Choosing the Heart of the Lotus Sutra

Written by Nichiren, the shramana of Japan

The sutras and treatises that have been brought from the western land of India to China and Japan run to more than five thousand or even seven thousand volumes. If one tries to use one’s own judgment in deciding which of these various sutras and treatises are superior and which inferior, which profound and which shallow, which difficult and which easy, which early in date and which later, one will find that one is not up to the task. But if one tries to go by what other people say or what the various schools teach, one will be confused and led astray.

Thus, for example, the Flower Garland school says that the Flower Garland Sutra is first among all the sutras. The Dharma Characteristics school says that the Profound Secrets Sutra is first among all. The Three Treatises school says that the Wisdom Sutra is first. The True Word school says that the three sutras such as the Mahāvairochana are first. The Zen school at times says that, among the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Lankāvatāra Sutra is first, or the Shūramagama Sutra is first, while at other times it claims that it is a school based on “a separate transmission outside the sutras.” The Pure Land school asserts that, now that we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, the three Pure Land sutras are first because they are the teachings that accord best with the capacities of the people. The members of the Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, and Precepts schools, on the other hand, insist that the four Āgama sutras, the rules of monastic discipline, and the treatises represent the words of the Buddha; they claim that the Flower Garland, Lotus, and other such sutras were not preached by the Buddha but are non-Buddhist scriptures. Thus one school says one thing and another says another.

The founders of these various schools were such men as Tu-shun, Chih-yen, Fa-tsang, and Ch’êng-kuan [of the Flower Garland school], Hsüan-tsang and Tz’u-en [of the Dharma Characteristics school], Chia-hsiang and Tao-lang [of the Three Treatises school], Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih and Pu-k’ung [of the True Word school], Tao-hsüan and Chien-chen [Ganjin] [of the Precepts school], T’an-luan, Tao-ch’o, and Shan-tao [of the Pure Land school], and Bodhidharma and Hui-k’o [of the Zen school]. These Tri-pitaka masters and great teachers were all sages or worthy men. Their wisdom shone as brightly as the sun and moon and their virtue filled the area within the four seas. Moreover, each one cited various sutras, texts of the rules of monastic discipline, and treatises to prove his particular assertions, so that
rulers and high ministers gave state support to their teachings and the ordinary people looked up to them with awe. Now in this latter age if a man who is lacking in knowledge such as I should try to decide who is right and who is wrong in the matter, no one would believe him.

On the other hand, it would surely be regrettable if one were to ascend a mountain of treasures and yet pick up only worthless stones and shards, or walk through a grove of fragrant sandalwood and gather only foul eranda. Therefore I have decided to ignore the slanders of the multitude and venture to declare what is to be accepted and what rejected. I hope that my disciples will give very careful attention to the matter.

Sometimes the teachers of a particular school will read only the old translations of the sūtras and treatises and will not even look at newer translations of the sacred texts, or sometimes they go by the new translations of the sūtras and treatises and discard the old translations. At other times they cling to the distortions of their school or insist upon their own interpretations, persisting in their foolish opinions and foisting them off on later ages. They will excitedly around the stake, hoping to catch another rabbit. On the other hand, there are persons who look at a round fan and, reminded by its shape, look up at the sky expecting to see a round moon. One who sets aside error and accepts what is reasonable is the real wise man.

Therefore I will set aside the views of recent scholars and the erroneous opinions put forth by earlier teachers and will concentrate upon an examination of the original sūtras and treatises themselves.

In all the sūtras preached by the Buddha over a period of fifty or more years, the most essential passage is that about the past, present, and future in the “Teacher of the Law” chapter of the fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra that states, “Among the sūtras I have preached [past], now preach [present], and will preach [future], this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.”

The various scholars and teachers of Buddhism have almost certainly read this passage. But they confuse it with similar passages in other sūtras, or they cling to the mistaken opinions of the patriarchs of their own school, or perhaps are simply afraid of the rulers and high ministers who support such mistaken opinions.

The Golden Light Sutra says, “This is the king of sūtras.” The Secret Solemnity Sutra claims that it is “the greatest of all sūtras.” The Six Pāramitās Sutra states, “The dhāranī division stands foremost among the five divisions of the teachings.” The Mahāvairocana Sutra exclaims, “What is the meaning of enlightenment? [It means to understand one’s own mind as it truly is.]” The Flower Garland Sutra states, “To be able to believe in this sūtra is the most difficult of all.” The Wisdom Sutra says, “When one understands that all secular matters and actions represent the essential nature of things, one will not see a thing [that is outside that essential nature].” The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom says, “Prajñā-pāramitā [the perfection of wisdom] is foremost.” And The Treatise on the Nirvana Sutra states, “Now is the truth of Nirvana.”

