

# The Tradition of the Lotus Sutra Faith in Japan\*

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## 1. Traditions of Chinese translations of the Lotus Sūtra

The Lotus-Sutra-based new religions that developed in Japanese society began to attract the attention of the Japanese public—and also the attention of Western researchers on Japan who were asking, “What is the Lotus Sutra?”—around 1945. Japanese people and Japanese sociologists asked the same question of Japanese Buddhist scholars, but the scholars were unable to give a definitive answer. At present, although such temporal enthusiasm has dissipated, the Lotus Sutra’s roots have taken hold and become widespread, and therefore such fundamental questions are not asked as often. So I believe that now I may be allowed to offer my humble comments on this topic in my capacity as a researcher on the Lotus Sutra.

As is known, the Lotus Sutra is thought to have been compiled during the early stages of the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. It is cited or quoted in 21 different articles in “The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom” [*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-Shāstra*; 大智度論 Jpn: *Daichido-ron*], attributed to Nāgārjuna. “The Treatise on the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law” [*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra-upadeśa*; 法華論 Jpn: *Hokke-ron*], by Vasubandhu, an overall commentary on the Lotus Sutra, is another well known work. As far as translations from China are concerned, there are three extant versions: 1) the “Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law” [正法華經 Chin: *Cheng-fa-hua-ching*; Jpn: *Shō-hokke-kyō*], translated by Dharmarakṣha ; 竺法護, a priest from Tun-Huang, in the year 286AD; 2) Kumarajiva’s translation in 406AD, “The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law” [*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*; 妙法蓮華經 Chin: *Miao-fa-lien-hua-ching*; Jpn: *Myōhō-rengē-kyō*] and, 3) the “Supplemented Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law” [添品妙法蓮華經 Chin: *T’ien-p’in-fa-hua-ching*; Jpn: *Tempon-hokke-kyō*], translated in 601AD by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta. Three other different Chinese translations are said to have been made.

Additionally, fifteen or more commentaries were written on the Lotus Sutra in China, all from differing basic viewpoints.

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Among those, the most influential ones were written by Chih-i (538-597). He gave lectures on the sutras, and especially on the Lotus Sutra. He left three major works: 1) *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* [法華玄義 Chin: *Fa-hua-hsüan-i*; Jpn: *Hokke-gengi*]; 2) “*The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*” [法華文句 Chin: *Fa-hua-wen-chü*; Jpn: *Hokke-mongu*]; and, 3) *Great Concentration and Insight* [□□止觀 Chin: *Mo-ho-chih-kuan*; Jpn: *Maka-shikan*]. These were written down, compiled, and preserved by his disciple Chang-an (章安). The sixth patriarch of the Chinese T’ien-t’ ai sect, Chan-jan [湛然: Tannen] (711-782), endeavored to revitalize the sect, which had been in decline, and he wrote commentaries on Chih-i’s lectures called: “The Annotations on *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*” [法華玄義積箋 Chin: *Fa-hua-hsüan-i-shi-ch’ien*; Jpn: *Hokke-gengi-shaku-sen*], “The Annotations on *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*” [法華文句記 Chin: *Fa-hua-wen-chü-chi*; Jpn: *Hokke-mongu-ki*], and “The Annotations on *Great Concentration and Insight*” [摩訶止觀輔行伝弘決 Chin: *Chih-kuan-fu-shing-chuan-hung-chüeh*; Jpn: *Shikan-bugyō-den-guketsu*]. With these he tried to emphasize the real meaning of Chih-i’s teachings; and, with several other writings, he tried to deepen the Buddhistic understanding of Chih-i’s concept of *Kyō-kan ni mon* (教觀二門) (two pillars: doctrine and practice), i.e., concentration on the teachings and on the methods and practices contained in the treatise “*Great Concentration and Insight*.”

In understanding the Lotus Sutra, Chih-i paid attention to *shohō-jissō* (諸法實相), the “true aspect of all phenomena,” found at the beginning of chapter two, which was followed by *jū-nyoze* (十如是), the “ten factors of life,” which is presented to suggest the outline and significance of *shohō-jissō* (諸法實相), true aspect of all phenomena. In the traditions of the Chinese sects of scholastic Buddhism, Chih-i focused attention on two factors which he considered to be the foundation upon which the concept of *jū-nyoze* (十如是) functions. One of them, described in the Buddha-avatamsaka Sutra [華嚴經 Jpn: *Kegon-kyō*], was *jikkai* (十界), “the ten potential states (worlds) of life inherent in each living being,” and the other was *san-seken* (三世間), the “three realms of existence” (the realm of living beings, the realm of the five components, and the material, or environmental realm), which was one of the subjects of “The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom,” mentioned previously. With regard to *jū-nyoze* (十如是), the ten factors, he made it clear that three aspects of existence, appearance (相), nature (性), and entity (体), become actual function that is accompanied by potential power (力) and actualization of potential power (作). These five factors operate along with internal cause (因), condition (緣), latent effect (果), and manifest effect (報). Ultimately, all of the previous nine actors function consistently and harmoniously as an interrelated whole (本末究竟等).

