

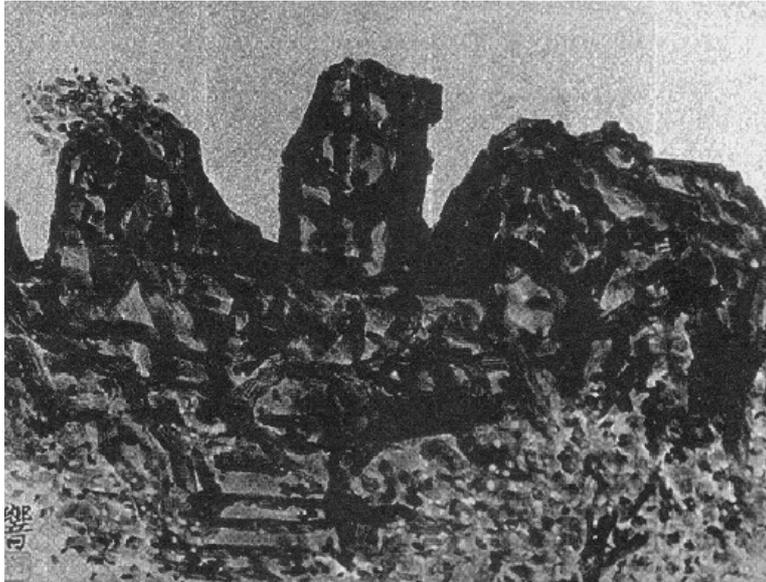
The Influence of the Lotus Sutra's Dramatic Aspects on Japanese Culture*

Gyōkai Sekido

The Lotus Sutra is often described as the “dramatic sutra.” It was highly regarded by the nobles of the Heian Period, who considered the sutra to have the power to bring peace to the country. This resulted in the sutra exerting great influence on the Japanese culture, both religiously and psychologically, which continues to this day. Seven parables from the Lotus Sutra have been evaluated from the perspective of literature, and the sutra’s repeated mentions of the Bodhisattva Way established a connection and relationship between Buddha and the common people.

A brief overview of the sutra will show features that I think led to its being labeled as “dramatic.” The opening scene of the sutra is at Vulture Peak, where the first teaching of the sutra takes place [Source: The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma (妙法蓮華經), translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什 344-413) in 8 scrolls]. However, in chapter 11 (見宝塔品: Appearance of the Treasure Stupa), the scene shifts dramatically to the skies when the memorial tower of Prabhūtarat Buddha (多宝如来: Many Treasures Buddha), adorned with the seven precious treasures, emerges from the ground, ascends into the air, and Śākyamuni Buddha likewise ascends to open it. In chapter 15 (涌出品: Bodhisattvas Emerging from the Earth), bodhisattvas as numerous as the sands of 60,000 Ganges Rivers, all taught by Śākyamuni Buddha, gush out from the space underneath the ground. Maitreya Bodhisattva (弥勒菩薩), observing this strange circumstance, questions Śākyamuni Buddha about it. Maitreya Bodhisattva’s perplexity leads to Śākyamuni’s explanation of the eternal nature of his being in chapter 16 (如来寿量品: The Life Span of the Buddha), describing how he achieved enlightenment an inconceivably long time ago. And, in chapter 22, beginning the last stage of the sutra, (嘱累品: Entrustment), Śākyamuni Buddha returns to Vulture Peak, the treasure tower, and the various buddhas that came to hear the teachings (十方分身仏) return to their original pure lands. I have explored these and other such vivid scenes that occur as the sutra develops with the intent to explain the characteristics that show why the Lotus Sutra is so respected in Japanese culture.

