

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS OF THE LOTUS SUTRA
PART 2
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The following is part two of a review of the Lotus Sutra chapters based on “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra” (DLS) which just completed serialization in *Living Buddhism* in October. This installment includes chapters fifteen through twenty. The fifty-three installments of the dialogue appeared in the magazine from April 1995 to October 2000. The series is being published in book form as *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra* (Volume One is now available). The dialogue was conducted between SGI President Daisaku Ikeda and representatives of the Soka Gakkai Study Department, Katsuji Saito, Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. With the fresh look at the Lotus Sutra they have provided for the past five years, the relevance of this ancient teaching to our times has been made clear. (The series installment numbers pertaining to each chapter of the sutra follow the title.)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: “EMERGING FROM THE EARTH” (DLS 23–25)

The second half of the Lotus Sutra comprises what is known as the “essential teaching.” With chapter fifteen, the sutra’s drama intensifies. Shakyamuni shakes up the assembly with the revelation of his true identity. In the theoretical teaching of the first half of the sutra, he did not refer to himself when sharing stories and parables of other Buddhas and their lands. He was careful to discuss only his princely, ascetic or bodhisattva practices in the past. The emergence from the earth of a multitude of wonderfully adorned bodhisattvas “more numerous than the sands of sixty-thousand Ganges Rivers” changed that. When asked who trained these wonderful exemplars of Buddhist practice, he reveals that he cared for them during the entire span of their development.

In the sixteenth chapter, “Life Span,” Shakyamuni describes, to the wonderment of his audience, that since the inconceivably remote past, he has been appearing in the *saha* world¹ as a Buddha, teaching and converting living beings. This major revelation expands his identity from Shakyamuni the revered teacher of the Buddhist Way in ancient India to a manifestation of the eternal Buddha in the universe, opening the way for people to reform their lives and bring forth their own Buddha nature just as they are.

In terms of the events in chapter fifteen, Shakyamuni’s statement that he had trained these bodhisattvas upset the assembly’s perception of the way to Buddhist enlightenment. Yes, there were other Buddhas in attendance, seated on their lion thrones, but the majority of beings present were content to accept a prophecy of future enlightenment. As we will see, Shakyamuni’s baring of his real self created a crisis in the assembly regarding their own comprehension of his teachings. The foundation upon which they had previously felt so secure had been yanked out from under them.

To set the context of the story, let us check the highlights of the final four chapters of the theoretical first half of the sutra. The eleventh chapter features the emergence of the wondrous Treasure Tower along with the arrival of other Buddhas with retinues from their respective Buddha lands. Along with the Buddhas is a diverse selection of all kinds of beings from all over the universe. In honor of the occasion, Shakyamuni purifies the vast realms in all directions, making them Buddha lands, and he also connects them to the

happenings at the floating tower via something like a “mystic-simulcast.”

This exercise expands the audience to incalculable proportions. In the midst of this universal stage, Shakyamuni takes his seat in the marvelous Treasure Tower. Many Treasures Buddha is already seated and attests to the veracity of Shakyamuni’s statements as he describes how the Lotus Sutra should be propagated after the Buddha’s passing. Chapter twelve lays out the exploits of the evil Devadatta but ends with a prophecy of his enlightenment. This shows that the practice of the Law, as revealed in the Lotus Sutra, enables one to overcome any kind of evil past. Chapters thirteen, “Encouraging Devotion,” and fourteen, “Peaceful Practices,” present the many vows by the assembly to spread and teach the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni shows his appreciation for these bodhisattva vows.

At the opening of the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter, it is the turn of the bodhisattvas and mahasattvas² who had assembled to hear the Lotus Sutra, and who numbered more than the sands of numerous Ganges Rivers, to make their pledge to propagate the Lotus Sutra. However, something had changed in the Buddha’s readiness to accept their determination. In a seeming turnabout, Shakyamuni emphatically responds:

Leave off good men! There is no need for you to protect this sutra. Why? Because in this saha world of mine there are bodhisattvas and mahasattvas who are as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges, and each of these bodhisattvas has a retinue equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges. After I have entered into extinction, these persons will be able to protect, read, recite and widely preach this sutra. (LS15, 212–213)

At that moment the earth trembled like jelly and many fissures open. From the empty space below pour multitudes of overpoweringly radiant bodhisattvas. Emanating light and graciousness, these “bodhisattvas-that-looked-like-Buddhas” cause a significant stir among the assembly. As a natural expression of their dignified character, these bodhisattvas proceed to the magnificent Treasure Tower to offer greetings and ask about the well being of Thus Come One, Shakyamuni, as well as Many Treasures Buddha. They rotate to perform obeisance to the full assembly: Buddhas in the lion seats with their attendants, Maitreya and other bodhisattvas, voice hearers and disciples of the two vehicles, dragons kings, humans and other beings.

