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## Mahayana Buddhism: The Lotus Sutra, c. 100 C.E.

Written in India in the first or early second century C.E., the Lotus Sutra became one of the favorite Buddhist scriptures in China, Japan, and other Mahayana Buddhist countries. This very brief section from the sutra tells of the Buddha's death ("passing into extinction" or nirvana). The goal of all Buddhists, like the Buddha himself, was a state of consciousness called *bodhi* (enlightenment, or awakening) that brought a release from the suffering of the world and the attainment of ultimate peace, called nirvana. After the Buddha achieved this state, two Buddhist schools developed concerning the issue of how others might attain nirvana. One, the Theravada, said you had to emulate the hard, ascetic life of the Buddha. Another, the Mahayana, said it was easier and open to everyone because you could pray for help.

Mahayana Buddhism developed alongside but in opposition to Theravada (or Orthodox) Buddhism in its home in India. Theravada Buddhism (still practiced in Southeast Asia) was the more exacting and orthodox form of Buddhism; it encouraged all young men to emulate the Buddha by becoming monks, practicing rigorous discipline begging for their food, and studying the classic texts. Mahayana Buddhism means "the Greater Vehicle" because it could appeal to a greater range of people. Central to Mahayana Buddhism is the idea of a Bodhisattva—a Buddha-type who is capable of achieving nirvana but who, instead, helps others reach enlightenment. Thus, one can pray to a Bodhisattva to achieve salvation. Mahayana Buddhism spread through China and North Asia, offering a less demanding avenue to salvation than Theravada Buddhism, because instead of renouncing the everyday world and becoming a monk or a nun, one could continue a normal life while worshiping at temples and making offerings to the Buddha and various Bodhisattvas.

Source: *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by the Buddhist Text Translation Society, Mahayana Buddhists sutras in English at [http://www.cribusa.org/lotus/lotus1\\_1.asp](http://www.cribusa.org/lotus/lotus1_1.asp).

Which ideas of this sutra make Buddhism more universal or offer “salvation” to a broader audience than monks, nuns, and other religious specialists?

#### THINKING HISTORICALLY

Some words and ideas in this document are “pre-Buddha” and some are “post-Buddha.” That is, some words and ideas could be found in a Hindu text before the Buddha was born. Others seem to come from a world after the Buddha has died. Which words or ideas fit into one or the other of these categories? How can you distinguish between what might have happened at the time of the Buddha’s death and what was probably added some time later? How are the ideas expressed in this sutra different from the ideas attributed to the Buddha in previous selections from this chapter? What might account for these differences? How did the early Buddhists who composed this sutra transform the Buddha as seeker of enlightenment into the Buddha as object of worship?

I recall that in ages past,  
Limitless, countless aeons ago,  
There appeared a Buddha, one honored among people  
By the name of Brightness of Sun-Moon-Lamp,  
That World Honored One<sup>1</sup> proclaimed the Dharma,<sup>2</sup>  
Taking limitless living beings across,  
Causing countless millions of Bodhisattvas  
To enter the wisdom of the Buddhas.

Before that Buddha had left home,  
The eight royal sons born to him,  
Seeing the Great Sage leave his home,  
Also followed him to practice Brahman conduct.

The Buddha then spoke a Great Vehicle<sup>3</sup>  
Sutra by the name of Limitless Principles;  
Amidst the assembly, and for their sake,  
He set it forth in extensive detail.  
When the Buddha had finished speaking the Sutra,  
Seated in the Dharma-seat,

<sup>1</sup> The Buddha. [Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> The Law. [Ed.]

<sup>3</sup> *Mahayana* literally means “Great Vehicle.” [Ed.]

He sat in full lotus<sup>4</sup> and entered the Samadhi<sup>5</sup>  
 Called the Station of Limitless Principles.  
 From the heavens fell a rain of Mandarava flowers,<sup>6</sup>  
 And heavenly drums of themselves did sound,  
 While all the gods, dragons, ghosts and spirits,  
 Made offerings to the Honored One;  
 And, within all the Buddha lands,  
 There occurred a mighty trembling.  
 The light emitted from between the Buddha's brows  
 Manifested all these rare events.

The light illumined to the east  
 Eighteen thousand Buddha lands,  
 Revealing the places of living beings'  
 Karmic retributions of birth and death.  
 Seen, too, were Buddha lands adorned  
 With a multitude of gems,  
 The color of lapis lazuli<sup>7</sup> and crystal,  
 Illumined by the Buddha's light.  
 Seen as well were gods and people,  
 Dragons, spirits, and Yaksha<sup>8</sup> Hordes,  
 Gandharvas and Kinnaras,<sup>9</sup>  
 Each making offering to the Buddha. . . .

The Buddha, having spoken The Dharma Flower<sup>10</sup>  
 And caused the assembly to rejoice,  
 Later, on that very day,  
 Announced to the host of gods and humans;  
 "The meaning of the real mark of all Dharmas  
 Has already been spoken for all of you,  
 And now at midnight, I  
 shall enter into Nirvana.  
 You should single-heartedly advance with vigor,  
 And avoid laxness, for  
 Buddhas are difficult indeed to meet,  
 Encountered but once in a million aeons."

<sup>4</sup>Yoga position on folded legs. [Ed.]

<sup>5</sup>Highest state of consciousness reached in meditation. [Ed.]

<sup>6</sup>Bright scarlet flowers associated with the story of an Indian princess. [Ed.]

<sup>7</sup>Rare blue stone. [Ed.]

<sup>8</sup>Indian nature spirits, often tree spirits, imagined in human form. [Ed.]

<sup>9</sup>Ancient tribal peoples or music spirits. [Ed.]

<sup>10</sup>The words that lead to the flowering of the Law; the Buddha's last words; sometimes refers to this Lotus Sutra itself. [Ed.]

All of the disciples of the World Honored One  
 Hearing of the Buddha's entry into Nirvana,  
 Each harbored grief and anguish,  
 "Why must the Buddha take extinction so soon?"  
 The sagely Lord, the Dharma King,  
 Then comforted the limitless multitude:  
 "After my passage into extinction,  
 None of you should worry or fear,  
 For the Bodhisattva Virtue Treasury,<sup>11</sup>  
 With respect to the non-outflow mark of reality,<sup>12</sup>  
 In heart has penetrated it totally;  
 He will next become a Buddha,  
 By the name of Pure Body, and  
 Will also save uncounted multitudes.

That night the Buddha passed into extinction,  
 As a flame dies once its fuel has been consumed.  
 The Sharira<sup>13</sup> were divided up,  
 And limitless stupas<sup>14</sup> built.  
 The Bhikshus and Bhikshuni,<sup>15</sup>  
 Their number like the Ganges' sands,  
 Redoubled their vigor in advancing  
 In their quest for the unsurpassed path.

<sup>11</sup> The name of the first Bodhisattva. [Ed.]

<sup>12</sup> He understands the true reality. [Ed.]

<sup>13</sup> The bones of the Buddha after cremation. [Ed.]

<sup>14</sup> Temples, usually built over a bone or other relic of the Buddha. [Ed.]

<sup>15</sup> Ordained nuns and monks. [Ed.]