

DHARMA ESSAY

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(Chapter VI)

THE LOTUS SUTRA

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THE LOTSU SUTRA

Lecture at *Shamiko*

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Introduction to the LOTUS SUTRA

For almost 50 years, Sakyamuni Buddha gave different messages depending on the level of each individual's understanding. That is why there are so many sutras in Buddhism. The founders of Buddhist sects chose different sutras for their salvation depending on what they emphasized. Nichiren Dai'Shonin in the 13th century Japan chose the *Lotus Sutra* as the salvation for people who live in the Declining Latter Age of Dharma or the *Mappo* Era. According to him, it is the *Lotus Sutra* that reveals the most essential teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha. Before I talk further about the *Lotus Sutra*, I would like to talk briefly on the history of Buddhism, and how the idea of the *Lotus Sutra* began.

EARLY SUTRAS

When the Sakyamuni Buddha was alive, none of his teachings were recorded by means of a written language. I am not sure that there was a writing method at that time, but it could be that it was impolite to write the words of the Most Honored One. Even today in Japan, some masters of the martial arts or Japanese culture such as flower arrangement or tea ceremony do not allow their students to take notes on paper. The students must learn to memorize the teachings. Sometimes this is called oral instruction.

Soon after the Buddha's death, 500 disciples gathered at Rajagrha to refresh their memory about the Buddha's teachings. They chanted *gathas* or Buddhist hymns. This kind of conference was held three times all together. The messages of the Buddha were kept in disciples' memory and transferred in the form of spoken words.

A few centuries later, the spoken words were written down in order to avoid forgetting important teachings. Therefore, all sutras start with the phrase, "Thus Have I Heard" in the first Chapter. The sutras compiled at that time were called the early sutras such as *Agon Sutra*, the *Dharma Parda*, and the *Sutta Niparta*.

THERAVADA & MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

After Sakyamuni Buddha's death, his teachings were well kept, practiced, and propagated by the ordained priests, priestesses, lay men, and women for about a century. However, the ways of understanding and practicing of the Buddha's teachings began to split into two different traditions because of varying interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. One

of the groups was called Theravada Buddhists who tried to keep up the traditional practices and rules. The other was called Mahayana Buddhists who emphasized the essential ideas but changed their ways of practice depending on their living places and time. Theravada Buddhists maintained their strict precepts that differed between the ordained priests and lay people. On the other hand, Mahayana Buddhism arose among the lay people who could not keep up the strict precepts but kept the essential ideas of the Buddha.

For instance, ten people can have ten different ideas on what is important. Some people may emphasize the traditional, liberal, emotional, theoretical or a practical attitude. It is unavoidable that interpretations of the Buddha's teachings differ depending on each individual's level of education, cultural background, era, and country.

Comparing the two main traditions, we see that Theravada Buddhism is mostly practiced mostly in Southern Asia like Thailand and Sri Lanka and that Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in northern and Far-Eastern Asia such as Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. It is said that Theravada priests stay in monasteries and practice for their own salvation. They go out begging for food in front of their devotee's houses every morning, because the priests are not allowed to produce or to own anything, including food. In Southern California, there is a group of Thai Buddhists in Hollywood. I once read an article in the L.A. Times regarding these priests begging for food from house to house every morning. In Theravada Buddhism, lay people cannot attain Buddhahood because they are not ordained, but wish to be reborn in better places by serving priests.

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism arose among the lay people who insisted that attaining Enlightenment is possible even for laymen and women. It was probably founded after the Christian era, and its attitude was very liberal in contrast to the Theravada Buddhists. I believe that the Mahayana Buddhists have been greatly influenced by merchants on the Silk Road in the first and second century A.D. Therefore, there are many stories regarding merchants, traders, treasure hunts, physicians, kings, millionaires and also the homeless in the *Lotus Sutra* which I will discuss later.

Theravada priests keep strict precepts, but Mahayana priests especially some Japanese priests eat meat, drink sake, are married, own personal property, and so on just like lay people. Although Japanese priests are ordained, they keep lay people's life styles. All Mahayana sutras emphasize the practice of BODHISATTVAS who are seeking Enlightenment not only for himself but for others.

MAHAYANA SUTRAS

There are many Mahayana Sutras, for example, *Heart Sutra*, *Amida Sutra*, *Maha Virocana Sutra*, *Infinite Light Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, and *Nirvana Sutra*. Ordinary people may wonder which sutra is good and which is the most excellent.

The Great Master T'ien-t'ai Chih-i (538-597) of China revealed the Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings. According to him, all sutras can be divided in the five categories depending on their contents.

Nichiren Dai'shōnin (1212-1282) read all the Theravada and Mahayana sutras before his proclamation of the O'Daimoku, "Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō." He accepted Chih-i's concept of the Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings. Therefore, the *Lotus Sutra* contained the most essential teachings of the Buddha, which was revealed whether people could understand them or not.

Another reason why Nichiren took the *Lotus Sutra*, as the most essential teaching among other sutras was the phrase in the *Innumerable Meaning Sutra*, the preceding sutra before the *Lotus Sutra*, says, "In the past forty odd years, I (Sakyamuni Buddha) had not yet expounded the truth." Then, the *Lotus Sutra* was preached. Thus Nichiren Shōnin chose the *Lotus Sutra* as the truest teaching of the Buddha.

