

DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA
43 THE “SUPERNATURAL POWERS” CHAPTER IS AN OVERTURE TO THE
TRIUMPHAL ADVANCEMENT OF THE PEOPLE

**The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra—
A Discussion on Religion in the Twenty-first Century**

What is the purpose of Buddhism? What was Shakyamuni’s true intention in expounding the Lotus Sutra? In this third discussion on the “Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” (twenty-first) chapter, the participants delve further into the meaning of the transmission to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, which holds the key to understanding these questions. This ceremony of transmission symbolizes the principle that ordinary people are Buddhas, and as such represents a crucial turning point in the history of Buddhism.

This is the forty-third installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra among SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takatori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the August 1998 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

43 The “Supernatural Powers” Chapter Is an Overture to the Triumphal Advancement of the People

DAISAKU IKEDA: The Lotus Sutra exists to enable ordinary people — who have been oppressed, made to suffer and derided throughout history—to stand up and advance, with their heads held high. It aims to help people develop strong life force, encouraging them: “You who have suffered the most will become the happiest!” It opens the eyes and raises the chins of those who deprecate themselves as “worthless,” telling them instead, “You are most noble and respectable.”

The Lotus Sutra empowers us ordinary people to unite and advance proudly for the happiness of all. And the “Supernatural Powers” chapter is the prelude, as it were, to this triumphal march. We are now setting in motion our goal of achieving a victory of the people in the twenty-first century. We are paving the way. We are building a bridge.

While this is an extremely laborious and inconspicuous undertaking, we should be confident that our accomplishment would only increase in brilliance with the passage of time.

TAKANORI ENDO: This is what is meant by the “living Lotus Sutra.”

HARUO SUDA: The transmission of the essence of the Lotus Sutra from Shakyamuni to Bodhisattva Superior Practices is a ceremony in which Buddhism in its entirety and the very life of the Thus Come One are transferred to Superior Practices. It amounts to a declaration that the Latter Day of the Law is not the “age of Shakyamuni” but the “age of Bodhisattva Superior Practices.”

ENDO: The “age of Bodhisattva Superior Practices” means an age when the truth that “ordinary people are Buddhas” is revealed. This is a new era that completely revamps Buddhism as it had existed previously; it overturns the assumption that the Buddha (conceived as a being possessing all manner of remarkable characteristics) is superior to the

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common mortal.

KATSUJI SAITO: The idea that there is no Buddha apart from ordinary people, apart from human beings, points to a profound and genuine humanism.

IKEDA: I heard someone make the following argument: “Fundamentally, doctors exist to serve patients. It is their effort on behalf of patients that makes them doctors. Yet, all too often, doctors arrogantly think themselves superior to their patients.

“Lawyers exist to help those facing legal troubles. Yet often lawyers become haughty, thinking themselves better than others.

“Politicians exist for the sake of citizens. They are public servants. Yet politicians tend to grow insolent, supposing themselves above their constituents, whom they exploit.

“The role of journalists should be to protect the rights of the people. Yet the mass media is sometimes at the forefront in violating those rights.

“Clergy exist for the sake of the faithful. Yet it happens that priests think of themselves as higher, asserting superiority over believers.”

SUDA: I think that sums things up pretty well.

ENDO: It’s a perverse situation.

IKEDA: Indeed. What is needed to right this state of affairs is a humanist “revolution.”

SAITO: The original meaning of the term “revolution” is to reverse or overturn.

IKEDA: I think we could say that Nichiren Daishonin and Shakyamuni were revolutionaries of the most radical and fundamental kind. Shakyamuni toppled the prevalent notion that “people exist for the sake of the gods,” teaching instead that “the gods exist for the sake of the people.” At the same time, he rejected the Brahman caste, which arrogantly took advantage of people’s belief, and the caste system itself. Proclaiming that all people are equal, he proceeded to put that assertion into practice.

ENDO: It seems only natural, therefore, that he should have been persecuted by conservative elements.

IKEDA: But in later times, the adherents of Buddhism forgot Shakyamuni’s spirit, and consequently Buddhism ceased to be a humanistic teaching.

It was then that Nichiren Daishonin appeared, declaring that people don’t exist for the sake of the Buddha; rather, the Buddha exists for the sake of people.

SAITO: This was an earthshaking declaration.

SUDA: The designation of the present time as the “age of Bodhisattva Superior Practices” has truly profound meaning.

IKEDA: Since religion is the very foundation of society, it is a revolution in the realm of religion that will rectify all of society’s ills on a fundamental level.

In any event, whatever our station in life or in society, we need to be aware that arrogance strips us of our humanity. The more we think ourselves better than others, the less humanistic we become, and the lower our life condition falls.

ENDO: In other words, the “higher” we place ourselves above others, the lower we in fact become.

SAITO: This is the case among those with an elitist attitude. In addition to the examples mentioned earlier of lawyers, politicians, doctors and priests, we also find elitism among graduates of leading universities, the wealthy, those who work for major corporations, or even those who have leadership positions in our organization. However, these are but “adornments” that have nothing to do with our basic identity as human beings. The Lotus Sutra urges us to win in life not based on such superficial laurels, but through our humanity itself.

SUDA: Since even the Buddha’s august attributes are rejected by the Lotus Sutra, the same goes without saying for all other “external adornments.”

IKEDA: Those who think themselves above others do not toil selflessly. To avoid personal harm, they shrewdly get others to do the hard work, while taking all the credit themselves. This is cowardice, and it is despicable.

The fundamental teaching of the Lotus Sutra and of the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin is that ordinary people — just as they are — should live, assert themselves and strive wholeheartedly for happiness while fully expressing their humanity. To do so is to throw oneself completely into the struggle, to stand up against adversity. This is what it means to practice without begrudging one’s life. Apart from this, there is no “living Lotus Sutra.”

The social elite has not advanced the movement for kosen-rufu. The path has been opened up by the fully engaged efforts of ordinary people. Herein lies the true practice of the “Supernatural Powers” chapter.

