

## Why the *Lotus Sūtra*?

### — On the Historic Significance of Tendai —

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In dealing with the T'ien-t'ai (henceforth Tendai) school, one cannot but ask the question as to why historically it is so central a school? Despite the fact that Tendai might have been subsequently overshadowed by other schools, the fact remains that it is the first Sinitic Mahāyāna school to emerge in China during the Sui-T'ang era. Other schools claim as ancient an ancestry or more, but those self-legitimizing legends rose later. And except for the Pure Land school, there is evidence that the Ch'an (Zen) school which became public with Tao-hsin might have originated from under the wing of Tendai. So argued Sekiguchi (1969, pp. 271-81). There is also the anticipation of the Hua-yen (Kegon) totalism, the idea of "One is All, All is One" in the later writings of Master Chih-i. So noted Andō (1968, pp. 147-57). That plus the fact that Tendai has always, in China as in Japan, had a soft spot for Amitābha piety, albeit in its own more meditative style, means that Chinese Tendai at one point embraced the meditative emphasis of Ch'an, the intellectualism of Hua-yen, the piety of Pure Land—in other words, it was the most "catholic" of schools—before these three, different paths of wisdom, insight, and deliverance went their own, separate, and more sectarian ways. It is only after the breakup of that medieval synthesis that we tend to forget exactly how central Tendai was in Chinese Buddhist history.

And is it an accident that the same story should repeat itself in Japan? There Tendai became as, if not even more, central a school in Heian. As is well known, it is the mother school to all of the Kamakura sects. The sects were all rooted in, even as they too should break away from, the home temple that was Mt. Hiei, much to the protestation of Nichiren, its reviver who nonetheless relocated to Mt. Minobu. And however much we might like to remember Tendai's eclipse after its glory in Heian, we must not forget that Nichiren revival. Less catholic-inclusive and more selective-intolerant, still

that Nichiren revival is behind another wave of Buddhist revival in modern times. The Nichiren wing still dominates the New Religions of Japan.

Therein as historians of religions we come back to the central question again: Why is such historic significance, such history-making potential, due the Tendai school? And here both fact and piety would have us turn to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Scripture of the Saddharma (True Law) of the Puṇḍarīka (Lotus, symbol of the Buddha) that is the heart and soul of this school. For indeed the glory of the Tendai school is only the derivative glory of the *Lotus Sūtra*. But pious homage before the Saddharma is not always easy for the factual historian to take. At first glance, it is not easy to see how the highly scholastic Tendai philosophy, most of which is said to be based on the Mādhyamika (Middle Path) system, a *śāstra* tradition, can be so derived from this Saddharma, a sūtra tradition, especially since as a sūtra, the *Lotus* really has little to say about that emptiness philosophy and does not indulge in the kind of arabesque of triple truths with which Chih-i so excelled. But accepting the wisdom of tradition, namely that the glory of Tendai is the glory of the *Lotus Sūtra*, then the question now becomes: Why the *Lotus Sūtra*?

What is in this sūtra that makes it the crown of Mahāyāna sūtras, the one copied more often by medieval scribes than any other and the most ancient text (fragment) to survive? A logical question to us, it is a misplaced one to the faithful. Like the Bible to the Christians, the truth of the *Lotus* is self-evident. This is the Word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) that declares itself as the Eternal Logos and Saddharma. This is the good news, the preaching of which, like in Pauline evangelical theology, resuscitates, re-actualizes, and makes present anew every time the Word of the Buddha and the Logos-Dharma that is the Buddha himself. On that final mystery, more later. Meanwhile remaining an outsider, a novice needs to be initiated into its mystique with greater objectivity than the homilies of old. Japan still has a living Tendai scholastic tradition. But there is a need to make sense of that medieval vision for moderns, and it is hoped that through that outsider's empathy and objectivity, perhaps we may acquire an understanding of its profundity, especially the issue of its historic significance the pious exegetics overlook, take for granted, or fail to assess.

#### *The Lotus Sūtra as the Expression of Popular Faith*

One of the charms of the *Lotus Sūtra* is that it satisfies both the simple soul of piety as well as the profound reflections of the philosopher. We will begin with the former because it is more obvious and, I believe, more original (to the sūtra). Few scholars would deny that the *Lotus Sūtra* was rooted in the veneration of the Buddha. This is not to say that this is the final end of the sūtra. As we will see later, the final end of homage is to the Dharma and not the Buddha. Originally, the Lotus (Buddha) piety grew definitely out of the

cult of the relic bones, *śarīra*, of the World-Honored one after his untimely demise (though timely *parinirvāṇa* and compassionate expediency in the *Lotus Sūtra*). Originally, not finally, the Lotus piety commemorates the cult of merit-making due stūpa-worshippers. It is in that sense that the *Lotus Sūtra* had a populist base, and according to Hirakawa, a largely lay-dominated base.<sup>1</sup>

Later tradition remembers that when the Buddha passed away, he entrusted the Dharma to the monks but gave his *śarīra* (relic bones) to the laymen. If not de jure (the original wish of the Buddha was to see his ashes scattered), then de facto (the eight princes took possession of the relics after the monks had so deliberated). In this division of labor, the monks were or had been previously instructed by the Buddha to “Follow the Dharma and not the Person” but by default, because the laymen were thought to be incapable of following the strenuous career of the renunciate, the laymen were left with following the Person, not the Dharma. That is to say, they were given the expediency of venerating the Buddha’s person through his physical remains, the relics, with the explicit understanding which the monks tirelessly reiterated, namely that such acts of devotion would not lead to nirvāṇa, but would nonetheless be so meritorious as to be efficacious in securing a better samsaric rebirth. This is the classic division between nibbanic wisdom and kammatic good works that Medford Spiro the anthropologist has schematized for his analysis of Burmese Buddhism (1970).

