

The Lotus Sutra's Presence in France and Europe

Bertrand Rossignol

Translated by Isabelle Aubert

FRANCE, Buddhism, and the Lotus Sutra seem to share a special connection. In fact, the first Buddhist ceremony ever held in Europe was in Paris, in the Guimet Museum library, in 1891. And it was Eugène Burnouf (1801–52), a French linguist, who completed the first translation in a Western language of the Sanskrit version of the Lotus Sutra, published in 1852 under the title *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi* (The Lotus of the Good Law). It was also a Frenchman, archaeologist and sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), who brought back in 1909 several Dunhuang manuscripts from China, among which were many copies and pages of the Lotus Sutra, including a beautifully illuminated version of the Sutra's 25th chapter.¹ And, it was again a Frenchman, Jean-Noël Robert, who in 1997 translated the Chinese version of Kumārajīva's Lotus Sutra into French for the first time.²

It was also in France where, for the first time in Europe, a dedicated practitioner of the Lotus Sutra and disciple of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Daisaku Ikeda, Dr Eiichi Yamazaki (1923–2000), decided to settle in 1961. He greatly contributed to expanding Nichiren Buddhism in Europe. Furthermore, in April 2016, the Paris UNESCO Headquarters hosted the first major Lotus Sutra exhibition in Europe.

Incidentally, one could also add that in Japanese 'France' reads 'Land of the Buddha' (*Bukkoku*) and in Chinese, 'Land of the Law' (*Faguo*). Ultimately there could be a very logical explanation to all this: the Lotus Sutra and France interconnect in the universality of their appeal — making Buddhahood and equality accessible to everyone.

The Introduction of the Lotus Sutra in Europe

In Europe, interest in the Buddha's teachings as a full-fledged religion began to grow during the second part of the 19th century. Until then, Buddhism was a mere exotic object of curiosity. German philosopher

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was the first to focus his research on Buddhism. The high esteem that he held for it undeniably contributed to the attention that this religion aroused in Europe. But proper understanding of Buddhist teachings came with the scientific studies initiated by Eugène Burnouf's work.

On April 20, 1837, 24 Sanskrit manuscripts arrived in Paris. They had been sent from Kathmandu seven months earlier by the British Resident at the Nepalese court, Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–94). One of these texts was a copy of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, dated 12th century³ — the first Sanskrit version of the Lotus Sutra to reach Europe. This sutra belongs to the 'nine *Dharmas*', the nine books officially recognized by the Newar people in Nepal, one of the last Buddhist communities of the Indian subcontinent (*Nepal* is thought to derive from *Newar*).

When Brian Hodgson arrived in Nepal in 1820, he already had some knowledge of Hindustani. He first started compiling Newari texts, then Sanskrit texts, with the help of a local Newari scholar. Although sacred texts from ancient India, such as the Bhagavad Gītā (1785), had already been translated at the end of the 18th century and Buddhism was already known in Europe at the time, no Sanskrit text had reached the Old Continent yet. The British Resident thus believed that they could be of interest to European universities and scholarly societies, especially in Paris, where a Chair in Sanskrit, the first in Europe, had been founded in 1814 at the Collège de France.

Between 1827 and 1845, he sent no less than 423 Buddhist manuscripts and texts to Europe. He received no answers, however, except from Paris.

Hodgson appears to be the first European to have collected a copy of the Lotus Sutra in its Sanskrit version, but he was not the first to have heard about it. Indeed, a Portuguese Jesuit missionary in Japan, Luís Fróis (1532–97), relates that, together with the Italian Jesuit Organtino Gneccchi-Soldo (1533–1609), he studied the Lotus Sutra (in the Chinese version) with a Buddhist monk, for two hours every day in the year 1574. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), one of the first Jesuit missionaries to enter China (1583), mentions the Lotus Sutra in his work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi)*. And the physicist Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), employed by the Dutch East India Company, who lived two years in Japan (1690–92) under the Tokugawa shogunate, refers to the sutra in his journal, mistranslating *Hokekyo* (the Sutra's title, in Japanese) as *The Book of Magnificent Flowers*.⁴

Hodgson's copy of the Lotus Sutra was not the first to reach Europe.

