

What the Lotus Sutra Requires of People

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1.0 What are the requirements being made by Shakyamuni Buddha to followers through the Lotus Sutra? The fundamental item at the heart of the sutra's advocacy of individual action can be said to be the establishment of communication between people.

1.1 The first chapter reveals the perspective that the sutra itself must take the initiative to create a framework of communication, and undertakes to do so by relating how the “present” circumstance of the sutra came about. The starting point finds the Buddha Shakyamuni present with a great audience that is wondering: What is about to happen? How? Why? The sutra replies to these questions through the agency of Mañjuśrī addressing the audience to explain what is about to take place—in effect establishing the line of communication with the audience. The aim of the Buddha in the sutra is to make up a world wherein all of its human beings are enjoying successful mutual communication. In the Sanskrit text of the first chapter, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva tells Maitreya Bodhisattva and others:

*mahā-dharma-śravaṇa-sāṃkathyam idaṃ kula-putrās
tathagatasya kartum abhiprāyo...* {KN 16.10; WT 15.6}

Gentlemen, it is the intention of the tathāgata to establish
[the plaza of] communication for learning the great Dharma.

However, instead of mutual conversation, the reading of sāṃkathya by
Kumārajīva is simply “expound.”

佛世尊欲說大法 {Taisho Vol.9, P.3c}

Buddha, the World-honored One, intends to expound the great
Dharma.

2.0 Through the succeeding chapters, communication becomes something that Shakyamuni wants to create between all living beings through the practices of the followers of the sutra. As one of those practices, particularly described in chapter 10, followers are to become expounders of the sutra, i.e., the agents and the establishers of that communication.

- 2.1 The sutra requires a bodhisattva who follows it to be a *dharmabhānaka*—one who expounds the sutra’s teachings. At the end of the chapter in which references to *dharmabhānaka* are found, the sutra says:

ye cāpi tasy’ āśrita bhonti sattvās
te bodhisattvā laghu bhonti sarve/ {KN 238.3; WT 205.19}

And, indeed, all sentient beings who approach him/her [will]
 immediately become bodhisattvas.

Here we can discern an attitude of non-discrimination regarding the invitation to become a bodhisattva according to the sutra’s teaching.

若親近法師 速得菩薩道 {Taisho Vol.9, p.32b}

Those who closely associate with the *dharmabhānaka* will
 attain the bodhisattva way.

- 2.2 The sutra’s nondiscriminatory stance stems from the understanding that people have a shared sensibility to discern that a “good” thing is “good.” In chapter 17, the sutra metaphorically says:

yaḥ kaś-cid Ajita kula-putro vā kula-duhitā vā tathāgatasya
parinirvṛtasyêmaṃ dharma-paryāyaṃ deśyamānaṃ
saṃprakāśyamānaṃ śṛṇuyād bhikṣur vā bhikṣuṇī vōpāsako
vōpāsikā vā vijña-puruṣo vā kumārako vā kumārikā vā śrutvā
cābhyanumodet /

sacet tato dharma-śravaṇād utthāya prakrāmet sa ca vihāra-gato
vā gṛha-gato vā ’raṇya-gato vā vīthī-gato vā grāma-gato vā
janapadagato vā tān hetūṃs tāni kāraṇāni taṃ dharmaṃ
yathā-śrutam yathōdgrhītam yathā-balam aparasya

sattvasy’ ācakṣīta mātur vā pitur vā jñāter vā saṃmodikasya

vā saṃstutasya vā ’nyasya vā kasya-cit so ’pi yadi
śrutvā ’numodet anumodya ca punar anyasmāācakṣīta /

so ’pi yadi śrutvā ’numodet anumodya ca so ’py

aparasmā ācakṣīta / so ’pi yadi śrutvā ’numodet / ity anena

paryāyeṇa yāvat pañcāśat-paramparayā /

{Chap. XVII, WT 292.10; KN 345.7, [... vā ’nyasya vā saṃstutasya...,
paramarā sa cānumodakas...}

Now, Ajita, in the age of the tathāgata’s *parinirvāṇa*, if any son (*kula-putra*) or daughter (*kula-duhitṛ*) hears an expression or explanation of the way of this dharma, whether a monk or a nun, layman or laywoman, mature in reasoning or a boy or a girl, and accepts joyfully what was heard; if, then,

arising from hearing this dharma, he or she happens to enter a cloister, or visit a house, or go through a forest, or to a street, or to a village, or to a gathering place and, according to his or her ability, expresses the cause, reason, and the teaching as heard and accepted to any other person, such as his or her mother, father, relative, friend, acquaintance, or to any others; if any one of these people, after hearing, joyfully accepts and, in joy, expresses it to another; if that one, after hearing, joyfully accepts, and, in joy, expresses it to another; if that one, hearing, joyfully accepts it; and so on, in succession, one after another up till as many as the fiftieth person...

