

The Lotus Sutra Needs Us

Tsugunari Kubo

1.0 Like the other Mahāyāna Sutras, the *Lotus Sutra* is composed as a report of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha's lifetime. Yet, the Buddha depicted in the sutra is beyond the historical. In the chapter concerning the lifespan of the Buddha, for example, the sutra itself declares that the teaching is by the Śākyamuni of eternal presence.

1.1 In the *Lotus Sutra*, attaining buddhahood, which is the goal of bodhisattva practices, is expressed as, *abhisam √ budh* (to attain) *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* (complete perfect enlightenment). Describing the case where the practices (*caryā*) for bodhisattvas are carried out, the terms *bodhi* or *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* are spoken of as a spiritual realm.

1.2 Regarding the concept of *parinirvāṇa*, the sutra's teaching that the Buddha Śākyamuni is not in the state of *parinirvāṇa* is something I discussed previously. I would like to discuss here how the concept of *parinirvāṇa* is defined and how it relates to that of *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* in this sutra.

1.3 Chapter Fifteen of the sutra, *Tathāgatāyus-pramāṇa*, speaks of the endlessness of the Buddha's lifespan in this way - *abhisambuddha* but *a-parinirvṛta*:

*tāvac cirābhisambuddho parimitāyus-pramāṇas tathāgataḥ
sadā sthitaḥ / aparinirvṛtas tathāgataḥ parinirvāṇam
ādarśayati vaineya-vaśāt /
{WT.271.14-16. KN318.15-319.1: āyus-pramāṇam, vaineya-
vaśena}*

The Tathāgata, with a lifespan of immeasurable length, who attained enlightenment in the distant past, always

* This paper was presented at XVIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, August 20, 2014

exists. The Tathāgata manifests himself as being in the state of *parinirvāṇa* in the hope of inspiring (the sentient beings), although he is not yet in the condition of *parinirvṛta* (*aparinirvṛta*).

idānīm khalu punar ahaṃ kula-putrā aparinirvāyamāṇa eva parinirvāṇam ārocayāmi / {KN319.4; WT272.4}

Further, O sons of good family, although I am not really in the state of *parinirvāṇa* now, I proclaim that I am in (the state of) *parinirvāṇa*.

In other words, Chapter Fifteen indicates that the Tathāgata, or Śākyamuni ("I," in the above quotation), is in the condition of *aparinirvṛta*, i.e., not in the state of *parinirvāṇa*, in spite of the fact that he is completely enlightened (*abhisaṃ √ budh*).

- 1.4 Here, as it is declared that he is not in the condition of *parinirvṛta* because his lifespan is endless, the announcement or manifestation of *parinirvāṇa* can be understood to mean the Buddha's death. Nevertheless, in the earlier parts of the sutra, we can find occasions of *parinirvāṇa* being used with a different meaning.
- 1.5 In passages describing *vyākaraṇa* (the predictions), the *Lotus Sutra* expresses the notion of having attained buddhahood as *abhisaṃ √ budh* plus *anuttarā samyak saṃbodhi*. Therefore we could understand the verb *abhisaṃ √ budh* in the above paragraph as meaning to have completely attained *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*. Thus, the Buddha Śākyamuni is not in the condition of *parinirvṛta*, but has completely attained (*abhisaṃ √ budh*) *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*.
- 2.0 The Buddha in this sutra is not satisfied with just ontological recognition by followers; he asserts that what is most important is to focus on the actual mental condition of one's individual life. The Buddha in the sutra manifests his attitude to grasp the beings in this world of dependent origination through that same dynamic.

The perspective of the Buddha in this sutra must be connected to its revolutionary exposition regarding the fundamental condition of buddhas and bodhisattvas. It says that *bodhi* / *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*, rather than relating to a metaphysical existence, indicate a realm wherein bodhisattvas—the name for Mahāyāna practitioners, including followers of this sutra—can gain awareness, be awakened, and become enlightened.

