

The Reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Japan

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IN discussing the Japanese reception of the philosophy and culture based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, one must note that in the development of the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the most influential events in the history of Japanese Buddhism was the emergence of Saichō (767–822), the founder of the Japanese Tiantai sect, and Nichiren (1222–1282), the founder of the Nichiren Hokke (Lotus) sect. In addition, with regard to the influence of the *Lotus Sūtra* on literature, art and the performing arts, the Tiantai sect played an overwhelming role, and from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) onwards one can note the influence of the Nichiren Hokke sect.¹

This paper introduces the Japanese reception of the philosophy and culture based on the *Lotus Sūtra* within the span from the official introduction of Buddhism up to Nichiren. Owing to the limitations of my research and to the length of this paper, I wish to summarize my observations along the following points: the *Hokke-gisho* (a four-fascicle annotation on the *Lotus Sūtra*) of Prince Shōtoku; the copying of and lecturing on the *Lotus Sūtra*; the founding of the Japanese Tiantai sect by Saichō; the *Lotus Sūtra* and its literature; and Nichiren and the *Lotus Sūtra*.

THE *HOKKE-GISHO* OF PRINCE SHŌTOKU

According to the *Nihon-shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*), the officially recorded transmission of Buddhism to Japan is said to be 552. However, according to the *History of the Construction and the Development of Gangyō-ji Temple and the Catalogue of the Existing Treasures of the Temple*, it is 538. At present, though, 538 is regarded as the year Buddhism was most likely transmitted to Japan. According to the *Fusō-ryakki* (*Concise History of Japan*), a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* was first introduced into Japan in 577, approximately 40 years following the introduction of Buddhism.

The *Jōgū-Shōtoku-hō-ō-teisetsu* (*Traditions Concerning His Holiness*

Prince Shōtoku) states that Prince Shōtoku (574–622) delivered a course of lectures on the *Shōman-gyō* (*Śrīmālā Sūtra*). According to the *Nihon-shoki*, the article of July of the 14th year of Emperor Suiko (606), he delivered a course of lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Shōman-gyō*, respectively. According to the *History of the Construction and the Development of Hōryū-ji Temple and the Catalogue of the Existing Treasures of the Temple*, dated February 11 in the 19th year of the Tempyō era (747), three copies of the *Hokke-gisho* (a four-fascicle annotation on the *Lotus Sūtra*), one copy of the *Yuima-gyō-gisho* (a three-fascicle annotation on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*) and one copy of the *Shōman-gyō-gisho* (a one or three-fascicle annotation on the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*) are recorded as having been made at the order of His Holiness Prince Shōtoku. Although this record does not mention the course of lectures he delivered on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the existence of the *Yuima-gyō-gisho* enables us to presume that Prince Shōtoku delivered a course of lectures on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. It has been believed for many years that he delivered a course of lectures on the three sutras, *Lotus*, *Śrīmālā* and *Vimalakīrti*, respectively, and the three annotations were made in natural course.

Despite heated discussions on the issue of his delivering lectures on the three sutras and the three annotations, a final conclusion has still not been reached.² Nonetheless, it is a historical fact that throughout the middle ages quotes and commentaries were made from the *Hokke-gisho*, which is undeniably Prince Shōtoku's writing. Thus, I shall briefly discuss the *Hokke-gisho*.

The fourth volume of the *Hokke-gisho* is an annotation on the *Lotus Sūtra* (27 chapters excluding the “Devadatta” chapter) and is principally based on the doctrine of the *Hokke-giki*³ (an eight-fascicle annotation entitled “Fahua-yiji,” which was lectured by Fayun [467–529] of Guang-zhai-si in China, and written by his disciple), frequently quoting many passages from it under the titles “the original's meaning,” “the original's annotation” and “the original's explanation.” The original is presently in the custody of the Imperial Household. It was first published in the first year of Hōji (1247). One will note that quotations are used from the *Hokke-gisho* in the *Jōmyō-genron-ryakujutsu* by Chikō (708–776?) of Gangyō-ji temple and the *Kegon-gokyōshō-shijiki* by Juryō (late eighth century) of Tōdai-ji temple. Annotations on the *Hokke-gisho* are the *Hokekyō-jōgū-ō-gisho*, the *Hokke-sho-ekōki* by Gyōnen (1240–1321), the *Hokke-kirin-yūfūdan* by Ryōjo (1268–1318), and others. In Japan, however, as the three major writings of Tiantai (*Fahua-xuanyi*, *Fahua-wenju* and *Mohe-zhiguan*) were overwhelmingly

popular as annotations on the *Lotus Sūtra* and as the *Hokke-giki* is criticized in those writings, it is only natural to say that the influence of the *Hokke-gisho*, which is based on the *Hokke-giki*, was limited to a small scale.

