

**UNDERSTANDINGS  
ON THE  
LOTUS SUTRA**



**Compiled and Translated  
by Dean Makinodan  
Honolulu Myohoji**

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The understandings in this booklet are translations of excerpts from *Hokkekyo to Shuso, Koso Tachi: Nippon Bukkyo no Shinzui wo Yomu* (The Lotus Sutra and Founders of the Denominations and High Priests: Reading the Essence of Japanese Buddhism), by Rev. Taido Matsubara, Published by Kosei Shuppan Sha, Inc., Tokyo, in 2005.

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## Preface

It is our pleasure to bring out this booklet that contains several understandings on the Lotus Sutra. We believe that it will greatly expand your knowledge of the sutra and enrich your life of faith. In many ways, it is a sequel to our publication, *The Lotus Sutra through the 7 Parables*, which we brought out in 2015. It is focused on several key concepts on understanding the sutra, which were brought forth in the translator's afterword of that booklet.

We are most happy to be able to share this vital knowledge with you in the form of this English publication. I am grateful to our Head Minister, Rev. Takamasa Yamamura, for his unending spiritual guidance. I am also grateful to our President, Dan Liu, for his generous support and encouragement. And, of course, much thanks are due to the dedicated officers of our temple, and our followers and friends.

We wish you the best in the use of these understandings, as you grow and help others to grow in the knowledge of the Lotus Sutra.

Namu Myoho Renge Kyo

Dean Makinodan  
Vice President  
Honolulu Myohoji Mission  
Board of Directors

## ***Understanding 1: St. Nichiren***

### ***The Great Vow and Sense of Mission that Supported the Young St. Nichiren***

When we hear the name St. Nichiren, we think of the Lotus Sutra, and when we hear the name Lotus Sutra, we think of St. Nichiren. In this way do we feel a deep connection between the Lotus Sutra and St. Nichiren. To begin with, how did St. Nichiren encounter the Lotus Sutra? Let us inquire into this affinity with the sutra.

St. Nichiren was born in the first year of Joo (1222) on February 16. He was born into the home of a poor fisherman in Kominato of Boshu. Although a fisherman, the father of St. Nichiren was Shigetada Mikuni, the lord of the Nukina house in Enshu (Shizuoka Prefecture). Due to a particular incident, Shigetada became a suspect of the Kamakura Bakufu and was banished to Kominato. He fished for the sake of his livelihood, but he was not born into generations of fishermen in Kominato. While engaging in fishing, Shigetada taught reading and writing to the children of the village.

The family of Umekiku, the mother of St. Nichiren, were Shinto priests who descended from the Kiyohara family. She was deeply pious and it is said that St. Nichiren was conceived when she had a dream of the morning sun, riding upon a lotus flower, jumping into her chest.

A domestic conflict known as the Jokyo disturbance occurred a year before the saint's birth. The Ex-Emperor Gotoba was angered by the highhandedness of the Kamakura Bakufu and sought its destruction, but he was defeated by the Kamakura forces, and the power of the Emperor and the aristocracy of Kyoto, until that time, fell to the ground. A great upheaval had occurred in which the military houses of Kamakura occupied the land.

The ruin of the Kyoto faction, which until yesterday lived in extreme splendor, and the thinking of mappo (the thinking that following the death of Shakyamuni Buddha, Buddhism will fall into decline after a specified period) overflowed within the country at the time. These were a deep fear of St. Nichiren from the time of his childhood and through his lifetime.

St. Nichiren is said to have been gifted from birth. His parents also looked forward to his achievements, and at the age of twelve, he was entrusted to Kiyosumidera (also known as Seichoji). At that time St. Nichiren made a firm vow: "I wish to become the wisest in Japan. I must become so."

Within his mind at the time, there were feelings of resentment that a practitioner of Buddhism in the nation must not silently approve of the actions of the Kamakura Bakufu to punish the Imperial House as a war criminal for the Jokyo disturbance. In addition, while new Buddhist sects had appeared, he felt a sense of mission to confirm whether or not they were of the true lineage of Shakyamuni Buddha.

From the age of twelve to the age sixteen when he entered the priesthood, St. Nichiren studied at Kiyosumidera. He read nearly all of the books in the large temple library.

He further sought to study the thinking of the new Buddhism of Kamakura, and receiving the permission of his teacher, he went down from Kiyosumidera and entered Kamakura. At the same time, he studied the teaching of the Jodo

Shu of St. Honen, and furthermore, he entered the sutra library of Tsurugaoka Hachimanguji, read the Daizo-kyo and watched the policies of the Kamakura Bakufu and so forth.

The saint's study at Kamakura was for three years and he returned to Kiyosumidera with much knowledge. He authored the *Kaitai Sokushin Jobutsu Gi* and harshly criticized the teaching of the Jodo Shu of St. Honen.

Soon after returning to Kiyosumidera, St. Nichiren set out to study at Hieizan and Nambu (Nara). Hieizan, at the time, had both the influence of the approach of the founder Dengyo Daishi and his understanding of the Lotus Sutra, which the Tendai Shu is based on, and it was also infiltrated by the approach of the Shingon Shu. St. Nichiren lamented this, and strove to return it to the teaching of Dengyo Daishi. At Hieizan too there was no one who equaled the ability of St. Nichiren.

St. Nichiren did not simply shut himself up in Hieizan, but he traveled to Kyoto and heard the expositions of Enni and Dogen of the Zen schools, and he studied the thinking of the new sects of Buddhism. On his way back to Hieizan,

he confined himself for prayer for seven days at the mausoleum of Shotoku Taishi in Shinaga. These were the movements of St Nichiren when he was twenty-five.

