

# Sutra around the Sutra

## —The Rhetoric of the *Lotus Sutra*—

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### Introduction

In this presentation, I consider the *Lotus Sutra* as a literary work and discuss its literary techniques.

I have previously approached the *Lotus Sutra* as a literary work, in Okada [2014]. Furthermore, last semester at Harvard, Prof. Abe also held a seminar “EASTD 260: The *Lotus Sutra*: Texts, Narratives, and Translations” based on this approach. I would like to proceed with discussion incorporating both these achievements and new knowledge.

### The episode of Chapter 1 in the *Lotus Sutra*

First, we focus on one episode in Chapter 1 of the *Lotus Sutra*; in the distant past, a Buddha whose name was “sun-moon-light” preached the *Lotus Sutra* for eight princely sons. The youngest of the brothers was Dīpankara Buddha.

In our seminar, Prof. Ryuichi Abe interpreted this episode as follows; Dīpankara-Buddha was a master of Shakyamuni-Buddha who is the Buddha in our world. So we can be directly connected with the former story of the *Lotus Sutra* though this Dimpamkara-Buddha. This interpretation by Prof. Abe may respond to the idea in Shimoda[2013]. “*Shyakyamuni is located at the end of the Buddha’s ancestry, which was continued to inherit long before Dīpankara. In other words, Shyakyamuni is a child of Buddha who is very close to the*

*genealogy of Buddha. To truly be a Buddhist disciple is to be a child of the child of Buddha.*" (pp.80-81.)

As you can see from this interpretation, the *Lotus Sutra* urges its readers, who are living in the post-Buddha era, to be willing to relate to the Buddha and participate in stories of the Buddha in the sutra. This was the aim not only in the *Lotus Sutra* but also in the early Mahayana scriptures in general.<sup>1</sup>

In order to make this attempt successful, the *Lotus Sutra* uses certain remarkable literary techniques throughout the entire sutra, including the episode of Chapter 1 mentioned above. It is "self-reference".

### The self-reference in the *Lotus Sutra*<sup>2</sup>

This self-reference, in which the *Lotus Sutra* mentions the *Lotus Sutra* itself, is found throughout.

At this point, I take Chapter 10 as a remarkable example. At the beginning of Chapter 10, Shakyamuni Buddha declares that he will bestow prophecy for everyone who has even a little relationship with the *Lotus Sutra*. Shakyamuni talks about the sutra that we have now. And he is talking to those who have the *Lotus Sutra*. Then, a direct relationship appears between Shakyamuni in the *Lotus* and the reader of the *Lotus*.

When the book tells a story about the book itself, the reader reading the book is, thereby, incorporated into the story as a character. This literary technique is called "metafiction" and found, for example, in literary works such as Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979).

The *Lotus Sutra* uses this literary technique to make a direct relationship between the Buddha who appears in the story of the sutra and readers of the Sutra who live in the post-Buddha era.

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<sup>1</sup> Cole[2005]

## The Eternal Buddha

As mentioned above, according to the self-reference in the Chapter 10 of the *Lotus*, all people, even if they live in the post-Buddha era, have the possibility of connecting with the Buddha at any time through the *Lotus Sutra*. This idea is developed further in the sutra.

At the beginning of Chapter 10, the *Lotus Sutra* is presented as a “tool” for creating relationships with the Buddha. However, later in the chapter, the *Lotus* is regarded as not just a “tool”, but a substitute for the Buddha, and even the Buddha himself. In the latter section of Chapter 10, Shakyamuni preaches that the sutra in the tower should be regarded as an entire body of Buddha. This preaching develops into a visible story in Chapter 11 in which the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Prabhūta-ratna, who have entire bodies, are actually sitting in the tower.<sup>3</sup>

The personification of “the sutra in the tower” in Chapter 10 is completed in Chapter 16 via Chapter 11. Thus the famous “Eternal Buddha” in the *Lotus* is presented.

