

**On the Gohonzon: The Bodhisattvas of the Earth — Part 1**  
**A Watershed Event**  
**By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor**

The emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the Lotus Sutra is a watershed event like the turning point in a drama. The scene is set when Shakyamuni turns down the vows to spread the Law offered by millions of bodhisattvas already present at the Ceremony in the Air.

Then the earth of the “thousand-millionfold countries of the saha world trembled and split open” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 213). And countless bodhisattvas emerged, their bodies all a golden hue.

These bodhisattvas, Shakyamuni goes on to explain, have been his disciples since the remote past. Among them are four leaders, whom Shakyamuni names: “The first was called Superior Practices (Jogyo), the second was called Boundless Practices (Muhengyo), the third was called Pure Practices (Jyogyo), and the fourth was called Firmly Established Practices (Anryugyo). These four bodhisattvas were the foremost leaders and guiding teachers among all the group” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 214).

They appear on either side of Shakyamuni and Many Treasures at the top of the Gohonzon. According to an interpretation by the T’ien-t’ai school, they represent the four virtues of the Buddha mentioned in the Nirvana Sutra: eternity (*jo*), happiness (*raku*), true self (*ga*) and purity (*jo*).

Amazingly, the first thing these bodhisattvas do after offering gestures of respect to Shakyamuni and the other Buddhas is to ask how Shakyamuni is feeling! “Are you comfortable, are you ill, are you worried?” “Are the people you’re teaching giving you a hard time?” “Are you weary and spent from the effort?”

And Shakyamuni responds cheerfully that he’s doing fine, and that his followers are accepting the teaching easily. That’s because they’ve constantly received his instruction in past ages. They’ve also made offerings to the Buddhas of past ages, building up their good causes. The ones who have resisted, practicing the Lesser Vehicle, he adds, will listen now.

Bodhisattva Maitreya (Miroku), who has been watching this scene in astonishment, verbalizes the questions on everyone’s mind: Where did these unknown bodhisattvas come from? Who taught and converted them? “Regarding the causes that govern the beginning and end / of this multitude of bodhisattvas, / possessor of immeasurable virtue, World-Honored One, / we beg you to dispel the doubts of the assembly!” (*The Lotus Sutra*, pp. 217–18).

In “The True Object of Worship,” Nichiren Daishonin points out that doubts about the legitimacy of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth raised in the minds of those assembled at the Ceremony in the Air were the most difficult they or people of the future would ever entertain. And the response to this greatest doubt was the Buddha’s highest teaching, the Law revealed in the “The Life Span of the Thus Come One,” chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, of which we recite a portion everytime we do gongyo.

By pointing out that he had been training the Bodhisattvas of the Earth since the infinite past — not just since his enlightenment under the bodhi tree in India — Shakyamuni revealed the original Law by which all Buddhas attain enlightenment.

**Five in a series**  
(*The Bodhisattvas of the Earth, part 2, will continue this explanation.*)

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