In this way did St. Nichiren thoroughly study Buddhist thought for a long period of time. And he finally reached a decisive conclusion. Shakyamuni Buddha had left the Shie (the four standards that members of the Buddhist religious order must conform). St. Nichiren took notice of the final standard, in particular: "To depend on the Great Vehicle sutras that are perfectly expressing the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha and to not depend on the sutras that do not perfectly express His teaching." By knowing this did his mind's eye open for the first time. In the knowledge that he had pursued until now, he believed: "Shakyamuni Buddha's true teaching had been transmitted by Tendai Daishi Chigi and Dengyo Daishi Saicho of Japan." As for depending on the Great Vehicle sutras that are perfectly expressing the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, according to Chigi's classification of the sutras of the Great Vehicle, the Lotus Sutra alone is the sutra that perfectly expresses the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. This was the belief that

he acquired after the end of his long years of study.

In this way did St. Nichiren meet the Lotus Sutra. He made a vow to himself that what he must do is to disseminate the Lotus Sutra, which is revealing Shakyamuni Buddha's original and fundamental teaching. This was when St. Nichiren was about thirty-two years old.

### ***Becoming One with the Lotus Sutra, Aiming to Save All of Society***

St. Nichiren had met the Lotus Sutra when he was twelve years old. It was probably when he had the opportunity to study the Buddhist sutras when he was entrusted to the nearby Kiyosumidera. Kenji Miyazawa had found the Lotus Sutra in the library of his home when he was in his fifth year of middle school. It is said that he was so deeply moved that he could not stop shaking.

Moreover, it is believed that St. Nichiren had realized the essence of the Lotus Sutra during the time that he was banished to Sado. We can

imagine how zealous his recitation of the Lotus Sutra was at the time. He was not in a quiet temple or room with a Buddhist altar, but in the depths of a crucible of a winter wind that pierced his body and deafened his ears. His chanting voice became increasingly stronger. St. Nichiren was not reading the Lotus Sutra with his mouth or his mind. He became one with the Lotus Sutra and assimilated with it. St. Nichiren himself was the Myoho Renge Kyo.

This was made clear in a reply to Sairenbo, when he was fifty-two years old. (*Shoho Jisso Sho*)

“My circumstances are because I disseminate Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. It is the Myoho Renge Kyo that Shakyamuni Buddha and Taho Buddha left behind for all sentient beings of the future Japan. This is what I hear and it is the reason for my actions. When I think about my present great persecution, I have tears, and when I think of my future Buddhahood, I cannot stop my tears of joy. The birds and insects cry, but they do not shed tears. Nichiren does not cry, but his tears are incessant. These tears are not for matters of this world, but solely for the Lotus Sutra. Perhaps they should be called the tears of sweet nectar.”

“The birds and insects cry, but they do not shed tears. Nichiren does not cry, but his tears are incessant.” This writing is famous and beautiful. The tears of St. Nichiren are different from the tears that are shed by the people of the world. The tears that he shed when meeting the Lotus Sutra are likened to the “sweet nectar” from the rain that falls from the deep emotion of heaven. They are tears that are oozing with Buddhism.

The sound of the raging waves of the severely cold Japan Sea was the thunder of the Dharma for St. Nichiren. The thunder of the Dharma (Horai) is found in a poem in the *Shodoka*, a Chinese Zen work written in the late eighth century. There the spread of Buddhism is likened to the sound of a snow grouse that can be heard from far away. Through his encounter with the Lotus Sutra, St. Nichiren grew to become a great religionist, and by having St. Nichiren did its teaching spread through the entire world (Itten Shikai).

St. Nichiren firmly believed that the Lotus Sutra alone was Shakyamuni Buddha’s pure teaching. Moreover, Buddhist thought was not limited to individual salvation but it should

strive for the salvation of all of society. This too was a difference from the founders of other denominations.

The time was called the final age of Buddhism (mappo). It was believed to be the age when Buddhism will fall into decay after a specified period following Shakyamuni Buddha's death. Except for the Lotus Sutra there was nothing that could be the foundation for society's salvation. Yet there is surely persecution and suffering to obstruct the prospects of carrying through with the salvation of society. This fact is being demonstrated by chapter 10, The Teacher of the Dharma, chapter 21, The Supernatural Powers of the Tathagata, and chapter 22, Transmission, of the Lotus Sutra.

Why must there be suffering and persecution for carrying out the teaching of the Lotus Sutra? St. Nichiren encourages his followers by saying to not fear suffering and persecution because they are proof of being apostles that are sent into the evil world by the Buddha. From this teaching, the desire to save society and to build society of Lotus Sutra believers was further intensified, and through the words of St. Nichiren, the elitist

consciousness of a martyr and an apostolic awareness were handed down to future believers of the Lotus Sutra.

“Nichiren and his disciples must not succumb to cowardice” (*Kyogyosho Goshō*). Chogyu Takayama, a Meiji era critic, who resonated with this heroic statement, gradually came to be absorbed in supranational Nichiren thought. For him, the fundamental principle of St. Nichiren is to correct the nation from a supranational perspective and to bring reform. However, in the modern period, this principle separated to become nationalism and gave birth to the branches of Chikaku Tanaka and Ikki Kita.

Within the lineage of supranational Nichiren thought, it was probably the poet and children’s story writer, Kenji Miyazawa, who penetrated more deeply than Chogyu into the belief of the universal reality. “Until all of society becomes happy, individual happiness is impossible.” Based on this belief, he worked to reform and guide poor farming villages. In his poetry, there are many who call to mind the bodhisattva practices of the Lotus Sutra.

In the modern age, new religions were born, including the Reiyu Kai and the Rissho Kosei Kai. These are new Buddhist religious bodies that are woven with the doctrine of the Lotus Sutra as their warp and the thought of St. Nichiren as their weft. And they are spreading through the world with a supranational perspective. They are continuing activities with the spirit of St. Nichiren that aims not for individual salvation but the salvation of all of society.

As a religionist and Buddhist leader, there is probably no one with so many followers and misunderstood as the founder of a denomination as St. Nichiren. The following words of Tadao Yanaibara, who is known as being a distinguished president of Tokyo University, a Christian and a scholar of economics, is probably a true assessment of St. Nichiren. I would like to share it here to end this writing.