- 2.1 Some of the references that indicate a realm shared by those who are not buddhas are:

caranti ete vara-bodhi-cārikāṃ {V vs 44, KN 131.12 WT 123.1}

(Śrāvakas, in reality,) do the practice of supreme *bodhi*.
sthito 'smi bodhaye {IX vs 7, KN 219.10 WT 192.15}
 (Ānanda says,) I am in the condition of *bodhi*.

kena bodhīya sthāpitāḥ {XIV vs 25, KN 306.3 WT 259.19}
 by whom have (these bodhisattvas) been established in
bodhi?

*evam eva Bhaiṣajyarāja dūre te bodhisattvā mahāsattvā
 bhavanty anuttarāyāṃ samyak-saṃbodhau yāvan nemaṃ
 dharmā-paryāyaṃ Śṛṅvantī...*{KN 233.6 WT 202.16}

Thus, indeed, *Bhaiṣajyarāja*, these bodhisattvas, *mahāsattvas* (who follow the other school) are far from *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* unless they know this *dharmā-paryāya*.

*Dūre yūyaṃ kula-putrā anuttarāyāḥ samyak-saṃbodher na
 tasyāṃ yūyaṃ saṃdṛśyadhve /* {KN 285.9 WT 244.4}

You are far from *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*, O *kula-putrā*, you are not seen there. (Here, the Buddha is telling his followers that they should *not* say things like this to others).

- 2.2 The Buddha himself does not yet enter the state of *parinirvāṇa*; that is to say, he stays in this world even though he has completely

achieved the condition of *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*. This is seen in the Buddha's own exposition in Chapter Fifteen, as seen in the references above in section 1.3.

- 3.0 Furthermore, around the middle of the sutra, in Chapter Eleven, another Buddha, Prabhūtaratna, who entered *parinirvāṇa* in the ancient past, happens to appear in the presence of Śākyamuni and collaborates with Śākyamuni up until the assembly ends.
- 3.1 The following description occurs in Chapter Twenty, *Tathāgata-rddhy-abhisamskāra*, in the latter half of the sutra:

*atha khalu bhagavān Śākyamunis tathāgataḥ sa ca
bhagavān Prabhūtaratnastathāgato 'rhan
samyak-saṃbuddhaḥ parinirvṛtaḥ...*
{KN387.7, WT328.2; cf. KN389.2, WT329.9.XX vs7;
KN393.3, WT332.14}

And indeed, the Bhagavat Śākyamuni who is a
Tathāgata, and the Bhagavat Prabhūtaratna who is a
Tathāgata, *Arhat*, *Samyak-saṃbuddha*, who has
entered the state of *parinirvṛta*...

It is obvious that the sutra is here contrasting the Buddha Śākyamuni with the Buddha Prabhūtaratna who is in the state of *parinirvṛta*.

- 3.2 Prabhūtaratna is a buddha of the past. In the above quotation, *parinirvāṇa* and *parinirvṛta* have the same meaning. Moreover, judging by a reference to a request to build a *stūpa*, it is obvious that these terms are here also used to refer to the death of the Buddha. Incidentally, the term *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* occurs in the description of a past episode in Prabhūtaratna's life and the bodhisattva practices he did before he attained buddhahood. In the passage dealing with Prabhūtaratna's past experiences, *parinirvāṇa* (*parinirvṛta*) and *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* are treated as different

things. However, since *parinirvāṇa* (*parinirvṛta*) is used only to mean the death of the Buddha, it is impossible to understand in any more detail how these terms relate to one another.

- 4.0 Then what are the implications of the situation, described in the above passage from Chapter Twenty, whereby Prabhūtaratna, who is in the state of *parinirvāṇa*, and Śākyamuni, who is considered not to be in this state, act and work together—both of them being connected with the real world? What can be taken from this context? The first thing is that the sutra propounds that the Buddha Śākyamuni is not dead. The second is that a buddha who died, while working with Śākyamuni, is connected with the real world. This kind of conclusion, however, does not answer how the sutra dares to let a buddha who died appear in the story. Śākyamuni is a historical person. The sutra stresses his *aparinirvṛta*. If we understand from the context that Śākyamuni is not dead, then what is meant by “not dead?”

