

Ticket to Ride: Boarding the Great Vehicle by Means of the Lotus Sutra

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To hear the Lotus Sutra tell it, as far as vehicles are concerned the Lotus Sutra itself is the most effective vehicle for ferrying living beings to liberation. It proclaims—à la Muhammad Ali—“I am the Greatest!” In the Devadatta chapter (chapter 12), the bodhisattva Accumulated Wisdom—prefacing a question to Manjuśri Bodhisattva—says the following:

“This sutra is profound, subtle, and sublime. It is the pearl of all of the sutras, and it is something rare in the world.”¹

And in chapter 23, Long Ago Deeds of Sovereign Medicine Bodhisattva, the Buddha says to the bodhisattva Flower of the Greatest of Constellations:

“Just as among streams, rivers, great rivers, and various other bodies of water, for example, the ocean holds pride of place, this Dharma Flower sutra is also just like that: within all of the sutras expounded by the *tathāgatas*, it is the greatest and most profound. And just as *Sumeru* Mountain holds pride of place among the Earthen Mountains, the Black Mountains, the Lesser Iron Encircling Mountains, the Greater Iron Encircling Mountains, the Ten Precious Mountains, and the multitudes of other mountains, this Dharma Flower sutra is also just like that: within all of the various sutras, it is the most supreme. And just as the moon—a child of the heavens—holds pride of place among the multitudes of celestial bodies, this Dharma Flower sutra is also just like that: within tens of millions of myriads of kinds and varieties of sutra teachings, it is that which shines the brightest... Bodhisattvas are foremost among all *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, and this sutra is also just like that: it is foremost among the teachings of all of the various sutras. Just as the Buddha is king of the teachings, this sutra is also just like that: among all sutras it is king.”

However, prior to both of these instances of self-praise, in chapter 10, Expounders of the Dharma, the Buddha says to the bodhisattva Sovereign Medicine:

“The sutras I have expounded are immeasurable tens of millions of myriads in number; but among the sutras I have already expounded, am

¹ All translations of sutra passages are those of the author, unless otherwise noted.

now expounding, and will expound in the future, the most difficult to believe and hardest to understand is this Dharma Flower sutra.”

This is all well and good. But if this—the king of all sutras—is so difficult to believe and hard to understand, then how are those who want to follow and practice it supposed to board this greatest of all vehicles so that it can do its self-stated work of ferrying them to liberation?

The sutra, of course, has an answer for this: it says that practitioners must accept it, internalize it, recite it, keep faith with it, elucidate it, copy it, expound it, and practice what they expound.

Today I would like to talk a little bit about one of those aspects, the aspect of recitation, and why I think that recitation in English is underutilized as a practice of the Lotus Sutra.

Why Recitation?

If one wants to uphold and keep faith with a sutra as a practice, one has to do more than just read it. One has to internalize it. It has to be retained within. Only when sutras become part of you can you move to actively uphold and keep faith with them by putting what you have internalized into practice within your everyday life activities. Recitation is an important step in the process of internalization.

The idea in reciting is to reproduce the sutra with one’s body, speech, and mind. Recitation, then, obviously requires the use of one’s vocal chords—even if one is reciting quietly. Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition notes,

“If you don’t read the sutra out loud, then you’re cheating yourself, and missing the chance to create the merit of speech.”²

The merits of such speech are numerous—but perhaps first and foremost, recitation, internalization, and oral transmission were the means by which the teachings were preserved and maintained until they took written form.

The body needs food. The mind needs nourishment. Sutra recitation is a way of nourishing the mind through the ears. It is a means by which you can “illuminate your mind,” in that it helps you to grasp deeper meanings within and behind a sutra. There are times when a section that you have recited countless times will quite literally grab your immediate attention—as a previously unrecognized significance it contains suddenly manifests itself in your mind.

Sutra recitation can be a one-pointed concentration practice—you use the ear to hear

² Website of the Arya Sanghata Sutra: Guide to Reciting
(http://www.sanghata sutra.net/reciting_guide.html; <http://www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa.html>)

the meaning instead of thinking about it. It can be helpful to do recitation in a group, because you can then hear others' voices in harmony (when they are indeed harmonious—which, if the recitation is long enough, gradually takes place, at least for a while—and those harmonious moments are quite pleasurable). I can attest to this experience because at my workplace we do a brief chant of greeting at the beginning and ending of the workday. Inasmuch as the chant is brief, harmony has to be attained quickly; and when it happens, our simple greeting feels extremely powerful to me. If it doesn't happen, though, trying not to listen can also be a one-pointed concentration practice.