“The goal of Nichiren was not a nationalistic religion, but a religious nation. His was not the truth for the nation, but a truthful nation.”

## ***Understanding 2: The Lotus and the Lotus Sutra***

Let us first study what kind of sutra is the Lotus Sutra. The full name of the title, Lotus Sutra, which we are accustomed to hearing, is Myoho Renge Kyo. The title of the sutra is based on the translation by Kumaraju, the famous sutra translator of fifth century China. The original text is in Sanskrit, it is called Saddharma Pundarika Sutra. It means the “sutra of true Dharma like a white lotus.”

The lotus in India apparently includes the water lily of both China and Japan. In ancient India, it was highly regarded as the seat of the gods. This was probably because of the four virtues of this flower—its sweet fragrance, its purity, its softness and its loveliness. The Buddhists, however, particularly fixed their gaze on the connotation with the white lotus and the central thought of the Lotus Sutra.

To begin with, starting with the white lotus, all lotuses do not grow in the pure water of the highlands. They only bloom in the muddy water of the low ground. Chigi, the founder

of the Tendai in the late sixth century China, who clearly saw this, acknowledges the lotus in his treatise, *Choshinron*: “Although the lotus originates in the water, it is not affected by the water. The bodhisattva also resides in the vulgar, but he is not a captive of it.”

While the lotus originally is born in the water, it is not caught up with the purity of the water. In the same way, for the bodhisattva to live in the ordinary world, but to not be bound by this world, is the faith of followers of Great Vehicle Buddhism, in particular, the followers of the Lotus Sutra. In this way, did Chigi unravel the idea of the white lotus. Even in Japan too, we have learned from the lotus that blooms in muddy water—“the lotus blooms from the very presence of the mud.”

“The lotus is not born in the highlands but in the marsh and slime, accordingly, I live just as how this flower originates.” Yuima Koji, who was a layman and wealthy and had mastered Buddhism, teaches this with his person (Yuimakyō). The world of suffering is the very place where the pure and peaceful world unfolds.

From within the muddy water, a single stem grows rapidly, and unlike other plants, it does not have an additional branch. Practitioners of the Lotus Sutra think of this stem as being a symbol of the One Vehicle (the single and absolute teaching that comprehensively unifies Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching).

Next, there is the flower. The lotus flower possesses the special characteristic that is praiseworthy by the earlier mentioned four virtues. Not only that, but the flowers of ordinary plants produce fruits after the bud flowers. In the case of the lotus, from the time that it buds, it possesses both the flower and fruit at the same time. When we examine a lotus flower in bloom, we can see the lotus fruit within its center. And there is the special characteristic of the fruit being ripe at the same instant that the petals fall away.

In any case, through the cause that is their buds, flowers appear before long and bring about the result of producing fruit. However, as I have now mentioned, for only the lotus, from the time that the bud appears the flower and the fruit are already prepared, and at the same time that the flower petals fall, the fruit is already ripe.

The cause and the result become one, and there is no distinction between them. In Buddhist terminology, this fact is called “inga ichinyo” (cause and result are one). That is to say, cause and result are by no means separate entities.

From the relationship between the flower and the fruit of the lotus, the truth of the cause and the result are one is called “keka doji” (flower and fruit simultaneously) in Buddhist terminology. The mind of this concept is found in the statement: “When one makes a vow (blooms), that it is the very moment when enlightenment (the fruit) is immediately completed.”

Even in the Jodo school there is a similar connotation to “keka doji.” We find this in the opening of the *Tannisho* by St. Shinran, where he writes: “When one desires to recite the nembutsu, one has received the benefit of the Amida Buddha’s original vow of “sesshu fusha” (literally, taking in and never abandoning, namely, the sentient beings that recite the nembutsu will be saved and never forsaken). Here too we know that the symbol of Great Vehicle Buddhism thought is the lotus flower.

Moreover, despite the fact that the root of the lotus flower lies deep in the mud, we call to mind the Buddha nature of eternal personal life. The life power of the source that causes the flower to bloom and the fruit to form is entirely in the root of the Buddha nature.

Our discussion will change a bit. I have heard that the previous Kabuki actor, Kichizaemon Nakamura, was a celebrated performer and a follower of the Lotus Sutra. He was also an accomplished Haiku poet who went by the name of Shuzan. In the poetry of his later years, we find the poem:

In the movement  
Of the torn autumn lotus  
I see my lines.

The autumn lotus is the lotus leaves that have been pitifully torn by the winds of late fall. Within the plain elegance with which the autumn lotuses move, Kichizaemon saw the verbal message and the mannerisms of an actor on the stage. To put it another way, Kichizaemon is impressed by the fact that the autumn lotus is demonstrating the actor's art. This

is undoubtedly the “shoho jisso,” the various realities” that is taught by the Lotus Sutra.

“Shoho” is literally everything in the universe and “jisso” is their true appearance. In the external appearance of all things that we can see, the truth that we cannot see is hiding within. To put this simply, everything around us is conveying truth or a teaching within silence or in words that are beyond words, or showing them to us. This is the nature of “shoho,” everything in the universe.

Kichizaemon has now grasped, from the depths of his mind, that in the movements of the autumn lotus the entirety of stage performance is being demonstrated for him alone, which is something that many people have overlooked. Not only is the lotus a beautiful flower, but even when it has become an autumn lotus, which is a mere shadow of its former self, it is expounding the Lotus Sutra. To put this another way, the entirety of the thinking of the Lotus Sutra is being symbolized by the lotus. The single-stemmed lotus is, just as it is, the symbol of the Lotus Sutra.

The relationship between the Lotus Sutra and the lotus is summarized in a wonderful poem called “Myonichi” by Tokuya Asumi, who served as the governor in Ibaragi prefecture and Okayama prefecture before the war, and worked for social education as a poet in the post-war period. I would like to share it here.

