Explaining the Causation of the Ten Worlds

Composed by the shramana Nichiren

VOLUME sixty-nine of the eighty-volume Flower Garland Sutra states: “When one has entered the way of Universal Worthy, one will fully understand the Ten Worlds.”

Volume six of the Lotus Sutra says: “Voices of hell dwellers, voices of beasts, voices of hungry spirits, asura voices, monks’ voices, nuns’ voices [world of human beings], voices of heavenly beings [world of heavenly beings], voices of voice-hearers, voices of pratyekabuddhas, voices of bodhisattvas, and voices of Buddhas.” (Above are the names of the Ten Worlds.)

First, regarding the world of hell, the Meditation on the Buddha Sutra says: “Persons who commit the five cardinal sins, disregard the principle of cause and effect, slander the Mahayana teachings, violate the four grave prohibitions, and waste the alms given to them by believers will fall into this realm of existence” (the Avīchi hell).

The Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra states: “Persons who kill, steal, or are guilty of sexual misconduct, drink intoxicants, or tell lies will fall into this realm” (the hell of great wailing).

The Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra also says: “Those who in the past have given intoxicants to others, causing them to become drunk, and afterward have been in the habit of teasing and beguiling them until they have committed some shameful act will fall into this realm” (the hell of wailing).

The Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra also says: “Persons who kill, steal, or are guilty of sexual misconduct will fall into this realm” (the hell of crushing).

The Nirvana Sutra states: “There are three degrees of killings: the lower, middle, and upper degrees. The lower degree constitutes the killing of any humble being, from an ant to any of the various kinds of animals... As a result of a killing of the lower degree, one will fall into the realms of hell... and will suffer all the pains appropriate to a killing of the lower degree.”

Question: Everyone in the world, whether cleric or lay believer, knows that, if one commits the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, one will fall into hell. But the fact that one will fall into hell if one slanders the Law is not yet fully understood. What have you to say of that?

Answer: The Treatise on the Treasure Vehicle of Buddhahood written by Bodhisattva Sāramati and translated by Ratnamati states: “There are those
who deliberately practice a lesser doctrine and slander the true doctrine and its teachers. . . . They preach without understanding the teachings of the Thus Come One, going against the sutras and yet declaring that they are expounding the true doctrine.” If we go by this passage, we must say that those who believe in the Hinayana teachings and declare them to be the true doctrine, failing to understand the Mahayana teachings, are slandering the Law.

The Treatise on the Buddha Nature written by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu and translated by the Tripitaka Master Paramārtha states: “To hate and reject the Mahayana teachings will make one an icchantika, or person of incorrigible disbelief, because in doing so one causes living beings to cast aside these teachings.” If we go by this passage, we must say that in an age when both Hinayana and Mahayana teachings are propagated, if one concentrates on spreading the Hinayana teachings, personally turns against the Mahayana teachings, and causes others to reject them as well, then such a person is guilty of slandering the Law.

A commentary on the Brahmana Net Sutra by the Great Teacher T‘ien-t‘ai states: “To slander means to turn against. In all cases where understanding does not accord with what is right in principle and words do not match the truth, and the person is expounding some different interpretation, this is to be labeled an act of slander. Because such persons go against the true doctrine of our school, they are guilty of this offense.”

The “Simile and Parable” chapter of the Lotus Sutra states: “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. . . . When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avīchi hell.”

The meaning of this passage is as follows. Even if one has not yet reached the three stages of worthiness of the Hinayana teaching, or has not yet reached the ten stages of faith of the Mahayana teaching; even if one is an ordinary mortal of this latter age who commits the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins, who is unfilial toward one’s father and mother, or who is a woman; if such a person hears the name of the Lotus Sutra, or chants the daimoku, or accepts and upholds one word, one line of a four-line verse, or four lines, one chapter, one volume, or all eight volumes of the sutra, reads and recites them, or merely responds with joy and praises a person who carries out these practices, then that person is superior to a great bodhisattva who profoundly adheres to all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime other than that set forth in the Lotus Sutra, who has fully mastered the principles of those teachings, and who rigorously obeys all the precepts and rules of the Mahayana and Hinayana teachings, and that person will be capable of gaining rebirth in a pure land and becoming a Buddha. But if one fails to believe this when one hears it preached, and on the contrary asserts that the Lotus Sutra was preached for the sake of bodhisattvas who have already reached the ten stages of development and the ten stages of security or have advanced beyond them; or that it was preached for ordinary mortals of superior capacity and superior wisdom, but not for the sake of foolish persons, evil persons, women, or ordinary mortals of this latter age, then that person will destroy the seeds for the attainment of Buddhahood by all living beings and will enter the Avīchi hell. This is what the passage is saying.

The Nirvana Sutra states: “When it comes to the correct teaching of the Buddha, they show no inclination to protect, treasure, and establish it over the ages.” This passage means that, at a time when the great teaching set forth
in the Great Nirvana Sutra is about to perish from the world, those who do not treasure it are in fact slanderers of the Law.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai has described those who are the sworn enemies of the Lotus Sutra, saying, "'Hatred' refers to those who take no delight in listening to the doctrine."3

There are many different kinds of slander of the Law. If one is born in a country where both Mahayana and Hinayana teachings are propagated, and one studies nothing but the Hinayana teachings, making that the basis of one's conduct, and does not move on to the Mahayana teachings, this constitutes a slander of the Law. Or again, if there are persons who are versed in the Mahayana sutras such as the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom sutras, and they believe that these sutras are on the same level as the Lotus Sutra, and teach others to believe that they are on the same level instead of urging them to shift their attention to the Lotus Sutra, this too is slander of the Law.

Or again, if one happens upon persons whose capacities are suited for the perfect teaching and who are studying the Lotus Sutra, and, greedy for material profit, urges them to convert to one's own doctrine, telling them that their capacities are not suited to the Lotus Sutra and causing them to abandon the Lotus and change over to the teachings of the provisional sutras, this constitutes a great slander of the Law.

