



Shakyamuni Buddha (Shakyamuni Buddha, Ming Dynasty, Xuande Period [1426-65] [gilt bronze], Chinese School, [15th century] / Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA / Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich / The Bridgeman Art Library International)

“All the living beings who escape the threefold world are given the enjoyments of buddhas — meditation, liberation, and so forth.”

Overview



The Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma (in Sanskrit, *Saddharmapundarikasutra*; in Chinese, *Miaofa lianhua jing*; in Japanese, *Myoho rengo kyo*), commonly known as the Lotus Sutra and believed to have been composed between the first century BCE and the second century CE, is arguably the most revered and influential sutra of Mahayana Buddhism and certainly one of the most significant sacred texts in eastern Asia. Through the medium of parables and short stories, the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra present a number of core doctrines of early Mahayana Buddhism. This school first emerged in India and western Asia roughly five centuries after the death of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563–483 BCE), and would eventually come to dominate East Asian Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra’s insistence on faith in the sutra as a revealed text of extraordinary power, combined with its promise of universal buddhahood for all beings, lends it an air of sacred authority that is unusual if not unique to Buddhist scriptures.

The Lotus Sutra is a devotional text—that is, one intended to work on the level of the emotions and the senses rather than the intellect. As such, it has been employed throughout East Asian history as a focus for devotion and also as an inspiration for art, literature, and political reform. In this respect, it plays a role equivalent to the Bible in Europe or the Qur’an in the Middle East. The Lotus Sutra is often paired with two shorter texts, the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings (in Sanskrit, *Amitartha-sutra*; in Chinese, *Wuliangyi jing*; in Japanese, *Muryogi kyo*) and the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy (in Chinese, *Puxian jing*; in Japanese, *Fugen kyo* or *Zange kyo*), which serve as “prologue” and “epilogue,” respectively. Together, these form the Threefold Lotus Sutra.

Context

At least some parts of the Lotus Sutra were likely composed in a local Indian or Central Asian dialect, which was then translated into a form of Sanskrit (known as Buddhist

Hybrid Sanskrit) in order to lend it an air of authority and to allow the teachings to be shared with others. The Lotus Sutra’s self-referential claims to transcendent authority and its insistence on the “one vehicle” of dharma—that is, of Buddhist law and teachings—are indicative of some of the disputes and transformations that were taking place within Indian Buddhism at the time of its creation. Between the first century BCE and the second century CE, a diffuse movement was developing that would come to be known as the Mahayana, or “great vehicle.”

Mahayana Buddhists generally reject the traditional Buddhist pursuit of individual nirvana (literally, “extinction”), which implies both a release from worldly suffering during life and liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) upon one’s death. While Mahayana Buddhists continued to understand nirvana in terms of a release from suffering, they centralized the virtue of compassion and further emphasized the necessity of releasing others from suffering as well as oneself. Mahayana Buddhists utilize the term *bodhisattva* to refer specifically to beings who put aside all personal hopes for liberation in order to “save” other beings. This goal is contrasted with the traditional Buddhist goal of the arhat—enlightenment—which was perceived by Mahayanists as being somewhat “selfish.” Given this context, it is not difficult to read the Lotus Sutra as part of a larger polemic by monks affiliated with the broader Mahayana movement to establish their credentials vis-à-vis more traditional monks. And yet, whatever its polemical or sectarian intent, the success of the Lotus Sutra as an inspirational and transformative text throughout East Asian history can hardly be reduced to this aspect alone.

Whatever its Indian (or possibly West Asian) origins, the oldest extant versions of the Lotus Sutra are in Chinese, and these Chinese translations—particularly that of the Indo-Kuchan monk-translator Kumarajiva (344–413)—became the standard versions of the text as it spread throughout East Asia. The Lotus Sutra would eventually serve as the primary text for two important East Asian Buddhist sects: the sixth-century Tiantai (in Japanese, Tendai) sect, often called the first indigenous Chinese Buddhist school, and the thirteenth-century Nichiren (also known as Hokke) sect, which can make a similar claim to being the first indigenous Japanese Buddhist sect. For followers of

Time Line	
CA. 563 –483 BCE	■ Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, is alive.
CA. 100 BCE –200 CE	■ The Lotus Sutra is compiled in northwestern India (or West Asia).
286 CE	■ Dharmaraksa translates the Lotus Sutra into Chinese.
406 CE	■ Kumarajiva translates the Lotus Sutra into Chinese.
587–593	■ The Chinese Tiantai sect founder Zhiyi writes two commentaries on the Lotus Sutra, <i>Fahua wenju</i> and <i>Fahua xuanyi</i> , interpreting the Lotus Sutra as the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings and as a basis for meditative practice.
802	■ The Japanese Tendai sect founder Saicho lectures on the Lotus Sutra before the Japanese imperial court.
1260	■ The Nichiren sect founder Nichiren writes <i>Rissho ankoku ron</i> , which correlates a realm's devotion to the Lotus Sutra with its protection and pacification.
1852	■ The first translation of the Lotus Sutra in a Western language (French) appears: Eugène Burnouf's <i>Le lotus de la bonne loi</i> , based on medieval Sanskrit manuscripts.
1884	■ The first English translation of the Lotus Sutra appears: Hendrik Kern's <i>Saddharmapundarika; or, The Lotus of the True Law</i> , based on medieval Sanskrit manuscripts.
1930	■ Makiguchi Tsunesaburo establishes the lay Buddhist organization Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, based on the teachings of Nichiren and the Lotus Sutra.
1938	■ Niwano Nikkyo and Naganuma Myoko establish the lay Buddhist organization Rissho Kosei Kai, based on the Lotus Sutra.

both these traditions, the Lotus Sutra contains the highest stage of the teachings of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, also known as Siddhartha Gautama. In turn, all earlier teachings—that is, the texts and doctrines of the so-called Hinayana (a pejorative term meaning “lesser vehicle”)—are considered provisional stages on the path toward the highest truth as revealed in the Lotus Sutra. For all this, the Lotus Sutra is notoriously vague about the actual content of this highest truth or highest law, to the extent that it has been called (and criticized as) an “empty text.” Moreover, despite the fact that the text—like many other early Mahayana sutras—revels in complex visualizations and otherworldly splendor, it has often been employed as a vehicle for this-worldly sociopolitical critique and religious reform. Indeed, in terms of its usage, the Lotus Sutra is the most “political” of all Buddhist scriptures.

About the Author

Nothing is known about the authors of the Lotus Sutra. Given the content of the text, however, scholars assume that they were monks associated with the Mahayana Buddhist movement. The Lotus Sutra as it is known today is a pastiche of several distinct works, written at different times by different people for different purposes over a period of several centuries.

Explanation and Analysis of the Document

Within its spectacular scenes and various parables, the Lotus Sutra presents the following four core ideas of Mahayana Buddhism: the doctrine of *upaya*, or “skillful means,” as the way in which buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas teach the dharma to less-advanced beings; perfect awakening, or buddhahood, as a realizable goal for all beings; the practice of compassion and the way of the bodhisattva as the highest goals of Buddhism; and the eternal and transcendent character of the Buddha. Although they are less immediately apparent, other significant Mahayana doctrines—such as emptiness, buddha nature, and the three bodies of Buddha—have also been read into the text by later exegetes.

The Lotus Sutra is made up of twenty-eight chapters of varying length. Each chapter contains a mix of straight narrative and verse, with the poetry generally repeating and reinforcing the prose (though most scholars believe that the verse portions are older). Like all Buddhist sutras, the Lotus claims to be a record of the words of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni (meaning “Sage of the Shakyas,” the people of his kingdom)—though it also asserts that this Buddha, like all buddhas, is considerably more than simply a historical teacher.

