

# Book Review – The Lotus Sutra and Pali Canon

*The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic Paperback* – December 2, 2008 by Gene Reeves (Translator)

*In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon (Teachings of the Buddha) Paperback* – July 28, 2005 by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Author)

Historians quickly learn to examine primary sources, information acquired at the time of the historical event, rather than secondary sources, information acquired after the historical event, to ascertain historical truth. The reasons for this are clear; primary sources tend to have better information, and secondary sources tend to amplify mistakes that were made by those before them. Suppose, for example, that an eyewitness account of a battle records that Army A had about 10,000 soldiers. If a secondary author reads the primary source incorrectly, he may write that Army A has 100,000 soldiers. If a later author consults the primary source, he will rightly record the complement of Army A as 10,000. If not, he will use 100,000 in his writings. Since secondary sources are generally easier to find and understand, having been written later and in a modern language, the mistake can be repeated hundreds of times. With enough repetition, the mistake is taken for fact, even when it is not. As with history, any study of religion must include primary sources.

The *Lotus Sutra* is one of the most popular and influential collections of the teachings of the Buddha. It forms the basis for Mahayana Buddhism, including the Tiantai, Tendai, Cheontae, and Nichiren schools. These schools are prominent in East Asia, including China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, and Russia. There are approximately 350 million Mahayana Buddhists worldwide. Mahayana tradition contends that the *Lotus Sutra* contains the actual words of the Buddha, as written at the time that he spoke them, but then stored for five centuries. They were revealed at the Fourth Buddhist Council in the Kashmir Province of India (around 78 AD). Around that time, Buddhism split into the Mahayana and Theravada branches, with the former being considered progressive and the later conservative and classical.

“Mahayana” refers to the “Great Vehicle”, and is a recurrent theme in the *Lotus Sutra*. The first part discusses the Unifying Truth of the Universe, the One Vehicle of the Wonderful Dharma. Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha, and these teachings are the only way to achieve enlightenment. The second part of the *Lotus Sutra* reveals the life of the Buddha, and the third part highlights the activities of people as they strive for enlightenment. The *Lotus Sutra* is fantastical, with stories of multiple Buddhas living impossibly long lives on mountaintops surrounded by thousands of millions of creatures seeking knowledge.

The teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* are similar to those in the *Pali Canon* and other Buddhist sources, but they are presented in much more of a poetic and unrealistic manner. Suffering is rendered as “fires.” In one story, a wealthy elder owned a large but decrepit house filled with people, animals, evil creatures, and demons. The man’s children were playing in the house but it caught on fire. The little ones refused to stop playing and so the elder enticed them out with stories of better playthings. Once outside, the children found their delights.<sup>1</sup>

In explaining the parable, the house is the current world, the children are the unenlightened ones, and the elder is the Buddha. The demons and other evil creatures are the dangers of this world, the toys in the house are the poor and fleeting pleasures of life, and the delights outside the house are the fruits of accepting the Buddhist dharma.

“Safe practices” is an important part of the *Lotus Sutra*. Buddhists should not be involved with dangerous sports such as boxing or wrestling, and should not be dancers, actors, or others who create illusions. They should not be butchers, hunters, fishermen, or others engaged in “evil pursuits.” Monks should not take pleasure in seeing women and should not be friendly with “unmanly men.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Lotus Sutra*, Wisdom Publications, 2008, 118-127.

<sup>2</sup> *Lotus Sutra*, Wisdom Publications, 2008, 261-262.

The *Lotus Sutra* suggests that anyone can become a Buddha, but that Buddhas are more than human, having semi-divine capabilities and therefore worthy of worship. For example, Buddhas can know kings, ministers, and their attendants by scent. They can tell if a woman is pregnant, the sex of the child, and whether the child has birth defects or not, by scent. A Buddha can even know the thoughts of others by smell.<sup>3</sup>

*In the Buddha's Words*, an anthology of discourses from the *Pali Canon*, reflects the more traditional, Theravada Buddhism. It speaks in more prose than poetry, and is more systematic than its Mahayana brother. Theravada Buddhism is prominent in southeast Asia, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, and China. There are about 150 million adherents worldwide. The *Pali Canon* is the most important selection of teachings in Theravada Buddhism.

The book begins by discussing the human condition, ignorant as we are to the true nature of life and suffering. It then refers to the Bringer of Light, the Buddha, who came to lift mankind out of its ignorance. The following sections describe the dhamma, reveal how to be happy in the present life, how to master the mind, how to be reborn, and how to teach others.

The Canon is also divided in “baskets (pitaka).” The Vinaya Pitaka covers rules and discipline of the monastic body, the Sutta Pitaka includes discourses and sermons of the Buddha, and the Abhidhamma Pitaka summarizes the systematic philosophy of the Buddhism.

Buddhist teachings frequently use numbers. For example, in the section on Mastering the Mind, the Buddha described “Four ways to arahantship (perfected person)”, “four kinds of persons”, and “four establishments of mindfulness.”

In summary, both the *Lotus Sutra* and *In the Buddha's Words* comprise some of the most important primary sources in the two major branches of Buddhism. The former is more poetic and the latter more prosaic, but both continue to be the best historical records available of the teachings of Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha.

## Questions

1. How does the literary nature of the *Lotus Sutra* shape Mahayana Buddhism?
2. How does the literary nature of the *Pali Canon* shape Theravada Buddhism?
3. What communicates to you more effectively, the rational prose of the *Pali Canon* or the poetry of the *Lotus Sutra*?

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<sup>3</sup> *Lotus Sutra*, Wisdom Publications, 2008, 326-330.