

Saddharma and the One Buddha Vehicle in the *Lotus Sūtra*

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1. The Problem

THE *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the Mahāyāna sūtras, which began to be compiled around the first century BCE in India. Many scholars suppose that it was composed between the first century BCE and the second century CE. We can surely say that since Dharmarakṣa (Fahu 法護; born around 230; died at age 78) translated it into Chinese as the ten-fascicle *Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經 in 286, it had been created by that time.

As for the formation not only of the *Lotus Sūtra* but also the Mahāyāna sūtras in general, there are a lot of mysteries. In the case of the *Lotus Sūtra*, how we think about the relationship between it and sūtras that preceded it, especially the *Prajñā Sūtras*, is problematic. The theory that the *Lotus Sūtra* was developed on the basis of the *Prajñā Sūtras* is persuasive, but there is another theory that the *Lotus Sūtra* was founded almost at the same time as the *Prajñā Sūtras* and independently from them. Even though this paper does not take up this problem, it is important for considering the idea of the one buddha vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which will be discussed in this paper.

Anybody who reads the *Lotus Sūtra* can easily find that its core idea is the one buddha vehicle taught in the second chapter, Skillful Means. In its present form, it is obvious that the idea of the “age-old existence of Śākyamuni Buddha” is one of the central ideas of the sūtra. On the other hand, from the historical viewpoint of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the theory that the idea of the one buddha vehicle was formed earlier than the idea of the “age-old existence of Śākyamuni Buddha” is taken more seriously¹.

2. The Idea of the One Buddha Vehicle of the Skillful Means Chapter

I will explain the meaning of the one buddha vehicle by introducing the

story of the Skillful Means Chapter. In the Introduction Chapter, Śākyamuni Buddha entered into the *samādhi* of the place of innumerable meanings and then in the following chapter the Buddha arises from that *samādhi* and addresses Śāriputra. Even though what the Buddha said to him is quite long, since it is very important, I will cite it from the Kumārajīva's translation:

The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. Not one of the śrāvakas or pratyekabuddhas is able to comprehend it. What is the reason for this? The Buddhas have personally attended a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million, a countless number of Buddhas and have fully carried out an immeasurable number of Buddhas' religious practices. They have exerted themselves bravely and vigorously, and their names are universally known. They have realized the *dharma*s that are profound and never known before, and preach them in accordance with what is appropriate, yet their intentions are difficult to understand. Śāriputra, ever since I attained Buddhahood I have through various causes and various similes widely expounded my teachings and have used countless skillful means to guide sentient beings and cause them to renounce their attachments. Why is this? Because the thus come ones are fully possessed of both skillful means and the *pāramitā* of wisdom. Śāriputra, the wisdom of the thus come ones is expansive and profound. They have [four kinds of] immeasurable [states of mind], [four kinds of] unlimited [eloquence], [ten kinds of] power, [four kinds of] fearlessness, [four kinds of] concentration [belonging to world of desires], [eight kinds of] emancipation, and [three kinds of] *samādhis*, and have deeply entered them beyond measure and accomplished *dharma*s never before attained. Śāriputra, the thus come ones expound many *dharma*s skillfully making various kinds of distinctions. Their words are soft and gentle and delight the hearts of the assembly. Śāriputra, to sum it up: the Buddhas have fully realized the *dharma*s that are limitless, boundless, never attained before. But stop, Śāriputra, I will say no more. Why? Because what the *buddha*s have achieved is the rarest and most difficult-to-understand *dharma*s, and only Buddhas can understand thoroughly the true characteristics of lots of *dharma*s. The characteristics of lots of *dharma*s [accomplished by the Buddhas] consist of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, internal cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end" (T09, no. 262, pp. 5b25–c13; Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing*

Sutras, Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2009, pp. 56–57 [with changes]).

The most important points here are that “the Buddhas have fully realized the *dharmas* that are limitless, boundless, never attained before” shown at the end of the citation and that “only Buddhas can understand thoroughly the true characteristics of lots of *dharmas*,” which are those “that are profound and never known before” and which are accomplished by the Buddhas who personally attended a countless number of Buddhas and have fully carried out an immeasurable number of religious practices. And these *dharmas* are Buddha wisdom consisting of concrete virtues such as the four kinds of immeasurable states of mind, the four kinds of unlimited eloquence, the ten kinds of power, the four kinds of fearlessness, the four kinds of concentration, the eight kinds of emancipation, and the three kinds of *samādhis*.

