

## Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra 27

*This is the twenty-seventh installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the April 1997 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.*

*Shakyamuni did not attain Buddhahood for the first time during the time he lived in India. Rather, he has been enlightened since the remote past; and though appearing to enter nirvana, he has in fact been constantly in this world expounding the Law. This revelation by Shakyamuni of his true identity is termed "casting off the transient and revealing the true." In this discussion, the participants explore the profound meaning of this principle, the relationship of the Person and the Law, the effort to restore the original humanism of Buddhism and other topics relating to Shakyamuni's true identity.*

### 27 Shakyamuni's Declaration of the Supreme Dignity of the Human Being

**Katsuji Saito:** I understand that the first part of this series of dialogues has been published in Hong Kong. Ming Pao Publications has reportedly chosen our discussion as the first volume of a new multi-volume series under the general theme "Buddhism and Life." This seems yet more evidence of the rising tide of interest worldwide in the profound philosophy of life that the Lotus Sutra expounds.

**Haruo Suda:** The general foreword to the series, written by Chengsi Wei, senior editor of the Ming Pao Newspapers, reads in part:

What is the value and significance of life? What is life's origin? What is its purpose? What is the significance of human existence in the boundless expanse of the universe? Such inexhaustible questions constantly weigh on our minds; and there is not a person alive who has not sought some kind of answer....

Among the many religions and philosophical systems in the world, Buddhism, with its profound insight into the nature of human existence, is like a great tree that towers alone high above the forest canopy, guiding people toward profound insight.

**Takanori Endo:** His perspective in comparing Buddhism to a tree towering above the forest is most perceptive. He also says:

Buddhism is not limited by the concept of a "savior." It teaches self-respect and self-trust, and that through our own power we can gain release from the sufferings of birth and death.

In consequence, Buddhism has a unique ability to put people's minds at ease and to help people change their lives. Herein lies the fundamental cause

for the rising popularity of Buddhism today in both East and West, indeed throughout the entire world.

**Daisaku Ikeda:** He puts his finger on the key point. The essence of Buddhism lies in developing oneself through one's own determination and tenacious effort—not by depending on anyone or anything else. We need to have the spirit to stand on our own initiative without relying on anyone. We don't need others' sympathy or sentimentality. We have to stand up and advance, even if there is no one to encourage us.

We resolutely and cheerfully take responsibility to change ourselves, our surroundings, society and the land where we live. That is the principle of *ichinen sanzen*, or three thousand realms in a single moment of life. What Buddhism teaches is not abstract theory; it is not a weak-kneed way of life of constantly clinging to something for support. At the same time, neither is it to be confused with the egoism to arrogantly suppose, "I alone am correct and respectable."

To believe in the great life force within oneself is at once to believe in the great life force existing within all people. Buddhism teaches that we should treasure the lives of others just as highly as we treasure our own.

**Saito:** The SGI has spread throughout the world because we have put this essential Buddhist teaching into practice. The fact that there are people in 128 countries practicing the essence of the Lotus Sutra, it seems to me, surely stands out in the history of Buddhism as a stupendous achievement.

**Ikeda:** Nichiren Daishonin, along with Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, the first and second Soka Gakkai presidents, surely rejoices at what we have achieved.

**Endo:** Friends from seventy countries gathered recently in Hong Kong for the SGI General Meeting [February 19, 1997]. And the 16th SGI World Youth Peace Culture Festival held there was put on by young people representing a hundred different countries. It seems to me that we have truly entered a brilliant new age thanks to you and all members around the world.

What is the wellspring of energy behind this unprecedented flourishing of Buddhism? As your remarks suggest just now, Mr. Ikeda, regarding President Makiguchi and President Toda, I am convinced it is because of the existence in the SGI of the "spirit of oneness of mentor and disciple" directed toward the realization of kosen-rufu.

**Saito:** My feelings are the same. Conversely, I think that we can trace any decline in Buddhism to the absence of this all-important spirit.

### **Why Did Buddhism Die Out in India?**

**Ikeda:** That's an important point. The oneness of mentor and disciple is in fact the

essence of both the Lotus Sutra and the “Life Span” chapter. My approach continues to be to explain the Sutra from a variety of angles in different contexts depending upon the occasion. This is a good time, I think, to introduce the view of Buddhism that was held by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), India’s first prime minister. He once discussed the question of why Buddhism died out in India with the French author André Malraux (1901–76).

I, too, once held a dialogue with Mr. Malraux.<sup>1</sup> I will never forget how his eyes shone. He had a certain aura about him; a great spirit of inquiry that seemed to radiate from his entire being. He was an incredibly curious man always seeking a deeper understanding of life. Mr. Malraux had a keen interest in Buddhism, and he suggested the possibility that a new civilization might some day be born that had its roots in Buddhism.

I once talked about the discussion between Nehru and Malraux in a speech I gave in Germany.<sup>2</sup> At one point in their conversation, Nehru remarked: “The genius of the Buddha has to do with the fact that he is a man. The originator of one of the most profound systems of thought in the history of humanity, an inflexible spirit and the most noble compassion. An accuser, vis-à-vis the teeming multitude of the gods.”<sup>3</sup>

**Suda:** Mention of his stance vis-à-vis the gods calls to mind how Nichiren Daishonin severely rebuked and remonstrated with Bodhisattva Hachiman.<sup>4</sup>

**Ikeda:** It was the wonderful character of the Buddha that won over people’s hearts. After Shakyamuni’s death, however, as Nehru deftly observed, “He became deified, he merged with that multitude, which closed round him,”<sup>5</sup> in effect, eclipsing his human side.

