

# THE ESSENTIALS OF NICHIREN BUDDHISM AN OVERVIEW OF THE LOTUS SUTRA PART 7

The Lotus Sutra was Shakyamuni Buddha's highest teaching and the purpose of his life. In it, Nichiren Daishonin found a theoretical and doctrinal basis for establishing Nichiren Buddhism—**the teaching to lead all humankind to happiness in the current age, the Latter Day of the Law.**

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## The Original Text and the Chinese Translations

The Lotus Sutra was first set down in writing in India sometime during the first and second centuries C.E. Compiled in the Sanskrit language, many copies and fragments of copies of the early text have been discovered in India and Central Asia.

By the third century C.E., the sutra had been transmitted to China where it was translated into Chinese. Six different Chinese language translations of the Lotus Sutra are known to have existed, of which three are extant today.<sup>2</sup>

Among these, Kumarajiva's Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law (Jpn Myoho-enge-kyo) became the most popular and widely used version in China and Japan. Nichiren Daishonin regarded Kumarajiva's translation, the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, or Myoho-enge-kyo, as the only translation that accurately conveys Shakyamuni Buddha's true intent. In "Reply to Lady Ota" he says, "Only Kumarajiva translated the scriptural passages of Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings, without injecting his own words" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1007).

## The Title of the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra's Japanese title, Myoho-enge-kyo (Chin Miao-fa-lien-hua-ching), is Kumarajiva's translation of the title of the Sanskrit text, Saddharma-pundarika-sutra.

Saddharma literally means "correct dharma" or "correct Law"; Pundarika, "white lotus"; and "sutra," the Buddha's teaching. (While Dharmaraksha translated the Sanskrit *sad* of Saddharma literally as the Chinese character meaning correct, Kumarajiva inferred a deeper meaning, translating *sad* as the Chinese character *miao*, pronounced *myo* in Japanese. In English, *myo* is rendered alternatively as wonderful or mystic.)

## The Twenty-eight Chapters of the Lotus Sutra and the "Prologue" and "Epilogue" Sutras.

The Lotus Sutra as we know it contains twenty-eight chapters. In Buddhist texts and study material, these chapters are generally referred to by their names together with their ordinal number within the sutra, such as the "Expedient Means" (second) chapter, and the "Life Span of the Thus Come One" (sixteenth) chapter. In Chinese and Japanese the chapter number is considered part of the chapter title. Sutras were recorded on lengths of paper, which were wound around wooden dowels. Each of these is called a volume, scroll or fascicle. The Lotus Sutra is composed of eight such volumes, each containing three or four chapters.

The Lotus Sutra is often regarded together with two other sutras: the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra and the Universal Worthy Sutra (Sutra on How to Practice Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy), each consisting of one volume. The Great Teacher T'ien-T'ai of

China classified the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra as the opening or prologue to the Lotus Sutra, and the Universal Worthy Sutra as its closing or epilogue. He designated the Lotus Sutra together with these two opening and closing sutras the “Threefold Lotus Sutra.” Bodhisattva Universal Worthy is also the protagonist in the last chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the “Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy” (twenty-eighth) chapter.

### **The Theoretical and Essential Teachings**

Among the Lotus Sutra’s twenty-eight chapters, the first fourteen chapters, comprising the first half of the Sutra from the “Introduction” (first) chapter through the “Peaceful Practices” (fourteenth) chapter, are known as the sutra’s theoretical teaching. The latter fourteen chapters, from the “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter through the “Universal Worthy” (“Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy”) (twenty-eighth) chapter, are known as the essential teaching.

The core of the theoretical teaching is the “Expedient Means” (second) chapter, and the core of the essential teaching is the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter. “Essential teaching” is a translation of the Japanese Buddhist term *honmon*, *hon* meaning true, original, essential, or fundamental. *Mon*, literally gate, denotes a teaching or school of thought, symbolizing a gate through which one enters the realm of understanding or wisdom. The essential teaching refers to the teaching expounded by the original or true Buddha—Shakyamuni—who attained enlightenment in the remote past, countless *kalpas*<sup>3</sup> ago, as described in the “Life Span” (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

The theoretical teaching is a translation of the Japanese word *shakumon*. The character *shaku* literally means trace, footprint or shadow. Each word symbolizes the transient or temporary nature of Shakyamuni’s identity as the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the present lifetime. From the standpoint of the essential teaching, this Buddha is merely a reflection of the true Buddha of that teaching. The term “theoretical teaching” implies that the doctrines and principles it contains remain in the realm of theory so long as they are viewed from the standpoint of the Buddha’s transient or provisional identity.

