

The Lotus: A symbol of Buddhist Philosophy in the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra

Nguyen Ngoc Tho

Ph.d Research scholar in Mahayana Buddhist Studies, Centre for Mahayana Buddhist Studies, India

Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur-522510, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract: *The Lotus Sutra, the Lord Buddha used the lotus as an example for the "Wonderful Dharma". The Wonderful Dharma is "One vehicle" and "One vehicle" is Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is the enlightenment that is inherent to all beings. However, all beings are drifting in the muddy of samsara, but Buddhahood in them not only does not lose, but it is not polluted. When conditions are sufficient, that Buddha-nature will arise and attain enlightenment. Also, such as a lotus flower, though submerged in mud, when enough condition and timely, will bloom a pure, immaculate fragrance. Therefore this sutta used the Lotus as an example for "One vehicle" morality or Buddha-nature.*

1. Introduction

The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra (Lotus sutra) uses the Lotus as a symbol. Why? Because the Lotus is a philosophical symbol, symbolising purity. Lotus brings moral values, purity and holiness, the maintenance and development of Buddhist Dharma, and wisdom leading to Nirvana. The Lotus is the most positive and typical engaged image. There are few flowers in the world with more noble qualities like Lotus. Therefore, Buddhism likens it to the qualities of liberated practitioners.

Especially, the lotus became a symbol of Buddhist philosophy and philosophical art in Eastern. It symbolises mystical beauty, fanciful, deep thoughts.

In Vietnamese art, the lotus image is sculpted from bas-reliefs, stone pedestals, Buddha pedestals to ceramics, and decorative motifs. The lotus has entered into folk songs, proverbs, and oral traditions, which are the harmony of Buddhist philosophy and Vietnamese social philosophy:

“The lotus bloomed in the red-and-white pond,
The mud is not infected, but the flowers are fresher,
The body is straight, looking empty, mirror full of beads,
The same is true for spiritual practice”.

Lotus is an extraordinary flower; its high nature is superior to other flowers. The life of the Buddha from the time he was born until his passing away is always associated with the lotus. Therefore, the lotus symbolises liberation in Buddhism. When Buddha was born, he walked on the lotus seven steps. When the Buddha spread to Mahakassapa, he also held a lotus. So the Buddha is always respected and seated on the lotus seat.

We also know that Lotus is a feature that most Buddhist sutras: The Theravada and Mahayana traditions mention. An important Mahayana Sutra, which most Buddhists recite, not only reciting but also studying and practising, is the Lotus Sutra.

In beyond, the Lotus is also symbolized in other areas of cultural characteristics of each nation according to

Buddhism. Especially for Asian Buddhist countries such as namely China, Vietnam, Japan, etc... Lotus flowers are displayed in temples or through flag badges or other badges of some Buddhist associations. Like the Vietnamese Buddhist Family Association. And among the Buddhist sects, there was a sect take Lotus to name, that is, the Pure Land sect, also known as the Lotus sect.

According to the Lotus Sutra, "Wonderful Dharma" is the Knowledge of the Buddha that has available to every being, also known as the pure Dharmakaya or Buddha-nature. If the person realizes that the Buddha's Knowledge is not stuck in the mistreatment between the two parties of people. Lotus is a Metaphor image; for Buddha's knowledge is like a lotus.

Thus, let us generalise how important a Lotus image is in Buddhist in its depths. Therefore, we would like to briefly explain through some typical characteristics that are implicit in Buddha teachings, because the lotus has the following features such as:

The virtue of Uncontaminated

Although the Lotus grows from the mud, its properties still don't smell the reek of mud. Folk-Songs of Vietnam talk about this uncontaminated characteristic:

“In pond what beautiful with like lotus,
The leaf green, flower white, and yellow pistil,
Yellow pistil, flower white, and leaf green,
Nearly mud that does not stink of mud.”

Although the Lotus live in the mud for many days, it still waited for the day to rise from the water to flower and then show off the fragrance, its radiant fragrance throughout the sky. We see nothing between the mud and flowers. Mud is the symbol of delusion, and the Lotus represents purity. This, to express the profound meaning that the Bodhisattva, Buddhas were born, they are still active in the flow of life, but they are never uncontaminated. Living in the world is uncontaminated.