So, the *jū-nyoze* (十如是) mentioned in the text of the Lotus Sutra should be recognized as the operation of existing things within the world of their actual state of existence—which can range, within the ten potential worlds of the *jikkai* (十界), from ignorance to enlightenment. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that this scheme is not only operating with regard to living beings. The material realm does not exist independently from the mind of living beings; rather, it is an object of perception paralleling the realm of the living. Thus, the material realm and the realm of living beings cannot be separated. The realm of the five components (form, perception, conception, volition, and consciousness), links the material realm with the realm of living beings. Existing things are recognized through a relationship between a perceiver—the function of the five components through its eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body, and the corresponding five senses of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch—and the object of perception; there is no recognition if one aspect is not present.

Thus from the simple words of *shohō-jissō* (諸法實相) and *jū-nyoze* (十如是) in chapter two of the Lotus Sutra, Chih-i conceived that the *jū-nyoze* (十如是) (ten factors), *jikkai* (十界) (ten worlds), and *san-seken* (三世間) (three realms), are intimately interacting in one’s perception during each moment. This is the basic idea that underlies the concept of “*ichi-nen sanzen*” (一念三千) —embracing three thousand realms in a single moment.

## 2. The Succession of the Concept of *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千)

The foregoing was a brief summary of the main theme detailed in Chih-i’s “Great Concentration and Insight.” However, there is research which claims that the creation of the concept of “*ichi-nen sanzen*” (一念三千) was done by Chan-jan (湛然), the sixth patriarch of the T’ien-t’ai sect. This theme is taken up in the work, “Doubt on the Theory of *Ichinen-sanzen* (一念三千) in the *Maka-shikan* (摩訶止觀),” by Tetsuei Sato, that appears in “*Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyū*,” #13, Volume 7-1, but I will not go into detail on that subject in this paper.

What I would like to address in this presentation is the fact that the *doctrine of ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千法門) has been transmitted within the T’ien-t’ai/Tendai tradition as a very significant and important doctrine until the present day.

In Japan, *Dengyō Daishi Saichō* (伝教大師最澄) [767-822] founded the *Hieizan Enryaku Ji* (比叡山延暦寺), and proposed the establishment of a comprehensive Buddhism that included *en-gyō* (円教) (perfect teachings), *mikkyō* (密教) (esoteric teachings), *zen-shugyō* (禪修行) (meditation practice), and *kai-ritsu* (戒律) (precepts). The central philosophy of *en-gyō* (円教), the perfect teachings, is the above mentioned

*doctrine of ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千法門) . The doctrinal texts of the Japanese Tendai sect, which were developed mainly on the basis of *isshin-sangan*” (一心三觀) (threefold contemplation in a single mind), were almost uncountable in number, and they were lectured on and recorded in various ways. After *Dengyō Daishi Saichō* (伝教大師最澄), *the Lotus Sutra Buddhism of the Heian Period* (平安法華佛教) focused on parallel study of the various schools of Buddhist thought.

*Hōnen-bō-Genkū* (法然房源空) (1133-1212) wrote the “*Senchaku-hongan-nenbutsu-shū*”(選択本願念佛集) and proposed the *ikkō-nenbutsu-senshu* (一向念佛專修), which means, “the concentrated practice of *nembutsu* (念佛)” (chanting the name of Amida Buddha). Following him, *Shinran* (親鸞), *Dōgen* (道元), and *Nichiren* (日蓮) appeared. These founders of Kamakura New Buddhism denounced the kind of Buddhism that had been practiced up until the Kamakura period as “mixed practice and mixed study,” and they emphasized concentrated practice based on the doctrines that they had respectively developed.

Within this trend, *Nichiren* (日蓮) proposed focused practice on *daimoku senshu* (題目專修)(chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra). In the Golden Age of the “Pure Land sects” (浄土教), only Nichiren proposed focusing chanting practice on the title of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren’s acceptance of the Lotus Sutra is based on the doctrine of *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千) discussed in Chih-i’s *Great Concentration and Insight* (摩訶止觀). Nichiren further developed the various theories of T’ien-t’ai/Tendai and advocated the “acceptance of the title of the Lotus Sutra.” Nichiren’s practice has now expanded all over the world.

