

The Sutra of Forty-Two Sections

Introduction

This Sutra was the first official Buddhist literature translated into Chinese by two early Indian missionaries (Kasyapa Matanga and Gobharana) during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Later Han Dynasty. The translators extracted all the passages from different Buddhist Canonical books which they brought along for their missionary purposes. It was compiled after the fashion of the Confucian Analects to suit the Chinese and therefore each section begins with “The Buddha said,” which corresponds to the Confucian “The Master said.” This Sutra was therefore specially prepared for the Chinese Buddhists and it contains a good collection of moral and religious sayings of the Buddha. It is still widely read by the Chinese and is very dear to their hearts.

Sutra

“When the World-Honored One had become Enlightened he reflected thus: “To be free from the passions and to be calm, this is the most excellent Way.”

He was absorbed in Great Meditation, subdued all evil ones, and later in the Deer Park caused to revolve the Wheel of Dharma, which consisted of The Four Noble Truths:

- (1) Life is Suffering.
- (2) Ignorance is the cause of Suffering.

(3) The Cessation of Suffering which is the goal of life as it transcends pains and pleasure.

(4) The Way to Cessation of Suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path which consists of:

(1) Right Understanding

(2) Right Thought

(3) Right Speech

(4) Right Action

(5) Right Livelihood

(6) Right Effort

(7) Right Mindfulness

(8) Right Concentration

He converted the five Bhikshus [mendicants], Kaudinya and the others, inducing them to attain Enlightenment.

Again, there were other Bhikshus [mendicants], who implored the Buddha to remove their doubts that they had concerning his doctrine. The World-Honored-One illumined all their minds through his authoritative teachings. The Bhikshus, joining their hands reverentially bowing, followed his sacred instructions.

1. The Buddha said: “Those who, taking leave of their families and adopting the homeless life, understand the mind, reach the source, and comprehend the immaterial, are called Sramanas.

Those who observe the two hundred and fifty precepts of morality [of the vinaya] , who are pure and spotless in their

behaviors, and who exert themselves for the attainment of the stages of progress, are called Arhats. The Arhat is able to fly through space and assume different forms; his life is eternal, and there are times when he causes heaven and earth to quake.

Below them is the Anagamin who, at the end of a long life, ascend in spirit to the nineteenth heaven and obtains Arhatship.

Next come the Skridagamin who ascends to the heavens (after his death), comes back to the earth once more, and then attains Arhatship.

Then come the Srotaapanna who cannot become Arhat until he has passed seven more rounds of birth and death. By the severance of the passions is meant that like the limbs severed they are never again made use of.”

2. The Buddha Said: “The homeless Sramana cuts off the passions, frees himself of attachments, understands the source of his own mind, penetrates the deepest doctrine of Buddha, and comprehends the Dharma which is immaterial. He has no prejudice in his heart; he hankers after nothing . He is not hampered by the thought of the Way, nor is he entangled in karma. No prejudice, no compulsion, no discipline, no enlightenment, and no going up through the grades, and yet in possession of all honors in itself — this is what is meant by the Way.”

3. The Buddha said, “Those who shaving their heads and faces and become Sramanas and have accepted the Doctrine of the Way, should surrender all worldly possessions and be contented with whatever they obtain by begging. Only one meal a day and lodging under a tree, he desires nothing else. For what makes one stupid and irrational are the attachments and the passions.”

4. The Buddha said, “There are ten things considered good by all beings, and ten things evil . What are they?

Three of them depend upon the body,
four upon the mouth, and
three upon the mind.

“Three evil deeds depending upon the body are:

 killing,
 stealing
 unchaste deeds.

The four depending upon the mouth are:

 slandering,
 cursing,
 lying and
 flattery.

The three depending upon the mind are:

 envy,
 anger and
 foolishness.

All these things are not in keeping with the Holy Way, and are therefore evil. When these evils are not done, they are ten good deeds.”

5. The Buddha said: “If a man who has committed many a misdemeanor does not repent and cleanse his heart of evil, retribution will come upon his person as sure as the stream runs into the ocean which becomes ever deeper and wider. If a man who has committed a misdemeanor comes to the knowledge of it, reforms himself, and practices goodness, the force of retribution will gradually exhaust itself as a disease gradually loses its baneful influence when the patient perspires.”

6. The Buddha said, “When an evil-man, seeing you practice goodness, comes and maliciously insults you, you should patiently endure it and not feel angry with him, for the evil-man is insulting himself by trying to insult you.”

