

A CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION  
OF A BUDDHIST CLASSIC

# THE LOTUS SUTRA

TRANSLATION &  
INTRODUCTION BY  
Gene Reeves



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## Preface

**T**HIS NEW TRANSLATION of the Lotus Sutra is intended primarily for people who are interested in Buddhism but are not Buddhist scholars. My intention is to provide a highly readable English version of this important text. I want to make this text accessible to ordinary readers with little or no familiarity with technical Buddhist vocabulary. Several other translations are available, some better than others. For scholars interested in comparison of Sanskrit and Chinese versions, for example, the translation by the late Leon Hurvitz will be useful.

While I do my best to make the sutra accessible, I never deliberately compromise the meaning of what I find in it. There are passages in this text that I don't like and wish were not there. There are passages that are extremely difficult if not impossible to understand. There are a great many ambiguities, some intentional, some probably not. My purpose is not to eliminate or soften such passages or to settle the controversies to which they have given rise, but only to provide a version that reveals as much meaning in the sutra as possible.

My first exposure to this sutra was around 1980 when I was invited to participate in a workshop sponsored by the lay Buddhist organization Rissho Kosei-kai, which has its headquarters and the vast majority of its members in Japan. The workshop was designed to enhance interest in the Lotus Sutra among participants, but it had the opposite effect on me. I found a number of things in the text uncongenial. In succeeding years, however, I became increasingly fascinated by this sutra. And I came to

think that part of what discouraged me initially was the poor choice of terms in the translation I had read.

Nearly a decade later I decided to move to Japan to study the Lotus Sutra and improve my skills in Japanese and Chinese languages. I was encouraged both by Nikkyo Niwano, the founder and then president of Rissho Kosei-kai, and by Yoshiro Tamura, the foremost Japanese scholar of Tendai thought, who had recently retired from the University of Tokyo and was teaching at Rissho University.

Tamura died within a few months of my moving to Japan, so our several joint projects had to be abandoned. But Tamura's blend of passionate, personal interest in the Lotus Sutra, combined with his profound scholarship and academic rigor, is an inspiration to me still. Nikkyo Niwano, on the other hand, was entirely lacking in scholarly, academic credentials. But he had the same sensibility as Tamura, except that whereas Tamura was primarily an academic and secondarily a follower of the Lotus Sutra, Niwano was primarily a practitioner and devotee of the sutra and secondarily one who studied the scholarship about it. I regard both of these men as my great Dharma teachers, and feel more indebted to them than I can express.

As I became more familiar with Japanese and Chinese versions of this sutra, and despite the fact that some new translations had appeared in print, I became even more convinced that a version for ordinary English-language readers was needed, one that avoided Buddhist jargon and Sanskrit terms as much as possible.

I began dabbling with a translation of my own about a dozen years ago. The first privately printed version was in 2001. Since then there have been many revisions and a few revised versions. I'm sure there will be more. Translation of any large and complex Chinese text is not something one can ever expect to get right. All one can hope for is that it will become better.

When Kumarajiva or other translators felt that they could not translate a Sanskrit word into Chinese, they transliterated it; that is, they provided a phonetic equivalent to the Sanskrit. This is one of the reasons why many Sanskrit terms have become familiar in English, terms such as "buddha," "dharma," "stupa," and so on, they are basically transliterations of Sanskrit terms. The normal procedure when translating a Chinese Buddhist text into English is to translate into English what the transla-

tor into Chinese translated and use the Sanskrit term if it was only transliterated into Chinese. This works fine, of course, for scholars already familiar with many Sanskrit terms, but less well for others. What I have done in this translation, then, is to translate into English wherever I can; that is, wherever I think there is a reasonably good English equivalent for the term in question.

Sometimes such choices are relatively easy to make. For example, the Sanskrit term *kalpa*, often left untranslated, is here rendered as “eon.” Perhaps “age” would work just as well, but I can see no point in retaining the Sanskrit.

Some choices will be more controversial. The Sanskrit term *sangha* is often used in English, both in translations and in general use among English-speaking Buddhists, where it has come to mean just about any Buddhist community. For this translation, I have chosen to use “monks,” since it was often used to translate “sangha” into Chinese, and “monk(s)” is what the Chinese character in this sutra literally means. Originally in India and still today in many of the Buddhist worlds of Asia, “sangha” still refers exclusively to a community of monks. Thus, to use “sangha” where the text has “monks” could be confusing or misleading. Where the text intends a larger grouping that includes monks but is not limited to them, I use “assembly” or, as is often the case in this text, “great assembly.”

My decision to use the English (originally Greek or Roman) equivalents for most Indian mythological creatures will seem misguided to some. The great Buddhist and Sanskrit scholar Hajime Nakamura was the first to point out to me how closely related these imaginary creatures are. When I saw that Jean-Noël Robert used translations of these terms in his excellent translation of the Lotus Sutra into French, I decided to do the same. The Sanskrit equivalents can be found in the glossary of terms. The one exception to this practice is the term *asura*, which does not correspond very well with “titan” and appears in English-language works, translations, and dictionaries. In the case of Dharma I retain the Sanskrit, whereas others have chosen to translate it. Some translators have used “law.” While I understand that choice, I think it is unfortunate. Sometimes, especially in non-Buddhist Indian usage, “dharma” does mean something like a regulatory principle, the way things ought to be. In Buddhism generally, the term has several uses, sometimes quite

vague. Sometimes, especially in the Universal Sage Sutra translated here, it means something like “method.” But in the Lotus Sutra the much more fundamental meaning of “dharma” is “teachings,” in particular the teachings of the Buddha. Sometimes this same term refers to the fundamental truths that the Buddha realized and taught, as later interpreters have insisted. But even in such cases, the meaning of “teachings” is always retained or included. In this text, “dharma” is Buddha-dharma. Given this complexity, I think it is best to retain the Sanskrit term.