The description in this Skillful Means Chapter was modeled on the basis of Śākyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment to the *dharma*². Śākyamuni Buddha became enlightened under the Bodhi-tree through contemplation at the age of 35. However, he thought that the people who were ruled by desire would not be able to understand the *dharma* to which he awakened and considered entering final nirvāṇa immediately, giving up teaching that *dharma*. At that time, Brahmā appeared before him and asked him to preach. This is called the request or encouragement from Brahmā. *The Saṃyutta-Nikāya* states:

I have penetrated this Norm, deep, hard to perceive, hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, no mere dialectic, subtle, intelligible only to the wise (*Saṃyutta-Nikāya*, I, p. 136; *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part I, p. 171, translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, P. T. S.).

“Norm” in this citation corresponds to “*dhamma*” in Pāli and is translated as *fa* 法 in Chinese.

Just after Śākyamuni became fully enlightened, he thought, “It is ill to live paying no one the honor and obedience due to a superior.” But he did not see anyone more accomplished in contemplation or knowledge of emancipation than himself. Therefore he concluded that he would live under, pay honor to, and respect this *dharma* to which he had awakened. And Brahmā also declared his support for this conclusion of the Buddha and pointed out that all the Buddhas in the past, present and future respect the *saddharma*³.

Thus, the early Buddhist scriptures clarify that Śākyamuni Buddha awakened to the *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pāli) and paid respect to it. Adding

the adjective “*sat*” (correct) to “*dharma*” makes “*saddharma*,” generally translated as *Zhengfa* 正法 in Chinese.

Yet the Sanskrit title of the *Lotus Sūtra* is *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka-sūtra*, translated as “*Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經” by Dharmarakṣa and as “*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經” by Kumārajīva. We easily see that the term “*saddharma*” was adopted for the *Lotus Sūtra* as a part of its title to refer to a fundamental point of the Buddha’s enlightenment. We understand that the *Lotus Sūtra* valued Śākyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment to the *dharma* more than anything else. It is like the *Prajñā Sūtras* valuing the *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of the wisdom).

What, then, is the understanding of this “*saddharma*” in the *Lotus Sūtra*? The answer to this question is shown in the above citation. In the Skillful Means Chapter the Buddhas’ wisdom is renamed as “*dharmas*” and four kinds of immeasurable states of mind, four kinds of unlimited eloquence, ten kinds of power, four kinds of fearlessness, four kinds of concentration, eight kinds of emancipation, and three kinds of *samādhis* as concrete contents of “*dharmas*” are taken up. Though I omit explanation of these technical terms here, each of them means wisdoms and various stages of meditations of the Buddha. In a word, “*dharmas*” are not abstract and objective truths. They are realized through practices by Buddhas themselves and are the Buddha wisdom and spiritual stages explained as the concrete moral items listed here⁴. Such actuality, dynamism and subjectivity of the *dharma* is very important.

The *Lotus Sūtra* emphasizes the transcendence of Buddha wisdom—that this Buddha wisdom cannot be understood by anyone other than the Buddha, while it clarifies that since the Buddha has the power of skillful means, which is composed of wisdom and compassion, he has taught Buddha wisdom skillfully in order to have sentient beings acquire this Buddha wisdom, i.e., to have sentient beings become Buddhas is the one great purpose for which Śākyamuni Buddha appears in this world. I will return to this point and explain it later.

After the above citation, Śāriputra requests Śākyamuni Buddha to preach three times. When Śākyamuni Buddha is about to comply with Śāriputra’s request, five thousand arrogant people leave the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra*⁵. However, the Buddha does not stop them and finally clarifies the reason for his appearing in this world, saying that in the audience only those of pure faith are left. This is his one great purpose, which is stated in a repetitive style for emphasis, which is to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all sentient beings, to show Buddha wisdom (*tathāgata-jñāna-darśana* in Sanskrit) to all sentient beings, to cause sentient beings to awaken to Buddha wisdom, and to induce sentient

beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom⁶. In other words, it is to make all sentient beings become Buddhas. Here the objective for which the Buddha appears in this world is manifested clearly. This is called “one buddha vehicle.” In short, it is an idea that all sentient beings equally can become Buddhas. This is one of the most important religious messages of the *Lotus Sūtra*⁷.

The Gods, who were very delighted to hear this message, say about the teaching of the one buddha vehicle, “In the past at Vārāṇasī the Buddha first turned the wheel of the *dharma*. Now he turns the wheel again, the wheel of the unsurpassed, the greatest *dharma* of all” (T09, no. 262, 12a15–17; Watson, p. 89 [with minor changes]). This statement compares the teaching of the “one buddha vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the first turning of the wheel of the *dharma* (the middle way transcending self-indulgence and self-mortification, the four noble truths, and the eightfold path) at Deer Park (Mṛga-dāva) in Vārāṇasī (modern Benares). In contrast, the preaching of the “one buddha vehicle” in the Skillful Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* is described as the second turning of the wheel of the unsurpassed *dharma*.