As the *Hokke-gisho* completely follows the Chinese style of annotation in its format and description and because it is principally dependent on the doctrine of the *Hokke-giki* by Fayun, it criticizes the *Hokke-giki* at times while establishing its own doctrines.

Generally speaking, annotations on a sutra clearly present its entire structure by separating its contents into paragraphs along numerous levels. Each paragraph sets its own respective theme and the relation between the large and small paragraphs is also established. Explanations of difficult terminology and interpretations of the metaphors are also included. However, they often bore readers and, due to its nature, the annotator's personal views are often not easily reflected. The same could be said of the *Hokke-gisho*.

In spite of this, I would like to point out two points in the *Hokke-gisho* that deserve attention. First is the unique interpretation of the description of a person "who constantly takes pleasure in sitting in meditation" which appears in the 14th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Peaceful Practices." In this chapter, it is taught that an ascetic should only approach and associate with people who constantly take pleasure in sitting in meditation. In contrast to the original interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Hokke-gisho* states that an ascetic should not approach a monk of Hīnayāna Buddhism who "constantly takes pleasure in sitting in meditation." The reason for this is explained as follows: "He, with the mind of delusion, lives here and constantly takes pleasure in sitting in meditation around mountains. Therefore, how can he find time to propagate this sutra in the world?"⁴ This interpretation takes into account that the *Lotus Sūtra* emphasizes the propagation of the sutra after the passing away of Śākyamuni. Secondly, the term "one great vehicle" does not appear in other annotations.⁵ Since the *Lotus Sūtra* expounds the theory of the one vehicle of the Buddha (i.e., the teaching that all persons can equally attain Buddhahood, irrespective of any distinctions made by voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones or bodhisattvas), the word "one" was placed before the "great vehicle" to separate it from the idea of a differentiation into a great and a lesser vehicle as done in previous Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁶

COPYING OF AND LECTURING ON THE LOTUS SŪTRA

The earliest mention of this practice in Japan is in 673 in Kawara-dera temple when the copying of all the sutras began. The *Lotus Sūtra* was first copied in the third year of Jinki (726)⁷ when Emperor Shōmu ordered a copy to be dedicated to the retired Emperor Genshō. The fact that the Emperor Shōmu ordered 1,000 copies of the *Lotus Sūtra* to be made in the 20th year of Tempyō (748) in memory of the late retired Emperor Genshō is worth a special mention. Since the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches the virtue of the five kinds of teachers who embrace, read, recite, expound and copy, the copying of the *Lotus Sūtra* became very popular practice in India and China. It also became popular in Japan to the extent that obscure priests, laymen and even emperors became engaged in it, resulting in numerous copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

During the Heian period (794–1185), in particular, it became a fashion among the nobility to make splendid decorated sutras. The *Lotus Sūtra* was copied on deep blue colored paper with gold paint. It was also copied on paper which had pictures of grass, trees, birds and other designs, which are deemed as works of high level artistry. The *Lotus Sūtra* was also copied with each character enthroned on a lotus pedestal or in a pagoda, or with each character copied alongside Buddhist statues. Such works of copying encouraged in the *Lotus Sūtra* give us a glimpse of the believers' unparalleled pious devotion. In particular, fan-shaped booklets of the *Lotus Sūtra* (a national treasure preserved in Shitennō-ji temple) and a set of the *Lotus Sūtra* dedicated by Taira no Kiyomori⁸ (1118–1181) to Itsukushima Shrine (a national treasure) are considered to be among the most splendid works of Japanese art.

In the latter part of the Heian period, under the influence of eschatology, the custom of burying⁹ sutras became a common practice. It was a tradition to copy the *Lotus Sūtra*, put it into tubes and bury them under the ground to prepare for the advent of Bodhisattva Maitreya, who was believed to come down to this world 5,670 million years after the death of Śākyamuni to preach the three assemblies of the dragon trees.

An overwhelming majority of the sutras that were buried were copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*. It is well known, for example, that Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027) buried the *Lotus Sūtra*, copied on deep blue colored paper with gold paint, in the Kinpusen Mountain in Yamato.

