## The Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings

**Commentary by Thich Nhat Hanh** 



E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net Web site: www.buddhanet.net

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# The Sutra On The Eight Realizations Of The Great Beings

Translated from the Chinese with Commentary by

## Thich Nhat Hanh

Translated from the Vietnamese by Diem Thanh Truong and Carole Melkonian









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Plum Village, Meyrac 47120 Loubes-Bernac, France

THICH NHAT HANH is a Buddhist monk and social activist. He served as Chair of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Accords and was nominated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. His many books include *Being Peace*, *Peace Is Every Step*, and *The Miracle Of Mindfulness*.

### Care Of Dharma Books

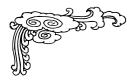
Dharma books contain the teachings of the Buddha; they have the power to protect against lower rebirth and to point the way to liberation. Therefore, they should be treated with respect – kept off the floor and places where people sit or walk – and not stepped over. They should be covered or protected for transporting and kept in a high, clean place separate from more "mundane" materials. Other objects should not be placed on top of Dharma books and materials. Licking the fingers to turn pages is considered bad form (and negative karma). If it is necessary to dispose of Dharma materials, they should be burned rather than thrown in the trash. When burning Dharma, first recite OM, AH, HUNG. Then, visualize the letters of the texts (to he burned) absorbing into the AH, and that absorbing into you. After that, you can burn the texts.

These considerations may also be kept in mind for Dharma artwork, as well as the written teachings and artwork of other religions.

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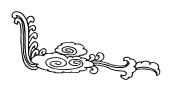


















## The Sutra On The Eight Realizations Of The Great Beings

### Translated from Chinese with Commentary By Thich Nhat Hanh

Wholeheartedly, day and night, a disciple of the Buddha should recite and meditate on the Eight Realizations discovered by the *Mahasattvas*, the Great Beings.

THE FIRST REALIZATION is the awareness that the world is impermanent. All political regimes are subject to fall; all things composed of the four elements<sup>1</sup> are empty and contain the seeds of suffering. Human beings are composed of the five *skandhas*, aggregates<sup>2</sup>, and are without a separate self. They are always in the process of change – constantly being born and constantly dying. They are empty of self, without sovereignty. The mind is the source of all confusion, and the body is the forest of all impure actions. If we mediate on these facts, we can gradually be released from *samsara*, the round of birth and death.

1. Earth, air, water, fire

2. Form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness









THE SECOND REALIZATION is the awareness that more desire brings more suffering. All hardships in daily life arise from greed and desire. Those with little desire and ambition are able to relax their bodies and minds, free from entanglement.

THE THIRD REALIZATION is that the human mind is always searching for possessions and never feels fulfilled. This causes impure actions to ever increase. Bodhisattvas however, always remember the principle of having few desires. They live a simple life in peace in order to practice the Way, and consider the realization of perfect understanding as their only career.

THE FOURTH REALIZATION is the awareness of the extent to which laziness is an obstacle to practice. For this reason, we must practice diligently to destroy the unwholesome mental factors, which bind us, and to conquer the four kinds of Mara<sup>3</sup>, in order to free ourselves from the prisons of the five aggregates and the three worlds<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4.</sup> World of desire and passion, the world of form (without desire and passion), the world of formlessness (only mental functioning).





<sup>3.</sup> Unwholesome mental factors, five aggregates, death, distractions (e.g. fantasies or forgetfulness)





THE FIFTH REALIZATION is the awareness that ignorance is the cause of the endless round of birth and death. Therefore, Bodhisattvas always remember to listen and learn in order to develop their understanding and eloquence. This enables them to educate living beings and bring them to the realm of great joy.

THE SIXTH REALIZATION is the awareness that poverty creates hatred and anger, which creates a vicious cycle of negative thoughts and activity. When practicing generosity, Bodhisattvas consider everyone, friends and enemies alike, as equal. They do not condemn anyone's past wrongdoing, nor do they hate those who are presently causing harm.

THE SEVENTH REALIZATION is that the five categories of desire<sup>5</sup> lead to difficulties. Although we are in this world, we should try not to be caught up in worldly matters. A monk, for example, has in his possession three robes and one bowl. He lives simply in order to practice the Way. His precepts keep him free from attachment to worldly things, and he treats everyone equally and with compassion.

<sup>5.</sup> Being wealthy, being beautiful, being ambitious, finding pleasure in eating, being lazy.









