

# Nichiren's Interpretation of the Universality of the *Lotus Sutra*

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## Introduction

Nichiren (1222-82) considered the *Lotus Sutra* (as translated by Kumārajīva) to be the most supreme of Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings—and based on the teachings and various characteristics of the sutra, he believed that Śākyamuni Buddha came to save all the people of the Sahā world.

Among the sutra's many important doctrines, Nichiren contended that the concepts of “Attainment of Buddhahood by Those of the Two Vehicles (*śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*)” from chapter 2, Skillful Means, and “Attainment of Enlightenment in the Eternal Past” from chapter 16, The Lifespan of the Tathāgata, were of particular importance, and were pillars supporting his conception of the sutra's universal indications. These points are the main differences between the many sutras taught by the Buddha during the first forty years after his enlightenment and the *Lotus Sutra*.

## Characteristics of Nichiren's *Lotus Sutra* Buddhism

Nichiren refers to many sutras that were expounded during those first forty years—sutras in which the attainment of Buddhahood by those of the two vehicles is rejected. But with regard to this he points out that Śākyamuni Buddha suddenly turns away from what these sutras expounded: in the *Lotus Sutra*, during the last eight years, he teaches that those in the two vehicles will attain Buddhahood.

Nichiren also cites references from various sutras that teach that the historical Buddha attained Buddhahood under the *pippala* tree at Gayā. Furthermore, he indicates related points from the *Sutra of Infinite Meanings* [無量義經] and from chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra* as well. Nevertheless, he makes it a point of emphasis that chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra* reveals that Śākyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment in the far distant past.

For Nichiren, Prabhūtaratna Buddha's appearance in chapter 11, The Appearance of a Jeweled Stupa, and his role during the scene of “the assembly in the sky [虚空会]” (which begins in chapter 11 and ends in chapter 22, Entrustment), was extremely important in the *Lotus Sutra* and was another great influence on how he perceived it. He

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thought that the truth of the *Lotus Sutra* is verified by the testimony of Prabhūtaratna Buddha in chapter 11, and that the appearance of the Jeweled Stupa set the stage for the revelation of the “Eternal Buddha” in chapter 16.

Śākyamuni Buddha completed his commission of the teachings in chapter 22. With the words, “All the Buddhas [who had come from everywhere in the ten directions] should be at ease. The Buddha Prabhūtaratna will be restored as before,” the scene of the “assembly in the sky” ends and the stage dramatically returns to Mt. Eagle Peak once more. Based on three major interactions with assemblies at two locations—Mt. Eagle Peak, [assembly in] the Sky, and a return to Mt. Eagle Peak—Nichiren created a sutra-based three-stage progression for the mission he felt was entrusted to him, i.e., relief for people during the Latter Age of Degeneration (*Mappō* 末法). They were: Initiation (起), based on the contents of chapter 10, “The Expounder of the Dharma” and chapter 11, “The Appearance of a Jeweled Stupa;” Revelation (顯) based on the contents of chapter 15, “Bodhisattvas Emerging from the Earth,” and Chapter 16, “The Lifespan of the Tathāgata;” and Completion (竟), which followed from the contents of chapter 21, “The Transcendent Powers of the Tathāgata,” and chapter 22, “Entrustment.”

### **Prophecies, viewpoints, and exhortations**

Nichiren thought that descriptions in the *Lotus Sutra* regarding its own status in times to come (*Miraiki* 未来記) were a “bright mirror” (明鏡) that reflected what the future held in store, and gave additional indications of the sutra’s scope. The following are representative examples from throughout the sutra:

Chapter 3, A Parable: “Listen to what I teach about the results of the errors of those people who...after [the Buddha’s] *parinirvāna*, disparage this sutra, and despise, hate, and hold grudges against the people who recite, copy, and preserve it.”<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 10, The Expounder of the Dharma: “Moreover, people show great hostility to this sutra, even in the presence of the Tathāgata. How much more so after the *parinirvāna* of the Tathāgata.”<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 13, Perseverance: “In the fearful, troubled world, after the Buddha’s *parinirvāna*, we will be patient with those who are ignorant...They will utter evil words with angry countenances, and they will repeatedly expel us, and keep us

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<sup>1</sup>*Taishō Daizōkyō* vol.9, 15c