Making the situation more complicated, the term “dharma” in this and other texts has a quite different meaning, which I render as “things” and for which others have sometimes use “phenomena.” These “things” are a consequence of ordinary sense experience; they are what we experience. Such things, of course, are not necessarily physical objects but can be events or even ideas. Fortunately, this use of “dharma” is almost always readily distinguishable from its use as “teaching.”

In the course of doing this translation earlier versions of it have been used in classes in Tokyo, Beijing, and Chicago, and the International Buddhist Congregation of Rissho Kosei-kai has used them for study and recitation. Along the way I have received a great many comments and helpful suggestions. Two staff members of Rissho Kosei-kai—Michio Shinozaki, the president of Rissho Kosei-kai’s seminary, Gakurin, and Yukimasa Hagiwara, now head of Rissho Kosei-kai’s Dharma Missions department—read the entire manuscript and proposed many improvements.

A former student of mine, now a retired Unitarian Universalist minister, Robert Swain, worked carefully on an earlier version of the text of the Dharma Flower Sutra itself, making numerous improvements in my English expressions. Professor Brook Ziporyn of Northwestern University has reviewed and refined the translations of the opening and closing sutras, and made useful suggestions on parts of the Lotus Sutra as well. Min Yang has been very helpful in developing Pinyin versions of the dharanis in chapters 26 and 28. And three reviewers for Wisdom Publications offered many useful suggestions.

I have consulted various versions of Kumarajiva’s translation into Chinese along with two frequently used Japanese versions of his translation. But the main reference text for this translation has been the three-

volume version published by Iwanami Shoten with translations and extensive notes by Yukio Sakamoto and Yutaka Iwamoto. One of the great virtues of this version is that it includes on facing pages the Chinese text, a Japanese version of the Chinese, and a translation into Japanese from Sanskrit.

Despite the differences between this translation and earlier ones, I feel enormously indebted to previous translators. I have consulted and been informed by earlier translations at every point along the way. The earliest of these is the one still in use by Rissho Kosei-kai called *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, in which the translation of the Lotus Sutra itself was done by Bunnō Katō, based in part on work previously done by W.E. Soothill. While the present version is significantly different from Katō's, I remain enormously indebted to him for initially arousing my interest in the sutra and prompting me to try to improve on his translation.





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## Translator's Introduction

**L**OTUS SUTRA” does not correspond to anything in Chinese or Japanese. The full title in Chinese is 妙法蓮華經, pronounced *Miao-fa-lian-hua jing*, and *Myō-hō-rengē-kyō* in Japanese. Literally these characters mean “wonderful Dharma lotus flower sutra.” Although just 法華 is sometimes found, the usual shortened title in the text itself is 法華經, pronounced *Fa-hua jing* in Chinese and *Hoke-kyō* in Japanese. In English this would be Dharma Flower Sutra. I’m uncertain about how or why this text came to be called the “Lotus Sutra” in English. I suspect it is because the first Western translation of it, in 1852 by Eugene Burnouf into French, was titled *Le lotus de la bonne loi*.

Often used as the base of statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas or held in the hands of bodhisattvas, the lotus flower may be the most common of Buddhist symbols. It is especially important in Mahayana Buddhism, where it symbolizes the bodhisattva as one who is firmly rooted in the mud of the earth and flowering toward the sky. It is a symbol of working in the world to help others to awaken while finding inspiration in a sense of the cosmos.

Thus the lotus flower and the lotus plant are important in the sutra. But more important than the plant itself, it seems to me, is its flowering. The sutra wants us to understand it as a blossoming of Buddha-dharma. Its own short title, “Dharma Flower Sutra,” or even “Dharma Flowering Sutra,” would thus be more appropriate than “Lotus Sutra” for the short title of this text, except, of course, for the fact that it is already well known as the “Lotus Sutra.”

## THE TEXT

The sutra is thought to have been translated into Chinese at least six times, the first being by Dharmaraksha (竺法護) in 286 CE. He gave it the title *Zheng-fa-hua jing* (正法華經), or True Dharma Flower Sutra. While this translation has received some attention from scholars, it has had very little influence on East Asian Buddhism or culture, as it was surpassed by the translation of Kumarajiva (鳩摩羅什) in 406, to which the title *Miao-fa-lian-hua jing* (妙法蓮華經) was given. The only other existing translation is actually a revision of Kumarajiva's version. An additional three translations found in some catalogs are no longer known to exist.

Save for a translation from Sanskrit by H. Kern, originally published in 1884 as a volume of *The Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Müller, all East Asian and almost all Western versions of the sutra are based on the translation by Kumarajiva, as are almost all commentaries. In fact, existing Sanskrit manuscripts are much more recent than the Chinese translations. Unfortunately, as I think is true of all translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese, the Sanskrit versions from which they were translated are lost.

