

Lotus Sūtra

- Closest scripture to a “Buddhist Bible” for many E.A. Buddhists
- Not in Pali/Theravada canon

1. Legends of miracles:

- 11th C. story of Hōgon and Renzō. Protection deity of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* who provided food to Hōgon not as powerful as protectors of the Lotus Sūtra.

2. Power:

- Powerful in the age of *mappō*.
- Nichiren (1222-82), *Nam(u) myōhō renga kyō*. 南無妙法蓮華經
- Tiantai - Zhiyi (Chih-I, 538–597)
- Copy it everyday for 30 years; recite it 3x/day (or 1000 times per month)

3. Extant versions:

- Earliest extant Chinese translation by Dharmarakṣa made in 286 CE.
- This is also oldest extant version. Earliest extant Sanskrit from 6th C.
- Kumārajīva (344 - 413 CE) and team made most influential translation in 406 CE. in 28 chapters.

4. Date:

- Scholars say oldest part dates from between 1st Cent. BCE to 1st Cent. CE.
- Oldest = Ch. 1-9 and Ch. 17.
- Appeared in 4 distinct sections written at different times.
- Most of the text was complete by the end of the 2nd Cent. CE.

5. Features:

1. Opens with “Thus I heard...one time when the Buddha was dwelling at....”
2. List of who was present and their relationship to the *Lotus Sūtra*.
3. Dramatic, frequent scene changes.
4. Parables: Ch. 3 Burning House;
 - Ch. 4 Prodigal Son goes to rich father’s house;
 - Ch 5. Rain falls equally and plants use what that need;
 - Ch. 7. Guide produces jeweled palace;
 - Ch. 8. Jewel sown into garment.
5. Some Question and Answer format
6. Especially in 2nd half, much laudatory self-reference.
Devotion to *Lotus Sūtra* stressed. If a person only hears of it and rejoices s/he will become a Buddha in the future.

6. Content:

- Establishes authority of itself: says it was written just prior to *parinirvana*.
- The Buddha makes it clear that his enlightenment is superior to other religious attainment.
- The Buddha taught other teachings that are provisionally true because of *upāya*.
Implications of *upāya*:
 - a. Most or all of the Buddha’s teachings have a relative truth.
 - b. The Great Physician teaches due to Great Compassion
 - c. To each according to ability
 - d. There is no point in carrying the raft after crossing the river
 - e. Result: *Panjiāo* systems: Lotus is highest and FINAL teaching
 - f. Bodhisattva might break vows for good cause
 - g. *Upāya* is important feature of doctrine of *Ekayāna*.
- *Ekayāna*

6. Content (continued)

- Interprets stories in the Life of the Buddha.
 - Q: Why did the Buddha once return with an empty begging bowl?
A: So future monks would not feel badly when this happened.
 - Q: Why did the Buddha take 7 steps
A: Better than 6 or 8
- Universalism: Ch. 12 is Devadatta chapter. Not in Dharmaraksa translation.
Devadatta is predicted to become a Buddha. No *icchantika* as in versions of *Paranirvana Sūtra*.
This was interpreted as backsliders can be saved by power of Lotus Sūtra in age of mappō.
- Female: Also in Ch. 12 is story of Dragon King's Daughter.
- Avalokitesvara, in Ch. 24, extends his compassion beyond the spiritual. Calling his name saves people from robbers and grants children to the barren.
- Burnt body offering in Ch. 23.
- In 2nd half we learn the Buddha is still here and is eternal. Like a physician helping his poisoned children.
- Dharani in Ch. 26.

7. Interpretations:

- Some say the *Lotus Sūtra* deifies the Buddha. If the Buddha is deified, Questions":
 1. What happened to *parinirvana*?
 2. Does one have to be a deity to be destined for enlightenment?
 3. If so, if everyone is eternal, is this atman?

Paul Williams says the *Lotus Sūtra* might mean the Buddha lives a very long time but not forever.

- Tiantai links the *Lotus Sūtra* with the *Parinirvana Sūtra*, which speaks of *Tathagathagarbha*. In this way, we don't have to be deities to realize Buddhahood but we all have the innate quality. However, there is no mention of this in the *Lotus Sūtra*.
- E.A. Buddhists sometimes interpret the Buddha of the Lotus Sūtra to be like the Buddha of the Huayen Sūtra.
- This can be related to the interpretation of certain Buddhas as Dharmakaya Buddhas.
- *Lotus Sūtra* has been interpreted variously:

esoteric	vs.	exoteric
secret		revealed
mysterious		overt
Tantric		literal
<i>mikkyō</i>		<i>kengyō</i>
- Nichiren (1222-82), believed there is scriptural evidence that when a country has lost the Dharma, bad things happen to it. This is why the Mongols were able to take over China. He said it would happen in Japan if the country did not reform. He said the Lotus Sūtra is the most suitable scripture during the age of mappō. Japan should restore the Dharma through the emperor and the people and become the Buddha-land from which Buddhism is spread worldwide.