The Five Periods of the Buddha's Teachings

Here is how the *Lotus Sutra* fits in relation to the other sutras according to the Great Teacher Chih-i (538-597). The teachings preached by Sakyamuni Buddha are split into five periods, beginning first when he attained enlightenment until he entered into Nirvana at the age of 80. Also outlined is the revelation of inferior and superior sutras.

1. The *Kegon* Period: After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha preached the *Kegon* teachings for 21 days. However, these teachings were too difficult for average people to understand.
 - a. Example: *The Kegon Sutra*
2. The *Agon* Period: The Buddha taught the *Agon* teachings during the next twelve years (from age 30 until 42) in a manner in which anyone could easily understand. (The Theravada teachings).
 - a. Example: *The Agon Sutra, the Hokku Sutra (the Dharma Pada) and the Sutta Niparta.*
3. The *Hoto* Period: The eight years following the *Agon* Period (from age 42 until 50) when the Buddha taught that the Theravada teachings are inferior to the Mahayana teachings.
 - a. Example: *The Yuima Sutra (The Vimalakirti Sutra), The Jodo Sutra (The Sutra of Meditation on the Buddha of Infinite Life), Konkomyo Sutra (the Suvarnaprabhasottamaraja Sutra), Shiyaku Sutra etc.*
4. The *Hannya* Period: The subsequent 22 years (from age 50 until 72) when the Buddha instructed the people to discard the one-sided teachings of Theravada and Mahayana as he introduced the teaching of *Ku* (voids).
 - a. Example: *The Dai Hannya Sutra (The Great Heart Sutra)*
5. The *Hokke-Nehan* Period: The final eight years (from age 72 until 80) preceding the Buddha's Great Nirvana. Since the understanding of the disciples and followers had deepened, Sakyamuni Buddha taught the truth of his enlightenment.
 - a. Example: *The Lotus Sutra and Nirvana Sutra.*

The Threefold Lotus Sutra Say's:

1. *The Sutra of Infinite Meaning:*

"In the past forty some odd years, I had not yet expounded the truth"

2. *The Lotus Sutra:*

"People of the two vehicles of *Sravakahood* or *Sho-mon* and *Pratyekabuddhahood* or *En-gaku* can attain enlightenment and the concept of the Eternal Buddha."

3. *The Fugen Bodhisattva Sutra:*

" Repentance is important."

Meanings of Lotus Flowers

The name of the *Lotus Sutra* in Sanskrit is The *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*. In English it is called the *Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma* or simply the *Lotus Sutra*. Chapter Fifteen reveals about the lotus flowers as follows: "They are not defiled by worldliness, just as the lotus-flower is not defiled by water." Lotus flowers symbolize purity because the beautiful lotus flowers are never soiled by muddy water, so our bad environment should not influence us. One should not blame others for what he or she did wrong. Lotus flowers also symbolize the law of cause, causation, and effect because when a flower blooms, it already has the seeds within it. A flower is the cause while the seeds are effects while water, soil, and temperature are causation.

Shaku-mon and Hon-mon

The *Lotus Sutra* contains 28 chapters. According to the Great Master T'ien T'ai Chih-I (538-597) of China, the first 14 chapters of the sutra is called *Shaku-mon* in which the Sakyamuni Buddha does not yet reveal his eternal nature but appears as a historical person bound by the limitations of time and space. On the other hand, the last 14 chapters of the sutra reveal the eternal nature of the Buddha, his existence in the remote past, present, and eternal future. The *Hon-mon* chapters emphasize salvation of all mankind after the Sakyamuni Buddha's death.

In Chapter Sixteen, The Duration of the Life of the Tathagata, the Sakyamuni Buddha says, "The gods, men, and *asuras* in the world think I, Sakyamuni Buddha, left the palace of the Sakyas, sat at the place of enlightenment not far from the city of Gaya, and attained Enlightenment. To tell the truth, it is many hundreds of thousands of billions of *nayutas* of *kalpas* since I became the Buddha." He reveals the existence of the eternal Buddha in Chapter 16.

Shaku-mon is the teachings of the historical Buddha while *Hon-mon* is the teachings of the eternal Buddha. When we see the Buddha as a physical being who was born in India and lived for 80 years, he is a historical Buddha. However, when we see the Buddha as a spiritual being, he is the eternal Buddha because his teachings will remain forever. More details will be discussed in Chapter 16.

SHAKU-BUTSU and HON-BUTSU

SHAKU-BUTSU (迹仏) is Sakyamuni Buddha as a historical human being. See Chapter 16:

"The gods, men, and asuras in the world think that I, Sakyamuni Buddha, left the palace of the Sakyas, sat at the place of enlightenment not far from the City of Gaya, and attained Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi [forty and odd years ago]". P.241 of The Lotus Sutra.

HON-BUTSU (本仏) is Sakyamuni Buddha as the Eternal and Original Buddha. See Chapter 16:

"To tell the truth it is many hundreds of thousands of billions of nayutas of kalpas since I became the Buddha." P.241 of The Lotus Sutra.

