

Inclusive and Exclusive Perspectives on the One Vehicle

by Jacqueline Stone

Debates over interpretations of the Lotus Sutra have continued for centuries. An American scholar examines some aspects of both sides of the controversy that she finds thought-provoking, particularly for those dedicated to interfaith dialogue.

In the worlds of the ten directions," says the Lotus Sutra, "there is the Dharma of only One Vehicle." The declaration of the One Vehicle, that all living beings shall attain buddhahood, is uniquely characteristic of the Lotus Sutra. In large part it is what made the sutra so immensely popular throughout East Asia. Philosophically, the teaching of the One Vehicle offered a way to reconcile disparate strands of Buddhist thought, and in terms of practice, it extended the possibility of supreme enlightenment to all, regardless of circumstances, ability, or level of understanding. But does the One Vehicle mean that different paths all lead to the same destination? Or does it mean that there is only one valid path?

We may think we know the answer, because we have become accustomed to reading the Lotus Sutra in a particular way. But in fact, variations on this question have been debated for centuries and continue to be disputed today. In studying even a little about the Lotus Sutra's history of interpretation, I have been fascinated to learn



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how, again and again, the very same text has been read in both inclusive and exclusive ways. I would like to share with *Dharma World* readers some aspects of this ongoing controversy that have struck me as especially thought-provoking.

How Many Vehicles?

The Mahayana, or Great Vehicle, is so called because it aims at the salvation of all. Early Mahayanists were critical of the path of the *shravakas* or "hearers," the Buddha's disciples who seek to master the Four Noble Truths and achieve the state of the arhat, who has eradicated all desire and attachment. They also criticized the *pratyekabuddhas*, or "privately enlightened," those who, independently of the Buddha's teaching, realize that everything is conditioned and impermanent but do not teach others. Mahayanists termed these two paths Hinayana or "small vehicle," because they lead only to personal nirvana. Instead, they vowed to follow the path of the bodhisattva as the Buddha himself had done, renouncing personal nirvana and remaining in the realm of rebirth to strive for the liberation of all beings. Some Mahayana sutras scathingly condemn the paths of the *shravaka* and *pratyekabuddha* as spiritual dead ends. For example, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says that persons of these two vehicles are "like scorched and rotten seeds" that can never sprout. That is, having eradicated desire, they can neither aspire to supreme buddhahood nor arouse compassion for all beings.

As is well known, the Lotus Sutra takes a radically different approach. It asserts that the Buddha taught three vehicles—those of the *shravaka*, the *pratyekabuddha*, and the bodhisattva—as a compassionate "skillful means," in accordance with his hearers' differing inclinations and capacities for understanding. Thus each of the three has a provisional validity. But they are not ends in themselves, nor are they ultimately separate, for these three seemingly different paths are informed by the same unitary intent, that all beings should eventually achieve buddhahood through the One Vehicle. Here, however, a question arises:

Is the One Vehicle that leads to buddhahood the same as the bodhisattva vehicle among the three vehicles? Or is the bodhisattva vehicle itself, like the other two, a provisional means, ultimately to be superseded by the One Buddha vehicle? Restated in the terms of the parable of the burning house, among the three carts that the father first promises his children—carts drawn by deer, by goats, and by oxen—is the ox cart the same as the great white ox cart that he actually gives them? Or is this great white ox cart something different, greater and finer, than the ox cart originally promised? When the Lotus Sutra came to be widely studied in China, this question gave rise to the so-called “three carts” vs. “four carts” controversy. This was by no means a mere trivial dispute over numbers. At stake was the question: Is the Mahayana the true, final teaching, and only the Hinayana provisional? Or is the Mahayana itself, like the two Hinayana vehicles, also ultimately a “skillful means,” leading to but transcended by a truth beyond expression?

In my upper division seminar, when we read the Lotus Sutra I sometimes ask students to read the first several chapters with careful attention to this question. They are surprised to realize that the sutra is itself ambiguous on this point and that one can find passages supporting either position. For example, in the parable of the magically conjured city, the illusory city is said to represent the Buddha’s teaching of the personal nirvana of the two vehicles, preached as an intermediary resting place for weary travelers, while the arduous journey to the treasure land represents the bodhisattva path. This parable would seem to be saying that the two vehicles are provisional and the bodhisattva vehicle is true. On the other hand, there are numerous passages in which all three vehicles are spoken of collectively as “skillful means.” Can the same sutra really be saying two different things?

