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On the Nature and Message of the Lotus Sūtra in the Light of Early Buddhism and Buddhist Scholarship (Towards the Beginnings of Mahāyāna)

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The aim of this paper is to compare the contents of the Lotus Sūtra and the style of presentation of its message with the thrust of the Buddha's teachings as they are preserved in the early Buddhist sources, particularly the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon, and also in the Pāli commentarial literature. In the process it attempts to identify in the early sources the precedents of some of the bold statements in the Lotus Sūtra which appear as complete innovations, but may be elaborations of elements contained in Pāli sources in germinal form. Despite the difference in style, language and mythological imagery, the conclusion is that both the Sutta Piṭaka and the Lotus Sūtra express in their respective manners the true spirit of the Buddhist message. Attention is drawn also to the striking parallels between the Buddhist picture of the multiple universe and modern cosmological theories.

Buddhism has produced a profusion of canonical and commentarial sources outlining many doctrines or formulations of its message, some of which appear to contradict each other, particularly in their ontological statements. Nevertheless adherents of all Buddhist schools of thought would agree on one point, namely that the ultimate aim of Buddhism is the achievement of liberation from the *necessity* of rebirth in the world of *saṁsāra*. This central message is explicitly or implicitly present in all Buddhist writings. It is only in modern times that in some Western circles the aspect of final liberation has been lost sight of and Buddhist practices are taken up as recipes for good living or even utilised in psychotherapeutic procedures. The message of final liberation was hammered in by the Buddha in many discourses

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of the 'basket of discourses' (Sutta Piṭaka), the second part of the Pāli Canon, the earliest comprehensive source of Buddhist teachings preserved in admirable completeness by the Theravāda school and written down in the 1st century BC in Sri Lanka. According to tradition it was recited at the first Buddhist Council in Rājagaha in the presence of 500 *arahats* in the first year after the Buddha's death.

The Buddha stressed the message of liberation especially on occasions when he declined to answer metaphysical questions stemming from speculation unsupported by experience. Instead he pointed to caves and trees as places for meditation, since speculation leads nowhere but meditation opens the gate to wisdom and direct knowledge of one's true self and of the nature of reality. However, paradoxical as it might seem, the Sutta Piṭaka and the preserved fragments of its Sanskrit versions produced by other Hīnayāna schools contain many hints that can be viewed as germs of later elaborate teachings of Mahāyāna schools. As is well known, many Mahāyāna sūtras explicitly associate themselves with the early sources by adopting their framework with respect to the place, time and manner of their delivery by the Buddha. Examining them in the light of the early discourses while also applying scholarly criteria, but with an open sympathetic mind, may greatly enhance our understanding of later scriptures and their doctrines and help us place them in context within the globality of the Buddhist tradition.

In the present article I wish to look in this way at the Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra (The Lotus Discourse on True Reality) in its Sanskrit version. Nothing much is known about its origin. Some scholars have expressed the opinion that it was originally composed in Prakrit in the Gandhāra region or in some vernacular in the heart of the Kushana Empire in Central Asia and was later translated into Sanskrit to enhance its reputation in educated circles (Kern, 1963; Watson, 1993). It may have been composed around the turn of our era or a century later, but its material was no doubt in making for some time prior to that. It is preserved in two versions. The shorter one (chs. 1–20 and 27) is, for linguistic reasons, regarded as older; it is also more compact. The second version has an interpolation of texts (chs 21–26) different in style and character and may be dated towards the end of the second century AD.[1]

Although a late creation, the Lotus Sūtra sticks to the convention of early discourses, starting with the formula 'Thus have I heard …' and describing the familiar scene on the Vulture Peak (Gṛdhrakūta) near Rājagṛha (modern Rajgir) where the Buddha, according to the Sutta Piṭaka, delivered several discourses to the congregation of monks and nuns, lay adherents and often also invisible deities (*devatās*). In the Lotus Sūtra the assembled Saṅgha is very large and contains many *arahats*, and in addition to hosts of *devatās* there are also innumerable *bodhisattvas*, presumably also invisible to ordinary worldlings. The presence of *bodhisattvas* is a marked Mahāyāna innovation. The traditional view of a *bodhisattva* was that he was on the way to becoming the Buddha (*tathāgata*) of a future world period and would enter the final *nirvāṇa* on accomplishing a one-life mission like the historical Buddha Gautama. But it transpires from later passages that those present were a new kind of 'permanent *bodhisattvas*' who had vowed not to enter *nirvāṇa* until all sentient

beings had been liberated. This, however, may never happen because *saṁsāra* would appear to be inexhaustible.