A further benefit of sutra recitation is the spreading of the Dharma—recitation may even be the catalyst for someone else's enlightenment! It is said that the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, Hui-neng, was illiterate, but realized enlightenment upon hearing a layman recite a phrase from the Diamond Sutra.³

Mahayana sutras say that whenever a person recites and upholds the sutras it is a manifestation of the Buddha—meaning that the Buddha will be present wherever there is recitation. Also, the Dharma-protectors and deities from the ten directions protect those who are reciting, and also protect the area around them.

Sutra recitation can be done to benefit the deceased. Recitation is given as an offering of merit and virtue for them. Buddhists usually like to have sutras recited, or do recitation themselves, for deceased family members. When a sutra is recited, the power of the Buddha-dharma calls to the deceased so that he or she can benefit from hearing it—as do the reciters as well as any sentient beings that may have gathered because of being attracted to the sound of the recitation. I can attest to this one, too. My wife is Japanese, and several years ago an elderly monk from the Nichiren sect performed the recitation for her mother's seventh memorial service, one of the more important ones in the Buddhist series of memorial services for the deceased. I don't know the sutra he recited since, immediately after the recitation—and before I could ask—he disappeared like a puff of smoke. I wanted to ask him what he recited because it was, literally, the most moving recitation I have ever experienced. It was like the man was chanting the blues. I was rocking—nearly dancing in my seat. It was so musical, so rhythmical—so soulful—that in my heart I felt like I was understanding exactly what he was saying, even though I knew in my head that I wasn't. Even he was rocking to his own rhythm as he recited. He would strike a gong from time to time, at seemingly random intervals; but in a few minutes I was striking my virtual gong right along with him, not missing a beat. It was amazing. I thought I might have been the only one who felt that way, but when I expressed my feelings to some of the others present, they said that they had a similar

³ Reading Sutras as a Spiritual Practice, Master Sheng-yen
<http://www.dharmawheel.net/viewtopic.php?f=41&t=51>

reaction. I still wonder what he was reciting because I would love to try to internalize it and reproduce that feeling.

Beneficial Effects of Reciting the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra itself describes vast benefits received by those whose ear the sutra reaches, although they may not even know of them. In chapter 5, Medicinal Herbs, when the Buddha is explaining to the eminent disciple Mahākāśyapa how the Dharma nourishes sentient beings, he says:

“When living beings hear the Dharma of a *tathāgata*, when they internalize it, recite it, keep faith with it, and practice it as expounded, they themselves will not know or comprehend what beneficial effects they will gain by doing so.”

In more than half of its twenty-eight chapters, the sutra speaks of sutra recitation—or of adorning or purifying the six sense faculties by means of recitation. Chapter 19, Beneficial Effects for a Dharma Teacher, opens with the Buddha saying to the bodhisattva Constant Endeavor:

“If men and women of good intent accept and keep faith with this Dharma Flower sutra, internalize it, recite it, explain it, and make record of it, such people will gain eight hundred beneficial effects for the eye, one thousand two hundred beneficial effects for the ear, eight hundred beneficial effects for the nose, one thousand two hundred beneficial effects for the tongue, eight hundred beneficial effects for the body, and one thousand two hundred beneficial effects for the mind. The six sense faculties, amended by means of these beneficial effects, will all be made pure.”

According to the sutra, perhaps the greatest beneficial effect of internalizing and reciting it is that the entire path to enlightenment is within it. In chapter 21, Wondrous Capabilities of the Tathāgata, when speaking to Superior Practice Bodhisattva and the great multitude, the Buddha says:

“Such are the wondrous capabilities of the buddhas—immeasurable, limitless, and beyond both thought and word. In the interest of passing this sutra on to others, if I were to employ these wondrous capabilities to enumerate its beneficial effects throughout immeasurable and limitless thousands of millions of myriads of untold numbers of *kalpas*, I still could not come to the end. But, to put it briefly: All of the teachings possessed by the Tathāgata, all of the unrestricted wondrous capabilities of the Tathāgata, the storehouse of all of the mysteries of the Tathāgata, and all of the exceedingly profound matters of the

Tathāgata are wholly announced, presented, brought to light, and expounded in this sutra. That is why you should wholeheartedly accept, internalize, recite, keep faith with, elucidate, expound, and make record of it—and practice what you expound—after the Tathāgata has passed away.”

