

DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA 44 THE IMPLICIT TEACHING IS “BUDDHISM FOR THE PEOPLE”

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

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

The ultimate teaching of Buddhism is the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo that is implicit in the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Why is it only through this “implicit” Buddhist teaching that people of the Latter Day of the Law can attain true happiness? How does the true value of our Buddhist faith become manifest in our daily life? Addressing these and other questions in this fourth and final discussion on the “Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” (twenty-first) chapter, the participants continue their investigation of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, a teaching for the human being, for the welfare of the people.

44 The Implicit Teaching Is “Buddhism for the People”

As the light of the sun and moon
can banish all obscurity and gloom,
so this person as he passes through the world
can wipe out the darkness of living beings,
causing immeasurable numbers of bodhisattvas
in the end to dwell in the single vehicle.
Therefore a person of wisdom,
hearing how keen are the benefits to be gained,
after I have passed into extinction
should accept and uphold this sutra.
Such a person assuredly and without doubt
will attain the Buddha way. (LS21, 276)¹

FROM “THE RECORD OF THE ORALLY TRANSMITTED TEACHINGS”

The expression “in the end” refers to widely declaring and spreading the teaching [kosen-rufu]. “To dwell in the single vehicle,” means that one should dwell in the single teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. “Such a person” refers to a common mortal who has reached the stage of initial aspiration. “The Buddha way” refers to the ultimate stage.

The word “doubt” here indicates the darkness of fundamental doubt and confusion. The passage makes clear that now, in the Latter Day of the Law, one should carry out this single practice only, that of accepting and uphold-

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ing “this sutra,” in order to attain Buddhahood. (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 772)

ENDO: I heard a woman from the Kansai area relate how, in 1957, a men’s division member was dozing off at a discussion meeting that you were attending, President Ikeda. She said that her husband earnestly attempted to rouse the man.

But you kindly said: “This man has come here after having worked hard all day, so he must be very tired. There’s no need to wake him. Discussion of the Mystic Law cannot fail to enter a person’s life — even if it has to be through the pores of the skin!” When you said this, the atmosphere at the meeting at once became relaxed and friendly.

The woman said she was impressed at the time by your ability to understand the circumstances of others despite your relative youth, and she thought, “This is a remarkable person.”

SAITO: I think there is an important lesson here. No one has the right to take someone to task for arriving late at a meeting; often people have to rush just to get there before the meeting ends. On the contrary, those who make their best effort to attend meetings despite their busy schedules ought to be praised.

ENDO: The same woman also described how, on another occasion she reported something to you, President Ikeda, and was about to leave. To her surprise, you came over to see her off. Addressing her in the most courteous manner, you told her: “Thank you so much for your efforts. Please return home safely.” She said that this gesture had really moved her, and she had thought to herself, “This is what it means to be a leader of the Soka Gakkai.”

IKEDA: I’m surprised you would hear of such an account from so long ago!

ENDO: It seems to me that the concept of religion existing for the sake of human beings ultimately comes down to people’s conduct. That’s all. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am of this.

IKEDA: How we behave as human beings is really the bottom line. Buddhism ultimately boils down to character. The purpose of Buddhism is to produce people of fine character.

People of excellent character are humble. They are not jealous. They are not self-absorbed, but are concerned with everyone’s happiness. For us, this means caring about *kosen-rufu*. People who do so are fair and compassionate. And because they have compassion, wisdom wells forth in their lives.

When any organization increases in size, it tends to become bureaucratic. But the SGI must never become this way. The SGI is a world of humanism.

It is the leaders who set the tone of an organization. The larger an organization grows, the more its leaders need to develop humility. It is the function of leaders in the SGI to treasure their fellow members. Where leaders genuinely make such thorough efforts, there is growth. Again, such efforts are what our Buddhist practice consists of. This is the Lotus Sutra.

ENDO: Excuse me for bringing up the past again, but I heard about another woman from Kansai who once consulted you, regarding her recent appointment as a district women’s division leader. She was uncertain as to how to direct her efforts in that capacity.

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That was in the summer of 1959. You replied to her, saying:

There are no set guidelines dictating what you should do. It's as though the short staff you have been wielding until now has been switched to a long one. Because it is longer, you are not sure how exactly to manage it. But, the fact is, whether the staff you carry is short or long, the basic principle is the same; if you grasp it at its base and move it, the other end will swing around.

The important thing is to earnestly chant daimoku and treat those around you with the utmost respect, just as you have done up to now. It's about really caring for one individual, about praying for the happiness of your friends and kindly and considerately encouraging them. Such determination will spread through the entire district. This is the principle of "our life pervades the entire universe both physically and spiritually."² (MW-1, 65)

It is a mistake to think that kosen-rufu will be accomplished if we fail to encourage people around us and share this practice with them.

Her growing insecurity vanished at once upon hearing this, like a mist that suddenly clears, and she felt great confidence that she would succeed.

SUDA: While we tend to think that a leader has to engage in special activities, the reality is that the higher one's position in our organization, the more important it becomes to really focus on the basics of the practice.

Where Does the Buddha Reside?