A number of commentators have sought to resolve this apparent contradiction by appealing to the inseparable, “two but not two,” relationship between ultimate and relative truth, a key insight of the Mahayana. From the ultimate standpoint, no teaching, formulated according to contexts and conditions, can ever be absolute, nor can verbal explanations fully convey the Buddha’s insight. From this perspective, even the bodhisattva vehicle must be a “skillful means,” leading toward but transcended by the One Vehicle. But from a relative standpoint, the Buddha’s intent must be verbally expressed as concrete teachings that people can follow; in this conventional sense, the bodhisattva vehicle is identified with the One Vehicle and is superior to the other two.

Yet however satisfying such solutions may be philosophically, matters may have been more difficult in actual practice. Indian Mahayana was a minority movement, usually ignored but perhaps occasionally harassed by mainstream Buddhist institutions. While we know very little about the community that compiled the Lotus Sutra, the

chapter “Exhortation to Hold Firm” enumerates various hardships that devotees must endure, such as being cursed and insulted, physically attacked, slandered to high officials, and repeatedly driven away from monasteries. We cannot easily tell whether such passages reflect historical realities or the hyperbole of a marginal religious group, but whatever the case, they convey a message that devotees of the sutra should be prepared to meet opposition from the Buddhist establishment. Doctrinally, the Lotus Sutra inclusively embraces all three vehicles in the grand vision of the One Vehicle. But for its early adherents, attempting to practice the bodhisattva path in actuality may have involved a difficult, either-or choice.

Inclusive and Hierarchical Readings

In East Asia, however, Mahayana forms of Buddhism prevailed, so the choice between *shravaka* or bodhisattva paths was hardly an issue. What did become an issue for Chinese scholar-priests very early on was how to reconcile the varying, often conflicting Buddhist teachings being introduced from India and Central Asia. The doctrine of the One Vehicle seemed to offer a unifying framework within which all teachings might be comprehended, and the Lotus Sutra was highly esteemed for that reason. The T’ien-t’ai (Jpn., Tendai) school in particular accorded it a central position among all the Buddha’s teachings. But now another question arose: Should the One Vehicle be understood as a unifying perspective in which all other teachings are somehow contained? Or is it a specific teaching in its own right, at the top of a hierarchy of teachings? In fact, both views developed within the T’ien-t’ai tradition, taking as their basis the thought of the T’ien-t’ai founder Chih-i (538–597).

In his lectures on “The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra,” Chih-i discusses in detail the five characters *Miao-fa lien-hua ching* (Jpn., *Myo-ho-ren-ge-kyo*) that compose the title of the Lotus Sutra in the famous Chinese translation by Kumarajiva (ca. 350–409). In discussing the first character, *myo*, meaning “subtle” or “wonderful,” Chih-i first divides it into two meanings: relative and absolute. In a relative sense, the Dharma of the Lotus Sutra is “subtle” or “wonderful” in comparison with other teachings, which are “coarse” or incomplete. But from an absolute standpoint, its subtle perfection is not established in comparison to anything else, for there is nothing outside it to which it might be compared. Within the T’ien-t’ai tradition in China, Korea, and Japan, these two viewpoints, the relative and the absolute, were applied to the relationship between the Lotus Sutra and other Buddhist teachings. From the “absolute” view, all teachings are “opened and integrated” within the One Vehicle of the Lotus Sutra. Once understood in this light, the distinction between “true” and “provisional” is dissolved; all teachings become expressions of the One Vehicle. This is an egalitarian, inclusive reading, in which all teachings in

effect become "true." But from the relative standpoint, a clear distinction is preserved between the "true" and the "provisional"; this is a hierarchical, potentially even exclusive reading, which emphasizes the superiority of the Lotus Sutra over other teachings. Very generally speaking, the inclusive standpoint may be said to represent the T'ien-t'ai world view, in which all changing phenomena, just as they are, at each moment manifest true reality. The hierarchical standpoint, on the other hand, was usually invoked when defending T'ien-t'ai doctrine against the rival interpretations of other schools. Thus the two viewpoints coexisted in the same tradition, sometimes even in the writings of a single teacher.