The text tells us that the Buddha had just delivered a discourse called 'Great Elucidation' (Mahānirdeśa) and entered the state of meditational absorption (*samādhi*) described as the 'basis for elucidation of infinity' (*ananta-nirdeśa-pratiṣṭhāna*) whereupon flowers showered down upon him and the earth shook. Most of what follows next is taking place not on an ordinary everyday level but on a higher transcendental or visionary plane. However, this does not mean that the discourse discards its concrete terrestrial anchorage in the quasi historical framework of the Buddha Śākyamuni's earthly mission. One has to look at this discourse as proceeding simultaneously on several existential planes and in different, although overlapping, time warps. In Buddhist cosmology existential dimensions in all the innumerable world systems interlock and cannot be viewed as entirely separate localities. Similarly, the time rhythms of these dimensions are intertwined as are the relations between the past, present and future phases of the flow of time. In this infinite multidimensional universe *tathāgatas* and advanced *bodhisattvas* are able to communicate with each other across vast chunks of space and time without impairing their 'normal' activities in our 'real' (material) world with its rigid laws, three-dimensional spatial coordinates and lineal time sequence.

Whether this astonishing picture of the cosmos is a product of creative imagination or direct knowledge acquired through meditation, Buddhist understanding of the complexities of reality thus predates Einstein's insight into the four-dimensional time–space continuum. If we make allowances for the different way of expressing its ideas when compared with scientific jargon, we can see that in a way the Buddhist cosmology anticipates even the contemporary string theory with its mathematical constructs of eleven dimensions as well as the '(mem)brane' theory with its parallel worlds.[2] Not even modern science fiction seems capable of outdoing the vision of the Lotus Sūtra.

From this point of view the adoption of the historical framework of Śākyamuni's discourse on the Vulture Peak with a large gathering of monks and nuns 2,600 years ago, even with the addition of the host of *bodhisattvas*, appears quite logical. One part of the assembled disciples would be able to hear only the 'conventional' version of the discourse which was carefully memorised by specialised monks (*bhānakas*) for later recitation and inclusion into the early canonical collections, while its full 'transcendental' version could be heard only by those monks and nuns who had developed the ability of suprasensory perception, such as some *arahats* and a few other 'noble persons' (*ariya puggalas*), and of course by 'visiting' *bodhisattvas* and perhaps some *devatās* who had been the Buddha's disciples in their previous lives on earth (such as the *devaputta* Hatthaka whose visit to the Buddha in Jetavana is described in A I, 278f.).

What is somewhat surprising in face of the great importance attached to the Lotus Sūtra within the Mahāyāna tradition is the fact that there is not much in it which can be classified as doctrinal content. Its main message is expressed in brief statements and is relatively simple despite its insistence that it fully reveals the highest truth contained in the old tradition in a cryptic form. One reason given for

its popularity and effectiveness is its literary form, which is rather dramatic, not to say theatrical, as if it had been derived from contemporary conventions used in staging Indian epic stories and influenced by the tricks employed in the budding Indian classical drama that was partly inspired by Greek examples (as was Buddhist sculpture in the Gandhāra period). This dramatic streak manifests itself in sudden changes of scene, unexpected and unusual entries of performers and in surprising turns of events.

The drama starts with Śākyamuni issuing from the point between his eyebrows (*urṇā*) a ray of light that illuminates countless worlds (*buddhakṣetras*) with all their dimensions from the highest spiritual realms to the deepest hells and with preaching Buddhas in each one of them. The Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī explains that this revelation is a sure sign that the present Buddha Śākyamuni will deliver the Lotus Discourse on True Reality. This he duly does, having emerged from his *samādhi*. Its first startling message proclaims the hitherto current teachings on three paths to liberation to have been just skilful devices (*upāyakauśalya*). They are: the Hīnayāna teachings on the liberation of his disciples on the path to arahatship (*śrāvakayāna*) and of individual ascetics on the path to solitary enlightenment (*pratyekabuddhayāna*) as well as the early Mahāyāna teaching for those who aspire to become helpers of multitudes by renouncing *nirvāṇa* when they reach its threshold (*bodhisattvayāna*). These teachings were meant to lure beings from burning desires that tied them to worldly pursuits leading to repeated deaths. The truth is that the achievement of the goal of all these three *yānas* is only a stopover.