On the contrary, we are always incited by the unenlightened mind. We are often contaminated by objects from the

five aggregates. Although each of us has this uncontaminated Lotus. The Lotus is a metaphorical symbol for Buddhahood in each of us. That Buddha-nature is uncontaminated because of its pure and clear nature. But because we follow the line of ignorance of karma, we create many sins and then become caught up in the pollution of mundane, and we are living in suffering.

The virtue of Purifying nature

Purifying nature is to make the water clean. A unique feature is that where a lotus grows, the water will never be dirty. Therefore, when we pick a Lotus, we do not need to wash it, because it does not stick to the mud. Because of its nature of purifying nature. This is to say that the symbolic meaning that, where there are Buddhas, Bodhisattvas are born, that place will bring sentient beings to have a serenity and peaceful security

On the contrary, where there are evil people, there will certainly be many troublesome. This purifying characteristic, other flowers are not. This characteristic, if we apply it in real life, is also very beneficial. Why? Because this feature helps us to eliminate contaminations, our clear lake will be clean. There is no contamination; of course, we will have peace and happiness immediately.

The virtue of Patience

As we all know, the Lotus tree does not sprout from seed but the Lotus tree sprout from its roots. The Lotus has patience character marvellous. Its roots stay in the mud for a long time to wait when the conditions are fully converged, and it will germinate immediately. That waiting, that is the virtue of patience. This quality is essential in our daily lives. Those who have this quality of endurance, when they go out to do something, they will certainly achieve success. Otherwise, it is difficult to achieve.

Sometimes, in life, something very small happens, we do not have the patience to overcome it, when big things come, how can we overcome them? In all our work, we want good results, of course, we must have this patience. If not, then it is difficult to succeed in any field. Therefore, the virtue of patience, which is a necessary and important quality in daily life, is like a lotus rise, bring a fragrant flavour to life.

The virtue of the complete combination

This virtue of complete combination especially appears only in lotus. Because the lotus has petals, it encloses a round lotus mirror inside. This is the typical image for the nature of the complete combination, the availability of each person. The lotus, from blooming to dying, it is not damaged by the bees of a bee, unlike other flowers that are found by the bee to come to the beans and suck the pistil. This, to say the nature of full enlightenment, no worries, without any scenes, can pollute it.

The virtue of clear and fresh

Usually, flowers bloom in the spring season, because the spring season is fresh weather, and, they cannot flourish in autumn or winter. Because of the autumn is a season with drizzle, while in the winter season it is cold. Therefore, not suitable for the appearance of flowers.

Other than other flowers, lotus bloom in Summer, this is a hot season. This, to express the meaning of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, born in the world of Five turbidities, where sentient beings are full of afflictions, sufferings, they bring the water of Sweet dew, compassion, to cool all people.

The summer is hot, but the lotus is still sprouting up, to say that, even though we live in the firehouse of the three realms, we are burned by the lustful fire of desire, hatred, ignorance, but we still try to persevere patiently and endure, to overcome and overcome. At the same time use water of right Dharma, to cool our mind.

The virtue of upright

The virtue of upright: is the showing for the upright body. The Lotus flower grows, it has an upright body. This, to represent: "people who practice religion, body and mind are always upright".

Vimalakirti Sutra has the saying: "the straight mind is a Bodhimandala (a holy site)". Whether living in any favourable or opposite situation or wherever our mind is upright, that is, we don't think the two sides: yes, no, right, wrong, and so on even at the market, we make that place become the Bodhimandala. The Bodhimandala is a pure place. Thus, righteous virtue is the virtue that Buddhists need to apply in practice in real life, then we have the benefit, like a lotus growing from the mud straight up and then showing incense and blooming.

The virtue of emptiness

The lotus is upright, but its intestines are empty. This particular point to express a very profound meaning that is Spirituality practitioner requires the mind of Joyful giving. These two qualities Bodhisattva always practice. When it comes to virtue of Joyful giving, we immediately think of Maitreya Bodhisattva.

Maitreya, sitting with a big belly,
How much dust clinging, then falls,
Even though life, full or lost,
Always have a calm smile.

