

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 100 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 et al., eds. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.

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**Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography***

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.  
257 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95/£24.95; eBook, \$28.07. ISBN  
9780691152202 (hardcover); 0691152209 (eBook).

THIS IS A small book, but with great weight, and with a significance far beyond its diminutive physical size. Donald Lopez has a gift for writing concisely and lucidly, making this volume a welcome addition to the “Lives of Great Religious Books” series.

The first clue to the unusual nature of this book is in the title. What does it mean, and how does one write a “biography” of a classical text? For one thing, calling it a “biography” indicates that it (the *Lotus Sutra*) is an entity that grows and changes over the years and in different contexts. Lopez promises to trace the various roles the *Lotus Sutra* “has played in its travels through Asia, Europe, and across the seas to America.” And he delivers. Lopez has a gift for summarizing a vast amount of possible detail into a satisfying discourse. His summary of the content of the *Lotus Sutra* (only a brief ten pages), for example, of necessity leaves out a great deal of detail, but leaves one satisfied that the main points have been covered. This is followed by chapters on the *Lotus Sutra* in India, in China, in Japan, “across the Atlantic” (though actually from India and Nepal to Europe and then to Boston), and finally on the *Lotus Sutra* in the twentieth century and its journey “across the Pacific” from Japan to the Americas. Lopez leaves some (perhaps unanswerable) questions unanswered—such as “what is the real content of the *Lotus Sutra*?”—but he does offer answers to questions that can be answered. How did the text identified as the *Lotus Sutra* develop? How was it understood and used in various times and cultures such as India, Nepal, China, Japan, France, Boston, and elsewhere?

I have taught a university graduate seminar on the *Lotus Sutra* for over twenty years, but was fascinated by how much information and compelling details can be discovered in these brief pages. I learned much about the role of the *Lotus Sutra* in India and Nepal, especially on the role of Brian Hodgson and the research of Eugène Burnouf in France. The only quibble I can point out is a sense of imbalance in that almost a third of the text (chapter 5 of over sixty pages, 116–78) is devoted to the contributions of Hodgson and Burnouf, compared to only ten pages to summarize the plot of the *Lotus Sutra* itself, and only twenty-three pages on China. I do not begrudge this imbalance, however, because it is a fascinating and well told story apropos to an English-reading Western audience, and also because much of the information was new to me. It was also a reminder that we (meaning scholars such as myself and followers of East Asian Buddhism) tend to focus and rely on the Chinese version of the Kumārajīva translation, and often unconsciously assume that its influence IS the Buddhism of the *Lotus Sutra*.

This brings us to a question that Lopez wrestles with throughout this book: What is the *Lotus Sutra*? Is the *Lotus Sutra* the Chinese translation by Kumārajīva, which is in fact the text that is most read by devotees and has had an incalculable influence on East Asian Buddhism? But there are many differences between the Kumārajīva translation and extant Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Lotus Sutra* and other classical Chinese translations of the text. And the *Lotus Sutra* itself speaks of a “*Lotus Sutra*” that embodies the final truth of the Buddha Dharma which was revealed over and over again many eons ago. In the final pages of the book Lopez wrestles again, as he does many times throughout the volume, with this vexing, most thorny, question, what is the “*Lotus Sutra*”? Perhaps the best answer is that the “*Lotus Sutra*” is *saddharma*—the transhistorical “true Dharma,” the “real” or final teaching (whatever that is) of the Buddha (whatever that is), of which Kumārajīva’s text is only one—though the most salient—explication. But does this really answer the question? In short, this book is a biography of a book which admits in its final pages that one cannot ultimately answer the question “What is this book?” or “What is the *Lotus Sutra*?” It is a challenge that Lopez leaves with the reader.

This volume has moved to the top of my list of books to recommend to people who want a clear and objective introduction to the *Lotus Sutra*. There is no need to argue over this or that which the author could have discussed in more detail or has left out altogether (such as why the *Lotus Sutra* is not important in Tibetan Buddhism; or its influence in other parts of Asia such as Korea and Vietnam; or the contrast between a Buddhism in which faith and chanting are central instead of the image of meditation as the focus of Buddhism; or why the Lotus schools of the Nichiren tradition have produced movements that are, on the one hand very nationalistic and even militaristic, and on the other hand those that are inter-

nationally-minded and pacifistically promote “world peace”). This is meant to be a short book; those interested in more detail have access to many fine translations of the *Lotus Sutra* itself and careful studies (many mentioned in the notes and Bibliography) to slake their thirst. But they will find it difficult to discover any work that is more readable and accessible than this one.

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\* My review of this book appeared earlier in *Buddhadharma* (summer 2017): 75–77, considerably shorter and rewritten for a more general audience. This original review, written more for an academic audience, appears here with permission.