

# Avatamsaka—The Garland of Flowers Which We Are In

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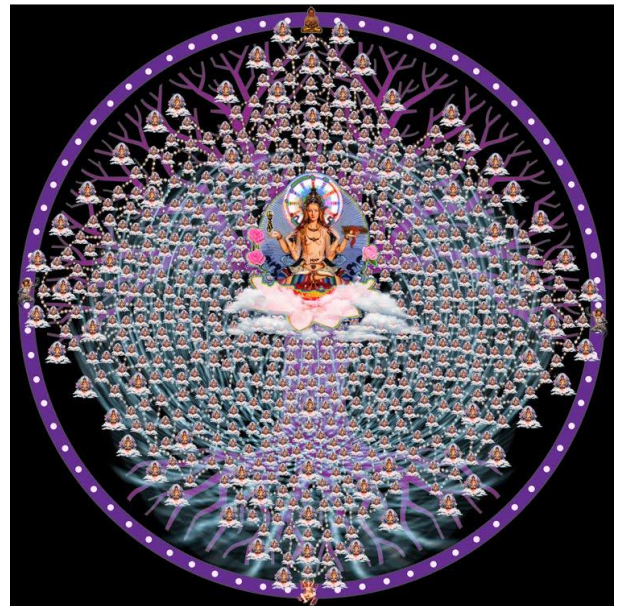
## The Net of Indra

*The universe is a shining net and at each intersection of the net there is a jewel and each jewel reflects and contains all other jewels.*

It comes in flashes and waves, in a pink apricot blossom, a gunshot from the next street, a pang of longing, a child's handprint stamped on a Hermès bag as though on a cave wall.

It comes in surprise and it comes in monotony and boredom. And I can enter there too, a school child counting the red bricks on the wall. It's more multiple than I can fathom or believe. It seems fragile until I notice that there's always a new bit arriving, a lily in December, someone shouting in a dark street. Then it looks as if it might be eternal, and not fragile at all. Even so I can't work out what's at the center. The shadow of the universe is still the universe, even copies of the universe are the universe. Whenever I decide "this is the core" my hands reach out like Ulysses in the underworld trying to embrace his mother. What is reached for, begins to fade. It moved and I have to enter there—through the movement of yearning.

To understand life is to understand what life feels like, the joy of it, the ongoing delirium, to embrace even the pains that so far I have never been able to surrender, since they too are at an intersection of the shining threads.



The young Buddha grew up inside a laboratory testing the effects of *more* and *anything you want, my dear child*. Possessions and experiences saturated him. The palace where he was raised, and the life that took place there, were designed to satisfy desire even before it was formulated. The paradoxical effect was to blur the difference between the prince and his surroundings. Unvarying fulfillment had no flavor. So the young Buddha fled in quest of less everything. But even that quest turned into more—more fasting, more losing things, more disregard of the world, and that also became too much.

There are more finches with breasts of cadmium yellow pale, more daffodils, more apple blossoms, more war in the Middle East, more Teslas in San Francisco, more

galaxies in the sky, more longing, more triumph for Beyoncé who slays, more champagne, more craft beers, more diet plans since the last one failed, more fake news on Facebook, more corrupt cabinet ministers, more ways an election was stolen, or votes suppressed, more raw fear, more shootings, more climate change, more viruses, more black holes merging, more gravity waves, more insults. “More Everything” is also a Verizon mobile phone plan.

A list is some stay against transience, but like the catalogues of ancestors and of ships in Homer, it's clear that making a list is something to do when I've given up on finding a pattern or true order. The world is spinning and rolling along in its spacetime gutter and that's what it's up to.

Even my modest attempts to take a stance, and be kind, or brave or at least clear, are just more of the things in the mind. So if rest there be, it must appear inside the activity that is always going on.

### **The Avatamsaka, or Flower Ornament Sutra**

In Asian tradition, the idea of complexity and the idea of the inconceivable is expressed in *The Flower Ornament Sutra*. In this sutra, the fragments of the world contain the world, the raindrop contains the ocean. Each moment and each smallest space encompasses a universe and all universes of whatever size simultaneously occupy that space and time without interfering with each other. The sutra explains this for about 1,400 pages.

Thomas Cleary did a grand three-volume English translation of the sutra and one method of reading it, favored by some Zen friends, is to flip a volume open randomly, treating each fragment as if it contained the whole book, or as if it were a divination. When you do this, what you always find is an attempt at an accurate description of reality. Like this:

*The one who realizes that the nature of things has no solidity  
Appears in all the boundless lands of the ten directions:  
Expounding the inconceivability of the realm of Buddhahood,  
and causes everyone to return to the ocean of liberation.  
The Buddha is in the world without a resting place—  
And, like a shadow or reflection appears in all lands.  
The nature of things is ultimately non-origination:  
This is the entryway of the Great Supreme Vision.*

And this:

*Even if every single one of the awakened beings of all the ten directions were to speak continuously, for as many eons as there are fine motes of dust in a incalculably infinite number of worlds, the merits and virtues of awakening could never be fully described.*

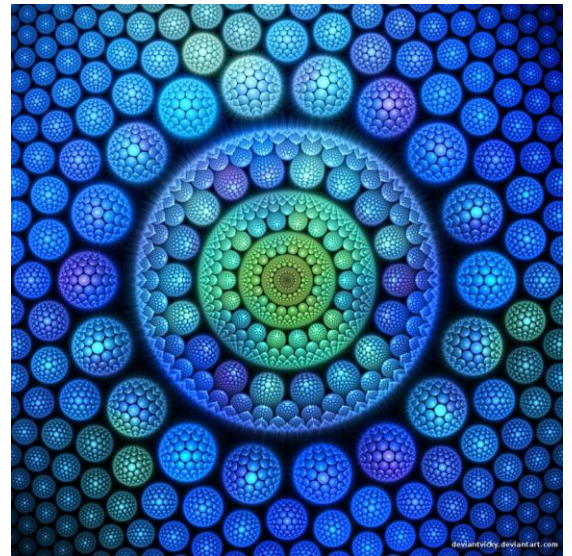
*In a single atom, buddhas as many as atoms in the universe, sit in the midst of enlightening beings; So it is: all things in the cosmos I realize all are filled with buddhas. I praise all the buddhas therein, expounding in all languages The qualities of all buddhas, with endless oceans of manifestations, with the finest flowers, garlands, musical instruments, perfumes and parasols...*

An ancient teacher built a room in which the walls, floor, and ceiling were all mirrors. He placed a lit candle in the center of the room and invited the emperor in to see what the universe is like.

In this notion, infinite universes appear in everything, and you'll never sort them out. The apricot tree really is a door to eternity. And eternity keeps tinkering and adding bits, appearing as bits. The word *ornament* is related to the word for earring—*The Flower Earrings Sutra*.

*Who am I?* is also a question. When I'm overwhelmed by how much of everything there is, I'm looking for the gate into the totality which also turns out to be the gate into unmaking everything, including myself, the one who is overwhelmed.

Since I'm implicated in everything, I can say "I am the tree, with the last, few, yellow leaves fixed to black branches." I can also say, "I don't know who I am," and be equally accurate. We ask what it's like to be a bat, a dog, a tree, or a different gender, because we want to taste the fullness of life and what it is like to be human is partly to have that empathy, that taste of reaching, yearning, joy, that taste of another piece of universe.



All the while the universes are coexisting in the same spacetime and swirling and making and undoing themselves. A galaxy, a solar system, the green tip of the onion weed I pulled on the way to school as a child. And underneath it all, uncertainty and questions are on our side, hints of the emptiness that is truly empty.

Here's Coleridge:

*The first lesson that innocent Childhood affords me is—that it is an instinct of my nature to pass out of myself, and to exist in the form of others.*

*The second is—not to suffer any one form to pass into ME and become a usurping Self in the disguise of what German Pathologists call a FIXED IDEA.*

If an idea of my position is just something made up, so is my idea of myself.

I experience my self as a rocking back and forth. When I look urgently for the shape of things, I can't find it anywhere, and an absence appears, a not knowing. And when I'm not looking for anything in particular, the emptiness turns itself into branches, dogs, imaginary lives, photons winking into existence in deep space, also demagogues, feelings, losses, and especially the act of searching for the true nature of things.

Forgetting and sleep are paths of undoing, because in those conditions I don't know who or where I am. In sleep the struggle to know who I am abates, and I surrender, I enter the great net at any point, I sink, I lose myself, happiness enfolds me and becomes me. Happiness is something that holds me up, that *is* me. But I don't know it directly, since I'm asleep.

The universe is alive in all its pieces. The scarred, wooden kitchen floor, the knife lying on the cutting board, the maple leaves on the steps, all greet me. I met a woman who recently became a mother and she was afraid something might happen to her, afraid that she wouldn't live to be able to help her baby. Being a mother had given her more stake in life but had also made her more afraid. What was consoling for her was the thought of infinite lives:

*Everything that could happen to me has happened already. I've already been murdered, raped, lost my baby, found my baby. It turns out that I can just live. I don't need to worry.*

At night I wake and, since nothing else presents itself, I meditate. Without thought I love any fragment of the silence—the owl calling, the white stripe that is the only sign of the collie dog now that the moon has set, the sounds of the trees talking to one another, Orion sinking below the live oak. At the same time as the world is confined like this, it becomes vast. This is the source of the profound beauty that is attached even to the sound of a truck shifting down as it drags itself up the s bends in the canyon. The happiness of that sound is unsought and uncontainable and has no source.



Underneath all the ways the world touches us is the realization that there's nothing we want really—it's life we want, the feel and taste of it, and we already do have it, and know it. Not even more life, just the life we have now, and again now. No injury can take it from us; in the middle of that vastness we're going to be alright.