

Ikeda Wisdom Academy

The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra

Review

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The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, vol. 2, Part I - Section 1

The Lotus Sutra contains various parables employed to convey the Buddha's profound message of enlightenment. The "Parable and Simile" chapter of the Lotus Sutra contains the first of seven outstanding parables.

"Parable and Simile" introduces a story told by the Buddha that describes the wonder of single Buddha vehicle. In the story, there is a rich father who owns a large but dilapidated mansion. He has many children and they play with games and toys inside the house. When the dilapidated mansion catches fire, the kids so engrossed in their games do not notice that they are in danger. The rich father calls for them but to no avail. He devises a plan to get them out with promises of their favorite items. He promises them goat, deer and ox carts. Excited, the children come rushing out, greeted by not the carts he promised them but with an even greater gift of a great white ox cart. The children are overjoyed to receive such a wonderful gift from their father who saves them from the fire.

The parable is used to depict the transformation of the three vehicles into the single Buddha vehicle. In the story, the rich father represents the Buddha and the children represent all living beings. The dilapidated house that catches fire represents the world or society. The three carts that the

rich father promises the children represent the three vehicles taught before the Lotus Sutra in the provisional teachings. The great white ox cart represents the single Buddha vehicle in which all living being can attain Buddhahood.

SGI President Ikeda and the Study Department leaders discuss how the Buddha used parables to create a strong impression of the depth and power behind his teachings. Visual devices and storytelling make the message being relayed relatable to the audience and ultimately easier to learn.

Key Passages

Key Passage #1

But seriously, let's consider this. If the Buddha had said, "I became a Buddha ten-to-the-x-hundredth-power years ago," his listeners could only respond passively, "Yes, we see." But when this fact is presented to them as a narrative—"five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkhya major world systems are pulverized to dust, and then one speck of the dust is dropped every five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkhya major world systems"—the listeners are forced to form their own image of this incredibly long period, to think for themselves and actively assimilate this information...

A certain educator once explained that when parables are used to teach, students follow the same path of thought that the teacher once followed. In other words, students don't simply listen passively to

information but are encouraged to engage in the active mental process of thinking for themselves. (WLS-2, 4)

- The Buddha presented his teachings in the form of narrative to convey his message of enlightenment in a way that his audience could comprehend on the deepest level.

Key Passage #2

Offering the children the three carts to lure them from the burning house is the Buddha's act of relieving suffering. Presenting them with the large carriages drawn by white oxen is his act of conferring joy. He gave the children the state of unsurpassed ease and happiness—that is, the Buddha's wisdom.

“I am the father of living beings and I should rescue them from their sufferings and give them the joy of the measureless and boundless Buddha wisdom so that they may find their enjoyment in that” (LSOC, 95).

The large carriages drawn by white oxen, which traverses freely over the most treacherous peaks, represents the state of Buddhahood, which knows no limitations. In “On the Large Carriages Drawn by White Oxen,” the Daishonin writes, “These large carriages drawn by white oxen are able to fly at will through the sky of the essential nature of phenomena” (WND-2, 976). (WLS-2, 9–10)

- The parable of the three carts and the burning house relays the Buddha's desire to impart the joy of experiencing Buddhahood to all living beings.

Key Passage #3

That is precisely the source of the richness of the parables of the Lotus Sutra.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai of China comments: "The Buddha's great compassion is never exhausted, his skillful wisdom operates without limit. That is why the Buddha preaches parables. Moving the trees, he shows us the wind; raising his fan, he reveals the moon. This is how he awakens us to the truth."

Nichiren Daishonin quotes this passage and adds his own comment: "[The Buddha's] 'great compassion' is like the mercy and compassion that a mother feels for her child" (OTT, 43). It is deep compassion that gives birth to these skillful parables. He further cites the words of T'ien-t'ai's disciple Chang-an: "One who rids the offender of evil is acting as his parent" (OTT, 43).

