On the Relative Superiority of the Tendai and True Word Schools

My best wishes for the New Year season. May you and all the others enjoy the greatest happiness and good fortune!

In matters pertaining to truth in both the sacred and secular realms, it is most important to determine what is superior and what inferior; for persons who remain in the secular world and those who enter clerical life, one must know what is primary and what is merely secondary.

The sages in the three lands of India, China, and Japan may have been aware of the relative superiority of the teachings of the various schools of Buddhism, and the numerous worthy persons of the two countries of China and Japan may have been similarly enlightened. But so far, no one in either India or Japan has clearly defined the relative worth of the Lotus Sutra as compared to the Mahāvairochana Sutra, or the Tendai teachings as compared to the True Word teachings, and no one in either the western or the eastern regions has clarified this matter.

The fact that sages such as T'ien-t'ai or Dengyō failed to speak out on some public occasion regarding the rights and wrongs in this matter—is this not because the rulers of the country, such as Emperor Ming of China or Emperor Kammu of Japan, did not question them about it?

The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei declared that the Lotus and Mahāvairochana sutras are equal in terms of principle but that the latter is superior in terms of practice. Jikaku, Chishō, and their like subscribed to this view. The Great Teacher Kōbō held that the Lotus Sutra is inferior to the Flower Garland Sutra. Both these opinions go against what is said in the sutras; both are no more than the private opinions of the persons who put them forth.

Moreover, Jikaku, Chishō, and the others drew up a memorial and submitted it to the ruler. The ruler responded with an imperial edict stating: “We have heard that the two schools, that of the True Word teachings and that of the teaching of concentration and insight, are both called the ghee of Buddhism, and are described as profound and recondite.... They are like the two eyes of an individual, or the two wings of a bird.”

The ruler also handed down a warning edict in which he stated: “We hear that the priests of Mount Hiei do nothing but turn against the teachings of the founding patriarch and instead follow the prejudices and inclinations of their own hearts. It would appear that they make no attempt to promulgate the original doctrines or to restore the old disciplines of the Tendai school.”
I was born into the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, and in my studies have followed in the wake of earlier worthies. If the opinions of Jikaku and Chishō were indeed correct, and the imperial edicts had in various ways confirmed this, then there would be no reason to entertain doubts or to speak out on the matter.

But the fact is that the two great teachers, Ennin [Jikaku] and Enchin [Chishō], have distorted and gone against the correct views of the earlier teacher, the Great Teacher Dengyō, and the imperial edict has raised doubts concerning the situation. And it is hard to overlook the warnings of the Buddha.

I see in such actions the causes and conditions that bring about the ruin of the nation, the beginnings of what may be called slander of the Law. Therefore, heedless of how the world may speak ill of me, or whether it will listen to what I say or not, I risk my life to speak out on this matter.

Question: The three Tripitaka masters, Shan-wu-wei, Chin-kang-chih, and Pu-k’ung, and the three great teachers, Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō, made pronouncements regarding the relative worth of the two sutras, the Lotus and the Mahāvairochana, declaring that they are equal in terms of principle but that the latter is superior in terms of practice, or that the Lotus Sutra is inferior to the Flower Garland Sutra. In addition, we have authoritative writings set forth by the sages and worthies regarding these matters, and men of outstanding character have for a long time abided by such writings. But now you take exception to them and expound what is merely your own personal opinion, causing others to be confused and misled, startling the eyes and ears of everyone throughout the world! You are acting like a person of overbearing arrogance, are you not?

Answer: Your lack of understanding is great indeed! I am reminded of the words of clear warning that the Scholar Manoratha gave to his disciple, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu, as is written [in The Record of the Western Regions]. "Manoratha said, 'Do not attempt to argue over important principles with the supporters of the various cliques; do not try to define what is doctrinally correct when dealing with bands of deluded persons!' After he had delivered these words, he died."