All these passages resemble the one from the Lotus Sutra that speaks of the past, present, and future. But such passages are declaring that a certain sūtra is a “king” in comparison to the sūtras of Brahmā, Shakra, or the four heavenly kings, or that it is a “king” in comparison to the Hinayana sūtras, or that among sūtras such as the Flower Garland or the Shrīmālā it is the most outstanding. They are in no way saying
that that particular sutra is the king of kings among all the Mahayana and Hinayana, provisional and true, exoteric and esoteric sutras preached by the Buddha during his entire fifty or more years of teaching.

It is important that we should clearly understand what is being compared when we try to decide which sutras are superior and which inferior. Only when one has succeeded in overcoming a powerful enemy can we say that one has displayed real strength.

Moreover, the relative superiority of those sutras [that claim each is “king”] is determined by a single Buddha, Shakyamuni, and is not supported by the words of testimony given by Many Treasures Buddha or the emanations of Shakyamuni Buddha. One must not confuse a personal opinion of one Buddha with the public announcements in the Lotus Sutra verified by all the Buddhas.

Some of these sutras are Hinayana sutras that were preached for the benefit of persons of the two vehicles or for ordinary persons, while others [Mahayana] are directed at bodhisattvas who spread the teachings, such as Manjushri, Moon of Deliverance, or Vajrasattva. They are certainly not directed at Superior Practices and the other bodhisattvas as numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds who sprang up out of the earth.

Now when we compare the Lotus Sutra with the other sutras, we find that there are twenty ways in which the Lotus surpasses all the other sutras preached during the Buddha’s lifetime of teaching. Among these there are two that are of the utmost importance, the so-called two truths of “three” and “five.”

“Three” refers to major world system dust particle kalpas. In various sutras, the time that it took for Shakyamuni to accomplish the practice needed to become a Buddha is in some cases said to have been three asamkhya kalpas, or in other cases a period of as many kalpas as there are dust particles, or countless kalpas.

The king Brahma declared, “For the past twenty-nine kalpas, I have been the ruler of this domain,” and the devil king of the sixth heaven, Shakra, and the four heavenly kings made the same claim. Thereupon Shakyamuni began to argue with Brahma and the others as to who was the first to become ruler of the domain. But once the Buddha, pointing his finger up toward the sky, had defeated the others, then Brahma bowed his head, the devil king of the sixth heaven pressed his palms together in reverence, and all the beings of the threefold world, following their example, acknowledged themselves as followers of Shakyamuni.

Moreover, when I examined how long the various Buddhas had spent accomplishing the practice needed to become a Buddha and how long Shakyamuni had done so, I found that some of the other Buddhas had spent three asamkhya kalpas or five kalpas, but that Shakyamuni Buddha had been in the saha world since major world system dust particle kalpas in the past, a great leader who made it possible for all people to establish the connections needed to attain Buddhahood. No one in this world who was in any of the six paths of existence was ever able to establish such a connection with any other bodhisattva of any other land.

The Lotus Sutra states, “The persons who heard the Law at that time are each in a place where there is one of these Buddhas.” T’ien-t’ai says, “The Buddha of the western land is different [from the Buddha of this saha world], and those who form a relationship with him are also different. It is impossible to assert that the living beings of this saha world are related to Infinite Life [Amida] Buddha in the way that the father and son are related.” Miao-lo
comments on this, “Amida and Shakyamuni are two different Buddhas to begin with... Moreover, the living beings who in past existences formed a bond with these two respective Buddhas represent two different groups, and the methods used to convert and guide them are not the same. Forming a bond with a Buddha represents the process of birth, while the maturing of one's Buddhist practice represents the process of upbringing. If the Buddha with whom one forms a bond and under whom one's practice matures is different [from the Buddha of this sahā world], then one cannot establish the father and son relationship with the Buddha.”

Nowadays all the people of Japan are waiting for Amida Buddha to come and take them to his realm. This is as absurd as to expect that one can feed mare's milk to a calf, or to use a piece of tile as a mirror and hope to see the reflection of the moon in it!

Again, if we consider the question of how long it has been since these various Buddhas attained the fruit of Buddhahood, then we will find that there are some who became Buddhas ten kalpas ago, others a hundred kalpas or a thousand kalpas ago. But in the case of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, it has already been a period of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas since he became a Buddha of perfect enlightenment and complete reward. The Thus Come One Mahāvairochana, the Thus Come One Amida, the Thus Come One Medicine Master, and all the other Buddhas of the ten directions are followers of Shakyamuni, the lord of teachings and our original teacher. He is like the moon in the sky that is reflected in ten thousand different bodies of water.

The Vairochana Buddha seated on the lotus pedestal with other Buddhas surrounding him in the ten directions, who is described in the Flower Garland Sutra, and the Thus Come One Mahāvairochana of the Diamond Realm and the Womb Realm, who is described in the Mahāvairochana and Diamond Crown sutras, are attendants who stand on the left and right of the Thus Come One Many Treasures, the Buddha described in the “Treasure Tower” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. They are like two high ministers in attendance on a worldly ruler. And this Many Treasures Buddha is a follower of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings of the “Life Span” chapter.

