

## VIEWS AND REVIEWS

### The Lotus Sutra in Japan

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IN THE YEAR A.D. 538, during the reign of Emperor Kimmei (r. 539–571), the Korean king Seong Myong (r. 523–554) of Paikche is said to have dispatched a diplomatic mission to formally transmit Buddhism to Japan. *The Legend of the Dharma Prince (Jōgu hōō teisetsu)* tells us that “on the second day, tenth month, year earth/horse of the reign of His Majesty [Emperor Kimmei], priests bearing gifts of Buddhist statuary and scripture from the Paikche king [Seong] Myong were received at court for the first time.”

These gifts were an auspicious beginning for Japanese Buddhism. In time Buddhist images, in particular that of Amida, became the object of general religious devotion. Buddhist sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra with its veritable treasure store of Buddhist teachings, fostered a number of different religious practices. Both imbued Japanese Buddhism with certain distinct characteristics.

What exactly comprised the sutra collection sent by the Paikche king will forever remain a mystery. Historically, it is not until the time of Shōtoku Taishi (574–622), well over half a century later, that mention is first made of the Lotus Sutra in Japan. After receiving Buddhist instruction from the Korean priest Hyeja who came to Japan in 595, Shōtoku proceeded to compile his classic *Commentary on Three Sutras (Sangyō gisho)*, a three-volume work on the Queen Srimālā, Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa, and Lotus Sutras. The extremely learned nature of the work must have led people to express doubts over its authorship. In a note added later to the work, we read: “This book was personally compiled by a royal prince of this great and noble country; it is not the work of foreign hands”—that is, the commentaries were indeed the writings of the Prince Regent Shōtoku, not those of his Chinese and Korean teachers.

The Lotus Sutra is the subject of the first volume of commentary. In it Shōtoku sets out the great vision Buddhism inspired in him and his aspiration of realizing

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\* Originally published in Japanese as “Hoke-kyō shinkō no ayumi,” *Daihōrin* (May 1982), pp. 22–27.

that ideal in the present world. His aim in writing the work was to awaken his subjects to the Buddha Way. By virtue of the bodhisattva practices he describes, he hoped his countrymen would be able to realize a Buddhist state modelled on the Pure Land, of an order never before witnessed on earth. This theme of an ideal nation is also articulated in his well-known *Seventeen Article Constitution* (*Jūshichijō kempō*). Shōtoku's concern with the realization of Buddhist ideals in this world differs greatly from the world-renouncing stance of Chinese Buddhism. It is much to his credit that, through his commentary, this ideal was incorporated into Japanese Buddhism from an early period. The ideal conceived by Shōtoku Taishi was to have great ramifications for future generations of Japanese.

It was not until the eighth century, during the Nara period (710–794), that the Buddhist state Shōtoku envisioned began to take shape. This was the great age of Tempyō culture. One event in particular which helped the rapid spread of Lotus Sutra devotion was the construction of a nationwide network of Buddhist nunneries. In 741, Emperor Shōmu (r. 724–749), well known for his Buddhist devotion, issued an imperial decree for the construction of official provincial temples (*kokubunji*). Each province was required to build a temple and a nunnery. Each nunnery was to have ten nuns in residence who were to constantly recite the Lotus Sutra. As the sutra was said to be invested with the power to rid the land of karmic evils accumulated since beginningless time, these nunneries were called "temples for eradicating evil by recitation of the Lotus Sutra" (*Hokke zetsuzai ji*). It was believed that the constant recitation of the Sutra would herald an enlightened age in which a prosperous nation could be established.

The Lotus Sutra was promoted on a nationwide level only after much deliberation on how the scripture filled the needs of the present world. It was through the efforts of the Buddhist leader Saichō (Dengyō Daishi, 766–822), that the Lotus Sutra became a Japanese institution. After receiving his ordination at the national temple in Ōmi (present Shiga prefecture), Saichō went to study Buddhism at the great monasteries in Nara, the Southern capital. At the age of 20, he formally entered the priesthood. He was ordained at Tōdaiji. But in the same year, for reasons unknown, he suddenly left Nara to live in a hermitage on Mount Hiei, near his native Ōmi, where he proceeded to engage in various Buddhist practices. It was around this time that he resolved to make the journey to China to study the T'ien-t'ai doctrine. It is speculated that the Lotus Sutra literature brought from China by the blind emigre priest Chien-chen (j. Ganjin, 668–763) may have influenced his decision.