IKEDA: At any rate, those who are working for kosen-rufu deserve the utmost respect. Ordinary people who honestly devote themselves to kosen-rufu are more noble—thousands, tens of thousands of times more noble—than any influential person.

It's not a matter of appearance, position or schooling. The strength of mind to be determined to help the suffering become happy and to accomplish kosen-rufu is most respectable. This is what it means to be at one with the Law.

The universe is also an entity of the Mystic Law; it is the great life of the Mystic Law itself. When we focus on the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law and devote our lives to realizing this goal, we become one with the Mystic Law in both body and mind. In a broad sense, we enter the path of "oneness of the Person and the Law."

SAITO: Concretely speaking, the path of the Mystic Law is the path of kosen-rufu.

IKEDA: And more precisely, since the SGI is the only group striving for kosen-rufu, the path of the Mystic Law is actually found in SGI activities. Those who really exert themselves in the organization for kosen-rufu embark on the path of the oneness of the Person and the Law.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, such people, while working long and hard in society, push themselves and take selfless action for the sake of the Law, society and others. They are truly noble. Though on the surface they may be working in a com-

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pany or taking care of the home or what have you, their inner status is that of Bodhisattvas of the Earth. And a Bodhisattva of the Earth is a Buddha. While we may speak of the Buddha in various contexts, apart from these people there simply aren't any Buddhas. This is a point that people really have a difficult time grasping.

SAITO: Your remarks really get at the superb features of the implicit teaching of the Lotus Sutra. One is that, as the Daishonin says in "The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings" (from "Eight Important Points of the 'Supernatural Powers' chapter"), "Thus Come One refers to all living beings, as has already been explained in the earlier 'Life Span' chapter" (GZ, 770). This is the point that all living beings are Buddhas, which is nowhere explicitly stated in the text of the "Life Span" chapter. Another feature is that the implicit teaching, or the Buddhism of "from the effect to the cause," enables one to directly address the reality of the nine worlds on the basis of inherent Buddhahood.

SUDA: All Buddhist teachings expounded prior to the Lotus Sutra encourage single-mindedly striving to attain Buddhahood. That is, they proceed from the nine worlds, or cause, to the world of Buddhahood, or effect. Because practicing those teachings means concentrating on one's own enlightenment first and foremost, they hardly bring forth the strength needed to change society.

ENDO: I think that historically Buddhism on the whole has not been able to shake this static and passive tendency.

IKEDA: To put it into simple terms, Buddhism that proceeds from the cause to the effect is analogous to someone saying, "After I become wealthy, I will help others"; or "After I get my Ph.D., I will instruct others." But one never knows whether or not that day will actually come. Buddhism that proceeds from the effect to the cause, on the other hand, seeks to provide others with supreme fortune and supreme wisdom right away.

ENDO: And this principle is contained in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

IKEDA: Yes, it's the "seed." The Daishonin says, "The blessings and wisdom [of both the objective and subjective worlds] are immeasurable. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo has these two aspects of blessings and wisdom" (GZ, 792).

SUDA: The implicit Buddhist teaching is then completely different from all the teachings that had come before.

IKEDA: Yes. We can discuss the differences from a variety of other perspectives, but the two points cited just now by Mr. Saito are the most important. Of course, they are two sides of the same coin.

The Practice and the Principle of the Fundamental Truth

SAITO: Regarding the idea that all living beings are the Buddha, let's first review the doc-

trine of “casting off the transient and revealing the true” that is revealed in the “Life Span” chapter. There, Shakyamuni refutes the view that he first attained enlightenment during his present lifetime, and discloses that he has in fact been continuously expounding the Law in the saha world since the extremely remote time in the past of gohyaku-jintengo. This is sometimes called the “practice of the fundamental truth [revealed in the ‘Life Span’ chapter].”

IKEDA: This is in contrast to the “principle of the fundamental truth [revealed in the ‘Life Span’ chapter].” This point is discussed in the Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings.

SUDA: Yes. Regarding the term “responding with joy” which appears in the “Benefits of Responding with Joy” (eighteenth) chapter, the Daishonin says:

“Respond” means to respond to and comply with practice and principle.... “Practice” means responding to and complying with the practice of the fundamental truth revealed in the Life Span chapter, which is known as gohyaku-jintengo [inconceivably remote past]. “Principle” means responding to the principle of the fundamental truth revealed in the “Life Span” chapter. In the end, then, responding means responding to and complying with the inner truth of the “Life Span” chapter. (GZ, 761)

ENDO: In the section of “The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings” on the “Benefits of the Teacher of the Law” (nineteenth) chapter, the Daishonin also refers to the “the practice and principle of the fundamental truth revealed in the ‘Life Span’ chapter” (GZ, p. 763).

IKEDA: From ancient times, various arguments concerning the revelations of true identity in practice and in principle have been put forward by the Tendai and other schools. What exactly do these refer to?

SAITO: In general, “practice” indicates something that manifests as a phenomenon, while “principle” indicates an invisible law or truth that exists behind the phenomenon.

In the present case, “practical revelation of true identity” means the preaching of the “Life Span” chapter. As the Daishonin says, it points to the “revelation in practice of true identity since gohyaku-jintengo.” By contrast, “revelation in principle of true identity” refers to something that, while not explicitly stated in the text, is implicitly contained in the “revelation in practice.” I think it could be said that it refers to the revelation of the true identity of the Buddha of absolute freedom (the Buddha of Limitless Joy) since time without beginning.