In 1346, a beautiful manuscript, in Chinese this time, enriched with illustrations of the Buddha's life, was sent to Rome by a Franciscan missionary then in China.⁵ And the Lotus Sutra was known in Paris before Hodgson sent a copy there. Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), a pioneer in Chinese studies in France and Europe, refers to it in a footnote of his translation (published after his death in 1836) of *Foguoji (Mémoire sur les pays bouddhiques)*⁶ written by the Chinese monk Faxian (337–422), who had traveled to India for a pilgrimage in 399 CE. It reads, in the way the Chinese was transcribed into French at the time, “as in the *Fă hoa king* (Lotus Sutra), the chapter *Ti pho thă to* (Devadatta), where Bodhisattva *Tchi tsy* (Mañjuśrī) discusses the excellent law with *Wen chu ssu li* (Prajñākūta).”⁷

Eugène Burnouf's Interest in the Sutra

One of the first to draw from Abel-Rémusat's work was his colleague at the Collège de France, Eugène Burnouf. It is he who, in a letter that has unfortunately not survived, acknowledges receipt of Hodgson's gift. In another letter, dated June 5, 1837, in his reply to Hodgson, he renews his appreciation for the gift of “twenty-four peculiar Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts”, which the Société Asiatique and Eugène Jacquet⁸ (1811–38) had commissioned him to study. In the same letter, he writes:

I focused my attention on a new book, one of the nine *Dharmas*, the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka*, and I can assure you that I did not regret my decision. Since around April 15, every moment I can spare from my occupation as Sanskrit professor and academician, I give unreservedly to this work.⁹

Eugène Burnouf was born on April 8, 1801. His father, Tacite Jean-Louis Burnouf (1775–1844), was a philologist and translator. Eugène entered the École des Chartes in 1822, and graduated from there in Literature and Law in 1824. With his knowledge of Greek and Latin acquired in particular from his father, he turned to the study of Sanskrit under the direction of Antoine Léonard de Chézy (1773–1832), first holder of the Sanskrit chair at the Collège de France. In 1823, he published, at the age of 22, his first translation from Sanskrit in the *Journal Asiatique*. Three years later, he published his first book, *Essai sur le pâli, ou langue sacrée de la presqu'île au-delà du Gange* (Essay on Pali, or the sacred language of the peninsula beyond the Ganges), written in collaboration with his young colleague at the Collège de

France, Christian Lassen (1800–76). Based on a rigorous comparison of Pali and Sanskrit, their essay demonstrates that Pali, one of ancient India's vernacular or Prakrit languages, is a derivative from Sanskrit, as are all Prakrit languages. His research opened the door for him to academia, and in 1829, the first study course in comparative grammar was created for him at the École Normale Supérieure. Upon Chézy's death, in 1832, Burnouf succeeded him at the Collège de France where, for the next 20 years, he taught Sanskrit and trained a whole generation of future distinguished philologists, such as Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and Ernest Renan (1823–92). His first major area of work was translating the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, for the *Collection orientale* that the Imprimerie nationale intended to publish. The Purāṇa, 36 in total, are religious, poetical, and philosophical Indian legends in which the god figure Krishna is central. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the last of the Puranas, does not go back beyond the 13th century. Hence, in a sense, it sums up all the cosmogonic dramas from India. Burnouf published three volumes between 1840 and 1847, but his premature death sadly prevented this project from completing.

In addition to his work on Sanskrit and Pali, we owe to Burnouf a large contribution to research on Avestique (then called Zend), the Zoroastrian sacred language, and the deciphering of the cuneiform script of Persian kings Darius and Xerxes's inscriptions, discovered in Persepolis.

But Eugène Burnouf is mainly known as the author of *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* (Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism, 1844) and for a translation of the Lotus Sutra, *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi*, from the Sanskrit manuscripts sent to Paris by Brian Hodgson, to whom he dedicates it. When Burnouf died in Paris on May 28, 1852, exhausted by his work — he used to get up at three o'clock in the morning, devoting himself day and night to his translation, he wrote to Hodgson — the Imprimerie nationale completed the printing of his 897-page work and published it in October of the same year, under the title *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi traduit du Sanskrit accompagné d'un commentaire et de vingt et un mémoires relatifs au Bouddhisme* (The Lotus of the Good Law translated from the Sanskrit, accompanied by a commentary and twenty-one memoirs on Buddhism). Burnouf considered adding a commentary and an introduction clarifying the history and the doctrines of Buddhism. The extent of his work on this subject made him realize that this introduction would become the main work. The first volume of his *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* was published in 1844. Before publishing the second volume,

Burnouf decided to publish his translation of the *Lotus*, completed in 1839. To answer the many historical and philosophical questions involved in the proper understanding of his *Introduction*, he composed a series of memoirs which he had printed as an appendix to his translation of the *Lotus*. Twenty memoirs were corrected and printed at his death. The national printing house even added the 21st, which Burnouf still had time to write before his death.

