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A Comparison of the Lotus and Other Sutras

QUESTION: The “Teacher of the Law” chapter in the fourth volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, “[This Lotus Sutra is] the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.” What is the meaning of this passage?

Answer: More than two thousand years have passed since the Buddha expounded the Lotus Sutra in India. It took a little more than twelve hundred years before this sutra was introduced to China, and two hundred more years before it was brought from China to Japan. Since then, more than seven hundred years have already passed.

After the demise of the Buddha, there were only three persons who realized the true meaning of this passage of the Lotus Sutra. In India, Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna said in his Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom: “[The Lotus Sutra is] like a great physician who can change poison into medicine.” This is the way he explained the meaning of the passage, “the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.” In China, the Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai Chih-che interpreted it in the light of its context: “Among all those I [Shakyamuni Buddha] have preached, now preach, and will preach, this Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.”¹ And in Japan, the Great Teacher Dengyō elaborated on it as follows: “All the sutras of the first four periods preached in the past, the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra now being preached, and the Nirvana Sutra to be preached in the future are easy to believe and easy to understand. This is because the Buddha taught these sutras in accordance with the capacity of his listeners. The Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and to understand because in it the Buddha directly revealed what he had attained.”²

Question: Can you explain what he meant by that?

Answer: The ease of believing and understanding in the one case is due to the fact that the Buddha taught in accordance with the capacity of the people. And the difficulty of believing and understanding in the other case is due to the fact that he taught in accordance with his own enlightenment.

The Great Teacher Kōbō and his successors at Tō-ji temple in Japan hold that, of all the exoteric teachings, the Lotus Sutra is the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand, but that, in comparison to the esoteric teachings, it is easy to believe and easy to understand. Jikaku, Chishō, and their followers contend that both the Lotus Sutra and the Mahāvairochana Sutra are among the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand, but that, of these two, the Mahāvairochana Sutra is by far the more difficult to believe and to understand.

All the people in Japan agree with both of these contentions. However, in interpreting this passage, I say that the non-Buddhist scriptures are easier to believe and understand than the Hinayana sutras, the Hinayana sutras are easier than the Mahāvairochana and other [Correct and Equal] sutras, the Mahāvairochana and other sutras are easier than the Wisdom sutras, the Wisdom sutras are easier than the Flower Garland Sutra, the Flower Garland is easier than the Nirvana Sutra, the Nirvana is easier than the Lotus Sutra, and the theoretical teaching of the Lotus is easier than the essential teaching.³ Thus there are many levels of comparative ease and difficulty.

Question: What is the significance of knowing them?

Answer: The great lantern that illuminates the long night of the sufferings of birth and death, the sharp sword that severs the fundamental darkness inherent in life, is none other than the Lotus Sutra. The teachings of the True Word, Flower Garland, and other schools are categorized as those expounded in accordance with the people's capacity. They are, therefore, easy to believe and understand. The teachings expounded in accordance with the people's capacity are the sutras that the Buddha preached in response to the wishes of the people of the nine worlds, just as a wise father instructs an ignorant son in a way suited to the child's understanding. On the other hand, the teaching expounded in accordance with the Buddha's enlightenment is the sutra that the Buddha preached directly from the world of Buddhahood, just as a sage father guides his ignorant son to his own understanding.

In the light of this principle, I have carefully considered the Mahāvairochana, Flower Garland, Nirvana, and other [provisional] sutras, only to find that all of them are sutras expounded in accordance with the people's capacity.

Question: Is there any evidence to support this contention?

Answer: The Shrimālā Sutra says: "The Buddha brings to maturity those who have only practiced non-Buddhist teachings by revealing the practice of good causes for the realms of human and heavenly beings. To those who seek to become voice-hearers, the Buddha imparts the vehicle for voice-hearers. To those who seek to become cause-awakened ones, the Buddha expounds the vehicle for cause-awakened ones. To those who seek the great vehicle, the Buddha reveals the great vehicle [for bodhisattvas]." This statement refers to those teachings that are easy to believe and easy to understand, such as the Flower Garland, Mahāvairochana, Wisdom, Nirvana, and other sutras.

