

THE LOTUS SÚTRA *Hokekyó* 法華經

- One of the earliest Mahayana texts extant, its authorship is obscure, Chinese translation from Sanskrit date from the 3rd ct.
- Usage of extremely vivid language and images, parables and analogies (to illustrate the inadequacy of verbal language to transmit the essence of Buddhist teachings)- all designed to make the Súra accessible
- Doctrinal simplicity of the text → one of the most popular and influential Sutras
- In one of the translations, the text alternates between prose and poetry, where the verse points to an oral transmission of the Sutra
- Its text itself therefore regarded sacred- considered the embodiment of the Shakyamuni Buddha himself- copying, transcribing, painting, reading the Súra are all activities that would bring one salvation -> the text became the most illustrated Súra

1/ Shakyamuni was a moral being and a manifestation of the Eternal Buddha at the same time -> demonstrates his omnipresence. His appearance as Shakyamuni was only an illusion conjured for those unable to cope with receiving teaching from an apparently immortal being.

‘The Buddha therefore, upon attaining Nirvana, does not go into extinction, but abides in the world for aeons out of compassion for those still in need of teaching.’ (Keown, p. 158)

2/ ‘Just as the Buddha’s presence is extended throughout time, so the salvation of the Buddha extends to all beings’ (de Barry); i.e. all practitioners are on the path to Buddhahood

⇒ SALVATION IS UNIVERSAL

Including WOMEN (chapter 12- the Dragon King Daughter)

⇒ important argument for the Tendai School:

the Lotus Súra encompasses all approaches to salvation in the ONE VEHICLE (sometimes considered a separate ‘third’ point of the message of the Sutra)

- special emphasis on Mahayana Buddhism
- Lotus Súra itself is an approach to salvation

‘The highest truth is by nature a sovereign truth that stands above other teachings, and the One Vehicle is therefore supreme.’ (de Barry)

‘With the development of rituals revolving round the sutra, the text was viewed not only as a means to protect the nation but as a path toward personal salvation as well.’ (Tanabe, p. xv)

- its use as a basis for ritual and art
- the Heian period saw the emergence of rituals associated with the production of paintings of the Lotus Sutra
- it was believed that the greater the number and luxury of the ritual acts performed, the greater the benefits
- earlier practice of copying sutras for the sake of reproduction transformed into act of devotion

Content (Bowring, p. 126-129):

Chapter One: Buddha enters meditation after having preached a sermon on the ‘Great Vehicle’

Chapter Two: Buddha emerges from meditation and ‘explains to his disciple Sariputra how difficult true wisdom is to comprehend: it is beyond language...’ hence the text is flooded with analogies, images and comparisons.

Buddha explains that indeed there is only one Vehicle- in the Lotus, this is identified with the ‘Way of the Buddha’. Buddha repeats that Sariputra (disciple) himself will become one, meaning everyone has the potential- central message of the scripture! More examples of universal Buddhahood in proceeding chapters:

Chapter Five: ‘Yes, says the Buddha, take the example of the rain, which falls equally on the whole of nature; different plants and trees react in different ways and only a very few have the potential to end up as the largest trees.

Chapter Eight: Parable of someone who has lived most of his life in extremely poor circumstances while remaining unaware that a friend had long ago sewn a rich jewel into the lining of his garment. Salvation has always been within easy reach; they have simply been ignorant and unable to see it.

Chapter Ten: the sutra itself said to be even more valuable than the relics of Shakyamuni and should be honoured above all things=> promise of myriad of benefits for those who revered the scripture; it is a document of discourse as well as an object of worship

Each time the Lotus Sutra is preached, a past emanation of Buddha appears in a large stupa; Sakyamuni then takes a place next to him and this world of ours is suddenly transformed into a Pure Land.

Chapter Twelve: 'Devadatta chapter' talks of Buddha's cousin Devadatta, who was reputed to have tried to kill him a number of times. Even he, nevertheless, would eventually reach ultimate buddhahood=> by means of the power of the Lotus Sutra

The Dragon King daughter, too, with the help of the Sutra achieves buddhahood- by undergoing instantaneous transformation into a male.

Chapter Twenty-five: 'The Universal Gate of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara' describes the efficacy of calling upon the Bodhisattva's name in times of distress, greatly contributed to the popularization of the Kannon cult (Kuan-yin, 觀音菩薩)