

Lotus Sutra Revisited

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Introduction

Over the centuries, Buddhist thought has witnessed major diversity and this has resulted in various schools that espouse Buddhist teachings. Especially, in the last few decades there has been a credible increase in people expressing interests in Buddhist teachings. One such surge of interest is to understand the Saddharmapundarika Sutra, more commonly known as the Lotus Sutra. The purpose of revisiting the sutra is to understand in depth the profound significance of the texts which talks about bringing inner transformation to one's collective consciousness and encourages its practitioners to appreciate the inherent dignity in all beings. Interestingly, the influence of Lotus Sutra isn't as wide as some of the East Asian countries. In China (Tientai¹) and Japan (Tendai and Nichiren), this sutra has become one of the most popular and influential Mahayana teachings. Overtime, these teachings have spread across the world and have established a significant follower base where majority of the followers have claimed that following the teachings has had a positive impact on their lives.

The paper explores why the Lotus Sutra has such a positive impact on so many people worldwide and is why is it considered as a profound teachings for humanity. The paper also looks at the aspect of gender equality and empowerment of women in the context of Lotus Sutra from the perspective of Nichiren Daishonin, a 13th century monk from Kamakura Period, Japan.

Nichiren (1222-1282) undeniably is one of the most influential figures when it comes to interpreting the Lotus Sutra. His extensive study of the various Buddhist Sutras led him to believe that the Lotus Sutra contained the essence of Buddha's enlightenment as related to the

¹Tientai is a school of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam that reveres the Lotus Sutra as the highest teaching in Buddhism. In Japan the school is known as Tendai.

laws of causality, Karma, and without any distinction to enlightenment. He continued his study and was committed to convert the profound theory of the Lotus sutra into a practice. His lifelong belief was that through the correct practice of Lotus Sutra, every individual could reveal his or her Buddhahood or highest state of life, in the midst of day-to-day reality. His ardent passion and resolve made him set forth the practice of chanting ‘Nam MyohoRengeKyo’² which encapsulates the essence of ‘Lotus Sutra’ as the sutra of hope, equality and dynamism for all in the Latter Day of the Law.

Text and Translations of the Lotus Sutra

Saddharmapundarika Sutra (*Sad* means Wonderful, Good, Noble and *Dharma* means Teachings of the Buddha and *Pundarika* means White Lotus) is one of the earlier Mahayana text written around first two centuries of Common Era in Sanskrit belonging to the Mahayana Canon. Followers of the Lotus Sutra believe that the teachings espouse the Buddha’s mind which focusses on enlightenment rather than suffering.

In the Indian context, there have been several citations of the Lotus Sutra. For instance, there are writings by Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Candakirti, Santideva and several authors of the Madhyamika and the Yogacara School (Mochizuki 2011, pp.1168-1177) that have covered thematic concepts from the Lotus Sutra comprehensively. However, the only surviving Indian commentary on the Lotus Sutra is attributed to Vasubandhu (Groner 2014, p.5).



Figure 1: Lotus Sutra Illustration c.1340

²Myoho-enge-kyo is the title of the lotus sutra. The invocation of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo was established by Nichiren Daishonin on April 28, 1253 in Japan, indicating it as the ultimate Law or true essence of life permeating everything in the universe.



Figure 2: Scroll from the Lotus Sutra writings

Chinese Translations

The Lotus Sutra was translated six times from Sanskrit to Chinese. Three Chinese translations of the sutra have survived till date(Reeves 2001, p.2). They are:

1. The Lotus Sutra of the Correct Dharma (in ten volumes and twenty-seven chapters, translated by Dharmaraksha in 286 CE
2. The Lotus Sutra of Wonderful Dharma (in eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters, translated by Kumarajiva in 406 CE
3. The Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma (in seven volumes and twenty seven chapters, a revised version of Kumarajiva’s text, translated by Jnanagupta and Dharmagupta in 601 CE(Stone 2003,p.471)

These scriptures were subsequently translated into Tibetan, and centuries later into Mongol,Manchu,Korean, and Japanese.In some Chinese and Japanese Lotus Sutra texts, two additional sutras are also mentioned which serve as a prologue and epilogue. The sutras are Innumerable Meanings Sutra and the Samantabhadra(Universal Worthy) Meditation Sutra. The Composite sutra is known as ‘Threefold Lotus Sutra’(Cole2005,p.59).

