

Comparison of Buddhist Parable Between *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *The Lotus Sutra*

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Buddhist parable plays an important role as a medium and bridge in Buddhist education. In order to elaborate different theoretical themes, each Buddhist sutra also presents diversified characteristics in the application of parables, so that different classical parables naturally have their own characteristics. The study analyzes the similarities and differences of Buddhist parable between *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *The Lotus Sutra* after introducing the two classic sutra and respective parable characteristics.

Keywords: *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, *The Lotus Sutra*, parable

Introduction

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment means achievement of the perfect Buddha nature. “Perfect” means complete, “enlightenment” means Bodhi, and “perfect Bodhi” is the Buddha nature, shared by all living beings. This is the core of *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and is why it is named *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. Translated by Buddha Kumarajiva who was a monk in the Tang Dynasty in the White Horse Temple, *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* takes the form of question-and-answer. The version of *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is relatively unified, and most of them are the imperial and secret ones of the Tang Dynasty.

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment consists of 12 chapters, each with a Bodhisattva asking the Buddha questions about the way to practice dharma. Among them, the first four chapters emphatically elucidated the principles of the Mahayana Buddha’s true nature and universal dharma, the middle four chapters emphatically explained the methods and practices of spiritual cultivation, and the last four chapters elaborated on the problems of the mind, dharma, and tautology.

The Lotus Sutra is the full name of *The Lotus Flower Sutra*, which is used to describe the whiteness, purity, and perfection of the lotus flower. This sutra originated in ancient India in the 1st century AD. It has been translated into Chinese about six times. There are three extant versions. The translation version of Kumarajiva is the most widely circulated and influential translation for later generations. With its huge system, rich content, profound meaning, and beautiful writing, *The Lotus Sutra* enables the enlightened person to discover the ideas of equality, karma, and national treasure, and also to find the ways and means of enlightenment, liberation, and cultivation to become a Buddha. The core idea of *The Lotus Sutra* is that living beings are inherently Buddha-like in nature. Therefore the Buddha’s teachings do not distinguish between Mahayana and Theravada, which is why *The Lotus Sutra* is regarded as the most extraordinary classic. *The Lotus Sutra* is not only highly

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regarded by all religions in the Buddhist circle and enjoys the reputation of “king of the Sutra”, but also is favored by scholars for its unique charm in language and characters. *The Lotus Sutra* is the classical basis for the establishment of the Tiantai Sect.

Characteristics of Buddhist Parable

The Buddhist parable is put forward after a long time of observation and deep reflection on the external world and inner psychology of the Buddha, which has profound practical significance. Buddhist parable is a kind of figure of speech. It is usually to find similarities between two or more things and then compare them, so as to make the profound philosophy easy to understand. The most fundamental feature is to explain abstract reasoning and figurative belief world with images and realistic things, which has religious and belief significance. It can be said that each Buddhist parable is closely aligned with the doctrines expounded by their respective scriptures, using human and realistic images to convey the teachings of the transcendental and sacred religions. Therefore, the Buddhist sutra analogy is still a reflection of the alienation of human real life. Although there is an imaginary realm beyond the human world, it cannot be separated from the constraints of human real life world. Finally, in order to elaborate different theoretical themes, each Buddhist sutra also presents diversified characteristics in the use of parables, so that different classical parables naturally have their own characteristics. The parable of *The Lotus Sutra* is to explain that living beings are inherently Buddha-like in nature. And the parable in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is mainly to show the theme of the sutra: perfect consciousness.

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment is a Buddhist classic with abundant parables. The full text only contains more than 10,000 words, but there are as many as 43 parables. Every chapter except Maitreya Bodhisattva employs parables, mostly from the Buddha's teachings, as a convenient way for the Buddha to answer the Bodhisattva's questions in order to make it easier for all beings to understand the Buddha's meaning. There are also parables from Bodhisattvas that are used by Bodhisattvas to make questions more figurative and concrete. In a word, the parables in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* play the most important role of the parables in the Buddhist sutra, that is, transforming the abstract into the concrete, which not only strengthens the reasoning power, but also helps the believers to have a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist doctrine. These parables well illustrate the theme of the sutra: perfect consciousness.

