

Discrepancies between the Provisional and the True Teachings



THE non-Buddhist teachings clearly distinguish the three good paths, or the realms of heavenly beings, human beings, and animals.¹ The question of whether or not there is a realm of hungry spirits is a matter of dispute, and with regard to the realm of hell they say nothing at all.

The Hinayana sutras make clear the causes and conditions that lead to the six paths, or the six lower worlds, but they do not clearly define the four noble worlds. The three schools, Dharma Analysis Treasury school, Establishment of Truth school, and Precepts school, since they rely upon the Hinayana sutras, confine their explanations to the six paths.

The Three Treatises school was brought from India to China before the T'ien-t'ai school came into being. It speaks of eight worlds,² but does not clearly define the Ten Worlds. The Dharma Characteristics school also originated in India, but was not introduced to China until the reign of Emperor T'ai-tsung of the T'ang dynasty, after the death of T'ien-t'ai. It too speaks of eight worlds. But although it bases itself on the Mahayana teachings, it divides human beings into five groups according to their inborn nature,³ holding that those who inherently lack the nature of enlightenment can never attain Buddhahood.

These schools in their teachings on the whole resemble the doctrines of the non-Buddhists, which is a source of sorrow both to themselves and to the other Buddhist schools.

The two schools known as the Flower Garland school and the True Word school date from a later period than T'ien-t'ai. The Flower Garland school arose in the time of Empress Wu of the T'ang dynasty. The True Word school was introduced to China by the Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei in the time of Emperor Hsüan-tsung. But one should note that in India there is no such school called True Word. The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei used the Mahāvairochana Sutra as a basis on which to found a school, but to lend it credibility he falsely claimed that a school of this name existed in India.

These two schools, the Flower Garland and the True Word, both speak of the Ten Worlds. But they came into existence after the T'ien-t'ai school. They stole the penetrating wisdom of the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai Chih-che and pretended that it was a product of their own talent and ability.

If we go by what the Buddha himself said, the sutras other than the Lotus Sutra, such as the Flower Garland Sutra, the Great Collection Sutra, the Wisdom sutras, the Mahāvairochana

Sutra, and the Profound Secrets Sutra, are merely Mahayana works of relative importance in comparison to the Hinayana works. Only the Lotus Sutra, "among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach,"⁴ deserves to be called the sutra for all other sutras to follow.

Before the time of T'ien-t'ai, however, the Buddhist teachers regarded the Lotus Sutra and all the other Mahayana sutras as works that, because they embody the Mahayana teachings, are superior in comparison to the Hinayana works. Thus they did not make a distinction between the ruler and his ministers, and confused the categories of superior and inferior. The truth of the Buddhist teachings had at that time not yet been clearly revealed, and ignorant errors such as this existed.

After the time of T'ien-t'ai, the schools of Buddhism that had earlier treated these various sutras as Mahayana works of relative importance in comparison to the Hinayana works, now treated them as of relative importance depending upon whether they represented provisional Mahayana or true Mahayana. But although in doing so they were stealing the wisdom of T'ien-t'ai, [they applied it in such a way that they were in fact] turning their backs upon the sun and moon and facing a mere candle wick, were treating hills and earth mounds as though they were the equal of Mount Hua or Mount Heng.⁵

The Buddha spoke of eighteen elements, but an asura claimed that there were nineteen.⁶ The T'ien-t'ai school described four kinds of wisdom,⁷ but the True Word school described five kinds. The T'ien-t'ai school spoke of the nine and ten consciousnesses, but the True Word school spoke of the ten and eleven consciousnesses.⁸ The T'ien-t'ai scholars became confused and misled by such assertions and took them to be the truth. Thus they say,

"The Lotus Sutra was preached by Shakyamuni and hence resembles the ten thousand words spoken by the common people. But the Mahāvairochana Sutra resembles the single authoritative pronouncement of the Son of Heaven, or the one word spoken by the ruler."⁹

The Tripitaka Master Shan-wu-wei, claiming to base himself on the teachings of India, compared the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairochana Sutra and declared that they were equal in principle, but that the latter was superior in terms of practice.¹⁰ This of course is a gross error.

I, Nichiren, setting aside the explanations added later by the Buddhist scholars and teachers, base my conclusions entirely upon the sutra texts themselves. On the basis of such an examination, I say that the six volumes of the Mahāvairochana Sutra, containing thirty-one chapters, along with the one volume describing the method of giving alms, describe four vehicles, the vehicle of the voice-hearer, that of the cause-awakened one, that of the Mahayana bodhisattva, and that of the Buddha. Among these four, the vehicle of the Mahayana bodhisattva is the bodhisattva vehicle described in the Tripitaka, or Hinayana, teaching, which requires three asamkhyā kalpas of austere practice in order to be attained. The Buddha vehicle is that of [the bodhisattva of] the true Mahayana teaching.