After this proclamation doubts crept into the minds of many listeners, including 500 of the host of present *arahats*. Was it truly the Enlightened One or some apparition making it? To clarify the point the Buddha, at Śāriputra's instigation, said that none of the doubters would have been able to grasp the full truth if it had been revealed to them or even to accept the validity of this profound truth. All that could be done for them was to enable them to embark on their respective 'minor' paths. The Buddha then agreed to expound the full truth further. In this dramatic moment the 500 *arahats*, distrustful of this unexpected disclosure, 'staged a walk-out' (as it was once put by Christmas Humphreys, the late founding president of the London Buddhist Society, during a lecture). One has to understand this event, I think, in the sense that these monks did not develop suprasensory perception so that they just could not hear or take in the meaning of the further parts of the discourse on the transcendental level and remained content with their limited '*arahat nirvāṇa*', not realising that it was only a temporary respite. Their departure would not have been a physical 'walk-out' from the congregation, but a mental withdrawal into the isolation of their meditational achievement with which they were satisfied.

The Buddha then disclosed that the only reason why *tathāgatas* appeared in the world was to open the eyes of beings to see that the sole way (*ekayāna*) to truth for those who truly aspired to find it was *buddhayāna*. This is the way to the only sure achievement, namely to perfect enlightenment (*sammāsaṁbodhi*) which entails the acquisition of higher powers (*siddhi*) and knowledges (*abhijñā*). Those who have achieved them will then be enabled to save innumerable beings and to culminate their salvific activity by passing into the final *nirvāṇa*. The *arahats* who regard their

achievement as final are only deceiving themselves. Śāriputra then realised that he himself had lived until now under that illusion, but was consoled by the Buddha who foretold his career as the Buddha Padmaprabha in a brilliant *buddhakṣetra* in the distant future. Overjoyed, the other participants were reminded by this teaching of the Buddha's first 'historical' discourse in the Deer Park near Sarnāth known as the Dharmacakrapravartaṇa Sūtra. Therefore they called the present occasion 'the second turning of the wheel of the doctrine'.

In order to disperse any doubts about the reliability and wisdom of his new revelation the Buddha then gave his reasons for having in the past taught the three lower *yānas* leading to merely interim results. He elucidated it by way of the famous parable of the burning house. The three *yānas* are compared in it to attractive toys that a father has just brought for his children from a trip. Finding his house on fire, he lures the children, absorbed in their childish games, out of the house by displaying in the yard the superior toys he has brought. (This scene can be found depicted on the outer walls of some Korean temples.) Thus rescued, the children can then slowly mature playing with the superior toys and eventually they become ready to inherit their father's fortune. Can this man be charged with deception?

It may not be flattering to the followers of the three lower *yāna* to be compared with immature youngsters and their spiritual methods with toys. Some Mahāyāna sources extolling the *bodhisattvayāna* did indeed look down upon the other two *yānas* as inferior so that the designation Hīnayāna coined for them (so disliked by the followers of Theravāda if it is applied to their school) acquired somewhat pejorative overtones. But that is not the case in the Lotus Sūtra, because even the *bodhisattvayāna* is classified in it as a lower path, even though it is higher than the other two. Adoption of one or the other depends on temperament: *śrāvakayāna* is for those who need to follow authority and so they become the Buddha's disciples struggling to rid themselves of passions, *pratyekabuddhayāna* appeals to those who prefer to rely on their own efforts, while those who are inspired by the thought of helping others choose *bodhisattvayāna*, which is a way to a fuller enlightenment than is achieved on the other two paths. They therefore deserve to be regarded as 'great beings' (*mahāsattvas*), but even they will have to show that they have matured by developing a strong and genuine aspiration to thread their way to absolute truth, because only then will they benefit from the prompting of the Buddha to go for *sammāsaṁbodhi* with all that it entails.

Many famous *arahats* praised in the early scriptures and present in the assembly then realised that they were wrong in assuming that they had reached final *nirvāṇa*. They had calmed their passions but had not acquired appropriate *siddhis* and *abhijñās* in full so that they did not take in the full meaning of the Buddha's message, although now they saw that it was there on offer all the time. Here the parable of the prodigal son who worked in his father's estate without realising that he was the heir to it is put to good use. Other parables illustrate the message and enable a true understanding of the goal to be grasped by many other figures known from the Hīnayāna sources, including Ānanda, the Buddha's son Rāhula and his foster mother Prajāpatī.

The Buddha then singled out the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja and addressing him

directly, extolled the significance of the message of the Lotus Sūtra for the activity and final accomplishment of the *bodhisattvas* who had vowed to help other beings to liberation. Only if they pass on its message will their help be effective, provided they do it in the spirit of benevolence and with infinite patience and modesty, bearing in mind the emptiness of all phenomena—a teaching here only hinted at without being fully expounded in this anti-speculation *sūtra*, because they will realise it directly when they reach buddhahood, but they can teach it even before that, because the Buddha Śākyamuni will assist them even after he will have passed away. This is another pointer to the Mahāyāna concept of the transcendental nature of Buddhas and their unlimited ability to intervene in the phenomenal world without being restricted by time and space.

The freedom of movement across boundaries of time and space that *tathāgatas* command is then again dramatically demonstrated by the sudden appearance of a precious stūpa with the ancient Buddha Prabhūtaratna inside it. Before he entered final *nirvāṇa* many world periods ago, he had promised himself to appear in any *buddhakṣetra* in which the Lotus Sūtra is being expounded. Because of the infinite number of worlds there must always be one or more of them in which this is happening so that we might be excused for regarding Prabhūtaratna's *nirvāṇa* as a state of constant coming and going rather than the final repose. Of course, we have to bear in mind the relativity of time and space whose parameters do not apply to those who have achieved buddhahood. Synchronicity of events and participation in them without being affected or disturbed by them is no problem for 'paranirvāṇic' Buddhas despite the infinity of worlds to be visited. This is further demonstrated by the arrival of innumerable *tathāgatas* from different universes to take part in this cosmic jamboree of spiritual giants.

The Buddha Śākyamuni then took his seat in the stūpa beside Prabhūtaratna and related a story from a past life of his when he gave up a kingdom to be able to struggle for perfect enlightenment. While developing perfections (*pāramitā*), he was assisted by an ascetic present in the assembly who was no other than the monk Devadatta. Known from Pāli sources as an initially successful meditator who acquired higher powers (*iddhi/siddhi*) but not any stage of sanctity, he developed the ambition to lead the Saṅgha in the place of the aging Buddha who, however, refused to retire. Devadatta then plotted with prince Ajātasattu, who was eager to inherit the throne of Magadha, to divide between themselves the spiritual and worldly powers in the state by murdering the Buddha and the prince's father, king Bimbisāra.[3] Only the prince succeeded, but he repented later and became the Buddha's admirer. Devadatta failed, because Buddhas cannot be deprived of life; only Śākyamuni's heel suffered injury during Devadatta's attempt to kill him. The Pāli sources relate that Devadatta was then swallowed by the earth to suffer in Avīcī hell for a 100,000 world periods (*kappas*), but would then become a *paccekabuddha*, because in the last moment he took refuge to the Buddha. His presence during the delivery of the Lotus Sūtra means that in the terrestrial timescale it must have taken place before his treachery, for he was excluded from the order of monks after it, but if he was already in hell, he must have had some residual *siddhis* to participate in this cosmic event. Śākyamuni went beyond the promise in Pāli sources (that he would become a

paccekabuddha) and foretold for him a career as the Buddha Devarāja in a very remote future world period.

Then a dramatic appearance was made by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī who had earlier left the assembly to teach in the world of *nāgas*, serpent beings inhabiting a watery realm who often visit the earth, also in human form. Pāli sources describe how their king Mucalinda sheltered the Buddha after his enlightenment from a storm by coiling himself seven times round the Buddha's body and expanding his hood above his head.[4] Mañjuśrī was followed by the eight-year old daughter of the king of *nāgas* who had fully grasped the message of the Lotus Sūtra from Mañjuśrī's delivery and was ripe for buddhahood. Śākyamuni acknowledged her achievement by accepting an offering from her to the consternation of the congregation because of her age and sex, but the principle according to which a being with a feminine body cannot become a Buddha (later disputed, especially by some modern Buddhist feminists) was preserved: she changed into a male on the spot and departed into another world to become its *tathāgata*.