The parables in *The Lotus Sutra* are the most prominent expression throughout the whole text. There are a lot of uses of parables in scripture, and most of the thoughts to be expounded in scripture are developed by parables, such as the first words of dharma when it is multiplied by reality, and the teachings when it is multiplied, etc. Among them, the seven allegorical parables of *The Lotus Sutra* have become the typical representative of the allegorical parables of the Buddhist sutra because of its unique connotation, profound Buddhist rhyme, literary and artistic height and attractive allegorical plots, which are cited in many literary works.

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Similarities

Buddhist parable plays an important role as a medium and bridge in Buddhist education. It not only enhances the power of reasoning, but also helps believers to have a thorough and comprehensive understanding

of Buddhist doctrines, because the Buddhist analogy can always subtly play the effect of changing the depth into the simple, abstract into the concrete. In Buddhist theory, when it comes to all the other worlds, such as the heart, reincarnation, retribution, and the three-life, it is often discussed in terms of parable.

The main purpose of Buddhist sutra is to make use of simple and easy to understand things or stories to elaborate Buddhist doctrines in a deep and vivid way, so that people who practice Buddhism can understand the profound Buddhist doctrines more easily. The similarity in function is also the biggest common between *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *The Lotus Sutra*. For example, the parable of dreamers in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. The dreamer feels that the things in his dream are real, but when he wakes up, he finds that they do not exist at all. They are all just dreams. Then the beings who are in a state of confusion, like those who are dreaming, believe that all false truths are not false, and that when they have realized the heart of enlightenment, they realize that there is no birth, no death, no nirvana, and no liberation at all. For another example, the parable of pearl within the clothing in *The Lotus Sutra* tells the story of a poor man who has been living a poor life without knowing there is a precious pearl in his clothes, thus vividly depicting the fact that everyone has the Buddha nature but does not know it. The Buddha shares all living beings the way to wake up, but because they are blinded by ignorance, they think they gain nothing from the Buddha, but once they wake up, they can prove the wisdom of the Buddha.

In addition to the same purpose, the parables in the two sutras have some other similarities. For example, the parables are drawn from real life and secular human things, which are existence of things or situations in real life, such as the dreamer in the parable of dreamer, finger, and moon in parable of the finger pointing at the moon, sky in parable of vanity in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*. Moreover, the story of rich father and poor son in parable of father and son, and story of doctor and children in parable of doctor in *The Lotus Sutra* are also from real life.

Differences

We analyze the differences of parable between *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *The Lotus Sutra* from the three perspectives: type, content, and purpose.

Types. The parables in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* are rhetorical parables, which is a kind of figure of speech “imitating another to this”. Such parables materialize the abstract meaning by finding the similarity of two or more things and then comparing them, thus making the abstruse one more obvious. For example, three parables in the Chapter of Manjusri Bodhisattva: the charming parable, the parable of the sick eye, and the parable of the two moons, illustrate all living creatures have no sense of delusion and confusion, leading to a variety of wrong understandings, just like a person who has lost his way and cannot distinguish the east, the west, the north, and the south. It is like that the person suffering from eye disease can see the phantom flowers or two moons in the sky. It is also like that the person who is confused regards the earth, water, fire, wind as the matter that makes him, and regards the color, sound, taste, and touch reflected by his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind as his own thoughts. The ignorant man has one thing in common with those who are lost and those who suffer from eye diseases: They are confused and lost. So the comparison of the ignorant man to the lost man and the man with sick eye naturally and powerfully reinforces the correctness and intelligibility of the argument.

There are also many figures of speech in *The Lotus Sutra*. For example, in the 23th Chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*, there is such a passage as: “This sutra can greatly benefit all living beings and meet their desires. It like

the thirsty find the pool, the clod people find the fire, the naked find clothing, a merchant finds a buyer, a son finds his mother, the people crossing the river find the boat, the sick find a healer, the poor find a priceless treasure, the farmer find the wise king, businessman find the treasure from the sea, a torch removes darkness". It is a very wonderful figure of speech. Eleven parallel parables are used in succession to express the merits and virtues of *The Lotus Sutra*.