Viewed from the perspective of the theory of Buddha’s body, this change of personification from chapters 10 to 16 can be regarded as a change from Dharma-Kāya[法身] to Saṃbhoga-Kāya[報身]. Many other sutras tried to preach the eternity of the Buddha, but only presented Dharma Kāya. However, the *Lotus* was not satisfied with this, adding more stories and creating an eternal saMbhoga-kaaya. This is the uniqueness of the *Lotus*.

After this, in Chapter 21, when the Buddha commissions the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakyamuni states that people should construct a tower in the place where

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2 Okada[2014]

3 “In deed foreshadowing what is about to happen, Chapter Ten, the Buddha tells the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja, “Wherever this sūtra is taught.....Because the Tathāgata is already in it.” Lopes and Stone[2019]p.138

there is the text of *Lotus*, for making the Buddha appear. Thus, this is a type of cycle where the Eternal Buddha, who appeared as an actual character, comes back in our hands again in the form of a sutra-book.

## The Bodhisattvas from the earth

Furthermore, in the process of forming the unique character “Eternal Buddha”, other interesting characters are also created, namely, the disciples of the eternal Buddha. In Chapter 15, many Bodhisattvas appear from the earth as disciples of this eternal Buddha.

These Bodhisattvas from the earth [地涌菩薩], who are also original characters in the *Lotus*, are authentic disciples of the eternal Buddha. In other words, they are directly related to the eternal Buddha. What we should remember in this context is that the *Lotus* encourages readers to have a direct relationship with the eternal Buddha through the literary technique of self-reference. Thus, Bodhisattvas from the Earth, who are directly related to the Eternal Buddha, can be regarded as a role model for the readers, who should be directly related to the Eternal Buddha.

Thus, Bodhisattvas from the earth match the readers of the *Lotus*. They are anonymous; multitudinous and their careers are unknown. So, anyone can project themselves into the characters without restrictions. Furthermore, the Bodhisattvas have been ordered to spread the *Lotus Sutra* from now on. This is clearly the role required of the readers of The *Lotus*.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned above, the *Lotus Sutra* told a story about the *Lotus* itself, thereby the readers reading the *Lotus* were incorporated into the story as a character. And the *Lotus* expressed this emergence of readers in the sutra as the appearance of Bodhisattvas from the earth in the symbolic and dramatic

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4 Okada[2014]

episode in Chapter 15.

## Nichiren's acceptance of unique motifs in the *Lotus*

The unique motifs created by self-reference in the *Lotus Sutra* such as “Eternal Buddha” and “Bodhisattvas from the earth” inspired Nichiren.

### About Eternal Buddha:

Nichiren listed both the eternal Buddha and *Sutra* as fitting for the principal object of worship[本尊]. After his death, this doctrine was considered a double standard and many scholars of Nichiren Buddhism have discussed whether a personal Buddha or impersonal Sutra is more appropriate.

However is this discussion “Buddha or Sutra” valid in the first place? As confirmed in the previous section, the *Lotus Sutra* articulates an inseparable relationship between Buddha and Sutra; first, in Chapter 10, the sutra is considered as a principal object of worship. In chapter 16, the personal eternal Buddha is shown as a principal object of worship. With that in mind, in Chapter 21, the sutra is presented as a principal object again. The *Lotus* has shown the transition of “Sutra → Buddha → Sutra.” Both are inseparable.

Therefore, let's read *Abstract of Questions and Answers about the Principal object of worship* [本尊問答抄]. It is a famous document about a principal object of worship written by Nichiren.

*Q: ..... What should ordinary people make as their principal object of worship?*

*A: They should make the title[題目] of the Lotus Sutra as their principal object of worship.”*

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5 At this point, Nichiren regards the *Lotus Sutra* itself and its [題目] as the same. This may reflect the self-reference of the *Lotus Sutra*. The self-references of the *Lotus Sutra* treat the existence of the *Lotus Sutra* itself as a kind of “keyword.” The *Lotus Sutra* which has become a keyword may be linked to the [題目]. ...just like chanting 題目.