There are significant differences among the existing versions, summarized well by Yoshiro Tamura in his introduction to *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*. We do not know how to explain these differences. Perhaps Kumarajiva translated very freely or had a Sanskrit version quite different from those we now possess.

The Chinese versions are usually said to be translations from the Sanskrit Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra. But while many Sanskrit texts and especially fragments of texts of this sutra have been found all over the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, they are all much more recent than existing Chinese versions.

The version in this book, like virtually all contemporary Chinese and Japanese versions, has twenty-eight chapters, though Kumarajiva's version had only twenty-seven. Sometime, probably in the fifth or sixth century, the text of what is now the Devadatta chapter was moved from the end of chapter 11 to form a separate chapter 12.

### *Formation of the Lotus Sutra*

Traditionally the Dharma Flower Sutra has been divided into two parts. In recent times some scholars have proposed a threefold division that compliments rather than supplants the traditional division. A change of focus after chapter 9, and the fact that making copies of the sutra becomes important after chapter 9 but is not mentioned at all in chapters 2–9, have led to the conclusion that chapters 2–9, with their focus on *shravakas*, constitute an earlier version of the text, and that chapters 10–21, focusing on bodhisattvas and the practice of the bodhisattva way, were added later. Chapter 1 is seen as having been created along with this second group as an introduction to the whole in an attempt to make the two groups coherent. Finally, the last six chapters are regarded as another group, stressing the practice of bodhisattvas. Some of the chapters in this group evidently were circulated as separate sutras, perhaps before the Lotus Sutra itself was created. Though we do not know how far back such practice extends, chapter 25, “Regarder of the Cries of the World” (the *Guanyin jing* or *Kannon-gyō*), is used as a separate sutra to this day. Some regard chapter 12 as part of this third group. Compilation of the sutra probably took place within the first century of the common era. In the *Mahāprajñāparamitā-upadeśa-śāstra*, attributed to Nāgārjuna and supposedly written around 200 CE, there are citations from Lotus Sutra chapters up to the last. If the dating of this text is correct, it would indicate that by the end of the second century the contents of the Lotus Sutra were pretty much what we have now.

This division of the sutra into three parts can also be understood doctrinally. The first part elucidates a unifying truth of the universe (the One Vehicle of the Wonderful Dharma); the second part sheds light on the everlasting personal life of the Buddha (Everlasting Original Buddha); and the third part emphasizes the actual activities of human beings (the bodhisattva way).

While the traditional division of the sutra into two halves is useful for understanding its teachings, the division into three groups of chapters is useful for understanding the historical development of the sutra and some of the various inconsistencies in it, both doctrinal and stylistic.

### *The Opening and Closing Sutras*

For centuries the Lotus Sutra has been closely associated in East Asia with the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings and the Sutra of Contemplation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva, typically referred to as the “opening” and “closing” sutras, the three together being referred to as the “three-part Dharma flower sutra” and published as *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*. In chapter 1 of the Dharma Flower Sutra it is said that for the sake of all bodhisattvas the Buddha taught the Great Vehicle sutra called Innumerable Meanings (無量義經 *Wuliangyi jing*). Tradition has it that a sutra with this name was received by the monk Hui-piao (慈表) from the translator Dharmajātayaśas (曇摩伽陀耶舍) toward the end of the fifth century. It has been taken to be a translation from a Sanskrit Amitārtha Sutra, which has been lost. There may have been an earlier translation, also now lost. Although a passage in this sutra, mentioning a truth not yet revealed after more than forty years of teaching, has been taken to be a reference to the Lotus Sutra, in fact the Lotus Sutra is not explicitly mentioned in this sutra. Virtually nothing is known of its origins or connection to the Lotus Sutra. Some believe that it may have been originally composed in Chinese.

The existing Sutra of Contemplation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva in Chinese, *Guan-puxian-pusa-xingfa jing* (觀普賢菩薩 行法經)—often shortened to *Puxian-guan jing* (普賢 觀經) and in Japan often termed the *Zange-kyō* (懺悔經), also pronounced *Sange-kyō*, “the repentance sutra”—is traditionally believed to have been translated by Dharmamitra (曇無蜜多) in the middle of the fifth century, following two earlier translations, including one by Kumarajiva, which are now lost. In it the Lotus Sutra is explicitly mentioned, clearly indicating an intended connection. In this case, too, no Sanskrit version has been found.

### *A Religious Inspirational Text*

There are many ways to read any important text. The Lotus Sutra has been taken to be a polemical document reflecting a conflict between conservative, classical monks and Mahayana upstarts. Its purpose would be to assert the superiority of the Great Vehicle, the Mahayana, over more conservative traditions while disparaging the smaller vehicle.

While it certainly is possible to read the Lotus Sutra this way, we

know too little about the beginnings of Mahayana Buddhism and the formation of this sutra to speak confidently about that history. In any case, it certainly is not as a record of Indian Buddhist history that this sutra has been read over many centuries by the peoples of East Asia, where it has almost universally been regarded as a religious text, recited as a devotional practice, and esteemed as a source of protection from forces both natural and human, real and imagined, and where it has inspired a range of Buddhist and secular arts and served as a spiritual basis and resource for political rebellion or reform.

In short, this text has become one of the world's great religious scriptures and most influential books. It did not acquire that renown as a polemic against people or schools largely unknown to East Asian readers.