Four chapters are addressed here: chapter 2, “Skillful Means”; chapter 3, “A Parable”; chapter 12, “Devadatta”; and chapter 16, “The Lifetime of the Tathagata.” The introductory chapter (not reproduced here), a later addition,



sets the scene and provides a justification for the teachings that follow. Toward the end of his life, we are informed, Shakyamuni preached the Lotus Sutra at Mount Gridhrakuta (Holy Eagle Peak) near the city of Rajagriha in northern India. While this is historically plausible, realism quickly breaks down as the reader is introduced to an astonishing cosmic tableau in which space and time extend in infinite directions and where buddhas from other realms travel to listen to Shakyamuni preach the Lotus. What the modern reader might take as pure fantasy or even science fiction is intended to unsettle one's usual habits of perception and understanding and to alert one to the power of the Buddha and the significance of what he is about to say.

The central message of the introductory chapter is that there is in fact only “one vehicle” for followers of dharma, namely, the path to perfect understanding or buddhahood, rather than three paths (those of *shravaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, and *bodhisattva*), as was traditionally understood and as the Buddha himself had previously taught. In the Mahayana understanding, a *shravaka* (literally, “hearer”) is a disciple of the Buddha who has accepted the Buddha's teaching (dharma) and is committed to personal awakening; the term is often synonymous with the term *arhat*. A *pratyekabuddha* (or “solitary buddha”) is one who achieves awakening on his or her own, without reliance on the words or teachings of others; this is considered a higher stage than the *shravaka*. Finally, the *bodhisattva* (or “buddha-to-be”) is a being who is dedicated to the liberation of all beings and is thus an embodiment of compassion. Within the Mahayana, the bodhisattva represents the highest stage of awakening and the ideal for all followers of dharma.

◆ 2. Skillful Means

This discussion leads to the introduction in the second chapter of the doctrine of *upaya*, or “skillful means,” which most interpreters see as the heart and soul of the Lotus Sutra. After an initial section in which the Buddha asserts the “profound and immeasurable” wisdom of buddhas as well as the connection of each and every buddha to innumerable buddhas in the past, he claims to have employed a variety of parables and expedient measures in order to inspire his followers, who were not yet prepared for the higher, unifying wisdom of the Lotus Sutra. The assembly, including twelve hundred *shravakas*, monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, are confused, and the Buddha's disciple Shariputra asks the Buddha to clarify his meaning. After some hesitation, based on the fear that “the worlds' heavenly beings as well as human beings will be startled and perplexed,” the Buddha finally agrees.

The Buddha's fears seem justified, as upon his saying this, five thousand monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen immediately get up and leave the assembly, because “their roots of sin were so deep and they were so utterly arrogant that they imagined themselves to have already attained and born witness to what they had not actually attained.” The Buddha goes on to explain that buddhas of all time periods have only one goal: to use a variety of methods to preach to all living beings “so that they might attain the complete



The Bodhisattva Manjushri riding on a lion

(The Bodhisattva Manjushri riding on a lion, illustration after a kakemono of the eleventh century from the temple of Kozan-ji at Yamashiro, published in *The Kokka* magazine, May 1904, / Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / The Bridgeman Art Library International)

wisdom of the One Buddha-Vehicle.” The text also notes that buddhas appear in the world during times of chaos and pollution, an idea that would have a profound effect on the way later East Asian followers of the Lotus Sutra, such as Nichiren, would interpret its message as a call to radical personal and collective transformation in a time of *mappo*, the “end of the law.” There is debate among scholars as to the precise implications of the doctrine of *upaya*—specifically with regard to how far the notion of “expedient means” extends, that is, whether it has metaphysical and ontological implications in addition to its more obvious

pedagogical ones. However, there is no question that it has been taken by some followers to mean that, in exceptional circumstances, extreme measures may be justified in order to spread the dharma for the purpose of saving beings and transforming this world into a buddha land.

From a sociological or sectarian standpoint, this chapter may be understood as an attempt by the authors to give authenticity to what was clearly a belated set of teachings and to address the fact that many Buddhists would disapprove of the Lotus Sutra's message (as was indeed the case). This line of reasoning is common to the Mahayana movement more generally: We may be late to appear, but we are in possession of the highest, definitive teachings, which supersede all that has gone before. Also of note here is the fact that, despite this criticism of those who reject the Lotus (such as those who leave the assembly), the Lotus Sutra does not deny the validity of the earlier Buddhist texts and teachings but rather absorbs them as necessary but provisional stages toward the highest law of the Lotus. Thus, the primary disciples of the Buddha, arhats such as Shariputra and Mahakashyapa (who appears in chapter 6), are depicted in the Lotus as inquisitive *shravakas* struggling to comprehend the deeper Buddhist truths. Though they are less than fully enlightened, they are not mocked as in some other Mahayana sutras—in fact, they are depicted here as being joyously receptive to the Buddha's promise that they, too, will one day achieve full buddhahood.

◆ 3. A Parable

The third chapter, "A Parable," opens with Shariputra's expression of ecstatic joy upon hearing the promise of universal buddhahood for all. Shakyamuni responds with a promise that Shariputra himself will in the distant future assuredly become a buddha called Flower Light, and he goes on to provide an elaborate description of the paradisiacal realm over which Shariputra will preside. This is followed by what amounts to a giant heavenly party by the assembly, which is overwhelmed with joy at the news of Shariputra's future buddhahood, complete with a heavenly announcement that "the Dharma wheel" is once more being turned—that is, that the Buddha has introduced a new and more advanced set of teachings.

The second half of the third chapter expands upon the doctrine of *upaya* via the parable of the burning house, perhaps the most famous story of the Lotus Sutra. The reader is introduced to a wealthy man who discovers one day that his house—spacious but in a state of disrepair—is on fire, with his several dozen children playing inside unaware. In order to get them to escape the fire through the sole, narrow gate, he promises them a variety of splendid carriages—each drawn by sheep or goats or oxen—if they come outside. Delighted to finally obtain things they had long desired, they come running out of the house, only to discover not the promised carriages but rather a set of even more spectacular ox-driven carriages, one for each child. On one level, the meaning of the story is clear: Whereas the Buddha had previously taught three different paths to awakening, these three are, in fact, provisional means to-

ward the one vehicle, embodied in the quest for perfect buddhahood. Still, there is some confusion in the text as to whether this all-encompassing one vehicle is the same as or distinct from the bodhisattva path (the third of the three carriages) and, if distinct, what exactly it entails. Finally, the question is raised, not for the last time in the Lotus Sutra, as to whether the father in employing *upaya* was "guilty of falsehood." No, the reader is told; he simply employed the most effective strategy to serve his compassionate purposes. So, too, does the Buddha use *upaya* to save all living beings, by giving them, in the one-vehicle teaching of the Lotus Sutra, "something they had never had before and never expected to have."

◆ 12. Devadatta

Although it is considered a relatively late addition to the Lotus Sutra, the twelfth chapter, "Devadatta," is a dense chapter with significant historical impact, particularly in its presentation of the concept of the universality of buddhahood for all beings. The chapter opens with the Buddha telling the assembly that at one time in the distant past, he had been a king who sought "unexcelled awakening." One day he met a seer, who introduced the king to the Mahayana teachings as embodied in the Lotus Sutra. This wise seer, whom the king served faithfully for a thousand years and who was instrumental in leading the king toward full buddhahood, was reportedly none other than Shakyamuni's cousin Devadatta. Shakyamuni completes this short tale with a declaration to the assembly that Devadatta, too, will one day become a buddha. Although the text does not make note of this, Devadatta was a figure notorious to early Buddhists as the epitome of evil. Though he was a cousin and disciple of the Buddha, his jealousy led him to challenge the Buddha's authority, foment schism in the *sangha* (monastic community), and even make several attempts on the Buddha's life. The first part of this chapter, then, can be taken as a classic example of Mahayana shock tactics and contrarianism; the choice of Devadatta as an exemplary teacher and future buddha seems deliberately provocative, yet it also drives home the point of the universality of buddhahood raised here and throughout the Lotus.

