

The Lotus Sutra

Introduction

The Lotus Sutra (Skt. *Saddhama Pundarīka Sūtra*, The Discourse on the White Lotus of the True Doctrine) is the most famous Mahayana, if not Buddhist, sutra.¹ Originating in India where it had moderate import, it had great influence in China, Korea, and Japan, where it inspired the development of the Tiantai, Tendai, Cheontae, and Nichiren schools of Buddhism. It also strongly influenced Zen and was instrumental in the development of new forms of art, poetry, and social movements. Among the many reasons for its widespread popularity were its use of compelling parables, illuminating if often mystifying contradictions, combinations of poetry and prose, radical reinterpretation of buddhahood, and the promise of enlightenment for all beings, even non-humans. Of special appeal is its claim to be the ultimate and complete teaching of the Buddha. For many Buddhists, the mere recitation or copying of the text was thought to bring spiritual merit and practical benefits; in turn to belittle the sutra was to cause profound misery to oneself, one's family, and one's nation.

This primer reviews the history and development of the Lotus, its storyline and key themes, and associated practices. To aid study of this most famous of sutras, notes and a sampling of references are attached.

History and Development

The origin of the Lotus in India remains obscure, but it is thought to have been written down in four phases, with Chapters 2-9 (in Kumarajiva's 28 chapter format, see below) appearing as early as 100-50 BCE, the prose sections of the same chapters then added, Chapters 1 and 10-22 (except Chapter 12) added still later, and Chapters 23-27, as well as Chapter 12, finally added, except for Chapter 28, which may have been attached as late as 220 CE as a final conclusion to the jimmied-together sutra.² As with other early sutras parts of the text likely existed orally for some time before it was written down. Like many Mahayana sutras the original, possibly written in a version of Sanskrit or possibly a Prakrit language, has not survived. The first documentation of the existence of the sutra is the earliest extant translation of the Lotus in China in 286 CE by Dharmaraksa (ca. 233-311), though the most influential translation also into Chinese was by Kumarajiva (344-413) in 406 CE.³ Commentaries by Tao Sheng (5th century) and especially Zhiyi (Chih-i) (538-597), the founder of the Tiantai school, greatly promoted the popularity of the sutra in that country.⁴ Both considered the teachings of the Lotus the final teachings of the Buddha and of Buddhism.

The sutra became the most revered sutra in Japan, where it strongly influenced the formation of Tendai (Tiantai in China) Buddhism, which remained the dominant form of Buddhism there for many years.⁵ Dōgen, the early 13th century founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan, trained in Tendai before converting to Zen.⁶ A later Lotus-centered Buddhist school, Nichiren Buddhism, became the parent organization of contemporary lay movements like Risshō Kōsei Kai, Soka Gakkai, and Nipponzan-Myōkōji-Daisaga, some branches of which played significant political roles in Japan in the twentieth century.⁷ Soka Gakkai in particular remains an important international Buddhist organization today.⁸

The Storyline

Although the Lotus contains many parables and stories, it is most widely known for two messages, each of which is scattered through 14 of the 28 chapters. The first (chaps 1-14) is that there is only one vehicle to enlightenment, not three (the paths of the disciple, the solitary buddha, and the bodhisattva) as proposed in other sutras. The proposal of three vehicles like many other statements by the Buddha is claimed in the Lotus to be only a skillful means (*upaya*) to aid the less prepared along the one vehicle path, but not the true Dharma itself. The use of skillful means is famously illustrated in seven parables like the Burning House (chap 3), the Lost Heir (chap 4), the Phantom City (chap 7), and the Concealed Gem (chap 8) that together suggest how this message is to be understood.⁹ In the Burning House parable the house of a wealthy man is on fire with his three sons absorbed in play inside. The father lures them out by promising the three their own carriage, each of which is drawn by either a set of goats, deer, or oxen. Once the children are safely out of the burning building the father gives them all a jeweled carriage pulled by a great white ox. In the parable the burning house is our soiled *saha* world, the father the Buddha, the children his followers who are easily distracted by worldly worries and amusements, the original three promised carriages the three vehicles, and the jeweled carriage the one true vehicle. In the parable of the hidden gem a man falls asleep at a friend's house. Unbeknownst to him his friend sews a priceless gem into his garment. The man struggles through life for many years only to find out from his friend that he was rich the whole time. In one interpretation the gem is the man's buddha nature, which he did not realize he possessed. This message with its parables is narrated by Shakyamuni in the form of a seemingly historical person and concerns the nature of his teaching.