When the Grand Council of State issued a notice requesting priests to recite the *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Sovereign Kings Sūtra of Golden Light* (*Konkōmyō-saishō-ō-kyō*), it was a requisite that priests acquire general knowledge of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the 13th year of Tempyō (741),

Emperor Shōmu ordered the building of Kokubun-ji temple and Kokubunni-ji temple for surmounting national crises such as the prevalence of plagues and the worsening of relations between Japan and Silla. The official name of Kokubun-ji temple was designated as Konkōmyō Shitennō Gokoku no Tera, and 20 priests were dispatched there and ordered to recite the *Sovereign Kings Sūtra of Golden Light* to pray for the protection of the nation. The official name of Kokubunni-ji temple was Hokke Metsuzai no Tera. 10 nuns were dispatched there and ordered to recite the *Lotus Sūtra* for the expiation of sins. Although there are no sections where the protection of the state is directly mentioned in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it was regarded as an important sutra by Kokubunni-ji temple (a state religion), and was officially authorized by the state as one of the three sutras to be recited for the protection of the nation along with the *Sovereign Kings Sūtra of Golden Light* and the *Benevolent Kings Wisdom Sūtra* (*Ninnō-gokoku-hannya-haramitsukyō*).

Thus, copying and reciting of the *Lotus Sūtra* prevailed during the Nara and Heian periods and, along with this phenomenon, assemblies for preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* were held more frequently. It was at Kenjaku Monastery in the premises of Tōdai-ji temple in the 18th year of Tempyō (746) that Rōben (689–773), for the first time, preached the *Lotus Sūtra* in an assembly. Assemblies on the *Lotus Sūtra* thereafter were held very frequently for the repose of the souls of the dead. Gonsō (754–827) first preached the eight volumes of the *Lotus Sūtra* for eight days each for the repose of the soul of the mother of his friend, the priest Eikō, at Iwabuchi-dera temple in Yamato in the 15th year of Enryaku (796). This is the beginning of Hokke-hakkō (eight lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra*). Hokke-hakkō became the most popular assembly held at temples, private residences of the nobility and in shrines during the Heian period. Hokke-jukkō (10 lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra*) was first initiated by Saichō, who explained and preached the 10 volumes of the *Lotus Sūtra* including the *Immeasurable Meanings Sūtra* (*Muryōgi-kyō*), the prologue to the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the *Universal Worthy Sūtra* (i.e., the *Sūtra of Meditation on Bodhisattva Fugen*), the epilogue of the *Lotus Sūtra*, in the 17th year of Enryaku (798) at Ichijō-shikan Monastery located on Mt. Hiei. Thereafter, Hokke-sanjukkō (30 lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra*) also started to be held, with the addition of the two sutras of the prologue and epilogue to the 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

This concludes my discussion on the copying of and lecturing on the *Lotus Sūtra* by emperors, the nobility and priests of high positions. I

shall now discuss devotional copying and recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* by the common people, as mentioned in the *Nihon-ryōiki* (*Nihonkoku-genpō-zen'aku-ryōiki*) compiled by Kyōkai, a Buddhist priest of Yakushi-ji temple. This is the earliest Japanese collection of Buddhist moral tales, said to have been compiled during the Kōnin period (810–824), which consists of three volumes (35 tales in the first volume, 42 in the second, and 39 in the third, respectively). Among them there are 12 tales¹⁰ whose titles bear the name of the *Lotus Sūtra*. They preach the virtue of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* as well as the punishment incurred for the slander of the sutra. Since Saichō founded the Japanese Tiantai sect, the *Lotus Sūtra* became all the more enthusiastically received by the common people, which led to the writing of Japanese collections of Buddhist moral tales. Among them are the *Nihon-ōjō-gokuraku-ki* (compiled by Yoshishige no Yasutane in approximately 986), the *Dai-nihonkoku-hokekyō-genki* (compiled by Shuryōgon-in-shamon Chingen in approximately 1004) and the *Konjaku-monogatari* (the mid-12th century; compiler unknown). These works enable one to learn about the history of the majority of the common people's faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE JAPANESE TIANTAI SECT BY SAICHŌ

During the Nara period (710–794), not only was the *Myōhō-rence-kyō* (*Miaofa lianhua jing*), translated in 406 by Kumārajīva (344–413 or 350–409), introduced to Japan, but the *Shōhoke-kyō* (*Zhengfa hua jing*), translated in 286 by Dharmarakṣa (c. 230s; died age 78), and the *Tempo-myōhō-rence-kyō* (*Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing*), translated in 601 by Jñānagupta (523–605) and Dharmagupta (d. 619), were also introduced into Japan. Moreover, numerous annotations were also introduced.¹¹ Ganjin (688–763), in particular, introduced the three major writings of Tiantai and many other documents of the Chinese Tiantai sect to Japan.¹²