T’ien-t’ai compared the Buddha of the essential teaching, or true Buddha, to the moon in the sky, and the Buddha of the theoretical teaching, or provisional Buddha, to the moon’s reflection on a pond.

### **Two Places and Three Assemblies**

The Lotus Sutra begins with Shakyamuni Buddha preaching at Eagle Peak. Later, he raises the assembly of those listening to his sermon into midair by invoking his supernatural powers, and continues to preach. Finally, he returns the assembly to Eagle Peak, where the sutra concludes. These various settings and occasions in which Shakyamuni preaches his teachings in the sutra are referred to as the “two places and three assemblies” and sometimes as “three assemblies in two places.” The three assemblies are: 1) the first, which takes place on Eagle Peak; 2) the Ceremony in the Air, in which the assembly is convened in midair; and 3) the conclusion that begins with everyone’s return to Eagle Peak.

The “two places” are atop Eagle Peak and in the air. The first assembly on Eagle Peak begins with the “Introduction” (first) chapter and continues through the first half of the “Treasure Tower” (eleventh) chapter. The Ceremony in the Air begins in the latter half of the “Treasure Tower” (eleventh) chapter and ends with the “Entrustment” (twenty-second) chapter. The final assembly on Eagle Peak begins with the “Medicine King” (twenty-third) chapter and continues through the “Universal Worthy”(twenty-eighth) chapter, or until the end of the sutra.

## Outline of the Lotus Sutra

In the first chapter, “Introduction,” a great number of persons and beings gather at Eagle Peak to hear the Buddha preach. This gathering includes 12,000 voice-hearers, 80,000 bodhisattvas, numerous human beings, heavenly beings, dragon kings, *asuras*, and other beings. Once they have gathered at Eagle Peak, Shakyamuni Buddha enters a kind of meditation called *samadhi*. At that point the earth moves in six different ways, and various other omens follow.

Then in the “Expedient Means” (second) chapter, Shakyamuni emerges from his *samadhi* meditation and begins his Lotus Sutra sermon. In this chapter, Shakyamuni reveals that all Buddhas appear in the world and expound their teachings for one fundamental purpose—to enable all living beings to become Buddhas.

The various sutras expounded before the Lotus Sutra taught of three paths or ways leading to Buddhahood: the way of voice-hearers, the way of cause-awakened ones and the way of bodhisattvas. These three ways or paths are known as the “three vehicles.” In terms of the ten worlds<sup>4</sup> these three represent the three worlds immediately below the world of Buddhahood. The doctrine of the three vehicles asserts that the Buddha expounded three kinds of teachings directed respectively at the capacity of each of these three levels of disciples. Thus the three vehicles consist of teachings that suit the capacity of voice-hearers, teachings that suit the capacity of cause-awakened ones and teachings that suit the capacity of bodhisattvas.

The Lotus Sutra, however, makes clear that the doctrine of the three vehicles does not represent the Buddha’s true intention, which is to reveal the single path that leads all people directly to Buddhahood. That single path is called the one vehicle, or the one Buddha vehicle, indicating the teaching capable of “transporting” all people directly to the life-state of Buddhahood. Specifically, only the Lotus Sutra itself constitutes the one Buddha vehicle. The sutra clarifies that the Buddha expounded the three vehicles as an expedient means or method for illuminating the one Buddha vehicle. T’ien-t’ai calls this way of teaching “opening the three vehicles and revealing the one vehicle.”

Shakyamuni then makes a series of prophecies predicting that all those in the assembly at Eagle Peak who hear the sutra and arouse faith in it, including Shariputra and his fellow voice-hearers, will in the future attain Buddhahood. Shakyamuni also guarantees that all of those who accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha’s death will attain Buddhahood as well. The theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra thus declares that voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones (people of the two vehicles) can attain Buddhahood, while sutras before the Lotus deny them the possibility. This assertion forms a major pillar of the theoretical teaching.

As events unfold, then the question becomes, “Who will propagate the Lotus Sutra in the time after Shakyamuni’s death, that is, in the Latter Day of the Law?”<sup>5</sup> In the Ceremony in the Air, a dramatic rite of transmission plays out as Shakyamuni Buddha entrusts the propagation of his teachings in the age after his death.

First, in the “Emergence of the Treasure Tower” (eleventh) chapter, a massive tower adorned with seven kinds of treasures emerges from within the Earth, rises to great heights and floats in midair. Residing within this immense treasure tower is a Buddha called Many Treasures, who affirms the truth of the sutra’s teaching. Next, from the ten directions, that is, from throughout the entire universe all Buddhas and bodhisattvas come and gather around the tower. When the treasure tower opens Shakyamuni Buddha takes a seat beside Many Treasures.

