

Ikeda Wisdom Academy

The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra

Review

April 2013 Study Review

The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, vol. 1, Part II - Section 4

The “Introduction” chapter of the Lotus Sutra opens up at Eagle Peak in India with the famous words “This is what I heard”. This phrase opens various other sutras but President Ikeda clarifies its significance in terms of the Lotus Sutra, which Shakyamuni himself declares to be supreme among other sutras.

The chapter proceeds by identifying members of Shakyamuni’s audience gathered to hear his preaching. The identified audience members include Shakyamuni’s direct disciples as well as other fictitious and non-fictitious characters. The sutra states that the leading monks numbered twelve thousand while the whole assembly probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Shakyamuni then enters a deep meditation in front of the assembly. A number of unusual events start occurring, foreshadowing the revelation of the content the Buddha’s enlightenment, the Lotus Sutra. In a conversation between two of the Buddha’s disciples, Manjushri replies to an inquiry from Maitreya about the significance of the events taking place. Manjushri explains that he has witnessed these portents in a past lifetime and the Lotus Sutra was then preached, indicating the same was going to happen.

This is the first indication that the sutra has universal implications, spanning before the lifetime of Shakyamuni. The episode reveals that the essence of the Lotus Sutra is not limited to the text found in this particular sutra.

Key Passages

Key Passage #1

Concerning the beings who gathered on Eagle Peak in the "Introduction" chapter, President Toda once wrote:

... Those gathered were the voice-hearers and the bodhisattvas who dwelled within Shakyamuni's own life. Hence, there is nothing to hinder even tens of millions of such voice-hearers and bodhisattvas from assembling.

Mr. Toda didn't want to make the Lotus Sutra seem like some fanciful story divorced from reality or Buddhism, some kind of abstraction. Moreover, he was absolutely convinced that the Lotus Sutra and Buddhism were neither. He knew the Lotus Sutra was in fact the Law of life, the Law existing in the depths of one's own being.

- The fantastic nature of the Lotus Sutra attests to the depth and vastness of the Law of life it describes. The beings gathered on Eagle Peak represent the functions of life that lie within the human being.

Key Passage #2

From this perspective, then, we see that the ray of light emanating from the tuft of white hair between the Buddha's eyebrows and illuminating the lands to the east represents the profound truth of life. In The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings, the Daishonin says, "The ray of light from the white hair is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (OTT, 16). Precisely because it is the light of the Mystic Law, it illuminated all worlds, from the hell of incessant suffering (Avichi hell) to the highest heavenly realm (Akanishtha heaven). The Mystic Law has the power to lead even those in the hell of incessant suffering to enlightenment (WLS-1, p. 65).

- The Mystic Law has the ability to illuminate all worlds and conditions of life. All beings in those worlds can be lead to enlightenment through the power of the Mystic Law.

Key Passage #3

The ultimate truth is one, but it is expressed in many forms, and all of them are the Lotus Sutra. The universal Lotus Sutra is the teaching in which the Buddha reveals and makes accessible to all people the Law he has become enlightened to, the Law for attaining Buddhahood, so that all may achieve true happiness and ease.

Nichiren Daishonin spoke of the Lotus Sutra in terms of its comprehensive, abbreviated and essential forms. The essential form of the Lotus Sutra was his own Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, and the practice most appropriate for today is this essential Lotus Sutra (WLS-1, p. 68).

- The essence of the Lotus Sutra takes on many forms, appropriate for the times, in order to reach the people and open the path for them to attaining Buddhahood.

Key Passage #4

I think we can say that Shakyamuni's thought, which forms the sutra's core, assumed a certain shape in response to the conditions of the time and the prevailing state of philosophical thought when the sutra was compiled.

The age sought Shakyamuni's thought, and Shakyamuni's thought appeared in response to that need. What we see at work here is the mutual response, or communion, between the people and the Buddha. This is how a universal philosophy comes into being. We could also describe it as the living dynamism of a true philosophy. Though the philosophy may appear in a new form, it does so because that form articulates the truth of the philosophy better in that particular circumstance of time. In that sense, I believe we can answer the question you posed earlier, about whether the Lotus Sutra is the direct teaching of Shakyamuni or a creation of its compilers, by saying it is the direct teaching of the Buddha (WLS-1, p. 69).

- The teachings of the Lotus Sutra were revealed through the seeking minds of disciples for the Buddha's ultimate message of enlightenment. The teachings compiled represents what emerged from the original intent of the Buddha and the disciples who sought to realize that intent.