In the rubbish heap  
    a pea plant blooms.  
From the muddy ground  
    the lotus flower grows strong.  
All people possess a beautiful seed.  
How will they bloom tomorrow?

## ***Understanding 3: How to Savor the Teachings of the Lotus Sutra***

The contents of this sutra are most symbolic. Beginning with the famous seven parables called the “Hokke Shichiyu,” everywhere in the sutra are parables being spoken. The Lotus Sutra is being taught through metaphorical expressions. It is a method of giving voice to truth that differs from such sacred books as the Christian Bible or the Analects of Confucianism. Unless we know this, we cannot correctly understand the contents of the Lotus Sutra.

For example, as in reading such things as newspapers, magazines, academic works and law books, if we think that we can understand the sutra’s contents by following only the face of the words of the Lotus Sutra’s parables, it is clear that whoever the scholar may be, he will not see the sutra’s guiding philosophy.

We are accustomed to an education that sees, hears and reads things objectively. As long as we touch the sutra with that “approach of reading,” it will be difficult to grasp the teaching from any Buddhist scripture, starting with the Lotus

Sutra. When I say “to change the approach of reading,” I mean that we do not read the sutra objectively, but that to read the Lotus Sutra is to not read the words, but to read ourselves. It is not that the Lotus Sutra is difficult, but it is difficult to change our approach. “To read ourselves” is to assimilate with the Lotus Sutra and to become completely one with it. That is what is difficult.

Will you discard the parables of the Lotus Sutra as a meandering fabrication or will you be able to uncover truth from them? Here is the difference from the approach of reading. When an approach that attempts to understand things only objectively and with a logical positivism looks hard at things with a symbolic approach (thinking), an abundant and humble mind comes to naturally reside within. In the Lotus Sutra, this mind is called a “humble, gentle and kind mind.” In Buddhist sutras this mind is “nyunan shin” (柔軟心). It is not simply “gentleness and kindness” but to follow the truth honestly and humbly.

In the Lotus Sutra, there are many fine expressions that bring joy to us when reading. For example, in the chapter Assurance of Future

Buddhahood, when Shakyamuni Buddha gave the prediction and assurance of truly becoming the Buddha, the disciples who were listening by His side, beginning with Mokuren, “joined their hands together with all their hearts, looked up at the World-Honored One with unblenching eyes and sang in gathas in unison.” In the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit original text, “unblenching eyes” is “gazed at the World-Honored One without blinking.” From the translation by Kumarajiva we feel the seriousness felt by the disciples in the presence of the Buddha. This is one of the reasons for his excellent translation.

I was taught about the method to read the Lotus Sutra from the lectures on sutras of Kanoko Okamoto. A poet and writer from the Taisho to the early Showa period, Kanoko Okamoto, together with her husband, the cartoonist, Ippei Okamoto, were possessors of a deep understanding of Buddhist thought. Kanoko is mother of the Western-style painter, Taro Okamoto. To those who sought to begin their studies of the Lotus Sutra, she advised: “Take it (the Lotus Sutra) on as through dealing with symbolic poetry,” and “read the Lotus Sutra as though reading drama.” Thanks to her advice, I

finally became able to understand the thinking that is taught by the Lotus Sutra.

Just as Kanoko Okamoto has said, the Lotus Sutra is certainly a drama. Moreover, it is a drama of a large scale. It is a stage that goes from the depths of the earth to the emptiness of space. That is because Buddhas and bodhisattvas of fiction are teaching the truth to actual historical personages.

This is not true for only the Lotus Sutra, but the contents of deep thought are almost impossible to explain with writing and words, and the voice and letters that are taught by St. Kobo. Nevertheless, if we were to remain silent, we would probably not convey anything to another. Unless we use words, we could not express or convey anything. If that is the case, the words and phrases of the Lotus Sutra are “words and phrases to express contents that cannot be expressed by words and phrases.”

In the second year of Kenji (1276), when St. Nichiren was fifty-five years old, there is a long letter (*Myomitsu Shonin Goshosoku*) that he gave to Myomitsu (biography unknown), who is thought to have been a lay follower. At the

end of that letter, it is written: “In the entirety of the Lotus Sutra there are few precise accounts but many words of praise—please think this way.” St. Nichiren is making this astonishing statement.

The lack of precise statements means that there are many parables and allegories, and words of praise. We should think of this as acknowledging the prevalence of praise for the Buddha’s virtues and the Lotus Sutra. Nevertheless, St. Nichiren possessed the deep religious wisdom that could know that these many parables, which are not “precise,” are speaking of things that are “precise,” which cannot be expressed by words and phrases. And that is why he read the Lotus Sutra as being not a nonsensical story but as the life of the Eternal Buddha.

I earlier spoke of “nyunan shin.” In the Duration of the Life of the Tathagata chapter of the Lotus Sutra, this is spoken of as “shichi jiki i nyunan” (質直意柔軟). Since “shichi jiki” is a “humble mind,” “shichi jiki i nyunan” means to “hear the teachings of Shakyamuni honestly and humbly, with a gentle and kind mind and with sincerity, and read the sutra.” If we make the receiver

of our mind honest, humble, gentle and kind, from everything that surrounds us, just as they are, we ought to hear a message from the Lotus Sutra.

Next, I said that there are many poems in the Lotus Sutra. In Sanskrit, poems and songs are called gathas. Since the gathas are rhymical by nature, they are convenient to memorize. Not just for the Lotus Sutra, but the long passages of the sutras are always followed by gathas to make the meaning of the main body of the sutra easy to memorize as a summary through the gathas. In the case of the Lotus Sutra, the first half of the Duration of the Life of the Tathagata chapter are long passages, but this followed by the famous phrase “Jigage” that begins with “Ji Ga Toku Butsu Rai” (Since I have become the Buddha).

The time that has passed, since I have become the Buddha, until the present day, is eternal. That time is infinite.