Your lack of understanding is like that of the groups he mentions. But as it happens, the Buddha, the World-Honored One, when he was preaching the Lotus Sutra, in the course of that one sutra twice gave instructions regarding its transmission. Moreover, when preaching another sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, he indicated how the Lotus Sutra was to be transmitted. Thus in the Nirvana Sutra he stated: "If even a good monk sees someone destroying the teaching and disregards him, failing to reprove him, to oust him, or to punish him for his offense, then you should realize that that monk is betraying the Buddha’s teaching." The two Tripitaka masters, Shan-wu-wei and Chin-kang-chih, and the two great teachers, Jikaku and Chishō, were doing just that, using the Mahāvairochana Sutra, which is one of the sutras embodying the provisional teachings, to destroy the Lotus Sutra, a sutra of the true teaching.

Therefore if I, Nichiren, fearful of the world, should fail to speak out, I would be the enemy of the Buddha. Hence the Great Teacher Chang-an has delivered his warning to students of the latter age, saying: "One who destroys or brings confusion to the Buddha’s teachings is betraying them. If one befriends another person but lacks the mercy to correct him, one is in fact his enemy. But one who reprimands and corrects an offender... is acting as his parent."
I have taken these words of Chang-an’s commentary thoroughly to heart, and therefore I risk my life to speak out in reprimand. I remember that Āryadeva, the fourteenth successor to Shakyamuni’s teachings, was murdered, and Āryasimha, the twenty-fifth successor, had his head cut off.\(^9\)

Objection: The various sutras regularly speak in praise of themselves—this is the usual practice. Thus the Golden Light Sutra says it is “the king of sutras.” The Secret Solemnity Sutra says it is “the greatest of all sutras.” The Susiddhikara Sutra says, “Among the teachings concerning the three divisions,\(^10\) this sutra is king.” And the Lotus Sutra calls itself “this king of the sutras.”\(^11\) Therefore the four ranks of bodhisattvas and the Tripitaka masters of the two countries of India and China are merely going along with this, are they not?

Answer: There are big countries and little countries, great kings and petty kings, large families and small families, people of honor and authority and those who are lofty and eminent—all have their various ranks and social stations. But the many inhabitants within each of these various countries all speak of their own ruler as the Great King or call him the Son of Heaven. When all is said and done, however, the heavenly king Brahmā is regarded as the Great King of the gods, and the Lotus Sutra is called the Son of Heaven among the sutras.

Question: What proof can you offer?

Answer: When the Golden Light Sutra says it is “the king of sutras,” it means it is the king in comparison to the sutras set forth by Brahmā and Shakra.\(^12\) When the Secret Solemnity Sutra says it is “the greatest of all sutras,” it means in comparison to the sutras it has mentioned just previously, the Ten Stages Sutra, the Flower Garland Sutra, the Shrīmālā Sutra, and so forth. In comparison to these various sutras, it is the greatest of all the sutras. The passage from the Susiddhikara Sutra means, as the passage itself indicates, that “among the teachings concerning the three divisions, this sutra is king.” In other words, the Susiddhikara Sutra is “king” in comparison to the Mahāvairocana Sutra and the Diamond Crown Sutra.

But when Shan-wu-wei and the others say that the Lotus and Mahāvairocana sutras are equal in terms of principle but that the latter is superior in terms of practice, or that the Lotus Sutra is inferior to the Flower Garland Sutra, erroneous pronouncements such as these are like asserting that the glow of a firefly is equal to the light of the sun and moon, or like trying to make the waters of the great ocean flow into a mere river or stream.

Question: Why should one discuss the relative worth of the various sutras?

Answer: The seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra states: “A person who can accept and uphold this sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings.”\(^13\) The “Medicine King” chapter of the Lotus Sutra lists ten comparisons indicating that this is the greatest of all the sutras preached by the Buddha in the past, present, and future. Of these ten comparisons, the eighth\(^14\) is followed by the passage just quoted, and thus it becomes evident that the Buddha’s intention was not only to establish the superiority of the Lotus Sutra in comparison to the other sutras, but also to indicate that the votary of the Lotus Sutra is superior to all other kinds of persons.

