



Key concepts

- The two Mahayana texts are: the Hrdaya Sutra (Heart Sutra) and the Suddharmapundarika Sutra (Lotus Sutra).
- The Heart Sutra is dated between the first century BCE and the seventh century CE; it is part of the Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) texts and is associated with the Madhyamaka (Middle School) of Buddhism and the teachings of Nagarjuna (c 150 – 250 CE).
- The Heart Sutra – in both its long and short forms – can be seen as containing the heart of Prajnaparamita teaching and can also be seen as being at the heart of meditation for Mahayana Buddhists
- The dialogue in the Heart Sutra is between Sariputra (representative of Theravada Buddhism), and the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokitesvara ('He who hears the cries of the world'). Avalokitesvara teaches Sariputra that 'form is emptiness and emptiness is form'.
- One approach to the Heart Sutra is to see it as the logical development of two of the lakshanas: anicca (impermanence) and anatta (no permanent self).
- In addition the Heart Sutra develops the concept of pratityasamutpada (dependent origination and the interconnectedness of all things).
- One approach to the Heart Sutra is to see its teaching as: there is not anything with inherent existence on its own independent of any other thing. Since no 'thing' has svabhava (own being) then every 'thing' is sunyata (empty). This is Ultimate Truth.
- It might therefore be argued that since every 'thing' lacks its 'own being', then every 'thing' is interconnected with every 'thing' else: there are no barriers/boundaries between one 'thing' and another 'thing'.
- The Lotus Sutra is dated between the first and second century CE. It is highly regarded by Mahayana Buddhists - particularly in East Asia – and has been influential in the development of Buddhism in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and, since the late 19th century CE, in the West.
- The Lotus Sutra presents the teaching of the Buddha – however it is not the historical Buddha of the Pali Canon, but the eternal Buddha who is the ultimate - beyond time, space, existence and non-existence. All beings share in the Buddha-nature and on realising this can achieve Buddhahood.
- The Lotus Sutra teaches Ekayana - that there is one true 'yana' or vehicle - to achieve Buddhahood: this is not through the arhat path of Theravada or through finding enlightenment for oneself but through the path of being a bodhisattva. The focus of the Ekayana is karuna (compassion).
- A key concept in the Lotus Sutra is upaya ('skilful means'): here it means that not only is the way that the dhamma is taught upaya, but the dhamma in itself is upaya.
- Among the parables in the Lotus Sutra are those of the: Burning House (the Buddha does all he can to save sentient beings from samsara), Prodigal Son (the work of being an arhat is replaced by the Ekayana), Phantom City (nirvana through being an arhat is replaced by the true goal of Buddhahood), Physician's Sons (the Buddha is like the physician in creating 'medicine' which will save his followers), Medicinal Herbs (the Buddha teaches the dhamma to all beings which respond in a variety of ways).

Key quotes

'There is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, and so forth... there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death.' (Heart Sutra)

'Emptiness means empty of a separate self. It is full of everything.' (Nhat Hanh)

'The great drama played out in the Lotus Sutra finds Sakyamuni Buddha as the cosmic Buddha in human form helping others in the same path to Enlightenment that he himself treads.' (Fowler)

Key words

Nagarjuna	Sunyata
Trikaya	Svabhava
Sariputra	Hinayana
Ultimate truth	Ekayana
Conventional truth	

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on sunyata as the key to understanding Mahayana Buddhist 'reality'.

Others focus on upaya as the key to understanding Mahayana Buddhism.

Key questions

If everything is sunyata, what happens to the Buddhist concept of samsara along with the supernatural realms of bodhisattvas, buddhas and their pure lands?

Could upaya make any form of Buddhism so temporary as to be irrelevant?

Is the approach taken by the two Mahayana texts in harmony with the concepts of Theravada or radically opposed to a Theravadin understanding of Buddhism?

Issues for analysis and evaluation