

Legitimacy of later Sutra in the Buddhist Canon

Question:

Many people say that because the Lotus Sutra is much later on that it is not the words of Buddha. What are your thoughts on this?

Answer;

Well, I do talk some about this in my early videos in “Basic Buddhism” playlist. This is a part of much scholarship I have been engaged in since the mid nineteen eighties. As you know, organizations like NSA and SGI and even temples of various sects do not like to talk about such matters. They may have a point in that many people ask such questions only to bolster their personal doubts, and that such information is really not relevant to practicing Buddhism.

What I will say as I have said many times for my own practice as well as others whose motives are a true understanding of the teachings is that this is important for understanding scholarship, but not essential for daily practice. I don't want to be a hypocrite though, because study is an essential component of Buddhist practice, so, here goes...

Buddha preached his sermons in a verbal pentameter for repeated repetition by his followers. In the Buddha's day, only the Brahman caste was even exposed to writing and reading. Since Shakyamuni's mission was to provide liberation to all people of any status (quite revolutionary in his time) he taught in the language of the common castes and spread his teaching in word only. The sermons were recited repeatedly every day of the practitioner's life. This is how Buddha's words were disseminated and taught. Shakyamuni's monks and close disciples were dedicated to repeating these sermons alone and in groups to maintain accuracy and training to others. It was not until almost 100 years after his passing that a large multi-region council was formed of the foremost disciples of Shakyamuni assembled to commit all his sermons to paper.

Now, as you might imagine, the foremost in discipline of Buddha's time included a large contingent of the Brahman caste and with the skills to write in the language of their respective kingdoms or regions of India. Also, you should consider that the accuracy of these transitions from verbal, nuanced teachings to written language would be a matter of many group meetings to read and edit over and over again until the council all agreed to an accurate translation in written form. With the claim of 84,000 teachings, this was a task spread over hundreds of years.

The translations had to be done in order of the Buddha's teachings in respect to the phases of Shakyamuni's sermons. This would mean two things that would naturally occur in this effort to disseminate the written teachings. First, that the sermons first preached would be translated first, and second, that the written translations would be distributed as soon as possible following the final approval of the work. When this translation council was begun, the official language of Pali was first employed as maintaining a closer relationship to the lower caste of the populace and known widely throughout India as the Brahman caste. As the centuries progressed, new members entered the council and more contemporary Scholars of the Buddha's top monks were more fluent and well versed in the

nuances of Sanskrit as the national discourse vernacular. So as translation continued, the later sermons were transcribed and first translated into Sanskrit.

For the uninitiated and ignorant these differences of time and language implied a disconnect of the sermons from the actual words of the Buddha. Add to that the major shifts in the progressive sermons, and rather than understand the development of the teachings as a natural consequence of teaching to the people's capacity and time, many rebuked the later writings as writings of the council or erroneous all together. The people of the southeast of India, Burma, Sri-Lanka, Malaysia, etc., considered only the teachings that had reached their land in previous generation as true. This was the formation of the Tripitaka, and later the Theravada schools of Buddhism, obstinately rejecting later writings.

As scholars traveled more easily through the Himalayas, into Northern China, A more completed library of the sermons had been accomplished so that a division of early period teachings and a later period teaching were already connected.

This would begin a great number of years of translation once again begun to translate the Pali and Sanskrit texts into Chinese. This too would add to the ignorant suggestion that these later teachings did not even come from India, let alone the Buddha himself. The time taken to translate all the Buddhist teachings into Chinese with accuracy was to be a daunting task and again, a task that would prove to take a great amount of time as it required the adoption and creation of completely new Chinese calligraphy and terms to capture the nuances of the meaning in the Sanskrit characters that had no previous counterpart in the Chinese language.

As you study more deeply into the scholarship of Buddhism both from within the Buddhist canon and from outside scholarly studies, you will find that this divisive issued has been with Buddhism from soon after the Buddha's passing. Scholarship however has only paid a annoying acknowledgement to this uneducated accusation. Suffice it to say that a translation of this order of magnitude would take a great deal of time today as well.

I hope this helps in your continued studies, but that these issues do not predominate over your study of the "meaning" of the words in the Sutra. One of the 8 Noble Paths is "Right Knowledge" of which this is a part, but as the Buddha often reminded as in the Lankavatara Sutra, to follow the meaning and not the words. Following the words is like a man staring at a finger being pointed. Rather than capturing that which is being pointed at in its wonders, the man only perceives the finger and is thereby cutting off all possibility of seeing the amazing wonder of what is being pointed to.

Here is a quote from the Lankavatara Sutta that illustrates the Buddha admonition against literal versus thoughtful understandings of the teachings...

"This is speech. Now, Mahāmati, what is meaning? (155) The Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva is said to have grasped meaning well, when, all alone in a lonely place, he walks the path leading to Nirvana, by means of his transcendental wisdom (*prajñā*) which grows from learning, thinking, and meditation, and causing a revulsion first at the source of habit-energy by his self-knowledge (*svabuddhi*), abides on the stages of self-realization where he leads a life full of excellent deeds.

Further, Mahāmati, the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who is conversant with words and meaning observes that words are neither different nor not-different from meaning and that meaning stands in the same relation to words. If, Mahāmati, meaning is different from words, it will not be made manifest by means of words; but meaning is entered into by words as things [are revealed] by a lamp. It is, Mahāmati, like a man carrying a lamp to look after his property. [By means of this light] he can say: This is my property and so is kept in this place. Just so, Mahāmati, by means of the lamp of words and speech originating from discrimination, the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas can enter into the exalted state of self-realisation which is free from speech-discrimination.

Further, Mahāmati, if a man becomes attached to the [literal] meaning or words and holds fast to their agreement in regard to the original state of Nirvana which is unborn and undying, the Triple vehicle, the one vehicle, the five [Dharmas], mentation, the [three] Svabhāvas, etc., he will come to cherish views either affirmative or negative. As varieties of objects are seen in Māyā and are discriminated [as real], statements are erroneously made, discriminations erroneously go on. (156) It is by the ignorant that discriminations thus go on; it is otherwise with the wise”

LXV. The Relation between Words (*ruta*) and Meaning (*artha*)

Please keep to your path of study while also focusing and meditating on the deep meaning of the dialog.

Sifu Sylvain Chamberlain,

Abbot; Threefold Lotus Kwoon

Quantum Life Buddhism