The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China analyzed the content and meaning of all the Buddhist sutras, concluding that the Lotus Sutra constitutes the highest essence of Buddhist teachings.

He classified the Lotus Sutra as conveying the teachings that Shakyamuni Buddha expounded toward the end of his life, which the Buddha intended to be passed on to the future for the enlightenment of all people. T’ien-t’ai also pointed out that teachings the Buddha expounded prior to the Lotus Sutra should be regarded as “expedient means” and set aside. In the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, considered an introduction to the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni says: “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” (The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras, p. 15).

Later, in the Lotus Sutra, he indicates that he is “discarding expedient means” and “will preach only the unsurpassed way” (LSOC, 79). In terms of the depth of its teaching, the Lotus Sutra unequivocally recognizes the possibility of all people, regardless of capacity and without distinction or exception, to attain enlightenment. Sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra place limitations on who is capable of attaining enlightenment and are therefore considered only partial expressions of the truth. For instance, they exclude persons of the two vehicles (classes of the Buddha’s disciples known as voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones), women and evil persons from the possibility of ever becoming Buddhas. And even for those considered capable of attaining Buddhahood, the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings presume that the process of doing so requires countless lifetimes of austere practice. There is no recognition that an ordinary person can attain Buddhahood in this single lifetime. The Lotus Sutra, on the other hand, makes clear that all people without exception possess a Buddha nature and indicates that they can attain enlightenment in this life, as they are, in their present form.

Outline and Structure of the Lotus Sutra

In analyzing the contents of the Lotus Sutra, T’ien-t’ai divided its twenty-eight chapters into two parts: he called the first fourteen chapters (from “Introduction” to “Peaceful Practices”) the “theoretical teaching” and the last fourteen chapters (from “Emerging from the Earth” to “Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy”), the “essential teaching.”

Beginning from the first chapter, “Introduction,” the story conveyed in the Lotus Sutra unfolds at Eagle Peak, where countless listeners gather to hear the Buddha preach important principles and teachings. The principle of the “true aspect of all phenomena,”
expounded in “ Expedient Means,” the second chapter of the sutra, is central to the theoretical teaching. Another important principle, the “attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles,” is emphasized beginning with “Simile and Parable,” the third chapter, and continues through “Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts,” the ninth chapter.

Through these teachings, T’ien-t’ai derived the principles known as “the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds” and “three thousand realms in a single moment of life.”

In “Teacher of the Law,” the 10th chapter, the discussion develops around the theme of who will propagate the Lotus Sutra in the evil age after the Buddha’s passing.

The 11th chapter, “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower,” describes an immense tower adorned with seven kinds of treasures rising up out of the earth and standing suspended in mid-air. Many Treasures, a Buddha of past ages who is seated in the tower, attests that Shakyamuni’s teachings set down in the Lotus Sutra are true and correct. Following this, all Buddhas of the ten directions throughout the universe gather before the Treasure Tower.

Shakyamuni then enters the Treasure Tower and takes a seat next to Many Treasures. Those gathered at Eagle Peak—where Shakyamuni Buddha has been expounding the teachings of the Lotus Sutra thus far—are lifted into the air through the Buddha’s transcendent powers, and the preaching known as the “Ceremony in the Air” begins.

From the first through tenth chapters, Shakyamuni preaches at Eagle Peak. The following twelve chapters, from “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” to “Entrustment,” describe the Buddha’s preaching and events that take place during the Ceremony in the Air. Then, from “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King,” the 23rd chapter, to the end of the sutra, Shakyamuni returns the assembly to Eagle Peak where he concludes his preaching. Because of these changes in venue, the preaching of Shakyamuni Buddha depicted in the Lotus Sutra is said to take place in “two places and three assemblies.” The two places are Eagle Peak and “in the air.” Shakyamuni begins preaching to the assembly gathered on Eagle Peak (the first assembly), raises the assembly into the air to continue his preaching (the second assembly) and returns the assembly to Eagle Peak to conclude (the third assembly). The “air” in this scenario symbolizes the pure realm of eternal truth, and Eagle Peak symbolizes the saha world, the real world filled with suffering and delusion.

During the Ceremony in the Air, Shakyamuni urges that the Lotus Sutra’s teachings be propagated in the evil age after the Buddha’s passing. In “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower,” he expounds the concept of the “six difficult and nine easy acts” to illustrate how difficult it is to propagate the Wonderful Law of the Lotus Sutra in the world after the Buddha’s passing. In “Encouraging Devotion,” the 13th chapter, Shakyamuni describes the “three powerful enemies,” three types of arrogant people who will persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra in the future evil age.