A Struggle for Human Rights Led by Ordinary People

ENDO: I have heard the experiences of Masayo and Kazuo Daimon, who valiantly struggled under your leadership, President Ikeda, and that of second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda, at the time of the so-called Yubari Coal Miners’ Union incident (in 1957) in Yubari, Hokkaido. Masayo, who presently lives in Tomakomai, Hokkaido, is over seventy. Her husband Kazuo passed away in 1995.

IKEDA: I am familiar with her experience. It was introduced in the *Seikyo Shimbun* newspaper just the other day (on June 3, 1998). To mark the fortieth anniversary of the incident (in 1997), the newspaper’s correspondents in Sapporo were kind enough to bring together important records from the time along with the testimony of participants. I will never forget my friends in Yubari who fought at my side during that difficult period.

ENDO: Volume eleven of *The Human Revolution* gives a detailed description of the series of events that took place. It is a moving account of the struggle for human rights waged by

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nameless individuals against the devilish nature of power.

Mr. and Mrs. Daimon joined the Soka Gakkai at the urging of Masayo's parents, who were concerned about Kazuo's immoral ways. Though they joined the Soka Gakkai, they did so in name only, however, and did not actually begin practicing. Because of Kazuo's spending on alcohol and their excessive debts, the couple lost their home twice.

SUDA: This was no ordinary fondness for drink!

ENDO: They relocated from Tokyo to Osaka, but Kazuo's business failed, and so he returned alone to his hometown of Yubari. Masayo thought hard about leaving him, but with her mother's encouragement to give their marriage another chance for the sake of the children, she followed Kazuo to Yubari. Immediately after that, however, her mother, on whom she had depended so greatly, passed away.

SAITO: She must have felt terribly lonely.

ENDO: Dazed by this turn of events, she stood by the bridge in Yubari one day gazing blankly out into space. As she did so, she heard an unfamiliar voice. "There is someone who is very concerned about you," a woman said. Following at the woman's behest, she found that it was President Toda who wanted to see her.

From the window of the inn where he was staying, President Toda, who had come to Yubari on a guidance tour of the area, had seen Masayo looking so dejected and downcast that he was concerned she might be about to throw herself into the water. And so he asked someone to call her over.

IKEDA: President Toda was truly perceptive.

ENDO: That was in August 1955.

Hearing President Toda's warm guidance enabled Masayo to turn over a new leaf, and she and her husband began energetically participating daily in activities for kosen-rufu. When Masayo asked President Toda why her mother had died even though she was practicing, he strictly reprimanded her: "You're a fool! I have never seen anyone as negligent of her responsibility toward her parents as you. Have you practiced earnestly enough to be able to say such a thing? Your mother was using her death as an expedient means to teach you, her daughter, about faith."

SAITO: President Toda put all of his energy into encouraging and revitalizing each person faced with hardship. This is the struggle carried out by Mr. Toda and by you, President Ikeda. It is this compassion that has given so many people the strength to stand up—knowing that there is someone who truly cares about their happiness.

SUDA: Wasn't the crux of the Yubari Coal Miners' Union incident the contempt, jealousy and fear directed at the solidarity of ordinary people by the union leadership?

SAITO: These feelings became particularly acute when, in the Upper House election of July 1956, the candidate supported by the Soka Gakkai received many times more votes from Yubari than had been projected. It seems that this gave the union leaders quite a start.

ENDO: And they used their powerful influence to threaten Soka Gakkai members who belonged to the union, trying to get them to renounce their faith. This was an outrageous violation of their rights as citizens; rights guaranteed them by the country's constitution.

SUDA: At both its national convention and at the local convention in Hokkaido, the Yubari Coal Miners' Union announced with great fanfare its policy to "staunchly oppose the Soka Gakkai."

IKEDA: Union leaders said things like: "Since disasters and illnesses such as silicosis are quite common in coal mines, and because the workers are uneducated, it is not surprising that a religion of this kind should find a ready reception among our membership." In other words, they were saying that sick and unintelligent people join the Soka Gakkai. What an arrogant and disparaging attitude toward the people!

SAITO: They threatened Soka Gakkai members with expulsion unless they obeyed the rules of the union. And to be excluded from the union in those days meant losing one's job.

SUDA: If our members tried to borrow money from their credit union, they would be told flat out, "We will make the loan if you quit the Soka Gakkai." The union also used cable broadcasting, leaflets and other means to attack the Soka Gakkai, issuing messages that said things like, "Beware of phony religions!"

IKEDA: There were many such examples of insidious harassment and coercion.

ENDO: Enduring everything, the Soka Gakkai members of Yubari fought on, united in spirit with you, President Ikeda.

At one union meeting, Kazuo Daimon boldly confronted the leadership, stating: "If there are any Soka Gakkai members who have damaged the union or any of its activities, I would like to hear an explanation of the facts!" There were of course no such examples.

The leaders of the union grew unsteady and their true colors were revealed.

An Organization Not Based on the People Will Perish

SAITO: President Ikeda, you assured the members of Yubari, saying: "This is a struggle for the people. So victory is certain." And, "The Union will no doubt resort to all kinds of means to harass Soka Gakkai members. We must therefore fight now to ensure that the members of Yubari are never again subjected to such abuse."

SUDA: The Soka Gakkai's historic Sapporo Convention was held on July 1 and the Yubari Convention on July 2, 1956. An account of one of these meetings in a local newspaper described the event as follows: "Conspicuous at the gathering was the large number of women with young children, and junior and senior high school students. I have never before witnessed a scene like it, with each comment by speakers greeted with unanimous applause in a packed auditorium."

SAITO: And this hasn't changed!

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IKEDA: At the time, it was probably quite unusual for women with young children to have anything to do with issues of politics or labor unions. But it was just such ordinary people who stood up to actualize politics for the happiness of all people, in contrast to the egoistic politics of the privileged. I simply could not abide the thought of these heroic members just swallowing such treatment in silence.