All actions of this kind are deeds that will lead to hell. The fact that one has been born as a human being means that the power one has gained by observing the five precepts in past existences is strong, and the causes that would have led one to rebirth in the three evil paths were weak. That is why one was able to be born as a human being.

Nowadays there are few people who are guilty of the five cardinal sins, but a great many who commit the ten evil acts. Sometimes you may find a person who, concerned about his next existence, is careful not to commit any of the ten evil acts and to act as a good person. But because of some quite natural error of ignorance, the person, though good in word and deed, in his heart believes in an evil teacher. Not only does that person himself put faith in the erroneous doctrines expounded by such a teacher, but he incites the rulers of the nation and the common people to embrace these same doctrines, or he persuades his wife and children, his followers, and members of his household to carry out the same religious practices that he does. Thus he prevents them from forming any ties with persons who would instruct them in the correct teaching, and keeps the common people and those related to him from experiencing a mind that responds with joy to that teaching. As a result, both he himself and others become slanderers of the Law, and those who would appear to be practicing good and putting aside evil in fact quite naturally end by committing deeds that lead to rebirth in the Āvīchī hell. Cases of this kind are rife in this Latter Day of the Law.

The Venerable Ānanda was a nephew of King Shuḍḍhodana and the son and prince of King Dronodana. He was a younger brother of Devadatta and a cousin of the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. He served the Thus Come One for twenty years, attained the mind-perceiving meditation, and understood all the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime. After the Buddha entered extinction, King Ajātashatru became a convert to Buddhism under Ānanda’s direction.

Forty years after the Buddha's entry into extinction, the Venerable Ānanda was passing through a bamboo grove when he came upon a monk who was
reciting a verse of the teaching that went, “Though one be born a human being and live a hundred years, if one has not observed how the waters overflow and dry up, one cannot compare to a person who has lived only one day but has seen these things.”

When Ânanda heard this verse, he said to the monk, “This is not the Buddha’s teaching. You should not be practicing this.”

The monk then asked Ânanda, “What is the Buddha’s teaching?”

Ânanda replied, “Though one be born a human being and live a hundred years, if one has not understood the Law of birth and extinction, one cannot compare to a person who has lived only one day but has fully understood that Law. This is the Buddha’s teaching. The verse that you were reciting is mistaken in its wording.”

At that time the monk took the verse he had learned from Ânanda to the monk who had taught him originally. But the monk who had been his teacher said, “The verse I taught you is the true teaching of the Buddha. The verse that Ânanda recited is not the Buddha’s teaching. Ânanda is old and senile and says many things that are in error. You should not believe him.”

The monk then discarded Ânanda’s verse and went back to reciting the erroneous one he had recited before. When Ânanda passed through the bamboo grove again and heard him doing so, he realized it was not the verse he had taught the monk and spoke to him about it once more, but the monk refused to heed him.

If errors such as this had already appeared a mere forty years after the Buddha’s passing, how much worse must things be now that over two thousand years have gone by!

The Buddha’s teaching was transmitted from India to China, and then from China to Japan. The scholars, the Tripitaka masters, the teachers who passed it down from one to another hardly relayed one doctrine in ten thousand in a condition that was free from error. And how much worse is the situation now when scholars of Buddhism put biased views above all else, are swayed by arrogance, contend with one another like fire against water, and never reach a conclusion. Even when a scholar appears who happens to relay the teachings as the Buddha proclaimed them, no one will believe or heed him. Hence hardly one person in ten thousand can avoid committing slander against the Law.

Second, with regard to the world of hungry spirits, the Meditation on the Correct Teaching Sutra states, “Persons who in the past, greedy for wealth, put other beings to death will suffer retribution by being born in this realm.” And it says, “Men who gorge themselves on fine food but refuse to give any to their wife and children, or wives who prepare food for themselves but none for their husband and children will suffer retribution by being born here.” Again, it says, “Persons who, because they are greedy for fame and profit, preach from such impure motives, will suffer retribution in this realm.”

The same source says, “Those who in the past sold liquor that had been watered will suffer retribution here.” And it says, “Persons who cheat others out of what little they have labored to acquire, seizing it for their own use, will suffer retribution here.” And it says, “Those who in the past, coming on someone by the roadside who was completely overcome by sickness and fatigue, tricked that person into handing over the goods he had for sale and paid only a paltry sum for them will suffer retribution here.” And it further states, “Persons who in the past were in charge of prisons and took away the food and drink of the inmates will suffer retribution here.” And further,
"Those who in the past cut down trees that had been planted to give shade and coolness, or who cut down trees in the gardens and groves used by the company of monks, will suffer retribution here."

The Lotus Sutra states: "If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, . . . he will constantly dwell in hell, strolling in it as though it were a garden, and the other evil paths of existence he will look on as his own home."

Ordinary people in the world can easily understand why those who commit crimes motivated by stinginess or greed or who rob and steal should fall into the world of hungry spirits. But it takes someone of wisdom to understand that, though one may be a good person, free of stinginess, greed, or such faults, if he slanders the Law, or merely associates closely with those who slander the Law and thoughtlessly believes their doctrines, he will fall into the world of hungry spirits. The greatest caution is needed in these matters!

Third, regarding the world of animals, those who are stupid and shameless, who simply accept alms from believers and do nothing by way of return will suffer retribution by being born in this realm.

The Lotus Sutra says, "If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, . . . he will fall into the realm of beasts." (This concludes the discussion of the three evil paths.)

Fourth, with regard to the world of asuras, volume one of Great Concentration and Insight states: "Since the mind of a person who is in the world of asuras desires in every moment to be superior to everyone else and cannot bear to be inferior to anyone else, he belittles and despises others and exalts himself just as a kite flies on high and looks down. Moreover, he outwardly displays benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and good faith, and develops an inferior kind of goodness of mind, and yet puts into practice the way of asuras."