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* 31b

away from the monasteries and stupas.”<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 14, Ease in Practice: “He [the Tathāgata] now teaches the *Lotus Sutra*, which is treated with hostility by the entire world and is difficult to believe in...”<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 20, Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta: “...he [Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta] would praise and pay homage to them, saying: ‘I deeply respect you. I dare not belittle you. Why is this? Because all of you practice the bodhisattva-path, and will become Buddhas.’...Whenever he spoke these words, people would assail him with sticks or stones...”<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 23, Previous Acts of Medicine King Bodhisattva: “I will entrust you [Naksatrarājasamkusumitābhijña/Star-King-Flower] with this chapter, ‘The Previous Acts of the Medicine King Bodhisattva.’ During the period of five hundred years after my *parinirvāna* you must spread it far and wide in Jambudvīpa and not allow it to be destroyed.”<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 28, Encouragement of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra: “O Bhagavat! Through my transcendent powers I [Bodhisattva Samantabhadra] will now protect, extensively distribute, and keep this sutra from extermination in Jambudvīpa after the *parinirvāna* of the Tathāgata.”<sup>7</sup>

Nichiren thought these descriptions in the *Lotus Sutra* regarding the difficulties the sutra and its followers would face were like mirrors that reflected future truths. Four times in his life Nichiren endured and overcame great religious persecution, and he considered that what he had experienced gave proof to the precious words of Śākyamuni Buddha.

### **Interpretations of aspects of chapters 23-28 of the sutra**

While the completion component of Nichiren’s self-imposed mission to save the people during the Latter Age was marked by chapters 21 and 22, the following are some examples from Nichiren’s writings in which he draws attention to what he considered to be important wide-reaching aspects of the *Lotus Sutra*—particularly vows to protect all of its practitioners—found in the final chapters of the sutra, chapters 23-28.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 36c

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 39a

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 50c

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 54c

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 61c

In his commentary on chapter 23 in the *Yakuōbon Tokui Shō*,<sup>8</sup> Nichiren discussed the attainment of Buddhahood by women:

“On a night when there is no moon, but only the light of the stars, strong men or resolute individuals may walk abroad, but elderly people and women will find it impossible to do so. But when there is a full moon, even women and elderly people may walk about anywhere they please, proceeding to a banquet or going to meet others. Similarly, in the various sutras, it is said that bodhisattvas and ordinary persons of great capacity can attain enlightenment. But for persons of the two vehicles, ordinary persons, evil persons and women, or persons in a latter age who are elderly and lazy and do not observe the precepts, no assurance is given that they can ever attain rebirth in the pure land or achieve Buddhahood. This is not so of the Lotus Sutra, however. There, even persons in the two vehicles, evil persons, and women are assured of becoming Buddhas, to say nothing of bodhisattvas and ordinary persons of great capacity...And if we consider the passages in the *Lotus Sutra* that state: ‘The World-Honored One has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth,’ and ‘All that you have expounded [in the *Lotus Sutra*] is the truth,’ then we must conclude that those passages in the *Lotus Sutra* that declare that women can most assuredly attain rebirth in the pure land and achieve Buddhahood are true statements and expressions of his observance of the precept against lying.”

Nichiren was adamant that the Buddha’s teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* was for people in the Latter Age, including us. In the *Kanjin Honzon Shō*,<sup>9</sup> he wrote:

“The Hosshi [tenth] chapter states: ‘Since hatred and jealousy abound even during the lifetime of the Buddha, how much worse will it be in the world after his passing?’ The Juryo [sixteenth] chapter states: ‘I leave this good medicine here for you now.’ The Funbetsu Kudoku [nineteenth] chapter speaks of ‘the evil-filled Latter Day of the Law.’ The Yakuo [twenty-third] chapter says: ‘During the last half-millennium after my death the *Lotus Sutra* will spread widely throughout the world.’ In the *Nirvana Sutra* occurs a passage that reads: ‘Suppose that a couple has seven children, one of whom falls ill. Although the parents love all their children equally, they worry most about the sick child.’

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<sup>8</sup> *Yakuōbon Tokui Shō, Teihon* pp.339

<sup>9</sup> *Kanjin Honzon Shō, Teihon* pp 718-19

These passages are a crystal mirror of the Buddha's will. They show that the Buddha did not appear for the sake of those present during the eight years when he revealed the *Lotus Sutra* at Mt. Eagle Peak, but for people like us, those living in the beginning of the Latter Day, not for those who lived in the Former or Middle Day of the Law. The 'sick child' mentioned in the *Nirvana Sutra* represents the slanderers of the *Lotus Sutra* in the Latter Age.”