All the *bodhisattvas* present were highly impressed by this event and vowed to spread the message of the Lotus Sūtra in the coming decadent age after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, but the Buddha had already prepared for the task a large number of *bodhisattvas* who now immediately started emerging from the crevices of the earth. The Bodhisattva Maitreya, the future Buddha of our world period, expressed surprise that Śākyamuni could have accomplished the training of such a multitude in the mere 40 years that had elapsed since his enlightenment. Replying, the Buddha disclosed the last great secret of the Lotus Sūtra: he had achieved *sammāsaṁbodhi* innumerable ages ago and since then had disseminated his message innumerable times in innumerable worlds under different names, including that of Dīpaṅkara, the first Buddha of the present world period.[5] His life in the flesh as Gautama Śākyamuni was a mirage, an act he had brought about by his supreme power (he says: *mamādhiṣṭhānabalādhāna*) with the aim of enabling beings of this age to receive his guidance.[6] He will continue in his mission on the phenomenal (material) level under different names and simultaneously on the transcendental level, as on this occasion, for an equal number of world periods as he has done hitherto as the cosmic Buddha Śākyamuni. Only then will he have fulfilled his task. Whether when he enters *parinirvāṇa* it will be his final repose is not quite clear, but considering the example of the Buddha Prabhūtaratna we may doubt it.

If we try to assess the status of this cosmic Buddha Śākyamuni, we can only say that he appears to be a kind of 'Mahā Buddha', but is one among many; the *tathāgatas* who came from other universes to join the jamboree are his equals, not his magic creations or his emanations. He is not the eternal Ādi Buddha of later developed buddhology, nor is there a suggestion in the text that he originates from or is rooted in some eternal principle of buddhahood that later emerged under the term *dharmakāya*, although germs of the *trikāya* doctrine could be identified in the text. What is clear is that he has a definite, albeit immensely long time scale of involvement in salvific activities in innumerable appearances as the Buddha of different world periods in different worlds and under different names. His present

form as the terrestrial as well as transcendental Buddha Śākyamuni is central in the sense that it marks the middle of his cosmic career.

What follows after this grandiose culmination can be viewed as only minor issues, such as technical aspects of practice on different levels, although these may be of great importance for 'ordinary' followers of the message of the Lotus Sūtra. The text stresses that it is a great privilege to be acquainted with this message, because there are many Buddhas who do not teach it. This is underlined by a miraculous demonstration of a kind of cosmic firework display which allowed the event to be seen in innumerable worlds. Then the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja took the stage again, this time by his own initiative, and demonstrated the power of his system of magic protective formulas (*dhāraṇī*) that the Buddha supplemented with a story from Bhaiṣajyarāja's past lives. Bhaiṣajyarāja offered his own life in a fire sacrifice to honour the Buddha of the time and his delivery of the Lotus Sūtra. He was subsequently reborn during the lifetime of the same Buddha who then entrusted him with the funeral arrangements for himself, including the entombment of his relics. Bhaiṣajyarāja fulfilled the task and to honour the relics burned his arm which, however, immediately regenerated itself when he uttered a 'vow of truth'. The result was that he became the 'king of healing' and was later associated with the 'Medicine Buddha' Bhaiṣajyaguru who is widely worshipped in China, Korea (as Yaksa Yorae), Japan and Tibet.

Bhaiṣajyarāja's act of burning his arm as an offering to honour his teacher is reminiscent of the story of Huike (Huei-k'e) when he pressed Bodhidharma to accept him as his disciple, a scene often depicted on outer walls of Korean temples. There may also be a link from Bhaiṣajyarāja's act of self-sacrifice to other instances of self-immolation of monks in flames as exemplified by Ven. Tich Quang Duc in Vietnam on 22 June 1963 in protest against the persecution of Buddhism by state authorities under a Roman Catholic president.[7] Another self-imposed endurance test, still practised in China and possibly elsewhere in the Far East, is to light candles placed on one's arm or on the top of one's head until they burn out which leaves hollowed out traces in the skin. (A monk in the Shaolin monastery in China showed me such marks on his head on 8 April 2000.)