**Saito:** It is certainly true that at present there are very few adherents of Buddhism in India. Of course, Shakyamuni generally is revered—but as one of many gods within the Hindu pantheon. The problem is that as soon as Shakyamuni was deified, the path he had revealed for human beings to attain enlightenment disappeared.

**Ikeda:** Yes. Fundamentally, Buddhism is a teaching about how to live that is transmitted from mentor to disciple. The relationship of mentor and disciple is formed when there are people who desire to follow the correct path in life and who seek a mentor, and when the mentor responds to their spirit. But if the Buddha as the mentor ceases to be a human being and becomes a “god,” then, practically speaking, the path of mentor and disciple cannot exist.

**Suda:** By following the same path as the mentor one can attain the same state of life as the mentor. That is the premise on which the path of mentor and disciple is based. If the mentor is thought to be a “god,” then the followers, put off by the seemingly insurmountable gap between themselves and the mentor, will not be able to muster the aspiration that would otherwise drive them to advance along the same path.

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**Saito:** In Hinayana Buddhism, which emerged relatively early after Shakyamuni's death, the people gradually came to view Shakyamuni as a deity. Consequently they came to feel that it was enough if they could just strive to attain the enlightenment of persons of learning, or voice-hearers (i.e., the stage of arhat<sup>6</sup>).

In Mahayana Buddhism, other than the Lotus Sutra, which was systematized at a later time as a countermovement to Hinayana, a large number of Buddhas are introduced besides Shakyamuni Buddha. These include, for example, Amida,<sup>7</sup> Dainichi<sup>8</sup> and Vairochana.<sup>9</sup> But there is an unbridgeable gap between these Buddhas and actual people. They are presented largely as beings to whom people can entrust their hopes for salvation; not as potential mentors.

Thus, the path of mentor and disciple exists neither in the Hinayana nor in the provisional Mahayana teachings.

**Ikeda:** When "Shakyamuni the human being" was forgotten, Buddhism ceased to be a teaching about how to live the best possible life. The path of mentor and disciple disappeared. Consequently, Buddhism declined and became authoritarian.

**Endo:** Nichiren Shoshu, under the leadership of Nikken, which represents the latest and, possibly, the most egregious case of authoritarianism and abuses by a Buddhist clergy, certainly gives no indication of presenting a teaching that is concerned with how people should live. They are merely using Buddhism as a shield of authority to hide their own decadence. Such a situation surely represents the "destruction of the Law."

**Saito:** Nichiren Daishonin and Shakyamuni went out among the people to propagate the Law widely while struggling to overcome all kinds of difficulties and attacks—collectively termed the "three obstacles and four devils." When followers fail to continue along the same path as the mentor, the very life of Buddhism is extinguished. One cannot fail to be impressed by Nehru's wisdom in discerning that Buddhism died out in India when Shakyamuni ceased to be viewed as a human being.

### **Shakyamuni Completely Reverses His Earlier Teaching**

**Ikeda:** Let's get back to the "Life Span" chapter. The Lotus Sutra's message of "return to Shakyamuni the human being!" is nowhere expressed more clearly than in the principle of "casting off the transient and revealing the true" found in the "Life Span" chapter. I propose that we consider this in some detail.

**Suda:** How does "casting off the transient and revealing the true" imply returning to Shakyamuni the human being? I should think that Shakyamuni's revelation that he has been enlightened since the remote past, rather than making him more human and accessible, would on the surface seem to suggest that he is a great

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Buddha far removed from ordinary people.

**Endo:** Since ancient times, there has in fact been a tendency to interpret the “Buddha of the remote past” of the Lotus Sutra as some kind of supreme deity. But such an interpretation certainly does not represent the essence of the Lotus Sutra.

**Ikeda:** Let’s begin by confirming the meaning of casting off the transient and revealing the true. I think a review will be valuable even for those who are well versed in Buddhist study.

**Endo:** Okay. In the “Life Span” chapter, Shakyamuni says:

In all the worlds the heavenly and human beings and asuras all believe that the present Shakyamuni Buddha, after leaving the palace of the Shakyas, seated himself in the place of practice not far from the city of Gaya and there attained anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood. (LS16, 225)<sup>10</sup>

**Suda:** People thought Shakyamuni had re-nounced the world at 19 and attained Buddhahood at the age of 30 while seated beneath a tree near the city of Gaya. While there is some variation among different accounts as to Shakyamuni’s age when the main events in his life occurred, they all share in common the view that Shakyamuni attained enlightenment for the first time during the lifetime he lived in India. That is the standard view.

This same view on when Shakyamuni attained enlightenment can also be found in the provisional teachings expounded prior to the Lotus Sutra, and in the theoretical teaching (or first half) of the Lotus Sutra.