The four leaders of the bodhisattvas address themselves to Shakyamuni Buddha who is seated at the top of the Treasure Tower. This scene, with its caring discourse, has become a true example of behavior that befits the mentor-and-disciple relationship:

Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices, the second called Boundless Practices, the third was called Pure Practices, and the fourth was called Firmly Established Practices. These four bodhisattvas were the foremost leaders and guiding teachers among the whole group. In the presence of the great assembly, each of these pressed his palms together, gazed at Shakyamuni Buddha, and inquired: “World-Honored One, are your illnesses few, are your worries few, are your practices proceeding comfortably? Do those whom you propose to save readily receive instruction? Does the effort not cause the World Honored One to become weary and spent?” (LS15, 214)

Shakyamuni answers them, “just so, just so, good men!” (LS15, 214). After replying in kind to their various questions, the Buddha observes: “Excellent, excellent, good men! You know how to rejoice in your hearts for the Thus Come One” (LS15, 215). The deeply caring dialogue between Shakyamuni and the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is a profound lesson for

the whole assembly. It sets a tone of gravity and awe for the revelation in the next chapter of the wonder that is life. Yet, this is not the end of the amazement to come.

It is appropriate to add some further depth about the leaders of these Bodhisattvas of the Earth. The characteristics of the Four Leaders of the Bodhisattvas who emerged from beneath the earth (Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, Firmly Established Practices) are equated with the four virtues of humanity: true self, eternity, purity, and happiness. From the perspective of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, all of these virtues are combined within the Mystic Law (*Seikyo Times*, May 1988, pp. 64–65).

In the unfolding drama, these bodhisattvas were something completely new and different from anything that the assembly had ever encountered. In particular, Bodhisattva Maitreya and the numerous bodhisattvas were set on their heels by this encounter. They approached the Thus Come One and inquired about the meaning of what had just transpired. Maitreya made the request in the context that what everyone had just witnessed was beyond anything they had experienced. They had never seen such well-developed and beautiful bodhisattvas. He asks of Shakyamuni, "This host of Bodhisattvas with their great dignity, virtue and diligence — who preached the Law for them, who taught and converted them and brought them to this?" (LS15, 217).

There are tones of consternation in the conclusion of Maitreya's verse soliloquy about the conspicuous nature of their arrival and their origins:

The earth in four directions trembles and splits
and they all emerge from out of it.
World-Honored One, from times past
I have seen nothing like this!
I beg you to tell me where they come from,
the name of the land.
I have constantly journeyed from land to land
but never have I seen such a thing!
In this whole multitude
there is not one person that I know.
Suddenly they have come up from the earth —
I beg you to explain the cause.
The members of this great assembly now,
the immeasurable hundreds, thousands, millions
of bodhisattvas,
All want to know these things.
Regarding the causes that govern the beginning and end
of this multitude of bodhisattvas,
possessor of immeasurable virtue, World Honored One,
We beg you to dispel the doubts of the assembly!
(LS15, 217–218)

Before he answers Maitreya and the numerous bodhisattvas, Shakyamuni warns everyone that he is going to bring forth a powerful teaching:

Excellent, excellent, Ajita, that you should question the Buddha about this great affair.
All of you with a single mind should don the armor of diligence and determine to be firm in intent. The Thus Come One wishes now to summon forth and declare the wisdom of the Buddhas, the freely exercised transcendental power of the Buddhas,

the power of the Buddhas that has the lion's ferocity, the fierce and greatly forceful power of the Buddhas. (LS15, 218)

Everyone is poised for the answer and Shakyamuni doesn't disappoint them. These brilliant bodhisattvas are his disciples. It is he who has trained them after attaining enlightenment in the *saha* world. He further explains that up until this time, these bodhisattvas had been dwelling in the realm of potentiality. It was in the "empty space" below the *saha* world. The empty space beneath the *saha* world refers to the ultimate depths of life or the ultimate reality. Nichiren Daishonin points out that the bodhisattvas who appeared from the earth in the fifteenth chapter, "are people who possess the fundamental Law. This 'fundamental Law' is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (GZ, p. 751).

Maitreya and his fellow bodhisattvas are even more perplexed with this answer. Far from clarifying things, it creates a quandary quite challenging for their minds and hearts to grasp. They do the math. Given the length of his life in this world, how could Shakyamuni have trained these innumerable legions of brilliant bodhisattvas? As they contemplate this impossibility, doubts in their mentor begin to stir. Straightforwardly, though, they challenge these doubts with a question to Shakyamuni:

"World Honored One, it is not long since you attained Buddhahood, and yet you have been able to carry out this great meritorious undertaking! We ourselves have faith in the Buddha, believing that he preaches in accordance with what is appropriate, that the words spoken by the Buddha are never false, and the Buddha's knowledge is in all cases penetrating and comprehensive. Nevertheless, in the period after the Buddha has entered extinction, if bodhisattvas who have just begun to aspire to enlightenment should hear these words, they will perhaps not believe or accept them but will be led to commit the crime of rejecting the law. Therefore, World Honored One, we beg you to explain so we may put aside our doubts, and so that, in the future ages when good men hear of this matter, they will not entertain doubts!" (LS15, 221–222)

Shakyamuni reserves his answer for later, so the chapter ends on this questioning note. One can imagine the buzz in the audience about how Shakyamuni could have trained this huge number of disciples in the fifty or so years since he sat beneath the bodhi tree and attained enlightenment. There is a sense of expectancy in the air. It was mentioned earlier that the intensity of the drama heats up in this chapter. Can the assembly handle any more surprises? Looking back, the sutra's story has had a magnificent assembly come to attend Shakyamuni's preaching, a nearly earth-sized tower appeared in the air, and the whole assembly was lifted as well. Once the stage is set, the amazing multitude of Bodhisattvas of the Earth made their appearance. Shakyamuni topped it off by telling the assembly that it is he who has trained all of these magnificent bodhisattvas. What could be next?

The confusion of the assembly is to be expected. Those who believed in teachings previous to the Lotus Sutra naturally would not understand how the Bodhisattvas of the Earth attained this wonderful state and would certainly balk at seeing themselves equated with the ranks of this kind of bodhisattva. This is precisely why Shakyamuni uses this kind of shock treatment to awaken the minds of those disciples still captured by former doctrines. President Ikeda explains:

Their surprise, shock and doubt represent the reaction of all those believing in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings as well as the Lotus Sutra's theoretical teaching. "Upsetting attachments and arousing doubts" indicates a sudden overturning of the beliefs and

convictions that people have held up to that point. It is a decisive blow to the foundation of an existing worldview. Through this dramatic overturning of the values that people were familiar and comfortable with, Shakyamuni reveals his true identity, his true state of life. (*Living Buddhism*, October 1997, p. 35)

Thus, the confusion in the minds of those at the assembly extends beyond the visual impact of the appearance of these respectable bodhisattvas. Up to that point, the various categories of disciples have placed their faith in the traditional model of the world and the causes that lead to Buddhahood. But their views are sent spinning. Shakyamuni's declaration that he had trained and developed these myriad of bodhisattvas shakes the foundation of what the audience believes. In the "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" President Ikeda says:

When we come to the essential teaching, everything Shakyamuni has taught up to that point is fundamentally overturned. The theoretical teaching reveals a succession of important doctrines; these include the true entity of life, the enlightenment of the people of the two vehicles (the voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas), the enlightenment of women, and the enlightenment of evil people. In addition, predictions of future enlightenment were bestowed upon Shariputra, the disciple reputed to be foremost in wisdom, and Shakyamuni's other disciples who had comprehended these doctrines.

But in an instant, all of this becomes meaningless. That's because the very foundation of these teachings, the entire premise upon which they were based, has fallen apart. (*Living Buddhism*, October 1997, p. 44)

Shakyamuni refutes what he has previously taught — that one becomes a Buddha, if at all, only after aeons of austere practices. There is the beginning of a new vision that enlightenment is a condition that is always an intrinsic characteristic of life. The impact of Shakyamuni's revelation compares to that of the Copernican revolution of the heliocentric view of the solar system. President Ikeda points out that the appearance of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is the sign of human liberation everywhere. It is the call to awaken people from resignation and powerlessness. It is also to recognize ultimate value in every person. President Ikeda paints this picture of human liberation:

Failing to comprehend the greatness of their own lives, they become attached to unimportant details. The power of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is the fundamental power we have as human beings to break through all of the differences — whether of ethnicity, race, gender or social standing — and lead people to happiness. We are plain and unadorned ordinary people; we are thoroughly human and infinitely courageous. This is the pride of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

The appearance of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is an earth-shaking event attesting to the greatness of the underlying power of life. We have to convey this to people throughout the world. The transformation of the perception of the Buddha in the essential teaching amounts to a fundamental transformation in the perception of human beings. (*Living Buddhism*, October 1997, pp. 47–48)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: "LIFE SPAN OF THE THUS COME ONE" (DLS 26–36)

The "Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter is the bridge over the waters of doubt and uncertainty. It is a revelation of the kernel of eternal life in every living being as well

as the means to realize it. We have the Buddhist sages in central Asia, China and Japan, including Nichiren Daishonin, who categorically assert that without the pivotal teaching of the “Life Span” chapter, all of Shakyamuni’s teachings would be rendered false. The “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra” series devotes more than ten installments discussing the many facets of the “Life Span” chapter. These include the metaphor of the lotus flower blooming and seeding at the same time for the simultaneity of cause and effect; the full implication of the eternity of the Buddha’s life for all people; activating the doctrine of the three thousand realms in a single moment of life by showing the mutual possession of the ten worlds; the relationship between the life of the common mortal in the “nine worlds” with the “tenth world” of Buddhahood; and the oneness of mentor and disciple.

The essence of the “Life Span” chapter is beyond grasp intellectually—the actuality of the eternal Buddha nature inscribed in Nichiren Daishonin’s Gohonzon.

With this preface, let us rejoin the story at the end of the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter. There is a whole assembly, who had experienced the full length of Shakyamuni’s preaching and is now on the verge of doubting him.

Sensing the tumult in the minds of his listeners, Shakyamuni exhorts his audience three times that “You must believe and understand the truthful words of the Thus Come One” (LS16, 224). The Bodhisattvas asked Shakyamuni to explain the truth to them and vow to deeply hear his words. Shakyamuni explains that while everyone believes that he sat underneath the bodhi tree in Gaya and attained supreme enlightenment, he in fact had originally attained supreme enlightenment an unimaginably long time ago. President Ikeda states:

The purpose of the “Life Span” chapter is to explain that all living beings, not just Shakyamuni, have in fact been Buddhas since the remote past; and to cause people to become aware of this. Its purpose is to open people’s eyes to see the great and eternal life of the universe. And it is Nichiren Daishonin’s revelation of the implicit teaching of the Lotus Sutra [Nam-myoho-enge-kyo] that makes it possible on a practical level for people to do so. (*Living Buddhism*, February 1998, p. 37)

Returning to the scene at the assembly, those present not only had to grapple with the new awareness that Shakyamuni attained enlightenment a long time ago, but also with the notion that the Buddha’s life is present in the world all the time. This world of Buddhahood is always present in life as part of its integral make-up. This creates both awe and confusion about who the real Shakyamuni is. In the eyes of those at the gathering, he has certainly become something more than the man they knew, preaching the sutra as they walked from town to town in their homeland of India. Beyond the issue of how long ago Shakyamuni attained enlightenment is the struggle to understand the manifestation of an eternal Buddha.

Buddhist practice exists so that we can purify our lives to a point where we can experience, even if partially at first, our own lives as eternal. In the “Life Span” Chapter, Shakyamuni explains that those who are deluded and in agony cannot see the Buddha, even when he is close by. President Ikeda comments about the Shakyamuni of the “Life Span” chapter and on the nature of enlightenment:

Suffice it to say that the Buddha to which this refers is Shakyamuni as the original Buddha enlightened since the remote past. The Buddha is called the “Thus Come One,” indicating the state of life of one in whom the Mystic Law manifests at each moment without effort or affectation.

This eternal pulsing dynamism of the Mystic Law is itself eternal life. It is the true identity of the Buddha; it is the original Buddha. Furthermore, it is the wellspring of the benefit that all Buddhas enjoy. Just as President Toda realized, the Buddha is life itself. In addition, this original Buddha is in fact the very wellspring of our lives. It is in this sense that the sutra speaks of the original Buddha as being nearby. In their befuddlement, however, people fail to perceive this Buddha. (*Living Buddhism*, January 1998, p. 36)

Even though the Buddha has constantly been present in one world or another, teaching the Law and converting living beings, he emphasizes how rare it is to encounter a Buddha and the true teaching. He explains that the Buddha senses that people are not ardently seeking the Buddha Way, so he seems to enter extinction. This action is yet another variation of “expedient means” to ignite a seeking mind for the Buddha wisdom. Then the Thus Come One reappears to teach the Law. He explains why he has undertaken this great endeavor:

Why do I do this? The Thus Come One perceives the true aspect of the threefold world exactly as it is. There is no ebb and flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction. It is neither substantial nor empty, neither consistent nor diverse. Nor is it what those who live in the threefold world perceive it to be. All such things the Thus Come One sees clearly and without error. (LS16, 226)

In the sutra, Shakyamuni states: “Good men, the Buddhas and Thus Come Ones all preach a Law such as this. They act in order to save living beings, so what they do is true and not false” (LS16, 227). To better communicate this profound intent of the Buddha, Shakyamuni recounts the “Parable of the Excellent Physician and His Sick Children.” Situated in the center of the “Life Span” chapter, it has become one of the most famous stories in the Lotus Sutra.

This physician has a large number of children, as many as one hundred. He departs from his home one day on an errand. While he is gone, the children drink poison because they don’t know that it is dangerous. The father returns home to find them in a painfully toxic condition. He is a renowned physician, so he creates a medicine that will be the perfect antidote to the poison. Those who are not too far gone accept the medicine and are cured. However, most of the children are completely deluded by the effects of the harmful substance they have ingested and they refuse the medicine that their father has prepared. As an expedient means, the compassionate parent leaves, explaining that he has grown old and cannot remain at home. Hearing that their father has died in another land, the children are overcome by grief. This suffering over the loss of their father brings them to their senses enough to take the medicine, which this excellent physician has left behind for them. They are quickly relieved of the poison in their bodies and minds. When his children are healthy, the father returns and is reunited with his family.