The second half of the chapter provides another well-known example of an unlikely buddha, in this case one who has already achieved full awakening. Here the tale is told by Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, to a sceptical bodhisattva called Accumulated Wisdom. Manjushri has just arrived from the palace of Sagara, the dragon king, where he claims to have successfully converted innumerable beings via the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Manjushri provides the remarkable example of the daughter of the dragon king, who, at just eight years old, achieved full buddhahood "in an instant." Accumulated Wisdom (as with, one might expect, most hearers or readers of the text) finds this unbelievable, given the countless eons it took Shakyamuni to achieve this same goal. The dragon princess duly appears before the assembly, and, in response to further skeptical and denigrating remarks by Shariputra, immediately transforms herself into: a male, a bodhisattva in a distant



“Shariputra, ever since I became a buddha, I have used a variety of causal explanations and a variety of parables to teach and preach, and countless skillful means to lead living beings, enabling them to give up their attachments. Why? Because the Tathagata has attained full use of skillful means and practice of insight.”

“All the living beings who escape the threefold world are given the enjoyments of buddhas—meditation, liberation, and so forth. All are of one character and one type, praised by sages and capable of producing pure, wonderful, supreme happiness.”

“Then the entire congregation saw the dragon girl instantly transformed into a male, take up bodhisattva practice, and immediately go to the world named Spotless, in the southern region, where, sitting on a precious lotus blossom, she attained impartial, proper awakening. With the thirty-two characteristics and eighty different attractive features she proclaimed the wonderful Dharma to all living beings everywhere in the universe.”

“You should all listen carefully to hear about the Tathagata’s secret and divine powers. In all the worlds, the humans, heavenly beings, and asuras think that the present Shakyamuni Buddha left the palace of the Shakya clan, sat at the place of the Way not far from the city of Gaya, and attained supreme awakening. But . . . in fact there have been innumerable, unlimited hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of eons since I became a buddha.”

realm called Spotless, and then a fully-awakened buddha, proclaiming the dharma to all living beings. The entire assembly, including Accumulated Wisdom and Shariputra, “silently believed and accepted this.”

Once again, as with the example of Devadatta, the choice of the dragon princess as a fully awakened buddha undercuts traditional Buddhist understandings of the necessary conditions for awakening, including the various hindrances associated with being a child, a female, and a nonhuman. Later exegetes would interpret this chapter and similar promises of buddhahood in the Lotus in terms of the later Mahayana doctrine of “buddha nature,” whereby all beings are possessed of a “spark” or “seed” of buddhahood. Contemporary feminist readers have mixed feelings

about this tale’s message for women: on one hand, it seems liberatory, given that the dragon princess is able to attain full buddhahood, and yet in order to do so she has had to transform herself, even if only for an instant, into a male.

◆ 16. The Lifetime of the Tathagata

Contemporary scholars divide the text of the Lotus Sutra into several parts, with chapters 10–22, along with the introductory chapter but excluding chapter 12, representing a later group of writings. These chapters focus on the transcendent powers of the Buddha (and of buddhas more generally), one of the most significant innovations in Mahayana thought. This is vividly expressed in the sixteenth chapter, “The Lifetime of the Tathagata.” The chapter follows a scene

in which the bodhisattva Maitreya shows confusion as to how the Buddha could have possibly converted innumerable bodhisattvas, as he claims to have done, in the short span (roughly forty years) since his initial awakening under the bodhi tree. Here Shakyamuni answers Maitreya's question, in the process effectively reinterpreting the very concept of buddhahood by way of the doctrine of skillful means. The reader is informed that the Buddha, in fact, achieved awakening many eons in the past and has spent an inconceivably long time since then leading other beings to nirvana. Thus, the biography of the "historical" Buddha—including his birth, renunciation of wealth and family, awakening, and "final" nirvana—are revealed as expedient means employed by the (virtually) eternal and transcendent fully awakened Buddha to most effectively teach the dharma.

To make this point clear, the Buddha relates the parable of the medicinal herbs, in which a doctor finds to his distress that his sons—"ten, twenty, even a hundred"—have ingested poison. He gives them medicinal herbs to cure them, but some refuse to take the medicine, having already "lost their minds." In order to save these sons, the doctor fakes his own death, which prompts them to realize that they cannot simply depend on him anymore, and forthwith they consume the medicine. Once they are recovered, the father reveals himself to them. Again, as with the parable of the burning house, it is said that the father cannot be accused of "lying," since his intention was to liberate his sons from suffering.

Beyond the reiteration of the importance of skillful means, one implication of this chapter is that the Buddha remains "in the world" out of boundless compassion for the suffering of living beings. But he also does so as an extraordinarily powerful being, one who is able to control space and time at will. Here the early Buddhist understanding of *nirvana* as "extinction" is overturned—a move that would have significant implications for East Asian Buddhist doctrine and practice. This teaching of the "primordial" or "eternal buddha" would find more elaborate expression in the Chinese interpolation of the so-called three bodies of buddha (that is, living being, spirit, and truth itself), in the doctrinal formulations of the Tiantai founder Zhiyi, and in the development of original enlightenment thought in Japan, which suggests that not only buddhas but all living beings and even nonsentient things are always already awakened. Also of note in this chapter is a repetition of the trope of the Buddha as a "father" to those he teaches, a concept that some have argued is fundamental to understanding the transformation brought about by the early Mahayana sutras in general. This conception may also help account for the success of the Lotus Sutra in East Asia, where culturally embedded notions of family and filial piety would seem to otherwise work against Indian Buddhist traditions of monasticism and asceticism.

Audience

As with all Buddhist scriptures, the Lotus Sutra was initially compiled for the benefit of monastics. Over time, however, owing in no small part to the sutra's claims to

universal salvific power, devotion to the Lotus spread beyond the *sangha* to lay Buddhists, both literate elites and nonliterate commoners.

The extent to which the Lotus Sutra was intended to "convert" audiences to a particular kind of Buddhism is uncertain. It is clear from the content that the Lotus Sutra is aligned with the Mayahana perspective and that its intention is to persuade its hearers or readers to follow the Mahayana-oriented teachings it provides. But most scholars now believe that there was no such thing as a coherent "Mahayana" movement until centuries after the Lotus Sutra was written, which means that its initial compilers and readers may have not even been thinking of conversion, per se, since the lines between "Mahayana" and "traditional" Buddhists remained vague. (Many scholars believe that they inhabited the same monasteries and engaged in many of the same practices for the first several centuries.) In short, the Lotus Sutra is understood to predate Mahayana but was adopted as a key text in some later Mahayana schools, especially those emerging in China and Japan. Thus, it is probably most accurate to assert that the Lotus Sutra attempts to convert its readers or hearers to the Lotus Sutra, rather than to any group or community called Mahayana.

Although the term *Mahayana* implies "Great Vehicle" or "Larger Vehicle," it is unlikely that the monks associated with Mahayana ever constituted a majority of Buddhists until the school began to grow and spread in China and perhaps some parts of West Asia. Schools with clearly Mahayana orientations emerged in China, such as the Tiantai/Tendai and Huayan/Kegon, in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Through that era, Mahayana triumphed in China, and these schools would provide the basis for East Asian Buddhism in Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Today, Mahayana Buddhism is the dominant—indeed, nearly exclusive—form in these countries, while Theravada, the only surviving major non-Mahayana school, dominates Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. A third school, Vajrayana, or tantric Buddhism, is the dominant form in the Himalayan regions of Tibet and Nepal and in parts of Siberia and Mongolia. In all, some 60 percent of the world's Buddhists follow traditions now associated with the Mahayana, while roughly 35 percent follow Theravada traditions and 5 percent Vajrayana.