**Endo:** In the “Life Span” chapter this view is completely overturned. Here, Shakyamuni reveals that, on the contrary, he has been enlightened since the remote past of *gohyaku-jintengo*.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the view that Shakyamuni attained enlightenment for the first time during his existence in India, he in fact attained Buddhahood long before. This original enlightenment is called “actual attainment in the remote past.” Shakyamuni, who attained enlightenment in the remote past, is called the “true Buddha of the remote past,” in the sense that he reveals his true identity in the remote past. “True,” here, includes the meanings of true identity, true origin or true entity.

By contrast, Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment for the first time in India is a “transient Buddha” that the true Buddha of the remote past manifested in response to people’s capacity and aspirations in order to lead them to happiness. A transient Buddha is to a true Buddha what a shadow is to a body; it is a provisional aspect.

**Saito:** A transient Buddha is also termed a “provisional Buddha.” The relation between the true Buddha and a transient or provisional Buddha is often likened to the relation between the “moon in the sky” and the “moon in a pond”; that is, the

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difference between the actual moon and its reflection.

**Suda:** The designation of the first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra as the theoretical (literally, “provisional”) teaching and of the latter fourteen chapters as the essential (literally, “true”) teaching is also based on this distinction between the provisional Buddha and the true Buddha.

**Ikeda:** Regarding the difference between the essential and the theoretical teachings, Nichiren Daishonin says, “One is as different from the other as fire is from water or heaven from earth” (MW-3, 275). He also stresses that the difference between the essential and theoretical teachings is far greater even than that between the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. That’s because the essential teaching contains this doctrine of casting off the transient and revealing the true.

### **Shakyamuni’s Last Words to His Disciples—Base Yourself on the Law**

**Saito:** This raises the question of just how Shakyamuni’s casting off of his transient status and the consequent revelation of his true identity as the Buddha enlightened since the remote past translates into a message to “return to Shakyamuni the human being.”

**Ikeda:** Why don’t we try to pursue this methodically? In the first place, Shakyamuni’s purpose in expounding his teachings lay in opening the eyes of all people to the “eternal Law” to which he himself had awakened. And Shakyamuni further taught that even after his death people should make this Law their mentor.

**Suda:** Yes. Ananda, who had constantly waited in service upon the Buddha, at one point asks Shakyamuni, “On what should we rely in our practice after you have passed away?” Shakyamuni replies: “Ananda, you should make yourself an island and depend on yourself. Without depending on others, you should make the Law an island and your foundation.”<sup>12</sup>

**Endo:** This dictum is variously phrased as “Depend on yourself, depend on the Law,” or “Illuminate the torch of the self, illuminate the torch of the Law.”

**Ikeda:** Yes. The important thing here is the relation of the Law and the Buddha. “Law” has a variety of meanings, including that of “teaching.” But, in conclusion, what Shakyamuni refers to as the Law, or Dharma, is in fact no different from the life of the eternal Buddha. We can think of the Law as the property of the Law, or Dharma body, of the eternal Buddha.

This may seem like a bit of a leap, but Shakyamuni’s awakening to the eternal Law can be seen as equivalent to his perceiving the “eternal Buddha” within himself. From the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra, the teaching to “make the Law your foundation” is essentially a directive to make the eternal Buddha one’s

mentor. More important, Shakyamuni himself attained enlightenment with that eternal Buddha as his mentor.

**Endo:** “Depend on yourself,” here, of course, does not mean to simply rely on the self. One knows best of all just how undependable the self is.

**Ikeda:** In effect he is saying, “Become the master of your mind” (MW-2, 205 [236–37]).<sup>13</sup> For us, this means thoroughly devoting ourselves to faith. The point is to make this self—the self of faith—our foundation.

**Saito:** There are certainly various ways of looking at the relationship of the Person and the Law. In the writing, “On Attaining Buddhahood,” Nichiren Daishonin says, “If you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but some inferior teaching” (MW-1, 3). While the “Law” might seem to imply something separate from our everyday lives, it in fact exists nowhere apart from our own hearts.

### Shakyamuni’s Mentor Is the Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One

Since I attained Buddhahood  
the number of kalpas that have passed  
is an immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands,  
millions, trillions, asamkhyas.  
Constantly I have preached the Law, teaching, converting  
countless millions of living beings,  
causing them to enter the Buddha way,  
all this for immeasurable kalpas.  
In order to save living beings,  
as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana  
but in truth I do not pass into extinction.  
I am always here, preaching the Law. (LS16, 229)

**Ikeda:** Fundamentally, the Law and the Person (i.e., the Buddha) are inseparable.

Thus Come One, another name for Buddha, literally means “one who has come from the world of truth.” In other words, Thus Come One means the actual Law that manifests in our day-to-day reality. The universal life has the aspects of the Person and the Law; and these two aspects are inseparable.

This may get a little complicated, but since it is a key concept I would like to pursue this point a little further. In one place in his preaching Shakyamuni says, “Those who see the Law see me, those who see me see the Law.” This means that to perceive the Law with one’s life is to encounter Shakyamuni, and that to encounter Shakyamuni is to perceive the Law. “Me,” in the phrase “those who see me,” fundamentally indicates the eternal Buddha who is at one with the eternal Law.