This idea of “the second preaching,” as contrasted with the first preaching, is not only found in the *Lotus Sūtra*⁸. This fact is clear evidence that the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* were well aware of their dependence on the second preaching, while early Buddhist sūtras, which were accepted by Nikāya Buddhists, were based on the first preaching. In other words, they knew very well that Mahāyāna sūtras were new creations.

3. The Relationship between One Buddha Vehicle and Saddharma

I introduced the idea of the one buddha vehicle on the basis of the content of the Skillful Means Chapter. In short, the purpose of the one buddha vehicle is not to lead people to become an arhat or pratyeka-buddha, but to open the way for everyone to become a Buddha. So why can anyone without prejudice become enlightened? Even though the sūtra doesn’t expressly provide the answer, the ground of becoming enlightened seems to be *dharma* or *saddharma*.

As seen above, early Buddhist scriptures also indicated that only the Buddha realized the *dharma* sufficiently. Here I organize the *Lotus Sūtra* and important things concerning the *dharma* as follows.

(1) The *Lotus Sūtra* says that not only the present Buddha Śākyamuni

but also the past Buddhas preached the *Lotus Sūtra*⁹. If we draw out the intention behind this, it seems that the *Lotus Sūtra* is being recognized as the supreme and ultimate teaching preached commonly by all Buddhas in the past, present, and future. All Buddhas including Śākyamuni become Buddhas only after awakening to *dharma* or *saddharma*, and the scripture which expounds that *saddharma* in detail is none other than the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, or the *Lotus Sūtra*. Because the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* at least thought in this way, they must have incorporated “*saddharma*” into the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Therefore, all Buddhas preach the “*saddharma*” realized by themselves, and its content is considered to be none other than the *Lotus Sūtra*. We can understand the intention of the compilers, who wanted to express the universality and the eternity of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

- (2) Realization of the *dharma* is open to not only specific Buddha but ideally to all people. Based on this, the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* must have formed the idea of the one buddha vehicle in which all people become enlightened. In other words, the vehicle of the śrāvaka with the goal of arhatship and the vehicle of the pratyekabuddha with the goal of pratyekabuddhahood are expedient teachings, and in reality there is only the one buddha vehicle¹⁰.
- (3) The *Lotus Sūtra* rarely refers to religions other than Buddhism, limiting its concern to internal affairs of Buddhism. However, I think that the universality of the *saddharma* of the *Lotus Sūtra* might exceed the scope of Buddhism. The “*saddharma*” does not discriminate against followers of other religions at all. In a word, the “*saddharma*” can be realized by anyone. Concerning this, the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* states, [The disciple] “is possessed of faith in the Truth—believing the Truth to have been proclaimed by the Exalted One, of advantage in this world, passing not away, welcoming all, leading to salvation, and to be attained to by the wise, each one for himself.”¹¹ This shows that the truth of Buddhism is real and can be experienced by anyone. The original word corresponding to “welcoming all,” “*ehi-passiko*” means literally “come and see.” The idea that everyone can come and can see the truth shows the Buddhist view of truth very well. The claim that the *saddharma* can be realized by anyone, will contribute to an attitude that recognizes the dignity of all people, even if they believe in another religion. The practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging seems to show this very well.

- (4) Whoever Bodhisattva Never Disparaging happened to encounter, whether monks, nuns, laymen or laywomen, he would bow in obeisance to them and speak words of praise, saying¹², “I have profound reverence for you. I would never dare treat you with disparagement and arrogance. Why? Because you will all practice the bodhisattva way and will then be able to attain Buddhahood” (T09, no. 262, pp. 50c19–20; Watson, p. 308 [with minor changes]). His actions express an attitude that attributes the utmost dignity to all humankind, bespeaking the possibility that all human beings will, without fail, become Buddhas if they practice the bodhisattva way. In other words, the scripture counsels us to respect all human beings equally as future Buddhas. However, certain persons became exceedingly annoyed by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s bestowals of prophecies of future Buddhahood, since he had no recognizable power or authority to make such momentous statements. Some harshly persecuted him. But he kept up this practice for his entire life. The dedication of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also represents a great revelation for us in the present age. His behavior indicates that we should believe firmly in our own ability to attain Buddhahood. And it conveys the idea that all other people are none other than potential Buddhas, all of whom have the ability to attain Buddhahood. What is important here is not a practice of offering something concrete to other people, but rather the undertaking to teach us all to awaken to our own fundamental dignity. When I bow in obeisance to another person as Buddha, in response his Buddha nature bows in obeisance to me as Buddha—even though this Buddha-nature has not yet been sufficiently manifested in either of us. In other words, here the scripture establishes the idea that respecting other people is directly connected with the manifestation of our own Buddha-nature. In the *Lotus Sūtra* the idea of coexistence is based on interdependent relationships between people, in which we mutually respect each other as beings of integrity, all of us with the prospect of attaining Buddhahood.
- (5) If we apply a framework such as that of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, which John Hick set forth with regard to how relations between religions are understood, if we think that the specific belief and practices of Buddhism are indispensable for realizing the “*saddharma*,” we should say that the *Lotus Sūtra* is not pluralist but inclusive. However, should we not think that there is a possibility that the method of realizing the “*saddharma*” is open widely to the methods of other religions and to non-religion? This

