

The *Lotus Sūtra*

Lokesh Chandra

WE convene in the charming metropolis of Paris to celebrate the release of a dialogue on the *Lotus Sūtra* as a “Way of Values”.¹ Paris reminds of the university created here by King Philip Augustus in 1200. It became the most famous and flourishing *alma mater* in the whole of Christendom and received the youth of all Europe. Paris is the only European capital that celebrates the Hellenic legend of Paris, the son of the king of Troy distinguished for his beauty and strength and represented in Greek art as a handsome young man.

First Translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Europe

It was in Paris that Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) translated the fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* in 1841. It attracted the attention of influential thinkers like Thoreau and Emerson who had given rise to the Transcendental school. It was the first landing of the *Lotus Sūtra* on European shores. He completed the translation of the entire *Sūtra*, the first in any modern language. Burnouf laid the first foundations of Buddhist studies, and is in fact the father of modern Buddhology. Jules Mohl wrote in tribute to him: “il avait ouvert à l’histoire des voies entièrement nouvelles, et qui resteront des monuments magnifiques d’une des vies littéraires les plus belles et plus remplies, et des titres de gloire pour la France (he opened completely new pathways into history, which will remain magnificent monuments to one of the most fulfilled and beautiful of literary lives, and are achievements which France can be proud of).”² Through mastermind German Indologists like Max Müller who studied Sanskrit under Burnouf, Japanese Buddhism attained a place of honour in modern Buddhology.

Nalanda Monastery and Scripture of ‘Ekayāna’

The great French sinologist Stanislas Julien translated the travels of Hsüan-tsang to India in 1853–58 for the first time. Hsüan-tsang



Ruins of Nalanda, present-day Bihar, India; Gupta era, 5th century: UNESCO World Heritage site as one of the oldest learning centers in the world (from Wikimedia Commons)

mentions that King Śākrāditya esteemed the ‘One Vehicle’ (Ekayāna) and revered the Triratna.³ He selected a lucky spot and built the first monastery at Nalanda. Śākrāditya is Kumāragupta of the Gupta dynasty, the golden age of Indian history. The *Lotus Sūtra* as the prime scripture of Ekayāna played a historic role in the founding of the world-renowned university of Nalanda.

Another iconic sinologist of France, Edouard Chavannes, translated the memoirs of sixty eminent monks who came to India in search of the Dharma during the great T’ang dynasty. They were written by I-tsing. I-tsing narrates the life of Hui-lun of the Silla dynasty of Korea who left a detailed description of the Nalanda monastery. “More than seven yojanas to the northeast of the Mahābodhi monastery, one reaches the Nalanda Monastery. It was constructed by the King Śrī Śākrāditya for the bhikṣu Hu Rājavamśa of Uttarāpatha.”⁴

Hui-li mentions in his life of Hūsan-tsang that King Bālāditya added a monastery at Nalanda in which a Chinese monk stayed. He was so moved by the life of the Chinese monk that he abdicated the throne to become a monk.⁵

French scholarship has revealed the outstanding role of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the establishment of Nalanda University due to the devotion of the Gupta emperor to its tenets of Ekayāna, and how Nalanda was frequented by monks from Korea and China.

Lotus Symbolises Upholding and Ascending of Life

The *Lotus Sūtra* is the realisation of life. It is “the crown of Mahayanist literature” for the richness and beauty of its spiritual tenets. Lord Buddha followed the kṣatriya tradition of contemplation, symbolising the descent of divine energy into life. Upaniṣads enshrine this way to contemplation. The Chāndogya-upaniṣad 8.1.1 says:

In the centre of the castle of Brahmā, our own body, there is a small shrine in the form of a lotus flower. This little space within the heart is as this vast universe. The whole universe is in Him and He dwells within our heart.

