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Questions and Answers about Embracing the Lotus Sutra



QUESTION: I have had the rare opportunity to be born a human being and the good fortune to encounter Buddhism. But it is said that there are shallow teachings and there are profound teachings, and that some people rank high in capacity while others rank low. Just what teachings should I practice to attain Buddhahood as quickly as possible? I beg you to instruct me on this point.

Answer: Each family has its respected elders, and each province, its persons of noble station. But although people all look up to their particular lord and pay honor to their own parents, could anyone stand higher than the ruler of the nation?

In the same way, confrontations between the Mahayana and the Hinayana or between the provisional and true teachings are comparable to disputes among rival houses; but among all the sacred teachings expounded by the Buddha in the course of his lifetime, the Lotus Sutra alone holds the position of absolute superiority. It is the guidepost that points the way to the immediate attainment of perfect wisdom, the carriage that takes us at once to the place of enlightenment.

Question: As I understand it, a teacher is someone who has grasped the central meaning of the sutras and treatises and who writes commentaries

explaining them. If that is so, then it is only natural that the teachers of the various schools should each formulate doctrines according to their own understanding, and on that basis write their commentaries, establish principles, and dedicate themselves to the attainment of enlightenment. How could such efforts be in vain? To insist that the Lotus Sutra alone holds the position of absolute superiority is to adopt too narrow a view, I believe.

Answer: If you think that to proclaim the absolute superiority of the Lotus Sutra is to take too narrow a view, then one would have to conclude that no one in the world was more narrow-minded than Shakyamuni Buddha. I am afraid you are greatly mistaken in this matter. Let me quote from one of the sutras and from the commentary of one school, and see if I can resolve your confusion.

The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra says: “[Because people’s natures and desires are not alike], I preached the Law in various different ways. Preaching the Law in various different ways, I made use of the power of expedient means. But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth.”

Hearing this pronouncement, Great Adornment and the others of the eighty thousand bodhisattvas replied in

unison, voicing their understanding that “[as for those living beings who are unable to hear this sutra . . .] though immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable asamkha kalpas may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment.”

The point of this passage is to make clear that, no matter how much one may aspire to the Buddha way by calling upon the name of Amida Buddha, or by embracing the teachings of the Zen school—relying on the sutras of the Flower Garland, Agama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods preached by the Buddha during the previous forty years and more—one will never succeed in attaining supreme enlightenment, even though a countless, limitless, inconceivable number of asamkha kalpas should pass.

And this is not the only passage of this type. The “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra states, “The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth.” It also says, “[In the Buddha lands of the ten directions] there is only the Law of the one vehicle, there are not two, there are not three.” These passages mean that only this [Lotus] sutra represents the truth.

Again, in the second volume it says, “I am the only person who can rescue and protect others.”¹ And it speaks of “desiring only to accept and embrace the sutra of the great vehicle and not accepting a single verse of the other sutras.”² These passages mean that only Shakyamuni Buddha can save and protect all living beings, and that one should wish to accept and uphold only the Lotus Sutra, and never even a verse from any other sutra.³

It also says, “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell.”⁴

This passage means that, if one does not believe in the Lotus Sutra but instead turns against it, one will immediately destroy the seeds for attaining Buddhahood in this world. After death, one will fall into the hell of incessant suffering.

Examining these passages, T’ien-t’ai concluded that it was statements such as these that had prompted the words, “Is this not a devil pretending to be the Buddha?”⁵ If we merely rely upon the commentaries of various teachers and do not follow the statements of the Buddha himself, then how can we call our beliefs Buddhism? To do so would be absurd beyond description!

Therefore, the Great Teacher Chisho stated that, if one claims that there is no division of Mahayana and Hinayana among the sutras and no distinction of partial and perfect among revelations of the truth, and therefore accepts all the words of the various teachers, then the preachings of the Buddha will have been to no purpose.⁶

T’ien-t’ai asserted, “That which has a profound doctrine and accords with the sutras is to be written down and made available. But put no faith in anything that in word or meaning fails to do so.”⁷ He also said, “All assertions that lack scriptural proof are to be branded as false.”⁸ How would you interpret such statements?

Question: What you have just said may apply to the commentaries of the teachers. But what about the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra that state, “This is the foremost sutra” or “This is the king of sutras”? If one were to go by what you have said, then one would have to reject these pronouncements, which are the words of the Buddha himself. Is this not so?