Western Language Translation:

The Lotus Sutra has caught the interest of people across the world. There have been several iterations of translations in classical languages. Some of the major ones are listed below:

1. French translation based on Nepalese Sanskrit manuscript, published by Eugene Burnouf in 1852(Burnouf 1852)
2. English Translation *The Saddharmapundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, translated by Jan Hendrik Kern, 1884
3. German (Deeg, 2007)
4. *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*, translated by Senchu Murano in 1974
5. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra: The Sutra of Innumerable Meanings; The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law; The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue*. Translated by Bunno, Yoshiro and Kojiro, 1975
6. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*. Translated By Leon Hurvitz , 1976
7. *The Lotus Sutra: The White Lotus of the Marvellous Law*. Translated by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, 1991

Core Teachings of Lotus sutra

It is hard to succinctly summarize all the teachings of the Lotus Sutra for the purposes of this paper. However, listed below are main themes covered in the Lotus Sutra that make this sutra attractive to its large base of followers:

1. **One vehicle and Many skillful means (Ekayāna and Upāyakaushalya):** Through understanding and thorough studying of the Lotus Sutra, one discovers the exhaustive instructions on the theme and application of the “skillful means” or “expedient means” – (Sanskrit: *upāya*). The “skillful” or “expedient” means and the “three vehicles” are part of the One Vehicle (Ekayāna), which is the Bodhisattva path. Ekayāna aimed to unify all different sects, studies, and practices into one ambit and become an inclusive path. Ekayāna’s inclusivity was based on the belief of the sanctity and dignity of all lives without preferring one to the other.
2. **All beings have the potential to become Buddha:** The Lotus Sutra postulates that every being irrespective of gender, actions, caste, or even form has equal potential to show Buddhahood in their/its life. This state isn’t achieved after death but in the current form. The profound message that all beings have the potential to become Buddhas and teach the Dharma here and now is essential to the Lotus Sutra.

3. **Eternal Buddha:** This theme postulates that there is a primordial Buddha who was always enlightened. It refutes the story that Buddha first achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. The Buddha achieved enlightenment billions of Kalpas ago, in the inconceivably remote past. Since then, Buddha has been preaching the Dharma unceasingly and helping to liberate others.

Gender Equality and Lotus Sutra

As we know that Lotus sutra has many points of departure to reflect upon, but I have chosen to explain the aspect of Gender Equality from the standpoint of Lotus Sutra. Equality in existence and attaining Buddhahood irrespective of caste, creed, gender, and social standing was revolutionary (and continues to remain so) is an underlying sentiment of the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha stated that ultimately nothing is male or female. Bodies of either gender are insubstantial, impermanent and empty of any intrinsic nature. Accordingly to the Sutra, the teachings are strictly gender nonaligned. Gender is not an obstruction in realizing the true nature of all phenomena. This is the reason Lotus Sutra appeals to both men and women as it promises Buddhahood to all, regardless of age, gender or social standing.

The first successful attempt to approach gender with equal opportunity for both women and men was attempted by Nichiren. Throughout his life, he advocated vociferously that all his followers (irrespective of their gender) had inherent inner strength and should not succumb to challenges or adversities and should live lives without fear. Nichiren's core belief was that the fundamental purpose of any religion or practice was to rid people from the vicious cycles of hurt, misery, powerlessness, etc.

Nichiren's perspective of Women Attaining Enlightenment and Lotus Sutra

The Buddhist thinker and reformer Nichiren (1222-1282) is regarded as one of the most progressive forefather of Kamakura Buddhism. It is evident through his writings that he unceasingly encouraged his lay disciples to challenge their circumstances and always aspire for a just, equitable world. Nichiren did this by urging his believer to reflect on their own behavior and start the change from within by which they can build a greater self. For women he wrote several letters of encouragement throughout his years, he remained active even when he was exiled.

His belief in gender neutrality of Buddhism is evident in the following passages in a letter that Nichiren wrote to Sennichi-ama, a female lay follower:

“In the letter you sent through your husband Abutsubo, you inquire about the faults and impediments that prevent women in attaining Buddhahood. According to the teaching, the Lotus sutra puts the attainment of Buddhahood by women first, you should rely upon this sutra in all matters”. (The Sutra of True Requit, WND-1,p.123)



Figure 3: Devdutta Chapter

The above passage reveals how not only Sennichi-ama but women in the medieval period were accustomed and ingrained to believe that attaining Buddhahood is an unattainable goal. Nichiren encouraging women to hold steadfast and believe in their Buddhahood was path breaking and trailblazing.

Enlightenment Theory Source: The Devdatta Chapter

Nichiren based his source on the ‘Devdatta Chapter’ for clarifying his teachings on the Enlightenment of Women. The Enlightenment of the Dragon King’s daughter in the ‘Devdatta Chapter’ is a very well known episode of the Lotus sutra’s teaching that women share the same potential for Buddhahood as men. It is the most remarkable and striking discourse in the entire text concerning women’s capacity for enlightenment. Manjushri describes the remarkable talents and wisdom of the eight year old daughter of the dragon king Sagara as follows:

