

# 7 *The Saddharmapūṇḍarīka (Lotus) Sūtra and its influences*

There were once two Japanese priests, Hōgon and Renzō. Hōgon practised reciting the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, while Renzō was a devotee of the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* (*White Lotus of the True Dharma*) *Sūtra*. As a result of the power of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, and Hōgon's virtue, a deity regularly supplied Hōgon with food. Out of his charity, and perhaps also a little spiritual pride, Hōgon requested one day that the deity provide enough food for two, and invited Renzō to dine. Alas, in spite of the deity's agreement, on the appointed day no food appeared. Evening came, and Renzō, realizing perhaps that he had something better to do, returned home. As soon as he left the hermitage the deity appeared, laden with food. At first sight one might suppose that Renzō was lacking in virtue – but nothing could be further from the truth. It seems that Renzō, through the power of the *Lotus Sūtra*, came accompanied by so many invisible protector deities that the poor deity of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* could not get through the door. Hōgon, duly impressed, abandoned reciting the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and became a fervent supporter of the *Lotus Sūtra* instead. As so often, religious practice is a matter of power and the greater magical potency lay with the *Lotus Sūtra*.

This story, and many like it, comes from the *Hokkegenki*, an eleventh-century collection of miraculous tales attesting to the efficacy of having faith in, reciting, copying, and generally promulgating the *Lotus Sūtra* (Dykstra 1983: 59–60). For many East Asian Buddhists since early times the *Lotus Sūtra* contains the final teaching of the Buddha, complete and sufficient for salvation. For many contemporary Japanese Buddhists who follow the lead of Nichiren (1222–82), the *Lotus Sūtra* is not only sufficient for salvation but is the only sūtra adequate to the task during the present epoch of spiritual decline (Japanese: *mappō*). From China we are told of a court official who recited the whole sūtra once every day for 30 years, and three times a day after the age of 80. A certain Chinese abbot recited the *Lotus* 37,000 times in 30 years. If we can believe the *Hokkegenki*, there were Japanese who recited the complete sūtra more than 30 times a day and 1,000 times a month.<sup>1</sup> One Chinese monk speaks of the 'inconceivable merit' of writing out the *Lotus Sūtra* in one's own blood.<sup>2</sup>

Any text which inspires such fervent enthusiasm (and not a little of East Asian art and literature) deserves closer examination.<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit text of the *Lotus Sūtra* survives in a

number of different versions, mainly fragmentary, the textual history of which is complex. The earliest extant Chinese translation was made by Dharmarakṣa in 286 CE (revised 290 CE). The version which conquered East Asia, however, and therefore by far the most significant version given the sūtra's importance in East Asian Buddhism, was the *Lotus* translated by Kumārajīva and his team of translators in 406.<sup>4</sup> One should never assume, incidentally, that because we are dealing with a sūtra originally composed in India an extant Sanskrit text must, where they differ, represent an earlier or more authentic version of the text than any Chinese translation. The codification of the Canon, and the printing and preservation of texts in China, has meant that Chinese translations will often be much earlier than any Sanskrit manuscript. To think of an extant Sanskrit text as *the*, or even an, original is fraught with textual and historical problems.

Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra* consists of 28 chapters. It is not a homogeneous work. Japanese scholars, who have carried out extensive study of the *Lotus Sūtra*, are inclined to see the oldest parts of the text (Chs 1–9, plus Ch. 17) as having been composed between the first century BCE and the first century CE. In Japan it is commonly held that most of the text had appeared by the end of the second century CE, although this could be questioned and still awaits fully convincing evidence.<sup>5</sup>

The *Lotus* is a dramatic sūtra. There are frequent changes of scene and apart from its message the success of the sūtra has been due perhaps in no small part to its use of several striking parables. The reasonable antiquity of the sūtra, or possibly its controversial message, is vividly attested by its need to establish its authority against those who would ridicule both the sūtra and its preachers. According to Sino-Japanese tradition the *Lotus Sūtra* was the final teaching of the Buddha, preached immediately before he manifested his final nirvāṇa, his death or, in the light of the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, his disappearance from human view.

In the sūtra the Buddha, Śākyamuni Buddha, is at pains to make it quite clear to his audience that he, as a Buddha, is infinitely superior both cognitively and spiritually to those who have attained other religious goals, Buddhist and non-Buddhist:

The Hero of the World is incalculable.  
 Among gods, worldlings,  
 And all varieties of living beings,  
 None can know the Buddha.  
 As to the Buddha's strengths, . . . his sorts of fearlessness, . . .  
 His deliverances, . . . and his samādhis,  
 As well as the other dharmas of a Buddha,  
 None can fathom them.