Answer: Although these earlier sutras may include such statements as “this is the foremost sutra” or “this is the king of sutras,” they are all nevertheless provisional teachings. One

should not rely on such pronouncements. The Buddha himself commented on this point when he said, "Rely on sutras that are complete and final and not on those that are not complete and final."⁹ And the Great Teacher Miao-lo stated: "Though other sutras may call themselves the king among sutras, there is none that announces itself as foremost among all the sutras preached in the past, now being preached, or to be preached in the future."¹⁰ Thus one should understand them according to the principle of 'combining, excluding, corresponding, and including.'¹¹ This passage of commentary is saying in essence that even if there should be a sutra that calls itself the king of sutras, if it does not also declare itself superior to those preached before it and those to be preached after, then one should know that it is a sutra belonging to the expedient teachings.

It is the way of the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra to say nothing concerning the sutras that would be preached in the future. Only in the case of the Lotus Sutra, because it is the final and ultimate statement of the Buddha's teachings, do we find a clear pronouncement that this sutra alone holds the place of absolute superiority "among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach."

Hence one commentary states, "Only in the Lotus Sutra did the Buddha explain the meaning of his earlier teachings and clarify the true meaning of this present teaching."¹² Thus we may see that, in the Lotus Sutra, the Thus Come One gave definite form both to his true intention and to the methods to be used in teaching and converting living beings.

It is for this reason that T'ien-t'ai stated: "After the Thus Come One attained enlightenment, for forty years and more he did not reveal the truth. With the Lotus Sutra, he for the first

time revealed the truth."¹³ In other words, for more than forty years after the Thus Come One went out into the world, he did not reveal the true teaching. In the Lotus Sutra, he for the first time revealed the true way that leads to the attainment of Buddhahood.

Question: I understand what you say about the Lotus Sutra being foremost among all the sutras that the Buddha "has preached, now preaches, and will preach." But there is a certain teacher who says that the statement "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth" is meant to apply only to the voice-hearers, who were able to achieve Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra. It does not apply to the bodhisattvas, who had already gained the benefit of enlightenment through the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra. What is your opinion on this matter?

Answer: You are referring to the view that the Lotus Sutra was preached for the benefit of those of the two vehicles and not for bodhisattvas, and that the words "I have not yet revealed the truth" therefore apply only to the two vehicles. This was the opinion put forth by the Great Teacher Tokuitsu, a priest of the Dharma Characteristics school. It has been repudiated by the Great Teacher Dengyo, who wrote: "There is at present a certain feeder on lowly food who has composed several volumes of spurious writings, slandering the Law and slandering persons. How can he possibly escape falling into hell!"¹⁴ As a result of these words of censure directed at him, Tokuitsu's tongue split into eight pieces and he died.

Be that as it may, the assertion that the statement "I have not yet revealed the truth" was made for the sake of the people of the two vehicles is in itself completely reasonable. The reason is that, from the very beginning, the fundamental purpose of the Thus Come

One's preaching was to open the way to enlightenment for the people of the two vehicles. And the methods of instruction used throughout his teaching life, as well as the skillful means exhibited in his three cycles of preaching, were chiefly employed for them.

In the Flower Garland Sutra, beings dwelling in hell are deemed able to become Buddhas, but voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones are condemned as incapable of doing so. In the Correct and Equal sutras, it is stated that, just as lotus flowers cannot grow on the peak of a high mountain, so the people of the two vehicles have scorched the seeds of Buddhahood [and hence can never attain it]. And in the Wisdom sutras, we read that persons who have committed the five cardinal sins can attain Buddhahood, but that those of the two vehicles are rejected as unable to do so. The Thus Come One now declared as his true intention that these pitiful, abandoned persons could indeed attain Buddhahood, using this as a standard to demonstrate the superiority of the Lotus Sutra.

Therefore, T'ien-t'ai stated: "Neither the Flower Garland Sutra nor the Larger Wisdom Sutra could cure [the plight of these persons of the two vehicles]. The Lotus Sutra alone was able to produce the roots of goodness in those who have nothing more to learn,¹⁵ and to make it possible for them to attain the Buddha way. Therefore, the sutra is called *myo*, or wonderful. Again, the icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, nevertheless have minds, and so it is still possible for them to attain Buddhahood. But persons of the two vehicles have annihilated consciousness, and therefore cannot arouse the mind that aspires to enlightenment. And yet the Lotus Sutra can cure them, which is why it is called *myo*, or wonderful."¹⁶

There is no need for me to explain in detail the import of this passage.