I believe we will understand this text better if we treat it as an inspirational text, rather than assuming its purpose was to give its readers ammunition against other Buddhists. Its main thrust is to encourage readers to understand themselves in certain ways. It seeks, in other words, to change human behavior by influencing the religious orientation and values of its auditors or readers.

It teaches, for example, that everyone without exception has the potential to be a buddha. This simple teaching would later develop into doctrines and theories about Buddha-nature. But in this text what we actually have is not so much a doctrine as a series of stories, narratives that appeal to the human imagination as well as to the rational mind. The story of Devadatta, for example, tells us nothing at all about the historical Devadatta, but it encourages us to understand that just as Devadatta, everywhere known to be evil, is told that he is to become a buddha, so we too, no matter how imperfect, have the potential to become a buddha. We also need to understand that this story teaches us that a buddha is one who sees the potential for good in others, even in enemies. It encourages us to realize our own capacity to be a buddha for someone else. Many other stories in this sutra are designed to move us to behave in accord with the sutra, primarily by helping others by sharing its teachings with them.

The Devadatta story is followed immediately by the very interesting story of the dragon princess, a little girl whom Manjushri Bodhisattva proclaims to be capable of becoming a buddha immediately. This story

was obviously intended to persuade monks, who would have been its only early auditors and readers, that women as well as men have the potential of being buddhas, common prejudice and informed opinion to the contrary. At the climax of the story, the girl tells her two male critics, a shravaka monk and a bodhisattva, that if they look—if they really look using their spiritual eyes—they too will see her as a buddha. In other words, this story is not designed merely to criticize male assumptions, though it does do that; it also affirms the positive potential to be a buddha in the very men it also criticizes. This also means, of course, that it affirms the positive potential of both its female and its male auditors or readers.

All readers of the Lotus Sutra would be well advised to ask what the story is saying about themselves.

The sutra certainly is, however, a Mahayana text, one that champions a Mahayana Buddhist understanding of Buddha-dharma. But its claim to superiority should not be seen as opposing or excluding anyone. Quite the opposite, it affirms the equality of everyone and seeks to provide an understanding of Buddha-dharma that excludes no one.

Though we can make conjectures based on what we find in the text, virtually nothing is known about the origins of the Dharma Flower Sutra in India, as we know very little about the early centuries of the Mahayana movement of which it was an important part. It's even quite likely that it is inappropriate to think of Sanskrit as the original language of this sutra. Sanskrit was a bit like the Latin language in medieval Europe: texts originally written in a vernacular were translated into Latin or Sanskrit to give them higher status and wider appeal. While it is possible that some of the Lotus Sutra was originally composed in Sanskrit, it is very unlikely that much of it was.

Thus while it is possible, even likely, that this sutra once existed in some other Indian language or languages, there is no hard evidence for this. It's also very likely that before being committed to any written form, most if not all of the text existed in oral versions. It also seems obvious that some parts of the sutra, especially the final six chapters, and possibly chapter 12 or at least the Devadatta and dragon princess stories in chapter 12, circulated separately at least in oral form. Chapter 25, the Guan-yin chapter, has circulated separately for several centuries down to the present and is sometimes confused with the whole sutra.

### *Historical Significance*

While the Lotus Sutra has had a fair share of critics, ranging from those who regard it as nothing more than snake oil to those who consider its influence pernicious, there can be no doubt that it has been enormously influential in East Asia from the time of its translation by Kumarajiva down to the present. In recent times it has served as a foundation for numerous Buddhist reform movements, especially in Taiwan and Japan. Today, with a revival of Buddhism in China, the sutra is widely studied and recited there as well, both by monastics and by laypeople. In Japan, where Buddhism is more sectarian than in other East Asian countries, well over fifty new Buddhist religious organizations claim to be based on the Lotus Sutra, most notably Soka Gakkai, now one of the largest Buddhist organizations in the world; Rissho Kosei-kai, which has pioneered Japanese involvement in international interfaith encounter and cooperation; and Reiyu-kai, the mother of the vast majority of new Japanese Buddhist movements and organizations.

The influence of the Lotus Sutra has not been limited to religious organizations. For many centuries it has had a major impact on East Asian culture, especially on art and politics. In the Chinese section of any major art museum one will find that a great many images are based solely on the Lotus Sutra, images such as the two buddhas sitting side by side in the stupa of Abundant Treasures Buddha, or Universal Sage Bodhisattva mounted on a white elephant with six tusks, or the burning house from the parable in chapter 3 of the sutra.

After reading it at an early age in his father's study, Japan's greatest twentieth-century storyteller and poet, Kenji Miyazawa, became devoted to the Lotus Sutra, writing to his father on his own deathbed that all he ever wanted to do was share the teachings of this sutra with others. Yet in writings published during his lifetime Miyazawa seldom if ever mentions the Lotus Sutra. He sought, rather, to display or illuminate its teachings implicitly, without explicit reference to the sutra. He wanted to embody the sutra quietly, both in his writing and in his life. This was no secret, however, in his impoverished native Iwate prefecture in the northeastern region of Japan's main island, where he was widely known as "Kenji Bodhisattva."