And, personally, I count getting to know buddhas and being inspired by bodhisattvas as a beneficial effect of reciting the Lotus Sutra: being reminded of virtuous attitudes and being enchanted by the special qualities reflected in the names of bodhisattvas like Constant Endeavor, Never Belittle, Courageous Altruist, Sovereign Medicine, Inexhaustible Resolve, Loving Kindness, All-Embracing Goodness, Regarder of All Sounds in the World—and in names of buddhas like Dharma Radiance, Lovingly Beheld by All Sentient Beings, Richness of Pure light of the Sun and the Moon, Seven-Jeweled Red Lotus Flowers Underlying Each Footstep, and, perhaps my favorite, Unfettered Commander of Transcendent Power with Wisdom on the Scale of Mountains and Seas.

A Fresh Perspective Toward Translation of The Lotus Sutra

My practice as a layperson has been evolving over the course of more than thirty years. When I first encountered the Lotus Sutra, there were only three published translations into English from Kumārajīva's Chinese—the versions by Kato (published in 1971), Murano (1974), and Hurvitz (1976).⁴ I still use them. The opening line of the Kato version begins, “Once the Buddha was staying at the City of Royal Palaces on Mt. Gṛdhrakūṭa with a great assemblage of great bhikṣus, in all twelve thousand.” Murano's begins, “The Buddha once lived on Mt. Gṛdhrakūṭa in the City of King House. He was accompanied by twelve thousand great *bhikṣus*.” The Hurvitz translation begins, “At one time, the Buddha was dwelling in the city of King's House, on Gṛdhrakūṭa mountain together with twelve thousand great *bhikṣus*.” Over the years, other versions were published—Kubo and Yuyama (1991), which begins, “Once the Buddha was staying in the city of Rājagṛiha, on the mountain called Rājagṛiha, together with a great assembly of twelve thousand monks...” and Watson (1993), whose opening line is, “At one time the Buddha was in Rājagṛiha, staying on Mt.

⁴ *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*: Bunnō Katō, Yoshirō Tamura, and Kōjirō Miyasaka; Weatherhill/Kosei; New York, Tokyo; 1975. *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*: Senchu Murano; Nichiren Shu Headquarters, Tokyo; 1974. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*: Leon Hurvitz, Columbia University Press, New York, 1976.

Gṛdhrakūṭa . Accompanying him were a multitude of leading monks numbering twelve thousand persons.”⁵

In December of 2002, I attended the 13th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Bangkok, Thailand, where I went to a presentation by Jonathan Silk, entitled An Economic Approach to the Study of Indian Buddhism. I remember that he didn’t provide a handout of his presentation the way most presenters did at that time, so we had to listen—we had no text to read; we had to take everything in with our ears. (I don’t know if that was intentional or not, but I think maybe it was). Anyway, during his presentation, when speaking about the standard introductions to sutras he gave an example, saying, “Thus have I heard: On one occasion the Buddha was staying at the City of the Royal Palace...” I still remember how those three words, “on one occasion,” literally grabbed my attention. I wrote them down. There was not much difference in meaning between “at one time,” “once,” and “on one occasion,” but the additional syllables were somehow music to my ears, and that moment has stuck with me ever since. It was at that point I realized that, although I had read it, I had never really “heard” the sutra in that way before. I was fascinated by how that little change in wording created such a difference. That moment was the spark that ignited my desire to have sutras available with that kind of effect all the way through them, and that has brought me to my current focus on the Lotus Sutra.

Some time ago when I was Googling “Lotus Sutra Recitation” for information that I might find useful for this presentation, I found some interesting things. One of them was at a site called the Everlife Buddhist Education Center,⁶ and the post read:

“Nichiren recommended the recitation of two key Lotus Sutra chapters (second and sixteenth). Originally recorded in the Sanskrit and Pali languages of ancient India, the Lotus Sutra was translated into the Chinese by Kumārajīva. Today the Japanese transliteration of his translation is recited phonetically by millions of Buddhists throughout the world. The English translation that follows is for meaning only. Reading the Lotus Sutra (Skt. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*; Jpn. *Myōhō-Renge-Kyō*) in English *does not constitute the practice of recitation*” [emphasis mine].

It would be fair to say that I totally disagree with that last statement.

⁵ *The Lotus Sutra*: Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, Reiyukai, Tokyo, 1994. *The Lotus Sutra*: Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993. Outside of the timeline of the above narrative (i.e., after 2002), a more recent publication is, *The Lotus Sutra*: Gene Reeves, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2008.

