

CHIH-I, THE LOTUS, AND THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

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Introduction

It is well known that the T'ien-t'ai/Tendai school is often referred to as the "Lotus school" 法華宗, since it is a comprehensive synthesis of the entire Buddhist tradition based on the *ekayāna* principle of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*)⁽¹⁾. Chih-i, the formulator of T'ien-t'ai teachings and practice, considered the lotus in its multifarious aspects to be the most appropriate symbol for the Dharma as both the teaching of the Buddha and reality itself. In the *Fa hua hsüan i* 法華玄義 (T. 33, 681-814), Chih-i's major work on the profound meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he orchestrates an aria of symbols showing how the lotus re-presents the meaning of the Buddha's teachings and the nature of reality, matters which are otherwise inconceivable and beyond verbalization. These variations on a theme illustrate the "inexhaustible intelligibility" of the lotus as a symbol which, like the promised but undelivered *Lotus Sūtra* itself, has "immeasurable meanings" 無量義. In fact when Chih-i uses the term *fa-hua* 法華 or *lien-hua* 蓮華, it is often difficult to tell if he is referring to the lotus itself, the lotus as a symbol, the *Lotus Sūtra*, or the teaching/message of the *Lotus Sūtra*, or all of these together.

Chih-i also speaks of the identity of the symbol and that symbolized. "The lotus blossom," he says, "is not (merely) a symbol, but is the essence 体 (of reality) itself" [T. 33, 771c21], or "names" the essence of reality itself. On the one hand the symbol stands in relationship to the symbolized object in much the same way as words to

objects, as an inadequate yet valid, appropriate, and helpful means of communication and aid to understanding, though the symbol is more powerful, more profound, and a better expression of reality than words or concepts.⁽²⁾ This provisional duality, the relationship between the lotus and reality, or the symbol and the symbolized, is consistent with, or rather an extension of, the general thrust of Chih-i's philosophy. It reflects the relationship between such T'ien-t'ai concepts such as phenomena 事 and principle 理, the provisional 權 and real 實, the mundane 俗 and the real 真, the traces 迹 and the basis 本, conventional existence 假 and emptiness 空. On the other hand the split of the symbol and the symbolized into opposing factors (the *signifié* and *signifiant*, perhaps) is a provisional or conventional device. These two aspects are not ultimately dual, but share an integrated reality, as conventional existence and emptiness are united as the Middle 中 in Chih-i's Threefold Truth concept. So also the symbol and the symbolized share participation in an integrated reality, and the symbol is as varied and full of meaning as the reality it expresses.

Let us first take a look at Chih-i's presentation of the lotus as a symbol in the *Fa hua hsüan i*, and then take a broader look at Chih-i's lotus symbolism in light of the meaning of symbols and symbolism.

Chih-i's Interpretation of the Lotus

The lotus as a symbol is applied often throughout the *Fa hua hsüan i*, but is discussed directly in two sections. The first is in the introduction, and the second is the section which explains the term *lien-hua* (lotus blossom) in the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miao fa lien hua ching* 妙法蓮華經) as translated by Kumārajīva. The *Fa hua hsüan i* is structured as a commentary on the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, with the bulk of the text devoted to explaining the meaning of *miao* and *fa*. In the introduction, however, *miao* and *fa* are described briefly with one short phrase each, and a much longer explanation is given for *lien-hua*. First it is defined as "a symbol for provisional and real dharmas 權實法" [681a 25]. The reason that such a symbol is used is that "truly the subtle dharma is difficult to understand, but it is easily clarified by the conventional use of a symbol" [681a26]. It is an aid to understand-

ing; a concrete re-presentation of teachings or realities which are beyond conceptual understanding.