We, the various beings who live in this world, have been the beloved children of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, since numberless major world system dust particle kalpas in the past. And though because of the offense of our unfilial behavior we are unaware of this to this day, we are nevertheless not the same as the beings of another realm.

A Buddha with whom one establishes a connection that leads to enlightenment, and the various beings who establish such a connection, may be compared to the moon in the sky as it is reflected in countless bodies of clear water. But in the case of a Buddha with whom no such connection can be established, the various beings are comparable to deaf persons straining to hear the sound of thunder or blind persons facing the sun or the moon.

And yet there are some teachers who deprecate Shakyamuni and pay reverence to the Thus Come One Mahāvairochana, or some teachers who declare that one cannot establish a connection leading to Buddhahood with Shakyamuni, but can establish such a connection with Amida. Other teachers support the Shakyamuni of the Hinayana teachings, the Shakyamuni of the Flower Garland Sutra, or the Shakyamuni of the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra. All these teachers and their supporters who forget [the]
Shakyamuni [of the “Life Span” chapter] and choose some other Buddha instead are like Prince Ajātashatru, who killed his father, King Bimbisāra, and, turning against Shakyamuni, became a patron of Devadatta.

The fifteenth day of the second month is regarded as the date when Shakyamuni Buddha passed away, and the fifteenth day of each month also as the day of memorial service for this loving father of all the beings of the threefold world. And yet, led astray by such veritable Devadattas as Shan-tao, Hōnen, and Yōkan, people have now decided that that date is to be looked on as a day consecrated to Amida Buddha! The eighth day of the fourth month is the birthday of the World-Honored One Shakyamuni, and yet it has now been taken over as the birthday of Medicine Master Buddha! To take the anniversary of the death of your own loving father and turn it into the anniversary for some other Buddha—what kind of filial conduct is that!

The “Life Span” chapter says, “I am the father of this world because I cure my deranged sons.” The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai says, “Originally one followed this Buddha and for the first time conceived the desire to seek the way. And by following this Buddha again, one will reach the stage where there is no retrogression....Just as all the hundred rivers flow into the sea, so is one drawn by one’s connection with the Buddha and born in company with the Buddha.”

Question: For whom was the Lotus Sutra preached?

Answer: The eight chapters from the “Expeditious Means” chapter to the “Prophecies” chapter give two answers to that question. If one reads the chapters in the regular order, then they were preached first for bodhisattvas, second for persons of the two vehicles, and third for ordinary persons. But if one begins by reading the “Peaceful Practices” chapter and then, proceeding backward, reads the “Encouraging Devotion,” “Devadatta,” “Treasure Tower,” and “Teacher of the Law” chapters, and reads the eight chapters mentioned earlier from the viewpoint of these chapters, then it appears that the people who live in the period after the passing of the Buddha are the true listeners for whom the Buddha preached the above eight chapters. The people living in his own lifetime were only an incidental audience. And if we speak of the periods of time that follow the passing of the Buddha, then the one thousand years of the Former Day of the Law and the one thousand years of the Middle Day of the Law are only incidental periods. The Latter Day of the Law is the crucial period, and within the Latter Day of the Law, Nichiren is the crucial person [for whom the eight chapters were expounded].

Question: What proof is there for that?

Answer: It is in the passage in the “Teacher of the Law” chapter that reads, “Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?”

Question: But where is the precise passage that indicates that Nichiren will be the crucial person?

Answer: It is in the passage in the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter that reads, “There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and will attack us with swords and staves.”

Question: Why do you sing your own praises in this fashion?

Answer: I am so overwhelmed with joy that I find it difficult to restrain myself. That is why I sing my own praises.

Question: What is the heart of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra?
Answer: There are two vital messages in the essential teaching. The first is the passage in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter in which the Buddha expounds “opening the near and revealing the distant in concise form.” Through this, he brings deliverance to all the persons who heretofore had put their faith in the first four flavors of teachings and in the theoretical teaching.

The second is the section that begins in the latter half of the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter where the listeners start to lose faith in their previous beliefs and to harbor doubts, and continues down through the “Life Span” chapter and the first half of the “Distinctions in Benefits” chapter, that is, one chapter and two halves. This section, known as that in which the Buddha expounds “opening the near and revealing the distant in expanded form,” is directed entirely to people living in the time after his passing.

Question: What is the meaning of this phrase, “opening the near and revealing the distant in concise form”?