The Lotus Sutra Crosses the Atlantic Ocean

Burnouf's translation — actually a very small part of the complete text — crossed the Atlantic in a most original fashion, as early as 1844, i.e., eight years before its publication in France.¹⁰ In the *Revue indépendante*'s edition of April 25, 1843, Burnouf published an article intitled 'Fragments of the Preaching of the Buddha', in which he presents two parables (of the man blind from birth¹¹ and of the medicinal herbs) from 'The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs' (5th chapter of the Lotus Sutra). This short text then fell into the hands of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–94), one of the heads of the Boston-edited Transcendental Club journal, *The Dial: A Magazine of Literature, Philosophy and Religion*. The main editors were no other than Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and the young Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). Elizabeth Peabody decided to translate Burnouf's article, that was to be published in *The Dial*'s penultimate issue in January 1844 under the title 'The Preaching of the Buddha'. It consisted of two parts, preceded by an introduction by Hodgson and Burnouf, a description of the Buddha, and the translation itself. In May the same year, Edward Eldridge Salisbury (1814–1901) presented a paper at a conference at the newly founded Bostonian American Oriental Society. As Burnouf's disciple, he had brought back from Paris the study of the Sanskrit language, which he started teaching at Yale University in 1841. His lecture, largely inspired by his mentor, is the first scientific article on Buddhism written by an American.

A New Public

It was not until 1884, however, that the first English version of the Lotus Sutra appeared. The Dutch scholar Hendrik Kern (1833–1917) based his work on a 12th-century Sanskrit manuscript of the Nepalese group, preserved in the Cambridge University Library (not the same one, but a copy similar to the one Burnouf had in front of him). Kern's

translation is volume XXI of the project initiated in 1879 by Oxford professor Friedrich Max Müller, called *Sacred Books of the East*. It is still regarded today as highly accurate and it gave the Lotus Sutra a new public in the West, which is not to say that it eclipsed Burnouf's translation, also well regarded, especially given the means available to the French philologist at the time. Burnouf's translation remained widely read in the French-speaking world, beyond scientific circles, and was republished in two volumes in 1925 (with a foreword by Sylvain Lévi), and then in 1973. In a letter dated June 24, 1871, addressed to his friend Frédéric Baudry, who had studied with Burnouf in his youth, the great French author Gustave Flaubert (1821–80) wrote, not without a touch of humor:¹²

O Bodhisattva! O youth of gentle birth! O perfect Buddha!

Like an old stork, I am sorrowful and dejected in spirit; like an old elephant fallen into the mire, I lack strength.

I need, O youth of gentle birth, the fourth of the medicinal plants¹³ that induce well-being in any situation, whatsoever it may be.

I have read the *Lalitavistara*,¹⁴ O Bodhisattva, I have read *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, O youth of gentle birth!

But I would spend innumerable (hundreds) of myriads of Kotis of Kalpas,¹⁵ without understanding, O holy name of God, in what Buddha consists.

I search within myself, to whether I may not possess the thirty-two qualities¹⁶ of the imbecile....

Here are two lines of *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law* that drive me crazy! They concern a house haunted by demons:¹⁷ "Seizing the dogs by their feet, they overturn them onto their backs; and growling they squeeze them by their throats and take pleasure in choking them to death." What a picture! How one sees it! Doesn't it make you want to do the same?

Adieu old Richi. O, the Law! O, the Assembly.¹⁸

Flaubert took a keen interest in Buddhism. We know from his correspondence that he had read Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* and the Lotus Sutra before writing the section dedicated to the Buddha in his work, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (The Temptation of Saint Anthony, 1874).

In the 20th century, in the aftermath of the Second World War in Japan, the Lotus Sutra in its Chinese version gained a much wider audience outside the official Buddhist schools. Sometime after,

several new religious movements were destined to see a remarkable development. Predominantly secular and claiming to be in the tradition of the Lotus Sutra, they stood against the 'Nichirenism' developed by a certain Chigaku Tanaka (1861–1939) who backed Japanese militarism and imperialism, claiming that the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's (1222–82) teachings were to spread throughout Asia and the world from the Japanese archipelago. Among them, the Soka Gakkai organization is the largest and best known (with around 12 million members). It grew outside Japan under the leadership of its third president, Daisaku Ikeda (born in 1928),¹⁹ and has spread to 192 countries and territories, including in France since 1961 when Dr Eiichi Yamazaki made it his home.