A good example is the Buddhist leader Saicho (767–822), who, after studying in China, established the Tendai sect in Japan. One strand of Saicho's thought maintains the superiority of the Lotus Sutra over all other teachings. He developed this position from a number of angles in written debate with his most learned opponent, a cleric named Tokuitsu of the Hosso sect. For example, Saicho asserted that only the Lotus Sutra was preached from the standpoint of "effect," that is, from the Buddha's own enlightenment, while other sutras represent the standpoint of "cause," or those still in the stages of cultivation. Or, he distinguished the Lotus Sutra as the "direct path" to enlightenment, in contrast to both the "roundabout path" of the Hinayana and the "path requiring eons" taught in other, provisional sutras of the Mahayana. Drawing on the sutra's account of the dragon princess who achieves buddhahood in the space of a moment, Saicho claimed that, through the power of the Lotus Sutra, those who had already made sufficient spiritual progress in prior lifetimes could even realize buddhahood in this lifetime—"with this very body." "Realizing buddhahood with this very body" became an extremely influential idea in the Japanese Buddhist tradition. In the Tendai sect, it was first developed as an argument for the superiority of the Lotus Sutra.

However, even while asserting that the Lotus Sutra surpasses all others, Saicho also developed inclusive readings. One such interpretation is his notion of the "three kinds of Lotus Sutra." First is the "fundamental Lotus," that is, the One Vehicle which represents the Buddha's single compassionate intent, underlying all his teachings, to lead all beings to buddhahood. Second is the "hidden and secret Lotus," or those teachings in which, due to the immaturity of the Buddha's audience, this intention is not outwardly revealed. And third is "the Lotus that was preached explicitly," or the actual text of the Lotus Sutra, Myoho-enge-kyo. From the standpoint of these "three kinds of Lotus Sutra," all Buddhist teachings are the "Lotus Sutra." Saicho's attempts to integrate all teachings within the One Vehicle were not merely theoretical but also extended to practice. He conceived a great Buddhist system in which all the traditions he had stud-

ied in China—the T'ien-t'ai Lotus Sutra system of doctrine and meditation, Esoteric Buddhist practice, Zen, and the bodhisattva precepts—would be unified within a single framework.

Was the One Vehicle Preached for Everyone?

Of course! we might respond. Doesn't the Lotus Sutra itself say so? But this, too, is not a matter on which all the sutra's interpreters have agreed.

In East Asia, the One Vehicle doctrine was widely thought to encompass not only all teachings, but also all people. Although the term buddha-nature does not actually occur in the Lotus Sutra, its One Vehicle teaching quickly came to be understood in light of the concept of universal buddha-nature taught in the Mahayana nirvana sutra. Whether cleric or lay person, man or woman, ignorant or learned, clever or slow, good or evil—all, it was asserted, could reach buddhahood through the One Vehicle.

Such was the majority understanding. But an important rival interpretation emerged within the Fa-hsiang (Jpn., Hosso) school, based on certain Indian Yogacara treatises brought to China by the translator Hsüan-tsang (602–664) and proposed by his disciple Tz'u-en (632–682). In contrast to T'ien-t'ai, Hua-yen, Ch'an, and other Chinese Mahayana schools which maintain that all people have the buddha-nature, Fa-hsiang doctrine denies that such is the case. Rather, it recognizes "five natures," or five categories of persons, said to be innately capable of different levels of spiritual development. They are: 1) those able to follow the bodhisattva path and achieve supreme buddhahood; 2) those able to follow the path of the *shravaka* and achieve the nirvana of the arhat; 3) those able to achieve the nirvana of the *pratyekabuddha*; 4) an indeterminate group, having a combination of two or three of the above natures; in this group, which one of these multiple potentials will develop is not fixed; and 5) those incapable of reaching any sort of enlightenment, though they can achieve better rebirth in the human or heavenly realms through religious efforts. It was out of compassion for people of different natures that the Buddha expounded different teachings, able to benefit all.

Fa-hsiang or Hosso is unusual among the Mahayana schools in asserting that not everyone has the capacity for buddhahood, and some have criticized it as elitist on that account. Others have seen it as offering a realistic assessment of human differences; not everyone appears to have equal capacity for spiritual cultivation. In either case, it represents an important minority voice in the history of East Asian Buddhism. Proponents of inclusive One Vehicle ideas were often forced to sharpen their arguments in debates with Fa-hsiang or Hosso scholars. For example, the famous Japanese Tendai doctrine of "the buddhahood of grasses and trees," extending enlightenment to



Lotus Sutra Mandala, scroll 1, depicts scenes from the Lotus Sutra, between chapters 1 and 7. 1335. Important Cultural Property. Courtesy of Honko-ji temple, Shizuoka Prefecture.

the insentient world, was first put forth by Saicho in response to the more restrictive arguments of his Hosso opponents.