如來滅後。若比丘比丘尼優婆塞優婆夷。及餘智者若長若幼聞是經隨喜已。從法會出至於餘處。若在僧坊若空閑地。若城邑巷陌聚落田里。如其所聞。爲父母宗親善友知識隨力演說。是諸人等聞已隨喜復行轉教。餘人聞已亦隨喜轉教。如是展轉至第五十。 {Taisho Vol.9, p.46b-c}

Here we can note that the underlying idea of this quote is the Buddhist philosophy that does not discriminate between people.

3.0 The Buddhist 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 way to that state. In this case, as will be shown later [3.2], although all other beings are included, the main object of the nominal (*sattva*) is the human being. The discussion of *sattva* thus becomes more realistic and relevant to the sutra's readers.

3.1 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 /*

{Chap. II, KN 40.7; WT 37.13}

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

欲令衆生入佛知見道故出現於世。

{Taisho Vol.9, p.7a}

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

3.2 The sutra seems to include all sentient beings when it refers to *sattvas*. For example, a passage in chapter 17 {WT 293.7 [KN 346.7]} contains a reference in which *sattvas* include *asamjñin*—non-sentient beings or entities. However, we can say that the scope of the word narrows to become human beings when the discussion turns to bodhisattva practice.

3.3 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-duhitṛs*) 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 dharmaparyāyād antaśa eka-gāthām api dhārayiṣyanty anumodaiṣyanti vā sarvāṃs tān ahaṃ Bhaiṣajyarāja vyākaroṃy anuttarāyāṃ samyak-saṃbodhau // {Chap. X, KN 225.8; WT 197.2}

若有人聞妙法華經乃至一偈一句一念隨喜者。

我亦與授阿耨多羅三藐三菩提記。 {Taisho Vol.9, p.30c}

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

kīḍṛśāḥ khalv api te sattvā bhaviṣyanty anāgate ’dhvani tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyak-saṃbuddhā

{Chap. X, KN 225.11; WT 197.7}

何等衆生於未來世當得作佛。 {Taisho Vol.9, p.30c}

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/

{Chap. X, KN 225.13; WT197.9}

應示是諸人等於未來世必得作佛。 {Taisho Vol.9, p.30c}

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 prejudice with regard to gender nor discrimination among people in general.

4.0 What the sutra requires of those people is revealed in the idea of the making the *buddha-kṣetra*, i.e., a buddha-world.

4.1 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
smāprativīry’ ārambhāḥ sma / ... / tato vyaṃ bhagavan bhagavato
dharmam deśayamānasya sūnyatā-nimittāpraṇihitam sarvam
āviṣkurmo nāsmābhir esu buddha-dharmesu buddha-kṣetra-vyūheṣu
vā bodhisattva-vikrīditeṣu vā tathāgata-vikrīditeṣu vā sprhōtpādītā
/ tat kasya hetoḥ / yac cāsmād bhagavaṃs traidhātukān nirdhāvitā
nirvāṇa-saṃjñīno vyaṃ ca jarā-jīrṇāḥ / tato bhagavann asmābhir
apy anye bodhisattvā avavaditā abhuvann anuttarāyāṃ samyak-
saṃbodhāv anuśiṣṭās ca na ca bhagavaṃs tatrāsmābhir ekam apī
sprhā-cittam utpāditam abhūt / {KN 100.8 – 101.5; WT 95.11 – 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.

4.2 The purport of the Chinese translation of this quoted reference can be said to be the same as that of the Sanskrit editions.