During that period, I have always continued to teach the true Dharma, taught an uncountable number of living beings and guided them to the supreme enlightenment.

The time, which has passed, since I have become the Buddha, until today, cannot be known.

To save all living beings, I use expedients,  
and pretend to them that I have died.  
However, the truth is that I have not died.  
I am always here and I am teaching the true  
Dharma.

Although I am always here, I use various divine  
powers, and while I am truly nearby, I make it  
seem as though I am no longer here.

It is because the people are convinced that I  
have died, they sincerely make offerings to  
my remains, adore and long for Me, and seek  
to meet Me at whatever the cost.

If you have a mind of faith, are honest, humble,  
gentle and kind, and sincerely seek to meet  
the Buddha—when you are resolved to do so  
even at the cost of your life, I will appear at  
Mt. Sacred Eagle with My many disciples.

Furthermore, depending on the sutra, the gatha  
appears first, and to speak in detail about it,  
the long passages are related. Another reason  
for the prevalence of gathas in Buddhist sutras  
is that ancient Indians seemed to have had an  
abundant talent for poetry and songs, and when  
talking with one another, their conversation  
naturally had a poetic quality about it. They  
apparently possessed this talent. We can feel  
this everywhere when we read the Lotus Sutra.

Since Shakyamuni was also an excellent poet, before one knew it, His sermons became poems. That is why we find many references in the Lotus Sutra to “at that time, World-Honored One wishing to repeat what He had said sang in gatha.” In the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit original text, this is simply related as “at that time, the World-Honored One sang the following poem.”

Unless we read the Lotus Sutra with the mind of finding meaning in parables, metaphors and poems, we will fall into the so-called state of thinking that the sutra is gibberish and nonsense. The poem is the essence of the long passages. And more abbreviated and condensed poems are probably the Buddhist spells (ju) and mystic incantations (dharani). Since Buddhist spells and mystic incantations are the essence of the essence of Shakyamuni Buddha’s sermons, they are true words (shingon, mantra) and laws and rules to be followed by all beings.

This is related to the lamentation of St. Nichiren: “The characters of the Lotus Sutra are the living body of the Buddha. Since we have physical eyes, we see them as characters” (*Houren Sho Hokkesho*). The characters of the Lotus Sutra

are the symbol of Truth, the living body of the Buddha, and words and phrases, voice and letters that go beyond words and phrases, voice and letters.

We find similarities in the poem of Ippen Shonin of the path of the Pure Land.

The mountains, rivers, grasses and trees,  
from the wind to the sound of the waves,  
there is nothing that is not the nembutsu.

And the same admiration and reasoning is in Dogen Zenji's poem:

The colors and sounds of the mountain peaks  
are, at the same time,  
the voice and figure of our Shakyamuni.

While this may be due my lack of experience, I encourage you by saying that when you understand poetry, you can savor the thinking of Buddhism and have insights into the meaning of life, so get to know poetry, whether it is haiku, waka or general poetry.

“The same cylinder becomes a ring or an oval depending on how it is cut.” I believe that it was Yogo Suigan Ryoshi of the Soto Shu who said this. It provides us thought for deep reflection. For the cylinder called the Lotus Sutra, the appearance is different from just a single slice that is made. Yet, there is no change in the cylinder itself. From what angle did the founders of each denomination make their cut? From the difference of the angle that I refer to, how did they read the Lotus Sutra? It is a matter for deep reflection. The life that is expounded by the Lotus Sutra is that milk that fosters, namely, the nourishing Dharma milk of Buddhism. This milk is one. Many brothers and sisters each drank from the same mother’s milk and grew and became people with different personalities. In the same way, the Dharma milk of the Lotus Sutra ran through the founder of each denomination and nourished every one of their followers.

## ***Understanding 4: The Lotus Sutra Is the Teaching of the Ichijo Myoho (Wonderful Dharma of the One Vehicle)***

The eight books of the Lotus Sutra are all together the Wonderful Dharma of the One Vehicle.

There is no one who will not become the Buddha, who hears, for even just an instant, a gatha or phrase from any of the twenty-eight chapters.

*(Ryojin Hisho 103)*

The *Ryojin Hisho* is a collection of songs and poems that was compiled by the Tonsured Emperor, Goshirakawa in the late Heian period. In the second volume of the remaining work, there are two hundred twenty poems and songs that speak about the meaning of sutras. Among them are the “One Hundred Fifteen Poems on Lotus Sutra.” The songs on passages from the Lotus Sutra are the absolute majority and they are proof of the flourishing faith in the Lotus Sutra of the Heian period (794-1185).

From olden times, the Lotus Sutra was said to be the most excellent teaching from among the many Buddhist sutras. For example, the name of this sutra also appears frequently in the works by Japanese women writers of the mid-Heian period, the *Makura Soshi* by Seishonagon and the *Genji Monogatari* by Murasaki Shikibu. Lectures on the Lotus Sutra were often held under the name of Hokke Hakko and so forth.

“The Kegon, Agon, Hodokyo, Hannyagyō, Dainichikyo, Nehangyo and so forth, which are all the sutras transmitted from the past to the present and the future, are the small monarchs. They are like the princes and governors. The Lotus Sutra is like the great king and emperor” (*Uchibo Nyobo Gohenji*). Just as these words of praise by St. Nichiren, the Lotus Sutra is the king of the sutras.

This statement is not confined to the small sectarian ego of those who follow the lineage of the Lotus Sutra faith of “my sect is precious,” but even the modern philosopher, Takeshi Umehara, has evaluated the Lotus Sutra: “Since the age of Shotoku Taishi, the country called Japan was a nation of the Lotus Sutra.” Indeed, for quite

some time the Lotus Sutra has been read as a philosophical work with the sense of being the Buddhist bible, independent of religion and not for the sake of ceremony. And it continues to be read today.

