

“This Is What I Heard”



I HAVE received the scroll of the entire Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law that you copied in small characters, as well as two quilted robes, ten thousand coins, and a hundred folding fans as offerings for consecrating the scroll.

In the first volume of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* we find a passage that states, “The word ‘this’ [of ‘This is what I heard’] indicates the essence of a doctrine heard from the Buddha.” And the first volume of *The Annotations on “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra”* states, “If ‘this’ is not the teaching that surpasses the eight teachings, then how can it be considered the teaching of this [Lotus] sutra?”

The Flower Garland Sutra begins: “The Great and Vast Buddha Flower Garland Sutra. This is what I heard.” The Wisdom Sutra begins: “The Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. This is what I heard.” The Mahavairochana Sutra begins: “The Mahavairochana’s Protection through Supernatural Powers Sutra. This is what I heard.” What does “this” indicate in these and all other sutras? It refers to the title of each sutra. When the Buddha expounded a sutra, he put a title to it, revealing its ultimate principle. After the Buddha’s passing, when his listeners such as Ananda, Manjushri, and Vajrasattva compiled the Buddha’s teachings, they first stated

the title of a sutra and then, “This is what I heard.”

The heart of each sutra is contained in its title. For example, the land of India has seventy states, and its borders measure ninety thousand *ri*, yet the people, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and earth within them are all included in the single word, India. All things that exist on the four continents of the world are clearly reflected on the face of the moon without exception. In like manner, the teachings of a sutra are encompassed in its title.

The titles of the Agama sutras, for instance, explain the ultimate principle of these sutras, which is that all things are impermanent. These titles are a hundred, thousand, and ten thousand times superior to the two characters meaning existence and nonexistence used in the titles of non-Buddhist scriptures. Followers of all the ninety-five non-Buddhist schools, hearing the titles of the Agama sutras, abandoned their erroneous views and converted to the truth of impermanence. Those who hear the titles of the Wisdom sutras realize the three teachings that all things are non-substantial in themselves,¹ that the Middle Way is independent of non-substantiality and temporary existence,² and that it is inseparably united with them.³ Those who hear the title of the Flower Gar-

land Sutra perceive either of the last two of the above teachings.

Those who hear the titles of the Mahavairochana Sutra as well as the Correct and Equal and the Wisdom sutras understand that all things, when analyzed, prove to be without substance,⁴ or that all things are non-substantial in themselves; that non-substantiality is independent of the Middle Way and temporary existence,⁵ or that it is inseparable from them;⁶ that the Middle Way is independent of non-substantiality and temporary existence, or that it is inseparably united with them. However, those who listen to the titles of such provisional sutras are unable to realize the benefit of perfect enlightenment that arises from the teachings of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, the hundred worlds and thousand factors, and three thousand realms.

The sutras other than the Lotus Sutra do not expound this ultimate doctrine, and so their followers are like ordinary persons at the stage of being a Buddha only in theory. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas who appear in those sutras do not reach the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth in the practice of the Lotus Sutra, let alone the stage of perception and action, for they do not even chant the title of the Lotus Sutra. This is why the Great Teacher Miao-lo stated in *On "The Words and Phrases,"* "If 'this' is not the teaching that surpasses the eight teachings, then how can it be considered the teaching of this [Lotus] sutra?" The titles of the various other sutras fall within the eight teachings. These titles are like the meshes of a fishing net, while the title of the Lotus Sutra is like the main cord of the net that gathers the meshes of the eight teachings. Those who chant Myoho-enge-kyo [the title of the Lotus Sutra] even without understanding its meaning realize not only the heart of the Lotus Sutra, but also the "main cord," or essen-

tial principle of the Buddha's lifetime teachings.

A crown prince who is only one, two, or three years old will, when he ascends the throne, reign over the empire and be obeyed by the imperial regent and ministers, although he is presently unaware of this. A baby has no conscious understanding but, taking the mother's breast, grows naturally. In contrast, an arrogant minister who belittles a young crown prince will bring about his own downfall, as did Chao Kao [of the Ch'in dynasty]. The scholars of the other sutras and schools, who look down upon the prince who chants only the title of the Lotus Sutra, will eventually cause their own ruin as Chao Kao did and fall into the hell of incessant suffering. However, if a votary of the Lotus Sutra who chants its title without knowing its meaning is frightened by the learned priests of other schools into forsaking his faith, then that person is like the young puppet emperor Hu Hai who [replaced the crown prince but] was intimidated and killed by Chao Kao.

Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is not only the core of the Buddha's lifetime teachings, but also the heart, essence, and ultimate principle of the Lotus Sutra. Yet as wonderful as this teaching is, no one has spread it during the more than 2,220 years since the Buddha's passing. The twenty-four successors of the Buddha in India did not propagate it, nor did T'ien-t'ai or Miao-lo of China, nor Prince Shotoku or the Great Teacher Dengyo of Japan. Therefore, when I, an insignificant priest, expounded it, people refused to believe it, thinking that it must be a false teaching. This is perfectly understandable. For example, if a lowly soldier had announced that he had seduced the beautiful court lady Wang Chao-chün, no one would have believed it. Similarly, people cannot believe that a humble priest could expound Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, the heart of the Lotus Sutra, which even

T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo, who ranked as highly as ministers and court nobles, did not propagate.