Much of the influence of the Dharma Flower Sutra can be attributed to its being championed by the Tiantai/Tendai and Nichiren schools

and denominations. Founded by the monk Zhiyi in the sixth century, Tiantai attempted to order the huge variety of Buddhist sutras by treating the Lotus Sutra as the summation of the Buddha's teaching. This understanding of the sutra was enormously influential for many centuries, even after Tiantai as a school had largely died out. Brought to Japan among the earliest Buddhist texts to come from Korea and China, the Dharma Flower Sutra was soon established as the major spiritual protector of the nation, with monasteries and nunneries built in every province primarily for the purpose of reciting the Lotus Sutra. Mount Hiei, outside of Kyoto, soon became the headquarters of the growing Tendai denomination of Buddhism. There all the major figures in the development of new denominations of Buddhism studied the Lotus Sutra, including Dogen (1200–53), the much-revered founder of the Soto branch of Zen, who made extensive use of the Lotus Sutra in developing his own approach to Zen ideas and practice.

Among these founders of new streams of Buddhism was Nichiren (1222–82), founder of what has been called both the Dharma Flower School and the Nichiren School. Nichiren was fanatically devoted to the Lotus Sutra, at different times in his life urging study of it, extolling devotion to it, and even proclaiming the adequacy of reciting only its title. In Japan it is mainly Nichiren and related schools that carried the Lotus Sutra into modern times, giving it such a prominent place in twentieth-century Japanese culture and politics.

The sutra has also continued to attract devotees in countries of Chinese culture and language. In Taiwan, for example, it is the initial inspiration behind the nun Dharma Master Cheng Yen, the founder and head the Tsu-chi Foundation, the largest Buddhist charitable organization in the world. It is recited regularly at temples both in Taiwan and in Singapore. And in China itself it is now a prominent part of the resurgence of Buddhism, both monastic and lay. Although this sutra is not the main text for any organization, as it is for many in Japan, it is widely studied and recited regularly in temples and lay Buddhist organizations.

Though often unrecognized, the relation of the Lotus Sutra to popular East Asian devotion to Guan-yin (Kannon in Japanese pronunciation) is also an important part of this story. This bodhisattva, who embodies compassion, is easily the most popular and important Buddhist figure in East Asia, found not only in Buddhist temples of all kinds

and sizes but also in Daoist and popular Chinese temples, in Shinto shrines, in ordinary homes, and increasingly in mammoth outdoor statues. The Lotus Sutra is not the only sutra in which Guan-yin appears, but it is the oldest, and more than any other it has provided a textual basis for the remarkable growth of Guan-yin devotion in China beginning in the tenth century. Consistent with the Guan-yin chapter of the sutra, “The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World,” though certainly not always based on it, devotion to Guan-yin embodies fundamental themes of the sutra, particularly its emphasis on skillfully doing whatever is needed to help or save others, on breaking down sharp distinction between the buddha and bodhisattva ideals, on the importance of leadership by women, and especially on having Buddha-dharma infuse everyday life and popular culture, in part by fostering compassionate care for the poor.

### *The Fantasy Setting*

Whatever else it may be, the Lotus Sutra is a storybook containing a great variety of parables and other stories, and stories-within-stories. Some of the characters are ordinary human beings, typically monks and nuns, some of them regarded as historical, such as Shariputra and his colleagues, some as fictional actors in a parable, typically a father figure, as is the physician-father who gets his dying children to take an antidote to a poison by leading them to believe he has died. Several major characters in these stories are human but not only human beings, such as the bodhisattvas Manjushri, Maitreya, and Medicine King. Other major figures who clearly are not only human also appear in these stories include Abundant Treasures Buddha and Universal Sage Bodhisattva. A large variety of gods, goddesses, and mythical creatures are also part of the setting for several stories.

The central figure in much of the text is the Buddha—Shakyamuni Buddha. Here he has supernatural powers; for example, he illuminates the infinite worlds of the universe with a light that emerges from a tuft of hair between his eyebrows. Yet the text frequently reminds the reader of the human, historical life of Shakyamuni, reminding us of key events in his life on earth: having a son and stepmother, becoming awakened under a tree, teaching ascetics at Varanasi, and so on.

Often these stories are given a vast, probably infinite cosmic setting.

Almost always in the background is the idea of vast reaches of time, divided into periods in which a buddha's teachings are alive and effective and periods in which they are merely formal, followed without enthusiasm to very little effect. Just as time is fantastically extended, so too is space. Shakyamuni lights up all the worlds on more than one occasion, in one case using that light to invite buddhas from all over the universe to come to this world to witness the presence of Abundant Treasures Buddha in his magnificent stupa, which has arrived from the distant past. Bodhisattvas travel to visit this world from other very distant worlds, and on such occasions extremely rare flowers rain down from the heavens, drums and other musical instruments make music by themselves, and the worlds, including this one, shake and tremble in the six ways that a world can shake and tremble.

To be sure, some of these fireworks have entertainment value, livening up stories. But that is not their only function.

In Kenji Miyazawa's most famous story, "The Night of the Milky Way Railroad," a young boy falls asleep and has a fantastic dream in which he and his best friend ride a very special train through the starry night, encountering a variety of strange and interesting characters and events. Eventually he realizes that the train is actually carrying souls of the dead to another world and discovers that he is the only one on the train with a round-trip ticket. He wakes up from the dream to learn that his best friend has drowned in the river that runs through their town, where a festival has been going on. And in that river he sees reflected the river that is the Milky Way, through which he has been traveling. It's a kind of epiphany, a moment in which the earthly river and the heavenly river, each with the stories of life and death associated with it, are envisioned as one. Then the boy finishes what he set out to do before falling asleep—going to the store to get some milk to take home to his mother.

