

The Essence of the “Life Span” Chapter



WHEN Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, expounded the “Life Span” chapter, he referred to what all living beings had heard in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. He said: “In all the worlds the heavenly and human beings and asuras all believe that the present Shakyamuni Buddha, after leaving the palace of the Shakyas, seated himself in the place of meditation not far from the city of Gaya and there attained supreme perfect enlightenment.”¹ This statement expresses the idea held by all the Buddha’s disciples and the great bodhisattvas from the time they heard Shakyamuni preach his first sermon in the Flower Garland Sutra up through the time he expounded the “Peaceful Practices” chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

We find two flaws in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings: First, “Because the Ten Worlds are separate from one another in these teachings, they fail to move beyond the provisional.”² That is, they do not reveal the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, that of discarding the provisional and revealing the true,³ or that of persons of the two vehicles being capable of attaining Buddhahood—the doctrines related to the ten factors of life stated in the “Expedient Means” chapter of the theoretical teaching.

Second, “Because they teach that

Shakyamuni first attained enlightenment in this world, they fail to discard the Buddha’s provisional status.”⁴ Thus they do not reveal the Buddha’s original enlightenment in the remote past expounded in the “Life Span” chapter. These two great doctrines [the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles and the Buddha’s original enlightenment] are the core of the Buddha’s lifetime teachings, the heart and marrow of all the sutras.

The theoretical teaching states that persons of the two vehicles can attain Buddhahood, thus avoiding one of the shortcomings found in the sutras expounded during the first forty years and more of the Buddha’s preaching. However, since the “Life Span” chapter had not yet been expounded, the true doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life remained obscure, and the enlightenment of persons of the two vehicles was not assured. In these respects the theoretical teaching does not differ from the moon’s reflection on the water, or rootless plants drifting on the waves.

The Buddha also stated, “But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.”⁵ With this single proclamation, he refuted as great falsehoods his other statements [concerning his own enlighten-

ment]. For instance, the Flower Garland Sutra states that Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood for the first time in this world. The Agama sutras speak of his first attainment of the way, and the Vimalakirti Sutra says, "For the first time the Buddha sat beneath the bodhi tree." The Great Collection Sutra states, "It is sixteen years [since the Thus Come One first attained the way]." The Mahavairochana Sutra describes the Buddha's enlightenment as having taken place "long ago when I sat in the place of meditation." The Benevolent Kings Sutra refers to the Buddha's enlightenment as an event of "twenty-nine years" ago. The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra states, "In the past I sat upright in the place of meditation," and the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, "When I first sat in the place of meditation . . ."

When we come to the "Life Span" chapter of the essential teaching, the belief that Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood for the first time [in India] is demolished, and the effects [enlightenment] of the four teachings are likewise demolished. When the effects of the four teachings are demolished, their causes are likewise demolished. "Causes" here refers to Buddhist practice [to attain enlightenment] or to the stage of disciples engaged in practice. Thus the causes and effects expounded in both the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra are wiped out, and the cause and effect of the Ten Worlds⁶ in the essential teaching are revealed. This is the doctrine of original cause and original effect. It teaches that the nine worlds are all present in beginningless Buddhahood and that Buddhahood exists in the beginningless nine worlds. This is the true mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, the true hundred worlds and thousand factors, the true three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

Considered in this light, it is evident that Vairochana Buddha depicted in the Flower Garland Sutra as sitting on a lotus pedestal, the sixteen-foot Shakyamuni described in the Agama sutras, and the provisional Buddhas of the Correct and Equal, Wisdom, Golden Light, Amida, and Mahavairochana sutras are no more than reflections of the Buddha of the "Life Span" chapter. They are like fleeting images of the moon in the sky mirrored on the surface of the water held in vessels of varying sizes. The wise men and scholars of the various schools are first of all confused as to [the nature of the Buddhas of] their own school, and more fundamentally, they are ignorant of [the Buddha of] the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra. As a result, they mistake the reflection of the moon on the water for the real moon shining in the sky. Some of them enter the water and try to grasp it with their hands, while others try to snare it with a rope. As the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai says, "They know nothing of the moon in the sky, but gaze only at the moon in the pond."⁷ He means that those attached to the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings or the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra are not aware of the moon shining in the sky, but see only its reflection in the pond.

The Great Canon of Monastic Rules also tells of five hundred monkeys who, emerging from the mountains, saw the moon reflected in the water and tried to seize it. However, as it was only a reflection, they fell into the water and drowned. This writing equates the monkeys with Devadatta and the group of six monks.⁸

Were it not for the presence of the "Life Span" chapter among all the teachings of Shakyamuni, they would be like the heavens without the sun and moon, a kingdom without a king, the mountains and seas without treasures, or a person without a soul. This being so, without the "Life Span"

chapter, all the sutras would be meaningless. Grass without roots will die in no time, and a river without a source will not flow far. A child without parents is looked down upon. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, the heart of the “Life Span” chapter, is the mother of

all Buddhas throughout the ten directions and the three existences.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the fourth month



Background

Neither the year nor the recipient of this letter is indicated. Its contents are quite similar to what the Daishonin wrote about the importance of the “Life Span” chapter in his treatise *The Opening of the Eyes*. Therefore, although it is generally thought to have been written in the eighth year of Bun’ei (1271), some hold that it might have been completed after the Daishonin wrote that lengthy treatise in 1272. In any event, it clarifies the important differences among the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, the theoretical and essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra, and the essential teaching revealed by Nichiren Daishonin, that is, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, which is implicit in the depths of the “Life Span” chapter.

First, the sutras that came before the Lotus discriminate among certain types of people in terms of their capacity for attaining Buddhahood. Second, the theoretical teaching reveals that the Buddha nature is equally inherent in all people. But neither sets forth Shakyamuni’s original enlightenment countless kalpas in the past. This led people

to believe that they could attain Buddhahood only after many lifetimes of self-sacrificing practice as they heard Shakyamuni had. For them, attaining Buddhahood was like a remote dream. Shakyamuni declares in the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra’s essential teaching, “But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.” From this it follows that Shakyamuni did not finally become a Buddha in his present life as the result of his many kalpas of ascetic practices, but that he had already been a Buddha.

The question that remained was what teaching or Law did Shakyamuni realize in his heart and put into practice when he first attained enlightenment countless kalpas before? No Buddhist teacher after Shakyamuni had ever answered this question. Nichiren Daishonin was the first to reveal this Law, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, to enable anyone in any time or any place to attain Buddhahood.

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 16.
2. *The Annotations on “The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.”*
3. A principle set forth in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. “The provisional” here refers to all the sutras expounded during the first forty-two years of

Shakyamuni’s teaching, and “the true,” to the Lotus Sutra.

4. *On “The Profound Meaning.”*
5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 16.
6. Here “cause” or the stage of practice is equated with the nine worlds of delusion in which the Buddha nature still remains

dormant, and "effect," with Buddhahood or enlightenment, the tenth world. By indicating that the Buddha still retains all the nine worlds even after attaining enlightenment, the "Life Span" chapter demonstrates that cause (nine worlds) and effect (Buddhahood) exist simultaneously, thus substantiating the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds.

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

8. The group of six monks refers to the monks who lived during the Buddha's lifetime, whose misconduct is said to have caused the necessity to formulate the precepts. They are Nanda, Upananda, Kaldayin, Chanda, Ashvaka, and Punarvasu.