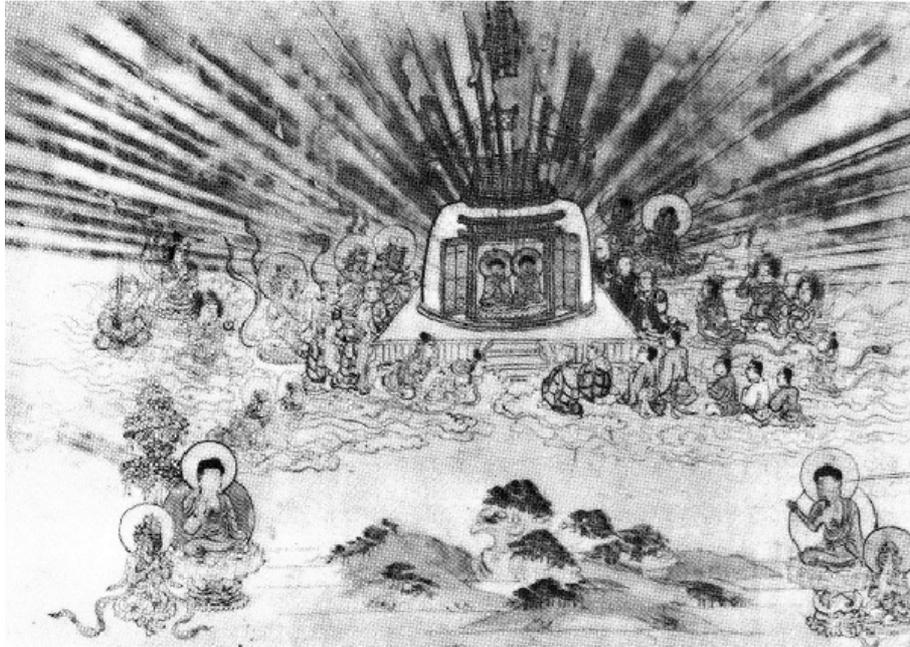
1. The teaching location moves from Vulture Peak into the sky and returns again to Vulture Peak



A picture of Vulture Peak owned by Hōryū-ji Temple, Tokyo

The story of the Lotus Sutra begins at Vulture Peak (靈鷲山: Mt. Sacred Eagle), in Magadha, India. Countless gods and goddesses and followers have gathered together in a great assembly, anticipating the start of Buddha's teaching (序品: chapter 1, Introduction). Śākyamuni Buddha sits quietly in samādhi (meditation). After some time, Śākyamuni arises tranquilly and with dignity from samādhi, and begins teaching the Lotus Sutra (方便品: Chapter 2, Expedients).

The setting changes suddenly when the Treasure Stupa, adorned with various jewels, appears from the eastern direction (見宝塔品: chapter 11, Appearance of the Treasure Stupa). The Treasure Stupa comes from a place in the east called Treasure Purity World, emerging from the great earth and floating in the sky. Within in it are the ashes of Many Treasures Buddha, his body perfectly configured in seated form. The gods, goddesses, and others in the great assembly pay homage to him with flowers, incense, flags, decorations, and music. The melodious voice of Many Treasures Buddha then resounds from the stupa, praising the truth of Śākyamuni Buddha's teaching, and inviting Śākyamuni to sit next to him. Śākyamuni then opens the door of the tower with the finger of his right hand; while he does so, a loud sound, like the opening of the gate to a great castle, is heard. Many Treasures Buddha offers half of his seat to Śākyamuni, who then enters the stupa, sits down, and continues his teaching from the tower dynamically floating in the sky.



*Hoke-kyō Emaki (Picture Scroll of the Lotus Sutra)
owned by Hatakeyama Kinenkan Museum, Tokyo*

Entrusting the bodhisattvas in the assembly with the propagation of the teachings in the future after his passing in chapter 22 (囑累品: Entrustment), Śākyamuni then requests all of the Buddhas emanated from him that had gathered in the assembly to return to their respective pure lands, and likewise requests that the tower of Many Treasures Buddha return to its original location. From chapter 23 (藥王菩薩品: Ancient Accounts of Medicine King Bodhisattva), the Buddha has descended from the sky, the various Buddhas have returned to their respective pure worlds, and the location of the teaching again becomes Vulture Peak. In Japan, Vulture Peak is thought of as symbolic of Pure Lands. Nichiren (日蓮 1222-82) regarded Vulture Peak as the most important of all Pure Lands, and he later likened it to Mt. Minobu (身延山: Yamanashi Prefecture).

2. Seven Parables of the Lotus Sutra

Seven allegorical parables show various devices by which the Buddha's teaching and its value are conveyed.

- ① The parable of three carts and burning house (三車火宅喩・譬喩品: Chapter 3, Parable)

Because the world in which we live in is full of illusion, (煩惱: contaminations and defilements of the mind), we are unable to live peacefully. In this parable, the story of a wealthy person whose children are captives in their own realm of illusion—representing the Buddha and those who follow the way of the Two Vehicles (the two types of sages of the Theravada tradition) respectively—the illusional world is portrayed as a burning house. The two types of Theravada sages are those who have been able to completely overcome illusion, but the Mahayana tradition sees them as selfish because they are concerned only with self-salvation and forget about helping others.