The lotus is a symbol of the purity of the soul and man’s moral efforts. Man overcomes his attachments to this flowing world, this ocean of being (*bhava-sāgara*) and strives for the white purify of the heart like the white lotus that is not entangled by this nether world once grown out of the muddy water. We are one with nature in the interpretative image of our psyche. The Chinese monk Chih-I (538–597) interpreted the relation between the lotus blossom and fruit in terms of an allegorical image. As the lotus blossom does not exist for producing a fruit and the fruit comes to full maturity when the blossom drops off, likewise when the tentative is abandoned then the only true remains. Everything in the universe and the ultimate truth are co-active. The growing lotus flower gives rise to the idea of the unfolding of man’s deepest roots while being rooted in the ground-swell of life.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is an intrinsic pattern of an open process that stirs and rouses, moves and drives humans forward by its mysterious power. The *Sūtra* creates sublime images that express self-unfolding activity. They are ideas that turn like flowers to the sun of their ideal. The *Sūtra* is an earth-bound stormer of the heavens. It seeks a synthesis of the Now and the Eternal, of man’s inner world of conscience and the vault of his heavens, in its purity and openness, in the eternal youth of tomorrows.

In the words of Poet Jien:

*Thought I search
Every field
Overlooking nothing,
All the flowers are but
The flower of Dharma.*

Every lotus seed contains the dream, the incorporeal image of a full-blown lotus. This dream can be sensed in the slowly unfolding buds. Men are moved by dreams, by the ideal images that sway their minds. The flame that glows in this impassioned heart, bursting into words, flaring into actions, is the fountainhead of all light and of all tomorrows. Value-creation is the utter silence, the frozen sleep of the primordial. Silence is sacred to sound, frozen sleep to resounding action, meaning to words, and words to tangible realities.

The lotus is a symbol of purity and its seed-vessel is the central peak of Mount Sumeru. As the symbol of man's ascension from darkness to resplendent light, the lotus flower leads to the innermost divine essence.

Open Spaces for Cultural Interpretation

The Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* relates a story about the Buddha in a previous life. He renounced his kingdom and served a sage by providing him with firewood, water and herbs to obtain the *Lotus* teachings. From this arose a poem by Gyogi (668–749):

*For collecting firewood,
Gathering herbs,
And carrying water,
My reward is
The Lotus Sūtra.*

This poem issues from the tradition of free interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The world (nature) and words (culture) are dynamic phenomena in the light of similitude and reflection. Resolution of opposition between nature and culture will be the episteme of the quality of life.

The *Lotus Sūtra* was preached by the Buddha amidst wondrous signs on the Vulture Peak at Rājagṛha in modern Bihar. The heavens rain flowers. The earth trembles. The crowds, human and divine, wait in great expectation for the sermon. The Buddha emits a light that illumines the universe. The portents are followed by the *Sūtra*. Śāriputra dances with joy on hearing the wondrous message of the *Sūtra*. The *Sūtra* is raised to an object of worship to be revered *per se*, and the preaching promised in the first chapter is never delivered. It is empty, open at the centre. It is pure content, which invites filling in by interpretation.

In the words of Shioiri Ryōdō: “Both the structure and the meaning of the text imply that the essential quality of the Lotus Sutra is that, having absorbed widely, it can be applied infinitely to a great many aspects of

culture.”⁶ The *Lotus Sūtra* leaves open spaces, with no promises. History and mystery, power and poetry, didactics and aesthetics have been intertwined in its long history. The meaning is drawn out from the stories, language of the text, as well as from its structure.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śākyamuni is no more conceived of as a historical personage subject to the fate of all transient beings, but as one who lives in eternity for the benefit of all who are and will be. He is not a human Buddha but a transcendent Tathāgata. His historical ministry was skillful means to save humankind. The 11th chapter on the emergence of the Treasure Tower transposes the earthly manifestation of the Buddha on a transcendental plane. The Buddha Prabhūtaratna gives half of his seat in the jeweled stupa to Śākyamuni who sits there in the lotus posture (padmāsana) to dissolve the momentous historical into the eternal Dharma.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is the supreme and unequivocal expression of Ekayāna “One Vehicle” which declares that the three vehicles of the Śrāvaka (disciple), Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattva are three expedient devices to attract beings to Ekayāna. This *Sūtra* is the unifying exposition of the teachings that lead to Buddhahood.

