"This is universal mindfulness teaching at its best."
- Jon Kabat-Zinn, Author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

Peaceful Action, Open Heart

Lessons from the Lotus Sutra

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THICH NHAT HANH

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Reciting the Lotus Sutra

At night as I recite the Lotus Sutra
The sound moves the galaxies
The Earth below wakes up
In her lap suddenly flowers appear

At night as I recite the Lotus Sutra
A jeweled stupa appears resplendent.
All over the sky bodhisattvas are seen
And Buddha's hand is in mine.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Introduction

THE WIDE EMBRACE OF THE LOTUS SUTRA

The Lotus Sutra is one of the most well-known and best-loved Mahayana Buddhist sutras. It is sometimes called the "king of sutras." The Sanskrit title, *saddharmapundarika*, means "The Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma."

While there are a few English translations of the Lotus Sutra available, including the one by Leon Hurvitz, quoted here, in general its particular message of inclusiveness and reconciliation has not been well known in the West.[1]

This book shows how the teachings of the Sutra can help us realize the practices of mindfulness, compassion, and love for the well-being of our family, our community, our society, and the world.

The Historical and the Ultimate Dimensions

Like many Mahayana texts, the Lotus Sutra was composed and compiled in stages over several centuries.[2] The Lotus Sutra writings developed during the second century C.E., and the Sutra took its current form toward the end of that century.[3]

The twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra have usually been divided into two parts.[4] The first part focuses on the historical dimension, what happened in Shakyamuni's lifetime. This is the historical Buddha seen through our ordinary way of perception. In this dimension, Siddhartha Gautama was born, grew up, left home to seek spiritual truth, practiced and attained great realization, and became the Buddha. He shared his realization and taught the Dharma for the rest of his eighty years of earthly life and then passed into nirvana. Vulture Peak is a real place in India, and you can still go and visit the site where Shakyamuni delivered many of his greatest teachings.

The second part of the Sutra deals with the ultimate dimension. The ultimate dimension shows us the existence of the Buddha on a plane that goes beyond our ordinary perception of space and time. This is the Buddha as a living reality, the Buddha as the body of the Dharma (*dharmakaya*). In the ultimate dimension, birth and death, coming and going, subject and object, don't exist. The ultimate dimension is true reality, nirvana, the Dharma realm (*dharmadhatu*), which is beyond all such dualisms.

Why does the Lotus Sutra have these two dimensions? It is because this Sutra has such a profound message that it cannot be delivered any other way. That message is that everyone has the capacity for Buddhahood. If we only recognize the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, we may feel that since we were not fortunate to live in the time of Shakyamuni, there is no one to testify to our potential Buddhahood here and now. But we do not have to go back 2,600 years in order to hear the message that we too can become a Buddha. We need only to listen very carefully to the message of the Sutra and recognize the Buddha of the ultimate dimension who affirms our capacity for Buddhahood.

We need to be able to recognize both the historical and ultimate dimensions in order to open the door of the Lotus Sutra so that we can get in touch with the wonderful Dharma. The historical dimension connects us to the Buddha who lived and taught in the India of the fifth century B.C.E. This is the human Buddha, whose search for truth and whose practice and path we can emulate. The ultimate dimension reveals the eternal meaning of the Buddha's teachings, the essence of the Dharma that is beyond time and space. As we will discover, we don't have to go somewhere else in order to touch the ultimate dimension. We can touch the joy and freedom of the ultimate dimension right in our everyday life in the historical dimension, just as the Buddha did under the bodhi tree.

While studying the Lotus Sutra, we can use this method to determine in which dimension the Sutra is operating. Whenever everyone's eyes are fixed on the earth—looking at the trees, plants, hills, mountains, or each other—then we know we are in the historical dimension, the world of birth and death. But when everyone's eyes look into space, then we have entered the ultimate dimension, the unborn and undying world.

The Sutra shifts between the historical and ultimate in separate chapters and in different scenes within one chapter. If we can recognize when we are in the historical dimension and when we are in the ultimate dimension, we will not become bewildered or perplexed by the words of the Sutra, especially those used to describe the ultimate dimension.

In Parts I and II of this book we look into the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension revealed in the Lotus Sutra. The themes presented here can help us put the Sutra's teachings of compassion and reconciliation into practice in a beneficial way. This is the path of engaged Buddhism. Our practice and insight

can help bring joy, peace, and freedom not only to us as individuals but also to our families, our communities, and our planet.

Three Dimensions

The Lotus Sutra affirms that we all have the capacity to become a Buddha. This is a very great gift. How can we best use this wonderful gift we have received? By becoming the arms of the Buddha through our practice in our daily life, in Sangha building, and in our work in the world. This is why I propose that we develop a third division of the Lotus Sutra, beyond the two of the historical and the ultimate: the dimension of action. Part III of this book shows us how the Lotus Sutra opens the gateway to enter the action dimension of the bodhisattvas.

In our practice we have the support of the many great bodhisattvas introduced in this Sutra, including Medicine King, Never Disparaging, Earth Holder, Samantabhadra (the bodhisattva of Great Action), Avalokiteshvara (the bodhisattva of Great Compassion), and countless other bodhisattvas who live with us in the world. Through our practice and our Sangha insight, we are able to become the hands and arms of the Buddha and carry out the work of healing, transformation, and reconciliation in the world.

Understanding the Sutra

The language of the Lotus Sutra is like a very skillful painting that appears to be quite real. In the Mahayana literature, vivid language and intense images are used to point to very deep and wonderful ideas. The creators of the sutras were very great poets, but such language is only a skillful means to express the profound ideas of the teachings. The dramatic language and images are the literary equivalent of a statue of a Buddha seated on a lotus throne, a reminder to us of the Buddha's capacity to sit mindfully and

peacefully. So when we read the Lotus Sutra, we should remember not to get caught up in the words. If we do, we will only see descriptions of miraculous events and supernatural powers and we will not be able to receive the true meaning of the Sutra.

For example, in Chapter 21, "The Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One," the Buddha performs a great miracle. He puts out his tongue and covers the *trichiliocosm*, a realm of cosmic space too vast for us even to imagine. This image comes from an ancient Indian saying that someone who speaks the truth "speaks with a very large tongue." From each pore of his skin he sends out innumerable rays of light of all colors that reveal the worlds of the ten directions. In Buddhist texts, light symbolizes enlightenment, and the phrase "ten directions" means the entire cosmos.[5] The intent of this passage is to express the tremendous capacity of the light of mindfulness of someone who is fully awakened. It is a poetic way of presenting the truth that the light of mindfulness is very strong.

Similarly, Chapter 15, "Welling Up out of the Earth," describes millions of bodhisattvas with bodies as beautiful as pure gold who spring up from within the Earth. They emit wonderful sounds to praise the Buddha and this praise is said to go on for as long as 50 billion *kalpas*. A "kalpa" is a vast unit of time, an eon. This is really a way of talking about the infinite, limitless nature of time in the ultimate dimension. One second contains thousands of lifetimes, and eternity is just one second. The one contains the all.

The Wide Embrace of the Lotus Sutra

One reason the Lotus Sutra is called the king of sutras is because it has the capacity to bring together and accept all the schools of Buddhism. Buddhism is a living reality, and living things are always growing. A tree continually grows more branches, leaves, and flowers. In order for Buddhism to stay alive we have to allow it to develop. If not, it will die. As we can see in our own time, life is not static. Political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental situations change—often very dramatically and sometimes very quickly. India in the fifth to first centuries B.C.E. was no different—in fact this period of its history was a time of great religious, cultural, and political change. The Buddha's realization, ministry, and teaching were themselves a radical departure from the prevailing religious and social structure of India, and many other new religions, such as Jainism, also sprang up in this time.[6] So we can see that the seeds of change and adaptation were in Buddhism from the beginning, and its ability to transform to respond to new ways of life and new kinds of problems is the key to its continuing as a living tradition for over 2,500 years.