(Hurvitz 1976: 23)

Nevertheless he, the Buddha, has employed his skill-in-means and devices (*upāya/upāyakauśalya*) in order to adapt his teaching to the level of his hearers. This teaching of skill-in-means, or skilful means, is a key doctrine of the Mahāyāna, and one of the key

teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*. It was undoubtedly one of the factors responsible for the success of the *Lotus Sūtra* in East Asia. Among the principal problems which faced Buddhist missionaries during the early transmission of Buddhism to China, and thence, of course, to other countries in East Asia, was on the one hand the quantity of apparently contradictory teachings attributed to the Buddha, and on the other a pressing need to adapt the Buddhist message to suit cultures very different from those in India. Broadly speaking, in the *Lotus Sūtra* the device of skill-in-means – the Buddha’s cleverness in applying appropriate stratagems – is used to suggest that out of his infinite compassion the Buddha himself adapted his teaching to the level of his hearers.<sup>6</sup> Where Buddhas are concerned, all is subordinate to their compassionate intentions that entail appropriate behaviour in that particular context. Hence, although the corpus of teachings attributed to the Buddha, if taken as a whole, embodies many contradictions, these contradictions are only apparent. Teachings are appropriate to the context in which they are given and thus their contradictions evaporate. The Buddha’s teachings are to be used like ladders, or, to apply an age-old Buddhist image, like a raft employed to cross a river. There is no point in carrying the raft once the journey has been completed and its function fulfilled. When used, such a teaching transcends itself.<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine of skill-in-means prompted the Chinese Buddhist philosophical schools to produce schemata known as *panjiao* (*p’an-chiao*). Each school ranks the Buddha’s teaching in progression leading up to the highest teaching, the ‘most true’ teaching, embodied in the principal sūtra of that school. Thus each school explains the purpose for teaching each doctrine, and the reason why only its own sūtra embodies the final teaching – inasmuch as the final teaching can be captured directly or indirectly in words.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover the doctrine of skill-in-means was taken to entail an apparently infinite flexibility in adapting the teaching of the Buddha to suit changing circumstances. The Buddha teaches out of his infinite compassion for sentient beings. All teachings are exactly appropriate to the level of those for whom they were intended. Any adaptation whatsoever, provided it is animated by the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom, and is suitable for the recipient, is a part of or relatively acceptable to Buddhism. The Buddha, or indeed in some contexts a Bodhisattva, is quite capable of teaching even non-Buddhist teachings if that is for the benefit of beings. In point of fact, the application of skill-in-means in Mahāyāna Buddhism comes to extend beyond simply adapting the doctrine to the level of the hearers to refer to any behaviour by the Buddha or Bodhisattvas which is perhaps not what one might expect, but which is done through the motivation of compassion, animated by wisdom, for the benefit of others. This is well illustrated by another sūtra entirely devoted to skill-in-means, with the shortened title of *Upāyakaūśalya Sūtra*. This sūtra contains a series of questions and answers concerning legendary events in the life of Siddhārtha, explaining that they were not what they appeared to be, but served the higher purpose of the Buddha’s teaching. For example, why did the Buddha, free of karmic hindrances and omniscient, once return empty-handed from his begging round? This was, it seems, out of his compassion for monks in the future who similarly will return occasionally empty-handed.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the person who composed

the sūtra seems to have been at a loss, or had to use some ingenuity, to explain a feature of the Buddha's conduct. Why did the Buddha, when still a Bodhisattva just after his birth, walk seven steps?

If it had been more beneficial to sentient beings to walk six steps than to walk seven steps, the Bodhisattva would have walked six steps. If it had been more beneficial to sentient beings to walk eight steps than to walk seven steps, the Bodhisattva would have walked eight steps. Since it was most beneficial to sentient beings to walk seven steps, he walked seven steps, not six or eight, with no one supporting him.

(Chang 1983: 445)