On one level Shakyamuni uses this story to explain why the Thus Come One uses the expedient means of his death to bring living beings to the Buddha Way. He wants all those in the assembly to understand his deep compassion, through which they are able to free themselves from their erroneous views that prevent them from actually experiencing their own Buddha nature. He explains that his actions are like that of the father, who left in order to have his stricken children miss him and drink the antidote to the terrible poison they ingested.

On a deeper level it is the story of unrelenting compassion, and the willingness to do whatever it takes to allow human beings to realize and act upon their true nature. It is also a metaphor for the function of death within the overall flow of life. This is rendered poetically by Shakyamuni in the verse section that concludes the “Life Span” chapter:

For if they see me constantly,
arrogance and selfishness arise in their minds.
Abandoning restraint, they give themselves up to the five desires
and fall into the evil paths of existence.
Always I am aware of which living beings
practice the way, and which do not,
and in response to their needs for salvation
I preach various doctrines for them.
At all times I think to myself:
How can I cause living beings
to gain entry into the unsurpassed way
and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?
(LS16, 231–232)

There are no further questions from Maitreya or the other provisional bodhisattvas. The members of the assembly vow to believe what the Buddha has preached about his life span and his expedient means of entering extinction. The expression of their willingness to believe has become somewhat of a footnote since the focus has shifted to the practice and propagation of the Lotus Sutra following the Buddhas passing. The torch is passed to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

At this stage of the sutra, we have to think about its structure and movement. The next three chapters deal with the various benefits that will accrue from practicing and teaching this sutra in future ages. As a prelude to this, the participants in the “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra” exchange their views about the historical accuracy of the drama that has occurred through sixteen chapters. They put forth the view that the over-the-top events described in the sutra were an experience taking place in Shakyamuni’s life and are not meant to be taken literally. President Ikeda responds by saying, “While not historically factual, the events described in the sutra do express the truths about life and the nature of existence” (*Living Buddhism*, January 1998, p. 38).

He goes on to explain that the Lotus Sutra is a teaching that shows Shakyamuni’s true self. It was this intent that dictated the need for the two halves of “theoretical teachings” and “essential teachings” in the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni’s true self is the eternal self that is one with the Mystic Law. This means that all the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are also included in Shakyamuni’s eternal self. The happy truth is that this eternal self is at the core of each person’s life. As President Ikeda states:

But this is not only true for Shakyamuni. The Daishonin says, “The example of one person represents the impartial truth inherent in all living beings” (*Gosho Zenshu*, 564). Shakyamuni’s “eternal self” is the “eternal self” of all living beings. In a broad sense, all beings are original Buddhas. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are therefore “eternal bodhisattvas” existing in the lives of all people. The Daishonin explains this saying: “The enlightened life Shakyamuni Buddha is our own flesh and blood. His practices and the resulting virtues are our bones and marrow.” (WND, 365); “The Shakyamuni Buddha within our lives is the eternal Buddha since time without

beginning” (WND, 365) and “The bodhisattvas Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices and Firmly Established Practices represent the world of the bodhisattva within ourselves.” (WND, 366) (*Living Buddhism*, January 1998, p. 39)

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: “DISTINCTIONS IN BENEFITS” (DLS–37)

The next three chapters have a similar theme, documenting the immense benefit that will be obtained by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and all who practice, study and propagate the heart of the Lotus Sutra revealed in the “Life Span” chapter. One might think that having reached the high point of the Buddha’s declaration in the sixteenth chapter, the following chapters would be anticlimactic. However, this is not so. Everything that follows the “Life Span” chapter takes on a much-deepened hue, bathed in the glow of the “Land of Tranquil Light.” We sense a significant change in the sutra’s direction.

The “Distinction of Benefits” chapter is a shining example of this transformation. It depicts a massive celebration that is kicked off by Shakyamuni regaling the audience with the fantastic rewards to be gained by living up to the spirit of the sutra. He presents a long dissertation addressed to Maitreya, reminding him of the exceedingly long life of the Thus Come One. He then points out that the practice of the Law has enabled “living beings numerous as the sands of six hundred and eighty ten thousands, millions, nayutas of Ganges attained the truth of birthlessness. And bodhisattvas and mahasattvas a thousand times more in number gained the dharani³ teaching that allows them to retain all that they hear” (LS16, 233–234). The telling of the benefits is extensive, detailed, and overwhelming. The varying result of what each group attains is where the chapter’s title the “Distinction of Benefits” originates. It is not meant so much to say, “these people received this and those people received that,” but rather to lay out a very wide spectrum of benefits that can be received. Also, the cumulative effect of detailing the massive number of recipients of benefits is to leave no room for doubt about the roots of goodness and every other virtue that will implant themselves in all those who adhere to and propagate the Lotus Sutra.