In the “Life Span” chapter Shakyamuni reveals the eternal Buddha body when he says, “I am always here, preaching the Law” (LS16, 229). While in terms of the literal meaning of the Lotus Sutra, this is referring to Shakyamuni who has been enlightened

since the remote past of *gohyaku-jintengo*, ultimately it points to the Buddha of *kuon ganjo*, or the Buddha who has been enlightened since time without beginning.

The eternal Law at one with the eternal Buddha to which Shakyamuni became enlightened is the eternal life to which all Buddhas are enlightened. Just as did Shakyamuni, all Buddhas of past, present and future have become enlightened to, and have taken as their mentor, the Buddha of *kuon ganjo*. This is the Buddha of Limitless Joy, the Buddha of absolute freedom of *kuon ganjo*, or the Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One. President Toda said, "The Life of Nichiren Daishonin and our own lives have neither beginning nor end. This is what is termed *kuon ganjo*. There is neither beginning nor end. The universe itself is a great entity of life." It has existed since time without beginning as the ultimate entity of compassion.

Embracing this great entity of life as his "mentor," Shakyamuni the human being became enlightened just as he was—as a human being. And the moment he became enlightened, he realized that all Buddhas throughout time and space became Buddhas with this "eternal Buddha" embodying the principle of the oneness of the Person and the Law as their mentor.

**Suda:** In the "Expedient Means" (second) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, we also find the concept of "five kinds of Buddhas who preach the one Buddha vehicle." "Five kinds of Buddhas" specifically means: all Buddhas, the Buddhas of the past, the Buddhas of the future, the Buddhas of the present, and Shakyamuni Buddha.

**Ikeda:** In other words, this means that by earnestly seeking and practicing the Law, we can certainly encounter the Buddha who is "always here, preaching the Law" (LS16, 229).

**Saito:** "You should earnestly seek out the Law that I have left behind," is what Shakyamuni is in effect telling us. "When you do so, you will encounter the Buddha enlightened since the remote past." This is in fact the motif of the parable of the excellent physician and his sick children that is expounded in the "Life Span" chapter.

**Suda:** I see. I never made that connection before.

The gist of the parable of the excellent physician and his sick children is as follows. In order to save his children (the people) who have by mistake consumed poison and lost their minds, the excellent physician (the Buddha) goes away and has someone report that he died in a distant land. Grieving over their father's death, the children come to their senses and drink the good medicine (the Law) that their father had left for them, and thereby recover their sanity. The father then returns and is reunited with his children who have been restored to health.

**Endo:** The Buddha is always in the world and never passes away. In order to arouse in people a seeking mind for the Law, he uses as an expedient means his apparent entry into extinction. But once the people come to believe in and embrace the Law, the Buddha again appears before them. This is the meaning of the parable.

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**Ikeda:** That's right. Through practicing the eternal Mystic Law, absolutely anyone can perceive in his or her heart the eternal Buddha who is "always here, preaching the Law." We can perhaps say that this is the true significance of the Buddha's decree—"return to Shakyamuni the human being!" And it is the "Life Span" chapter's parable of the excellent physician and his sick children that faithfully expresses this spirit.

**Suda:** As you pointed out last time, the "Life Span" chapter is a message for the people in the world after Shakyamuni's death, and in particular for the people of the Latter Day of the Law. Shakyamuni is saying, in other words, "After I have passed away, you must take my mentor as your own, and advance along the same path as I have." This is in a sense Shakyamuni's will.

**Endo:** So Shakyamuni's not being in the world is really not an obstacle to one's attaining enlightenment.

**Suda:** Those in the world during Shakyamuni's lifetime could sense the eternal Law through direct personal contact with the Buddha, and could advance along the path of enlightenment. But that is not possible for those of us living in the world after his passing. I think that in this we find an important reason for why the "Life Span" chapter is said to be for those in the world after the Buddha's passing.

### **Those Alive in Shakyamuni's Day Had Personal Contact With the Buddha**

**Endo:** To give one example from Shakyamuni's time, after attaining enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree, he delivered his first sermon to five monks with whom he had formerly practiced austerities. Traditionally, this is called "the first turning of the wheel of the law."

The five ascetics had previously derided Shakyamuni, on the grounds that he had "regressed from the path of difficult practices." But it is said that when they laid eyes on Shakyamuni, they were struck by the undeniable brilliance of his character and immediately became his followers.

**Ikeda:** Shakyamuni's first words on that occasion were, "I have attained immortality."<sup>14</sup> With these words Shakyamuni was expressing how he felt having attained enlightenment. He must have perceived the great and eternal life of the universe pulsing in his heart. He must have sensed the eternal life force of the Thus Come One welling forth at each moment from the very depths of his being.

So moved were they by the great state of life they sensed flowing from Shakyamuni the human being that the five monks entered the path of Buddhism. Through the person Shakyamuni, they were able to connect to the eternal Law. It was only during Shakyamuni's lifetime that it was possible for people to have such a personal exchange between mentor and disciple.

**Suda:** To illustrate the kind of exchange that Shakyamuni had with his disciples, there was someone who was so impressed by Shakyamuni that it changed his entire life. I am referring to the notorious thief called Angulimala. He was apparently given the name Angulimala on account of his supreme villainy. *Anguli* means finger and *mala* means necklace in Sanskrit. He was said to have killed a great many people and to have made a kind of ornament with his victims' fingers that he hung around his neck. It is said that a single phrase from Shakyamuni, "Come along,"<sup>15</sup> caused him to have a change of heart, and that as a result he became the Buddha's follower.