The later section on *lien-hua* gives a more extensive interpretation of how the lotus symbolizes the dharma, but the introduction gives a tidy outline of the symbolism of the lotus in six parts, the first three parts having to do with the "traces" 迹 section, or first half, of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the last three parts having to do with the "original basis" 本 section, or second half, of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The significance of this distinction is one which runs through Chih-i's philosophy, that reality is provisionally distinguished into categories such as the mundane and real truths, the "traces" and original basis of the Buddha, the provisional and real teachings, and so forth, but that ultimately there is only one integrated truth, one fundamental Buddha, and one basic teaching. The *Lotus Sūtra* is also provisionally divided into two halves; the first half dealing with the "traces" of the Buddha in his historical manifestations, and the second half dealing with the original, fundamental Buddha. Thus Chih-i gives three ways in which the lotus is symbolic of the provisional "traces" of the Buddha and his teachings, and three ways in which the lotus is symbolic of the original Buddha and the fundamental teachings.

First, the lotus is symbolic of the presentation of conventional truth or teachings for the sake of coming to know the real, ultimate truth, as the blossom (*hua*) exists for the sake of the core of the lotus (*lien*). The *Lotus Sūtra* reveals that the Buddha has used many skillful and expedient means (*upāya*) for the purpose of leading people to understand the true intent of his teachings.

Second, the blossoming of the lotus flower (*hua*) is symbolic of the revelation of the true meaning of the conventional teachings or skillful means, and the simultaneous appearance of the core of the lotus (*lien*) is symbolic of the manifestation of the true teachings. The truth is manifested as the conventional means are "exposed," as the core of the lotus is revealed while the lotus flower blossoms.

Third, the falling of the blossom is symbolic of the falling away of the conventional means, and the maturation of the lotus is symbolic of the establishment of the real truth. The expedient means have served their purpose and can be abandoned when one realizes the real meaning of the teachings.

The last three sections deal with the lotus as symbolic of the original Buddha and the fundamental teachings which are the content of the second half of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

First, in general the core of the lotus (*lien*) is a symbol for the “original basis,” i.e. the original Buddha, the fundamental teachings, and reality as it truly is. The blossom (*hua*) is a symbol for the “traces,” the conventional means and teachings, and the historical manifestations of the Buddha. In short, “the traces emanate from and depend on the original basis” [681b5-6].

Second, the blossoming of the lotus flower is a symbol for the revelation of the true meaning of the “traces,” and the appearance of the core of the lotus is a symbol for the manifestation of the “original basis.”

Third, the falling of the blossom is a symbol for the rejection of the “traces” and the maturation of the lotus is symbolic of the establishment of the “original basis.” These last two points may seem to repeat the second and third point above, but actually it goes one step further in going beyond the realm of the “traces” to the ultimate reality of the original Buddha and the fundamental truth.

This outline in six parts is well constructed, but in places is rather abstract. Chih-i gives more specific and concrete details in the text of the *Fa hua hsüan i* [771c17-774c25].

First, Chih-i defines what he means by using the lotus as a symbol. He points out again that the lotus is “borrowed” provisionally as a symbol for the “subtle Dharma” (*miao-fa*), which has just been discussed in detail and shown to be inconceivable, beyond conceptual thought, and beyond verbalization.⁽⁴⁾ The lotus, however, is a concrete object which can illustrate and help people understand the true meaning of the Dharma, especially in its dual roles as provisional and real truth.

Chih-i goes on, however, to point out that the lotus is not merely a symbol, but is the essence of reality itself, or the “naming” of that essence. The symbol is not separate from that which it symbolizes, but participates with it in a single integrated reality. Again, he adds, the designation “lotus” is not merely a provisional symbol 假喻, but is the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself [771c24-25]. The perpetual preaching of the *Lotus* dharma finds its expression in the lotus more perfectly than in any

other concrete phenomenal object.

Chih-i then refers to previous interpretations of the lotus as a symbol, such as that by Fa-yün, and then quotes other sutras and treatises (such as the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra Upadeśa* and the *Samnipāta Sūtra*) on their use of the lotus as a symbol, but these details need not detain us here.