Saichō became interested in the teachings of the Chinese Tiantai sect through the *Kegon-gokyō-shō* (a five-fascicle of the five kinds of teaching classified by the Kegon sect) and the *Daijō-kishin-ron-giki* (a three or five-fascicle annotation on the *Daijō-kishin-ron*) by Fazang (637–714) of the Kegon (Huayan) sect in China. After completing his studies of the documents introduced by Ganjin, he went to China in 804. He returned to Japan after he had learned the teachings of Tiantai under the guidance of Daosui and Xingman. In 806, the court permitted Saichō to take in two priests every year and authorized his school as an

independent Tiantai sect along with six other sects of Nara. Particularly noteworthy among his achievements were the disputes against Tokuichi of the Hossō sect on the doctrine of the three provisional teachings and the one true teaching, and against the six sects of Nara about the establishment of a Mahāyāna ordination center at Mt. Hiei. The dispute with Tokuichi concerned the theory of the “one Buddha vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra* versus the respective doctrines of the five groups of the Hossō sect. Saichō claimed the superiority of the universal Buddha nature and the possibility of anyone attaining Buddhahood according to his perception of the doctrine of the “one Buddha vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

One of the major works on the *Lotus Sūtra* by Saichō is the *Daitō-shiragi-shoshū-gisho-ehyō-tendai-gishū* (*Classification of the Schools Based on Tiantai's Doctrine in Great China and Silla*), in which he indicates that numerous Buddhist masters in China and Silla founded their schools based on Tiantai's doctrines, thus claiming the superiority of the Tiantai sect.

In his writing, the *Hokke-shūku* (*The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sūtra*), Saichō insists that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the most superior among all sutras because it offers a direct means to enable one to attain Buddhahood in one's present form in contrast to other sutras which require lengthy ascetic practices over a span of many kalpas. His other writings include an annotation on the *Immeasurable Meanings Sūtra* (the prologue to the *Lotus Sūtra*). Although it is said that he wrote an annotation on the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is no longer in existence.

THE LOTUS SŪTRA AND ITS LITERATURE

One can see traces of widespread faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* as recorded in the aforementioned *Nihon-ōjō-gokuraku-ki*, *Dai-nihonkoku-hokekyō-genki* and *Konjyaku-monogatari*. These writings clearly indicate the tremendous influence of the *Lotus Sūtra* on literature. Moreover, one will note the emergence of literature by woman authors such as the *Makura-no-sōshi* (*The Pillow Book* in approximately 1000) by Seishō Nagon, the *Genji-monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji* in approximately 1005) by Murasaki Shikibu, and others. These are evidence of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s tremendous influence on the religious life of the people.

One must mention the Shakyō-ka (a 31-syllable Japanese poem on the theme of Buddhism) as one example of Japanese literature directly based on materials taken from the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹³ We can find some Shakyō-ka in the *Shūi-waka-shū* (a collection entitled Shūi consisting of a 31-syllable Japanese poem compiled in approximately 1001–1005),

which are based on materials taken from the *Lotus Sūtra*. In 1002, around the time when the *Shūi-waka-shū* was compiled, Fujiwara no Michinaga composed some waka poems with his colleagues for the repose of the soul of his sister, Higashi-sanjō-in Senshi. Since then, it became fashionable to compose waka poems on the themes of the 28 chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *Hosshin-waka-shū*, compiled by Senshi-nai-shinnō (964–1035), is a collection of only Shakkyō-ka, and more than half of them are based on themes of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

In the *Go-shūi-waka-shū* (compiled in 1086), classification into two items, the Shakkyō and the Jingi (God of Heaven and God of the Earth) were initiated. In the *Senzai-waka-shū* (compiled in 1187), we can see an independent part of Shakkyō being established for the first time. It is said that about one third of Shakkyō-ka are related to the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹⁴

The retired Emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192) ordered the compilation of the *Ryōjin-hishō* (a collection of Ima-yō, a Japanese poem with a basic form of four lines with seven-five syllables or eight-five syllables each) in which are found 135 waka poems based on materials from the *Lotus Sūtra*.

NICHIREN AND THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

Nichiren, while accepting the trend of the holders of the *Lotus Sūtra* during the Heian period,¹⁵ established his own concept of chanting *daimoku* (the Japanese title of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the word “namu” in the beginning). In contrast to the widespread faith in the Nembutsu sect (the invocation of the name of Amitābha Buddha) by the common people of China, the practice of the chanting of *daimoku* flourished to match the faith in Nembutsu by the Japanese common people. Also, the new sects that appeared in Japan were mostly based on the concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These facts indicate that this trend was based on Nichiren’s origination of the invocation of the *daimoku*.

While *daimoku* and *honzon* (the object of worship) are the most essential aspects of Nichiren’s thought, he directed his attention to the theory of *ichinen-sanzen* (three thousand realms in a single moment of mind) as the theoretical basis of his doctrine. To Nichiren, it was the vitally important theory of *ichinen-sanzen* that linked himself with Zhiyi (another name for Tiantai, 538–598) and Śākyamuni of the *Lotus Sūtra*, manifesting that the three were in line with the orthodox history of Buddhism.

Nichiren’s interpretation of *ichinen-sanzen* can be summarized as fol-

lows. Historically speaking, although it was Zhiyi who first expounded the theory of *ichinen-sanzen* in his *Great Concentration and Insight* (*Mohe zhiguan*), Nichiren states that *ichinen-sanzen* was originally expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and that Zhiyi merely drew it out from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Since *ichinen-sanzen* is the principle by which anyone can attain Buddhahood, it was expressed as the “seed of Buddhahood.” Nichiren established *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* in the Latter Day of the Law as the medium to interpret the principle of *ichinen-sanzen*. Furthermore, as *ichinen-sanzen* also enables non-sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, it was established as the object of worship or mandala. Thus, we can understand that *ichinen-sanzen* was explained and taught through the means of the object of worship and *daimoku* of *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, the original interpretation of Nichiren.

Needless to say, Nichiren’s interpretation of *ichinen-sanzen* is not that of Zhiyi, but his own original concept called *ji-no-ichinen-sanzen* (actual *ichinen-sanzen*).¹⁶ In studying the characteristics of Nichiren’s reception of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is requisite that one studies how Nichiren interpreted the mainstream concept of the *Lotus Sūtra* of India. I would like to comprehend the mainstream concept of the *Lotus Sūtra* from three angles.¹⁷ The first is the concept of the “one Buddha vehicle” that teaches that all sentient beings can equally attain Buddhahood. The second is the theory of the eternal existence of Śākyamuni and that he is the Eternal Buddha who attained Buddhahood in the remote past and is the only and absolute savior of all sentient beings in the *sahā* world. The third is the concept that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the successors of the *Lotus Sūtra* after the passing away of Śākyamuni. In conclusion, it can be said that the theories of Nichiren, which are beyond time and space, are in closest connection to the three main thoughts of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Nichiren and the Concept of the “One Buddha Vehicle”

The concept of the “one Buddha vehicle” means that Śākyamuni appeared in this *sahā* world for the sole and lofty purpose of enabling all sentient beings to equally attain Buddhahood. There are two important aspects in this concept. One is the teaching that all sentient beings can equally attain Buddhahood. The second is the teaching that stresses the importance of the advent of Śākyamuni as the savior.

The former point, which is to enable all beings to attain Buddhahood, does not need any further explanation as it was easily understood by those who recited the *Lotus Sūtra* in China and Japan. Nichiren’s recep-

tion and development of the teaching that all people can attain Buddhahood was inherited from Zhiyi's theory of *ichinen-sanzen*. As for the latter teaching, the significance of Śākyamuni's advent for the purpose of enabling all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, it can be said that Nichiren's religious piety enabled him to accept this as it is. The importance of the close relationship between the Buddha and the common mortal as expressed in the principles of *geshu-yaku* (benefit received from sowing the seed of Buddhahood), the *juku-yaku* (the benefit received from the seed maturing) and the *datchaku* (the benefit received from the seed being harvested) revealed by Tiantai, was strongly stressed by Nichiren far beyond comparison to Tiantai.

There is a concept derived from the aforementioned theory, which is called *Nichiren no Shakuson-goryō-kan* which means Nichiren's view that Śākyamuni dominates the world. This view is based on the third chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Simile and Parable," which states: "But now 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."¹⁸ In other words, it teaches that this *sahā* world is Śākyamuni's domain and, therefore, there is a deep religious connection between Śākyamuni and all sentient beings. Based on this theory, Nichiren criticizes the Pure Land sect, saying that because Amitābha Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Light) of the pure land of the highest joy in the west has no connection with human beings living in the *sahā* world, faith in Amitābha Buddha is off the point, and further criticizes it, saying that faith in Amitābha Buddha only makes light of the true master Śākyamuni. In addition, Nichiren's criticism of the Tathāgata Mahāvairocana as the Buddha of the dharma body of the Shingon sect is also based on the same view.

Nichiren and the Concept of the Eternal Buddha from the Remotest Past

As for the concept of the eternal Buddha from the remotest past, one must mention that Nichiren made a clear distinction between the theoretical teaching (*shakumon*) and the essential teaching (*honmon*) of the *Lotus Sūtra* and that he particularly emphasized the importance of the latter. He pointed out, for example, that the theory of *ichinen-sanzen*, which is a systematic thought on the ten factors expounded in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Expedient Means," can never be ultimately complete until the meaning of the essential teaching is taught. Furthermore, in the "True Object of Worship," Nichiren explains Buddhahood as he refers to the name associated with Śākyamuni in the remote past as *mushi no kobutsu*. He never uses such universal, abstract

or immanent terms as “Buddha nature” mentioned in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* of the great vehicle. In his writings, we can easily comprehend Nichiren’s fervent faith in Śākyamuni of the remotest past.

Nichiren and the Concept of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth

With regard to Nichiren and the concept of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, it is a well-known fact that, from the standpoint of the realization that he was a Bodhisattva of the Earth, Nichiren lived his life as the “votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*.” The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are expounded in the 14th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, “Emerging from the Earth.” They emerged from the earth as the successors of the *Lotus Sūtra* after the passing away of Śākyamuni.

At the beginning of this chapter, innumerable bodhisattvas far outnumbering the sands of eight Ganges, who came from other lands, vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* after the passing away of Śākyamuni. However, Śākyamuni refuses their vow for the reason that there existed in the *sahā* world other bodhisattvas equal to the number of the sands of 60 thousand Ganges, and that they were the very ones who possessed the mission to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*. Just then, those bodhisattvas emerged from the earth through a cleft in the ground. When Bodhisattva Maitreya and the bodhisattvas as many as the number of the sands of eight thousand Ganges saw these bodhisattvas never seen or heard of before, they were in doubt and inquired who they were. Śākyamuni replied that they were disciples whom he had taught since his attaining Buddhahood. Bodhisattva Maitreya, still not convinced how Śākyamuni could have taught so many disciples in the short period (some 40 years) after attaining Buddhahood, continued to beg Śākyamuni to relieve him from his doubt. In response to this request, Śākyamuni reveals the concept of the Buddha who attained Buddhahood in the remote past, as taught in the 16th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, “The Life Span of the Thus Come One.” The “Emerging from the Earth” chapter does not give sufficient explanation on the characteristics of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. In fact, one should refer to the 10th chapter, “The Teacher of the Law,” for explanations on who these successors of the *Lotus Sūtra* were after the passing of the Buddha.

In conclusion, those who embrace faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* are believed to have already attained true Enlightenment in their past life, and yet out of deep compassion they relinquished the fruit of their good karma and voluntarily chose to be born in this evil world to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*. They, therefore, do not seek to attain Enlightenment through their own efforts, nor do they seek to be saved by an absolute

savior.¹⁹ They strongly bear in mind their true identity that they have already attained Enlightenment in their past life and have been born into this evil world at their own will to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* for the sake of all sentient beings in the evil world, and thus feel satisfied by fulfilling their mission. Herein lies an extremely interesting religious theory. Therefore, with regard to their mission in this life, they declare that they are envoys of the Tathāgatha, or Buddha, dispatched by the Tathāgatha to undertake the task of the Tathāgatha, which is to save all sentient beings by preaching the *Lotus Sūtra*.

One can say that the key phrase that reveals Nichiren's view of the *Lotus Sūtra* is "the envoy of the Tathāgatha," which appears in "The Teacher of the Law" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The reason for this is because it can be said that Nichiren used this term to express his awareness of being the Bodhisattva of the Earth. Nichiren interprets the time span after the passing away of Śākyamuni as the Latter Day of the Law, during which he will live as the rebirth of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the leader of bodhisattvas equal in number to the sands of 60 thousand Ganges. Namely, he recognizes himself as the savior of all sentient beings in the Latter Day of the Law.

Although most Buddhists in China and Japan seem to interpret the story of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as a myth taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren, as mentioned above, interpreted them as real happenings in history.²⁰ In this way, Nichiren can be said to be a pure-minded and unaffected practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*. When viewed from a religious point, this aspect of him, in fact, shows us what a tremendously interesting character and philosophy he possessed. The same could be said of not only his interpretation of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth but also of *shakuson-goryō-kan*, or of Śākyamuni who attained Enlightenment in the remote past.

The Circumstances that Formed Nichiren's Interpretation of the Lotus Sūtra

Nichiren placed great importance on the essential theory of the Eternal Buddha and the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, which are still often made light of. I would like to examine the reasons that made this possible for Nichiren. At the time the *Lotus Sūtra* was compiled, it can be presumed that the followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* were under strained relations with Nikāya Buddhism. The same could be said of his isolation from the Buddhist society in those days due to his religious activities. Regardless of time and place, criticizing existing, preconceived ideas and calling for new ones is like throwing oneself into difficulty. This is a lesson his-

tory repeatedly teaches. Even though the minor persecutions incurred by Hōnen (1133–1212), who was the target of Nichiren’s severest criticism, are incomparable to those suffered by Nichiren, it is still a historical fact that Hōnen was persecuted by the authorities. It is presumed that Nichiren being isolated only triggered him to long for the advent of the absolute savior and to deepen his self-awareness as the Bodhisattva of the Earth.

Nichiren’s claim that the *Lotus Sūtra* was the highest teaching and his refusal to take into account other teachings put him in the same category as those followers who, when the *Lotus Sūtra* was compiled, claimed that only the *Lotus Sūtra* could save all sentient beings. Nichiren’s interpretation differs much from those of the Chinese annotators who were obliged to annotate numerous sutras in the framework of an organic system.

It may be said that at the time of completion of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the faith of these numerous compilers and successors had been reduced to an empty shell in the process of its academic reception in China. In contrast to this, Nichiren’s unique and personal view of the *Lotus Sūtra* revived it.

With the confidence gained by not only studying the *Lotus Sūtra* with his mind but by “living” the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* and his confidence in declaring that he was the “votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*,” we can safely conclude that he was the sole person who accepted the essential theory of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the true sense and developed it. One can reasonably say that the many contemporary religious activities based on the *Lotus Sūtra* are all ultimately derived from Nichiren.

Notes

¹ This paper does not include periods after the Muromachi. The following are believers of the Nichiren Hokke sect from later periods who were related to arts and the performing arts: Kanō Motonobu (1476–1559), Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539–1610), Hon’inbō Nichikai (1555–1618), Hon’ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), Kanō Tan’yū (1602–1674), Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), Hishikawa Moronobu (1618–1694), Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693), Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), Jippensha Ikku (1765–1831), Nakamura Utaemon III (1778–1838), Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) cf. Yojō Nomura, *Nichiren-kei-geijutsuka-ryakuden (Short Biography of the Artists Related to the Nichiren Sect), Nichiren and the Lotus Sūtra, Lectures on Nichiren*, vol.1, Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1972. However, it is not clear how strong their faith was.

² On the genuineness of *Hokke-gisho*, cf. Hiroshi Kanno, “Sangyō-gisho-no-shingimondai-ni-tsuite (On the Genuineness of the Three Commentaries)”, compiled by the Okura Institute of Spiritual Culture, *Comprehensive Study on Asuka Culture*, Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1989. For the “Hokke-gisho,” the following were used as reference: *Gyobutsu-bon-Hokke-gisho-fukusei-bon (A Facsimile of the Hokke-Gisho, Imperi-*

al Household), Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1971. *Hokke-gisho* in *Taishō-shinshū-daizō-kyō* vol. 56, Tokyo: Society for the Publication of the Taisho Tripitaka, 1926. Translation; edited and translated by Shinshō Hanayama, *Hokke-gisho* vol. 1–2, Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, (old edition in 1931–1933, new edition 1975). Research works: Shinshō Hanayama, *A Study on Hokke-gisho of Prince Shōtoku*, Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1933. Compiled by Hisatoyo Ishida, *An Encyclopaedia on Prince Shōtoku*, Tokyo: Kashiwa Shobō, 1997.

³ cf. Translated and noted by Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokke-giki, Collections of Annotations of the Lotus Sūtra* vol. 2, Tokyo: Okura Publishing Co., 1996.

⁴ cf. *Taishō-shinshū-daizō-kyō*, vol. 56, p. 118 mid.

⁵ One must be careful to conclude that the term “one great vehicle” was originated by the author of *Hokke-gisho* and take into consideration that many annotations were lost in China.

⁶ Shinshō Hanayama had already pointed out these two points in his *Hokke-gisho* vol. 2, 1975, pp. 407–8.

⁷ cf. Yutaka Takagi, *A History of Hokke Buddhism in the Heian Period*, Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1973, p. 193. Much reference is made to the fourth chapter of the book: “Origin and Development of Lecture Courses on the *Lotus Sūtra*.”

⁸ Each chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* can be regarded as one volume. Including one volume each of the *Immeasurable Meanings Sūtra*, the *Universal Worthy Sūtra*, the *Amitābha Sūtra*, the *Heart Sūtra* and the Verse of Vows it reaches a total of 33 volumes.

⁹ In the *Verse of Taking Vows* of Nanyue Huisi (515–577) of China, it is recorded that he buried the *Great Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* written in golden letters. It is said that En'nin (794–864) introduced this custom to Japan.

¹⁰ cf. *Nihon-ryōiki*, (Nihon-koten-bungaku-taikei 70), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1967.

¹¹ cf. Mosaku Ishida, *Shakyō-yori-mitaru-nara-chō-bukkyō-no-kenkyū* (*A Study of Buddhism in Nara Period from the View of the Copying of Sutras*), Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1930, pp. 136–146.

¹² *ibid.* pp. 32–41.

¹³ Dai-sōjō (Archbishop) Gyōki composed a Shakyō-ka poem based on the contents of the “Devadatta” chapter, the 12th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* as follows: “I received the *Lotus Sūtra* because of my service to Devadatta in the past by gathering firewood, picking vegetables and drawing water.” On waka poems of the *Lotus Sūtra*, cf. Yutaka Takagi, the *Hokekyō-waka-to-hōmonka* (*Waka Poems and Hōmonka on the Lotus Sūtra*), the fifth chapter of *A History of Hokke Buddhism in the Heian Period*.