With regard to the beneficial effects of embracing the *Lotus Sutra*, in the *Hokke Daimoku Shō*,<sup>10</sup> Nichiren wrote:

“Question: Is there any scriptural proof that we gain merits through the exclusive chanting of the *daimoku* [the name of the *Lotus Sutra*]? Answer: In chapter 26 the *Lotus Sutra* says that the merits obtained will be immeasurable when one keeps only the name of the *Lotus Sutra*. Dharmaraksha's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* (正法華經) says that the merits of a person who hears this sutra and keeps its name will be innumerable. The *Lotus Sutra with Additions* (添品妙法蓮華經) says that the merits will be innumerably great when one keeps the name of the *Lotus Sutra*.”

Here Nichiren's belief that anyone who chants the name of the *Lotus Sutra* will gain incalculable merit is clearly shown. And in the *Nichinyo Gozen Gohenji*,<sup>11</sup> he wrote:

“The *Kannon* (twenty-fifth) chapter is also called the *Fumon* chapter. The first part describes the merit of those who put faith in Bodhisattva Kanzeon [or Kannon] - so the title *Kannon* chapter. The latter part expounds the merit of those who embrace the *Lotus Sutra*, [the teaching of universal enlightenment,] which Bodhisattva Kannon upholds - so the title *Fumon* [Universal Gate] chapter.”

Protection of the sutra's practitioners (including himself) was important to Nichiren, and he frequently referred to it in his works. In the *Nichinyo Gozen Gohenji*,<sup>12</sup> he wrote:

“Chapter 24, Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara, tells of a bodhisattva called Gadgadasvara (Wonderful Voice) who dwells in the land of the Buddha Wisdom King of the Pure Flower Constellation in the east. In the past, in the age of the Buddha King Cloud Thunder-Sound, he was Lady Jotoku [Pure Virtue], the wife

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<sup>10</sup> *Hokke Daimoku Shō, Teihon* pp.394

<sup>11</sup> *Nichinyo Gozen Gohenji, Teihon* pp.1509-10

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pp.1509

of King Wonderful Adornment. At that time, Lady Jotoku made offerings to the *Lotus Sutra* and was reborn as Bodhisattva Gadgadasvara. When Shakyamuni Buddha expounded the *Lotus Sutra* in the *saha* world, this bodhisattva came to attend the ceremony and pledged to protect those women who would embrace the *Lotus Sutra* in the latter age.”

In the same treatise,<sup>13</sup> Nichiren wrote:

“The *Dharani* (twenty-sixth) chapter describes how the two saints, the two heavenly gods, and the ten demon daughters will protect the votary of the *Lotus Sutra*. The two saints are Yakuo [Medicine King Bodhisattva] and Yuze [Brave Donor Bodhisattva], and the two heavenly gods are Bishamon and Jikoku. The ten demon daughters are the ten major female demons, the mothers of all demons of the four continents.“

And also:

“Next we come to chapter 28, Encouragement of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. Though there were many monks among the disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha, Mahakashyapa and Ananda always accompanied him on his right and left, just like the ministers of the right and left who attend the ruler. This was when the Buddha expounded the Hinayana sutras. Moreover, among all the innumerable bodhisattvas, Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī were distinguished as Lord Shakyamuni's ministers of the right and left. It was strange, therefore that Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, one of Shakyamuni's two ministers, should be absent during the eight years when the Buddha expounded the *Lotus Sutra*, which surpasses all the other sutras of his lifetime teachings, in the ceremony where the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions gathered in numbers exceeding those of the dust particles that comprise the earth. But when chapter 27 (Ancient Accounts of King Śubhavyūha) had been expounded and the preaching of the *Lotus Sutra* was drawing to a close, Bodhisattva Samantabhadra came hurrying belatedly from the land of the Buddha King Surpassing the Awesome Excellence of Gems in the east, accompanied by the sounds of billions of musical instruments and leading a retinue of countless numbers of the eight kinds of mysterious beings. Probably fearing the Buddha's displeasure at his tardy arrival, he assumed a serious expression and pledged in all earnestness to protect the votary of the *Lotus Sutra* in the latter age. The Buddha, no doubt pleased with Samantabhadra 's extraordinary sincerity in

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* pp.1510

vowing to spread the *Lotus Sutra* throughout the continent of Jambudvīpa, thereupon praised him—more warmly, in fact, than he had earlier praised the other bodhisattvas of high rank.<sup>14</sup>”

### **Relationship between chapters 2 and 16, and chapters 23-28**

Even though he emphasized notable aspects of chapters 23-28 throughout his writings, Nichiren considered chapters 2 and 16 to be the pillars of his interpretation of the sutra and of his conception of the breadth of the sutra’s scope.