⁶ <http://www.everlife.org/changingroom.htm>

A contributor posting on another site, The Endless Further,⁷ writes:

“I don’t subscribe to the notion that sutras must be chanted in an Asian language. I often recite the *Heart Sutra* in English and find it just as powerful and beneficial as in Sanskrit, Chinese, or Japanese. But there are a couple of caveats: *one being that when the sutras are translated into English the text is often chunky, the rhythm uneven*” [emphasis mine].

With this I certainly agree: I think this is one of the greatest factors contributing to the underutilization of sutra recitation in English. A passage from the *Sutra Expounded by the Buddha on Practice of the Way Through Contemplation of the Bodhisattva All-Embracing Goodness* reads:

“The sense faculty of hearing gives ear to disruptive sounds and spoils your sense of accord.”

Hearing chunkiness and uneven rhythms in the language is certainly not conducive to a sense of harmonious accord in English recitation.

It is of course true that several Lotus Sutra-based organizations—for example Reiyukai, Rissho Kosei-kai, and Heart of the Lotus International—promote recitation practices, and members/practitioners do recite in English. The recitation texts of these organizations—compiled for daily recitation practice—are made up of excerpts from the Threefold Lotus Sutra, and each organization has created texts specifically to facilitate English recitation. But because they are texts for daily recitation, they are by nature rather brief, and as far as I know to this date, the excerpts are not taken from an entire Threefold Lotus Sutra that has been translated to facilitate recitation in English.

Returning to the posting on The Endless Further, the writer continues:

“The second caveat is that when reciting in English, we have to avoid being tempted to ‘read’ the sutra. We should let the words flow through us, and from us, rather than trying to read them as we recite.”

Again, I agree. To facilitate internalization we must make sure that our translations are not rhythmically disruptive when they enter the ear, and that they do not disrupt the flow of our sense of accord with the story.

In my own translation work I try to avoid this disruption by imagining that I am building a word picture for a child. Our culture is a reading culture, not a listening one. We don’t challenge our minds to create mental images and remember things as was done ages ago. But the mind of a young person who hasn’t become fully dependent on reading is a fertile field for the cultivation and creation of images by means of input through the ears. Picture how children listen to stories when we read to them—eyes wide

⁷ <http://theendlessfurther.com/?p=3296>

as they construct the scenes in their minds with the building blocks of the words they hear, the intonations they process, and the rhythms that resound in their mind.

When I read the Lotus Sutra and take in all of its imaginative language, I feel that a child would be totally comfortable with hearing it because they let their minds absorb and create without question until something conflicts them. Kids have imagination; they can easily accept fancy; they go with a flow. They are able to picture people flying up out of the earth, towers hanging in the air, etc. And when we read to children, our own imagination often soars with the story. We go with the flow like they do. I think we can learn from them in that regard. I think taking the mind of a child into consideration would make our translations more attentive to detail, and it might stimulate us to use words differently—or to use different words—in building a smoothly continuing story and thus a more recitable text. I'll give you an example to explain why I think this way.

Chapter 11 - The Appearance of the Jeweled Memorial Tower, begins as follows:

“At that time, in front of the Buddha, a memorial tower made of the seven precious substances—measuring five hundred *yojanas* in height and two hundred fifty *yojanas* in width and depth—sprung forth from the ground into the air and remained suspended there.”

(It is important to note here that, according to dictionary sources, the minimum measure equivalent to 500 *yojanas* would be at least 16 kilometers.) Then, to be witnesses to the opening of this tower in which the buddha Abundant Treasures—who had long since realized extinguishment—abides, Shakyamuni Buddha then summons, from throughout the universe, all of the buddhas who are his separated embodiments. After they arrive, these innumerable buddhas send their emissaries to greet Shakyamuni and to scatter jeweled flowers over him in homage (the phrase “scatter jeweled flowers over the Buddha” appears several times in the sutra). Then Shakyamuni rises up into the air, preparing to open the door. Inside, the buddha Abundant Treasures—whose body is intact even though he had long since passed away—is heard to proclaim that it is a wonderful thing that Shakyamuni Buddha is teaching the Dharma and that he has come to hear it. The multitudes of beings who were present and observing all of this were stricken with wonderment and awe. Then, praising this unprecedented experience, they picked up the jeweled flowers that had been scattered over the Buddha when he was on the ground, and—as current English translations of the sutra say—“scattered them over Abundant Treasures Buddha and Shakyamuni Buddha.”⁸

Now, you can probably guess the reaction of children who might be hearing this story and building the picture in their mind. They most likely would be in wonder at the

⁸ All readings of all versions are similar to this. The lone exception is Senchu Murano's version, which reads: “They strewed heaps of jeweled flowers from heaven *to* the Many Treasures Buddha and also *to* Shakyamuni Buddha” (emphasis mine).

size of the tower, and at Shakyamuni Buddha floating in the air, and at the idea that the buddha in the tower, who had realized extinguishment ages ago, was talking to Shakyamuni—after all, these are buddhas with wondrous capabilities. And they most likely would also say, “Wait a minute! Those guys are way up in the air! How could the people throw flowers *over* them?” And they would be right, because a few lines later in the sutra, the beings in the multitude are thinking to themselves:

“The buddhas are seated high up and far away. If only the Tathāgata would make use of the power of his wondrous capabilities to let us join them up there in the air!”

