

THE ESSENTIALS OF NICHIREN BUDDHISM THE LOTUS SUTRA AND SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA PART 6

This series is based on the book *Kyogaku no Kiso* (Essentials of Study) published by the Soka Gakkai Study Department.

In this section, we introduce the Lotus Sutra, which is the quintessence of Shakyamuni's Buddhism, and some of its key points.

In subsequent sections we will present a summary of the sutra's contents and an overview of its history and transmission from Shakyamuni Buddha to Nichiren Daishonin.

The Outstanding Characteristics of the Lotus Sutra — The Purpose of Shakyamuni Buddha's Advent

Shakyamuni Buddha fulfilled the purpose of his advent by expounding the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra teaches that the purpose of the Buddha's appearance in this world is to enable all people, all living beings, to attain Buddhahood, that is, supreme enlightenment. The Lotus Sutra, in the "Expedient Means" chapter, explains the "one great reason" why Buddhas appear in this world: "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" (p. 21).

In the same chapter, Shakyamuni declares that in teaching the Lotus Sutra he has fulfilled the vow he made in the distant past. He says, "Shariputra, you should know that at the start I took a vow, hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us, and what I long ago hoped for has now been fulfilled" (p. 36).

These passages tell us that the Buddha expounded the Lotus Sutra in order to fulfill his fundamental purpose, which was to enable all people to attain Buddhahood.

The King of Sutras

Shakyamuni Buddha elucidated many teachings, and they have been preserved in the form of a great number of Buddhist sutras. Among these sutras, the Lotus Sutra has been called the "sutra king" or the "king of sutras" because it contains the highest and most profound of the Buddha's teachings.

We can say this for the following reasons: While the other sutras expound important aspects of the Buddha's teachings, the Lotus Sutra, in contrast, clarifies the Buddha's true intent, the fundamental purpose for which he revealed the entire body of his teachings. And while that true intent is clearly the enlightenment of all people, the Lotus Sutra further clarifies the universal life potential of Buddhahood, enabling people to deepen their faith in the world of Buddhahood within them.

The relationship between the Lotus Sutra and other sutras may be compared to the relationship between a large fishing net and the individual meshes of the net. In other words, the various sutras are comparable to the many meshes of the net, and the Lotus Sutra to the net itself. It expresses the universal truth or principle that ties all of the Buddha's teachings together and allows them to fulfill their purpose.

Another example often cited to describe the relationship between the Lotus Sutra and other sutras is that between a building and the scaffolding erected to enable its construction. In other words, sutras other than the Lotus were expounded to prepare people's hearts and minds to receive the Lotus Sutra and thus compare to scaffolding, and the Lotus Sutra, to the building itself. The purpose of all the Buddha's teachings is to enable all people to attain the world of Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra.

The Sutra Expounded for the Period after the Buddha's Passing

The Lotus Sutra is the Buddhist scripture expounded for all people living after the time of the Buddha. To realize the enlightenment of all people, it was not enough that the Buddha sought to save his contemporaries. The Buddha revealed the Law or teaching for attaining Buddhahood for the sake of all those living after his death, entreating people of that future age to propagate it and transmit it further to future generations.

The Lotus Sutra clearly focuses on enabling people in the ages after the Buddha's death to achieve enlightenment. To that end, it teaches the Law, the mission and the practice for making this possible. Many concepts and principles taught in the Lotus Sutra are aimed specifically at future generations. They include: the one Buddha vehicle, or the principle that the Buddha's enlightenment is itself the vehicle by which all people can attain Buddhahood; the clarification of the true nature of the Buddha's life and the eternal life-potential of the world of Buddhahood, as well as its power to save people; the central ceremony of the Lotus Sutra, the Ceremony in the Air,³ in which propagation of the sutra's teaching after the Buddha's passing is entrusted to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth; the six difficult and nine easy acts⁴ described in the "Emergence of the Treasure Tower" (eleventh) chapter; and the three kinds of powerful enemies⁵ described in the "Encouraging Devotion" (thirteenth) chapter, which express the praiseworthiness and the difficulty of propagating the Lotus Sutra after Shakyamuni Buddha's death and encourage Buddhist practice with the goal of accomplishing the widespread propagation of the Law, or kosen-rufu. All of these principles set forth in the Lotus Sutra transcend the teachings and rules of discipline taught earlier by the Buddha, which address his immediate disciples, instead addressing those of future ages.

Key Points of the Lotus Sutra

If we view the Lotus Sutra as a scripture taught for the purpose of enabling all people to attain Buddhahood, then we can organize its teachings under the three following categories:

The Principle of Attaining Buddhahood

First, the Lotus Sutra reveals the principle that all living beings possess the potential to attain Buddhahood. This is the same principle that the world of Buddhahood is innate within all life. Put another way, all people possess a Buddha nature, meaning the inner potential to become a Buddha. For example, the passage above from the "Expedient Means" chapter states "The Buddhas. . . wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings."