Shortage of space means that analysis of further episodes in the Lotus Sūtra, interesting though they are, must be left for another occasion and that we proceed to concluding remarks. At first glance the Lotus Sūtra may make an impression of a fantastic text in contrast with the 'sober' nature of the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, but is their reputation for soberness fully justified? Does it not stem from the fact that early European accounts of Buddhist teachings based on Pāli sources usually disregarded supernatural elements contained in them? This happened because early European interpreters of Pāli sources valued in the first place the rational features of Buddhist philosophy and ethics and brushed aside everything that did not fit in with this image as superstitious accretions, although, paradoxically, some of them were believing Christians and would not regard supernatural features of their faith (such as miracles, appearances of angels or the Virgin Mary, divine intervention in world history etc.) as superstitions. However, that has changed and if we look at and assess the sources in their entirety, we may find that there is not as wide a

difference between the Sutta Piṭṭaka and the Lotus Sūtra as may appear on the surface.

Let us take the setting of the Lotus Sūtra first. The Buddha of the Sutta Piṭaka often talked and preached to *devas* and other beings inhabiting invisible dimensions and they often came to listen to him when he was delivering a discourse to his disciples. Adding *bodhisattvas* to them is not against the spirit of early Buddhism, even though they are not explicitly mentioned. Pāli sources allow an implicit conclusion about the existence of many *bodhisattvas* preparing themselves for a Buddha's mission. Only the Bodhisattva Maitreya (Metteyya) is mentioned explicitly in the Pāli Canon as the future Buddha, but there is no reason why many *bodhisattvas* could not be present when a Buddha preaches if they have developed powers to move about in transcendental spheres which, after all, some monks also managed to do even prior to becoming *arahats*. While the Pāli sources make it clear that the Buddha knew Maitreya and presumably also communicated with him, at least when visiting Tuṣita heaven, the absence of references to other *bodhisattvas* does not mean that he would not have been aware of or even in touch with them. He also recognised the traces of past Buddhas even when he was still travelling on the path to enlightenment as a *bodhisatta* and would have been in contact with them when he accomplished his path. About the status of Buddhas after they pass away from the material world, the Pāli sources are silent and the Theravāda monks avoid the subject, but the transcendental presence of past Buddhas creates no problem for the lay followers in Theravāda countries who venerate them and even pray to them.[8]

The Lotus Sūtra's verbal formulation about *buddhayāna* being the only way to final liberation may look like a total innovation, but it need not be so viewed if we take into account the situation after the Buddha's demise. Soon false *arahats* started appearing on the scene and sometimes even monks who earnestly strove for spiritual accomplishment on the traditional Buddha's eightfold path mistakenly thought that they had achieved arahatship. They used the method of 'dry' or 'pure' insight (*sukkha* or *suddha vipassanā*), which led to the uprooting of passions, but not to the acquisition of higher knowledges (*abhiññā*), which include, among others, remembrance of all one's former existences (*pubbenivāssānussati*), knowledge of destinations in future lives according to actions in previous ones (*yathākammūpagañāṇa*) and sure knowledge of the destruction of one's cankers (*āsavakkhayañāṇa*) and therefore the certainty of being liberated from further rebirth.[9] After some years an event would arouse a residue of passion in them so that they saw that there was still work to be done.[10] Also outside the Saṅgha there were (and even nowadays are) dubious 'holy men' who would, in the Buddhist context, pass for *pratyekabuddhas* if they were genuine. There is no wonder that both arahatship and pratyekabuddhahood eventually lost their appeal and that only perfect enlightenment (*sammāsaṁbodhi*) with the whole set of higher knowledges could provide the certainty that the final goal had been attained. This goal was first conceived, following the example of Gotama Buddha, as the way to becoming an enlightened 'teacher of gods and men' as the Buddha of some future world period, but later this conception underwent modifications.

A further problem arose with the appearance of would-be *bodhisattvas* who

conceived the idea of bringing help to others as long as there were beings who needed it—a complete innovation. As the possibility of the whole world of *saṁsāra* being transfigured into a 'nirvāṇic' reality is nowhere unequivocally envisaged, they may never enter *nirvāṇa*. The impression one gains from some texts is that some of these 'permanent *bodhisattvas*' just wanted to enjoy the 'good life' in *saṁsāra* permanently, while at the same time revelling in the status of spiritual masters; they pursued blatantly worldly practices which they proclaimed to be skilful devices (*upāyakauśalya*) for winning people after they had gone astray to embrace the *dharma*. The Lotus Sūtra rectifies this innovation. The cosmic Buddha Śākyamuni made it clear to all *bodhisattvas*, genuine or otherwise, that even they are subject to the discipline of *buddhayāna*.

