

# **Daily Practice on the Lotus Sutra**

Lecture at the Renko-ji Temple, Cereseto, Italy

September 11, 2011

## **Nirvana (Is it final aim for Buddhists?)**

### **Sufferings**

Buddhism starts with Suffering from the death of Gautama Siddhartha's mother soon after his birth.

One spring day during his childhood, Prince Siddhartha of Kapilavastu witnessed the death of a small worm, which had been turned up from the earth by the farmer's plough so a small bird could swoon down and pluck it. Soon after, the small bird was also killed by a bigger bird soaring in the sky.

After marriage, he went out of the palace to see the kingdom of Kapilavastu. He saw three sufferings: old age, disease, and death. This was a great shock for him because he had never seen these kinds of sadness. Later he also saw the sufferings caused by separation from loved ones, being together with hated ones, not to getting what he wanted, and natural disasters.

### **Liberation from Sufferings**

Siddhartha left the palace to seek freedom from these sufferings. After six years of ascetic practices, the homeless monk found the path to enlightenment or Nirvana and became a Buddha. At first, he taught The Four Noble Paths:

1. Life Is Full of Suffering,
2. Cause of Suffering is greediness, anger, and ignorance from the truth,
3. Nirvana is the realm free from all sufferings,
4. In order to attain Nirvana, one must practice the Eight Noble Paths.

These are the very basic teachings of Buddhism that apply to all Buddhist schools.

Here Nirvana means not to repeat the cycle of birth and death. However, this form of Nirvana is salvation for only himself or herself after quenching all desires and destroying the karma of being born again.

## **Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism**

After the Buddha's death, his teachings continued to spread across India and other countries. Here arose different interpretations of the original teachings, which led to schisms within the Sangha and the appearance of many distinct sects of Buddhism.

**Theravada** literally means "the Teaching of the Elders" or "the Ancient Teaching." It is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. It is relatively conservative, and generally closest to early Buddhism, and for many centuries had been the predominant religion of Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia such as Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. They keep very strict precepts: 250 precepts for monks while 340 precepts for nuns such as not to eat after 12 noon or not to produce or cook any food. Only those who keep these strict precepts are able to reach Nirvana after many rebirths.

In the first half of the Lotus Sutra the Sakyamuni Buddha assured his disciples attaining Buddhahood after making offerings to hundreds of thousands of Buddhas in many lives. Is this the way we want to be able to reach Nirvana?

**Mahayana** literally means "the Great Vehicle"; so many people can ride in the huge vehicle. The Mahayana doctrines were probably found during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Centuries. Its attitude is liberal in contrast to Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism produced a great degree of philosophical speculation but also was very practical so lay people could easily practice the teaching at home and at work and not be restricted by monastic life. Today Mahayana Buddhists are mostly in Nepal, Tibet, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Generally speaking, Mahayana Buddhism accepts the idea that everyone is able to attain Buddhahood under some circumstance depending on each denomination.

## **Why so many scriptures instead of One Book like the Bible?**

Since Sakyamuni Buddha attained Enlightenment at age of 35, he traveled mostly in the Northeastern areas of present day India on foot until his Pari-Nirvana at the age of 80. During 75 years of propagation, the Buddha always taught according to the mental and spiritual capacities of his listeners. These teachings are similar to education in pre-school, kindergarten, elementary school, high school, undergraduate, graduate school, and doctorate. Thus, there are a great number of doctrines within Buddhism.

These Mahayana teachings were compiled as sutras by many editors at different places during these centuries; for example, Heart Sutra, Amitabha Sutra, Maha-Virocana Sutra, Infinite Light Sutra, Lotus Sutra, and Nirvana Sutra. These are some of the well known Mahayana sutras.

Ordinary people may wonder which sutra is good and which is the most excellent. Thus, the Great Master T'ien T'ai (538-597) of China revealed the Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings with the revelation of the inferior and superior depending on their contents. The classification began with the Buddha's teachings immediately after enlightenment until his entrance into Pari-Nirvana.

### **Composition of the Lotus Sutra**

The Buddha's spoken words were not written down during the first few centuries after Buddha's death. Doctrines were transmitted mouth to mouth for several centuries. Later, the spoken words were written down in order to avoid forgetting and miss-memorizing. Many editors compiled the Buddha's teachings into many sutras depending on the contents and the times of his teaching.

Many of his earlier teachings revolved around our daily lives in order for the people to understand more easily. Several centuries later after the Buddha's death, a few editors compiled the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. At that time, they separated the contents of the teachings by chapters. Thus, the sutra starts with "Thus Have I Heard 如是我聞." This phrase of "Thus Have I Heard" is the same with all Mahayana sutras, because the words and phrases are not direct words of Sakyamuni Buddha.

Rev. Zuigaku Kodachi who is a Professor Emeritus at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, says, "Thus have I heard" allows the editor to use their imagination freely and form their own opinions. It seems as if the Lotus Sutra was intended to transcend time and space to reach another dimension especially Chapter 11 to 23 of the Lotus Sutra.

He continues, "Buddhists wanted to spread the new image of Buddha beyond the borders of country and beyond the lines of human race. To achieve this, they attempted to take the new image of Buddha in all directions. They realized that the teachings of Buddha in the Ganges River basin were limited by the social tradition of the Hindu community, so they transferred their new ideas to the Indus River basin in the Northwestern of India where Greek culture was flourishing.

The editors of the Lotus Sutra probably lived along the Silk Road. This is the Route referring to

a network of interlinking trade routes across the Eurasian landmass that connected East, South, and Western Asia with the Mediterranean and European world, as well as parts of North and East Africa. The land routes were supplemented by sea routes which extended from the Red Sea to East Africa, India, China, and Southeast Asia. China traded silk, spices, teas, and porcelain; while India traded ivory, textiles, precious stones, and pepper; and the Roman Empire exported gold, silver, fine glassware, wine, carpets, and jewels.

To prove this theory, there are many evidences in the Lotus Sutra such as the seven treasures like gold, silver, lapis lazuli, amber, agate, and pearl. Many of these items were not produced in India. Other examples are the parable of the Burning House of a Rich Man (Chpt.3), Rich Man and his Run Away Poor Son (Chapt.4), the Magic City (Chapt.7), Hidden Gem (Chapt.8), the Gem in the Top-Knot (Chapt.14) and the Excellent Physician (Chapt.16). These parables are all related to lay people along the Silk Road and not from monastic life.

Thus, Mahayana doctrines are for you, lay people. Japanese Buddhist priests are no different than with lay people. We cannot quench all desires.

Do you know Sakyamuni Buddha might have desires? In Chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra, he says, “I wish all living beings become just like me.” He also says in Chapter 16, “How shall I cause all living beings to enter into the unsurpassed way and quickly become Buddhas?”

Does he want all of us to be just like him sitting or standing at the altar? Does he want all of us to reach Nirvana – Not to Be Born Again? Of course NOT! If everyone on the earth becomes Buddhas, there is not human beings on this precious land. We are Mahayana Buddhists. We are not looking for not to be born again. We must find out what Buddha really means when he says, “I wish all living beings become just like Buddha.” Please think about it! The answer is in the Lotus Sutra.

### **Meaning of Lotus Flowers**

The Lotus Sutra is originally called the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra in Sanskrit, the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law in English, and Myo-ho Renge Kyo 妙法蓮華經 in Japanese. Saddharma means wonderful laws while Pundarika means white lotus flowers. The lotus flower symbolizes beauty, purity, cause/condition, and eternity. The flower is beautiful.

The flower is never defiled with dirty water even though it grows out of dirty water, because the surface of the flowers, leaves, and stems are oily. Even if you pour dirty water on the lotus, the dirty water forms into beads and whisks away.

So this symbolizes purity and teaches us that we should not be influenced by bad friends and bad environment. It also symbolizes the law of cause and effect. Usually a flower blooms, bears fruit and seeds in the fruit later. The flowers are the cause, and fruits and seeds are the effect.

However, the lotus seeds are already inside the flower when it blooms. So instead of the waiting for the cycle from bloom to fruit to seed, the lotus flower accomplishes all three feats at the same time.

It also symbolizes eternity because the shell of the olive shaped seed is very hard; therefore, it can keep dormant for a long time – centuries long. Dr. Ohga, an archeologist in Japan, discovered three seeds along the Kemi River in Chiba, Japan. The seeds were estimated to be around 2,000 years old. Two of them bloomed and were named Ohga Lotus.

### **Shakumon (Teachings of Historical Buddha) and Honmon (Teacings of Eternal Buddha)**

The Lotus Sutra has 28 chapters. Chapter 1 to 14 is called *Shaku-mon* which reveals the historical Buddha as a being bound by limitations of time and space and of birth and death just like us. In the *Shakumon*, Sakyamuni is one of the Buddhas located in the ten directions of the universe of the past, present and future.

The last fourteen chapters of the Sutra reveal the Original Buddha and the Buddha's eternal nature. Sakyamuni is the only Original Buddha, while all the other Buddhas are his manifestations. Thus, Sakyamuni who attained Buddhahood under the bodhi tree in Buddhagaya, India was indeed the original Buddha's manifestation. Chapter 16 explains the relationship between the Original Buddha and the manifestation Buddhas.

This concept of the Original Buddha is revealed only in the Lotus Sutra. Many people including the founders of many Buddhist schools did not understand or could not believe the concept of the Original Buddha, so they said that the Lotus Sutra is too difficult to understand and that the teachings are not for us, the ordinary people.

Without understanding or faith in the concept of the Original Buddha, no one can digest the truth revealed in the sutra. However we must be very careful that the Original Buddha is only able to

be revealed after the historical Buddha was revealed just as the teaching of *Honmon* is revealed only after *Shakumon*. Through expedients, the Original Buddha manifests in many forms in order to educate us, so that one day we will be able to comprehend the concept of the Eternal Buddha.

Nichiren Shonin had not realized that he was the rebirth of Bodhisattva Jogyo, a disciple of the Eternal Buddha, until the Sado Exile. After the Tatsu-no-kuchi Execution and the exile to Sado, he firmly believed that Sakyamuni Buddha transmitted the Lotus Sutra to him. He says that those who chant Odaimoku are also the disciples of the Eternal Buddha, so we must propagate the Odaimoku.

### **THE PARABLE OF THE EXCELLENT PHYSICIAN**

There was once an excellent and wise physician. He was good at dispensing medicines and curing diseases. He had many children. One day he went to a remote country on business.

After he left home, the children accidentally took some poison. The poison passed in to their bodies, and the sons writhed in agony, rolling on the ground. At that time the father returned home. Some of his children had already lost their senses while others still had not. All of them begged him to cure the poison sickness and said, "We were ignorant. We took poison by mistake. Cure us and give us back our lives!"

Seeing his children suffering so much, he compounded a medicine by pounding and sieving the herbs, and gave it to them, saying, "It has good color, smell and taste. Take it! It will remove the pain at once. You will not suffer any more."

Those who had not lost their right minds took it at once, and were cured completely. But the rest of them, who had already lost their right minds, did not consent to take the remedy given to them, because they were so perverted that they did not believe that this medicine having a good color and smell had a good taste.

The father thought, "These children are pitiful. They are so poisoned that they are perverted. Although they rejoice at seeing me and asked me to cure them, they do not consent to take this good medicine. Now I will have them take it with an expedient."

Then he said to them, "Now I am old and decrepit. I shall die soon. I am leaving this medicine here. Take it. Do not be afraid, you will be cured!" Having advised them, he went to a remote country again. Then he sent home a messenger to tell them, "Your father has just died."