Following this, Nichiren quotes the sentence of Chapter 10 that the enshrined scripture should be regarded as Buddha.<sup>5</sup>

In this sentence, Nichiren instructs that we should take the impersonal Sutra as the principal object of worship. However following this, he instructs that Shakyamuni, who is a personal Buddha, is appropriate as the principal object of worship.

*Q: ... Which is superior, Buddha or Sutra?*

*A: We should regard a superior thing as a principal object... Buddhists should regard Shakyamuni-Buddha as a principal object.*

At first glance, the claim seems to have changed. What does this mean? The answer is shown below.

*Q: So why do you consider not Shakyamuni-Buddha but the title of the Lotus Sutra the principal object of worship?*

*A: ... The Lotus Sutra is Shakyamuni's parents... Now I consider producer as principal objects of worship.*

In order to make the Buddha the principal object of worship, we should regard the Sutra which produces the Buddha as the principal object of worship.

The evolution of the argument in this document by Nichiren, "Sutra → Buddha → Sutra", is consistent with the composition of the *Lotus Sutra* shown in the previous section. According to the description of the *Lotus Sutra* itself, we understand that Nichiren's seemingly contradictory claims are not unnatural at all.

#### **About Bodhisattvas from the earth:**

Nichiren implied that he was the leader of the Bodhisattvas from the earth that appeared in the post-Buddha era. As mentioned above, the *Lotus Sutra* demands that its be Bodhisattvas from the earth. So Nichiren's self-awareness matches this. Until today, Nichiren believers have seen him as the leader of the

Bodhisattvas from the earth.

However, this self-awareness of Nichiren was not simple, but involved a complex problem. Nichiren hardly ever claimed that, “I am the leader of the Bodhisattvas from the earth” directly. In most cases, Nichiren said, “I am not the leader of Bodhisattvas from the earth, but somehow I am in that position.” Is this excessive modesty? Nichiren’s uncharacteristically vague attitude towards this issue is still being discussed among Nichiren scholars.

On the other hand, Nichiren regarded himself as similar to two another bodhisattvas, without modesty; One is the Bodhisattva in Chapter 13 who foresaw the persecution he would suffer and vowed to withstand it. The other is Never-Disparaging-Bodhisattva[不輕菩薩]. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, Bodhisattvas in Chapter 13 will appear in a different world, not our world. Never-Disparaging-Bodhisattva is the previous existence of Shakyamuni. So these two bodhisattvas cannot be Nichiren himself. He could only present them as “role models”.

However, Bodhisattvas from the earth are different from these two. They appear in this world and are not attributed to a particular person. And, as mentioned above, the *Lotus Sutra* demands that the readers themselves to become the Bodhisattvas from the earth. This is too heavy a responsibility and may seem arrogant to others.

Nichiren often made a claim similar to the Messianic belief that he was merely acting as an agent with the support of the leader of the Bodhisattvas from the earth and was waiting for the Bodhisattvas to appear in the future. However, such a Messianic belief would have been incompatible with his desire for realizing the ideal “at the moment”. So, in his later years, he had increased his tendency to identify himself with the leader of Bodhisattva from the earth.

Nichiren’s hesitation gives us a very important suggestion in considering the uniqueness of the *Lotus Sutra* and in reconsidering on our approach to the *Lotus Sutra*.

## Conclusion

In this presentation, I described the *Lotus Sutra's* literary techniques, their effects, and their acceptance in a later era.

First we reviewed Chapter 1 and confirmed the purpose of the *Lotus Sutra*, urging its readers, who are living in the post-Buddha era, to be willing to relate to Buddha and participate in stories of Buddha in its sutra. For achieving this aim, the *Lotus Sutra* uses a literary technique of “self-reference.” As a result, the unique motifs of the “Eternal Buddha” and “Bodhisattvas from the earth” were created. And as an example of acceptance of these unique motifs in a later era, I discussed Nichiren.

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