Finally Chih-i gives us his “correct interpretation” of the lotus. As is his wont he follows the usual pattern of the *Fa hua hsüan i* and interprets the symbolism of the lotus in terms of the ten such-likes 十如是, conditioned co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), the Four Noble Truths, the two truths (*samvṛti-satya* and *paramārtha-satya*), the threefold truth (emptiness, conventional existence, and the Middle), one truth, no-truth, and so forth [773a24-26]. The six categories given in the introduction are repeated and explained further. However, it is pointed out that this is only a “partial” interpretation of the symbolism of the lotus. The possibilities are actually limitless and a more extensive interpretation would involve explaining all the categories mentioned above (conditioned co-arising and so forth). It is in this context that Chih-i gives more concrete details as to what the lotus symbolizes.

A few examples should suffice.⁽⁵⁾ In the area of the ten such-likes, e.g., the lotus is a symbol of the nature of Buddhahood in that the white “meat” of the lotus embryo bud is not altered even though it, with its black rind, is in the mud. So also sentient beings, though they pass through the muddy swamp of *saṃsāra*, inherently possess the pure Buddha nature [773b16-18]. It is a symbol of the power for attaining Buddhahood; as the lotus embryo bud is enclosed in its husk and buried in the mud, but the kernel has in its core the spark of life or potential for growth; so also sentient beings, though they are bound by bad karma and submerged in a mass of delusions, have within them the ability to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment [773b25-28]. It is a symbol of the causes which lead to Buddhahood: as the lotus bud grows out of the mud, is blown by the wind and illuminated by the sun, and grows gradually day by day until it blossoms in splendor; so also sentient beings aspire for enlightenment, cultivate the deeds of a Bodhisattva, perfect the practices, and become worthy of Buddhahood [773c8-13]. In the same way the symbol of the lotus is applied to twelfold links of conditioned co-arising. For example, the lotus soak-

ing up moisture is a symbol for the links of passion (*trṣṇā*), attachment (*upādāna*), and existence (*bhava*), and so forth. The same is done briefly with the Four Noble Truths, the two truths, threefold truth, and one truth.

The above still deals only with the first of the ten categories of subtlety as outlined in the *Fa hua hsüan i*, i.e., the subtlety of objective reality 境妙. Chih-i then deals with the lotus as a symbol for his other nine categories of subtlety. For the subtlety of practice, for example, the stalk is compassion, the leaves are wisdom, the stamen is *samādhi*, and the blossoming of the flower is liberation [774a26-29]. The stages in the growth of the lotus symbolize the stages of attainment to Buddhahood. For example, the sprout tearing out and emerging from the husk is a symbol for the stages of abodes 住位. Emerging from the mud and being in the water is the stage of the four *dhyānas* 四禪, since *dhyāna*, like water, is able to wash away the dust of desires. Emerging from the water is a symbol for the ten stages of faith 十信, and so forth. Also, “from the vicinity of one root-stock there again grows another lotus. One after the other again there grow immeasurable lotus flowers. This is a symbol for the increase in the attendants of the Buddha...” [774b5-8].

Finally it is pointed out that all of the above categories still deal only with the aspect of the “traces” of reality. Chih-i closes his explanation by dealing with the symbol of the lotus in relation to the “original basis.” “The symbolism is like a lake where the lotus first matures. After maturing the lotus falls down into the muddy water where again it grows to attain maturity. In this way one (lotus) after the other again grows to maturity until after many months it finally stretches all across the great lake, and a field of (lotus) flowers is completely spread out. The Buddha is also like this. His original basis has already finished cultivating the causes for the fruit of enlightenment. For the sake of sentient beings he again arouses skillful devices, appears in (the world of) life and death, conveys his first aspiration for enlightenment and also his ultimate end (of the attainment of Buddhahood). Through numerous arising and perishing, and innumerable hundred thousand imparting of responses 垂応 from the original basis 本地, he bends down to become the same as ordinary mundane (people) and again cultivates the five practices. The black lotus seed again grows a stem and leaves; this is a symbol for again cultivating the Noble