But classic dictums are often more ideal than real. The Buddha, being such an extraordinary figure (the foremost one deserving of veneration from those in heaven and those on earth), that homage paid him at his stūpa sites (reliquaries in which the relics are enshrined) came in the end not just from the uncouth laity who knew no better but also from the monks who did. And though proverbially we associate the liberal sectarians (Nikāya Buddhists) with greater Buddha-devotion, yet as attested to by the dedications and inscriptions on site, both conservatives and liberals were among those who joined the laity in so honoring the Buddha. The Sarvāstivādins of northwest India were not lax in this regard, but the liberal Mahāsāṃghikas understandably did give to Buddha-devotion greater prestige and status by assessment more merits due such actions than the conservatives would. Still they stopped short of making devotion the equivalent of wisdom, still regarded as the surest path to liberation. This is understandable for we should not over-romanticize the Mahāsāṃghikas. They might be for a larger (*mahā*) com-

<sup>1</sup> Hirakawa located the basis of Mahāyāna in the lay stūpa cults and Shizutani modified this by pointing out how monks were also involved and how Mahāyāna as a distinct movement was due to certain leaders known in Mahāyāna texts as masters of the Law (*dharmabhāṅakas*). See Hirakawa 1963, pp. 57–105 and Shizutani 1967. Abbott 1985 contains a review of the Hirakawa/Shizutani debate on Mahāyāna origins. Shizutani’s more radical thesis is not available in English, but I have introduced his ideas in Lai 1981, pp. 447–69.

munity (*saṅgha*) that included within itself the laity, but their leaders were as much monks (*bhikṣus*). This is not a lay movement.

Although trying to draw the line between lay piety and monk wisdom is risky at best, it is still safe to assume that after the Buddha passed away, there were two foci of faith: the Buddha and the Dharma. (The third jewel, the Saṅgha as Refuge, is definitely added on later.) According to these two foci, there evolved two different types of literature: the *jātakas* or birth stories of the Buddha that grew into the Avadāna corpus, and the *mātrkā* or enumeration (of teachings by numbers) that grew into the Abhidharma genre.

Buddha	—————>	Jātaka	—————>	Avadāna
Dharma	—————>	Mātrka	—————>	Abhidharma

The former is kammatic literature used by monks (we suspect) to edify the populace. It is focused on the Buddha. The latter we can characterize as dhammic literature, reserved for the monks alone, and Dharma-centered.

The original, popular base of the Lotus cultus is such that it can be seen in the predominance in the *Lotus Sūtra* of the mythopoeic tradition, i.e. the Avadāna materials. This is very unlike the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Transcendental Wisdom) *Sūtras* dedicated to the explication of the Dharma: the *Lotus Sūtra* is fundamentally not a philosophical treatise. The final recension knew of philosophical matters, but as a whole the sūtra made scant mention of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), was fairly indifferent to both the Hīnayāna abhidharmic subtleties and the Mahāyāna anti-abhidharmic dialectics. It can be impatient with one as with the other. The reasons for that we will see later. The important thing to note is that in no way can the *Lotus Sūtra* be regarded as a philosophical treatise, even less a systematic one. Its most primitive stratum is acknowledged by scholars to be very ancient and in the form of *gāthās*, poetic verses mostly dedicated to singing the praise of the Buddha. Its strongest didache comes not in some refined doctrines but rather in the form of a series of famous parables. Even the doctrine of *upāya* and *ekayāna* was formulated in terms of the parable of the burning house. In other words, Mythos and not Logos is its forte. And among the core mythic lore, the *Lotus Sūtra* shines in a series of *vyākaraṇas*, prophecies or assurances given by the Buddha to his followers concerning their future destinies. The philosophical implication might indeed be “universal Buddhahood,” for even Devadatta is redeemed as a future Buddha, but it is characteristic of the *Lotus Sūtra* not to put that forward in a line like the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*’s “All sentient beings have Buddha-nature.” The importance of its not so saying we will show later.

This is not to say that the *Lotus Sūtra* had no profound philosophical ideas. As acknowledged above, the sūtra took in such doctrines as current in its surrounding, from the Hīnayāna *skandhas* to Mahāyāna emptiness, from the elemental *dhyānas* to intimation of the bodhisattvic *bhūmis*. To say it is not a philosophical work would horrify the traditional Tendai scholastic

whose understanding is that this sūtra has enough depth of insight to engage anyone for a life time. This point we do not mean to dispute. But it is as much to the credit of Chih-i in unearthing these hidden meanings (*hsüan-i* 玄義) as it is to the merit of the sūtra in keeping such mysteries, for all practical purposes, esoteric. They are so very less than obvious to the untrained eye that without Chih-i we probably would never have become cognizant of them and the arabesque structure of this text. It takes a genius to uncover what most of us can never see. But as a historian of ideas who must record the growth of ideas as a growth in the exegetical tradition that unfolded in time, I must stay first with the obvious and the apparent (the *Lotus Sūtra* as expressive of popular piety) and only take into account the less obvious and the better concealed (when we come to Chih-i). Otherwise we would let medieval scholastics overshadow the pristine gospel. Posing the problem this way brings us to the next, somewhat controversial, issue.