THE EIGHTH REALIZATION is the awareness that the fire of birth and death is raging, causing endless suffering everywhere. We should take the Great Vow to help everyone, to suffer with everyone, and to guide all living beings to the realm of great joy.

These Eight Realizations are the discoveries of Great Beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who have diligently practiced the way of compassion and understanding. They have sailed the *Dharmakaya*<sup>6</sup> boat to the shore of *Nirvana*<sup>7</sup>, but they return to the ordinary world, having abandoned the five desires, with their minds and hearts directed toward the noble way, using these Eight Realizations to help all living beings recognize the suffering in this world. If the disciples of the Buddha recite these Eight Realizations and meditate on them, they will put an end to countless misunderstandings and difficulties and progress toward enlightenment, leaving behind the world of birth and death, dwelling forever in peace.

<sup>7.</sup> Liberation from birth and death.





<sup>6.</sup> The body of the teaching of awakening.



### Commentary

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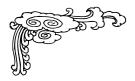
#### THE ORIGIN OF THE SUTRA

This sutra was translated from Pali to Chinese by the Parthian monk, An Shih Kao (Vietnamese: An The Cao), at the Loyang city in China during the later Han Dynasty, 140–171 A.D. It is not certain if the Pali version is extant. The ancient form of this sutra is the culmination of several smaller works combined, just like the *Forty-two Chapters Sutra* and *The Sutra On The Six Paramitas*. This sutra is entirely in accord with both the Mahayana and Theravada traditions.

Each of the eight items discussed can be a subject of meditation, and each of these subjects can be further divided. Although the form of the sutra is simple, its content is extremely profound and marvelous. *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations Of The Great Beings* is not an analytical treatise. It is a realistic and effective approach to meditation.









#### The Content Of The Sutra

The Sutra On The Eight Realizations Of The Great Beings contains eleven essential subjects for meditation. I will discuss these subjects along with the eight realizations.

1. The First Realization explains and clarifies the four basic subjects of Buddhist meditation:

(a) impermanence, (b) suffering, (c) no-self, and (d) impurity. We must always remember and meditate on these four principles of reality. As mentioned in the sutra, if someone meditates on these facts, he or she will gradually gain release from *samsara*, the round of birth and death.

a. Impermanence – the impermanent nature of all things: From moment to moment, all things in this world, including human life, mountains and rivers, and political systems, are in constant transformation. This is called impermanence in each moment. Everything passes through a period of birth, maturity, transformation, and destruction. This destruction is called impermanence in each cycle. To see the impermanent





nature of all things, we must examine this closely. Doing so will prevent us from being imprisoned by the things of this world.

b. Suffering – the emptiness of all things: The ancient people of India said that all things are composed of four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Acknowledging this, Buddhas and Bodhisat-tvas understand that when there is a harmonious relationship among the four elements, there is peace. When the four elements are not in harmony, there is suffering.

Because all things are created by a combination of these elements, nothing can exist independently or permanently. All things are impermanent. Consequently, when we are caught up in the nature of things, we also suffer from their impermanent nature. And since all things are empty, when we are caught by things, we also suffer from their emptiness. Awareness of the existence of suffering leads us to being able to practice the way of realization. This is the first of the Four Noble Truths<sup>8</sup>. When we lose aware-

<sup>8.</sup> Suffering, The Cause of Suffering, The End of Suffering, The Eightfold path.





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ness of and do not meditate on the existence of suffering in all things, we can easily be pushed around by passions and desires for worldly things, increasingly destroying our lives in the pursuit of these desires.

Only by being aware of suffering can we find its cause, confront it directly, and eliminate it.

Selflessness – the nature of our bodies: Buddhism C. teaches that human beings are composed of five aggregates, called *skandhas* in Sanskrit. If the form created by the four elements is empty and without self, then human beings, created by the unification of the five skandhas, must also be empty and without self. Human beings are involved in a transformation process from second to second, minute to minute, continually experiencing impermanence in each moment. By looking very deeply into the five skandhas, we can experience the selfless nature of our bodies, our passage through birth and death, and emptiness, thereby destroying the illusion that our bodies are permanent. In Buddhism, no-self is the most important subject for meditation. By meditating on no-self, we can break through the barrier







between self and other. When we no longer are separate from the universe, a completely harmonious existence with the universe is created. We see that all other human beings exist in us and that we exist in all other human beings. We can see that the past and the future are contained in the present moment, and we can penetrate and be completely liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

Modern science has also discovered the truth of the selfless nature of all things. The approach of British biologist Lyall Watson, for example, corresponds entirely with the principle of dependent-origination and no-self. Scientists who meditate continuously on the selfless nature of their own bodies and minds, as well as the selfless nature of all things, will one day easily attain enlightenment.

