

## THE LOTUS SUTRA AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BY BURTON WATSON

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I have been invited to write on the topic, "The Lotus Sutra and the Twenty-first Century," by which I assume is meant the degree to which the Lotus Sutra may be timely for persons of the coming century, and what aspects of it make it timely. Being a person of the twentieth century, I can naturally only surmise how the sutra will appear to men and women of the next century. And being American, I will of necessity be looking at these matters through the eyes of an American, or, more broadly speaking, of an individual of Western cultural background and upbringing.

Ideally speaking, if a text dealing with religious or philosophical matters is truly sound in its ideas, it would seem that it ought to be relevant and timely for any century, regardless of how many years may have elapsed from the time of its origin. But though the fundamental truth of the text may remain unchanged with time, we are all aware that the receptivity to that truth, the ability to accept it or even to understand it correctly, may vary greatly with the age and the cultural conditions that prevail in the world. The Lotus Sutra itself makes clear reference to this fact when it warns of the hostility and disbelief that will confront the sutra in the ages following the death of Shakyamuni Buddha.

In this connection I would like to note that not only the Lotus Sutra but all the texts of Buddhism and the Buddhist religion as a whole at present face a relatively favorable time and environment. The long era of European cultural and territorial expansion that began with the voyages of exploration of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and culminated in the colonialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has now come to an end. Beliefs concerning the cultural and racial superiority of the European peoples, so prevalent during that era, no longer command widespread acceptance, and Christianity, the religion of the colonizers, is now simply one of a number of major religions competing for attention among the countries of the world.

In the town in the suburbs of New York City where I was born and grew up, all the people I knew invariably fell into one of three religious categories: Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant, the last group divided into a dizzying number and variety of subgroups. Other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam were to us only names that we learned about in school.

Now, however, the situation in America has changed greatly. In recent decades, large numbers of immigrants from Asia and the Near and Middle East have settled in many different parts of the country and the religious affiliations of the population have become far more complex and varied than in the past. Americans may now become acquainted with such religions as Buddhism or Islam not only through schoolbooks, but through actual contact with persons brought up in those faiths, and these religions are rapidly becoming a part of the "American experience." The last time I taught a course in the great books of China and Japan (including the Lotus Sutra) at Columbia in the spring of 1991, I had a number of students in my class who were of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Vietnamese ancestry, and many of them already had some acquaintance with Buddhism through what

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they had learned from their parents or grandparents. For most Americans today, and, I would assume, for many Europeans as well, Buddhism is no longer the strange and exotic religion that it was in earlier centuries, the creed of “backward” Asian nations whose ways of thought are looked on as inscrutable, but a world religion whose texts and teachings are to be viewed with serious attention and respect.

One may argue, of course, that this kind of religious pluralism that characterizes America today and the air of tolerance with which people of different religious groups view one another simply reflects the fact that, for most people of the present century, religion is not as important a concern as it was to those of earlier centuries. Religion has ceased to be the binding force that it once was in social or ethnic groups; children are no longer required or even expected to embrace the religion of their parents or forebears. Though such a situation perhaps leads to greater religious tolerance as a whole, it may also lead to sheer ignorance or indifference in matters of religion, which is hardly desirable, or may cause young people who have been cut adrift in religious matters and are “shopping around” for some belief they can call their own to fall prey to the attractions of bogus leaders or unsavory cults.

But to return to the subject of the Lotus Sutra, there is another way in which our present century, and presumably the century to come, provide an atmosphere that is favorable to the reception and understanding of the Lotus Sutra and other texts of the Buddhist canon. This is the fact, often pointed out, that modern science speaks so frequently in terms that are strikingly similar to those found in the sutras. Men and women of earlier centuries, with their limited knowledge of astronomy or the history of the formation of the earth and the planetary system, were accustomed to think of time and space in relatively modest and limited terms; even, in Christian countries, viewing the creation of the world as an event that had taken place a mere several thousand years in the past. Now, however, science describes the nature and extent of the universe in terms of spatial and temporal dimensions that are so vast they are all but incomprehensible to the imagination of the average person.

Moreover, this type of language and imagery of modern science has been taken over and popularized through the books and movies and TV productions of science-fiction, so that it has in a sense become a part of everyday life. We are therefore no longer astonished or repelled, as Westerners of earlier times would no doubt have been, by the seemingly fantastic language and imagery to be found in the Lotus Sutra, by descriptions of vast numbers of universes other than our own, of periods of time so long that they defy calculation, or of beings who travel freely from one universe to another. Indeed, one reviewer of my recently published translation of the Lotus Sutra immediately commented on the striking similarity between the imagery of the sutra and that of works of science-fiction.