Fifth, with regard to the world of human beings, the Repaying Debts of Gratitude Sutra states: "Those who give their allegiance to the three treasures and abide by the five precepts will be born in the world of human beings."

Sixth, regarding the world of heavenly beings, there are two such realms. First are the six heavens of the world of desire, where persons who observe the ten precepts are born. Second are the world of form and the world of formlessness. Those who carry out the six types of meditation practices, despising the lower levels as crude, distressful, and impeded, and aspiring to the upper levels as peaceful, wonderful, and removed, will be born in these heavenly realms.

Question: The causes that lead to birth in the six paths of existence are as you have described them. But at the same time, if people are able to be born in the world of human beings because they have observed the five precepts, then why are there so many countless differences among them, some blind, deaf, or dumb from birth, some puny and vile in stature, bent and crippled or hunchback, some troubled by poverty, numerous illnesses, or rage and anger?

Answer: The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom says: "If there are persons who destroy the eyes of living beings, who pluck out their eyes, or who deprive them of proper eyesight and yet claim that there is no retribution for such deeds, when such persons die they will fall into hell. After they have finished paying for their sins, they will be reborn as human beings, but they will be blind from birth. Or if there are persons who steal the fires or the lamps or torches from stupas for the Buddha and do other evil deeds of
various kinds in a previous existence, they will as a result of these causes be reborn without eyesight.

“Deafness likewise is the result of causes in a previous existence. Those who refused to listen to or obey the instructions of their teachers or fathers but instead responded with anger will because of this offense be born deaf. Or again those who cut off the ears of living beings or destroyed their hearing, or who stole the big bells, little bells, shell ornaments, or drums from stupas for the Buddha or stupas for monks, which serve as fields of good fortune for good persons, will because of these evil acts suffer this kind of retribution.

“Those who in a previous existence cut out the tongues of others or stopped their mouths or gave them evil medicine that deprived them of the power of speech, or who, hearing the instructions of their teachers or the admonitions of their fathers or mothers, silenced them midway, when they are reborn in the world will be mute and powerless to speak.

“Those who in a previous existence spoiled other people’s meditation or destroyed their meditation shelters or used various enchantments to put a spell on them, causing them to become enraged or contentious or to give way to lewd behavior, when they are reborn in the world will be heavily burdened with earthly desires, behaving like a Brahman who has lost his rice fields, whose wife has died, and who, seized by madness, rushes about naked. Or those who in a previous existence took food away from a Buddha, arhats, or pratyekabuddhas, or from their father or mother or relatives, though they may be reborn in an age when a Buddha is in the world, will suffer hunger and thirst because of the gravity of the sins they have committed.

“Those who in a previous existence delighted in applying the whip to others, torturing them, holding them in confinement, or tormenting them in various ways, will as a result suffer sickness in their present life.

“Those who in a previous existence did bodily injury to others, cutting off their heads or their arms or legs or other parts of their bodies, or who destroyed Buddha statues, broke off the noses of Buddha statues or smashed the statues of worthy persons or sages or destroyed statues of their fathers or mothers will in consequence of their crimes be reborn in bodies that are defective in many ways. Or again, those who embrace doctrines that are not good will in retribution be reborn in bodies that are vile and ugly.”

The Lotus Sutra says: “If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, . . . If he should become a human being, his faculties will be blighted and dull, he will be . . . blind, deaf, hunchbacked. . . . The breath from his mouth will be constantly foul, he will be possessed by devils, poor and lowly, ordered around by others, plagued by many ailments, thin and gaunt, having no one to turn to. . . . If others should turn against him, he would find himself plundered and robbed. His sins would be such that they would bring unexpected disaster on him.”

Or again in volume eight of the Lotus Sutra we read: “If anyone sees a person who accepts and upholds this sutra and tries to expose the faults or evils of that person, whether what he speaks is true or not, he will in his present existence be afflicted with white leprosy. If anyone disparages or laughs at that person, then in existence after existence he will have teeth that are missing or spaced far apart, ugly lips, a flat nose, hands and feet that are gnarled or deformed, and eyes that are squinty. His body will have a foul odor, with evil sores that run pus and blood,
and he will suffer from water in the belly, shortness of breath, and other severe and malignant illnesses.”

Question: What sort of actions must a person carry out in order to be born in the six paths of existence and become a king in such realms?

Answer: One who observes the bodhisattva precepts set forth in the Mahayana teachings but later violates them will become the king Brahmā in the world of form, or a devil king, Shakra, one of the four wheel-turning kings, a king of the birds and beasts, or King Yama, all in the world of desire.

The Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra says: “The happiness and good fortune enjoyed by those who are kings are due to the fact that in the past they observed the three pure precepts, and the power of the precepts has brought this about. So they are able to gain these wonderful results in the human and heavenly realms and to become kings there…

“Those who observe the bodhisattva precepts in a manner belonging to the middle category will gain blessing and merit that allow them to become wheel-turning kings, free to carry out any act to which their minds direct them, honored and revered by all the countless beings of the human and heavenly realms. Those whose observance of the precepts falls into the higher part of the lower category will become great kings of demons, commanding the obedience of all nonhuman beings. Such persons have undertaken to obey the precepts, and though they later violate them, the power of the precepts prevails and therefore they are able to become kings.

“A person who keeps the precepts in a manner belonging to the middle part of the lower category will become a king of the birds and beasts, looked up to and heeded by all creatures that fly or run. Though in time he violates the pure precepts, the power of the precepts will win out and therefore he will be able to become a king.

“A person who keeps the precepts in a manner belonging to the lower part of the lower category will become King Yama, dwelling in hell and acting as he wishes at all times. Though the fact that he violated the prohibitions caused him to be born in this evil realm of existence, the power of the precepts prevailed, and therefore he was able to become a king in that realm…

“If these persons had not initially observed the precepts of the Thus Come One, they would not have been able to be reborn even as foxes, much less to enjoy the highest pleasures and delights of the human and heavenly realms and to occupy the position of kings.”