The votaries of the Mahāvairocana Sutra and the other sutras are like the various mountains or stars or rivers and streams or the subjects of the various rulers. But the votaries of the Lotus Sutra are like Mount Sumeru, the sun and moon, or the great ocean.\(^15\)

And yet the world today despises
and makes light of the Lotus Sutra, treating it like dirt or like a lowly subject of the ruler, while it respects and honors the erroneous men of the True Word teaching, awarding them the title of Teacher of the Nation and treating them like gold or like kings.

So the country has become full of persons of overbearing arrogance, causing the blue heavens to blaze with anger and the yellow earth to bring forth strange calamities. As small streams come together until they break down the walls and moats, so the sorrow and distress of the common people will pile up until it destroys the nation.

Question: In the Buddhist commentaries and the other types of non-Buddhist writings, are there any passages setting forth this view?

Answer: The memorial\textsuperscript{16} submitted to Emperor T'ai-tsung by the historian official Wu Ching states: “I make so bold as to observe that the government administered by Emperor T'ai-tsung, ruler in both civil and military affairs, has no equal in excellence, however far back we may seek in history. Even Yao of T'ang, Shun of Yü, Yü of the Hsia dynasty, T'ang of the Yin dynasty, Kings Wen and Wu of the Chou, Emperors Wen and Ching of the Han—none of these could compare to him.” Looking at the words of the memorial, we may wonder if Emperor T'ai-tsung was not a highly conceited ruler. But in fact he is praised because the skill and excellence with which he governed surpassed that of all these earlier sages mentioned in the memorial.

The Great Teacher Chang-an, speaking in praise of T'ien-t'ai, says: “Even the great scholars of India were not in a class with him, and the Chinese teachers—well, one need hardly mention them. This is no idle boast—the doctrine he taught was indeed of such excellence.”\textsuperscript{17} And the Dharma Teacher Ts'ung-i also praises him, saying, “Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu cannot compare with T'ien-t'ai.”\textsuperscript{18}

The Great Teacher Dengyō has these words of praise: “The Tendai Lotus school is superior to the other schools because of the sutra that it is founded on. Therefore, in declaring its superiority, it is not simply praising itself and disparaging others. I hope that gentlemen of wisdom will examine the matter of sutras and on that basis decide which school they will follow.”\textsuperscript{19}

And he also says, “Those who can uphold the Lotus are foremost among living beings. This is borne out by the words of the Buddha himself. How could it be mere self-praise?”\textsuperscript{20}

Now if I may state my own humble view on the matter, I would say that Shan-wu-wei, Kōbō, Jikaku, Chishō, and the others all not only go against the intentions of the Buddha, but are persons of grave error who steal from the Law\textsuperscript{21} and contradict the Great Teacher Dengyō. Therefore Shan-wu-wei was reprimanded by King Yama, Jikaku has no grave mound, [Kōbō’s] disciples declare that he entered a “state of deep meditation” [instead of acknowledging his death], and the temples [of Jikaku’s and Chishō’s lineage] are repeatedly visited by great fires or massive attacks from soldiers.\textsuperscript{22}

The old texts\textsuperscript{23} tell us that if one is a temporal manifestation of a Buddha or a bodhisattva, then one’s dead body will not suffer shame, and yet they met with such a fate!

Question: As was done by the six older schools of Buddhism,\textsuperscript{24} did the True Word school ever submit a document in which it acknowledged its inferiority to the Tendai school?

Answer: Such a document will be found at the end of the tenth volume of The Annotations on “The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.” The Great Teacher Dengyō wrote A Clarification of the Schools Based on T’ien-t’ai’s Doctrine and included such material.\textsuperscript{25}
Those who have eyes would accordingly do well to open the text and see what it says.