One should understand once and for all that even the medicine of the teachings offered by the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, and Larger Wisdom sutras cannot cure the grave illness that afflicts persons of the two vehicles. Moreover, in the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra, even guilty persons who are condemned to inhabit the three evil paths are regarded as bodhisattvas and therefore able to attain Buddhahood, but no such recognition is accorded to the persons of the two vehicles.

With regard to this point, the Great Teacher Miao-lo stated: "In the various sutras, it is sometimes taught that beings in all other paths are led to the true [path of Buddhahood], but there is absolutely no such hope offered to the two vehicles. Therefore, [in the Lotus Sutra] beings in the six paths are grouped with bodhisattvas [as being assured of Buddhahood], and the power of the sutra is set forth with respect to those of the two vehicles for whom Buddhahood is the most difficult to achieve."¹⁷ Indeed, T'ien-t'ai established that the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles is proof that all living beings without exception can become Buddhas.

Could one think it difficult for an asura to cross the great ocean? Could one possibly think it easy for a little child to overthrow a strong man? In like manner, the sutras preached before the Lotus Sutra explain that persons who have the seeds of the Buddha nature may attain Buddhahood, but nowhere is it stated that those whose seeds are hopelessly scorched can ever do so. It is only the good medicine of the Lotus Sutra that can readily cure this grave affliction.

Now, if you wish to attain Buddhahood, you have only to lower the banner of your arrogance, cast aside the staff of your anger, and devote yourself exclusively to the one vehicle of the

Lotus Sutra. Worldly fame and profit are mere baubles of your present existence, and arrogance and prejudice are ties that will fetter you in the next one. Ah, you should be ashamed of them! And you should fear them, too!

Question: Since, by means of a single instance, one may surmise the nature of all, on hearing your brief remarks about the Lotus Sutra, I feel that my ears and eyes have been clearly opened for the first time. But how can one understand the Lotus Sutra, so as to quickly reach the shore of enlightenment?

I have heard it said that only one for whom the sun of wisdom shines unclouded in the great sky of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life, and for whom the water of wisdom in the broad pond of the threefold contemplation in a single mind is clear and never muddied, has the capacity to carry out the practice of this sutra. But I have never exerted myself to study the various schools of the southern capital of Nara, and so I know nothing of the doctrines of *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* and *The Treatise on the Consciousness-Only Doctrine*; and my eyes are equally unopened with respect to the teachings of the northern peak of Hiei, and so I am quite confused about the significance of the works *Great Concentration and Insight* and *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*. With regard to the Tendai and Dharma Characteristics schools, I am like a person with a pot over his head who is standing with his face to a wall. It would seem, therefore, that my capacity is not suited to the Lotus Sutra. What am I to do?

Answer: It is the way of scholars these days to assert that only those who possess superior wisdom and strenuously exert themselves in the practice of meditation have the capacity to benefit from the Lotus Sutra, and to discourage persons who lack wisdom from

even trying. But this is in fact an utterly ignorant and erroneous view. The Lotus Sutra is the teaching that enables all living beings to attain the Buddha way. Therefore, the persons of superior faculties and superior capacity should naturally devote themselves to contemplation and to meditating on the Law. But, for persons of inferior faculties and inferior capacity, the important thing is simply to have a heart of faith. Hence the sutra states: "If there are good men or good women who . . . believe and revere it with pure hearts and harbor no doubts or perplexities, they will never fall into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of beasts, but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions."¹⁸ One should have complete faith in the Lotus Sutra and look forward to being born in the presence of the Buddhas in one's next life.

To illustrate, suppose that a person is standing at the foot of a tall embankment and is unable to ascend. And suppose that there is someone on top of the embankment who lowers a rope and says, "If you take hold of this rope, I will pull you up to the top of the embankment." If the person at the bottom begins to doubt that the other has the strength to pull him up, or wonders if the rope is not too weak and therefore refuses to put forth his hand and grasp it, then how is he ever to get to the top of the embankment? But if he follows the instructions, puts out his hand, and takes hold of the rope, then he can climb up.