7. The Buddha said, “Once a man came unto me and denounced me on account of my observing the Way and practicing great loving-kindness. But I kept silent and did not answer him. The denunciation ceased. Then I asked him. ‘If you bring a present to your neighbor and he accepts it not; does the present come back to you?’ He replied, ‘It will,’ I said, ‘You denounce me now, but as I accept it not, you must take the wrong deed back on your own person. It is like echo succeeding sound, it is like shadow following object; you never escape the effect of your own evil deeds. Be therefore mindful, and cease from doing evil’.”

8. The Buddha said, “Evil-doers who denounce the wise resemble a person who spits against the sky; the spittle will never reach the sky, but comes down on himself. Evildoers again resemble a man who stirs the dust against the wind, the dust is never raised without doing him injury. Thus, the wise will never be hurt but the curse is sure to destroy the evil-doers themselves.”

9. The Buddha said, “If you endeavor to embrace the Way through much learning, the Way will not understood. If you observe the Way with simplicity of heart, great indeed is this Way.”

10. The Buddha said, “Those who rejoice in seeing others observe the Way will obtain great blessing.” A Sramana asked the Buddha, “Would this blessing be destroyed?” The Buddha replied, “It is like a lighted torch whose flame can be distributed to ever so many other torches which people may bring along; and therewith they will cook food and dispel darkness, while the original torch itself remains burning ever the same. It is even so with the bliss of the Way.”

11. The Buddha said,

“It is better to feed a good man than one hundred bad men. It is better to feed one who observes the Five Precepts of the Buddha than to feed one thousand good men.

It is better to feed one Srotaapanna (Stream-enterer) than to feed ten thousands of those who observe the Five Precepts of Buddha.

It is better to feed one Skridagamin than to feed one million Srotaapanna.

It is better to feed one Anagamin than to feed ten millions of Skridagamins.

It is better to feed one Arhat than to feed one hundred millions of Anagamins.

It is better to feed one Pretyekabuddha than to feed one billion of Arhats.

It is better to feed one of the Buddha, either of the present, or of the past, or of the future, than to feed ten billions of Pratyekabuddhas.

It is better to feed one who is above knowledge, one-sidedness, discipline, and enlightenment than to feed one hundred billions of Buddhas of the past, present, or future.

12. The Buddha said, “There are twenty difficult things to attain in this world:

- (1) It is hard for the poor to practice charity.
- (2) It is hard for the strong and rich to observe the Way.
- (3) It is hard to disregard life and go to certain death.
- (4) It is only a favoured few that get acquainted with a Buddhist sutra.
- (5) It is hard to be born in the age of the Buddha.
- (6) It is hard to conquer the passions, to suppress selfish desires.
- (7) It is hard not to hanker after that which is agreeable.
- (8) It is hard not to get into a passion when slighted.
- (9) It is hard not to abuse one’s authority.
- (10) It is hard to be even-minded and simple hearted in all one’s dealings with others.

- (11) It is hard to be thorough in learning and exhaustive in investigation.
- (12) It is hard to subdue selfish pride.
- (13) It is hard not to feel contempt toward the unlearned.
- (14) It is hard to be one in knowledge and practice.
- (15) It is hard not to express an opinion about others.
- (16) It is by rare opportunity that one is introduced to a true spiritual teacher.
- (17) It is hard to gain an insight into the nature of being and to practise the Way.
- (18) It is hard to follow the way of a saviour.
- (19) It is hard to be always the master of oneself.
- (20) It is hard to understand thoroughly the Ways of Buddha.”

13. A monk asked the Buddha, “Under what conditions is it possible to come to the knowledge of the past and to understand the most supreme Way?”

The Buddha answered, “Those who are pure in heart and single in purpose are able to understand the most supreme Way. It is like polishing a mirror, which becomes bright when the dust is removed. Remove your passions, and have no hankering, and the past will be revealed to you.”

14. A monk asked the Buddha, “What is good, and what is great?”

The Buddha replied, “Good is to practice the Way and to follow the truth. Great is the heart that is in accord with the Way.”

15. A monk asked the Buddha, “What is most powerful, and what is most illuminating?”

The Buddha replied, “Meekness is most powerful, for it harbours no evil thoughts, and, moreover, it is restful and full of strength. As it is free from evils, it is sure to be honored by all.

The most illuminating is a mind that is thoroughly cleansed of dirt, and which, remaining pure, retains no blemishes. From the time when there was yet no heaven and earth till the present day, there is nothing in the ten quarters which is not seen, or known, or heard by such a mind, for it has gained all-knowledge, and for that reason it is called ‘illuminating’.”

16. The Buddha said, “Those who have passions are never able to perceive the Way; for it is like stirring up clear water with hands; people may come there wishing to find a reflection of their faces, which, however, they will never see. A mind troubled and vexed with the passions is impure, and on that account it never sees the Way. O monks, do away with passions. When the dirt of passion is removed the Way will manifest itself.”

