

THE PARABLE

A rich man's house, now in a terrible state of repair and to which there is only one narrow gate, catches on fire with all of his many children playing inside. Though the father compassionately calls to them, urging them to leave the burning house, they are too absorbed in their play to listen to these warnings. He also considers carrying them out by force, but soon realizes that this too will not work. So he tells the children that, if they go out quickly, outside the gate they will find goat-drawn carriages, deer-drawn carriages, and ox-drawn carriages that he will give them to play with.

Such rare playthings being just what they always wanted, the children rush outside, to the great joy of the father, and soon ask him for the promised carriages. Instead, because he is rich and has many of them, he decides to give each of the children a much larger and fancier carriage drawn by a great white ox. The children, having received something even better than what they had expected, are overjoyed.

The Buddha then interprets this parable for Shariputra, explaining that he, the Buddha, is much like the father in the parable, attempting to save his children from the fires of birth, old age, disease, death, grief, sorrow, suffering, and so on, from which they cannot escape by themselves because they have many attachments. He offers them the three vehicles as a way to get them through the gate, but rewards them

in the end with the Great Vehicle—an even better reward than the one promised.

COMMENTARY

Parables are metaphorical; they are analogies, but never perfect ones. This parable provides an image of four separate vehicles. But if we follow the teaching of the Sutra as a whole, the One Buddha Vehicle is not a separate alternative to other ways; it includes them. Thus, one limitation of this parable is that it suggests that the diverse ways (represented by the three lesser carriages) can be replaced by the One Way (the great carriage). But the overall teaching of the Sutra makes it plain that there are many paths within the Great Path, and the Great Path integrates them all. They are together because they are within the One Vehicle. To understand the many ways as somehow being *replaced by* the One Way would entail rejecting the ideal of the bodhisattva way (the third carriage), which the Sutra clearly never does.

What the parable stresses is the urgency of the human condition, making it necessary for the Buddha to find some way to get people to leave their play and suffering behind in order to enter the Way. The Buddha, we are to understand, has used such means, not to deceive people, but to lead them to awakening. For this, he has used a great variety of ways and means, here represented by the three carriages.

It is extremely important, I believe, to understand that the many skillful means are always within the One Buddha Way, not alternatives to it. The many skillful means are “skillful” only because they skillfully lead to the One Way, and the One Way exists only by being embodied in many skillful means. Understanding the One Way and the many skillful means as separate, alternative ways has been a great mistake, a mistake that has sometimes led to disrespect, intolerance, and disdain for others.

THE RICH FATHER AND THE POOR SON ⁶⁷

AS WE HAVE SEEN, in Chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra the parable of the three vehicles was used by the Buddha to explain why there is a diversity of Buddhist teachings and why he is now teaching the One Buddha Way. Having heard this explanation, four shravakas—Subhuti, Maha-Katyayana, Maha-Kashyapa, and Maha-Maudgalyayana—all “living a life of wisdom,” hearing from the Buddha a teaching they had never heard before, and also hearing the Buddha’s assurance of Shariputra’s eventual supreme awakening, were astonished and ecstatic with joy. In Chapter 4 of the Sutra they tell the parable of the rich father and the poor son as a way of checking out whether they have understood the Buddha correctly.¹³

THE STORY

When still a boy, a man ran away from home, only to live a life of desperate poverty, moving from place to place in search of menial work. Meanwhile his father, who had become extremely rich and powerful, searched everywhere for the lost son but could not find him.

One day the son accidentally came to the place where the father lived. He saw his father in the distance surrounded by servants and

other signs of great wealth but he did not recognize him and began to flee in fear of such wealth and power. But the father, having secretly longed for his son for many decades and wanting the son to have his inheritance, recognized the man immediately and sent a servant after him. But when the servant caught up with him, the son, fearing that he would be forced to work or even be killed, pleaded that he had done nothing wrong and fell to the ground in a faint. Seeing this, the father told the servant to douse him with cold water to wake him up, tell him he could go wherever he liked, and then leave him alone.

The son went off to another village to look for food and clothing. Later, the father secretly sent two unimposing, poorly dressed servants to go to the son and offer to hire him to work with them at double pay shoveling animal dung. To this the son agreed, and he went to work at his father's house. Later, seeing how poorly the son looked, the father disguised himself as a lowly worker, went to the son, praised his work, and promised him better wages and treatment if he would continue to work for him, explaining that as he was old he wanted to treat the man just like a son. The son was pleased, and continued to shovel dung for another twenty years, gradually becoming more confident and more trusted by the father. But still lacking self-confidence, he nonetheless continued to have a very low regard for himself and live in a hovel outside the gate.¹⁴

Eventually the rich man became ill. Knowing he would die soon, he asked the son to take charge of his various properties and businesses. As the time of his death grew near, the father called together various officials and all of his relatives and friends and servants and revealed to them that the poor man was in fact his son and would inherit all of his wealth. With such enormous wealth coming to him quite unexpectedly, the son was very amazed.

COMMENTARY

Imbedded in this story are many of the lessons that are to be found throughout the Dharma Flower Sutra. Let's look at some of them.

FAITH IN YOURSELF, FAITH IN THE DHARMA

At a meeting some time ago of the International Buddhist Congregation in Tokyo, a young woman described how, dissatisfied with faith in which she had been raised, she had searched among Christian and Buddhist traditions for an appropriate faith for herself, finally covering with some joy the importance of having faith in herself. But it is an important beginning. The poor man in this story was able to become a functioning contributor to his family and so until he gained some respect for and confidence in himself.