Which side would win; the powerful, with their tactics of intimidation, or the people, who stood on the side of justice? The problem with the Coal Miners' Union in Yubari might have seemed like a local incident, but it was an important struggle for Buddhism and for the victory of the people.

ENDO: Victory was certain.

The Coal Miners' Union had requested to be allowed to observe the Gakkai's Yubari Convention. But midway through the event, the union representatives quietly slipped away.

Kikutaro Mitobe, who was then a chapter leader, gave this testimony: "Of all the guidance I have received from President Ikeda, I am most deeply impressed by something he said to me at the time of the Yubari Coal Miners' Union incident when we were riding in a car together. He told me, 'The union, which does not draw its strength from the people, is really rather pathetic. And someday it will crumble. I hope each of you will carry out a strong practice and solidify your foundation in life.' Just as he predicted, in November 1978 the Yubari Coal Miners' Union disbanded, and so its thirty-two-year history came to an end."

IKEDA: Of course, it was not only the union that was at fault. No one had ever taught these people a correct view of democracy and of humanity. So in a sense, they were victims.

ENDO: The Soka Gakkai members of Yubari who created this history all have significantly developed and cultivated their lives. Mrs. Daimon showed actual proof in her work as a calligrapher, and is still quite active. She says unequivocally of her late husband, who had once caused her so much grief, "He was my greatest friend and comrade."

I was moved to hear Kazuo's final words. While semi-conscious, he repeatedly called out, "Sensei, please wait! I'll be right there Quick, dear, put on your shoes." This revealed his spirit for the two of them to always continue struggling for kosen-rufu together with you, President Ikeda. I think this marked Kazuo's departure on the supreme "journey over the three existences." "Soka Gakkai activities are what I live for," he used to say.

SUDA: A scholar who read about the Coal Miners' Union incident in *The Human Revolution* remarked that, in the final analysis, the postwar labor movement was based on nothing more than reactionary conservatism, which could not become a force for genuine change. And it was this particular incident, he added, that first made this apparent to the Japanese public.

Professor Koichi Murao of Ehime University also said regarding the incident: "It vividly illustrates that it was the poor and anonymous 'ordinary people' who supported Toda at the time of this persecution. It clearly reveals that the Buddha nature dwells within 'ordinary people.' One could not find a better example of Bodhisattvas of the Earth."

IKEDA: Anonymous and poor "ordinary people" are themselves most noble and respect-

worthy. Ordinary people who strive for kosen-rufu are themselves Buddhas. This is the “secret of the Thus Come One.” It was to teach this that the Thus Come One—the Buddha—appeared.

SAITO: Indeed, Buddhism is itself humanism. President Ikeda, in your dialogue with the noted Hong Kong author Jin Yong (titled *Kyokujitsu no Seiki wo Motomete*, Quest for a Bright New Century), Mr. Jin explains how he came to have faith in Buddhism. His words are most impressive and profound.

From Great Pain to Great Joy: One Person’s Encounter with the Mystic Law

IKEDA: That’s right. His remarks provide a valuable reference for considering the question, “What is Buddhism?” He says that as a result of his lifelong investigations, he came to realize that the truth is to be found within Buddhism.

SAITO: Yes. And Mr. Jin describes it as “an extremely painful process” that led him to dedicate himself to the teachings of the Buddha. His eldest son, an outstanding student who was studying at Columbia University in the United States, had committed suicide. Nothing could have been more devastating for Mr. Jin.

SUDA: How old was Mr. Jin then?

SAITO: Fifty-two.

SUDA: By that time he had already realized considerable success as an author and journalist.

IKEDA: He also said that he considered committing suicide himself and following his son in death.

SAITO: Plagued with questions about what could have driven his son to take his own life—about why he suddenly chose to throw away all that he had—Mr. Jin spent a year investigating the issue of life and death, reading countless books on the subject. But for a long time he simply could not find any explanation of the significance of death that was truly convincing and persuasive. He says that though he repeatedly pondered the teaching of Christianity on the matter, he never really felt comfortable with it.

IKEDA: That is when he began studying Buddhism.

SAITO: He started by taking up the Agama sutras, which are a part of the so-called Hinayana teachings. For months he poured his energy into studying and pondering their meaning, even to the point of neglecting to sleep and eat properly. Then he suddenly had a revelation: “The truth was in Buddhism all along. Its teachings are true beyond any doubt.”

Mr. Jin, reading English and Chinese-language translations of Buddhist texts side by side, says that he “accepted Buddhism from the bottom of my heart with all my body and soul.”

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ENDO: He also says, “Buddhism resolved the huge doubts that had burrowed into my heart. Thinking, ‘So that’s it! Finally I understand!’ my heart overflowed with joy. My happiness knew no bounds.”

IKEDA: That is wonderful.

Early Buddhist canons (to which the Agama sutras belong) repeatedly talk about “immortality.” They are filled with statements like the following: “Immersed in the state of immortality you merge [with the universe] without dying . . . you experience the joy of peace”;¹ “The one who reaches the foundation of immortality is the enlightened person”;² “Better than a hundred years not seeing one’s own immortality is one single day of life if one sees one’s own immortality”;³ “Enter the realm of immortality”;⁴ and, “I will surely beat the drum of immortality.”⁵

As we see from such passages, Shakyamuni was trying to teach people about a state of eternal happiness that transcends life and death. With keen and subtle insight, Mr. Jin must have sensed this essential meaning.

SAITO: He next studied a number of Mahayana texts including the Vimalakirti, Lankavatara and Prajnaparamita sutras. But he says that he found these hard to accept because they contain so much that are mysterious and fantastical.

SUDA: It is certainly true that Mahayana Buddhist texts display rich imagination, depicting many occurrences and miracles.