As extolled in the poem from the *Ryojin Hisho*, one of the important contents of this sutra is the teaching that “everyone will become to the Buddha” called “shitsu u bussho” (悉有仏性). Shakyamuni awakened to the truth that “every human being possesses the possibility to become the Buddha.” And from His vow that He “must make all human beings the Buddha,” the contents that glorify human beings are found in the Lotus Sutra.

For example, in the Assurance of Future Buddhahood chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni gives the prediction and assurance of becoming the Buddha to many disciples beginning with Sharihotsu. Shakyamuni steadily fixes His gaze on the truth that is concealed deep within the mind of all people that is a pure human nature (Buddha nature), which makes that person a person. In this way does He make His prediction and assurance.

I do not think of this as being only a prediction and assurance, but a prediction and assurance that is infused with Shakyamuni's love and vow that He "must make this person the Buddha." This was not limited to only those who had accumulated religious training. He made the same prediction and assurance for even Daibadatta, an evil person who had attempted to harm Him.

The act of saving a person is to have him become aware of the buried truth of the great and pure human nature, the Buddha mind that gives life to that person, which all people possess deep within their mind, and to have him develop that mind. To have the person become a person is salvation. And what makes this possible is the teaching that glorifies human beings by Shakyamuni, which does not discriminate between the good person and the bad, that all people possess a pure human nature (Buddha nature). We can know this from the Assurance of Future Buddhahood chapter.

Next, the thinking of "shitsu u bussho" unfolded and it became the teaching of "shoho jisso" (諸法実相), the various realities. The teaching that from everything that we can see with our

eyes and hear with our ears, namely, everything in the universe, is just as it is, manifesting an aspect of Buddha nature. And this thinking advances the religious training of service so that all people are happy, and not just believers of the Lotus Sutra. This is called “bosatsu gyodo” (菩薩行道) “path of the bodhisattva practice.” The “bodhisattva” is a person who seeks to follow Buddhism and “gyodo” is the practice of the Buddhist path.

In addition, the most important thinking of the Lotus Sutra is the “ichijo myoho” (一乘妙法) “wonderful Dharma of the one vehicle.” At the time Shakyamuni’s teaching was a discriminative one that was divided into two vehicles or three vehicles (hearers, cause knowers and bodhisattvas). The “ichijo myoho” unifies this discriminative division. “Jo” is a “vehicle.” The Buddhism that was taught by Shakyamuni was likened to a vehicle. Moreover, the one vehicle is the absolute and sole vehicle that negates and raises up the lesser vehicle and the great vehicle. If one rides on this vehicle, anyone will equally become the Buddha and achieve the state of enlightenment. “One” also means unification and the sole vehicle (teaching), and to emphasize that there are

no other vehicles, it is called “ichijo myoho” (wonderful Dharma of the one vehicle) or the absolute excellent Truth. It is stated in the Lotus Sutra: “Sharihotsu, the Tathagata expounds the teaching of the one Buddha vehicle [identical with wonderful Dharma of the one vehicle]. The second and third other vehicles [other teachings] do not exist.” In other words, the claim that the Buddhism taught by the Lotus Sutra is the absolute and sole Buddhism is being set forth.

The “ichijo myoho” of the Lotus Sutra that is taught by the Lotus Sutra is a unification of various schools of thought of Buddhism until that time. In olden times, “Ichijo myoho” was one of the three great ideas of the Lotus Sutra according the Chinese Buddhist scholars, and it was also transmitted to Japan. The three great ideas are “the wonderful Dharma of the one vehicle, the Eternal Buddha and the path of the bodhisattva practice.” They respectively advocate a unified universal Truth, an eternal personal life and real human activity.

## ***Understanding 5: The Meaning and Value of the Lotus Sutra***

It might seem odd to be told that two Shakyamuni Buddhas appear in the Lotus Sutra. Nonetheless, the reason for the Lotus Sutra lies in this fact. It goes without saying that one of the Shakyamuni Buddhas is the human Shakyamuni Buddha, who really existed historically. He was born in 463 B.C. and died in 383 B.C. (Dr. Hajime Nakamura's theory). This Shakyamuni Buddha possessed a physical body just like ourselves. He is the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha and the human being Shakyamuni Buddha.

In Great Vehicle Buddhism, the manifestations in form to save the various sentient beings (all living beings) are called "ojin" (literally "responding body"). For example, in the sense of being a Buddha that appeared in a human body to save human beings, we revere that Buddha as the Ojin Shakyamuni Buddha. (Shakyamuni Buddha of the responding body).

Since He is a human being, that Shakyamuni Buddha will also die. At the end of His life, that

Shakyamuni Buddha left behind the teaching: “Since My body that is visible is finite, it will die, but the Dharma, which I awakened to, is the Eternal Truth and it will never disappear or die.” From the sadness of Shakyamuni Buddha’s disciples and worshipers, His teaching was followed to the word, and the formless Dharma, which He awakened to, was personified as the hosshin (Dharma body) and, as opposed to the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha, they came to have faith in the “Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha” (Dharma Body Shakyamuni Buddha).

I believe that the meaning of the “two Shakyamuni Buddhas” is now very clear. The Introductory chapter, the first chapter, to the Peaceful Practices chapter, the fourteenth chapter, of the first half of the twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra, are the sermons of the Ojin (physical body) Shakyamuni Buddha. The later half, the fourteen chapters from the fifteenth chapter, The Appearance of the Bodhisattvas from Underground chapter, to the final chapter, the twenty-eighth chapter, The Encouragement of Universal Sage Bodhisattva chapter, are the sermons of the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha. This is the organization of the sutra. While we speak of two Shakyamuni Buddhas, from the

beginning they are not separate persons. That is because the source that makes the human being Shakyamuni Buddha, the human being Shakyamuni Buddha, is the Dharma (the Truth that penetrates universe and human life) that Shakyamuni Buddha had awakened to. To put this another way, the Dharma is the original body and essence of the physical body (human being) Shakyamuni Buddha. The human being Shakyamuni Buddha, who possessed only a finite life, had grasped the infinite Dharma, and that is why Shakyamuni Buddha, His Dharma body and His physical body are unified, and we have faith in Him (the reason for Shakyamuni Buddha's holiness). However, in the thinking of Great Vehicle Buddhism, more than the human being Shakyamuni Buddha of the physical (o [responding]) Buddha-body, from Dharma-body Buddha that is the personification of the Dharma, the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha is projected, and in the devotion to the Eternal Buddha, there is found its special characteristic.