Impact

The Lotus Sutra appears to have had little impact upon Indian Buddhism. Similarly, its influence within Tibetan and related forms of Buddhism has been marginal. The text first flourished in China, owing to the various Chinese translations from the third through fifth centuries and its adoption by the Tiantai sect—one of the foremost Mahayana branches—and then spread to Korea and Japan. Although Dharmaraksa's third-century translation may be the earliest Chinese version, it was the translation in 406 by Kumarajiva that proved most successful as the Lotus



Sutra spread throughout East Asia. Kumarajiva's work was furthered in the late sixth century by the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi, who wrote several works extolling the power and significance of the Lotus Sutra. In addition, beginning in medieval China and extending to Japan, a number of so-called miracle tales focusing on the power of the Lotus Sutra began to circulate. Although these tales were not necessarily intended for a popular audience, they no doubt contributed to the spread of devotion to the Lotus among the nonliterate population in both countries. The story of the medicine king, in which a bodhisattva burns himself to death as an offering to the Buddha, inspired a tradition of self-immolation among certain Chinese and, more recently, Vietnamese monks. In addition, the Lotus Sutra played a role in spreading the cult of the bodhisattva Guanyin, the most popular Buddhist figure in East Asia. Finally, though its impact on politics and society is less pronounced in China than in Japan, images and scenes from the Lotus can be seen throughout medieval Chinese art and literature, including many of the spectacular Buddhist murals adorning caves along the Silk Road.

In Japan, from an early period, the Lotus Sutra was understood as a spiritual protector of the imperial family and the realm. One of the earliest commentaries is attributed to Shotoku Taishi (573–621), the semilegendary regent of Japan and “father of Japanese Buddhism.” From the early medieval period, monasteries were constructed throughout the nation with the express purpose of reciting the Lotus Sutra. As noted, the Lotus Sutra was central to the Japanese Tendai sect, founded by Saicho, which would dominate Japanese Buddhism for several centuries and give birth to the various new Buddhist movements of the Kamakura Period (1185–1333). Saicho lectured on the Lotus Sutra before the Japanese emperor and court. Whereas Tendai embraced devotion to the Lotus Sutra as one path among many, Nichiren broke

from Tendai eclecticism by insisting that the sole effective path to buddhahood ran through the Lotus Sutra and that this could be achieved simply by chanting its title in good faith and with pure heart in a prayer known as the *daimoku*. For Nichiren and his followers, this prayer—*Namu myoho renge kyo*, or “devotion to the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma”—encapsulates all the teachings contained within the Lotus Sutra and thus, by extension, all the practices and merit accumulated by Shakyamuni Buddha through countless eons, which can then be transferred to the believer via the act of chanting. While this practice remains central to Nichiren Buddhism, some contemporary Nichirenists question the idea that the *daimoku* is sufficient for liberation in and of itself.

In modern times, the Lotus Sutra has played a role in a variety of Buddhist reform and activist movements in Japan, China, and Taiwan. This is due to the fact that the Lotus is often understood as giving primary importance to the very world in which humans dwell, an interpretation that runs from Zhiyi through Nichiren down to modern lay-Buddhist movements. Nichiren, in particular, interpreted the message of the Lotus Sutra in a political and eschatological fashion, teaching in works like *Rissho ankoku ron* (Treatise on Spreading Peace throughout the Country by Establishing the True Dharma, 1260) that widespread devotion to the Lotus in an age of decline could transform this world into an ideal “buddha land” and that, contrariwise, a refusal to embrace the text would bring disaster upon the realm.

This perceived message of the Lotus, combined with the inherent vagueness of the sutra itself, has allowed for manifold political interpretations. In prewar Japan, the Lotus inspired figures as diverse as Seno'o Giro (1881–1961), founder of the Socialist Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism; the left-leaning poet, agronomist, and activist Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933); Ishiwara Kanji (1889–1949),

Questions for Further Study

1. What is a sutra? Literally, in Sanskrit, the word means “a thread that holds things together.” To what extent does this describe the Lotus Sutra? Explain.

2. Why is the Lotus Sutra “the most “political” of all Buddhist scriptures?

3. Buddhism, as reflected in the Lotus Sutra, places considerable emphasis on concepts such as enlightenment, wisdom, liberation, buddhahood, and awakening. To what extent, if any, do you think that the concepts found in the Lotus Sutra are valuable to ordinary people going about their ordinary busy lives? Do you find the concepts too vague and impractical, or do you think they would provide something valuable for, say, a construction worker, an insurance salesperson, or a high school student?

4. The entry states that the Lotus Sutra plays a role somewhat similar to that of the Bible among Western Christians and Jews and the Qur'an among Muslims. To what extent, if any, do you think this is true? Provide examples.

the Imperial Army general famous for his role in fomenting the 1931 Manchurian Incident, in which Japanese militarists dynamited a section of railroad in southern Manchuria and blamed the Chinese as a pretext for engaging China in all-out war; and Inoue Nissho (1886–1967), founder of the Ketsumeidan, or Blood Pledge Corps, a terrorist group that would embark on a wave of assassinations of prominent political figures and business leaders in the 1930s. In the radically changed circumstances of the postwar period, several new religious movements associated with Nichiren Buddhism began to flourish. Soka Kyoiku Gakkai, now known as Soka Gakkai or Soka Gakkai International, is a popular lay Buddhist movement that first emerged in the 1930s and, after surviving persecution during World War II, gained a massive following in Japan during the 1950s and 1960s, eventually spreading its activities to the United States. Its teachings are rooted in Nichirenist conceptions of the interconnectedness of personal and social transformation. Though it is somewhat less popular than Soka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, also founded in the 1930s, is rooted in similar Nichirenist assumptions as well as in the conviction of the continuing relevance of the Lotus Sutra.

In the West, the Lotus Sutra has had less direct impact, though Western-language translations have appeared since the mid-nineteenth century. The first was Eugène Burnouf's French version, *Le lotus de la bonne loi* (1852). This was followed several decades later by Hendrik Kern's *Saddharma-pundarika; or, The Lotus of the True Law* (1884), the first translation into English. The number of English and Western-language translations of the Lotus Sutra has exploded through the end of the twentieth century, as Western scholars and lay Buddhists have begun to take a greater interest in this seminal East Asian sacred text.

Further Reading

■ Books

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—James Mark Shields

LOTUS SUTRA

2. Skillful Means

At that time the World-Honored One rose calmly from concentration and said to Shariputra: “The wisdom of buddhas is both profound and immeasurable, and the gateways to this wisdom are hard to understand and hard to enter. No shravaka or pratyekabuddha can apprehend it.

“Why is this? It is because every buddha has been closely associated with hundreds of thousands of billions of buddhas in the past, fully practicing the way of the immeasurable Dharma of all the buddhas. Boldly and diligently working, they have become famous everywhere, fulfilling the very profound, unprecedented Dharma and teaching it wherever opportunities arose. Yet their intention is difficult to grasp.

“Shariputra, ever since I became a buddha, I have used a variety of causal explanations and a variety of parables to teach and preach, and countless skillful means to lead living beings, enabling them to give up their attachments. Why? Because the Tathagata has attained full use of skillful means and practice of insight. . . .

“In sum, Shariputra, the Buddha has fulfilled the whole Dharma—innumerable, unlimited, unprecedented teachings.

“But this is enough Shariputra. No more needs to be said. Why? Because what the Buddha has achieved is most rare and difficult to understand. Only among buddhas can the true character of all things be fathomed. This is because every existing thing has such characteristics, such a nature, such an embodiment, such powers, such actions, such causes, such conditions, such effects, such rewards and retributions, and yet such a complete fundamental coherence.” . . .

At that time in the great assembly there were shravakas, arhats without faults, Ajnata-Kaundinya and others, twelve hundred in all. And there were various monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen who had vowed to become shravakas and pratyekabuddhas. They all thought: “Why does the World-Honored One speak so enthusiastically about skillful means? Why does he say that the Buddha’s Dharma is so profound and so difficult to comprehend, and that what he says is so difficult that not even shravakas and pratyekabuddhas can understand it? And yet at the same time he has said that there is only one principle of libera-

tion, so that we too, with this Dharma, will attain nirvana. But now we do not know where this leads.”

Then Shariputra, seeing the doubts in the minds of the four groups and not having fully understood everything himself, spoke to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, what are the reasons for you to praise so enthusiastically the buddhas’ principle of skillful means and the very profound, fine, and wonderful Dharma, which is so hard to understand? Never before have I heard such teaching from the Buddha! Now these four groups are full of doubt. Will the World-Honored One please explain why you have so enthusiastically praised this very profound, fine, and wonderful Dharma, which is so difficult to comprehend?” . . .