It is my hope that scholars of this latter age will heed the sage words of Miao-lo and Dengyō and will put no trust in the crass statements of Shan-wu-wei or Jikaku. And I hope that the followers of my own teachings will give deep thought to this matter. Do not let fear of others in your present existence lead you to do something that will invite evil consequences in an existence to come.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The twenty-fourth day of the first month
To the lay priest Ōta Kingo

Background

Nichiren Daishonin sent this letter, dated the twenty-fourth day of the first month, to Ōta Jōmyō, also known as the lay priest Ōta Kingo, who lived in Shimōsa Province. It is generally believed to have been written in 1275. While addressed to Ōta, this letter speaks to the Daishonin’s disciples as a whole. Nichiren Daishonin makes clear the superiority of the Lotus Sutra’s teachings over those of the esoteric True Word sutras. The True Word school, founded by Kōbō, was based on the three True Word sutras, the Mahāvairocana, the Diamond Crown, and the Susiddhikara sutras; its practice included the recitation of mantras, the formation of mudras, and the worship of esoteric mandalas. Tendai Esotericism, which originated with Jikaku and Chishō, patriarchs of Enryaku-ji temple on Mount Hiei, incorporated the esoteric practices of the True Word school into the Tendai school.

The Tendai school was founded by Dengyō on the basis of T’ien-t’ai’s teachings, which regard the Lotus Sutra as the supreme teaching. While Kōbō argued that the Lotus Sutra is inferior to the Flower Garland Sutra, not to mention the Mahāvairocana Sutra, Tendai Esotericism asserted that the Mahāvairocana Sutra is equal to the Lotus Sutra in terms of principle but superior to it in terms of practice. This follows the teaching of Shan-wu-wei, who first brought the esoteric teachings from India to China. The Daishonin declares that the development of this esoteric tradition within the Tendai school is a betrayal of the spirit of the school’s founder, Dengyō, and a deviation from the Lotus Sutra. Both the True Word school and Tendai Esotericism betrayed Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching that the Lotus Sutra is supreme among all the sutras.

Notes

1. The eastern region refers to China and Japan, and the western region to India.
2. Emperor Ming (28–75) was the second ruler of the Later Han dynasty. He sent eighteen envoys to the western region in order to obtain the Buddha’s teachings. And, at the request of these envoys, two Indian Buddhist monks came to China in C.E. 67 with Buddhist scriptures and images carried on the backs of white horses. Emperor Kammu (737–806) is regarded as Japan’s fiftieth sovereign. In 785, Dengyō founded a temple on Mount Hiei in order to insure the maintenance of peace. Em-
peror Kammu paid honor to the new establishment, designating it as a place of worship where prayers could be offered to the guardian star of the ruler. He ceased to heed the teachings of the six schools and instead gave wholehearted allegiance to the doctrines of the Tendai school.

3. According to this interpretation, both the Mahāvairochana Sutra and the Lotus Sutra reveal the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, and therefore these two sutras are equal in terms of principle. Because the Mahāvairochana Sutra contains descriptions of mudras (hand gestures) and mantras (mystic formulas), however, it is held superior to the Lotus Sutra in terms of practice.

4. In his Treatise on the Ten Stages of the Mind, Kōbō classified the various Buddhist teachings as corresponding to ten stages of the mind's development and ranked the Lotus Sutra eighth, the Flower Garland Sutra ninth, and the esoteric teachings tenth or the highest.

5. Manoratha is a monk of Gandhāra in northern India who is thought to have lived around the fourth or fifth century and been the teacher of Vasubandhu. This statement is found in The Record of the Western Regions. According to that work, King Vīramāditya of Shravasti resented Manoratha and plotted to humiliate him. He assembled one hundred non-Buddhist scholars to debate with Manoratha. Ninety-nine yielded, but the last, in collusion with the king, shouted Manoratha down and refused to yield. As a result, Manoratha is said to have bitten off his own tongue, admonished Vasubandhu not to debate with persons who rely on their number or to discuss the truth among the ignorant, and then died. Later, Vasubandhu vindicated his teacher in debate.

6. Transmission is one of the three sections of a sutra employed to interpret the sutra's teachings, the other two being preparation and revelation. The statement "one sutra twice gave instructions regarding its transmission" is thought to indicate the transmission sections referred to in the theoretical teaching and the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra. The former covers from the "Teacher of the Law" (10th) chapter through the "Peaceful Practices" (14th) chapter, and the latter, from the second half of the "Distinctions in Benefits" (17th) chapter through the "Universal Worthy" (28th) chapter and the Universal Worthy Sutra.