Thus the Mahāvairochana Sutra cannot begin to compare with the Lotus Sutra, but is inferior even to the Flower Garland and Wisdom sutras. It is comparable merely to the Āgama and Correct and Equal sutras. The most profound principles set forth in the Mahāvairochana Sutra cannot compare to the profound teachings set forth in the works categorized by T'ien-t'ai as the connecting teaching and the specific teaching.

The Great Teacher Kōbō went to T'ang China in the twenty-third year of Enryaku [804], and returned to Japan in the second year of Daidō [807]. During those three years, he encountered the Reverend Hui-kuo and studied the esoteric True Word doctrines under him. After returning to Japan, he wrote *The Treatise on the Ten Stages of the Mind* and *A Comparison of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism* and spread the True Word doctrines among the people of the time.

In these works, he attempted to establish the relative superiority of the doctrines expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha and Mahāvairochana Buddha. He assigned first place to the Mahāvairochana Sutra, put the Flower Garland Sutra in second place and the Lotus Sutra in third place,¹¹ signifying his ranking of most profound first, and shallower works second and third.

In ranking the Flower Garland Sutra as superior to the Lotus Sutra, he was following the opinion held by the three schools of the south and seven schools of the north in China, and that of the Flower Garland school. In holding such an opinion, the teachers of these northern and southern schools and the Great Teacher Kōbō showed their foolishness by ignoring what is written in the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, and the Nirvana Sutra. The Buddha had already made clear that the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra is superior to the Flower Garland Sutra. Why would anyone cast aside the sacred words of the Buddha and follow the error of the ordinary teachers of the northern and southern schools?

And if one is going to adopt recent opinions in judging a matter of long ago, one cannot of course hope to understand the relative superiority of the Lotus Sutra in comparison to the Mahāvairochana Sutra. The Mahāvairochana Sutra contains no passage say-

ing, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."¹² Moreover, it lacks any passage [such as that in the Lotus Sutra] that says, "Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, . . ." And it fails to reveal that persons of the two vehicles can attain Buddhahood, or that the Buddha gained enlightenment in the inconceivably distant past. If one is to give a correct estimation of the worth of the Mahāvairochana Sutra in comparison to the Lotus Sutra, one must show that it is like comparing a mere commoner to a king, or a stone to a jewel. Such is the distinction between these two sutras.

The Reverend Annen showed the relative superiority of the sutras in general. Though he seemed to be correct, however, in his estimation of the worth of the Lotus Sutra in comparison to the Flower Garland Sutra, he was wholly mistaken when he spoke of the worth of the Lotus Sutra in comparison to the Mahāvairochana Sutra. In fact his understanding of this matter was as dim as the darkness or black lacquer.

The Great Teacher Jikaku inherited the doctrines of the Great Teacher Dengyō, but he too discarded the basic understanding of the school and adhered to a deviant interpretation. While he was in China, he was influenced by the wild and deluded views of followers of the True Word doctrines, and therefore he subscribed to the opinion that the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairochana Sutra are equal in principle, but that the latter is superior in terms of practice. Thus, although he may appear to have been a worthy man, in fact he was merely going along with the distorted views of Shan-wu-wei.

But I, Nichiren, living in this latter age, have certain doubts about these views. The people pay honor to those who lived in the distant past and disdain those of recent times, they respect

the dead and pay little heed to the living.¹³ Therefore the scholars of the present age refuse to listen to my words.

There are priests and nuns who firmly keep the precepts, adhering to the threefold refuge,¹⁴ the five precepts, the ten good precepts, the two hundred and fifty precepts, the five hundred precepts, or the ten major precepts, but are so misled by ignorance that they believe Hinayana sutras to be Mahayana sutras, or mistake the provisional Mahayana sutras for the true Mahayana sutra, holding to erroneous views. Such persons are guilty of cardinal offenses, they are great liars, great takers of life, great thieves. And yet ignorant people, failing to understand this, honor them as men and women of wisdom.

Though one may violate the various precepts of the secular world, if one clearly distinguishes between Mahayana

and Hinayana, between provisional and true sutras, then while violating worldly precepts one is in fact an observer of the precepts of the Buddhist teachings. The Nirvana Sutra states that one who is lax in observance of the precepts shall never be called lax, but one who is lax in observance of the teachings shall be called lax indeed. And in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha says, “[This sutra is hard to uphold; if one can uphold it even for a short while I will surely rejoice. . . .] This is what is called observing the precepts.”¹⁵

But this letter has gone on too long, so I will stop here. We can discuss details when we meet on Eagle Peak.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The second day of the seventh
month

To Daigaku Saburō



Background

Nichiren Daishonin is thought to have written this letter at Minobu in 1275. It is addressed to Daigaku Saburō, whose full name was Hiki Daigaku Saburō Yoshimoto, the son of Hiki Yoshikazu, a military commander in the early days of the Kamakura shogunate. Daigaku Saburō received his education in Kyoto and served as a teacher of Confucianism to the leaders of the Kamakura regime.

