

“The Lotus Sutra” and Some Problems of Modern Culture

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DURING their first contacts with Buddhism, Europeans had primarily been fascinated with yoga, mass hypnosis, the skill of controlling the body. The scholars, on the other hand, since the end of the 19th century had been interested in the Buddhist philosophy. Finally, in the mid-20th century, it drew attention of those whose field of study was psychoanalysis; one of the first to build the bridge between the two was Erich Fromm. The question arises, why any special interest towards Indian ways to control one’s mind? Fromm wrote: “The fact of death is immanent for humans who recognize it and its inevitability. That recognition causes an essential influence on one’s life.”¹ The desire to push the unpleasant moment as far away as possible makes one to search for ways of salvation in other teachings. Buddhism appeared to The Teaching which promised assistance in achieving immortality.

At first, the best known section of the Buddhist Tripitaka happened to become its second part, the sutras. They are actually discourses in philosophical dogma intended primarily for oral sermons. The very idea of a sutra was common for all ancient Indian teachings; the oldest written Buddhist ones are not dated before the end of the 1st millennium B.C. The most popular sutra since the first century B.C. and till the present time has remained the “Saddharmapundarika” or the “Lotus Sutra”. This paper is based on its Kashgar (more strictly, Khotan) Sanskrit version. Before everything else, one should ask, why has it been popular for so long?

The beginning of the sutra tells about Buddha presiding over an assembly of his pupils, Bodhisattvas, Gods, rulers of the four parts of the world, and everybody else, and explaining the Great Teaching, the Great Dharma which no one had heard of before. The Dharma was hard to grasp, so Buddha had waited for the audience capable enough to perceive that their primary goal was to achieve the *annutara-samq-sambodhi*, i.e. the threshold of the Nirvana. The path towards the Nirvana is long and complicated, so we will have to follow Buddha in considering certain points in the history of his Teaching, those which have not yet

been addressed by scholars.

The people (among them, Buddha’s first disciples) having entered the path of the Teaching, listened to Buddha’s first sermons (and were therefore referred to as shravaks), learned about the four noble truths and the eight-folded path, about the arkhats’ way and the Nirvana. All that is sufficiently well described in the Jatakas. In the second chapter of the “Lotus Sutra”, Buddha demonstrates the gradual development of their minds. The Sutra lists a lot of examples of the noblest deeds of the disciples. The sermons had not been a waste of breath. They sowed the seeds of faith over a fertile ground.

In the 16th chapter, Buddha tells about the “mystery of the Tankhagata” hinting at his personal history: “Both Gods and people... believe that Buddha Shakyamuni who you see before you, left the tribal palace of the Shikyas, sat under a tree close to the town of Gaya, and reached the state of annutara-samq-sambodhi. However, my dear sons, since the moment when I became a Buddha, there have passed countless and endless hundreds, thousands, dozens of thousands, and even millions... of kalpas. Since then, I have resided in the world of the Sakha, proclaim the Dharma, teach and instruct the living.” The more profoundly the shravaks learned the Teaching, the better they understood that they indeed were facing The Buddha who could give them rebirth and lead them to the Nirvana. Some of them were seriously worried that Buddha would leave them any moment and delve into the Nirvana. Others, though standing near Buddha, could not see him. Still others thought that Buddha had long gone away, into the Nirvana. Buddha understood that everything depended on whether the roots of their faith were “sharp or blunted”; he saw it with his third eye and everything to assist those who had already come to the faith.

Sutra frequently tells about the nobility of the disciples. In the 20th chapter, Buddha tells about a Bkhikshu, Boddhisattva called The Boddhisattva Never Disparaging. Wherever that one encountered people, whoever those people might be, he bowed to them and praised them with the following words, “I revere you and cannot despise you, because you will all follow the path of Boddhisattva and become Buddhas.” He was ridiculed, beaten with clubs, hurt with stones thrown at him, but he only ran away and repeated in loud voice, “I will never despise you, because you will all become Buddhas!”

The Buddhist tradition states that every person contains something of a Buddha, and that tiny sprout will bring its fruit sooner or later. Even the poorest, worth developed, unhappy man will become a Buddha a lot of kalpas later, if he has listened to the Teaching. The patricidal King

Ajatashatru, and Devadatta who repeatedly tried to assassinate Buddha himself, would inevitably turn into Buddhas with more kalpas passing. It goes without saying that such Teaching simply could not fail attracting adepts.