This can be well understood from an example of the world of science. As anyone knows, the law of universal gravitation was discovered by the English physicist, Newton. While Newton died at the age of eighty-five, the law of gravitation

that he discovered is deathless. Let us think about this a bit more deeply. Whether Newton had been born or had not been born, or he had discovered it or not, from the eternal past, the law of gravity had existed. It was Newton who discovered this truth that no one had discovered. And that is the reason his greatness is praised.

The same is true for the law of causation (karma) that Shakyamuni had awakened to. This law had existed before Shakyamuni's enlightenment, but just as with gravity, no one had taken notice of it. Buddhism speaks of the Kako Shichibutsu (seven Buddhas who appeared in succession in this world). This parable that speaks of six Buddhas before Shakyamuni is a symbolic representation of the fact that the law of causation was a truth that existed before His enlightenment.

Shakyamuni Buddha says: "I did nothing more than discover the path of past enlightened ones" (Zoagon-kyo). It is by no means that He said this because of His humility, but like the law of gravity, the law of causation, which He awakened to, is the truth regardless of Shakyamuni's birth and death. As we have earlier learned, the personification of the Eternal Truth, which

Shakyamuni Buddha awakened to, is the “Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha” and the “Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha.” Accordingly, it is clear that the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha and the Eternal (Hosshin) Shakyamuni Buddha are not different persons.

The “Eternal” that we speak of is not the “eternal past” that is generally thought of, but it suggests infinite time that extends to the “eternal future.” In the song of Waseda University, which is my alma mater, and that I even now sing dearly, there are the lyrics: “the eternal ideal that does not forget this world.” When we think about it, to not forget the various observable events of this world and to live with an eternal ideal is probably the way of life for those who believe in the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. In the same way as the law of gravity and causation, whether or not it was discovered or awakened to, the Truth of Buddhism, which had existed from the eternal past and the fact that the Buddha had become the Buddha who awakened in the eternal past, is spoken of as “Kuon Jitsujo” (literally, existed and became enlightened eternally). The physical body Shakyamuni Buddha, who had awakened to the enlightenment that existed and became eternally, and the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha

(Dharma Body Shakyamuni Buddha) are one and the same.

Even if the physical body Shakyamuni dies, His teaching does not die, and it is being expounded here and now. To believe in this is to be honored by the sermon of the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha. The Lotus Sutra explains this with the words 常住此說法 (Jo Ju Shi Seppo [I am always here and I am teaching the Dharma]). Specifically, the words “Jo Ju” speak of forever residing here and an existence that exists eternally.

“Jo Ju Shi Seppo” is not limited to the sermon of the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha, but it probably even includes a deceased parent, teacher or friend for whom we have an awareness of the facts that they have taught us with their now voiceless voice.

I recall the poem:

“With yearning you should chant Namu Amida Butsu, I truly dwell within the six characters of His name.”

St. Honen is saying that if you wish to meet me, who has died, you should chant the name of the Buddha, by chanting “Namu Amida Butsu.” I am residing within the six characters of the Buddha’s name in prayer. In this way did he advise his followers. In this poem, the original word used for “dwell” is a pun for both “dwell” and “clearness.” When the believer’s mind is clear, the mind of St. Honen and the Amida Buddha resides there. There is no difference in chanting the Onembutsu or the Odaimoku. Within the clear mind of the person who chants, the Buddha’s mind resides.

The Zen Master Ikkyu has masterfully infused the mind that combined “Kuon Jitsujo” and “Jo Ju Shi Seppo” in a poem.

“I do not die, and I have gone nowhere.  
I am here, but I do not speak to those who come to call.”

This is indeed a witty poem that is very typical of the Zen Master Ikkyu, who had mastered the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. When reading it there is something that deeply strikes our heart.

Many researchers of the Zen Master Ikkyu consider this poem to be a satirical poem that is a deathbed poem. It is natural for them to think that way. When the Zen Master Ikkyu and the Zen Priest Ryokan were alive and well, they most casually composed and gave witty poems and comical poems when receiving alms and called them death poems. This poem can probably be considered one such poem.

At the time I also thought this way about the poems of Zen Master Ikkyu, but as I later read this poem, from the strong assertion “I do not die,” the teaching from the gatha of the sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra unexpectedly came to mind: “I have really not died. I am always here and teaching the true Dharma.” And it goes without saying that the verse “I am here. I have gone nowhere,” is referring to “Jo Ju Shi Seppo” of the same gatha.

“I do not speak to those who come to call.” In this final line of the Zen Master Ikkyu’s poem, we can feel the depth of absolute silence and the Tathagata’s sermon of silent concentration. It is for these reasons that I believe that this poem by the Zen Master Ikkyu that begins “I do not die” is more than his death poem but his deep

understanding and the grasp with his entire being of the Lotus Sutra.

Accordingly, if we were to consider that poem to be the Zen Master Ikkyu's death poem, we should see it as being based on his deep faith in the Lotus Sutra.

As mentioned earlier, the earlier portion of the Lotus Sutra is the sermon of the physical body (Ojin) Shakyamuni Buddha and the later portion is the sermon of the Hosshin (Dharma body) Shakyamuni Buddha. There are these two divisions in the Lotus Sutra. In this we can feel the thoroughness of the Lotus Sutra's design. Although Shakyammui Buddha is not two persons, in the sermon of the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha we feel a concrete location, and we feel universality in the sermon of the Eternal Shakyamuni Buddha.