Of course, in the Lotus Sutra such language and imagery is not intended to convey scientific information but is basically metaphorical and religious in intent. And yet because of such language, the words in the sutra and the message they are attempting to convey seem to us much less exotic or far-fetched in nature than they must have seemed to Western readers of earlier centuries, and instead to be rather in keeping with the modes of thought and expression of our own time.

There is another way in which, it seems to me, the imagery of the Lotus Sutra has, or ought to have, particular appeal to Western readers of our time. I am referring to the markedly mild and peaceful tone that characterizes both the thought and imagery of the text. Whenever I am back in New York after a stay in Japan, I like to go to the Metropolitan

Museum and wander through the galleries of the painting collection. And in recent years, perhaps in part because of my long exposure to Buddhist art in Japan, I am always struck by the shocking and violent quality of so much of the imagery in the galleries devoted to European art of the premodern period, art that is largely religious in nature and devoted to depictions of Biblical figures or events in the lives of the Christian saints. From the Old Testament come scenes of David slaying Goliath or Judith with the severed head of Holofernes, while Christianity provides inspiration for paintings of the Massacre of the Innocents, Saint Sebastian shot full of arrows, Saint Catherine on her wheel of torture, or, of course, that most brutal and shocking of all events, the Crucifixion.

Needless to say, as with all true religious art or literature, we are meant to see beyond the mere surface aspects of such imagery and to appreciate the truths that underlie them. But one can hardly avoid a certain instinctive reaction to the images themselves, particularly when they carry such a strong emotional impact. The central metaphor of the Christian religion is sacrifice, as exemplified by the symbol of the Cross, the wooden frame upon which persons in ancient times were put to death, and sacrifice inevitably involves a victim and suffering. By contrast, the overriding theme of the Lotus Sutra and the other Mahayana texts is that of teachings bestowed and alms and praise offered in gratitude for such teachings. The atmosphere is one of peace and rejoicing, there is little reference to acts of violence or evil, and the offerings made to the Buddhas are not the blood sacrifices of the old Brahman religion but flowers, incense and music, emblems of innocence and joy. This peaceful and basically optimistic outlook of the Lotus Sutra I for one find particularly appealing, and I would expect it to have a similar appeal for other Westerners of my time and of the century to come.

Another aspect of the thought and imagery of the Lotus Sutra that appeals to me is the sutra's view of what I might call the continuity or interrelatedness of the various levels of existence. In the Bible, and hence in Christian theology, all the different inanimate and animate beings of the world are described as being created by the hand of God. And it is stated in the very opening pages of the Bible that human beings were created so that they could "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26). Thus man or humankind is pictured as the "lord of creation," to use the traditional phrase, standing on a level separated from and high above that of the beasts and birds and other living beings, and invested with the right to exercise control over them all.

Above human beings are the various types of angels, though it is not clear whether or not there is any hard-and-fast barrier or line of demarcation that separates human beings from angels. And at the very top sits God, so perfect and all-powerful that he is completely removed from all of the objects of his creation. Thus, in this system of thought, the various levels or categories of being appear to be fixed and static, with little or no possibility of moving up or down from one level to the other. The line separating human beings from the lower forms of life is particularly pronounced, while God, the creator of the whole system, exists on a plane so wonderful and exalted that he is in a category by himself.

This Biblical view, which has so deeply influenced the thought and culture of Western civilization, is very different from that reflected in Buddhist texts such as the Lotus Sutra. These texts, drawing upon earlier Indian concepts of the structure of the universe and the nature of being, show us a concept of levels of being that is much more fluid and less rigorously compartmentalized. It is customary to speak of the Ten Worlds depicted in the thought of the Lotus Sutra, ranging from that of hell dwellers on the lowest level, through