Tradition has it that he assisted with the proofreading of a draft of the Daishonin's treatise *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* and that he converted to the Daishonin's teaching after reading it. Both he and his wife appear to have been strong believers. In *The Eight Winds*, the Daishonin wrote, “Daigaku and Uemon no Tayū [Ikegami Munenaka] had their

prayers answered because they followed my advice” (I, p. 794). Daigaku's wife received a letter entitled *The Recitation of the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” Chapters*, in which the Daishonin instructed her to read these two chapters in daily prayer and chant Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

Discrepancies between the Provisional and the True Teachings begins by contrasting T'ien-t'ai's teaching with other teachings. The Daishonin evaluates their relative superiority in terms of how fully they elucidate the doctrine of the Ten Worlds. Beginning with non-Buddhist teachings, and examining the various Buddhist schools of Hinayana and Mahayana, he concludes that none of them fully reveal the Ten Worlds. He then pointedly calls into question the Flower Garland school

and the True Word school, which, founded after T'ien-t'ai, incorporated T'ien-t'ai's doctrine of the Ten Worlds into their teachings.

Moreover, Shan-wu-wei, who brought the esoteric teachings of India to China, argued that the Mahāvairochana Sutra and the Lotus Sutra were identical in principle but that the former was superior in terms of practice. In the Daishonin's analysis, the teachings of the Mahāvairochana Sutra rank below those set forth in the sutras T'ien-t'ai categorized as either specific teaching or connecting teaching.

He then testifies to the Lotus Sutra's superiority with the sutra's references to the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles and Shakyamuni's original enlightenment.

The Daishonin also questions the foolishness of the priests of the Tendai school at Mount Hiei for allowing

themselves to be deceived by the faulty reasoning of the True Word doctrines. Perhaps because Daigaku Saburō was familiar with the content of *On Establishing the Correct Teaching*, in which the Daishonin points out in detail the errors of the Pure Land, or Nembutsu, school, he makes no mention of that school here.

He closes by addressing the misunderstanding of those who revere the upholders of the Buddhist precepts. Though one may not adhere to such rules, he argues, if one correctly distinguishes which Buddhist teaching is inferior and which superior, then one can be said to be correctly observing the precepts of Buddhism. Citing the Lotus Sutra he declares, "[This sutra is hard to uphold; if one can uphold it even for a short while I will surely rejoice. . . .] This is what is called observing the precepts."

Notes

1. Buddhism classifies the six paths into two categories: the three evil paths and the three good paths. The three good paths are the three realms of asuras, human beings, and heavenly beings. They are called "good" because rebirth in these three realms is held to result from one's good deeds in a previous existence. The non-Buddhist teachings expound the three realms of heavenly beings, human beings, and animals, but do not distinguish either the realm of hungry spirits or the realm of asuras.

2. There are two views of the "eight worlds." One excludes the worlds of bodhisattvas and Buddhahood from the Ten Worlds; the other excludes the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones, who are believed to be unable to attain Buddhahood.

3. This refers to the Dharma Characteristics school's theory of five natures into which all beings are inherently divided. For five natures, see Glossary.

4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.

5. Two of five sacred mountains in China.

6. According to the Nirvana Sutra, an asura contended that the Buddha taught only eighteen elements, but that he himself expounded nineteen. Eighteen elements refer to the comprehensive concept of the three interrelated categories: the six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind), the six objects they perceive, and the six consciousnesses, the sense organs' functions of perceiving their respective objects.

7. The four kinds of wisdom are the great round mirror wisdom, the non-discriminating wisdom, the wisdom of insight into the particulars, and the wisdom of perfect practice. The five kinds of wisdom add to these the wisdom of the essence of the phenomenal world.

8. For nine consciousnesses, see Glossary. Details about the ten consciousnesses and the eleven consciousnesses are unknown.

9. Source unknown.

10. 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; however, because the Mahāvairochana Sutra contains descriptions of mudras (hand gestures) and mantras (mystic formulas), it is superior to the Lotus Sutra in terms of practice.

11. 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 highest.

12. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.

13. In this passage "those who lived in the distant past" refers to Kōbō and Jikaku, "those of recent times" to the Daishonin, "the dead" to Kōbō and Jikaku, and "the living" to the Daishonin.

14. The threefold refuge means to take refuge in the three treasures, i.e., to believe in and give allegiance to the Buddha, the Law (the Buddha's teaching), and the Buddhist Order (community of believers).

15. Lotus Sutra, chap. II.