Determined to face any difficulties, many bodhisattvas ask permission to propagate the sutra after the Buddha’s passing. However, in “Emerging from the Earth,” the 15th chapter, Shakyamuni restrains them. Instead he summons forth a multitude of bodhisattvas, whom he identifies as his original disciples, who emerge in astounding numbers from beneath the earth. Known as the “Bodhisattvas of the Earth,” they are true leaders who will propagate the Law after the Buddha’s death.

These events reveal that the purpose of the Ceremony in the Air is to entrust the task of propagating the Lotus Sutra in the age after the Buddha’s passing to those who share an eternal bond with the sutra’s teaching. The emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth marks the beginning of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

In “Life Span of the Thus Come One,” the 16th chapter, Shakyamuni reveals that he
attained Buddhahood “in the remote past,” thereby making clear the true nature of his enlightenment and the ever-present potential for Buddhahood innate in all people. Furthermore, he entrusts Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the other leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth with the essence of the Lotus Sutra for the sake of future generations. With the conclusion of the Ceremony in the Air, Shakyamuni returns the assembly to Eagle Peak and preaches the means to lead all people from suffering to happiness through citing the examples of several bodhisattvas. These are the bodhisattvas Medicine King, Wonderful Sound, Perceiver of the World’s Sounds and Universal Worthy.

In “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King,” the 23rd chapter, Shakyamuni says, “After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period, you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa and never allow it to be cut off” (LSOC, 330), predicting the worldwide propagation of the Lotus Sutra beginning in the fifth five-hundred-year period after his death. He also predicts that the benevolent deities will protect those who propagate the Law. With this, he concludes his preaching.

Core Principles of the Theoretical and Essential Teachings

The Buddhist principles central to the Lotus Sutra’s theoretical teaching, the first fourteen chapters, are the true aspect of all phenomena and attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles.

The concept of the “true aspect of all phenomena” is expounded in the sutra’s second chapter, “Expedient Means.” “All phenomena” includes all things and activities throughout the universe. “True aspect” is the ultimate reality or true nature underlying and permeating all phenomena. All phenomena and the true aspect are inseparable, and all things and phenomena are expressions of the true aspect. The “Expedient Means” chapter teaches that all phenomena take form and function in accord with the principle of the “ten factors of life” (see pp. 47–48).

Nichiren Daishonin clarifies that all phenomena are, in fact, Myoho-renge-kyo—the essential Law of the universe itself. In his writing “The True Aspect of All Phenomena,” he says that this principle “means that all beings and environments in the Ten Worlds, from hell, the lowest, to Buddhahood, the highest, are without exception manifestations of Myoho-renge-kyo” (The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, vol. 1, p. 383). In light of the teaching of the true aspect of all phenomena, all people are equal in that they share the essential nature of Myoho-renge-kyo. Based on the principle that all people can attain enlightenment, the theoretical teaching begins to emphasize the fact that Buddhist teachings expounded prior to the Lotus Sutra do not describe the “attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles.” The Lotus Sutra reveals this possibility and that, based on the same principle, the attainment of Buddhahood even by evil persons, as well as the attainment of Buddhahood by women, is possible. Though Buddhism in general may appear to be a fair and egalitarian religion, only the Lotus Sutra clearly sets forth a teaching of fundamental equality.

The Buddhist principle central to the Lotus Sutra’s essential teaching, its latter fourteen chapters, is the “attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past” described in “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter. In the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni is depicted as having been born in India as a prince, becoming a monk and for the first time attaining enlightenment while meditating beneath the bodhi tree. But the concept of attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past fundamentally overturns this existing view of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment. In
the “Life Span” chapter, Shakyamuni says, “It has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood” (LSOC, 265–66), toppling the prevailing view that he had attained enlightenment for the first time in his present lifetime. He also reveals his true nature and identity as a Buddha who has been enlightened since the remote past and states that he has been constantly in this saha world teaching the Law to the people.