The teaching of skill-in-means is of some importance when considering Mahāyāna ethics, since there is a tendency to subordinate all to the overriding concern of a truly compassionate motivation accompanied by wisdom. Thus it can be skill-in-means for a Bodhisattva to act in a way contrary to the 'narrower' moral or monastic code of others.<sup>10</sup> The *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra* recounts how the Buddha in a previous life as a celibate religious student had sexual intercourse in order to save a poor girl who threatened to die for love of him (*ibid.*: 433). A story well known in Mahāyāna circles tells similarly how in a previous life, while still a Bodhisattva, the Buddha killed a man. This was the only way to prevent that man from killing 500 others and consequently falling to the lowest hell for a very long time. The Bodhisattva's act was motivated by pure compassion; he realized he was acting against the moral code but he was realistically prepared to suffer in hell himself out of his concern for others. As a result, the sūtra assures us, not only did the Bodhisattva progress spiritually and avoid hell, but the potential murderer was also reborn in a heavenly realm (*ibid.*: 456–7).<sup>11</sup> Stories like this have provided the basis for Mahāyāna Buddhist participation in violence, such as violence by Tibetan monks in defence of the Dharma against the Chinese Communist invasion. Paradoxically, justification in Mahāyāna sūtras for killing by a Bodhisattva has also been used by the Chinese Communists to persuade Chinese Buddhists to take part in the class war and to support the People's Liberation Army.<sup>12</sup> In the *Hokkegenki* we are told of the skill-in-means of a Japanese devotee of the *Lotus Sūtra* who insisted on repeatedly stealing so that he could carry out missionary work, spreading the *Lotus Sūtra* in prison. The chief of police was told in a dream that '[i]n order to save criminals in prison, the holy man Shunchō stayed there seven times. This was nothing but the expedience [skill-in-means] of various Buddhas who concealed their glory from sentient beings in order to make contact with them' (Dykstra 1983: 51).<sup>13</sup>

The teaching of skill-in-means is a crucial ancillary of one of the other principal doctrines of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that of the One Vehicle (*ekayāna*). The sūtra explains that when the Buddha mentioned the topic of skill-in-means a number of Arhats and other followers began to feel uneasy:

Now, why has the World-Honored One made this speech earnestly praising expedient devices [skill-in-means]? The Dharma which the Buddha has gained is very hard to understand. He has something to say, whose meaning is hard to know, and which no

voice-hearer [*śrāvaka*] or pratyekabuddha can attain. The Buddha has preached the doctrine of unique deliverance, which means that we, too, gaining this Dharma, shall reach nirvāṇa. Yet now we do not know where this doctrine tends.

(Hurvitz 1976: 25–6)

That is, although it is agreed that the Buddha is in certain respects superior to Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas, as regards their having attained liberation, the goal, freedom from rebirth, Arhats, Pratyekabuddhas, and Buddhas are all on the same level. They are all enlightened. Now the Buddha is portrayed arguing that he taught many provisional ways and goals: his doctrine was taught out of skill adapted to the level of his hearers, with the implied possibility that the goals of Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood are no real goals at all, they are merely provisional devices, and there is a great gulf separating Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood from the true goal of full and complete Buddhahood.

At first, we are told, the Buddha refused to elaborate on the position newly stated, even when beseeched by Śāriputra:

Cease, cease! No need to speak.  
My dharma is subtle and hard to imagine.  
Those of overweening pride,  
If they hear it, shall surely neither revere it nor believe in it.

(Hurvitz 1976: 28)

There is a tradition, however, that the Buddha will not refuse a request three times. Upon being begged three times by Śāriputra to elaborate, the Buddha does decide to preach. At this we are told that 5,000 of the gathering got up and left the assembly:

For what reason? This group had deep and grave roots of sin and overweening pride, imagining themselves to have attained and to have borne witness to what in fact they had not. Having such faults as these, therefore they did not stay. The World-Honored One, silent, did not restrain them. At that time the Buddha declared to Śāriputra: 'My assembly has no more branches and leaves, it has only firm fruit. Śāriputra, it is just as well that such arrogant ones as these have withdrawn'.

(Hurvitz 1976: 29)

Perhaps it is possible to see in this episode a reflection of what really happened in the monastic assembly when a follower of the Mahāyāna rose to preach the new doctrine. Those who dissented withdrew in silence, privately reserving their scorn. The Mahāyānists, on the other hand, placed in the mouth of the Buddha a scathing criticism of the arrogance of those who believed themselves to have attained, or to be well on the path to, what they considered quite erroneously to be the final spiritual goal and were not open to the Mahāyāna perspective. In reality they are not the sweet fruit of the Dharma but only its branches and leaves, its marginalia, its detritus.