Shaku-mon (Provisional Gate)

Nijo sabutsu 二乗作仏 (*Shomon* and *Engaku* are able to attain Buddhahood.)

Kai san Ken Ichi 開三顯一 (Opening the provisional three vehicles to reveal the One Buddha vehicle)

Chap. 1 Introductory

Chap. 2 Expedients

Chap. 3 A Parable

Chap. 4 Understanding by Faith

Chap. 5 The Simile of Herbs

Chap. 6 Assurance of Future Buddhahood

Chap. 7 The Parable of a Magic City

Chap. 8..... Future Buddhahood of 500 Disciples

Chap. 9 Future Buddhahood of the Sravakas

Chap. 10 ... The Teacher of the Dharma

Chap. 11 ... Beholding the Stupa of Treasures

Chap. 12 ... Devadatta

Chap. 13 ... Encouragement for Keeping This Sutra

Chap. 14 ... Peaceful Practices

Hon-mon本門(Primary Gate)

Kai shaku ken pon 開迹顯本(Opening the provisional teachings to reveal the Primary teachings)

*Kuon jitsujo Honshi Shakamuni butsu*久遠実成本師釈迦牟尼仏(The Eternal Buddha):

Chap. 15 ... The Appearance of Bodhisattvas from Underground

Chap. 16 ... The Duration of the Life of the Buddha

Chap. 17 ... The Variety of Merits

Chap. 18 ... The Merits of Rejoices at Hearing This Sutra

Chap. 19 ... The Merits of the Teacher of the Dharma

Chap. 20 ... Never-Despising Bodhisattva

Chap. 21 ... The Supernatural Powers of the Buddha

Chap. 22 ... Transmission

Chap. 23 ... The Previous Life of Medicine-King Bodhisattva

Chap. 24 ... Wonderful Voice Bodhisattva

Chap. 25 ... Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva

Chap. 26 ... Dharanis

Chap. 27 ... Previous Life of King Wonderful-Adornment

Chap. 28 ... The Encouragement of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva

Nisho San-E 二処三会 (Two Places and Three Gatherings):

At Mt. Sacred Eagle:

Chapter 1 ~ Chapter 11

Teachings to the Disciples and followers of Buddha Sakyamuni

In the Sky:

Chapter 11 ~ Chapter 22

Teachings to the people after Buddha's Nirvana and salvation for the people in the *Mappo* Era.

At Mt. Sacred Eagle:

Chapter 23 ~ 28

Bodhisattvas' vows to protect the practitioners of the *Lotus Sutra*

Nichiren Shu is based on the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. In order to familiarize you with the Lotus Sutra, I will explain it in a simple manner relating to our daily lives through this bulletin for the coming years.

The Three Lives of Maitreya Bodhisattva

(Lotus NO. 52, May & June, 2003)

In Chapter One of the Lotus Sutra, Buddha's disciples and followers, as well as deities and animals gather before the meditating Buddha Sakyamuni at Mt. Sacred Eagle in Rajagriha, India.

The Buddha does not speak at all in this chapter but meditates in deep concentration. Then suddenly he emits a ray of light from the white curls between his eyebrows that illuminates down to the hells and up to heavens of the eighteen thousand worlds in the east.

Maitreya Bodhisattva wonders, "Why is he displaying this good omen?" He asks Manjusri Bodhisattva who was a great scholar.

"I think that the Buddha wishes to expound a great teaching named the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. The reason is this, in my previous existence; I saw the same good omen at the time of a Buddha called Sun-Moon-Light. He emitted a ray of light then expounded the great Dharma."

After the Nirvana of Buddha Sun-Moon-Light, Wonderful-Light Bodhisattva kept the Lotus Sutra and expounded it to people for many years. One of his disciples was called Fame-Seeking. He was attached in seeking to make his name famous. He read and recited many sutras but did not understand them. He forgot many parts of those sutras. Therefore he was called Fame-Seeking. He later planted the roots of good and made offerings to innumerable Buddhas. Because of this good conduct, he will become a Buddha in his future life. He will be called Buddha Maitreya.

Manjusri continued to talk. "Wonderful-Light at that time was none other than me, and Fame-Seeking was none other than you."

Don't you think that Fame-Seeking is like you and me? Even though we hardly understand the teaching of the Lotus Sutra and easily forget phrases of the sutra, we will be able to become Buddhas in our future lives by accumulating good conducts. This is what Chapter One teaches us.

Chapter Twenty-eight of the Lotus Sutra reveals, "Anyone who copies this sutra will be reborn in the Tusita Heaven, the fourth of the six heavens in the world of desire, immediately after one's present life." The Tusita Heaven is where Maitreya Bodhisattva stays now, waiting to be born on this earth to become the Maitreya Buddha.

The future Buddha will be you and me!

Reality of All Things (The Insights of the Buddha)

(LOTUS #53, July/August, 2003)

In the previous bulletin, I discussed the Three Lives of Maitreya Bodhisattva and wrote that we would be able to become Buddhas in our future lives. This teaching is revealed in Chapter One of the Lotus Sutra. I would like to talk about Chapter Two of the sutra this time.

“Reality of All Things” means to realize the three processes of all things; why human beings and other beings were born, how they progress, and where they will end. When we become Buddhas, we can see the past, present, and future of all things. This is the insight of the Buddha revealed in the “Coming of the Buddhas,” Chapter Two.