In the story, a rich man's great mansion was being consumed by fire. Unaware of the situation, his children were happily playing in the house. The wealthy man tried to warn his children, but, completely absorbed in play, they made no attempt to escape. Trying another approach, he said to the children still playing in the burning house, "There is a sheep-cart, there is a deer-cart, and there is an ox-cart in front of the gate outside the house." Hearing this, the children were filled with joy and immediately went outside, thus escaping the danger.

Safely outside, the children discovered that carts they had longed for were not there; there was only a large cart pulled by a white ox (大白牛車). Then, soothing his children's wondering minds, the wealthy man told them, "This white-ox cart is the only one. The other carts are not here. I had to use an expedient to save you." The story alludes to the Buddha using expedients to rescue people from the world of illusion. His teaching of Two Vehicles is likewise an expedient, and the teaching of the Lotus Sutra is his truth.

② The Parable of the wealthy man and his wandering son (長者窮子喻・信解品: Chapter 4, Willing Acceptance)

The son (someone who follows the way of the Two Vehicles) of a wealthy man (Buddha) left home about fifty years ago. The wandering son was unsuccessful and became poor. The wealthy father, who never stopped searching for his son, came across him while living in certain castle city. He tried to communicate with his son, but the son, surprised and afraid, tried to run away—because of his wanderings his heart had become hardened, and he did not recognize that the rich person was his father. So, the father employed various means and methods over a long period of time to gain his son's confidence and trust. At last he was able to declare that they were actually parent and child. He then gave his great fortune (the Lotus Sutra) to the son.

Buddha, with various expedients, makes the person who has been "raised" with the concept of the Two Vehicles develop the consciousness of a bodhisattva. In this story, the son wanders from place to place for a long time. The father then re-connects

with him by chance in a castle city that was their mutual destination. Scenes like this establishing the teaching of the Lotus Sutra are seen.

③ **The parable of herbs (三草二木喩・薬草喩品: Chapter 5, Simile of Herbs)**

There are innumerable kinds of plants; some as great as trees, some as small as grass. But the rain falls upon all of them equally, and all plants, big and small, receive the moisture that they need. The qualities and abilities of people are not the same, but the Buddha-nature (仏種) is inherent in all of them. All living beings equally possess the seeds of Buddhahood and therefore all have the potentiality of realizing Buddhahood.

Just as the rain falls equally to all plants, Buddha explains the teachings of the one vehicle to all beings equally, which enables all living beings to attain Buddhahood.

④ **The parable of an envisioned city (化城喩・化城喩品: Chapter 7, Apparitional City)**

There was a road through a wilderness area that was 500 yojanas long (由旬: a yojana is said to be 160 km). It was a difficult and rugged road passing through a terrible uninhabitable place. But after crossing the wilderness there was a place where precious treasures could be found. A group of people (all living beings) banded together and set out to reach the place where the treasures were (the teachings of one vehicle, Enlightenment). In the group was an excellent leader (Buddha) who knew all about the bad road. He guided the people, and they advanced along the rugged way. However, nearly halfway through, those in the party got tired and felt that they could not advance another step further. At that time, the excellent leader conjured up for the party a phantom castle (an expedient teaching) 300 yojanas along the road, where they were able to take their rest. When their vigor was returned, he made the phantom city disappear. Finding that the city was an apparition, they were very much discouraged. But the leader explained that only a short distance remained until the actual destination, so they continued on and safely reached the place where the treasures were.

The practices to Enlightenment are difficult and challenging. Buddha, teaching by various expedients, leads the people, and through that guidance the people attain Enlightenment (the Lotus Sutra).

⑤ **The parable of a gem in a robe (衣裏繫珠の喩・五百弟子受記品: Chapter 8, Five Hundred Followers Receive Predictions of Enlightenment)**

A man (a follower of the Two Vehicle concept) went to the house of his good friend (Buddha) and, becoming intoxicated by liquor (illusion), fell asleep. His host had to attend to some business, but before leaving, sewed a precious gem (the Lotus Sutra)

into the lining of his friend's clothes. After awakening, the man parted from his host's house and traveled from place to place. Living day-to-day and enduring hardship and suffering, he never noticed the gem in the lining of his clothes. He met his good friend again by chance after some time had passed, and was told about the gem. Then, he came to lead a satisfied life.