我等...自謂已得涅槃無所堪任。不復進求阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。
世尊...我...但念空無相無作。於菩薩法遊戲神通淨佛國土成就
衆生心不喜樂。所以者何。世尊。令我等出於三界得涅槃證。
又今我等年已朽邁。於佛教化菩薩阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。
不生一念好樂之心。 {Taisho Vol.9, p.16b}

However there is no literal correspondence between them. The translation of the underlined part in Chinese, which is correlated to, but does not literally correspond to the underlined part of the Sanskrit is:

“We did not have any aspiration to act with a special mentality to purify buddha-lands in order to inspire sentient beings in the bodhisattva way.”

4.3 The words *sūnyātā*, *animitta*, and *apraṇhita*, 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 *prajñā-pāramitā* sutras in Mahayana, 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-sambodhi*;

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-sambodhi*,” a mind of enjoyment never once arose them. Incidentally, the Chinese by Kumārajīva has a different reading at this point, but his version has the same contents as the Sanskrit in a later location: (我等又因如來智慧爲諸菩薩開示演說而自於此無有志願. Taisho Vol.9, p.17b).

Their thoughts paradoxically reveal a position of the sutra, as the underlined part of the reference shows—going along with the splendors (*vyūha*; adornment, composition) of buddha-lands are the vibrant behaviors 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.

5.0 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.

5.1 In the description of the prediction for Shariputra, the lands portrayed are 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 prāsādikaṃ parama-sudarśanīyaṃ
pariśuddhaṃ ca sphītaṃ ca rddhaṃ ca kṣemaṃ ca subhikṣam ca
bahu-jana-nārī-gaṇ'ākīrṇaṃ ca maru-prakīrṇaṃ ca vaidūrya-
mayam suvarṇa-sūtrāṣṭāpada-nibaddham / teṣu cāṣṭā-padeṣu ratna-
vrkṣā bhaviṣyanti saptānāṃ ratnānāṃ puṣpa-phalaiḥ satata-
samitaṃ samarpitāḥ // {KN 65.8; WT 64.12}*

國名離垢。其土平正清淨嚴飾。安隱豐樂 天人熾盛。琉璃爲地
有八交道。黃金爲繩以界其側。其傍各有七寶行樹常有華果
{Taisho Vol.9, p.11b}

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

*Mahāratnapratimaṇḍitaś ca nāma Śāriputra sa kalpo bhaviṣyanti//
tat kiṃ manyase Śāriputra kena kāraṇena sa kalpo
Mahāratnapratimaṇḍita ity ucyate / ratnāni Śāriputra buddha-
kṣetre bodhisattvā ucyate / te tasmin kāle tasyāṃ Virajāyāṃ
loka-dhātau bahavo bodhisattvā bhaviṣyanti
aparamēyāsaṃkhyeyātulyāmāpyā gaṇanāṃ samatikrāntā
anyatra tathāgata-gaṇanayā / tena kāraṇena sa kalpo
Mahāratnapratimaṇḍita ity ucyate //*

{WT 64.23 [KN 66.1; ratnāṇi]}

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}

- 5.3 Then, the question is what is 莊嚴? Kumārajīva translated different Sanskrit root words like (*prati*)*maṇḍita*, *alaṃkṛta*, (*upa*)/*śubh*, and *vyūha* as 莊嚴. In that case, the essence of 莊嚴 is not “decoration,” but rather “equipped,” “well-prepared,” “finely finished,” “composed.” It is “something essential” to be in a certain way. It is describing the essential attribute of the thing. In this sense, Kumārajīva is successful in translating the different words using the same concept of 莊嚴.

5.4 *Vyūha* is translated as 淨, and also as 事, in addition to 莊嚴 by Kumārajīva. 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. We can find an instance of the use of 淨 in the reference quoted above. We can confirm the fact that *vyūha* is translated as 淨 here through the reading of the verse part correlated to the prose {IV vs.42}.

As for 事, in the story of *Raśmiprabhāsasya tathāgata*, the Buddha says:

Raśmiprabhāsasya viyūha bheṣyati {VI vs.9.d, KN 146.12; WT133.9}

Kumārajīva translated this as 光明世尊 其事如是 {Taisho Vol.9, p.20c}

The arrangement of that buddha-world is stated to be the task of its buddha. However, there must be *vikrīḍita* of the bodhisattvas for the 莊嚴 of the buddha's world. Thus, while the entirety of the accomplishment of any buddha's world must be the responsibility of a buddha, *vyūha*, however, as a buddha-task, is accomplished by the actions of bodhisattvas.