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BOOK REVIEW

Readings of the Lotus Sūtra. Edited by Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 284 pages. Hardcover, \$79.50; paperback, \$24.50. ISBN 978-0-231-14288-5.

Taigen Dan Leighton

Institute of Buddhist Studies

READINGS OF THE LOTUS SŪTRA serves as a good, brief introduction to significant issues in the *Lotus Sutra* as a text. Even more, with impeccable scholarship throughout, it surveys major aspects of the devotion and practice based on the sutra in East Asia, where it is arguably the most important Buddhist scripture. Suitable for undergraduate classes, this is a collection of eight informative but accessible articles by leading scholars in the field of East Asian Buddhism, with useful reference material added at the end.

One notable feature of this book is that all citations for textual references to the sutra use the translation by Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (orig. pub., New York: Columbia University Press, 1976). This translation has been reprinted and updated for the occasion of this *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* volume and includes a new foreword by *Readings* co-editor Stephen Teiser. The Hurvitz translation is one of more than a half-dozen reasonably good English translations of Kumārajīva's Chinese rendition, the primary version for all East Asia. While there is an earlier, nineteenth-century English translation by H. Kern from the Sanskrit, the Hurvitz edition is the most academically careful and includes notes on the Sanskrit edition, so it is a sensible choice. Hopefully this joint publication by Columbia University Press will not dissuade readers from also referencing and comparing passages from the other available good translations, for example the excellent new translation by Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), which is less academic but more accessible

to modern general readers, and unlike Hurvitz, also includes the important though shorter so-called opening and closing sutras associated with the *Lotus Sutra*. Among its useful end-materials, *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* includes an annotated bibliography of all European-language translations of the sutra, as well as a cross-references to citations given in this book with page numbers from the Hurvitz old and new editions, the Kumārajīva version in Chinese in the *Taishō*, and the translation by Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (orig. pub., New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

The editors of *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone, have written an extremely helpful introductory article, "Interpreting the *Lotus Sūtra*." It first presents the sutra's role in setting key issues in early Indian Mahāyāna and a new vision of liberation apart from the extinction of nirvana. Teiser and Stone further describe how the sutra's bold claims fit into Mahāyāna developments in India, and even more in East Asia, including how aspects of the sutra provides a fresh context for envisioning bodhisattva practice. The article lists "central claims" of the sutra, especially the One Vehicle teaching, which might be seen as inclusive of various equally useful *upāya*, "skillful means" or "expedient devices" in Hurvitz's translation, or, by contrast as a way of championing the *Lotus Sutra* itself as preeminent. The radical promise of universal buddhahood is a key feature of the sutra, especially influential in East Asia and prefiguring the somewhat later idea of "buddha-nature." Perhaps most radical is the unique *Lotus Sutra* view of Śākyamuni Buddha as a primordial buddha with an unimaginably extensive life span. The article then provides an account of Chinese translations of the sutra and their commentaries, as well as historical movements dedicated to the sutra. This includes Chinese Tiantai, and Tendai and Nichiren developments in Japan. Modes of popular approaches to the sutra's dissemination are discussed, such as artistic copying of the text as well as miracle tales about the efficacy of its veneration.

The second article, by Carl Bielefeldt, "Expedient Devices, the One Vehicle, and the Life Span of the Buddha," informatively addresses the central issues in the sutra. He focuses on expedient devices as a problematic spiritual technique, as seen in the related One Vehicle teaching. The *Lotus Sutra* often depicts itself as the elitist, one supreme vehicle transcending the three vehicles of *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, and bodhisattva, although it instead may also be seen as inclusive, with

all three as part of the universal one vehicle. Bielefeldt interestingly highlights the distress of the original, faithful students of the Buddha, now viewed as somehow deficient. He further explores the *Lotus Sutra* Buddha's inconceivable life span. Bielefeldt considers such a Buddha not a "mere wise man and kind teacher; he is more like a supernatural ruler, a lord of hosts," and the sutra's fantastic vision as more mythic than practical. The article includes considerations of some of the sutra's parables and the history of interpretive traditions about it, but the questions raised by these key issues are complex and susceptible to a wide range of perspectives, far beyond the scope of a single introductory article.