The types of parables in *The Lotus Sutra* are mostly in the form of stories. This kind of parable belongs to the combination of principal and subsidiary causes. It is all based on the stories of characters representing the Buddha or his disciples, or the living beings, and principal and subsidiary causes, so that the living beings who have heard the dharma can easily understand it. This is somewhat similar to the fable, through a story to convey a truth. *The Lotus Sutra* is famous for its seven allegorical parables: parable of three carts of burning house, parable of the elderly and poor son, parable of medicinal herbs, parable of transformed town, parable of pearls inside the clothes, parable of pearl overhead, and parable of doctor.

The parable of three vehicles of burning house, for example, tells the story of an elderly man who tries every means to save his children from the burning house. The story is full of twists and turns, which fully embodies the Buddha's convenience of guiding all living beings to get rid of suffering and happiness. The other six parables also further illustrate the Buddha's art of guiding sentient beings into the truth through six different stories from different perspectives.

Parables are also used in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, such as the parable of taking the thief as son, in which a man identifies a thief as his son then all his treasure is stolen. But this kind of parable is far less powerful than the story and plot of the parable in *The Lotus Sutra*.

Content. There are also great differences in the content of the two sutras due to the different types of parables. The parables in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* are mainly rhetorical parables, so the content of parables is mainly based on an object or situation similar to the parables. Such parables are usually short and concise, and only one sentence or even one phrase is used to play the role of parables. Parable of the finger pointing at the moon, for example, is used to direct people to see the moon instead of the finger. All the Buddhist scriptures and all the words of the Buddha are aimed at guiding the practitioner away from delusion and enlightenment. They are just a method of enlightenment, rather than the truth and enlightenment. If we cling to scripture, we are stuck in the obstacle of knowledge and remain confused, so that we do not truly realize the circle of consciousness. It is like seeing only the finger, but not the moon. The same is true of parable of vanity, parable of flower, and so on.

The parable in *The Lotus Sutra* is a parable of the combination of principal and subsidiary causes, mainly by telling the story of the image of the Mahayana. The parables in *The Lotus Sutra* are relatively long and give full demonstration to their argumentation. Almost every detail contains a Buddhist meaning, and there is a perfect correspondence between the facts and the theory. For example, this parable contains more than 1,800 words, and is nearly 4,500 words if adding the Gatha. In this parable, the elder refers to the Buddha; burning house refers to three suffering boundaries; the sons refer to living creatures; sheep cart, deer cart, and ox cart refer to three cultivate hierarchy; house refers to Saha world; house burned by fire and unable to live inside refers to the suffering and insecurity of all beings. The sons who did not listen to their father's refer to all living beings. It can be seen that the multiple layers of Buddhist doctrines are expressed so meticulously in this parable story, which makes people feel that not a single word is wasted, and Buddhist doctrines are contained

everywhere. This is true of the remaining six parable stories, with multiple layers of Buddhist doctrine perfectly embodied in one story.

Purpose. The parables of the two sutras both make the abstract Buddhist theory concrete, vivid, and easy to understand. Therefore, the two sutras share the same essential purpose. However, as far as the specific purpose of the two sutras is concerned, the purpose of parables in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is mainly to interpret the perfect consciousness, which is the theme of the sutra. The main purpose of parables in *The Lotus Sutra* is to explain that living beings are inherently Buddha-like in nature. For example, parable of smelting ore into gold in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, the gold in the ore is originally in the ore and is not produced by smelting. When the ore is smelted into gold, it will not return to ore. All living beings are inherently the perfect consciousness in nature, which does not produce after the dharma practice. Once living beings wake up, their perfect consciousness will never change. Another example is the parable of transformed town in *The Lotus Sutra*, which tells the story of a wise tutor who, knowing the weakness of the traveller, transforms a town and everyone can have a rest to get temporary physical and mental satisfaction. Finally, he makes the city disappear and leads all beings to seek for the treasure. It is a parable for Buddha to understand the weakness of all living beings, and to first teach the Theravada, so as not to abandon the Dhamma because of insufficient faith. In the end, the Buddha will achieve the goal of “only one” and show the Mahayana by distinguishing the Theravada.

Conclusion

Different classical parables naturally have their own characteristics. The study analyzes Buddhist parable between *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and *The Lotus Sutra* and the differences are demonstrated from the three perspectives: type, content, and purpose. The employ of parable in *The Lotus Sutra* is to explain that living beings are inherently Buddha-like in nature. And the parable in *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* is mainly to show the theme of the sutra: perfect consciousness.

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