Upon the completion of the description of this awesome tableau of rewards, a gigantic party starts up as if in a convention hall the size of the Grand Canyon. Mandarava flowers fall from the heavens all over the audience. It is crucial not to lose contact with the tone and fervor of the actual text. In order to sense the level of joy in the assembly and the response from the heavens, we need to put ourselves right in the midst of the hyperbole of the Lotus Sutra:

When the Buddha announced that these bodhisattvas and mahasattvas had gained the great benefits of the Law, from the midst of the air mandarava flowers and great mandarava flowers rained down, scattering over the immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of Buddhas who were seated on lion seats under jeweled trees, and also scattering over Shakyamuni Buddha, and over Many Treasures Thus Come One who long ago entered extinction, both of whom were seated on lion seats in the tower of the seven treasures. They also scattered over the all the great bodhisattvas and the four kinds of believers. In addition, finely powdered sandalwood and aloes rained down, and in the midst of the air heavenly drums sounded of their own accord, wonderful notes deep and far-reaching. And a thousand varieties of heavenly robes rained down, draped with various necklaces, pearl necklaces, mani jewel necklaces, necklaces of wish-granting jewels, spreading everywhere in nine

directions. In jewel-encrusted censers priceless incense burned, their fragrance of its own accord permeating everywhere as an offering to the great assembly. Above each one of the Buddhas there appeared bodhisattvas holding banners and canopies reaching up to the Brahma heaven. These bodhisattvas employed their wonderful voices in singing immeasurable hymns of praise to the Buddhas. (LS16, 234–235)

This is a celebration of joy caused by Shakyamuni taking the audience through his transformation from transient identity to true identity. A turning point is reached. The audience, along with all the heavenly gods, celebrates mightily, but it goes on for less than half a chapter. The focus shifts quickly to the Buddhas' and bodhisattvas' prime concern of how to enable all living beings to enter the Buddha Way. It is clear from what follows that the compassion of the sutra extends limitlessly forward in time. Maitreya delivers an extended verse response to Shakyamuni's descriptions of the benefits. Shakyamuni's response is phrased differently from his earlier pronouncements of all the wondrous effects of being present at the revelation of the Buddha's eternal teaching. Now looking to the future, he speaks of living beings who might come to hear this teaching of the "Life Span of the Thus Come One" and the limitless benefits that they will gain.

The participants in the "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" devote considerable discussion to determine the true nature of benefit in Buddhism. President Ikeda explains a fundamental point about benefit in Buddhism: "The bottom line is, positive action has inherent benefit. Benefit is definitely not something that comes from the outside; rather, it wells forth from within our lives, manifested through our own actions. It gushes out like water from a spring. That's what benefit is" (*Living Buddhism*, April 1999, p 31). Moving into the perspective of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and the meaning of the Japanese word for benefit, President Ikeda states:

Nichiren Daishonin says, "The element *ku* [in the word *kudoku*, or benefit] means eliminating evil while the element *doku* means producing good." (GZ, 762). Benefit in the Daishonin's Buddhism means getting rid of the fundamental darkness in one's life and bringing forth goodness. To manifest benefit we need to carry out the practice of propagating the Daishonin's teaching. Doing so means refuting mistaken beliefs that cause people to suffer and enabling them instead to live based upon the Mystic Law. (*Living Buddhism*, April 1999, p 31)

Their discussion confirms the benefit that is received from a valid religion or life philosophy. It must strike a balance between the inner spiritual result of a high life condition and the power to improve the material and social environment. It must be fully applicable to the realities of daily life. It also must fuse the personal desires of each person with the happiness of all people.

President Ikeda explains that it comes down to the practice of faith based upon the "Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter and the confidence that can be had from the power of the mentor-disciple relationship:

All benefit that can be attained through bodhisattva practice comes from faith in the "Life Span" chapter. That's because those bodhisattvas who reach the stage of enlightenment almost equivalent to the Buddha's when they hear the "Life Span" chapter simultaneously awaken to the Mystic Law of time without beginning. It is from that moment that they make the transition from the stage of common mortals who have just embraced the Lotus Sutra to that of a Buddha.

It is as though they are steadily climbing a mountain with their sights set on reaching the state of enlightenment, the life-state of the Buddha. But when they arrive at the top, at the summit of the “Life Span” chapter, what do they see, what kind of scene unfolds before them? They perceive that the true Buddha enlightened from time without beginning is constantly and tirelessly carrying out activities in the world to lead all beings to enlightenment. They understand that they themselves once received his instruction. And they realize that they themselves were originally united in a relation of mentor and disciple with the Buddha who is one with the universe. (*Living Buddhism*, April 1999, pp. 37–38)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: “THE BENEFITS OF RESPONDING WITH JOY” (DLS–38)

Chapter Eighteen is entitled “The Benefits of Responding With Joy” because it describes, in detail, the immense benefit received by those who hear the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, respond with joy and teach it to others. President Ikeda states this simply:

When we respond with joy, we receive benefit—that, in essence, is the meaning of the title. In other words we receive great benefit to the extent that we joyfully exert ourselves in faith. Here, again, we see that the heart is the all-important factor. If you’re going to practice Buddhism anyway, you might as well enjoy it rather than complain about it!

