

**BACK TO THE BASICS  
THE CEREMONY IN THE AIR  
BY SHIN YATOMI  
SGI-USA VICE STUDY DEPARTMENT LEADER**

We may think of the Lotus Sutra as a three-act play, enacted upon the stage of the universe, in the theatre of life—Shakyamuni’s as well as ours. In this grand drama of life and cosmos, the actors number from several hundreds of thousands to several millions and even more. They are Buddhas, bodhisattvas, ordinary men and women, monks and nuns, heavenly deities, mythic beings, and even the persons and beings previously considered irrevocably evil—to represent the “ten worlds” or all possible states of existence inherent within our lives.

For this large and diverse crowd, the main character Shakyamuni starts his preaching on Eagle Peak from the “Introduction” (1st) chapter to “The Teacher of the Law” (10th) chapter. This may be thought of as the first act. The second act starts with the emergence of a gigantic treasure tower from the earth and its elevation into midair along with the entire assembly. This second act is called the Ceremony in the Air, which spans from “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” (11th) chapter to the “Entrustment” (22nd) chapter. Returning again to Eagle Peak, the third act begins from the “Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King” (23rd) chapter to the concluding “Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universal Worthy” (28th) chapter.

This structure of the sutra is sometimes called “the three assemblies in two places.” There are also plays within the play. These are the stories in Shakyamuni’s preaching as well as the accounts given by various other characters that are set throughout the universe and extend from the remote past before Shakyamuni’s birth to the distant future beyond his death. The drama transcends both space and time.

Of the sutra’s three “acts,” the Daishonin places particular emphasis on the second, that is, the Ceremony in the Air. The Gohonzon, which is the embodiment of the Daishonin’s ultimate teaching, employs the Ceremony in the Air as a conceptual motif. He explains: “This Gohonzon was revealed in the last eight years of the fifty that the Buddha preached in this world, and in this period of eight years, in eight chapters [of the Lotus Sutra], from the ‘Emerging from the Earth’ chapter through the ‘Entrustment’ chapter” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 831). He often compares the Gohonzon itself to the treasure tower, which is the central imagery in the Ceremony in the Air: “Faith like yours is so extremely rare that I will inscribe the treasure tower especially for you.... You and your wife should worship this treasure tower privately” (WND, 300). Regarding the treasure tower, the Daishonin also writes: “The daimoku of the Lotus Sutra is the treasure tower, and the treasure tower is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo...Abutsu-bo is therefore the treasure tower itself, and the treasure tower is Abutsu-bo himself. No other knowledge is purposeful” (WND, 299).

In light of the Daishonin’s teaching, the Ceremony in the Air and the treasure tower in particular may be viewed as a metaphor for the emergence of our innate Buddhahood. The size of the tower, which is said to be one-third to one-half of the Earth, is intended to express the enormous strength and expansiveness of our inner life, and the magnificent appearance of the tower, which is adorned with the seven kinds of gems, to indicate the brilliance of our inner beauty often buried beneath delusion. All the diverse groups of living beings lifted in midair symbolize all our life-conditions, including hellish suffering

and despair, elevated and transformed to work for our genuine happiness and freedom. The raised assembly may also be symbolic of an elevated perspective that enables us to see all of humanity within us and thereby transcend the differences separating our lives from others.

Commenting on the meaning of the Ceremony in the Air, the Daishonin states, “The ‘place’ where Nichiren and his followers chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and dwell in faith corresponds to the passage ‘reside in the air.’ In other words, they reside in the Ceremony in the Air” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 740). The Ceremony in the Air is neither a historical event nor merely a fantasy out of an ancient Buddhist text. The ceremony is the possibility present in all people to bring forth the supreme power of compassion and wisdom from within; it is a sublime drama that we can enact at any time through our prayer to the Gohonzon. No matter what difficulties we may be experiencing, with confident prayer that our lives are endowed with the wellspring of joy and hope, we can transform even the most tragic episode of our lives into a victory to inspire both ourselves and others. This is what it means to be at the Ceremony in the Air.