He thereafter began collecting alms as part of his practice. But people who bore a grudge against him because of his past actions pelted him with dirt and rocks, and tore his robe to shreds. He returned to Shakyamuni covered with blood.

Shakyamuni encouraged Angulimala, saying: "You must persevere. You have to tenaciously endure this hardship. You are now receiving the effects of negative karma that ordinarily you would have to undergo in hell for years, for hundreds of years, for thousands of years."<sup>16</sup>

**Endo:** That calls to mind the principle of lessening karmic retribution.

**Ikeda:** One's negative karma from past misdeeds doesn't just disappear immediately once the person begins practicing Buddhism. Still, it must have been very painful for Shakyamuni to see someone who had had a genuine change of heart and become a disciple receive such treatment, even if it were due to evil karma the person himself had created. Doubtless it was as painful for Shakyamuni as if he had received a wound to his own flesh.

Shakyamuni wanted above all to enable his followers to carry through with their practice without regression and advance along the path leading to the attainment of Buddhahood. For precisely that reason, he gave them encouragement of profound compassion. The suffering of the disciple is also the suffering of the mentor. This is the heart of a true mentor.

Angulimala keenly felt the Buddha's compassion. As a result he was able to endure this hardship.

**Saito:** There is another well-known episode that concerns Aniruddha,<sup>17</sup> a disciple who had lost his sight. Aniruddha was trying to thread a needle to mend his robe. But he was having difficulty because of his poor eyesight. He muttered in exasperation, "Isn't there anyone who wants to accumulate further benefit by threading this needle for me?" Someone replied, "Let me accumulate more benefit." He was taken aback when he realized that he was hearing the warm voice of Shakyamuni.

Aniruddha felt ashamed and tried to refuse the offer. "Surely there's no need for you to accumulate any more benefit," he told Shakyamuni. But Shakyamuni told him that this was not the case, and that the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of happiness were never-ending. And with that he threaded the needle.<sup>18</sup>

**Ikeda:** That's a marvelous vignette. It conveys a sense of the actual person Shakyamuni, who, if he saw a disciple who was having difficulties, would by no means simply ignore the person; on the contrary, he would do everything he could to warmly help them.

In any event, Shakyamuni's teachings differed considerably depending on whom he was addressing. All the same, through personal exchange with Shakyamuni, his disciples were able to advance along the correct path. Those alive during Shakyamuni's lifetime pursued the Law—the Buddha's mentor—inspired by the fresh and profound sense of the Buddha they gained through their direct contact with Shakyamuni.

### **After Shakyamuni's Death, the Law Becomes the Mentor**

**Saito:** By contrast, after Shakyamuni's death the Law necessarily becomes fundamental. That is inevitable. The only way to attain Buddhahood is to have a direct connection with the Law and, in effect, make the Law one's mentor.

**Ikeda:** Yes. After Shakyamuni's passing, therefore, the practice of the Buddha's disciples came to center around the issue of how to perceive the eternal Law that is at one with the eternal Buddha.

The so-called Hinayana Buddhist Order, which came into existence after Shakyamuni's death, was composed primarily of Shakyamuni's direct disciples and of those monks who carried on after them. It may be that at first they earnestly observed the practice of strictly regulating the self based on teachings that Shakyamuni left behind. But that spirit was gradually lost with the passage of time. They departed from the original teaching to look within the self to perceive the Law at one with the Buddha to which Shakyamuni had awakened; and it may be that as a result there arose a tendency to see Shakyamuni as somehow a different kind of being than they were.

In any event, at some point they forgot about struggling to embody the eternal Law that is one with the eternal Buddha to which Shakyamuni the human being had awakened. This is a generalization, but it seems likely that this is more or less the essence of what took place.

### **Shakyamuni's Deification Resulted in Buddhism's Dehumanization**

**Saito:** Because direct contact with the Buddha was impossible, in time the concept of the "great Buddha" took on a kind of life of its own. People thought that Shakyamuni alone had attained the Buddha's enlightenment, and that it was far beyond them to ever become Buddhas themselves.

**Endo:** The enlightenment toward which they strove was the highest enlightenment of voice-hearers—the stage of *arhat*. The state of the Buddha was seen as utterly unattainable.

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**Suda:** In the meantime, the precepts gradually became more and more complex. Also, it is pointed out that, to maintain the order, the monks created an air of mystery around their temples, and went so far as to expound teachings arrogating authority to themselves. At the same time, they placed the Buddha on a pedestal rendering him inaccessible to ordinary people.

**Ikeda:** Still, things weren't quite as bad as they could have been as long as Shakyamuni's direct disciples were around. The first compilation of sutras is said to have taken place about a century after Shakyamuni's death. By then Shakyamuni's deification may have already been fairly well advanced. Also, it might be that the project had been prompted by a sense of crisis that memory of Shakyamuni the human being, which had grown increasingly dim, was fading away entirely.