Does everyone who enters *buddhayāna* have to assume on its completion the role of a Buddha in a certain world period or even become a cosmic *tathāgata* like the Buddha Śākyamuni of the Lotus Sūtra? This issue is not directly addressed, but there are some indications in it that there are different kinds of Buddhas, for example those who do not proclaim the teachings of the Lotus Sūtra. Maybe becoming a *buddha* meant for some just reaching absolute certainty of their liberation since buddhahood entails the attainment of all *abhijñās*. Some later developments in Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism and even in Zen (Sōn) certainly point that way, which brings us back to the issue of arahatship.

The old tradition, and the present-day Theravāda one, regard it as the final liberation; the Buddha himself carries the epithet *arahat* in the formula praising him. The Lotus Sūtra sees it as a temporary repose, yet it does not deny that *arahats* are liberated from rebirth in known spheres of *saṁsāra*. It insists only that arahatship is not the final state of perfection so that genuine aspirants for truth must embark on *buddhayāna* to become fully enlightened. Yet it appears that the earliest concept of arahatship included the attainment of *abhiññās* (D 13 & 34; M 3; 6 & 7) and the Buddha envisaged just after his enlightenment that his accomplished disciples (*sāvakas*) would become even fully fledged teachers of the *dhamma* (D 16). On several occasions he later allowed some *arahats* to deliver a discourse and then approved of it saying that he himself would have dealt with the topic in the same way, although the overall superiority of his teaching skills was obvious. Nevertheless *arahats* were equal to him in the sense of having attained the final liberation. Some commentaries even refer to *arahats* as Buddhas (e.g. Sāratthappakāsinī I, 20). So the gap between some types of Buddha in the Lotus Sūtra and accomplished *arahats* of the Pāli tradition may not be as great as initially appears. The gap starts to widen when it comes to the specifically Theravāda notion of *arahats* without *abhiññās*, which seems to have appeared when the Saṅgha became rather big and the guidance of newcomers was entrusted to advanced disciples. During the Buddha's lifetime he could, and often did, confirm the attainment of arahatship by his disciples and thus guaranteed the integrity of the Saṅgha. What started happening when he was no longer available to do so has already been dealt with above.

The disclosure, in the Lotus Sūtra, of the immensely long period of activity of the Buddha Śākyamuni in different worlds and ages under different names may be a strikingly new formulation, but in fact its germinal form can be seen in the early

Buddhist teaching of the periodic appearances of 'historical' Buddhas in most successive world periods. Does not this assurance of the availability of the salvific message through accomplished teachers in almost every world period imply some transcendental backing? It would be philosophically unsatisfactory to accept that each time an individual attains perfect enlightenment it is a unique and ever new event in *saṁsāra* which would thus for a time have within it a person with a nirvāṇic mind and that such an event must of necessity happen from time to time. This necessity, I think, implicitly suggests the existence of a nirvāṇic dimension of Buddhas with some kind of link to *saṁsāra* that enables enlightenment to break through into it. This is corroborated by the often quoted Pāli passage about the existence of 'an unborn, unoriginated, unmade, uncompounded', which makes escape from 'the born' etc. possible (Udāna VIII, 3). About the existence of Buddhas in the realm of the unborn there is silence, though not a denial, in the Pāli Canon. The Buddha only states in several of his discourses that no description fits the state of a *tathāgata* after his bodily death. Similarly, the Lotus Sūtra, while dealing with the existence of Buddhas in transcendence, does not describe their nirvāṇic state when they are not active, although it accepts their reappearances in the manifested universe on a higher plane as in the case of Prabhūtaratna. The Theravāda tradition deviates from the canonical texts in that it denies any involvement in or connection of the Buddha with the world after his bodily demise. It admits only to residual influence of his personality, which still lingers on, but popular perception of the Buddha's status in Theravāda countries is much more positive, as mentioned above. In fact it corresponds in practice more to the teachings of the Lotus Sūtra than to the restrained interpretations of Theravāda monks.