the ascending levels of hungry spirits, animals, asuras, human beings, and so forth until one reaches the highest level, that of Buddhahood or the Buddhas. Not all of these ten levels of being are clearly delineated in all the sutras, but in the Mahayana texts this general concept of the ascending levels of being is evident. And it is important to note that there are no hard-and-fast barriers separating one level from another. Depending upon the deeds that beings do and the degree of understanding they achieve, they may move up or down from one level to another, those committing evil or stupid actions in one existence being reborn in their next existence on a lower level, even perhaps on the very lowest, that of hell. On the other hand, those who do good and strive for enlightenment may in a comparable fashion rise in the scale of being until they attain the highest of the ten levels, that of Buddhahood. And if one follows the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai in viewing the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* or "three thousand realms in a single moment of thought" as part of the fundamental teaching of the Lotus Sutra, then one need not even wait for the process of rebirth in order to move from one level to another. According to T'ien-tai's doctrine, all the ten levels of existence are potentially possible to an individual at any moment, regardless of the level that that individual occupies at the time, and hence, through good deeds, understanding and faith, or through the lack of these, one may move up or down on the ladder within the span of a single lifetime.

These are highly complex philosophical and doctrinal matters and I have no intention of trying to go into them in detail here. The point I wish to make is that this view of the interconnectedness of the different levels or categories of life expressed in the Lotus Sutra, and particularly the manner in which the sutra interprets the relationship between human beings and other forms of life, is much more in accordance with the trends of present-day thinking on the subject than is the Biblical view I have outlined earlier. If human beings are supposed to be the supervisors of other forms of life on our planet, we can only say that they have so far, especially in the present century, been very poor caretakers indeed. Through their predatory activities, or their careless treatment of the environment and exploitation of natural resources, they have succeeded in wiping out or driving to the verge of extinction any number of other species of life, of which the *toki* or Japanese crested ibis is simply one of the latest and most publicized examples. It has become increasingly clear to thinking people all over the world that unless human beings cease to act as unrestrained "lords of creation" and learn to integrate their activities and manner of living with those of other forms of life and levels of existence, they will in the future not only continue to drive other species of beings into extinction but will bring about their own annihilation as well.

One of the things that pleases me most about the Lotus Sutra is the way in which both human and nonhuman beings—*nimpinin* is the phrase the Kumarajiva translation of the sutra uses to express it—are depicted as attending the Buddha and listening attentively to his teachings. To be sure, Western legend tells us that Saint Francis of Assisi preached to the birds, and certain of the Christian mystic thinkers express a sense of the oneness or wholeness of existence that is quite close to the Buddhist view. But in Christianity in general, because human beings are the only creatures who are thought to possess an immortal soul, they are viewed as the only ones who are in need of salvation and hence the only ones for whom the teachings of religious truth are intended.

In the Lotus Sutra, by contrast, the Buddha's message is preached not only to beings of advanced religious understanding such as the bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas and voice-hearers, or to the dwellers in the heavenly and human spheres of existence, but to a vast number and array of nonhuman beings as well. Many of these have strange-sounding

Sanskrit names and are difficult for those of us not familiar with the Indian cultural tradition to imagine or visualize. But that they are not simply to be regarded as inferior forms of life, second-rate listeners standing in the back rows of the assembly while the front rows are occupied by gods and humans, is dramatically illustrated by the fact that one such being, the dragon king's daughter, gains enlightenment in a fashion that is so rapid and exemplary that it astounds all the other members of the assembly and puts them to shame.

To be sure, the occupants of the lowest levels of existence, the hungry spirits and hell dwellers, are not shown taking part in these assemblies at which the Dharma is preached, presumably because the karma that caused them to fall into those realms of existence does not for the moment allow them to do so. But since the sutra makes clear that the beings in all realms of existence possess the Buddha nature and that all alike are potentially capable of attaining Buddhahood, there is no doubt that the Buddhist teachings will be conveyed to them at some appropriate time. For, as the sutra again and again reiterates, it is the aim of the Buddhas to save "all sentient beings," *issai shujo*, which means those on every level of existence. And T'ien-t'ai's doctrine, basing itself on the Lotus Sutra, goes a step farther to assert that even plants and trees or inanimate things such as stones possess the Buddha nature and are capable of responding to the teachings of the Buddhas.

This concept of the universal applicability of the teachings, or the potential for enlightenment possessed by all beings, is of course one of the features of the Lotus Sutra that is most frequently pointed out. I have already mentioned the dramatic incident in which the dragon king's daughter, in the presence of the assembly, demonstrated that she has achieved enlightenment and can become a Buddha. Earlier Buddhist teaching had insisted that women could not attain Buddhahood, at least as long as they remained in female form, but this idea is clearly refuted in the Lotus Sutra, a fact that aligns it with the trends of feminist thinking in our own time. And elsewhere in the Lotus Sutra we are told that Devadatta, a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha who is depicted in most Buddhist writings as the epitome of evil, will attain Buddhahood in a future existence. Thus the Lotus Sutra makes clear that no category of beings, no matter what terrible deeds they may have committed in the past, are forever barred from the achievement of enlightenment.

