

Lotus and Pure Land

Jérôme Ducor

AMONGST world religions, Buddhism is distinguished by the first three centuries of its history, a period in which it lacked both a scriptural canon and representations of its founder in images. In fact, we had to wait until the dawn of the Christian era for its iconography to develop and for the establishment of the Sanskrit canon in the Indian subcontinent and the Pāli canon in Sri Lanka. It was in conjunction with their appearance that the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna) developed, this enlarged form of Buddhism proposing that enlightenment is available to all.

Double Dimension of Mahāyāna

The Great Vehicle is known, in particular, for its insistence on universal emptiness, a view radicalised by the Mādhyamika school in its ‘double emptiness’ formulation, that is, of the people (*pudgala*) and the elements (*dharma*) that constitute them. It is above all this philosophical dimension that would—for decades from the 19th century onwards— attract the attention of Western scholars. In doing so, they neglected, for the most part, another dimension that was at least as crucial to the Great Vehicle: its cosmology and Buddhology, which leaned more and more towards a supra-mundane conception of the Buddha (*lokottara*).

This original double dimension of Mahāyāna—philosophical and Buddhological—is illustrated by a dozen sūtras that the specialist Etienne Lamotte highlighted as having been translated into Chinese between 147 and 297, marking the simultaneous establishment of the Great Vehicle in China with the development of Buddhism in that country.¹

Among these texts arising from the early days of Mahāyāna we of course find the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* (*Prajñāpāramitā*) in 8,000 and 25,000 stanzas, on which the Mādhyamika philosophy was founded. But we also find there the *Sūtra of the samādhi of being in the presence of all Buddhas* (*Pratyutpanna-buddha-samukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra*)

and the *Sūtra of the Adornments of the Land of Bliss* (*Sukhāvātīvyūhasūtra*), as well as the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*. It is this second group that is testament to the evolution of the Buddha as a supra-mundane being.

Let's not forget that in general Buddhism considers, firstly, that there can be only one buddha at a time in a given universe and, secondly, that there were buddhas before Śākyamuni and that there will be others after him. But the Great Vehicle stands out by maintaining the existence of other buddhas in the universe around ours with whom it is possible to make contact in various ways or to be born with them in the next life.

In this respect, the example of *Dazhidulun* (Treatise on the Great Sūtra of the Perfection of Wisdom) is particularly significant. It was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva between 404 and 406, 406 also being the year that he translated the *Lotus Sūtra*. Now the *Dazhidulun* provides a veritable treatise on the existence of the Present Buddhas (現在佛), those Buddhas residing in the ten directions (十方佛), 'outside' our own universe (他方佛), each one reigning over their own realm, or 'buddha field' (佛土).²

The *Lotus Sūtra* and Amida's Pure Land

As we know, amongst these buddha fields is that of Buddha Amitābha (Jap. Amida) who would win a popular following, from China to Japan. However during this transmission, the Tiantai/Tendai school associated it with the *Lotus Sūtra*. Still today, the daily liturgy of this school focuses on the *Lotus* in the morning, and the commemoration of Amida in the evening (*asa daimoku, yū nembutsu* 朝題目 夕念佛).

The *Lotus Sūtra* itself attests to this association. In Chapter XXIII (*Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King*), Śākyamuni states:

If in the last five-hundred-year period after the Tathāgata has entered extinction there is a woman who hears this sutra and carries out its practices as the sutra directs, when her life here on earth comes to an end she will immediately go to the world of Peace and Delight (*Sukhāvātī*) where the Buddha Amida dwells surrounded by an assembly of great bodhisattvas, and there will be born seated on a jewelled seat in the centre of a lotus blossom.

But the *Lotus Sūtra* is even more famous for another reason. The *Sukhāvātī* is a buddha field purified by Amida and located outside of our *Sahā* world, the buddha field of Śākyamuni, where the filth of passions

No Image

Illustration of *Devadatta* Chapter (Chapter 12, the *Lotus Sūtra*) known as the *Sūtra* Consecrated by the Heike. Japan; 12th century. Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima (Courtesy of Benrido Ltd.)

proliferates. However Chapter XI of the *Lotus* (*The Emergence of the Treasures Stūpa*) will show a true epiphany: in order to open the stūpa of the Buddha Many Treasures, Śākyamuni must first rally the beings separated from him who were preaching in the ten directions; and when they return to the Buddha, “the Sahā world becomes pure.”

For its part, the *Sūtra of the contemplation of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, the third text of the *Lotus Trilogy* as defined by Tendai, names Śākyamuni’s purified realm as the ‘Eternally Tranquil Light’ (*Jōjakkō* 常寂光), the Buddha himself receiving the name ‘Vairocana’ (*Birushana* 毘盧遮那). This therefore reminds us of another famous text of the Great Vehicle of the Far East: the *Flower Garland Sūtra* with its ‘cosmic’ Buddha Vairocana and his ‘Lotus Treasury World’ (*Rengezō* 蓮華藏).

However, this Mahāyāna doctrine that Śākyamuni’s kingdom is not so impure as it first appears is eloquently expressed in the first chapter of the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, entitled ‘buddha kingdoms’, where the Buddha states:

If a Bodhisattva wants to get a pure land, he must purify his mind!
When his mind is pure, the buddha land is pure.

In China this famous statement gave birth to an immanent interpretation of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land. But during the same sermon of the Buddha, it caused confusion for his disciple Śāriputra: if the purity of a buddha land is based on the purity of mind, then Śākyamuni's intention was not pure when he built his own buddha field—our universe. So that is the moment when Śākyamuni showed him its fundamental purity, but in a more immediate and prosaic manner than in the *Lotus*:

The Buddha pressed the earth with his toe. Immediately, the great universe of a billion worlds was adorned with hundreds of thousands of rare jewels, like the land of Buddha Ratnavyūha, adorned with jewels of infinite merits.

