

## **BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (8)**

### **THE LATTER DAY OF THE LAW: THE END OF THE WORLD OR A NEW DAWN OF HOPE?**

“The end is coming!” On December 31, 999, many people in Christian Europe fearfully anticipated the catastrophic end of the world and the judgment of their souls. But as Pope Sylvester II conducted midnight mass in the Vatican, nothing happened. A half-century later, the similar millennium fear swept Buddhist Japan. Many believed that the year 1052 marked the first year of “the Latter Day of the Law,” a period in which they expected the world to be lost to suffering and chaos. As aristocratic rule was collapsing and the warrior class was gaining more influence, Japanese society at the time was in turmoil. For the next several centuries, as war, famine and pestilence continued to rack the country, many Japanese were convinced that they were indeed living in the Latter Day of the Law.

This apocalyptic frenzy in medieval Japan was based on the concept of the “three time periods” of Buddhism—the Former, Middle and Latter Days of the Law (or Shakyamuni’s teaching). These are the three consecutive stages into which the time after the Buddha’s death is divided. There are several views on the length of these three periods. Many Buddhists, including T’ien-t’ai, Dengyo and Nichiren Daishonin, adopted the explanation found in the Sutra of the Great Assembly, which describes five consecutive five-hundred-year periods following Shakyamuni’s death. The first two five-hundred-year periods are regarded as the Former Day of the Law, the following two five-hundred-year periods as the Middle Day of the Law, and the fifth five-hundred-year period as the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, which continues indefinitely.

Nichiren Daishonin describes the three time periods of Buddhism in terms of teaching, practice and proof. “Teaching” refers to the Buddha’s teaching, “practice” to the practice set forth by the Buddha’s teaching, and “proof” to the resulting benefit of that practice. During the Former Day of the Law, the pure spirit of Buddhism remained intact, and people practiced Buddhism correctly and enjoyed the benefit of their practice. Thus, in the Former Day, the teaching, practice and proof of Buddhism were all present. During the Middle Day of the Law, Buddhism flourished in society, but the emphasis was placed on formalities and rituals. The vibrant humanism of Buddhism was beginning to decline. In this stage, people practiced Buddhism yet could not enjoy the fullest extent of its benefit.

In the present Latter Day of the Law, people neither practice the Buddha’s teaching nor gain its benefit. While the teaching is present, there is neither practice nor proof. The Sutra of the Great Assembly describes this degenerate stage in the history of Buddhism as a time in which “quarrels and disputes will arise among the adherents to my [Shakyamuni’s] teachings, and the Pure Law will become obscured and lost” (quoted in *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 3, p. 85). That is, during the Latter Day of the Law, people lose sight of the Buddha’s true teaching and suffer from egoistic delusions.

According to the ancient Chinese dating of Shakyamuni’s death as 949 BCE, most Japanese thought that the year 1052 marked the beginning of the third millennium after the Buddha’s passing, that is, the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law. Most modern scholars, however, date Shakyamuni’s death at either around 480 or 380 BCE. Based on these recent datings, the time in which Nichiren Daishonin lived would correspond to 1,600 or 1,700 years after Shakyamuni’s death.

When examining this discrepancy, it is important to note that the Daishonin deeply considered the conditions of religion and society at large in light of statements in various

sutras. This fact is more significant than simple arithmetic. The Daishonin was living in the midst of conditions that could be best characterized as those of the Latter Day of the Law as described by the Buddhist teachings. In addition, it is important to note that expressions like “500 years” and “1,000 years” in the Buddhist scriptures should be taken not so much as a succinct fixed length of time, but as a description of a magnitude of time and a corresponding flow of events. From this standpoint as well, the conditions in the realm of Buddhism and society predicted for the Latter Day of the Law in the Buddhist sutras are more relevant a gauge than the precise number of years.

Why is Shakyamuni’s teaching said to fall into obscurity in the Latter Day of the Law? Because in the Latter Day, the sutras teach, people are profoundly deluded. Just as medicine kept beyond its expiration date can lose its power to combat pain or illnesses, Shakyamuni’s teaching has over the millennia lost its power to save ordinary people from suffering. In this regard, the Daishonin states: “In this way, the extremity of greed, anger and stupidity in people’s minds in the impure world of the latter age is beyond the power of any sage or worthy man to control” (MW-6, 141). The Daishonin here indicates that Shakyamuni’s teaching is no longer effective in relieving the people of the Latter Day of their suffering and confusion.

Although the Latter Day of the Law is described as rife with “quarrels and disputes,” this does not simply mean that there is an abundance of Buddhist dialogue and debate. In the history of Buddhism prior to the Daishonin’s time, there had been many doctrinal debates to evaluate the merits of various teachings. But in these earlier times, practitioners shared a strong desire to seek the correct teaching. Because of this seeking spirit, those who lost a debate over doctrine would gladly discard their own teaching or teacher and adopt those of the one who had successfully pointed out their error. In contrast, in the Latter Day, most people, including Buddhist practitioners, are so entrenched in greed, anger and ignorance that they refuse to follow the correct teaching even when they encounter it. Consumed with pride and ego, they tend to value status, position and fame more than the heart and spirit of Buddhism. So, in league with those in power, they persecute the practitioners of the correct teaching. The Lotus Sutra explains that the sutra’s practitioners after Shakyamuni’s death will encounter various forms of oppression from religious authority. What underlies such persecutions is the tendency, particularly among the Buddhist clergy, to be attached to status or wealth instead of striving to uphold the correct teaching.

The corruption of priesthood that characterizes the Latter Day of the Law was rampant during the Daishonin’s time. For example, Ryokan—a powerful and highly revered priest in Kamakura—was behind the government’s failed attempt to execute the Daishonin and his exile to Sado Island. Threatened by the Daishonin’s forthright challenge to the teachings they espoused, many influential priests felt enmity and contempt for the Daishonin.

While the characteristics of the Latter Day—corrupt and arrogant clergy and the people immersed in misery—were apparent in thirteenth-century Japan, the Daishonin remained optimistic. To be sure, the Latter Day of the Law signified the end of Buddhism to many; but Nichiren Daishonin viewed it as a new era in which the teaching by which all Buddhas attain enlightenment is to be revealed and spread among the common people. He confidently declared: “But that which is to come after ‘the Pure Law has become obscured and lost’ is the Great Pure Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the heart and core of the Lotus Sutra. This is what should be propagated and spread throughout the continent of Jambudvīpa. . . so that it may be chanted by all persons. . .” (MW-3, 87-8). While he recognized the bleak reality of people’s lives in his contemporary society, the Daishonin viewed the arrival of the Latter Day of the Law as an opportunity to bring a new and pow-

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erful light of hope to humanity. He transformed the concept of the Latter Day of the Law from one of a fearful end into one of a hopeful new beginning.

Standing now as we do at the brink of a new millennium, his spirit can serve as a model for all those who have their gaze fixed upon the future. □

By Shin Yatomi, Associate Editor, based on the book *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Study), published by the Seikyo Press, Tokyo.

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