But how did this school understand the One Vehicle? Tz'u-en, its first Chinese theoretician, could hardly ignore so influential a text as the Lotus Sutra. But he cleverly borrowed the sutra's own language to subvert its usual interpretation. Although the Lotus Sutra says that the three vehicles are expedient devices and the One Vehicle is true, Tz'u-en and his successors argued that this statement is itself a "skillful means," preached by the Buddha to encourage persons of the fourth, indeterminate category. In other words, by hearing that "all can attain buddhahood," those possessing multiple potentials would be inspired to follow the bodhisattva path and achieve buddhahood, rather than settling for the lesser goal of the arhat or *pratyekabuddha*. For Fa-hsiang scholars, the "three vehicles" represented the truth, because they saw the distinctions among *shravakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and bodhisattvas as indicating real differences in human capacity. They saw the One Vehicle instead as a skillful means designed to encourage those capable of bodhisattva practice but not yet firmly committed to it. It was in response to this very argument that Saicho asserted the Lotus Sutra's superiority.

How Should the Lotus Sutra Be Practiced?

A fourteenth-century Japanese Tendai textbook for novice clerics called *Shoshin kangakusho* (Encouraging Study for Beginners) reads in part: "The Lotus Sutra itself has no essence. It takes as its essence the teachings expounded before it. Nevertheless, the followers of Nichiren profoundly revere only the Lotus and deeply reject the teachings expounded before it. This is a grave error. . . . It is attachment to these teachings [as separate truths] that is to be rejected, and not the teachings themselves." Here we see indications of an ongoing debate in Japan's medieval period between two groups of Lotus Sutra practitioners. One, a Tendai faction, argued that since all other teachings are contained within the One Vehicle, to practice other teachings with this understanding is in effect to practice the Lotus Sutra. In this radically inclusive reading, the One Vehicle is seen, not as having specific content, but as the Buddha's unifying intent. The other side in the controversy, the "followers of Nichiren," maintained that the Lotus Sutra is, quite simply, superior to other teachings and should be practiced exclusively.

The Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222–82) began his religious career as a Tendai priest but would later be revered as the founder of the Hokke or Nichiren sect. His reading of the Lotus Sutra was based on the widely held idea that the world had entered the age of the Final Dharma (*mappo*), beginning two thousand years after Shakyamuni Buddha's nirvana, when human beings are said to be particularly sinful and traditional disciplines

are hard to uphold. During the two thousand years of the True and Semblance Dharma ages, he taught, people had planted wholesome roots in prior lifetimes, so it was possible for them to attain buddhahood through provisional teachings. But now in the age of the Final Dharma, people no longer have good roots and cannot realize enlightenment through provisional teachings. In Nichiren's view, the only path to buddhahood in the *mappo* era is the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha's supreme and final teaching, specifically intended for the evil age when people would need it most. In stressing the sutra's unique connection to the present, the age of the Final Dharma, Nichiren's emphasis on the superiority of the Lotus Sutra in effect became an argument for its exclusive truth. Based on the principle of the nonduality of people and their environment, he even attributed the many disasters of his time—epidemics, earthquakes, famine, and the threat of war—to the fact that people had abandoned the Lotus Sutra in favor of provisional teachings. Conversely, he taught that the spread of faith in the sutra could transform this world into an ideal Buddha-land.

As the fundamental practice of the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren advocated chanting its *daimoku* or title, "Namu-myoho-enge-kyo," which he believed to embody the heart of the sutra and the seed of all buddhas' enlightenment. But not everyone agreed about how devotees of the Lotus Sutra should practice. In one of his writings, *Shoshu mondo sho* (A Debate with Other Schools), Nichiren summarizes the points of argument between himself and other Tendai thinkers of his day about whether believers in the Lotus Sutra should chant only its title or whether they may also chant the names of other sutras or invoke the names of other buddhas and bodhisattvas. His opponents agree that it would be an error to chant the names of other sutras, buddhas, or bodhisattvas while thinking that these represent separate or contradictory truths. But in fact, they continue, the Lotus Sutra is like an ocean gathering all rivers. Once one understands that all the varied forms of Buddhism are like rivers encompassed by the great sea of the Lotus Sutra, then it is perfectly acceptable to chant Esoteric mantras, recite the name of Buddha Amida, or indeed carry out any other Buddhist practice in accordance with one's personal inclination.

