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**The Fifty Skandha-Demon States:
A Simple Explanation by the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua.
The Shurangama Sutra, Volume VIII**

"Foreword"

By
Ron Epstein

For over a thousand years the Shurangama Sutra has been held in great esteem in the Mahayana countries of East Asia. In China the Sutra was ranked in popularity and importance with the Lotus, Avatamsaka, and Prajna Paramita Sutras; it was also accorded imperial favor.

One major reason for the importance of the Sutra is its final section, presented in this volume, on fifty deviant mental states associated with the Five Skandhas; ten states are described for each of the skandhas. For each state a description is given of the mental phenomena experienced by the practitioner, the causes of the phenomena and the difficulties which arise from attachment to the phenomena and misinterpretation of them. In essence what is presented is both a unique method of cataloguing and classifying spiritual experience and indication of causal factors involved in the experience of the phenomena. Although the fifty states presented are by no means exhaustive, the approach taken has the potential of offering a framework for the classification of all spiritual experience, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

An important causal theme of the Sutra that reaches its full development in this section is the relation of the experience of the demonic to failure to observe the guidelines of the moral precepts. Thus we find a link between this particular section and the Aiding Practices of the Bodhimanda described in volume six. There the elimination of lust, killing, stealing and false speech is presented as a prerequisite for correct meditational progress. In this volume the consequences of the failure to completely eliminate them are presented in terms of wrong views and encounters with demonic states, both internal and external.

The Sutras particularly clear and graphic exposure of wrong practice, wrong views, the wrong use of spiritual powers, and the deceptions of deviant spiritual teachers is probably one of the major factors involved in the perennial attacks on its authenticity. It is clear that the types of people it criticizes have certainly been threatened by it, and in order to preserve their own authority and views have attacked the Sutra. Unfortunately this primary motivation for discrediting the Sutra has been ignored by the modern Buddhist scholarly community. It is not, however, difficult to see why this is the case.

To examine this dimension of discourse would mean plunging into the "subjective" realm of values, that is, the Dharmic evaluation of the correctness of various historical schools and trends. For example, not in this volume but in the above mentioned one, the Buddha proclaims:

How can thieves put on my robes and sell the Thus Come One, saying that all manner of karma one creates is just the Buddhadharma? They slander those who have left the home-life and regard Bhikshus who have taken the complete precepts as belonging to the path of the Small Vehicle. Because of such doubts and misjudgments, limitless beings fall into the unintermittent hell.
(Volume 6, p. 37)

Students of Buddhist history will have no difficulty identifying those for whom such a statement would be extremely uncomfortable. The present volume profiles in vivid detail deviant experiences, claims and behaviors on the part of so-called Buddhist teachers in such a way as to make it an embarrassment and threat

to many, including both historical and contemporary figures.

This volume of the Sutra cannot be dismissed as a narrow sectarian document. Its classification of non-Buddhist Indian religious traditions, through its framework of interpretation of meditational states, attributes to many of their founders very high states of consciousness and accords them unusual respect.

The primary importance of this volume is as a unique and intensely valuable guide for Buddhist practitioners. Herein lies the value of the commentary of the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua, which accompanies the Sutra text. His erudition, Wisdom and personal experience help both to bring to life the text and to illuminate its practical use and current relevance.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the publication of this section of the Sutra with the accompanying commentary. It is an excellent resource for the English-speaking Buddhist world in the quest for proper understanding of Buddhism. Careful study of it will lead to greater insight into one's spiritual experiences and those of others. It is also an invaluable aid to avoiding the pitfalls of association with false gurus and so-called spiritual masters, many of whom have achieved great prominence in the contemporary spiritual scene.