Original Buddhism (also called Source Buddhism) comprises the teachings given during the lifetime of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. This was the first Buddhism.[7] Original Buddhism was a time of Unified Buddhism; there was just one Sutra Collection and one Vinaya Collection. Then came Schools Buddhism, which developed about 150 years after the Buddha's lifetime, when the early Buddhist Sangha split into two schools—the Theravada ("Way of the Elders"), which was conservative in nature; and the Mahasanghikavada ("The Way of the Majority"), which was more progressive.[8] As time went on, these two schools further divided. The records speak of eighteen schools, but we know that at one time there were more, as many as twenty-five or twenty-six schools, each with its own sutra and Vinaya collection.[9]

Theravada is a Pali word; the Sanskrit equivalent is Sthaviravada. The Mahayana way of study and practice arose from the Mahasanghika (Majority) school. When that study and practice were sufficiently ripe, the sutras of the Mahayana began to appear.

The first Mahayana writing to appear was the Prajñaparamita literature. Thus, we could say that the formation of Buddhism took place in three stages: 1) Original Buddhism, 2) Schools Buddhism, and 3) Mahayana Buddhism.

When Mahayana Buddhism began to develop, Mahayana practitioners called the schools that did not belong to Mahayana (Great Vehicle), "Hinayana" (Little Vehicle). The word "little" here decries that kind of Buddhism, saying: "Your vehicle cannot carry many people. At the most it can only carry you yourself. Our vehicle, on the other hand, is great. It can carry tens, hundreds, thousands of people." The very use of the words "Great" and "Little" shows that there was a sense of competition and self-importance in the early Mahayana followers.

As the Buddhist monastic institution developed, the conservative tradition became rather inflexible and insular. Rather than seeking ways of teaching and practice that would be useful in everyday life, the monastic Sangha had a tendency to devote itself to analyzing points of abstract philosophical doctrine, focusing on study of the Abhidharma, the Commentary Collection. These are additional works written to systematize and further expound the teachings of Buddhism.[10] A hair could be split many times, and the prose of the Abhidharma is full of minutely split hairs. Analysis followed upon analysis and the monk-scholars began to enjoy analysis for analysis's sake. In this environment, the practice of mindfulness was there but it could be rather sterile and mechanical, not leading to peace, joy, happiness, and freedom right in the present moment. The method of interpreting, understanding, and practicing the teachings became quite rigid with a hard-line attitude that was difficult for others to accept.

Locked into this conservative attitude, the monastic Sangha could not fulfill the whole of its responsibility to society. A few

hundred years after the Buddha's parinirvana, the monastic Sangha was not really engaged; it did not take into account the difficulties of society outside the monastery. Buddhism had to change and grow in order to continue as a living tradition. So around the first century B.C.E. a progressive school began to evolve out of the Mahasanghika lineage: the Mahayana. This was a reform movement within Buddhism, a revolutionary movement that reached out to include both monastic and lay followers, a great vehicle that was capable of carrying all living beings to liberation.

The highest spiritual ideal of the Hinayana is the *arhat* ("worthy one"), who through his own effort and practice attains liberation. The early monastic Sangha was focused only on personal salvation, thinking about nirvana only in individual terms. The Mahayana put forth the ideal of the bodhisattva (*bodhi*, "wisdom, enlightenment," *sattva*, "being"), who shares the fruits of his or her practice with all other beings. The bodhisattva is someone who, upon attaining enlightenment, vows to forgo entering nirvana until all other sentient beings—down to the very last blade of grass—are also liberated. This insight was very profound. Buddhism expressed in Mahayana terms is engaged, quite positive, and very beautiful.

The Mahayana began with this insight and further developed it, and when the study and practice were sufficiently ripe, scriptural texts began to appear. Mahayana sutras attempted to reveal that the best things already existed in the tradition, but hadn't had a chance to manifest because of the conservative attitude that had developed in the monastic community. For example, the idea that everyone has Buddha nature and can become a Buddha was an idea of the Buddha's own teaching that the Mahayana school wanted to emphasize. The Mahayana sutras began with the Prajñaparamita ("Perfection of Wisdom") sutras, which explored in great

depth the principle of nonduality and the understanding of emptiness (*shunyata*). The concept of "emptiness" here is not a form of nihilism as some early Western scholars of Buddhism thought; it simply means that all things are empty of an inherent, unchanging, and permanent nature—no thing exists independently and remains fixed, but rather arises due to a set of constantly changing causes and conditions. This is the insight of interbeing.

We can see that this insight in the Prajñaparamita sutras arose from such essential Buddhist teachings as dependent coarising (*pratityasamutpada*).[11] It's important to remember that the Mahayana draws upon the same teachings that are the basis for the Theravada school. Rather than stopping there, however, Mahayana thinkers continued to expand upon these teachings, adding new insights and interpretations to respond to the changing conditions and spiritual needs of the people. So we should not think of the Mahayana as a rejection of the early Buddhist canon but rather as a continuation and a new way of presenting its insights to fit the times.

Next to appear was the Ratnakutna Sutra (Sutra of the Collection of Jewels), followed by the Avatamsaka Sutra (Garland Sutra), and culminating in the Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra (Discourse of Vimalakirti), which describes the accomplishment of a great lay practitioner, Vimalakirti. As described in this Sutra, the insight and wisdom of the layman Vimalakirti surpassed the insight and wisdom of all the monastics. Even the spiritual attainment of the Buddha's greatest disciples, such as Shariputra, Purna, and Mahakashyapa, was nothing compared with that of Vimalakirti.

Though the Vimalakirtinirdesha has many deep and wonderful teachings, it is not my favorite sutra because it goes a little too far in its reaction to the conservatives and its treatment of the Buddha's original disciples, in particular Shariputra, one of the great senior disciples of the Buddha. In the Sutra, he's presented as being rather infantile, credulous, and foolish, in contrast to Vimalakirti, who is depicted as very intelligent, a truly great practitioner. But when we study the matter carefully and see the extent of the conservative attitude and rigidity of the monastic Sangha, we can better understand why this and other Mahayana texts took such a critical stance.

These Mahayana sutras—the Vimalakirtinirdesha in particular—were a kind of heavy artillery firing into the monastic institution, which no longer provided the kind of spiritual guidance that people needed to put the teachings into practice in their daily lives. On the other hand, the Lotus Sutra was the first Mahayana sutra to use loving speech and the first to accept all schools and tendencies of Buddhism. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra is like a cool breeze, a gentle rain, assuaging the stifling atmosphere of contention between the conservatives and the progressives.

The Theravada school taught that there was only one bodhisattva, the historical person Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha. According to the Hinayana, the best some of us could do was to become an arhat, and that only after many lifetimes of practice. Unable to dedicate themselves to the kind of austere practices required of monastics, lay Buddhists began to focus only on providing support to the monastic Sangha in order to gain merit that would help them to a favorable rebirth. People did not believe they could become a Buddha so they didn't feel the need to practice in order to become a Buddha.

The Mahayana thinkers saw the great danger of this. Among the early Mahayana philosophers were many intelligent laypeople as well as a number of monastics who saw that there was a risk that Buddhism would die as a living tradition if the monastic Sangha did not open up to the world. Noting that the Buddha mentions

the existence of other Buddhas in early sutras, they concluded that if there are many Buddhas, there must also be many bodhisattvas. In the Mahayana sutras, Shariputra is predicted to attain Buddhahood. The significance of this is that every disciple of the Buddha, the original Sangha of the *shravakas* ("word-hearers," monks and nuns), those who directly heard the Buddha's teaching, also has the capacity to become a Buddha. What was possible for Siddhartha, and for Shariputra and the other shravakas, is also possible for each of us.

This is the great insight of the Mahayana: *everyone* can become a Buddha. What Siddhartha achieved, all of us can also achieve, whether we are a man or a woman, no matter what social class or ethnic group we were born into, or whether we practice as a monastic or as a layperson. We all have the capacity to become a fully enlightened Buddha. And while on the path to becoming a fully enlightened Buddha, we are all bodhisattvas.

The new development of the Mahayana rejuvenated Buddhism, and there was a lot of enthusiasm in the air. But the Mahayana as a well-defined community was not yet a reality. At that time the bodhisattva precepts had not yet been developed. The monastic Sangha had the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the *Pratimoksha* to rely on, but the guidelines for the practice of the bodhisattva had not yet been created.[12] Then, in the Brahmajala Sutra (Sutra of the Net of Brahma), the bodhisattva pratimoksha was set out—fifty-eight precepts to be shared and practiced by both lay and monastic bodhisattvas.[13] The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing are a modern version of these bodhisattva precepts.[14] They are of exactly the same nature and are shared by both monastic and lay practitioners.