If one doubts the strength of the Buddha when he says, "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others"; if one is suspicious of the rope held out by the Lotus Sutra when its teachings declare that one can "gain entrance through faith alone";¹⁹ if one fails to chant the Mystic Law which guarantees that "such a person assuredly and without doubt [will attain the

Buddha way],²⁰ then the Buddha's power cannot reach one, and it will be impossible to scale the embankment of enlightenment.

Lack of faith is the basic failing that causes a person to fall into hell. Therefore, the sutra states, "If with regard to this sutra one should harbor doubt and fail to believe, one will fall at once into the evil paths."²¹

When one has had the rare good fortune to be born a human being, and the further good fortune to encounter the teachings of Buddhism, how can one waste this opportunity? If one is going to take faith at all, then among all the various teachings of the Mahayana and the Hinayana, provisional and true doctrines, one should believe in the one vehicle, the true purpose for which the Buddhas come into the world and the direct path to attaining enlightenment for all living beings.

If the sutra that one embraces is superior to all other sutras, then the person who can uphold its teachings must likewise surpass other people. That is why the Lotus Sutra states, "A person who can accept and uphold this sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings."²² There is no question about these golden words of the great sage. And yet people fail to understand this principle or to examine the matter, but instead seek worldly reputation or give way to suspicion and prejudice, thus forming the basis for falling into hell.

All I wish is that you will embrace this sutra and cast your name upon the sea of the vows made by the Buddhas of the ten directions, that you entrust your honor to the heaven that is the compassion of the bodhisattvas of the three existences. One who thus embraces the Lotus Sutra will cause the heavenly gods, dragons, and the others of the eight kinds of nonhuman beings, as well as all the great bodhisattvas, to become one's followers. Not only that,

but that person's physical body, still in the process of forming causes for achieving Buddhahood, will acquire the Buddha eye of one who has perfected that course; and this ordinary flesh that exists in the realm of the conditioned will put on the holy garments of the unconditioned. Then one need never fear the three paths²³ or tremble before the eight difficulties.²⁴ One will ascend to the peak of the mountain of the seven expedients and sweep away the clouds of the nine worlds. Flowers will bloom in the garden of immaculate earth, and the moon will shine brightly in the sky of the Dharma nature. One can rely on the passage that promises, "Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way," and there is no question about the Buddha's pronouncement that "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others."

The blessings gained by arousing even a single moment of faith in and understanding of the Lotus Sutra surpass those of practicing the five paramitas;²⁵ and the benefit enjoyed by the fiftieth person who rejoices on hearing the Lotus Sutra is greater than that acquired by giving alms for eighty years.²⁶ The doctrine of the immediate attainment of enlightenment far outshines the doctrines of other scriptures; and the pronouncements concerning the revelation of the Buddha's original enlightenment and his immeasurable life span are never found in any other teachings.

Thus it was that the eight-year-old dragon girl was able to come out of the vast sea and in an instant give proof of the power of this sutra, and Superior Practices, a bodhisattva of the essential teaching, emerged from beneath the great earth and thereby demonstrated the unfathomably long life span of the Buddha. This is the king of sutras, defying description in words, the won-

derful Law that is beyond the mind's power to comprehend.

To ignore the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra and assert that other sutras stand on a par with it is to commit the worst possible slander of the Law, a major offense of the utmost gravity. No analogy could suffice to illustrate it. The Buddhas, for all their powers of magical transformation, could never finish describing its consequences, and the bodhisattvas, with all the wisdom at their command, could not fathom its immensity. Thus, the "Simile and Parable" chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, "If I were to describe the punishments [that fall on persons who slander this sutra], I could exhaust a kalpa and never come to the end." This passage means that not even a whole kalpa would be time enough to explain the full gravity of the offense of a person who acts even once against the Lotus Sutra.

For this reason, a person who commits this offense will never be able to hear the preaching of the Buddhas of the three existences, and will be cut off from the doctrines of the Thus Come Ones, who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. Such a person will move from darkness into greater darkness. How could he escape the pains and sufferings of the great citadel of the Avichi hell? Could a thoughtful person fail to dread the prospect of lengthy kalpas of misery?

Thus the sutra states, "If this person . . . on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell." This passage means that a person who despises, looks down on, hates, envies, or holds a grudge against those who read and embrace the Lotus Sutra will fall into the great citadel of the Avichi hell after he dies.²⁷ Who could help but fear these golden words of the great sage? And who could doubt the

clear-cut pronouncement of the Buddha when he said, "Honestly discarding expedient means, [I will preach only the unsurpassed way]"²⁸

However, people all turn their backs on these sutra passages, and the world as a whole is completely confused with regard to the principles of Buddhism. Why do you persist in following the teachings of evil friends? T'ien-t'ai said that to accept and put faith in the doctrines of evil teachers is the same as drinking poison.²⁹ You should deeply consider this and beware!