practices 聖行. The lotus spore with its four minute (elements) little by little grows larger; this is a symbol for again cultivating the divine practices 天行. The first growth of the leaves is a symbol for again cultivating the pure practices 梵行. The lotus spore falling into the mud is a symbol for sharing all evil (conditions) and again cultivating the practice of dis-ease 病行. The first germinating of the lotus sprout is a symbol for sharing small virtues and again cultivating childlike practices. In this way things which can be beneficial in this triple world are immeasurable. Permeating the universe, (the Buddha) does not refrain from dividing his body and lowering his traces, benefiting (others) by revealing his traces, abandoning his traces, and so forth” [774c12-25].

Of course some of Chih-i’s explanations make more sense than others, and one gets the impression that often he is being rather imaginative (and tiresome) in order to fill in all his categories. Nevertheless the point is that the possible applications of the lotus as a symbol are endless, since it re-presents the infinite and subtle dharma itself.

Here ends Chih-i’s presentation, but the ramifications could go on and on. The lotus as a symbol, like the promised but undelivered *Lotus Sūtra*, is never exhausted. It is what we make of it, and yet its intrinsic nature is such that it represents the true nature of reality in a way in which we mere ignorant mortals can understand it. It is the most perfect of symbols. As Chih-i says, “If not the lotus blossom, then what (else) could so thoroughly symbolize [the true nature of] phenomena (*sarvadharma*)?” [774c23-24]

Symbolism and the Lotus

So far we have used the word “symbol” without defining what it means. In the remaining part of the paper let us examine some recent definitions and speculations on symbolism and apply these to Chih-i’s use of lotus symbolism.

First, Raymond Firth, in his book on *Symbols Public and Private*, discusses the complex uses of the concept of the symbol, but gives the general guideline that a symbol is “a concrete indication of abstract values” (1973, p. 54). Heisig makes the

same point in defining the nature of the symbolic process as consisting “in the fact that one thing, usually concrete and particular, stands for something else, usually abstract and generalized, and becomes a focal point for thoughts and emotions associated with that referent, or a trigger for a set of habits associated with it” (1987, p. 204). At the risk of oversimplifying a complicated concept,⁽⁷⁾ we can point out that certainly the lotus is a concrete object which stands for the more abstract Dharma. But a symbol is much more than a concrete expression of something abstract. It does not merely point to an object it symbolizes, nor does it merely “stand” for something else, like a sign. A symbol has what Victor Turner calls “multivocality,” i.e. a symbol condenses within a single formulation a number of significant meanings and values (Turner 1967, 19-41).

For Chih-i, the “multivocality” of the lotus is as unlimited and inexhaustible as the Dharma it symbolizes. The most appropriate expression I found to convey the way Chih-i utilizes the lotus as a symbol is Bernard Lonergan’s phrase “inexhaustible intelligibility” (see Lonergan 1975). This expression immediately brought to mind the description of the preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* as having “immeasurable meaning” 無量義, and confirmed Chih-i’s proposition that the lotus as a symbol is unlimited in its potential to express and re-present the unlimited Dharma. As George and Willa Tanabe point out in their introduction to the volume of essays collected from the first International Conference on the *Lotus Sūtra* in Japan,⁽⁸⁾ the *Lotus Sūtra* is constantly promised but never actually preached. The reason is that its meanings are immeasurable, and no verbal preaching of it could exhaust its almost infinite depth. The inexhaustible intelligibility of the lotus as a symbol is the same as the content of the *Lotus Sūtra*; it has immeasurable meaning for those with eyes to see. The relationship between the lotus flower and the seed, the way the white core of the lotus emerges from the mud with its purity intact, the growth of the lotus from a seed through many stages until its full flowering, and so on, act as symbolic representations of the unlimited Dharma.