With regard to chapter 23, in the *Yakuōbon Tokui Shō*,<sup>15</sup> Nichiren wrote:

“Concerning the general meaning of this Medicine King Bodhisattva chapter, it is in the seventh fascicle and is the twenty-third of the twenty-eight chapters that make up the *Lotus Sutra*. The first fascicle of the sutra contains two chapters—chapter 1 (Introduction), and chapter 2 (Skillful Means). Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the entire twenty-eight chapters. The eight chapters beginning with the Skillful Means chapter (chapter 2) and continuing through The Predictions for Those Who Still Have More to Learn and for Those Who Do Not chapter (chapter 9) are concerned primarily with clarifying how persons of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles can attain Buddhahood, and secondarily with clarifying how bodhisattvas and ordinary people can attain Buddhahood. The following five chapters, consisting of The Expounder of the Dharma, The Appearance of a Jeweled Stupa, Devadatta, Perseverance, and Ease in Practices chapters, explain how the teachings set forth in the preceding eight chapters are to be carried out by ordinary persons in the Latter Age of Degeneration. The ensuing chapter 15, Bodhisattvas Emerging from the Earth, serves as an introduction to chapter 16, Life Span of the Tathāgata. The subsequent twelve chapters, beginning with chapter 17, Description of Merits, explain mainly how ordinary people in the Latter Age of Degeneration should practice the doctrines set forth in the Life Span of the Tathāgata chapter, and secondarily explain how those set forth in the eight chapters from the Skillful Means chapter on are to be carried out. The Medicine King Bodhisattva chapter, therefore, is a chapter that explains how one ought to carry out the teachings both of the eight chapters beginning with the Skillful Means chapter and of the Life Span of the Tathāgata chapter.”

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp.1514-5

<sup>15</sup> *Yakuōbon Tokui Shō, Teihon* pp.337

Looking at the final six chapters as a unit, in the *Kanjin Honzon Shō*,<sup>16</sup> Nichiren wrote:

“The [twenty-second] chapter states: ‘At this time Shakyamuni Buddha rose from his place of preaching, and displaying his great mystic powers, put his right hand on the heads of the infinite numbers of bodhisattvas, saying, “I now transfer the supreme law of enlightenment to you.” The Buddha passed the Law to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, the bodhisattvas of the theoretical teaching, bodhisattvas of other worlds, Brahmā, Indra, and the Four Heavenly Kings. Then ‘all the Buddhas, who had gathered from the ten directions of the universe, returned to their respective lands... And the Buddha ordered that the Treasure Tower of Prabhūtaratna Buddha return to its original place.’ After the Bodhisattvas of the Earth had departed, the Buddha urged all the remaining bodhisattvas to keep the teachings after his passing as he preached the last six chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Fugen Sutra*, and the *Nirvana Sutra*.”

And, in the *Hōren shō*,<sup>17</sup> he wrote:

“Moreover, those who attained enlightenment by listening to the six chapters from the Medicine King Bodhisattva chapter on are merely those who had remained unenlightened after gaining blessings from the *jiga-ge* [verse section of the Life Span of the Tathāgata chapter]. And in the forty volumes of the *Nirvana Sutra* the Buddha once more explained the blessings to be derived from the *jiga-ge* to the fifty-two types of beings who were gathered there. “

## Epilogue

Nichiren believed that Śākyamuni Buddha came to save the people of the Sahā world. And he thought that “Attainment of Buddhahood by Those of the Two Vehicles” from chapter 2, Skillful Means, and “Attainment of Enlightenment in the Eternal Past” from chapter 16, The Lifespan of the Tathāgata, were extremely important doctrines that were pillars supporting the sutra’s universal indications. He thought that the doctrine of the eternity of Śākyamuni Buddha in chapter 16 is a most important doctrine for the people of Sahā world in the Latter Age of Degeneration, which includes those of us in the present day. Nichiren also focused on the importance of the vows by heavenly divinities in chapters 23-28 to protect all practitioners of the *Lotus Sutra*, and it can be said that he thought that doctrine of chapter 16 was the foundation of those chapters.

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<sup>16</sup> *Kanjin Honzon Shō, Teihon* pp.718

<sup>17</sup> *Hōren shō, Teihon* pp.949

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