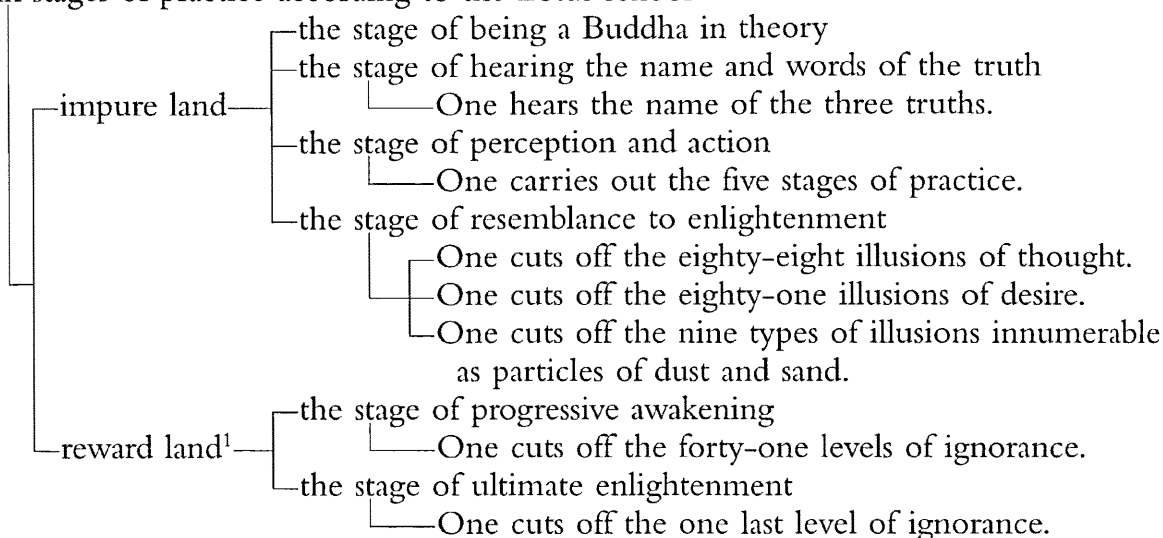


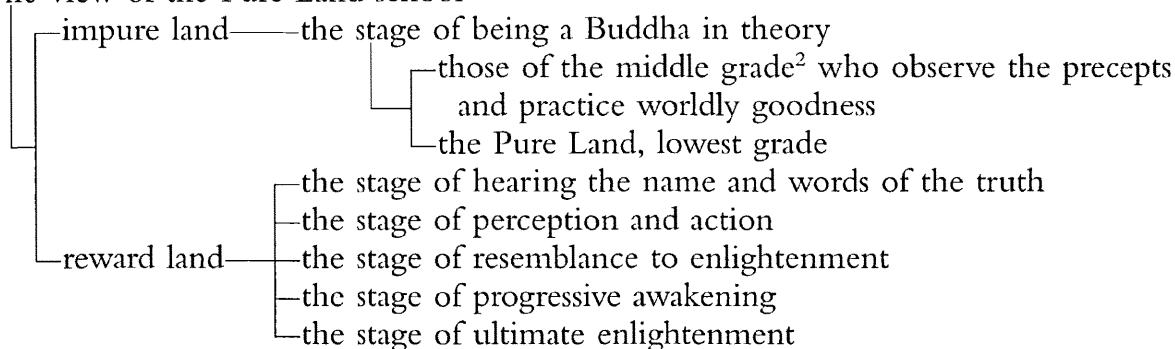
Dialogue on the Lotus and Pure Land Teachings



Six stages of practice according to the Lotus school



The view of the Pure Land school



BENJŌ stated as follows: The practices of the Sacred Way [teachings] are difficult for me to adjust to, and so I discard and close them, ignore and abandon them, and put my faith in the Pure Land [teachings], whereby I will attain rebirth in the Pure Land, listen to the Lotus Sutra,

and achieve an understanding of the truth of birthlessness.³

I, Nichiren, rebutted this as follows: You say it is difficult for you to adjust to [the Sacred Way teachings] and so, while you are in the impure land, you discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni Buddha,

the lord of teachings, and will go to the Pure Land where you will be able to achieve understanding. On what passages of the sutras do you base such a doctrine?

Moreover, the T'ien-t'ai school holds that the reward land corresponds to the stage of progressive awakening and the stage of ultimate enlightenment, but the Pure Land school states that the reward land corresponds to all the five stages from the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth to the stage of ultimate enlightenment. On what sutras, treatises, or commentaries is this assertion based?