interpretation seems to come close to pluralism. However, even though the one vehicle aims at all sentient beings' attainment of Buddhahood, it will be regarded as a kind of the inclusivism from the standpoint of Buddhism because its ultimate aim is expressed in the terminology of the "attainment of Buddhahood."

Now if we describe "Buddha," the goal at which Buddhism aims, as an ideal state possessing human values that are more universal than Buddhism, what does this imply? This conception may come close to being pluralistic. Even though I am not necessarily in complete agreement with John Hick's pluralism, I at least agree with his motivation to advocate a pluralistic approach so that as much as possible we can prevent harmful, useless fighting among religions.

4. Conclusion

The idea of one buddha vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* that all sentient beings can become enlightened is an epoch-making idea in the history of Buddhism and has been very influential. This idea seems to have been formed on the basis of the universality of "dharma" or "saddharma," which enabled Śākyamuni's enlightenment. In short, the universal "dharma" or "saddharma" does not discriminate among the possibilities of enlightenment of human beings. The fact that Śākyamuni Buddha appealed to people, "*ehi-passiko* (come and see [the dharma])" demonstrates this very well. By expanding this universality from inside of Buddhism to outside, Buddhists should take the initiative to re-realize the primary mission of religions, which is to contribute widely to humanity and overcome conflicts among religions.

Afterword

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Prof. Gene Reeves for his expertise in editing the English version of this paper.

Previous papers related to this paper include:

1. The Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the *Lotus Sūtra* and its Reception in China and Japan, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 12, 2002.12, pp. 104–122.
2. The Modern Significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 14, 2004.10, pp. 95–111.
3. Inclusivism and Religious Tolerance in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 15, 2005.12, pp. 94–108.

4. The *Lotus Sūtra* and the Dialogue of Religions, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 16, 2006.10, pp. 139–155.
5. The Bodhisattva Way and Valuing the Real World in the *Lotus Sūtra*, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 17, 2007.10, pp. 180–197.
6. The Core of Śākyamuni Buddha’s Teachings and the Distinctive Features of the *Lotus Sūtra*, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 19, 2009.8, pp. 36–50.
7. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the *Lotus Sūtra*: Involvement in the Human Society, *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 20, 2010.9, pp. 108–128.

NOTES

¹ Kariya Sadahiko (*Hokekyō ichibutsujō no kenkyū*, Ōsaka: Tohōshuppan, 1983) and Suguro Shinjō (*Zōtei hokekyō no seiritsu to shisō*, Tokyo: Daitōshuppansha, 1993 [first edition], 1996 [revised edition]) hypothesized that not only the idea of the one buddha vehicle but also the idea of the “age-old existence of Śākyamuni Buddha” were formed at the beginning of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In addition to these two central ideas, I would like to add the idea of the “bodhisattvas of the earth.” Even though the bodhisattvas of the earth are mythological figures appearing in the *Lotus Sūtra*, from a historical perspective, they seem to reflect the self-image of the central bearers of the *Lotus Sūtra* who created the two core tenets and beliefs.

² Śāriputra’s subsequent request and the second turning of the wheel of the *dharma* that manifests the Buddha’s “one great purpose” correspond to Brahmā’s request and the first turning of the wheel of the *dharma* in Śākyamuni Buddha’s life, respectively.

³ Cf. *Samyutta-Nikāya*, I, pp. 139–140; *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part I, pp. 175–176, translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, P.T.S.