Answer: Of the great bodhisattvas such as Manjushri and Maitreya, or among Brahmā, Śakra, the gods of the sun and moon, the gods of stars, and the dragon kings, there was not one who had been a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha from the time when the Buddha first attained enlightenment [under the bodhi tree] up through the period when he preached the Wisdom sutras. At the time the Buddha first attained enlightenment, before he had begun to expound any teachings, these bodhisattvas and heavenly beings had already dwelt in “inconceivable emancipation” and were expounding to others the two kinds of teachings, the specific and perfect teachings. Later, Shakyamuni expounded the Āgama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom sutras, but these were not beneficial for the bodhisattvas and heavenly beings. Since they were already familiar with the specific and perfect teachings, they were of course familiar also with the Tripitaka and connecting teachings, which are inferior to them. This is what we mean when we say that superior teachings contain inferior teachings within them. Strictly speaking, then, could we describe them as being teachers of Shakyamuni Buddha? Obviously they were not followers of Shakyamuni. They were simply good friends in the faith.

But when we come to the eight chapters in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, then for the first time these beings heard the teachings that they had never heard before, and they thereupon became disciples of Shakyamuni.

Shāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and the others had been disciples of Shakyamuni from the time when he first began his preaching at Deer Park and caused them to arouse an aspiration for enlightenment. Nevertheless, they had only been permitted to hear the provisional teachings. But now, with the preaching of the Lotus Sutra, they were put into possession of the true teaching. And when Shakyamuni expounded “opening the near and revealing the distant in concise form” in the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, then the great bodhisattvas and the persons of the two vehicles, as well as the great heavenly king Brahmā, Śakra, the gods of the sun and moon, the four heavenly kings, and the dragon kings, all of them who had been listening to the Buddha from the time he preached the Flower Garland Sutra, reached the stage of near-perfect enlightenment, and then entered into the stage of perfect enlightenment. And if such is the case, then when we look up into the sky, we should see them as living Buddhas who dwell in the stage of perfect enlightenment and work to bring benefit to all beings.
CHOOSING THE HEART OF THE LOTUS SUTRA

Question: For whom was the "Life Span" chapter expounded, in which the Buddha preaches "opening the near and revealing the distant in expanded form"?

Answer: The "Life Span" chapter, or rather the "Life Span" chapter and the halves of the two chapters that precede and follow it, was from beginning to end preached entirely for the people who live in the world after the passing of the Buddha. And among such people, it was preached for Nichiren and his followers, who are living today in the Latter Day of the Law.

Question: Such a doctrine as this has never been heard in previous times. Are there passages in the sutras to support it?

Answer: My wisdom does not excel that of the worthy men of former times. Even if I were to cite passages from the sutras, who would believe me? I would be like Pien Ho weeping and wailing, or Wu Tzu-hsü sorrowful and distressed.

Nevertheless, in the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter, in the place where the Buddha preaches "opening the near and revealing the distant in concise form" and his listeners start to lose faith in their previous beliefs and to harbor doubts, there is a passage that reads, "Nevertheless, in the period after the Buddha has entered extinction, if bodhisattvas who have just begun to aspire to enlightenment should hear these words, they will perhaps not believe or accept them but will be led to commit the crime of rejecting the Law." The meaning of the passage is that, if the Buddha did not preach the "Life Span" chapter, then ordinary people born in the latter age would all fall into the evil paths of existence.

The "Life Span" chapter states, "I will leave this good medicine here." Although the Buddha seems to have preached his original enlightenment here for the people of his lifetime, when we examine this sutra passage we can see that he in fact intended it primarily for the people after his passing. He cited his own attainment of enlightenment in the far remote past as an example for the latter age.

The "Distinctions in Benefits" chapter speaks of "the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law." And the "Supernatural Powers" chapter says, "Because after the Buddha has passed into extinction there will be those who can uphold this sutra, the Buddhas are all delighted and manifest immeasurable supernatural powers." The "Medicine King" chapter states, "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off." And the same chapter says, "This sutra provides good medicine for the ills of the people of Jambudvīpa."

The Nirvana Sutra says, "Suppose that a couple has seven children, one of whom falls ill. Though the parents love all their children equally, they worry most about the sick child." Now the sickest of these seven children are ichchantikas, or persons of incorrigible disbelief, and those persons who slander the correct teaching. For among all illnesses, the gravest illness is that of slandering the Lotus Sutra. And among all medicines, the finest medicine is Nam-myoho-rench-kyo. Jambudvīpa, this world we live in, measures seven thousand yojanas square and includes within it eighty thousand states. During the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, the Lotus Sutra had not yet been widely proclaimed and disseminated throughout the world. And now if we do not make certain that it is widely spread in our own time, then Shakayamuni Buddha will have been a teller of great lies, Many Treasures Buddha's words of testimony will have been as insubstantial as froth or foam, and the emanation
Buddhas who gathered from the ten directions and extended their tongues to lend support to those words of Shakyamuni Buddha will in fact have their tongues split like the leaves of the plantain.

Question: Many Treasures Buddha’s testimonial, the helping tongues of the Buddhas of the ten directions, the appearance of the bodhisattvas who came forth from the earth—for whose sake did these things take place?