The Dharma Flower Sutra stresses that each of us is someone important—important to himself or herself, important to others important to the Buddha. Each of us is a person of great potential this reason we are sought after by the Buddha. The Buddha's wealth supreme awakening or enlightenment—is not something you have to earn or purchase in any way; it already belongs to you; it was yours from before your birth; it is your rightful inheritance.

Self-respect and self-confidence are primarily attitudes, types of emotional and psychological states, but they also entail respect for what has been given to you, including your body. If we eat, or drink, or take drugs to excess, we show disrespect for ourselves and devalue the Buddha of what he is trying to achieve in our lives, through us. The Buddha needs us, needs everyone. The Buddha's compassion is for all the living.

Accordingly, we should not be overly humble or servile—or allow others to be oppressed into such servility. Oppression is the worst

of evil, because it denies the buddha-nature of all creatures. It is akin to an insult to the Buddha.

Though this story does not directly advocate social responsibility, it makes evident the need for those who seek to follow the Dharma Flower Sutra to be concerned about social as well as individual evil. War, class oppression, racism, and environmental pollution are affronts to the Buddha. They are affronts to the Buddha precisely because they assault and insult the buddha-nature in people and give rise to totally unnecessary suffering.

Apart from the Buddha and blind to the Buddha Dharma, we are like someone wandering around, destitute, impoverished, without purpose, miserable. In a sense, this is the destiny of those who do not, in some way, follow the Buddha Way. This does not mean, however, that one has to be a Buddhist in the ordinary sense. To follow the Buddha is to put one's trust in and devote oneself to the happiness of others and the life of the whole. It is to share in a kind of common human faith that life is meaningful, a faith that finds expression in a variety of religious and other forms.

THE PARABLE

A poor man visiting the home of a good friend, a rich man, became drunk and fell asleep. The host, having to leave in order to take care of some business, sewed a priceless jewel into the robe of his sleeping friend and went off. After a while the poor man woke up and left. He went to another town, where he had great difficulty earning enough for sufficient food and clothing. Eventually he happened to run into his friend once again, who promptly scolded him, explained that he had given him the jewel so that he would not have to struggle so much, and called him a fool for not making use of his hidden treasure.

The Buddha, we are told, is like that rich friend. He reminds us of good roots planted long ago. An arhat is like the poor man. Being satisfied with what little he has already attained, he does not realize that in reality he is a bodhisattva who will attain supreme awakening.

COMMENTARY

The central lesson of this parable is, of course, that the greatest treasure is never far off, but intimately close to each of us. Though we may not know it, we already have it. That is, each of us has within us abilities, skills, talents, strengths, potentialities, powers, and so forth with which to do the Buddha's work, abilities that we do not yet know about and have not yet utilized.

The idea that the treasure we seek is very close may seem to contrast with the story of the fantastic castle-city discussed in the previous

chapter. In that story, the goal is both very distant and very difficult to reach. But these two stories can be understood to be in harmony: the goal is very distant in one respect and very close in another.

While the term "buddha-nature" is never used in the Dharma Flower Sutra, this is a good example of the use of the basic idea behind the concept that would be developed after the Dharma Flower Sutra was compiled. One way we can understand the term is as a kind of "power" that makes it possible for any one of us to be a bodhisattva for someone else, a strength that makes it possible for us to share in doing the Buddha's work of awakening all the living, a strength that makes it possible for us to go far beyond our normal expectations.

Buddha-nature, the potential to become a buddha, is not something we have to earn; it is something that all of us have received naturally, something that cannot be destroyed or taken away from us. It is, as the parable in Chapter 4 teaches, our inheritance; it is ours by virtue of our very existence. This is why we are taught in this chapter that our treasure is very close.

Our buddha-nature is, in one sense, part of the basis of our very existence. Nothing could be closer. On the other hand, unless we learn to make use of this ability and put it into practice in our daily lives, the goal of realizing it, of becoming a buddha, remains very distant. In light of these two views, gaining the treasure is a matter of more fully understanding and realizing something that was always within us. While our treasure is very close, that full realization and appropriation of it always remains very distant.

In a sense, a hidden treasure has no value until it is disclosed and used in some way. This is the difference in economics between investing and hoarding. If we take our savings and just stuff it in a mattress, the money doesn't "work" for us. It earns no interest or dividends, and accomplishes no ends for anyone. So it is with our abilities and talents. If we hoard them by keeping them hidden and unused, they do no good for ourselves or for others.

In this story, using the treasure clearly means using it to enjoy life. Life is difficult, but we are much freer, more able to appreciate, more able to cope with whatever difficulties life presents us if we have an appropriate attitude toward life and toward ourselves. Having a good attitude toward life, for the Dharma Flower Sutra, means seeing everything that comes to us as a gift, more especially as an opportunity, as what we call a “learning experience.” Yes, life can be very difficult, but if we approach the troubles and difficulties that come our way as opportunities for learning, we will enjoy life more fully.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the importance of helping others is often stressed. But we should know that even helping others is never *merely* helping others—it always contributes to our own enjoyment of life as well. The Dharma Flower Sutra encourages us to look for and cultivate the good both in ourselves and in others.