IKEDA: That would probably be a fair conclusion. In the section of “The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings” that deals with the “Distinctions in Benefits” (seventeenth) chapter, the Daishonin interprets “believe and understand” (in the phrase “to believe and understand it even for a moment” [LS17, 237]), as follows: “This one word ‘believe’ means to believe in the principle of the fundamental truth revealed in the ‘Life Span’ chapter. And the word ‘understand’ means to understand the practice of the fundamental truth revealed in the ‘Life Span’ chapter” (GZ, 760). Since the revelation in principle of true identity is not

clearly articulated, it can only be grasped through belief. And this belief translates into an understanding of the true meaning of the revelation of true identity in practice.

SUDA: In other words, when people heard the preaching of the “Life Span” chapter (i.e., the revelation of true identity in practice), they grasped the revelation of true identity in principle.

IKEDA: The term “revelation of true identity” sounds somewhat complicated, but in simpler terms it means “to show one’s full potential.”

This principle is actually illustrated quite well by the Japanese historical drama of Mito Komon in which the deputy shogun disguises himself as an ordinary citizen and travels throughout the country. At the end of each episode, the protagonist Mito Komon discloses his real identity. In a way, this is an example of revealing the fundamental truth!

ENDO: Yes, just when everyone thought him to be a retired grandfather, he turns out to be a very powerful man second only to the shogun!

SUDA: Then the villains shrink back in fear, and the good people rejoice. This indicates the benefit that comes from revealing one’s true identity!

IKEDA: Of course, this is only an analogy. In world literature, we could compare it with Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*. I am thinking of the scene where the true identity of the learned and wealthy count is revealed to be Edmond Dantès. Although it’s a story about revenge, I think this is still a kind of revelation of true identity.

SAITO: Those who had looked down on Mito Komon were certainly taken aback when they found out who he really was!

In the Lotus Sutra, as well, great bodhisattvas like Manjushri are at first thought to be the disciples not of Shakyamuni but of other Buddhas. Therefore they view Shakyamuni as a “new Buddha” who has only just attained enlightenment. The revelation that Shakyamuni in fact has been the Buddha since the remote past refutes this illusion.

ENDO: So, Mito Komon’s sidekicks, Suke and Kaku, are comparable to Bodhisattvas who attend a Buddha!

IKEDA: That means that just the sight of these attendants is cause for alarm to those who know the true identity of their boss!

SUDA: People who see them coming immediately think of the deputy shogun Mito Komon whom they represent.

SAITO: The relation between revelation of true identity in practice and in principle is similar to this. That is, those who are quick to grasp the meaning of Shakyamuni’s revelation of true identity in practice understand the revelation of true identity in principle that is implicit in it.

IKEDA: On the Gohonzon, the Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures appear as atten-

dants on either side of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Nichiren,” which is written in large characters down the center. And flanking these two Buddhas are the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

The explicit revelation of true identity corresponds specifically to the attendant “Shakyamuni Thus Come One,” who represents the True Effect of the Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past of gohyaku-jintengo. Also, Shakyamuni represents the extremely long life span and boundless wisdom and compassion to lead all beings to happiness acquired as the benefit of this True Effect.

Those listening to the preaching wonder what True Cause gave rise to this great True Effect, and what is the source of the benefit of this True Effect? To understand this is to grasp the explicit revelation of true identity.

ENDO: With regard to the cause of his enlightenment in the remote past, in the “Life Span” chapter Shakyamuni says only, “Originally I practiced the bodhisattva way” (LS16, 227). But the True Cause of his enlightenment is implicit in these words. This is what we mean when we say that it is implicit in the sutra.

SUDA: While the Tendai school does not have terminology to refer specifically to these two levels of “explicit” and “implicit” meaning, the school’s interpretation of the sutra follows similar lines. They speak of the “phenomenal revelation of true identity” and the “essential revelation of true identity.” Also, there are other schools that call them “doctrinal revelation of true identity” and “mind-observing revelation of true identity.” Despite differences in terminology, the basic thrust of the approach to the sutra is the same.

SAITO: Namely, that there is a revelation of true identity that is not literally expressed in the sutra text.

IKEDA: Let’s talk about that.

The preaching of the “Life Span” chapter is the “revelation of the fundamental truth” pertaining to the individual person Shakyamuni. It could be said that the person Shakyamuni revealed the essence of his own life.

Though he completely revealed his true identity as an individual, the revelation of true identity implicit in the sutra is another matter entirely; it is on a completely different level. It is a revelation of universal significance. It is the revelation of the fundamental truth for all living beings of the Ten Worlds, from common mortals to the Buddha. The text of the sutra describes the eternal Buddha who has continued to expound the Law and instruct people from the remote time in the past of gohyaku-jintengo.

SUDA: This is the idea of “Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment in the remote past.”