This is not limited to Shakaymuni alone, but for the talk of a person who possesses the form of a physical body, we see his form with our eyes, and we can hear his voice with our ears. However, for a talk by a person with no physical body, we are unable to hear his voice, but when our ears and mind are clear, we are able to see

that person even if we do not try to see him, and hear his voice although we make no particular effort to do so. When our mind that is caught up with our self is settled, even persons like ourselves realize these faculties.

The disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha were able to see His form and hear His voice when He was alive. However, when Shakyamuni Buddha was no longer alive, His form could not be seen and His voice could not be heard. That painful remorse and the endless yearning had probably caused them to wish for a Shakyamuni Buddha who would live forever. It is here that we find the reason for the heightening of faith in the eternal Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha.

Hence, in the many Buddhist sutras, in addition to the Hokku-kyo, which is based on the sermon of the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha, there are such sutras as the Kegon-kyo and the Lotus Sutra, which are the expounded by the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha. There are also sutras expounded by many Tathagatas and bodhisattvas other than Shakyamuni Buddha. As I mentioned earlier, the only Buddha that existed historically is Shakyamuni Buddha. All the other Buddhas and bodhisattvas are not

real historic personages. Although they are all fictitious Buddhas and bodhisattvas, they are not simply fiction and it goes without saying that they are also not idols. The names of the various Buddhas (Tathagata) are expressions of the contents of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment. And the names of the many bodhisattvas are all expressing the contents of Shakyamuni Buddha's deep religious training. Buddhist statues are symbols of the meaning of enlightenment and religious training.

There are many names of the hosshin, which are the personification of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment. And there are also a good number of sutras where the Hosshin Buddha gives His sermon. The Dainichi-kyo is the sermon of Dainichi Nyorai. Since the name Dainichi Nyorai is a representation of the contents of Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment, the Dainichi-kyo is similar to the latter half of the Lotus Sutra. It is the sermon of not a physical body Buddha but the Hosshin (Dharma Body) Buddha.

The Dharma expounds the Dharma and the Truth expounds the Truth—here is the uniqueness of Buddhist sutras. Here is the

reason for the accounts of the sutras using a symbolic and literary method. In the unification of the sermon of the physical body Shakyamuni Buddha and the Hosshin Shakyamuni Buddha there is the great meaning and value of the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra is also called a “miraculous sutra.” Contrary to the fervent devotion to the Lotus Sutra, there is severe criticism. It is a fact that just as in the past this continues today. A summary of that censure and criticism is that it is not theoretical, it is exclusivistic and cliquish. This does not differ from the remarks that were made in the past. The approval or disapproval for the Lotus Sutra is divided because the contents of this sutra are demanding and it contains the diversity to reflect itself in any which way depending of the reader’s angle.

More than residing within the Lotus Sutra itself, I believe that the true value of the Lotus Sutra lies within the readers themselves. Therefore, depending on the growth of the reader’s mind, the Truth that this sutra expounds develops the reader’s mind endlessly. The Lotus Sutra possesses this fathomless power. Each time I read the Lotus Sutra I feel new life being created

in my mind. The Lotus Sutra possesses this motive power because the Truth expounded by Shakyamuni Buddha is explained by parables and metaphors. Theories that can be expressed by words and phrases are limited to the sphere of what can be understood with knowledge. Nevertheless, through human emotion and speculation, and finally as intuition, the so-called figurative language of parables and metaphors causes us to nod in approval from the depths of our mind on points of doubt from knowledge. And we can find agreement.

While there are limitations to theoretical expressive power through words and phrases, figurative language can go beyond those limitations and convey the true meaning. When we have received a theoretical answer, we are satisfied with that answer and we are prone to not pursue the question further. However, in the case of figurative language, even if we take notice of the suggestions that are conveyed, the human imaginative power that yearns for Truth is not suppressed in the least, and it delves even deeper into those suggestions and searches for the Dharma. Through multiple religious training of trial and error, a new world of faith is created and developed.

I earlier wrote that many of the sutras of the Great Vehicle have sermons in parables. It is the Lotus Sutra that most frequently uses parables and expounds the profound Dharma. Even from the perspective of being a higher symbolic sermon, the Lotus Sutra could probably be called the “King of Sutras.” The traditional interpretation is that the Lotus Sutra is the last sutra that Shakyamuni Buddha expounded. And since the teaching is the most complete, it is called the “King of Sutras.” Yet the historical reality is that it came into existence in the early Christian Era in northwestern India and it was conveyed to China through central Asia. The transmission of the Lotus Sutra to Japan is thought to be at the time of the official transmission of Buddhism in 538 from China through Kudara (an ancient Korean kingdom). Then just seventy-seven years later, in 615, Prince Shotoku authored a commentary on a major portion of the Lotus Sutra. Until the eighth century, as though being the state religion, the Lotus Sutra was embraced by both high and low alike. In terms of historical order, first of all, in the early Heian period (794-1185), the Priest Saicho (Dengyo Daishi) traveled to China in 804. He received the teaching of the Tendai Shu, which was established by Tendai

Daishi Chigi. After his return, the Priest Saicho established the Tendai Shu of Japan at Hieizan. From the fact that this denomination is called the Tendai Hokke Shu, the fundamentals of its doctrine are based on the Lotus Sutra. Furthermore, since Hieizan became the center of learning for all Japanese Buddhism, the founders of all the denominations, including St. Honen (Jodo Shu), St. Eisai (Rinzai Shu), St. Shinran (Jodo Shin Shu), St. Dogen (Soto Shu) and St. Nichiren (Nichiren Shu) had certainly studied and matured there.

In their younger days, the founders of the denominations earnestly read the Daizo-kyo (appellation for all Buddhist sutras) at Hieizan. And they must have particularly read the Lotus Sutra with a sense of intimacy. The teaching of the Lotus Sutra is the milk that fosters life. It is the milk of the Dharma, namely, the “Dharma milk.”

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