

# Characteristics of the *Lotus Sūtra* with regard to the Human Spirit\*

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It must be acknowledged that there are many interpretations regarding Buddhism's relationship to the human spirit. The *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, can be seen as a declaration that a "buddha's world" can be realized through the spiritual commitment and actions of living beings, and as an exploration of how they can do it even though they may differ in their capacities, personalities, and levels of spirituality. The original text of the sūtra acknowledges such differences as it tells of what practitioners are doing and achieving. And, with regard to those who are actual followers of the sūtra, we can see innumerable concrete correlations between their efforts and their results. In this presentation and exchange between our distinguished panelists and attendants, we will examine the *Lotus Sūtra* from different perspectives with the hope of gaining further insight into its characteristics and into why Buddhism gives rise to so many interpretations.

## I.

Among the many sūtras in the Mahayana tradition, the *Lotus Sūtra* displays a unique characteristic in its perspective of inspiring people themselves to be creators of what the sūtra expounds—and what it wishes people to aspire to—with regard to the fundamental structure of existence. It is in the *Lotus Sūtra* that Sakyamuni Buddha reveals his attitude of including "all sentient beings (*sarva-sattvāḥ*)" within the focus of his thoughts. His attitude is then extended to become the attitude of all buddhas.

In chapter two of the sūtra, "*UPĀYA-KAUŚALYA*", where the fundamental intent and main task of buddhas is revealed, the "way (*mārga*)" to the attainment of the buddhas' perspective and wisdom is described as follows:

*tathāgata-jñāna-darśana-mārgāvatārana-hetu-nimittaṃ sattvānāṃ tathāgato 'rhan samyak-saṃbuddho loka utpadyate* / {KN40.7; WT37.13}

(A Buddha [*tathāgato 'rhan samyak-saṃbuddha*] appears in the world for the reason and aim of letting sentient beings walk in the way of the wisdom and perspective of a buddha [*tathāgata*])

(諸佛世尊 . . . 欲令衆生入佛知見道故出現於世。 Taisho 9.7A)

The same attitude is expressed in the verse portion using "how (*kathaṃ*)" as follows:

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*evaṃ ca cintemy ahu Śāriputra*

*kathaṃ nu evaṃ bhavi sarva-sattvāḥ /*

*dvātriṃśatī-lakṣaṇa-rūpa-dhāriṇaḥ*

*svayaṃ-prabhā loka-vidū svayaṃ-bhūḥ //60// {KN47.9; WT44.7}*

(Śāriputra, I am thinking like this;

How, indeed, will all the sentient beings be like the one

Who possesses a figure with the thirty-two characteristics,

Who is radiant on his own, knows the world, and exists by himself?)

(舍利弗當知 我本立誓願 欲令一切衆 如我等無異 Taisho 9.8B)

A typical example in the sūtra describing people's behavior that leads to realization of the Buddha's intent as expressed above appears in chapter seventeen, "ANUMODANĀ-PUṆYA-NIRDEŚA":

*yaḥ kaś-cid Ajita kula-putro vā kula-duhitā vā tathāgatasya parinirvṛtasyēmaṃ dharma-  
pariyāyaṃ deśyamānaṃ saṃprakāśyamānaṃ śṛṇuyād bhikṣur vā bhikṣuṇī vōpāsako vōpāsikā  
vā vijñā-puruṣo vā kumārako vā kumārikā vā śrutvā cābhyanumodet | sacet tato dharma-  
śravaṇād utthāya prakrāmet sa ca vihāra-gato vā gṛhagato vā 'raṇya-gato vā vīthi-gato vā  
grāma-gato vā janapada-gato vā tān hetūṃs tāni kāraṇāni taṃ dharmam yathā-śrutam  
yathōdgrhītam yathā-balam aparasya sattvasy' ācakṣīta mātur vā pitur vā jñāter vā  
saṃmodikasya vā saṃstutasya vā 'nyasya vā kasya-cit so 'pi yadi śrutvā 'numodet anumodya  
ca punar anyasmā ācakṣīta | so 'pi yadi śrutvā 'numodeta anumodya ca so 'py aparasmā  
ācakṣīta | so 'pi taṃ śrutvā 'numodet | ity anena paryāyeṇa yāvat pañcāsat-paramparayā |  
{WT292.10;(KN345.7 saṃmoditasya vā 'nyasya vā saṃstutasya kasya-cit...)}*