Mahayana Buddhists also saw the need to begin forming Sanghas of both monastic and lay practitioners. There are many sutras reflecting this period of time when Sangha building was taken up by monastics (monks, *bhikshus*, and nuns, *bhikshunis*) together with male and female lay practitioners (*upasakas* and *upasikas*). The Lotus Sutra appeared during this crucial period in the development of the Mahayana, and it represented a beautiful reconciliation between the early tradition of the shravakas and the bodhisattva path, the expansive, inclusive vehicle of the Mahayana. The two traditions were unified as the One Vehicle that can carry all beings to the shore of liberation.

The Role of the Lotus Sutra

Right from the beginning, in the Prajñaparamita sutras and culminating in the Vimalakirtinirdesha, we see extreme expressions of thought and language in the Mahayana scriptures. They were skillful, sometimes quite harsh, polemics aimed at breaking the stranglehold of the traditional congregation. The ideas expressed in these sutras are very deep and wonderful, but they do not show the gentle countenance of the true, mature Mahayana.

Before the appearance of the Lotus Sutra, many profound Mahayana ideas and philosophies had already been developed and had begun to be admired by many people. But the Mahayana was only there as a number of individuals scattered here and there. It was an expression of thought and scripture, but it was not yet there in the form of a community, an organization, or an establishment. Only when the Lotus Sutra was born, with its spirit of moderation, reconciliation, and unity, did the Mahayana begin to have a complete fourfold Sangha of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. This is the environment in which the Lotus Sutra was born, and its appearance was a very fortunate occurrence that contributed to the foundation of Mahayana Buddhism at just the right time. The Lotus Sutra applied a new method that was very compassionate

and inclusive in order to reconcile the traditional shravaka path with the new *bodhisattvayana*, the path of the bodhisattva.

The attitude of reconciliation and harmony reflected in the Lotus Sutra was very important in the maturation of Mahayana Buddhism. Because of the Sutra's capacity to accept and integrate the paths of all the Buddhist vehicles, it has been given the highest place in the Mahayana canon. In the Lotus Sutra the Buddha says to the bodhisattva called Beflowered by the King of Constellation, "Just as among all streams, rivers, and bodies of water the sea is the first, the Sutra of the Dharma Blossom is the deepest and greatest among the scriptures preached by the Thus Come One."[15] And earlier in the Sutra, the Buddha says:

Medicine King, I now proclaim to you
the scriptures that I preach;
And among these scriptures
The Dharma Blossom is foremost.[16]

The Literary Style of the Lotus Sutra

When we read the Mahayana sutras, it may seem that the verse sections are there to summarize the prose sections. When I was young, I thought the sutras had a verse section because poetry is easier to remember by heart than prose. When the Lotus Sutra first arose, sutras were generally written in verse form and not in prose. It's rather like the store of proverbial folksongs in Vietnam or the Greek epics of Homer which originally were also transmitted orally. The sutras of the Mahayana were the same. In the beginning, the sutras appeared in the form of verses that were passed on orally. So it is in verse form that the Lotus Sutra first made its appearance, and the prose sections were added later to expand upon and further explain the teachings in verse.

The reason for this is that for the first 400 years during and after the Buddha's lifetime, his teachings were transmitted orally, memorized, and recited by the shravakas. In order to be easier to understand and learn by heart, the teachings were transmitted in verse form in a poetic language called Prakrit. This language had its own metric rules rather like we might find in English poetry. For instance, in the poem "The Fountain" by Wordsworth, one line is eight syllables and the next line is six syllables:

We talked with open heart and tongue
affectionate and true.
A pair of friends though I was young,
and Matthew seventy-two.

It's very easy to remember and understand. Nevertheless, because this literary style has its own particular form and metrical rules it is difficult to change it or to translate it into a different language. In the second stage of the appearance of the Lotus Sutra people added the prose part with the aim of making the verse parts clearer in meaning. For instance, when Wordsworth writes *a tongue which was affectionate and true* it doesn't just mean that the tongue is affectionate and true, it means that the two people are affectionate and true to each other. The prose is able to speak more extensively and use more words to explain the verse portions.

So the earliest form of Buddhist teachings were in verse, and only later, when the teachings began to be recorded in written form in Sanskrit, the classical language of religion and philosophy of India, did long prose sections, called *sutra*, emerge. The word "sutra" means "thread" in Sanskrit, so a sutra is a thread of prose that links and expands upon the verse form of a teaching.

As we read the Lotus Sutra and other Mahayana sutras, it

is important to remember this because these texts were not just recorded in one form once and for all. The Lotus Sutra went through four periods of development, beginning with its original form of spoken verses. In the second stage, the verses were recorded in written form. In the third stage, more prose sections were added. When we compare the Sanskrit versions with each other we see that there are versions whose prose part is shorter than that of others.[17] This means that the Lotus Sutra grew up like a large tree, sending out new sprouts, shoots, and branches as time went on. In the mid-second century it was still quite a small tree. But by the end of the second century it had grown a great deal.

In the fourth stage, the Sutra was given new chapters. In the Chinese version of Kumarajiva, the Lotus Sutra has twenty-eight chapters, and in the Sanskrit version that we presently have, it has twenty-seven.[18] Recent research has shown that from Chapter 23 onwards, new chapters have been added. Maybe when people were using the Lotus Sutra, they saw its shortcomings, and so they added new chapters later on. In order to make them seem like original parts of the Lotus Sutra, verse sections were added back in afterward.[19]

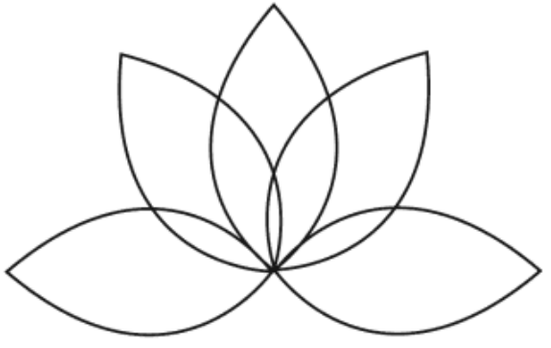
At that time in India, scholarship prospered and many new theories and currents of thought arose. Philosophical and literary works of the time were all written in Sanskrit. Buddhist literature also had to take on new forms. A number of scholars adapted the Lotus Sutra from Prakrit, the language of the people, into Sanskrit, the language generally used by scholars and in literature. It is rather like the time when the French had just come to Vietnam. The Chinese and native Vietnamese languages were suppressed, and people who were able to speak French were perceived as being more civilized, and therefore were respected.

Prakrit and Sanskrit are related to each other, but their syntax and semantics are very different; and while it was not difficult to adapt the prose section from Prakrit to Sanskrit, it was very difficult to translate the verse sections. Therefore, the Sanskrit in the Lotus Sutra, as in a number of other sutras, is Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, a language that is a mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit. If you were to read a section of the Lotus Sutra in the Chinese version, which is a mixture of Chinese and Sanskrit, translated by the Venerable Kumarajiva, it reads much more smoothly.

Something else to remember when reading the Lotus Sutra is its theatricality. At the time of the development of the Mahayana, India was undergoing a period of cultural renewal and famous religious and literary epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were made into theatrical presentations.[20] This is the way many people in rural India received an education in religious and cultural traditions. The Buddhists presented the sutras as drama, with each chapter like an act in a play. Many teachings are illustrated in parables, and the characters of the shravakas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas are depicted very colorfully. The action is presented in wondrous settings, like stage sets, that are described in vivid detail. This way of presenting the teachings can appeal to people of various social classes, educational levels, and so on. So the dramatic structure of the sutras makes them accessible to more people.

The Lotus Sutra is not a scholarly work for specialists. It is more of a popular work with universal appeal that can be applied in practice. As we read the Lotus Sutra, we see how it has inherited the essence and the ideas of the Mahayana sutras that preceded it. For example, it has inherited the teachings of emptiness from the Prajñaparamita sutras, the teachings of the multiple layers of causation from the Avatamsaka Sutra, and the idea of the liberation that goes beyond all conceptualization from the Vimalakirti-

nirdesha. However, the way the Lotus Sutra presents these ideas is not academic. The Lotus Sutra takes Buddhism forward an enormous step because of its universal appeal and practical nature. The strength of the Lotus Sutra lies in its ability to present deep teachings in a clear way that is easy to understand and applicable to all walks of life.