Answer: Most people would probably be inclined to say that these things happened for the sake of those living in Shakyamuni’s lifetime. But I, Nichiren, would like to make this observation. If we speak of the Buddha’s lifetime, there were Shāriputra and Maudgalyāyana, great sages who were known respectively as foremost in wisdom and foremost in transcendental powers. If we speak of their past existences, they were respectively the Buddha Konryū-da and the Buddha Seiryū-da. If we speak of their future existences, Shāriputra will be the Buddha Flower Glow [and Maudgalyāyana, the Buddha Ta-mālapattra Sandalwood Fragrance]. If we speak of their status at Eagle Peak, they were the great bodhisattvas who had immediately cut off the three categories of illusion. If we speak of their true identities, they were ancient bodhisattvas who hid their identities as such and took on the outward form of voice-hearer disciples. Great bodhisattvas such as Manjushrī and Maitreya were ancient Buddhas who chose to make their appearance in the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Brahmā, Sakra, the gods of the sun and moon, the four heavenly kings, and others like them were great sages who were already in existence before the time of Shakyamuni’s enlightenment, and moreover they had gained an understanding of the first four flavors and the four teachings by hearing a single word from Shakyamuni Buddha. At the time that Shakyamuni Buddha was in the world, there were in fact no ignorant persons among the Buddha’s disciples. So whose doubts was the Buddha trying to dispel when he called upon the testimonial of Many Treasures Buddha, arranged for the Buddhas of the ten directions to extend their tongues, or summoned the Bodhisattvas of the Earth? There is no reason whatsoever for the Buddha to do these things for the sake of those living in his lifetime.

The sutra states, “How much more will this be so after his passing?” and “Each . . . has come to this place on purpose to make certain the Law will long endure.” If we think about these passages carefully, we will realize that these things took place solely for our own sake.

The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai, speaking of our age, said, “In the last five-hundred-year period, the mystic way will spread and benefit humankind far into the future.” And the Great Teacher Dengyō, writing of our age, said, “The Former and Middle Days are almost over, and the Latter Day is near at hand.” These words “the Latter Day is near at hand” mean that his own age is not one in which the Lotus Sutra will be widely propagated throughout the world.

Question: In these two thousand and more years since the passing of the Buddha, what are these “secret Laws” that were left unrevealed by Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, T’ien-t’ai, and Dengyō?

Answer: They are the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the sanctuary of the essential teaching, and the five characters of the daimoku of the essential teaching.

Question: Why were these not propagated during the Former and Middle Days of the Law?

Answer: If these had been propagated during the Former and Middle Days of the Law, then the doctrines that comprise the Hinayana, the provi-
sional Mahayana, and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra would have been wiped out in an instant.

Question: Then why would anyone want to propagate a doctrine that wipes out the teachings of the Buddha?

Answer: Because in this, the Latter Day of the Law, all the doctrines that we call the Hinayana and the Mahayana, the provisional and the true, the exoteric and the esoteric, still exist, but no one can attain Buddhahood by practicing them. That is why all the people in the land of Jambudvīpa have become slanderers of the Law. In order to bring salvation to those who oppose the Lotus Sutra, the only thing that is effective is the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo. It is like the situation described in the “Never Disparaging” chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Only my disciples are now the ones who openly accept the Lotus Sutra, and the people of Japan are the ones who oppose it and thereby form a reverse relationship with it.

Question: Why do you abandon the expansive or the simplified approach and concentrate only on essentials?

Answer: The Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang abandoned the simplified approach and favored expansion. Thus he took the Larger Wisdom Sutra in forty volumes and expanded it into six hundred volumes. The Tripitaka Master Kumārajīva, on the other hand, abandoned the expansive approach and favored simplification. Thus he took Great Perfection of Wisdom in one thousand volumes and reduced it to one hundred volumes.

I, Nichiren, have abandoned both the approach that expands and that which condenses and favor the essence of the matter, which means the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo that were transmitted to Bodhisattva Superior Practices.

When Chiu-fang Yin was appraising horses, he paid no attention to whether they were black or yellow but concentrated only on picking a thoroughbred. When Chih Tao-pin lectured on the sutras, he put aside questions of detail and concentrated on getting at the basic meaning. Shakya-muni Buddha has already entered the treasure tower and is seated side by side with the Buddha Many Treasures, the emanations of the Buddha have gathered from the ten directions, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth have been summoned, and the essence, the five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo, has been entrusted to these bodhisattvas so that they may transmit it to the Latter Day of the Law. No one in the present age can doubt this.

Question: If this teaching is to spread throughout our present age, are there any portents that would indicate this fact?

Answer: The “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra states, “This reality consists of the appearance... and their consistency from beginning to end.” T’ien-t’ai comments on this as follows: “When a spider weaves its web, it means that some happy event is near, and if a magpie chatters, it foretells the coming of a guest. If even minor events such as these have their signs or portents, how much more likely is it that there will be signs for some major event.” (Only the gist of the passage is given.)