This means that the lives of living beings originally and fundamentally possess the wisdom of the Buddha. Sutras other than the Lotus exclude certain types of persons from the possibility of attaining Buddhahood. Many assert, for example, that people of the two vehicles (voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, indicating the most learned among the Buddha's disciples) can never attain Buddhahood. Other sutras assert that neither women nor evil men are capable of becoming Buddhas. Such sutras thus effectively deny the principle that all living beings can attain Buddhahood. The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai² of China explained and further developed the teaching of the Lotus Sutra that all people can attain enlightenment through such teachings as the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds and three thousand realms in a single moment of life.¹ These teachings spread in China and then in Japan. Later, Nichiren Daishonin opened the way for all people to tap into and bring forth the world of Buddhahood in the reality of their own lives.

A Genuine Buddha Fulfills a Great Vow To Save All People

Second, the Lotus Sutra explains what it really means to be a Buddha. That is, it describes the genuine qualities and behavior of a Buddha. The “Life Span” (sixteenth) chapter contains an important teaching concerning the nature of the Buddha’s enlightenment. In short, in that chapter, Shakyamuni discloses his true identity as the Buddha who has been enlightened since the remote past, that is, since countless kalpas ago. Until that announcement, in other sutras and in the first fifteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni is depicted as having attained enlightenment for the first time after meditating under the Bodhi tree in the present lifetime in India. In the “Life Span” chapter, his identity and when and how he became a Buddha are shown to be provisional. In reality, he says, he attained Buddhahood countless lifetimes ago, in the incomprehensibly remote past. Since that time long ago, Shakyamuni explains, he has constantly resided in this saha world (meaning this real world, in which people must endure suffering), endeavoring to save living beings and lead them to enlightenment.

This expresses the principle that a true, or genuine, Buddha is one who fulfills the vow to save all living beings; that is, amid the severe realities of this world, to lead all people to enlightenment.

(At the conclusion of the “Life Span” chapter, Shakyamuni expresses his wish to enable all living beings to attain Buddhahood: “At all times I think to myself: / How can I cause living beings / to gain entry into the unsurpassed way / and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?” [p. 232])

Other sutras teach of Buddhas and sages who have attained a special stage of development far removed from the realities of this world. They are often depicted as inhabiting idyllic, transcendent “pure lands” that are distant and distinct from the world of ordinary humans. From the viewpoint of the Lotus Sutra, however, such fantastic Buddhas, sages and pure lands are neither genuine nor real.

The Buddha described in the Lotus Sutra is one who strives to lead all people from suffering to happiness, enabling those who are struggling amid the harsh realities of this world to open within them the exact same world of Buddhahood that the Buddha possesses. It is within this way of living that the life state of the Buddha who is awakened to the eternal truth dynamically displays itself. And it is the Lotus Sutra that reveals this solid and immovable condition of absolute happiness.

Bodhisattvas who Inherit and Transmit the Buddha's Great Desire and Vow to Lead all People to Enlightenment

Third, the Lotus Sutra clarifies the fundamental mission of bodhisattvas who believe in the sutra after Shakyamuni Buddha’s passing. The Sanskrit word *bodhisattva* means a living being (*sattva*) who seeks enlightenment (*bodhi*). The Lotus Sutra reveals, however, that the true mission of a bodhisattva is to pursue not only his or her own enlightenment, but to enable all beings inhabiting the real world to attain Buddhahood. It depicts the bodhisattvas who will carry out this mission as the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

1. Three thousand realms in a single moment of life: A philosophical system established by T'ien-t'ai. The three thousand realms indicate the varying aspects and phases that life assumes at each moment. At each moment, life manifests one of the Ten Worlds. Each of the Ten Worlds contains all the other nine as potential within itself. Mutual possession means that an individual's state of life can be changed, and that all beings of the nine worlds possess the potential for Buddhahood. This totals 100 worlds. Each of these hundred worlds possesses the ten factors and operates within each of the three realms of existence, thus making three thousand realms.
2. T'ien-t'ai: The founder of the T'ien-t'ai school in China, he became known for his profound lectures on the Lotus Sutra. He refuted the scriptural classifications formulated by the ten major Buddhist schools of his day, and classified all of Shakyamuni's sutras into five periods and eight teachings, demonstrating the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra. In Great Concentration and Insight T'ien-t'ai set forth the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life and the practice of meditation to realize it.
3. Ceremony in the Air: One of the three assemblies described in the Lotus Sutra, in which the entire gathering is suspended in space above the saha world. It extends from the "Treasure Tower" (eleventh) chapter to the "Entrustment" (twenty-second) chapter. The heart of this ceremony is the revelation of the Buddha's original enlightenment in the remote past and the transfer of the essence of the sutra to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.
4. Six difficult and nine easy acts: Comparisons expounded in the "Treasure Tower" chapter of the Lotus Sutra to teach people how difficult it would be to embrace and propagate the sutra in the Latter Day of the Law.
5. Three powerful enemies: Also, the three types of enemies. Three types of people who persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's passing, as described in the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter of the sutra. They are: (1) lay people ignorant of Buddhism who denounce the votaries of the Lotus Sutra and attack them with swords or staves; (2) arrogant and cunning priests who slander the votaries; and (3) priests respected by the general public who, fearing the loss of fame or profit, induce the secular authorities to persecute the sutra's votaries.