

THE LOTUS SUTRA

Lecture #40 (June 15, 2011)

Lecture #41 (June 29, 2011)

Chapter 17

The Variety of Merits

Before we go to Chapter 17, I would like to share the historical background at the time when the Lotus Sutra was composed. Just as with all the other Mahayana texts, the Lotus Sutra was composed during the first and second centuries. According to Theravada Buddhists who were *Sravakas* (声聞), *Pryataka-buddhas* (緣覺) and *Bodhisattvas* (菩薩), it was almost impossible for them to attain Buddhahood. If these learned people could not attain enlightenment, then lay people had zero chance. But the Buddha's real wish was to save all living beings; therefore, a group of people began to write and create Mahayana Buddhism in order to bring Buddha Dharma to the ordinary people a few centuries after the Buddha's death. His message is a good example: as we read in the last phrase of Chapter 16, "How shall I cause all living beings to enter into the unsurpassed way and quickly become Buddha?" Therefore the first half of the Lotus Sutra repeatedly spoke about people of the Three Vehicles who were able to become Buddhas by practicing the way of the Bodhisattvas.

By the first century mutual trading along the Silk Road brought forth a mixing of different cultures from around the known world. Central Asia, where present day Afghanistan and Pakistan lie, became the central point where Hellenism and Indian influences meshed together with a sharing of ideas. Alexander the Great brought Greek Mythology and Buddhism crossed the Indus River. It was not until this combination that the first Buddha statues were created, the incorporation of gems and jewels in text form and adaptation of philosophies. In the past it was considered to be disrespectful to show and create an image of the Buddha. But with Greek influence, people began to carve Buddha's image with some of the early statues looking quite Greek. The Lotus Sutra reveals many treasures such as gold, silver, copper, lapis lazuli agate, coral and pearls. These are items not found in India but in the Mediterranean and Africa. Without the Silk Road, the people in India would not know of such fine treasures. Theravada Buddhism only referred to Buddha Sakyamuni while Mahayana Buddhism revealed many names of Buddhas such as Amida, Dainichi, Yakushi, and others. This idea must have been copied over from Greek Mythology. The Lotus Sutra took it one step further and revealed that all Buddhas including the historical Sakyamuni were the manifestation of the Eternal Buddha.

Even with the passing of the physical Buddha 2,500 years ago, he is still alive. This is the main message of Chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra. So where then is the Eternal Buddha? We cannot see him anywhere. He is the Dharma, the teachings. Who expounds the Dharma in his absence? The later chapters of the sutra reveal the messengers of the Eternal Buddha, who turn out to be you and me. By being the expounders of the Lotus Sutra, you will receive wonderful merits. Thus, the next three chapters talk about the merits of practicing to keep, to read, to chant, to copy and to expound the Lotus Sutra.

SUMMARY

In the preceding chapter, the Original Eternal Buddha, Sakyamuni, was revealed for the first time, not having been previously revealed in any of the other sutras. In the next three chapters, the Buddha explains, in detail, the merits coming to those who believe in the Eternal Buddha and practice the teaching of the Eternal Buddha.

There are “Four Faiths while the Buddha Exists” and “Five Stages After the Buddha’s Death” in order to receive the full merits. The Four Faiths while he exists are:

1. Understanding by faith a single moment’s thought: As a first step, if anyone opens the heart by faith and understands the gist of the sutra, even for just a moment, his or her happiness and virtue will be everlasting. (P.254~255)
2. Understanding the meaning: In the second step, one becomes clearly aware of the inner meanings of the sutra.
3. Disseminating it to others: In the third step, one’s practice makes further progress. The practitioner upholds and copies the Lotus Sutra, not only for personal satisfaction, but also for the sake of others, by expounding it to them, and having them copy it or make offerings to it. (P.257)
4. Entering into deep faith: At the fourth step, the practitioner mentally sees clearly the figure of the Original Buddha and his Pure Land and is able to enter into the stage of deep faith, thanks to the teaching of Chapter 16. (P.258)

Having faith in the Lotus Sutra is to change the way of thinking and behaving as follows: Thinking changes Attitude, Attitude changes Action, Action changes Habits, Habit changes Personality, Personality changes Fortune, Fortune changes Life, Life changes to Happiness.

In addition, in order to receive the full merits one must follow the “Five Stages After the Buddha’s Death” which are:

1. Rejoicing: At the first stage, one listens to the Lotus Sutra, receives it joyfully, and desires to follow its teachings. (P. 258)
2. Reading and reciting: At this stage, one who has already experienced joy makes further progress. He or she keeps the sutra, reads and recites it aloud, examines its meanings and studies it more deeply.
3. Expounding it to others: At this stage, one makes further progression and is able to explain the sutra to others.
4. Practicing the Six *Paramitas*: At this stage, one is so immersed in the sutra that he or she begins to practice the Six *Paramitas* (Giving, Keeping Precepts, Patience, Endeavor, Concentration, and Wisdom). By practicing the *Paramitas*, we reach the other shore or Buddha Wisdom.
5. Mastering the Six *Paramitas*: At the final stage, one upholds the Lotus Sutra, extracts its deep meaning, explains it to others, practices the Six *Paramitas* and begins to realize them naturally in daily life.

By practicing these stages, one receives various merits.

EXPLANATIONS

“Thereupon the innumerable, asamkya living beings in the great congregation, who had heard from the Buddha that the duration of his life was so many kalpas as the previously stated, obtained great benefits.” (P.250, LL.1~4)

Great benefit is to realize that we are also eternal like the Buddha. This chapter explains the *Variety of Merits* that we can obtain. They are as follows:

‘Obtain the Truth of Birthlessness.’ (P.250, LL.11~12)

Birthlessness means here that one’s mind is in the state where he or she will not see the two sides of things such as birth or death, winning or losing, beneficial or not, prosperity or decline and so forth. Even if I obtained birthlessness, I still wish to come back to this exciting world on this earth.