There are many other features in the Lotus Sūtra that have their precedents in the early tradition and in Theravāda sources. The magic formulas (*dhāraṇī*) are known as *parita* in Pāli (*pirit* in Sinhala) and have canonical backing (D III, 194). Stories from past lives of disciples told by the Buddha to illustrate the working of karmic laws and explain contemporary situations are frequent in Pāli sources, both canonical and commentarial. As to the many predictions of buddhahood in the Lotus Sūtra, the Pāli precedent, apart from the canonical passages about the future Buddha Metteyya/Maitreya, is the commentarial story of the ascetic Sumedha and the Buddha Dīpaṅkara that has already been referred to above. It corresponds to the spirit of Mahāyāna to make a much more frequent use of this feature.

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the early discourses of the Buddha and the Lotus Sūtra is the latter's style, which makes an impression of exaggerated claims and is full of fantastic events, assertions and metaphors, but this has to be viewed as the natural means of expressing suprarational messages in a mythological language corresponding to the spirit of the time. It was calculated to impress multitudes at a time when pre-Buddhist Brāhmanism was making a comeback as popular Hinduism by admitting into its corpus the equally fantastic mythology of the Purāṇas. Even this fanciful mythological idiom has its inner logic and lends itself to analysis. Even the Sutta Piṭaka, which so impressed its early European interpreters with its many sober rational passages congenial to the modern way of thinking, has its own mythology and uses symbolical imagery to express the

suprarational contents of its message. My conclusion therefore is that the Lotus Sūtra presents in its own peculiar way the true spirit of the Buddhist message. It has certainly succeeded in bringing its liberating teaching to many millions of people in the course of many centuries and enabled them not only to grasp its basic message, but also to incorporate its practice into their lives on different levels according to their individual capabilities.

Abbreviations

A Aṅguttara Nikāya
D Dīgha Nikāya
M Majjhima Nikāya

Notes

[1] The full version was translated into Chinese in AD 225, but better known is the later translation by Kumārajīva dated to 406. It differs somewhat from both Sanskrit versions so that one can surmise that he worked from a different, perhaps vernacular version, now lost.

[2] The Buddhist (and Hindu) notion of successive births and dissolutions of the universe has its parallel in the 'Big Bang' theory and the associated, although disputed, theory of the 'pulsating universe'; it has recently reappeared in the 'brane theory', which envisages the origin of multiple successive and parallel universes in the collision of membranes (Chown, 2003; Greene, 2000).

[3] If this story reflects historical events and if the plot had succeeded, there would have arisen in India in the 5th century BC a similar situation to that in medieval Europe where power was divided between the Pope and the Emperor, who nevertheless then often fought with each other for supremacy with dire consequences for the nations of Europe and the integrity of the Christian religion.

[4] Some see in it a hint at the 'serpent power' Kuṇḍalinī Devī and the seven spiritual centres (*cakras*) along the spine through which she travels during an ascetic's yoga practice, resulting in enlightenment when she reaches the highest centre on the top of the head.

[5] This is in direct conflict with the Theravāda commentarial story according to which the Buddha Gotama conceived the intention to become a Buddha in a previous life as the ascetic Sumedha when he met the Buddha Dīpaṅkara (Jātaka I, 2f; Dhammapada Commentary I, 68; Buddhavaṁsa II, 5; Sutta Nipāta Commentary I, 49; the story is related also in Divyāvadāna).

[6] A similar teaching, known as Docetism, emerged also in early Christianity under the influence of Gnosticism. It regarded Christ's earthly life and death as mere appearance. It was condemned as heresy by the Roman Church at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

[7] This example of a peaceful self-sacrifice in protest against official oppression, carefully planned to avoid harming anybody else (which sharply contrasts with the intention of contemporary suicide bombers to harm as many people as possible whether they are supposedly guilty in some way or just innocent bystanders), was followed by two students in Prague, Jan Palach on 16 January 1969 and Jan Zajíc on 25 February 1969. The motivation of these peaceful young freedom fighters was to rouse their countrymen to an inner resistance against the subjugation of the soul of their nation by the alien Marxist ideology after its re-imposition on the people of Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Soviet invasion of the country on 21 August 1968.

[8] The exploration of the problem of personality and its state after liberation both in Buddhist and Hindu contexts was the subject of several of my articles (Werner, 1978, 1986, 1988, 1996.

[9] See Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhi magga*, ch. XVIII.
[10] For an extensive treatment of this topic and references see Werner (1981).

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