**Saito:** The Sanskrit term that, in the Chinese Buddhist canon, is translated as "World-Honored One" is *bhagavat*, an ancient Indian literary term. This was apparently an appellation that disciples used in addressing a teacher. But as Shakyamuni's deification became solidified, people came to refer to him instead as the "supreme deity" or as the "god of gods."

**Suda:** When we come to Mahayana Buddhism, we find an emphasis on a personal Buddha as a "savior" figure who leads people to enlightenment.

**Endo:** However, as was pointed out earlier, these Buddhas are not the same as Shakyamuni. They include Amida, Vairochana and Dainichi. They are personal Buddhas of deep compassion; moreover, they are described as supreme beings who continually save people over the span of eternity.

**Ikeda:** They may have arrived at these Buddhas in attempting to approximate the "eternal Law at one with the eternal Buddha" that Shakyamuni made his own mentor. In that sense, we can see them each as a partial expression of the life of the original Buddha enlightened since the remote past.

**Suda:** In terms of the doctrine of the Buddha's three bodies or enlightened properties,<sup>19</sup> according to one interpretation Dainichi represents the Dharma body, or the property of the Law; and Amida represents the bliss body, or property of wisdom. By contrast, Shakyamuni of the "Life Span" chapter who has been enlightened since the remote past is the Buddha inherently possessing all three enlightened properties. From the standpoint of the "Life Span" chapter, therefore, all other Buddhas represent partial views of enlightenment.

**Saito:** Regarding these pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, the Daishonin says, "All teach no more than fragments of the Law inherent in one's life" (MW-5, 181). The same can perhaps be said of the Buddha's bodies or enlightened properties taken individually. Why don't we review this concept of the three bodies another time?

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**Endo:** These teachings explain nothing but idealized Buddhas—Buddhas exhibiting special appearances and characteristics. This becomes a common concept in Buddhism.

**Ikeda:** From one standpoint, these Buddhas are expressions of people’s ardent spirit of yearning for the Buddha; or perhaps they were formulated in response to that longing. Nichikan Shonin says that these Buddhas are “adorned with distinguishing features and characteristics in accord with the sentiments of the people of the time.”

**Suda:** The problem is that as a result of this Mahayana Buddhist movement, people came to make light of Shakyamuni, the originator of Buddhism. Instead, they revered imaginary Buddhas as “gods.” Ultimately, this closed off the path whereby people could discover the “Law at one with the Buddha” within their own lives.

**Endo:** Moreover, the teaching of such Buddhas, rather than encouraging people to place importance on their own inherent strength, only reinforced the tendency to depend on the Buddha’s compassion for salvation. The Pure Land or Nembutsu school of Buddhism, in which people seek salvation through the benevolence of Amida Buddha, is a case in point.

**Ikeda:** In short, both the Hinayana and Mahayana teachings completely deviate from the spirit of the teaching that Shakyamuni left behind to make the Law and the self our foundation.

If I may venture to generalize, while the Hinayana teachings emphasize the side of seeking the Law, they needlessly alienate the Buddha from human beings. The Mahayana teachings, on the other hand, while they seek to revive the relationship between the Buddha and human beings, fail to extend people’s understanding to the extent that they themselves can embody the Law. Neither approach is adequate. This underlines the significance of the “Life Span” chapter’s teaching of casting off the transient and revealing the true.

**Endo:** Buddhism is not the only place we find such tendencies as you have just described. Any religion may succumb to the flawed notion of trying to subordinate people through dogma or authority.

**Ikeda:** That’s right. The spirit of the Lotus Sutra is to resist the dehumanization of religion and religion’s tendency to become divorced from reality; but rather to steadfastly redirect religion to the prime point of the human being.

**Suda:** I recall the Daishonin’s declaration in “On Practicing the Buddha’s Teachings” that he has “[launched] the battle of the provisional and true teachings” and “the battle goes on even today” (MW-1, 101). The true legacy of Buddhism can be found only within unceasing spiritual struggle.

**Saito:** The Daishonin constantly proclaimed: "Return to Shakyamuni!" He refutes adherents of the Shingon sect who revered Dainichi Buddha, saying, "Who were the parents of Dainichi Buddha, and in what country did he appear when he expounded the Dainichi Sutra?" (MW-7, 53).

**Endo:** He condemns as utterly confused those who try to do away with the actual person Shakyamuni while making much of imaginary Buddhas of uncertain origins. "Return to Shakyamuni!" means "Return to the human being!"

**Suda:** The Daishonin waged a desperate struggle to revive the humanistic spirit of Buddhism.

**Ikeda:** That suggests just how strong the tendency of religion is to depart from the human being. And when that happens, religion becomes little more than a means for controlling people.

**Suda:** That's a truly frightful prospect.

**Saito:** While various arguments can be made about the principal cause for this phenomenon, the following can certainly be cited as contributing factors: corruption of members of the clergy, increasing rigidity in the organization of the religious body, and a stagnant spirit of faith. When these coincide, a religion becomes alienated from the people and grows authoritarian.

**Suda:** The Nikken sect is a classic example of a school in which these factors are all in evidence. They have a dissolute high priest making wild claims; for example, that he is equal to Nichiren Daishonin. This alone sends a clear message that they are not the least concerned with fundamental issues of human life and existence.