IKEDA: While this Buddha might be thought of as eternal, in an absolute sense, he is not eternal. Although it was an extremely long time ago, there is still a specific point in time at which he attained enlightenment. This Buddha consequently cannot be identified with the Mystic Law that is one with the universe and without beginning or end. There is a “gap.” Therefore, the Buddha in the text of the sutra is presented as “inferior” and the Law as “superior.”

The true intent of the “Life Span” chapter in revealing this “eternal” Buddha is to hint at

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the existence of the perfectly eternal Buddha (the Buddha of absolute freedom from time without beginning). This Buddha is one with the Mystic Law that is without beginning or end, and is identified with the great life of the universe itself, embodying the oneness of the Person and the Law.

ENDO: That is to say that all living beings in the universe are “perfectly eternal Buddhas,” just as they are.

IKEDA: All living things are originally Buddhas. This is the central thesis of the “Life Span” chapter. The Lotus Sutra calls on us to open our eyes to this truth.

SAITO: To recapitulate, the revelation of true identity in the text of the sutra is the revelation of the true identity of the individual Shakyamuni. And the revelation of true identity that is implicit in the sutra is the revelation of the true identity of all beings in the entire phenomenal world (i.e., of the Ten Worlds).

SUDA: In terms of both scale and profundity, they are completely different.

IKEDA: Yes, they are.

Only when we understand the implicit revelation of true identity do we grasp the Daishonin’s real meaning when he says that the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra is as different from the theoretical teaching “as fire is from water or heaven from earth” (MW-3, 275).

ENDO: When the Daishonin says, “Thus Come One refers to all living beings, as has already been explained in the earlier ‘Life Span’ chapter” (GZ, 770), he is speaking from the level of the implicit teaching.

The Implicit Teaching Completes Buddhism

SAITO: Last time, we reviewed the history of Buddhism in terms of people’s efforts to seek the cause of enlightenment. The conclusion is that the ultimate cause lies in the depths of the “Life Span” chapter. If this were not the case, Shakyamuni’s desire to enable all living beings to become Buddhas would be incomplete.

IKEDA: Needless to say, the “cause of Buddhahood” that is implicit in the “Life Span” chapter is the Mystic Law that is without beginning or end, or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. At the same time as this is the “cause of enlightenment,” it is also the “effect of enlightenment.” It is the “inscrutable Law of the simultaneity of cause and effect.” Those who listened to the preaching of the “Life Span” chapter realized this and attained enlightenment.

It is a mistake to read the “Life Span” chapter as a fantastic tale of a resplendent Buddha endowed with the thirty-two features [see box this page] suspended aloft in the Ceremony in the Air. If the point of the teaching were simply a matter of revering this august Buddha, it would ultimately be a teaching of looking outwards. Through the teaching of the Buddha’s attaining enlightenment in the remote past, however, the participants at the

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Ceremony in the Air realize that they share the same origin as Shakyamuni.

It is as though by gazing upwards into the “air” they at last become aware of their feet on the ground. This is explained [in Nichikan Shonin’s *Hokke Shuyo Sho Mondan* (Commentary on the “Essence of the Lotus Sutra”)] as “those at the highest stage of bodhisattva practice, or the stage of near-perfect enlightenment, changing into persons at the stage of initial aspiration and instantaneously attaining enlightenment.”

The True Cause of enlightenment is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Thus Come One. By awakening to this Mystic Law of time without beginning, bodhisattvas at the 51st stage of practice (according to T’ien-t’ai’s doctrine of the 52 stages from bodhisattva to Buddha) return to the stage of initial aspiration, or that of ordinary people, and quickly jump over the intervening stages to reach the highest, 52nd stage, that of enlightenment.

SUDA: After proceeding through the bodhisattva stages step by step toward Buddhahood, as though climbing a staircase, in the end they return to their “point of departure.” This means that they perceive the life of the universe itself that gives rise to and sustains their very life.

ENDO: The Great Teacher Miao-lo of China expressed the same thing, saying that the fundamental cause of enlightenment is contained in the depths of the “Life Span” chapter, and that those at the assembly of the Lotus Sutra were able to attain Buddhahood by virtue of their having discerned this original cause.

SAITO: This “original cause” is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. That is what they realized.

IKEDA: They understood the implicit teaching just by hearing the literal teaching. For beings with such high capacity, that’s all it took.

But what about those unable to grasp this? This is why Shakyamuni entrusted Bodhisattva Superior Practices with the task of propagating the teaching after his passing.

Superior Practices is a “bodhisattva-Buddha” — that is, a being whose life embodies the “wonderful Law of simultaneity of cause and effect” — who spreads that wonderful Law. Buddhism teaches in no uncertain terms that the Law and the person who expounds it are one.

SAITO: The Daishonin explains this idea when he says, “Because the Law was expounded by the original Buddha, it was entrusted to his true disciples” (MW-1, 73).

This statement appears in Miao-lo’s supplement to the Hokke Mongu Ki (Annotations on the Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra by the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China) by the T’ien-t’ai scholar Tao-hsien of the T’ang period. The Daishonin cites this passage in “The True Object of Worship” and other writings.

IKEDA: Nichiren Daishonin says, “Bodhisattva Superior Practices of the True Cause is brought together with Shakyamuni of the True Effect solely for the benefit of those in the Latter Day of the Law after the Buddha’s passing” (GZ, 864).

