

The Lotus

Buddhism's Favourite Flower



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

The Lotus: Buddhism's Favourite Flower

It is said that the world's most beloved flower is the rose and the second-most loved is the lotus. Found from northern China and Korea all the way through south, south-east and east Asia and down to northern Australia, the lotus plant has influenced all the fine arts, culinary science, medicine, horticulture, poetry and even architecture (e.g. the lotus bath in Polonnaruwa). It is an aquatic plant growing best in bodies of water with thick muddy bottoms and being a hardy plant it tends to dominate the lakes, ponds and reservoirs where it grows. The flower comes in three colours; creamy white, pink and yellow. One often hears of or reads about the 'blue lotus' but actually there is no such flower, for here the term lotus is mistakenly used for the blue waterlily, *uppala* in Pali, plants of the Nymphaeaceae family according to botanists. Even a cursory look at this flower will reveal its difference from the lotus. Lotus leaves are a lustreless pastel green and rise above the water; waterlily leaves are a shiny green and float of the surface of the water. The lotus flower is large with a pronounced carpel and its petals are like rounded slightly elongated cups; the waterlily flower is much smaller, its carpel small and its petals are spear-shaped. Also, the lotus' perfume is subtle and hardly noticeable while the waterlily's is quite pronounced.

The lotus endeared itself to the Indians long before the Buddha which is clear from the many names it was given in both Pali and Sanskrit; *bhisa*, *kamala*, *kokananda*, *kumunda*, *mulalipuppha*, *pokkhara*, *pundarika*, *rasaroruha*, *varija*, and of course its most common name *paduma*. While it is obvious that the lotus' ethereal beauty would attract attention this does not fully explain why it would become so favoured by Buddhists and so identified with Buddhism. After all, northern India is home to many beautiful flowers, the *kimsuka* (*Butea fondosa*), the *sala* (*Shorea robusta*) and the *simbali* (*Bombax malabaricum*) being some of them. So why did the early Buddhists give the lotus a special place in the symbolism and iconography of their religion?

Examining all the Buddha's references to the lotus, and two things in particular, helps to answer this question. The first was that this beautiful pure flower emerges from dirty muddy water. To the Buddha, this was analogous to the enlightened person's transcendence of samsara. He said: "Just as the lotus is born in the water and grows up beneath the water, yet remains undefiled by the water, fragrant and beautiful, even so, the Buddha is born in the world, grows up and dwells in the world but like the lotus unstained by the water, he is not defiled by the world." Taking note of these words and using their creative imagination ancient Buddhists sculptors often depicted the Buddha sitting on a lotus. In later centuries Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, known in Sri Lanka as Natha, was sometimes also known as Padmapani (Lotus in Hand) and was always depicted holding a lotus. The second thing was the fact that water will not adhere to the lotus leaf. Because of microscopic waxy papillae on the surface of the leaves water splashed on them instantly turns into quicksilver-like drops and immediately slips off, leaving no trace of moisture. Concerning this the Buddha said in the Dhammapada: "Whoever in the world overcomes this low unruly craving, sorrow falls away like drops of water on a lotus leaf." So for the Buddha of two of the lotus' characteristics one reminded him of the beauty and freedom of the Nirvanic state, while the second suggested to him the mind of the mature Buddhist – living in the world but unaffected by it. So next time you see a lotus blossom, after admiring its beauty, take the opportunity to consider the spiritual messages it embodies.