

BACK TO THE BASICS
THE LOTUS FLOWER
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Blossom by blossom the spring begins,” a poet writes. The first flowers of spring can make the heart leap for joy. And if you’ve ever grown vegetables in your backyard, you know that flowers mean something more: the tomatoes, zucchini or green beans are soon to follow.

Remember elementary school biology? When flowers open, their color and scent attract bees that squeeze in through the petals to gather nectar. Pollen sticks to legs and wings and gets carried to the next flower, completing fertilization. Its mission over, the flower fades, and fruit soon appears, filled with the seeds for new plants. The process is a clear example of a cause leading to an effect. But the lotus flower (Jpn *renga*) is unique. When its petals unfold, they reveal a fruit, or seedpod, fully developed. The “cause” and “effect” occur simultaneously.

Hence the title “Lotus” Sutra, one of whose main messages is the simultaneity of cause and effect. This principle means that the instant we offer a prayer, the effect registers in the depths of our lives. Of course, it may not appear visibly right away, but the moment we chant to get that job, solve a relationship problem, overcome an illness or whatever, we are guaranteed to see a result.

As Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Of all the flowers, [the Buddha] selected the lotus blossom to symbolize the Lotus Sutra. There is a reason for this.... The benefit of all the other sutras is uncertain, because they teach that one must first make good causes and only then can one become a Buddha at some later time. With regard to the Lotus Sutra, when one’s hand takes it up, that hand immediately attains Buddhahood, and when one’s mouth chants it, that mouth is itself a Buddha...” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 1099).

In Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, there is no path (cause) to Buddhahood (effect)—the path *is* Buddhahood. The efforts we make as Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the actions of a Buddha.

We display our Buddhahood in our daily lives in this mundane world, not on a mountaintop or in some “pure” land.

The lotus also symbolizes this empowering idea. It grows in mud, the deeper and muckier the better. Yet it stays pristine. Though mud clings to the leaves of most plants, not so with the lotus. Nothing sticks. (Interestingly, science has recognized this self-cleaning attribute and aptly named it the “lotus effect,” applying the principle to various technologies—even a self-cleaning house paint called Lotusan.)

Out of the muddy swamp blossoms the pure lotus. Out of our swamp of suffering springs our Buddhahood. Thanks to the mud, the lotus can survive. Thanks to all the problems we have to face, we can reveal the power within us.

And thanks to our deep sense of mission as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, we remain unsullied by the world around us.

“The Lotus Sutra speaks of the pure white lotus rising from the waters of a muddy pond,” writes SGI President Ikeda. “This analogy illustrates the attainment of a pure and empowered state of life in the midst of the sometimes degrading realities of human society. In this way, the bodhisattva never tries to escape from reality, never leaves suffering people unsaved and plunges into the turbulent waters of life in the effort to help

each person drowning in suffering onto the great vessel of happiness” (May 1998 *Living Buddhism*, p. 32).

Through this kind of faith and practice, we cultivate our lives like a gardener works the soil. But the flower of our Buddhahood doesn't need to wait for spring to arrive. It can bloom every day and gladden the hearts of all who see it.

The lotus flower has much more symbolism than can be discussed in one article. To read more on the cultural history of the lotus, see President Ikeda's "Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra" in the November 1997 Living Buddhism, available on the Pubs 97-98 CD-ROM, or in the upcoming third volume of The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra, available this spring.