To match the capacity of beings of the Latter Day, the Mystic Law of *kuon ganjo*, which is the original cause of Buddhahood, is expounded in a direct and straightforward man-

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ner. That is the purpose of the transmission in the “Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” chapter.

Therefore, the meaning of “Thus Come One” in the chapter’s title refers not exclusively to Shakyamuni, but to all living beings. And “supernatural powers” means the power of life. The “Supernatural Powers” chapter reveals the true “power of life” of all living beings, and particularly of ordinary people. To indicate this, the Buddha’s ten supernatural powers are expounded on a cosmic scale.

ENDO: In other words, the magnificent Buddha endowed with the thirty-two features is simply a provisional Buddha serving to help people understand the truth.

“It Is Not Difficult to Become a Buddha Equal to Shakyamuni”

IKEDA: The thirty-two features are a collection of ideal characteristics; perhaps these were qualities that the Indian people of that time revered. They were expounded to initially arouse in people a sense of respect and seeking toward the Buddha. The point is not whether Shakyamuni actually possessed these features. Their purpose is to lead ordinary people to the awareness that they themselves are Buddhas. I think Nichiren Daishonin refers to this principle in his writing “Junyoze Ji” (On the Ten Factors of Life).

The Daishonin says, “These three factors of life (of appearance, nature and entity) of our own are the Buddha’s three enlightened properties. But we common mortals think the three enlightened properties have nothing to do with our own lives. One who is thoroughly awakened to this is a person who truly understands the Lotus Sutra” (GZ, 410).

The point is that after searching for happiness high and low, it turns out that it is found in one’s immediate surroundings, in one’s own home, as it were. Happiness does not lie way off in the distance; happiness means that one’s life is afire with the inherent life force of the world of Buddhahood, and that it is being expressed in a manner true to oneself. It means advancing continuously, no matter what happens, determined to fulfill one’s mission in this life. To have such faith is Buddhahood itself; it is eternal happiness.

Such things as learning, fame and social standing could be called the modern equivalents of the thirty-two features. In some instances, possessing these adornments might be useful in teaching others about the greatness of the Mystic Law. That’s because there are people in whom those qualities inspire respect. But they are definitely not the “goal.”

As long as we cloak the self in such ornamentation, we cannot cultivate our true strength as human beings. We cannot understand the real meaning of faith, or of Buddhism. Such vanity is the spirit of Devadatta. In “Letter to Horen,” the Daishonin notes that Devadatta tried to adorn himself with the thirty-two features.

SUDA: Yes. Devadatta is said to have possessed thirty of the thirty-two features, lacking only “the tuft of white hair” and “the markings of the thousand-spoke wheel.” Thinking that this made him inferior to Shakyamuni and would cause people to look down on him, he contrived to collect the light of fireflies to smear in the middle of his forehead to achieve the effect of the tuft of white hair, and to have a blacksmith brand the soles of his feet with

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the pattern of a chrysanthemum in place of the markings of the thousand-spoke wheel (MW-7, 99).

IKEDA: But instead, his feet were severely burned! It's funny to think about, but it reveals Devadatta's true nature—his jealousy toward Shakyamuni and his vanity in seeking to embellish himself.

Many of those who have abandoned faith and turned against the SGI have displayed the same tendencies. There are also many people who, as the Daishonin says, "outwardly maintain their practice but cherish doubt in their hearts" (MW-3, 287).

Genuine practitioners of Buddhism do not put on airs; they act in a manner true to themselves. Things such as academic background have nothing to do with the world of faith; rather, to be obsessed with such extras is only an obstacle to one's faith.

True faith is selfless. It is not about looking out for one's own interests, but actively challenging and seeking to overcome difficulties with a spirit of not begrudging one's life. To carry out the pure practice of the Buddhism of the True Cause, which explains that the ordinary person is a true Buddha, is to advance the great popular movement of the SGI. The fundamental spirit of the Lotus Sutra is found in Nichiren Daishonin's "Buddhism of the people," which teaches struggling against the personal affectations of power and authority.

SAITO: Yes. The thirty-two features are characteristics that match people's worldly aspirations. They are taught "in accord with the understanding of others." This is one reason why Shakyamuni, while a Buddha of absolute freedom, is said to be the "Buddha who struggled to advance to the state of limitless joy through accumulated practice."³

IKEDA: Shakyamuni is a Buddha of absolute freedom, but on a scale completely different from that of the "Buddha of absolute freedom of kuon ganjo." One is a Buddha who is enlightened as an individual, while the other is a Buddha embodying the entire universe.

ENDO: I am reminded again of how wonderful the teaching implicit in the sutra is. If one were to compare various Buddhist teachings in terms of their relative level, this is truly the most advanced.