Convinced that the Lotus Sutra with its tenet of the One Vehicle was the true Buddhist teaching, Saichō set out to establish the Lotus-based T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) doctrine in Japan. His first step was to journey to T'ang China, where he studied

the orthodox T'ien-t'ai doctrine at firsthand. During his stay he amassed voluminous literature on the Lotus Sutra, which he took back with him to Japan. Through the patronage of the Buddhist Emperor Kammu (r. 781–806), he was able to establish the Tendai school on Mount Hiei. There he at once set himself to the task of training disciples. He saw them as bodhisattvas who would devote themselves to averting the disasters that bring ruin to a nation, and help bring in an era of peace and prosperity for all. The term "bodhisattva" itself soon gained currency among the ordinary people. It is not surprising that the ruling classes welcomed Saichō's "bodhisattvas" as a boon to the nation.

There existed a great doctrinal gap between Saichō and the established Nara-based school of Buddhism. The orthodox Hossō (Dharma-sign) school maintained that Buddhahood was the domain of the spiritually elite—an interpretation diametrically opposed to the Lotus Sutra's statement that Buddhahood is open to all. This led to a confrontation. Did the Buddha taught a doctrine of Three Vehicles or One Vehicle? Was a particular sutra a tentative teaching or the ultimate one? The position formulated by Saichō on these issues is basic to the thinking of a number of eminent religious figures who subsequently appeared from the ranks of the Tendai school to promote the cause of popular Buddhism. In Saichō's view, the Lotus Sutra is not limited to the citizens of a certain nation or to a spiritually elite; rather it is a teaching of universal salvation that extends equally to all living beings.

Many eminent Buddhist figures appeared from among Saichō's descendants. Their contributions to Buddhist thought and practice earned for them the esteem of later generations. While greatly indebted to Chinese Buddhism, these men were also keenly aware of the particular needs of the Japanese people and sought to adapt Buddhism accordingly. In them the Tendai teachings underwent development in several directions at once. While the Lotus Sutra remained at the center of activity, esoteric (*mikkyō*) and Pure Land practices were also propagated by such Tendai prelates as Ennin (794–864), Enchin (814–891), and Genshin (942–1018), who had great reputations as Buddhist teachers even in their own day.

Lotus Sutra devotion began in the Nara period among the aristocracy. The center then moved to Mount Hiei, near Kyoto, and later took hold among the ordinary people. For the aristocracy, the object of worship was a mixture of the teachings embodied in the Lotus Sutra and Pure Land Buddhism. The former guaranteed benefits in the present life, the latter promised birth in the Pure Land in the next life. This mixed form of worship was carried over to the common people in later generations.

During the late Heian period (866–1160), when many monks began to leave the great Buddhist monasteries for the solitude of mountain retreats, wandering monks, or *hijiri*, appeared. They went from village to village spreading the

Dharma. Among their number were monks who sought to live by the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. The Sutra itself prescribes certain practices, such as the recitation of the sutra, or expounding its doctrines, or making copies of the sutra. Some of these monks probably engaged in fortune telling or miracle working on the side.

Chingen's *Tales of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokke kenki*: c. 1040) gives us a glimpse of the popular narrative of the day. He seeks to show how the Lotus Sutra has the power to affect our present life through karmic bonds established in past lives (demonstrating that good acts bring good results), and how an act of devotion can benefit the devotee by the principle of karmic reward, (demonstrating the power an act of devotion to the Lotus Sutra has for bringing peace and prosperity into the world). Hence, all our acts in past, present, and future hold the potential to accrue benefits.

Around the time of the Gempei War (1180–1185), a great many priests left their temples and took up the wandering life of the *hijiri*. One training haunt for them was the mystery-enshrouded Mount Ōmine area in Kii (present Wakayama prefecture). Journeying through the deep mountains with voices raised in chant, these monks would stop at villages along the way to conduct Dharma meetings. Participants were assured of securing karmic ties that would guarantee peace and happiness in this world and the next. The practice of copying sutras was also popular. People believed that they lived in the last Dharma age (*mappō*). The coming of the future Buddha was imminent. It was common for them to have one of these wandering monks copy a sutra, which was placed in a bronze sutra-container and buried in the mountains or placed inside designated sutra mounds.

It was the practice to deposit sutra copies at the famous shrines. Records from this time tell of wandering monks who made the long pilgrimage to these shrines. There were also monks who went around raising funds to support public works, such as repairing temples or erecting Buddhist statues. This latter category of monks, known as *kanjin hijiri*, did not limit their beliefs to the Lotus Sutra, and often followed a curious mixture of Pure Land, esoteric Buddhist, and Shinto belief. All the same, the impact which the Lotus Sutra had on people of the period can be attributed directly to the role played by these wandering ascetics who sought to adhere to the Lotus teachings.