What is this new perspective? It is the perspective of the One Vehicle. At the time the *Lotus Sūtra* was compiled it was accepted on all counts that there were Arhats,

Pratyekabuddhas and Buddhas. Most Buddhists were following the path to Arhatship. Somewhere, sometimes, perhaps, there were Pratyekabuddhas, while certain rare beings such as Siddhārtha Gautama became Buddhas. It was agreed that the attributes of these were different, the Buddha was in certain respects superior, but all were truly enlightened – after death none would be reborn. We have in the *Lotus Sūtra*, however, and indeed suggested in texts belonging to certain non-Mahāyāna traditions, a gradual or relative devaluation of Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas, and an elevation of the Buddha and his attainments. The *Lotus Sūtra* marks the culmination of this process.<sup>14</sup> There is in reality only One Vehicle (*yāna*), not three. This One Vehicle is the Supreme Buddha Vehicle.<sup>15</sup> Just as the Buddha is infinitely superior to the Arhat and the Pratyekabuddha, so the only final vehicle is the One Vehicle to Perfect Buddhahood. All who are capable of any enlightenment at all, if they attain enlightenment, will eventually become Buddhas. The doctrine of the three vehicles was itself in reality nothing more than the Buddha's skill-in-means, in devising the appropriate strategies in context to help his particular audience:

Knowing that the beings have various desires and objects to which their thoughts are profoundly attached, following their basic nature, by resort to the expedient power of various means, parables, and phrases, I preach the Dharma to them. Śāriputra, I do this only in order that they may gain the One Buddha Vehicle and knowledge of all modes. Śāriputra, in the world of the ten directions there are not even two vehicles. How much the less can there be three!

(Hurvitz 1976: 31)

It is only because Buddhas who appear at the decay of a cosmic epoch find that beings are so full of demerit and evil that they would not understand such doctrines that they teach the other vehicles. This is their skill-in-means, their use of appropriate expedients. The ways of the Arhat and the Pratyekabuddha are simply pedagogically skilful devices to save those who would not believe if they were told about the only true goal, the full and complete nirvāṇa of a Buddha (*ibid.*: 31). There is really no such thing as Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood as final Buddhist goals. These were taught simply to encourage people. All capable of enlightenment, in achieving their aim, will eventually take the path of the Bodhisattva and progress to Perfect Buddhahood – including those who consider themselves to have attained already the goals of Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood. Much space in the *Lotus Sūtra* is taken up with the Buddha predicting how the great Arhats in his entourage, people like Śāriputra, the hero of the Ābhidharmikas, will eventually become Full Buddhas. Śāriputra had embarked on the Bodhisattva path aeons ago – he had just forgotten it. That is all.

There is some evidence from the *Lotus Sūtra* itself that there may have been persecution of those who insisted, perhaps with evangelical zeal, on shouting the new teachings at people who would rather not hear them. In one of the later sections of the sūtra we are told of the insistent Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta, who would pounce on his fellow Buddhists with the words, 'I profoundly revere you all! I dare not hold you in contempt. What is the

reason? You are all treading the bodhisattva path, and shall succeed in becoming Buddhas! The result was that some,

reviled him with a foul mouth, saying, ‘This know-nothing bhikṣu! Whence does he come? He himself says, “I do not hold you in contempt,” yet he presumes to prophesy to us that we will succeed in becoming Buddhas! We have no need of such idle prophecies!’ In this way, throughout the passage of many years, he was constantly subjected to abuse; yet he did not give way to anger, but constantly said, ‘You shall become Buddhas!’ When he spoke these words, some in the multitude would beat him with sticks and staves, with tiles and stones. He would run away and abide at a distance, yet he would still proclaim in a loud voice, ‘I dare not hold you all in contempt. You shall all become Buddhas!’

(Hurvitz 1976: 280–1)<sup>16</sup>

Skill-in-means and the doctrine of the One Vehicle form the subjects of the main parables for which the *Lotus Sūtra* is justly renowned. The first parable is that of the burning house. Summarized, it tells how three sons of a wealthy man are trapped inside a burning house while playing. So absorbed are they in their games that they are unaware of the fire. The father, well-trained in those skilful devices needed by all parents, resolves to persuade the children to come out by offering them various new playthings. They like playing in carriages drawn by animals. He offers them goat carriages, deer carriages, and ox carriages. The children cannot wait, and they rush into their father’s arms. What does he now do? He gives them each a wonderful carriage, the very best, drawn by a white ox (Ch. 13). The parable requires little interpretation. The father is the Buddha. The burning house is the house of saṃsāra, within which sentient beings, absorbed in their playthings, are trapped. The Buddha offers various vehicles (*yānas*) as bribes, according to the tastes of sentient beings, but when they have taken up the practices and are (becoming) saved from saṃsāra at the appropriate point he gives them all the very best, the only, solitary One Vehicle of Buddhahood. The question is asked (*ibid.*: 60 ff.) whether the father, or the Buddha, lied to his children? He did not. The Buddha describes himself as the Father of Beings (*ibid.*: 61). He simply uses skill-in-means out of compassion in order to save his children. He acted out of compassion solely with the intention of saving them. They cannot complain. He has given them the very best.<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Lotus Sūtra* we find a parable of the Prodigal Son, this time spoken not by the Buddha himself but by several of his overjoyed followers. A man’s son has left home, wandered away, and fallen into dire poverty. Meanwhile his father’s business by contrast has prospered in another city, and his father has become a very rich man. The son arrives one day at his father’s house. While the son no longer recognizes his father or his new mansion, the father instantly recognizes his son and sends a servant to fetch him. The son, alas, is terrified. The father accordingly realizes that he must introduce him in gradual stages to the truth that he is the son of the father and heir to all this wealth. The father offers his son very menial and dirty work (attaining of Arhatship). He does the job well, and the father gradually promotes him. Eventually the father starts to treat him like a son. At long last