*The Lotus Sūtra as Buddhayāna, Bodhisattvayāna, and Ekayāna*

As alluded to in passing, we regard the *Lotus* tradition to be very different from the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Prajñā* or Wisdom) tradition. This is contrary to orthodox understanding. Ever since Chih-i explicated the *Lotus Sūtra* using the tools derived from the Mādhyamika philosophy, which is rooted in the Wisdom tradition, most scholars simply cannot consider the *Lotus* tradition as being originally (not finally) distinct from the Wisdom tradition. This affects a major departure on our part from the current theory or theories on Mahāyāna genesis.

The genesis of Mahāyāna is still hidden. The older, more textualist, theory is to trace Mahāyāna to the Mahāsāṃghikas. But mention has been made in the last section concerning the popularity of the stūpa cult well attested to by archaeology. This fact has led Hirakawa to amend the older thesis since the older thesis cannot sufficiently account for the ideological and the sociological break. Ideationally Mahāyāna took over ideas not just from the liberals but also the conservatives. Sociologically Mahāyāna broke with both the liberals and the conservatives. Noting the importance of the stūpa cult, which is extra-canonical (i.e., separate from the Dharma entrusted to the monk leaders of the sectarians), Hirakawa at first proposes that lay-dominated cultus as a more viable base for the rise of Mahāyāna. But as noted, the stūpa cult was not an exclusively lay movement. Therefore Shizutani amended Hirakawa's thesis by noting that (a) it was a mixed lay-and-monk cult in which (b) certain preachers (*dharmabhāṅakas*) seem to act as their communal leaders (1967). Judging from the praise given to these Dharma masters, it seems that they were the articulators for the seminal Mahāyāna tradition. The identity of these preachers, what exactly they proclaimed, and whether they were one homogeneous group with one homogeneous message is far from clear.

Those issues aside, there is one major problem in the stūpa-genesis thesis. Textually speaking, “Mahāyāna” by definition arose along with the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* because this corpus is the first to proclaim a new Dharma, the first to claim a separate Bodhisattvayāna, and the first to call that “Mahāyāna” at the expense of the “Hīnayāna” of the *śrāvakas* (listeners). But this significantly contradicts the Hirakawa thesis since the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition glorifies the emptiness of wisdom as Dharmakāya (the three terms *śūnyatā*, *prajñā*, and *dharmakāya* are here synonymous) and as a Dharma-centered movement had little good to say about stūpa worship. Specifically, it teaches that the bodhisattva should honor the Dharmakāya and not the Rupakāya—whether that be the person Śākyamuni or any of his physical remains (*śarīra*). The bodhisattva, like the arhant after the demise of the Buddha, adheres to the dictum of “Follow ye the Dharma and not the Person.” Dharma is now specifically the unborn, a synonym for emptiness, in the formulaic *anutpattidharma-kṣānti*, a passive, meditative recognition of reality as unborn [i.e., as being neither of birth nor of cessation]. Given its Dharmacentrism and his disparaging of Buddha relics, it is hard to see how this wisdom tradition could be intrinsically tied to a tradition of faith centered on the Buddha and his glorified body. Or how its ideal, a formless Dharmakāya (impersonal), with no beginning or end (i.e., eternal) could sit well with an adoration of a very concrete, transcendental personality that is tied to what would be then the Rupakāya by his assessment. (The *Lotus Sūtra* does not know even that Dharmakāya and Rupakāya distinction, and there was not yet the notion of a Saṃbhogakāya.)

In view of this discrepancy I propose, as a methodological necessity, that the Wisdom tradition not be traced to the stūpa cult and that the latter, the *Ur-Lotus* tradition, be granted a separate socio-ideological lineage, following what we said earlier that there were two foci of Jewel-adherence after the Buddha passed away:

Buddha:

Buddha-centric piety— [Avadāna-based]	at the stūpa centers with monk-lay participation that is trans-sectarian = Roots of a Buddhayāna
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Dharma:

Dharma-centric wisdom— [abhidharma-defined]	for sectarian monks experiencing post-Aśoka schism between village-dwelling monks and forest dwelling ascetics = Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddhayāna
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The canon was the Dharma (*sūtra-vinaya*) and the sectarians were defined by the Dharma. The stūpa cult was extra-canonical and thus duly trans-sectarian. It existed side by side with the various sects, ready to accept one

