The Lotus Sutra
Lotus Sutra’s Place in the Buddhist Canon

- Position of the scripture within the Mahayana sutra section of the Buddhist canon
- Traditional belief that the text contains the teachings of the Buddha
- Relative lack of prominence in Indian (and Tibetan) Buddhism
- Central position and great influence in Chinese (and E Asian) Buddhism
Uncertainties about the early provenance of the text, which seem to have been composed in India during the first or second century CE

Scholarly hypothesis that the scripture was compiled in stages and contains materials from diverse sources

Discovery of Sanskrit manuscripts of the scripture

Translation of the text into Tibetan and other languages
Three extant Chinese translations of the sutra (out of a total of six), produced from the 3rd century CE onward

Greatest popularity of Kumārajīva’s translation (406)

Wide circulation and popularity of the sutra in China and throughout E Asia

Compilation of numerous commentaries on the sutra, including those of Zhiyi (538-597), the founder of the Tiantai school
Variations of the Scripture’s Title

- Sanskrit: सद्धर्मपुण्डरीकसूत्र  Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra
- Chinese: 妙法蓮華經  Miàofǎ Liánhuā Jīng
- Japanese: Myōhō Renge Kyō
- Korean: Myo beom nyeon hwa gyeong
- Vietnamese: Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa Kinh
Translations and Studies in English and Other Languages

Poceski - Chinese Buddhism
Sutra’s Roles and Impact on Chinese Buddhism

- Broad popularity of the sutra across a range of Buddhist traditions
- Foundation of the Tiantai school on the basis of the sutra, which it considered to be the highest and final expression of the Buddha’s wisdom
- Development of rich artistic and literary heritages related to the sutra
Devotional Practices

- Development of various devotional practices and rituals inspired by or centered on the sutra
  - Cultic worship of the sutra itself
  - Reading and recitation of the text
  - Copying of the text
  - Self-immolation
Central Themes and Ideas

- One Vehicle
- Skilful means
- Universality of Buddhahood
- Primordial or eternal Buddha
- Salvific powers of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas
Categorization of the previous Buddhist teachings in terms of the “three vehicles”
- Disciples (śrāvaka)
- Privately enlightened buddhas (pratyekabuddha)
- Bodhisattvas

Ascribing of provisional status to the three vehicles

Assertion of the ultimate truth and validity of the One (Buddha) Vehicle—the unique teaching the *Lotus Stūra*—which reconciles and supersedes the three vehicles

Lack of clear explanation of the One Vehicle
Use of various teaching strategies and pedagogical devices by the Buddha—skilful means (upāya)—in response to varied circumstances and the different capacities or predilections of his listeners

Placement of the three vehicles into the category of upāya

The doctrine of skilful means as a critique of religious dogmatism or attachment to specific truth claims, based on the notion that all religious teachings are provisional, even if they might point to an ultimate truth, which is indescribable
Chapter 2: Expedient Means
Revelation of the Buddha’s Wisdom

At that time the World-Honored One calmly arose from his samadhi and addressed Shariputra, saying: “The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult to enter. Not one of the voice-hearers or pratyekabuddhas is able to comprehend it…. Shariputra, ever since I attained Buddhahood I have through various causes and various similes widely expounded my teachings and have used countless expedient means to guide living beings and cause them to renounce attachments. Why is this? Because the Thus Come One is fully possessed by both expedient means and the paramita of wisdom…. Because what the Buddha has achieved is the rarest and most difficult-to-understand Law. The true entity of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas.” (Watson 1-2)
“Shariputra, the Buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand…. This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are Buddhas can understand it. Why is this? Because the Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone…. The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world. They wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to cause living beings to awaken to the Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world.” (Watson 9)
“Shariputra, the Thus Come Ones have only a single Buddha vehicle which they employ in order to preach the Law to living beings. They do not have any other vehicle, a second one or a third one. Shariputra, the Law preached by all the Buddhas of the ten directions is the same as this.... Shariputra, the Buddhas of the past used countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of living beings. These doctrines are all for the sake of the one Buddha vehicle. These living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, are all eventually able to attain wisdom embracing all species.” (Watson 9)
"Shariputra, when the age is impure and the times are chaotic, then the defilements of living beings are grave, they are greedy and jealous and put down roots that are not good. Because of this, the Buddhas, utilizing the power of expedient means, apply distinctions to the one Buddha vehicle and preach as though it were three. ... Again, Shariputra, if there should be monks or nuns who claim that they already have attained the status of arhat, that this is their last incarnation, that they have reached the final nirvana, and that therefore they have no further intention of seeking anuttara-samyaksambodhi, then you should understand that such as these are all persons of overbearing arrogance.... There is no other vehicle, there is only the one Buddha vehicle." (Watson 10-11)
Chapter 3: Simile and Parable
“In a certain town in a certain country there was a very rich man. He was far along in years and his wealth was beyond measure. He had many fields, houses and menservants. His own house was big and rambling, but it had only one gate.... At that time a fire suddenly broke out on all sides, spreading through the rooms of the house. The sons of the rich man, ten, twenty perhaps thirty, were inside the house.... But though the father was moved by pity and gave good words of instruction, the sons were absorbed in their games and unwilling to heed them. They had no alarm, no fright, and in the end no mind to leave the house. Moreover, they did not understand what the fire was, what the house was, what the danger was.... At that time the rich man had this thought: the house is already in flames from this huge fire. If I and my sons do not get out at once, we are certain to be burned. I must now invent some expedient means that will make it possible for the children to escape harm.” (Watson 34-35)
“The father understood his sons and knew what various toys and curious objects each child customarily liked and what would delight them. And so he said to them, 'The kind of playthings you like are rare and hard to find. If you do not take them when you can, you will surely regret it later. For example, things like these goat-carts, deer-carts and ox-carts. They are outside the gate now where you can play with them. So you must come out of this burning house at once. Then whatever ones you want, I will give them all to you!‘... At that time, when the sons heard their father telling them about these rare playthings, because such things were just what they had wanted, each felt emboldened in heart and, pushing and shoving one another, they all came wildly dashing out of the burning house.... Shariputra, at that time the rich man gave to each of his sons a large carriage of uniform size and quality. The carriages were tall and spacious and adorned with numerous jewels.... Each carriage was drawn by a white ox, pure and clean in hide, handsome in form and of great strength, capable of pulling the carriage smoothly and properly at a pace fast as the wind.” (Watson 35-36)
“The Thus Come One is like this. That is, he is a father to all the world.... He is endowed with expedient means and the paramita of wisdom, his great pity and great compassion are constant and unflagging; at all times he seeks what is good and will bring benefit to all. He is born into the threefold world, a burning house, rotten and old. In order to save living beings from the fires of birth, old age, sickness and death, care suffering, stupidity, misunderstanding, and the three poisons; to teach and convert them and enable them to attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi.... Shariputra, that rich man first used three types of carriages to entice his sons, but later he gave them just the large carriage adorned with jewels, the safest, most comfortable kind of all. Despite this, that rich man was not guilty of falsehood. The Thus Come One does the same, and he is without falsehood. First he preaches the three vehicles to attract and guide living beings, but later he employs just the Great Vehicle to save them. Why? The Thus Come One possesses measureless wisdom, power, freedom from fear, the storehouse of the Law. He is capable of giving to all living beings the Law of the Great Vehicle. But not all of them are capable of receiving it.” (Watson 37-40)