Mahayana Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra

Shakyamuni Buddha, for nearly half a century, expounded various teachings, collectively referred to in Buddhist texts as the eighty thousand or eighty-four thousand teachings. Such figures, though not literal, indicate the great variety and number of Buddhist teachings. After Shakyamuni’s death, his disciples gathered to confirm and compile his teachings for posterity in what came to be called the Buddhist Councils.

The First Buddhist Council took place shortly after the Buddha’s death, near Rajagriha, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Magadha. It was led by Mahakashyapa, Ananda and Upali, three of the Buddha’s ten major disciples, and attended by many others. They recounted and corroborated their memories of the Buddha’s teachings, creating an oral tradition to be passed to future generations. Two more Buddhist Councils were held—the second about one hundred years after the Buddha’s death and the third some one hundred years after that.

Mahayana Scriptures

The teachings compiled as oral Buddhist tradition during the first three Buddhist councils are thought to have been first put into writing around the second century BCE. The resulting scriptures are known as sutras. Among the sutras, those known as the Agama (meaning “teachings handed down by tradition”) sutras are said to have been compiled earliest. These sutras belong to the category of teachings later classified as Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle), also called Shravakayana (the Vehicle of the Voice-Hearers).

A number of Buddhist schools arose out of divisions that took place following the Second Buddhist Council, but only one has survived until today. That is the Theravada, meaning “Teaching of the Elders,” the dominant tradition in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

During the second or first century BCE, the compilation of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures began. One of the most important movements in Buddhist history, Mahayana emphasized the practice of bodhisattvas, those dedicated to the enlightenment of others, as well as their own. This was in contrast to the practice of those aspiring to become arhats, or sages, who led a monastic lifestyle. Mahayanists criticized such practitioners as self-centered, because they focused primarily on personal attainment and kept their teachings closed off to society.

It is thought that the Lotus Sutra was compiled in its present Sanskrit form somewhere between the first century BCE and the first century CE. Because they were written down later, the Mahayana scriptures have been criticized as not being the words of the Buddha. But modern scholars point out that they share much in common with the scriptures compiled earlier. Rather, Mahayana Buddhism is today...
seen by many as the product of a movement to revive Shakyamuni Buddha’s original spirit and approach. In other words, the essential philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism can be traced to the earliest Buddhist scriptures and to the practice and behavior of Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Mahayana Buddhists, it is now thought, sought to give new expression to Shakyamuni’s original awakening and teachings as a response to new circumstances facing the Buddhist community.

A Universal Lotus Sutra

We can view the Lotus Sutra, regarded as a most important Mahayana sutra, as a scripture that profoundly conveys Shakyamuni’s original awakening, intent and his behavior as a Buddha—reviving Buddhism in accord with the demands of the times.

According to early Buddhist scriptures, after his awakening, Shakyamuni pledged to regard the truth to which he had awakened as his teacher and live accordingly. In his final years, it is said, he stated that he had fulfilled this vow. Before his death, he encouraged his disciples: “Therefore, you must be your own islands. Take the self as your refuge. Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the Law as an island, and do not seek refuge in anything besides yourselves” (The Living Buddha, p. 132). Shakyamuni encouraged his disciples to rely upon themselves and the Law as an “island,” unperturbed by the surrounding currents. He took the universal truth to which he had awakened as his teacher and made it the foundation of his life and encouraged people to follow in his footsteps after his death.

In its textual narrative, the Lotus Sutra refers to itself, as well as other Lotus Sutras expounded by Buddhas in the past. The size and format of these other Lotus Sutras vary, but their purpose is to explain the universal Law and encourage and empower people to live as Buddhas who manifest that Law. In this sense, what those sutras point to may be described as a “universal Lotus Sutra.”

Nichiren Daishonin viewed the twenty-eight chapters of Shakyamuni’s Lotus Sutra, T’ien-t’ai’s Great Concentration and Insight and his own teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo as different expressions of the same universal Law described as “three thousand realms in a single moment of life.”

Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda called these three respectively “the Lotus Sutra of the Former Day,” “the Lotus Sutra of the Middle Day” and “the Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day” of the Law. All Buddhas of past, present and future become enlightened to this eternal universal Law or truth, the Wonderful, or Mystic, Law of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra is a teaching based on this truth describing how to manifest this truth in the reality of our lives.

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