So what does this mean with regard to buddhas and bodhisattvas? Purna, we are told in the first section of this chapter, while seeming to be a shravaka, is actually a bodhisattva in disguise. The Dharma Flower Sutra both retains the classical meaning of bodhisattva as one who is very high in status, on the way to becoming a buddha, and it gives new meaning to the term by proposing that all are, to some degree bodhisattvas. This means that the title “bodhisattva” should be seen, not so much as a mark of status, but rather as a term used to name a kind of activity. Just as a teacher who does not teach is not really a teacher, a bodhisattva who does not do the work of the Buddha is not truly a bodhisattva. On the other hand, anyone who does do the work of the Buddha, regardless of title or status, is—to that degree—a bodhisattva. I sometimes like to say that we should regard the word “bodhisattva” not so much as a noun, but as a verb. Unfortunately, this is much easier to do in Chinese than it is in English!

Here is one version of the surprising revelation that shravakas may indeed be bodhisattvas.

Monks, listen carefully!
 Because they have learned skillful means well,
 The way followed by children of the Buddha [bodhisattvas]
 Is unthinkably wonderful.

Knowing that most delight in lesser teachings
 And are overawed by great wisdom,
 Bodhisattvas become
 Shravakas or pratyekabuddhas.

Using innumerable skillful means,
 They transform all kinds of beings
 By proclaiming themselves to be shravakas,
 Far removed from the Buddha Way.

They save innumerable beings,
 Enabling them to succeed.
 Though most people are complacent and lazy,
 In this way they are finally led to become buddhas.

Keeping their bodhisattva actions
 As inward secrets,
 Outwardly
 They appear as shravakas.

They appear to have little desire
 And to be tired of birth and death,
 But in truth
 They are purifying buddha lands. (LS 210-11)

The point is in part to emphasize the importance of embodying the Dharma in our lives, in our actions and behavior toward others. But

equally important is the idea that anyone can be a bodhisattva for us, if we are open to seeing and experiencing the other as a bodhisattva. As is so often the case, this teaching, the idea that a shravaka can be seen to actually be a bodhisattva, is both about how we should regard ourselves and about how we should regard others, an idea that will be developed and emphasized over and over again in subsequent chapters of the Dharma Flower Sutra.

We should notice that the rich friend's initial ploy doesn't really work well. Apparently he expected the poor man to realize that he had the treasure and make use of it. Yet he did not, remaining just as poor as before. Why? In this story it is simply because the poor man is foolish, too dumb to realize that the jewel had been sewn into his garment. This means, of course, that the Buddha depends on others. In this case, making use of the treasure depends on the poor man. A treasure has been given to him, but unless he himself makes use of it, it amounts to nothing.

So it is with us. We should not think that the Buddha is some kind of all-powerful god who can awaken all living beings by himself. The Buddha of the Dharma Flower Sutra, like all beings, lives interdependently with others. He needs his children, his bodhisattvas, to do his work in this world, working both for their own liberation and for the liberation of others.

Shinran, the great founder of the True Pure Land (Jodo Shin-shu) tradition of Japanese Buddhism, thought it important to say that human beings are utterly dependent on the "other-power" of the Buddha and can accomplish nothing good by their "own-power." But in the Dharma Flower Sutra we cannot find this radically dualistic distinction between the power of the Buddha and the power of others. In this Sutra, the power in us, the buddha-nature in us, is always both our own power and the power of the Buddha embodied in us.

Taking interpretation of this parable further, the idea of being given a great treasure is not only an individual matter, but something

that can be applied to human beings as a whole. The treasure is the earth, the natural environment and resources that we have inherited. Human beings have been given not only buddha-nature, but all of nature itself. The Buddha (the reality of the world) is basically generous and supportive of human life. We have inherited an incredibly rich earth. With it we are given an enormous opportunity to do good. The question is, will we recognize and appreciate how valuable this treasure is, and, if we do, how will we use this treasure given to us?

Perhaps humanity as a whole is like the poor man in the parable—still stumbling around without realizing that we have such a treasure. Perhaps humanity as a whole needs to wake up to see not only the wonderful treasure that is in us but also the wonderful treasure that is all around us.

EVEN THE LOTUS SUTRA HAS LIMITATIONS

In this chapter, as in others, when the Buddha describes the future buddha land of Purna after he has become the buddha named Dharma Radiance, he says that his land will be without women, that men will have no sexual desire, and that they will be born without having mothers. Historically, such a misanthropic attitude toward women probably reflects the experience of celibate monks living in India twenty centuries ago. Sexuality and gender has been an ongoing problem for Buddhism. This is in large part because sexual desire in men can be seen as the prime embodiment of desire and greed—everything that Buddhism, especially traditional Indian Buddhism, opposed and sought to abolish. Women were seen as the cause of men's sexual desires, and thus as embodiments of evil.

THE STORY

In the second part of the Lotus Sutra's Chapter 12, the bodhisattva Accumulated Wisdom—an attendant of Abundant Treasures Buddha, who is still sitting with Shakyamuni Buddha in his great stupa in the air—proposes to Abundant Treasures Buddha that it is time for them to return home. But Shakyamuni stops them, saying that the bodhisattva Manjushri, someone with whom they would enjoy discussing the Dharma, will soon be back, and that they should wait for him.

Soon, Manjushri emerged from the sea, paid his respects to the two buddhas sitting in the stupa, and exchanged greetings with Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva. Asked by Accumulated Wisdom how many he had led to the Way, Manjushri asked him to wait a minute to see for himself, and immediately countless bodhisattvas—who had been taught nothing other than the Dharma Flower Sutra by Manjushri—also emerged from the sea.