The other message (chaps 15-28) is that the Buddha is not an historical person, as seems the case in many sutras, but a primordial, cosmic essence that exists throughout space and time, a message that concerns the nature of the Buddha himself. Other prominent revelations in the text are: the sutra teaches the final, true dharma; the one vehicle will transfer all beings, even the unfit, to a buddhaland (a pure land); this world itself is a buddhaland; and there are many benefits to honoring the sutra and great misery for those who do not.¹⁰ Five of these storylines are developed below.

Key Themes

One vehicle, many skillful means. As a reading of Buddhist sutras demonstrates, Shakyamuni taught the dharma to different people in different ways, a style of teaching that caused consternation in his followers, for it was not clear to them which teachings were the true dharma. The Lotus settles this issue by proclaiming that Shakyamuni's diverse teachings were skillful means intended to lead people at different levels of preparedness along the path, for the real teachings were considered too difficult for them to understand.¹¹ A classic example is the tradition of the three vehicles mentioned above. According to the Lotus there are not three vehicles or paths to enlightenment but only one buddha vehicle, with everything Shakyamuni taught based on this vehicle. Parables throughout the sutra illustrate the importance of the use of skillful means in a variety of situations. An example in Chapter 16 is the parable of the physician whose sons have drunk poison and have become so crazed that they will not heed his prescription of an antidote. He sends word that he has died and the children take the medicine and are cured. Given this ultimate teaching the Lotus claims that it is superior to other sutras, and that full buddhahood will only be arrived at through its teachings and Shakyamuni's style of teaching.

All beings have the potential to become a buddha. According to tradition women, evil people, people who lack the innate ability, and animals cannot attain full buddhahood. The Lotus maintains instead that all beings have the potential to become bodhisattvas and eventually buddhas.¹² It also claims that these different kinds of beings are able to attain buddhahood in their present bodily form without having to spend countless eons of rebirth, austerity, and transformation to a male form, a path of purity that bodhisattvas and buddhas were said to have had to go through. Again, the claim of the equal spirituality of all beings is illustrated in the sutra through stories and parables. The Lotus claims that these beings are helped along the path by countless bodhisattvas (each an embodiment of the Buddha) who remain in this *saha* world as an act of compassion, as the imagery in the title of lotus flowers in muddy ponds hints at. This radical message is present as well in other Mahayana sutras.

The Buddha is a cosmic being. Sutras in the Pali canon portray Shakyamuni as an historical person who was born, taught for many years in mid-life, and died in old age. According to the Lotus the Buddha is actually an eternal, cosmic entity who, while becoming enlightened many eons ago, retained a presence in this world to teach the dharma to all beings. According to the sutra the story of his birth, enlightenment, and death is again a skillful means intended to inspire those on the path in their practice. This cosmic image of the Buddha is illustrated by extra-normal events, such as the appearance in Chapter 1 of countless gods, divas, dragons, and other mythological beings from innumerable realms who have come to hear the Buddha teach the *Lotus Sutra*. In the sutra we learn that infinite numbers of buddhas (again manifestations of the Buddha) exist throughout space in the ten directions, where they have dwelt for eons of time. When looked at from this cosmic perspective, the Lotus contains a sense of timelessness and the inconceivable absent in earlier visions of the Buddha and Buddhism.¹³ It also emphasizes importantly that the purpose of the existence of buddhas and bodhisattvas is the salvation of all beings, not for self-interested reasons.

Faith in and devotion to the Lotus are necessary for enlightenment. A key teaching of the Lotus and Zen Buddhism more generally is that enlightenment cannot be achieved through intellectual understanding alone or articulated in words. According to the Lotus both faith in and devotion to the sutra are necessary to realize enlightenment. A reason for this view may be that it makes buddhahood seem more accessible to people who are not monks. The following section describes common practices associated with the Lotus, especially in East Asia.

Practice According to the Lotus Sutra

Since the book itself was considered to have sacred power and to be the body of the Buddha, ritual practices developed around the text, with the sutra itself repeatedly mentioning that the faithful should preserve, read, recite, teach, and copy it.¹⁴ In China Zhiyi composed ritual texts, the most famous of which is the *Lotus Samādhi Rite of Repentance*, which provide examples of rituals that express devotion to the sutra. For example, reading the sutra was at times carried out in a ritual context that involved specialized robes, incense, and rites of purification. The widespread practice of copying the sutra is evident in the presence of thousands of copies in the “Library Cave” at Dunhuang in northwestern

China. Scenes from the sutra are present as well on the walls of some 75 caves at Dunhuang.¹⁵ In retreats intense physical and contemplative practices often involved the visualization of buddhas and bodhisattvas mentioned in the sutra, such as the bodhisattva He Who Observes the Sounds of the World (Avalokitasvara), who the Lotus claims (Chapter 25) will rescue all beings who call upon him.. A more extreme form of practice was self-immolation, following the example in the sutra of the bodhisattva Medicine King who burned himself up to show his devotion to the Lotus and its teachings.¹⁶ Related practices were the offering of fingers and the burning of incense on one's skin. Miracles supposedly the results of these practices were recorded in large anthologies in 7th and 8th century China.¹⁷