PART I

The Historical Dimension

Chapter One

THE TWO DOORS

Chapter 1 of the Lotus Sutra, "Introduction," takes us to Vulture Peak, near the city of Rajagriha in the kingdom of Magadha (present-day northeast India), where the Buddha has gathered with a large assembly of disciples including Kashyapa, Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, and Ananda, as well as thousands of bhikshus and bhikshunis, including the Buddha's aunt, Mahaprajapati, and his former wife, Yashodhara. In addition, there are tens of thousands of great bodhisattvas in attendance, among them Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, Medicine King (Bhaisajyaraja), and Maitreya. Also present are many thousands of gods, including Indra, and the kings of the *nagas*, *kinnaras*, *ghandharvas*, *asuras*, and *garudas*.[21] The ruler of Magadha, King Ajatashatru, and his royal family and retinue, are also in attendance. This vast multitude of many different kinds of beings was present in the assembly when the Buddha was about to deliver the Lotus Sutra.

This chapter not only sets the stage for the delivery of the Sutra in the historical dimension but also reveals the ultimate dimension.

It thus serves as a general introduction to the entire text. Just as in a theatrical presentation, it introduces the characters of the play we are about to see. The vast number of shravakas and bodhisattvas, the presence of gods and mythical beings, gives us our first taste of the ultimate dimension and shows us that the opportunity to hear the Lotus Sutra delivered by the Buddha is something very special, a great occurrence not to be missed.

First, the Buddha delivered a Mahayana sutra called the Sutra on the Immeasurable Meaning, then entered a state of meditative concentration (*samadhi*). While he was in this concentration, heavenly flowers rained from the sky, and the earth quaked. Then the Buddha sent out a ray of light from his *ushnisha*, illuminating various cosmic realms.[22] The entire assembly was able to see these worlds appear very clearly, and everyone was most surprised and delighted at the wonderful event that was taking place around them. In all these worlds, Buddhas could be seen giving Dharma talks to great assemblies of bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas, and upasikas—exactly like the Buddha's disciples in this world.

When this wonderful event took place, Bodhisattva Maitreya, who is also called Ajita ("Unconquered One"), said to himself, "Today the World-Honored One is going to do something very special, that is why he sent out this ray of light and performed this miracle." He turned to Bodhisattva Manjushri and asked him, "Why has the Buddha manifested these unusual signs?" And Manjushri replied, "Today the World-Honored One wishes to give a great teaching, to cause the rain of the Dharma to fall, to beat the great drum of the Dharma." He described a similar occurrence he had witnessed, when a Buddha called Sun and Moon Glow (Chandrasuryapradipa) had also delivered the Sutra on the Immeasurable Meaning, entered samadhi, caused flowers to rain from the sky, and emitted a ray of light that illuminated all the cosmic realms.

Then that Buddha had taught the Lotus Sutra. So Manjushri said, "Today the World-Honored One, our teacher Shakyamuni, will also teach the Lotus Sutra."

The intention of this introductory chapter is to prepare the audience psychologically and spiritually to receive a very important teaching, the Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma. In order to understand the great import of this teaching, the assembly that has gathered in this historical dimension must be introduced to the ultimate dimension. In the past, in another cosmic realm, Buddha Sun and Moon Glow had also given the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. So the miraculous events that are happening today are only a repetition of something that has already occurred in another dimension of reality, the ultimate dimension that is unbounded by our ordinary perceptions of time and space.

As far as the historical dimension is concerned, Shakyamuni is the Buddha who is giving the Dharma talk today in this *saha* world.[23] From this perspective, the historical Buddha gave teachings for forty years, and then only at the end of his life did he give the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. But in terms of the ultimate dimension, Buddha Shakyamuni and Buddha Sun and Moon Glow are one and the same. In the ultimate dimension, never for a moment has the Buddha ceased to deliver the Lotus Sutra.

So this introductory chapter opens two doors. The first door is that of history, the events we experience and what we can see and know in our own lifetimes. The second door is that of ultimate reality, which goes beyond time and space. Everything, all phenomena, participate in these two dimensions. When we look at a wave on the surface of the ocean, we can see the form of the wave and we locate the wave in space and time. Space and time are not two separate entities; space is made of time and time is made of space. Looking at a wave from the perspective of the historical

dimension, it seems to have a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. A wave can be high or low, a wave can be long or short—many qualities can be ascribed to the wave. The notions of "birth" and "death," "high" or "low," "beginning" and "ending," "coming" and "going," "being" or "nonbeing"—all of these can be applied to a wave in the historical dimension.

We, too, are subject to these notions. When we look in terms of the historical dimension we see that we are subject to being and nonbeing. We are born, but later on we will die. We have a beginning and an end. We have come from somewhere, and we will go somewhere. That is the historical dimension. All of us belong to this dimension. Shakyamuni Buddha also has a historical dimension—he was a human being who was born in Kapilavastu and died in Kushinagara, and during his lifetime of eighty years he taught the Dharma.

At the same time, all beings and things also belong to the ultimate dimension, the dimension of reality that is not subject to notions of space and time, birth and death, coming and going. A wave is a wave, but at the same time it is water. The wave does not have to die in order to become water; it is already water right in the present moment. We don't speak of water in terms of being or nonbeing, coming and going—water is always water. To talk about a wave, we need these notions: the wave arises and passes away; it comes from somewhere or has gone somewhere; the wave has a beginning and an end; it is high or low, more or less beautiful than other waves; the wave is subject to birth and death. None of these distinctions can be applied to the wave in its ultimate dimension as water. In fact, you cannot separate the wave from its ultimate dimension.

Even though we are used to seeing everything in terms of the historical dimension, we can touch the ultimate dimension. So our practice is to become like a wave—while living the life of a wave in the historical dimension, we realize that we are also water and live the life of water. That is the essence of the practice. Because if you know your true nature of no coming, no going; no being, no nonbeing; no birth, no death, then you will have no fear and can dwell in the ultimate dimension, nirvana, right here and now. You don't have to die in order to reach nirvana. When you dwell in your true nature, you are already dwelling in nirvana. We have our historical dimension, but we also have our ultimate dimension, just as the Buddha does.

In this introductory chapter, the Lotus Sutra reveals to us these two dimensions. The Buddha Shakyamuni is none other than the Buddha Sun and Moon Glow—and all the other cosmic Buddhas that have appeared in various forms to teach the Dharma from beginningless time.

Chapter Two

SKILLFUL MEANS

The second chapter of the Lotus Sutra is called "Expedient Devices." The Sanskrit term *upaya* is often translated in English as "skillful means." Skillful means are the various skillful ways we can use to fulfill our intentions and manifest our practice. This chapter is the real beginning of the Lotus Sutra in that it serves as the foundation for the entire Sutra. If we can understand the foundational teaching of skillful means we will be able to grasp the whole of the Sutra.

The chapter begins as Shakyamuni Buddha emerges from his samadhi and says to Shariputra, "The wisdom of the Buddha is profound and incalculable. Shravakas or *pratyekabuddhas* cannot achieve this wisdom." This is a very important detail. The Buddha has just come out of a deep state of meditative concentration and is about to begin delivering this most important Mahayana sutra. Whom does he choose to address at this moment? Not one of the great bodhisattvas, such as Manjushri or Maitreya, but his loyal disciple, the bhikshu Shariputra. In the Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra,

Shariputra is held in low regard and made an object of denigration. He represents all the shortcomings of the Hinayana tradition. But now, in the Lotus Sutra, he is the object of the Buddha's care and love. In this Sutra, Shariputra represents the fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen to whom the Buddha will transmit the teachings for future generations. Right away we can see how the Lotus Sutra aims to reconcile the two traditions.

The Buddha then describes in some detail the profound insight that is "without measure and without obstruction," the wisdom and understanding he has learned and practiced according to the immeasurable methods of countless other Buddhas. Only a Buddha can perfect and realize the insight into the suchness, the true nature, of all dharmas (phenomena)—the suchness of their marks (outer appearance), their nature, their substance, their powers, their functions, their causes and conditions, their effects, their retribution, and their ultimate origin. These are called "the ten suchnesses." Many scholars and Buddhist teachers say that this passage contains the basic philosophy of the Lotus Sutra, and they have spent a lot of ink and paper and time analyzing it in great detail. But the meaning of the ten suchnesses can be distilled into one thing: the Buddha's wisdom is very deep, and with this insight he is able to see the true nature, the ultimate reality of everything—all dharmas—in time and in space, in the phenomenal world as well as in the ultimate dimension.