That, in part, is what the Lotus Sutra tries to achieve though fantasy—moments of cosmic connectedness that enable us to carry milk home to our mothers. It seeks, in other words, to have us be inspired by a cosmic vision, one that puts our lives into a cosmic perspective and encourages us to live better, perhaps like the lotus plant itself whose roots sink deeply into the mud of the earth while its blossom is caressed by the sun.

## KEY TEACHINGS

Traditionally, following Zhiyi, the sixth-century founder of the Chinese Tiantai School of Buddhism, the Dharma Flower Sutra was understood to be composed of two halves. The first, ending with chapter 14 and centered on chapter 2, the Skillful Means chapter, is called the opening half and has to do with the idea of the one vehicle of many skillful means. The second half, centered on chapter 16, the chapter on the length of the Buddha's life, has to do with how the Buddha is both everlasting and embodied in a great many forms. This twofold division is still a useful one, as it provides a convenient way of understanding key teachings of the sutra and unifying diverse parts of the text.

*One Vehicle of Many Means*

Often the model of the one vehicle of many means is the famous parable of the burning house found in chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra. A father manages to get his children to abandon their play and escape from a burning house by telling them that the playthings they had long wanted—carriages drawn by goats, deer, and oxen—are waiting for them just outside the gate. But after everyone is safely outside, the father decides that he is rich enough to give each of the children a much larger and nicer carriage drawn by a great white ox. And this he does to the children's great delight.

The parable can be taken to indicate that there are four vehicles in all and that the three lesser ones are replaced by the great one. More commonly, however, the one vehicle is understood to be inclusive of the three. "Shariputra," the Buddha says in chapter 2, "with their powers of skillful means, the buddhas have distinguished three ways within the One Buddha-Vehicle." The three carriages represent three different approaches to practicing Buddha-dharma—the shravaka, the pratyekabuddha, and the bodhisattva ways. Very little is said about the second of these three, that of monks who pursue awakening by and for themselves deep in forests in isolation from others. The first, the shravaka way, is a portrayal of traditional monks who pursue awakening in monastic communities, primarily by listening. "Shravaka" means hearer. Quite often in the text these first two ways are assimilated into a single way, such that there is a contrast between this pair, exemplified by monks who pursue

the fundamentally negative goals of nirvana, putting out of passions, and such, and the third way, the way of the bodhisattva, which is basically understood to be the pursuit of awakening in interaction with others in the world.

Here there is also a basic contrast between the goal of the shravaka, which is to become an arhat, one who is worthy of offerings, and the goal of the bodhisattva, which is to become a buddha. Bodhisattvas are often called children of the Buddha because they are formed by the teachings of the Buddha. Who and what they are is more importantly a function of what they have learned from the Buddha than it is of their birth. In a sense, the Dharma they have inherited from the Buddha is more important than the genes and culture they have inherited from their parents. Much of the Lotus Sutra is a championing of this bodhisattva way, which is also the way to supreme or complete awakening. The goal of nirvana should, according to this text, be understood as a limited and inadequate goal, but nevertheless one that can lead to the bodhisattva way and thus to supreme awakening.

While the three ways can be understood as two, they can also be understood as representative of many ways. “Ever since I became a buddha,” Shakyamuni says at the beginning of chapter 2, “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.” The reason the Dharma is so difficult to understand and accept is that a great many teaching devices have been used, among them both the metaphor of the three vehicles and the reality underlying the metaphor, the three different approaches themselves. What makes everything clear, says the Buddha, is an understanding of the one vehicle of many skillful means now being revealed.

While the Lotus Sutra rejects the extreme of pure diversity and the consequent danger of nihilism through use of the one vehicle as the unity in purpose of the many skillful means, it also clearly rejects the opposite extreme of complete unity in which diversity disappears or is relegated to mere illusion. Here diversity is not lamented but regarded as a necessary consequence of the fact that living beings and their situations are diverse. And it is celebrated as the way in which a diversity of people can share the Dharma. Even when the sutra describes a future paradise, it includes shravakas as well as bodhisattvas; the diversity of approaches never disappears. In this sense, as in many others, this sutra

teaches a “middle way,” here a middle way between utter diversity and sheer unity.

The infinite variety of ways of teaching have the one purpose of leading all living beings to pursue the goal of becoming a buddha, a goal that everyone without exception can reach, though the time may be very long and the way far from smooth or easy. “Shariputra,” Sakyamuni says in chapter 2, “buddhas of the past, through an innumerable variety of skillful means, causal explanations, parables, and other kinds of expression, have preached the Dharma for the sake of living beings. These teachings have all been for the sake of the One Buddha–Vehicle, so that all living things, having heard the Dharma from a buddha, might finally gain complete wisdom.”

As in the case of the carriages in the parable of the burning house, the great vehicle can be understood as replacing the other vehicles, or as making skillful means unnecessary. There are passages in the sutra that suggest this interpretation. We might call this the narrow interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, a perspective taken by some followers of Nichiren. They insist that in the Lotus Sutra they have found the one truth in light of which all other claims, and all other forms of religion including all other forms of Buddhism, are to be rejected as false and misleading. Most of those who study the Lotus Sutra, however, understand the teaching of the one vehicle in a much more generous, inclusive way.

