

On the Receiving of the Three Great Secret Laws



IN volume seven of the Lotus Sutra, the “Supernatural Powers” chapter, it is stated: “To put it briefly, all the doctrines possessed by the Thus Come One, all the freely exercised supernatural powers of the Thus Come One, the storehouse of all the secret essentials of the Thus Come One, all the most profound matters of the Thus Come One—all these are proclaimed, revealed, and clearly expounded in this sutra.”

The commentary [by T’ien-t’ai] on this says: “The essence of all the essential passages in the Lotus Sutra is the four matters [represented by the four phrases].”¹

Question: What is the Law that represents the essence that has been set forth?

Answer: It consists of the object of devotion, the sanctuary, and the five characters of the daimoku [which are termed the Three Great Secret Laws] of the “Life Span” chapter. After Shakyamuni Buddha first attained enlightenment, when he was setting forth the four flavors and three teachings, and when he was preaching the part of the Lotus Sutra that deals with the expanded replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle, until he preached the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter and opened the near and revealed the distant in concise form,² he kept

this Law secret. But it was set forth in the “Life Span” chapter, which deals with the true aspect as he came to understand and practice it in an age long ago.

This secret Law of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, was not entrusted to Universal Worthy or Manjushrī, bodhisattvas who are widely known in the three existences of past, present, and future, much less to any being of lesser importance. It follows, then, that the ceremony in which the Buddha expounded this secret Law differs from those in which he preached the four flavors and three teachings, and the first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, which embody the theoretical teaching.

The place where the ceremony occurred was the eternally existing Land of Tranquil Light. The lord of teachings who abided in this land was the Buddha eternally endowed with the three bodies, and those whom he converted had to be of equal status. This being the case, from the depths of the Land of Tranquil Light he summoned up Superior Practices and the others who make up the four bodhisattvas, original followers of the Buddha who since the remote past had praised [the Buddha and the original Law], and entrusted this doctrine to them. As the Discipline Master Tao-hsien says, “The

Law embodied therein [in the Lotus Sutra] is the Law that was realized countless kalpas in the past, and therefore it was entrusted to persons who had been the Buddha's disciples from countless kalpas in the past."³

Question: With regard to this Law that the Buddha entrusted to his disciples, after the Buddha passed away, in what period of time was it to be propagated?

Answer: In the seventh volume of the Lotus Sutra, the "Medicine King" chapter, the Buddha says: "In the last five-hundred-year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off." If we examine this sutra passage and abide by it faithfully, we can see that the proper time is the fifth five-hundred-year period, after the Buddha has passed into extinction and when the two thousand years of the Former and Middle Days of the Law have gone by, an age of "quarrels and disputes," when "the pure Law will become obscured and lost."⁴

Question: The pity and compassion of the Buddhas is like the moon in the sky. Where the waters of the people's capacity and affinity are clear, the beams of that moon will shine equally in every body of such water, bringing benefit to living beings. Of the three periods of the Former, the Middle, and the Latter Days of the Law, if this doctrine is expounded only in the Latter Day of the Law, it would seem as though Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, were showing partiality and favoritism in his exercise of pity and compassion, would it not?

Answer: The gentle light of the Buddhas, their moonbeams that benefit living beings, illuminate the darkness of the nine worlds, but their beams are not reflected in the muddy water of slanderers of the Law and icchantikas, persons of incorrigible disbelief.

Given the capacities of the people

who lived during the thousand years of the Former Day of the Law, only the Hinayana and provisional Mahayana teachings were suitable. During the thousand years of the Middle Day of the Law, the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra is what accorded with people's capacities. And with the last five-hundred-year period, which marks the start of the Latter Day of the Law, of the fourteen chapters that make up the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the thirteen chapters that appear before and after the "Life Span" chapter are to be set aside, and only the "Life Span" chapter is to be propagated, for it fits the capacities of the people of this time.

This one chapter, entitled "Life Span," of the essential teaching did not suit the capacities of people who lived in the latter five hundred years of the Middle Day of the Law, much less the capacities of those who lived in the former five hundred years of that period. And of course, given the capacities of people who lived in the Former Day of the Law, it would have been too soon to confront them with the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, to say nothing of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

But once the world entered the Latter Day of the Law, the doctrines of the sutras preached prior to the Lotus Sutra and those of the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra no longer were capable of freeing one from the sufferings of birth and death. Only in the "Life Span" chapter of the essential teaching is to be found the vital doctrine needed to free one from the sufferings of birth and death. When you take all this into consideration, you certainly cannot say that the Buddhas show partiality or favoritism in the manner in which they teach and convert others.