It was in the “Lotus Sutra” that Buddha explained the gradual nature of his disciples’ development. When they had started listening to his sermons, they had not fully understood them. What caused suffering? Were there ways of getting rid of it? Buddha said that yes, there were. What were they, then? And what was the eight-folded path? Some of the disciples appeared to be cleverer than others, and grasped the meaning. Mr. Daisaku Ikeda, President of the International Soka Gakkai Society wrote complete books about his having started studying the “Lotus Sutra” in the 1940s, guided by his teacher Josei Toda; presently, this society is world-famous with sections in virtually all European and Asiatic countries.

We will here try to present our viewpoint in regard to the Buddhist teaching and the three Yana chariots related in the second chapter of the “Lotus Sutra”. The Buddhist tradition refers to the outcome of the initial period of the Teaching as “The First Chariot” or “The Shravaks’ Chariot”. During the gaps between the kalpas when Buddha was absent, there stepped forth people capable enough to grasp the Teaching on their own. They were however few, and the Buddhist tradition calls their way of achieving the Nirvana “The Pratyekabuddhas’ Chariot”. Finally, there came the time when all people realized their unhappiness and learned the ways to get liberated from it. Then, Buddha decided to help them via the Bodhisattvas, those disciples of his who had reached the state of annutara-samq-sambodhi and were ready to delve into the Nirvana. The Bodhisattvas sacrificed their own salvation for the sake of assisting the unlucky ones who were unable to “cross the river” themselves. Those who crossed it with the help provided by the Bodhisattvas, rode the third Chariot, the Mahayana. As a result, three categories of Buddha’s followers appeared to use three different ways of reaching the Nirvana. The question arises, why the process required the word “yana”, or “chariot”? It might seem, that the “yana” in this context is a coded symbol indicating the way of “reaching beyond”. On the other hand, “the other shore”, the Nirvana, was the same for everybody. If one has a closer look at the three ways, one must conclude that their names imply that those worthy of Nirvana did differ in regard to the extent to which their minds were developed. Suddenly Buddha declared in the “Lotus Sutra” that there were no three chariots, but solely one providing salvation for everybody, the “Buddha Chariot” or “Buddhayana”. As the father of all

living beings, he alone could rid them of all and any problems of existence bringing them to salvation. In his study “A Voyage to the West” (“Taisho Tripitaka”, vol. XXX, pp. 592–593), Chinese scholar Fayung wrote, “One Chariot is ‘Buddha’s Chariot’, two Chariots are ‘The Chariot of the ones listening to the Voice’ and ‘The Chariot of those enlightened through understanding the causes’. Three Chariots are the two mentioned above plus ‘The Bodhisattvas’ Chariot’. These three Chariots are counterpoised to the fourth, Single Chariot... The reasons of that contrast are the following: before, due to the differences in the human perceptive abilities, Buddha had to proclaim “The ways of three Chariots”. However, those had been but “temporary teachings”... Presently, thanks to the earlier sermons by Shakyamuni, all people understood they were like statues cast of pure gold. In other words, ‘there exists but one Teaching, one Principle, one set of abilities, one man...’

Another question, why the human abilities had been designated through the word “yana”? For the first time, it was posed by the Japanese scholar Seishi Karashima in his paper “Who authored the Lotus Sutra?”² He proved that the earliest parts of the Lotus Sutra had not been written in Sanskrit, but rather in Prakrits, the middle-stage Indian languages. If we assume that the first written version of the text originated from Magadha (that opinion is shared by quite a few other scholars as well, among them, G.Lueders), it would seem that Magadhi was to be its original language. However, the manuscripts show that it is by no means Magadhi, but rather “mixed” Sanskrit. It was at that point that copyists might replace the initial “Buddha-jnana”, “Buddha’s knowledge” with “Buddha-yana”, or “Buddha’s chariot”. If that were the case, the “Chariots” should actually mean “Levels of knowledge” or “Levels of spiritual development”.

Mr. Karashima continued his studies and found a lot of occasions in various Buddhist treatises, where the context suggested a possibility of replacing “yana” with “jnana”.³ Here is an example: “Bodhisattvas who are desirous of the knowledge of the All-Knowing (sarvajna-jnana), the Buddha-knowledge (buddha-jnana), the knowledge of the “Self-Born One” (svayambhu-jnana) and the knowledge without a master (anacarya-jnana) and long for the great vehicle (mahayana; O. tathagatayana)⁴...”