In his counter-argument, however, Nichiren turns the ocean metaphor upside down. He points out that once rivers flow into the sea, they all assume the same salty flavor and lose their original names. Once other teachings and practices have been encompassed in the ocean of the Lotus Sutra, they are all "Namu-myoho-enge-kyo"; there is no longer any reason for the separate categories of Zen, precepts, mantras, etc. In this particular dispute, both sides agreed that the Lotus Sutra encompasses all truth and leads all persons to buddhahood. But where one side

saw the One Vehicle as legitimizing a great range of practices, the other saw it as mandating one practice alone.

This difference over how to understand the One Vehicle has continued down to the present, when it has been extended to include issues of religious pluralism. How should we understand human religious difference? Do all religions participate in a larger, encompassing truth? Or are some more "true" than others? Is one "true" and all others mistaken? Broadly speaking, we might also say that the tension between inclusive vs. exclusive readings of the Lotus Sutra has been inherited by the two largest and most active Lotus Sutra-based lay Buddhist movements in the world today. Rissho Kosei-kai, which promotes interfaith dialogue, tends to adopt an inclusive stance, searching for common ground among many religions, while Soka Gakkai generally takes a more exclusive position, asserting that chanting the *daimoku* of the Lotus Sutra as Nichiren taught is the only practice that can truly lead humanity to peace and happiness.

Some Reflections

In addition to asking students to read the Lotus Sutra itself, I often ask them to consider what some modern scholars have written about the sutra. Two of my favorite seminar readings for this purpose—deliberately selected for their different emphases—are Michael Pye's *Skillful Means* (Duckworth, 1978) and Carl Bielefeldt's "The One Vehicle and the Three Jewels" (*Buddhist-Christian Studies* 10, 1990). Prof. Pye argues that the concept of skillful means, properly understood, serves as a built-in check against dogmatism, allowing the Buddhist tradition continually to develop new forms appropriate to the time and place, even while understanding that no single form is complete and final in itself but rather leads to the truth of the One Vehicle that is always beyond direct expression. Prof. Bielefeldt, on the other hand, notes that the One Vehicle has also been understood as a summons to a new, absolute form of Buddhism said to transcend all earlier forms—especially in light of the sutra's stated connection to the "latter age" following the Buddha's nirvana. This interpretation, he suggests, formed the theological basis for the exclusive orientation of the Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren sects of Buddhism that appeared in medieval Japan and have become so influential today. At first students usually insist that one position must be right and the other mistaken. What I try to have them see, however, is that the Lotus Sutra can be, and has been, read for a long time in both inclusive and exclusive ways, and that the very fact of this ongoing controversy may have something significant to tell us.

In reflecting on this issue, it has occurred to me that both inclusive and exclusive readings have great strengths and weaknesses. The obvious strength of an inclusive reading is that it works to reconcile divergent, even antagonistic

views within a common framework and thus could, potentially, defuse conflict over religious differences and promote mutual respect and understanding. Herein lies the contemporary appeal of inclusive interpretations of the One Vehicle for interfaith dialogue. However, inclusive arguments are not without dangers. We must be careful that claims for the ultimate unity of religious truth do not conceal, without our realizing it, a subtle egoism that glosses over real points of divergence by assuming that other people's religion must be essentially like our own. Another potential problem is what sociologist of religion Robert Bellah has called "overtolerance," a readiness to be so open to heterogeneous elements that we fail to protect what is distinctive about our own tradition.

The dangers of an exclusive stance are perhaps more obvious. The claim that one teaching alone is true can easily lead to dogmatism, self-righteousness, and, in the worst case, the forceful imposition of one's own views. However, exclusive truth claims in religion also have a po-

tential strength, in that faith in a single, transcendent truth can provide a moral basis from which to criticize the status quo and the courage to challenge oppressive forms of power. For example, in Japan's early modern period (1600–1868), members of the *fuju fuse* ("neither receiving nor giving") minority movement within Nichiren Buddhism repeatedly risked their freedom and their lives to defy growing government control of religion, asserting that the authority of the Lotus Sutra transcends that of worldly rule.

There may be no way to reconcile these two perspectives. But then, perhaps we do not need to. Perhaps the tension between them can be made to work in a constructive way. Whether we ourselves understand the message of the Lotus Sutra to be inclusive or exclusive, an awareness that Buddhists before us have debated this issue for many centuries may help us to define our personal stance in a clear-sighted rather than a dogmatically attached fashion, giving play to its strengths while avoiding its potential pitfalls. □



Ichiji Rendai Hokekyo, or Lotus Sutra scroll in which each character is considered as the representation of a buddha and depicted being mounted on a lotus pedestal. Heian period. Important Cultural Property. Kyoto National Museum.