Question: Regarding the teachings to be spread after the Buddha passed away, during the three periods of the

Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law, it is clear that the first half of the Lotus Sutra was entrusted [for this purpose] to his disciples of the theoretical teaching and the latter half to his disciples of the essential teaching. But I do not know just what sutra passage makes it clear that the one chapter of the "Life Span" alone was preached for the sake of the living beings of the muddied and evil age of the Latter Day. I would like to hear of some passage in the sutra that gives proof of that fact. Is there such a passage?

Answer: Since you press me for an answer, listen and then have firm faith in what you have heard. The passage is that in the "Life Span" chapter that reads: "I will leave this good medicine here. You should take it and not worry that it will not cure you."

Question: The passage you have cited makes it clear that the "Life Span" chapter was intended solely for the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law. I can therefore pose no further objections on that point. However, just what sort of things are these Three Great Secret Laws?

Answer: This is a matter of the utmost importance that I keep in my mind. But since you have an unmatched aspiration, I will explain it in brief.

The object of devotion as set forth in the "Life Span" chapter is Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, eternally endowed with the three bodies, who since the beginning of numberless major world system dust particle kalpas in the past has had deep and abiding affinities with this land of ours.

The "Life Span" chapter speaks of "the Thus Come One's secret and his transcendental powers."

Volume nine of the commentary [by T'ien-t'ai] says: "The single body is none other than the three bodies, a statement that is secret. The three bodies are none other than the single body,

a statement that is secret. Also, because from ancient times this has never been expounded, it is called secret. And because only the Buddha can understand this, it is called secret. The Buddha consistently possesses the three bodies throughout the three existences. But in the various teachings [other than the Lotus Sutra], he kept this secret and did not transmit it."⁵

The term "daimoku" has two meanings: one indicates the daimoku of the Former and Middle Days of the Law, and the other indicates that of the Latter Day of the Law.

During the Former Day of the Law, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu and Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna chanted the daimoku, but they did this solely as a practice for themselves and went no further than that. In the Middle Day of the Law Nan-yüeh and T'ien-t'ai likewise chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo; they did so as a practice for their own benefit, but they did not expound it widely for others. These examples may be called the daimoku of meditative practice.

Now, however, we have entered the Latter Day of the Law, and the daimoku that I, Nichiren, chant is different from that of earlier ages. This Nam-myoho-enge-kyo encompasses both practice for oneself and the teaching of others. Its five characters are the five major principles of name, essence, quality, function, and teaching.

The sanctuary, or ordination platform,⁶ constitutes one of the Three Great Secret Laws of the essential teaching.⁷ When the secular law and the Law of the Buddha⁸ are fused and in mutual accord; when both the ruler and his officials uphold the Three Great Secret Laws of the essential teaching; and when the practice of King Possessor of Virtue and the monk Realization of Virtue⁹ is actualized in the future of the muddied and evil age of the Latter Day, then imperial edicts

and official proclamations will be issued,¹⁰ and the most fitting site will be sought out, one resembling the pure land of Eagle Peak, and the sanctuary will be established there. We have only to wait for the proper time for this. This is what is meant by the practice of the precept of the Law.¹¹

This will be a sanctuary not only where the people of the three countries of India, China, and Japan, and all the inhabitants of Jambudvīpa, will come to receive the precept of the Law that enables them to repent and wipe out offenses, but also where the great heavenly kings Brahmā and Shakra will descend to take part in the ceremony.

Once the precept of the Law is established, the ordination platform of Enryaku-ji, since it administers the precepts of the meditative practice of the theoretical teaching, will cease to be of any benefit.

The third and fourth chief priests of Mount Hiei,¹² Jikaku and Chishō, contrary to expectation, turned their backs on their teachers, the founder Dengyō and his successor Gishin, and made an absurd pronouncement, declaring that the Lotus and Mahāvairochana sutras were equal in principle but that the latter was superior in practice. With this as their basis, they derided the precepts of their own temple, describing them as mere “childish theory.”