Then Accumulated Wisdom asked Manjushri if he had ever encountered anyone, anywhere in his vast travels, who had followed the Dharma Flower Sutra so well that they were qualified to become a buddha quickly. Manjushri replied that, yes, “there is the daughter of the dragon-king Sagara. Just eight years old, she is wise and has sharp faculties, and is well acquainted with the abilities and actions of living beings. She has mastered incantations. She has been able to receive and embrace all the profound inner core treasures preached by the buddhas, and has entered deeply into meditation and gained an understanding of all things. Within a moment, she aspired to become awakened and reached the stage of never backsliding. Her eloquence knows no bounds, and she has compassion for all the living as if they were her own children. She is full of blessings, and the thoughts in her mind and the explanations from her mouth are both subtle and great. Compassionate and respectful of others, kind and gentle, she is able to attain awakening.” (LS 251)

Accumulated Wisdom, recalling that Shakyamuni had devoted enormous time and effort to achieving awakening, expressed doubt that this girl could do so in a moment. “It’s unbelievable,” he said.

Even before he had finished saying this, however, the girl herself appeared and went over to Shakyamuni and bowed deeply before him, expressing the thought that only he could know whether or not she is qualified to attain awakening because he alone knows that she has truly heard the Dharma and will preach the way of the Great Vehicle in order to save all beings from suffering.

Shariputra then spoke to the girl, expressing conventional belief: “You think that in no time at all you will attain the unexcelled way. This is hard to believe. Why? Because the body of a woman is filthy and impure, not a vessel for the Dharma. How could you attain unexcelled awakening? The Buddha Way is long and extensive. Only after innumerable eons of enduring hardship, accumulating good works and thoroughly carrying out all the practices can it be reached.” Adding that she could never become a Brahma-king, an Indra, a Mara king, a holy wheel-rolling king, or a buddha, since they all have male bodies, he asked how she could possibly expect “in a woman’s body [to] so quickly become a buddha.” (LS 252–3)

The girl offered a valuable jewel she had with her to the Buddha who accepted it immediately. Then she asked Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom whether the Buddha had accepted the gem quickly or not. The two of them responded, “Most quickly.” And she said, “Use your holy powers to watch me become a buddha even more quickly than that!” (LS 253)

Then the whole congregation saw her suddenly change into a man, carry out all the bodhisattva practices, and go to the pure world in the South, where she sat upon a jeweled lotus flower, attained supreme awakening, acquired the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a buddha, and began to teach the Dharma all over the universe.

Shariputra, Accumulated Wisdom, and everyone else in the congregation—the bodhisattvas and shravakas, the monks and nuns, and

the human and nonhuman beings—accepted her teaching amid great rejoicing.

COMMENTARY

Taken in context, the main purpose of this story is very clear: women are as capable of becoming fully awakened buddhas as any of the monks who would have been the early hearers of the story. Later, this story would be used appropriately to say the same thing to women. As indicated in the previous chapter, Chapter 12 of the Lotus Sutra contains a message of universal salvation, a powerful reinforcement of the idea found throughout the Sutra that all living beings have within them the potential to become fully awakened buddhas.

Some have made much of the fact that the body of the girl in this story is transformed into that of a male before she becomes a buddha.²³ There are many stories in the sutras of such gender transformations. All can be seen to be reflections of a belief that a buddha must have a male body, as the thirty-two marks of a buddha always include reference to the male sex organ.

This belief that buddhas always have male bodies was seldom if ever challenged in India. It remained basically unchallenged in East Asia as well, with the remarkable exception that in Chinese culture the Indian bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who was always taken to be male, was transformed into Kwan-shih-yin (Kanzeon in Japanese),²⁴ the bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, who is both male and female and widely recognized in East Asia not only as a bodhisattva but also as a buddha. While this remarkable bodhisattva will be discussed later in this book, we would do well to recognize here that the textual basis for this understanding of Kwan-yin is Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, in which it is said that Kwan-yin can take on any form in order to help others. Thirty-three such forms are listed, the first of which is the form of a buddha.

The compilers of the Lotus Sutra no doubt assumed that Avalokiteshvara would have to be male. While today we can regret the fact that early Buddhists failed to challenge the assumption that a buddha must always have a male body, it is not surprising that this was simply assumed in this story of the dragon princess.

It is an incorrect representation of the story, however, to claim that the Sutra "insists" on such a transformation. What is insisted on is the claim that "even" a girl can become a buddha. Since by definition buddhas are male, the story simply says in one brief phrase that her body was transformed into that of a male during the process of her becoming a buddha. There is no insistence. It is simply assumed to be a necessary step in becoming a buddha.

Many generations took this story to be a proclamation that women are as capable of becoming buddhas as men. When Japan's Emperor Shomu (701-756) established a kind of national temple system throughout the country, in each district one temple was established for ten monks and another, a nunnery, for ten nuns. While the whole system was related primarily to Mahavairocana Buddha and the Flower Garland Sutra²⁵ rather than to Shakyamuni and the Dharma Flower Sutra, in the nunneries it was the Dharma Flower Sutra that was installed and recited for the protection of women, most likely because it contained the story of the dragon princess.

Today much, if not all, of the world is gradually undergoing something of a transformation with respect to what people think about gender. Women insist on equality with men, resulting in some quite remarkable changes in social structures and cultural habits in much of the world. The story of the dragon princess can be used to support the ideal of equality between men and women, as that was its obvious purpose, at least with respect to the ability to become fully awakened.