‘Obtain the Dharanis.’ (P. 250, L.14)

Dharanis are the mystic syllables that have power to stop evils and keep goodness. The power is that one can memorize and remember many hundreds of thousands of repetitions of teachings. The Sacred Title of the Lotus Sutra, “Namu Myoho Ren Ge Kyo,” is a *Dharani*. More *dharanis* are revealed in Chapter 26 and 28 of the Lotus Sutra. So always continue to keep chanting the Odaimoku for your protection from evils within you and outside of you.

‘Obtain Eloquence without Hindrance.’ (P. 250, L.16)

The one who has heard that the duration of the life of the Buddha is eternal will be able to preach gracefully and fluently even though he is attacked or persecuted. In fact he enjoys preaching to others like our founder, Nichiren Daishonin.

‘Obtain the Faculty of Turning the Wheel of the Pure Dharma.’ (P.250, LL.23~24)

Turning the wheel of the Dharma means that a Buddha preaches his teaching. The teaching is spread from one person to another just like a wheel turns and is able to go anywhere. In this way, the Dharma will be spread throughout the world. When we try to teach righteousness, we may face many obstacles. However, one who has heard that the duration of the life of the Buddha is eternal will be able to endure the hardship.

‘Obtain the Faculty of Attaining Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi after Eight Rebirths.’ (P.250, LL.26~27)

Anyone who has heard that the duration of the life of the Buddha is eternal is able to attain Buddhahood after eight rebirths, after four rebirths, after three rebirths, after two rebirths, or immediately after this life. To attain Enlightenment depends on one's faith and practice. It is as if we acquired tickets to attain Enlightenment. For example, several people receive train tickets to go from Las Vegas to New York. If they do not get on the train, they will never reach New York. Some may go straight to New York while others may stop along the way. To reach New York sooner or later depends on one's conduct. The Lotus Sutra teaches that we must have strong faith and practice the teaching of the Eternal Buddha to attain Enlightenment sooner or later.

'Furthermore, the good men or women who do not speak ill of this sutra but rejoice at hearing it after my extinction, should be considered, know this, to have already understood my longevity by firm faith.' (P.258, LL.11~14)

It is very important to rejoice at hearing the Buddha's teaching. To rejoice is the first step in keeping one's firm faith. Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933) who wrote *Night of Galaxy Railroad*, rejoiced when he read the Lotus Sutra. Kenji was 18 years old when he first found the sutra on his father's bookshelf. It was said that while he was reading it, he could not stop his body from shaking from the emotions that were stirred up inside. He had no concept of one's eternal life until he read the sutra. His sister, Toshi, was in process of dying. Kenji was surprised to know that he could meet her even after her death. From that time on, the rest of his life was based on the sutra. He was always praying for others' happiness. His poem says that he is "Not defeated by rain, not defeated by wind, not defeated by snow or the heat of summer... All things in my daily life are shared, without taking account of me."

'Anyone who keeps, reads or recites this sutra, expounds it to others, copies it, causes others to copy it, or makes offerings to a copy of it after my extinction, also gives alms, observes the precepts, practices patience, make endeavor, concentrates his mind, and seeks wisdom, will be able to obtain the most excellent and innumerable merits. His merits will be as limitless as the sky....' (P.259, LL 9~16)

Those of us in the period 2,500 years after the death of Sakyamuni Buddha, our practice begin with elation to hear that the duration of the Buddha is eternal. Then we keep the Lotus Sutra in order to read it, recite it, copy it and explain it to others. Furthermore we, Bodhisattvas, practice the Six Paramitas (the six kinds of practice by which Bodhisattvas are able to attain enlightenment).

'His merits will be as limitless as the sky.' What kind of merits is the Buddha talking about? Is it to be wealthy, healthy or live forever? The answer to this question is, **"These innumerable merits of his will help him obtain the knowledge of the equality and differences of all things."** (P.259, LL.18~19) The merits are not attaching to wealth, health or birth and death. By accepting reality as it is, then we will not suffer.

'... need not build a stupa or a monastery,' (P.259, LL.11)

‘Erect a stupa in the place where he or she sat, stood or walked! All gods and men should make offerings to that stupa of a Buddha...’ (P. 259~260, bottom line to LL.1~2)

The above two sentences seemed to be contradictory; however, this was Buddha’s viewpoint. He says it was not necessary to build a temple for him. He was very humble. He advised instead to build a temple for the people who keep, read, recite and expound the Lotus Sutra. For example, if someone saved a child from drowning, they might say, "I just did what I was supposed to do. It was nothing special. You do not need to honor me." But the child’s parents feel an obligation to show their gratitude. So, it is the same with us when we build a stupa for the Buddha. It is true that when we build a temple, the building is for us to honor the Buddha, but also for us to practice Buddha’s teachings.

The following is a quotation from *Introduction to the Lotus Sutra* by Shinjo Suguro:

“Nichiren considered these teachings of the Four Faiths and Five Stages to be extremely important practices in the Lotus Sutra. We know this from his writing *Shishin Gohon Sho* (四信五品鈔), (*Selection of the Four Faiths and Five Stages*). Nichiren also taught that ‘Understanding by Faith in a Single Moment’s Thought’ and the stages of Joy are the vital points of these teachings. If we ordinary people, or those who are just beginning to practice the Lotus Sutra, have faith and joy for a single moment upon hearing it, it becomes natural for our hearts to want to learn and practice more. ... ‘Understanding by Faith in a Single Moment’s Thought’ and Joyful Acceptance are cornerstones of the Four Faiths and Five Stages.”