The precepts of Enryaku-ji were pure and spotless, the wonderful precepts of the Middle Way. But now, contrary to all expectation, they have been changed into so much dirt and mire. One can hardly bear to speak of it, and no amount of lamentation can repair it. If Mount Malaya were to be reduced to shards and rubble and its sandalwood groves changed to thorns and brambles, the situation could not be worse!

Could any learned person who is capable of distinguishing between the erroneous and the correct, the partial

and the perfect, among the sacred teachings of the Buddha’s lifetime bring himself to set foot upon the ordination platform of Enryaku-ji as it exists today? I hope you will examine the ideas and principles underlying this doctrine that I am here expounding and will fully understand its meaning.

These Three Great Secret Laws were unquestionably received by me, Nichiren, some two thousand and more years ago, when I was the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth; they were passed on to me by oral transmission from the lord of teachings, the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment. And these actions that I now take embody what I received in transmission on Eagle Peak, without the slightest deviation or alteration in form, the three great matters of the Law of the “Life Span” chapter.¹³

Question: What passage of the sutra can be cited to authoritatively substantiate the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life?¹⁴

Answer: The following passages may be cited. They are of two kinds. The first is in the “Expedient Means” chapter and reads: “The true aspect of all phenomena . . . This reality consists of the appearance . . . The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings.” This refers to the three thousand realms in a single moment of life that in principle exists in the life of even the most inferior of ordinary mortals.

The other is the passage in the “Life Span” chapter that reads: “It has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.” This refers to the three thousand realms in a single moment of life that the World-Honored One of Great Enlightenment realized when he attained enlightenment in the far distant past.

I, Nichiren, conscious of the age we live in, now wish to give wide propagation to this doctrine [of the Three Great Secret Laws]. Up until now I have kept this doctrine secret within my heart. But if I do not leave behind me a written record of it, the future followers of my teachings will perhaps slander me by saying that I was without pity or compassion. And at that time, no matter how I might regret it, I would have no way to refute their charges. With this in mind, I am therefore sending you this written record of the matter.

When you have finished reading it,

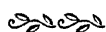
you must keep it secret and not show it to others or discuss it with them.

The Lotus Sutra describes itself as representing the one great reason for which the Buddhas make their appearance in the world¹⁵ because it is a scripture that contains these Three Great Secret Laws. Therefore you must keep this matter secret, keep it secret!

Nichiren

The eighth day of the fourth month
in the fifth year of Kōan [1282]

Reply to Ōta Kingo



Background

Also known as *On the Three Great Secret Laws*, this is the only writing in which Nichiren Daishonin fully addresses the Three Great Secret Laws, his ultimate doctrine. He defined these as the object of devotion, the daimoku, and the sanctuary, or ordination platform, of the essential teaching.

Though the Daishonin sent this letter, dated the eighth day of the fourth month in 1282, to Ōta Kingo, also known as Ōta Jōmyō, he actually intended it as a record of his teaching on the Three Great Secret Laws for future generations.

Nichiren Daishonin first cites a passage from the “Supernatural Powers” (21st) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. It contains four phrases said to embody the essence of the Lotus Sutra, which Shakyamuni Buddha transferred to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth headed by Superior Practices. This essence, the Daishonin declares, “consists of the object of devotion, the sanctuary, and the five characters of the daimoku [which are termed the Three Great Secret Laws] of the ‘Life Span’ chapter.”

The Daishonin says these three are to be spread widely in the Latter Day of the Law, and he explains the nature of each. First, the object of devotion is Shakyamuni Buddha eternally endowed with the three bodies, who attained enlightenment in the remote past and has since then had deep and abiding affinities with this world. The Daishonin had earlier embodied this object of devotion in the form of a mandala called the Gohonzon.

Second, the sanctuary, or ordination platform, is the place where the precept of the Law, which means the practice of faith in the object of devotion, or the Gohonzon, is carried out. The Daishonin proclaims that the sanctuary should be established when “the secular law and the Law of the Buddha are fused and in mutual accord.” That is, when the secular law, or the whole spectrum of human affairs, comes to be based on the Law of the Buddha.