The *Lotus Sutra*, like the other Mahāyāna sutras, talks of various buddhas aside from Prabhūtaratna. But those buddhas had no historical existence. It can be said that originally these other non-historical buddhas in the sutra can be described as buddhas on condition that they are in the state of *parinirvāṇa*. In other words, it can be argued that by describing buddhas in the same scenario who have two different backgrounds—concrete and abstract—the sutra is teaching that they both work together, connected with the real world.

The concepts of *bodhi /anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* are established for followers not only as a goal but also as a pathway. The breadth of these concepts as denoted by the sutra ranges from step-by-step awareness to the condition of being a buddha. Thus, by means of these concepts, the Buddha of the sutra successfully invites us into the realm of Buddhism.

- 5.0 The Buddhistic philosophy of non-discrimination arises from the universalistic character of its approach to human beings. The *Lotus Sutra* states that all sentient beings (*sarva-sattvāḥ*) can attain the state of the Awakened Ones, and thus they should take up the

pathway of that state. In this case, the main object of the nominal (*sattva*) is the human being. The discussion of *sattva* thus becomes more realistic and relevant to us, the people.

- 5.1 In its beginning parts, the sutra expresses that the buddhas' objective for appearing in this world is, ultimately, to cause sentient beings to take up the way of a buddha, an Awakened One:

*tathāgata-jñāna-darśana-mārgāvatāraṇa-hetu-nimittaṃ
sattvānāṃ tathāgato 'rhan samyak-saṃbuddho loka
utpadyate /*

{II. KN40.7; WT37.13}

The tathāgata, arhat, *samyak-saṃbuddha* appears in the world to let the people enter the way of the tathāgata's wisdom and perspective.

Then, who are the sentient beings that are being referred to?

- 5.2 The sutra seems to include all sentient beings when it refers to *sattvas* {XVII. WT293.7; KN346.7}.

In this instance, the *sattvas* include *asaṃjñin*—non-sentient beings or entities.

- 5.3 However, we can say that the scope of the word narrows to become human beings when the discussion turns to bodhisattva practice. In the sutra, Shakyamuni gives us the prediction (*vyākaraṇa*) of entering the sphere of complete *bodhi*. And it is given to any sons (*kula-putras*) or daughters (*kula-duhitīs*) who will take to heart merely a single verse of an expression of the Dharma and rejoice in it:

*ye ke-cid Bhaiṣajyarāja kula-putrā vā kula-duhitāro vēto
dharma-paryāyād antaśa eka-gāthām api dhārayiṣyanty
anumodayiṣyanti vā sarvāṃs tān ahaṃ Bhaiṣajyarāja
vyākaroṃy anuttarāyāṃ samyak-saṃbodhau // {X.*

KN225.8; WT197.2}

O Medicine King, for any man or woman of good intent—anyone—who accepts even a single verse of this teaching that leads to the truth and becomes joyful, I give assurance, O Medicine King, that all of them are in *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*.

Following that portion, the sutra gives an answer to the particular question, “What kind of *sattvas* will become buddhas in the future?”

*kīdṛśāḥ khalv api te sattvā bhaviṣyanty anāgate ’dhvani
tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyak-saṃbuddhā*
{X. KN225.11; WT197.7}

In its answer, the sutra acknowledges that “sons (*kula-putras*) and daughters (*kula-duhitṛs*)” are those who will become buddhas.

sa kula-putro vā kula-duhitā vā darśayitavyaḥ /
{X. KN225.13; WT197.9}

So the *sattvas* described here by the sutra as bodhisattvas are evidently just people. And the people referred to are *any* people; the discussion shows neither discrimination with regard to gender nor discrimination among people in general.