The Reverend Annen in his Extensive Commentary on the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts states: “By observing the great precepts of a bodhisattva one becomes the Dharma King; by subsequently violating them one becomes a worldly king. The fact that the power of the precepts is not lost may be compared to a situation in which one uses gold and silver to fashion a vessel. As long as one can use it, it is of great value; but even if the vessel is broken and becomes useless, the materials it is made of do not cease to be precious.”

Again, he states: “The Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra says: ‘From the beginning of the present kalpa until now there have been eighty thousand kings who killed their fathers.’ These men accepted the bodhisattva precepts and thus became kings of the nation. Because they had violated the precept against killing, they all later fell into hell, but in spite of the adverse power caused by this violation of the precept, they were still able to become kings.

“The Great Crown of the Buddha’s
Head Sutra says, ‘Though a bodhisattva who has set his mind on enlightenment commits a crime, he may still for the time being be reborn as a heavenly deity or earth god.’

“The Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāranī Sutra states: ‘When the life of Shakra, the heavenly lord, came to an end, he at once entered the womb of a donkey, but through the power of the wish-fulfilling dhāranī, he was instead able to be reborn in the realm of heaven.’

“The Honored Victorious Dhāranī Sutra says, ‘The heavenly son Abiding Goodness was destined after his death to fall into the realm of the animals and be reborn there seven times, but through the power of the Honored Victorious dhāranī, he was instead rewarded by rebirth in the heavenly realm.’

“In the past there was once a king of a country who used a thousand carriages to transport water and rescue Buddhist towers that were threatened by fire. But because he grew arrogant in mind, he was reborn as a king of the asuras. In a past existence Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty presented five hundred clerical robes to five hundred arhats of Mount Sumeru. Pao-chih commented, ‘Long ago he presented alms to five hundred persons. But he overlooked one person in the group, and because he had committed that crime, he was born for the time being as a king in the world of human beings, namely, as Emperor Wu. In the past there were kings of countries who ruled their people in different ways. Three of them have now become heavenly kings, but they are great kings of demons, namely, the three heavenly kings of the east, south, and west respectively. At the close of the era of the Buddha Krakucchanda, one of the kings became a bodhisattva and made a vow, and he is now the heavenly king Vaishravana, or heavenly king of the north.’”

When we consider these passages, we see that those who obey the Hinayana precepts but later violate them will be reborn as commoners in the six paths. Those who obey the Mahayana precepts but later violate them will be reborn as kings in the six paths. And those who consistently obey the Mahayana precepts will become Buddhas.

Seventh, regarding the world of voice-hearers, the causes and conditions that lead to birth in this world are clearly set forth in the Âgama sutras of the Hinayana teachings preached by the Buddha over a period of twelve years, while the various Mahayana sutras also make very clear how this world of voice-hearers contrasts with that of [bodhisattvas in] the Mahayana teachings.

There are four types of voice-hearers. First is the upâsaka, or male lay believer. By observing the five precepts, perceiving the nature of suffering, non-substantiality, impermanence, and non-self, focusing their minds on self-discipline and self-salvation, not venturing to think of converting others but cutting off all one’s own illusions of thought and desire, such a person can become an arhat. When that happens, the hair of his head will naturally fall off without needing to be shaved.

Second is the upâsikâ, or female lay believer. If she observes the five precepts, her hair will fall off of itself without needing to be shaved, as in the case of a male lay believer.

Third is the bhikshu, or monk. By observing the two hundred and fifty precepts (the complete precepts), perceiving the nature of suffering, non-substantiality, impermanence, and non-self, and cutting off illusions of thought and desire, such a person can become an arhat. When that happens, though he does not shave his head, the hair on his head will cease to grow in.

Fourth is the bhikshunî, or nun. She
must observe the five hundred precepts, but in other respects is the same as a monk.

Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and the others who during the Buddha’s lifetime attended the assemblies at which he preached the various sutras were examples of such voice-hearers. They were able for all time to escape rebirth in the six paths, but they were on the other hand never able to become Buddhas or bodhisattvas. By annihilating consciousness and reducing the body to ashes, they once and for all made it impossible for themselves to attain Buddhahood.

The typical Hinayana precepts are the precepts whose benefit is lost with the death of the individual. Hence, once the body has come to an end, the beneficial effect of the precepts ceases to exist. A person who observes such precepts in a superior manner will become a person of the two vehicles. One who observes them in a middling or inferior manner will be reborn in the human or heavenly realms and be a commoner. One who violates such precepts will fall into the three evil paths where one suffers retribution as an offender.

The Reverend Annen in his On the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts states: “One gains birth in the three good paths by observing the precepts in ordinary life. Through the observance of such conduct one gains birth there and enjoys the results, but when the effect of such past behavior runs out, one will then fall into the evil paths. Such persons are like the leaves of the willow tree, which turn gold when autumn comes, but when autumn is over, fall to the ground. Even those who observe the Hinayana precepts for persons of the two vehicles achieve only paltry results, while those who violate such precepts are forever deprived of such benefits. They are like clay vessels that, even when whole, are used only for mean purposes, and which, once broken, are forever discarded.”

Eighth is the world of cause-awakened ones [or pratyekabuddhas], who are of two types.

First are those known as “self-awakened ones of group practice.” At a time when the Buddha is present in the world, they do as the voice-hearers do, carrying out the Hinayana teachings, observing the Hinayana precepts, and cutting off the illusions of thought and desire, but they are among those who can never attain Buddhahood.

Second are the “self-awakened ones of solitary practice.” At a time when the Buddha is not present in the world, they observe the scattering blossoms and falling leaves, perceive the nature of suffering, non-substantiality, impermanence, and non-self, and cut off the illusions of thought and desire, but are among those who can never attain Buddhahood. The precepts they observe are like those of the voice-hearers.

These two worlds, those of the voice-hearers and the cause-awakened ones, are known as the two vehicles.

Ninth is the world of bodhisattvas, those who remain among the ordinary mortals of the six paths of existence, thinking little of their own lives but much of the lives of others, aiming always to take evil upon themselves and to dole out good to other beings.

