Diagram of the Five Periods of the Buddha’s Lifetime Teachings

The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom (written by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna) says that at the age of nineteen Siddhārtha, the crown prince of King Shuddhodana, left household life and gained enlightenment at age thirty.

Flower Garland Sutra
provisional Mahayana
[preached for] 21 days
[60 volumes]
[80 volumes]——Flower Garland school——Dharma Teacher Tu-shun
Dharma Teacher Chih-yen
Great Teacher Fa-tsang
Dharma Teacher Ch’eng-kuan

Āgama sutras
Hinayana sutras
[preached for] 12 years
[Increasing by One Āgama Sutra]
Medium-Length Āgama Sutra
Long Āgama Sutra
Miscellaneous Āgama Sutra
Dharma Analysis Treasury school
Bodhisattva Vasubandhu
Tripitaka Master Hsüan-tsang
Establishment of Truth school
Harivarman
Precepts school
Discipline Master Tao-hsüan

Hinayana precepts
two hundred and fifty precepts—monks
five hundred precepts—nuns
five precepts—men and women [lay believers]
eight precepts—men and women [lay believers]

Correct and Equal sutras
provisional Mahayana

The Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice
100 volumes
written by Bodhisattva Maitreya

The Treatise on the Consciousness-Only Doctrine
written by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu
Immeasurable Meanings Sutra [preached at] age seventy-two

"But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."
"I made use of the power of expedient means. But in these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth."
"Though immeasurable, boundless, inconceivable asamkhya kalpas may pass, they will in the end fail to gain unsurpassed enlightenment. Why? Because they will not know about the great direct way to enlightenment, but will travel perilous byways beset by numerous hindrances and trials."
"Because, practicing it, one travels a great direct way free of hindrances and trials."
Lotus Sutra — T’ien-t’ai [Jpn Tendai] school
true Mahayana — Lotus school
[preached for] 8 years — Buddha-founded school

"The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth."

"Honestly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way."

"Though they [the Buddhas] point out various different paths, in truth they do so for the sake of the Buddha vehicle."

"But now this threefold world is all my domain, and the living beings in it are all my children. Now this place is beset by many pains and trials. I am the only person who can rescue and protect others, but though I teach and instruct them, they do not believe or accept my teachings."

"If a person fails to have faith but instead slanders this sutra, immediately he will destroy all the seeds for becoming a Buddha in this world. Or perhaps he will scowl with knitted brows and harbor doubt or perplexity. Listen and I will tell you the penalty this person must pay. Whether the Buddha is in the world or has already entered extinction, if this person should slander a sutra such as this, or on seeing those who read, recite, copy, and uphold this sutra, should despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against them, the penalty this person must pay — listen, I will tell you now: When his life comes to an end he will enter the Avichi hell, be confined there for a whole kalpa, and when the kalpa ends, be born there again. He will keep repeating this cycle for a countless number of kalpas."

"And after he has died he will be born again in the body of a serpent, long and huge in size, measuring five hundred yojanas."

"If one of these good men or good women in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One’s work... Medicine King, if there should be an evil person who, his mind destitute of goodness, should for the space of a kalpa appear in the presence of the Buddha and constantly curse and revile the Buddha, that person’s offense would still be rather light. But if there were a person who spoke only one evil word to curse or defame the lay persons or monks or nuns who read and recite the Lotus Sutra, then his offense would be very grave."

"Medicine King, now I say to you, I have preached various sutras, and among those sutras the Lotus is the foremost!... The sutras I have preached numerable thousands, ten thousands, millions. Among the sutras I have preached, now preach, and will preach, this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand."

"If one stays close to the teachers of the Law, one will speedily gain the bodhisattva way. By following and learning from these teachers one will see Buddhas as numerous as Ganges sands."