Boundless Interpenetration of All Lives

Traces of nature flow in Śākyamuni’s meditation under the Bodhi tree for 49 long days, in his stay on the banks of the Nairāñjanā River after Bodhi, in Sujātā’s offering him milk-rice on its banks, and in Brahmā persuading him to preach the Dharma. It was the visualisation of the three thousand worlds in one thought (*ichinen sanzen*). *Sanzen* is the boundlessness of the interpenetration of phenomena with one another. The Saṃyuktāgama and Ekottarāgama illustrate it:

“Beneath the pippala tree, the hermit Gautama focused all of his formidable powers of concentration to look deeply at his body. He saw that each cell of his body was like a drop of water in an endlessly flowing river of birth, existence, and death.... Intermingled with the river of his body was the river of feelings in which every feeling was a drop of water. In his meditation Siddhārtha “looked up at a pippala leaf imprinted against the blue sky, its tail blowing back and forth as if calling him. Looking deeply at the leaf, he saw clearly the presence of the sun and stars—without the sun, without light and warmth, the leaf could not exist.... He also saw in the leaf the presence of clouds—without clouds there could be no rain, and without rain the leaf could not be. He saw

the earth, time, space, and mind—all were present in the leaf. In fact, at that very moment, the entire universe existed in that leaf. The reality of the leaf was a wondrous miracle.”⁷

Animals, plants, mountains, and humans are resonances of deeper implications, the interdependence of life. Living entities, their environment, the vast physical universe and human beings are one. Our charred world with all kinds of imbalances, depletions and disasters can be saved for future generations by the vehicle of spirituality acting in coherence with the many-sided reality of the universe.

Interweaving of Humanity and Nature can come only from the path of the Bodhisattva: “Ideas arising from that universal life force and from the future are the characteristic quality of bodhisattva-like human beings.”⁸

As harsh winds howl into us from the muffled moans of pollution, global-warming, tsunamis and the like, an ancient Japanese poet reminds us: “Poems arise as ten thousand leaves of language from the seeds of peoples’ hearts.”⁹

The Vinaya narrates how the Buddha and his monks were invited to a meal at the palace by King Śuddhodana, along with other guests. The Buddha gave a discourse on how to mediate to transcend suffering. The Buddha smiled and spoke: “But suffering is only one face of life. Life has another face, the face of wonder. If we can see that face of life, we will have happiness, peace and joy. When our hearts are unfettered, we can make direct contact with the wonders of life. When we have truly grasped the truths of impermanence, emptiness of self, and dependent co-arising, we see how wondrous our own hearts and minds are. We see how wonderful our bodies, the branches of violet bamboo, the golden chrysanthemums, the clear stream, and the radiant moon are.”¹⁰

In Quest of a New *Forma Mentis*

The *Lotus Sūtra* is a ferry boat to the horizons of our heritage so that we live to have something to outlive. It enriches the aroma of destiny like moonlight that sheds lustre in the humblest of homes. Man lives in a physical universe and blossoms in a symbolic universe. Cultural capacity can and should undergo a completely new evolution on a metaplane. The fallacy that “man” is no longer dependent on biological foundations and is a being apart from nature will not function. The criteria of fitness have to be decided by life and nature. The freedom of civilisation cannot devour its children. We cannot go on legitimising “ecotaxes” and graze

all regeneration.

The materialistic foundations of classical physics have crumbled down. Science itself has proved that matter is energy, processes are as valid as facts, and it has affirmed the non-materiality of the universe. An encounter of the 'two cultures', the scientific and the humane, will restore the normal vision, and will be the bedrock of a 'science of understanding' in the new century. As they ascend, they will converge. It will give new meaning to the ancient perception that quantity (measure) and quality (value) coexist at the root of nature. Human endeavours cannot afford to be humanistically irresponsible. We need an integrating centrum of human consciousness and action. We need to envision the world in beauty and nobility, devotion and dedication to Cosmic Humanism. In this we can develop a 'world sensorium' (in the nomenclature of Oliver L. Reiser¹¹), in which a global society will discover its inner selfhood, to illuminate the interrelatedness of all. In an organic cosmic order there is no isolated system: no person and no aspect of him/her is an island.