The Buddhas see this world as “Everything Is Constantly Changing,” “Everything Relies on Others,” and “Buddha Dharma Is Eternal.”

“Everything Is Constantly Changing,” does not mean that things disappear to nothing. They simply change their forms and appearances to something else. Human beings, houses, and cars become old and eventually decay, changing their forms to the five elements such as soil, water, energy, air and void. Lotus flowers and cherry blossoms keep their beauty only for a few days. That is why we cherish their beauty, and we enjoy seeing the beautiful flowers.

“Everything relies on others.” Human beings, animals, plants, minerals, mountains, rivers, oceans, and all others exist together while helping each other. With the blessing of the rays of the sun and the blessing of the rain, all living beings are alive in great harmony and balance. Therefore, if a man cuts trees down, pollutes the rivers or kills other people for his own convenience, we may not exist on this earth in the near future.

“Buddha Dharma Is Eternal.” Physical bodies change. Societies change as time changes. However, the laws of “Everything Is Constantly Changing” and “Everything Relies on Others” never change in the past, present, and future.

Our physical features explain these three laws. Our parents did not decide our facial features like the size of their children’s eyes, height of a nose, and the shape of the mouth. Of course, the parents affect their children’s skin color, features, and characters to some extent. Physical features are also caused by karma from previous lives. Previous lives cause a person to have a physical feature such as a gentle or an angry face, being tall or short, and healthy or sickly.

Therefore, I cannot say that my parents bore me at their pleasure; rather my soul in my previous karma chose my parents. As the result of my previous karma meeting with my parents, siblings, environment, education, friends, and time, I exist as I am now. It is called “*En*,” or mutual relationship.

Good karma or bad karma in one's previous lives appears in this life, then in turn, the karma in this life will bring forth future result. We cannot erase the past, but we can change our life in the present. Our future depends on now.

That is the teaching of the Ten Suchness in Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra.

Buddha Sakyamuni was born on this earth in order to reveal these laws; Everything Is Constantly Changing, Everything Relies on Others, and the Eternal Dharma.

If we knew the past, present, and future of all things, we may not suffer as much.

The Meaning of - “Difficult to Understand and Difficult to Enter” in Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra

(LOTUS #54, September & October, 2003)

I wonder what kinds of books and magazines you have on your bookshelves at your home. Are they about golf, cooking, or computers? The kinds of books and magazines you have depend on your occupation, interests, and hobbies.

How many books and magazines about Buddhism do you have? Those who say that Buddhism is too difficult to understand may have few Buddhist books on their bookshelves. For me, golf is more difficult than Buddhism, so I have only one book about golf.

It is said that Buddha Sakyamuni has revealed 84,000 teachings since He attained Enlightenment. However, in the Innumerable Meanings Sutra that is the prelude to the Lotus Sutra, He said, “In forty years and more, the truth has not been revealed yet.” All disciples and followers who attended that gathering were very surprised to hear that. They were also excited by the words, “It seems that the Buddha will speak some very important teachings soon!” These words were spread all over. My goodness! Not only human beings, but also gods, bodhisattvas, animals, and all kinds of living beings gathered at Mount Sacred Eagle in Rajagriha, India. It was very natural for them to come there because the Buddha, the most honorable one in the universe, was going to expound some very important teachings. It was very exciting.

During the last 42 years, the Buddha has not revealed the truth yet! Now it seems that He would give his last and most important teaching!

The Buddha was still in deep meditation. Thereupon the Buddha suddenly emitted a ray of light from the white curls between his eyebrows and illuminated all the corners of eighteen thousand worlds in the east.

“What is going to happen? Is this a good omen?” Everyone present wondered.

“I think that the Buddha wishes to expound a great teaching,” answered Bodhisattva Manjusri. “Innumerable kalpas ago, I had the same experience under a Buddha called Sun-Moon-Light, who expounded the Lotus Sutra after the illumination of a ray from his forehead. Therefore, Buddha Sakyamuni will teach us the Lotus Sutra.”

Thereupon Buddha emerged quietly from his meditation and said, “The gate to the wisdom of the Buddhas is difficult to understand and difficult to enter.” Then He revealed the teaching of the reality of all things, or *shoho jisso*, that I explained already in the last issue of the LOTUS, No.53. Buddha Sakyamuni revealed the Reality of All Things in the Ten Suchnesses. Soon after that the Buddha said, “I will not say any more because the Dharma attained by the Buddhas is difficult to understand.” And He closed his mouth.

Representing the entire congregation, Sariputra requested, “Please explain all the truth!”
“No, I will not!”

Such requests and denials were repeated three times. Then the Buddha said, “You asked me three times with enthusiasm. How can I leave the Dharma expanded?”

When he said that, five thousand people among the congregations stood up and left the place. What do you think about that? Isn't there anyone around you who says, “Oh, Buddhism is too difficult! I don't understand it!” There were even high priests who said that the Lotus Sutra was too difficult to understand. “The teachings are not for us. So close the book of the Lotus Sutra and throw it away!” These priests were highly honored by many people.

