

A Discourse on the Śūraṅgama Sutra

Preface

A Discourse on the Śūraṅgama Sutra is based on the edited transcripts of the lectures on the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, which commenced in the early summer of 2001. It is hoped that this book will benefit many more Buddhist learners and help them develop faith in and great respect for the *Mahāyāna* teachings, thereby willing to follow suit and eliciting their Bodhisattva-nature. Moreover, by reading this book and imbibing the teachings of *Mahāyāna* to gradually acquire correct knowledge and views, practitioners will be able to eliminate their self-view by distancing themselves from the eternalist non-Buddhist view of the states of the mental consciousness. They will simultaneously gain a true understanding of the definition of the everlasting True Mind by delving deeply into the underlying meanings of dharma expounded in this book, thus capable of detaching from the erroneous views of nihilistic non-Buddhist. Furthermore, practitioners can proceed to achieve awakening to the True Mind by realizing the ultimate reality and personally witnessing that all phenomena are derived from the *tathāgatagarbha*, thereby becoming a real bodhisattva at the non-retrogressive stage; directly observing that the *tathāgatagarbha*, the *ālaya*-consciousness mind entity they have realized, is definitely not the eternalist non-Buddhist Divine Self; and directly observing that this Divine Self that non-Buddhists mistakenly believe in is, in fact, within the scope of the consciousness aggregate that stemmed from their own *tathāgatagarbha*. In addition, as the conditions ripen, practitioners will be able to see the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes and reach the Tenth Abiding stage to instantly perfect the attainment of direct observation of the illusoriness of the body, mind, and world. As this mode of instantaneous perfect accomplishment is not achieved by progressive cultivation, practitioners may also further reach the First Practice stage and leap over one-third of the first great *asaṃkhyā-kalpa* of the Path to Buddhahood. That practitioners benefit in this way is my earnest wish.

Given that nine long years have lapsed since the end of the sutra lecturing to the current compiling of lectures for publication, the situation has changed. My original intention at the start was to help Buddhist learners swiftly eliminate their self-view and grasp the wondrous teachings of the *tathāgatagarbha* in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, so

only brief and sketchy explanations were given. As a result, many doctrines on the Buddha-nature were left unexplained. In addition, some profound and wondrous doctrinal parts about the *tathāgatagarbha* were not sufficiently elucidated. This does not align with the current considerations for circulating and passing on publications to future generations, including complying with the *Mahāyāna* principle that bodhisattvas should widely teach and display the wondrous doctrines of reality-suchness and Buddha-nature to all people. Therefore, in-depth supplemental elucidations of the profound and wondrous teachings of the *tathāgatagarbha* that have never been expounded before are provided in this book. The text has been made colloquial in style, with substantial additions and deletions. This was done to help readers, especially those who have realized the *tathāgatagarbha*, read and contemplate the sutra's teachings repeatedly and gain a deeper understanding of them. Therefore, after the compilation of the text, certain changes were made during the polishing process to enhance its clarity, allowing readers to delve into the text and ponder it multiple times until they already understand it. Readers can then accelerate their practice to enter the bodhisattva stage, stay far away from the sound-hearer disposition, not be confined by the sound-hearer doctrines, and become true bodhisattvas.

The *Mahāyāna* sutras contain many doctrines, but among them, the teachings on the *tathāgatagarbha* mind entity are particularly difficult to understand. Even renowned masters throughout history had problems comprehending it. Moreover, the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* not only teaches the *tathāgatagarbha* mind but also covers the personal realization and connotations of the Buddha-nature, which makes its meanings even more difficult to grasp. The *tathāgatagarbha* mind entity is free from all seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognizing the six sense objects, but the wondrous nature of reality-suchness—the Buddha-nature—is not, although it does not discern the six sense objects, nor does it see, hear, feel, and cognize as the perceptive mind of the consciousness aggregate (skandha). For those seeking to realize the *tathāgatagarbha* mind entity and to see the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes, the cultivational direction and conditions for actual realization vary significantly. One cannot achieve true awakening by understanding the meaning of the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* through reading alone, without personally experiencing each realization stage. In addition, the wording of the sutra is extremely refined and concise; how can contemporary readers with limited classical Chinese proficiency comprehend its true meaning? Thus, it is extremely difficult for practitioners to realize the *tathāgatagarbha* mind and understand the meaning of the Buddha-nature as explained in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, without generating ambivalent thoughts about them. In particular,

the diverse and confused elaborations concerning the realization, connotation, and interpretations of the terms related to the Buddha-nature are done mainly by unenlightened ordinary people in Buddhist communities from ancient to modern times who do not know or have yet to witness the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes. These people might read the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* and inevitably mistake the natures of seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognizing of the six sense consciousnesses for the everlasting Buddha-nature. For this reason, this sutra is elucidated herein to correct the old erroneous views held by Buddhist communities.

