

CHAPTER IV

THE CONCEPT OF ONE VEHICLE



In one religion, it is usually stated that there must be one single way to salvation which is true. When Buddhism has been divided to Theravada and Mahayana, the adherents of both schools sometimes say that the way taught in their school is such 'the only way.' In this chapter, the content will be dedicated to explore the understanding of the concept of 'one vehicle' in the *Sutta Nipata* and the Lotus Sutra.

The Concept of One Vehicle in the *Sutta Nipata*

One Buddha's vehicle is the teaching that leads all people to Buddhahood (Enlightenment). As this concept is not found directly from the *Sutta Nipata*, other sources in the *Theravada Tipitaka* will be used. In the Pali Canon, the word "one Vehicle" or "*eka-yana*" is found in the "Setting-up of Mindfulness" (*Mahasatipatthana-suttanta*), the Dialogues of the Buddha 22 (the *Digha Nikaya* 22). This *sutta* was preached at *Kammassadhamma*, a city of the *Kuru* country (one of sixteen large countries in India at the age of Sakyamuni Buddha).

The passage (at the beginning part of the *sutta*) is as follows:

"The one and only path (*eka-yana*), *Bhikkhus* leading to the purification of beings, to passing far beyond grief and lamentation, to the dying-out of ill and misery, to the attainment of right method, to the realization of Nirvana, is that of the Fourfold Setting up of Mindfulness."

And, another passage (at the last part of the *sutta*), it was on account of this that was said which was said (at the beginning).

"The one and only path (*eka-yana*), *bhikkhus*, leading to the purification of beings, to passing for beyond grief and lamentation, to the dying out of ill and misery, to the attainment of right method, to the realization of Nirvana, is that of the Four-fold Setting-up of Starting."

The Four fold Setting up of Starting are contemplation of the "body" (*kaya*), to be mindful that it is impurity; contemplation of "feeling" (*vedana*), to be mindful that is

suffering; contemplation of the thought (the expression of the text)-here meaning “mind” (*citta*), to be mindful that it is impermanent; contemplation of ideas (the expression of the text here meaning “phenomena”) (*dhamma*), to be mindful that it is that they are devoid of self. The doctrine here expounded is the most important after that of the Aryan Path. This is the oldest authoritative statement of the doctrine, and is still in frequent and popular use among for the Buddhist who holds fast to the ancient faith.

In the Kindred Sayings on the Stations of Mindfulness, (The book called *Mahavagga*) of *Samyutta-nikaya*, the following is noteworthy.

The Exalted one said:

“This, monks, is the sole way (*ekayano*) that leads to the purification of beings, to the utter passing beyond sorrow and grief, to the description of woe and lamentation, to the winning of the Method, to realizing *Nibbana*, to wit: the four stations of mindfulness (*cattaro satipattana*).”³

“*Eka-yana*” is translated to leading to the one goal, direct way, or leading to the goal as the one & only way (*Magga*). In the stanza 15 of the “Treasure-store Discourse” (*Nidhikhandasuttama*), the one goal is described as “*buddha-bhumi*” (the plane of enlightenment). The purpose of this *sutta* is showing its means (*vidhana*) to the success (excellence, *sampatti*).

The source of this *sutta* is described as followings.

At *Savatthi*, it seems, there was a certain land-owner rich in much money and property. He lived the household life in faith and confidence uncognizant. One day he gave an almsgiving to the community of *Bhikkus* headed by the Enlightened One. It so happened that occasion the king was in need of money, so he sent a man, telling him ‘Go and fetch the land-owner named so-and-so’. The man went to the land-owner and told him ‘Householder, the king summons you’. The land owner was actually serving the Community of *Bhikkhs* headed by the Enlightened One, his mind being graced by the special qualities of faith and so on. He replied ‘Go now, good man, I shall come later. Just now I am engaged in laying up a treasure (*nidhi*)’. Then, when the Blessed One had eaten and had shown that he had had enough, he

³ This passage is the part of the conclusion for (i) Ambapali of Chapter 1. Ambapali.

uttered these stanzas, namely 'A man lays by a treasure store', as a blessing in order to show to the land-owner how that same excellence in merit is in the ultimate sense a treasure store.⁴

A treasure store, according to "The Illustrator of Ultimate Meaning" (*Paramatthajotika*) is of four kinds, namely, (1) a fixture (fixed property---any bullion, of gold [stored away] underground or in attics, or any field or land, anything else of the sort any [alternation of] posture), (2) the ambulant (movable property---bondswomen and bondsmen, elephant, cattle, horse and mares, fowls and pigs, or anything else of the sort that is associated with [alternation of] the postures), (3) a pseudo-limb (any sphere of work, sphere of craft, branch of science, ample learning [erudition] or anything else of the sort acquired by training and bound up with one's own selfhood if it were a limb: this is a treasure store as a pseudo-limb), (4) a follower (merit consisting in giving, consisting virtue, consisting in maintenance [of concentration and insight] in being, hearing the True Ideas, and consisting in teaching the True idea, or any other merit of the sort gives desirable fruit here and there as if it had followed one).