Then the Buddha said to Shariputra: “Stop, stop! There is no need to say more. If I explain this matter, all of the worlds’ heavenly beings as well as human beings will be startled and perplexed.”

Again Shariputra said to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, please explain it. Please explain it! Why? Because in this gathering there are countless hundreds of thousands of billions of living beings who have already seen buddhas. Their faculties are excellent and their wisdom is clear. If they hear the Buddha preach, they will be able to believe respectfully.” . . .

But the Buddha again said: “Stop, Shariputra! If I explained this, all the worlds of human and heavenly beings and asuras would be startled and perplexed, and extremely arrogant monks might fall into the great pit.” . . .

Then Shariputra once again said to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, please explain it. Please explain it! In this meeting there are hundreds of thousands of billions of beings like me who in previous lives followed buddhas and were transformed. Certainly they can respect and believe what you say, and thereby enjoy great peace of mind throughout the long night of time and gain abundant benefits of various kinds.” . . .

Then the World-Honored One said to Shariputra: “Since you have now earnestly repeated your request three times, how can I refuse you? Now listen carefully, ponder over what I will say and remember it, for I will explain it for you clearly.”

When he had said this, immediately some five thousand monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen,



got up and, bowing to the Buddha, left the meeting. Why? Because their roots of sin were so deep and they were so utterly arrogant that they imagined themselves to have already attained and born witness to what they had not actually attained. Having such faults, they could not stay. The World-Honored One kept silent and did not stop them.

Then the Buddha said to Shariputra: "Now the congregation no longer has useless branches and leaves, but only firm, good fruit. It is good, Shariputra, that such utterly arrogant ones have gone. So listen carefully now. I am ready to explain it for you."

And Shariputra said: "Very well, World-Honored One, I am eager to hear you."

The Buddha said to Shariputra: "Such a wonderful Dharma as this is taught by the buddha-tathagatas only on very rare occasions, just as the udumbara blossom is seen only very rarely. You should believe me, Shariputra, in the teachings of the buddhas nothing is empty or false.

"Shariputra, the meaning of the Dharma that buddhas preach as appropriate to the occasion is difficult to understand. Why? Because we use a variety of skillful means, causal explanations, and parables to teach. This Dharma cannot be well understood through calculation or analysis. Only a buddha can really grasp it. Why is this? Because it is for this great cause alone that buddhas, the world-honored ones, appear in the world.

"What do I mean by saying it is for this one great cause alone that buddhas, the world-honored ones, appear in the world? The buddhas, the world-honored ones, appear in the world because they want living beings to open a way to the buddhas' insight, and thus become pure. They appear in the world because they want to demonstrate the buddhas' insight to living beings. They appear in the world because they want living beings to apprehend things with the buddhas' insight. They appear in the world because they want living beings to enter into the way of the buddhas' insight. This alone is the one great cause, Shariputra, for which buddhas appear in the world." . . .

"Shariputra, I too am like those buddhas. Knowing that living beings have various desires and things to which they are deeply attached, I have taught the Dharma according to their basic nature, using a variety of causal explanations, parables, other kinds of expression, and the power of skillful means. Shariputra, this is so that they might attain the complete wisdom of the One Buddha-Vehicle.

"Shariputra, in the entire universe, there are not even two such vehicles, much less three!

"Shariputra, the buddhas appear in an evil world of five pollutions—the pollution of the age, the pollution from afflictions, the pollution of living beings, the pollution of views, and the pollution of life. When the age is in chaos, the stains run deep, and greedy and jealous living beings acquire unhealthy roots. For this reason, Shariputra, with their powers of skillful means, the buddhas have distinguished three ways within the One Buddha-Vehicle.

"Yet if any disciples of mine, Shariputra, thinking themselves to be arhats or pratyekabuddhas, neither hear nor know of these matters that the buddhas, the tathagatas, use only to teach and transform bodhisattvas, they are not true disciples of the Buddha, and not really arhats or pratyekabuddhas. Again, Shariputra, if such monks and nuns say to themselves: 'I have already become an arhat. This is my last body. I have already attained final nirvana!' And if they no longer vow to seek supreme awakening, you should know that they are extremely arrogant. Why? Because it is impossible that a monk who has already become an arhat would not believe this Dharma.

"There is only one exception—after a buddha has passed into extinction and there is no buddha present. Why? Because after a buddha's extinction it will be difficult to find people who can receive, embrace, read, recite, and understand a sutra such as this. But if they meet another buddha, they will receive decisive teachings about this Dharma.

"Shariputra, all of you should believe, understand, and embrace the words of the Buddha with all your hearts, for in the words of the buddhas, the tathagatas, there is nothing empty or false. There are no other vehicles. There is only the One Buddha-Vehicle."

3. A Parable

. . . at that time Shariputra, ecstatic with joy, stood up, put his palms together, reverently looked up at the face of the Honorable One and said to him: "Hearing this sound of the Dharma from the World-Honored One, I am filled with ecstasy, something I have never experienced before. Why? When we heard such a Dharma from the Buddha before, we saw that bodhisattvas were assured of becoming buddhas, but not that we ourselves were. And we were very distressed at never being able to have a tathagata's immeasurable insight.

"World-Honored One, whenever I was alone under the trees in a mountain forest, whether sitting or walking, I was occupied with this thought: 'We



have all equally entered Dharma-nature. Why does the Tathagata offer us salvation only by the Dharma of a small vehicle? This is our own fault, not the fault of the World-Honored One. Why? Because had we waited to hear you teach how to attain supreme awakening, we would certainly have been saved by the Great Vehicle. But, not understanding your way of preaching by skillful means according to what is appropriate, when we first heard the Buddha-dharma we only passively believed and accepted it, pondered it, and were informed by it.

“World-Honored One, ever since then I have spent whole days and nights blaming myself. But now, hearing from the Buddha the unprecedented Dharma that I have never heard before, all my doubts and regrets are over. I am mentally and physically at ease, and happily at peace. Today, having received my share of Buddha-dharma, I realize that I really am a child of the Buddha, born from the Buddha’s mouth and transformed by the Dharma.” . . .

Then the Buddha said to Shariputra: “Now in this great assembly of human and heavenly beings, mendicants, brahmins, and others, I say this: In the past, in the presence of two trillion buddhas, for the sake of the unexcelled way, I always taught and transformed you. And throughout long days and nights you have followed me and accepted my teaching. Since I used skillful means to guide you, you have been born into my Dharma.

“Shariputra, in the past I led you to aspire and vow to follow the Buddha way. But now you have entirely forgotten this, and therefore suppose that you have already attained extinction. Now, wanting you to recollect the way that you originally vowed to follow, for all the shravakas I teach this Great Vehicle sutra called the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma, by which bodhisattvas are taught and which buddhas watch over and keep in mind.

“Shariputra, in a future life, after innumerable, unlimited, and inconceivable eons, when you have served some ten million billion buddhas, maintained the true Dharma, and perfected the way of bodhisattva practice, you will be able to become a buddha whose name will be Flower Light Tathagata, one worthy of offerings, truly awakened, fully clear in conduct, well gone, understanding the world, unexcelled leader, trainer of men, teacher of heavenly beings and people, buddha, world-honored one.

“Your land will be called Free of Dirt. It will be level and smooth, pure and beautifully decorated, peaceful and prosperous. Both human and heavenly beings will flourish there. It will have lapis lazuli for

its earth, with eight intersecting roads with golden cords marking their boundaries. Beside each road will be a row of trees of the seven precious materials, which will always be filled with flowers and fruit. Using the three vehicles, Flower Light Tathagata will teach and transform living beings. . . .