and all devotees, an indiscriminate piety that would inform the Ekayāna slogan later when it could declare itself as a new teaching or Dharma. The hitch was that this devotional cult, being centered on the Buddha, originally had no Dharma of its own. It could not because it had followed the person (the Buddha) and not the Dharma. According to the sectarian doctrine of the separation of the Three Jewels preserved in the *vinaya*, which states that the three refuges are distinct and separate — such that the goods donated to one jewel can never be used by another without its explicit permission — any physical or emtaphysical fusion of the Buddha jewel and the Dharma jewel was disallowed. Non-aligned with the liberals or the conservatives, though patronized by both, the stūpa cult originally had no Yāna consciousness. Even when it did develop a Yāna-identity, its Buddhayāna did not fall into any of the traditional Triyānas, i.e., Śrāvaka-, Pratyekabuddha-, and Bodhisattvayāna. For its scripture it had *gāthās* (verses), *jātakas* (birth stories of the Buddha), and *avadānas* (birth stories of other Buddhas) but it had no sūtra. And that is not just because the sūtra canon (the *Nikāya*) was in the hands of the monks but more importantly because a formal sūtra always presumes a sūtra-dharma. That is to say, a sūtra should always be Dharma-centered, not Buddha-centered.

One should not be too purist about this. Extra-canonical “sūtras” dedicated to teachings about other Buddhas such as Akṣobhya and Amitābha were probably in circulation. Shizutani would date the “primitive” or Ur-Mahāyāna corpus at 100 B.C. to A.D. 100, that predating even the “early” or consciously Mahāyāna corpus (beginning with the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, by his count, A.D. 50–250. The mark of the Ur-Mahāyāna corpus is that it does not know itself as “Mahāyāna.” And this label indeed does not appear even in the classic *Sukhāvativyūha* corpus. I would postulate that these *Vaipulya* “sūtras” were tolerated by the sectarians most probably because they were considered to be lores about other Buddhas other than Śākyamuni, and as such beyond the purview of the sons of Śākyamuni who were keepers only of the Śākya tradition.

At any rate, for some three centuries after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Buddha tradition grew side by side. Then came an important change. Both the stūpa cult, now a full *caitya* (large, temple compound) center and the dharmic learning, now a full abhidharma system, flourished after Aśoka lent the tradition his imperial support. But as with Constantine and his patronage of Christianity, Buddhism under Aśoka also suffered the bane of worldliness that came with prosperity.

Our hypothesis is that the Prajñāpāramitā tradition rose up against not one but both of these developments. It indeed castigated both the stūpa devotion and the abhidharmic scholastics. This seminal Mahāyāna tradition, contrary to accepted reading, rose not within but in tension with the urbane cult

of stūpas and the settled community of the village monks. Like the Desert Fathers who reacted to the secularity of the Constantinean Church—with its share of mindless magic and doctrinal nitpicking—the future Mahāyāna bodhisattvas were ascetics rooted I believe in the very ancient tradition of the *āryanikas*, the forest-dwelling monks, who pursued, as forest-dwellers always had, a program of superhuman perfection or *pāramitās*. Before these forest monks were remade by an adoring public into the classic bodhisattva saints, much as the desert Fathers became (despite their withdrawal from the world) the living saints and intercessors of the Church, they were probably regarded as pratyekabuddhas, the solitarily enlightened. Our hypothesis is that the pratyekabuddha was not yet seen as one who enlightened himself with no compulsion to save others. That is the later schematized reading. Pratyekabuddha at one time seems not to refer to some nebulous, unknown self-enlightened but silent Buddhas. It seems to be a term used, as it is still used in Jainism, to describe the recluse ascetics. As a class of actual *dhutas* known to an admiring public, they are still so recognized in the Pali canon. The title of Pratyekabuddha is still an attribute given to revered forest monks in folk Theravada Buddhism and given even nowadays by modern historians to the rebel ascetics in Mahāyāna (Bodhidharma and the early Zen masters had been so typed).

The placement of the pratyekabuddha in the Triayāna scheme remains even now problematical. We have two views of the relationship between the Three Vehicles, one assuming the three were continuous grades while the other one would have them as discrete destinies:

1. The (earlier) continuous model:

Arhant → Pratyekabuddha → Bodhisattva → Samyaksambuddha

A person can advance from one to the next through higher virtues.

Preserved by Buddhaghosa in Theravada and in the Mahāyāna *bhūmis*.

2. The (classic) discrete model:

Śrāvakagotra, Pratyekabuddhagotra, and Bodhisattvagotra are separate.

Distinction now based on dependence/independence/advocacy.

Once determined, a *gotra* cannot cross over into another.

I believe the first model is earlier and that certain forest-ascetics were being graded as individual saints, lesser than the Buddha but higher than his now secularized disciples in the village, the *śrāvakas*, and that the future Mahāyāna tradition (called Bodhisattvayāna by the time of its proclamation) was rooted in this tradition of the solitary desert saints of Buddhism.