Question: If that is so, then what signs can you point to?

Answer: The great earthquake that occurred in the Shōka era [1257], the great comet that appeared in the Bun’ei era [1264], and the various kinds of strange and unusual things that have occurred in the sky and on the earth since then—these are all such signs. The seven disasters, twenty-nine disasters, and countless difficulties mentioned in the Benevolent Kings Sutra, and the various kinds of disasters listed in the Golden Light, Great Collection,
Protection, and Medicine Master sutras have all appeared. The only disaster that has failed to occur is that in which two, three, four, or five suns appear at the same time.

But this year the people living in the province of Sado spread a report from mouth to mouth saying that on the twenty-third day of the first month, at the hour of the monkey [3:00–5:00 p.m.], two suns appeared in the west. Some even say that three suns appeared. They also say that on the fifth day of the second month, two morning stars appeared side by side in the east, with a distance of no more than three inches between them. All these extraordinary occurrences are of a kind hitherto unknown in previous ages in Japan.

The “Discourse on the Sovereigns’ Rule” chapter of the Sovereign Kings Sutra says, “Strange and unusual shooting stars will fall to earth, two suns will come out at the same time, marauders will appear from other regions, and the people of the country will meet with death and disorder.” The Shūramagama Sutra says, “Two suns will be seen, or a pair of moons.” The Medicine Master Sutra speaks of “the calamity of eclipses of the sun and moon.” The Golden Light Sutra states, “Comets will appear again and again, two suns will come forth side by side, and eclipses will occur with uncustomed frequency.” The Great Collection Sutra says, “When the teachings of the Buddha truly become obscured and lost, . . . the sun and moon no longer shed their light.” And the Benevolent Kings Sutra speaks of a time when “the sun and moon depart from their regular courses, when the seasons come in the wrong order, when a red sun or a black sun appears, when two, three, four, or five suns appear at the same time, when the sun is eclipsed and loses its light, or when one, two, three, four, or five coronas appear around the sun.”

Such calamities affecting the sun and moon are the most evil and portentous of all those listed among the seven disasters, twenty-nine disasters, and countless difficulties described in the sutras.

Question: What is the cause that brings about these various major and minor disasters?

Answer: The Sovereign Kings Sutra says, “Because those who go against the good Law are respected and favored and those who practice the good Law are subjected to suffering and punishment.” The Lotus Sutra, Nirvana Sutra, and Golden Light Sutra all say in effect, “Because evil people are respected and favored and good people are subjected to punishment, the stars and constellations, along with the winds and rains, all fail to move in their proper seasons.” The Great Collection Sutra states, “When the teachings of the Buddha truly become obscured and lost . . . The wicked rulers and monks who perform these ten evil acts will curse and destroy my correct teaching.” The Benevolent Kings Sutra warns, “Once the sages have departed, then the seven disasters are certain to arise.” It also says, “Though it is not in accordance with the laws or regulations, they will bind the monks and treat them like condemned criminals. At that time the destruction of the Law will not be far off.” And in another place it states, “Evil monks, hoping to gain fame and profit, will in many cases appear before the ruler, the crown prince, or the other princes, and take it upon themselves to preach doctrines that lead to the violation of the Buddhist Law and the destruction of the nation. The ruler, failing to perceive the truth of the situation, will listen to and put faith in such doctrines.”

Let us use these passages as a bright mirror to hold up before the Japan of our time. If we do so, we will see all heaven and earth reflected there as plainly as one sees the two sides of a tally fitting together. You among
my disciples who have eyes, look and see! You should understand that we are living in an age when evil monks in this country are appearing before the emperor, the princes, and the shogun and speaking slanders in an attempt to do away with the sage!

Question: In the past King Pushyamitra, the emperor of the Hui-ch'ang era, and Mononobe no Moriya appeared in India, China, and Japan respectively, all men who attempted to destroy the Buddhist Law. Other Indian kings put to death Bodhisattva Aryadeva, the Venerable Aryasimha, and other teachers. At the time these men lived, why did these various great disasters fail to appear?

Answer: Disasters and calamities may be major or minor depending upon the persons who call them forth. During the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, there were evil rulers and evil monks. Some were followers of the non-Buddhist doctrines of India, some were supporters of Taoist adepts, and some were believers in false deities. They seemed to be playing a large part in the destruction of the Buddhist Law, but in fact their crimes were not as serious as one might think. But the evil rulers and evil monks in the world today who seek to destroy the Buddhist Law use Hinayana doctrines to attack Mahayana ones, and employ provisional teachings to wipe out the true teaching. They rob people of their minds without actually destroying their bodies; they do not actually burn down temples and pagodas, and yet they make it so that the Buddhist Law will naturally be destroyed. Their fault greatly surpasses that of the men of former times.