Although the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* sometimes also elucidates that the *tathāgatagarbha* fully possesses the property that allows practitioners to attain Buddhahood, which is also the connotation illustrated in the *Treatise on Buddha-nature*¹ by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu, it should not be confused with bodhisattvas seeing the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes at the Tenth Abiding stage, as expounded in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* by the World-Honored One. This is also not the true implication of the direct perception state of realizing the Buddha-nature—the wondrous nature of reality-suchness—that the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* explains. This is why practitioners who have not personally realized the *tathāgatagarbha* and have not seen the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes often mistake the phenomenal states of the eighteen elements and six sense fields depicted in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra* as the state of the Buddha-nature and fall into the natures of seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognizing pertaining to the six sense consciousnesses. Nine years ago, I briefly explained the true meaning of the Buddha-nature and slightly touched on the principle of Buddha-nature based on the metaphoric denotation of the second moon illustrated in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*. However, I did not thoroughly elaborate these matters for the sake of the readers as I intended to reserve the right conditions for them to see the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes in the future. Thus, I deliberately concealed the secret meaning of the Buddha-nature, giving only sketchy explanations of its principle, in the hope of inducing readers' conditions of seeing the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes so that they could gradually mature after attaining enlightenment of the True Mind in the future. Perhaps in this life or another, upon sudden awakening instant, practitioners can personally witness their own Buddha-nature in the mountains, rivers, or lands. The direct perception state of seeing the illusoriness of the body, mind, and world with one's physical eyes is instantaneously accomplished; it is not derived from gradual cultivation but attained in an instant moment, allowing one to complete the Tenth Abiding stage and directly perceive the illusoriness of the body, mind, and world.

¹ 《佛性論》

In addition, bodhisattvas who have reached the First Ground and beyond are endowed with the meritorious quality of acquiescence to the non-arising of dharmas, thereby achieving the state of seeing the Buddha-nature with the physical eyes. They are capable of directly connecting with the minds of sentient beings through their *tathāgatagarbha*. Even though the minds of ordinary beings or those at the stages of worthiness may not be aware of this connection, bodhisattvas at or above the First Ground can already telepathize the seeds that have flowed out of the *tathāgatagarbha* of sentient beings when they first meet them. From this, the bodhisattvas will know whether those sentient beings have formed good or bad affinities with them in the past. Bodhisattvas who have entered the First Ground or above but have ignorance about past lives due to their reincarnation have such meritorious qualities when they see the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes. Hence, with this direct connection, they can give these ordinary and worthy-stage bodhisattvas the teachings appropriate for them. This is why the under Third-Ground bodhisattvas can respond appropriately to people's different dispositions through the virtue of "going along with the Buddha-nature," even without having the supernatural power of divine eyes and the supernatural power of knowing people's past lives. As such, the wisdom gained by bodhisattvas at the various Ground stages after seeing the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes is significantly different from the wisdom gained by Tenth-Abiding-stage bodhisattvas and is unknown to bodhisattvas from the Tenth Abiding stage to the Tenth Dedication stage, let alone all enlightened bodhisattvas at the stages of worthiness who have not seen the Buddha-nature.

There is no need to mention the unenlightened ordinary bodhisattvas who have long dwelled in the state of mental consciousness with ignorance, who are referred to as "ordinary people going along with the Buddha-nature." Monks with sound-hearer dispositions and various non-Buddhists have always mistaken the natures of seeing, hearing, feeling, and cognizing of the six sense consciousnesses (consciousness-skandha) as the Buddha-nature. This misunderstanding has led them to slander the state of seeing the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes achieved by the Tenth-Abiding-stage bodhisattvas, not to mention that the wisdom state of "going along with the Buddha-nature" of bodhisattvas of the various Ground stages is utterly beyond their grasp. They can only speculate and make false claims about it. In addition, the Buddha-nature seen by all the Buddhas differs from that seen by bodhisattvas at the Ten Ground stages, the Sublime Enlightenment stage, and the Virtual Enlightenment stage. After seeing the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes, the Buddhas display the perfect-achievement wisdom, and each of their five consciousnesses can flow out