In the darkest night, man searches for light. In his deepest need, he seeks a dawning consciousness. He aspires to repaint the world canvas, to revalue what *is* in the primal sources of the eternal process. Out of the real and the imagined is born the Realm of the Future wherein man rises above himself, as a dynamic bearer of culture. He crosses the River of Today and ferries across to the Other Shore of unborn tomorrows. Crossing frontiers is man's heritage, or in the chimes of the *Heart Sūtra*: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṅgate bodhi svāhā*. This pāramitā illumines and enlightens our hearts and summons us by the quiet of the bower to span life with compassion, wisdom and beauty. In this pāramitā, humans are a part of all other humans, of all life, of all matter, of all stars and of all voids of eternity. We are Eternal pilgrims in quest of a new *formamentis*. In the words of poet Tagore:

*The traveller has to knock at every alien door
to come to his own,
and one has to wander through all the outer worlds
to reach the innermost shrine at the end.*¹²

The dialogue to be released today, in the haunting charm of the French language, is on the historic evolution of valorisation across time and space in the *Lotus Sūtra*. It kindles anew our inner consciousness that humanity has to be the joy and beauty of life, that we and nature are interdependent and thus nature should command our reverence. We have

to share with fellow beings and with nature for all things to flourish in harmony.

Notes

¹ Chandra, Lokesh and Ikeda, Daisaku (2016/March). *Le bouddhisme ou la voie des valeurs—Un dialogue sur la création de valeurs à travers l'Histoire* (Buddhism or Way of Values: A Dialogue on Creation of Values throughout History). Paris: L'Harmattan. This dialogue was published in previous month of the symposium.

² Translated by Mr. David Hare.

³ Hsüan-tsang (Xuanzang). *Da Tang xiyuji* (The Great Tang Records of the Western Regions), Vol. 9. *T* no. 2087, 51. 923b21–23.

⁴ I-tsing. *Da Tang xiyu qiu fa gao seng zhuan* (The Biographies of Eminent Priests of the Great Tang Dyansty Who Sought the Law in the Western Regions) Vol. 1. *T* no. 2066, 51. 5b17–19.

⁵ *Da Tang Da Ci'ensi Sanzang fashi zhuan* (The Biography of the Tripitaka Master of Tatz'u-en-ssu Temple of the Great Tang Dyansty). *T* no. 2053, 50. 237b12–14.

⁶ Shioiri, Ryodo (1989). "The Meaning of the Formation and Structure of the Lotus Sutra" in *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, edited by George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 15–36.

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). *Old Path White Clouds: The Life Story of the Buddha*. London: Rider, pp. 152–3.

⁸ Ikeda, Daisaku. (1990) "The Environmental Problem and Buddhism", *The Journal of Oriental Studies* Vol. 3, p. 13.

⁹ Ki no, Tsurayuki. *Kokin Wakashu Kanajo* (The Preface to "A Collection of Ancient and Modern Japanese Poetry").

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, op. ci., pp. 233–4. King Śuddhodana is father of Shakyamuni Buddha.

¹¹ Cf. Reiser, Oliver Leslie. (1946) *The World Sensorium: The Social Embryology of World Federation*. NY: Avalon Press.

¹² Cf. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Gitanjali, Song Offerings: A Collection of Prose Translations Made by the Author from the Original Bengali Manuscript*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors in association with Visva-Bharati, p. 25.

Author Biography

Lokesh Chandra is a director of the International Academy of Indian Culture and a president of Indian Council for Cultural Relations. He is a prominent scholar of Buddhism, Vedic scriptures and Indian arts. Dr. Chandra was born in 1927 at Ambala as a son of a renowned Sanskrit scholar Dr. Raghu Vira. While having studied more than 20 languages including Sanskrit and Pali, he has to his credit over 400 works and text editions. The *Satapitaka* (Hundred Baskets of Teachings) is one of his most important works, as a major compilation of Asian Buddhism, arts, literature, and history. He was awarded Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 2006.