For the sake of persons such as this the Buddha in the various Mahayana sutras set forth the bodhisattva precepts. These bodhisattva precepts are classified into three categories. The first is described as the “precept for encompassing all good deeds,” because through it one aims to carry out to the fullest all the so-called eighty-four thousand teachings. The second is called the “precept for benefiting sentient beings,” because one hopes by observing it to bring salvation to all
living beings and only after that to obtain Buddhahood oneself. The third is called the “precept for encompassing the rules and standards,” because through it one attempts to observe to the fullest all the various precepts.

The Brahmā Net Sutra, which sets forth the essence of the Flower Garland Sutra, states: “The Buddha addressed those who are his children, saying, ‘There are ten major rules of discipline’¹⁴ to be observed. If one accepts the bodhisattva precepts but fails to recite these rules, one is not a bodhisattva nor has the seed of Buddhahood. I myself recite them as others do. All bodhisattvas have learned them in the past, all bodhisattvas will learn them in the future, and all bodhisattvas are learning them at present.’”

The term “bodhisattva” applies to all sentient beings except those of the two vehicles. In the Hinayana teachings, beings vary depending upon the precepts they observe, but this is not true in the case of the bodhisattva precepts. All beings who possess a mind should undertake to observe the ten major precepts. Those who succeed in observing one precept may be called one part a bodhisattva, and those who observe all ten of them deserve to be called complete bodhisattvas.

Hence the Jeweled Necklace Sutra says: “If one accepts one precept, that person may be called one part a bodhisattva, and the same for two parts, three parts, four parts, and so on to ten parts, in which case one may be called a complete observer of the precepts.”

Question: When you say “all sentient beings except those of the two vehicles,” what text is your authority?

Answer: When the Brahmā Net Sutra lists those who are to accept the bodhisattva precepts, it says: “If there are those who observe the Buddha precepts, whether they are kings, princes, government officials, prime ministers, monks, nuns, dwellers in the eighteen heavens of the world of form, heavenly sons in the six heavens of the world of desire, commoners, eunuchs, lustful men, lustful women, male or female slaves, the eight kinds of nonhuman beings, spirits, vajra-bearing gods, animals, or persons magically conjured, if they can understand the words of the teacher of the Law and undertake to observe the precepts in full measure, then they all deserve to be called beings of prime purity.” Persons of the two vehicles are not included in this list. The Jeweled Necklace Sutra, which represents the conclusion of the Correct and Equal sutras, likewise excepts persons of the two vehicles.

Question: How does the precept against the taking of life observed by persons of the two vehicles differ from the precept against the taking of life observed by bodhisattvas?

Answer: The name of the precept is the same in both cases, but the manner of observing it and the thoughts in the mind of the observer are totally different. Therefore the blessings derived from observing it differ in their profundity.

Question: How is the manner of observing it different?

Answer: When persons of the two vehicles observe the precept against the taking of life, they have no thought of ever being reborn again in the six paths, and therefore they pay no mind to the converting and guiding of others. Likewise they have no thought of becoming a Buddha or a bodhisattva. Their thoughts are simply upon how to annihilate consciousness and reduce the body to ashes, which is like burning a piece of wood and turning it to ashes, after which not a single particle of it remains. Therefore those who observe the precept in this way may be compared to clay vessels that, once broken, are of no further use.

But bodhisattvas are not like this. They approach the precepts in the spir-
EXPLAINING THE CAUSATION OF THE TEN WORLDS

it of the precept for benefiting sentient beings and observe the precept against the taking of life in this spirit. Therefore in observing the capacities of others [and striving to lead them], they may have occasion to behave like those who commit the five cardinal sins or the ten evil acts, committing offenses as they do, but this does not constitute a violation of the precept against the taking of life. On the contrary, the precept is rendered more fully observed than before. Hence the Jeweled Necklace Sutra says, “Though they commit offenses, the power of the precept is not destroyed, but will remain effective through all future time.”

Therefore those who observe the precept in this spirit may be compared to vessels made of gold or silver which, whether whole or broken, whether observed, in the case of the precept, or unobserved, never lose their value.

Question: When persons observe the precept against the taking of life in this spirit, how many kalpas must they do so in order to attain Buddhahood?

Answer: The Jeweled Necklace Sutra states: “For those who are still in the stages previous to the ten stages of security . . . one kalpa, two kalpas, three kalpas, and so on up to ten kalpas, must go by before they are able to enter the first of the ten stages of security.” This means that one who is an ordinary mortal but observes this precept may be called a bodhisattva in the ten stages of faith [which precede the ten stages of security]. However, though such persons may continue to be reborn in the six paths over a period of one kalpa, two kalpas, and so on up to ten kalpas, when they have done so for ten kalpas, they will enter the stage of non-regression and be called bodhisattvas of non-regression, which means that they will never again have to undergo the sufferings of the six paths. They cannot yet attain Buddhahood, and on the contrary will continue to be reborn in the six paths, but will do so without any suffering.

Tenth is the world of Buddhahood. Those who are in the stage of bodhisattva and who undertake to carry out the four universal vows as their precepts, who over a period of three asamkhya kalpas fulfill the six pāramitās and the ten thousand religious practices, completely cutting off the illusions of thought and desire, the illusions innumerable as particles of dust and sand, and the illusions about the true nature of existence, will attain Buddhahood. Thus the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra says: “Those who in the space of three great asamkhya kalpas carry out the various hundreds and thousands of ascetic practices and thereby gain full and complete blessings that pervade the entire realm of phenomena will attain the last of the ten stages of development and acquire the three bodies.”