Eyes seeing sharp are seeing like emptiness,
The ear hears the sound, listen then emptiness,
Steadfastly quietly a mind,
Gently, we step, within the life.

Flowers and fruit simultaneously

Usually other flowers, when the wither of flowers, then become fruiting and appearing seeds. On the contrary, the lotus is not like that. If the lotus blossomed, there was seed-pod and seeds simultaneously. It is cause and effect simultaneously. This, it is meaning of a philosophy life; the Cause and the effect are never different. The Cause and the effect are like as the shape and shadow, how it the shape, the shadow like that.

People think that lotus flowers are always associated with Buddhist philosophy. Because among flower had fruit, Buddhism still teaches all beings to believe in the cause and the effect to build a moral life. The lotus symbolizes the meaning of the philosophy of "cause and effect". This philosophy is a truth, if we want to be happy and free all suffering, then we need to practice the philosophy of cause and effect, that is a Buddhist philosophy.

Therefore, in order for our life to be peaceful, fresh like a lotus flower, we should remember the cause and effect philosophy and practising virtue. It will bring benefits to ourselves and others. We will surely have happiness in our present lives, without having to spend time and effort searching elsewhere. Nirvana or suffering, ultimately existence our mind only.

2. Conclusion

Above, we present an overview of the characteristics of the Lotus. The meaning of the lotus is profound, and can not explain all meaning of the Lotus. However, through these typical features, we have also understood a part about the philosophical value and symbolized lotus image in Buddhism doctrine.

We should contemplate the lotus, in remembrance of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas, to remind our mind that is pure as a lotus. And to see such a beautiful lotus, but finally withered; my body too, that is the impermanent philosophy. We also have the lotus contemplation, to see that the lotus dedicates its fragrance to life, unpolluted before all things and phenomena; from which we develop loving-kindness, not expecting to be responded, peacefully and happily beyond the afflictions such as over, losing, yes, not, passion, anger, anxiety...

Therefore the Buddha took the lotus as a symbol in Skillful means to save sentient beings. 'Means' in the Vietnamese language means direction, method, means, etc., 'skill' is easy, convenient, etc... "Skillful means" is understood and used as a skilful method, often appearing in Sanskrit texts.

In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha Shakyamuni appeared to help sentient beings to "enter Buddha's knowledge". That means that Buddha sees depending on the conditions of each person, the Buddha had used the

Skilful means as saying the three vehicles (upāya) but in fact, only the Buddhayana leads to enlightenment.

This view was clarified, by the metaphor of a father who wanted to save the giddy children, in the burning house, the father promised each child a gift, which they loved; such as car deer, car goat, car buffalo to take them to go out. Those are the methods of education, depending on the conditions to benefit sentient beings and life. That is the value of modern Buddhism. This philosophy as orientation can be applied to solve social problems. Try to help people, know the nature of phenomenal things, which are as real as the original. However it is expressed in any way, it is only a means. Therefore, people in society need to live in harmony, peace, development and progress and understand the true value of the phenomenal nature of things.

References

[1] Hurvitz, Leon, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma: The Lotus Sutra*, New York: Columbia university press, 2009.

- [2] Kern, Hendrik, trans, *Saddharma Pundarika or the Lotus of the True Law*, Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XXI, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884.
- [3] Kuo-lin, Lethcoe, ed., *The Wonderful Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra with the Commentary of Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua*, San Francisco: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1977.
- [4] Lopez, Donald, *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*, Princeton University Press, 2016.
- [5] Ikeda, Daisaku, *Lectures on "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" Chapters of the Lotus Sutra, Vol.2*,
- [6] Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Excerpted from The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*, Princeton University Press, 2016
- [7] Hirakawa, Akira; Groner, Paul (trans.; ed.), *A History of Indian Buddhism*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.
- [8] Cole, Alan Text as Father, *Paternal Seductions in Early Mahayana Buddhist Literature*, California: University of California Press, 2005.
- [9] Pye, Michael, *Skilful Means - A concept in Mahayana Buddhism*. London, UK: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, Routledge, 2003.
- [10] Tanabe, George J. Tanabe, Willa Jane, *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.
- [11] Winternitz, M., *History of Indian Literature*, Munshiram Manoharlal: Delhi, 1991.