the father, about to die, announces to all that this man really is his son and natural heir. The son is, of course, overjoyed. The parable is obvious – as all good parables should be (Ch. 4).

The Buddha's teaching, again, is likened to the rain which pours down equally on all plants. This rain is nevertheless absorbed and used by each plant according to its nature (Ch. 5). This parable, well-known in East Asia, inspired a lovely Japanese poem by Shunzei (1114–1204):

Spring's fine rain  
both in the distance and right here  
both on grasses and trees  
is evenly dyeing everything  
everywhere in its new green.

(LaFleur 1983: 94)

The impact of the Buddha's teaching of universal Buddhahood is illustrated by the case of a poor man who fell asleep while drinking with a wealthy friend. The friend, having to leave, sewed a jewel into his poor friend's garment. The poor man eventually wanders off, to resume his life of poverty. When the two meet again the rich man is astonished. Why is his friend so poor when he has this jewel on his person? He is really wealthy. He can have all that he ever hoped for. Like this is the joy of discovering that one is really destined for Buddhahood (Ch. 8). The nature of Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood as goals is illustrated by the parable of the Place of Jewels (Ch. 7). The Buddha is like a guide leading people to the Place of Jewels, a fabulous Utopia, perhaps. The followers become tired and want to give up. The guide, however, is the best sort of guide – he is also a magician. He creates a magical city in which they can rest before going on to their true destination. Likewise the Buddha creates the magical city of Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood.<sup>18</sup>

This, therefore, is the principal message of the first half of the *Lotus Sūtra* – the Buddha's skill-in-means, the doctrine of the One Vehicle, and the complete joy of the Buddha's disciples in finding that they will, indeed they must, attain Perfect Buddhahood. There are in reality no such goals as Arhatship and Pratyekabuddhahood. While we are still in the first part of the *Lotus Sūtra* extraordinary events start to take place, events which foreshadow the equally shattering message of the second part of the sūtra. To the astonishment of the assembly the *Lotus* depicts the appearance of another Buddha, one from the past, previously unknown, called Prabhūtaratna (Ch. 11). This Buddha appears in midair inside a floating stūpa that had emerged from out of the earth. He had so admired the *Lotus Sūtra* that he vowed to be present whenever it is preached. We can see reflected here a number of assertions. First, the *Lotus Sūtra* is not new, but its preaching is part of the ministry of every Buddha. Second, there can be more than one Buddha existing at the same time and in the same region. Third, and this was the most radical implication of all, there is here a denial of a cardinal teaching found in non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, the teaching that the Buddha after his death, or apparent death (his final nirvāṇa), has gone completely beyond any further



recall or reference, has to all intents and purposes ceased as far as those who are left are concerned. For Prabhūtaratna is supposed to be dead, and yet here he is radiantly vigorous and apparently living inside his stūpa.

It is this teaching, the doctrine that the Buddha remains, has not abandoned his children but is still here helping them in many infinite compassionate ways, which forms the centrepiece of the *Lotus Sūtra's* second half. The Buddha has not really died. He is like a great doctor whose sons have been poisoned. He quickly mixes the antidote, but the minds of some of the sons are so deranged that they ignore the medicine. The father fakes his own death and retires elsewhere. Brought to their senses by shock the sons take the antidote. The father then reappears. His very death itself was a skilful device (Ch. 16). The Buddha is still with us. Furthermore, the Buddha's life can be projected far into the past. In the sūtra the Buddha explains that he has converted countless individuals, many myriads of *koṭis* (i.e. a large number – the sūtras relish the breathless multiplication of immense figures). At this, Maitreya, the Bodhisattva who is for this world the coming Buddha, asks in astonishment how it can be that the Buddha teaches so many beings in the span of some forty years since his enlightenment (Hurvitz 1976: 234):

In this way, since my attainment of Buddhahood it has been a very great interval of time. My life-span is incalculable asaṃkhyeyakalpas [rather a lot of aeons], ever enduring, never perishing. O good men! The life-span I achieved in my former treading of the bodhisattva path even now is not exhausted, for it is twice the above number. Yet even now, though in reality I am not to pass into extinction [enter final nirvāṇa], yet I proclaim that I am about to accept extinction. By resort to these expedient devices [this skill-in-means] the Thus Come One [the Tathāgata] teaches and converts the beings.