individually, enabling them to perform countless deeds that will benefit sentient beings. They will also have boundless emanation bodies, which the bodhisattvas of the Virtual Enlightenment and Ten Ground stages cannot speculate about. Therefore, there are different states of seeing the Buddha-nature with the physical eyes. Those less informed and have scant wisdom do not know this; even Tenth-Abiding-stage bodhisattvas who have seen the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes still cannot have complete knowledge of it! Such different states of seeing the Buddha-nature are not described in detail in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, but the World-Honored One had separately expounded on this subject extensively in other sutras to complete the task of teaching sentient beings with karmic connections. Only then did He expediently manifest entering nirvana with His response body. Such a connotation of the Path to Buddhahood is abstruse. Without profound and wondrous wisdom, a practitioner will inevitably misunderstand its meaning and commit the deed of grievous false speech, or have doubts out of disbelief and commit acts of groundless defamation. The retribution they will face for these after death is worrisome. Hence, I am stating this in advance in this preface to forewarn others. I hope that after reading this book, less-informed ordinary people with minimal wisdom will refrain from slandering the Dharma, thus avoiding severe retribution after their death.

In addition, in this Dharma-ending era, followers of demons often don Buddhist robes yet propagate non-Buddhist dharmas of eternalism and nihilism, causing the four Buddhist assemblies to embrace the non-Buddhist views of eternalism and nihilism. Even worse, some don Buddhist robes and live in the Tathagata's monasteries, practicing Hindu Shaktism—Tantric Buddhism, which is not Buddhism. This practice involves the yab-yum practice of Tantra Yoga, which is associated with a craving for sexual contact and is encompassed by mental consciousness. The members (but not the novice adherents) know that the yab-yum method is openly practiced in the monasteries every night and even during the day. In this Dharma-ending era, such erroneous teachings and deviant conduct have already become prevalent in Tantric Buddhism temples on both sides of Taiwan Strait, making it extremely difficult to turn the tide. How can these deviant behaviors align with the true teachings of the Buddha and not violate the precepts established by the Buddha? How can one who engages in the practice of yab-yum, which involves lustful activities and falling into the state of the consciousness aggregate, while donning a monk's robe, correspond to the pure state of the true mind, *tathāgatagarbha*, that is free from the craving of the six sense objects? Seeing such a phenomenon during **this Dharma-ending era**, I cannot help but sigh at the lack of merits among **sentient beings**. Without realizing it, practitioners often come across unwholesome teachers who propagate non-Buddhist teachings.

Some of these teachers even lead their followers to engage in the yab-yum practice, which broadly goes against the precepts set by the Buddha. By engaging in such practices, practitioners deplete the merits and virtues they have accumulated from their charitable acts and regular offerings to the Three Jewels.

Even worse, practitioners single-mindedly follow false teachers, believing their erroneous dharmas to be the true Dharma, unaware that unwholesome teachers often appear graceful and pretend to be enlightened and unsullied. Due to the hindrance of ignorance and the blind worship of famous teachers, practitioners, out of their good intention of safeguarding the dharma, destroy the definitive and wondrous true Dharma together with these teachers by slandering it, claiming that it is the non-Buddhist Divine Self and the non-Buddhist view of self-nature. They also defame the worthies and sages propagating the true Dharma by accusing them of being non-Buddhists or demons. All these lead to the rise of unwholesome teachers and the wide spread of false dharmas. As a result of ignorance and blind worship of famous teachers, out of their good intention, these practitioners unknowing the truth yet committing sinful deeds. That is, these practitioners often take great pride in attaining **great merits by protecting the Dharma** in these ways, namely **destroying the dharma and defaming the worthies and sages**. How pitiful. The Buddha explained this subject extensively in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*. If readers can discard the notions that they learned previously from the famous teachers and objectively delve into this book, comparing in detail what they have learned with the Buddha's words and pondering the latter deeply one by one, they can directly observe the manifestation of aggregates, sense fields, and elements in terms of the valid knowledge of their natures, functions, and arising-and-ceasing characteristics, as explained in the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*. Readers will thus be able to detach themselves from erroneous views and embrace the correct ones. Once they have obtained the correct knowledge, they can accumulate virtues and merits through the virtuous deed of protecting the true Dharma. If they do this, they do not need to worry about lacking the opportunity and conditions to personally realize the *tathāgatagarbha* of *Mahāyāna Bodhi* in this life. Moreover, readers with great meritorious qualities and diligently cultivate the Bodhi path can even see the Buddha-nature with their physical eyes, complete the Tenth Abiding stage, and attain direct observance of the illusoriness of the body, mind, and world.