- 6.0 What the sutra requires of those people is revealed in the concept of creating the *buddha-kṣetra*, i.e., a buddha-world.
- 6.1 The sutra reports the thoughts of Subhūti and other *śrāvakas* at the beginning of Chapter Four, as follows:

*vayaṃ hi bhagavan nirvāṇa-praptāḥ sma iti bhagavan
nirudyamā anuttarāyāṃ samyak-saṃbodhāv apratibalāḥ
smâprativīry’ārambāḥ sma /... / tato vayaṃ bhagavan
bhagavato dharmam deśayamānasya sūnyatā-
nimittâpraṇihitaṃ sarvam āviṣkurmo nāsmābhir eṣu
buddha-dharmeṣu buddha-kṣetra-vyūheṣu vā bodhisattva-*

*vikrīḍiteṣu vā tathāgata-vikrīḍiteṣu vā sprhōtpāditā / tat
kasya hetoḥ / yac cāsmād bhagavaṃs traidhātukān
nirdhāvītā nirvāṇa-saṃjñīno vayaṃ ca jarā-jīrṇāḥ / tato
bhagavaṃ asmābhir apy anye bodhisattvā avavaditā
abhūvann anuttarāyāṃ samyak-saṃbodhāv anuśiṣṭās ca na
ca bhagavaṃs tatrāsmābhir ekam api sprhā-cittam
utpāditam abhūt / {KN100.8-101.5; WT95.11-96.5}*

Indeed, Bhagavat, we thought that we had attained *nirvāṇa*, and, Bhagavat, because of our laziness we did not have the energy to begin to make the effort to seek *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi* ... then, when the Bhagavat taught the Dharma, we were able to clarify to ourselves that all things have no substantiality, no settled aspect, and that thus they are out of the realm of desire; (but) Bhagavat, we have not generated any aspiration toward these Buddha-natures, or to the splendors of the Buddha-lands, or to the vibrant behaviors of these bodhisattvas and of the Buddhas in those lands. What is the reason? Indeed, Bhagavat, having escaped this world we imagined we attained *nirvāṇa* and have become old and senile. Bhagavat, we indeed taught and led other bodhisattvas with regard to *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*; nevertheless Bhagavat, a mind of enjoyment never once arose in us.

- 6.2 The words *śūnyātā*, *animitta*, and *apraṇihita*—usually translated as “emptiness,” “formlessness,” and “beyond causation”—appear in the quoted reference. These three elements of Buddhist philosophy are the main themes of the *praññā-pāramitā* sutras in Mahāyāna, and Subhūti is also the main character in the story of those sutras. In the quoted text, Subhūti and others say that they had attained *nirvāṇa* and clarified to themselves that things had no substantiality, no settled aspect, and were thus outside of the realm of desire. And therefore the *Lotus Sutra* has them confess in the story that they never aspired to *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*.

An aura of interest surrounding this item is that in spite of the fact that Subhūti and the others “taught and led other bodhisattvas with

regard to *anuttarā samyak-saṃbodhi*,” a mind of enjoyment never once arose them.

Their thoughts paradoxically reveal a position of the sutra, as the underlined part of the reference shows, i.e., that going hand-in-hand with the “splendors” (*vyūha*; decoration, adornment, composition) of buddha-lands are the “vibrant behaviors” (*vikrīdita*) of bodhisattvas as well as those of buddhas. People’s vibrant behaviors as bodhisattvas are expected as an attribute of a buddha’s world. This philosophy is affirmed by the description of the necessity of people’s activities within the bodhisattva way. The sutra clarifies that communication with others is the fundamental activity for people within the bodhisattva way.

7.0 In the *Lotus Sutra*, prior to the “comprehensive prediction” in Chapter Ten (Expounder of the Dharma), predictions are given to the senior *śrāvakas* like Shariputra. The descriptions of such future buddha-lands seem to be unrealistic if you look at, for example, the environmental constructions and numbers of bodhisattvas. Nevertheless, some of these descriptions represent idealistic targets of desirable human resources and physical environments based on the actual condition of this real world.

7.1 In the description of the prediction for Shariputra, the land portrayed is plain, clean, rich, and filled with groups of men and women. Such descriptions can be interpreted as indicative of hope for improvements of the actual condition of the real world.