This means that if, when they are at the stage of cause, or practice, they observe the various precepts, then when they reach the stage of effect, or Buddhahood, they will have their Buddha body adorned elaborately. The thirty-two features and the eighty characteristics [that adorn the Buddha body] are thus produced by the blessings accruing from the observance of these precepts. However, when one reaches the stage of effect, or Buddhahood, the power of the precepts is cast off. The process may be likened to a fruit developing from a flower; when the fruit appears, the form of the flower ceases to exist. Therefore T’ien-t’ai in his commentary on the Brahmā Net Sutra says, “Once the effect of Buddhahood is reached, it [the power of the precepts] will be discarded.”15

Question: Does the Brahmā Net Sutra or any similar text permit the Mahayana precepts to be administered to persons who have committed the
seven cardinal sins in their present existence or those who are destined by nature to become persons of the two vehicles?

Answer: The Brahmā Net Sutra states: "When a person wishes to receive the precepts, the teacher shall question that person, saying, 'Have you in your present existence committed the seven cardinal sins?' A bodhisattva teacher of the Law may not administer the precepts to a person who has committed the seven cardinal sins in his present existence." In light of this passage, we see that persons who have committed the seven cardinal sins in their present existence are not permitted to receive the precepts.

The Great Wisdom Sutra says: "Though a bodhisattva may be subject to the five desires for wonderful things for as many kalpas as there are sands in the Ganges, in terms of the bodhisattva precepts he may not be said to have committed any violation. But if for one instant he allows thoughts of the two vehicles to arise, then he may be said to have committed a violation."

And The Ornament of Mahayana Sutras states: "Though one may dwell constantly in hell, this presents no barrier to great enlightenment. But if one gives rise to thoughts of self-benefit, this will be a barrier to great enlightenment." From these passages we may see that, though the bodhisattva precepts may be administered to ordinary mortals of the six paths, it is prohibited to administer them to persons of the two vehicles.

Persons of the two vehicles are disliked not because of any dislike for the five precepts, the eight precepts, the ten precepts, the ten good precepts, or the two hundred and fifty precepts that are observed by them. These precepts are observed by bodhisattvas as well. What is disliked is simply the thoughts in the minds of persons of the two vehicles.

If we stop to consider, we realize that one observes the precepts in order that one may repay the debt of gratitude that one owes to one's father and mother, one's religious teachers, the ruler of the nation, one's own particular lord, living beings as a whole, and to the three treasures. One owes a profound debt to father and mother for having raised one, and a heavy debt to all living beings for mutual help and assistance. And because the ruler of the nation governs by means of the correct principles, the people can enjoy peace and security. As a result they can practice good, and hence this debt to the ruler is a heavy one. And one owes a debt to one's particular lord because it is thanks to him that one is able to care for one's parents, wife and children, household members, followers, oxen and horses, and so forth. Even if one did not take these others into consideration, one would owe a heavy debt to one's lord simply for his taking care of oneself. One also owes a profound debt to one's teachers for preventing one from following erroneous doctrines and leading one to the correct way. And the debt one owes to the Buddha goes without saying.

In this manner, then, one owes an incalculable debt of gratitude to others. But persons of the two vehicles fail to repay any of these debts of gratitude. Therefore to turn one's mind to the two vehicles even for one instant is worse than committing the ten evil acts or the five cardinal sins. But to turn one's mind for an instant to the way of the bodhisattva is to give rise to blessings such as accrue to one who is far advanced in the teachings and practices of all the various Buddhas.

Above is a description of the Mahayana and Hinayana precepts as taught by the Buddha in the first forty and more years of his preaching life.

The precepts of the Lotus Sutra are viewed from two aspects. First, they are
precepts of comparative myō, or comparative wonderfulness; second, they are precepts of absolute myō, or absolutely wonderfulness.

First, with regard to the term “precepts of comparative myō,” it means that, when the Mahayana and Hinayana precepts set forth by the Buddha in the first forty and more years of his preaching life are compared with the precepts of the Lotus Sutra, the former are seen to be “rough precepts,” while the latter are seen to be “wonderful precepts.” The precepts set forth in the various other sutras are disliked because they are precepts before the truth was revealed, precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas, precepts of those forever predestined by nature for the two vehicles, while the precepts of the Lotus Sutra are precepts of the truth, precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment, precepts allowing persons of the two vehicles to attain Buddhahood. When the latter are compared to the former, one can see which are rough and which are wonderful. Therefore we speak of the latter as “precepts of comparative myō.”

Question: The Brahmā Net Sutra says: “If living beings accept the Buddha precepts, they enter the state of the Buddhas and gain the same great enlightenment as theirs. They are truly children of the Buddhas.” The Flower Garland Sutra states: “The first time they conceive the desire to do so, they can attain enlightenment.” And the Larger Wisdom Sutra says: “As soon as they conceive the desire for enlightenment, they are seated in the place of enlightenment.” Judging from these passages, it would seem that the Mahayana precepts set forth by the Buddha in the first forty and more years of his preaching life, like those of the Lotus Sutra, may be called precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment. Why should they be designated merely as precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas?

Answer: There are two interpretations of the matter involved here. According to the first interpretation, during the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life, he set forth both “precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas” and “precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment.” But in the Lotus Sutra he preached only “precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment.” With regard to the former two types of precepts, the precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas, which were set forth in the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life, are inferior to the precepts of the Lotus Sutra, but the precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment set forth in those first forty and more years are the same as the Lotus Sutra precepts. Therefore the passages cited above that say that if living beings accept the Buddha precepts, they enter the state of the Buddhas, and so forth, are comparable to the passage in the Lotus Sutra that states: “If one listens to them [the preachers of the Law] for even a moment, one will immediately attain supreme perfect enlightenment.” When the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra mentions the sutras preached in the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life and describes them as teachings pertaining to the numerous kalpas of practice, it is expressing dislike simply for the precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas set forth in those forty and more years, not expressing dislike for the precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment set forth in that period.

