

# Critical Considerations on the Lotus Sutra --- Discrimination or Anti-Discrimination ---\*

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It is generally considered that the central message of the Lotus Sutra is the attainment of Buddhahood by all sentient beings. However, there are some passages in the Sutra which have discriminatory tendencies and can be interpreted as stating that some people, like icchantika in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, can never attain Buddhahood.

For example, in verses (III, vv. 114-134) at the end of the third chapter, i.e. the chapter on Parable (aupāmya), physically discriminatory expressions, like laṅgaka, kubuja, kāṇa, badhira, andha, kilāsa etc., are abundantly used. These expressions, I think, are not to be understood separately from the problem of the attainment of Buddhahood by sentient beings, because, in the verse portion at the end of the third chapter, it is stressed that the Lotus Sutra should be preached only to Bodhisattvas, which seems to mean that the Sutra must not be preached to Śrāvakas. If the interpretation is right, it will follow that the central message of the verse portion of the chapter on Parable is that Bodhisattvas only can attain Buddhahood, while Śrāvakas can never attain it. This is definitely a discriminatory message, against which, I think, the Lotus Sutra itself was originally composed.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to understand that the original message of the Lotus Sutra was stated not throughout the Sutra, and that, in some portions of the Sutra, the original message was superseded by other messages, which sometimes were contradictory to the original one. In other words, it seems inevitable to consider that the Lotus Sutra itself was historically or gradually formed, as has been considered by many scholars<sup>(1)</sup>.

Which part then was the original or the oldest portion of the Sutra? My opinion<sup>(2)</sup> is basically that the prose portion of the second chapter, i.e. the chapter on Expedient Devices (upāya-kauśalya) was the original portion, where, I think, the attainment of Buddhahood by all sentient beings was preached by the famous fivefold or fourfold expressions on the relation between Buddha's cognition (buddha-jñāna-darśana) and

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sentient beings (sattva)[SP, Kern & Nanjio ed., 40,3-8].

The characteristic feature of the prose portion of the chapter on Expedient Devices is that the words bodhisattva, mahāyāna and hīnayāna are never used there, at least in the Sanskrit text (SP) (3). It is to be noted that, in the 27 chapters of the Sanskrit text, the chapter on Expedient Devices is the only chapter, in which the prose portion has no examples of the term “mahāyāna.” The fact, I think, cannot be explained without considering that the prose portion of the chapter is the oldest or the original part of the Lotus Sutra. On the other hand, Chinese translations, especially the translation by Kumārajīva, who repeatedly inserted the words 菩薩 and 大乘 in the places where there are no Sanskrit equivalents<sup>(4)</sup>, are in many cases unreliable because they reflect the later development which praises the ideals of “Bodhisattva” and “Mahāyāna.” Therefore, if the prose portion of the second chapter on Expedient Devices was the original portion of the Lotus Sutra, it seems clear that the original message of the Sutra cannot be expressed by words such as “Bodhisattva” and “Mahāyāna.”

In my opinion, the central position of the Sutra had, in the process of its gradual formation, basically shifted from “Buddhayāna” to “Mahāyāna” or from “eka-yāna” to “tri-yāna;” in other words, from “anti-discrimination” to “discrimination.” In this respect, it becomes important to understand accurately the central message of the third chapter on Parable, at the end of which, as stated before, physically discriminatory expressions are abundantly used.

In this chapter on Parable, it is well known that Śāriputra, the representative of Śrāvakas, was predicted by the Buddha to attain Buddhahood. The prediction has been interpreted as the prediction given to Śrāvakas (5). However, I think that Śāriputra was regarded in the chapter not as a Śrāvaka but as a Bodhisattva, because, according to the words of the Buddha’s prediction in question (SP,64,10-65,7), it is stated that the Buddha preaches the Lotus Sutra to Śrāvakas wishing Śāriputra — who has in fact been made ripened in the highest enlightenment by the Buddha at the presence of innumerable Buddhas in the past, and who has forgotten his past practices — to recall his past practices and vow (pūrva-caryā-praṇidhāna)[SP,64,14].

In this statement, the term “pūrva-caryā” cannot but be interpreted as meaning “bodhisattva-caryā.” Thus it seems quite clear that Śāriputra was considered there to be, in fact, a Bodhisattva who had been long practiced Bodhisattva practice (bodhisattva-caryā) in past lives. If this interpretation is correct, it will follow that the prediction to attain Buddhahood was given, in the chapter on Parable, not to a Śrāvaka but to a Bodhisattva, which seems to express the above-mentioned discriminatory position that Bodhisattvas only can attain Buddhahood, while Śrāvakas can never attain it.

