

**SOKA SPIRIT STUDY  
OUT OF CONTEXT: MANIPULATING THE TEACHINGS  
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In a sense, religious scripture is not absolute. That is, different people may derive different inspiration or act differently in response to the same text or passage. Upon reading a religious teaching, some may respond with selfless love and compassion, others may behave arrogantly, and still others lash out destructively.

This is perhaps why Nichiren Daishonin states that actual proof—the reality of how practitioners live and behave—surpasses documentary or scriptural proof in evaluating a religious teaching. Nevertheless, the principal writings of any religion are extremely important. In them, the deep heartfelt intent of the author is surely present.

Differing interpretations arising from a sincere desire to seek the truth are understandable. Through dialogue, sincere people can reach some common understanding.

Unfortunately, religious writings are sometimes purposefully used in a manner that is utterly self-serving and blatantly at odds with their original intent.

One tool often employed to accomplish this is the out-of-context quote. This involves taking a short statement, assigning it a meaning independent of its context and using it to support one's own aims or agenda.

The following citation in Nichiren Shoshu literature of the Daishonin's words could qualify as a textbook illustration of this technique: "The Daishonin states in *Ichidai Shogyo Taii* ('An Outline of the Sacred Teachings Taught by the Buddha During His Lifetime'), 'Unless one is included in the transmission, it is difficult to know this sutra' (*Shinpen*, p. 92). At the current time the Soka Gakkai slanders and denies the High Priest who alone inherits the lifeblood of the Law while asserting that they are 'based on the Goshu.' Their claim of being based on the Goshu is not in accord with the transmission, so they cannot correctly understand the Goshu's meaning" (*Refuting the Soka Gakkai's "Counterfeit Object of Worship": 100 Questions and Answers*, Nichiren Shoshu Temple, 1996, p. 18).

Here the priesthood wants us to believe that the term *transmission* in the quoted Goshu sentence refers to a formal transmission of the authority of its high priest. Only those individuals who receive that transmission can "know the sutra," that is, understand the Goshu, the writings of the founder. Only priests, they assert—specifically, the high priest—is qualified to interpret the Goshu.

However, reading this passage in context leaves us with quite a different impression of its message: "Question: As we see with other sutras, some are expounded for bodhisattvas, some for those of the human and heavenly realms, and some for voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones. Each of these groups, according to their capacity, understands these respective teachings differently and derives differing benefit from them. For what kind of persons is this [Lotus Sutra] expounded?"

"Answer: Unless one is included in the transmission, it is difficult to know this sutra. Ultimately, this sutra is expounded for evil persons, good persons, persons of wisdom, persons without wisdom, those who observe the precepts and those who keep no precepts, for men and for women, for those of the four paths and for the eight kinds of beings; it is for all of the beings of the Ten Worlds.

"Evil persons are [represented by] Devadatta, King Wonderful Adornment and

Ajatashatru; good persons, by Vaidehi and others of the human and heavenly realms; persons of wisdom, by Shariputra, and those without wisdom, by Chudapanthaka; those who keep the precepts, by the voice hearers and bodhisattvas; those who keep no precepts, by the dragons and beasts; and women, by the dragon girl.

“All of them, the beings of the ten worlds, are enlightened to this one perfect teaching. Scholars who fail to understand this say that the Lotus Sutra is not intended for us ordinary mortals; but they should fear the Buddha’s will” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 398; tentative translation).

The persons and beings the Daishonin lists above are among those depicted as attaining enlightenment in the Lotus Sutra.

The Daishonin’s point in this passage is clear: While the provisional teachings—those expounded by the Buddha before the Lotus Sutra—were tailored for specific groups of people and their specific capacities, the Lotus Sutra directly expresses the Buddha’s will to save all living beings equally and without distinction. People of any capacity, any inclination, any race, culture, rank or status can attain enlightenment through the Lotus Sutra. It deeply respects the precious potential for Buddhahood innate in all human life. In saying so, the Daishonin states his will as the votary of the Lotus Sutra and the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law to save all people from suffering and lead them to happiness.

There are those, however, the Daishonin points out, who are not included in the transmission: They are “scholars who fail to understand” this essential point and who “say that the Lotus Sutra is not intended for us ordinary mortals.” The priests of Nichiren Shoshu hold that they alone are party to an exclusive transmission. They divide and distinguish themselves from “ordinary mortals” by insisting that only they can understand the Daishonin’s words. For this reason, they most resemble the scholars the Daishonin describes above, who have removed themselves from inclusion in the transmission of his teachings.