Taking a careful look at the world today, we see that, although people declare that the Law is worthy of respect, they all express hatred for the person who upholds it. You yourself seem to be very much confused as to the source from which the Law springs. Just as all the different kinds of plants and trees come forth from the earth, so all the various teachings of the Buddha are spread by persons. As T'ien-t'ai said: "Even during the Buddha's lifetime, the Law was revealed by people. How, then, in the latter age, can one say that the Law is worthy of respect, but that the person who upholds it is to be despised?"³⁰

Hence, if the Law that one embraces is supreme, then the person who embraces it must accordingly be foremost among all others. And if that is so, then to speak ill of that person is to speak ill of the Law, just as to show contempt for the child is to show contempt for the parents.

You should realize from this that the people of today speak words that in no way match what is in their hearts. It is as though they were to beat their parents with a copy of *The Classic of Filial Piety*. When they know that, unseen by others, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are observing them, how can they fail to be ashamed of such actions! The pains of hell are frightful indeed. Beware of them! Beware of them!

When you look at those of superior capacity, do not disparage yourself. The Buddha's true intention was that no one, even those of inferior capacity, be denied enlightenment. Conversely, when you compare yourself with persons of inferior capacity, do not be arrogant and overproud. Even persons of superior capacity may be excluded from enlightenment if they do not devote themselves wholeheartedly.

One may think fondly of one's native village, but, paying no visit and with no particular reason to go, one in time gives up the idea of returning. Or one may pine for a particular person, but, with no hope of winning that person's love and having exchanged no vows, one abandons the thought of waiting. So in like manner we neglect to journey to the pure land of Eagle Peak, though it surpasses in grandeur the palaces of nobles and high ministers, and moreover is quite easy to reach. We fail to behold the gentle and benign figure of the Buddha, who has declared, "I am a father to you,"³¹ though we ought surely to present ourselves before him. Should we not grieve at this, until our sleeves are drenched with tears and our heart consumed by regret?

The color of the clouds in the sky as twilight falls, the waning light of the moon when dawn is breaking—these things make us ponder. In the same way, whenever events remind us of life's uncertainty, we should fix our thoughts on the existence to come. When we view the blossoms of spring or the snow on a winter morning, we should think of it, and even on evenings when winds bluster and gathering clouds tumble across the sky, we should not forget it even for an instant.

Life lasts no longer than the time the exhaling of one breath awaits the drawing of another. At what time, what moment, should we ever allow ourselves to forget the compassionate vow

of the Buddha, who declared, "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]?"³² On what day or month should we permit ourselves to be without the sutra that says, "[If there are those who hear the Law], then not a one will fail to attain Buddhahood?"³³

How long can we expect to live on as we have, from yesterday to today or from last year to this year? We may look back over our past and count the years we have accumulated, but when we look ahead into the future, who can for certain number himself among the living for another day or even for an hour? Yet, though one may know that the moment of one's death is already at hand, one clings to arrogance and prejudice, to worldly fame and profit, and fails to devote oneself to chanting the Mystic Law. Such an attitude is futile beyond description! Even though the Lotus Sutra is called the teaching that enables all living beings to attain the Buddha way, how could a person such as this actually attain it? It is said that even the moonlight will not deign to shine on the sleeve of an unfeeling person.

Moreover, as life does not go beyond the moment, the Buddha expounded the blessings that come from a single moment of rejoicing [on hearing the Lotus Sutra]. If two or three moments were required, this could no longer be called the original vow of the Buddha endowed with great impartial wisdom, the single vehicle of the teaching that directly reveals the truth and leads all living beings to attain Buddhahood.

As for the time of its propagation, the Lotus Sutra spreads during the latter age, when the Buddha's Law is about to perish. As for what capacity of persons it is suited to, it can save even those who commit the five cardinal sins, or who slander the correct teach-

ing. Therefore, you must be guided by the intent of [the Lotus Sutra, which is] the immediate attainment of enlightenment, and never give yourself up to the mistaken views that stem from doubts or attachments.