According to the words of the Buddha's prediction, it is also stated that Śāriputra will become a Buddha after having completed Bodhisattva practice (bodhisattva-caryāṃ paripūrya)[SP,65,5], which means that one cannot attain Buddhahood without having completed Bodhisattva practice. It is needless to say that this idea is based on the discriminatory position that Bodhisattvas only can attain Buddhahood. Moreover, in the Buddha-land (buddha-kṣetra) of Padmaprabha — the future Buddha whom Śāriputra was predicted to be — Bodhisattvas are stated to be called jewels (ratna)[SP,66,2], while the existence of Śrāvakas is never mentioned. It is also stated that the Padmaprabha Buddha, the future form of Śāriputra, will give the prediction to attain Buddhahood to a Bodhisattva named Dhṛtiparipūrṇa [SP,67,1-2]. This statement, needless to say, means that Śāriputra, who has been now predicted by Śākyamuni Buddha to attain Buddhahood, is in fact a Bodhisattva like Dhṛtiparipūrṇa who will be predicted by the Padmaprabha Buddha.

In the chapter on Parable, it is noteworthy that the name of the Lotus Sutra is explicitly and fully stated for the first time in the Sutra. The full name given to the Sutra, as well as its Chinese translation by Kumārajīva, is as follows :

[1] saddharmapuṇḍarīkaṃ dharmaparyāyaṃ sūtrāntaṃ mahāvaipulyaṃ

bodhisattvāvavādaṃ sarvabuddhaparigrahaṃ (SP,65,1-2)

[2] 是大乘經、名妙法蓮華、教菩薩法、佛所護念。(Taisho,9,11b15-16)

The name given has many problems. First, it seems evident that the term “bodhisattva-avavāda,” which was translated as “byañ chub sems dpaḥ rnams la gdams pa”(P, mdo,chu,30b3) in Tibetan translation, and as 教菩薩法 in Kumārajīva's Chinese translation, expresses the understanding of the composer of this chapter, or of this term, that the Lotus Sutra is to be preached to Bodhisattvas or that all listeners of the Sutra, including Śrāvakas, are in fact Bodhisattvas.

Second, the term “mahā-vaipulya,” which was translated as “śin tu rgyas pa chen po”(P, mdo,chu,30b2-3) in Tibetan translation, was translated as 大乘 in Kumārajīva's translation. The term “mahā-vaipulya” was generally translated as 方等 (Taisho,9, 63b25,66a18,66b7,66b25) in Dharmarakṣa's translation. In translating the term “mahā-vaipulya,” it seems that Kumārajīva was wrong, while Dharmarakṣa was right. But this was not the case. The important thing is that the composer of the term seems to have added the word “mahā” to the well known term “vaipulya,” which had been used in the traditional nine-fold or twelve-fold classification of Āgama texts. Then, what was intended by the addition of “mahā” ? It seems natural to consider that the idea “mahā-yāna” was intended. Therefore, in this respect, Kumārajīva's translation of the term “mahā-vaipulya” as 大乘 can be interpreted as indicating the real intention of the composer of the term “mahā-vaipulya.”

People in China, Korea and Japan have not been able to doubt the validity of the understanding that the Lotus Sutra is a Mahāyāna sutra, because, in Kumārajīva's translation which has been quite influential in these countries, the Sutra is explicitly called 大乘經. However, this appellation, although well expressing the intention of the composer of the term “mahā-vaipulya,” seems to have greatly damaged the accurate understanding of the Lotus Sutra itself, because, as is stated before, the original message of the Sutra, in my opinion, cannot be expressed by words such as Mahāyāna and Bodhisattva.

In this respect, it is to be noted that, in the chapter on Parable, the reality of three vehicles (tri-yāna) seems to be affirmed, contrary to the position of the chapter on Expedient Devices where the existence of one vehicle (eka-yāna) only is admitted. According to the Buddha's prediction to Śāriputra, the Padmaprabha Buddha, who Śāriputra will become in the future, is stated to preach the Dharma concerning three vehicles. The Sanskrit text runs as follows:

[3] trīṇy eva yānāny ārabhya dharmam deśayiṣyati | (SP,65, 12-13)

It seems quite clear that this expression contradicts the message of the following sentence in the chapter on Expedient Devices.