And on what sutra passages do you base your assertion that while one is in the impure land one should discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, and then, when one has reached the Pure Land, one will be able to gain an understanding of the Lotus Sutra?

Benjō then stated as follows: When I discard, close, ignore, and abandon the various practices of the Lotus and the other sutras and adopt the practice of the Nembutsu, I am following the passage in the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra that reads: "The Buddha said to Ānanda, 'You must hold fast to these words. Holding fast to these words means holding fast to the name of the Buddha Infinite Life.'"

And when I speak of being reborn in the Pure Land and listening to the Lotus Sutra there, I base myself on the passage that reads: "Perceiver of the World's Sounds and Great Power, speaking in a voice of great compassion, will expound for them the teaching of the true aspect of all phenomena that wipes away guilt. When they hear it, they will rejoice and immediately conceive the determination to gain enlightenment."⁴ There are many other passages I could cite, but I will omit them here.

I, Nichiren, once more made my rebuttal, saying: The Meditation Sutra [which you have just cited] was expounded in the first forty and more years after the Thus Come One attained enlightenment, but the Lotus Sutra was preached in the eight years that followed that period. How could the name of a sutra such as the Lotus that had not yet been preached be found in a sutra such as the Meditation Sutra that had already been preached, and how could the Buddha in the latter be telling one to discard, close, ignore, and abandon a sutra not yet preached?

It follows, then, that the passage you have cited, which begins "The Buddha said to Ānanda," must simply be encouraging one to practice the chanting of Amida Buddha's name. I have never heard it being taken to mean that one should discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra.

And this is even more obvious when one considers that, when the Buddha was about to preach the Lotus Sutra, in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra he referred to the sutras preached in the preceding forty years and more and stated that in these sutras he had "not yet revealed the truth." How, in the Meditation Sutra, preached when he had "not yet revealed the truth," could there be a passage telling one to discard, abandon, and so on, the Lotus Sutra, which was preached in the period when he revealed the truth?

Moreover, the Lotus Sutra says, "For long he remained silent regarding the essential, in no hurry to speak of it at once."⁵ In the preceding forty and more years of his preaching life, Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, never referred even to the name of the Lotus Sutra. Why, then, in the Meditation Sutra, which he preached in the past, when speaking of the Nembutsu, would he tell anyone to abandon the Lotus Sutra?

Next, you cite the passage that, in referring to the teaching designed for those of the lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land,⁶ speaks of “the teaching of the true aspect of all phenomena that wipes away guilt.” But in the sutras that precede the Lotus there is more than one occurrence of this phrase “true aspect.” To begin with, there is the “true aspect” expounded by the non-Buddhist Dīrghanakha.⁷ And in the Buddhist teachings, the term “true aspect” is used in the Hinayana [or Tripitaka] teaching and the rest of the four teachings of the pre-Lotus sutras to refer to their ultimate principles. Why must one necessarily suppose, therefore, that the term “true aspect” as it appears in the Meditation Sutra, a sutra preached earlier in the Buddha’s career, is identical in meaning with the term as it appears in the Lotus Sutra?

You must come forth with some more positive passage of proof if you hope to rescue the Honorable Hōnen from the hell of incessant suffering.

Benjō then stated as follows: Although the Meditation Sutra was preached previous to the Lotus Sutra, it was preached for the sake of the future, and therefore living beings of future times, by reading and reciting the sutra that will spread in their age, can gain rebirth in the Pure Land. The Lotus Sutra and the other sutras preached in the past were likewise intended for propagation in the future, and therefore by reading and reciting them one can probably gain such rebirth. But Hōnen, basing himself on the passage in the Meditation Sutra that tells one to “hold fast to the name of the Buddha Infinite Life,” said that one should discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra and carry out that practice. He said this because, preceding the passage on holding fast to the name of the Buddha Infinite Life, the Meditation Sutra describes various good practices

and then, in this passage, goes on to urge that one rely solely on the name of the Buddha Infinite Life.

As to the objection that there are many different uses of the term “true aspect,” it does not apply in this case because the sutra here is speaking of the Pure Land.

The Honorable Hōnen believed that people would find it too difficult to practice and adapt their capacities to the Sacred Way. Therefore he advised them to discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra designed for propagation in future times. Hence we may say that in doing so he displayed the utmost in pity and compassion. Through this pity and compassion he allows people to gain rebirth in the Pure Land—he would thus have no reason whatsoever to fall into hell!