The Daishonin is describing the strict love of a parent who will fight to rid his or her child of evil, even if it means earning the child's dislike.

*"[N]ow this threefold world
is all my domain,
and the living beings in it
are all my children.
Now this place
is beset by many pains and trials.
I am the only person
who can rescue and protect others,..." (LSOC, 105-06) (WLS-2, 16)*

- The parables that appear in the Lotus Sutra are informed by Shakyamuni's deep compassion for all living beings. By using metaphor and story, he conveys the profound messages of the sutra.

Key Passage #4

All seven of the central Lotus Sutra parables reveal the compassion of the Buddha for living beings. In three of them—the parables of the three carts and the burning house, the wealthy man and his poor son, and the skilled physician and his sick children—the Buddha is depicted as a father who saves his children.

In the parable of the three kinds of medicinal herbs, he is likened to a great cloud of compassion that delivers rain equally to all types of plants; in the parable of the phantom city and the treasure land, he is depicted as a leader of a group of people; in the parable of the jewel in the robe, he is depicted as a man who protects his friend; and in the parable of the bright jewel in the topknot, he is depicted as a king who praises a soldier.

The parables are not preached 'in accordance to the mind of living beings,' matching their capacities. They are preached 'in accordance with the Buddha's own mind,' to reveal that mind and to draw living beings toward it. The Daishonin writes: "But the Lotus Sutra is an example of preaching in accordance with the Buddha's own mind, because in it the Buddha had all living beings comply with his own mind"(WND-1, 969).

The parables of the Lotus Sutra are taught to make the minds of living beings one with the Buddha's mind. (WLS-2, 17)

- In the parables of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha is depicted as one who supports or protects others.
- The parables are taught to share the mind of the Buddha and allow the audience to understand the depth of the Buddha's compassion.

Key Passage #5

Simply hearing the Buddha's skillful parables and similes and declaring, "Yes, I understand!" do not constitute a full understanding. Truly profound understanding results in a transformation of one's entire being. By its very nature, understanding entails a transformation. As one rises to a higher state of being, wisdom is born. That is why the disciples who heard and truly understood the Buddha's teachings could then speak in parables themselves.

We must also remember that Shakyamuni used parables to reach all living beings. His purpose was to open the path of Buddhahood to all without exception. Once his disciples understood the meaning behind the parables, the reason why the Buddha used them, it seems quite natural that they would respond with parables of their own. The joy of understanding filled them with an irrepressible desire to share this truth with others. (WLS-2, 20)

- True understanding of the Buddha's intent is demonstrated through a deep transformation in one's life, or human revolution.
- Disciples of the Buddha demonstrated their understanding through sharing parables of their own in response to the Buddha.

Key Passage #6

Interestingly, Shakyamuni tells Shariputra that he is preaching the Lotus Sutra to make him recall the Buddha way, which the latter had aspired to and practiced in the past. The Buddha states: “Now, because I want to make you recall to mind the way that you originally vowed to follow,... I am preaching this great vehicle sutra called the Lotus of the Wonderful Law” (LSOC, 86).

Understanding and conveying the truth to others are acts of remembering. Recollection is possible because the truth is already within one’s life. That is why the Lotus Sutra places such importance on both parables and the influence of causes and conditions. The “Life Span” chapter teaches the ultimate causes and conditions dating back to the beginningless past. (WLS-2, 21)

- Understanding the truth means recalling and returning to our eternal vow inherent in all life. The parables in the Lotus Sutra aim to recall that vow.

Key Passage #7

Nichiren Daishonin wrote something that seems at first glance to be of similar intent: “Bear in mind that the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra contain only a few passages elucidating the truth, but a great many words of praise” (WND-1, 673). But the Daishonin’s conclusion is the

opposite of Hirata's. He asserts, "The more one praises the blessings of the Lotus Sutra, the more one's own blessings will increase" (WND-1, 673).