 Impurity – the nature of our bodies and minds: Impurity means the absence of an immaculate state of being, one that is neither holy nor beautiful. From the psychological and physiological standpoint, human beings are impure. This is not negative or pessimistic, but an objective perspec-







tive on human beings. If we examine the constituents of our bodies from the hair on our head to the blood, pus, phlegm, excretion, urine, the many bacteria dwelling in the intestines, and the many diseases waiting to develop, we can see that our bodies are quite impure and subject to decay. Our bodies also create the motivation to pursue the satisfaction of our desires and passions. This is why the sutra regards the body as a place where misdeeds gather.

Let us now consider our psychological state. Since we are unable to see the truth of impermanence, suffering, and the selfless nature of all things, your minds often become victims of greed and hatred, and we act wrongly. So the sutra says, "The mind is the source of all confusion."

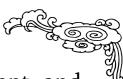
2. "More desire brings more suffering" is the basis of the second realization. Most people define happiness as the satisfaction of all desires. There are five types of desire<sup>9</sup>. These desires are boundless but our ability to realize them is not, and unfulfilled desires always create suffering. When desires are only partially fulfilled,

9. See footnote 5









we continue to pursue their complete fulfillment, and we create more suffering. Even when a desire is fulfilled, we suffer when its fulfillment terminates. It is only after we become completely exhausted from this incessant pursuit that we begin to realize the extent to which we are caught in the insatiable net of desires and passions. Then we can realize that true happiness is really a peaceful state of body and mind, and this can only exist when our desires are few. Having few desires and not seeking fulfillment through the pursuit of the five desires are great steps toward liberation.

3. Knowing how to feel satisfied with few possessions destroys desire and greed. This means being content with material conditions that allow us to be healthy and strong enough to practice the way. This is an effective way to cut through the net of passions and desires, attain a peaceful state of body and mind, have more to help others, and be free to realize the highest goal: the development of concentration and understanding to attain realization. Knowing how to feel satisfied with few possessions helps us to avoid buying unnecessarily and becoming part of an economic system that exploits others, and it enables us



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to decrease our involvement in the pollution of the environment.

Diligent practice destroys laziness. After we cease 4. looking for joy in desires and passions and know how to feel satisfied with few possessions, we must not be lazy, letting days and months slip by neglectfully. Great patience and diligence are needed continually to develop our concentration and understanding in an endeavor of self-realization. We must use all of our time to meditate on the four truths of impermanence, suffering, selflessness, and impurity, the first four subjects of meditation. We must penetrate deeply into the profound meaning of The Four Foundations of Mindfulness<sup>10</sup>, practicing, studying, and meditating on the posture and cycles (becoming, maturing, transformation, and destruction) of our bodies, as well as our feelings, sensations, mental formations, and consciousness. We should read sutras and other writings which explain meditation - correct sitting and controlling the breath, such as The Satipatthana Sutra and The Maha Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra. We have to follow the teaching of these sutras and practice them in an intelligent way, choosing the methods,

10. Body, feeling, state of mind, mental contents









which best apply to our own situation. As necessary, we can modify the methods suggested in order to accommodate our own needs. Our energy must also be regulated until all the basic desires and passions – greed, anger, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, doubt, and preconceived ideas – are uprooted. At this time we will know that our bodies and minds are liberated from the imprisonment of birth and death, the five *skandhas*, and the three worlds.

5. Concentration and understanding destroy narrowmindedness. Among the basic desires and passions, narrow-mindedness has the deepest roots. When these roots are loosened, all other desires and passions – greed, anger, doubt, and preconceived ideas – are also uprooted. Knowing this, we can make a great effort to mediate on the truths of impermanence, noself, and the dependent-origination of all things. Once the roots of ignorance are severed, we can not only liberate ourselves, but also teach others to break through the imprisonment of birth and death.

The first four subjects of meditation are to help us attain liberation. The next four subjects have the aim of helping others attain liberation, thus clearly and solidly uniting Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist thought.