(Hurvitz 1976: 239)

In East Asian Buddhism it is commonly taught that the Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra* is eternal. However, there is a problem with the notion of an eternal Buddha. If the Buddha is eternal then no one who is not already a Buddha could attain Buddhahood. If the *Lotus Sūtra* taught an eternal Buddha it would accordingly destroy the notion that all will eventually attain Buddhahood – unless, that is, the *Lotus Sūtra* also held to a doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha*. In China, particularly in the Tiantai tradition, the *Lotus Sūtra* was linked with the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which, as we have seen, advocates the *tathāgatagarbha*, and also with the *Awakening of Faith*.

However, there is little or no evidence from the *Lotus Sūtra* itself that it consciously accepts the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching.<sup>19</sup> Thus I suspect that the East Asian doctrine of an eternal Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* results from the systematization of the teachings of the *Sūtra* within the context of Tiantai thought, which draws on other Mahāyāna material to equate the Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the ultimate truth and to teach a cosmic Buddha rather like the Mahāvairocana of Huayan Buddhism. The quotation above is apparently contradictory. It speaks of the Buddha attaining enlightenment in time, and seems to give a finite figure to the length of his subsequent life. Nevertheless, it also speaks of the Buddha's life as 'ever

enduring, never perishing'. In Buddhist theory it is commonly said that the length of a life is contingent upon merit. This is why the Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* speaks of the lifespan he has achieved through his many good deeds on the Bodhisattva path. Thus I suggest that the quotation above, in its Indian context, is to be taken as indicating an enormously long but still finite length to the Buddha's life. His life as a Buddha both begins and ends in time, and references to its eternity are typical examples of sūtra hyperbole. Nevertheless, whether the Buddha is literally eternal or not, the Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra* is, as it were, religiously eternal – for any devotee he is always there.<sup>20</sup>

The feature of laudatory self-reference, a feature of many Mahāyāna sūtras, is also very much to the fore in the *Lotus Sūtra*. If a person hears just one verse of the sūtra and rejoices in it for even a moment the Buddha predicts that person to Full Buddhahood. The sūtra should not only be recited and promulgated but worshipped as if it were the Buddha himself with 'sundry offerings of flower perfume, necklaces, powdered incense, perfumed paste, burnt incense, silk canopies and banners, garments or music' (Hurvitz 1976: 174; cf. Chs 20–3). Moreover the demerit of maligning this sūtra and its preachers is much worse than constantly maligning the Buddha (*ibid.*: 175).<sup>21</sup> The *Lotus Sūtra* enjoins active missionary work in promulgating the sūtra and its teachings (Ch. 22). Those who preach the sūtra will themselves see the Buddha (*ibid.*: 180–2). If a person promulgates the sūtra even a little bit he or she will receive a favourable rebirth and be strikingly handsome – 'His teeth shall not be wide-spaced, yellow or black. His lips shall not be thick, pursed or thin. In short, he shall have no disagreeable features' (*ibid.*: 262). The preacher too is to be revered as a Buddha. If a person is ill and hears this sūtra he shall recover and neither grow old nor die (*ibid.*: 301). Many other miracles will accompany the sūtra's devotees. Their senses will all become perfect, indeed superhuman (Ch. 19). Divine young boys will come and minister to the sūtra's devotees. When the preacher preaches, if there are no human beings to hear then supernatural beings will arrive instead. The short Chapter 21 of the sūtra, detailing the great powers of the Buddha, was itself used in East Asia for magical protection. In East Asia there were many popular stories of miraculous happenings accompanying the *Lotus Sūtra's* devotees.<sup>22</sup>

The magical power of the *Lotus Sūtra* has no doubt been one reason for its popularity. Another reason is the way in which the sūtra praises even a little act of faith and devotion as having apparently quite disproportionate results. If a person makes offerings to the Buddha's relic stūpas, if a child builds stūpas in play out of mud, if someone makes statues and worships them, or sponsors such activities, prostrates himself or herself, or even raises just one hand, if a person recites 'Adoration to the Buddha' just once, even with a distracted mind, that person is on the path to Buddhahood.<sup>23</sup> A great deal of devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* has centred on the enormous benefits the sūtra itself predicts (very much greater than that produced by normal moral action such as giving alms) for those who copy, worship, read and recite or preach the sūtra. These are practices that everyone can share in, in one way or another, from lavish court productions to the devotions of ordinary peasants. The merit gained by individual, group, or sponsored performance can be transferred to the benefit of,

e.g., one's ancestors, or for one's own this-worldly as well as 'supramundane' goals, ranging from recovery from illness through to rebirth in a Pure Land or even (remotely) enlightenment.