The Lotus-Sutra based “New Buddhism” that developed in the modern age differentiated itself from traditional Buddhism in that it aggressively tried to propagate itself to the general public.

### **3. English translations of the Lotus Sutra from Sanskrit originals**

As one of the projects of the East India Trading Company, the Eastern Sacred Books series, edited by Max Muller, was published. Within that series, the Lotus Sutra (*Saddharmapundarīka-sūtra*), as translated by Kern, was published. Western research on the Lotus Sutra was introduced by Keisho Tsukamoto in his article “Western View of Nichiren—research by G. Renondeau and W. Kobler,” which appeared in the work, *Lotus-Sutra Based Buddhism in Modern Japan*, edited by Mochizuki Kanko.

Since then, translations and research based on original Sanskrit have been continuing, piece-by-piece, until today. Regarding the Lotus Sutra, the influence of Iwanami Bunko’s three-volume series, “The Lotus Sutra,” is very great. In this translation

work, the left pages contain a translation from Sanskrit originals into Japanese by Hiroshi Iwamoto. The upper half of the facing pages on the right contain the corresponding translation by Kumarajiva into Chinese, while the lower half of the same page contains the Japanese reading of Kumarajiva's Chinese characters. This work was originally intended to be a comparison of both translations by showing them facing each other. But there were differences in the original source texts, so it was not necessarily possible to make an accurate comparison at first glance. In the chapter on Kanzeon Bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara), for instance, there is a Sanskrit sentence that does not appear in the Chinese translation.

Among such differences, the most significant ones relate to the *shohō-jissō* (諸法實相) and the *jū-nyoze* (十如是) in chapter two. The comparison reveals that the *jū-nyoze* (十如是) of the Chinese does not appear in such a form in the original Sanskrit. In fact, scholars of Sanskrit originals share the opinion that there is no such *jū-nyoze* (十如是) in the Sanskrit. At the same time, researchers on the Chinese translations consider that further study should be done to determine whether it really does not exist in the Sanskrit; and, furthermore, that when following traditional understandings of the Chinese translations of the *Myō-hōrenge-kyō* (妙法蓮華經), such understandings cannot be established without the *jū-nyoze* (十如是), which is why it cannot be eliminated.

#### 4. Traditions within Chinese translations of *Myō-hōrenge-kyō* (妙法蓮華經)

Regarding Kumarajiva's Chinese translation work on the *Myō-hōrenge-kyō* (妙法蓮華經), his disciple and assistant, Sēng-chao [僧肇 Jpn: Sōjō], left records; however, no references to the above discussed *jū-nyoze* (十如是) could be found in them. But as Dr. Fuse Kougaku mentioned in his article, "Assuming the Difficulty of Translations by Kumarajiva" which appeared in *Osaki Gakuhō* (大崎学報) Volume 100, the attitude of Kumarajiva's translation project was not simply to translate Sanskrit into Chinese, but to try convey the message of the Lotus Sutra as well.

Chih-i quoted seventeen epithets of the Lotus Sutra found in the Vasubandhu's "The Treatise on the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law" in his lectures. When we consider how such a tradition of reverence for the Lotus Sutra has been passed on continuously until today, it is quite understandable that such reverence for the sutra could be incorporated into the efforts of the Chinese translations.

The Lotus Sutra does not talk much about specific doctrines. However, *shohō-jissō* (諸法實相) is one prominent theme, and it is quite natural to assume that there was an intention to reinforce that concept with *jū-nyoze* (十如是) at the time of the Chinese translations.

At any rate, I would like to point out here that, rather than employing only a technique of pure translation, Chinese translations traditionally had an element of interpretation operating in the background.

## 5. Contemporary Interest in Research on the Lotus Sutra

Religions are always developing or being revived during any age, and following the First World War, in the 1930s in particular, there were efforts on a global scale to revive religions in different forms based on the growing recognition of the existence of the “self.”

