



# The Lotus Sûtra

Translated by  
Gene Reeves

## *The Parable of the Burning House*

Then the Buddha said to Shariputra: "Did I not tell you before that when the buddhas, the world-honored ones, by using causal explanations, parables, and other kinds of expression, teach the Dharma by skillful means, it is all for the purpose of supreme awakening? All these teachings are for the purpose of transforming people into bodhisattvas. But, Shariputra, let me once again make this meaning still more clear through a parable, for intelligent people can understand through parables.

"Shariputra, suppose in a village or city in a certain kingdom there was a great elder. He had many fields, houses, and servants. His house was large and spacious but had only one gateway. Many people lived in the house, one hundred, two hundred, or even five hundred in all. Its halls and rooms were old and decaying, its walls crumbling, its pillars rotting at the base, its beams and rafters falling down and dangerous.

"All over the house, at the same moment, fire suddenly broke out, engulfing the house in flames. The children of the elder, say ten, twenty, or even thirty, were in this house. The elder, seeing this great fire spring up on every side, was very alarmed and thought: 'Though I can get out safely through the flaming gateway, my children are in the burning house enjoying themselves engrossed in play, without awareness, knowledge, alarm, or fear. Fire is closing in on them. Pain and suffering threaten, but they do not care or become frightened, and have no thought of trying to escape:

"Shariputra, this elder said to himself: 'My body and arms are strong. I can wrap the children in some robes and put them on a palette or bench and carry them out of the house'. But then he thought again: 'This house has only one gateway, and it is narrow and small. My children are young. Knowing nothing as yet of the danger, they are absorbed in their play. Probably they will be burned up in the fire. I must tell them why I am alarmed, and warn them that the house is burning and that they must get out quickly or be burned up in the fire: In accord with this line of thought, he called to his children: 'Get out quickly, all of you!'"

"Although the father was sympathetic and tried to persuade them with kind words, the children, absorbed in their play, were unwilling to believe him and were neither alarmed nor

frightened. They didn't even think about trying to escape. What's more, they did not understand what he meant by the fire, or the house, or losing their lives. They only kept running around playing, barely glancing at their father.

"Then the elder thought: 'This house is already going up in a great blaze. If my children and I do not get out at once, we will certainly be burned alive. Now I have to find some skillful means to get my children to escape from this disaster.'

"Knowing what his children always liked, and all the various rare and attractive playthings and curiosities that would please them, the father said to them: 'The things you like to play with are rare and hard to find. If you do not get them when you can, you will be sorry later. A variety of goat carriages, deer carriages, and ox carriages are now outside the gate for you to play with. You must get out of this burning house quickly, and I will give you whatever ones you want.'

"When they heard about the rare and attractive playthings described by their father, which were just what they wanted, all of the children, eagerly pushing and racing with each other, came scrambling out of the burning house.

"Then the elder, seeing that his children had safely escaped and were all sitting in the open square and no longer in danger, was very relieved and ecstatic with joy. Then each of the children said to their father:

"Those playthings you promised us, the goat carriages, deer carriages, and ox carriages, please give them to us now!"

"Shariputra, then the elder gave each of his children equally a great carriage. They were tall and spacious, and decorated with many jewels. They had railings around them, with bells hanging on all four sides. Each was covered with a canopy, which was also splendidly decorated with various rare and precious jewels. Around each was a string of precious stones and garlands of flowers. Inside were beautiful mats and rose colored pillows. Pulling each of them was a handsome, very powerful white ox with a pure hide, capable of walking with a smooth gait and fast as the speed of the wind. Each also had many servants and followers to guard and take care of them.

"Why was this? Because this great elder's wealth was so inexhaustible, his many storehouses so full of treasures, he thought: 'There is no limit to my wealth. I should not give inferior carriages to my children. They are all my children and I cherish them equally. I have countless numbers of these large carriages with the seven precious materials. I should give one to each of the children without discrimination. I have so many large carriages I could give one to everyone in the land without running out. Surely I can give them to my own children'

"Then the children rode on their great carriages, having received something they had never had before and never expected to have.

"Shariputra, what do you think about this? Is that elder, in giving equally the rare treasure of great carriages to his children, guilty of falsehood or not?"

Shariputra said: "No, World-Honored One. That elder only made it possible for his children to escape the disaster of the fire and preserve their lives. He committed no falsehood. Why do I say this? By saving their lives he has already given them a kind of plaything. How much more so when by skillful means he saved them from that burning house. World-Honored One, even if that elder had not given them one of the smallest of carriages, he would not be guilty of falsehood. Why? Because the elder, from the beginning, had intended to use some skillful means to enable his children to escape. That is the reason why he is not guilty of falsehood. How much less so, when knowing his own immeasurable wealth and wanting to benefit his children abundantly, he gave them equally great carriages!"

The Buddha said to Shariputra: "Good, good. It is just as you say, Shariputra. The Tathagata is also like this, for he is a father to the whole world. He has long ago completely gotten rid of all fear, distress, anxiety, ignorance, and blindness; has attained immeasurable insight, powers, and freedom from fear; and has gained great spiritual powers, and wisdom. He has fully mastered skillful means and the practice of wisdom. His great mercy and compassion never stop. He always seeks the good, whatever will enrich all beings.

"He was born into this threefold world, an old decaying burning house, in order to save living beings from the fires of birth, old age, disease, death, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, agony, folly, blindness, and the three poisons, and to teach and transform them, enabling them to reach supreme awakening.