That the story retains what we see as an incorrect assumption that buddhas are always male can be used as an occasion for us to challenge our own assumptions about gender and gender roles. It is easy for us to

recognize that the assumption in the Sutra that buddhas must be male is both unnecessary and undesirable, but it is not as easy to see our own unchallenged assumptions about the nature and appropriate roles of men and women. We might even think that the assumption found in this Lotus Sutra story comes to us a gift from the Buddha—is an opportunity for us to become more awakened, especially with respect to gender issues.

In the context of the Dharma Flower Sutra, it is not surprising to find that a dragon or young person can become a buddha, but that someone can do so suddenly is quite surprising—because it goes against the Sutra's often repeated assertion that the way to becoming a buddha is long and arduous. Indeed, this is the point of the tale of the weary travelers and the fantastic castle-city in Chapter 7. This story about the dragon princess is the only place in the Dharma Flower Sutra where it is said that one can become a buddha suddenly.

At least in Japan and China, and quite likely in India as well, there was controversy over whether or not sudden awakening is possible. What we find in the Dharma Flower Sutra can be taken as another example of its tolerance of diverse views. Taken as a whole, it seems to say that becoming a buddha is normally, perhaps almost always, a long and difficult path, but that there can be exceptions. Rather than articulating this exception as a kind of doctrine, however, the Sutra simply makes it part of a story, illustrating the exception without entering into debate on the subject.

True awakening is difficult and rare; sudden awakening is much rarer still. If profound awakening happens at all, and certainly if it happens suddenly—in ourselves or in others, like those at the end of this story—we too should be amazed and grateful. But let us not suppose that there is some shortcut to true awakening through the use of drugs or some other esoteric practices. True awakening takes much time and effort.

We might also note that the sudden awakening in this story is

highly qualified by Manjushri's observations about what the dragon princess had already attained. From his description, we know that she had already become a bodhisattva who aspired to become a buddha. She had already made considerable progress on the Way and demonstrated great compassion before becoming a buddha suddenly. Thus, she was especially ready to become a buddha suddenly.

There are other elements of this story that might be held up for our own benefit. For example, like Shakyamuni Buddha, the girl is the child of a king. She leaves a palace—which in the Dharma Flower Sutra is always a symbol of luxury and comfort—in order to come into the world to help others by becoming a buddha. Princes and princesses are supposed to stay in their palaces, where all is clean and comfortable, and settle down with another prince or princess to produce royal heirs. Not many of us live in palaces today.

Or do we? The palace can be understood as the comfort and security of tradition and conventional wisdom. Like Shakyamuni himself, the dragon princess, this buddha-in-the-making, is a convention-breaker who does the unexpected. Imagine how shocked the venerable Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom, both presumably monks well up in years, must have been when this young girl turned to them, demanded to know whether or not her jewel had been accepted by the Buddha quickly, and instructed them to watch her. This is not the way young girls are supposed to behave toward their elders. It was not the way things were done then; it is not the way they are done now.

Like many great religious leaders, this girl is highly unconventional. Jesus, Saicho, Dogen, Nichiren, Gandhi, and even Nikkyo Niwano were not conventional either. We have heard the story about Shakyamuni Buddha leaving his father's palace and his own wife and child so often that we forget that that story too is about shockingly unconventional behavior. For that matter, virtually the whole story of early Buddhism is about unconventional behavior and lifestyles—a group of young men leaving comfortable homes to become wandering beggars

who encourage other young men to leave their homes and families to take up a life of begging!

The dragon princess resorts to unconventional behavior not to be unconventional but to make a point. She needed to get the attention of these men in order to teach them something. In other words, she was unconventional, but unconventional for the purpose of helping others not for the sake of unconventionality. Maybe the world needs more people who are willing and able to be unconventional for the sake of helping others.

We are told at the end of the story that, as a buddha, the dragon princess began teaching the Dharma all over the universe. But it is also relevant that in her very being and in her actions in the process of becoming a buddha, she teaches the Dharma to Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva. And this is witnessed by the whole congregation, which in turn is then taught by the girl who has become a buddha. And we hearers or readers of the story are also offered an opportunity to witness this whole scenario. In this way the dragon princess is our teacher, one who leads us to buddha-wisdom. It is important to see that she can be a teacher of the Dharma and a buddha for us even during the process of becoming a buddha. In challenging Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom Bodhisattva, though still in the body of a girl, she was already a buddha—even though they cannot yet see that.

The idea of seeing a buddha is almost a constant theme in the Dharma Flower Sutra. At times, *seeing* a buddha can be equated with *being* a buddha. As we saw in the story of the Buddha and Devadatta, at least one of the things that make the Buddha a buddha is his ability to see the buddha in others. So it is not insignificant that toward the end of this story the dragon princess tells Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom that they should watch with their supernatural ability to see. Such holy powers are nothing less than the fantastic powers of the human imagination. Shariputra and Accumulated Wisdom learned

to see what others could not see—a mere girl becoming a buddha—because they were enabled to transcend their normal vision and their normal, conventional ways of thinking. They were transformed by the dragon princess into men who could see like a buddha, men who could see the buddha in the girl.

That is what we are asked to do by the Dharma Flower Sutra—to use our imagination to see further and deeper than we have ever seen before: to see the buddha in others, to see the positive potential in others—both their inherent good and their good for us. It is seldom if ever easy to do this, but we already have such holy powers, and they can be awakened through the story of the dragon princess—a girl who becomes a buddha and who is a buddha in the process of becoming a buddha.

If, as many scholars believe, Chapter 12 with its story of the dragon princess was added to the Dharma Flower Sutra relatively late, this chapter would have been needed to make it quite clear that becoming a bodhisattva and eventually achieving full awakening is not something limited to men.