⁴ See the Parable of the Phantom City Chapter, “The Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence had a life span of five hundred and forty ten thousand million *nayutas of kalpas*. This Buddha at first sat in the place of enlightenment and, having smashed the armies of the devil, was on the point of attaining supreme perfect enlightenment, but the *dharmas* of the Buddhas did not appear before him. This state continued for one small *kalpa*, and so on for ten small *kalpas*, the Buddha sitting with legs crossed, body and mind unmoving, but the *dharmas* of the Buddhas still did not appear before him. . . . The Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence passed ten small *kalpas* before the *dharmas* of the Buddhas finally appeared before him and he attained supreme perfect enlightenment” (T09, no. 262, pp. 22b19–c3; B. Watson, *ibid*, pp. 156–157 [with minor changes]). As seen in this citation, realizing “*dharmas*,” which mean supreme characteristics possessed by Buddhas, is identified with enlightenment.

⁵ This episode shows that overbearing arrogance (being sure that we have become enlightened, even though actually we have not) should be abandoned in order to hear the *Lotus Sūtra*, which teaches that enlightenment of arhats prior to the *Lotus Sūtra* is only expedient.

⁶ See T09, no. 262, pp. 7a21–28.

⁷ If all sentient beings can become enlightened, a new problem develops as to why the Buddha preached the vehicles of śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha, who aim at the goal of arhatship and pratyekabuddhahood, respectively. The *Lotus Sūtra* reveals that the

vehicles of śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha are skillful means to mature their spiritual capacities. In other words, the Buddhas previous assertions of the existence of three different teachings were only expedient and in reality there exists one buddha vehicle. This idea was called “elaborating the three to reveal the one” (*kaisan xianyi* 開三顯一) in the specialized terminology of Chinese exegetical discourse. It provides the criteria of forming doctrinal classification, which is one of the major features of Chinese Buddhism.

⁸ See the *Dapin bore jing*, vol. 12, the Unconditioned Chapter, “We see the second wheel of the dharma turned in the Jambu-dvīpa (T08, no. 223, p. 311, b15–16).” Also see the southern edition of the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, vol. 13, the Holy Practice Chapter, “in the past at Vārāṇasī I turned the wheel of the *dharma* for the sake of śrāvakas. Now at Kuśinagara here I will turn the wheel of the great *dharma* for the sake of bodhisattvas” (T12, no. 375, p. 689, c5–7).

⁹ In the *Lotus Sūtra* there is not only the *Lotus Sūtra* preached by Sun Moon Bright Buddha in the Introduction Chapter but also the *Lotus Sūtra* preached by Great Universal Wisdom Excellence Buddha in the Parable of the Phantom City Chapter, the *Lotus Sūtra* preached at the palace of the dragon by Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in the Devadatta Chapter, and the *Lotus Sūtra* preached by Awesome Sound King Buddha in the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging Chapter. The length of time when the *Lotus Sūtra* was preached and the number of verses of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which expresses the length of the sūtra, are described in figures that go beyond our imagination. For example, Sun Moon Bright Buddha preached the *Lotus Sūtra* for sixty small *kalpas* and his disciple Bodhisattva Wonderfully Bright preached it for eighty small *kalpas* (not indicating the number of the verses) and Great Universal Wisdom Excellence Buddha preached it in verses of as numerous as the sands of the Ganges for eight thousand *kalpas* and his disciples sixteen *śramaṇas* preached it for eighty four thousands *kalpas* and Awesome Sound King Buddha preached twenty thousand, ten thousand, a million verses of the *Lotus Sūtra* (not indicating the length of time).

¹⁰ The one vehicle is related to the three vehicles of śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva. In my understanding, the bodhisattva vehicle (great vehicle) in the three vehicles is related to the two vehicles of śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha (the lesser vehicles), while that of Buddha transcends the polarity of the two vehicles and the bodhisattva vehicle. On this basis, the bodhisattva vehicle should not be merely equated with the Buddha vehicle. From the standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, śrāvaka and pratyekabuddhas should awaken to being bodhisattvas themselves, while bodhisattvas, for whom the bodhisattva vehicle is preached, should not contest with śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, but rather maintain a profound discernment that śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are actually practicing the way of true bodhisattvas. Therefore, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas, for whom the three vehicles are preached, are states of existence all of which demand personal transformation.

¹¹ *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*, *Dīgha-Nikāya*, II, p. 93; *Dialogues of the Buddha*, forth edition, vol. II, p. 99, translated by T.W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, P.T.S.).

¹² According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the people to whom Bodhisattva Never Disparaging spoke were limited to Buddhist followers. However, I think it may be possible to expand this to non-Buddhist and interpret it to indicate that all sentient beings can become enlightened.