IKEDA: It is the great Buddhist teaching that can lead all people, whatever their capacity, to happiness. The Daishonin says, "Ordinary medicine will help a slight ailment, but for grave illnesses, elixir should be used" (MW-3, 55). And:

With the coming of the Latter Day of the Law, however, with regard to these Hinayana sutras, Mahayana sutras and the Lotus Sutra—which were entrusted respectively to Mahakashyapa, Ananda and others, to the bodhisattvas Monju, Miroku and others, and to Yakuo, Kannon and others—though the words of these sutras still remain, they will no longer serve as medicine for the illnesses of living beings. The illnesses will be too grave, and these medicines too ineffectual. At that time, Bodhisattva Jogyo [Superior Practices] will make his appearance in the world and bestow upon all living beings of Jambudvipa the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo. (MW-6, 125)

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This is the Mystic Law that is eternity itself. It is the original seed that has enabled all Buddhas throughout time and space to attain enlightenment. And the Daishonin says that if we embrace this original seed of enlightenment, “it is not difficult to become a Buddha [equal to Shakyamuni]” (MW-1, 259). This is a statement of no small significance.

When we truly have confidence in these words, we will never become deadlocked in life. We are Buddhas. We cannot possibly fail to be victorious. There’s no such thing as a down-cast Buddha. Nor is there such a thing as a Buddha who is defeated by hardship and loses hope.

Whatever happens, it is vital that we muster our courage and continue advancing, reminding ourselves: “That’s right! I have the Mystic Law! There is no difficulty that I can’t overcome!” As long as we possess this fighting spirit, our lives will develop greatly in accord with the principle that earthly desires are enlightenment, in that our desires and sufferings work as fuel for our development.

A seed may be a tiny thing. But a single seed contains all the necessary elements to produce a towering tree more than a hundred feet tall. This is the mystery of the seed. When we plant the original seed of Buddhahood, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, in our heart and cultivate it, we develop boundless good fortune and wisdom.

Giving a lecture on the Daishonin’s teachings, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda would often say, “If the benefit that each of you has received is the size of one’s little finger, then the benefit I have received is large enough to fill this entire hall.” My feelings are exactly the same.

The Heart Determines Everything

SAITO: President Ikeda, you have received honorary doctorates and honorary professorships from nearly sixty universities around the world. In the ordinary course of affairs, for someone to receive so many accolades would be unimaginable.

IKEDA: I hope that people will view this as symbolizing the good fortune and benefit of all SGI members throughout the world.

I did not go to college. Instead, I dedicated my youth to President Toda. Because of the failure of President Toda’s businesses, I changed my plans to attend college. I told him: “Please don’t worry about anything. I will work; I will fix everything. So please rest assured.” And I have done everything I said I would. I turned the Soka Gakkai, which had fallen upon the hardest of times, into a worldwide organization. I have made the greatness of President Toda and President Makiguchi known to the world.

I believed that to protect President Toda was to protect kosen-rufu and to protect Buddhism. There was no other way. I thoroughly devoted myself to the path of mentor and disciple.

I am confident that the cause I made to support President Toda rather than pursue my plans to attain an education has now come back to me in the form of these honorary degrees from universities across the globe. The law of cause and effect is unailing.

SUDA: This is truly a drama of actual proof of Buddhism that will be eternally remem-

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bered by generations to come.

IKEDA: The heart is key. Because of his spirit in making an offering of a mud pie to Shakyamuni, the boy Virtue Victorious [Jpn Tokusho Doji] was reborn as the great king Ashoka.

ENDO: A little earlier we talked about not adorning the self. Everything depends on the state of one's heart, on whether one has genuine strength as a human being.

IKEDA: We should carefully consider the significance of Nichiren Daishonin's having been born into the lowest rung of the society of his day. If he were to have expounded a Buddhist teaching "according to the minds of others," he might have been better off born as a member of the nobility or of a powerful family.

But he was born as the "son of a commoner" (MW-5, 293). The fact that he was not a member of a noble family helps explain why he encountered such a succession of incredible persecutions.

ENDO: The Daishonin says of himself, "Nichiren... in this life was born poor and lowly to a *chandala* family" (MW-1, 37).

IKEDA: To help people form a connection with Buddhism even through a reverse relationship, he boldly took on and endured great persecution. Forgetting this immense compassion, there were some that treated the Daishonin with contempt. He says: "There are also those who appeared to believe in Nichiren but began doubting when they saw him persecuted. They have not only forsaken the Lotus Sutra but actually think themselves wise enough to instruct Nichiren" (MW-1, 42). This is deplorable. Without the path of mentor and disciple, there is no Buddhism.

SAITO: The Daishonin says of the end that these arrogant people will meet, "the pitiful thing is that these perverse people must suffer in the depths of hell even longer than the Nembutsu believers" (MW-1, 42). This is an unchanging principle; one that will apply as much in the future as it does today.

IKEDA: In any event, ordinary people understand the hearts of ordinary people. A citizen truly understands the feelings of other citizens. The Daishonin dared to be born as member of the most abused and reviled class, as the son of a *chandala*.

This summer will mark the fifty-third anniversary of the end of the Second World War. I heard that when the fighting moved to Okinawa, Japan's southernmost island, the locals there experienced severe discrimination at the hands of many Japanese officers and soldiers [who had in large part been mobilized from other parts of Japan]. The only soldiers who did not abuse them were those who were aboriginal Ainu from northernmost Hokkaido.

SAITO: I too have heard unbelievable, sickening accounts of how the people of Okinawa were treated by the Japanese army. There are reports of soldiers murdering local citizens on suspicion of their being spies, simply because they were heard speaking in the Okinawan language, which to the soldiers was unintelligible.