You may not know this, but the crow, the most despised of birds, can recognize omens of good and evil events that will occur during the year, which the eagle and the hawk cannot. A snake is no match for a dragon or an elephant, but it can foresee the coming of a flood seven days in advance. Even if Nagarjuna and T'ien-t'ai had not known the teaching that I propagate, if it is clear in light of the sutra, one should not doubt it. One who holds me in contempt and does not chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is like a baby who doubts its mother's milk and refuses the breast, or a sick man who is suspicious of his physician and rejects the medicine prescribed for him. Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu realized this teaching but did not propagate it, perhaps because they knew that the time was not right, and that the people of their day had no capacity to understand it. Others most probably did not spread it because they were ignorant of it. Buddhism spreads according to

the time and the people's capacity. Although I may not be worthy of this teaching, I expound it because the time is right.

Our contemporaries think of the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo only as a name, but this is not correct. It is the essence, that is, the heart of the Lotus Sutra. Chang-an stated, "Hence [T'ien-t'ai's explanation of the title in] the preface conveys the profound meaning of the sutra. The profound meaning indicates the heart of the text."⁷ According to this comment, Myoho-enge-kyo is neither the scriptural text nor its meaning, but the heart of the entire sutra. Those who seek the heart of the sutra apart from its title are as foolish as the turtle who sought the monkey's liver outside the monkey,⁸ or the monkey who left the forest and sought fruit on the seashore.

Nichiren

The twenty-eighth day of the eleventh month in the third year of Kenji (1277), cyclical sign *hinoto-ushi*

To the lay priest Soya Jiro⁹



Background

"This is what I heard" is the phrase that appears at the beginning of many sutras. The sutras are records of Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings that were committed first to memory and later to writing by his disciples. The above phrase, therefore, represents a testimony to the validity of what was about to be set down in writing in the form of a sutra, but here the Daishonin explains its more profound meaning. T'ien-t'ai said, "The word 'this' [of 'This is what I heard'] indicates the essence of a doctrine heard from the Buddha." The essence of each sutra is represented by

its title. And the title, or essence, of the Lotus Sutra, Myoho-enge-kyo, is Buddhism's supreme teaching. Hence Miaolo explained T'ien-t'ai's words, saying, "If 'this' is not the teaching that surpasses the eight teachings, then how can it be considered the teaching of this [Lotus] sutra?"

In this letter, Nichiren Daishonin emphasizes that Myoho-enge-kyo, the title of the Lotus Sutra, is the essence of not only the Lotus, but all the other sutras as well. He compares it to the main cord of a net, which gathers the "meshes of the eight teachings." This

also means that, when viewed from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra, all the other sutras and the teachings they contain have value and can be used to explain and propagate the Lotus Sutra's essence, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

Finally he cites Chang-an's interpretation of T'ien-t'ai's statement in the preface to *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* and concludes: “Myoho-enge-kyo is neither the scriptural text nor its meaning, but the heart of the entire [Lotus] sutra.”

Notes

1. A view expounded in the connecting teaching, or introductory Mahayana, which holds that, because all things arise through dependent origination, their existence is in itself non-substantial.

2. A view expounded in the specific teaching, which holds that the three truths are separate from and independent of one another.

3. A view expounded in the perfect teaching, which sets forth the mutually inclusive relationship of the ultimate reality and all phenomena, and the unification of the three truths. In other words, the view that each of the three truths possesses all three within itself.

4. A view expounded in the Tripitaka teaching, which means that all phenomena are viewed as non-substantial when analyzed in terms of their constituent elements. This is in contrast to the view mentioned above (n. 1), that all phenomena are without substance in and of themselves. The teachings of this category were expounded primarily for persons of the two vehicles and secondarily for bodhisattvas.

5. The view of non-substantiality expounded in the Tripitaka teaching, meaning that it is the only reality and excluding all other views or truths.

6. A view expounded in the connecting teaching that everything is essentially with-

This letter also explains why the people refused to believe in the title of the Lotus Sutra, its most profound principle. They failed to grasp its significance based on the relative superiority of the various teachings, but instead judged it according to the status of priests who preached those teachings. It was not these exalted teachers of Buddhism but a humble priest, Nichiren Daishonin, who had expounded the Law of Myoho-enge-kyo.

out substance, yet manifests a temporary reality or phenomenal aspect.

7. This passage appears in Chang-an's preface to *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* and refers to T'ien-t'ai's own preface to the same work.

8. This story is found in the Storehouse of Various Treasures Sutra. There were once two turtles at the bottom of the sea. The female, being pregnant, had a desire to eat a monkey's liver. The male surfaced and deceived a monkey into mounting his back, saying that he would carry the monkey to the other shore where the fruit was more bountiful. When the turtle carried the monkey into the ocean and tried to take his liver, the monkey said that he had left his liver behind on the top of a tree, and that if he could return there he would give it to the turtle. The turtle then carried the monkey back to the shore. No sooner had the turtle reached the shore than the monkey jumped off his back and scurried up a tall tree, where he mocked the turtle for his foolishness.

9. Soya Jiro Hyoe-no-jo Kyoshin (1224–1291), who lived in Soya Village in Shimosa Province and was one of the leading believers in the area. He is thought to have been an officer of the high court of the Kamakura shogunate.