So vast was the influence of these monks that even the great monasteries in Nara were not unaffected. The southern Nara Buddhism comprising virtually every form of Buddhist worship easily accommodated the eclectic beliefs of the wandering monks into its own system. When the Tōdaiji monastery was razed during the Gempei Wars, it was restored to its original magnificence by the fund-raising activities of the famous *hijiri* Chōgen (1121–1206). Chōgen is said to have embraced and propagated the nembutsu teaching. He also revered the

Lotus Sutra, and incorporated esoteric elements into his practice. This eclecticism was not unusual for the period; in fact it seems to have been the rule.

If the wandering monks lent a dash of color to the capital at Nara, one can imagine the veritable spectrum of events on Mount Hiei, which from its very beginning was an important center in the Buddhist world. It had a large priesthood with followers throughout the country. Its teachings supported a wide range of religious practices, with new forms constantly appearing. The practice of nembutsu devoted to Amida Buddha developed into a movement that swept the Tendai center. This was followed by the popular dharanis and rites of esoteric Buddhism. The Tendai teaching based on the Lotus Sutra underwent further development as well.

It was a Tendai priest by the name of Nichiren (1222–1282) who did most to champion the cause of the Lotus Sutra during the Kamakura period (1192–1333). He believed that those who follow the Lotus Sutra and recite *Namu-myōhō-renge-kyō* (O Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma!) are saved in this world and the hereafter. He taught that if all people recite the Sacred Name of the Lotus (*Daimoku*), an everlasting Buddha-land would be established in this world. This is the thesis he advocated in his tract *Securing the Peace of the Land Through the Propagation of True Buddhism* (*Risshō ankoku ron*), which he submitted to the government. To Nichiren the teaching of the Lotus Sutra was not limited to the religious world; it was equally relevant in political and social spheres as well.

As an advocate of total devotion to the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren was a harsh critic of Pure Land and esoteric practices. His scathing denunciation of the then highly popular Pure Land teaching and his open promotion of the Lotus Sutra, soon went beyond being a purely religious concern and brought him into open confrontation with civil authorities. His insistence that politics and society must submit to the Lotus Sutra drew the ire of government officials. He was subjected to persecution on several occasions, but his faith in the Lotus Sutra remained unshaken and was even strengthened. His difficulties served to convince him all the more that he alone was the true practitioner of the Lotus Sutra, and that it was his sacred duty to effect the salvation of the world by propagating the recitation of the Sacred Name.

It was not Nichiren's intention to create a new sect. As mentioned above, the Tendai teachings supported a wide variety of religious practices, which were constantly changing and developing. Nichiren criticized the basic tendency of these religious practices. He demanded an unconditional return to the Tendai teaching based on the Lotus Sutra. His bold insistence that salvation be realized through absolute reliance on the Lotus Sutra and the recitation of the Sacred Name was so original and timely that, ironically, it became a movement in its own right independent of the Tendai school.

It came to be known as the Nichiren sect or Lotus sect. The latter name was

the cause of much annoyance to the Tendai school. By the time of Nichizō (1269–1342), the influence of the sect in Kyoto had grown immensely. There were frequent confrontations with the Tendai school. Followers and sympathizers began to appear in the aristocratic classes and the Bakufu (government), and from the families of the most influential merchant and craft guilds in Kyoto. Kyoto became a Lotus sect stronghold, especially in the period following the Ōnin War (1467–1477).

The destruction brought by the Ōnin War, which began in Kyoto, quickly spread to outlying villages. In its aftermath, the townspeople resolved to rebuild the city and sought to create a society where they could live under their own rule. In this hour of need, they turned to the recitation of the Sacred Name of the Lotus Sutra for spiritual support. They were inspired by the Lotus teaching of creating a Buddha land in this world, and they made the Sacred Name a rallying point for the ideal society they wished to build. But the dreams of the townspeople were shortlived. Trouble flared up between the Lotus sect and other schools. In 1536, in an incident known as the Temmon-Hokke War, an army of warrior-monks from Mount Hiei swept down and destroyed the Nichiren community.

It was around this time too that other Lotus-inspired practices became popular. The practice of dedicating "treasure towers" (*tahōtō*) for the repose of the souls of the dead spread among the populace. They ranged from small stone stupas to magnificent wooden structures of elaborate design. A well-known example is that of the Jōdo-ji temple in Onomichi, Hiroshima, which dates back to the fourteenth century. The custom of making pilgrimages to shrines and temples also began around then. Pilgrims made the rounds of the thirty-three Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) temples in the Saigoku, Bandō, and Chichibu districts. At each temple they visited they recited the Kannon Sutra. This sutra is actually the "Universal Gate" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in which Śākyamuni urges all beings to recite the Sacred Name. It is from this time also that records tell of wandering monks visiting the famous shrines throughout the country. On such pilgrimages sutra copies were deposited at sites along the way. In each of these cases the Lotus Sutra figured greatly in the ceremonies and practices connected with the repose of the souls of the dead.

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