When all of the four groups, namely monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, and the gods, dragons, satyrs, centaurs, asuras, griffins, chimeras, pythons, and others—the entire great assembly—saw that Shariputra had received his assurance of supreme awakening from the Buddha, their hearts overflowed with joy and danced in ecstasy. Each took off the outer robes they were wearing and presented them as offerings to the Buddha. Indra Devendra and Brahma, the king of heaven, as well as others, with countless children of heaven, also made offerings to the Buddha with their wonderful heavenly robes, mandarava and great mandarava flowers from heaven, and so on. The heavenly robes they had scattered remained in the sky, whirling around and around by themselves. With hundreds of billions of kinds of heavenly musical instruments, these heavenly beings made music together in the sky. And, raining down numerous flowers from heaven, they spoke these words: “In the past at Varanasi the Buddha first turned the Dharma wheel, and now he rolls the wheel again—the unexcelled, greatest Dharma wheel!” . . .

Then Shariputra said to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, I now have no more doubts or regrets. I personally have received assurance of supreme awakening from the Buddha. But these twelve hundred who are mentally free, while they were at the learning stage in the past, were always taught by the Buddha, who said: ‘My Dharma can free you from birth, old age, disease, and death and enable you finally to attain nirvana.’ These people, some still in training and some no longer in training, being free from views of self and about ‘existence’ or ‘nonexistence,’ thought they had attained nirvana. But now, hearing something they have never heard before from the World-Honored One, they have fallen into doubt.

“Thus, World-Honored One, I beg you to give causal explanations to the four groups so that they may be free from doubt and regret.”

Then the Buddha said to Shariputra: “Did I not tell you before that when the buddhas, the world-honored ones, by using causal explanations, parables, and other kinds of expression, teach the Dharma by skillful means, it is all for the purpose of supreme awakening? All these teachings are for the purpose of transforming people into bodhisattvas. But, Sharipu-

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tra, let me once again make this meaning still more clear through a parable, for intelligent people can understand through parables.

“Shariputra, suppose in a village or city in a certain kingdom there was a great elder. He had many fields, houses, and servants. His house was large and spacious but had only one gateway. Many people lived in the house, one hundred, two hundred, or even five hundred in all. Its halls and rooms were old and decaying, its walls crumbling, its pillars rotting at the base, its beams and rafters failing down and dangerous.

“All over the house, at the same moment, fire suddenly broke out, engulfing the house in flames. The children of the elder, say ten, twenty, or even thirty, were in this house. The elder, seeing this great fire spring up on every side, was very alarmed and thought: ‘Though I can get out safely through the flaming gateway, my children are in the burning house enjoying themselves engrossed in play, without awareness, knowledge, alarm, or fear. Fire is closing in on them. Pain and suffering threaten, but they do not care or become frightened, and have no thought of trying to escape.’

“Shariputra, this elder said to himself: ‘My body and arms are strong. I can wrap the children in some robes and put them on a palette or bench and carry them out of the house.’ But then he thought again: ‘This house has only one gateway, and it is narrow and small. My children are young. Knowing nothing as yet of the danger, they are absorbed in their play. Probably they will be burned up in the fire. I must tell them why I am alarmed, and warn them that the house is burning and that they must get out quickly or be burned up in the fire.’ In accord with this line of thought, he called to his children: ‘Get out quickly, all of you!’

“Although the father was sympathetic and tried to persuade them with kind words, the children, absorbed in their play, were unwilling to believe him and were neither alarmed nor frightened. They didn’t even think about trying to escape. What’s more, they did not understand what he meant by the fire, or the house, or losing their lives. They only kept running around playing, barely glancing at their father.

“Then the elder thought: ‘This house is already going up in a great blaze. If my children and I do not get out at once, we will certainly be burned alive. Now I have to find some skillful means to get my children to escape from this disaster.’

“Knowing what his children always liked, and all the various rare and attractive playthings and curiosities that would please them, the father said to them: ‘The things you like to play with are rare and hard to

find. If you do not get them when you can, you will be sorry later. A variety of goat carriages, deer carriages, and ox carriages are now outside the gate for you to play with. You must get out of this burning house quickly, and I will give you whatever ones you want.’

“When they heard about the rare and attractive playthings described by their father, which were just what they wanted, all of the children, eagerly pushing and racing with each other, came scrambling out of the burning house.

“Then the elder, seeing that his children had safely escaped and were all sitting in the open square and no longer in danger, was very relieved and ecstatic with joy. Then each of the children said to their father: ‘Those playthings you promised us, the goat carriages, deer carriages, and ox carriages, please give them to us now!’

“Shariputra, then the elder gave each of his children equally a great carriage. They were tall and spacious, and decorated with many jewels. They had railings around them, with bells hanging on all four sides. Each was covered with a canopy, which was also splendidly decorated with various rare and precious jewels. Around each was a string of precious stones and garlands of flowers. Inside were beautiful mats and rose-colored pillows. Pulling each of them was a handsome, very powerful white ox with a pure hide, capable of walking with a smooth gait and fast as the speed of the wind. Each also had many servants and followers to guard and take care of them.

“Why was this? Because this great elder’s wealth was so inexhaustible, his many storehouses so full of treasures, he thought: ‘There is no limit to my wealth. I should not give inferior carriages to my children. They are all my children and I cherish them equally. I have countless numbers of these large carriages with the seven precious materials. I should give one to each of the children without discrimination. I have so many large carriages I could give one to everyone in the land without running out. Surely I can give them to my own children.’

“Then the children rode on their great carriages, having received something they had never had before and never expected to have.

“Shariputra, what do you think about this? Is that elder, in giving equally the rare treasure of great carriages to his children, guilty of falsehood or not?”

Shariputra said: “No, World-Honored One. That elder only made it possible for his children to escape the disaster of the fire and preserve their lives. He committed no falsehood. Why do I say this? By saving their lives he has already given them a kind of plaything. How



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much more so when by skillful means he saved them from that burning house. World-Honored One, even if that elder had not given them one of the smallest of carriages, he would not be guilty of falsehood. Why? Because the elder, from the beginning, had intended to use some skillful means to enable his children to escape. That is the reason why he is not guilty of falsehood. How much less so, when knowing his own immeasurable wealth and wanting to benefit his children abundantly, he gave them equally great carriages!"

The Buddha said to Shariputra: "Good, good. It is just as you say, Shariputra. The Tathagata is also like this, for he is a father to the whole world. He has long ago completely gotten rid of all fear, distress, anxiety, ignorance, and blindness; has attained immeasurable insight, powers, and freedom from fear; and has gained great spiritual power and wisdom. He has fully mastered skillful means and the practice of wisdom. His great mercy and compassion never stop. He always seeks the good, whatever will enrich all beings.

"He was born into this threefold world, an old decaying burning house, in order to save living beings from the fires of birth, old age, disease, death, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, agony, folly, blindness, and the three poisons, and to teach and transform them, enabling them to reach supreme awakening. . . .

"Shariputra, the elder, seeing his children safely out of the burning house and no longer threatened, thought about his immeasurable wealth and gave each of his children a great carriage. The Tathagata does the same. He is the father of all living beings. He sees innumerable thousands of millions of beings escape from the suffering of the threefold world, from the fearful and perilous path, through the gateway of teachings of the Buddha, and thus gain the joys of nirvana. Then the Tathagata thinks: 'I have Dharma storehouses of buddhas, with immeasurable, unlimited wisdom, power, and freedom from fear. All these living beings are my children. I will give the Great Vehicle to them equally, so that no one will reach extinction individually, but all gain the same extinction as the Tathagata.'

"All the living beings who escape the threefold world are given the enjoyments of buddhas—meditation, liberation, and so forth. All are of one character and one type, praised by sages and capable of producing pure, wonderful, supreme happiness.

"Shariputra, the elder at first attracted his children with the three carriages and afterward gave them just one great carriage decorated with jewels, which was the safest and most comfortable carriage. Yet the man is not guilty of lying. The Tathagata does

the same. There is no falsehood in teaching three vehicles first, to attract living beings, and afterward using just the Great Vehicle to save them. Why? Because the Tathagata has Dharma storehouses of immeasurable wisdom, power, and freedom from fear. He can give all living beings the Great Vehicle Dharma. But not all are able to receive it. For this reason, Shariputra, you should understand that the buddhas use the power of skillful means, thus making distinctions within the One Buddha-Vehicle and teaching the three." . . .