“She has mastered the dharanis, has been able to accept and embrace all the storehouse of profound secrets preached by the Buddha’s, has entered deep into meditation, thoroughly grasped the doctrines and in the space of an instant conceived the desire of Bodhi and reached the level of no regression.”(Watson 1993,p.187) Nichiren asserts that dragon girl’s enlightenment is the indication that all women have the potential for attaining enlightenment. Nichiren writes,” When the dragon king’s daughter attained Buddhahood, it opened up the way to attaining Buddhahood for all women of latter ages.” (WND,p.269)

Nichiren's Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form

Nichiren shed light on women having equal stake when it came to experiencing Buddhahood with his analysis of the Enlightenment of Dragon King's daughter that was written in the Devdatta Chapter. According to his explanation, 'the dragon is the manifestation of the world of Animality (which is overrun with animalistic behavior devoid of humanity)'. Hence, the attainment of Buddhahood by Dragon Girl is based on the internal transformation of the life state of Animality to that of Buddhahood (Kobayashi, p.140). In one of his major treatise titled 'True aspect of all phenomena', Nichiren states, "There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of 'MyohoRengeKyo' in the latter day of the Law, be they men or women (WND, p.385)."

We find that Nichiren strongly criticized the interpretation which limited women's capability to attain Buddhahood in their current form. The "transformation" interpretation referred to a stream of belief that elucidated that the **only** way a woman can attain enlightenment was if she were to be reborn as a man. Nichiren refuted this interpretation with vigor. He stated, the Dragon King's daughter attains Buddhahood with the doctrine of **Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life**- in other words, irrespective of what form or identity she currently holds; she has the power to manifest the life state of Buddhahood. Hence, the eight year old daughter of the Dragon King had the same potential as anyone else to manifest and show her Buddhahood and achieve enlightenment. Dragon King's daughter is also a powerful example for standing up for oneself. She brushes aside censure, arrogant ridicule, severe prejudices that are thrown at her. It is symbolic when she boldly declares to an assembly, "Watch me attain Buddhahood" (LSOC12.227). The Dragon King's daughter shows actual proof and thus, opens the way to happiness for all women of the future.

The allegory of the Dragon King's daughter defiance and subsequent enlightenment is well documented and is used to as an example of attainment of enlightenment instantly when one understands the Dharma. Historically, India lacked significantly when it came to gender equality in religion. It was always presumed that women were spiritually backward to men and ergo could not experience any of the five superior existences. The state of Buddhahood is one of the five existences. This is documented in an experience stated in the SuttaPitaka (a part of Tipitaka in Pali Canon). This particular incident is referred in Therigatha (Verses of Senior nuns). In one of

the exchanges between Mara(the embodiment of evil) and a nun known as Soma Theri, Mara taunts Soma that no women could reach ‘the highest ground of the wise’ because she has only ‘two-finger knowledge’ (dvangulapañña), an allusion to cooking where the consistency of the cooked rice is tested by pressing it between the two fingers. Soma theri then refuted the Mara uttering the following verses;

ittibhāvokimkiyirā(What difference does being a woman make)

cittamhisusamhite(When the mind is all composed)

Ñānamhivattamnamhi(When knowledge is proceeding on)

sammādhammavipassato(When One rightly sees into Dhamma?) Somāsuttam, SN 5.1.2

To summarize, it will be pertinent to point out here that Nichiren’s proclamation about the enlightenment of women emanates from his deep sense of gratitude towards his mother. In his writing, “The Sutra of True Requitall”, Nichiren states, “Since, I have realized that only the Lotus Sutra teaches the Attainment of Buddhahood by women and only the Lotus is the sutra of true requital for repaying kindness of our mother, in order to repay my debt to my mother, I have Vowed to enable all women to chant the daimoku of this sutra” (WND 1,p.123). He writes to Sennichi-ama, the wife of Abutsubo, that ‘I made vow to save all women of Japan and that sincerity cannot be ignored’(The Major Writings of NichirenDaishonin, vol-6,p.214). In a way it demonstrates, the parental dimension of Buddhist Practice.

Concluding Observations

The Lotus Sutra, through various discourses, has made it clear that respect and dignity to all life is integral to its essence. The equanimity of Buddhism is reflected when it repeatedly stresses that every human being possesses the ability to be enlightened in his/her current form. This belief creates a unifier among genders, castes, and belief systems. In this case, both the genders become complementary to each other recognizing their interconnectedness.

When we speak about eternity of life, the distinction between male and female is not logical. Rather, we may be born as a man in one life and women in another. Moreover all people have both male and female attributes. With reference to the Lotus sutra, when the dragon girl attains Buddhahood, it does not only empower her but opens the way for all the women. It spawned a philosophy of individual empowerment that was both unique for its time and

universal in its appeal. Solidarity of women, who are awakened to the nobility and dignity of their lives, will undoubtedly bring change in the tenor of the age and illuminate the very character of civilization. In other words, it will create a shift from a society of control to a society of contribution and compassion. So this is the clarion call. Now is the time to act. If not even now, then when?

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