The Blessed One said in 'Stanza 5 second half, "*Yada punnakkhayo hoti sabbam etam vinassati*" (And when his merit is consumed, / The whole will vanish utterly", showing the one and only reason which is the root of all those aforesaid reasons, namely, exhaustion of merit.) In 'the Illustrator of Ultimate Meaning' of 'Stanza 6', 'the Blessed One have stated, the kind of treasure store recognized in the world, which, although laid by with such and such intension, yet fails to serve as intended and is in various ways inseparable from the idea of vanishing away.' The blessed one, now, showed that excellence of merit as a treasure store in the ultimate sense, in order to show which he began this Treasure-Store Discourse when giving the landowner His blessing.

From above, it is seen that the concept of 'one vehicle' given in the *Pali Canon* consists of two main meanings. The first one is: one vehicle as the final aim in one's life. It is enlightenment. The second one is: one vehicle as the means to that end. It is the practice of mindfulness.

The Concept of One Vehicle in the Lotus Sutra

The Buddha's teaching is compared to a vehicle (*yana*) that carries one to a particular state of enlightenment. In accordance with people's capacities, the voice-hearer vehicle (*savaka-yana*) leads one to the state of *arahant*; cause-awaken one

⁴ This passage is the explanation of the background for the "Treasure-Store Discourse".

vehicle or self-awakened one (*paccekabuddha-yana*) leads one to the state of *paccekabuddha*; and the *bodhisatta* vehicle (*bodhisatta-yana*), after many *kalpas* of practice leads one to Buddhahood. The voice-hearer vehicle (*savaka-yana*) and the cause awakened one vehicle (*paccekabuddha-yana*) are together termed the two vehicle, and with the addition of the *bodhisatta* vehicle (*bodhisatta-yana*) the three vehicles.

The Flower garland Sutra and other Mahayana *suttas* teach that the Buddha's teaching leads all people including the voice-hearer and self-awakened one to one vehicle (*eka-yana*) of Buddhahood, and especially the Lotus Sutra places the greatest emphasis on it. The Lotus Sutra teaches that these three vehicles (*ti-yana*) are not ends in themselves but means to lead people to the one vehicle (*eka-yana*), which unifies and refines the three vehicle (*ti-yana*) teachings. The "Expedient Means" (second) chapter of the Lotus Sutra says that the Buddha employ only single vehicle to preach the Law to living beings. It also says that the Buddha, utilizing the power of expedient means, divide the one vehicle (*eka-yana*) and preach as though it were three. The chapter again says that there is only one vehicle in all the Buddha lands throughout the universe, and the Buddha's sole purpose is to lead all being to Buddhahood. The *T'ien-t'ai* school called this the "replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle." In the Lotus sutra, the term one vehicle (*eka-yana*) is synonymous with the Buddha's true teaching.

The passages in the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra say:

"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. *Shariputra*, this is the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the World."

The Buddha said to *Shariputra*, "The Buddhas, the Thus Come Ones, simply reach and convert the bodhisattvas. All the things they do are all times done for this one purpose. They simply wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings and enlighten them to it.

"*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 Buddha vehicle. These living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, are all eventually able to attain wisdom embracing all species.

Shariputra, when the Buddhas of the future make their appearance in the world, they too will use 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 will all be for the sake of the Buddha vehicle. And these living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, will all eventually be able to attain wisdom embracing all species.

Shariputra, the Buddhas, the World-Honored ones, who exist at present in the countless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, and millions of Buddha lands in the ten directions, benefit and bring peace and happiness to living beings in large measure. These Buddhas too use 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. And these living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, are all eventually able to attain wisdom embracing all species.

Shariputra, these Buddhas simply teach and convert the bodhisattvas. They do it because they wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings. They do it because they wish to use the Buddha wisdom to enlighten living beings. They do it because they wish to cause living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom.

Shariputra, I too will now do the same. I know that living beings have various desires, attachments that are deeply implanted in their minds. Taking cognizance of this basic nature of theirs, I will therefore use various causes and conditions, word of simile and parable, and the power of expedient means and expound the Law for them. *Shariputra*, I do this so that all of them may attain the one Buddha vehicle and wisdom embracing all species.

Shariputra, in the worlds of the ten directions, there are not two vehicles, much less three! *Shariputra*, the Buddha appears in evil worlds of five impurities. These are the so-called impurity of the age, impurity of desire, impurity of living beings, impurity of view, and impurity of life span.

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.”



From above, it is seen that the concept of one vehicle as given in the Lotus Sutra consists of two main meanings. First, one vehicle as the essence of all teachings of the Buddha. According to this meaning, it does not matter the teachings of the Buddha are given in the texts of Theravada or Mahayana school. All of them are the teachings of the same Buddha. Their essence is the same. It is the essence that leads to enlightenment alike. Second, one vehicle as the shared form of the different practices adopted by the adherents of different Buddhist schools. According to this meaning, the different ways of practicing the Buddha's dharma are naturally given when the teachings of the Buddha come to different lands—for example, to Thailand and Japan. The way Thai Buddhists practice the dharma is naturally different from Japanese Buddhists. Their ways are not the same in their forms. But as both of them share the way of the same Buddha, so they belong to one vehicle.