The *Lotus Sutra's* story of the *nāga* king's daughter quickly attaining buddhahood has been a central contested narrative for Western considerations of the role of women in Buddhism. In her illuminating article, "Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*," Jan Nattier provides valuable contexts from both Indian and later Mahāyāna Buddhism for considering not only gender issues, but the question of early Buddhist roles in supporting or challenging societal hierarchy. For both gender and hierarchy the story is certainly mixed. Buddhism did overturn caste hierarchies but also gave validity to claims of karmic misdeeds in past lives of those born to lower castes, thus reinforcing social hierarchies. Furthermore, monastic hierarchies were established, though these might be considered as alternatives countering conventional social prejudices. As to gender roles, Nattier usefully mentions other exemplary Mahāyāna women but points out that they are still very much in the minority. Nattier highlights the most radical aspect of the story about the *nāga* king's daughter, simply the rapidity of attainment of buddhahood, and its wider availability, deeply subversive to the conventional Mahāyāna view of lifetimes of practice. She discusses this in its importance to East Asian devotees as a "leap of faith" providing a major shift in Buddhist understanding and at least the "potential for sweeping egalitarianism." But Nattier concludes that while the sutra does challenge conventional gender roles and hierarchy, leaving them "profoundly weakened," it still falls short of a truly inclusive view, for example with the *nāga* king's daughter's need to assume, albeit with ease, a male body before achieving buddhahood.

James Benn in "The *Lotus Sūtra* and Self-Immolation" discusses one of the aspects of Chinese veneration of the sutra probably most bizarre and uncomfortable for Westerners. Many Americans in the sixties had

as their first image of Buddhism the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc sitting upright as he immolated himself in downtown Saigon to protest the war in Vietnam. But probably still, few Westerners know about the venerable Chinese tradition described by Benn of *Lotus Sutra* devotees from the early fourth century on immolating themselves, or burning limbs or other body parts. This practice was inspired directly by the Bodhisattva Medicine King celebrated in chapter 23 of the *Lotus Sutra*. In the sutra story this bodhisattva performs this act of “auto-cremation” as an offering to buddhas, indicating his sincerity and expiating lifetimes of karma. Benn discusses the story and its traditional readings, and also describes the history of notable historical Chinese monks who performed this act in emulation of Medicine King. Of course this was never a widespread practice, but the fact that it was respected at all will surprise Westerners with customary perspectives of suicide as sin and without a belief in future lifetimes. In this article Benn, who has published a book-length treatment of Chinese self-immolation practices, also mentions some related apocryphal practices and other relevant scriptural sources besides the *Lotus Sutra*. While this material may be the most startling and unfamiliar aspect of the sutra to some readers, given its relatively minor role in the total history of *Lotus Sutra* veneration it is a somewhat surprising choice for an anthology of only eight articles surveying the text. Nevertheless, it does provide a wider viewpoint for understanding the range of historical *Lotus Sutra* devotion.

Daniel Stevenson’s excellent article, “Buddhist Practice and the *Lotus Sūtra* in China,” provides a fine survey of less extreme but more diverse (and probably more agreeable) popular Chinese practices associated with the sutra. These practices were expressions of the sutra as itself an object of devotion. Stevenson notes that they were never as formalized or institutionalized as Japanese veneration of the sutra, but discusses the development of these Chinese ritual practices directly from the sutra’s own encouragements to uphold, read and recite, expound, and copy the sutra itself. Each of these modes produced a range of ritual activity. Stevenson also mentions the rich lore of *Lotus Sutra* related miracle tales and of hagiographies of devotees of the sutra.

Willa Jane Tanabe in “Art of the *Lotus Sūtra*” discusses the rich artwork focused on the *Lotus Sutra* that developed especially in Japan but also in China and Korea. This artwork derived from the sutra’s

exhortation to copy the text and served to disseminate the sutra's stories and teachings. Tanabe provides classifications of this artwork in terms of varied genres, such as frontispiece paintings and jeweled *stūpa* mandalas, as well as for their functions. The article includes nine photographs of exemplary paintings and one sculpture. Also provided are a table listing the episodes commonly depicted from the sutra, as well as a detailed, informative table itemizing the paintings of the sutra at the important Buddhist caves at Dunhuang on the Silk Road in Western China, showing the works from each chapter of the text during seven different periods ranging from the Sui dynasty (561–618) to the Song (960–1279). The art derived from the *Lotus Sutra* both represents devotional practice and expression of the sutra's popular role, so this chapter of the book is an important aspect of describing the impact of the sutra.