(阿逸多。如來滅後。若比丘比丘尼優婆塞優婆夷及餘智者若長若幼。聞是經隨喜已。從法會出至於餘處。若在僧坊若空閑地若城邑巷陌聚落田里。如其所聞。爲父母宗親善友知識隨力演說。是諸人等聞已隨喜復行轉教。餘人聞已亦隨喜轉教。如是展轉至第五十。 Taisho 9.46B)

This story tells of those who expound the teaching to others, referring to them as *kula-putra* or *kula-duhitṛ*. These "expounders" include lay people as well as renunciants, and the sūtra says that such expounders do not necessarily have to be mature adults (*vijñā-puruṣa*), but may also be young children. After hearing the teaching and returning to wherever they dwell—whether a monastery (*vihāra*), city, village, forest, or general gathering place—they tell their parents, families, friends, and others about what they have heard, in the way they have understood it and in their own capacity of expression (*yathā-śrutam yathōdgrhītam yathā-balam*). Through this story we can confirm the sūtra's philosophy of stressing, without discriminating between people's type or status,

the importance of the efforts that any person makes that follow from his or her good intentions.

The sūtra is also showing here that the people are endeavoring to discuss with others the teaching they heard that both interested and inspired them. At its very beginning, in chapter one, “*NIDĀNA*,” the sūtra expresses, through the words of *Mañjuśrī*, that what is about to happen is that the Buddha is going to expound the Dharma, and that those in the great gathering will be stimulated to discuss among themselves what they are about to hear:

*mahā-dharma-śravaṇa-sāṃkathyam idaṃ kula-putrās tathāgatasya kartum abhiprāyo*  
{KN16.10; WT15.6}

(今佛世尊欲說大法 Taisho 9.3C)

At the end of the sūtra’s main section, there is the story, in chapter nineteen, “*SADĀPARIBHŪTA*,” of a bodhisattva who was Śākyamuni in a previous life. The only practice this bodhisattva does is to say to anyone he meets, “Live as a bodhisattva, and you will become a Buddha!”:

*nāham āyuṣmanto yuṣmākaṃ paribhavāmi | aparibhūtā yūyam | tat kasya hetoḥ | sarve*  
*hi bhavanto bodhisattva-caryāṃ carantu | bhaviṣyatha yūyaṃ tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyak-*  
*saṃbuddhā iti* {KN378.1; WT320.5}

*nāhaṃ bhagīnyo...*{KN378.6; WT320.12}

{ (是比丘凡有所見若比丘比丘尼優婆塞優婆夷皆悉禮拜讚歎而作是言。) 我深敬汝等不敢輕慢。所以者何。汝等皆行菩薩道當得作佛。Taisho 9.50C, *āyuṣmanto* [gentlemen], *bhagīnyo* [ladies] are not translated literally }

In this particular story I believe the sūtra is expressing its basic premise vis-à-vis the human spirit—make your own efforts to be a good person, strive to improve yourself, and most importantly, strive to motivate others to do likewise.

## II.

What inspires all these individuals to strive, in their various ways, to communicate their feelings about the teaching to others? Several lines in the verse portion (vs. 109-112) of chapter two reveal aspects of the sūtra’s perspective regarding their motivation:

*deśemi dharmāṃ ca bahū-prakāraṃ*

*adhimuktīm adhyāśayo jñātva prāṇinām |*

*saṃharṣayāmī vividhair upāyaiḥ*

*pratyātmikāṃ jñāna-balaṃ mamātāt || 109 ||* {WT52.16; KN54.5 *saṃharṣayāmī*}

(And I show many kinds of teachings,

Knowing the inclinations and wishes of the people; /

By various ways I rouse dynamic joy in them.