Finally, it is imperative to address a significant matter. Tsongkhapa's non-Buddhist views on the contemplation of dependent origination and *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment [Lamrim Chenmo]* have existed in the Chinese Buddhist community for a hundred years, and in Tantric Buddhism for centuries.

Therefore, it is crucial to broadly refute them by expounding the true meaning of the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*. For around a century, many great masters have often erroneously followed the views of a few scholars in Japanese academia who single-mindedly seek to replace Buddhist sutra teachings that specifically emphasizing empirical realization with academic research findings. However, such academic researchers of Buddhism in modern-day Japan are essentially Christians eager to **exit from Asia and integrate with Europe** to boost Japan's academic reputation globally and rival European and American academia. They have adopted a demagogic approach, vigorously criticizing Buddhism and intending to detach themselves from and be superior to Buddhism in China. This led them to criticize the teachings of the *tathāgatagarbha* in traditional Buddhism in China, which subsequently gave rise to the "Critical Buddhism" School in Japan thirty years ago. This school focuses only on the literal and superficial meanings of the four *Āgamas* and distorts the doctrines in these sutras. Proponents of them propagate the contemplation of dependent origination based on the theory of six sense consciousnesses asserted by non-Buddhists to replace the contemplation of dependent origination based on the Buddhist teachings on the theory of the eight consciousnesses in the four *Āgamas*. They take their own fallacy as the only true Buddha Dharma, advocating that all phenomena are just **dependent arising** and therefore impermanent, and they falsely claim that the traditional Chinese Buddhist teachings of the *tathāgatagarbha* are non-Buddhist Divine Self teachings. However, the *tathāgatagarbha* is the eighth consciousness that can give rise to the non-Buddhist Divine Self and cannot be destroyed in any way whatsoever in the dharma realm. In addition, everyone who has personally realized the *tathāgatagarbha* can witness and verify this valid knowledge through direct observation. On the other hand, the notion of non-Buddhist Divine Self belongs to the sixth sense consciousness or the six sense consciousnesses of the consciousness aggregate, which arises from the *tathāgatagarbha* and is an arising-and-ceasing dharma. The *tathāgatagarbha* is the principal, and the non-Buddhist Divine Self is the subordinate; there is a world of difference between them. How can one treat them as equals? This proves the fact that the theory of Critical Buddhism created by Japanese scholars Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiro is a mere conceptual proliferation based on ignorance, and is devoid of any real meaning.

For sixty years, Buddhism in Taiwan has been influenced by Yin Shun and his followers, who adhere to Tsongkhapa's Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka teachings. These teachings originated from Tantric Buddhism in ancient India and advocate for the theory of six sense consciousnesses. They used the Western theological research method employed by Christians, which goes against the notion of personal realization.

Additionally, they distort the true principle of dependent arising based on the underlying theory of the eight consciousnesses elucidated in the four *Āgamas* and intentionally deny the teachings that expound on the wondrous meaning of the *tathāgatagarbha* in the Chinese Chan School to debase it by claiming that it is either the “wild-fox Chan” or the non-Buddhist concept of the “Divine Self.” In this way, they create the illusion that Yin Shun’s six-sense consciousnesses theory is not “conventional” but “transcendental and non-superstitious,” which is different from the traditional Buddhism. Thereafter, Buddhist followers of Fo Guang Shan, Dharma Drum Mountain, and Tzu Chi followed Yin Shun’s teachings accordingly. Yet the essence of the Yin Shun School’s thought is the Contemplation of Dependent Origination based on the non-Buddhist theory of six sense consciousnesses, inherited from the theory of recent Japanese academic researchers who do not engage in cultivational realization. Furthermore, these teachings were acceded to by advocators of the theory of the six sense consciousnesses in ancient times: Tsongkhapa, Atiśa, Śāntideva, Chandrakirti, Buddhapalita, and others, who were unenlightened commentators. These non-Buddhists’ proclamation on the contemplation of dependent origination is that the arising of the six sense consciousnesses is solely due to the presence of the sense faculties and the sense objects as causes and conditions, and that there is no need for the fundamental consciousness, *tathāgatagarbha*, to hold seeds, simply relying on the six sense faculties and the six sense objects as causes and conditions to bring forth the six sense consciousnesses. They also assert that the mental consciousness is permanent and indestructible, blatantly violating the Buddha’s teaching. Such a contemplation of dependent origination by non-Buddhists totally goes against the valid knowledge of the dharma-realm, which is the direct observational fact in the phenomenal world. Based on this fact, it is clear that all dharmas do not arise from themselves, from others, from symbiosis, or from no cause. The aforementioned non-Buddhists’ understanding also completely goes against the Middle Way teachings of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna.