And then Crosses the Pacific

In a curious twist of history, some 150 years after the article was published in *The Dial*, the Lotus Sutra's teachings crossed the Pacific and landed in Boston this time. In 1993, President Daisaku Ikeda founded the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, near Harvard (today the Ikeda Center for Peace, Learning, and Dialogue), dedicated to creating peace by promoting Buddhist humanist values. In a lecture he gave at Harvard University, on September 24, 1993, President Daisaku Ikeda declared as a tribute to this article and the 5th chapter of the Lotus Sutra:

The third point I would like to discuss is the philosophical basis which Buddhism provides for the symbiotic coexistence of all things. Among the many images in the Lotus Sutra, one that I find particularly compelling is that of an impartial rain that compassionately moistens the vast expanse of the earth, bringing forth new life from all the trees and grasses, large and small. This scene, depicted with a vividness, grandeur and beauty characteristic of the Lotus Sutra, symbolizes the enlightenment of all people touched by the Buddha's Law of great and impartial wisdom. At the same time, it is a magnificent paean to the rich diversity of human as well as all forms of sentient and insentient life, each equally manifesting the inherent enlightenment of its nature, each thriving and harmonizing in a grand concert of symbiosis.²⁰

He referred to Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of *The Dial's* editors, saying that the 'greater self' resonated with what Emerson called "the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal

One".²¹

The Exhibitions on the Lotus Sutra Organized by the IOP in Europe

The first Lotus Sutra exhibition organized in Europe by the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) was entitled 'The Lotus Sutra and Its World: Buddhist Manuscripts of the Great Silk Road'. It was presented, in partnership with the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Saint-Petersburg), in the year 2000, in Germany and Austria (in the Library of the Viennese Academy of Sciences).

The Exhibition 'The Lotus Sutra — A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence' was held in the public library of Lleida, in Spain, from April 28 to May 16, 2009. It was cosponsored by the IOP, the University of Lleida, the UNESCO Association of Lleida, and the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. It attracted some 5000 visitors. It was also presented in the SGI-Spain Cultural Center in Madrid, from February 17 to March 10, 2012.

From November 22–27, 2011, the same exhibition was held at the SGI-UK's London Ikeda Center for Peace. The exhibition was the result of cooperation between the IOP and SGI-UK, and support by the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the British Library's International Dunhuang Project, and the Royal Academy Asiatic Society.

The exhibition 'Buddhist Sutras: A Universal Spiritual Heritage — Manuscripts and Iconography of the Lotus Sutra' was organized in Paris, at UNESCO, April 2–10, 2016, in partnership with various institutes, including the Institut d'Études Bouddhiques (Institute of Buddhist Studies) in Paris. Thousand-year-old Buddhist scriptures were exhibited for the first time in France and more than 7300 visitors were able to discover their treasures.

A colloquium entitled 'The Lotus Sutra — Transmission and Reception of a Major Teaching of the Buddhist Canon', organized in parallel, sought to clarify the doctrinal principles that characterize the Lotus Sutra: enlightenment accessible to everyone, the notion of cosmology leading to coexistence and interdependence, as well as the essence of a non-violent ethic through the behavior and actions of the bodhisattva. It brought together Yoichi Kawada, then Director of the IOP; Dennis Gira, Honorary Professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris; Lokesh Chandra, Director of the International Academy of Indian Culture; Irina Popova, Director of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts

of the Russian Academy of Sciences; Sylvie Hureau, lecturer at the École Pratique des Hautes Études; Hiroshi Kanno, Professor at Soka University in Tokyo; Paul Magnin, Director of research emeritus at the CNRS; Jérôme Ducor, University of Lausanne, President of the Institut d'Études Bouddhiques; and Jean-Noël Robert, Professor at the Collège de France.