When you are faced with a challenge, do you sigh deeply and say, “Oh no, not again”? Or do you confront it head-on, determined to use the situation to accumulate still more good fortune? This slight distinction in attitude makes a world of difference in the end. (*Living Buddhism*, June 1999, p. 20)

In keeping with the model of dialogue to reveal Buddhist truths, the chapter opens with Maitreya asking about the benefits that can be obtained from hearing about the Lotus Sutra and rejoicing. Shakyamuni uses this opportunity to discuss the potent power of the Law to reach the fiftieth person with ever-broadening merit as it impacted the first person to hear of it and then share it. This is a chain of joy that teaches two points. First, the degree of benefit of hearing the Law is up to the joyful response of the listener, and second is the action to share this joy with others. Shakyamuni explains that the pure Law insures that the benefit flowing to the fiftieth person is in no way abated. This is in contrast to the telling of stories or gossip in which the content becomes changed as it passes from one person to the next. President Ikeda explains that the sharing of the kernel of the Lotus Sutra transcends the theoretical teaching and seeks to reform the human and natural environment as well:

Kosen-rufu also includes the struggle to transform the “realm of the environment.” This is the meaning of actual (as opposed to theoretical) *ichinen sanzen* [three thousand realms exist in a single life-moment].

At any rate, propagation from one person to the next and so on to the fiftieth person is the democratic path of dialogue. Democracy is definitely not simply a matter of setting in place certain forms and institutions. Without content, democracy is an empty vessel that is easily crushed.

What is this content? It is individual self-reliance and self-improvement. It is

individual happiness. Democracy must enable each person in society to live to the fullest. Without valuing the sanctity of the individual, democracy is a mere shell. (*Living Buddhism*, June 1999, p. 25)

Shakyamuni continues to give specific examples of how a person should effectively propagate the heart of the Lotus Sutra. President Ikeda explains that this chapter gives clear guidelines on the transmission of Buddhism and who is actually putting them into action:

Transmission is kosen-rufu, the spread of the Law. The transmission section is full of guidelines pertaining to the propagation of the Mystic Law. It is remarkable that in the three thousand years of Buddhist history, we of the SGI, virtually alone, can understand this chapter based on actual experience. (*Living Buddhism*, June 1999, pp. 21–22)

CHAPTER NINETEEN: “BENEFITS OF THE TEACHER OF THE LAW” (DLS–39)

The nineteenth chapter explains that the benefits of those who carry out the five practices of embracing, reading, reciting, teaching, and transcribing the Lotus Sutra will receive the benefit of the purification of the six sense organs. The Buddha speaks to Bodhisattva Constant Exertion, enumerating the benefits accruing to the sense organs:

If good men or good women accept and uphold this Lotus Sutra, if they read it, recite it, explain and preach it, or transcribe it, such persons will obtain eight hundred eye benefits, twelve hundred ear benefits, eight hundred nose benefits, twelve hundred tongue benefits, eight hundred body benefits, and twelve hundred mind benefits. With these benefits they will be able to adorn their six sense organs, making all of them pure. (LS19, 251)

One by one, the Thus Come One proceeds to explain the function and effect of the major benefits for each of the six sense organs. The amount of detail makes for a chapter of extended length. An example of a tongue benefit is that any flavor, whether bitter or not, would be transformed into something superb. Furthermore, if the person who has attained these tongue benefits uses his tongue for preaching, it will cause all the listeners to rejoice and delight. Beings of all categories will come to hear the teaching of the Law. The attributes of the user of the voice with tongue benefits are awesome to contemplate. The final attribute is one that should not be overlooked, “And in addition he will be able to emit the deep and wonderful sound of the Law” (LS19, 260).

The purification of the six sense organs is not a ritual cleansing. It is set into motion by undertaking bodhisattva action. It is the change of karma that we experience in propagating Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. When we are rebuked talking to others about Buddhism, our life is purified. President Ikeda cites the guidance of the second president of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, who told members to be appreciative of rude responses when carrying out propagation because it cleanses negative karma that has held them back from happiness.

The benefits of the sixth sense are those of the mind. President Ikeda ties it together by linking the mind to all the other functions:

Through purifying the mind, practitioners become wiser. In lifetime after lifetime, they may become great scholars or people of unsurpassed insight.