The insight of the Buddha is infinitely deep, and not easily understood. Those who are still at the level of the shravakas or pratyekabuddhas cannot fathom this profound insight of the Buddha. Whatever eyes you use to look at the Buddha, you will see the Buddha only through those eyes. If you are driven by craving and look at others through those eyes, everyone you see will seem to you to be full of craving also. If you feel angry, and regard others

with eyes of anger and small-mindedness, then you will see everyone as angry and small-minded too. So if you look at the Buddha through the eyes of a shravaka or pratyekabuddha, you will not be able to see the real Buddha as he is, you will see the Buddha only as a shravaka or pratyekabuddha. But the Buddha's insight is much greater than that.

After the Buddha has described this great insight, he says to Shariputra, "Cease, we need speak no more. What is the point of speaking about these things, when people of the world will not be able to understand them?" The seeming reluctance of the Buddha to continue to teach is also a skillful means. The very precious teachings cannot be given too readily, because then they will lose their true value. A Dharma teacher has to be very careful. He or she should not present the Buddhadharma to just anyone but should only teach those whose practice and understanding have ripened to the point where they will be able to receive and put into practice the teachings they are given. Among the assembly gathered around the Buddha, there were those who did not yet have the capacity to receive these new teachings. Some would reject or oppose them. For a Dharma teacher giving a Dharma talk, it is always like this. There will always be some who oppose your ideas.

The Buddha understood that in the audience that day there were some who were not yet ripe, who did not yet have the capacity to receive the truth. Seeing the harm they would bring on themselves by opposing the wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha says, "Let us speak no more. This teaching is very rare, very deep, difficult to understand, and difficult to accept. Only a Buddha can realize this teaching."

Hearing this, Shariputra knelt down, joined his palms, and asked the Buddha again, "I beg you, World-Honored One, to expound this matter. Why have you so earnestly praised this

very profound and subtle Dharma, so difficult to understand?" But again the Buddha refused, saying, "If I preach this matter, then many people in the worlds, including gods, humans, and asuras, will be seized by fear. And those bhikshus who believe they are already enlightened and do not need to learn anymore will fall into the abyss of doubt and arrogance." Then he spoke this gatha:

Cease, cease! No need to speak.
My Dharma is subtle and hard to imagine.
Those of overwhelming pride,
If they hear it, shall surely neither revere it nor believe in it. [24]

But Shariputra refused to give up. He entreated the Buddha again to preach the wonderful Dharma, for the sake of the fourfold assembly. Shariputra is the advocate for all sincere disciples, and since he has asked the Buddha three times, according to custom the Buddha cannot refuse and agrees to teach the wonderful Dharma. Immediately upon hearing this, five thousand people stand up, bow respectfully, and leave the assembly. This may seem strange but in fact it often happens. During a public talk, when I come on stage and announce the subject of my talk, very often a number of people will stand up and walk out because they don't want to hear a talk on that subject. After the five thousand had departed, the Buddha said, "The assembly has no more branches or leaves, it has only firm fruit. Shariputra, it is just as well that such arrogant ones as these have withdrawn. Now listen well, for I will preach to you."

Reading this, we may feel some dismay. It does not seem in keeping with the spirit of the Mahayana for the Buddha to dismiss those who left the assembly as unworthy or not ready to receive the teachings. This is a shortcoming of the Lotus Sutra that we have

not yet seen. The principle message of the Lotus Sutra is that all living beings have Buddha nature. Quite naturally, from this point of view, those of the two vehicles, shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, can also become a Buddha. Monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, children—all have the capacity for Buddhahood. So this passage may reflect more of the spirit of the earlier Mahayana sutras that were highly critical of the Hinayana path. It was in order to address such shortcomings as this in the Lotus Sutra that new chapters were later added.

But there is another aspect of this passage, which reveals another kind of skillful means of the Buddha. Those who left the assembly did not feel there was anything more they could learn. With such an attitude, they would not be able to receive the true meaning of the profound teachings the Buddha was about to deliver. Knowing this, the Buddha says that it is just as well, because if someone is not able to receive a teaching's true meaning, that teaching may do more harm than good. It is very important that the hearer of a teaching be appropriately prepared to receive its true import, its deepest insight—otherwise they may fall into doubt and refuse to accept the teaching, which would be more harmful for them than not hearing that teaching at all. Later on, when the time is right and their practice and insight has ripened sufficiently, they will be able to receive the teaching.

Now the Buddha begins to teach the wonderful Dharma. He explains that all the Tathagatas that appear throughout space and time—past, present, and future—do so only in order to open up the Buddhas' great insight, demonstrate that insight, and help beings to awaken and enter the path of the Dharma so that they too can attain Buddhahood. In order to bring all beings to the path of the Dharma, these Buddhas employ "incalculable expedient devices," offering the teaching in various forms that are suited

to different personality types and temperaments. The teachings may be given in the form of discourses in prose (sutras); discourses in verse (*geya*); short verses (*gatha*); tales of the Buddha's former lives (*jataka*); miracle tales (*adbhuta*); teaching of causes and conditions (*nidana*); parables (*aupamya*); quotes (*itivrittaka*); or dialogue (*upadesha*).[25] These many different forms of teaching are a skillful means used by the Buddha to teach people with different levels of understanding.

Here, the Buddha reveals one of the most important insights of the Lotus Sutra. The various skillful means used by the Buddhas to teach beings are all aimed at one goal: to bring everyone, regardless of their spiritual capacity or attainment, whether they are followers of the shravaka or pratyekabuddha paths, monastic or layperson, man, woman, or child, into the bodhisattva path. The historical Buddha had taught only one path. But by the time of the Mahayana, some in the monastic Sangha had come to interpret the shravakayana and the pratyekabuddhayana as something separate from the bodhisattva path. Now, in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha reveals that the teachings of the two vehicles were only an expedient device used to reach those of limited spiritual capacity or aspiration.

Some people want only to find relief from their own suffering. They feel it is all they can do to try to liberate themselves, and so they take up the practice and attend a retreat or two at Plum Village and receive the benefit of that. This is the shravaka path. Then there are some practitioners who are able to get a direct insight into the nature of dependent co-arising and attain freedom for themselves, but they do not wish to teach or guide others. This is the path of the pratyekabuddha. Others have a wider aspiration. They hope that by practicing the Dharma they will be able to organize Dharma communities and share the benefits of the practice

with many people. Rather than just enjoying their own attainment, they want to share the fruits of their practice with others. This is the bodhisattva path. So when the time is ripe the Buddha reveals the path of the One Vehicle (*ekayana*), the Great Vehicle of the Mahayana, which embraces all three of these paths—the shravakayana, pratyekabuddhayana, and bodhisattvayana.[26] The One Vehicle teaching says you can do more—you can arrive at the fruit of the highest awakening, become a Buddha, and help many other beings across the river of suffering to the shore of freedom.

The Buddha affirms that the two vehicles are worthy paths, and that even though they were not the most beautiful paths he had to offer, he taught them because there were people who wanted to follow them. In this section of the Sutra we see that the Buddha defines a true arhat or pratyekabuddha not as someone who is seeking their own liberation and running away from life's suffering, but as someone who has compassion and wants to do their utmost to help others. Therefore, to say that the arhat is someone who only looks after their own liberation and the bodhisattva is someone who looks after the liberation of others, is to make only a superficial distinction. In the Mahayana sutras which appeared before the Lotus Sutra there may have been the idea that the arhat is someone who just looks after his own liberation and the bodhisattvas embody *bodhichitta* and look after liberating others.[27] In the Lotus Sutra we see a different point of view. That is, the real arhat also wants to liberate others. If the arhat does not have that desire to liberate others, then he is not yet a real arhat.