Earlier forms of Buddhism had tended to draw a rather sharp line between monks and nuns, the men and women who had abandoned family life and become members of the Buddhist Order, and the ordinary lay believers who gave alms to the monastic community and helped to support them. The members of the Order of course had to obey numerous precepts or rules of conduct and to live quite different lives from those of ordinary believers. But in exchange for such dedication they were believed to be able to achieve levels of understanding and spiritual attainment that were far beyond the reach of lay believers.

In Mahayana Buddhism, however, this sharp line of demarcation between the laity and the members of the Order becomes blurred or ceases to be of such great importance. In the Lotus Sutra the Buddha is shown preaching to members of the Order and lay believers alike, and it is clearly indicated that both groups have an equal chance for spiritual advancement and attainment of the highest level of understanding. What is important is the faith and sincere striving of the individual, not whether he or she belongs to the Order or to the lay community. This point is even more clearly brought out in another of the major Mahayana texts, the Vimalakirti Sutra, in which the principal figure, Vimalakirti, a rich lay believer of the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, has reached a level of spiritual attainment that is as high or higher than that of any of the Buddha's monk disciples.

In Christianity there are certain sacraments or rituals such as baptism, holy commun-

ion, marriage, etc., that, at least in many forms of Christianity, are believed to be valid and effective only if they are performed by ordained members of the clergy. The clergy thus possess spiritual powers that are not accessible to the members of the lay community, and the lay community must in turn be dependent upon the clergy in situations where the exercise of such powers is required, situations that in many cases are of the most vital concern to the lives and faith of the believers.

So far as I know, Buddhism has never had a separate priestly caste or class with power to bestow blessing or spiritual benefit upon lay believers, such as existed in Brahmanism, ancient Judaism, or Christianity. In Buddhism, those believers who choose to leave secular life and become members of the Buddhist Order have always been regarded with special respect because they are able to devote more time and energy to religious matters than is possible for most lay followers and can become expert in the texts and rituals of the religion. But, like the rabbis of later Judaism, their role is principally that of teachers, preachers of doctrine, and leaders of the religious community. They have no power to confer enlightenment or spiritual advancement upon believers. That must come through the faith and spiritual practice of the individual, whether the individual is a monk or a nun, a man or a woman of the lay community. This emphasis upon the importance of the individual believer, and upon the potentialities for spiritual advancement open to him or her, regardless of social background or status, represents another aspect in which Mahayana teaching as exemplified in the Lotus Sutra accords well with the prevailing attitudes of our present century.

This is not to say, of course, that all the ideas of the Lotus Sutra will necessarily be appealing, or even easily understandable, to readers of our time, particularly those like myself whose upbringing has been in Western culture. The concept of karma—that one's good or bad deeds have inevitable results and shape the course of one's life—seems reasonable enough, and in fact would appear to be a part of the thinking of almost all religions to some degree. But the view that such a process operates over a very long span of time, its effects manifesting themselves in different forms over the course of successive reincarnations, will seem strange to most Westerners, who tend to think of the life of the individual as a separate and self-contained unit. And the concept of *ku*, Emptiness or non-dualism, as I know from my experience in trying to teach it in classes at Columbia, is extremely difficult for most persons to grasp, whatever their cultural background. Moreover, though the tone of the Lotus Sutra is for the most part mild and sunny, its language can be surprisingly harsh when it describes the punishments that await those who speak slanderously of the sutra. And when the sutra depicts persons burning their own bodies or arms as a form of offering, its imagery becomes close to repellent, though such imagery is undoubtedly meant to be understood metaphorically and not in any literal sense.

Despite these minor drawbacks, however, the Lotus Sutra undoubtedly has, as I have tried to indicate above, many aspects that should make it attractive to Western readers of the present age. If it is made available in an accurate and readable translation with suitable explanatory material, and if it is allowed to circulate freely in an "open market" of religious ideas, I can well imagine that many Westerners, young people in particular, will be drawn to it. I will be interested to see how it is received in the years to come and how its ideas and images influence the shape and direction of the twenty-first century. □

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