### **President Toda: "I Am Merely an Upstanding Common Mortal"**

**Endo:** President Toda said:

It would be pretty peculiar if by practicing Nam-myoho-renge-kyo we could attain the rank of "bodhisattva" or "great bodhisattva." Now, in the Latter Day of the Law, there couldn't be another of the status of Nichiren or of a great bodhisattva. Such a being could only be a phantom.<sup>20</sup>

**Ikeda:** I recall how a newspaper reporter once sarcastically asked President Toda, "Since you're the president of the Soka Gakkai, that must make you a living Buddha. Doesn't it?"

"Hah!" he retorted with a hearty laugh. "If a living Buddha were to eat raw fish or drink whiskey, that would be terrible. There isn't any such being."

"I am merely an upstanding common mortal," he would often say. "Religious

leaders who claim to be gods and the like are frauds.”<sup>21</sup>

**Saito:** There isn't anyone who is superhuman—that was his firm conviction. I am impressed with a sense of how important a condition Buddhist humanism will be for religion in the twenty-first century. This is indeed just as you are always telling us.

**Ikeda:** Likewise, it is not at all uncommon to find instances of powerful people using religion as a sign of authority to make themselves appear somehow superior to others. When clergy or leaders of society try to pass themselves off as better than others or as special, the people are invariably plunged into misery. This is a lesson of history, as the witch hunts and the oppressive regimes of dictators such as Hitler and Stalin make abundantly clear.

Blaise Pascal (1623–62) puts his finger on the essence of this tragedy, saying, “Man is neither angel nor beast, and it is a misfortune that whoever tries to play the angel ends by playing the beast.”<sup>22</sup>

**Endo:** Those who try to pass themselves off as somehow superhuman or as “angels” are in fact beasts; they come to behave in a way that is subhuman. From this standpoint, we find that the principle of casting off the transient and revealing the true signifies Shakyamuni displaying the great and eternal life that is at one with the universe while never for a moment departing from his status as a human being.

**Ikeda:** In philosophical terms, it urges us: “Direct your gaze on the eternal without departing from the present reality!” “Seek out the supreme that is at one with life’s inherent truth!” “Discover the universal right where you are!” That is the spirit of casting off the transient and revealing the true.

### The “Life Span” Chapter Unifies the Hinayana and the Mahayana

**Saito:** Although both the Hinayana teachings and the provisional Mahayana teachings make repeated attempts to get at the truth, and have produced significant philosophical results, in the last analysis they are distorted by biases. It is through the “Life Span” chapter’s teaching of casting off the transient and revealing the true that these two bodies of teaching are for the first time largely unified.

**Ikeda:** That’s right. The “Life Span” chapter beckons us to return to Shakyamuni the human being. And yet, through the concept of the eternal Buddha, it develops a religious world more profound than that afforded through the Buddha’s deification. Without departing in the least from the human being, it opens up a path whereby people can limitlessly expand or transcend the narrow limitations of their humanity.

**Saito:** Thinking in these terms, it occurs to me that while we tend to place importance on the aspect of Shakyamuni’s revealing his true identity as the eternal Buddha, the aspect of his “casting off the transient” is equally important. In

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“casting off the transient,” we can sense Shakyamuni’s determination to discover the truth without departing from the actual person; that is, to always base himself on “Shakyamuni the human being.”

**Ikeda:** To “cast off” means to open. Opening up the transient could be compared to removing the clouds blocking the sun. When the clouds are dispelled, the “true identity,” like the brilliant light of the sun, appears. Just because there are clouds in the sky, it doesn’t mean that you look for the sun somewhere else. You don’t stop looking for the sun in the sky; for that is where its true identity resides.

**Suda:** I understand the meaning of “return to the human being,” but I imagine that many people may be a little unclear as to what precisely is meant by the expression “eternal Buddha” or by the “Buddha who is always here, preaching the Law.” Some may associate these terms with a kind of superhuman being.

**Endo:** Actually, general Buddhist scholarship treats Shakyamuni of the “Life Span” chapter as a kind of deity.

**Ikeda:** It was for precisely this reason that Nichiren Daishonin inscribed the Gohonzon. Nothing could be more actual or concrete. The Daishonin made it possible for us ordinary people of the Latter Day, by chanting the Mystic Law to the Gohonzon, to become one with the “Buddha who is always here, preaching the Law.”

The Gohonzon embodies the oneness of the Person and the Law. In terms of the Person, it is the manifestation of the Buddha of absolute freedom since time without beginning; in terms of the Law, it is the manifestation of actual *ichinen sanzen*. Therefore, President Toda referred to the eternal Buddha of time without beginning as “Lord Ichinen Sanzen.”

When we embrace the Gohonzon and exert ourselves for *kosen-rufu*, the “eternal Buddha who is always here, preaching the Law” comes forth in our lives.