Not only Mahaprajapati and Yashodhara but Mahaprajapati's six thousand nun followers as well, who are to become great Dharma teachers, gradually fulfilling the bodhisattva way, are assured of reaching supreme awakening as buddhas. In contrast with the story of the dragon princess, there is no mention of these nuns having to become male. Clearly, as Dharma teachers and bodhisattvas at least, they are female.

This teaching of universal salvation, of the potential in all living beings to become buddhas, is always also about us, the hearers and readers of the Dharma Flower Sutra. The focus of the chapter is the question of how the Dharma will survive in a hostile world without Shakyamuni Buddha to teach it. The answer is that it is a responsibility of bodhisattvas to teach and proclaim the Dharma everywhere. Among such bodhisattvas are women. This means that anyone can grow spiritually through encountering women and that one can meet the Buddha in a woman. This was very important in the development of Buddhism in China, and subsequently in the rest of East Asia, as it fostered the growth in devotion to Kwan-yin, in which the Buddha is encountered in female form.

That the women in this story are both nuns should not, of course, be taken to mean that nuns are the only women in whom we can meet the Buddha. Mahaprajapati is a nun, but she is also Shakyamuni's aunt, and Yashodhara is a nun, but she is also Shakyamuni's wife and the mother of their son, Rahula. The fact that they have had non-monastic roles is important. It means that while we can see the potential to be

Females in Buddhism

a buddha in nuns, this potential and power can also be seen in aunts and mothers, and, of course, in any woman.

We might wonder why these two women come last in a succession of assurances of becoming a buddha. Perhaps it was to give them a special place, but more likely it has to do with the enormous importance in the Sutra of Chapter 10, "Teachers of the Dharma."

In earlier chapters of the Sutra various shravakas, beginning with Shariputra, are assured of becoming buddhas in the future. This is brought to a kind of conclusion in Chapter 9, in which Ananda and Rahula and two thousand shravakas are given assurance of becoming buddhas.

Then Chapter 10 opens with the Buddha expressing as fully as possible the central theme of the Dharma Flower Sutra. "Do you see in this assembly," he says to Medicine King Bodhisattva, "the innumerable gods, dragon kings, satyrs, centaurs, ashuras, griffins, chimeras, pythons, humans and nonhumans, as well as monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, those who seek to become shravakas, those who seek to become pratyekabuddhas, and those who seek the Buddha way? I assure all such beings... that if they hear a single verse or a single phrase of the Wonderful Dharma Flower Sutra and respond in joy even for a single moment, they will attain supreme awakening." (LS 225)

Then he goes on to say that after his extinction "if there is anyone who hears even a single verse or a single phrase of the Wonderful Dharma Flower Sutra, and responds in joy for even a single moment, I assure that one also of supreme awakening." Further, he says, if anyone receives and embraces, reads, recites, explains, or copies even a single verse of the Wonderful Dharma Flower Sutra, or looks upon it with reverence as if it were the Buddha himself, or makes any kind of offering to it, or even shows reverence toward it by putting their palms together, they have already worked to fulfill their great vow under many millions of buddhas. And he says to Medicine King Bodhisattva

that if anyone asks him what sort of living beings will become buddhas in the future, he should show them that such good sons and daughters will become buddhas. Anyone who shows devotion to the Lotus Sutra should be honored by the whole world. Offerings should be given to them as they are to buddhas, as they are great bodhisattvas.

If anyone after the Buddha's extinction, the Buddha says to Medicine King, "is able, even in secret, to teach to one person even one phrase of the Dharma Flower Sutra, then you should understand that they are emissaries of the Tathagata, sent by the Tathagata to do the work of the Tathagata. How much more true this is of those who teach this Sutra everywhere for others before great crowds of people!" (LS 225-26)

It would be difficult to be any clearer than this: anyone is capable of receiving and embracing the Sutra and of teaching it to others. With this clearly established as the teaching of the Dharma Flower Sutra, the reader should be prepared for Chapter 13 and its emphasis on nuns and women as bodhisattvas. In Chapter 13, it is said that the two nuns are to become "Dharma teachers." In no previous occurrence of the Buddha giving assurance to someone of their becoming a buddha was this done.

We might wonder also about the initial reluctance of the Buddha to admit women into the monastic community. Undoubtedly there was some tension in the early Buddhist community of monks between two matters: on the one hand is the teaching that all are equal in that all are bodhisattvas with the potential of becoming buddhas, and on the other hand is the reality of sexual desire in monks who had renounced their sexuality. The reality of the monks' desire and consequent disrespect for women did not go away, but by admitting women into the Sangha as nuns, the teaching won out.

UPHOLDING THE SUTRA

The Dharma Flower Sutra makes frequent reference to "upholding" the Sutra. What does it mean to "uphold" the Sutra? The Chinese

THE PARABLE

Once upon a time there was a wise and good doctor with many sons. One day, after the father had left home on business, the sons unknowingly drank some poison that they had found in the house. Returning home, the father found the children writhing on the floor, sick from the poison. By that time, some of them had completely lost their minds, while others were not yet so seriously affected.

Seeing that the father had come back, the sons were very happy and begged him to cure them of the poison. The father consulted his books, prepared an appropriate medicine, and urged the sons to take it to free themselves from their illness, suffering, and agony. The sons who had been least affected by the poison saw right away that the medicine was good for them, took it, and were immediately cured. Others, however, were further gone and could not see that the medicine would help them, and so refused to take it.