The one vehicle itself can be understood as nothing but skillful means. That is, without a great variety of skillful means there can be no one vehicle, since it is through skillful means that living beings are led toward the goal of being a buddha. Without skillful means the one vehicle would be an empty, useless vehicle. Furthermore, the one vehicle itself is a teaching device, a skillful means of teaching that the many means have a common purpose.

When speaking of skillful means, some contemporary interpreters of Buddhism choose to use phrases such as “mere skillful means” or “only skillful means” to indicate that teaching by skillful means is an inferior practice, something used only when one does not have something better. But this is never, I think, the perspective of the sutra itself. There, when some action is said to be a skillful means it is always taken to be something wonderful, a way by which someone, typically the Buddha or a stand-in for the Buddha, is able to save people, converting them into bodhisattvas.

Though I think this image of the one vehicle of many skillful means is the primary model for the reality of the one and the many, throughout the text a variety of other images express the theme of the reality and importance of the one and the many. On more than one occasion, for example, the many worlds of the universe are brought together into a unity. In a related image, Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have countless embodiments in other worlds, buddhas who are real in their own right yet closely tied to Shakyamuni Buddha. Similarly, buddhas of the past, present, and future are many and different, yet are somehow one in that they teach the same thing and their lives follow the pattern of Shakyamuni's. All of these images serve to affirm the inseparability of the one and the many.

### *One Buddha of Many Embodiments*

The second half of the sutra, centering on chapter 16, can be understood as involving another one-and-many, the one Buddha of many embodiments. Throughout the sutra, but especially in the second half, there is an expressed concern over the question as to who is going to carry on Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings after his complete nirvana, his death. Various bodhisattvas promise to do so, often with an expectation that they will face strong opposition and humiliation. The most dramatic affirmation of the role of bodhisattvas in continuing to spread Buddha-dharma is the story in chapters 15 and 16. Some of the bodhisattvas who have come to this world along with their buddhas in order to see Abundant Treasures Buddha in his stupa offer to remain in this world to help Shakyamuni Buddha, the buddha of this world, in his especially difficult task of teaching and demonstrating the Dharma. Shakyamuni basically responds by saying, "Thanks, but no thanks. We already have plenty of bodhisattvas of our own." Then a great host of bodhisattvas springs out of the earth. Everyone is shocked and wants to know who could have led and taught such an incredibly large number of bodhisattvas. And Shakyamuni Buddha responds that he taught them all. How such a thing could be possible, when Shakyamuni had been alive and teaching for only a relatively few years, is taken up in chapter 16.

I agree with those who understand that this great hoard of bodhisattvas includes bodhisattvas of ages to come; that is, bodhisattvas who will carry on in place of the Buddha when he is no longer available, at

least no longer available as the historical Shakyamuni Buddha. Because the Buddha and his Dharma are alive in such bodhisattvas, he himself continues to be alive. The fantastically long life of the Buddha, in other words, is at least partly a function of and dependent on his being embodied in others. With the exception of the now deceased Abundant Treasures Buddha, while many different buddhas appear in the Lotus Sutra, not one is unaccompanied by bodhisattvas, suggesting that buddhas need bodhisattvas. Those who do the work of the Buddha are bodhisattvas, even when they don't know they are doing the work of the Buddha.

Thus the bodhisattvas found in the final chapters, including Guan-yin, can quite appropriately be regarded as buddhas. It is no accident that both Wonderful Voice Bodhisattva and Guan-yin, the Regarder of the Cries of the World Bodhisattva, can take on the form of a buddha when that is what is needed. Scholars may very well say that Guan-yin is not a buddha, but any devout Chinese layperson can tell you that Guan-yin is a fully awakened buddha who has chosen to continue to work in this world as a bodhisattva. Such a view is consistent with the Lotus Sutra.

Embodying the Buddha is not something limited to bodhisattvas, at least not to bodhisattvas who are recognized as such. In some ways chapter 10, "Teachers of the Dharma," is the most surprising and unconventional chapter in the sutra. There the Buddha points to a huge congregation, one that includes not only monks, nuns, laypeople, shravakas, and bodhisattvas but also a large assortment of nonhuman creatures, dragon kings, centaurs, and such, and he tells Medicine King Bodhisattva that if anyone asks what sorts of beings will become buddhas in ages to come, Medicine King should tell them that these are the ones who will do so. This chapter insists not only that all living beings have the potential to become buddhas eventually but that anyone can be a Dharma teacher now.

The idea in this sutra that everyone has the ability to become a buddha gave rise to the association of the sutra with the notion of Buddha-nature as found in somewhat later Mahayana sutras. The term "Buddha-nature" is another powerful expression of the reality and importance of the one Buddha in many embodiments. One's Buddha-nature is both the Buddha's and one's own. Consequently, anyone can develop an ability to see

the Buddha in others, their Buddha-nature. Thus, to awaken is to see, to see the Buddha, or as the text often says, to see countless buddhas.

It would be a great mistake, I think, to reify this notion, turning it into some sort of substantial reality underlying ordinary realities, something that is easy to do and is often done. In the text itself, it seems to me, Buddha-nature has no such ontological status. It is mainly a skillful way of indicating a potential, a potential with real power, to move in the direction of being a buddha by taking up the bodhisattva way.