ENDO: They read almost like science fiction! The content may even appear absurd. I think this is one reason the Mahayana sutras have been regarded by many as not being Shakyamuni’s teachings at all, but apocryphal works by people of later generations. And the fact that historically Mahayana Buddhism appeared several hundred years after Shakyamuni’s death (around the start of the Common Era) seems to lend support to such a view.

IKEDA: The question is, what is Mahayana Buddhism trying to express? In the case of the Lotus Sutra, such events as the Ceremony in the Air or the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth from within the ground sound preposterous if we only read them literally.

But there are three different levels to the sutra: the words (the text itself), the teaching (the meaning that follows from the words), and the intent (the true intention behind the sutra). It is the intent or “heart” of the sutra that we need to understand.

SAITO: Although Mr. Jin was at first puzzled by the Lotus Sutra, he says that as a result of lengthy reflection, he finally grasped its true meaning. He says, “I understood that this ‘Mystic Law’ fundamentally encompasses everything that the Mahayana sutras are trying to teach.”

ENDO: That’s a remarkable insight. Certainly the sutras all have the Mystic Law as their common focus.

IKEDA: They are directed toward the great life that is the oneness of life and death, the Mystic Law. “Mystic” refers to death, and “Law,” to life. The term “Mystic Law” expresses

the oneness of life and death. The state of immortality, or “no death,” that Shakyamuni talks about in early texts is the state of someone who is awakened to this eternal great life.

SAITO: That’s the world of Buddhahood.

IKEDA: Yes. When we dedicate ourselves to the Mystic Law, the tremendous life force of Buddhahood, which neither ages nor dies, wells forth.

SUDA: “Beating the drum of immortality” could be taken to mean causing the great voice of the Mystic Law to resound.

ENDO: Mr. Jin says: “In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha uses a variety of familiar metaphors such as a burning house, an ox cart and heavy rains to explain Buddhism to people. And there are also instances where he uses ‘expedient means’ to guide people. There are even scenes where the Buddha causes people to think that he has died. This, too, is to cause Buddhism to spread among people.

“I began thinking deeply about the meaning of ‘Mystic Law.’ In time, I ceased to feel repelled by the illusions that fill the Mahayana sutras. It took about two years for the immense pain I felt to turn into immense joy.”

SUDA: These are striking comments. It’s as though he undertook an odyssey through the stages of the fivefold comparison.⁶ From Christianity he turned to Buddhism; from the Hinayana teachings he turned to the Mahayana; and then to the Lotus Sutra.

IKEDA: This clearly demonstrates the earnestness with which Mr. Jin pursued his investigation of life and death. Guided by his son, he approached the Mystic Law.

The true intent that the “Supernatural Powers” chapter is trying to express is the Mystic Law; it seeks to convey the eternal and supreme life that is without beginning or end from time without beginning.

Who Is the True Protagonist of the Lotus Sutra?

ENDO: Last time, we learned that the appearance of Bodhisattva Superior Practices refers to the original Buddha of *kuon ganjo* whose life is without beginning or end.

SAITO: To reiterate, Superior Practices is a “bodhisattva-Buddha,” a bodhisattva in his outward conduct but a Buddha in his inner state of life. His true identity is that of a Buddha exerting himself at the initial stage of Buddhist practice when the cause to attain enlightenment is made; in other words, he is a Buddha embodying the simultaneity of cause and effect. Such a figure had never before been known in the history of Buddhism.

SUDA: Through the appearance of this “Buddha of the simultaneity of cause and effect,” the original Buddha of time without beginning could be finally identified. That’s because as long as the discussion was premised on the notion that the cause comes first and the effect later, it was assumed that a person became a Buddha at some particular point in time; such enlightenment, therefore, could not be “without beginning or end.”

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IKEDA: The lotus flower represents the principle of the simultaneity of cause and effect. The *rengé*, or lotus flower, of Myoho-rengé-kyo symbolizes the Buddha of the simultaneity of cause and effect.

ENDO: This idea is pretty complicated.

IKEDA: It certainly is. But the important thing is to have the spirit to learn. As long as we have such a seeking mind, we will continue to advance in our human revolution.

President Toda often said, “changing is more important than understanding.” Even if we should intellectually comprehend the so-called eighty thousand teachings, unless we can use this knowledge to grow as human beings, it will not benefit us in the least. We study Buddhism to do our human revolution and strengthen our faith. It’s enough that we have the faith to continue our Buddhist study, even if only a little at a time.

SAITO: Superior Practices is a truly wondrous being. His appearance overturns the prevailing understanding of Buddhism.

IKEDA: That’s right. In fact, the question of the identity and nature of Bodhisattva Superior Practices is the main theme of the essential teaching (or second half) of the Lotus Sutra. In that sense, he is the true protagonist of the Lotus Sutra. While Shakyamuni might appear to be the protagonist, in fact Superior Practices more deeply embodies the sutra’s spirit.

This is first and foremost revealed by the development of the Lotus Sutra itself. Shakyamuni calls out, “After my death, who will spread the Mystic Law in the *saha* world?” Many bodhisattvas announce their “candidacy,” beseeching him to entrust them with the teaching. But Shakyamuni refuses.

SUDA: He flatly turns them down, saying, “Leave off, good men! There is no need for you to protect this sutra” (LS15, 212).⁷ And he calls forth the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

IKEDA: The words “Leave off” are very significant. With this, he refutes all the teachings he has expounded up to that point. Nichiren Daishonin says, “With this single expression ‘leave off,’ Shakyamuni Buddha settled once and for all that there is no need for any bodhisattvas other than Bodhisattva Superior Practices and his followers [to spread the Mystic Law]” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 840).

ENDO: This is a declaration that the Latter Day of the Law—the period indicated by references to the time after Shakyamuni’s passing—is the “age of Bodhisattva Superior Practices.” Tremendous weight attaches to the expression “Leave off.”