In Nichiren Buddhism in Japan, in which it was assumed that people now live in the degenerate age of *mappō*, chanting *Namu Myōchō Renge Kyō* (*Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra* or *Glory to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Supreme Law*) was thought to be the only way and the highest way to practice Buddhism.¹⁸ An important aspect of the practice was to intentionally spread the teachings of the sutra far and wide, even at times by war; the goal was to convert the world to Nichiren Buddhism and its faith in the power of the *Lotus Sutra*.¹⁹

Notes

1. For translations of the Lotus, see Gautama Buddha and Kern (2012), Hurvitz (1976), Tsugumari Kubo and Akira Yuyama (2007), Reeves (2008), Warner and Murano (2013), and Watson (1993, 2009). For overviews and studies of the Lotus, see Stone (2003), Reeves (2002), Yoshira Tamura and Reeves (2014), Tola and Dragonetti (2009), and especially Teiser and Stone (2009), which is intended for students. See Silk (2001) for the place of the sutra in Indian Buddhism. For the movement and uses of the sutra throughout the world, see Lopez (2016).
2. This division follows Zhiyi (see note 4). In an earlier version of the sutra, Chapter 21 most likely served as a summary statement, with Chapter 22 the final chapter.
3. Kumarajiva divided the sutra into 28 chapters, which remains the standard format and translation today; it is thought to be the most faithful to the original text, for Kumarajiva concentrated on the meaning of sentences and paragraphs, not on a direct word-for-word translation. For translations of the Lotus into Chinese and other languages, see Teiser and Stone (2009). For the reception of Lotus Sutra thought in China, see Kanno Hiroshi (2001).
4. For Zhiyi's (Chih-i) view of and use of the Lotus, see Hurvitz (1980) and Swanson (1989).
5. For Tendai, which was founded by Saicho (767-822), see Groner (2000). For the history and use of the Lotus in Japan, see Groner and Stone (2014) and Tanabe and Tanabe (1989).
6. For the influence of the Lotus on Dōgen's thought, see Leighton (2007).
7. For Nichiren and Nichiren Buddhism, see Causton (1995), Williams (1989:159-166), and Habito (2009). Also see Stone (2000).
8. For Soka Gakkai Buddhism and its international importance today, see Strand (2014).
9. For an introduction to the parables and the depth of their symbolism, see Bielefeldt (2009).
10. Some Nichiren sects claimed, for example, that Japan lost World War II and brought misery onto the country because it did not properly honor the Lotus (Yoshira Tamura and Reeves (2014).
11. The use of skillful means (*upāya*), which has also been translated as expedient devices and other such phrases, is a key teaching in the Mahayana tradition. On the use of skillful means in the Lotus, see Bielefeldt (2009), and in Buddhism more generally, see Pye (2003) and Schroeder (2001).
12. The Lotus presents a mixed or at least unclear message on the ability of women to attain enlightenment. In traditional Buddhism it is claimed that women have to transform to a male form because of their greater amount of negative karma. In the sutra it is mentioned in some places that some women can become arhats but not true buddhas, while in others it states that all beings who express faith in and devotion to the Lotus, or merely hear the Lotus itself, will

- attain full buddhahood. See Nattier (2009). A mixed message in the sutra is the story of the Dragon King's daughter who achieves buddhahood, but only after changing into a male (Childs 2002). On attitudes toward women and the feminine in Early Buddhism more generally, see Sponberg (1992).
13. To some practitioner's consternation, the vision violates core principles of traditional Buddhism, such as the impermanence of all things and the nonexistence of an enduring self (cosmic or otherwise).
 14. These were considered the five pious deeds that all supporters of the Lotus should practice. For practices associated with the Lotus in China, see Stevenson (2009), and for suggested practices today, see Jeffus (2012). For the cult of the book in modern South Asia and its history, see Jinah Kim (2013).
 15. For art inspired by the Lotus, see Wang (2005), Bunsaka Kurata and Yoshiro Tamara (1987), and Tsugio Miya (1989). For poetry and songs, see Shōzen Yamada (1989).
 16. On self-immolation as a practice inspired by the Lotus, see Benn (2009).
 17. On miracle tales associated with the Lotus, see Company (1996) and Stevenson (2007, 2009).
 18. For Nichiren Buddhism, see note 7. On the prophecy of the spiritual decline (*mappō*) of the Dharma, see Nattier (1991).
 19. For the spread of Nichiren Buddhism, see Part III in Yoshira Tamura and Reeves (2014) and Chapters 5-7 in Lopez (2016)..

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