That this tracing of the Prajñāpāramitā tradition to the forest-dwelling monks is not spurious is supported by the fact that the six *pāramitās* nearly all spell of asceticism. Even the first (*dāna pāramitā*) has little to do with donation of goods. Practising such a charitable virtue due a layman is honorable,



but by definition *pāramitā* is more than even the Eight Noble Paths. It means superhuman perfection, total giving. *Dāna pāramitā* in the classic *jātakas* meant selfless sacrifice of the self. Thus it is a mistake to connect the primacy of *dāna pāramitā* with the popular donative piety of stūpa worshippers. The original bodhisattva path is the path of a few pratyekabuddhas, but this Way or Yāna of a rare handful became much admired by the populace—forest dwelling monks still are so awe-inspiring as to have extraordinary powers attributed to them—that as the holy ones, the great beings, Mahāsattvas, they were remade or reclaimed as the Mahāsattva Bodhisattvas whose way then grew into what was then renamed as Mahāyāna. Because of their forest origin, this new movement existed in tension with the *śrāvaka*, the archetypal Hinayanist, a Listener, someone who kept the canon in the village. The pratyekabuddha, the solitary saint, also came under criticism later, with the added impetus of the compassionate bodhisattva ideal. Henceforth, in the classic scheme of the Triyāna (see above), the pratyekabuddhas became grouped with the Hinayāna. Still ambivalence remains. Mahāyāna typically targets the *śrāvaka-arhant* for criticism, and much less so the pratyekabuddha.

Forest-dwellers of course did not start movements. Solitary souls did not create sizeable communities, any more than St. Anthony fanned the cult of the Desert Fathers. The legend of St. Anthony was spread by the Church Fathers themselves in admiration of his lifestyle. So likewise may we suspect the same happened to these pratyekabuddhas. It is the popularization of their virtue (*pāramitās*) and powers (*tapas*) that led to the transformation and maturation of their path into the Mahāyāna Bodhisattvayāna. That, however, is another story.

This hypothesis of Mahāyāna genesis with the forest ascetics can be supported by an analysis of the legend concerning the formation of the Hinayāna canon itself. By “listeners” is meant one who follows the teachings of the Buddha. In the institutionalized Saṅgha, the teaching is the sūtra-vinaya and to listen is to hear these codified words repeated in and by the community of bhikṣus. But forest-dwelling monks lived far away from such monasteries. Being contemplatives, they had few scriptures and even less use for them. They had few images and knew little communal *mātrka* recitations. They attained enlightenment in solitude. This is quite unlike the sectarian Buddhists, liberal or conservative, who had their sūtra, vinaya, and eventually, their sectarian abhidharma. So protective were they of the authority of the canon that their record would remember the First Council as one attended by all Arhants (five hundred in number). There was then no category of pratyekabuddhas. But there was one Arhant missing and it was the venerable Gavampati, who when summoned to join the council in effect refused and in the heat of *tapas*, extinguished himself in like manner as the Buddha. He

represents the non-conformist pratyekabuddha who would have no part in the cult of the memorized, and later the written, the well chanted and thus well harkened to, canon. But if he should be the stubborn outsider, the five hundred Arhants who legitimized communal living also staked their claim. In order to join the council, they are said to have renounced the places they delighted in most—living in mountains, forests, near lakes, or in caves. This Church community repudiated the solitary lifestyle.

But lo and behold, whom should the early *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* make its spokesmen? Not someone known as a Bodhisattva by name, because that association to the Bodhisattva category was yet unknown. The teaching of Emptiness came from the disciple of the Buddha who is known to love dwelling in mountains and lakes: Subhuti, traditionally known to us as an Arhant. It always seemed strange to me why Mahāyāna emptiness should be taught by an Arhant until I realize that Subhuti really symbolizes a pratyekabuddha, a forest ascetic, at a time when the Triyāna categories have not become so schematized and discrete. And whom did Subhuti criticize? Śāriputra the disciple, known not just for his wisdom as is the usual reading (Śāriputra is tied later to the abhidharmic tradition) but also for being the one who instituted village-dwelling monks. He was the one who established the Buddhist monastic community close to the village to serve and be served by the laity, whose support was what provided the leisure for abhidharmic studies in the first place. Thus the Subhuti-Śāriputra exchange in the earliest texts of the *Prajñā* corpus points us back to the real source of the Wisdom tradition: tension between forest-dwelling monks and village-dwelling monks after the reign of Aśoka had secularized the latter enough to make these Buddhist Desert Fathers the saints of a new era.

Making this methodological distinction between the *Lotus* Buddhayāna and the *Prajñā* Bodhisattvayāna would help to account for some of the peculiarity of the *Lotus* tradition that scholars to date have failed to account for satisfactorily. A long dissertation is not possible here, so briefly, these points are:

a) Why, although some portions of the *Lotus* might predate the *Prajñā* corpus, the *Lotus* as *Sūtra* could only emerge after the *Prajñā* tradition had effected a break with the sectarians? This is because the *Prajñā* tradition, by proclaiming a new Dharma (the Unborn), was the first to create a new sūtra (*buddhavacana*) with which to repudiate the authority of the *Nikāya* canon. It was only after this Bodhisattvayāna effected the Mahāyāna break with Hīnayāna that the non-aligned and extra-canonical *Lotus* tradition joined the Great Vehicle.

b) To do so, the *Lotus* had to proclaim itself a Dharma (*Saddharma*). However, this involved a transormation of what was originally a Buddha-centric cult into a Dharma-centric cult. The *Lotus Sūtra* must have a sūtra-

Dharma. This explains why, though the *Lotus Sūtra* quite obviously championed Buddha-devotion, the final position (and the official Tendai doctrine) is that the object of worship (*honzon* 本尊) is not the Buddha but the (Sūtra) Dharma itself.