17. The Buddha said, “Seeing the Way is like going into a dark room with a torch; the darkness instantly departs, while the light alone remains.

When the Way is attained and the truth is seen, ignorance vanishes and enlightenment abides forever.”

18. The Buddha said, “My doctrine is to think the thought that is unthinkable, to practice the deed that is non-doing, to speak the speech that is inexpressible, and to be trained in the discipline that is beyond discipline. Those who understand this are near, those who are confused are far. The Way is beyond words and expressions, is bound by nothing earthly. Lose sight of it to an inch, or miss it for a moment, and we are away from it for evermore.
19. The Buddha said, “Look up to heaven and down on earth, and they will remind you of their impermanency. Look about the world, and it will remind you of its impermanency. But when you gain spiritual enlightenment, you shall then find wisdom. The knowledge thus attained leads you quickly to the Way.”
20. The Buddha said, “You should think of the four elements of which the body is exposed. Each of them has its own name, and there is no such thing there known as ego. As there is really no ego, it is like unto a mirage.”
21. The Buddha said, “Moved by their selfish desires, people seek after fame and glory. But when they have acquired it, they are already stricken in years. If you hanker after worldly fame and practise not the Way, your labours are wrongfully applied and your energy is wasted. It is like unto burning an incense stick.”

22. The Buddha said, “People cleave to their worldly possessions and selfish passions so blindly as to sacrifice their own lives for them. They are like a child who tries to eat a little honey smeared on the edge of a knife. The amount is by no means sufficient to appease his appetite, but he runs the risk of wounding the tongue.”
23. The Buddha said, “Men are tied up to their families and possessions more helplessly than in a prison. There is an occasion for the prisoner to be released, but the householders entertain no desire to be relieved from the ties of family. Even into the paws of a tiger will he jump. Those who are thus drowned in the filth of passion are called the ignorant. Those who are able to overcome it are saintly Arhats.
24. The Buddha said, “There is nothing like lust. Lust may be said to be the most powerful passion. Fortunately, we have but one thing which is more powerful. If the thirst for truth were weaker than passion, how many of us in the world will be able to follow the way of righteousness?”
25. The Buddha said, “Men who are addicted to the passions are like the torch-carrier running against the wind; his hands are sure to be burned.”
26. The Lord of Heaven offered a beautiful fairy to the Buddha, desiring to tempt him to the evil path. But the Buddha said, “Be gone. What use have I for the leather bag filled with filth which you brought to me?” Then, the god reverently bowed and asked the Buddha about the

essence of the Way, in which having been instructed by the Buddha, it is said he attained the Srotaapannafruit.”

27. The Buddha said, “Those who are following the Way should behave like a piece of timber which is drifting along a stream. If the log is neither held by the banks, nor seized by men, nor obstructed by the gods, nor kept in the whirlpool, nor itself goes to decay, I assure you that this log will finally reach the ocean. If monks walking on the Way are neither tempted by the passions, nor led astray by some evil influences; but steadily pursue their course for Nirvana, I assure you that these monks will finally attain enlightenment.”

28. The Buddha said, “Rely not upon your own will. It is not trustworthy. Guard yourself against sensualism, for it surely leads to the path of evil. Your own will becomes trustworthy only when you have attained Arhatship.”

29. The Buddha said, “O monks, you should not see women. (If you should have to see them), refrain from talking to them. (If you should have to talk), you should reflect in a right spirit: ‘I am now a homeless mendicant. In the world of sin, I must behave myself like unto the lotus flower whose purity is not defiled by the mud. Old ones I will treat as my mother, elderly ones as elder sisters; younger ones as younger sisters; and little ones as daughters’. And in all this you should harbor no evil thoughts, but think of salvation.”

30. The Buddha said, “Those who walk the Way should avoid sensualism as those who carry hay would avoid coming near the fire.”

31. The Buddha said, “There was once a man who, being in despair over his inability to control his passions, wished to mutilate himself: The Buddha said to him: ‘Better destroy your own evil thoughts than do harm to your own person. The mind is lord. When the lord himself is claimed the servant will themselves be yielding. If your mind is not cleansed of evil passions, what avails it to mutilate yourself?’

Thereupon, the Buddha recited the gatha,

“Passions grow from the will,
The will grows from thought and imagination.
When both are calmed,
There is neither sensualism nor transmigration.”

The Buddha said, that this gatha was taught by Kashyapabuddha.

32. The Buddha said, “From the passions arise worry, and from worry arises fear. Away with passions, and no fear, no worry.”