In France, the exhibition 'Buddhist Sutras — A Universal Spiritual Heritage', in a simplified format, was also presented at the Buddhist Cultural Center in the city of Rennes (western France) October 22–29, 2017, and then in the city of Marseille, from October 6–15, 2018. It is planned to hold the exhibition in Lyon in October 2021, in the Chapel of the Trinity, the building in which, in January 1802, Napoleon I presided over an assembly of over 450 deputies and transformed the Cisalpine Republic into the Italian Republic. In the coming years, the exhibition is also scheduled to be held in Lille (northern France) and Toulouse (southwest). In the 21st century, the Lotus Sutra thus continues its journey and its propagation in France and Europe.

These exhibitions, as well as the colloquiums that complement them, make it possible to create or strengthen contacts with leading researchers and major institutes of Buddhist studies in France and in Europe. More broadly, these events contribute to pursuing the path of dialogue between East and West, and thus fostering understanding between cultures and civilizations. As a bulwark against intolerance, the tendency to withdraw into national borders and obscurantism, they promote the universal values of Buddhism and contribute to the future establishment of a culture of peace. As the IOP founder President Daisaku Ikeda notes:

Our ultimate goal, I believe, should be to make Asia's rich spiritual Buddhist heritage a common resource for people throughout the world. We should help people to find in Oriental tradition a rich reservoir of wisdom that will contribute to the value of their lives and provide a source for the creation of richer culture.²²

Notes

¹ The Pelliot Collection is now curated at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Guimet Museum, Paris.

² *Le Sūtra du Lotus*, translated from Chinese by Jean-Noël Robert (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

³ This is a much later version than the three Chinese versions that have come down to us, dated respectively 286, 406, and 601.

- ⁴ Engelbert Kaempfer, *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*, ed., trans., and ann. Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 129.
- ⁵ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 121.
- ⁶ Jean-Pierre Drège has given a new French translation of *Foguoji*, published by Les Belles Lettres, in 2013.
- ⁷ Abel-Rémusat, *Foe-koue-ki ou relation des royaumes bouddhiques, voyage dans la Tartarie, dans l'Afghanistan et dans l'Inde, exécuté à la fin du IV^e siècle par Chy Fa Hian*, (Foe-koue-ki or an Account of the Buddhist Kingdoms, a Journey through Tartary, Afghanistan, and India, Undertaking at the End of the Fourth Century by Chy Fa Hian) (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1836), 322, n.
- ⁸ Eugène Jacquet (1811–38): Belgian scholar who died prematurely, member of the Asiatic Society, known for his philological and historical works covering the whole Far East.
- ⁹ Translated from French. Cited in Léon Feer, *Papiers d'Eugène Burnouf conservés à la Bibliothèque nationale* (Eugène Burnouf's papers kept at the National Library) (Paris: H. Champion, 1899), 158.
- ¹⁰ Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*, 157–58.
- ¹¹ The second half of the 5th chapter, in which the parable of the man blind from birth is found, does not appear in Kumārajīva's Chinese translation.
- ¹² We owe the discovery of this letter to the very instructive essay by Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*, 173.
- ¹³ Reference to the 5th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, 'The Medicinal Herbs'.
- ¹⁴ Literally *The Play in Full*, the Buddha's biography.
- ¹⁵ In ancient Indian cosmology, an extremely long period of time.
- ¹⁶ Reference to the 32 characteristics of a Buddha.
- ¹⁷ The parable of the three chariots and of the house on fire in the 3rd chapter of the Lotus Sutra, 'Simile and Parable'.
- ¹⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1857–1880*, trans. by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982) 186–87, quoted in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*, 173–74.
- ¹⁹ The organization's first two presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944) and his disciple Josei Toda (1900–58), both educators, were among the few opponents of Japanese militarism at the time. On July 6, 1943, they were arrested and imprisoned with 21 other representatives of the association. Makiguchi died in prison in November 1944, and Toda spent two years there.
- ²⁰ Daisaku Ikeda, 'Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization (Harvard University, 1993)', accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/resources/works/lect/lect-04.html>.
- ²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems of Emerson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), quoted in *ibid*.
- ²² Daisaku Ikeda, 'IOP Founder: Message from Daisaku Ikeda', accessed October 29, 2021, <http://www.iop.or.jp/About.html>.

About the Author and Translator

Bertrand Rossignol is a graduate of the École Doctorale in the history of religions at Paris-IV-Sorbonne University and holds a doctorate in the history of religions and religious anthropology (Japanese Buddhism) from the École Pratique des Hautes Études. He has specialized in the study of the Lotus Sutra tradition. He is an overseas research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy.

Isabelle Aubert earned a degree at the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) in Paris.