Look at what is happening, my disciples, and then put your faith in the Lotus Sutra! When you stare at a mirror with angry eyes it reflects your anger. Heaven itself is angry, because people are at fault. When two suns appear side by side, it is a sign that two rulers will contend for power within a single country, king fighting against king. When the stars invade the precincts of the sun and moon, it is a sign that subjects will invade the prerogatives of the ruler. When another sun comes forth to contend with the one that is there already, it means that all the four continents of the world will fall to wrangling. When two morning stars appear side by side, it means that two heirs apparent will vie for the succession.

And when, as these signs portend, the nation has been plunged into disorder, then Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the other sages will come forward, establish the three secret Laws of the essential teaching, and spread Myoho-renge-kyo widely throughout the four continents and the region within the four seas! Could anyone doubt it?

The fifth month of the eleventh year of Bun'ei [1274]

Background

Nichiren Daishonin completed Choosing the Heart of the Lotus Sutra on the twenty-fourth day of the fifth month in 1274, and addressed it to Toki Jōnin, one of his leading lay disciples, who lived in Shimōsa Province. It was designated by Nikkō as one of the Daishonin's ten major writings. In it, the Daishonin for the first time reveals "the secret Laws that were left unrevealed
by Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, T’ien-t’ai, and Dengyō,” which he later defined as the Three Great Secret Laws. These are, as he states, “the object of devotion of the essential teaching, the sanctuary of the essential teaching, and the five characters of the daimoku of the essential teaching.” They are the foundation of his teachings, the essence of the Lotus Sutra to be spread in the Latter Day of the Law. Here “the essential teaching” is that of the Latter Day and refers to the teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

After his two-and-a-half years of exile in Sado, Nichiren Daishonin was pardoned and returned to Kamakura on the twenty-sixth day of the third month of 1274. On the eighth day of the fourth month, he had an interview with Hei no Saemon-no-jō Yoritsuna, who represented the regent of the Kamakura government. Asked when the forces of the Mongol Empire would attack Japan, the Daishonin replied that they would do so within the year, and warned that the rulers should cease their support of Buddhist schools that went against the Lotus Sutra. But the government did not heed his admonition. This is regarded as his third official remonstration with the ruler of the nation.

On the twelfth day of the fifth month, the Daishonin left Kamakura, and on the seventeenth day arrived at the foot of Mount Minobu in the province of Kai. Just seven days later, on the twenty-fourth day, he completed this work. In the tenth month, the Mongol Empire launched its first attack on Japan just as the Daishonin had predicted to Hei no Saemon.

Under the title, the Daishonin signs the work “Written by Nichiren, the shramana of Japan.” Shramana refers to a seeker of the Buddha way. The Daishonin uses it here to mean a genuine practitioner of Buddhism, the person who inherits the correct teaching of Buddhism and transmits its essence to the world and in the future.

This work consists of three sections. In the first section, the Daishonin examines the relative superiority of the sutras expounded by Shakyamuni from two standpoints, that of the teaching and that of the teacher. A single Buddha, Shakyamuni, can be viewed differently according to the sutras he expounded. The Shakyamuni of the “Life Span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, who attained enlightenment in the unimaginably distant past, is the ultimate Buddha. And the Lotus Sutra is the foremost of all the sutras.

In the second section, the Daishonin explains that both the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra were expounded for the people of the Latter Day of the Law, particularly for the Daishonin himself. And within the Lotus Sutra the so-called “one chapter and two halves,” which comprises the “Life Span” chapter and its surrounding text, constitutes the core of the essential teaching, and this too was expounded for the Daishonin and his followers. These statements explain the Daishonin’s crucial role of relieving the ills of all people in the Latter Day of the Law.

The third section clarifies the great Law to be spread in the Latter Day. The Daishonin states, “I, Nichiren, have abandoned both the approach that expands and that which condenses and favor taking the essence of the matter, which means the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo that were transmitted to Bodhisattva Superior Practices.” That essence is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo of the Three Great Secret Laws. Hence he entitled this work Choosing the Heart of the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin then speaks of the signs appearing at the time that portend the dissemination of that Law, and states with conviction that the wide spread of the Three Great Secret Laws is inevitable.
Notes

1. Tao-lang actually indicates Fa-lang, a priest of the Three Treatises school in China, who lived at Hsing-huang-ssu temple. In The Continued Biographies of Eminent Priests, the name of Chia-hsiang’s teacher, Fa-lang, was incorrectly written as “Tao-lang of Hsing-huang-ssu temple.” Since then, Fa-lang, also called Hsing-huang after the temple where he lived, has often been referred to as Tao-lang. The Daishonin in his On Repaying Debits of Gratitude refers to Hsing-huang (Fa-lang) and his successor, Chia-hsiang, as representatives of the Three Treatises school.