The importance of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, centred on rebirth in Sukhāvātī, the Pure Land of Amitābha or Amitāyus Buddha in the West, has meant that the few references to this land and Amitābha/Amitāyus in the *Lotus Sūtra* have tended to associate this sūtra in Japan with rebirth in the Pure Land.<sup>24</sup> It is noticeable that faith in the sūtra and its practices almost invariably entails a rebirth in the Pure Land according to the stories in the *Hokkegenki* (e.g. Dykstra 1983: 79). Moreover, the sūtra is said to be so powerful that it can save even the most incorrigible sinners. Chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, probably the last major section to be interpolated into the text, tells how in a previous life the Buddha offered himself as a lifelong servant to someone who could preach to him the Mahāyāna. Eventually a hermit offered to preach the *Lotus Sūtra*. That hermit is in the present life none other than the Buddha's erring cousin, Devadatta. The evil Devadatta is in reality the Buddha's best friend. Thanks to Devadatta the Buddha has been able to practise throughout his lifetimes the various virtues, especially, perhaps, the virtue of patient endurance. Devadatta too is predicted to achieve future Buddhahood. In Japan the stated ability of the sūtra to save the wicked gave it a great advantage over many other sūtras. An evil priest participated in many non-Buddhist acts, such as hunting, fishing and eating meat. Nevertheless he regularly recited the *Lotus Sūtra* at night with great faith. He was accordingly reborn in the Pure Land.<sup>25</sup> A layman who regularly took part in hunting and all the other wickednesses of an active courtly life placed his entire hope in a passage of the Devadatta chapter which declared that he who has faith in the sūtra will avoid an unfortunate rebirth. During his final illness he repeatedly recited just this chapter. He too was reborn in the Pure Land (Dykstra 1983: 122–3). Even a robber, because of his devotion to the saving virtues of the great Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (*Lotus*: Ch. 25; Hurvitz 1976), was protected from injury when attacked by forces of the law (*ibid.*: 132–3). The sūtra states that:

... one might encounter royally ordained woes,  
Facing execution and the imminent end of one's life.  
By virtue of one's constant mindfulness of Sound-Observer [Avalokiteśvara]  
The knives would thereupon break in pieces,  
Or, one might be confined in a pillory,  
One's hands and one's feet in stocks.  
By virtue of mindfulness of Sound-Observer  
One would freely gain release.<sup>26</sup>

Not only are the wicked greatly encouraged by the *Lotus Sūtra*, but also that other group so often discriminated against in early Buddhist writings – women. In the same chapter of the sūtra in which Devadatta is predicted to Perfect Buddhahood, a nāga princess appears, barely eight years old. She has become an advanced Bodhisattva in a moment due to the preaching of Mañjuśrī, another great Bodhisattva. The monkish Śāriputra, in spite of the other miracles he has seen, is now really taken aback. How can such spiritual progress happen to

a female? With her supernatural power the Nāga princess before his very eyes is instantly transformed into a male and attains Buddhahood. True, in the *Lotus Sūtra* it does appear to be necessary that the girl becomes a male. Nevertheless in other Mahāyāna sūtras the situation is perhaps more to the modern taste. In a famous section of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* a goddess, in order to demonstrate once more to Śāriputra that sex differences are all part of the realm of phenomenal illusion, transforms herself into a male and Śāriputra, to his panic, into a female. The poor monk was no doubt concerned about all the Vinaya rules that he was infringing in experiencing a female body.<sup>27</sup> Out of her compassion the goddess then returns them both to their conventional forms. We have seen already that the principal figure in the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* is a queen. Many Tibetans are deeply devoted to Tārā, who declared that she would always act in female form for the benefit of sentient beings (see Chapter 10 below).

The final feature of the *Lotus Sūtra* we must note, a feature which has been of some influence in East Asian Buddhist practice, is that of body-burning. Chapter 23 of the *Lotus Sūtra* recounts how the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja in a previous life wished to make the most perfect offering to the Buddha. He accordingly offered his body by setting fire to it. The body burned for a very long time, and he was eventually reborn in a Pure Land: ‘Good man this is called the prime gift’ (Hurvitz 1976: 295). Supposing someone wishes to become enlightened:

[I]f he can burn a finger or even a toe as an offering to a Buddha-stūpa, he shall exceed one who uses realm or walled city, wife or children, or even all the lands, mountains, forests, rivers, ponds, and sundry precious objects in the whole thousand-millionfold world as offerings.