The father, realizing this, decided to devise a way to reach them and get them to take the medicine. He told them that he was getting old and would soon die, but was leaving a good medicine for them, with the recommendation that they take it. Then he went away again, and sent back a messenger with news that he had died.

The sons, hearing that the father had died, felt lonely, deserted, and helpless. "If our father were alive he would have been kind to us, and would have saved us. But now he has abandoned us and died in a distant land. We think of ourselves as orphans, with no one to rely on." (LS 295) But this grief caused them to come to their senses, whereupon they realized that the medicine would indeed be good for them, took it, and were completely cured. Learning that his sons had recovered, the father returned home.

COMMENTARY

The physician-father, of course, represents the Buddha, and his supposed death is like the Buddha's entry into final nirvana, his human death. In reality, though, the Universal Buddha, the loving father of the world who is working even now to save all from suffering, did not die. The Buddha's death and entry into final nirvana, like the physician-father's report of his own death, is a story told in order to get people's

attention, to get them to wake up and take greater responsibility for their own lives.

One other lesson we might see is that the same medicine is not always good or equally effective for all. Some of the children are immediately cured by the father's medicine; others are not because they don't take it. This medicine is like the rain of the Dharma in Chapter 5, the same rain that goes everywhere to nourish all kinds of plants, but is received differently because people are different in their abilities, in what they like and dislike, and in their backgrounds. In other words, Buddha-medicine needs to be different for different people. What is important is to discern what medicine will actually work for someone. The medicine prepared for and given to the children is not really medicine at all for them until they actually take it. A medicine that is not taken, no matter how well prepared and no matter how good the intentions of the physician, is not effective, not skillful, not yet really medicine.

The same is true of the Buddha Dharma. It has to be taken or embraced by somebody, has to become real spiritual nourishment for someone, in order to be effective. Again, this is why in the Dharma Flower Sutra teaching is always a two-way relationship. The Dharma is not the Dharma until it is received and embraced by someone. And, of course, people are different—so the Dharma has to be taught in a great variety of ways, using different stories, different teachings, poetry as well as prose, and so on.

The same is true of religious practices. For some Buddhists, meditation is effective; for others, recitation; for others, careful observance of precepts; for still others, sutra study; and so on. It is through an ample variety of teachings and practices that the Dharma has been effective and can be effective still. If we insist that there is only one proper way to practice Buddhism, it would be as if the physician in this story decided to let the children die because they did not immediately take the medicine he had offered.

A closely related idea is that even the most heavily poisoned can be saved—though saving them may require more wisdom, more effort, and more creativity. The father in this parable does not give up just because at first he does not succeed. Though the idea of universal salvation—the idea that all are capable of becoming a buddha—is certainly not unique to the Dharma Flower Sutra, it is central to the teachings of the Sutra, and is taught and suggested there in a great many ways. No doubt one of the reasons for the near extinction of the doctrine that there are beings with absolutely no possibility of awakening in them, who are, therefore, beyond hope of any kind of salvation—the so-called *icchantika*³¹—has been the enormous popularity of the Dharma Flower Sutra in East Asia. Under the influence of this Sutra and other teachings, the universality of buddha-nature won out over the idea that some people are beyond any possibility of awakening.

Though he does not appear in the Lotus Sutra, Medicine (or Healing) Buddha (Yakushi Nyorai in Japanese, Yao-shi Ju-lai [Yāoshī Rúlái] in Chinese, Bhaiṣajya-guru in Sanskrit) is very popular in East Asia as one who is prayed to for long life, and who cures people of illness—including disease and ignorance. He is often portrayed as one of a trio of buddhas along with Shakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha. Many sutras are dedicated to him, including an entire sutra dedicated to his vows. Yet in this story it is not Medicine Buddha but Shakyamuni Buddha who is portrayed as a medicine buddha, as one who has profound knowledge of medicine and seeks to cure those who have become deranged by the poisons of the world. This is one reason why these three buddhas—Shakyamuni Buddha, Medicine Buddha, and Amida Buddha—are often conflated, or integrated, in the minds and hearts of ordinary Buddhists in East Asia. Shakyamuni himself is a medicine buddha, a healing buddha.

We should notice that, as in the parable of the burning house of Chapter 3 of the Sutra, the dangers—the fire and many other terrible

things in Chapter 3 and the poison in Chapter 16—are found in the fathers' houses. Some have raised questions as to why the Buddha would be so careless as to have such a fire-hazard of a house or why he would leave poison lying around in a house full of children. This kind of question probably presupposes that the Buddha is somehow all-powerful and creates and controls the world. But that is not a Buddhist premise. In the Dharma Flower Sutra the point of having the danger occur in the Buddha's home is to indicate a very close relationship between the Buddha and this world. The world that is dangerous for children is the world in which the Buddha—like all of us—also lives.

While Medicine Buddha is the Buddha of the East, just as Amida Buddha is the Buddha of the West, Shakyamuni Buddha is the Buddha of this world in which suffering both has to be endured and can be. He is, in other words, our Buddha in a special way. Because he is not all-powerful, and even suffers himself, he can understand the sufferings of others, be compassionate toward them, and offer wise and compassionate help, just like a wise and good physician. Thus Shakyamuni is our Medicine Buddha, the Medicine Buddha of this world.

The parables in the Dharma Flower Sutra do not say that the fathers created the burning house or the poison found in the home of the physician. Shakyamuni Buddha has inherited this world, or perhaps even chose to live in this world, in order to help the living. The dangers in this world are simply part of the reality of this world. Indeed, it is because of them that good medicine and good physicians are needed here.