c) The sūtra-ization of the *Lotus* devotion led to the displacement of the Buddha-relic by the Sūtra itself. This not only led to the popularity of copying the sūtra to the preservation of the Dharma, but led later to the ritual enshrinement of the written *pustaka* (book) in the stūpa itself in lieu of actual physical relics. In that cultic twist, one also follows the Dharma and not the Person, even though the Saddharma declares the longevity of the Buddha.

d) Mahāyāna as Bodhisattvayāna at first accepted the distinction of the Three Vehicles, since it was upon the discreteness of the three (*śrāvaka*, pratyekabuddha, bodhisattva) that the superiority of the bodhisattva vehicle is established. But the *Lotus* came after that, and continuing its primordial trans-sectarianism, repealed the three in an endorsement of itself as the One Vehicle. *Ekayāna* refers originally to an inclusive Buddhayāna, what Fa-yün justly called the “fourth vehicle.” The *Lotus* Buddhayāna was then more than the Wisdom Bodhisattvayāna. It is only later when that distinction was smoothed out that we now accept the orthodox reading of Mahāyāna, Bodhisattvayāna, *ekayāna*, and Buddhayāna as synonyms. At one time, however, Buddhayāna-*ekayāna* transcended Bodhisattvayāna-Triyāna.

e) A qualification: Our attribution of Bodhisattvayāna to the tradition of the forest-dwelling pratyekabuddhas seems to be duly contradicted by the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra* where the hero is a householder bodhisattva of prosperous Vaisali. Space does not allow a full defense of our thesis. Briefly though, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra* is a separate and slightly later tradition than the original *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. It even repudiated the forest-dwelling tradition (the mark of Subhuti) and attacked it in a well-concealed way, namely, by having Vimalakīrti mock Śāriputra (!) for meditating in the forest. It transposed the mark of Subhuti, the new target, onto his old protagonist, the village-dwelling Śāriputra.

All that is now history. The mature Mahāyāna tradition fused *Lotus* devotion and *Prajñā* wisdom. And Chih-i is fully justified to fuse these two traditions into one, allowing Mādhyamika in a “round, perfect” dialectics to make sense of the Oneness of *ekayāna* and making it possible for the positive reality of Dharma (the *shih-hsiang* of *dharmatā*) to modify the negative tone of emptiness in the *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus. After him, it is impossible to read the *Lotus Sūtra* with the kind of critical innocence we have assumed above. But no synthesis is ever flawless, not even the Tendai one. The very imperfection can hold the key to the dynamism of the tradition itself. Of the many untold tensions we could write on, we will select a few and end with one that Ruben Habito has addressed.

*The Continual Tension between the Personal and the Impersonal*

Despite the eventual fusion of Faith and Wisdom in Mahāyāna, sufficient tensions survived in the *Lotus* tradition itself to give it a unique stamp. This is because faith in the Buddha will always be somehow more personal, more specific, more committed to a historical memory and horizon than intuition into a Wisdom that is impersonal, universal, and timeless.

The orthodox reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* would say that it endorses the idea of a permanent Dharmakāya and teaches the universality of Buddha-nature. But neither idea can be found so literally in the *Lotus Sūtra*. For example, except in the later-inserted Devadatta chapter (into the preferred Kumārajīva translation), the *Lotus Sūtra* did not know of the term Dharmakāya. It had never used it or had use for it. Instead of that impersonal Absolute, the sūtra knows the Buddha as mythopoeically having a very, very long lifespan. Longevity is not eternity. Unlike the Dharma that has neither beginning nor end, the *Lotus* which depicts the Buddha as having a long life still keeps to the memory of finite historicity. Namely, there is logically a beginning to the Buddha career (i.e. a time when he had not embarked on the path of *Bodhisattvacarya* toward enlightenment, and it is assumed that one day he would come to a well-deserved end—final *parinirvāṇa* or extinction). That is the legacy of Mythos over against Logos.

Likewise, not knowing the gnostic distinction between the form and the formless, the Rupakāya-Dharmakāya dualism in the Wisdom sūtras, the *Lotus Sūtra* knows the long-living Buddha only in a glorified form. The *Lotus* retains simply the older, the cruder, the Mahāsāṃghika-shared idea of a Buddha with wellnigh boundless physical form (*se hsin* 色身, *rupakāya*), meaning in Avadāna language that the Buddha can project multiple bodies at will, assume identity with other Buddhas in time, and recall into himself the myriad Buddhas in space. All these are realistically depicted in the sūtra itself in a language that would befuddle the modern mind but delight anyone who has any sensitivity toward the sublime. Though often philosophically categorized as docetic, the mystery in the *Lotus Sūtra* is actually never phrased in terms of Śākyamuni being some docetic shadow of some eternal Wisdom. The mystery is rather that somehow the historical Buddha preaching the sūtra at Vulture Peak is at once the eternal Buddha preaching eternally this eternal sūtra at this numinous axis mundi (nay, this Pure Land) and *dharmamaṇḍa* (Jpn. *dōjō* 道場) of a sacred mountain in India.