(Hurvitz 1976: 298)

In general in India people were used to the hyperbole of religious enthusiasm and may have taken such exhortations as a rhetorical exaggeration of the imperative to ‘be unattached’. Alternatively, as we shall see in Chapter 10, they may well have seen such exceptionally brave, almost superhuman, Bodhisattva conduct as something they might be able to do in a future life if they begin now with more accessible practices. Nevertheless Chinese pilgrims to India do apparently describe cases where Buddhists engaged in mortifying the flesh and religious suicide, although further research may be necessary on these problematic texts before their evidence can be relied upon fully (Joshi 1967: 108–11). But we know it happened in East Asian Buddhism, where from the early fifth century CE burning joints or the whole body as an act of devotion was taken very seriously indeed.<sup>28</sup> James A. Benn’s detailed study (2007a) shows that complete or partial self-immolation has been from quite early days in Chinese Buddhism to the present day by no means a minority or fringe activity. It has always been a serious religious option often accompanied, it is said, by miracles and sacred relics and with the power of converting others and encouraging them in their own religious striving.<sup>29</sup> As Benn observes (2007a: 190, 201, cf. 193), ‘[S]elf-immolation was a practice that cut across the whole of the *saṃgha* in China. From Chan monks, to scholars, to Pure Land believers, all kinds of monks and nuns found valid reasons for offering their bodies’; ‘[It] was an extremely

flexible and adaptable form of expedient means (*upāya*). Indeed it was not infrequently advocated and defended in a doctrinally sophisticated manner by learned and spiritually mature religious specialists such as the Chan master Yanshou (Yen-shou; 904–75). Other Chan masters were included among self-immolators (Benn 2007a: 154–7). The Huayan master Fazang himself is said to have burnt a finger off out of religious devotion. Burning fingers was a not-uncommon practice in Chinese Buddhist monasteries up to very recent times. Burning patches on the head, leaving visible scars, is part of Chinese Buddhist ordination ceremonies to the present day.<sup>30</sup> Holmes Welch tells of an informant who burnt one finger each year for four years in succession. Xuyun (Hsü-yün), a renowned and respected Chan abbot, burnt a finger off in 1897 out of filial piety, in order to help his mother who had died while bearing him, through transferring the merit thus obtained (Welch 1967: 324–5). The burning was apparently a spiritual experience; healing was very rapid.<sup>31</sup> In Japan, Jōshō burnt off a finger as a penance for accidentally touching a woman (Dykstra 1983: 66). In one Chinese account of complete self-immolation the monk concerned expressed a wish that his burning should be a slow one (on the model of the burning of Bhaiṣajyarāja) and continued to preach the Dharma while the flames slowly did their work. He declared to well-wishers that he felt ‘quite cool and pleasant’, and experienced no pain whatsoever.<sup>32</sup> Cases of complete self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism are by no means infrequent, and it is clear that it was sometimes undertaken by practitioners as the culmination of a lifetime of serious and devoted Buddhist practice. Several cases are recorded as recently as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the *Hokkegenki* records stories of similar events in Japan. Accounts of engaging in such acts reflect among other things a strong dislike of the physical body as well as the attractions of a Pure Land or some other favourable after-death state.<sup>33</sup> While sometimes viewed with horror, or at least frowned upon, by Confucians and other Buddhists alike, self-immolation was an act also greatly admired even by its detractors for what it showed of bravery, religious devotion, and self-abnegation.<sup>34</sup> Relics of complete self-immolators were eagerly sought (Benn 2007a: 144–7, 168, cf. 180). Making donations on the occasion of a self-immolation might establish a karmic connection with someone who was sure to become a Buddha quickly (at least, more quickly than the donors; *ibid.*: 35).

The reader is reminded, perhaps, of the auto-cremation by Vietnamese monks in the 1960s. The Vietnamese immolations were primarily by way of a political gesture in an age of mass media rather than a direct attempt to offer devotion to the Buddhas.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of Bodhisattvas (or even aspirant-Bodhisattvas) it is difficult to separate out religious devotion from political gestures that are held to be for the benefit of the wider community. And the particular form of killing themselves, burning, was undoubtedly indicated by the age-old precedent of the *Lotus Sūtra*.<sup>36</sup>

### A note on Tiantai (Tendai)

The Tiantai school is usually classed with Huayan as representing characteristically Chinese responses to Buddhism, its creative internalization. Although there are, of course,