At this point, the listeners assembled at Eagle Peak are raised into the air, where the treasure tower is now suspended. In midair, Shakyamuni resumes his sermon concerning who will spread the Lotus Sutra in the age after his passing, or the Latter Day of the Law, teaching the principle of the six difficult and nine easy acts.

The six difficult and nine easy acts are a series of comparisons set forth by Shakyamuni in the eleventh chapter to show how difficult it will be to embrace and propagate the sutra in the evil age after his death. The six difficult acts are: (1) to propagate the Lotus Sutra widely, (2) to copy it or cause someone else to copy it, (3) to recite it even for a short while, (4) to teach it even to one person, (5) to hear of and accept it and inquire about its meaning, and (6) to maintain faith in it.

The nine easy acts are: (1) to teach innumerable sutras other than the Lotus Sutra; (2) to take up Mount Sumeru and hurl it across countless Buddha lands; (3) to kick a major world system into a different quarter with one's toe; (4) to stand in the Summit of Being Heaven and preach innumerable sutras other than the Lotus Sutra; (5) to grasp the sky with one's hand and travel around with it; (6) to place the earth on one's toenail and ascend to the Brahma Heaven; (7) to carry dry grass on one's back into the great fires occurring at the end of the kalpa without being burned; (8) to preach eighty-four thousand teachings and enable one's listeners to obtain the six transcendental powers; and (9) to enable innumerable people to reach the stage of arhat and acquire the six transcendental powers.

By citing these impossible feats as “easy,” while designating acts of upholding and transmitting the Lotus Sutra as “difficult,” Shakyamuni emphasizes the extreme difficulty of embracing the sutra and teaching it to others in the evil age he predicts will come after his passing.

Shakyamuni urges the bodhisattvas present to embrace the six difficult acts and make a vow to propagate the sutra's teachings after his death.

The next part of the sutra teaches the enlightenment of evil persons, based on the example of Devadatta's attaining Buddhahood, and the enlightenment of women, based on the example of the dragon girl attaining Buddhahood. Both possibilities are denied in sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra, are taught here. These examples affirm the ability of all people to attain Buddhahood, and serve to encourage the propagation of the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's death.

The bodhisattvas and voice-hearers present in the assembly then pledge to propagate the Lotus Sutra. In particular, in the “Encouraging Devotion” (thirteenth) chapter, the bodhisattvas vow to spread the sutra, overcoming opposition by the three powerful enemies;<sup>6</sup> but Shakyamuni stops them, however. Instead, in the “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter, he calls forth from beneath the earth countless bodhisattvas whom he says he has been teaching since long ago, and who will shoulder the task of spreading the Lotus Sutra in the age after his passing. These are the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

The appearance of these bodhisattvas and the Buddha's statement that he has long been their teacher perplexes the rest of the assembly. It clearly would have been utterly impossible for Shakyamuni to do so in his present life, since attaining Buddhahood at the age of 30 under the bodhi tree, to have converted and trained such a multitude of bodhisattvas.

In the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in response to a question from his listeners regarding when and where the Buddha had converted and taught these countless bodhisattvas, Shakyamuni clarifies the true nature of his existence — his true status as a Buddha. He reveals that he did not attain Buddhahood for the first time in his present life, as all had thought. In fact, he attained Buddhahood in the incalculably remote past described as “countless major world system dust particle *kalpas* ago.” Since that time, he explains, he has been living in the *saha* world — the real world, filled with suffering — converting and teaching living beings. His life span as a Buddha has thus been extremely long. He teaches that to accept and believe in this Buddha who actually attained enlightenment in the remote past is a source of unfathomable benefit and virtue.

Shakyamuni then introduces the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, whom Shakyamuni describes as himself in a past existence. Through the example of Never Disparaging's Buddhist

practice, Shakyamuni teaches that one who strongly believes in the ability of all people to become Buddhas, and persists in respecting others based on that conviction, will absolutely attain Buddhahood. The behavior of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is meant as a model for bodhisattvas who practice the Lotus Sutra.

In the “Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” (twenty-first) chapter, the Buddha specifically entrusts the Bodhisattvas of the Earth with the task of spreading his teachings after his death. Then, in the “Entrustment” (twenty-second) chapter, he turns to all of the bodhisattvas present at the assembly and urges them to propagate the Lotus Sutra. With this, the Ceremony in the Air ends.

Thereafter, the venue returns to Eagle Peak and the second assembly on Eagle Peak begins. Such great bodhisattvas as Medicine King and Universal Worthy, as well as various benevolent deities, vow to safeguard the widespread propagation of the Lotus Sutra and the genuine practitioners of the Lotus Sutra after Shakyamuni’s death. The Buddha finishes preaching with the instruction: “Therefore, Universal Worthy, if you see a person who accepts and upholds this sutra, you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha” (LS, 324).

