

## Introduction

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It must have been the spring of 1972. I was in my sophomore year at the University of Virginia. A friend told me that his roommate had invited a Buddhist teacher to come over from Richmond to give a talk at their apartment in town. I decided to go along. I knew nothing about Buddhism. I was taking a course on Hinduism at the time and understood that Buddhism was somehow like Hinduism. In those days, people still used phrases such as “Oriental philosophy” and “Eastern mysticism” to subsume the various religious traditions of Asia in a single category. When I arrived at my friend’s apartment that night, I was surprised to find that the Buddhist teacher was a white guy, a distinctively unhip white guy. He looked like Matt Foley, the motivational speaker played by Chris Farley on *Saturday Night Live*. He was dressed in a plaid sport coat, with a white shirt and narrow tie. He wore glasses, and he had short, thinning hair, greased back. He was relatively tall, heavysset, probably in his early fifties. A short Japanese woman was with him, apparently his

wife. He gave a brief talk, which I cannot remember. I noticed that in the corner of the room, there was a wooden cabinet sitting on a coffee table. It was about two feet tall. He opened two little doors, and there was a small statue of the Buddha inside. To my amazement, the man got down on his knees, joined his palms together, and started chanting something. We were all supposed to chant along with him. I did not know what it meant or even what language it was.

Later, tea and cookies were served. A guy walked up to me; he was probably in his mid-twenties, someone who had come over from Richmond. He was dressed in the standard uniform of the day, a blue work shirt and bell-bottom jeans. He started telling me about the wonders of chanting. He said, “I was walking down the street the other day, chanting to myself. I happened to look down at the sidewalk, and—I don’t know whether you’re into this, man—I found an ounce of hash.” (Only years later did I learn that Chapter Five of the *Lotus Sūtra* is called “Medicinal Herbs.”)

The white guy in the sport coat was the first Buddhist I ever met. I guess I was expecting something more exotic, perhaps a shaved head and long robes. I didn’t know that a Buddhist could look like Willy Loman, carrying in his cases a cabinet with a Buddha inside. I now know that the incomprehensible words that he was chanting were *Namu myōhō renge kyō*, Japanese for “Homage to the *Lotus Sūtra*.” Millions of Americans would hear Tina Turner chant the phrase on *Larry King Live* on February 21, 1997.

This is the second book I have written for Princeton's Lives of Great Religious Books series. The first was about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Despite its great fame, I was disturbed at the thought that it would be the only Buddhist text represented in the series. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, at least the famous version published in 1927, is something of a sham. It is a partial translation of a relatively obscure Tibetan work, purportedly buried in Tibet in the eighth century and unearthed in the fourteenth century, with that translation buried under all manner of odd introductions, notes, and appendices by an American Theosophist named Walter Evans-Wentz (1878–1965), who named it *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (it is called something completely different in Tibetan) because it reminded him somehow of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. For Princeton's prestigious series, I felt that something more authentically Buddhist was required, and thus I agreed to write a book about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* if I could choose another Buddhist text to write about as well.

The press agreed, as long as the text was sufficiently famous. What to choose? Buddhism has a huge canonical literature, but it does not have a single signature text, no *Daode Jing*, no *Analects of Confucius*, no *Bhagavad Gītā* (and how these became signature texts is something explored in the volumes devoted to them in Princeton's series). Apart from Evans-Wentz's eccentric work, only three Buddhist texts are known by English titles: the *Heart Sūtra*, the *Diamond Sūtra*, and the

*Lotus Sūtra*. The first is one page long and certainly rich in meaning, but I had already written two books about it. The *Diamond Sūtra* is notoriously difficult to speak about because it is in many ways a critique of speech; as one scholar has noted, when the Buddha's interlocutor Subhūti sheds tears of joy at the Buddha's words, the modern reader sheds tears of despair trying to understand what the Buddha means.

The books in Princeton's series are meant to be reception histories of classic texts, accounts of their lives and afterlives. From this perspective, the *Lotus Sūtra* seemed the obvious choice: composed in India, making its way to China and then to Japan, its influence and importance building along the way, the first Buddhist sūtra to be translated from Sanskrit into a European language (French in 1844). It was the first Buddhist sūtra to appear in an American publication (in Boston, also in 1844), where we read, "The book, from which the following extracts are taken, is one of the most venerated, by all the nations, which worship Buddha, and shows very clearly the method followed by the Sage who bears this name." In many ways, it is far more approachable than the *Heart* or the *Diamond*; its philosophical content is small compared with those two perfection of wisdom sūtras, and, unlike them, it is filled with parables.

As I look back on my insistence that Princeton include an authentic Buddhist text in its series, I see now that I chose a text that is obsessed with the question of authenticity, above all, the question of its own

authenticity. Let us consider its title. The Sanskrit title is *Saddharmapunḍarīka Sūtra*, literally, “The Discourse on the White Lotus of the True Doctrine.” It is a loaded title. The more common word for “lotus” in Sanskrit, *padma*, appears in many Buddhist titles and names. Here, however, we have the white lotus, the *punḍarīka*, the best of lotuses and a symbol of particular purity in Indian literature. The term *dharma*, notoriously difficult to translate but often meaning the teachings of the Buddha, is among the most ubiquitous in Buddhist literature. Here, however, we have *saddharma*, the “true doctrine.” Because the term *dharma* is shared with other Indian religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhists sometimes used the term *saddharma* to distinguish their dharma, the true dharma, from the dharma of non-Buddhist Indian schools. Here, however, as we shall see, the term *saddharma* seems to be used to distinguish the *Lotus Sūtra* from all other previous teachings of the Buddha.

Finally, it is a sūtra. The term *sūtra* literally means “thread” in Sanskrit. By extension it means an aphorism or rule and works in which those aphorisms are collected, often ascribed to a particular founder of a tradition. Thus, in Buddhism, the sūtras are the discourses of the Buddha (often much longer than aphorisms). However, we know that nothing that the Buddha taught was committed to writing until some four centuries after his death, making it difficult to know what constitutes an authentic sūtra. The early tradition

considered as the authentic word of the Buddha those discourses recited by the Buddha's attendant Ānanda at the council that was convened shortly after the Buddha's death. But the first accounts of this event (which is likely mythological) do not provide a list of titles. In the first centuries after the Buddha's passing, various Buddhist schools arose, with overlapping but not identical canons. Some four centuries after the Buddha's death, a new genre of texts (written rather than only recited) began to appear in India, a corpus that would come to be called the Mahāyāna sūtras—the discourses of the “great vehicle”—works that offered a sometimes radical reinterpretation of buddhahood and of who will follow the path to its attainment. The authenticity of these works as the word of the Buddha was rejected by many Buddhist schools in ancient India, earning them the pejorative epithet “Hīnayāna” or “base vehicle” from the proponents of the Mahāyāna. Modern scholars agree that, although the Mahāyāna sūtras purport to be the words of the Buddha, they were composed long after his death. Still, because the Mahāyāna corpus is so large and so influential, especially in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet, scholars do not call these texts apocryphal, reserving that term for works yet a further remove from the Buddha: works composed beyond the borders of India that purport to be Indian works.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is one of those Mahāyāna texts, calling itself a sūtra, that is, a discourse of Śākyamuni Buddha, and devoting many of its pages to the attempt

to convince the reader of this, promising all manner of munificent rewards to those who believe and threatening all manner of misery to those who do not. But many Mahāyāna sūtras do this. Generations of readers of the *Lotus Sūtra*, especially in the West, have complained about the *Lotus Sūtra's* incessant praise of itself, so much so that it raises the question of whether the *Lotus Sūtra* is so famous because it promotes itself so well, that it is a great work because it keeps saying that it is. Yet many Mahāyāna sūtras praise themselves and extol the benefits of devotion to them, and yet none has achieved the lasting fame of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Why is the *Lotus Sūtra* so famous? This is one of the questions we will need to ponder.

It is clearly a work of high literary quality. Its authors are unknown, but they were likely highly educated Buddhist monks, fully at ease among the doctrines and tropes of Buddhism as it existed in India at the time. This is certainly part of its appeal. In addition, the *Lotus Sūtra* has, if not a plot line, dramatic movement, provided in part by its many parables but also by the dramatic scenes that occur in the text, among the most powerful in all of Buddhist literature.

At the same time, the *Lotus Sūtra* seems a perfect text for a reception history because it is obsessed about its own reception. It is like a book that responds to its reviewers within its own pages, not only answering their complaints but condemning them to hell for complaining. It seeks to proclaim a timeless truth, yet it is a historically self-conscious text that implicates

itself in history. This remarkable feature would have its own implications for the history of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, especially in Japan. And so we must ask: Can a single work be both a literary masterpiece and a polemical tract? Not wanting a text that claims to be unearthed, I chose a text filled with cracks and fissures, as if the earth had been rent by a giant pagoda breaking out from beneath the ground, as if the earth had been cracked open by thousands of princes digging themselves out of their subterranean realm.