6. When practicing generosity, we should consider everyone equal. Some people think that they can only practice generosity if they are wealthy. This is not true. Some people who are very wealthy do practice generosity, but many give alms with the aim of gaining merit, profiting, or pleasing others. People whose lives are grounded in compassion are seldom rich, because they share whatever they have with others. They are not willing to enrich their lives financially at the cost of other's poverty. Many people misunderstand the Buddhist expression "practicing generosity" to mean casually giving five or ten cents to a beggar on the street. In fact, the practice of generosity is even more beautiful than that. It is both modest and grand.

Practicing generosity means to act in a way that will help equalize the difference between the wealthy and the impoverished. Whatever we do to ease human suffering and create social justice can be considered practicing generosity. This is not to say that we engage in any political system. To engage in partisan political action that leads to a power struggle among opposing parties and caused death and destruction is not what we mean by practicing generosity. Practicing generosity is the first of the six paramitas<sup>11</sup>. Paramita means to help others reach the







other shore, the shore of liberation from sickness, poverty, hunger, ignorance, desires and passions, birth and death.

How can a person practicing "Knowing how to feel satisfied with few possessions" also practice generosity? It is by living simply. Almost everyone who spends his or her life serving and helping others, sacrificing themselves for the sake of humanity, lives simply. If they live their lives worrying about making money and gaining merit, how can they practice generosity? Mahatma Gandhi lived a very simple life; nevertheless his merit in helping humanity and saving human beings was immeasurable. There are thousands of people among us who live very simply, while being very helpful to many, many others. They do not have as great a reputation as Gandhi, but their merit is no less than his. It is enough for us just to be a little more attentive and aware of the presence of people like these. They do not practice generosity by giving money, which they do not possess, but rather by giving their time, energy, love, and care - their entire lives.

<sup>11.</sup> Giving, observing the percepts, diligent effort, endurance, concentration, and understanding



Practicing generosity in a Buddhist context means not to discriminate against anyone. Even though among the poor and destitute there are cruel persons and kind persons, we must not exclude the cruel ones from our practice. Because poverty brings anger and hatred, poor people are more inclined to create evil. As the sutra states, "Bodhisattvas consider everyone, friends and enemies alike, as equal. They do not condemn anyone's past wrongdoing, nor do they hate even those who are presently doing evil." This expresses the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. Poverty creates anger, hatred, and wrongdoing. If we teach Buddhist philosophy through lectures, but do not practice generosity to ease the suffering of others, we have not yet attained the essence of Buddhism. We should practice generosity with compassion and not disdain, without discriminating against people who, because of their poverty, have caused anger and hatred.

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7. While living in society, we should not be defiled by it. We must live in harmony with society in order to help others, without being caught by the five desires; living like the lotus flower which blooms in the mud and yet remains pure and unstained. Practicing the way of liberation does not mean avoiding society, but helping in



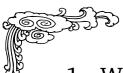


it. Before our capacity to help becomes strong and solid, we may be defiled by living in society. For this reason, Bodhisattvas meditate on the detrimental nature of the five desires and firmly decide to live simply in order to practice generosity without discrimination. Thus, living in society and not being stained by it is to practice the six paramitas.

We should create in ourselves the firm decision to 8. help others. We must make a deep and solemn vow to overcome the difficulties, dangers, and suffering that may occur while helping others. Since the suffering in society is limitless, the willingness and devotion to practice the way of helping others must also be limitless. Thus, the Mahayana spirit is an endless source of energy which inspires us to practice generosity without discrimination. With the Mahayana spirit, we can withstand the many challenges and humiliations encountered in society and be able to continue to practice the Way. This will bring great happiness to others. Only with the Mahayana spirit can we realize the following topics taught by the Po Lun San Mi Lu (Vietnamese: Bao Vuong Tam Muoi Sastra):



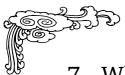






- While meditating on the body, do not hope or pray to be exempt from sickness. Without sickness, desires and passions can easily arise.
- 2. While acting in society, do not hope or pray not to have any difficulties. Without difficulties, arrogance can easily arise.
- 3. While meditating on the mind, do not hope or pray not to encounter obstacles. Without hindrances, present knowledge will not be challenged or broadened.
- 4. While working, do not hope or pray not to encounter obstacles. Without obstacles, the vow to help others will not deepen.
- 5. While developing a plan, do not hope or pray to achieve success easily. With easy success, arrogance can easily arise.
- 6. While interacting with others, do not hope or pray to gain personal profit. With the hope for personal gain, the spiritual nature of the encounter is diminished.