How long does a lifetime last? If one stops to consider, it is like a single night's lodging at a wayside inn. Should one forget that fact and seek some measure of worldly fame and profit? Though you may gain them, they will be mere prosperity in a dream, a delight scarcely to be prized. You would do better simply to leave such matters to the karma formed in your previous existences.

Once you awaken to the uncertainty and transience of this world, you will find endless examples confronting your eyes and filling your ears. Vanished like clouds or rain, the people of past ages have left nothing but their names. Fading away like dew, drifting far off like smoke, our friends of today too disappear from sight. Should you suppose that you alone can somehow remain forever like the clouds over Mount Mikasa?³⁴

The spring blossoms depart with the wind; maple leaves turn red in autumn showers. All are proof that no living thing can stay for long in this world. Therefore, the Lotus Sutra counsels us, "Nothing in this world is lasting or firm but all are like bubbles, foam, heat shimmer."³⁵

"[At all times I think to myself]: How can I cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way?" These words express the Buddha's deepest wish to enable both those who accept the Lotus Sutra and those who oppose it to attain Buddhahood. Because this is his ultimate purpose, those who embrace the Lotus Sutra for even a short while are acting in accordance with his will. And if they act in accordance with the Buddha's will, they will be repaying the debt of gratitude they owe

to the Buddha. The words of the sutra, which are as full of compassion as a mother's love, will then find solace, and the cares of the Buddha, who said, "I am the only person who can rescue and protect others," will likewise be eased. Not only will Shakyamuni Buddha rejoice, but because the Lotus Sutra is the ultimate purpose for which all Buddhas appear in the world, the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences will likewise rejoice. As Shakyamuni said, "[If one can uphold it even for a short while] I will surely rejoice and so will the other Buddhas."³⁶ Not only will the Buddhas rejoice, but the gods also will join in their delight. Thus, when the Great Teacher Dengyo lectured on the Lotus Sutra, Great Bodhisattva Hachiman presented him with a purple surplice,³⁷ and when the Honorable Kuya³⁸ recited the Lotus Sutra, the great deity of Matsuo Shrine was able to gain protection from the cold wind.

For this reason, when praying that "the seven disasters will instantly vanish, and the seven blessings will instantly appear,"³⁹ this sutra is the most effective of all. That is because it promises that its votaries "will enjoy peace and security in their present existence."⁴⁰ And when offering prayers to avert the disasters of foreign invasion and internal revolt, nothing can surpass this wonderful sutra, because it makes certain that persons who embrace it will "suffer no decline or harm within the area of a hundred yojanas."⁴¹

Nonetheless, the way that prayers are offered in our present age is the exact opposite of what it ought to be. Prayers today are based upon the provisional teachings, which were intended for propagation in previous ages, rather than upon the secret Law of the highest truth, which is intended for propagation in the latter age. To proceed in this way is like trying to make use of last year's calendar, or to employ a crow

for the kind of fishing that only a cormorant can do.

This situation has come about solely because the error-bound teachers of the provisional teachings are accorded high honor, while the teacher enlightened to the true doctrine has not been duly recognized. How sad to think that this rough gem, such as was presented by Pien Ho⁴² to the kings Wen and Wu, should find no place of acceptance! How joyful, though, that I have obtained in this life the priceless gem concealed in the topknot of the wheel-turning king,⁴³ for which Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world!

What I am saying here has been fully attested to by the Buddhas of the ten directions and is no mere idle talk. Therefore, knowing that the Lotus Sutra says, "It will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe,"⁴⁴ how can you retain even a trace of disbelief; and when it says, "Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way," how can you refuse to become a Buddha?

Since the remotest past up until now, you have merely suffered in vain the pains of countless existences. Why do you not, if only this once, try planting the wonderful seeds that lead to eternal and unchanging Buddhahood? Though at present you may taste only a

tiny fraction of the everlasting joys that await you in the future, surely you should not spend your time thoughtlessly coveting worldly fame and profit, which are as fleeting as a bolt of lightning or the morning dew. As the Thus Come One teaches, "There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house."⁴⁵ And in the words of a bodhisattva, "All things are like a phantom, like a magically conjured image."⁴⁶

Everywhere other than the Capital of Tranquil Light is a realm of suffering. Once you leave the haven of inherent enlightenment, what is there to bring you joy? I pray that you will embrace the Mystic Law, which guarantees that people "will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences."⁴⁷ This is the only glory that you need seek in your present lifetime, and is the action that will draw you toward Buddhahood in your next existence. Single-mindedly chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo and urge others to do the same; that will remain as the only memory of your present life in this human world. Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Nichiren



Background

Although there are different opinions concerning the date of this letter, it is generally accepted that Nichiren Daishonin wrote it in the third month of the third year of Kocho (1263), shortly after he had been pardoned and had returned to Kamakura following two years of exile on the Izu Peninsula. The Daishonin was then forty-two years old.

