

SELECTION FROM THE LOTUS SŪTRA: “THE BUDDHA PREACHES THE ONE GREAT VEHICLE”

Introduction

The *Lotus Sūtra* is a Buddhist scripture composed well after the death of the historical Buddha (around 483 BCE) and written down in Sanskrit even later. The scripture was translated into Chinese at least five different times between 255 and 601 CE and proved to be a tremendously influential text for Chinese Buddhism. The *Lotus Sūtra* is a text of the Mahāyāna School of Buddhism. As such, its major message is that there is only one way to reach enlightenment, and that is through the way of the bodhisattva as described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The passage below, which describes the Buddha talking with one of his followers, Śāriputra, addresses the question of the multitude, of why there are so many schools of Buddhism. This is an issue that Mahāyāna scriptures had to address, since they were written relatively late in the history of Buddhism and had to compete for authority with earlier texts.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 447-448. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selection from the Lotus Sūtra:
“The Buddha Preaches the One Great Vehicle”

“Śāriputra, ever since I attained Buddhahood I have through various causes and various similes widely expounded my teachings and have used countless expedient means to guide living beings and cause them to renounce their attachments. Why is this? Because the Thus-Come One is fully possessed of both expedient means and the perfection of wisdom. ...”

...

“Śāriputra, the Buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand. Why is this? Because we employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings. This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it. ...”

...

“Śāriputra, I know that living beings have various desires, attachments that are deeply implanted in their minds. Taking cognizance of this basic nature of theirs, I will therefore use

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
SELECTION FROM THE LOTUS SŪTRA: "THE BUDDHA PREACHES THE ONE GREAT VEHICLE"**

various causes and conditions, words of simile and parable, and the power of expedient means and expound the Law for them. Śāriputra, I do this so that all of them may attain the one Buddha vehicle and wisdom embracing all species. ..."

...

"... There is no other vehicle, there is only the one Buddha vehicle."

Questions:

1. In these excerpts, how does the Buddha explain the existence of various Buddhist teachings?
2. As the *Lotus Sūtra* describes it, is there one or are there many truths?
3. Is the understanding of truth articulated in these excerpts something that would contribute to a democratic and egalitarian religion or to an elitist religious hierarchy?
4. How do later texts in other philosophical or religious traditions deal with alternative texts that claim authority? Do they use techniques similar to the doctrine of "expedient means"? Or do different philosophical or religious traditions use other strategies to establish the ultimate authority of a particular text or teaching?

Longer Selection

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 447-448. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selection from the Lotus Sūtra:
"The Buddha Preaches the One Great Vehicle"

At that time Mañjuśrī said to the bodhisattva and *mahāsattva* Maitreya and the other great men, "Good men, I suppose that the Buddha, the World-Honored One, wishes now to expound the great Law." ...

At that time the World-Honored One calmly arose from his *samādhi* and addressed Śāriputra, saying, "The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. ...

"Śāriputra, ever since I attained Buddhahood I have through various causes and various similes widely expounded my teachings and have used countless expedient means to guide living beings and cause them to renounce their attachments. Why is this? Because the Thus-Come One is fully possessed of both expedient means and the perfection of wisdom. ...

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
SELECTION FROM THE LOTUS SŪTRA: "THE BUDDHA PREACHES THE ONE GREAT VEHICLE"**

"Śāriputra, to sum it up: the Buddha has fully realized the Law that is limitless, boundless, never attained before. ...

"Śāriputra, the Buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand. Why is this? Because we employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings. This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it. ...

"Śāriputra, I know that living beings have various desires, attachments that are deeply implanted in their minds. Taking cognizance of this basic nature of theirs, I will therefore use various causes and conditions, words of simile and parable, and the power of expedient means and expound the Law for them. Śāriputra, I do this so that all of them may attain the one Buddha vehicle and wisdom embracing all species. ...

"Śāriputra, if any of my disciples should claim to be an *arhat* or a *pratyeka-buddha* and yet does not heed or understand that the Buddhas, the Thus-Come Ones, simply teach and convert the bodhisattvas, then he is no disciple of mine; he is no *arhat* or *pratyeka-buddha*.

"Again, Śāriputra, if there should be monks or nuns who claim that they have already attained the status of *arhat*, that this is their last incarnation, that they have reached the final *nirvāṇa*, and that therefore they have no further intention of seeking supreme perfect enlightenment, then you should understand that such as these are all persons of overbearing arrogance. Why do I say this? Because if there are monks who have truly attained the status of *arhat*, then it would be unthinkable that they should fail to believe this Law. ... There is no other vehicle, there is only the one Buddha vehicle." ...