12. Devadatta

At that time the Buddha addressed the bodhisattvas, the human and heavenly beings, and the four groups, saying: "Through innumerable eons in the past, I tirelessly sought the Dharma Flower Sutra. Throughout those many eons I was a king who vowed to seek unexcelled awakening. Never faltering, and wanting to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, the king diligently and unstintingly gave alms—elephants, horses, the seven rare things, countries, cities, wives, children, male and female servants, attendants, and even his own head, eyes, marrow, brain, flesh, hands, and feet—not sparing his body or life.

"At that time a person's lifetime was beyond measure. For the sake of the Dharma, he gave up his kingdom and throne, left the government to the crown prince, sounded drums and sent proclamations in all directions, seeking the Dharma, and saying: 'For the rest of my life, I will be the provider and servant for anyone who can teach me the Great Vehicle.'

"Then a seer came to the king and said: 'I have a Great Vehicle sutra named the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. If you will obey me, I will explain it for you.' Hearing what the seer said, the king became ecstatic with joy and immediately went with him, providing for his needs, gathering fruit, drawing water, collecting firewood, laying out his food, even offering his body as a seat and bed, yet never feeling tired physically or emotionally. During this period of service, all for the sake of the Dharma, a thousand years passed in which he diligently provided for the seer so he would lack nothing." . . .

The Buddha said to all the monks: "The king at that time was me and the seer was the present Devadatta. Because Devadatta was a good friend to me I was able to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, in kindness, compassion, joy, and impartial-

ty, in the thirty-two characteristics, the eighty different attractive features, the deep gold color, the ten powers, the four kinds of freedom from fear, the four social teachings, the eighteen kinds of uniqueness, and the powers of the divine way. That I have attained impartial, proper awakening and saved many of the living is due to my good friend Devadatta.”

“I declare to all four groups that after innumerable eons have passed Devadatta will become a buddha whose name will be Heavenly King Tathagata, one worthy of offerings, truly awakened, fully clear in conduct, well done, understanding the world, unexcelled leader, trainer of men, teacher of heavenly beings and people, buddha, world-honored one. His world will be named Heaven’s Way. At that time Heavenly King Buddha will live in the world for twenty intermediate eons, teaching the wonderful Dharma everywhere for the sake of all the living. Living beings as numerous as the sands of the Ganges will enjoy being arhats; innumerable beings will aspire to be pratyekabuddhas; and living beings as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, aspiring to the unexcelled way, will attain assurance of not being reborn and the stage of never backsliding. After the complete nirvana of Heavenly King Buddha, the true Dharma will dwell in his world for twenty intermediate eons. The remains of his entire body will be put in a stupa of the seven precious materials sixty leagues high and forty leagues in length and width. All the human and heavenly beings, with various flowers, powdered incense, incense for burning, paste incense, robes, garlands, banners, flags, jeweled canopies, and music and song, will respectfully greet and make offerings to the wonderful stupa of the seven precious materials. Innumerable living beings will enjoy being arhats; incalculable numbers of living beings will become awakened as pratyekabuddhas; and inconceivable numbers of the living will aspire to become awakened and reach the stage of never backsliding.”

The Buddha then said to the monks: “In the future, if there are any good sons or good daughters who, hearing this Devadatta chapter of the Wonderful Dharma Flower Sutra, faithfully respect it with pure hearts and are free from doubt, they will not fall into a purgatory or become a hungry spirit or a beast, but will be born into the presence of the buddhas of the ten directions. Wherever they are born they will always hear this sutra. If they are born among human or heavenly beings, they will enjoy marvelous delights. And if they are reborn in the presence of a buddha, they will be born by transformation from lotus flowers.”

Then a bodhisattva from a lower region, named Accumulated Wisdom, an attendant of Abundant Treasures, the World-Honored One, said to Abundant Treasures Buddha: “Let us return to our homeland.”

But Shakyamuni Buddha said to Accumulated Wisdom: “Good man, wait a while. There is a bodhisattva here named Manjushri. You should meet him and discuss the wonderful Dharma with him, and then return to your homeland.”

Then Manjushri, sitting on a thousand-petaled lotus flower as large as a carriage wheel, accompanied by bodhisattvas who had come with him also sitting on treasured lotus flowers, emerged naturally from the palace of Sagara Dragon King in the great ocean. Suspended in the air, he went to Holy Eagle Peak, got down from his lotus flower, went before the Buddha, and reverently prostrated himself at the feet of the two world-honored ones. When he had expressed his respect he went over to Accumulated Wisdom, and after they had exchanged greetings, they withdrew and sat to one side. Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva asked Manjushri: “When you were at the dragon palace, how many beings did you convert?”

Manjushri responded: “The number of them is innumerable, incalculable. It cannot be expressed in words or fathomed by the mind. Just wait a moment and there will be proof.” And before he had finished speaking innumerable bodhisattvas sitting on treasured lotus flowers emerged from the ocean and went to Holy Eagle Peak, where they were suspended in the air. All these bodhisattvas had been transformed and delivered by Manjushri. They had done bodhisattva practice and together discussed the six transcendental practices. Those in the air, originally shravakas, taught shravaka practices, even though they were now all practicing the Great Vehicle principle of emptiness. Then Manjushri said to Accumulated Wisdom: “This is the result of my teaching and converting in the ocean.” . . .

Manjushri replied: “What I always proclaimed when I was in the ocean was only the Wonderful Dharma Flower Sutra.”

Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva asked Manjushri: “This sutra is very profound, fine and wonderful, the jewel of all the sutras, a rare thing in the world. Is there any living being who, diligently and devotedly practicing this sutra, can quickly become a buddha?”

Manjushri replied: “There is the daughter of the dragon king Sagara. Just eight years old, she is wise and has sharp faculties, and is well acquainted with the faculties and actions of living beings. She has



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mastered incantations. She has been able to receive and embrace all the profound inner core treasures preached by the buddhas. She has entered deeply into meditation and gained an understanding of all things. Within a moment, she aspired to become awakened and reached the stage of never backsliding. Her eloquence knows no bounds, and she has compassion for all the living as if they were her own children. She is full of blessings, and the thoughts in her mind and the explanations from her mouth are both subtle and great. Compassionate and respectful of others, kind and gentle, she is able to attain awakening.”

Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva said: “I have seen how Shakyamuni Tathagata carried out arduous and difficult practices for innumerable eons, accumulating blessings and piling up virtue by following the way of the bodhisattva without resting. I have observed that in the three-thousand great thousandfold world there is not even a spot as small as a mustard seed where he has not laid down body and life as a bodhisattva for the sake of the living. Only after that did he attain the path of the awakened. It is unbelievable that this girl, in an instant, can become truly awakened.”

But before he had finished talking, the daughter of the dragon king suddenly appeared and, after reverently prostrating herself at the Buddha’s feet, withdrew to one side, praising him in verse:

Profound in insight into the nature of good and evil,
He illuminates the universe.
His fine and wonderful pure Dharma body
Has the thirty-two characteristics.
The eighty different attractive features adorn his
Dharma body.
Human and heavenly beings look up to him,
Dragons and gods revere him,
And all kinds of living beings hold him in reverence.
Having heard him, I can become awakened
Only the Buddha can bear witness to this.
I will reveal the teaching of the Great Vehicle
To save living beings from suffering.

Then Shariputra said to the dragon girl: “You think that in no time at all you will attain the unexcelled way. This is hard to believe. Why? Because the body of a woman is filthy and impure, not a vessel for the Dharma. How could you attain unexcelled awakening? The Buddha way is long and extensive. Only after innumerable eons of enduring hardship, accumulating good works, and thoroughly carrying out all the practices can it be reached. Moreover, a woman’s body has five hindrances: first, she cannot

become a king of a Brahma heaven; second she cannot become king Indra; third, she cannot become a devil king; fourth she cannot become a wheel-turning saintly king; and fifth she cannot have the body of a buddha. How then could you, in a woman’s body, so quickly become a buddha?”