It is also a very clever way to answer the question of how it is possible for one to overcome obstacles, however conceived, along the path of becoming a buddha. If ordinary human beings are completely under the sway of passions and delusions, by what power can they break through such a net of limitations? Some say that it is only by one's own strength; one can be saved only by oneself. Others say that it is only by the power of Amida Buddha or perhaps Guan-yin that one can be led to awakening. The Lotus Sutra says that it is by a power that is at once one's own and Shakyamuni Buddha's. The Buddha really is embodied in the lives of ordinary people. He himself is both a one and a many.

### *Wisdom, Compassion, and Practice*

While the ideas of one vehicle of many skillful means and one Buddha of many embodiments can be seen as the central teachings of the two halves of the sutra, a great many other things are, of course, taught in the Lotus Sutra, some implicitly, some explicitly. There is, for example, the important notion that the Dharma rains on all equally, nourishing all in accord with their needs. Combined with the ideas that Buddha-nature can be found in all people, that anyone can be a Dharma teacher, that all are equally children of the Buddha, and that following the bodhisattva way is not limited to those identified as bodhisattvas, one finds a powerful counter to the prevailing Indian ideas of rank and status as purely a function of birth and stage of life.

In addition to the extremely important but relatively abstract notion of following the bodhisattva way, the Lotus Sutra frequently advocates concrete practices, which are often related to the sutra itself. They are often given as sets of four to six practices, but include receiving and embracing the sutra, hearing it, reading and reciting it, remembering it

correctly, copying it, explaining it, understanding its meaning, pondering it, proclaiming it, practicing as it teaches, honoring it, protecting it, making offerings to it, preaching it and teaching it to others, and leading others to do any of these things. The six transcendental practices taught especially for bodhisattvas also play a prominent and important role. But in the first chapter we find a story about a previous life of Maitreya Bodhisattva in which, as the disciple of another bodhisattva, he was called “Fame Seeker” because he was especially attracted to lucrative offerings. He read and memorized many sutras but forgot all of them and gained nothing from his reading. But, having “planted roots of goodness,” he was able to meet countless buddhas and later became Maitreya Bodhisattva, the future buddha. Even more influential is the story of Never Disrespectful Bodhisattva in chapter 20. This bodhisattva did not read and recite sutras but simply went around telling everyone he met that they would become buddhas. Often despised for this, he persisted in refusing to be disrespectful to anyone. Later, after hearing the Lotus Sutra from the sky, he was able to enjoy a large following and eventually became Shakyamuni Buddha. What’s most important, these stories seem to say, is not which religious practices you use but how you treat others. To do good, in other words, is to follow the bodhisattva way.

The Lotus Sutra itself ends with a chapter on the bodhisattva Universal Sage and is traditionally followed by a sutra on the contemplative methods of Universal Sage Bodhisattva. Universal Sage has widely been taken to symbolize Buddhist practice, putting Buddhist teachings to use in everyday life, making them a foundation of one’s life. Manjushri and Maitreya are the two bodhisattvas who appear repeatedly in the sutra. Manjushri symbolizes Buddhist wisdom: both practical wisdom, the wisdom that solves or overcomes problems through knowledge and rational analysis, and creative wisdom, the imaginative wisdom that leads to fresh solutions to practical problems—difficulties such as helping one’s son to overcome a depressing sense of inadequacy, or getting one’s children to take an antidote for poison. Maitreya, along with Guan-yin, symbolizes compassion—not as just a state of mind but as the energy and drive, the inner motivation, that make it possible to work for the benefit of others as well as oneself. Universal Sage can be said, then, to symbolize the coming together in everyday life of wisdom

and compassion, which can be taken perhaps as one way of expressing the heart of the Lotus Sutra.

### *Peace*

Throughout the sutra many traditional Buddhist doctrines are mentioned and sometimes discussed, especially the four holy truths, the eightfold path, the twelve-link chain of causes and conditions, and the six transcendental practices. Thus it is possible to interpret the sutra as having the purpose of overcoming suffering. Such basically negative goals as overcoming suffering, getting rid of attachments, becoming free of faults, dispelling illusion, and so on are not to be disparaged. They do describe very important Buddhist goals. But at least for the Lotus Sutra they are not enough. Beyond them there is always a positive goal.

The positive goal of the Dharma Flower Sutra is described in several different ways. Here I have used the idea of becoming a buddha as the highest goal. Of course being a buddha is also called “supreme awakening,” often translated as “enlightenment.” So it might rightly be said to be the highest goal. Another very prominent term in the sutra is “joy.” Over and over we are told that a result of hearing even a small part of the sutra is joy. And we are allowed to witness the great joy that comes to Shariputra when he realizes that he too is a bodhisattva on the way to becoming a buddha. Joy can be said to be the goal of the Lotus Sutra. Another equally important term is “peace.” “It is not my intent,” the Buddha says in chapter 3, to lead people to extinction. “I am the king of the Dharma, free to teach the Dharma, appearing in the world to bring peace and comfort to all the living.” Peace can also be said to be the goal of the Lotus Sutra.

The goal of peace has inspired many people to work not just for inner peace but for peace in families, communities, nations, and the world. Peace is not the mere absence of conflict. It brings joy and happiness to living beings and gives them the strength to share their joy and happiness with others, so that all can work together to transform the world into a pure land of peace.