I, Nichiren, made the following rebuttal: You have referred to the Meditation Sutra as having been preached before the Lotus Sutra. You agree, then, that it was expounded before the Lotus. That is, at the time the Meditation Sutra was expounded, the Lotus Sutra had not yet been preached. But the Honorable Hōnen is saying that at that time the Buddha looked into the future and said that one should discard, close, ignore, and abandon the Lotus Sutra.

Now if the Buddha in this fashion looks into the future, and in the sutras that he expounds at an earlier period he sets forth restrictions regarding the sutras that he will preach in the future, then do the Hinayana sutras, which were preached in an earlier period, contain restrictions regarding the Mahayana sutras that were preached at a later period?

Again, you argue that the provisional Mahayana sutras [such as the Meditation Sutra] that were preached earlier contain restrictions regarding the true Mahayana sutra that had not yet been preached, restrictions that apply to the

Lotus Sutra as it would be propagated in future times. But if this were so, then how do you explain the fact that in these earlier sutras the Buddha never so much as mentions the name of the Lotus Sutra?

And with regard to the pity and compassion of the Honorable Hōnen, do you say it was pity and compassion that led him to advise people to abandon the Lotus Sutra and Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings? But none of the passages you have cited so far give any clear proof of that. You must produce some more positive passage of proof if you hope to rescue the Honorable Hōnen from his terrible sufferings.

You say that [according to the Meditation Sutra] persons in the six upper grades⁸ should carry out various good practices to gain rebirth, but those in the three lowest grades should rely on the Nembutsu and abandon the good practices, and that this is tantamount to meaning that one should abandon the Lotus Sutra. But the good practices that the Meditation Sutra prescribes for persons in the six upper grades are good practices that were set forth in works preached prior to the Lotus Sutra. Given that the Meditation Sutra is telling persons in the three lowest grades to rely on the Nembutsu and abandon the good practices prescribed for those in the six upper grades, one can hardly suppose that the Lotus Sutra is included among such good practices. How, then, can you take this to mean that one should ignore the Lotus Sutra?

The message of the Lotus Sutra is that, telling one to discard the good practices set forth in the earlier sutras, along with the Nembutsu described in the Meditation Sutra, the Thus Come One expounded the Lotus Sutra and thus fulfilled the original purpose for his advent in the world. Limited as my view may be, I have never seen any passage in any of the sacred teachings set forth in the Buddha's lifetime or in the text of the Lotus Sutra itself that cites the Lotus Sutra by name and says one should abandon it or close the door on its doctrines.

This being the case, then how can one escape from [the exceptions mentioned in] Amida's original vow,⁹ the vow upon which the Honorable Hōnen relies, or from the warning set forth by Shakyamuni Buddha that those who slander the Lotus Sutra "will enter the Avīchi hell."¹⁰ And if the Honorable Hōnen falls into the hell of incessant suffering, then those disciples he has converted to his teachings, and his various lay supporters as well, will all together enter the great citadel of the Avīchi hell. In the future you must come forward with some clear and convincing passage of proof if you hope to quench the flames of the Avīchi hell that beset the Honorable Hōnen.

Nichiren
Benjō

The seventeenth day of the first month in the ninth year of Bun'ei [1272], cyclical sign *mizunoe-saru*



Background

This document is a record of a debate that took place on Sado Island between Nichiren Daishonin and Inshō-bō Benjō, a leading local priest of the Pure

Land school, on the seventeenth day of the first month in 1272. The previous day, the so-called Tsukahara Debate was held in the same place between

Nichiren Daishonin and priests of the Pure Land and other schools who gathered from Sado and the neighboring provinces on the mainland. Before this debate, Benjō and other local priests had approached Homma Rokurō Saemon, the deputy constable of the island, and asked him to have the Daishonin done away with. Homma refused, and urged them instead to confront him in religious debate.

Subsequently, a crowd of priests and their followers converged in front of the Daishonin's lodging at Tsukahara in Sado, and challenged him in debate. But he answered their criticisms point by point, revealing their contradictions and inaccuracies. Several of them admitted defeat. A detailed account of these events appears in *The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra* (I, pp. 771–72). Benjō was present on that day, and witnessed the Daishonin's victory over his Pure Land colleagues. The following day he returned on his own to debate the Daishonin one on one.