7. In the first of the fivefold view of revelation (see Glossary) that appears in The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind, the Daishonin states that, from the standpoint of all of Shakayamuni's teachings, preparation is represented by the sutras of the Flower Garland, Āgama, Correct and Equal, and Wisdom periods, that is, the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings; revelation is represented by the threefold Lotus Sutra, and transmission by the Nirvana Sutra.

8. The Annotions on the Nirvana Sutra.

9. The number and ordering of the successors of Shakayamuni Buddha who propagated his teachings in the Former Day of the Law differ slightly according to the source. In the case of Āryasimha, the last of the successors, the Daishonin counts Shakayamuni among the successors; hence the total number of successors is twenty-five. Usually, however, Shakayamuni is excluded so that there are only twenty-three or twenty-four successors. See Āryadeva and Āryasimha in Glossary.

10. "The three divisions" refers to the Buddha, Lotus, and Diamond divisions of the Womb Realm of the Mahāvairochana Sutra. They refer to the Buddha's great insight, compassion, and wisdom, respectively.

11. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

12. The word "sutras" here refers to the non-Buddhist scriptures of Brahmanic tradition.


14. The eighth comparison refers to the simile of voice-hearers at the four stages of enlightenment and cause-awakened ones; just as voice-hearers at the four stages of enlightenment (the stages of stream-winner, once-returner, non-returner, and arhat) and cause-awakened ones are foremost among all ordinary beings, so the Lotus Sutra is foremost among all the sutra teachings. This simile also states that one who can uphold the sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings. For ten comparisons, see Glossary under ten similes.

15. A reference to the ten comparisons set forth in the "Medicine King" (23rd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. For example, the simile of water is that, just as the ocean is foremost among all bodies of water, so the Lotus Sutra is the most profound of all the sutras.
16. The Essentials of Government in the Chen-kuan Era. A work written by Wu Ching during the T'ang dynasty. It discusses the state of political affairs between Emperor T'ai-tsung and his subjects during the Chen-kuan era (627–649).


18. A passage to this effect appears in The Supplement to the Three Major Works on the Lotus Sutra by the T'ien-t'ai scholar Ts'ung-i of the Sung dynasty (1042–1091), though the exact quotation has not been found.


20. Ibid.

21. In his compilation of Shan-wu-wei's commentaries on the Mahāvairochana Sutra, I-hsing (683–727), a Chinese priest of the esoteric teachings, made it appear as if core doctrines of the T'ien-t'ai school, such as the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, were part of the True Word teachings.

22. According to The Genkō Era Biographies of Eminent Priests and The Tale of the Heike, Onjō-ji temple was burned in 1081 by the priests of Mount Hiei and in 1180 by the soldiers of the Taira clan, respectively. The Record of Tendai Chief Priests says that in 1264 the priests of Mount Hiei burned down the various halls and lodging temples of Enryaku-ji.

23. What texts the Daishonin refers to here are uncertain.

24. The Dharma Analysis Treasury, Establishment of Truth, Precepts, Dharma Characteristics, Three Treatises, and Flower Garland schools, which were the major Buddhist schools in Japan during the Nara period (710–794).

25. This refers to the story that Han-kwang, one of the six major disciples of Pu-k'ung, related to Miao-lo, which appears in The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra." According to Han-kwang, when he was traveling in India with Pu-k'ung, a monk said to him, "In the land of China there are the teachings of T'ien-t'ai, which are most suitable in helping distinguish correct from incorrect doctrines and illuminating what is partial and what is perfect. Would it not be well to translate these writings and bring them here to this country?" On hearing this story, Miao-lo exclaimed, "Does this not mean that Buddhism has been lost in India, the country of its origin, and must now be sought in the surrounding regions? But even in China there are few people who recognize the greatness of T'ien-t'ai's teachings." Dengyō cited this material from On "The Words and Phrases" in his Clarification of the Schools Based on T'ien-t'ai's Doctrine, in which he also wrote: "The True Word school that has recently been brought to Japan deliberately obscures how its transmission was falsified in the recording [by I-hsing, who was deceived by Shan-wu-wei]."