

THE LOTUS SUTRA

Lecture #49 (October 5, 2011)

Lecture #50 (October 19, 2011)

Chapter 23

The Previous Life of Medicine-King Bodhiattva

SUMMARY

In the previous chapter, we came to the end of the second stage of the Lotus Sutra. Chapters 23 through 28 are the final stage. In these chapters, Sakyamuni Buddha tries to stimulate us with stories of the previous lives of Bodhisattvas and how they devoted their lives for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. This chapter reveals the previous life of Medicine-King Bodhisattva. It is very interesting that another previous life of a Bodhisattva under a different Buddha is also revealed in Chapter 27. So Medicine-King Bodhisattva repeats birth and death many times and serves different Buddhas.

Once upon a time, there lived a Buddha called Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue. Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva (Medicine-King Bodhisattva's previous life) willingly practiced austerities under this Buddha. Because of his hard practice, the Bodhisattva attained the *samadhi* or deep concentration by which he could transform himself into any other living being. He willingly showed his appreciation to the Buddha by burning his body by pouring perfume oil on his skin and setting it on fire. The light of the flame illuminated the worlds for many thousands of millions of years. The *samadhi* that transforms oneself into any other living being are revealed in the next two chapters, 24 and 25. So please look forward to studying the following chapters.

After the death of the Bodhisattva, he was born again as a son of a king named Pure-Virtue under the same Buddha. Since the Buddha knew about the previous life of the son, He said to him, "I will enter Nirvana tonight. I transmit all my teachings, treasures, and relics to you. Erect a stupa to enshrine them and make offerings to them!"

The Bodhisattva followed the last words of the Buddha and erected many thousands of stupas. Finally, he sat in front of a stupa and burned his elbows as an offering to the Buddha. When people saw the Bodhisattva lose his elbows, they felt sorry for him. But the Bodhisattva made a vow and said, "Since I made an offering of my elbows, I will become a Buddha with a golden body if my words are true. Then my two elbows will be restored." As he made the vow, his elbows were restored.

Sakyamuni Buddha explains, "Anyone who wants to attain enlightenment can do so by burning just one finger or toe, and making an offering just like Medicine-King did in his former life. This kind of offering is more valuable than the offerings of lands, palaces, and treasures."

EXPLANATIONS

"World-Honored One! Why does Medicine-King Bodhisattva walk about this Saha-World? World Honored One! This Medicine-King Bodhisattva will have to practice hundreds of thousands of billions of nayutas of austerities in this world." (P.299, LL.5~8)

Although Senchu Murano translated from Kumarajiva's Chinese version, "This Medicine-King Bodhisattva will have to practice hundreds of thousands of billions of nayutas of austerities in this world," I believe it should be past tense. The same sentence from the Kumarajiva's version is translated differently by Kubo Tsugunari and Yuyama Akira as follows: "This Bodhisattva Bhaisajayaraja has performed hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nayutas of difficult and arduous practices." Leon Hurvitz also translates the same sentence as, "This Bodhisattva Medicine King has to his credit several hundreds of thousands of myriads of millions of nayutas of difficult deeds, of painful deeds." The congregation of the Lotus Sutra knew that the Bodhisattva had engaged in painful practices for so many kalpas in the past, but they did not know what kind of practices he performed. To answer this question is the main subject of this chapter. Medicine-King Bodhisattva is popular in this sutra and appears in six different chapters in the Lotus Sutra: Chapters 1, 10, 13, 23, 26, and 27.

"Thereupon Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha expounded the sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma to Gladly-Seen-By-All-Being Bodhisattva, to the other Bodhisattvas, and also to the Sravakas. Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva willingly practiced austerities under the Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha. He walked about the world, seeking Buddhahood strenuously with all his heart for twelve thousand years until at last he obtained the *samadhi* by which he could transform himself into any other living being." (P.300, LL. 13~21)

Not only did Sakyamuni Buddha expound the Lotus Sutra but also other Buddhas such as Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra. At the time of Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha, Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva had performed painful practices for many years and finally attained Samadhi.

In order to lead others, one must have endured hard practices in order to be a leader. *Samadhi* means concentration of the mind on a single matter. This Bodhisattva's *Samadhi* was able to transform himself into any other living being for the salvation of a person or persons. He can become a child, an adult, a rich man, a homeless, a girl or a woman. He changed his form depending on the person for them to easily accept Buddha's teaching. In another words, we are able to learn lessons from anyone when we are seeking Buddha Dharma.