Then the dragon girl took a precious jewel that she had with her, worth as much as a three-thousand great thousandfold world, and presented it to the Buddha. The Buddha immediately accepted it. The dragon girl then said to Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva and the Venerable Shariputra: “I presented my precious jewel and the World-Honored One accepted it—was that not done quickly?” “Most quickly,” they answered. The daughter told them: “Use your holy powers to watch me become a buddha even more quickly than that!”

Then the entire congregation saw the dragon girl instantly transformed into a male, take up bodhisattva practice, and immediately go to the world named Spotless, in the southern region, where, sitting on a precious lotus blossom, she attained impartial, proper awakening. With the thirty-two characteristics and eighty different attractive features she proclaimed the wonderful Dharma to all living beings everywhere in the universe.

Then from afar the bodhisattvas, shravakas, gods, dragons, the eightfold assembly, humans, and non-humans in this world watched the dragon girl become a buddha and teach the Dharma to all the gods and people in the assembly. Their hearts filled with great joy, they paid their respects from afar. Hearing the Dharma, countless living beings were able to understand it and reach the stage of never backsliding. The countless multitude also received assurance of attaining the Way. The world Spotless trembled and shook in six ways. Three thousand living beings in this world reached the stage of never backsliding, while three thousand living beings aspired to become awakened and obtained assurance of doing so.

Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva and Shariputra and the whole congregation silently believed and accepted this. . . .

16. The Lifetime of the Tathagata

At that time the Buddha said to the bodhisattvas and to all the great assembly: “Have faith in and understand, all you good sons, the truthful words of the Tathagata.” . . .

“You should all listen carefully to hear about the Tathagata’s secret and divine powers. In all the worlds,

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the humans, heavenly beings, and asuras think that the present Shakyamuni Buddha left the palace of the Shakya clan, sat at the place of the Way not far from the city of Gaya, and attained supreme awakening. But, my good sons, in fact there have been innumerable, unlimited hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of eons since I became a buddha.

“Suppose someone were to take five hundred thousand billions of myriads of countless three-thousand great thousandfold worlds and grind them into dust. Then, after going east through five hundred thousand billions of myriads of innumerable lands, one of those specks of dust was deposited. And suppose he continued eastward until he had used up all those specks. What do you think, my good sons? Is it possible to imagine or calculate the number of all those worlds?” . . .

Then the Buddha said to all those bodhisattva great ones: “Good sons, now I will speak to you

clearly. Suppose you took all those worlds, where a speck of dust has been deposited and where none has been deposited, and reduced them to dust. Let one speck be equal to an eon. The time that has passed since I became a buddha exceeds these by hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of countless eons. Since that time I have constantly been in this world—preaching, teaching, and transforming. And in other places, in hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of countless other lands, I have led and enriched living beings.

“Good sons, during this time I have talked about the Buddha Burning Light and others, and have told of their entering nirvana. In all of this I used skillful means to analyze things. . . .

“Thus, since I became Buddha a very long time has passed, a lifetime of innumerable countless eons of constantly living here and never entering extinction. Good sons, from the beginning I have practiced

Glossary

Ajnata-Kaundinya	one of the five ascetics who were companions of the Buddha
arhat	personal awakening
bodhisattva	or “buddha-to-be,” one who is dedicated to the liberation of all beings and is thus an embodiment of compassion
Brahma	the Hindu god of creation
Devadatta	Shakyamuni’s (the Buddha’s) cousin
Dharma	a complex concept that can refer to the basic principles of the cosmos or to a person’s duty to follow a virtuous path
Indra Devendra	title given to the Hindu god Indra
Maitreya	a bodhisattva who is to appear on the earth, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure dharma
Manjushri	the bodhisattva of wisdom
nirvana	the extinction of suffering and escape from the cycle of reincarnation
pratyekabuddha	a “solitary Buddha,” or one who achieves awakening on his or her own, without reliance on the words or teachings of others
Sagara	a dragon king
Shakyamuni	Siddhartha Gautama, or the historical Buddha
Shariputra	one of the Buddha’s principal disciples
shravaka	literally, “hearer,” a disciple of the Buddha who has accepted the Buddha’s teaching
Tathagata	the name the Buddha used to refer to himself; literally, “one who has thus come” and “one who has thus gone”
Varanasi	a holy city on the banks of the River Ganges in India

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the bodhisattva way, and that life is not yet finished, but will be twice as long as what has already passed. Even now, though I will not actually enter extinction, I announce that I will adopt the way of extinction. By using such skillful means, the Tathagata teaches and transforms living beings.

“Why is this? If the Buddha lives for a long time in this world, people of little virtue will not plant roots of goodness, and those who are poor and of humble origins will become attached to the five desires and be caught in a net of assumptions and false views. If they see that the Tathagata is always alive and never extinct, they will become arrogant and selfish or discouraged and neglectful. Unable to realize how difficult it is to meet him, they will not have a respectful attitude toward him.

“Therefore the Tathagata teaches by using skillful means, saying: ‘Monks, you should know that it is difficult to meet a buddha who has come into the world.’ Why is this? In the course of countless hundreds of thousands of billions of eons, some people of little virtue may see a buddha while others may never see one. For this reason I say this: ‘Monks, it is difficult to see a tathagata.’ Living beings, hearing such words, surely will realize that it is difficult to meet a buddha. They will yearn for one. Then they will cultivate roots of goodness. This is why the Tathagata announces his extinction even though he does not in reality become extinct.

“Good sons, the teachings of all the buddha-tathagatas are all like this. They are for the sake of liberating all the living. They are true and not empty.

“Suppose, for instance, there is a fine physician who is wise and clever and knows how to make medicines for curing all sorts of disease. He has many sons—say, ten, twenty, even a hundred. To take care of some business he goes off to a distant land. After he leaves, his children drink some poisonous drugs, which drives them into deliriums of agony and leaves them writhing on the ground.

“At this point their father comes back home to find the sons have drunk the poison. Some have lost their minds, others have not. Seeing their father in the distance, they are all very happy. Kneeling to greet him, they say: ‘How good it is that you have returned safely! Foolishly we have taken some poison by mistake. Please heal us and give us back our lives.’

“The father sees his children in such suffering and agony and, following various formulas, looks for good medicinal herbs, perfect in color, fragrance, and flavor. Then he pounds, sifts, and mixes them

and gives them to his children, telling them: ‘This excellent medicine is perfect in color, fragrance, and flavor. Take it and you will quickly be rid of your suffering and agony, and be free from the illness.’

“Those children who have not lost their minds, seeing this excellent medicine of good color and fragrance, take it immediately and are completely cured of their illness. The others, who have lost their minds, are also happy to see their father return and ask him to heal their illness. Yet when the medicine is given to them, they refuse to take it. Why? Because the poison has penetrated deeply into them and they have lost their minds. Even though this medicine has good color and fragrance, they think it is no good.

“The father thinks to himself: ‘These poor children. Because of the poison in them, their minds are completely unbalanced. Though they are glad to see me and ask to be healed, they refuse to take this good medicine. Now I have to use some skillful means to get them to take this medicine.’ Then he says to them: ‘You should know that I am now worn out with old age, and the time for me to die has now arrived. I will leave this excellent medicine here. You should take it and not worry that it will not make you better.’ After instructing them in this way, he leaves again for another land, from which he sends back a messenger to inform them: ‘Your father is dead.’

“Now, when those children hear that their father has died and left them behind, they become very distressed and think to themselves: ‘If our father were alive he would have been kind to us, and would have saved us. But now he has abandoned us and died in a distant land. We think of ourselves as orphans, with no one to rely on.’

“This continuous grief brings them to their senses. They recognize that the medicine is excellent in color, fragrance, and flavor, and they take it and are fully healed of the poison. The father, hearing that the children have all recovered, returns home immediately, so that they all see him again.

“Good sons, what do you think? Can anyone say that this fine physician is lying?”

“No, World-Honored One.”

The Buddha said: “I too am like this. Since I became Buddha, innumerable, unlimited hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of countless eons have passed. For the sake of living beings, I use the power of skillful means and say that I will take the way of extinction. Yet, taking the circumstances into account, no one can accuse me of being guilty of lying.”