The Daishonin is suggesting that we adopt the position of the Buddha. Since the Buddha praises the Lotus Sutra, we are bound to reap great benefit if we do the same. It means embracing the Buddha's spirit as our own. Unless we have this attitude—that is, unless we have faith—we will never understand the Lotus Sutra, which expounds the Buddha's heart and intent. Indeed, when we read the Lotus Sutra with the heart of faith, it is immediately clear how shallow such criticisms of it are.

For in those "few passages elucidating the truth," of which the Daishonin speaks, the seed of Buddhahood for all living beings is indisputably present. (WLS-2, 23-24)

- The Lotus Sutra is a teaching of the greatest praise towards the value of one's life. The praise of the sutra itself characterizes its greatness.

Key Passage #8

The proof of faith that we manifest in our lives represents parables or illustrations of the virtues to be obtained from embracing the Mystic Law. Such proof is an eloquent testimony to the truth of the Mystic Law.

The great examples of Shijo Kingo, the two Ikegami brothers and other disciples of Nichiren Daishonin who faced and overcame great difficulties in their pursuit of faith are a tremendous encouragement to us who face similar problems. The Daishonin encouraged the Ikegami brothers when the two united in the face of persecution, writing, "Could there ever be a

more wonderful story than your own?" (WND-1, 499). And just as the Daishonin asserted, the story of the brothers is now told around the world.

The same applies to us. Our individual experiences of triumph over our problems give courage and hope to many others. Our personal victories, in other words, become parables expressing the power of the Mystic Law.

And those who hear our experiences can share them with still others.

(WLS-2, 26)

- Examples of outstanding character, victory in life, and perseverance in faith mark the stories of Nichiren Daishonin and his disciples. The stories of their lives are retold to draw forth inspiration and guidance in contemporary times.
- Our own parables, in other words our experiences in faith, are the greatest proof that attests to the greatness of the Mystic Law.

Key Passage #9

Mr. Makiguchi started the Soka Gakkai's discussion meeting movement, which centers on members sharing their experiences in faith with others. He taught the Mystic Law not in the form of difficult abstract theories but through easily intelligible personal experiences.

Each individual experience is a parable of the all-pervading Mystic Law. And the discussion meeting, based on sharing such personal experiences, is a contemporary representation of the "Simile and Parable" chapter, a modern version of the seven parables of the Lotus Sutra, an infinite treasury of parables.

Parables are wisdom and compassion distilled to their most fragrant essence. The Soka Gakkai initiated a revolution in the way Buddhism is spread by adopting the same method as the Lotus Sutra. The spirit of the Lotus Sutra's parables lives on in the sixty-five year history of the Soka Gakkai. And we will continue to write the brilliant story of the widespread propagation of the Lotus Sutra (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo) day after day, a story that will be passed down through eternal future generations. (WLS-2, 26-27)

- The SGI's discussion meeting movement is the embodiment of actualizing Buddhist wisdom. It serves as a forum for members to share their experiences in faith, or parables, that brings "Simile and Parable" to life.
- The SGI is spreading Buddhism through members sharing encouraging stories in faith, the same method used in the Lotus Sutra.

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. How are stories a powerful way to relate a message? Share when you have shared a story to relate a message.
2. Regarding the parable of the three carts and the burning house, President Ikeda says that "life is like a burning house." What does this mean? (Refer to p. 7)

3. Stories were also used in other religious texts, like the Bible of Christianity, and some scholars suggest that the Lotus Sutra may have influenced stories of other religious scriptures. What does this say about the universality of the parables in the Lotus Sutra? (Refer to pp. 12–13)
4. What does it mean that the parables were preached “in accordance with the Buddha’s own mind?” (Refer to p. 17)
5. The Lotus Sutra is described as a sutra of praise. Why is praise of the sutra so important in the sutra itself? (Refer to pp. 23–24)
6. Recount an experience at a discussion meeting you have attended that expressed the wonder of human revolution.