The Buddha taught these three vehicles to respond to the different levels and capacities of beings, the different causes and conditions, and the different times and situations in which the teachings were given. The three-vehicles teaching is a skillful means in the historical dimension. In terms of the ultimate dimension, however,

the Buddha always aims to reveal the deepest meaning, the absolute truth. The reason for all Tathagatas appearing in the world is to guide living beings to the ultimate truth of the One Vehicle, which is also called the Buddha vehicle—opening up, pointing out, awakening to, and entering the insight of the Buddha.[28] So the philosophy of the One Vehicle revealed in the Lotus Sutra has been called "opening up the three to the one" or "gathering the three and returning them to the one." The teaching of the three vehicles is but a skillful means; in fact, there is only One Vehicle. The Buddha says in a verse:

Within the Buddha Lands of the ten directions
There is the Dharma of only One Vehicle.
There are not two, nor are there yet three,
Save where the Buddha, preaching by resort to expedients,
And by merely borrowing provisional names and words,
Draws the beings to him.[29]

This passage is considered the essence of the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra. With this insight, the Sutra achieves something that all previous Mahayana sutras had not yet been able to do. It reconciles and unifies the teachings of the three vehicles into the One Vehicle, the great vehicle that has the capacity to carry all beings to the shore of liberation. This is the heart of the wonderful Dharma, and it is for this reason that the Lotus Sutra is regarded as the king of sutras, not because it expresses more profound or mystical theories, but because it reunites all the disciples and paths of practice into the one great family of the Buddha.

Chapter Three

ONE VEHICLE

The next seven chapters of the Lotus Sutra, Chapter 3 through Chapter 9, are called "the seven chapters of clear exposition," and they serve to further clarify skillful means. At the very end of Chapter Two, the Buddha says in verse,

All of you, knowing now
That the Buddhas, the Teachers of the Ages,
In accord with what is peculiarly appropriate have recourse to expedient devices,
Need have no more doubts or uncertainties.
Your hearts shall give rise to great joy,
Since you know that you yourselves shall become Buddhas.[30]

Chapter Three, "Parable," opens with Shariputra's response to this great revelation. At first, on hearing the profound and wonderful teachings, Shariputra harbored doubts, thinking that Mara had

appeared as the Buddha to give false teachings. The idea that all living beings have Buddha nature and the capacity for Buddhahood, that there are not two or three vehicles but only one Buddha vehicle, was almost too much for him to imagine. The impact of these profound revelations must have been quite intense. Shariputra's doubting the truth of these revelations is representative of that of many followers of the early Buddhist tradition, who thought that all Mahayana sutras were actually put forth by Mara to confuse listeners and lead them astray. This passage in the Sutra is a vestige of this view.[31]

The Lotus Sutra describes how once Shariputra looked deeply and carefully, he saw that it really was the Buddha who was giving these wonderful and deep teachings. He "danced for joy" and immediately cast off all his doubts. Though previously he had followed the path of the shravakas, on hearing the teaching of the One Vehicle he realized that he too had the capacity for Buddhahood and his mind gave rise to bodhichitta:

Of a certainty I shall become a Buddha,
Revered by gods and men;
I shall turn the unexcelled Dharma-wheel,
Teaching and converting bodhisattvas.[32]

Shariputra has determined to become a Buddha, and when he makes this proclamation he has already entered the bodhisattva path. Hearing this the Buddha said, "Shariputra, in past lives you studied and practiced with me, and I taught you the bodhisattva way. But in this lifetime you forgot it and, following the path of the shravaka, believed you had reached the final goal of your practice, nirvana. Now, through teaching this Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma, I am able to reestablish you on the bodhisattva path.

In the future you will become the Buddha Flower Glow (Padmaprabha) in a Buddha Land called Free of Defilements (Viraja). You will do as I do, and teach the three vehicles to guide living beings, and finally you will also teach the One Vehicle, just as I am teaching now."

This passage is a prediction. The Buddha is able to recognize the innate capacities of a person and see what that person will be able to realize in the future, and which path he or she needs to take in order to realize those capacities. All living beings are able to become a Buddha, but they all become a Buddha in a different way, and each Buddha teaches in a different way. A wise teacher, when he or she looks at their disciples, is able to see which path each disciple will follow in the future and the realization they will attain, and with this knowledge the teacher can help their disciples have more confidence and follow the right path. Giving a prediction is a transmission of spiritual energy from teacher to disciple.

Now, when the other members of the assembly witnessed the Buddha's prediction of Shariputra's Buddhahood, they also rejoiced, because they understood that if Shariputra is able to become a Buddha, then they and all living beings also have the capacity for Buddhahood. This creates a feeling of great joy and enormous confidence in everyone's heart. But fearing that there are still some among the fourfold assembly who have doubts, Shariputra asks the Buddha to use his skillful means to further explicate the teaching of the One Vehicle. So the Buddha offers the parable of the burning house.

A phrase that appears often in Buddhist texts is, "The three realms are in disturbance, just like a house on fire." According to classical Buddhist thought, the three realms are three levels of existence in the world of *samsara*: the realm of desire (*kamadhatu*), the ordinary world we inhabit, where beings are subject to the three

poisons of greed, anger, and delusion; the realm of form (*rupadhatu*), a higher realm of existence in which beings have severed some attachments; and the realm of formlessness (*arupadhatu*), the highest realm of samsaric existence in which beings are free of attachment to form. Even though the higher two of the three realms may offer some respite from the afflictions, all three are still samsara. None of the three realms can provide real peace or security. They are like a burning house, full of traps and dangers.

Imagine a group of chickens in a cage. They fight each other to get the corn, and they fight over whether the corn or the rice tastes better. And while they are competing with each other over a few kernels of corn or grains of rice, they are unaware that in a few hours they will be taken to the slaughterhouse. We too live in a world full of insecurity, but we don't see it because we're so caught up in our craving and delusions.

The parable given by the Buddha tells of a wealthy merchant who had many acres of land, many servants, and a large house where many people lived. But the house had only one door. The house was full of dangers and in fact was not a very safe place to live. One day a fire broke out. The merchant saw that the house was on fire, and he knew that it was a very dangerous situation, because his children were playing inside the house. The merchant loved his children very much and did not want them to die. The merchant cried out, "Children, run out quickly! The house is on fire; it will collapse, and you will all be burned!"

But the children continued to play. They were so caught up in their games that they didn't even realize the house was burning. When they finally heard the merchant yelling at them to run out of the house, they ignored him. They weren't afraid. They said, "Why do we have to go outside? Where's the fire? What's the danger?" They were so enjoying their games and distractions that they didn't want to leave the house, even though it was about to collapse.

The merchant was very sad and distressed, but he was able to find a way to help. He thought, "How foolish are these children, how attached to their games! I will use a skillful means to break their absorption in their games in order to have a chance to save them."

Knowing that his children liked to play with carts he called out, "My children, I have brought for you a number of very beautiful carts. Some of them are pulled by goats, some by deer, some by oxen. They are all different colors and shapes. If you come out of the house, each of you can have one of these carts."

When the children heard this they were very excited and they jostled with one another trying to push through the door of the house to get to the carts. But once they were outside, they saw only one very beautiful cart, pulled by a magnificent white ox. There were no deer carts or goat carts, only this one kind of cart. But once they saw the beautiful ox cart pulled by the white ox, all the children immediately wanted to climb into it.

When we hear this story, we may think it's just a children's story and that it doesn't really have anything to do with our lives. But if we look more deeply into our minds and the state of mind of those around us, we see that this parable expresses the truth about our situation. We're full of craving, always running after things. We want to become the director or president of a company, we want to buy a beautiful car or a nice house, or go on an exotic vacation. We don't see that the world we're living in, driven by craving and delusion, is like a burning house

After relating this parable, the Buddha said, "Shariputra, the merchant promised his children that they would have many kinds of carts but in the end he gave only one kind of cart, pulled by

a white ox. Why did he do that? Because his beloved children deserved only the best kind of cart; only the best was worthy of his love for them. Therefore he gave them the most luxurious cart drawn by a white ox. Would you say that he told a lie?"

Shariputra said, "No, we cannot say that he was telling a lie. Out of his love for them, the merchant gave his children the most precious thing. The reason he offered different kinds of carts is because he wanted to give his children something they would like."

The Buddha said, "That is correct. Among the merchant's children were some who liked goat carts, some who liked deer carts, and some who liked ox carts. So he said that for those who like the goat cart there is a goat cart, for those who like the deer cart there is a deer cart. He offered these different kinds of carts to make his children happy but in the end because he wanted only to give them the best kind of cart, the most precious cart, the most luxurious cart, he gave them the white ox cart. Living beings are like this. Some have a liking for the shravakayana, some for the pratyekabuddhayana, some for the bodhisattvayana. But in the end the Buddha gives living beings the most precious vehicle, the One Vehicle that transcends all other vehicles, the Buddha vehicle. Although I have spoken of the three vehicles, there is in fact only One Vehicle."