Yin Shun School’s contemplation of dependent origination and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka are exactly the same as the non-Buddhist theory of dependent origination that Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna discredited, claiming that it is “**arising from others and from symbiosis.**” They also violate the contemplation of dependent origination principle based on the theory of the eight consciousnesses expounded ubiquitously, both implicitly and explicitly, in the four *Āgamas*: That is, the eighth consciousness, *tathāgatagarbha*, gives rise to the six sense consciousnesses of consciousness-skandha by means of the sense faculties and sense objects, which it also gives rise to, as conditions (see a detailed explanation of this in my book *The*

Correct Meanings of the Āgamas, Vol. 1–7). The essence of their theory is exactly the erroneous non-Buddhist dependent origination principle based on the six sense consciousnesses theory. In the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, we find a complete explication to differentiate between right and wrong. It is explained in the sutra that the five aggregates, six sense entrances, six realms, twelve sense fields, and eighteen elements all arise from the wondrous nature of the reality-suchness of the *tathāgatagarbha*. The sutra delves into the correct meanings through the nine attempts to identify the True Mind and the corresponding eight rebuttals in the text. It highlights the correct principle that “the six sense consciousnesses of consciousness skandha cannot be **self-generated**, that **the sense faculty alone cannot give rise to consciousness**, that **the sense object alone cannot give rise to consciousness**, that **the symbiosis of sense faculty and sense object cannot give rise to consciousness**, and that empty space cannot give rise to consciousness **without any cause.**” These principles fully conform to the principles expounded in the four *Āgamas*, and this sutra further delves into deeper explications. Given such detailed explanations, the correct principle of Buddhist dependent arising elucidated in the sound-hearer vehicle of the *Āgamas* can be clearly unfolded. This also highlights the differences between the Buddhist dependent arising principle based on the theory of the eight consciousnesses and the non-Buddhist dependent arising principle based on the six sense consciousnesses theory advocated by Yin Shun and Tsongkhapa. Consequently, Buddhist learners will be able to reject the erroneous non-Buddhist dependent origination principle and can quickly attain the Sound-hearer Bodhi and even the Buddha Bodhi. Then, the diligent cultivation by various people in this life will not be in vain!

Cultivating the Buddha Dharma relies heavily on wisdom. Therefore, one can become an enlightened sage or worthy and a real bodhisattva, happily cultivating the Bodhisattva Way life after life, or can soon become trapped in the three lower destinies of rebirth after death and suffer endlessly as an ordinary person, cut off from the true Bodhi for over many kalpas, despite cultivating diligently life after life but still never being able to cross the threshold and feel completely at a loss. These two completely different retributions for cultivation are determined based solely on a single current thought: whether or not an individual is willing to discern objectively and strive to truly understand the similarities and differences between the doctrinal explanations of all those famous masters and my arguments, instead of blindly following hearsay. As such, this pivotal cause can make one embark on the correct path rather than follow the wrong way! I hope that all four Buddhist assemblies can objectively and calmly compare and comprehend the doctrines in depth, and then make rational decisions instead of blindly following. By doing so, practitioners will be able to set forth the correct

approach to Buddhist cultivation in this life. They will then be able to accelerate their cultivation and realization of the Path to Buddhahood, and make it more enjoyable. As a practitioner, it is possible to detach from being in the stage of a nominal bodhisattva and avoid the causes and conditions that lead to rebirth into the three lower destinies, ultimately becoming an authentic bodhisattva. Why not take this desirable course of action?

As the polishing and publication of this book approaches, I feel compelled to express my emotions in the preface and explain the cause for writing this book.

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Yours respectfully,
Buddha's disciple Pingshi
Spring equinox, 2008 AD
at Zhugui Mountain Residence

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