Another interpretation of the matter holds that the precepts set forth in those forty and more years are all to be regarded as precepts to be practiced over numerous kalpas, and the precepts of the Lotus Sutra as the only pre-
cepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment. Regarding the passages cited above that speak of the precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment set forth in the first forty and more years of the Buddha's preaching life, these passages do not mean that one who is at the stage of ordinary mortal can immediately attain enlightenment. What they mean is that one who is at the stage of ordinary mortal, after carrying out an immeasurable number of practices and doing so over an immeasurable number of kalpas, can then in the end move directly in their present form from the stage of ordinary mortal to that of Buddhahood. Therefore this final stage of the process is described as “immediate attainment of enlightenment.” To speak in more precise terms, it is simply a part of the process of practice carried out over numerous kalpas.

Therefore in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra the Buddha, citing the various sutras that he preached in the previous forty and more years, states that, although in these he described “the many kalpas of practice for bodhisattvas,” this approach cannot begin to compare with the method of immediate attainment of enlightenment mentioned in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

The bodhisatta Great Adornment, hearing this explanation and understanding and assenting to it, says that “though immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable asamkhya kalpas may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment. Why? Because they will not know about the great direct way to enlightenment, but will travel perilous byways beset by numerous hindrances and trials. . . . Because, practicing it [this sutra], one travels a great direct way free of hindrances and trials.”

If during the first forty and more years of the Buddha’s preaching life there had in fact been precepts for the immediate attainment of enlightenment such as were later set forth in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra and the Lotus Sutra, then the Buddha would have been at fault for deliberately concealing the truth during those forty and more years.

Of these two interpretations of the matter I have described above, the second is the one more commonly accepted.

This concludes my description of the term “precepts of comparative māyā.”

Next, with regard to the term “precepts of absolute māyā,” we may note that, where the Lotus Sutra is concerned, this does not refer to a separate set of precepts. The precepts set forth in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra constitute, just as they are, the precepts of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, the observers of the so-called “willow leaf” precepts18 of those in the human and heavenly realms as described in the sutras prior to the Lotus, the observers of the “clay vessel” precepts of persons of the two vehicles as described in the Hinayana Āgama sutras, the observers of the “gold and silver vessel” precepts to be carried out by bodhisattvas over numerous kalpas as described in the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, Wisdom, and Meditation sutras—when it comes to the Lotus Sutra, all these different groups come together in harmony and form a single body.

Thus the persons in the human or heavenly realms who observe the willow leaf precepts gain the same blessings as persons of the two vehicles who observe the clay vessel precepts and bodhisattvas who observe the gold and silver vessel precepts; bodhisattvas who observe the gold and silver vessel precepts gain the same blessings as persons in the human and heavenly realms who observe the willow leaf precepts and those of the two vehicles who observe
the clay vessel precepts; and so forth in the same manner.

Beings in the three evil paths do not in their present existence observe any precepts at all. In their past lives, when they were born in the human or heavenly realms, they observed the willow leaf precepts of persons in the human and heavenly realms, or the clay vessel precepts of persons of the two vehicles, or the gold and silver vessel precepts of the bodhisattvas. Later, because they violated these precepts, they fell into the three evil paths. But the blessings they gained earlier have not been lost and are still in existence. When such persons in the three evil paths encounter the Lotus Sutra, the power of the earlier precepts is brought to life once more, and hence, although such persons dwell in the three evil paths, they become endowed with the potentiality of all of the Ten Worlds. Thus, when persons in any of the Ten Worlds who abided by the teachings of the sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra come into contact with the Lotus Sutra, they all become observers of the precepts.

This is what the Lotus Sutra means when it says, "This is what is called observing the precepts." The Reverend Annen in his On the Universally Bestowed Bodhisattva Precepts states: "The Lotus Sutra is saying that those who are capable of preaching the Lotus Sutra deserve to be called observers of the precepts." That is, such persons do not, as described in the sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra, have to observe the precepts under the supervision of a teacher. They have only to put their faith in this sutra to become observers of the precepts.

The sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra did not set forth the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds. Therefore, although bodhisattvas might carry out practices over innumerable kalpas, they did not gain any other blessings such as those acquired by observers of the precepts in the two vehicles or the human and heavenly realms; they acquired only the blessings associated with their own one world. And because they acquired the blessings of only one world, they were in the end unable to attain Buddhahood. Therefore [in terms of the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds] they did not even acquire the blessings that pertain to one world.20

But when persons who had previously followed the teachings of the pre-Lotus sutras encounter the Lotus Sutra, the blessings of all the other nine worlds become the possession of beings in any of the Ten Worlds. When this happens, then, the pre-Lotus sutras become synonymous with the Lotus Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra becomes synonymous with the pre-Lotus sutras. The Lotus Sutra is no longer separate from the pre-Lotus sutras, and the pre-Lotus sutras are no longer separate from the Lotus Sutra. This is what is meant by the term "wonderful Law."

Once one has gained an understanding of this, then though the practitioner may read the Āgama sutras of the Hinayana teachings, one therewith becomes a reader of all the Mahayana sutras and a reader of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore the Lotus Sutra says, "[But if they hear this profound sutra] which defines the Law of the voice-hearer, [if they hear] this king of the sutras . . ."21 This passage is saying that the Āgama sutras are none other than the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra says, "[The Buddhas] apply distinctions to the one Buddha vehicle and preach as though it were three."22 This passage is saying that the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom sutras are none other than the Lotus Sutra.

And the Lotus Sutra says, "If they should expound some text of the secular world or speak on matters of
government or occupations that sustain life, they will in all cases conform to the correct Law.23 This passage is saying that all the texts of the non-Buddhist teachers, of Lao Tzu and Confucius, are none other than the Lotus Sutra.

The precepts of provisional Mahāyana recorded in the Brahmā Net Sutra and similar texts differ in many respects from the Lotus Sutra precepts. First, the former may not be administered to persons of the two vehicles or to those who have committed the seven cardinal sins. Second, the blessings accruing from the former do not include the possibility of attaining Buddhahood. Third, the former are precepts that are designed to be practiced over a period of numerous kalpas. Hence they are faulty in many respects.