In both of these stories of a father and his children, and in the parable of the rich father and poor son (as well as in other stories in the Dharma Flower Sutra), it is important to recognize that the father *helps* the children, *facilitates* the liberation of the children—he does not, and indeed cannot, somehow rescue them by force. Nor does he

save them by demanding their obedience; he does not set up laws and punish offenders. Rather, he skillfully creates a situation in which his children are encouraged to save themselves. The important lesson here is, of course, that we too need to recognize and lead others to recognize that while we have all been offered good medicine by the Buddha, while always and everywhere we are being helped by the Buddha, still, we too have to save ourselves. Neither Shakyamuni Buddha nor Medicine Buddha nor any other buddha will do it for us; no one will carry us out of the burning house or force us to take our medicine. We too have to be finally responsible for our own actions, for our own way of life, for our own health and salvation.

The Buddha has come into the world of suffering and suffers with the living beings of this world. Like others, he participates in the creation of the world at every moment. He does so by being a teacher and medicine giver, not by being a kind of external, unilateral power. Above all, the Buddha is a teacher. And it is precisely in reference to his being a teacher that bodhisattvas are so frequently referred to in the Dharma Flower Sutra as children of the Buddha. Those whose lives are shaped by the teachings of the Buddha, by the Buddha Dharma, have been created as much by the Buddha's words as by their biological parents. But, like normal parents, the Buddha does not have absolute power over his children. Like the father in the parable of the rich father and poor son in Chapter 4, the Buddha longs for his children to be ready to receive their inheritance from him, his great wealth of the Dharma.

The Buddha can be called the loving father of all, not because he has complete power over others, but precisely because he does not. Far from demanding that human beings be obedient to him, the Buddha challenges us to enter into and take up the way of the bodhisattva, a way to which we can be led but cannot be forced to enter. Like the poor son in Chapter 4, we may need encouragement in order to learn gradually to accept responsibility for the responsibilities we

have inherited, for the buddhas' business, or, like the weary travelers in Chapter 7, we may need a resting place, even an illusory one, in order to pursue the valuable treasure in our own lives, but finally it is we ourselves who have to be responsible.

Various reasons are given in the Sutra as to why the Buddha has announced his entry into final nirvana when actually he is still alive in this world. For example: "If the Buddha lives for a long time in this world, people of little virtue will not plant roots of goodness, and those who are poor and of humble origins will become attached to the five desires and be caught in a net of assumptions and false views. If they see that the Tathagata is always alive and never extinct, they will become arrogant and selfish or discouraged and neglectful. Unable to realize how difficult it is to meet him, they will not have a respectful attitude toward him." (LS 293)

It is useful to understand these terms through the vehicle of the parables. The children in the parable of the burning house are too absorbed in their play to notice what is going on around them, including their father's attempts to warn them of the dangers. The son in the parable of the rich father and poor son is simply lacking in self-confidence and self-respect. The children in this parable are stricken by poison. All are in need of help and guidance, but what they need guidance for is to accept greater responsibility for the direction and quality of their own lives. In this way, they can, perhaps only very gradually, become bodhisattvas, and take responsibility for doing the Buddha's work in this world.

And yet, even though stories have been told about the death of the Buddha, even now the Buddha is not really dead. He is still with us, alive in this world, living the bodhisattva way, doing the bodhisattva work of transforming people into bodhisattvas and purifying buddha lands. "From the beginning," he says, "I have practiced the bodhisattva way, and that life is not yet finished..." (LS 293)

When the Dharma Flower Sutra says that the Buddha is some-

how embodied or represented in all directions throughout time and space, it is not claiming that the Buddha is somehow beyond time and history—in fact, it is saying something that is nearly the opposite: namely, that no matter where we go, whether on foot or by spaceship, and no matter when in our lives, whether celebrating our eighteenth birthday or lying on our deathbed, there is no place and no time in which the Buddha is not available to us.

The father returns home after the children have been shocked into taking the medicine and have recovered. The children are able to see him once again. By taking good medicine, the Dharma, people are able to see the Buddha, even though he died some twenty-five hundred years ago. To incorporate the Dharma into one's life is to be able to see the Buddha. The Buddha can be found in anybody and anything at all. This is what it means for the Buddha to be universal: he is to be found whenever and wherever we look for him.

Chapter 16 ends with an interesting and important verse, spoken by the Buddha:

I am always thinking:
 "How can I lead all the living
 To enter the unexcelled way
 And quickly perfect their Buddha-bodies?" (LS 299)

The Buddha's purpose is to lead the living to enter the unsurpassed way and quickly take on the body of a buddha, embody the Buddha. The Chinese verb that I have here translated as "perfect" might more literally be rendered as "fulfill" or "realize." The point is that it is something we *do* or *can do*. It is an activity, not a dead end. It is an opportunity more than an achievement. The purpose of the Dharma, in other words, is to lead people to act like buddhas, that is, to be *doers* of the bodhisattva way, and, in this sense, the wider purpose is to enable each of us to be the Buddha in the world for anyone to see. When we

do that, when we make it possible for others to see the Buddha, we ourselves will be able to see countless buddhas, not only when we are dreaming, but even when we are most awake.

By embodying the Buddha in our own lives through living the bodhisattva way, we give life to the Buddha in the present. In a sense, we are creating the Buddha, contributing to the shaping of the life that is the ongoing life of the Buddha.