Ruben Habito's informative article "Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*" discusses the expression in Nichiren Buddhism of the sutra's encouragement of its own veneration. The article starts with discussing the sutra's idea of the "value of the book," apart from what is cognitively signified in the text, as the sutra's physical scrolls are identified with the Tathāgatha's body by the sutra itself, and in the history of its veneration. Habito discusses how Nichiren most fully expressed this idea in his primary physical practice of chanting the sutra's name, "*Namu myōhō renge kyō*," along with encouraging reading of the sutra text. Nichiren is also interesting in his embrace of *mappō*, the declining final dharma age, widely believed to have already arrived in thirteenth-century Japan. Nichiren came to see this as a welcome opportunity, rather than a hindrance, as he understood himself and his followers to be those predicted in the *Lotus Sutra*, and thus themselves verification of the sutra's truth. Habito also briefly surveys some of the prominent exponents and outgrowths of the Nichiren and Japanese *Lotus* tradition after Nichiren, including in the twentieth-century nationalist Tanaka Chigaku, socialist Seno'o Girō, and the Risshō Kōseikai and Sōka Gakkai movements.

In the book's excellent final article, "Realizing this World as the Buddha Land," co-editor Jacqueline Stone starts from the sutra's promise not only of eventual buddhahood for all practitioners, but also for the enlightenment of the land or realm. She shows how this idea of the buddha's land is informed by the context of the Buddha's vast life span, or virtual omnipresence, and how it was developed in Chinese Huayan

and Tiantai and Japanese Tendai thought to subtly express the non-duality of beings and land, and of the Pure Land and this very world. Stone adeptly presents the subtlety of these ideas and their unfolding practical expression in Japan. From Tendai slogans such as, "Grasses, trees, the land itself: all will become buddhas," Japanese Buddhism implemented various means for placing the *Lotus Sutra* in various local sacred geographies and ultimately as a protector of the whole land of Japan as a nation. This leads naturally to Nichiren, with a detailed discussion of Japanese nationalism and its unfolding in modern times, and concludes with a discussion of post-war *Lotus Sutra* devotion, supplementing some of the material also discussed by Habito.

Readings of the Lotus Sūtra is not a substitute but rather a welcome adjunct to the two other somewhat comparable available anthologies of good critical articles, *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, edited by George and Willa Jane Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), and *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra*, edited by Gene Reeves (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 2002). The eleven articles in the Tanabe and Tanabe's useful volume, as its name suggests, focus on the sutra's impact in Japan, covering aspects medieval and modern, political, poetical, and artistic. It begins with two very useful surveys of the text's literary and conceptual structure and central ideas. The first article, by Shioiri Ryōdō, helpfully analyzes the traditional interpretations of the structure of the sutra especially by the great Tiantai founder Zhiyi, who divided the text into halves of cause and effect or fruit; the second article by Tamura Yoshirō provides detailed commentary on the development of central ideas, including those highlighted in the first two articles in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*. *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope* is broader in scope than either of the other two books, with thirty mostly academic and stimulating articles covering a wide range of informative topics including philosophical, social, and ethical issues. For example, topics include the relationship of the sutra to the work of Kenji Miyazawa and Tolstoy; discussions of the sutra's relationship to ecological crises, healthcare, and gender justice; and coherent contesting views of key issues such as temporality and skillful means. While probably not as approachable a volume for general readers, it contains articles by three of the contributors to *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, including co-editor Jacqueline Stone.

What *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* provides to supplement the previous two volumes is an informed and comprehensible introduction to

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the sutra, more accessible to general readers but at the same time with high quality scholarship and depth that will prepare those who might want to read further in the other anthologies. *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra* will surely enhance awareness of the *Lotus Sutra* and its importance among Western readers interested in Buddhism.