33. The Buddha said, “Those who follow the Way are like unto warriors who fight single-handed with a multitude of foes. They may all go out of the fort in full armour; but among them are some who are fainthearted, and some who go halfway and beat a retreat, and some who are killed in the affray, and some who come home victorious. O monks, if you desire to attain enlightenment, you should steadily walk in your Way, with a resolute heart, with courage, and should be fearless

in whatever environment you may happen to be, and destroy every evil influence that you may come across for thus you shall reach the goal.”

34. One night a monk was reciting a sutra, bequeathed by Kashyapa-buddha. His tone was so mournful, and his voice so fainting, as if he were going out of existence. The Buddha asked him, “What was your occupation before you became a homeless monk?” The monk replied, “I was very fond of playing a stringed instrument.” The Buddha said, “How did you find it when the strings were too loose?” “No sound is possible.” was the reply.

“How when the strings were too tight?”

“They crack.”

“How when they were neither too tight nor too loose?”

“Every note sounds in its proper tone.”

35. The Buddha then said to the monk, “Religious discipline is also like unto playing such a stringed instrument. When the mind is properly adjusted and quietly applied, the Way is attainable; but when you are too fervently bent on it, your body grows tired, and when your body is tired, your spirit become weary; when your spirit is weary, your discipline will relax; and with the relaxation of discipline there follows many an evil. Therefore, be calm and pure, and the Way will be gained.”

36. The Buddha said,

“Even if one escapes from the evil creations:

It is one’s rare fortune to be born as a human being.

Even if he is born as human, it is one's rare fortune to be born as a man and not a woman.

Even if one be born a man, it is one's rare fortune to be perfect in all the six senses.

Even if he be perfect in all the six senses, it is his rare fortune to be born in the middle kingdom.

Even if he be born in the middle kingdom, it is his rare fortune to be born in the time of a Buddha.

Even if he be born in the time of a Buddha, it is his rare fortune to see the enlightened.

Even if he be able to see the enlightened, it is his rare fortune to have his heart awakened in faith.

Even if he has faith, it is his rare fortune to awaken the heart of intelligence.

Even if he awakens the heart of intelligence, it is his rare fortune to realise a spiritual state which is above discipline and attainment."

37. The Buddha said, "O children of Buddha! You are away from me ever so many thousand miles, but if you remember and think of my precepts, you shall surely gain the fruit of enlightenment. You may, standing by my side, see me always, but if you observe not my precepts, you shall never gain enlightenment."

38. The Buddha asked another monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" He answered, "By days." The Buddha said, "You do not understand the Way." The Buddha asked another monk, "How do you measure the length of a man's life?" The monk answered, "By the time

that passes during a meal.” The Buddha said, “You do not understand the Way.” The Buddha asked the third monk, “How do you measure the length of a man’s life?” The monk answered, “By the breadth.” The Buddha said, “Very well, you know the Way.”

39. The Buddha said, “Those who study the doctrine of the Buddhas will do well to believe and observe all that is taught by them. It is like unto honey; it is sweet within, it is sweet without, it is sweet throughout; so is the Buddhas’ teaching.”

40. The Buddha said, “O monks, you must not walk on the Way as the ox is attached to the wheel. His body moves, but his heart is not willing. But when your hearts are in accord with the Way, there is no need of troubling yourselves about your outward demeanor.”

41. The Buddha said, “Those who practice the Way might well follow the example of an ox that marches through the deep mire carrying a heavy load. He is tired, but his steady gaze, looking forward, will never relax until he comes out of the mire, and it is only then that he takes a respite.

O monks, remember that passions and sins are more than the filthy mire, and that you can escape misery only by earnestly and steadily thinking of the Way.”

42. The Buddha said,

“I consider the dignities of kings and lords as a particle of dust that floats in the sunbeam.

I consider the treasure of precious metals and stones as bricks and pebbles.

I consider the gaudy dress of silk and brocades as a worn-out rag.

I consider this universe as small as the holila fruit.

I consider the lake of Anavatapa as a drop of oil with which one smears the feet.

I consider the various methods of salvation taught by the Buddhas as a treasure created by the imagination.

I consider the transcendental doctrine of Buddhism as precious metal or priceless fabric seen in a dream.I

consider the teaching of Buddhas as a flower before my eyes.

I consider the practice of Dhyana as a pillar supporting the Mount Sumeru.

I consider Nirvana as awakening from a daydream or nightmare.

I consider the struggle between heterodox and orthodox as the antics of the six (mythical) dragons.

I consider the doctrine of sameness as the absolute ground of reality.

I consider all the religious works done for universal salvation as like the plants in the four seasons.”