Comparison and Comment

The first comparison is the similar point between one vehicle '*eka-ana*' of the the 'Setting-up of Mindfulness' (*Mahasatipatthana Suttanta*) above quoted, and one Buddha vehicle of the Lotus Sutra.

The concept of '*eka-yana*' is very similar between two.

One vehicle (*eka-yana*) is also defined 'a road leading to one place', that is, *nibbana*; in short, this practice (the fourfold field mindfulness) is considered a complete system of practice, suitable from the earliest stages through the highest enlightenment. This *Suttanta* is regarded one of most important *suttas* on the practice of Theravada Buddhism. The *sutta* says, as quoted, 'The one and only path, to the realization of Nirvana.'

In the 'Greater Discourse at *assapura*' (*Mahaassapura-sutta*) of *Majjhima-Nikaya* lists seventeen stages of practice, from the beginning of religious practice to enlightenment. They are ①Feeling shame (*hirottappa-samannagata*) ②Purity of

bodily conduct (*parisuddha-kayasamacara*) ③Purity of speech ④Purity of thought (*parisuddha-manosamacara*) ⑤Purity of living (*parisuddha-ajiva*) ⑥Protecting the doors of senses organs (*indriyesuguttadvara*) ⑦Knowing what is sufficient for nourishment(*bhojane-mattannu*) ⑧Intent on vigilance (*jagariyam anuyutta*) ⑨Mindfulness and clear consciousness (*sati-sampajannena samannagata*) ⑩remote lodging and abandoning the five hindrances (*vivitta-senasana, pancaniva-rana-pahana*) ⑪Attaining the first *jhana* stage (*pathamajjhana*) ⑫Attaining the second *jhana* stage (*dutiyajjhana*) ⑬Attaining the third *jhana* stage (*tatiyajjhana*) ⑭Attaining the fourth *jhana* stage(*catutthajjhana*) ⑮Insight into the past lives (*pubbenivasanussati-nana*) ⑯Insight into the future lives (*sattanam cutupapata-nana*) ⑰Having *nibbana* insight into suffering so as to be able to overcome all defilements and temptations in the present.

Stages ①—⑧ are concerned with morality, stages ⑨—⑭ with concentration, and stages ⑮—⑰ with wisdom. With enlightenment, the three insight (⑮—⑰ *te-vijja*) are attained.

The noticeable point in the *sutta* is to be stated 'while you are aiming at recluseship, fall not short of the goal if there is something further to be done', on the tail of each stage. It means to go forward, without stopover, to the final attainment. The same spirit on practice is taken in the verse 68 of the *Sutta Nipatta* as follows: 'Resolute for the attainment of the supreme goal, with intrepid mind, not indolent, or firm exertion, furnished with strength and power, one should wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn.'

Now, One vehicle in the Lotus Sutra:—

In the 'Belief and Understanding' (forth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, '*Subhuti, Mahakatyana, Mahakashyapa, and Mahamaudgalyayana*, the four senior leaders said. They said, "we were old and decrepit", and admit, "believed that we had already attained nirvana and that we were incapable of doing more, and so we never sought to attain *anuttara-samyaku-sambodhi*". But then the prediction of *Shariputra's* enlightenment broke through complacency of these leaders.

They say; "Now in the presence of the Buddha we have heard this voice-hearer receive a prophecy that he (*Shariputra*) will attain *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* and our minds are greatly delighted." And then Sakyamuni tells them they still have much to achieve and urges them to keep trying. They, in their rapturous, employ a parable to describe the teaching they have just grasped. They regain youthful vigor and once again begin to lead energetic lives of self-improvement. Namely, it means that they began to set out on the path of "one Buddha vehicle".

Sakyamuni Buddha discourses in the last verse of next chapter, 'the Parable of the Medical Herbs' (fifth) chapter, as follows.

Now for you and the others / I preach the utmost truth: / none in the multitude of voice-hearers / has entered the stage of extinction. / What you are practicing / is the bodhisattva way, / and as you gradually advance in practice and learning / you are all certain to attain Buddhahood.

And, in 'Bestowal of Prophecy' (sixth) chapter, Sakyamuni Buddha predicts that the four senior leaders, *Subhuti*, *Mahakatyana*, *Mahakashyapa*, and *Mahamaudgalyayana*, will attain the enlightenment of Buddhahood in the future.

Both the Sutta Nipata and the Lotus Sutra form the similar concepts on one vehicle. It is that 'while you are aiming at, fall not short of the goal if there is something further to be done'.

The different point is that the final goal is dissimilar. The final goal in the *Mahaassapura-sutta* (Greater Discourse at *Assapura*) plainly indicates to become Arahant. (In the expression, this is called a monk who, and who is a perfected one.)

In the Lotus Sutra, the final goal is to attain the enlightenment of Buddhahood.