But when we come to the precepts of the Lotus Sutra, we find that they may be administered to persons of the two vehicles and to those who have committed the seven cardinal sins. Moreover, through them even persons in the lowest category of ordinary mortals will enter the stage of Buddhahood within the space of a single lifetime and achieve perfect enlightenment. Thus one may acquire both the merit of practice and the benefit of Buddhahood.

Nichiren

The twenty-first day of the fourth month in the second year of Shōgen [1260], cyclical sign /anoe-saru

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Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote *Explaining the Causation of the Ten Worlds* in Kamakura on the twenty-first day of the fourth month in 1260. In this work, he cites the Lotus Sutra to introduce the names of the Ten Worlds and offers a detailed explanation of the causal relationships characterizing each of the Ten Worlds. In the discussion of the world of Buddhahood, he describes the differences between the precepts of the sūtras preached before the Lotus Sutra and those of the Lotus Sutra, clarifying that only the Lotus Sutra teaches the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s present form for all people.

First, citing the Flower Garland Sutra and the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin lists the names of the Ten Worlds: the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, animals, asuras, human beings, heavenly beings, voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas, or Buddhahood. Sutras expounded before the Lotus Sutra generally portray the Ten Worlds as ten distinct realms, in which people are said to be reborn due to the causes they create in their present life. The teachings of the Lotus Sutra, however, regard the Ten Worlds as categories representing the state of life of any living being at any given moment.

Next, the Daishonin explains the causal relationships pertaining to each of the Ten Worlds. Concerning the first six worlds, also known as the six paths, he introduces the views of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings regarding what kind of actions cause one to be reborn in them. Then he explains how slander of the Law causes one to be reborn in the three evil paths and declares that it also accounts for differences among people born in the same world of humanity, citing *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* and the Lotus Sutra.

Concerning the two vehicles, the
worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, the Daishonin states that voice-hearers such as Shāriputra and Maudgalyāyana “were able for all time to escape rebirth in the six paths, but they were on the other hand never able to become Buddhas or bodhisattvas.” He also states that two groups of cause-awakened ones, one carrying out the Buddha’s Hinayana teachings and the other practicing on their own, “cut off the illusions of thought and desire, but are among those who can never attain Buddhahood.”

Next, concerning the world of bodhisattvas, the Daishonin identifies them as those who “remain among the ordinary mortals of the six paths of existence, thinking little of their own lives but much of the lives of others, aiming always to take evil upon themselves and to dole out good to other beings.” The Daishonin, defining “bodhisattva” as “all sentient beings except those of the two vehicles,” says, “All beings who possess a mind should undertake to observe the ten major precepts. Those who succeed in observing one precept may be called one part a bodhisattva, and those who observe all ten of them deserve to be called complete bodhisattvas.”

Finally, the Daishonin addresses the subject of the world of Buddhas, or Buddhahood, first outlining the causes for its attainment from the standpoint of the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, which state that one requires countless lifetimes to achieve it. Next he describes the precepts of the Lotus Sutra, of which there are two kinds: the precepts of comparative myō and the precepts of absolute myō. The precepts of comparative myō means to compare the precepts of the Lotus Sutra with those of the other sutras, and regard the former as myō, or “wonderful,” and the latter as so, or “rough.”

With regard to the precepts of absolute myō, the Daishonin says, “Where the Lotus Sutra is concerned, this does not refer to a separate set of precepts. The precepts set forth in the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra constitute, just as they are, the precepts of the Lotus Sutra.” He also says, “When persons in any of the Ten Worlds who abided by the teachings of the sutras prior to the Lotus Sutra come into contact with the Lotus Sutra, they all become observers of the precepts.” This is what the Lotus Sutra means when it says, “This [to uphold this sutra] is what is called observing the precepts.” Then, the Daishonin concludes, “Even persons in the lowest category of ordinary mortals will enter the stage of Buddhahood within the space of a single lifetime and achieve perfect enlightenment.”

Notes

1. Lotus Sutra, chap. 19. The words in brackets are notes by Nichiren Daishonin.
2. The Commentary on the Meaning of Bodhisattva Precepts.
3. This statement is not found in T‘ien-t’ai’s works, but a similar statement is found in The Annotations on “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra,” Miao-lo’s commentary on T‘ien-t’ai’s Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.
4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
5. Ibid.
7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.
8. Ibid., chap. 28.
9. The “three pure precepts” refers to the three comprehensive precepts, which are also known as the three comprehensive pure precepts. See three comprehensive precepts in Glossary.
10. According to the capacities of people, the degrees of strictness in observing the precepts are divided into nine: the higher, middle, and lower parts of each of the higher, middle, and lower categories.
11. A deity dwelling in the heaven of the thirty-three gods located on the sum-
mit of Mount Sumeru.
12. A priest also known as Pao-kung. Pao-chih (418–514) was criticized for using occult powers and deluding the people but later won the respect of Emperor of Wu of the Liang dynasty.
13. A self-awakened one of group practice is one who practices together with other practitioners but finally on his own gains insight and emancipation. A self-awakened one of solitary practice, referred to in the next paragraph, is one who practices in isolation and gains insight and emancipation.
14. "Ten major rules of discipline" refers to the ten major precepts. See ten major precepts in Glossary.
15. Commentary on the Meaning of Bodhisattva Precepts.
16. This passage is not found in the extant edition of the Larger Wisdom Sutra. However, T'ien-t'ai in his Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra cites this passage as that of the Larger Wisdom Sutra.
17. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.
18. The "willow leaf" precepts refer to the precepts for the human and heavenly beings, such as the five precepts and ten good precepts. The transient nature of benefits deriving from the observance of these precepts is compared to that of the leaves of the willow tree, which turn gold in autumn and soon fall to the ground.
19. Lotus Sutra, chap. 11.
20. According to the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, because one world possesses the other nine worlds, one cannot obtain the benefits that pertain to one's own world without also obtaining the benefits of the other nine worlds.
22. Ibid., chap. 2.
23. Ibid., chap. 19.