- While speaking with others, do not hope or pray not to be disagreed with. Without disagreement, selfrighteousness can flourish.
- While helping others, do not hope or pray to be paid.
  With the hope of remuneration, the act of helping others will not be pure.
- If you see personal profit in an action, do not participate in it. Even minimal participation will stir up desires and passions.
- 10. When wrongly accused, do not attempt to exonerate yourself. Attempting to defend yourself will create needless anger and animosity.
- 11. The Buddha spoke of sickness and suffering as effective medicines; times of difficulties and accidents as times of freedom and realization; obstacles as liberation; the army of evil as the guards of the Dharma; difficulties as required for success; the person who mistreats one as one's good friend; one's enemies as an orchard or garden; the act of doing someone a







favor as base as the act of casting away a pair of old shoes; the abandonment of material possessions as wealth; and being wrongly accused as the source of strength to work for justice.

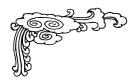
In the paragraph explaining the eighth realization, it should be also be noted that the Mahayana Buddhist practice of the six paramitas is contained in this sutra:

1 <sup>st</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of giving	6 <sup>th</sup> realization
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of observing the precepts	7 <sup>th</sup> realization
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of diligent effort	4 <sup>th</sup> realization
4 <sup>th</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of patience	8 <sup>th</sup> realization
5 <sup>th</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of concentration	1 <sup>st</sup> realization
6 <sup>th</sup>	Paramita –	The Paramita of understanding	5 <sup>th</sup> realization

The style, content, and methodology of *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations* are consistent and logical. It is a very practical and concise sutra. But this discussion of the content is only intended to serve as a preliminary guideline. To fully benefit from this sutra, we must also practice and observe its teachings.









PRACTICING AND OBSERVING THE SUTRA

To practice and observe *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations Of The Great Beings* choose a time when your body and mind are completely relaxed, for example after taking a comfortable bath. You can begin by lighting a stick of incense to give the room a pleasant fragrance. Then, take the sutra and slowly read it to discover its deepest meanings. Relate the words of the sutra to your life experiences. It is through your own life experiences that you can understand any sutra's content than through someone else's explanation of it.

Each time you sit in meditation, thoroughly examine each subject of the sutra. The more you mediate on each subject, the more deeply you will discover the profound wisdom contained in the sutra. It would be helpful for you to also read other sutras, such as The *Anapanasati Sutta Of Mindfulness On Breathing* and *The Satipatthana Sutta*. Both are profound and concise works which will complement *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations*. These two sutras explain in practical detail how to progress step-by-step towards realization. If you combine the method of following and relaxing your breathing, as described in *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations*; you will easily succeed in achieving your aim of realizing your own self-nature.



#### Afterword



The content of *The Sutra On The Eight Realizations* is grounded in both Mahayana and Theravada viewpoints. Please treasure this sutra. When I was seventeen, and in my first year of novice studies at a Buddhist Monastery, I had to study and memorize it. This enabled me to easily combine the meaning of the Sutra with the meditation of breath counting. From this period until now, 44 years have passed and this Sutra is still an invaluable torch lighting my path. Today I have the opportunity to present it to you. I am grateful to this deep and miraculous Sutra. I join my hands and respectfully recite, "Homage to the precious *Sutra On The Eight Realizations.*"

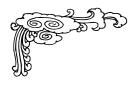
In 1978, I asked the La Boi Press to give this Sutra away in order to pray for those boat people who drowned in the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam during the prior three years, and also for those who had the chance to survive so that they can find a new home somewhere in the world. In 1987, I asked Parallax Press to publish an English edition in order to make this Sutra available for western readers and for refugees in the west.

The Vietnamese edition of this book was written by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1978 while conducting a project to rescue boat people in the South China Sea.

Thich Nhat Hahn, Vietnamese Buddhist Master is one of the most beloved Buddhist teacher, poet, and peace activist in the West and in 1967 was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr.