1. Sanskrit: Ancient Indian literary language.

2 The three extant Chinese versions are: (1) the Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law, in ten volumes and twenty-seven chapters, translated by Dharmaraksha in 286; (2) the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, in eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters, translated by Kumarajiva in 406; and (3) the Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, in seven volumes and twenty-seven chapters, translated by Jnanagupta and Dharmagupta in 601.

3 *kalpa*: In ancient Indian cosmology, an extremely long period of time. There are various views on the length of a *kalpa*. For example, according to The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, a kalpa is longer than the time required to wear away a cube of rock 450 meters on each side, by brushing it with a piece of cloth once every hundred years.

4. Ten Worlds: ten potential states or conditions that a person can manifest or experience. From the lowest to the highest, the realms of (1) Hell, (2) Hunger or desires, (3) Animality, (4) Asuras or Anger, (5) Human Beings or Tranquility, (6) Heavenly Beings or Rapture, (7) Voice-hearers or Learning, (8) Cause-awakened ones or Realization, (9) Bodhisattvas, and (10) Buddhas. The Ten Worlds were viewed originally as distinct physical locations, each with its own particular inhabitants. The Lotus Sutra, however, teaches that each of the Ten Worlds contains all ten within it, making it possible to interpret them as potential states of life inherent in each individual being. The mutual possession of the Ten Worlds is a component principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which T’ien-t’ai (538—597) set forth in Great Concentration and Insight.

5. Latter Day of the Law: Also, age of the Decadent Law, age of the Final Law, or latter age. The last of the three periods—the Former Day of the Law, the Middle Day of the Law, and the Latter Day of the Law—following Shakyamuni Buddha’s death, when his teachings are said to fall into confusion and lose the power to lead people to enlightenment. The Latter Day of the Law is said to last for ten thousand years. The fifth of five five-hundred-year periods following Shakyamuni’s death described in the Great Collection Sutra corresponds to the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law. The sutra predicts that it will be an “age of quarrels and disputes,” when monks will disregard the precepts and feud constantly among themselves, when erroneous views will prevail, and when Shakyamuni’s teachings will “be obscured and lost.” In contrast, the Lotus Sutra views the Latter Day of the Law as the time when the teaching it contains will be

propagated. The “Medicine King” (twenty-third) chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, “After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa and never allow it to be cut off.”

6. three powerful enemies: Also, three types of enemies. Three types of arrogant people who persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra in the evil age after Shakyamuni Buddha’s death. Miao-lo (711–782) defines them in his work *The Annotations on “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra”* on the basis of descriptions in the concluding verse section of the “Encouraging Devotion” (thirteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Miao-lo summarizes them as follows: (1) “The arrogance and presumption of lay people” or arrogant lay people; a reference to those ignorant of Buddhism who curse and speak ill of the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra and attack them with swords and staves. (2) “The arrogance and presumption of members of the Buddhist clergy” or arrogant priests. These are priests with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked who, though failing to understand Buddhism, boast they have attained the Buddhist truth and slander the sutra’s practitioners. (3) “The arrogance and presumption of those who pretend to be sages” or arrogant false sages. This third category is described as priests who pretend to be sages and who are revered as such, but when encountering the practitioners of the Lotus Sutra become fearful of losing fame or profit and induce secular authorities to persecute them. Miao-lo states, “Of these three, the first can be endured. The second exceeds the first, and the third is the most formidable of all. This is because the second and third ones are increasingly harder to recognize for what they really are.” Nichiren Daishonin called them the “three powerful enemies” and identified himself as the votary, or true practitioner, of the Lotus Sutra because he was subjected to slander, attacked with swords and staves, and sent into exile twice by the authorities, just as prophesied in the sutra. In his treatise *The Opening of the Eyes*, he says: “At such a time, if the three powerful enemies predicted in the Lotus Sutra did not appear, then who would believe in the words of the Buddha? If it were not for Nichiren, who could fulfill the Buddha’s prophecies concerning the votary of the Lotus Sutra?” (WND, 243).

## POP QUIZ

- 1.** Among the various translations of the Lotus Sutra, which one does Nichiren Daishonin hold as superior?
- 2.** What is the title of the Lotus Sutra in the Japanese language?
- 3.** What is the difference between the theoretical and essential halves of the Lotus Sutra?
- 4.** Explain the three meetings in two places that take place in the Lotus Sutra.
- 5.** What is the vow of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth?