

The Teaching, Capacity, Time, and Country

Written by Nichiren, the shramana of Japan



WITH regard to the first item, the teaching consists of all the sutras, rules of monastic discipline, and treatises expounded by the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, comprising 5,048 volumes contained in 480 scroll cases. The teachings of Buddhism, after circulating throughout India for a thousand years, were introduced to China 1,015 years after the Buddha's passing. During the 664-year period beginning with that year, the tenth of the Yung-p'ing era (C.E. 67), cyclical sign *hinoto-u*, in the reign of Emperor Ming of the Later Han, and ending with the eighteenth year of the K'ai-yüan era (C.E. 730), cyclical sign *kanoe-uma*, in the reign of Emperor Hsüan-tsung of the T'ang, all of the Buddhist teachings were introduced to China.

The contents of these sutras, rules of monastic discipline, and treatises can be divided into the categories of Hinayana and Mahayana teachings, provisional and true sutras, and exoteric and esoteric sutras, and one should carefully distinguish between them. Such designations did not originate with the later scholars and teachers of Buddhism; they derive from the preaching of the Buddha himself. Therefore, they should be employed without exception by all living beings in the worlds of the

ten directions. Anyone who fails to do so should be regarded as non-Buddhist.

The custom of referring to the teachings of the Agama sutras as Hinayana derives from the various Mahayana sutras of the Correct and Equal, Wisdom, and Lotus and Nirvana periods. In the Lotus Sutra the Buddha says that, if he had preached only the Hinayana teachings and withheld the Lotus Sutra, he would have been guilty of stinginess and greed. Moreover, the Nirvana Sutra states that those who accept only the Hinayana sutras and declare that the Buddha is characterized by impermanence will have their tongues fester in their mouths.

Second is the matter of capacity. One who attempts to propagate the teachings of Buddhism must understand the capacity and basic nature of the persons one is addressing. The Venerable Shariputra attempted to instruct a blacksmith by teaching him to meditate on the vileness of the body, and to instruct a washerman by teaching him to conduct breath-counting meditation.¹ Even though these disciples spent over ninety days in their respective meditations, they did not gain the slightest understanding of the Buddha's teachings. On the contrary, they took on erroneous views and end-

ed by becoming icchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief.

The Buddha, on the other hand, instructed the blacksmith in breath-counting meditation, and the washerman in the meditation on the vileness of the body, and as a result both obtained understanding in no time at all. If even Shariputra, the foremost in wisdom among the disciples of the Buddha, failed to understand people's capacity, then how much more difficult must it be for ordinary teachers today, in the Latter Day of the Law, to have such an understanding! Ordinary teachers who lack an understanding of people's capacity should teach only the Lotus Sutra to those who are under their instruction.

Question: What about the passage in the Lotus Sutra that says, "Do not preach this sutra to persons who are without wisdom"?²

Answer: When I speak of understanding capacity, I am referring to preaching by a person of wisdom. Again, one should preach only the Lotus Sutra even to those who slander the Law, so that they may establish a so-called "poison-drum relationship" with it. In this respect, one should proceed as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging did.

However, if one is speaking to persons who one knows have the capacity to become wise, then one should first instruct them in the Hinayana teachings, then instruct them in the provisional Mahayana teachings, and finally instruct them in the true Mahayana. But if speaking to those one knows to be ignorant persons of lesser capacity, then one should first instruct them in the true Mahayana teaching. In that way, whether they choose to believe in the teaching or to slander it, they will still receive the seeds of Buddhahood.

Third is the consideration of time. Anyone who hopes to spread the Buddhist teachings must make certain to understand the time. For example, if a farmer were to plant his fields in

autumn and winter, then, even though the seed and the land and the farmer's efforts were the same as ever, this planting would not result in the slightest gain but rather would end in loss. If the farmer planted one small plot in that way, he would suffer a minor loss, and if he planted acres and acres, he would suffer a major loss. But if he plows and plants in the spring and summer, then, whether the fields are of superior, medium, or inferior quality, each will bring forth its corresponding share of crops.

The preaching of the Buddhist teachings is similar to this. If one propagates the teaching without understanding the time, one will reap no benefit but, on the contrary, will fall into the evil paths. When Shakyamuni Buddha made his appearance in this world, he was determined to preach the Lotus Sutra. But though the capacities of his listeners may have been right, the proper time had not yet come. Therefore, he spent a period of more than forty years without preaching the Lotus Sutra, explaining, as he says in the Lotus Sutra itself, that "the time to preach so had not yet come."³

The day after the Buddha's passing begins the thousand-year period known as the Former Day of the Law, when those who uphold the precepts are many while those who break them are few. The day after the end of the Former Day of the Law marks the beginning of the thousand-year period known as the Middle Day of the Law, when those who break the precepts are many while those without precepts are few. And the day after the ending of the Middle Day of the Law begins the ten-thousand-year period known as the Latter Day of the Law, when those who break the precepts are few while those without precepts are many.

During the Former Day of the Law, one should cast aside those who break the precepts, or who have no precepts

at all, giving alms only to those who uphold the precepts. During the Middle Day of the Law, one should cast aside those without precepts and give alms only to those who break them. And during the Latter Day of the Law, one should give alms to those without precepts, treating them in the same way as if they were the Buddha.

However, whether in the Former, the Middle, or the Latter Day of the Law, one should never in any of these three periods give alms to those who slander the Lotus Sutra, whether they keep the precepts, break the precepts, or do not receive them at all. If alms are given to those who slander the Lotus Sutra, then the land will invariably be visited by the three calamities and seven disasters, and the persons who give such alms will surely fall into the great citadel of the hell of incessant suffering.

When the votary of the Lotus Sutra denounces the provisional sutras, it is like a ruler, a parent, or a teacher disciplining a retainer, a son, or a disciple. But when practitioners of the provisional sutras denounce the Lotus Sutra, it is like retainers, sons, or disciples attempting to punish their ruler, parent, or teacher.

At present, it has been 210 or more years since we entered the Latter Day of the Law. One should consider very carefully whether now is a time best suited for the provisional sutras or Nembutsu teachings, or whether it is the time when the Lotus Sutra should spread.

Fourth is the consideration of the country. One must never fail to take into account the kind of country in which one is spreading the Buddhist teachings. There are cold countries, hot countries, poor countries, rich countries, central countries, and peripheral countries, large countries and small countries, countries wholly given over to thieving, countries wholly given over to the

killing of living things, and countries known for their utter lack of filial piety. In addition, there are countries wholly devoted to the Hinayana teachings, countries wholly devoted to the Mahayana teachings, and countries in which both Hinayana and Mahayana are pursued. In the case of Japan, therefore, we must carefully consider whether it is a country suited exclusively to Hinayana, a country suited exclusively to Mahayana, or a country suited for the practice of both Hinayana and Mahayana.

Fifth is the sequence of propagation. In a country where the Buddhist teachings have never been introduced, there of course will be none who are familiar with Buddhism. But in a country where Buddhism has already been introduced, there will be those who believe in the Buddhist teachings. Therefore, one must first learn what kind of Buddhist doctrines have already spread in a particular country before attempting to propagate Buddhism there.

If the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana teachings have already spread, then one should by all means propagate the true Mahayana teaching. But if the true Mahayana teaching has already spread, then one must not propagate the Hinayana or provisional Mahayana teachings. One throws aside shards and rubble in order to pick up gold and gems, but one must not throw aside gold and gems in order to pick up shards and rubble.

If one takes the five principles outlined above into account when propagating the Buddhist teachings, then one can surely become a teacher to the entire nation of Japan. To understand that the Lotus Sutra is the king of sutras, the foremost among them all, is to have a correct understanding of the teaching.

Yet Fa-yün of Kuang-che-ssu temple and Hui-kuan of Tao-ch'ang-ssu temple claimed that the Nirvana Sutra is superior to the Lotus Sutra. Ch'eng-

kuan of Mount Ch'ing-liang and Kobo of Mount Koya claimed that the Flower Garland and Mahavairochana sutras are superior to the Lotus Sutra. Chi-tsang of Chia-hsiang-ssu temple and the priest K'uei-chi of Tz'u-en-ssu temple claimed that the two sutras known as the Wisdom and the Profound Secrets are superior to the Lotus Sutra. One man alone, the Great Teacher Chih-che of Mount T'ien-t'ai, not only asserted that the Lotus Sutra is superior to all the other sutras, but urged that anyone claiming there is a sutra superior to the Lotus should be admonished; he said that, if such persons persist in their false claim, their tongues will surely fester in their mouths during the present existence, and after death they will fall into the Avichi hell. One who is able to distinguish right from wrong among all these different opinions may be said to have a correct understanding of the teaching.

Of all the thousand or ten thousand scholars of the present age, surely each and every one is confused as to this point. If so, then there must be very few who have a correct understanding of the teaching. If there are none with a correct understanding of the teaching, there will be none who read the Lotus Sutra. If there are none who read the Lotus Sutra, there will be none who can act as a teacher to the nation. If there is no one to act as a teacher to the nation, then everyone within the nation will be confused as to the distinctions within the body of sutras, such as those between the Hinayana and the Mahayana, the provisional and the true, and the exoteric and the esoteric sutras. Not a single person will be able to escape the sufferings of birth and death, and in the end they will all become slanderers of the Law. Those who, because of slandering the Law, fall into the Avichi hell, will be more numerous than the dust particles of the land, while those who, by embracing

the Law, are freed from the sufferings of birth and death, will number less than the specks of dirt that can be placed on a fingernail. What a fearful thing it is!

During the four hundred or more years since the time of Emperor Kammu, all the people in Japan have had the capacity to attain enlightenment solely through the Lotus Sutra. They are like those persons with capacities suited to the pure and perfect teaching who for a period of eight years listened to the preaching of the Lotus Sutra on Eagle Peak. (Confirmation of this may be found in the records of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai, Prince Shōtoku, the Reverend Ganjin, the Great Teacher Kompon [Dengyō], the Reverend Annen, and Eshin.)⁴ To understand this is to have an understanding of the people's capacity.

Yet the Buddhist scholars of our time say that the people of Japan all have capacities fit only for the recitation of Amida Buddha's name, the Nembutsu. They are like Shariputra in the episode I mentioned earlier who, because he was misled as to the capacity of the persons under his instruction, in the end turned them into icchantikas.

In Japan at present, some 2,210 years after the passing of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, in the last of the five five-hundred-year periods after his passing, the hour has come for the widespread propagation of Myōhō-*renge-kyō*. To understand this is to have an understanding of the time.

Yet there are Buddhist scholars in Japan today who cast aside the Lotus Sutra and instead devote themselves exclusively to practicing the invocation of Amida Buddha's name. There are others who teach the Hinayana precepts and speak contemptuously of the priests [who were ordained with the Mahayana precepts] on Mount Hiei, as well as those who present what they describe as a separate transmission

outside the sutras, disparaging the correct doctrine of the Lotus Sutra. Such persons may surely be said to misunderstand the time. They are like the monk Superior Intent who slandered Bodhisattva Root of Joy, or the Scholar Gunaprabha who behaved with contempt toward Bodhisattva Maitreya,⁵ thus inviting the terrible sufferings of the Avichi hell.

Japan is a country related exclusively to the Lotus Sutra, just as the country of Shravasti in India was related solely to the Mahayana teachings. In India there were countries that were wholly devoted to Hinayana, those that were wholly devoted to Mahayana, and those that were devoted to both Hinayana and Mahayana teachings. Japan is a country that is exclusively suited to Mahayana, and among those teachings it should be dedicated solely to the Lotus Sutra. (The above statement is attested to in *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice*, the writings of Sengchao, and the records of Prince Shōtoku, the Great Teacher Dengyo, and Annen.)⁶ To understand this is to understand the country.

Yet there are Buddhist scholars in our present age who address the people of Japan and instruct them only in the precepts of the Hinayana, or who attempt to make them all into followers of the Nembutsu. This is like "placing impure food in a jeweled vessel." (This simile of the jeweled vessel is taken from *An Essay on the Protection of the Nation* by the Great Teacher Dengyo.)

In Japan during the 240 or more years from the time when Buddhism was first introduced from the Korean kingdom of Paekche in the reign of Emperor Kimmei to the reign of Emperor Kammu, only the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana teachings were propagated throughout the country. Though the Lotus Sutra existed in Japan, its significance had not yet been made clear. This was similar to the

situation years before in China, where the Lotus Sutra had existed for more than 300 years before its significance was clarified.

In the time of Emperor Kammu, the Great Teacher Dengyo refuted the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana teachings, and made clear the true significance of the Lotus Sutra. From that time on, opposing opinions ceased to prevail, and everyone single-mindedly put faith in the Lotus Sutra. Even those scholars of the earlier six schools [of Nara] who studied Hinayana and Mahayana teachings such as the Flower Garland, Wisdom, Profound Secrets, and Agama sutras regarded the Lotus Sutra as the ultimate authority. Needless to say, this was even more so with scholars of the Tendai and True Word schools, and of course with lay believers who had no special knowledge of the subject. In its relation to the Lotus Sutra, the country was like the K'unlun Mountains where there is not a single worthless stone, or the mountain island of P'eng-lai where no poisons are known.

However, during the fifty or more years since the Kennin era (1201-1204), the priests Dainichi and Buddha⁷ have spread the teachings of the Zen school, casting aside all the various sutras and postulating a doctrine that is transmitted outside the scriptures. And Honen and Ryukan have established the Pure Land school, contradicting the teachings of the true Mahayana and setting up the provisional doctrines. These men are in effect casting aside gems and instead gathering aside stones, abandoning the solid earth and trying to climb up into the air. They know nothing about the order in which the various doctrines should be propagated. The Buddha warned of such persons when he said that it was better to encounter a mad elephant than an evil friend.⁸

In the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, it is record-

ed that, in the last five-hundred-year period, or two thousand or so years after the Buddha's passing, there will be three types of enemies of the Lotus Sutra. Our present age corresponds to this last five-hundred-year period. And as I, Nichiren, ponder the truth of the Buddha's words, I realize that these three types of enemies are indeed real. If I allow them to remain hidden, then I will not be the votary of the Lotus Sutra. Yet if I cause them to appear, then I am almost certain to lose my life.

The fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra states, "Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?"⁹ The fifth volume says, "It will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to believe."¹⁰ The same volume also reads, "We care nothing for our bodies or lives but are anxious only for the unsurpassed way."¹¹ And the sixth volume reads, "Not hesitating even if it costs them their lives."¹²

The ninth volume of the Nirvana Sutra states: "For example, it is like a royal envoy skilled in discussion and clever with expedient means who,

when sent on a mission to another land, would rather, even though it costs him his life, in the end conceal none of the words of his ruler. Wise persons too do this. In the midst of ordinary people and without begrudging their lives, those who are wise should without fail proclaim the Thus Come One's prize teaching from the correct and equal sutras of the great vehicle." The Great Teacher Chang-an, commenting on this passage, says: "[A royal envoy . . . would rather], even though it costs him his life, in the end conceal none of the words of his ruler' means that one's body is insignificant while the Law is supreme. One should give one's life in order to propagate the Law."¹³

When I examine these passages, I know that, if I do not call forth these three enemies of the Lotus Sutra, then I will not be the votary of the Lotus Sutra. Only by making them appear can I be the votary. And yet if I do so, I am almost certain to lose my life. I will be like the Venerable Aryasimha or Bodhisattva Aryadeva.

Nichiren

The tenth day of the second month



Background

In the seventh month of 1260, Nichiren Daishonin submitted his treatise *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* to the former regent Hojo Tokiyori, who, though retired from office, was still the most influential member of the ruling Hojo clan.

Infuriated at the Daishonin's criticism of the Pure Land school set forth in this treatise, a group of Pure Land believers attacked his dwelling at Matsubagayatsu, Kamakura, in an attempt

to do away with him. The Daishonin narrowly escaped to Toki Jonin's residence in the nearby province of Shimosa. When he reappeared in Kamakura in the spring of 1261 and resumed his propagation activities, the government arrested him and, without investigation, ordered him exiled to Ito on the Izu Peninsula. He remained in Izu from the twelfth day of the fifth month until he was pardoned and returned to Kamakura on the twenty-second day of the second month, 1263. This work is

dated simply “the tenth day of the second month,” but it is generally assumed that it was written in the second year of Kocho (1262) while he was in exile in Izu.

The Daishonin wrote this letter, reconfirming the correctness of his teaching in light of the five principles for propagation: the teaching, the people’s capacity, the time, the country, and the sequence of propagation. He also reaffirms his own mission in view of the Lotus Sutra’s predictions that its votary in the Latter Day of the Law will undergo persecutions at the hands of the three powerful enemies.

Buddhist scholars of the past had set

forth various criteria that one must understand and take into account in propagating Buddhism. Nichiren Daishonin organized these criteria into an integral system, establishing the five principles for propagation as a standard for the comparative evaluation of the various Buddhist teachings. In this letter he explains these five guides, demonstrating in terms of each why the Lotus Sutra is the supreme teaching. Although this letter refers only to the Lotus Sutra, in light of the Daishonin’s other writings we may understand this to mean the sutra’s essence, Nammyoho-rence-kyo, and the practice and spirit it encompasses.

Notes

1. This story is found in the Nirvana Sutra. Mentioned are the five meditations to stop the mind’s disturbances and eliminate delusion. They are: meditation on the vileness of the body, meditation on compassion, meditation on dependent origination, meditation on the correct discernment of the phenomenal world, and breath-counting meditation. Meditation on the vileness of the body is concentrating on the impurity of the body to sever one’s attachment to it. Breath-counting meditation is a method of calming the mind by counting the breaths.

2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

4. This passage is given as a note in the text. The “records” may refer to the descriptions in *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* by T’ien-t’ai; *The Biography of Prince Shotoku*; *The Life of the Great Priest of T’ang China Who Journeyed to the East*; *An Essay on the Protection of the Nation* and *The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra* by Dengyo; *An Extensive Commentary on the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts* by Annen; and *The Essentials of the One Vehicle Teaching* by Eshin.

5. The monk Superior Intent lived in the Latter Day of the Buddha Lion Sound King. He slandered Bodhisattva Root of Joy who taught the doctrine of the true aspect of reality, and was therefore said to have fallen into hell. The Scholar Guna-

prabha first studied the Mahayana, but converted to the Hinayana after reading *The Great Commentary on the Abhidharma*. According to *The Record of the Western Regions*, he ascended to the Tushita heaven in order to resolve his doubts concerning the Hinayana and the Mahayana. There he met Bodhisattva Maitreya, but did not respect him because Maitreya was not an ordained monk. Thus he failed to learn from Maitreya because of his arrogance.

6. *The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice* is a work attributed to Maitreya or Asanga. The “writings of Seng-chao” refers to *The Afterword to the Lotus Sutra Translation*. Seng-chao (384–414) was one of Kumarajiva’s major disciples. The records of Shotoku, Dengyo, and Annen probably indicate the same sources cited in n. 4.

7. The priest Buddha is generally believed to refer to Butchi-bo Kakuan, a disciple of Dainichi (n.d.) who spread the Zen teachings in Japan before Eisai (1141–1215), the founder of the Rinzaï school of Zen Buddhism. Dainichi, also called Nonin, named his school the Japanese Bodhidharma school.

8. Nirvana Sutra.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

10. *Ibid.*, chap. 14.

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 13.

12. *Ibid.*, chap. 16.

13. *The Annotations on the Nirvana Sutra*.