In short, purifying the six sense organs means transforming one's entire being into a vehicle of kosen-rufu. It's not a matter of shrewdness or calculation; when we work selflessly and wholeheartedly for kosen-rufu without begrudging our lives, then our entire being overflows with boundless life force. Wisdom, vitality, and compassion all well forth.

No matter what worries or sufferings we might have, we can change them all into value and benefit. Such great life force is the benefit gained by a teacher of the Law.

In conclusion, those who live out their lives together with the SGI, an organization that is dedicated to actualizing the Buddha's will and decree, and who single-mindedly work for peace and the happiness of humankind, are on the ultimate path in life.

A person who steadfastly moves forward is certain to win. A person who chants daimoku through everything will absolutely win in the end. (*Living Buddhism*, July 1999, p. 38)

CHAPTER TWENTY: "THE BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGING" (DLS-40)

Shakyamuni addresses Bodhisattva Great Authority about the era of Buddha Awesome Sound King Thus Come One who existed in the incredibly distant past. In fact, there was a lineage of twenty thousand million Buddhas of this same name. After the initial Thus Come One had entered extinction and his Law had become corrupt, evil monks gained great authority and power. At this time, there was a bodhisattva called Never Disparaging. He suffered considerable abuse at the hands of arrogant monks and laity. They spoke negatively about him and assailed him for this behavior of never disparaging them. They considered it to be vain and irresponsible that he would predict their eventual Buddhahood despite their behavior.

Many years passed in this way, during which this monk was constantly subjected to curses and abuse. He did not give way to anger, however, but each time spoke the same words, "You are certain to attain Buddhahood." When he spoke in this manner, some among the group would take sticks of wood or tiles and stones and beat and pelt him. But even as he ran away and took up his stance at a distance, he continued to call out in a loud voice, "I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!" And because he always spoke these words, the overbearingly arrogant monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen gave him the name Never Disparaging.

When this monk was on the point of death, he heard up in the sky fully twenty thousand, ten thousand, a million verses of the Lotus Sutra that had been previously preached by the Buddha Awesome Sound King, and he was able to accept and uphold them all. Immediately he gained the kind of purity of vision and purity of the faculties of the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind that have been described above. Having gained this purity of the six faculties, his life span was increased by two hundred ten thousand million nayutas of years, and he went about widely preaching the Lotus Sutra for people. (LS20, 267)

With his dignified appearance and wonderful voice he was able to convert all those who previously opposed him. Shakyamuni reveals that this Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was in fact himself in a previous lifetime. He also explains that all those who had previously treated him with disrespect were now in the great assembly in the air witnessing all that

has transpired. He explains how the Lotus Sutra can benefit all people, even those who are at first against the teaching.

This is a lesson Shakyamuni wished to transmit to the future so that after his extinction, no one would hesitate to propagate the sutra, even though they will face strong and unjust opposition. “The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” chapter represents a new phase of the transmission portion of the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha has been as expansive and detailed as he could in painting a picture of the benefits to be received from carrying out propagation. Now it was time to prepare his disciples for the obstacles and hardships they would face in propagating the wonderful Law of the lotus. The story of his incarnations as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging and his current role as Shakyamuni Thus Come One shows the great good fortune to be obtained from not being defeated by the obstacles to propagation.

The declaration of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is often called the Twenty-Four Character Lotus Sutra. It is a compact statement that contains the compassion to care deeply for another life and the confidence that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. In “Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra,” President Ikeda discusses the essence of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s Lotus Sutra:

Just what does the Lotus Sutra teach? The sutra is condensed into this twenty-four-character passage: “I deeply respect you. I would never slight you or behave arrogantly toward you. For if you carry out the bodhisattva practice you can become a Buddha without fail.” All living beings have this Buddha nature, the world of Buddhahood. It is this world of Buddhahood that Never Disparaging reveres.

The twenty-eight chapter Lotus Sutra does not explicitly state that all people have the Buddha nature, but this is without a doubt what it is affirming. This is the highest philosophy of the sanctity of life.

While there are any number of religions that preach equality, often what they mean by that is human beings are equally sinful. But the Lotus Sutra teaches that all people are noble children of the Buddha, that they are equal as entities in the world of Buddhahood. This is a very important difference. (*Living Buddhism*, August 1999, p. 20)

This chapter depicting the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is a declaration of religious revolution through non-violence. As President Ikeda states, “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging and the Lotus Sutra directly oppose all forms of violence. The Lotus Sutra is a teaching of struggle on a spiritual plane, not of violence” (*Living Buddhism*, August 1999, p. 20).

Finally, the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is the courage to propagate the Law.

(To be continued)

1. *saha* world—A world where humans endure suffering. In pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, Buddhas did not appear in *saha* worlds.
2. mahasattvas—A “great being,” another term for bodhisattva.
3. dharani—A spell or formula said to protect the one who recites it and benefit the person by virtue of its mystic power.