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### Verse Of Transference

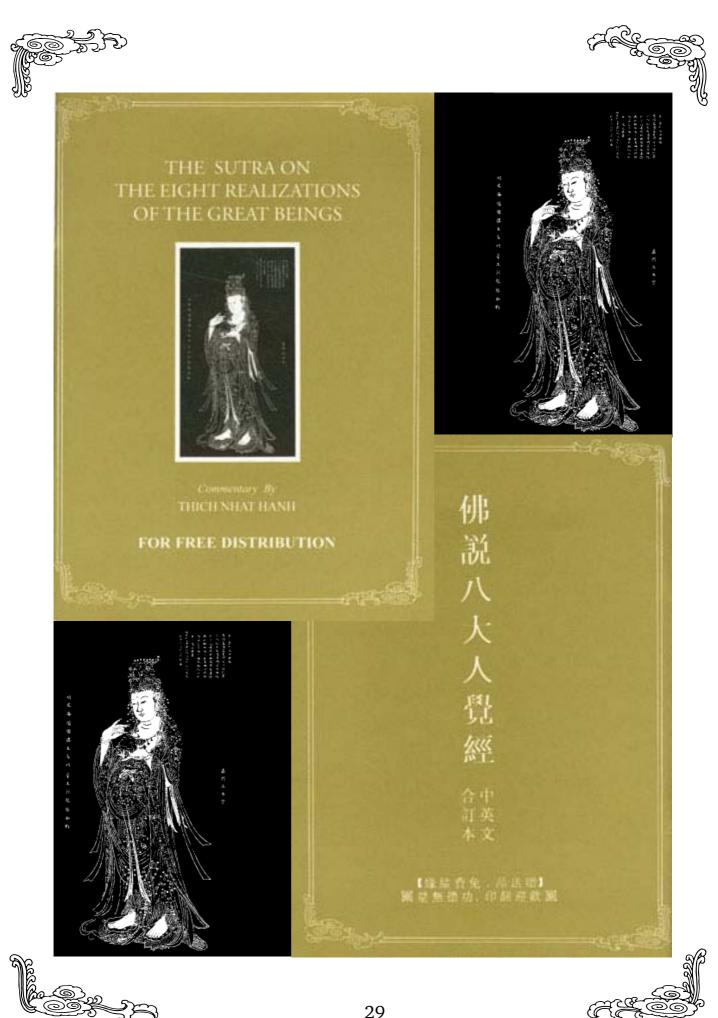
May the merit and virtue accrued from this work, Adorn the Buddha's Pure Lands. Repaying four kinds of kindness above. And aiding those suffering in the oaths below.

> May those who see and hear of this. All bring forth the resolve for Bodhi. And when this retribution body is over. Be born together in ultimate bliss.



Amita Buddha Maha Sthama Prapta Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Bodhisattva

Note: One should recite this verse of transference to universally transfer all the merit and virtue that accrue from sutra recitation or performance of any meritorious deeds (e.g. giving).



## Ten Benefits From Printing Buddhist Sutras And Making Buddha-Images

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- 1. All evil karma made in the past, will either be wiped off and retribution created by past serious offence, reduced.
- 2. Auspicious spirits constantly protect you and you do not have to experience the disasters of plagues, floods, fires, thieves, armed conflict, or imprisonment.
- 3. Suffering inflicted by vengeful enemies, made in the past, will be avoided and the merit derived from printing sutras will allow these enemies to receive the benefits of Dharma, and thereby untie the bond of hatred.
- 4. Evil ghosts and other yaksha-ghosts cannot encroach on you; poisonous snakes or man-eating beasts cannot harm you.
- 5. You will have a peace of mind. During the day you will meet with no danger, and at night you will have no bad dreams. Your complexion will be healthy, smooth and moist. Your energy will be full of vitality. Your business will continue to prosper and meet with ultimate success.



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- 6. You will always have ample food and clothing. Your families will always be at peace, and your prosperity and blessings will constantly increase.
- 7. Gods and other people will immediately take a liking to things you do or say. Wherever you go, you will always be greeted with respect and revered by happy crowd of dear friends.
- 8. Ignorant people will grow wiser, unhealthy people will grow healthier, trouble people will feel happier, and woman can become man in their next life, if they wish to do so.
- 9. You will escape from the three lower realms, and always be reborn in wholesome place, with a handsome upright appearance and unusually fine character. You will enjoy supreme happiness and abundant wealth.
- 10. You will be able to plant innumerable roots of goodness in the blessed minds of all living beings. You will help the living beings to reap bounteous, measureless merits and help them attain the final Buddhahood.





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