SAITO: Shakyamuni then calls forth the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, led by Superior Practices, from below the ground. The entire assembly is thunderstruck, for these bodhisattvas are even more splendid in appearance than Shakyamuni.

On behalf of all those gathered, Bodhisattva Maitreya entreats Shakyamuni to explain where these bodhisattvas have come from and what “causes and conditions” bring them together (LS15, 216). By way of reply, Shakyamuni expounds the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter. This is the general progression of events.

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SUDA: Shakyamuni uses the question of the identity of Superior Practices to reveal that he has been enlightened since the remote past. And in the “Supernatural Powers” chapter, he transfers the “life of the Thus Come One” in its entirety to Superior Practices. In this light, we can see just how central is the role played by Superior Practices.

It may be that he is on a par with Shakyamuni during the Ceremony in the Air. But after the Buddha’s passing, Superior Practices becomes the undisputed “star.”

SAITO: Isn’t this to say that Shakyamuni and Superior Practices, the “eternal mentor and disciple,” are the protagonists of the Lotus Sutra?

IKEDA: Just what does this “oneness of mentor and disciple” signify? That is the issue. It indicates the life of the original Buddha without beginning or end that is at one with the universe.

In the twenty-eight-chapter Lotus Sutra, Bodhisattva Superior Practices personifies the “true cause” of the original Buddha, and Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment in the remote past personifies the “true effect.”

ENDO: So they are the same Buddha. They are both functions of the original Buddha.

IKEDA: That’s right. Shakyamuni and Superior Practices are one Buddha, not two. They are two sides of the same Buddha.

Therefore, while we may speak of transmission, this is nothing more than a formality. To think that this transmission itself has any substance is to misunderstand the Lotus Sutra.

What Shakyamuni Ultimately Wanted to Communicate

SUDA: What is the purpose of the ceremony?

IKEDA: Fundamentally, it is to announce that Superior Practices will appear in the Latter Day and propagate the Mystic Law of time without beginning. Because of this “announcement” or “prophesy,” when the person who was to spread the true Mystic Law did appear, it would be apparent that this was the person predicted in the sutra to do so.

ENDO: That suggests that those who compiled the Lotus Sutra distinctly knew that someone would appear in the future who would spread the Mystic Law.

SAITO: That makes sense.

ENDO: How did they know?

SAITO: I think it is because they grasped the limitations of the twenty-eight-chapter Lotus Sutra.

ENDO: In other words, although they themselves understood, they knew that there were things that were not made explicit in the sutra’s text.

SUDA: This brings us to the question of the sutra's "implicit meaning."

IKEDA: The conversation has again taken a difficult turn. But since this is an important point, let's try to set things straight.

First of all, what was the enlightenment of the historical Shakyamuni?

ENDO: I believe it was that he perceived the "state of life of immortality."

SAITO: He opened his eyes to the eternal life, the "eternal Law."

SUDA: The Pali term for "immortality" (*amata*) originally also indicated the mystic elixir of heaven (*amrita*) that is said to bestow immortality.

SAITO: The Mystic Law is the true "mystic elixir of immortality."

IKEDA: The Daishonin says in his writings:

Amrita is said to be the elixir of immortality. In the first place, *myo* is the elixir of immortality.... That the behavior and actions of beings in each of the Ten Worlds are in themselves eternally-dwelling and unchanging is called *amrita*, the Mystic Law, mystic, the original Law, or concentration and insight [as taught by the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai]. In the Latter Day of the Law, *amrita* is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 831–32)

ENDO: This is saying that the lives of all beings in the Ten Worlds, or all phenomena of the entire universe, while undergoing constant change, are eternal.

IKEDA: Viewed through the "eye of the Lotus Sutra," all phenomena manifest the eternal original Buddha, the universal life that is without beginning or end. That is the true aspect of all phenomena. Therefore, all beings are themselves, just as they are, the Thus Come One. This is what is meant by, "The Thus Come One is all living beings" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 770).

SUDA: Shakyamuni awakened to the fact that this eternal Law is itself the eternal Buddha. And he called it the Dharma or (in Pali) *Danma*, and the Tathagata or Thus Come One.

SAITO: This Dharma manifested through and pervaded his own life. He perceived it as a state of life at one with himself and called it a state of immortality. I think that in this we find the basic paradigm of the "Life Span" chapter.

IKEDA: That may be. Shakyamuni dedicated his entire life to communicating this realization to others. But he could not succinctly express all that he wanted to convey in words.

While expounding various teachings according to people's suffering or their capacity, he was ultimately trying to open their eyes to this state of life, to the great life force of eternal youth and immortality. Through a lifetime of teaching, he gradually developed the people's capacity, and in the end he taught them the Lotus Sutra.

Of course, the content of Shakyamuni's sermon may not be identical to what is written in the twenty-eight-chapter Lotus Sutra itself. But he certainly expounded the truth that constitutes the sutra's core. For a Buddha who does not expound the Lotus Sutra is not a

Buddha.

SUDA: This “core” is the real existence of the great life that is the eternal Mystic Law, which is itself the eternal Buddha.

IKEDA: It is the principle that this great life manifests in ordinary human beings. This is the purpose of the living Lotus Sutra. It could be said that the progression and advance seen over the entire history of Buddhism comes down to the question of how to express and open people’s eyes to this one point. From that standpoint, I think the advent of Mahayana Buddhism was inevitable.

What was Shakyamuni’s last wish for his followers when he passed away? It was: “In this world be an island to yourself, be a refuge to yourself and take refuge in no other. Make the Dharma your island, the Dharma your refuge and no other.”⁸ In other words, depend on no one other than yourself. With the Law as your sole foundation, rely on yourself alone. Amid the turbulent currents of the sufferings of life and death, he is saying, we should live with the Law and the self as our only support. The pursuit of this “self” and this “Law” became the task of adherents of Buddhism after Shakyamuni’s passing.

SUDA: In terms of the Person and the Law, the self corresponds to the Person. And the goal of our pursuit is the eternal Buddha and the eternal Law, the entity of the oneness of the Person and the Law.