"He sees how living beings are scorched by the fires of birth, old age, disease and death, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, and agony. Moreover, because of the five desires and the desire for wealth, they undergo all kinds of suffering. Because of attachment *to* desire and striving, they endure much suffering in this life and later will suffer in a purgatory, or as animals or hungry spirits. Even if they are born in a heaven, or among people, they will experience many kinds of suffering, such as the suffering of poverty and hardship, the suffering of separation from what they cherish, or the suffering from encountering what they hate.

"Absorbed in these things, living beings rejoice and amuse themselves, without knowing or seeing or being alarmed or frightened. And never being dissatisfied, they never try to liberate themselves. In the burning house of this threefold world they run about here and there, and, though they encounter great suffering, they are not disturbed by it.

"Shariputra, having seen this, the Buddha thought: 'I am the father of all living beings and should rescue them from suffering and give them the joy of immeasurable, unlimited Buddha-wisdom, so that they can find enjoyment in it.

"Shariputra, the Tathagata also thought: 'If I used only divine powers and wisdom, setting aside skillful means, and for the sake of living beings praised only the insight, powers, and courage of the Tathagata, living beings would not be saved. Why? As long as all these beings have not escaped birth, old age, disease, death, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, and agony, and are being consumed in the burning house of the threefold world, how can they understand the wisdom of the Buddha?'

"Shariputra, even though the elder had strength in his body and arms, he did not use it, but only through carefully worked-out skillful means saved his children from the danger of the burning house and then gave each of them great carriages with precious materials. So too the Tathagata, though he has power and is free from fear, does not use these, but only by wisdom and skillful means rescues and liberates living beings from the burning house of this threefold world, teaching the three vehicles to them, the shravaka, pratyekabuddha, and buddha vehicles.

"He says to them: 'None of you should be happy dwelling in the burning house of the threefold world. Do not crave its crude forms, sounds, scents, tastes, and sensations. If you become attached to them and learn to cherish them, you will be burned up by them. You need to get out of this threefold world quickly so that you can have the three vehicles, the shravaka, pratyekabuddha, and the buddha vehicles. I now make this promise to you, and it will never turn out to be false. Just apply yourselves and make the effort!'

"The Tathagata uses this skillful means to bring people to act. And then he says to them: 'You should know that the teachings of these three vehicles are praised by sages. With them, you will be free from attachments and bondage, and will not need to rely on or seek anything else. Riding in these three vehicles you will gain flawless roots, powers,

awareness, ways, meditation, liberation, concentration, and so forth. And then, enjoying yourselves, you will be able to delight in infinite peace and comfort.'

"Shariputra, if there are living beings who are wise by nature and who, following the Buddha, the World-Honored One, hear the Dharma, receive in faith, and make a great effort, wanting to escape quickly from the threefold world and seek their own nirvana, they will be called those who take the *shravaka* vehicle. They are like the children who came out of the burning house to get a goat carriage."

If there are living beings who, following the Buddha, the World-Honored-One, hear the Dharma and receive it in faith, and who, seeking natural intelligence and taking solitary delight in tranquility and goodness, make a great effort to deeply understand the causes and conditions of all things, they will be called those who take the pratyekabuddha vehicle. They are like the children who came out of the burning house to get a deer carriage."

If there are living beings who, following the Buddha, the World-Honored One, hear the Dharma and receive it in faith, who apply themselves and make a great effort, seeking comprehensive wisdom, buddha wisdom, natural wisdom, the wisdom that needs no teacher, and seeking as well a tathagata's insight, powers, and freedom from fear, and who pity and comfort innumerable living beings, enrich human and heavenly beings, and save them all, they will be called those who take the Great Vehicle. Because bodhisattvas seek this vehicle, they are called great ones. They are like the children who came out of the burning house to get an ox carriage.

"Shariputra, the elder, seeing his children safely out of the burning house and no longer threatened, thought about his immeasurable wealth and gave each of his children a great carriage. The Tathagata does the same. He is the father of all living beings. He sees innumerable thousands of millions of beings escape from the suffering of the threefold world, from the fearful and perilous path, through the gateway of teachings of the Buddha, and thus gain the joys of nirvana. Then the Tathagata thinks: 'I have Dharma storehouses of buddhas, with immeasurable, unlimited wisdom, power, and freedom from fear. All these living beings are my children. I will give the Great Vehicle to them equally, so that no one will reach extinction individually, but all gain the same extinction as the Tathagata.'

"All the living beings who escape the threefold world are given the enjoyments of buddhas-meditation, liberation, and so forth. All are of one character and one type, praised by sages and capable of producing pure, wonderful, supreme happiness.

"Shariputra, the elder at first attracted his children with the three carriages and afterward gave them just one great carriage decorated with jewels, which was the safest and most comfortable carriage. Yet the man is not guilty of lying. The Tathagata does the same. There is no falsehood in teaching three vehicles first, to attract living beings, and afterward using just the Great Vehicle to save them. Why? Because the Tathagata has Dharma storehouses of immeasurable wisdom, power, and freedom from fear. He can give all living beings the Great Vehicle Dharma. But not all are able to receive it. For this reason, Shariputra, you should understand that the buddhas use the power of skillful means, thus making distinctions within the One Buddha- Vehicle and teaching the three."