¹⁴ cf. Tadayuki Nishida, “*Lotus Sūtra* and Japanese Literature,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* (a separate volume): A Collection of Lectures at Buddhist University vol. 8, Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Philosophy, 1978, p. 64.

¹⁵ Concerning the holders of the *Lotus Sūtra*, cf. “On Religious Activities of Holders of Sutras” in the seventh chapter of *A History of Hokke Buddhism in the Heian Period*.

¹⁶ cf. Hiroshi Kanno, “Nichiren’s Reception and Development of Ichinen-sanzen,” the third chapter of *What is Ichinen-sanzen*, Tokyo: the Daisan Bunmei Sha, 1992.

¹⁷ cf. Hiroshi Kanno, “The Essential Concept of the *Lotus Sūtra* and its Development in China and Japan” in the second chapter of the *Emergence of the Lotus Sūtra*, Tokyo: Daizō Publishing Co., 1997. The writer states that the early Mahāyāna Buddhist sutras could be seen as a new interpretation of the Buddha’s life and thought (*ibid.*, p. 13). I think this description is especially appropriate for the *Lotus Sūtra*. The most significant

events in the Buddha's life are his attainment of Buddhahood, the request of Brahmā, his first preaching and his nirvāṇa at the age of 80. In Buddhism, needless to say, everything begins with his Enlightenment. Moreover Buddhism could not have been formed if the Enlightenment of the Buddha was not been taught through speech. Therefore Śākyamuni's first preaching based on the request of Brahmā is naturally very significant. Since then he never ceased to preach for more than 40 years until he entered nirvāṇa at the age of 80.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śākyamuni either interprets or adds explanations to the significant events in his life, that is, his attaining Enlightenment, the request of Brahmā, his first preaching and his nirvāṇa at the age of 80. At first his attaining of Enlightenment was regarded as the Enlightening to the saddhamma (correct law). The *Lotus Sūtra* adopted the event of the Enlightening to the saddhamma (Pāli for saddharma in Sanskrit) as the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*) and recognized itself as the supreme and ultimate law preached by all Buddhas in common.

Next, the second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Expedient Means," contains the request made by Śāriputra in accordance with the request of Brahmā. Śākyamuni complies with this request by expounding the "one Buddha vehicle." This is in perfect accordance with the first preaching. The preaching is clearly defined as Śākyamuni's second preaching of the supreme law in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The term "the second preaching" is not only found in the *Lotus Sūtra* but in other Mahāyāna sutras as well. This fact is a clear evidence that the compilers of Mahāyāna sutras were well aware of their dependence on the second preaching, while sutras of early Buddhism were based on the first preaching. The 16th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One," gave a new interpretation of his nirvāṇa. It states, "as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana" (tr. by B. Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 229). In other words, this theory expounds that while Śākyamuni possesses an eternal life, as a skillful means to save all sentient beings, he provisionally enters the state of nirvāṇa.

As mentioned above, the *Lotus Sūtra* is structured around the significant events in Śākyamuni's life. This is in contrast with other Mahāyāna sutras which were based on stories of other Buddhas or bodhisattvas in order to save all sentient beings. In this way, one can say that only the *Lotus Sūtra* was based on the historical Buddha who actually existed and had as its main theme the eternal Buddha who appeared to save all sentient beings of the *sahā* world.

¹⁸ Tr. by Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, pp. 69–70. cf. *Taishō-shinshū-daijō-kyō*, vol. 9, p. 14 lower column.

¹⁹ My two descriptions of "the significance of the existence of the Buddha, the savior" and "they do not seek to be saved by the absolute savior" are easily misunderstood to be contradictory to each other. My intent was to clarify that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth would fulfill their past vows supported by the great power of the Buddha, the savior. I would like to take this opportunity to mention the relationship between the difficult-to-practice way and the easy-to-practice way mentioned in the Mahāyāna sutras. In my opinion, the Mahāyāna sutras were brought to existence by those followers of Buddhism who diligently performed their religious practice to attain Enlightenment in exact accordance with the historical Buddha. On the other hand, there must have been numerous sentient beings who were not religiously trained enough to be saved. Therefore, the Mahāyāna sutras expounded the difficult-to-practice way for the former and the easy-to-practice way for the latter. In my opinion, the mutual relationship of these dual natures

of practice is that the easy-to-practice way would be an introductory to Buddhism and the difficult-to-practice way would be the practice that would lead a person to deepen their resolve to attain Enlightenment.

²⁰ His view can be compared to that of the Pure Land sect whose followers were convinced that the pure land existed in the west and that Amitābha Buddha lived there. On the other hand, a distinguished difference with Nichiren is that he perceived himself to be the mythical figure in the sutra.

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