The Buddha knew that there were people who could not accept the Lotus Sutra and who would not try to understand it. That was the reason why the Buddha said, “The gate to the wisdom of the Buddhas is difficult to understand and difficult to enter.”

Even after these 5,000 people left Mount Sacred Eagle it was full of gods, human beings, animals, and others. It was then that Buddha Sakyamuni revealed the one great purpose for which the Buddhas appear in this world. I am going to talk about it in the next issue.

In the Lotus Sutra there are many parables, similes, and happenings that we can't understand logically, such as the existence of sky under the ground, or people floating in the sky, or a Bodhisattva appearing instantly from another planet. These phenomena are hard to understand without belief.

Thus, the reason the Buddha emphasized “Difficult to Understand” is for us to have faith in the sutra. When you have faith in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, you will thoroughly understand them.

A Piece of Paper

(LOTUS #49, November/December, 2003)

While I was picking up trash in the temple parking lot the other day, I found a piece of paper on the ground. It happened to be a California Lottery ticket. Since the drawing day was a few days away, I placed it in the lost and found box at the edge of the temple altar. I wondered, “Will someone come to claim it?” “Is it going to be a winning ticket?” I waited for the drawing day with some expectation.

Unfortunately, it did not match any winning numbers, and so it went into a trash container. This piece of paper could have made people either happy or sad.

I would now like to explain the Ten Suchness (*Nyoze*) in Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra. The piece of paper is an object (*Nyoze Tai*). It appeared (*Nyoze So*) as part of the trash in the parking lot. Paper has the characteristic (*Nyoze Sho*) of being easy to burn. The piece of paper also has the characteristic such that if it was just trash, it will be thrown away into a dustpan.

However, it was a lottery ticket that has power (*Nyoze Riki*) to win a million dollars. Therefore I picked it up (*Nyoze Sa*) instead of putting it into a dustpan. Since (*Nyoze In*) someone lost it, I picked it up (*Nyoze Ka*) with the condition (*Nyoze En*) of time: if I had not cleaned up the parking lot at that time, the ticket might have blown away with the wind. The numbers on the ticket did not match the winning numbers, so it resulted (*Nyoze Ho*) in being thrown into a wastebasket.

Since this piece of paper relates to the nine *Nyoze* from *So, Sho, Tai, Riki, Sa, In, En, Ka* and *Ho*, it is called *Nyoze Honmatsu Kukyo To*, which means to relate to all nine facts. Nichiren Daishonin and T'ien-t'ai (Chi'i), a Master of Chinese Buddhism, developed the truth of the Ten Suchness to the *Ichinen Sanzen* or the Three Thousand Worlds in One Instant Thought. One's thought in an instant affects the whole world.

If the piece of paper was worth several million dollars, what would happen to me, to the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple, and to other people? It would certainly affect them.

Thus, even a piece of paper relates to many phenomena.

Three Different Levels of Vehicles

(LOTSU #55, November, and December, 2003)

In Buddhism, there are many Buddhas, such as Sakyamuni, Amitatabha, and Maha Vairocana (Dai-Nichi) to name a few. Many other Buddhas appear as past Buddhas in the Lotus Sutra. Chapter Two of the sutra says, "All of the Buddhas appeared in this world to open the gate, to show, to obtain, and to enter the way of the insight of the Buddha."

Buddha Sakyamuni says, in the *Sutra of the Innumerable Meaning*, which is the prelude to the Lotus Sutra, "In forty years and more, the truth has not been revealed yet," even though He revealed 84,000 teachings.

Why did He not reveal the truth at first? It was because nobody understood what He was trying to say. It was an era in which people were physically and mentally weak and polluted. The caste system was strongly emphasized, and one's fate was determined by one's birth, and one's fate could not be changed or improve at that time in India. The nobles and ordinary people were fine with this system; however, some women, slaves, and people who were considered non-human beings were never able to get out of this hell. We in the present cannot imagine how strict and discriminatory the society was at that time.

The Buddha wished to speak up, proclaiming "Everyone is equal and able to become a Buddha!" However, nobody would believe Him or listen to Him in that caste system society. Thereupon the Buddha said, "Listen well to my words and get away from your worries and illusions!" This teaching was for the people in the *Shomon* (*Sravaka*-hood) Vehicle. They exerted themselves to listen to the Buddha and to attain the Universal Truth. They were like students who learned from their teachers.

When they advanced in their studies, the Buddha said, "Only listening to my preaching was not enough. You must learn the Truth by yourselves through your own experiences." These people are part of the *Engaku* (*Pratyekabuddha*-hood) Vehicle. They learned by themselves without their teachers.

When they advanced some more, the Buddha said to both groups, "It is not true salvation to seek just your own enlightenment! You must save others from suffering, and then you will reach real Buddhahood." This last group is part of the *Bosatsu* (*Bodhisattvas*) Vehicle.

Thus, the Buddha revealed the three different vehicles. In other words, the Buddha taught at first that the two vehicles of *Shomon* and *Engaku* were not able to become Buddhas. This teaching was appropriate in the society of the strict cast system in India. It took 42 years for Him to reverse the truth, "*Everyone is able to become Buddha.*"

Chapter Two of the Lotus Sutra says, "All the Buddhas in the past expounded various teachings to all living beings with innumerable expedients. Those expedients arose from

the purpose of revealing the One Buddha-Vehicle" or "*Everyone is able to become Buddha.*" "The living beings in that kalpa are so full of illusions, so greedy, and so jealous that they plant many roots of evil. Therefore, the Buddhas divided the One Buddha-Vehicle into three as an expedient."