At that moment Shakyamuni Buddha lifted up the entire great multitude using the power of his wondrous capabilities, and all became suspended in the air.

The Chinese character (上) describing where the flowers went quite clearly means “on, over, on top of,” and also “above, upper.” Nevertheless, even though “scattering flowers over a buddha” is a “stock phrase,” I think that, according to flow of the story as it unfolds, it can be slightly modified so that the flowers, in this case, are “cast up toward them.” I think a child’s mind would easily detect that disharmony in the flow, and I think that, as translators, we have to have a similar frame of mind.

The Art of Rhythm and Rhetoric

When I was formulating my ideas for this presentation, I often looked back on my experience of studying Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in high school. We studied it word-by-word, simile-by-simile, metaphor-by-metaphor, learning how pictures were made with language. As we dealt with the words, and as the story came to our mind through our eyes, there was no excitement at all (back then it seemed more like drudgery). The genius of the teacher, however, was to then show us *Julius Caesar* the movie. When the story came to us through both our eyes and our ears, we got it; and the Shakespearian experience at once became upliftingly complete. This is what I think sutra recitation can do for us.

We usually translate with an eye to literary quality, but maybe not with an ear to the spoken word. We translate with intent to bring simplicity and understanding to the mind through our eyes, but maybe not with an idea of building pictures in the mind through our ears. But we *know* of the power of words when they reverberate and resound within us. We *know* how much we are stirred by a righteous rhythm of rhetoric. What is the mathematical difference, for example, if a quantity of things is described as being 87 things, or as and four score and seven things? With regard to the number of things, there is no difference. But Abraham Lincoln, opening one of the most beloved speeches in American history with the statement, “Four score and seven years ago,” understood the importance of their difference in expression. John F. Kennedy’s speechwriter knew how to make a common combination become heroic when directed to the ears. “Don’t ask”

became “Ask not,” and those of us who heard the line spoken during Kennedy’s inaugural address in January, 1961, are unlikely to forget how, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” inspired so many into service for others. In 1963 Martin Luther King mesmerized a great multitude in Washington D.C. with the simple words, “I have a dream,” spoken with overwhelming conviction. But what kind of impact would Marc Antony have had if he had started his call to arms with, “Friends, Romans, countrymen, I’ve got something I wanna tell ya!”

We can take things to heart and be motivated and inspired by things that we see, or by things that we read—by words put together in a certain way that come to our mind through our eyes. We can take things to heart and be motivated and inspired by things that we hear—by songs and by poems; by words put together in a certain way that come to our mind through our ears. The most important aspect of a sutra is what one does with it—how one uses it in life. When we recite a sutra, it affects us differently than if we are simply reading it in order to find a doctrine. What is important is how we make use of what the text inspires in us. The recitation of a sutra is an opportunity to be motivated and inspired by words that we can both see and hear. I don’t believe that current translations of the Lotus Sutra into English have put enough emphasis on the aspect of entry to the heart and mind through the ear, and that is why I think that sutra recitation is an underutilized practice by English speaking people whose Buddhist practice is based on the Lotus Sutra.

We used to have hard copy tickets for air travel. Now we have E-tickets. A show of hands, please: Do any of you remember what the original E-ticket was? An E ticket used to be for the most thrilling rides at Disneyland. I think that what we need with the Lotus Sutra—or with any other sutras to be translated into English for that matter—is a Double E-ticket. I believe we need to build translations that let us board these uplifting and enlightening vehicles through the gateway of the Ear as well as through the gateway of the Eye. And so I hope that both Shakespeare and Longfellow will appear together in some future time; that they will return to this *saha* world fluent in Sanskrit, Chinese and English; and that they will then collaborate with sutra scholars to make translations of the Lotus and other sutras.

Well, I can dream, can’t I? Until that time, however, I offer this presentation as an encouragement to keep the need for recitation in mind as we create English translations of sutras.