As the title indicates, this work discusses the significance of embracing the Lotus Sutra and is written in the form of five questions and answers. In the first section, the questioner asks: Which teaching should one practice in order to attain Buddhahood quickly? In answer, the Daishonin declares that the Lotus Sutra enables all people to achieve Buddhahood without excep-

tion and is therefore the highest of all the sutras.

In the second section, the questioner objects to such exclusive emphasis on the Lotus Sutra as narrow-minded. The Daishonin replies that his assertion of the sutra's supremacy among all the Buddhist teachings is based on the Buddha's own words as they appear in the sutras themselves, and not on the arbitrary theories or commentaries of later scholars and teachers. When the questioner points out that other sutras also identify themselves as "the foremost sutra" or "the king of sutras," the Daishonin explains that such statements are relative. Only the Lotus declares itself to be supreme among all the sutras preached in the past, now being preached, or to be preached in the future. Next, the Daishonin says that Shakyamuni Buddha did not reveal the truth during the first forty years and more of his preaching, and that only the Lotus Sutra is the true way that leads to Buddhahood.

The questioner then asks about an interpretation put forth by the Dharma Characteristics school, which claims that the Lotus Sutra is a provisional teaching, expounded solely for the purpose of leading to Buddhahood the people of the two vehicles, voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, and not for the sake of the bodhisattvas, who had already gained benefit through the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings. The Daishonin acknowledges that the Lotus Sutra was indeed expounded chiefly for the people of the two vehicles, whose capacity for supreme enlightenment had been denied in the earlier Mahayana sutras. However, he continues, this does not mean that the Lotus Sutra

is a provisional teaching, or that it benefits only the people of the two vehicles. Rather, by singling out those of the two vehicles, for whom Buddhahood is especially difficult to attain, and asserting that even these people can become Buddhas through the power of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni made clear that this sutra is the one vehicle that opens the way to Buddhahood for all people.

In the last section, the questioner, now convinced, asks how one should embrace the Lotus Sutra in order to reach enlightenment quickly. Nichiren Daishonin replies that one need not master the principle of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, or perfect the threefold contemplation in a single mind, as the Tendai scholars asserted. Rather, the essential thing is simply to have a heart of faith in the sutra. Faith, he explains, is the fundamental cause for attaining enlightenment, and to slander the Lotus Sutra and its votary is an act that invites indescribable misery.

A concluding passage of great poetic beauty stresses the fleeting nature of human existence. To be born as a human and, moreover, to encounter the supreme teaching of Buddhism are rare opportunities. Rather than wasting one's brief yet precious life in the pursuit of worldly fame and profit, the Daishonin says, one should dedicate oneself to faith in the Lotus Sutra and so attain the everlasting joy of enlightenment. He declares that to chant *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo* oneself and to enable others to do the same are the most important tasks in this present existence.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
2. *Ibid.*
3. In the Japanese text, the two passages from the Lotus Sutra are written in Chi-

nese original form, followed by the Daishonin's interpretation.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
5. *Ibid.*

6. *A Collection of Orally Transmitted Teachings.*

7. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Nirvana Sutra.*

10. A summary of a passage in the "Teacher of the Law" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

11. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."* T'ien-t'ai's principle of "combining, excluding, corresponding, and including" clarifies the relationship between the four teachings of doctrine and the first four of the five periods, and shows that the Lotus Sutra is the only true, perfect teaching.

12. *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra."*

13. *Profound Meaning.*

14. A rephrasing of a passage in *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra.* By referring to Tokuitsu as a "feeder on lowly food," Dengyo implies that his opponent is content with the four inferior flavors (the provisional teachings of the Flower Garland, Agama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods), refusing to taste the finest delicacy of ghee, to which the Lotus Sutra is likened.

15. "Those who have nothing more to learn" refers to the people who have reached the state of arhat, the highest stage of Hinayana enlightenment.