With the teaching of the One Vehicle, they obtained the knowledge of the equality that everyone was able to become a Buddha even though they held different levels of status such as priests, nobles, merchants, slaves, and non-human beings. It further states, that those who offer flowers to a Buddha statue, who offer incense to a Buddhist monument, who erect a *stupa*, or who, by playing, drawing a picture of the Buddha or chant "Namu Buddha" just once have already attained the enlightenment of the Buddha.

Thus, the sole reason for which the Buddhas appeared in this world was to reveal that everyone was able to equally become Buddhas regardless of one's race, status, sex, and background. The *Lotus Sutra* teaches that all living beings are equal because they are able to become Buddhas someday.

What is the reason you were born in this world?

One Great Vehicle (Dharma)

(LOTUS #56, January/February, 2004)

Suppose there once lived a very rich man. His wealth was vast. He had many warehouses full of merchandise and treasures. He had many workers. His house was very large but it had only one narrow gate. Many people lived in that house. The rich man had as many as thirty children who also lived there.

One day while their father was out, fire broke out and spread all over. Everyone, except the children, escaped safely from the burning house through the narrow gate.

Returning home and seeing what was happening, the rich man was shocked to hear that his children were still inside the burning house. He rushed into the burning house.

He shouted “Fire! Fire! Get out of the house quickly!” However, they were preoccupied with playing and did not pay any attention to their father. They did not know the meaning of fire. They continued playing. He thought quickly, “My children will be killed in the fire if they do not come out right away. I could carry only two or three out of the house at one time through the narrow gate but not all of them at one time.”

He had a good idea and told them, “There are toys out there that you like. There are sheep-carts, deer-carts, and bullock-carts. You can have whichever you want if you come out right now!”

Hearing the words “Toys” and “Carts,” the children suddenly ran out of the burning house.

The rich man was relieved that he had saved them all. The children saw no toys and carts outside and said to him, “Where are the toys? Where are the carts? Give us the carts you promised us!” Instead of giving them toys and carts, he gave them real “Great White Bullock-carts.”

The great white bullock-carts were not toys but the real ones were decorated with all kinds of jewels and pulled by big white bulls.

This parable is in Chapter Three of the Lotus Sutra.

In this parable, the rich man represents Buddha Sakyamuni, while the children are us, living beings, who are constantly worrying and suffering. The toy carts of sheep, deer, and bull represent the three vehicles of the *Shomon* (*Sravaka-hood*) who practice the Dharma by listening to the Buddha, the *Engaku* (*Pratyekabuddha-hood*) who learn Dharma for themselves through natural phenomena, and the *Bosatsu* (*Bodhisattvas*) who practice the Dharma for themselves and for others.

It is said that there are 84,000 teachings taught by the Buddha. He taught the Three Vehicles at different levels of understanding, such as *Shomon*, *Engaku*, and *Bosatsu*.

However, he revealed the One Great Vehicle of the Lotus Sutra for all living beings to be saved.

We, Nichiren Buddhists, follow the teachings of the Lotus Sutra that reveals that all living beings will be saved equally.

Three Virtues of the Original Buddha

(LOTUS #57, March/April, 2004)

Buddhism starts with the awakening thought that “Life Is Full of Suffering.” The four major sufferings are birth, old age, disease, and death. Besides these four, there are four additional sufferings. They are 1) Separation from a loved one, 2) Being together with a disliked one, 3) Not getting what one wants, and 4) Suffering arising from the environment, such as natural disasters and attachments to certain conditions.

These sufferings attack us one after another just like a person in a burning house. Chapter Three of the Lotus Sutra reveals the parable of the burning house which I explained in the last issue. Without exception, the fire of old age and death is chasing us for sure.

The Buddha is the one who leads us to the way of liberation from these sufferings, because He has the three virtues. They are 1) virtue of the warm-hearted LORD, 2) virtue of the dignified MASTER and 3) virtue of the compassionate FATHER.

The Triple World of Chapter Three of the Lotus Sutra says, “This triple world is my property.” The triple world signifies the place where we live, the world of human beings and animals who have desires, the world of plants and metal that have no desire, and the world of no-forms such as gas, air, and spirit. The Buddha who realizes the Reality of All Existence grasps not only this earth but the universe. Therefore, He is the Lord. “All living beings are my children,” because everyone has Buddha nature within themselves. He is the Father. “There are many sufferings in this world. Only I can save all beings.” The Buddha is the one who knows how to be free from these sufferings. He is the Master.

Only the Buddha Sakyamuni has these three virtues. He is the only Buddha who existed on this earth historically. As a human being just like us, He is the one who attained Enlightenment. He is the one who preached the Lotus Sutra, the teaching of equality of all living beings. Other Buddhas are his manifestations.