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IKEDA: But the soldiers of Ainu descent treated the locals differently. I think this was because they themselves had experienced discrimination as a minority. It seems that they were themselves discriminated against and mistreated even by the army. That is probably why they treated the people of Okinawa kindly and saved the lives of many. They were truly noble.

SUDA: That's very moving. To stand eternally on the side of the people, eternally to stand on the side of those being mistreated—I think that this is true humanity.

Zhou Enlai: "I Am Here Thanks to Everyone"

IKEDA: True humanity is true Buddhism.

When a delegation of the Buraku5 Liberation League of Japan visited China (in 1962), Chinese premier Zhou Enlai met with them. The head of the delegation thanked him for taking time out of his busy schedule to meet with them, to which Zhou replied: "What are you saying? A premier who would not receive the most mistreated people in Japan, the people who are suffering the greatest hardship, on their visit to this country is no premier of China."⁶

At the time of the historic Long March (1934–35), Zhou shared his personal rations with the troops. When his party advanced into the wetland region of Szuchuan province, they had nothing to eat. For emergency rations, Zhou had a sack of beef that had been boiled and dried, and a sack of barley flour. It was something that could be hydrated with cold or hot water and eaten anywhere.

The soldiers, who had no such provisions, at first resorted to eating rats, leaves and the roots of plants as they went along. As a result, they all began to suffer from malnutrition. Seeing what was happening, Zhou directed that the beef be distributed to the soldiers, and had his rations divided among everyone.

After a while, they again faced starvation. It was so bad that people who seemed healthy enough one evening would be found dead the following morning. Zhou immediately told his escort to distribute the barley flour. But the man did not ensure that everyone received a portion. When Zhou reproached him for failing to follow his directions, the man protested, "If I follow your orders, what will you have to eat, Sir?" Premier Zhou drew close and, gazing into the soldier's face said: "I am here thanks to everyone. If the life of even one more person can be saved, the justice of the revolution can be that much more securely demonstrated. I entreat you to do as I have asked." Having no alternative, the escort divided the remaining rations among all the soldiers. Luckily the company finally reached a village four or five days later.

This is what it means to be a leader. This is what it means to truly treasure one's companions. The bonds of people who are united behind the same goal are more profound even than the bonds of parent and child or between siblings. These are bonds not of blood, but of justice—of people fighting side by side to realize a common goal. To cultivate and maintain such bonds is proof of one's humanity.

Leaders exist solely because of the people they lead. A genuine leader is someone who takes the initiative and selflessly devotes himself or herself to achieving some goal. There are, however, far too many "leaders" in the world who use the people to realize personal

gain. The SGI exists to battle such evil tendencies. Without opposing the “enemies of the people,” one cannot attain Buddhahood. Without battling the “one great evil,” without directly confronting the “enemy of Buddhism,” kosen-rufu cannot be achieved. As the Daishonin strictly states, “One must set aside all other affairs and devote one’s attention to rebuking slander of the Law” (MW-5, 103).

SAITO: Among many kinds of slanders, the offense of slandering the votary of the Lotus Sutra is particularly grave. The Lotus Sutra says that the offense of slandering the sutra’s votary in the age after Shakyamuni’s passing is even greater than the offense of continuously slandering the Buddha for an entire kalpa.

The offense of slandering an ordinary person who is dedicated to the practice of the sutra is even greater than the offense of slandering the Buddha who preaches the Law. This may seem odd on the surface, for it is impossible to grasp without realizing that it is common people in the Latter Day who directly propagate the Mystic Law, the ultimate source of enlightenment for all people.

IKEDA: That’s it exactly. Of course, while the votary of the Lotus Sutra specifically refers to Nichiren Daishonin, we who follow the Daishonin are likewise votaries of the Lotus Sutra, and are leading the most noble of lives.

President Toda said:

I declare those great champions of propagation who carry on the Daishonin’s work will appear now without fail.... In kuon ganjo, these great champions of propagation are Buddhas of absolute freedom embodying the oneness of parent and child; in the intermediate term of the assembly at Eagle Peak, they stood beside Bodhisattva Superior Practices as his attendants; and in the near term, during the Daishonin’s lifetime, they were without a doubt people who made a profound vow of mentor and disciple. I am firmly convinced that these people will put the Daishonin’s prophecy into practice with their lives, will solidly vow to see to it that the original Buddha endowed with the three virtues of sovereign, teacher and parent does not become a Buddha whose prophecies are not fulfilled; and they will surely exert themselves in their practice with the spirit of not begrudging their lives.

The fact that the Soka Gakkai has emerged at this time [700 years after the time of the Daishonin] is cause for great joy!

As a human being, there is no more honorable way of life, no life of greater good.

The Age of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth Has Arrived!

ENDO: As SGI members, each of us has been born with a tremendous mission. The “Supernatural Powers” chapter describes the activities of Bodhisattva Superior Practices as follows:

As the light of the sun and moon

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can banish all obscurity and gloom,
so this person as he passes through the world
can wipe out the darkness of living beings,
causing immeasurable numbers of bodhisattvas
in the end to dwell in the single vehicle.
(LS21, 276)

Japan and the world are today cloaked in an impenetrable darkness. I think that for precisely this reason, our time has now arrived.