The Buddha has sown a priceless gem (the Lotus Sutra) in the mind of people. We are enduring hardship and suffering because we fail to become aware of it.

⑥ The parable of a priceless gem in a topknot (髻中明珠喻・安樂行品: Chapter 14, Peaceful Practices)

In this short parable a noble king of a great empire (轉輪聖王) has a priceless gem decorating the topknot of his hair, and he gives this gem as the ultimate reward only to the bravest and most distinguished of his warriors. It shows how difficult it is to encounter and hear the Lotus Sutra.

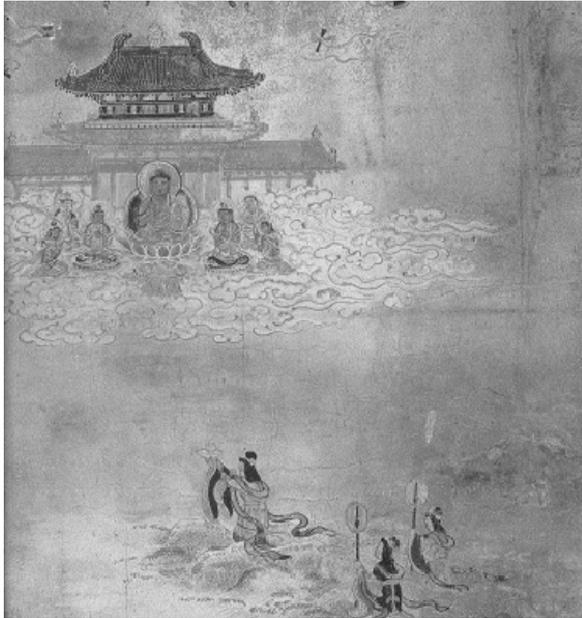
⑦ The parable of the physician's sons (良医治子喻・如來壽量品: Chapter 16, Life Span of the Buddha)

The children (all living beings) of a skilled physician (Buddha) accidentally consumed poison while their father was away. When the father returned he found his children in various stages of illness, and he prepared an effective medicine (the Lotus Sutra) to cure them. The children were happy to see their father return, and those who were not very ill drank the medicine and were cured. But others, who were more gravely ill, had lost their power of reason and refused to take the excellent medicine their father offered them. The father said to those children, "Now I will leave this excellent medicine here with you. You should take it without worrying that you will not be cured," and he again went abroad. He then sent a messenger back to his children to tell them that their father had passed away. Hearing the message, the children were shocked into their senses; they then drank the medicine their father had left for them and recovered completely. The father, upon hearing of their successful recovery, then returned to his family.

People are confused by illusion, and they do not accept the teachings. It is commonly believed that Śākyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment at the age of thirty (or thirty five) under the pipal tree (菩提樹) at Gāya, but in chapter 16 Buddha declares that, in truth, he achieved enlightenment an inconceivably long time ago, and manifested his passing as an expedient in order to motivate people to see the value of his teachings.

These seven parables became well known and were appreciated as literature. Because of this, a 31-syllable Japanese poem (和歌: Waka) that included the doctrines of the Lotus Sutra was written and became popular in Japan during the Heian Period.

3. The attainment of Buddhahood by a woman (提婆達多品: Chapter 12, Devadatta)



Heike Nōkyō (Sutras donated by Heike Clan, Flyleaf of Chapter 12, Devadatta) owned by Itsukushima Jinja Shrine, Hiroshima

The attainment of Buddhahood by woman has been commented on in various scriptures, both Buddhist and Non-Buddhist. But, the 12th chapter of the Lotus Sutra clearly teaches the attainment of Buddhahood by a woman. The eight-year-old daughter of a dragon king (龍女) taught by Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, (文殊菩薩) offered a priceless gem to Śākyamuni Buddha and attained Buddhahood immediately by the merit of her pious act.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva and the bodhisattvas accompanying him, seated on

wheel-like jeweled lotus-blossoms with 1,000 petals, after visiting the palace of the dragon king in the sea emerged from the sea and floated in the air. They then came to Vulture Peak. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva spoke of the young daughter of the dragon king that he had taught who was capable of attaining Buddhahood. Those who heard him were skeptical.

The daughter of the dragon king then appeared before Buddha, praised and honored him, and offered to the Buddha a priceless gem. Then, in an instant of time, all those present saw the dragon girl, in the span of an instant, change into a man, carry out all the practices of a bodhisattva, and immediately attain Buddhahood.