Therefore Nichiren Dai’Shonin honored only the Sakyamuni, the Original Buddha. Since a statue of the Buddha could not express the three virtues of the LORD, the MASTER and the FATHER, Nichiren described the *Mandala Gohonzon*.

All Nichiren Shu members are supposed to have this *Mandala Gohonzon* in their altar.

A Penniless Man Becomes a Billionaire in Twenty Years

(LOTUS #58, May/June, 2004)

The little boy of a billionaire ran away from his father and became homeless for many years. Meanwhile, his father had a trading business with foreign countries and made innumerable treasures and wished to pass all his treasures on to his son.

The homeless son wandered about in all directions, begging for food and trying to obtain odd jobs for many decades. One day he happened to be at the gate of his wealthy father's estate.

The rich man recognized him at first sight as his son and immediately dispatched a man standing next to him to quickly bring back the poor man standing at the gate to him. The messenger pulled him by force. The poor son thought, "I am caught even though I am not guilty. I shall be killed," then he fainted and fell to the ground.

Seeing the frightened son who was too afraid to meet the noble man, the father said to the messenger, "I don't want to see him any more. Pour cold water on his face and let him go!"

The rich man then dispatched another messenger in secret to bring his son back and gave him work to remove dirt with a double day's pay in advance.

Many months passed. The father took off his garments and jewels, and instead put on worn-out clothes, defiled with dirt and dust, to approach his son in disguise and said, "Man! Stay here and work hard. I will pay you more."

Many years passed. The rich man gave him a name and higher pay to take care of the storehouses.

Thus, twenty years passed. The father told his son to call in the king, ministers, and other members of the household. When they all gathered, he said to them, "This is my son, my real son. All my treasures are his."

This story of a penniless man who becomes a billionaire is revealed in Chapter Four, Understanding by Faith of the Lotus Sutra. It says, "We have obtained unsurpassed treasures although we did not seek them."

The Buddha and deities are always trying to save us from misery; however, we do not understand their intentions.

You may think that the poor son inherits his father's treasures because he is the real son of the rich man. The Buddha says, "All living beings are my children" in Chapter Three. We are all able to inherit the Buddha's treasures (Buddhahood) when we trust in the sacred title of the sutra, "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo." Thus, we will realize the reality of all things without notice and have a peaceful mind.

Compassionate Rain

(LOTUS #59, June/July, 2004)

There has almost no rain in Southern California for over a six month period from April to November. Mountain fires burn many acres every year. Once the fire starts, it is hard to control because of the dry plants and strong winds. It continues to burn thousands of acres for several weeks.

Because of the shortage of rain, it is currently dusty and dirty all over the Southern California cities. The beautiful blue roof tiles of our temple are dirty with dust and smog these days. We need rain!

I would like to talk about the Compassionate Rain, a story in Chapter Five of the Lotus Sutra as follows:

There are countless number of plants such as trees, shrubs, flowers, and weeds in the mountains, forests, woods, deserts, villages, towns, and cities on this earth. They all differ in their shapes, sizes, colors, and fragrances. Some plants can be medicine for human beings while others are poisonous.

Suppose a big black cloud appears in the sky and covers the entire planet. Rain starts to fall and all the plants are watered. Rain falls without any difference as to whether the plant is tall, medium or short, has beautiful or ugly flowers, or is a herb or poisonous. Each one of these plants receives just enough water depending on their need.

The cloud and rain are the same as the Buddha. Buddha Sakyamuni has appeared on this earth like the large cloud. He expounded the Dharma to gods and men just as the large cloud covered all the trees, shrubs, grasses, and weeds. The Buddha taught us his teachings with no difference to him or her, the rich or the poor, the Buddhists or the non-Buddhists.

In the preceding sutras of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha lead us to the highest teaching, the Lotus Sutra, step by step, according to the level of our understanding just like in the story of the Penniless Man Becoming a Millionaire in twenty years. In this chapter, the Buddha reveals that people vary in their education, race, culture and moral behaviors, but his teachings were equally given to all people without any discrimination.

The parables in the two chapters mean that the Buddha is always trying to lead all living beings equally to Buddhahood although they may need different step by step guidance.

Some people understand his teachings a lot, while others a little. Even though we understand his teachings differently, the Buddha gives us his compassionate teachings equally without discrimination just as the cloud gives rain without discrimination.

Let us not discriminate about others.

The Parable of the Magic Castle

Once upon a time there was a dangerous, long, and bad road. It was so fearful that only one man lived in the vicinity. Now, many people wished to pass through this road in order to reach a treasure land. They were led by a man who was clever, wise, and well informed about the conditions of the dangerous road.

Halfway through their journey, the people got tired of walking and said to the leader, "We are tired out. We are also afraid of the danger on this road. We cannot go a step further. Our destination is still far off. We wish to go back."

The leader, who knew many expedients, thought, "What a pity! They wish to go back without getting the great treasures." Having thought this, he expediently made a city appear by magic in the distance. He said to them, "Do not go back! You can stay in that great city, and do anything you like. If you enter that castle, you will be peaceful. If you go on afterwards and reach the place of treasures, then you can go home."

Thereupon the worn-out people had great joy. They said, "We have never had such joy as this before. Now we shall be able to get off this bad road and become peaceful." They entered the magic castle and felt peaceful.