The Buddha also explained to Śāriputra:

My Buddha realm is always of this purity! It is from my desire to liberate the weakest people that I show it as an unclean land with all its ills.

Then, 'The Buddha lifted his sublime foot and this world reappeared as before.'

The Pure Land canon also presents this land as being close at hand. For while the *Amida Sūtra* maintains that it is "west of here, beyond a trillion other buddha lands," the *Sūtra of Infinite-Life Contemplations* declares for its part that "Amida Buddha is not far from here." The *Infinite-Life Sūtra* also shows how the audience was rewarded with a vision of the Pure Land of Amida: "The assembly here saw all of it in an instant; and those assembled there [in the Pure Land] also saw our land in this way." Suffice to say that with the yardstick of the transcendence of enlightenment, everything is relative!

The *Lotus Sūtra* in Japanese Hymns on the Pure Land

In Japan, at the turn of the 11th century, the work of the monk Genshin 源信 (942–1017) brought a significant contribution to the Tendai doctrine, including its links with Amida's Pure Land tradition. It is through him that another Tendai monk, Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), was to discover the teachings of a Chinese master from another stream of the Pure Land than Tendai: Shandao 善導 (613–681). After a quarter of a century in the Tendai school, Hōnen then undertook to establish Shandao's teaching in Japan through an independent school: the Pure Land School

(Jōdoshū).

He developed the argument that the *Lotus Sūtra* was concomitant to the *Sūtra of Infinite-Life Contemplations*, on which Shandao was mainly based.³ Without going into detail, we recall that it was Hōnen who was the main target of the *Lotus*'s ultimate advocate, Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282).

Finally, Hōnen is known as the master of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263), who, for his part, rediscovered another Chinese master Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542) whose work had such a strong influence on him that his own teaching formed a new current, the true school of Pure Land (Jōdo-Shinshū). Yet, from the age of nine, Shinran had spent twenty years in Tendai before meeting Hōnen. It is therefore all the more surprising that his voluminous work does not mention the *Lotus Sūtra* even once. However, there is an important reference in his *Japanese Hymns on the Pure Land (Jōdo Wasan)*, where Shinran says:

Having really become (*jitsujō* 實成) Amida Buddha in the remote past
(*kuon* 久遠)
Out of compassion for foolish ordinary beings within the five defilements,
He revealed himself as Śākyamuni Buddha
Appearing in the city of Gayā.

This takes us back to one of the most famous teachings of the *Lotus*. In Chapter XV (*Emerging from the Earth*), Bodhisattva Maitreya repeatedly noted that Śākyamuni's attainment of enlightenment was "not so distant" (未久), and even that it was "extremely close" (甚近) since it took place forty years before the Buddha preached the *Lotus*.

But in the following chapter, the famous chapter XVI (*The Life Span of the Tathāgata*), the Buddha makes this revelation:

In all the worlds the gods, human beings and asuras all say that the present Śākyamuni Buddha left the palace of the Śākyas, seated himself in the place of enlightenment not far from the city of Gayā, and there attained *anuttara-samyaksambodhi* (supreme perfect enlightenment).

But Good Sons, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I really became buddha (*jitsujō butsu* 實成佛). (...) Thus, since I became a buddha in the remote past (*kuon* 久遠), my longevity is of infinite and immeasurable aeons, and I still abide here without entering extinction.

This shows that, without explicitly referring to the *Lotus*, Shinran nevertheless drew from it to present Śākyamuni as the transformation-body of Amida (*nirmānakāya*). While Shinran never spoke of the *Lotus*, it fell to his descendant Zonkaku 存覺 (1290–1373) to reveal the interpretation of Jōdo-Shinshū by explaining the identification of Śākyamuni of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s essential teaching (*honmon* 本門) with Amida Buddha.⁴

To conclude, after revealing his immeasurable longevity, Śākyamuni continues with these stanzas in the *Lotus*:

While living beings see the end of a kalpa
And all is consumed in a great fire,
This, my land, remains safe and tranquil. (...)
My pure land (*jōdo* 淨土) is not destroyed,
Yet the multitude sees it as consumed in fire.

Here we find a sort of recap of Mahāyāna doctrine of the supra-mundane dimension of enlightenment balanced with that of the illusion of our universe, as in the relationship between the Two Truths—absolute and relative.

Notes

¹ *La concentration de la marche héroïque (Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra)*, 1965, Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, pp. 44–45.

² *Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna, Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra, traduit en chinois par Kumārajīva*, tr. Étienne Lamotte, Bureaux du Muséon, Louvain, vol. 1, 1944, pp. 300–306, 485, 531–557.

³ Jérôme Ducor, *Hōnen: Le gué vers la Terre Pure (Senchaku-shū)*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2005, pp. 168–169.

⁴ Jérôme Ducor, *La vie de Zonkaku, religieux bouddhiste japonais du XIVe siècle*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1993, pp. 181–183.

Author Biography

Jérôme Ducor began his Buddhist studies at the University of Lausanne with Prof. Jacques May and received his Ph.D. from the University of Geneva. He teaches at the universities of Lausanne and Geneva, and is the curator at the Asia department of the Museum of Ethnography of Geneva (MEG). In addition, he received ordination and mastery of the Jodo-Shinshu Buddhist school at Hōmpa-Honganji (Kyoto). He is based at the Shingyōji Temple in Geneva and is the President of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Paris. Bibliography: www.pitaka.ch/ducbio.htm