[4] ekam evāham śāriputra yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam  
deśayāmi yad idaṃ buddhayānam | (SP,40,13-14)

The importance of this sentence can be known from the fact that the term “ekam yānam” was used here for the first time in the Sanskrit text of the second chapter, and the fact that almost same sentences were repeated later in the chapter concerning the past Buddhas, the future Buddhas, the present Buddhas and once again Śākyamuni Buddha, as follows :

[5] ekam eva yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam deśitavanto yad  
idaṃ buddhayānam (SP,41,4-5)

[6] ekam eva yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam deśayiṣyanti yad  
idaṃ buddhayānam (SP,41,15)

[7] ekam eva yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam deśayanti yad  
idaṃ buddhayānam (SP,42,6-7)

[8] ekam eva yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam deśayāmi yad  
idaṃ buddhayānam (SP,42,15-16)

Although these sentences in the chapter on Expedient Devices seem to have been regarded as expressing the central message of the Sutra in stating the reality of one vehicle, i.e. the Buddha's vehicle (buddha-yāna), the composer or the composers of the chapter on Parable had dared to adopt, on purpose, expression [3], which clearly contradicts these sentences, in order to deny the message of attainment of Buddhahood by

all sentient beings and to establish the discriminatory position of affirming the reality and the distinction of three vehicles.

The theory of the distinction of three vehicles is based on the idea of the superiority of Mahāyāna and Bodhisattvas to Hīnayāna and Śrāvakas. Thus, the theory of the distinction of three vehicles results from praising the ideals of Mahāyāna and Bodhisattva. In this respect, the famous parable of “the burning house” 火宅 in the chapter on Parable is to be examined next. First of all, how many people were there in the house? It is stated that, at most, five hundred people (SP,72,4) had lived in the house, and that, at most, there had been in the house twenty sons (SP,72,8) of the owner of the house, who were finally salvaged from the burning house by the expedient device of the owner, the rich man 長者. Then, what has become of the rest of the people (possibly 480 people)? Does this mean that the 96% of the people were not salvaged and were abandoned to die in the burning house? Is this the so-called universal salvation?

In this parable, because the Buddha is compared to the owner, it is doubtless that “sons of the owner” means “sons of the Buddha”(buddha-putra), i.e. Bodhisattvas. Thus, it seems clear that what is expressed by the parable is the discriminatory message that Bodhisattvas only can attain Buddhahood, while Śrāvakas can never attain it, as is explicitly stated in the verse portion at the end of the chapter on Parable.

Moreover, the fundamental shift of position from Buddhayāna to Mahāyāna is evidently recognized in the chapter. More precisely, it seems that this fundamental shift was the main motive of composing the parable of “the burning house.” First, it is to be recalled that the word “mahāyāna” was never used in the prose portion of the second chapter on Expedient Devices, which, as stated before, I think, was the original portion of the Sutra. However, not only the prose portion but also the verse portion of the second chapter lacks the word “mahāyāna.” In other words, the term “mahāyāna” was never used in the second chapter, at least in Sanskrit text. This is not a surprising fact, considering that, in this chapter, eka-yāna was repeatedly stated to be Buddhayāna, as is shown by the phrase “yad idaṃ buddhayānam” in sentences [4]□[8], and that the terms “eka-yāna” and “buddha-yāna” seems to have been used, possibly for the first time, by the composer of the prose portion of the second chapter, in order to deny the then prevalent idea of the superiority of Mahāyāna to Hīnayāna.

Therefore, the composer of the third chapter, the chapter on Parable, who seems to have been convinced of the superiority of Mahāyāna to Hīnayāna, like many Mahāyānists in those days, had been seeking for a device to replace Buddhayāna by Mahāyāna, and finally he hit upon the solution to compose the parable of “the burning house.” It is to be noted that the first occurrence of the term “mahāyāna” in the chapter on Parable, or in the Sutra in my opinion, is as follows:

[9] saṃvidyante ca me imāny evaṃrūpāṇy mahāyānāny (SP,76,1-2)

In this sentence, the term “mahāyānāni” means “ large vehicles” without any Buddhist connotation. These large vehicles (mahāyāna) of the father, the owner of the house, were, it is stated, later given equally to his sons. By merely stating that the vehicles given to the sons were large, the composer of the parable had succeeded, without difficulty, in introducing into the Sutra the term “mahāyāna” — which seems to have been purposely rejected by the composer of the prose portion of the second chapter — and, as a result, succeeded in replacing “Buddhayāna” by “Mahāyāna.”