ENDO: In other words, after Shakyamuni passed away, Buddhism became a search for the cause of enlightenment that enabled him to become a Buddha. This of course was not just a theoretical pursuit, but an all-out struggle on which people staked their very lives.

SAITO: It has been a search for the eternal life that could be called “Shakyamuni’s mentor.”

IKEDA: The pursuit of the cause of enlightenment is also summed up in the “Jataka.”

SUDA: This is a collection of tales describing Shakyamuni’s activities during past lives and the benefits that he accumulated.

ENDO: There are a number of remarkable tales, such as how as a Bodhisattva he once gave up his life to save others, or how he became a king of animals so as to lead other animals to happiness.

IKEDA: Many of these stories are cited in the Daishonin’s writings. They include accounts of his incarnations as King Shibi (who gave his own flesh to a hawk in order to save a dove), as the hermit Ninniku (who does not bear a grudge even when his hands and legs are cut off by King Kali), as the king of the deer (who allows himself to be eaten to save the lives of the other deer), as Prince Satta (who gives his body to feed a famished tigress), and as Sessen Doji (who throws himself into the mouth of a demon to learn half a Buddhist verse).

SAITO: These accounts are also well known in Japan from early collections of folklore

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such as the *Konjaku Monogatari* (Tales of Times Now Past).

IKEDA: These might seem like mere fairy tales of old. But we are in fact composing many such “bodhisattva tales” through our SGI activities, which constitute bodhisattva practice for the modern age.

Nichiren Daishonin praised the united struggles of the Ikegami brothers, saying, “Could there ever be a more wonderful story than your own?” (MW-1, 143). People of later generations will certainly talk about and relate our efforts for kosen-rufu. They will doubtless become “tales” that are broadly praised.

SAITO: The fierce struggles of the first three presidents of the Soka Gakkai certainly constitute a glorious tale that will endure throughout the ten thousand years and more of the Latter Day of the Law.

ENDO: To be directly connected to this legacy is the greatest honor.
The Buddha Appears in Response to the People’s Longing

SUDA: Speaking of the “Jataka,” when I visited India, I saw many stupas with carvings and reliefs depicting scenes from such tales.

IKEDA: Stupas, as you know, have much to do with this pursuit of the cause of enlightenment.

ENDO: Yes. After Shakyamuni’s death, lay followers held a funeral in which they cremated his remains. It was conducted by lay people because Shakyamuni had admonished the monks and nuns that they should not have anything to do with the holding of funerals. “If you have that kind of free time, then you ought to spend it on your practice,” he told them in his final words. His ashes were divided up and interred in stupas set up for that purpose.

Thereafter, a faith centering on stupas spread widely. While the details of how exactly this came about remain unclear, it has become generally accepted that the spread of stupas is closely linked to the rise of Mahayana Buddhism.

SAITO: What was the belief upheld by those who prayed to these stupas? While this is not substantiated, it is thought that their actions were motivated by a sense of longing for the deceased Shakyamuni.⁹

IKEDA: The “Life Span” chapter says, “Then when their minds are filled with yearning, / at last I appear and preach the Law for them” (LS16, 230). In other words, the eternal Buddha appears and expounds the Law in response to the “longing” in people’s hearts.

Isn’t it the case that after Shakyamuni’s passing, people were seeking an “essential” or “true” Shakyamuni that transcended even his death? I think this is also evident in the emergence of teachings articulating theories about the Buddha body.

SAITO: Yes. As scholars such as Nagarjuna indicate, it seems that early Buddhist theorists postulated the existence of two bodies: the “living body” of the person Shakyamuni and the “Dharma body” of the Buddha. The historical Shakyamuni Buddha who died at the age of eighty is termed the “living body.” By contrast, the eternal state of enlightenment that made

Shakyamuni the Buddha is called the Buddha's "Dharma body."

IKEDA: The Dharma body is later said to possess the two properties of the Dharma body (objective reality) and the Reward body (subjective wisdom). This further gives us the doctrine of the three enlightened properties of the Law, wisdom and action. While such theories concerning the nature of the Buddha body developed, the basic spirit to view the eternal Buddha as existing in the depths of the life of the actual person Shakyamuni remained unchanged.

SUDA: In like manner, I imagine that people's faith in stupas was sustained by the belief of people "single-mindedly desiring to see" (LS16, 230) an eternal Buddha transcending the corporeal Shakyamuni.

ENDO: There are a number of passages in the Lotus Sutra that refer to such practices. The "Expedient Means" chapter says things like:

If . . . they pile up earth to make a mortuary temple for the Buddhas, or even if little boys at play/ should collect sand to make a Buddha tower,/then persons such as these/ have all attained the Buddha way. (LS2, 39)

SAITO: The appearance of the Treasure Tower probably also reflects the practice of building stupas.

ENDO: Many Treasures Buddha who appears with the Treasure Tower is a "Buddha of the past." Shakyamuni is the "Buddha of the present." And Bodhisattva Superior Practices is the "Buddha of the Future." Together, they represent the Buddhas of past, present and future.

IKEDA: In any event, stupas were built as expressions of people's yearning for the eternal Buddha who transcends the three existences of past, present and future. The truth is that the life of the ordinary person is itself the Treasure Tower. Ordinary people who embrace the Mystic Law are themselves Treasure Towers; they are one with the eternal Buddha. The Daishonin writes to his follower Abutsu-bo, "Abutsu-bo is the Treasure Tower itself, and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself" (MW-1, 30).

SUDA: Tracing the matter in this way, it becomes all the more clear why Mahayana Buddhism postulated the existence of various "eternal Buddhas." The Mahayana teachings are often blamed for wanting to turn the deceased founder Shakyamuni into a divine being. But even though there may be an element of truth to this charge, this is not the main point. The driving force of Mahayana Buddhism is the pursuit of the "cause of enlightenment" that enabled Shakyamuni to become a Buddha; and this turned into the pursuit of the eternal Buddha.