The Sutra tells us that the Buddha says to himself, "I am the Father of the beings; I must rescue them from their woes and troubles and give them the joy of incalculable and limitless Buddha wisdom." The word "Father" here is a symbol of the Buddha's love and concern for his children, all living beings. A father will use any means to rescue his children from a dangerous situation. That is how the Buddha feels about us. He sees how we are attached to our games, living in an illusion, and because of this we are not able to see the danger of our situation. So out of his love for his children, all living beings, he uses various methods to lead them out of suffering.

A disciple of the Buddha is the spiritual child of the Buddha. Our parents brought us into the world; they give us our physical body. When we come to the practice, we are reborn into our spiritual life, thanks to the Buddha. In the sutras it is said that the disciple is "born from the mouth of the Buddha." From the mouth of the Buddha comes the sound of the true teachings, and from the true teachings comes our spiritual life. This beautiful image of the Buddha as the spiritual father of all beings is a symbol of his great love. The idea of "father" here symbolizes only a heart of love that is able to embrace all beings. It is not about authority or domination. The father does not fly into a rage, he does not punish us and send us away. His only function is to love. And because the father loves his children, he uses many different ways—skillful means—to save beings from danger. The verses say:

Even though the Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones,
Resort to expedient devices,
The living beings whom they convert
Are all bodhisattvas.[33]

All the Buddhas throughout space and time, not just Shakyamuni Buddha, use these skillful means to help bring living beings out of the burning house. The Buddha's original teachings—the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Three Dharma Seals, and dependent co-arising—contained the idea of the essential Buddha nature of all beings, their capacity for Buddhahood, in fact, their assurance of Buddhahood.[34] Once living beings are able to enter the One Vehicle, they are all bodhisattvas. These two ideas in this

chapter of the Lotus Sutra are very important.

The teachings of the shravakayana—the Four Noble Truths, and so on—were taught to help people free themselves from delusion and get some relief from their suffering. The fruit of this path, nirvana, literally means "to extinguish," just as one blows out a candle flame. The idea was that you would leave the burning house of samsara once and for all, never to be reborn. But leaving behind one's delusions and thinking of nirvana as extinction are not yet the authentic liberation. It is the first part of liberation, but it is not the whole picture. The idea of nirvana as extinction is a teaching that uses skillful means to bring people into the path of practice.

The Mahayana proposed an understanding of nirvana, which is not separate from our existence in the world. True nirvana is possible in the here and now when we are able to get in touch with the ultimate dimension of reality. Just as a wave does not have to die in order to live in its ultimate dimension of water, we do not have to "extinguish" ourselves in order to reach nirvana. When we get in touch with our true nature, our ultimate dimension, we are freed from fears of existence and nonexistence. We know that "samsara" and "nirvana" are just distinctions in the realm of the historical dimension, and no such distinction exists in the ultimate dimension. As bodhisattvas, assured of Buddhahood, we ride joyfully on the waves of birth and death, abiding fearlessly in samsara to help guide others to liberation.

The Buddha says in a gatha:

I am the Dharma King,
With respect to the Dharma acting completely at will.[35]

The Buddha, the Dharma King, grasps the true nature, the ultimate dimension, of all things (dharmas) and therefore has the ability to use various skillful means to teach beings in the phenomenal realm—this world of form and appearances called "samsara." The various teachings are Dharma doors, and a Buddha is someone who can enter any of these Dharma gateways at will and use them in a very free and skillful way, just as a great poet knows how to use words with great artistry and skill.[36] So the teachings may appear in different forms, but ultimately they all lead to the One Vehicle, the Buddha vehicle, in which all beings realize their innate Buddha nature. This is absolute freedom in the field of time and space, nirvana right in the realm of samsara, and this is the great insight of the Buddha that was renewed in the Mahayana.

Chapter Four

THE DESTITUTE SON

Lotus Sutra Chapter Four, "Belief and Understanding," also furthers the teaching of skillful means through an example given in a parable. Here it is not the Buddha but four of his disciples, Subhuti, Mahakatyayana, Mahakashyapa, and Mahamaudgalyayana, who tell the story. Thanks to the Buddha's teaching of the Lotus Sutra, these four monks realized awakening. They knelt before the Buddha and addressed him, "We belong to the shravakayana. Well advanced in age, we thought we had already attained nirvana and therefore had no further tasks to perform. We did not have the intention to become a fully enlightened being, a Buddha. But now that the Buddha has opened our eyes to the truth and explained the matter to us clearly, we have gained the inexhaustible energy of the bodhisattva. We wish to show our gratitude to you by offering a parable to the assembly." Then the monks related the parable of the destitute son.

There was a man who when very young had run away from his family and who had become impoverished and destitute. For

fifty years he wandered far and wide, trying to find a way to make a living. Then one day, having long since forgotten the land of his birth and his family, he returned to his native country. His father had become a successful, wealthy merchant. Over the years he had always thought lovingly of his lost son and regretted that his son had run away from home at such an early age. With no one to inherit his fortune when he died, the merchant believed that his wealth would be scattered. But he had never spoken to anyone of his situation, and this made his feeling of loss and regret even greater.

One day, the destitute son came to the palace of this rich man to look for work as a laborer. Peering in from the doorway, he saw the man sitting on a lion throne, resting his feet on a footstool of precious materials. Many brahmans, nobles, and other rich merchants were respectfully gathered around the wealthy man. He was so rich that members of the government and even of the royal family visited in order to stay on good terms with him. His palace was opulent, with curtains of precious jewels, beautiful garlands of flowers, and perfumed water sprinkling in fountains. Seeing this, the destitute son asked himself, "Why have I come here? It's very dangerous. They could arrest me and put me in prison. People like me are not welcome in such luxurious palaces." So he left.

While he had been at the doorway, however, the wealthy merchant immediately recognized him as his son. He was very moved, and in his excitement he ordered one of his servants to run after the man and bring him back. But when the son saw a servant from the palace coming after him, he became afraid. He said to the servant, "Sir, I have not done anything wrong. I have not offended against anyone. Why are you arresting me?" But the servant had to carry out his orders, so he grabbed the son and forced him back to the house. Panicked, the destitute son thought, "This is the end. Now I have been arrested, and they will execute me." He was so afraid that he lost consciousness and collapsed.

At that moment the father saw his mistake. Though he had acted out of love, he understood that the method he had used to get his son back was much too forceful. We too love people in this way. Sometimes the intensity of our feelings can make our beloved feel suffocated. We want so much to express our feelings of love to them that it can be too much. So sometimes, even though we may love someone very much, we have to be careful not to frighten or overwhelm the object of our love with our strong feelings. When the merchant saw that his son had passed out from fear, he regretted very much what he had done. He sprinkled some water on the man's face to revive him. When the son came around, the merchant did not burst out saying that he was the man's father and profess his love. Instead, he told him, "I've made a mistake; I've arrested you wrongly. I thought you had committed an offense, but in fact you have not. You are an honest man, and you are free to go wherever you want to go."

This is the true meaning of love. When we truly love someone, we have to let him or her be free. If we tie someone up in our love, even though the bonds are made from our love, it is not true love. When the destitute son heard that he was free, he was so happy. In all his life he had never felt as happy as at that moment. He had not gained anything new yet he was overjoyed, because he had regained the most precious thing on this Earth—his freedom.

The merchant was using skillful means. He knew if he tried to bring his lost son back to him too quickly or abruptly the man would not be able to accept it. So he instructed two men to disguise themselves in dirty, ripped clothing, as if they too were destitute, to follow the son and befriend him. They were to ask the son to go with them to perform some work and pay him a little money. The

merchant instructed that his son should be given the most lowly work to do, like sweeping up excrement, carting away rubbish, and so on, the kind of work that those of even small means would avoid. The merchant knew that his son, having lived his whole life in extreme poverty and having no means to better himself, would not believe himself capable of anything but the humblest kind of work. Naturally, when he was given low work like this to do, he knew that he was capable of it and thought himself lucky. He did not need anything more, and he did not aspire toward any greater happiness.