In the “Life Span” chapter, he teaches that the period since he originally attained enlightenment is long beyond comprehension. To help his listeners understand, he relates an example of astronomical scale describing a length of time known as “numberless major world system dust particle kalpas.” Though this seems to refer to a fixed, though incalculably remote, point in time in the past, Shakyamuni is in substance describing eternity (see The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, vol. 4, p. 14). This also shows that the world of Buddhahood is eternally present within life. The sutra quotes him as stating, “I practiced the bodhisattva way, and the life span that I acquired then has yet to come to an end” (LSOC, 268). Shakyamuni who achieved the attainment of Buddhahood in the remote past is still practicing the bodhisattva way; in other words, he is a Buddha who continues to carry on a compassionate practice to save all people while innately possessing all the Ten Worlds and fully utilizing them. This teaching reveals not only that the life of Buddhahood is eternal, but that the nine worlds are also eternal. It teaches that Buddhahood can never be separated from the other nine worlds, that they are eternally present together in life, which itself is eternal. This is the basis for the principle of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds—that each of the Ten Worlds possesses the potential for all other nine worlds within it at each moment.

**The Bodhisattvas of the Earth**

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the innumerable host of bodhisattvas who emerge from beneath the earth and to whom Shakyamuni entrusts the propagation of the essence of the Lotus Sutra in the age after his death. The realm beneath the earth represents the world of truth, or the ultimate reality of life. The sutra describes the number of Bodhisattvas of the Earth as being equal to “the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers,” each with a retinue of followers.

The sutra explains that Bodhisattvas of the Earth have been taught and trained by Shakyamuni after his attainment of enlightenment in the remote past, and that they already possess the ultimate principle or Law for attaining the enlightened life state of Buddhahood. But having the mission to propagate the Mystic Law in the degenerate age called the Latter Day of the Law, they take the form of bodhisattvas rather than Buddhas. They are led by four leaders—Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices and Firmly Established Practices. All vow to propagate the “Great Law” after the Buddha’s passing, and Shakyamuni entrusts them with this mission. Referring to the content of Shakyamuni’s preaching in the Ceremony of the Air, Nichiren Daishonin taught that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth will indeed make their appearance in the world in the Latter Day of the Law after the Buddha’s death and that the great Law referred to in the Lotus Sutra is the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Nichiren Daishonin, who propagated the essence of the Lotus Sutra, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, at the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law as predicted, fulfilled the function and mission of Bodhisattva Superior Practices. As Nichiren says in “The True Aspect of All Phenomena”: “Now, no matter what,
strive in faith and be known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and remain my disciple for the rest of your life. If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth. And if you are a Bodhisattva of the Earth, there is not the slightest doubt that you have been a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha from the remote past” (WND-1, 385). This means that we who believe in Nichiren’s teaching and strive to practice in accord with his intent are Bodhisattvas of the Earth directly connected to Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

The practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, described in the sutra’s 20th chapter, demonstrates the way to practice and propagate the correct Buddhist teaching in the evil age after the Buddha’s passing. Shakyamuni identifies Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as himself in a past existence. The sutra describes Never Disparaging as praising all the people he encountered, bowing to them in reverence and saying: “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you will all practice the bodhisattva way and will then be able to attain Buddhahood” (LSOC, 308). This statement by Never Disparaging consists of twenty-four characters in the Lotus Sutra’s Chinese text. Because it expresses the essential spirit of the Lotus Sutra, it is known as the “twenty-four-character Lotus Sutra.” It reveals directly and concisely the spirit and action to respect the life of every person based upon the Lotus Sutra’s philosophy that all people equally possess the Buddha nature. Despite being cursed and attacked with staves and stones by those to whom he expressed profound respect, Never Disparaging continued to bow to people in reverence while uttering these words of praise, ultimately attaining Buddhahood and leading countless others to enlightenment.

The Latter Day of the Law is known as the age of quarrels and disputes. The only way to change such times for the better is for each of us to believe in the Buddha nature within ourselves and within all others and to act consistently in a way that expresses respect toward all people.

Buddhism teaches the loftiest way for human beings to behave. In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin says: “The heart of the Buddha’s lifetime of teachings is the Lotus Sutra, and the heart of the practice of the Lotus Sutra is found in the ‘Never Disparaging’ chapter. What does Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s profound respect for people signify? The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being. The wise may be called human, but the thoughtless are no more than animals” (“The Three Kinds of Treasure,” WND-1, 851–52). The purpose of Buddhism is to guide people toward the kind of human behavior represented by the practice of Never Disparaging: believing in the noble Buddha nature within ourselves and others, and expressing that belief in our actions.

This article is adapted from the October 2009 Daibyakurenge, pp. 98–102.

2. Three powerful enemies: Also, three types of enemies. Three types of arrogant people who persecute those who propagate the Lotus Sutra in the evil age after Shakyamuni Buddha’s death. Miao-lo summarizes these three as arrogant lay people, arrogant priests and arrogant false sages.