IKEDA: That's right. The deeper the darkness, the more brightly shines the Buddhism of the sun.

SUDA: This is our opportunity.

IKEDA: It's a chance for us to help countless people become truly happy. Kosen-rufu means enabling people "in the end to dwell in the single vehicle" (LS21, 276) and to take faith in the Mystic Law. In "The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings," the Daishonin says, "'in the end' means kosen-rufu" (GZ, 772). It was for this reason that we were born in this world according to our own wishes. We need to live out our lives to the fullest as we work to fulfill our mission.

When our heart blazes with the spirit to "exert oneself bravely and vigorously" (LS2, 23), ageless and immortal vitality wells forth. "Bravely and vigorously" means immense courage. "Exert" has two meanings: pure, in the sense of unsullied; and incessant, in the sense of continuous activity and unswerving advancement. The Daishonin says, "Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is the practice of 'exerting' oneself" (GZ, 790).

We must never stop challenging ourselves; the "supernatural powers of the Thus Come One" are manifested through such faith. The Daishonin says, "If you exert a hundred million eons of effort in a single moment of life, the three enlightened properties of the Buddha will appear within you at each moment" (GZ, 790). It comes down to "exerting a hundred million eons of effort in each moment" — not just one or two year's effort. This means racking one's mind and exerting oneself wholeheartedly for kosen-rufu. This is what is meant by "as he passes through the world" (LS21, 276). Those who take action in society are the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who have received the transmission of the "Supernatural Powers" chapter. They are people who, without putting on airs or adorning themselves, work tirelessly in the organization for kosen-rufu, that is, directly connected to Nichiren Daishonin.

Such people are more respectable than any dignitary or celebrity. They are the "emissaries of the Buddha" in the Latter Day of the Law. And they themselves are Buddhas.

To be continued

Footnotes

1. 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 page number.
2. *Makashikan Bugyoden Guketsu* (Annotations on T'ien-t'ai's Maka Shikan [Profound Concentration and Insight]), vol. 5.
3. "Through accumulated practice" refers to the process of transforming from the Buddha of Inferior Manifestation expounded in Hinayana Buddhism, to the Buddha of Superior Manifestation in Mahayana Buddhism, to the Buddha of Beneficence in the teachings specifically targeted at bodhisattvas, and to the Buddha of Absolute Freedom in the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.
4. *Chandala* (Candala): A Sanskrit term designating the lowest social class, comprised of those professions required to kill living creatures. The Daishonin was born to the family of a fisherman.
5. Buraku: Originally referring to people living in a small village or hamlet, but came to mean the largest discriminated-against population in Japan. They are not a racial or a national minority, but a caste-like minority among the ethnic Japanese.
6. *Saichiro Uesugi, Jinken wa Sekai o Ugokasu* (Human Rights Move the World) (Osaka: Kaiho Shuppansha, 1991), pp. 127–28.

Thirty-two Features

Remarkable physical characteristics said to be possessed by Buddhas, bodhisattvas, Bonten, Taishaku and the wheel-turning kings, symbolizing their superiority over ordinary people. The "Treatise on the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom" (Daichido Ron) lists them as follows: They are listed as follows: (1) flat soles, (2) the markings of the thousand-spoke wheel on the sole of each foot, (3) long and slender fingers, (4) broad and flat heels, (5) webbed feet and hands, (6) extremely flexible limbs, (7) protuberant insteps, (8) slender legs like those of a deer, (9) hands which extend past the knees even in standing position, (10) concealed genitals, (11) a body of equal breadth and height, (12) body hair that turns upward, (13) one hair growing from each pore, (14) golden skin, (15) light radiating from the body, (16) thin and pliant skin, (17) well-developed muscles of the hands, feet, shoulders and nape of the neck, (18) well-developed muscles below each armpit, (19) a dignified torso like that of a lion, (20) a large and straight body, (21) substantial shoulders, (22) forty teeth, (23) even teeth, (24) four white fangs, (25) full cheeks like those of a lion, (26) an unexcelled sense of taste, (27) an extremely long and broad tongue, (28) a voice that can reach the Brahma Heaven, (29) eyes the color of blue lotus blossoms.

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soms, (30) long eyelashes like those of a cow, (31) a protuberant knot of flesh resembling a topknot on the crown of the head and (32) a tuft of white hair between the eyebrows, curling to the right. According to the "Treatise on the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom," these marks are to be acquired one by one as a result of good causes accumulated over a total of three asogi kalpas (an incalculable amount of time).

Nichiren Daishonin states in "Letter to Niike," "If you chant Nam-myohorenge-kyo with your whole heart, you will naturally become endowed with the Buddha's thirty-two features." The Daishonin's Buddhism teaches that one can attain Buddhahood in one's present form. In other words, one can attain Buddhahood "just as one is," without discarding one's present identity. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the Daishonin's Buddhism, these thirty-two unusual qualities are interpreted as wisdom, ability, compassion, etc., which one displays by manifesting one's Buddha nature.

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