Reviewing the history of the formation of the various sects of Japanese Buddhism, ancient Buddhism developed in Japan as a national religion; and even following the “early modern age” (over the last 140 years) it was positioned and used to strengthen governmental systems and procedures. Within this atmosphere of governmental influence, it is quite impressive that the sects of the so-called Kamakura New Buddhism founded by *Hōnen* (法然), *Shinran* (親鸞), *Dōgen* (道元), and *Nichiren* (日蓮) in the middle ages developed outside of such integration into the national governing structure. Furthermore, a review of the activities of those sects up to the beginning of the early modern age shows that, among them, the sects of *Shinran* (親鸞) and *Nichiren* (日蓮) particularly maintained their separation from governmental authorities. That may be the reason why they still maintain popular influence in current times. *Shinran*'s sect, however, became associated with governmental policy making from the late early modern age until the dawn of the modern age. By contrast, *Nichiren*'s sect did not have any such relationship with the national government, and because of that, it was free from any popular conceptions of being under any government control or influence, and it maintained a potential to develop freely. I believe that this historical background was one of the foundations for the explosive development of lay movements from *Nichiren*'s sect following the Edo period.

The theme of “Lotus Sutra reverence in the modern age” is at the core of these various popular movements, both new and old, and these movements can be characteristically described as *daimoku shinkō* (題目信仰) (organizations expressing faith in the Lotus Sutra's name). But it is quite doubtful whether doctrinal understanding of the above mentioned *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千) is thoroughly transmitted in such Lotus Sutra reverence movements. Even in traditional sects, *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千) remains as a statement of doctrine, but it is not fully reflected in the actual practice of the faiths.

Nevertheless, reaffirmation of the traditional doctrines will probably happen

sooner or later in the new movements that are non-mainstream. At any rate, doctrine is an important issue, and it needs to be understood in some practical sense.

Within an environment that was focusing on Indian Buddhism after 1945, it is quite natural that the bodhisattva way (菩薩道) became prominent in the new trends of thought. The bodhisattva way is repeatedly emphasized in the Lotus Sutra. According to traditional doctrinal interpretations, the doctrine of *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千) lies strongly in the background of bodhisattva practice, but since the phrase *ichi-nen sanzen* (一念三千) is not found in the original Lotus Sutra, emphasis on bodhisattva practice did not have to be taken from that perspective. Thus it became possible for the elucidation of the concept of one vehicle (一乘思想), which is expounded in the Lotus Sutra, to take on new forms, and it became effectively presentable as a doctrine of practical value for some sects.

There is, however, room for traditional doctrines to become integrated into such new interpretations. This is how both new and old Lotus Sutra reverence movements have been developing in different forms up to now—creating new faces, fusing old and new, or reverting to tradition—and we can assume that there will continue to be new developments in the future.

## 6) Interest in the Lotus Sutra within Literature and Art

So far, I have briefly looked at the tradition of Lotus Sutra reverence and its development in the early modern age and the modern age, by considering Lotus-Sutra-based movements before and after 1945.

Along with this, the history of Lotus Sutra reverence found in Heian Period literature should not be overlooked. Through the influence of *Dengyō Daishi Saichō* (伝教大師最澄), faith in the Lotus Sutra spread among the aristocracy in the Heian period. Although it was practiced as part of the Pure Land faith, many traces of Lotus Sutra reverence can be found. In addition to particular literature reflecting Lotus Sutra reverence, like the *Honchō Hokke Genki* (本朝法華験記), the Lotus Sutra often appears even in narrative literature, like the *Konjaku Monogatari* (今昔物語). Recently, research that focused on the *Hokekyō Dangi* (法華經談義) of the Tendai sect was published in the *Chūsei Hokekyō chūshakusho no kenkyū* (中世法華經注釈書の研究), written by Tetsumichi Hirota. And, exhibitions featuring the “Art of the Lotus Sutra” were held at the Nara National Museum, and contents of the exhibits were introduced in popular art books like *Art of the Lotus Sutra* (法華經の美術), edited by Bunsaku Kurata and Yoshio Tamura. *Heike-nōkyō* (平家納經) is a very famous book that is often quoted. The *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語) is internationally known through its English translation,

and in Japan it is very popular among women. Not only from the viewpoint of literature, even among the Buddhist researchers, references to the Lotus Sutra in the *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語), and the deep understanding of the sutra that it reflects, is highly appreciated, and many books and research theses are written about it. Not only that, research is often done on the way of rituals, discourses, chanting, and particular ways of recitation it describes.

Because of the appeal of such literature, the number of people who are becoming attracted to the Lotus Sutra is growing; and through participation in traditional Buddhist faiths or through involvement in new movements, interest in the Lotus Sutra is increasing. This increasing interest, the Lotus Sutra related literature, and the Lotus Sutra's integration into Japanese culture, are all reflected in the "reverence for the Lotus Sutra" movements. Western researchers are currently doing very excellent work on this point.