This is my own power of wisdom. //109//)

(我以智慧力 知衆生性欲 方便說諸法 皆令得歡喜 Taisho 9.9B)

Here we can see the appearance of *adhimukti* (state of mind to seek for something) in connection with the emotional condition of willingness and excitement (*harsā*) to follow the Buddha's teaching. The word *adhimukti*, a key concept relating to one's motivation to follow the teaching, often appears alluding to a person or people's spiritual condition. With the basic sense of "inclination" in the text, *adhimukti* is the intent and aspiration toward all manner of things in matters of human life.

In chapter four, *ADHIMUKTI*, the sūtra says that the general attractions of human beings to worldly things become the fundamental causes of suffering (*duḥkha*):

*vayaṃ ca bhagavaṃs tiṣṭhīr duḥkhatābhiḥ saṃpīditā abhūma | katamābhis tiṣṭhīr yad uta duḥkha-duḥkhatayā saṃskāra-duḥkhatayā vipariṇāma-duḥkhatayā ca saṃsāre ca hīnādhimuktikāḥ |* {KN108.17; WT101.30}

(And, Bhagavat, we were worried about three sufferings. What are the three? These are the suffering from suffering, the suffering from change, and the suffering from separation. And we were inclined to have ordinary aspirations in worldly life.)

(世尊。我等以三苦故於生死中受諸熱惱。迷惑無知樂著小法 Taisho 9.17B)

According to the sūtra, *adhimukti* becomes a cause of *duḥkha* because *hīnādhimukti*, literally, "common intent," creates *trṣṇā* (thirst) and *kāma* (desire) in one's mind.

The Buddha who appears in the *Lotus Sūtra* has come to challenge the human spirit that tends toward attachments to worldly things. He makes his stance clear early in the sūtra, in chapter two, declaring to Śāriputra:

*yaṃ Śāriputra sugataḥ prabhāṣate adhimukti-saṃpanna bhavāhi tatra |* {vs19,KN32.15; WT31.19}

(Śāriputra! To what the Sugata expounds, be perfect in aspiration.)

(於佛所說法 當生大信力 Taisho 9.6A)

The Buddha also says in the same chapter that no one, including even *arhats* or bodhisattvas who have attained the highest levels of advancement toward buddhahood, can fully understand the Buddha's wisdom and perspective except bodhisattvas who are fully committed in their aspiration to follow the way of his teaching:

*...anyatra bodhisattvebhyo adhimuktīya ye sthitāḥ ||* {vs7, KN31.6; WT29.23}

(除諸菩薩衆 信力堅固者 Taisho 9.5C)

The teaching of the Buddha referred to in the text, if I summarize it from the context, is unflagging effort in pursuit of human betterment in this world. In Mahayana Buddhism this is known as bodhisattva practice and the bodhisattva way. The sūtra's

attitude can be characterized as an invitation to all people, without exception, to follow that way.

Chapter ten, *DHARMA-BHĀṆAKA*, shows the sūtra's positive wish that all people who chance to encounter a dharma-expounder will develop the aspiration to take up the bodhisattva way. And, as previously described, in chapter nineteen, *Sadāparibhūta* bodhisattva declares the possibility for all people to attain buddhahood by means of bodhisattva practice.

Thus, the sūtra expects the betterment of this world by actualizing, within the human spirit, an aspiration for betterment of the human individual and, in turn, the human society. Nevertheless, similar to the character of the contents of the previously referenced sections, one might not be able to find elsewhere in the sūtra any particular characterization of the “betterment” it is urging philosophically. Moreover, even given the sūtra's expectations of all people, without discrimination, and its attitude to inspire the human spirit to betterment, as far as the way (*mārga*) to betterment is concerned, details of no method other than communication between people can be found. From slight examinations of the original text of the sūtra, many interpretations of what it is aiming for will be derived; nevertheless, the original text offers the idea of everyone equally pursuing its teachings. Thus, the *mārga*— how one applies the message of the text within one's actual current situation—becomes a more important point for examination.