Having heard that their father had passed away leaving them behind, they felt extremely sorry. They thought, "If our father were alive, he would love and protect us. Now he has deserted us and died in a remote country."

They felt lonely and helpless because they thought that they were parentless and shelterless. Their constant sadness finally caused them to remember what the father had said in his last words, "Take this remedy!" Then they took it and completely recovered from the poison.

On hearing that they had recovered their health, the father returned home and showed himself to them.

"What do you think of this? Do you think that anyone can accuse this excellent physician of falsehood?"  
The answer is "No!"

### **(EXPLANATIONS):**

The Buddha is like the father. It is many hundreds of thousands of billions of *kalpas* since he became the Buddha. In order to save the perverted people in the world after the Buddha's death, he says expediently, "I shall pass away."

Although Sakyamuni Buddha has been gone for almost 2500 years, his teachings exist even today and will exist forever. Just as the physical body of the doctor could not cure the sickness but rather it was the remedy that cured the poor children, the Buddha's teachings, the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, is continuing to cure the people in the declining latter age of the law.

### **Odaimoku AS THE GOOD REMEDY**

Nichiren Shonin, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism, said the title of the Lotus Sutra, which is the Odaimoku, "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo," is just like the remedy of good color, taste, and fragrance. Nichiren Shonin also said, "Chant the Odaimoku. It is the only way to attain Buddhahood in the latter age of the law."

By chanting "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo," you are practicing the Six Paramitas, the way of Bodhisattvas. Nichiren says, "One Volume of the Lotus Sutra contains 28 chapters. Each chapter contains the Buddha's body. Each phrase has equal values with "Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo." This sutra condenses all other Buddha Dharma; therefore, each character of this sutra is truly a manifestation of the Eternal Buddha, and the teachings of the Buddha truly benefit all living beings. Once you hear a phrase or a word of this sutra, even if you have not practiced the Six Paramitas, the Paramitas appear naturally in one's action."

## **The Six Paramitas**

For many decades, I have read the entire Lotus Sutra in Japanese, in English and also in old Han Dynasty Era Pronunciation of Chinese; and also taught chapter by chapter sometime in Japanese and sometime in English. I was surprised to find out very recently. The Sutra says, “Nirvana is an expedient. The way of Bodhisattva is to practice the Six Paramitas. They are offering, keeping precepts, patience, endeavor, meditation, and wisdom.

Nichiren Shonin says, ‘When you chant the Odaimoku, even if you have not practiced the Six Paramitas, the Paramitas appear naturally in one’s action.

I rephrased the Six Paramitas to the Six Merits by Chanting Odaimoku.

1. You will be grateful to offer.
2. You will follow the rules and laws.
3. You will be patient (not angry).
4. You will continue to endeavor.
5. You will have calm mind.
6. You will have wisdom.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding my lecture I would like to answer the question I brought up at the beginning, “Is Nirvana the final aim for Buddhists?” The answer is “No, not for Nichiren Buddhists” according to the last half of the Lotus Sutra. For other sects, Nirvana is the ultimate goal. Instead of not being born again, the Lotus Sutra encourages us to repeat rebirth and come back to help all suffering people. This is the practice of Bodhisattvas. For example the Bodhisattvas from Underground appeared in Chapter 15 have 32 marks just like the Buddha; however, they appeared on this earth in order to save all people. Nichiren Shonin is one of them, and he says we are, too. So let us chant the Odaimoku, “Namu Myoho Renge Kyo,” act as Bodhisattvas and release the bondage of suffering for both ourselves and for others.

### **What Is Your Big Dream?**

Rev. Shoryo Tarabini's long time dream came true!

My dream comes true next fall.

What is your dream?

In order to accomplish your dream:

1. Continue till it comes true even in the next life.
2. Tell it to many people.
3. Like attract like.
4. Harmonize to nature.