The *Lotus Sūtra* has no use for some cerebral formula like an eternal Dharmakāya. Such a pure Dharmakāya concept would enforce a dualism of Dharmakāya and Rupakāya, of enlightened mind and coarse body, of the pure and the polluted, whereas the genius of the Tendai tradition, following what we said above about the translucency of the physical and the noumenal,

is that it could and did weave these opposites together in Chih-i's tripartite dialectics. It is this interpretation that modified the more abstract "Saṃsāra is nirvāṇa" dictum of the Wisdom tradition to produce such a human (non-docetic) conception as the "Buddha with essential evil" (*hsing-o* 性惡). The same down-to-earthliness is responsible for its preference for a personalist reading of eternity, best seen in the myth of the dual Buddhas on one lotus seat. Prabhūtaratna, or "Many Jewels" (symbol of the abundant treasure of merits lodged at the stūpa), is the past enlightened Buddha that somehow appeared while Śākyamuni was preaching the *Lotus Sūtra*. He broke the time barrier that divided past and present — Buddhas of the past were not supposed to live into the realm of a Buddha of the present — to share the same seat of enlightenment with Śākyamuni, Buddha of the present. The Tendai scholastics say that all three times (past, present, and future) are One, but in this key episode in the *Lotus Sūtra* history is so respected that the yet unenlightened Maitreya, Buddha of the future, is still kept waiting in the wing, dumbfounded and wondering what was going on. This scene only encapsulated the unity of past, present, and future to come in the end of time. In this scene Prabhūtaratna appears as the intimation of a Buddha of longevity. The hypostasis of the stūpa with abundant merits, he had his own cult, claiming stūpas of his own decked with "many jewels" and usually grander than the stūpas of Sakyamuni. There are icons as well of the Dual-Seated Buddha. In all this, we are dealing with the extravagance of form, not the abstraction of formlessness; mythic reality, not logic.

Likewise the *Lotus Sūtra* never said "All sentient beings have Buddha-nature." This idea is embedded in the omnipresence of the Buddha which is represented in the language of the Buddha splitting his body into a multitude of Buddhas (an old, supernatural power granted the Buddha) and of recalling all these Buddhas back into himself (which happened prior to Prabhūtaratna's self-disclosure). His omnipotence is phrased in terms of his all-knowing wisdom, his omniscience by a light flowing like a stream to lit up all corners of the universe in the opening chapter — a common and standard scene given prior to a demonstration of his prophetic powers or *vyākaraṇa*.

In so refusing an escape into some timeless emptiness, the *Lotus Sūtra* kept up a more historical perspective than the Wisdom Sūtras. For example, the attention paid to specific *vyākaraṇa* (prophecies) means that this sūtra did not reduce all human fate to one homogeneous Buddha-nature. As a matter of fact, the genre of *vyākaraṇa* eclipsed precisely after the Mahāyāna version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* so afforded every sentient being a share of the timeless Buddha-nature. History became irrelevant when enlightenment becomes omnipresent. Mahāyāna lost that sense of historicity soon thereafter. Ahistorical Buddhas overshadowed the historical Śākyamuni. The *Lotus Sūtra* suffered that shift in the later appended chapters of the sūtra away from Śākyamuni

and history to more ahistorical Buddhas and bodhisattvas. These are independent chapters dedicated largely to nonhistorical bodhisattvas coming from a more unstable time (second or third century A.D.). But then to its credit the sūtra does succeed in drawing them under the *Lotus* umbrella. The historical sense is heightened by eschatological hope and despair, making the *Lotus Sūtra* a timely sūtra in moments of crisis. The revival of *Lotus* piety in those hours in the history of East Asian Buddhism is no accident. Nichiren and the New Religions of Japan only carried out the mission assigned within the sūtra itself.

*The Survival of the Buddhayāna Motifs in Later Mahāyāna*

Buddhayāna and Bodhisattvayāna did fuse into mature Mahāyāna. The *Lotus* and the *Prajñā* tradition also became indisassociably one. If we look closer we can still find tension between Buddhayāna and Bodhisattvayāna. This is diagrammatized as follows. The bodhisattva concept has two modes. (a) In Low Buddhology, the bodhisattva is the Buddha-to-be, one still striving after wisdom. (b) In High Buddhology, the bodhisattva is already enlightened and is now exercising *upāya* and *karuṇa* for the deliverance of other sentient beings.

Bodhisattva as yet unenlightened . BODHI . Bodhisattva as savior

————— PPS ————— . ————— SDP —————

The early *Prajñā* tradition knew only the former; its six ascetic paramitas did not include *upāya*, *karuṇa*, or *jñāna* (for *samyaksambodhi*). The original *Lotus* tradition knew only the latter; the virtues are in reverse. It is the latter tradition that would endorse a higher notion of an active Buddhahood, and consequently a higher notion of the Buddhakāya.

Although the two traditions fused, still the *Lotus* Buddha excels over the *Prajñā* Dharmakāya in two aspects. (1) The Dharmakāya as empty, *śūnya*, was by definition without attributes (*nirguṇa*), but the *Lotus* Buddha by his formal personality is necessarily gifted with extraordinary *guṇas* and cannot be ontologically empty; (2) Emptiness as wisdom was knowable to the bodhisattva, but what is not-empty (*aśūnya*, i.e., the marvelous attributes or *guṇas* of the Buddha in the Buddhayāna tradition) lies beyond the limits of the bodhisattva's wisdom. This second aspect is already stressed in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which held its higher mystery of Buddhahood as something known only among Buddhas, something not privileged even to the highest of bodhisattvas. From this noumenal standpoint of the *Lotus* Buddhayāna (plus inputs from the *Avatāmsaka* tradition) came the so-called *Tathāgatagarbha* tradition. The *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* then repeats the claim that its *tathāgatagarbha* mystery is not known to or knowable by the bodhisattvas. In addition, it formalized the first aspect noted above and postulated explicitly an *aśūnya*

*tathāgatagarbha*, a not-empty store of merits stored in this matrix of the Buddha (omnipresent in all beings) that contradicted and overcame the passive nihilism of emptiness, the *śūnya tathāgatagarbha*.

