvas had not understood. We are now in an advantageous position, even though we have been born after Shakyamuni Buddha spoke the dharma. Who knows how long a road those Bodhisattvas in the Shurangama assembly had to travel to get there? Not from our north, south, east, and west, perhaps, but from great distances from numberless other worlds. Now we have encountered this sutra. We have great good roots and great affinities that enable us to listen to this dharma. Don’t be afraid and think that since Bodhisattvas didn’t understand it, you shouldn’t attempt to study it. That’s a mistaken attitude.

**Sutra: Then the Tathagata arranged his seat, sat quietly and peacefully, and for the sake of everyone in the assembly proclaimed the profound and mysterious. Those in the pure assembly at the banquet of dharma obtained what they had never obtained before.

Commentary: Then** refers to the time when the *Shurangama Sutra* was spoken. It was a time when the conditions were appropriate - a time when the Shurangama Mantra was about to be proclaimed.

**The Tathagata arranged his seat**. “Tathagata,” one of the ten titles of the Buddha, has been explained already.

**Arranged his seat** means that he opened his sitting-cloth, spread it out, and sat down on it.

 **Sat quietly and peacefully** means the Tathagata sat “in purity,” in the manner of one absorbed in dhyana, that is, “still consideration.” “Peacefully” means at ease; he did not knit his eyebrows together straining to display the pose of one meditating but was very relaxed, with the faint trace of a smile on his face, making those who saw him feel happy. This quiet peaceful style pleased those who looked at him and made them become resolved to learn from him.

**And for the sake of everyone in the assembly**. Why did the Buddha arrange his seat and sit quietly and peacefully? It was because he wished to enter samadhi, and, in peace and quiet, contemplate the basic natures of living beings. In the “assembly” there were twelve hundred fifty bhikshus, countless pratyekabuddhas who were beyond learning, Bodhisattvas from the ten directions, and many more, countless hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions who circumambulated the Buddha. Although the number of people attending our dharma assembly is not nearly as great, the assembly is still vast because there are limitless, boundless numbers of ghosts and spirits who have come to join us. Countless ghosts are outside listening to the dharma, and vast numbers of spirits are standing outside protecting this place. If you don’t believe it, take a look; you won’t be able to count how many there are.

**Proclaimed the profound and mysterious**. “Proclaim” means to explain clearly and teach. “Profound” refers to the deep “secret cause.” “Mysterious” and wonderful refer to the “complete meaning.” He teaches the dharma-door of the secret cause that leads to the complete meaning. If the Buddha did not speak about the secret cause, you would have no way to know of it. If the Buddha did not explain the complete meaning, you wouldn’t be able to understand it. The mysterious and wonderful is whatever you don’t know. What you already know you consider quite ordinary, but if you see something you have never tasted before, you’ll want to have a taste of it no matter what.

The Bodhisattvas came desiring to understand the doctrine more fully, and Shakyamuni Buddha, knowing what was in the minds of those in the dharma assembly, proclaimed the profound and mysterious principle.

**Those in the pure assembly at the banquet of dharma obtained what they had never obtained before.** Speaking dharma is compared to giving living beings flavorful dharma to taste. When you have eaten your fill of flavorful dharma, you will realize Buddhahood. The banquet does not refer to an ordinary feast where wine is drunk and the like.

”Pure assembly” means that not one being who came to the assembly was unclean. All were pure in body and mind, without defilements. They did no evil and respectfully offered up good conduct. Since they did not engage in any improper or unwholesome behavior, they are referred to as the “pure assembly.” This is the first time they had heard the wonderful dharma, and so what they obtained was unprecedented. Unprecedented teaching also refers to the ninth of the twelve divisions of the Buddhist canon, dharma that has never been spoken before.

F2 The assembly that arrived later after hearing the Buddha’s voice.

**Sutra: The Immortal’s kalavinka-sound pervaded the ten directions and Bodhisattvas as numerous as the sands of the Ganges gathered at the Bodhimanda with Manjushri as their leader.

Commentary:Kalavinka** is Sanskrit for “wonderful sound”; it is the name of a bird whose cry can be heard at a great distance, even while it is still in the egg. Once the bird is hatched, its call can be heard even more clearly, and the sound is very pleasing to the ear. Here the reference is not to the bird’s call but to the sound of the Buddha’s voice, which is as pleasing, clear, and penetrating as the kalavinka’s.

The Buddha is called **the Immortal** because in the past, Shakyamuni Buddha cultivated as a patient immortal and upon realizing enlightenment, he was known as the Great Enlightened Golden Immortal.

The Buddha’s voice **pervaded the ten directions**: it can be heard everywhere. For example, the Buddha spoke dharma in India and we in America can hear it. Under the right conditions, it can be heard more clearly than a radio, and it arrives faster than a telegraph message.

Once, the Buddha’s disciple Mahamaudgalyayana, who was foremost of the Buddha’s disciples in spiritual penetrations, became curious to know just how far the Buddha’s voice reached. So he used his spiritual penetrations to travel east through numberless unreckonable lands, through hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhalands. But when he had reached a land an enormous distance away, he still could hear the Buddha speaking dharma as if it were spoken right into his ear. It was still perfectly clear.

The inhabitants of that far-off eastern land were huge. The shortest of them was thirty or forty feet tall. Maudgalyayana arrived at lunch time, and the bowls they were using were as large as our houses. The amount they ate far surpassed what we consume. Maudgalyayana perched on the edge of one of the bowls and stood watching the giants eat. Eventually one of them noticed him and exclaimed, “Oh? Where did that human-headed bug come from?” He was so tiny that they called him a human-headed bug.

But the Buddha of that far eastern land told them, “You must not speak like that. That is Maudgalyayana from the Saha world. He is foremost in spiritual penetrations among Shakyamuni Buddha’s disciples. Don’t ridicule him. He’s not a human-headed bug.” The disciples of that land were surprised indeed to learn that Shakyamuni Buddha’s disciples were the size of insects.

**Bodhisattvas as numerous as the sands of the Ganges gathered at the Bodhimanda.** The Ganges River in India is about fifteen miles wide and its sands are as fine as flour. So they are used as an analogy for the unreckonable number of Bodhisattvas who came to the dharma assembly. The Bodhisattvas came to protect the place where Shakyamuni Buddha spoke the *Shurangama Sutra*. The Way-place referred to is also this present Way-place where the *Shurangama Sutra* is now being explained. The Bodhisattvas from the former assembly are also here. You should not look lightly on this place just because the room is small. There are also many great Bodhisattvas here listening to the sutras, protecting this Way-place, and enabling it to become more flourishing every day. Would you like to meet them? I will tell you that they have **Manjushri as their leader**. Manjushri is a Sanskrit name that means “wonderful virtue,” referring to his subtle, wonderful, inconceivable virtuous practices. He is also called “wonderfully lucky,” because every place he goes becomes auspicious. Every time he comes to a Way-place, the Way-place becomes very auspicious.

In China, the Bodhimanda of Manjushri is at Wu Tai mountain. He is referred to as the Greatly Wise Manjushri because he is foremost among the Bodhisattvas in wisdom. Among the arhats, Shariputra is foremost in wisdom, but his wisdom is small compared to that of the Bodhisattvas.