President Toda commented on the passage of the “Life Span” chapter, “Ever since then [*gohyaku-jintengo*] I have been constantly in this *saha* world, preaching the Law, teaching and converting” (LS16, 225), as follows: “This is the ‘universe that is at one with the Gohonzon.’ The life of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo has since the remote past been at one with the universe.”<sup>23</sup>

He also said: “When we pray to the Gohonzon and receive the life of the Gohonzon in ourselves, then, because our life itself is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the power of the Gohonzon wells forth within us. Then we can observe the affairs of the world without any serious error in judgment.”<sup>24</sup>

### Revealing Our True Identity Every Morning and Every Evening

**Endo:** The “Ongi Kuden” (Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings) cites a quotation of Fu Ta-shih,<sup>25</sup> “We awaken with the Buddha every morning, dream with the Buddha every night; at every moment we enter the Way, and at every moment we reveal our true identity” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 737). We who are

dedicating our lives to faith in the Gohonzon are able to sense the truth of these words more profoundly and immediately than any Buddhist scholar can.

**Ikeda:** It's a matter of "revealing the true" at each moment. Every morning and evening we actualize the principle of casting off the transient and revealing the true. We cause the life of the eternal Buddha of *kuon ganjo* to manifest in our hearts and we continuously advance toward kosen-rufu. From a broad perspective, this means that we are in fact reading the "Life Span" chapter with our lives each day.

**Saito:** Over the course of two millennia, the spiritual channel that Shakyamuni opened gradually drifted away from humanity and dried up. It is the humanism of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism that has caused it to be revitalized as a great river that will endure for eternity.

**Ikeda:** Yes. The Daishonin's teaching refutes all philosophies and religions that force people to kneel down before "religious authority," and enables people instead to open up the "sacred great life" within themselves. It was for this reason that the Daishonin encountered great persecution. His was a great struggle for human rights, undertaken with indomitable courage.

In "The True Entity of Life," he says: "The common mortal is the entity of the three properties, or the true Buddha. The Buddha is the function of the three properties, or a provisional Buddha" (MW-1, 90). I think we will have the chance to discuss this profound doctrine in detail later on; but in essence what he is saying is that the common mortal is the true Buddha. I would like to interpret this as the ultimate declaration of the "humanization of Buddhism."

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is a humanistic religion that will illuminate the third millennium, beginning with the twenty-first century, and the entire 10,000 years and more of the Latter Day of the Law.

*To be continued*

1. Their dialogue was published under the title *Ningen Kakumei to Ningen no Joken* (The Human Revolution and the Human Condition) by Ushio Publishing Company, Tokyo, in 1976.
2. At the Third SGI of Germany Executive Conference, held in Frankfurt am Main on May 24, 1994.
3. André Malraux, *Anti-memoirs*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 228.
4. Bodhisattva Hachiman: Originally, a Japanese deity of the harvest. He is often called Great Bodhisattva Hachiman. In Buddhism, Hachiman is regarded as a deity who protects the votaries of the Lotus Sutra.
5. André Malraux, p. 228.
6. *Arhat*: Defined variously as "one worthy of respect," "one who has nothing more to learn," "destroyer of the bandits of the illusions of thought and desire," "no rebirth" (because an *arhat* has freed himself from transmigration in the six

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paths), and “worthy to receive offerings.”

7. Amida: Skt. *Amitayus*, “Infinite Life,” or *Amitabha*, “Infinite Light.” The Buddha of the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the western region of the universe.

8. Dainichi: Skt. *Mahavairochana*. A Buddha mentioned in the Dainichi and Kongocho sutras, worshipped by adherents of esoteric Buddhism.

9. Vairochana: A Buddha who appears in the Kegon, Bommo and Dainichi sutras. The Shingon sect equates this Buddha with its central deity, Mahavairochana.

10. Editor’s note: All quotations from the Lotus Sutra are from: *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For purposes of convenience, all citations from this work will be given in the text and abbreviated as follows: LS followed by the chapter number, and then the page number.

11. *Gohyaku-jintengo*: Please refer to the previous installment of this series.

12. *Nanden Daizokyo*, ed. Junjiro Takakusu (Tokyo: Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo Kanko-kai, 1935), vol. 7, pp. 68–69.

13. Editor’s note: Quotes from volume 2 of *The Major Writings* are from the revised edition; the page number for the earlier edition is given in brackets.

14. *Nanden Daizokyo*, (Tokyo: Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo Kanko-kai, 1938), vol. 3, pp. 16–17.

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 11, Part 1, p. 134.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.

17. Aniruddha: Also Anaritsu. One of the ten great disciples of the Buddha. Having once fallen asleep in the presence of the Buddha, he vowed that he would never sleep again. He eventually lost his eyesight, but acquired the ability to see intuitively.

18. *Kokuyaku Issaikyo Indo Senjutsubu Agonbu* Vols. 9–10, ed. Shinyu Iwano (Tokyo: Daito Shuppansha, 1969), p. 152.

19. According to Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China, the benefit of the Buddha specifically consists of the Buddha’s three bodies or enlightened properties: the Dharma body or property of the Law (the truth to which the Buddha is enlightened), the bliss body or property of wisdom (the wisdom the Buddha has attained), and the manifested body or property of action (the physical form in which the Buddha appears in this world and his compassionate actions).

20. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1987), vol. 7, p. 372.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 372–73.

22. *Pascal’s Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (London: Harvill Press, 1962), p. 173.

23. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Writings of Josei Toda) (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1985), vol. 5, p. 431.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 373–74.

25. Fu Ta-shih (497–569): A Chinese priest of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. His true name is Fu His, but he was also called Fu Ta-shih, which can be construed to mean a bodhisattva who will succeed the Buddha.

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