These two lines of Buddhayāna conception—the *Lotus* line that stresses an empowered, not-empty, Buddhakāya actively working for the deliverance of man, and the *Prajñā* line that stresses the self-effort of the seeker of wisdom or bodhisattva striving after Buddhahood to come—in turn affected the later reading of the dispensation of the Trikāya. As well documented by Habito,<sup>2</sup> the *Lotus* line ended up in the *Ratnagotravibhāga* and the *Prajñā* line in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*. In the former, where significantly the emphasis is on the *aśūnya* attributes of the Buddha, it is on the Dharmakāya which is emanating into and empowering the Saṃbhogakāya for the deliverance of sentient beings. Habito types this as a Buddhakāya conception from “above down.” In the latter, which follows more closely the *Prajñāparamita* as the upward striving of the bodhisattva, the stress is on the Saṃbhogakāya as the well-deserved, self-achieved, Enjoyment Body of the seeker after wisdom, and the centerpiece of the Trikāya scheme. This affirms our contention that the faith tradition is responsible for the conception of a concrete personality working for others and the Wisdom tradition is instrumental in the perception of an impersonal emptiness without, initially, positive *guṇas* to effect changes in the world. The latter follows rather logically from its roots in the pratyekabuddha tradition of the solitary forest-dwelling gnostics.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In a paper given at a symposium at the Nanzan Institute for Culture and Religion on Tendai Buddhism and Christianity, 16–18 March, 1987. These papers will be published in the near future by Shunjūsha.

<sup>3</sup> Habito's thesis has changed my previous view on the place of the Saṃbhogakāya in the economy of the Trikāya. I had worked on the assumption that since the *Lotus Sūtra* stressed the personhood of the transcendental Buddha, this is what injected or necessitated the postulation of a third body, the Saṃbhogakāya, in the two bodies theory of the *Prajñāpāramitās*. I was expecting the Saṃbhogakāya to be the key item that the *tathāgatagarbha*-defined *Ratnagotravibhāga* would bring out. I was not prepared for its displacement by the Dharmakāya whose superiority I associated with the *Prajñā* tradition. Although my hunch remains valid to a degree, yet the finer nuances are being drawn out with Habito's finding. The *Ratnagotravibhāga* does retain the *Lotus*-derived emphasis on the *aśūnya* aspect of the Dharmakāya; this is what gives primacy to Dharmakāya still. But if the personhood of the Saṃbhogakāya should be somewhat overshadowed by the universalism of the Dharmakāya, that should be attributed to the very notion of the *tathāgatagarbha* itself. This synonym for Buddha-nature was derivative of the concept of Buddha-jñāna, the omniscience of the Buddha, in both the *Lotus* and the *Avatāmsaka* tradition. But abstract and universal Buddha-nature is a notion unknown to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which delights rather in numerous *vyākaraṇas*. The displacement of *vyākaraṇa* by *buddha-gotra/dhātu* by the time of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, i.e. the superseding of particular, personal prophecies by the guarantee of universal enlightenment, is, in my present retrospect, one key factor for the ascendancy of the impersonal over the personal, alias, the Dharmakāya over the Saṃbhogakāya, even in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Docetism did win and modify the personalist mystique of the *Lotus* lineage of ideas.

### Conclusion

In the above short excursion into the reasons for the historic significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*, I have attempted to show how (a) in its core, the *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the oldest of the Buddhist teachings, one dedicated to the veneration of the Buddha and the living memory of his person despite his seeming extinction; (b) that as Buddhayāna it was originally distinct from the Bodhisattvayāna of the Wisdom Sūtras into whose Mahāyāna camp the *Lotus Sūtra* only later joined; but how (c) even in so doing, the *Lotus Sūtra* was never absorbed into the gnosticism of the *Prajñā* tradition but preserved much better the sense of history and personality, maybe not to the extent of how history and personality are understood in the Christian tradition, but nonetheless most significantly so. And (d) not only did the *Lotus Sūtra* champion a higher *ekayāna* qua Buddhayāna that opposed the teaching of a timeless Wisdom and formless Dharmakāya of the originally Triyāna-based emptiness tradition, the *Lotus Sūtra* contributed to a more positive understanding of the Buddhakāya in the Trikāya scheme, empowering the not-empty Dharmakāya to emanate into the salvaic Sambhogakāya. Furthermore (e) with its commitment to specific historic destinies in its prophetic genre (*vyākaraṇa*), the *Lotus* tradition enhanced the eschatological gospel found in its later chapters. All this makes for a dynamic tradition that thrives to this day and provides an objective, historical, and comparative answer to the question of why the *Lotus Sūtra* is of such pivotal importance in Buddhist ecclesiastical history.

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