*tena khalu punaḥ Śāriputra samayena tasya bhagavataḥ
Padmaprabhasya tathāgatasya Virajaṃ nāma buddha-
kṣetraṃ bhaviṣyati samaṃ ramaṇīyaṃ prāsādikam
parama-sudarśanīyaṃ pariśuddham ca sphītaṃ ca rddham
ca kṣemaṃ ca subhikṣaṃ ca bahu-jana-nārī-gaṇ’ ākīṇaṃ ca
maru-prakīrṇaṃ ca vaiḍūrya-mayaṃ suvarṇa-sūtrāṣṭāpada-
nibaddham / teṣu cāṣṭā-padeṣu ratna-vṛkṣā bhaviṣyanti
saptānāṃ ratnānāṃ puṣpa-phalaiḥ satata-samitaṃ
samarpitāḥ // {KN65.8; WT64.12}*

At that time, Shariputra, the land of that World-honored One, Radiance of a Red Lotus Flower, will be named Free of Dust. The lay of its land will be level, and it will be delightful, pleasant, wondrously beautiful, pure, abundantly rich, tranquil and fruitful, and filled with many men, women, and heavenly beings. Its ground will be made of lapis lazuli, and its checkered array of plots will be marked with golden cords and lined with rows of jeweled trees that constantly bear flowers and fruits made of seven jewels.

- 7.2 When Shariputra is going to become a buddha, the sutra says that his world is composed of “jewels.” The sutra explains here that these countless numbers of “jewels” are indicating the bodhisattvas. Thus, composed of “jewels” represents the conditions of an era when the actions of bodhisattvas are playing indispensable roles.

*Mahāratnapratimaṇḍitaś ca nāma Śāriputra sa kalpo
bhaviṣyati / tat kiṃ manyase Śāriputra kena kāraṇena sa
kalpo Mahāratnapratimaṇḍita ity ucyate / ratnāni
Śāriputra buddha-kṣetre bodhisttvā ucyate / te tasmin kāle
tasyāṃ Virajāyāṃ loka-dhātau bahavo bodhisattvā
bhaviṣyanty aprameyāsamkhyeyācintyātulyāmāpyā
gaṇanāṃ samatīkrāntā anyatra tathāgata-gaṇanayā / tena
kāraṇena sa kalpo Mahāratnapratimaṇḍita ity ucyate //*
{WT64.23 (KN66.1; ratnāṇi)}

O Shariputra, the era (when the World-honored One Radiance of a Red Lotus Flower appears) will be named Composed of Great Treasures. Why do you think, Shariputra, that this age will be named Composed of Great Treasures? O Shariputra, in that buddha land “treasures” are what the bodhisattvas are called. Their number will be countless, immeasurable, and beyond conception—unable to be known except by the reckoning of a tathāgata. Because of such a reason that era will be known as Composed of Great Treasures.

其劫名大寶莊嚴。何故名曰大寶莊嚴。其國中以菩薩爲大寶故。

彼諸菩薩無量無邊不可思議算數譬喻所不能及。非佛智力無能知者。{Taisho Vol.9, P.11b}

- 7.3 Kumārajīva translated different Sanskrit root words like *vyūha*, (*prati*)*maṇḍita*, *alaṃkṛta*, and (*upa*) $\sqrt{\text{śubh}}$, as 莊嚴 (decoration, adornment; to build and adorn). In such cases, the essence of 莊嚴 is not “decoration,” but rather “equipped,” “well-prepared,” “finely finished,” “composed.” It is necessary component of something—describing an essential attribute of the thing. In this sense, Kumārajīva is successful in translating the different words using the same concept of 莊嚴.
- 7.4 In addition to 莊嚴, *vyūha* is also translated by Kumārajīva as, 淨 (clean; to purify), and also as, 事 (matter; action). This is where we can see traces of Kumārajīva’s effort in having tried to grasp the intention of the sutra and translate it properly.
- 7.5 There must be *vikrīdita* (vibrant activities) of the bodhisattvas as part of the 莊嚴 (“equipment”) of the buddha’s world. Thus, while the entirety of the accomplishment of any buddha’s world must be the responsibility of a buddha, the buddha-task of developing its composition is actually accomplished by us, the people, as bodhisattvas.