Of importance looks yet another essential idea revealed by the “Lotus Sutra”. Addressing his disciples, Buddha said that he had acquired might, fearlessness, artfulness in samadhi, dhyana, and other abilities impossible to enumerate. Technically, the words samadhi, dhyana, or meditation link his ideas with psychoanalysis. *Dhyana* has two mean-

ings in Sanskrit: 1) the state of existence; 2) the state of spiritual concentration. The commentary of the Author clarifies the idea of the spiritual concentration, defining it as “the concentration of good-natured spirit on a single object” or “the uniform direction of good-natured spirit”. The essence of that uniform direction of good-natured spirit is nothing else but concentration, or samadhi. Concentration is a spiritual phenomenon with a sole object. Dhyana in that case represents the spiritual object assisting in the process of in-depth concentration, i.e. perception remaining coordinated with the reality. The Sanskrit stem *dhyai* from which *dhyana* was derived, meant “concentrated thinking”. Vasubandhu remarked that concentrated thinking meant nothing else but wisdom.

The processes going on inside the brain had been of interest for Buddhists since the end of the 1st millennium B.C. The “Lotus Sutra” explains the three sorts of samadhi. Every time, Buddha began his sermon only after having entered the state of samadhi meaning under the circumstances meditation with the object of “shunyata” or “nothingness”. What can that “nothingness” be? It should be related to the processes of perception, to the work of the brain itself. There is nothing real in the world created by our own minds. “Separate entities” (dharma) have no “nature of their own”. Finally, there disappears the “linkage” to all and any objects or subjects.

Buddhist meditation, as noted by V.G. Lysenko,⁵ “rests upon the Brakhmanist-Shraman traditions of the yoga”. It seems that in the “Lotus Sutra”, the word “meditation” has two separate meanings, one of which is contemplation (bhavana), at first addressing the beautiful, but gradually descending towards the despicable. In that way, a human being “lives through a whole life” inside his brain during a single session. That clears the mind, expands the horizons, and results in spiritual and physical improvement. The process itself proves that psychoanalysis has its roots in Buddhist spiritual practices. The “Lotus Sutra” is of importance not only as a must-read for all Buddhists, but also as a source while studying various complicated problems of brain functioning. Till now, its precise standing in that has remained undefined.

The European tradition regards Buddhism as a religion “with neither faith nor God”. Indeed, Buddha was not a God. On the other hand, his statues mounted in temples perform as those of deities. They are prayed to; in the places where Buddha’s remains were buried, chapels are built, ornamented with jewels and flowers, fumigated with incense, in one word, revered. Erecting Buddha statues in temples could possibly be compared with the Roman Catholic traditions. On the other hand, as

before Shakyamuni there had existed an endless number of other Buddhas, and he himself declared in the “Lotus Sutra” that in a lot of kalpas everybody would become one, Buddhism remains unparalleled by any Christian religion.

Faith without a God seems to be impossible. However, the faith in Buddha’s Teaching flourishes. Buddhism is presently gaining still more adepts in Europe, America, the Baltic states, and Russia. This Oriental philosophy and literature has given everybody a chance to overcome that psychological impasse which causes not solely the mid-life crisis, but also problems of the younger ages. Oriental psychological techniques have proved to be useful for businesses which use them still more frequently. The path for psychoanalysis has been paved by philosophy, and it seems that the St. Petersburg school is not lagging behind the trend either. Founded by F. I. Shcherbatsky, it works on with great success. Completed has been the translation of the multi-volume treatise “Abhidharmakoshabhashya” written by Vasubandhu in Sanskrit. Established have been the highly fruitful relations with Japanese scholars and philosophers. The Buddhist Soka Gakkai school and Dr. Daisaku Ikeda heading it have contributed a lot to the development of culture and science. Thanks to his activities, culturology and politology have received a powerful push forward.

Notes

¹ E. Fromm. *Tchelovek dlya sebya (Man for Himself)*. M., 1998, p. 420.

² *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University for the Academic Year 2000*. Soka University. Tokyo. 2001. pp. 171–173.

³ Seishi Karashima. Some features of the language of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*. *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44: 2001. pp. 207–230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵ Rannyaya buddiyskaya filosofiya. “Early Buddhist Philosophy”. Moscow, “Vos-totchnaya literatura”, RAN, 1994, pp. 183–193.