This document bears the signatures “Nichiren” and “Benjō,” indicating that both agreed that the statements therein correctly represent their positions. At the beginning is a chart outlining the contrast between the Lotus school (the teachings of T'ien-t'ai based on the Lotus Sutra) and the Pure Land school with respect to how they view the six stages of practice in terms of the “impure land” and the “reward land.” According to the Pure Land teachings, the reward land where one will be reborn as a reward for one's practice is a realm far removed from this impure world and is known as the pure land of Amida Buddha. T'ien-t'ai's teachings also speak of a reward land or pure land, but do not view it as a realm separate from the impure land. As the Daishonin says, “There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the

good or evil of our minds” (I, p. 4).

While T'ien-t'ai associated the first four of the six stages of practice with this impure world and the two highest stages with the reward land, the Pure Land school associates only the lowest stage with this impure world. According to the chart attributed to Benjō, though the Pure Land teachings assert that people of all three grades—lower, middle, and upper—will be reborn in the Pure Land only if they chant the name of Amida Buddha, in terms of the six stages of practice, those of the middle grade who observe the precepts and practice worldly goodness and those of the lower grade who do not observe the precepts but commit worldly offenses belong to the stage of being a Buddha in theory and dwell in the impure world. But those of the upper grade belong to the second through the sixth stages and dwell in the reward land.

The beginning portion of this document is no longer extant, but from the Daishonin's response, it can be assumed that the chart represents an outline of Benjō's initial assertions. Referring to this chart, the Daishonin asks, “The T'ien-t'ai school holds that the reward land corresponds to the stage of progressive awakening and the stage of ultimate enlightenment, but the Pure Land school states that the reward land corresponds to all the five stages from the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth to the stage of ultimate enlightenment. On what sutras, treatises, or commentaries is this assertion based?”

The body of the text consists of three statements by Benjō, which the Daishonin counters and refutes from a number of angles. First, Benjō states that he has abandoned the Sacred Way teachings, which include the Lotus Sutra, because they do not suit his capacity, but will gain an understanding of the Lotus Sutra after being reborn in

the pure land of Amida Buddha. The Daishonin points out that neither this assertion, nor Benjō's association of five stages of practice with the reward land as shown in the chart, can be backed up by any sutra passage or treatises.

Next, when Benjō cites passages from the Meditation Sutra in an attempt to support his claim, the Daishonin makes clear that these say nothing about abandoning the Lotus Sutra; and because the Meditation Sutra was preached by the Buddha prior to the Lotus Sutra, which Benjō acknowledges, it could not have in any

way alluded to the Lotus Sutra, let alone to its rejection. And finally, when Benjō identifies the source of his interpretations as Hōnen, the founder of the Japanese Pure Land school, the Daishonin logically overturns Hōnen's view that Shakyamuni intended that the Lotus Sutra be rejected and the Nembutsu spread in its place in the future. He concludes instead that Hōnen and his followers, due to their slander of the Lotus Sutra and rejection of Shakyamuni Buddha, are sowing the seeds for future suffering.

Notes

1. A pure land in which one is reborn as a reward for former deeds.

2. "Those of the middle grade" refers to one of the three ranks described in the Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra. It divides aspirants for Amida's pure land into the upper grade, middle grade, and lowest grade according to their capacities and attributes, and furthermore subdivides each of these three grades into three. Thus the sutra sets forth nine grades of aspirants. "The Pure Land, lowest grade," which appears below, refers to the lowest of the first three divisions, and comprises three ranks.

3. The truth of birthlessness means the truth that nothing is born and nothing dies.

4. Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra.

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.

6. "Those of the lowest of the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land" refers to persons of the lowest among the nine grades of aspirants for Amida's pure land, who are described in n. 2.

7. A maternal uncle of Shāriputra. In

the Chinese sutras he is referred to as Long Nail. He was defeated by his sister in debate and left for southern India where he vowed not to cut his fingernails until he completed his study of Brahmanism. Thus he became known as Long Nail. On learning that Shāriputra, his sister's son, had become a disciple of Shakyamuni, he returned from southern India and challenged the Buddha to debate, but was refuted and converted to his teaching.

8. The higher six of the nine grades of aspirants. The Meditation Sutra classifies those reborn in Amida's pure land into nine grades according to their capacity and quality. "Those in the three lowest grades," which is mentioned subsequently, refers to the lowest three of these nine grades of aspirants.

9. A reference to the eighteenth of Amida's forty-eight original vows listed in the Buddha Infinite Life Sutra, which excludes perpetrators of the five cardinal sins and slanderers of the correct teaching from being reborn in his pure land.

10. Lotus Sutra, chap. 3.