"He ate various kinds of incense taken from candana, kunduraka, turuska, prkka, aloes and sumac, and drank perfumed oil taken from the flowers of campaka and other flowers. He continued doing all this for twelve hundred years. Then he applied perfumed oil to his skin, put on heavenly garment of treasures in presence of Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha, sprinkled various kinds of perfumed oil on the garment, and set fire to his body." (P.301, LL. 3~10)

Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva experienced great joy in attaining that *samadhi* and showed his appreciation to the Buddha and the Lotus Sutra by offering incense and flowers, but he felt that they were not enough. He then offered his own body by burning himself. The light of the flame illuminated the worlds for countless years. The light symbolizes the Buddha's teachings. The merit of burning his body continues for countless years. So it means Buddha's teachings expound for countless years. Please do not misunderstand this with the suicide burning monks.

Can you think of things that burn themselves to illuminate their surroundings? They are matches, candles, incenses, gases, and so forth. They offer their body by burning themselves. They should be able to attain Nirvana, shouldn't they?

“In his next life, he appeared again in the world of Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha. It was in the house of King Pure-Virtue.” (P.301, L.26~28)

Gladly-Seen-By-All-Beings Bodhisattva was reborn as a son of King Pure-Virtue at the same time of the Buddha called Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue Buddha. The son tried to lead his father to the Buddha who was still alive at that time. It is interesting to know that in Chapter 27, Pure-Virtue was the mother's name (not the father's) of another previous life of Medicine-King Bodhisattva.

“Sun-Moon-Pure-Virtue Buddha said to Gladly-Seen-By-All-Being Bodhisattva, ‘Good man! The time of my Nirvana is near at hand. The time of my extinction is coming. Prepare me a comfortable couch! I shall enter into Parinirvana tonight. ... I will transmit all my teachings to you.’” (P.302, LL. 21~26)

When the Bodhisattva went to see the Buddha, Sun-Moon-Pure-Virtue Buddha was glad to see the Bodhisattva and so he transmitted the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and asked him to cremate the Buddha's body, distribute the ashes far and wide, erect stupas, and make offerings to them. The Buddha did not say to erect the stupas for his own sake, but rather he meant that the stupas would let people in a latter era know about Buddha existed and about the teachings of the Buddha.

“He made eighty-four thousand urns of treasures and put the *sariras* therein. He erected eighty-four thousand stupas, and enshrined the urns therein. The stupas were higher than the Third Dhyana-Heaven. They were adorned with yastis. Many streamers and canopies were hanging down from the stupas. Many jeweled bells also were fixed on the stupas.” (P.303, LL.10~15)

84,000 stupas for the Buddha's urns were erected. Many jeweled bells were hung from the eaves of the stupas. Most temple buildings and five-story pagodas have bells hanging at the corners of the eaves. The sound of bells is supposed to remind one of the Buddha's teachings. When you go to a temple, please look up and find the bells hanging from the buildings and the five-story pagodas.

“He burned his arms adorned with the marks of one hundred merits, and offered the light of the flame to the eighty-four thousand stupas for seventy-two thousand years.” (P.303, LL.23~25)

Gladly-Seen-By-All-Being Bodhisattva was not satisfied even though he had erected 84,000 stupas. It was at this time that he burned his elbows in front of the stupas. Those who saw him burning his elbows as an offering to the Buddha and the sutra were amazed and requested him to expound the teachings of the Buddha to them.

Outsiders may feel sorry for him; “It must be hot and painful! He might suffer from the

burn!” However, the Bodhisattva was grateful. The same can also be said about Nichiren Shonin, who was ambushed, exiled, beaten, and almost be-headed. His followers felt very sorry for him. In spite of their worries, Nichiren was glad to be persecuted many times because all of these perils meant that what the sutra says is true because of prediction of these persecution happens. Therefore, millions of people follow after him and have practiced the Lotus Sutra in the past, practice in the present and will practice in the future. He accepted these persecutions for our sake.

“Gladly-Seen-By-All-Being Bodhisattva was no one but Medicine-King Bodhisattva of today.” (P.304, LL.7~8)

At the beginning of this chapter, Star-King Bodhisattva asks, “World-Honored One! Why does Medicine-King Bodhisattva walk about this *Saha-World*?” Now we know that the previous life of Medicine-King Bodhisattva was actually Gladly-Seen-By-All-Bodhisattva himself. Buddha Sakyamuni also said, “Anyone who aspires for, and wishes to attain Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, should offer a light to the stupas of the Buddha by burning a finger or toe.” But never try to burn a part of your body as a lay person. This story emphasizes that Buddha Dharma is more value than one’s life.