Key Passage #5

[N]o amount of discussion of the text and meaning of the Lotus Sutra will be truly valuable unless we get to its heart, or true intent. The Daishonin concludes that “the ‘substance of a doctrine’ means its heart or core....The heart or core of all phenomena is Myoho-renge-kyo” (OTT, 9).

“The substance of a doctrine,” “the heart or core of all phenomena,” is the Buddha’s wisdom itself, which pulsates through all twenty-eight chapters of the sutra. That wisdom is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. “This is what I heard” — in other words, having heard that wisdom just as it is — refers to faith and the way of mentor and disciple. Only through the disciples’ faith in the mentor can they enter the world of the Buddha’s wisdom. As T’ient’ai stated in his Great Concentration and Insight, and Nagarjuna in his Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, “Buddhism is like an ocean that one can only enter with faith” (WND-1, 832).

From this perspective, “This is what I heard,” in terms of the Lotus Sutra, means to concentrate one’s entire being on apprehending and connecting with the vibration of the Buddha’s life. “This” refers to the faith and understanding that enable those who hear the teachings to “hear them exactly as they are preached” and engrave them in their lives. Since this activity involves one’s entire being, the expression “I heard” is used. “I,” the entire being, “hear,” not just the ears.

The “I” in this phrase is usually taken to mean Ananda, the disciple of Shakyamuni said to have been central in compiling the scriptures. Today, in the Latter Day of the Law, however, “I” signifies each of us. We each

listen to the Daishonin's teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with our whole being and embrace faith in it. This is the true meaning of "This is what I heard."

As Nichiren Daishonin says: "The meaning behind each and every word and phrase of the twenty-eight chapters of the sutra refers to the hearing of this doctrine as it applies to one's own self, and this is summed up in the words 'This is what I heard.' This thing that is heard is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Therefore, the sutra says that all achieve the Buddha way" (OTT, 222).

We are not to read the sutra as something separate from ourselves. Instead, we should "hear" it as it applies to oneself and as the Law of our own lives (WLS-1, pp. 72-73).

- Regarding the Lotus Sutra's text, meaning and intent, the sutra's intent is the most important to grasp. The intent lies in arousing faith in the mentor's teaching to lead all to attain Buddhahood.
- "This is what I heard" pertains to disciples embracing faith in the doctrine, in other words chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with faith.

Key Passage #6

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the fundamental rhythm of the universe, the most revered of all voices. Nichiren Daishonin writes: "[W]hen once we chant Myoho-renge-kyo, with just that single sound we summon forth and manifest the Buddha nature of all Buddhas... and all other living beings. This blessing is immeasurable and boundless" (WND-1, 887).

He also writes: “We, too, are the eggs of ignorance, which are pitiful things, but when nurtured by the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, [we] are free to soar into the sky of the true aspect of all phenomena and the reality of all things” (WND-1, 1030), and, “Nichiren alone, without sparing his voice, now chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” (WND-1, 736). Not sparing one’s voice doesn’t refer to loudness or volume. It means the great voice of compassion that seeks to bring all beings to enlightenment.

Without sparing our voices, and with our hearts as one with Nichiren Daishonin, we of the SGI are engaging in activities to propagate the Buddhist teachings (WLS-1, pp. 79–80).

- By aligning our lives with the Mystic Law, SGI members chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, summoning forth compassion and propagating Buddhism for the sake of all beings.

Questions for Discussion

The questions below can be used during discussion sessions. They are intended to serve as example questions to generate faith-based discussion on the material covered.

1. The elaborate descriptions in the Lotus Sutra may make it seem like fantasy. Given the discussion on the descriptions’ significance, how would you encourage a friend to understand the sutra? (Refer to p. 64)
2. How important is it that the Buddhas Sun Moon Bright, Great Universal Wisdom Excellence, and Awesome Sound King, who

preached the Lotus Sutra before Shakyamuni, had disciples who propagated their teachings after their passing? (Refer to p. 67)

3. The universal Lotus Sutra means recognizing that its essence was taught even before Shakyamuni 2,500 years ago. What is the significance of understanding that the Lotus Sutra is expressed in many forms? (Refer to pp. 67–68)
4. The Lotus Sutra was compiled hundreds of years after it as taught by Shakyamuni, calling into question the authenticity of the teachings. If not based on historical accuracy, what is the foundation of our faith in the Lotus Sutra? (Refer to pp. 69–70)
5. How is the essence of “This is what I heard” related to the oneness of mentor and disciple? (Refer to pp. 72–77)
6. How does the voice do the Buddha’s work? How important is courageously using our voice in sharing Buddhism with others? (Refer to pp. 78–80)