IKEDA: We should note that the eternal Buddha is another name for the "cause of enlightenment." All Buddhas are born of the "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One." Of course, while this is the cause of Buddhahood, it is simultaneously the effect of Buddhahood.

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SAITO: In connection with the “two bodies” doctrine of the “living body” and the “Dharma body” that we talked about a moment ago, it is said that the living body is born of the Dharma body.

IKEDA: We could probably explain this as follows: All practitioners of Buddhism strove to awaken to the Dharma (i.e., the Law, eternal life or the Thus Come One). But the moment they awakened to this, they understood that the self is none other than the “child of the Thus Come One” (i.e., a bodhisattva) born of the Dharma. I know this is somewhat confusing.

ENDO: This development in thought seems to parallel the historic transition from Hinayana to Mahayana Buddhism. It is the change from Hinayana (or Sectarian) Buddhism, which made the pursuit of the Dharma its object, to Mahayana Buddhism, which is a movement of bodhisattvas (or children of the Buddha).

The “Truth of the Mentor” Is Revealed in Response to the Earnest “Words of the Disciple”

IKEDA: To say this definitively would require more solid research. But what is certain is that Mahayana is definitely not a “non-Buddhist” doctrine that has no relation to Shakyamuni. On the contrary, it is the result of an attempt to get at Shakyamuni’s true intent.

Of course, regardless of who expounded a teaching, it should be judged on the basis of its own merits. The Lotus Sutra is not great because it was expounded by Shakyamuni; rather, Shakyamuni is the Buddha because he expounded the Lotus Sutra. No matter who the person is, one who expounds the Lotus Sutra is a Buddha. To say that a particular teaching is supreme because it was taught by Shakyamuni smacks of a kind of authoritarianism or elitism.

SUDA: While Socrates is the protagonist of the enormous collection of dialogues left behind by his disciple Plato, the dialogues are not in fact a literal record of Socrates’ conversations. However, we cannot on that basis dismiss the dialogues as “lies,” or as representing a “non-Socratic doctrine.” I think they express the true intent of the mentor as grasped by the disciple Plato.

IKEDA: That’s right. The Mahayana sutras were expounded by people committed to seeking Shakyamuni’s true intent who exercised remarkable ingenuity in their effort to widely communicate that intent to others.

ENDO: Mr. Jin says, “Finally I understood. This Mystic Law is what all the Mahayana sutras fundamentally are trying to express. The Mahayana sutras employ skillful expedient means in enhancing and explaining Buddhism so as to enable even the slow and unintelligent to understand and embrace it.”

SAITO: Certainly, the view that the Mahayana teachings are non-Buddhist is weak in that it accuses the compilers of the sutras of stooping to such shameful conduct as to attribute their own “arbitrary” ideas to Shakyamuni.

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As indicated by the line “Thus I heard” that begins almost all sutras, it seems far more reasonable to assume that the people who set down these teachings in writing acted with the profound realization and genuine belief that they had “heard” these teachings from Shakyamuni.

IKEDA: In that case, when they say, “Thus I heard,” from whom did they hear the teaching? It must be none other than the eternal Buddha who is “always here, preaching the Law” (LS16, 229).

They surely heard this teaching. The expression “Thus I heard” no doubt refers to a profound religious experience.

SUDA: There are a number of scholars of Mahayana Buddhism who take such a position.

IKEDA: Naturally, it can also be conjectured that the sutras articulate and elaborate on the essence of a teaching expounded by the historical Shakyamuni that had been transmitted and distilled over time.

ENDO: In practicing with the spirit of “single-mindedly desiring to see the Buddha” (LS16, 230), it is not unusual for people to have profound religious experiences that defy all rational explanation. I imagine that such experiences certainly played a part.

SAITO: There might be scholars who would dispute this, but someone who flatly denies the validity of such an experience of “seeing the Buddha” cannot possibly understand the history of Buddhism, or for that matter the history of religion.

ENDO: That would be like someone who has no knowledge of music whatsoever attempting to write a history of the subject.

IKEDA: The view that Mahayana is not the Buddha’s teaching seems to be based on the major premise that there is no Buddha other than the historical person Shakyamuni. If that is true, however, then Shakyamuni’s reason for expounding his teaching becomes ambiguous. For he did so in order to awaken people to the fact that they, too, possess the “state of immortality” he did. And there absolutely are people who have reached the same enlightenment as Shakyamuni.

SAITO: Such people are also Buddhas—not in theory, but in actuality.

IKEDA: Yes.

SUDA: It must then follow that the people who compiled the Lotus Sutra were also Buddhas.

IKEDA: That is fair to say.

ENDO: Why, then, does the sutra take the form of a teaching expounded by (the historical person) Shakyamuni at Eagle Peak?

IKEDA: This may have to do with Indian folklore, but more than that, it is probably because the compilers believed that this format represented Shakyamuni's true intent.

SUDA: The Mahayana movement peaked over several centuries around the start of the Common Era; that would have put it about five hundred years after the time of Shakyamuni's death. In terms of the doctrine of the "five five-hundred-year periods,"¹⁰ it would roughly correspond to the period known as the "age of meditation."

SAITO: We can surmise that through the experience of meditation, practitioners of Buddhism were able to "see" the eternal Shakyamuni who is "always here, preaching the Law."

ENDO: President Toda described his enlightenment in prison as an experience in which he found himself present during the "assembly at Eagle Peak, which continues in solemn state and has not yet dispersed" (GZ, p. 757).

IKEDA: Our discussion today has centered on Buddhist history, but I think that in order for people of the modern age to grasp the essence of the Lotus Sutra, it is necessary to consider the teachings from this standpoint.

ENDO: This conversation has solidified my understanding that the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, while not a statement of fact per se, nonetheless expresses the truth of life.