16. *Great Concentration and Insight.*

17. *On "The Profound Meaning."*

18. *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 12.

19. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

20. *Ibid.*, chap. 21.

21. *Ibid.*, chap. 15.

22. *Ibid.*, chap. 23.

23. The three paths refer here to the path of fire, the path of blood, and the path of swords. Roads that the dead are said to travel. The term is used synonymously with the three evil paths of hell, hungry spirits, and animals.

24. Eight places, states, or circumstances wherein one is unable to see the Buddha or to listen to the Buddha's teaching. They are the realms of hell, hungry spirits, and animals; the heaven of long life, a division within the fourth meditation heaven in the world of form; Uttarakuru, the continent north of Mount Sumeru whose people experience many pleasures; obstruction of the sense organs; prejudice or false views

arising from attachment to secular knowledge; and the period before the Buddha's birth or after his death.

25. The five paramitas refer to the first five of the six paramitas or practices. According to the "Distinctions in Benefits" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, to arouse even a single moment of belief and understanding on hearing the Lotus Sutra produces benefit surpassing that of practicing the five paramitas for eight hundred thousand million nayutas of kalpas.

26. This refers to the following passage in chapter 18 of the Lotus Sutra: "Suppose there is a great dispenser of charity who bestows goods on immeasurable multitudes, doing this for a full eighty years, responding to each person's desires. . . . But the fiftieth person who hears one verse [of the Lotus Sutra] and responds with joy gains blessings that are far greater, beyond description by simile or parable." See also continual propagation to the fiftieth person in Glossary.

27. Here, because the Daishonin wrote the above sutra passage in Chinese, he then explains its meaning.

28. *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 2.

29. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.*

30. Probably a quote not from T'ien-t'ai but from Miao-lo, in *On "The Words and Phrases."* The wording here differs slightly from Miao-lo's.

31. *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 3.

32. *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

33. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

34. A mountain located in Nara. A place of great scenic beauty, it often appears in traditional Japanese poetry.

35. *Lotus Sutra*, chap. 18.

36. *Ibid.*, chap. 11.

37. According to *The Biography of the Great Teacher Dengyo*, in 814 Dengyo visited Usa Hachiman Shrine in Kyushu, where he lectured on the Lotus Sutra. The deity, much moved, is said to have personally presented Dengyo with a purple robe.

38. Kuya (903-972) was a Nembutsu priest who spread the Pure Land teachings among the common people, traveling from one province to another. He chanted the name of Amida Buddha while dancing in the streets. According to *The Biographies of Eminent Priests of Japan*, when Kuya stayed at Unrin-in temple in Kyoto, he saw an elderly man, shivering with cold, who announced himself to be the deity of Ma-

tsuo Shrine. Though the man had heard the Wisdom sutras, he said, he had not yet been able to hear the Lotus Sutra; so he was still shivering in the wind of greed and delusion. Kuya recited the Lotus Sutra for him, whereupon the deity was relieved of his suffering.

39. These words appear in the Benevolent Kings Sutra. The "seven disasters" are: (1) extraordinary changes of the sun and moon, (2) extraordinary changes of the stars and planets, (3) fires, (4) unseasonable floods, (5) storms, (6) drought, and (7) war, including enemy attacks from without and rebellion from within. The "seven blessings" means averting or eradicating the seven disasters.

40. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.

41. *Ibid.*, chap. 26.

42. Pien Ho was a native of the state of Ch'u in China during the Spring and Autumn period (770-403 B.C.E.). According to *Han Fei Tzu*, Pien Ho found a precious stone at Mount Ch'u and presented it to King Li. When the king had it appraised,

it was identified as a mere stone. So the king had Pien Ho's left leg cut off at the knee. After the king's death, Pien Ho again presented the precious stone, this time to King Wu, only to have his right leg cut off at the knee on a second charge of deception. Later, after King Wen had ascended the throne, Pien Ho wept for three days at the foot of Mount Ch'u, holding the precious stone and shedding tears of blood at the kings' ignorance. Hearing of this, King Wen asked for Pien Ho's stone and had it polished. It was then recognized as being genuine and, in consequence, is said to have been widely treasured by the populace.

43. This story appears in chapter 14 of the Lotus Sutra. The "priceless gem" indicates the one Buddha vehicle.

44. Lotus Sutra, chap. 14.

45. *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

46. Probably a reference to a similar passage in Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, discussing the non-substantiality of all phenomena.

47. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.