This replacement is well shown in the following expression.

[10] ekayānāni dattāni yad uta mahāyānāni | (SP,77,2)

Here, the formula “ekayāna= buddhayāna,” stated by sentences [4]□[8] in the chapter on Expedient Devices, was replaced by the formula “ekayāna= mahāyāna.” In other words, “Buddhayāna” was replaced by “Mahāyāna.” Thus, the composer of the parable had succeeded in establishing the Mahāyānist theories of the superiority of Mahāyāna to Hīnayāna, and of the distinction of three vehicles.

Against these arguments above, one might think that, because what were given to the sons were not three kinds of vehicles, i.e. ox-drawn vehicles, goat-drawn vehicles and deer-drawn vehicles, but one kind of vehicle, i.e. large vehicle “mahāyāna,” and because the formula “ekayāna=mahāyāna” is admitted in the parable, what was preached by the parable is not the theory of three vehicles but the theory of one vehicle. I think otherwise.

First, the large vehicles (mahāyāna) given to the sons were in fact the ox-drawn vehicles, i.e. one of the three kinds of vehicles. Here “one vehicle” (ekayāna) means “one of the three vehicles,” i.e. Mahāyāna. This is a typically Mahāyānist interpretation of “one vehicle,” because, if “one vehicle” is Buddhayāna, “one vehicle” cannot be “one of the three vehicles.” The theory of three vehicles presupposes the superiority of Mahāyāna to Hīnayāna. The idea of superiority and the idea of oneness are contradictory to each other. Thus, “one and equal vehicle” cannot be “one of the three vehicles” based on the idea of superiority. Therefore, I think, the following expression in the chapter on Parable seems to contain a logical contradiction, because “eka” means equality, while “mahā” means superiority.

[11] ekam eva mahāyānaṃ (SP,82,4-5,10)

So if one considers, based on the following sentence, that the one vehicle theory is preferred to the three vehicles theory in the chapter on Parable, he seems to be too naïve in interpreting the text.

[12] pūrvam upāyakauśalyena trīṇi yānāny upadarśayitvā paścān  
mahāyānenaiva sattvān parinirvāpayati | (SP,82,7)

When the composer of the third chapter on Parable tried to introduce the concept of

Mahāyāna into the Sutra, it seems that he was not able to deny the concept of *ekayāna* itself, because the concept had been already prevalent as denoting the essential teaching of the Sutra. Therefore, he could only change the content of the concept by replacing *Buddhayāna* by *Mahāyāna*. It seems not probable that he was supporting the one vehicle theory, considering that he made, in expression [3], *Padmaprabha Buddha* preach the Dharma concerning three vehicles, and that he used the term “*ekayāna*” nowhere in the words of the Śākyamuni Buddha’s prediction (SP,65,3-67,6).

Therefore, in conclusion, I consider the central message of the chapter on Parable to be the discriminatory position of the superiority of *Mahāyāna* and *Bodhisattvas* to *Hīnayāna* and *Śrāvakas*, and of the distinction of the three vehicles, as is stated by the verses at the end of the chapter as follows:

[13] mā haiva tvaṃ bālajanasya agrato bhāṣiṣyase sūtram  
 im’avarūpam ||136cd||  
 ye tū iha vyakta bahuśrutās ca smṛtimanta ye paṇḍita jñānavantaḥ |  
 ye prasthitā uttamam agrabodhiṃ tāñ śrāvayes tvaṃ paramārtham  
 etat ||137||(SP,97,6-8)

Here, because “*ye prasthitā uttamam agrabodhiṃ*”(“those who have proceeded to the highest, excellent enlightenment”) means *Bodhisattvas*, while “*bāla-jana*” (“foolish people”) means *Śrāvakas*, therefore it is stated in this passage that the Lotus Sutra must not be preached to *Śrāvakas* and that it should be preached to *Bodhisattvas* only.

Moreover, physically discriminatory expressions, including “*bāla-jana*” in passage [13], were abundantly used for non-*Bodhisattvas* in the verse portion. Thus, I think, it cannot be denied that the central position of the chapter on Parable is the discriminatory message that non-*Bodhisattvas* can never attain Buddhahood.

It is to be understood that, in the so-called *Mahāyāna* sutras, praising *Bodhisattvas* and *Mahāyāna* was inseparable from blaming *Śrāvakas* and *Hīnayāna*. For example, in the chapter on *Bodhisattvas* 問菩薩品 (Taisho,12,891b16-896a4) of the first Chinese translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, the inability to attain Buddhahood by *icchantikas*—闍提 was repeatedly preached. The distinction of the three vehicles was finally fixed by the *gotra* theory of the *Yogācāras*, according to which the *gotras* of *Śrāvakas*, *Pratyekabuddhas* and *Bodhisattvas* are different from one another and not interchangeable. However, it is to be noted that the difference between the three *gotras* are fixed steadily, because, in my opinion, the *gotras* are placed on the eternally existing single locus, which I call “*dhātu* (6).”

A prototype of “*dhātu-vāda*” (locus theory) can be found already in the fifth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, i.e. the chapter on Medicinal Herbs, where it is stated that different

kinds of plants and seeds grow up on the single earth (*eka-dharaṇī*)[SP,122,7], which, I consider, corresponds to “*dhātu*” in my hypothesis of “*dhātu-vāda*.” Thus, it seems clear that the discriminatory position is found at least in the third and the fifth chapters of the Lotus Sutra

It is quite difficult to understand the central position of the Lotus Sutra concerning the problem of attaining Buddhahood by sentient beings. The passages of the Sutra, in fact, have been used to support not only the one vehicle theory but also the three vehicles theory. I, for myself, consider the original and central message of the Lotus Sutra to be not discrimination but anti-discrimination, which denies the distinction of the three vehicles, and rejects the discriminatory message that some people can never attain Buddhahood. However, it seems that such understanding can be justified only when we consider the prose portion of the chapter on Expedient Devices to represent the original form of the Lotus Sutra.

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- (1) Cf. Huse Kōgaku 布施浩岳, *Hokekyō Seiritsushi* 『法華經成立史』 Tokyo, Daitō Shuppan, 1934 etc. Prof. Suguro Shinjō 勝呂信静, on the other hand, has criticized the theory of the gradual formation of the Lotus sutra. Cf. Suguro, *Hokekyō no Seiritsu to Shisō* 『法華經の成立と思想』 Tokyo, Daitō Shuppan, 1993.
  - (2) Cf. Matsumoto, “Hokekyō no shisō” 「『法華經』の思想 — 「方便品」と「譬喩品」 —」 Komazawa Daigaku Daigakuin Bukkyōgaku Kenkyūkai Nenpō 『駒澤大学大学院仏教学研究會年報』 28, 1995, pp.1-27.
  - (3) However, it is to be noted that, in the second chapter of the Kashgar manuscript only, the expression “*bodhisattvasamādapaka*” (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, Kashgar Manuscript, Lokesh Chandra ed., Tokyo, The Reiyūkai, 1977, 47a4) is found in the place where the text in SP reads “*tathāgatajñānadarśanasamādāpaka*” (SP, 40, 11). This expression, which corresponds to 「教化菩薩」 (Taisho, 9, 7a29) in Kumārajīva’s translation, has been considered by Prof. Kariya Sadahiko 荻谷定彦, to represent the central position of the Lotus sutra. Cf. Kariya, *Hokekyō Ichibutsujō no Shisō* 『法華經一仏乗の思想』 Osaka, Tōhō Shuppan, 1983, pp.94-96.

In my opinion, however, it seems that the expression “*bodhisattvasamādapaka*” in the Kashgar manuscript merely reflects the later development.

- (4) The word 大乘 (Taisho, 9, 8a5, 8a7, 8a23, 8a25) and the word 菩薩 (Taisho, 9, 8a15) have no Sanskrit equivalents.
- (5) In Bodhiruci’s translation of Vasubandhu’s commentary on the Lotus sutra, the prediction is described as 「声聞等得授記」 (Taisho, 26, 8c28) or as 「声聞人得授記」 (Taisho, 26, 9a15), while the word 「声聞授記」 (Taisho, 26, 18a, 18b8) is used in the pertinent passages of Ratnamati’s translation of the commentary. It is to be noted that Vasubandhu, in interpreting the prediction, had used the *Yogācāra* theory of four kinds of *Śrāvaka* (Taisho, 26, 9a15-18).
- (6) On my understanding of the gotra theory of *Yogācāras*, cf. Matsumoto, *Bukkyō Shisō Ron* [I] 『仏教思想論 上』 Tokyo, Daizō Shuppan, 2004, chapter 2.