The Revelation That the Buddha Is a Human Being

IKEDA: We're not done yet! If our readers find some parts too much to digest, it's perfectly fine to skip over them and continue on.

The history of Buddhism could broadly be summarized as follows: So-called "early" Buddhism put its energy into upholding the precepts that the living person Shakyamuni left behind for those who had renounced secular life. Because of its basically conservative nature, this teaching tended to lose sight of Shakyamuni's true intent—his desire to enable everyone to become a Buddha by revealing the cause of his own enlightenment.

Mahayana Buddhism, on the other hand, investigated the cause of Shakyamuni's enlightenment and pursued the eternal Buddha. Put another way, it was a reformist force. It expounded the existence of many Buddhas possessing extremely long spans of life, such as Amida, Vairocana and Dainichi of the Nembutsu and Shingon schools. From the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra, these teachings all explain different aspects of the "Thus Come One inherently possessing the three enlightened properties whose life is without beginning or end" (i.e., the Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One). But because of its exclusive pursuit of the eternal Buddha, the Mahayana teachings departed from the essential point of Shakyamuni the human being, and even from the human being.

SUDA: Amida is a Buddha said to dwell not in this saha world but in "another land." And Dainichi (Mahavairocana) is merely the Dharma body, possessing no physical form. Such beings are far removed from the human world. Rushana, likewise, is described as a great "Buddha of beneficence," something completely separate from ordinary people.

IKEDA: Both Hinayana and Mahayana have such limitations. It is the Lotus Sutra that

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integrates these two traditions, breaking down their limitations. That's because it reveals that the real identity of the person Shakyamuni is that of the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past. It opens a path to the Buddha, who while eternal and awe inspiring is at the same time familiar and accessible. It could be said that this constitutes returning to the essential point of Shakyamuni the human being.

SUDA: In an earlier discussion you explained that the principle of “casting off the transient and revealing the true” signifies returning to Shakyamuni the human being.

IKEDA: The appeal to, “return to Shakyamuni the human being,” means to return to the true nature of humanity. It urges us to open our eyes to the dignity of human life.

SAITO: The Lotus Sutra is then a sutra that integrates Hinayana and Mahayana.

IKEDA: That's right. Through the principle of casting off the transient and revealing the true, all Buddhas are unified as “Buddhas instructed by Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment in the remote past.” This is the Lotus Sutra's essential teaching. This unifies all Mahayana sutras.

The theoretical teaching (or first half) of the Lotus Sutra explains that the voice-hearers and *pratyekabuddhas*, meaning those who uphold the Hinayana teachings, can attain Buddhahood. This is because it unifies all phenomena into a single truth called the “true aspect.”

ENDO: Namely, the “true aspect of all phenomena.”

IKEDA: Moreover, the unification of all phenomena of the theoretical teaching and the unification of all Buddhas of the essential teaching are complementary. They are both integrated into the Mystic Law.

SAITO: The Lotus Sutra is the “summit” of all Buddhist doctrine up to that point in the progress of Buddhist history. It is truly the “king of sutras.”

IKEDA: But this progress is not complete at this point. We have yet to touch on the Buddhism that is implicit in the Lotus Sutra.

Next time let's discuss the need for an implicit teaching. It is through the implicit teaching that the epochal and fundamental turning point in the history of Buddhism—the teaching that the common mortal is a true Buddha—first becomes a reality.

To be continued

Footnotes

1. *Budda no Kotoba* (The Buddha's Words): *Sutta Nipata*, trans. Hajime Nakamura (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1994), p. 52. cf. *The Sutta-Nipata*, trans. H. Saddhatissa (Richmond Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1994), p. 24.
2. *Budda no Kotoba*, p. 138. cf. *The Sutta-Nipata*, p. 73.
3. *Budda no Shinri no Kotoba, Kankyo no Kotoba* (The Buddha's Words of Truth and

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- Inspiration), trans. Hajime Nakamura (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1994), p. 26. cf. *The Dhammapada: Sayings of Buddha*, trans. Thomas Clearly (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 41.
4. *Budda no Shinri no Kotoba, Kankyo no Kotoba*, p. 41. cf. *The Dhammapada: Sayings of Buddha*, p. 77.
 5. *Budda no Shinri no Kotoba, Kankyo no Kotoba*, p. 224. cf. *Dharmatrata*, comp., *The Tibetan Dhammapada Sayings of the Buddha: A translation of the Tibetan version of the Udanavarga*, trans. Gareth Sparham (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986), p. 109.
 6. Fivefold comparison: Five successive levels of comparison set forth by Nichiren Daishonin in “The Opening of the Eyes” to demonstrate the superiority of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo over all other teachings. They are: (1) Buddhism is superior to non-Buddhist teachings; (2) Mahayana Buddhism is superior to Hinayana Buddhism; (3) true Mahayana is superior to provisional Mahayana; (4) the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra is superior to the theoretical teaching; and (5) the Buddhism of sowing is superior to the Buddhism of the harvest.
 7. 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.
 8. Hajime Nakamura. *Gotama Buddha*. Los Angeles Buddhist Books International, 1977. Pp. 113–14.
 9. This makes a reference to the passage in the “Life Span” chapter: “In their minds they will harbor a longing and will thirst to gaze upon the Buddha, and then they will work to plant good roots” (LS16, 227).
 10. Five five-hundred-year periods: Five consecutive periods following Shakyamuni’s death during which Buddhism is said to spread, prosper and eventually decline. The five periods are: (1) the age enlightenment, in which many people are sure to attain enlightenment through practicing the Buddha’s teachings; (2) the age of meditation, when meditation is widely practiced; (3) the age of reading, reciting and listening, in which studying and reciting the sutras and receiving lectures on them are the central practice; (4) the age of building temples and stupas, when many temples and stupas are built, but the spirit of seeking the Buddhist teachings declines; and (5) the age of conflict, when strife occurs among the various rival schools and Shakyamuni’s Buddhism perishes.

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