2. The story of the rabbit that ran into a stump is from Han Fei Tzu. A farmer happened to find a rabbit that had run into a tree stump and broken its neck. He stopped plowing and kept watch on the stump, hoping another rabbit would run into it. The example of the round fan and moon comes from a statement in Great Concentration and Insight: “When the moon is hidden behind the mountain range, we hold up a round fan as a symbol of it.”

3. The Japanese equivalent of major world system dust particle kalpas literally reads “three thousand dust particle kalpas,” and “three,” here refers to this term. The word “five” refers to “five hundred dust particle kalpas,” or numberless major world system dust particle kalpas.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7. According to this chapter, when the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence attained enlightenment, his sixteen sons renounced secular life to follow their father, who preached the Lotus Sutra for them. While the Buddha dwelt in meditation, each of the sixteen sons preached the Lotus Sutra in their capacity of bodhisattva. The people who had heard the sutra from one or other of these sons were always reborn together with their respective teachers. The above chapter states that these sixteen bodhisattvas presently live as buddhas in their respective lands in the ten directions and preach the Law. One of them is regarded as Amida Buddha of the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss in the west. The youngest was reborn in this sahā world as Shakyamuni.

5. The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.


7. Here Nichiren Daishonin combines two separate clauses of the Lotus Sutra to summarize the meaning of its “Life Span” chapter. The sutra reads, “He is like a skilled physician who uses an expedient means to cure his deranged sons. . . . I am the father of this world, saving those who suffer and are afflicted.”

8. The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.

9. These five chapters (which constitute the transmission section of the theoretical teaching), the “Peaceful Practices,” “Encouraging Devotion,” “Devadatta,” “Treasure Tower,” and “Teacher of the Law” chapters, describe how one should practice and spread the Lotus Sutra in the period after the Buddha’s passing. From this viewpoint, it can be said that the eight chapters from “Expedient Means” to “Prophecies” (the revelation section of the theoretical teaching) were expounded for people in that period.

10. Pien Ho was a native of the state of Ch’u in China during the Spring and Autumn period (770–403 B.C.E.). According to Han Fei Tzu, Pien Ho found a precious stone on Mount Ching and presented it to King Li. When the king had it appraised, it was said to be a mere stone. So the king had Pien Ho’s left leg cut off at the knee. After the king’s death, Pien Ho again presented the stone, this time to King Wu, only to have his right leg cut off at the knee on a second charge of deception. Later, after King Wen ascended the throne, Pien Ho wept for three days at the foot of Mount Ching, holding the stone and shedding tears of blood at the kings’ ignorance. Hearing of this, King Wen asked for Pien Ho’s stone and had it polished. It was then recognized as genuine.

11. Wu Tzu-hsü was a loyal minister of Fu-ch’a (d. 473 B.C.E.), the twenty-fifth ruler of the state of Wu. The father of Fu-ch’a was killed by Kou-chien, king of the state of Yüeh, and Fu-ch’a took revenge two years later by defeating him in battle. Kou-chien proposed a peaceful settlement with Fu-ch’a, but actually planned to attack the state of Wu again. Wu Tzu-hsü perceived Kou-chien’s true intentions and urged the king to kill him, but the king would not listen. Instead, he compelled Wu Tzu-hsü
to commit suicide in 481 B.C.E. After his death, as he had predicted, the state of Wu was destroyed by the state of Yüeh.

12. “These words” refers to the Buddha’s statement “ever since the long distant past I have been teaching and converting this multitude,” which appears in chapter fifteen of the Lotus Sutra.

13. This paragraph explains the meaning of the passage “I leave this good medicine here. You should take it and not worry that it will not cure you.” “You” refers to the children in the Lotus Sutra who refuse to take the good medicine. They represent the people of the Latter Day of the Law who refuse to take faith in the Lotus Sutra.

“His original enlightenment” and “his attainment of enlightenment in the far remote past” refer to Shakyamuni’s attainment of enlightenment in the far distant kalpas of the past.

14. Konryūda and Seiryūda are the Japanese rendering of their names as they appear in Miao-lo’s On “The Words and Phrases.” Their original names in Sanskrit are unknown.

15. Lotus Sutra, chap. ii.


18. A judge of horses in China in the seventh century B.C.E.

19. A learned priest in China. Chih Tao-lin (314–366) gained fame for his lectures on Buddhist sutras such as the Wisdom sutras and the Vimalakīrti Sutra.

20. Profound Meaning.

21. In his Clarification of the Precepts, Dengyō subdivided the seven disasters described in the Benevolent Kings Sutra into twenty-nine types.

22. Wu-tsung, the fifteenth emperor of the T’ang dynasty (814–846). In 845, urged on by Taoists, he destroyed some 4,600 Buddhist temples and monasteries and forced more than 260,000 priests and nuns to return to secular life. This suppression is one of the four imperial persecutions of Buddhism in China.