When the precept of the Law has been established, the Daishonin asserts, the ordination platform of Enryaku-ji temple at Mount Hiei, which administers precepts for meditative practice,

will cease to be of any benefit. Moreover, he emphasizes, the precepts of Enryaku-ji have already been corrupted by the chief priests Jikaku and Chishō, who turned against the founder, Dengyō, and mistakenly regarding the True Word teachings as superior to the Lotus Sutra, incorporated them into the teachings of Mount Hiei.

Third, the daimoku, or Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, is of two kinds, that chanted in the Former and Middle Days of the Law, and that chanted in the Latter Day of the Law. The daimoku of earlier times was a personal practice alone, but the daimoku of Nichiren Daishonin for the Latter Day encompasses both practice for oneself and teaching others.

Finally, citing passages from the Lo-

tus Sutra, the Daishonin validates the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life from two angles. One reveals three thousand realms in a single moment of life inherent as a potential in ordinary people's lives and the other reveals it as perceived by the Buddha in his own life at the time of his original enlightenment in the remote past. The Daishonin embodied the reality of three thousand realms in a single moment of life in the Three Great Secret Laws. Hence he concludes: "The Lotus Sutra describes itself as representing the one great reason for which the Buddhas make their appearance in the world because it is a scripture that contains these Three Great Secret Laws."

Notes

1. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*. "The four matters" refers to all the doctrines possessed by the Thus Come One, all the freely exercised supernatural powers of the Thus Come One, the storehouse of all the secret essentials of the Thus Come One, and all the most profound matters of the Thus Come One in the above-quoted passage of the Lotus Sutra.

2. See opening the near and revealing the distant in Glossary.

3. *The Supplement to "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

4. This passage and the words "quarrels and disputes" appear in the Great Collection Sutra.

5. *Words and Phrases*.

6. In Nichiren Daishonin's teaching, "ordination platform" means the sanctuary, or place, where the object of devotion, or Gohonzon, is enshrined and the daimoku is chanted. According to the Lotus Sutra, upholding the sutra is observing the precepts. In the Daishonin's teaching, upholding the sutra means to chant, and teach others to chant, the daimoku with faith in the object of devotion.

7. The "essential teaching" here means the essential teaching of the Latter Day of the Law, that is, the teaching of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

8. "The secular law" means the whole system of a community's customs, practices, and rules as well as the activities there in all walks of life. "The Law of the Buddha" refers to the Law of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo and to the various principles based on it that underlie and support all human endeavors.

9. According to the Nirvana Sutra, King Possessor of Virtue himself went to protect the monk Realization of Virtue, who alone was upholding the correct teaching against the violent attacks of its numerous slanderers. The king's soldiers and the people, overjoyed at his behavior, joined him willingly in the battle. The king was wounded and killed, but because of his actions, he was reborn in the land of Akshobhya Buddha. In this story the king represents the secular law, and the monk, the Law of the Buddha, and their unity is an expression of the fusion and mutual accord of the two types of law.

10. "Imperial edicts" were issued by the emperor and "official proclamations" by the Kamakura shogunate. In these references, Nichiren Daishonin follows the example of the Great Teacher Dengyō, whose plans for building an ordination platform to administer the precepts for immediate and perfect enlightenment were material-

ized by imperial edict, the political system of the day. In the Daishonin's time the virtual ruler was the regent of the Kamakura shogunate and the formal ruler was the emperor. Such "edicts" and "proclamations" would have been the official procedure for building an ordination platform in his day.

11. The Daishonin says, "Only by observing this wonderful precept have the Buddhas of the three existences become Buddhas endowed with the three bodies—the Dharma body, the reward body, and the manifested body, which are each without beginning or end" (I, pp. 481–82).

12. Chishō was the fifth chief priest of Enryaku-ji.

13. A reference to the Three Great

Secret Laws.

14. Regarding the relationship between the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life and the Three Great Secret Laws, the Daishonin, in *Letter to Gijō-bō*, says that he was able "to embody the Three Great Secret Laws, or the reality of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, that is found in the 'Life Span' chapter" (I, p. 389).

15. The "Expedient Means" (2nd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, "The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone," that is, to expound the "one Buddha vehicle" of the Lotus Sutra. This is because, the Daishonin says, the sutra contains the Three Great Secret Laws.