4. The appearance of bodhisattvas from beneath the ground (涌出品: Chapter 15, Bodhisattvas Emerging from the Earth)

Bodhisattvas from other worlds requested permission to spread the teachings in this world (娑婆: Sahā World) after the Buddha's passing, but Buddha declined their offer, saying that there were already enough of his followers in this world to continue his work. Then the ground shook violently and split, and innumerable great bodhisattvas, as many as the sands of 60,000 Ganges Rivers, emerged from the space below the ground, led by the Four Great Bodhisattvas. All were great leaders, some had more senior bodhisattvas than Buddha, but all of them were Buddha's followers.



*Lotus Sutra Mandala (A part of the 14th hanging scroll)
owned by Hōmpō-ji Temple, Toyama*

Maitreya Bodhisattva (弥勒菩薩), observing this strange circumstance, questioned Śākyamuni Buddha about it. Maitreya Bodhisattva's perplexity leads to Śākyamuni's explanation of the eternal nature of his being in chapter 16 (如来寿量品: The Life Span of the Buddha).

The "Latter Age of Degeneration" is the period of the decline of the Law which starts two thousand years after Śākyamuni's demise. It was thought that the 1052 years of the Heian Period coincided with the initial stage of the "Latter Age of Degeneration." Because of this, the people of the Heian and Kamakura Periods, anxious over the fin de siècle, feared the approach of the end of the world. They believed that they could be saved by the eternal Buddha, and faith in the Lotus Sutra became popular.

5. The merit of pious acts of faith in the Lotus Sutra

① Chapter 25, (觀世音菩薩普門品: Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's-Voices)

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (觀世音菩薩品) “Perceiver of the World’s Voices Bodhisattva” made a vow to watch over people closely in order to rescue them. This bodhisattva assumes 33 different forms, and appears anywhere to save people from their suffering. The 25th chapter teaches the merit of the pious act of faith of calling upon this bodhisattva when in need.

② Chapter 26, (陀羅尼品: Mystic Phrases)



Kishimojin (Hārītī) and Ten Female Demons owned by Myōden-ji Temple, Toyama

The 26th chapter teaches of a female demon (鬼子母神: Kishimojin) named Hārītī who had five hundred children and who fed them human babies. When she and ten other female demons (十羅刹女) heard the Buddha’s teachings, they repented their sins and vowed to safeguard the Buddha’s teachings and those who followed them.

③ Chapter 27, (妙莊嚴王品: King Wonderful Adornment)

King Wonderful Adornment (妙莊嚴王) was originally a follower of non-Buddhist teachings. His wife, Queen Pure Virtue (淨德夫人), and his two sons, Pure-Store (淨藏) and Pure-Eyes (淨眼), took him to hear Buddha’s teaching. After hearing the teachings, the king became a follower of the Buddha.

In order to convince their father to meet the Buddha, the two sons manifested their supernatural powers to the king. They ascended high into the sky, and walked, sat, and remained suspended there. Then they expelled fire and water from their bodies, enlarged their bodies to fill the sky, and made them small again. They disappeared in the air and appeared again, and walked on top of water. Seeing these amazing sights, the king then raised the desire meet the Buddha who was their teacher. The Lotus Sūtra teaches that the king’s wife and his sons were “good friends, good teachers (善知識) who led the king to the True Faith.”

④ Chapter 28, (普賢菩薩勸發品) Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Sage

The Bodhisattva Universal Sage (普賢菩薩) vows to protect people who accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra in the corrupt age of the last five-hundred-year period, appearing before them riding on a white elephant with six tusks.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva (文殊菩薩) appears in the first chapter, Introduction, and, explaining to the assembly that the Buddha is about to expound the Dharma, opens the curtain to the Lotus Sutra story. In chapter 28, after Universal Sage Bodhisattva appears upon the stage, the curtain to the story is closed. Mañjuśrī, symbolic of wisdom, is often portrayed as manifesting himself riding on a lion; Universal Sage, symbolic of truth, bodhi-citta, manifests himself riding a white elephant. The lion and the elephant are the kings of the animal world; thus they represent the great virtues of these bodhisattvas.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva expresses wisdom, and Universal Sage Bodhisattva expresses truth. Truth and wisdom are complementary because it is with wisdom that one makes truth understandable and effective.

Even now, many believers gather to worship at the temple where this bodhisattva was deified as a guardian god. Belief in the merit of pious acts of faith in the Lotus Sutra continues in modern Japanese society.

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