Eliade’s description of the role of religious symbolism also confirms much of what I had discovered in Chih-i’s use of the lotus as a religious symbol. In *The Two and the One* he discusses the role of religious symbolism as follows,

Symbols are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a condition of the World which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.... An essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its multivalence, its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings the unity between which is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.... The symbol is capable of revealing a perspective in which diverse realities can be fitted together or even integrated into a "system." In other words, a religious symbol allows man to discover a certain unity of the World and at the same time to become aware of his own destiny as a integral part of the world.... Perhaps the most important function of religious symbolism ... is its capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way.... Finally, we must stress the existential value of religious symbolism, that is to say the fact that a symbol always points to a reality or a situation concerning human existence.... It follows that the man who understands a symbol not only "opens himself" to the objective world, but at the same time succeeds in emerging from his personal situation and reaching a comprehension of the universal.... Thanks to the symbol, the individual experience is "awoken" and transmuted into a spiritual act (1965, pp. 201-208).

The role of the lotus in revealing the subtle Dharma in ways not immediately evident in our everyday experience, its capacity to express several ("inexhaustible") meanings, its role in showing the integrated nature of "provisional" and "real" dharmas, its existential value as an aid to understanding which points to a reality which is fundamental for human experience and contributes to sentient beings reaching a "comprehension of the universal"; these are all part of Chih-i's lotus symbolism.

In conclusion, there are three notable aspects of Chih-i's lotus symbolism:

- the function of symbol as having "multivocality" and "inexhaustible intelligibility" so that the lotus re-presents the dharma in limitless and accessible expressions;
- the role of the lotus as a concrete symbol of an abstract dharma, as a means for facilitating understanding for those who are not astute enough

to realize the truth directly; and

- the unity of the symbol and the symbolized so that the lotus and the dharma participate together synergistically in a single reality.

In these ways Chih-i's use and interpretation of lotus symbolism confirm many modern theories of the meaning and significance of symbols. The significance of modern theories of symbolism for a deeper understanding and contemporary re-interpretation of Chih-i's Buddhist religion and philosophy, and to what extent the use of the term "symbol" is appropriate for what Chih-i is attempting in the *Fa hua hsüan i*, are subjects for further study.

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NOTES

- (1) It is worth noting, however, that the T'ien-t'ai system does not rely exclusively on the *Lotus Sūtra* and in that sense cannot be called a "Lotus-only" school. Chih-i extensively utilized texts such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the *Pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra*, the *Ta chih tu lun*, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, and so forth.
- (2) For a provocative study which argues against the "semiological" conception of symbols (the idea that symbols have meaning in much the same way that words do) see Sperber 1974. He writes, for example, that "symbolic knowledge is neither about semantically understood categories, nor about the world, but about the encyclopaedic entries of categories. This knowledge is neither about words nor about things, but about the memory of words and things" (p. 108).
- (3) Actually Chih-i uses two terms in describing the role of the lotus: *yü* 喻 "a parable or metaphor," the term used, e.g., for the parables of the *Lotus Sūtra*; and *p'i* 譬 "to compare; a simile or symbol." Technically the two should be distinguished, but Chih-i often uses them interchangeably and also together as a compound. For this paper I will use the word "symbol" to translate both of these terms.
- (4) See my work *Foundations of T'ien-t'ai Philosophy*, 1989.
- (5) For details see the *Fa hua hsüan i*, T 33.773b-c.
- (6) The other nine categories of subtlety are: the subtlety of wisdom, the subtlety of prac-

tice, the subtlety of stages, the subtlety of the threefold dharmas, the subtlety of empathy and response, the subtlety of supranormal powers, the subtlety in preaching the dharma, the subtlety of attendants, and the subtlety of benefits.

- (7) Both Firth and Heisig, of course, go into the subject in much greater depth, and the interested reader is referred to their works.
- (8) See George J. Tanabe, Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe, ed. *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 1-2.