Like all Buddhist sūtras, however, the *Lotus Sūtra* is important not only for what it says but for what it does and what can be done with it. In many ways, the *Lotus Sūtra* has been influential not so much for its semantic meaning, which for many has remained elusive. Traditional commentators have been quick to cite the Buddha's statement at the beginning of his discourse that "I have already attained the profound and subtle dharma that is incorruptible. Only I and the buddhas of the ten directions know this" (26).<sup>1</sup> We must therefore also consider the *Lotus Sūtra's* (for want of a better term) "ritual use." Again, many of these are prescribed by the sūtra itself, which repeatedly lists five pious deeds: preserving (also rendered as "keeping" and "upholding"), reading, reciting, explaining, and copying.

With this in mind, in this book I will attempt to explain the *Lotus Sūtra*, a work that seemed somehow aware of its own future, "in states unborn and accents yet unknown." Yet this explanation must be different

from what the author(s) of the sūtra intended by that term. My explanation, for example, will include the scholarly consensus that the author of the sūtra was not the Buddha or his attendant Ānanda, that the *Lotus Sūtra* was in fact composed long after the Buddha's death. From the point of view of the tradition, such a position is regarded as heretical, to be a case of "slandering the dharma." One of the violations of the bodhisattva vows is to deny that the Mahāyāna is the word of the Buddha.

Each fall for the last twenty years, I have taught a course at the University of Michigan called Introduction to Buddhism. It is a large lecture course, with some four hundred students in recent years—what is known in the trade as "a lapel mike course." One of the required books for the course is the *Lotus Sūtra*; the students read the entire sūtra. My lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* mark the beginning of the second half of the course, after the midterm. Prior to that, I have given ninety-minute lectures with the following titles: "Why Are We Here?" "The Buddhist Universe," "The Life of the Buddha," "The Four Truths," "The Order," "Nirvana," "The Veneration of the Buddha," "Women and the Dharma," "Lay Practice," and "Meditation."

Many students do not feel comfortable asking questions in a large lecture course, and so for many years I have used a sadly low-tech pedagogical tool that Jonathan Z. Smith told me about: the 3 × 5 index card. At the end of each class, the students take out a card and answer two questions: (1) What was the most

interesting thing you learned today? (2) What question would you like to ask? They put their name on the card, which I use to take attendance. I read the cards after the lecture, checking the first question to make sure that what they learned was something that I had in fact said. I also read their questions and select about ten of them, which I answer at the beginning of the next lecture as a way of providing a transition from one lecture to the next.

The lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* tend to provoke outrage. Among the things that students say they learned from lecture (despite the fact that I said nothing to this effect) are: “How one text completely changes the image of the Buddha from a truthful, good-hearted being, to a deceitful, sly teacher who lies in order to help our ignorance”; “Mahayana Buddhism makes me pretty sad. I feel like they just made up an easy way for everyone to feel special”; “Weird how so many people still practice the Mahayana since it is so outrageous and unbelievable”; “Is the rest of this class about the Mahayana teachings? It’s crazy how betrayed I feel after reading just a few chapters after about eleven lectures; can’t imagine how the arhats must have felt!”; “The *Lotus Sūtra*’s venture into the more fanciful, and supernatural, in my mind, seems to delegitimize all the basic Buddhist principles.” Among the questions they wrote on their cards were: “Why did people not turn on the Buddha after he admitted lying to them?”; “How can people accept the words of one monk who decided to write a text to

completely change Buddhism?”; “Are there any suspicions about any political or subversive motives behind the *Lotus Sūtra*?”; “It would seem that the *Lotus Sūtra* is systematically disavowing all the basic principles of Buddhism that we have been taught. What is the motive of the writers to do this?”; “If the Mahayana sutras aren’t really Buddha’s teachings, why are we learning about it?”

In the course of the chapters that follow, we will have occasion to ponder these and other questions as we follow the *Lotus Sūtra* from India, to China, to Japan, to Europe, and to America. When we consider a religious text to be divine—whether it be a book of the Bible or a Buddhist sūtra—we greatly delimit the thoughts we can think about it. There are many Buddhists today who consider the *Lotus Sūtra* to be the word of the Buddha, that is, to have been spoken by the historical Buddha. Like most scholars of Buddhism, I do not. That does not, to my mind, in any way demean the text. In many ways it exalts it. For I see the *Lotus Sūtra*, this work of such extravagant wonder and of such yearning plea, not as the product of a mind of confident omniscience and calm equanimity, long liberated from the mundane, but as the product of a mind that is human, all too human, dreaming of, yet far from reaching, that state in which the dense passions of the human have been destroyed.