

INTRODUCTION TO THE LOTUS SUTRA

Lecture #2 (Sep. 17, 2008)

The Five Periods of Buddha's Teaching 一代五時 (2)

The Lotus Sutra has essentially different characteristics when compared to the other sutras. To know this difference is the key to understanding the Lotus Sutra. The other sutras focus on practicing the content of the sutra rather than discussing the interconnectivity among all the sutras. For example:

1. **The Kegon Sutra** 華嚴經 reveals that all beings without distinction have Buddha-nature, that each phenomenon bears a connection to all other phenomena, and that each experience contains all experiences within itself in an interdependent relationship. Kegon teaches how to practice to attain Buddhahood; however, it is too difficult for beginners to understand. It is said that this sutra was revealed for the deities as their request soon after Buddha Sakyamuni's enlightenment.

2. **The Agon Sutras** 阿含經 teach what we need to do to attain liberation from human sufferings. Its teachings are for your own salvation. Those who reached the highest level of liberation are called *arahats*. They think that they have reached nirvana, though in actuality have not.

3. **The Hoto Sutras** 方等經 reveal that the teachings in the Agon Period are inferior because it concentrates only on salvation for oneself. This form of teachings can only save a small group of people; therefore, the teachings were called Small Vehicle (Theravada Buddhism). Compared to the Agon Sutras, the Hoto Sutras are superior because the focus is now on seeking liberation for all living beings. The sutras in the Hoto period are able to save a greater number of people; therefore the teachings were called the Great Vehicle (Mahayana Buddhism). At this level, people think about the differences between the teachings of the small and great vehicles. Previous *arahats* felt ashamed that they have not actually reached Nirvana and have practiced only the inferior teachings.

4. **The Hannya Sutras** 般若經 reveal that there is no difference between the small and great vehicles since the Buddha revealed different teachings to the people at various levels of understanding. For example, a teacher in a grade school uses an apple for his or her students to understand gravity while a high school teacher may introduce Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation. The Buddha's teachings are for everyone without discrimination; therefore, all teachings are part of the great vehicle. The difference comes from the various methods and practices in teaching the great vehicle. The Hannya Sutras reveal the fundamental teachings of Buddhism; that is "Ku空" or "sunyata" or "nothingness." It means that since the fundamental factors are constantly changing, there can be no static existence.

5. **The Lotus Sutra**法華經 reveals how this sutra and all the other sutras relate to each other. For example, think of all the other sutras as parts to a car. Without a piece, the object cannot be a car. The completed car is like the Lotus Sutra. It contains all of Buddha Sakyamuni's teachings and teachings of all Buddhas in the past, present and future. In other words, there is no difference among the Buddhas. They all teach The Reality of All Things諸法実相. All Buddhas appeared, appears, and will appear to reveal their true nature to us. This is what Buddha Sakyamuni patiently waited for over forty years to reveal to us.

The Threefold Lotus Sutras法華三部經

The three sutras are as follows:

1. **The Sutra of Innumerable Meaning**無量義經 :

The prologue for the Lotus Sutra

2. **The Sutra of Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma**妙法蓮華經 :

The main content of the Lotus Sutra

3. **The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue**仏説観普賢菩薩行法經 :

The conclusion of the Lotus Sutra

The Sutra of Innumerable Meaning無量義經

The Lotus Sutra aimed to draw all of Buddha's teachings into one. The Sutra of Innumerable Meaning is meant to open the gate to the Lotus Sutra and let the people know that there are big differences with the other sutras; therefore, they must all listen to the Buddha's words attentively. It explains that the Buddha Sakyamuni is not only a physical being but also spiritual. Anyone who believes in the Lotus Sutra understands that the Buddha exists. Buddha is the Dharma; therefore, Buddha is eternal.

Chapter Two of the sutra says, “**As natural desires are innumerable, the ways of preaching are innumerable. The innumerable meanings originate from one law. This one law is, namely, non-form. Being formless, is called Real Aspect of Things(実相).**” All of the Buddha's teachings before the Lotus Sutra were taught to adjust to the listeners' level of understanding and what they wished to hear; however, the physical Buddha's life span was quickly approaching the end. He must transmit the Real Aspect of Things to all whether they understood or not before his death. (The Real Aspect of Things will be discussed in Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra.)

Thus, the Buddha says in the same chapter, “In over forty years, **the truth has not been revealed yet** 40余年未顕真実.” This statement highlights the superiority of the Lotus Sutra over his preceding teachings.

Chapter 3 of *the Sutra of Innumerable Meaning* says, “**The inconceivable merit-power of this sutra is as follows: if good sons or good daughters, hearing this sutra either during the Buddha’s lifetime or after his extinction, rejoice, believe, and elevate the mind to keep, read, recite, copy, and expound it; practice it as it has been preached; aspire to Buddhahood; cause all the good roots to flourish; raise the mind of great compassion; and want to relieve all living beings of sufferings, the Six *Paramitas* that will be naturally present in them, though they cannot yet be fully realized (六波羅蜜自然に在前せん).**” Thus if you rejoice, believe, keep, read, recite, copy and expound the Lotus Sutra, you do not need to keep the 250 precepts like Theravada Buddhists in order to gain merits. You do not have to force yourself to practice certain ways because you will naturally gain the benefits of the *Six Paramitas* through the Lotus Sutra.

After hearing these teachings, Great Adornment Bodhisattva with eighty thousands other followers promised to propagate the teaching of the Lotus Sutra after Buddha Sakaymuni’s extinction and promised to let all keep, read, copy, and adore it. Hearing their promises, Buddha Sakyamuni praised them saying, “**Excellent! Excellent! You are really and truly the Buddha’s sons.**” Then he entered into deep meditation. His body and mind became motionless.

The meditation continues to Chapter One of the Lotus Sutra.

Composition of the Lotus Sutra

The Buddha’s spoken words were not written down during the first few centuries after Buddha Sakyamuni’s Pari-Nirvana. Later, the spoken words were written down in order to avoid forgetting and miss-memorizing. Many editors compiled the Buddha’s teachings into many sutras depending on the contents and the times of his teaching.

Many of his earlier teachings revolved around our daily lives in order for the people to understand more easily. A few centuries later after the Buddha’s death, several editors compiled the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. At that time, they separated the contents of the teachings and time sequenced chapter by chapter. Thus, the sutra starts with “**Thus Have I Heard**如是我聞.”

The Great Master T’ien T’ai天台大師智顛(538-597) of China broke down all chapters into three different unique ways, such as:

1. Prologue, Body, Conclusion序分、正宗分、流通分:
Ch. 1, Ch. 2 ~ the first half of Ch. 17, the last half of Ch. 17 ~ Ch. 28
2. Shaku-mon 迹門(Teachings by the historical Buddha Sakyamuni) and Hon-mon本門(Teachings by the Eternal Buddha Sakyamuni):
Ch. 1 ~ Ch. 14 and Ch. 15 ~ Ch. 28
3. Preaching at Mount Sacred Eagle前靈山会, In the Sky虚空会, and Returning to the Mountain後靈山会:



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