"At that time a loud voice issued from the treasure tower, speaking words of praise: ‘Excellent, excellent! Shakyamuni, World-Honored One, that you can take the great wisdom of equality, a Law to instruct the bodhisattvas, guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas, the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, and preach it for the sake of the great assembly! It is as you say, as you say. Shakyamuni, World-"
Honored One, all that you have expounded is the truth!”*14

“The other sutras number as many as Ganges sands, but though you expound those sutras, that is not worth regarding as difficult. If you were to seize Mount Sumeru and fling it far off to the measureless Buddha lands, that too would not be difficult… But if after the Buddha has entered extinction, in the time of evil, you can preach this sutra, that will be difficult indeed!”*15

“There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and will attack us with swords and staves, but we will endure all these things. In that evil age there will be monks with perverse wisdom and hearts that are fawning and crooked who will suppose they have attained what they have not attained, being proud and boastful in heart. Or there will be forest-dwelling monks wearing clothing of patched rags and living in retirement, who will claim they are practicing the true way, despising and looking down on all humankind. Greedy for profit and support, they will preach the Law to white-robed laymen and will be respected and revered by the world as though they were arhats who possess the six transcendental powers.”*16

“Because in the midst of the great assembly they constantly try to defame us, they will address the rulers, high ministers, Brahmans, and householders, as well as the other monks, slandering and speaking evil of us, saying, ‘These are men of perverted views who preach non-Buddhist doctrines!’ ”*17

“In a muddied kalpa, in an evil age there will be many things to fear. Evil demons will take possession of others and through them curse, revile, and heap shame on us.”*18

“The evil monks of that muddied age, failing to understand the Buddha’s expedient means, how he preaches the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, will confront us with foul language and angry frowns; again and again we will be banished.”*19

“He displayed his great supernatural powers. He extended his long broad tongue upward till it reached the Brahma heaven… The other Buddhas… did likewise, extending their long broad tongues.”*20

Nirvana Sutra

[preached for] one day and one night
at age 80, when the Buddha entered nirvana

Rely on the Law and not upon persons—Manjushri, Universal Worthy, Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, Earth Repository, and Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna Shan-wu-wei, Kōbō, Jikaku, Fa-tang, Chia-hsiang, Shan-tao, etc.

Rely on the meaning of the teaching and not on the words
Rely on wisdom and not on discriminative thinking
Rely on sutras that are complete and final—Lotus Sutra

and not on those that are not complete and final—Meditation Sutra, etc.
Mahāvairochana Sutra, etc.
Profound Secrets Sutra, etc.
Flower Garland Sutra, etc.
Wisdom sutras, etc.
Background

This is one of two works bearing the name *Diagram of the Five Periods of the Buddha's Lifetime Teachings*, the other being known as the extended version, and this, the abbreviated version. The present work is believed to have been written by Nichiren Daishonin at Minobu in 1276, while the other was written around 1260.

Both of these, as well as another work titled *Rooster Diagram of the Five Periods of the Buddha's Lifetime Teachings*, contain diagrams relating to the periods and teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha's preaching life, and the Buddhist schools and teachers in China and Japan that upheld those teachings, in a format that can be taken in at a glance. The Daishonin probably intended these works as references for his disciples. Although the extended version and this abbreviated version address similar points, their emphasis differs. While the earlier work focuses criticism on the Pure Land, or Nembutsu, school, this work emphasizes the Lotus Sutra's supremacy among all the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime. *Rooster Diagram*, in contrast, emphasizes the person, or Buddha, that one should properly revere.

The title is a reference to the “five periods,” a classification of the teachings expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha during the fifty years of his preaching life that divides them into five distinct periods or divisions. This classification was set forth by the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai in China.

Notes

1. According to one account, the Correct and Equal sutras were preached for 16 years and the Wisdom sutras for 14 years; according to another, for 8 years and 22 years.
2. A school founded by Shakyamuni Buddha himself.
3. A school based on the most profound and the most secret teaching.
4. A school that explicitly reveals the true teaching of the vehicle of Buddhism.
5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., chap. 3.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., chap. 10.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., chap. 11.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., chap. 21.