We must have preparedness if we really wish to expound the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. “At the cost of one’s life” in Chapter 16 is the spirit of a true preacher’s mind.

“Just as the sea is larger than the rivers, this sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma is more profound than any of the other sutras expounded by the Tathagatas. . . .”
(P.304, L.27~)

The Buddha continues to explain that the Lotus Sutra is unsurpassed by any other sutra. He gives ten metaphors of comparison:

Just as the sea is larger than rivers,
Just as Mt. Sumeru (or Mt. Everest) is the highest of mountains,
Just as the moon is brighter than the other planets,
Just as the sun dispels all darkness,
Just as the wheel-turning-holy-king is superior to ordinary monarchs,
Just as King Sakra is the king of the thirty-three gods,
Just as the Great-Brahman-Heavenly-King is the father of all living beings,
Just as saints are superior to unenlightened mortals,
Just as Bodhisattvas are superior to Sravakas or Pratyekabuddhas,
Just as the Buddha is King of the Dharma,

So the Lotus Sutra is king of all sutras.

“This sutra saves all living beings. This sutra saves them from all sufferings, and gives them great benefits. All living beings will be able to fulfill their wishes by this sutra just as a man who gets fire when he suffers from cold. . . .” (P.305, L.16~)

What is more, the Lotus Sutra has the power to save all living beings from suffering and give them great joy:

Just like a man who reaches a stream of fresh water when he is thirsty,
Just like a man who finds a fire when he is cold,
Just like a man who is given a garment when he is naked,
Just like a party of merchants who find a ship when they want to cross a river,
Just like a sick person who finds a skilled physician,
Just like a man who is given light when he is in darkness,
Just like a poor man who finds a treasure,
Just like the people of a nation who enthrone a new king,
Just like a trader who reaches the seacoast,
Just like a torch which dispels darkness,

So this sutra saves all living beings from sufferings, from diseases, and from the bonds of life and death (from any change).

How can we get the merits?

“Excellent, excellent, good man! You kept, read and recited this sutra, thought it over, and expounded it to others under Sakyamuni Buddha. Now you have obtained innumerable merits and virtues, which cannot be burned by fire or washed away by water.” (P.306, LL.21~25)

It is interesting to know that there is no word of “copied.” It is probably because the Buddha still existed and they could hear Dharma from him any time. Your merits and virtues of keeping, reading, reciting, thinking, expounding and copying Buddha’s teachings will never be burned or washed away even after your death. The merits and virtues will be carried on to your next life just like the merits and virtues of Medicine-King Bodhisattva’s.

“Now you have defeated the army of Mara, beaten the forces of birth and death, and annihilated all your enemies.” (P.306, L.26~27):

This phrase does not mean that you will not die physically, but it means that when you realize birth and death are natural phenomena physically, you will be able to accept death easily and believe in your virtues and merits carried over to your next life. Thus, you beat the force of birth and death. You have no attachment to birth and death. Accept them as natural phenomena.

“It is because this sutra is a good medicine for the diseases of the people of the *Jambudvipa*. The patient who hears this sutra will be cured of his disease at once. He will not grow old or die.” (P.307. LL.14~17)

Jambu-dvipa (Embu-dai) is the name of a great island to the south of Mt. Sumeru (*Shumisen*) and is, according to the traditional cosmological view, the world in which we are living.

The sentence, “the patient who hears this sutra will be cured of his disease at once” means similar to above explanation. Sickness and enlightenment are both sides of a coin. Many people realize how faith important and begin to practice chanting Odaimoku. Pain, sickness, sufferings are a door way for you to open up Buddha Dharma.

Nichiren Shonin often wrote the above quotations on an amulet *Gohonzon* and gave it to his followers. The army of Mara, for examples, of growing old, birth and death, are all processes of our lives. Our enemies are sufferings caused by changes (birth and death.) The army of Mara lives within our bodies. One of Buddha’s basic teachings is “Everything is changing; to realize these changes is a way to attain Buddhahood.” Through hardship in our lives, we must realize the reality of life. To become free from sufferings is Nirvana and happiness.

We shall keep, recite, memorize, copy and expound the Lotus Sutra. Then we will get innumerable merits and virtues.