Seeing that they had already rested and were now relieved from their fatigue, the leader caused the castle to disappear and said to them, "Now the place of treasures is near. Let us go further to get the treasures. I made this city by magic in order to enable you to rest."

EXPLANATION:

The Buddha is like the leader of the treasure hunt. He knows the bad road that is comprised of birth, death, and illusion. Those who are satisfied with the magic city are the people of the self-satisfaction (*shomon* and *engaku*). Although they may think that they have reached their own happiness (enlightenment), they have not reached it yet. It is similar to their satisfaction with the magic castle. Real happiness for all mankind (Enlightenment) is farther away and obtained by practicing the way of Bodhisattva.

This parable also teaches that we sometimes need expedients. *Kito* blessing, amulets, or prayer tablets in the Nichiren Sect are some of those expedients. Prayers for material satisfaction are necessary for many people, but the final the goal is to reach the treasure land which signifies attaining Buddhahood.

This parable also shows us that a part of the Lotus Sutra was composed during the time of the Silk Road trade. Trade merchants traveled through long and huge deserts and passed through many countries throughout the Silk Road. An oasis along the journey was used to rest for a while before getting the real treasures that existed beyond the oasis.

Bodhisattvas from Underground

The Buddha Sakyamuni expounded the Lotus Sutra during the last eight years of his life. He appointed us, Nichiren's followers, to expound the teaching of the Lotus Sutra on this earth after his death. In Chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra, Buddha Sakyamuni says, "Who will preach the Lotus Sutra in this *Saha*-World after my death?"

Responding his request, 500 monks arose and said in Chapter 13 of the sutra, "Don't worry, World-Honored One, we will keep, read, recite, and expound this sutra after your extinction. But we will expound it in some other worlds rather than on this earth." The reasons for not expounding it in this *Saha*-World are because people in this world will speak ill of the preachers, abuse them, threaten them with swords or sticks, and because they will drive the preachers out of their monasteries."

The Buddha Sakyamuni did not respond to their proposal. Therefore, in Chapter 15 of the sutra, the Bodhisattvas from the other worlds rose, joined their hands together in *gassho* towards the Buddha, bowed to him and said, "World-Honored One! If you permit us to protect, keep, read, recite, and copy this sutra in this world after your extinction, we will expound it in this *Saha*-World."

Thereupon, the Buddha said to the Bodhisattvas from the other worlds, "I do not need you here because there are Bodhisattvas sixty thousand times as many as the sand of the River Ganges in this *Saha*-World."

As soon as he said this, the ground of the *Saha*-World quaked and cracked, and many thousands of billions of Bodhisattvas sprang up from underground. Those Bodhisattvas had four leaders: Superior-Practice, Limitless-Practice, Pure-Practice, and Steadily-Established-Practice.

It is said that the Great Sage Nichiren was the reincarnation of Superior-Practice Bodhisattva and we, Nichiren's followers, are the Bodhisattvas who sprang up from underground.

St. Nichiren says that we who practice the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are the Bodhisattvas from the underground because we are not from the other planets. We are born on this earth. Many years ago in past lives, we have practiced the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. We might have listened to the Buddha Sakyamuni. With this relationship between the Buddha and the Lotus Sutra, we are here to expound the Lotus Sutra.

Never Despising Bodhisattva

(June 16, 1997)

It was 33 years ago, when I came to America for the first time. I was deeply impressed with friendly strangers. On the streets of Los Angeles, they said "Hi!" to me, a stranger who just arrived from Japan. It was surprising because I had been raised in Tokyo where even some neighbors did not greet each other.

Six and a half years later, I moved to Salt Lake City. The people in that city were even friendlier. Strangers smiled and said, "Hi!" to me. Salt Lake City is the capital of the State of Utah, but there were only a couple of thousand Japanese who lived in the city. It seemed to be that every Japanese person knew each other. Because I was a minister of the Nichiren Buddhist Temple, most Japanese knew who I was. So I greeted all Japanese when I encountered them on the streets or in the stores even though I had never met them before.

These greetings among strangers reminded me of a story in the Lotus Sutra. In Chapter 20, a man had never looked down on others. Every time he saw someone, bowed with Gassho and praised the strangers and said, "I respect you deeply. I do not despise you. It is because you will be able to practice the way of Bodhisattva and become Buddha's."

This man had never read or recited the sutras. He only bowed to people and said these phrases. When he saw someone at a distance, he ran to him or her, and praised them saying the same words.

Some of the people encountered this man got angry and spoke ill of him, and said, "This guy says that he does not despise us and assures us that we shall be able to become Buddha's. We don't need such false Assurances of our Future Buddha hood." The man was sometimes hit with a stick or struck by a rock. Then he would run away from these people, but when he was at a safe distance, he shouted, "I do not despise you. You will be able to become Buddha's." Because of this habit, the man was nicknamed the "Never Despising Bodhisattva."

At the end of Chapter 20, the Lotus Sutra says, "This Never-Despising Bodhisattva was a former life of the Sakyamuni Buddha." I hardly can do the same as the Bodhisattva. However, what the sutra is teaching us is that we should respect everyone because he or she has Buddha-nature or Buddha Seed, and that we should act rather than merely talk.



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