A couple of months later the destitute son was working near the wealthy merchant's house. The father still missed his son very much. So he altered his appearance. He took off all the gold, silver, and jewels, and traded his fine clothes for ordinary ones. Then he approached his son in order to become acquainted with him. Although the father had disguised himself as an ordinary worker, he still had a nobleman's manner and authority. When he met his destitute son, he was very kind and solicitous. He asked him, "Where do you come from? How long have you been working here? Do you have enough to eat? Are you given a decent wage?" The merchant's great love for his lost son is revealed in these questions. And he said to his son, "Although you are not actually my son, I regard all those who work for me as my own sons, so you do not have any reason to be afraid of me."

The merchant used these skillful means in order to diminish his son's fear and feeling of inferiority and build up his confidence little by little. And in this way, he became close to his son. The merchant praised his strength, loyalty, honesty, and respectful manner toward others. Gradually, the son's affection and trust toward the merchant grew. The merchant did not reveal to him that he was his father, because he knew that the destitute son would not have

believed it. So the merchant told him instead, "I look on you as my adopted son." The man was extremely happy. In all his life he had never had someone treat him as kindly as he was being treated now. He had become the trusted assistant to the master of the house. He could come and to go as he liked without fear. He was given a number of tasks of great importance. But he still believed that he was adopted, a trusted servant of the master but not his direct descendant. Even though the destitute son had taken on the role of a manager—he made important decisions and dealt with large sums of money—nevertheless he still had a servant's attitude of mind.

Here, we begin to see the meaning of this parable. The small vehicle teachings say that the shravaka disciples cannot realize the profound insight and become a Buddha, as Shakyamuni did. So the shravakas lacked confidence and did not believe they possessed or could cultivate the spiritual capacity of a bodhisattva and lead others to liberation. They believed they could only attain nirvana for themselves. Only the goat or deer carts were suitable to them; they did not yet believe themselves worthy of the glorious white ox cart of the Buddha.

In the parable, the wealthy merchant cannot right away reveal to the destitute son that he is his father. So he carefully builds up his son's confidence and draws him closer. Eventually, the destitute son will be able to realize and accept that he is the worthy heir of a vast fortune. But a truth, especially such a profound truth about our own nature that we had never before thought possible, must be revealed at the right moment. Revealing a truth at an inappropriate moment, when the hearer is not yet mentally or spiritually prepared, can cause great harm. This is why the Buddha first gave the small vehicle teaching and only later, after his disciples had mastered those teachings and their practice had ripened suffi-

ciently, did he reveal the teachings of the bodhisattvayana to them. Had he done so earlier, they would have rejected the teachings. The Buddha used skillful means to deliver the right teaching at just the right time in order to eventually lead all his disciples to the One Vehicle.

In the parable, the merchant also had to wait for the right moment to tell the truth. Slowly and gradually, he had built up his son's confidence in himself as someone who is worthy and capable. When the merchant fell seriously ill and knew that he was nearing the end of his life, he realized that the time had come to reveal the true nature of their relationship. He organized a gathering attended by the king and royal family, various dignitaries, military officials, scholars, and others. This detail reveals that the merchant wielded great power and influence. Then he brought the destitute son before the assembly and said, "Though you know this man only as the manager of my household, in fact he is my son." In his whole life the man had never dared think that he was the son of a great man of tremendous power, influence, and wealth. But now the time had come and the truth could be presented without doing any harm. The son hears and accepts the realization.

This point in the parable is equivalent to the moment of the Buddha's delivery of the Lotus Sutra, when he reveals that everyone possesses Buddha nature and has the capacity for Buddhahood. And the destitute son's state of mind, his realization, is the same as that of the shravakas when they hear and accept that they too are the real children of the Buddha, bodhisattvas on the way to Buddhahood. They no longer believe they can achieve only their own liberation but know they are capable of much more. Their doubts are lifted, and they rejoice:

We this day
Have gained something we have never had before,
Something which, though never before hoped for,
Yet now has come into our possession of its own accord.
As that poor son
Gained incalculable gems,
So, O World-Honored One, have we now
Gained the Path and the Fruit. . . .
We now
Are truly voice-hearers,
Taking the voice of the Buddha Path
And causing all to hear it.[37]

This parable presented by the bhikshus Subhuti, Katyayana, Kashyapa, and Maudgalyayana is aimed at opening the eyes of their fellow disciples, who believed that their practice to attain individual liberation was quite enough. They felt they had achieved all that there was to achieve. Although they had heard the wonderful Dharma of the Lotus Sutra, they still did not believe in it. They had heard the Buddha speak of the bodhisattva practice of guiding all beings to liberation, yet still they did not feel drawn to it because they had not yet given birth to the great aspiration, bodhichitta. But the four bhikshus knew that their destiny was much greater. So they offered this parable to their brothers and sisters to reveal to them their true destiny as inheritors of the noble career of the Buddha.

Chapter Five

DHARMA RAIN

In ancient India, medicines were derived from leaves and plants, and the name of Chapter Five of the Lotus Sutra, "Medicinal Herbs," refers to this fact. This chapter offers another example of the Buddha's skillful means. The Buddha describes to Kashyapa how he looks into the hearts of living beings, and on the basis of his perception, he offers the most appropriate and skillful teaching—just as a good physician prescribes the right medicine for each person's ailment.

Whether a Dharma talk succeeds or fails does not depend on the teacher's eloquence or on whether his or her knowledge of the Dharma is profound or superficial. The transformative power of a teaching depends entirely on the teacher's understanding and clear perception of the psychological state and situation of those who will receive it. A Dharma talk must always be appropriate in two ways: it must accord perfectly with the spirit of the Dharma, and it must also respond perfectly to the situation in which it is given. If it only corresponds perfectly with the teachings but does

not meet the needs of the listeners, it's not a good Dharma talk, it's not appropriate.

The Dharma is like a powerful lamp, helping people to see deeply into their situation and releasing them from suffering. When a teaching touches real concerns, real suffering, it can unblock the obstacles and difficulties that are there in the mind of the listener. When you hear a Dharma talk that is appropriate in these two ways, faithful to both the true teaching and the actual conditions and situation of the listeners, you have the feeling that it is directed to you personally. It is as if the teacher has seen right into your heart and is speaking to you and you alone. When many people have this feeling, that is the mark of a skillful Dharma talk.

The teacher gets insight from looking deeply into the situation of his students, observing and listening to them in order to understand them. When we can understand them, then the teaching we offer will be a good influence on their lives. With regard to one person, a skillful teacher may give a particular teaching, while for another person he or she may teach something quite different. There is a well-known story of a Chinese Chan master who, when asked by a student whether a dog has Buddha nature, answered yes. When another student asked him the same question, he said no.

Whether or not beings have Buddha nature is not something that can be taught just because we have read it in a sutra or we adhere to some abstract principle or theory. A teaching is not merely a set of ideas or information but a tool, a skillful means that can help unblock and liberate those who hear it. Looking deeply into the psychological and spiritual state of the questioner, a teacher may say "yes" because that is the response that will be most beneficial for that person. Yet for another student, he or she may say "no" in order to help their student look more deeply. With some students, we have to speak gently in order to be successful.

For others, we have to shout. Using a different approach for different students has nothing to do with personal preference; it is simply a reflection of the teacher's insight into each student's particular situation.

In this chapter, the Buddha says to Kashyapa, "Bhikshu, you should know that the Tathagata is the Dharma King. If the Tathagata says something then those words are not false, they are always true. If the Tathagata says something exists, that is true. If the Tathagata says something does not exist, that is also true. If the Tathagata teaches the Mahayana, it is true. And if the Tathagata teaches the Hinayana, it is also true." From his great wisdom, the Buddha gave teachings in the form that was most appropriate for the listeners at the time. But all the teachings of the Buddha have the capacity to bring us to the level of *sarvajñana*, the highest absolute wisdom, universal wisdom. Looking deeply, the Tathagata is able to know the circumstances of all living beings. He knows the ultimate result of all the teachings. His knowledge of all dharmas is complete, without obstacle. And he has the capacity to present his perfect wisdom to all living beings through the skillful means of the various teachings.

In this chapter the Buddha uses the example of medicinal herbs. Throughout the worlds there are innumerable valleys, fields, and gardens that contain countless species of plants. Every species has its own name and character, its own life cycle, its specific strengths and properties. None is exactly like another. Living beings are the same. They are of many different types. The sphere of activities of one person is like this; the social circumstance of another person is like that. Living beings are thus like the innumerable kinds of plants that grow in different environments.

One day the clouds came and covered the entire cosmos, and rain fell on all the species of plants. Some plants were very small