In contrast, the [Lotus] sutra says: "At that time the World-Honored One addressed Bodhisattva Medicine King, and through him the eighty thousand great men, saying: 'Medicine King, do you see in this great assembly the immeasurable number of heavenly beings, dragon kings, yakshas,

gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, mahoragas, human and nonhuman beings, as well as monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, those who seek to become voice-hearers, who seek to become pratyekabuddhas, or who seek the Buddha way? Upon these various kinds of beings who in the presence of the Buddha listen to one verse or one phrase of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law and for a moment think of it with joy I will bestow on all of them a prophecy that they will attain supreme perfect enlightenment.”⁴

In the various other sutras we find that the five precepts were taught for human beings, the ten good precepts for heavenly beings, [the four infinite virtues of] pity, compassion, joy, and impartiality for the god Brahmā, the practice of almsgiving for the devil king, the two hundred and fifty precepts for monks, the five hundred precepts for nuns, the four noble truths for voice-hearers, the twelve-linked chain of causation for cause-awakened ones, and the six pāramitās for bodhisattvas. This method of teaching is comparable to water that assumes the round or square shape of its container, or to an elephant that exerts just enough strength to subdue its enemy.

The Lotus Sutra is entirely different. It was preached equally for all, including the eight kinds of nonhuman beings and the four kinds of believers. This method of teaching is comparable to a measuring rod that is used to eliminate uneven places, or to the lion king that always exerts its full power in attack, regardless of the strength of its opponent.

When one examines all the various sutras in the clear mirror of the Lotus, it is evident that the three True Word sutras, including the Mahāvairochana, and the three Pure Land sutras⁵ are teachings expounded in accordance with the people’s capacity. And yet because the people have made the teachings of Kōbō, Jikaku, and Chishō their basis, this truth has been obscured in Japan now for more than four hundred years. It is like exchanging a gem for a pebble or trading sandalwood for ordinary lumber. Because Buddhism has gradually been turned upside down, the secular world also has been plunged into corruption and chaos. Buddhism is like the body, and society like the shadow. When the body bends, so does the shadow. How fortunate that all of my disciples who follow the Buddha’s true intention will naturally flow into the ocean of comprehensive wisdom! But the Buddhist scholars of our time put their faith in teachings expounded according to the people’s capacity, and are therefore doomed to sink into the sea of suffering. I will explain in more detail on another occasion.

With my deep respect,

Nichiren

The twenty-sixth day of the fifth month

Reply to Toki

Background

This letter was written at Minobu to Toki Jōnin in Shimōsa in the fifth month of the third year of Kōan (1280). Nichiren Shonin explains to Toki the meaning of the passage from the “Teacher of the Law” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that describes the sutra as “the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand.” In the beginning of the letter, the Shonin introduces the three Buddhist scholars who correctly interpreted this passage—Nāgārjuna of India, T’ien-t’ai of China, and Dengyō of Japan. Next, he distinguishes two types of teachings—the provisional teachings, which Shakyamuni Buddha taught according to the people’s capacity, and the Lotus Sutra, which was a direct statement of Shakyamuni’s own enlightenment. The Shonin says that, while the former type of teaching is easy to believe and understand, only the Lotus enables one to overcome the fundamental darkness inherent in life.

Finally, the Shonin asserts that, because the Japanese people have embraced the misleading doctrines of Kōbō and other priests, confusion reigns in the world of Buddhism, and society has consequently been thrown into chaos. He declares that the correct teaching of Buddhism provides a basis for the peace and prosperity of the country, and concludes by saying that his followers are able to attain enlightenment because they believe in the Buddha’s correct teaching.

Notes

1. The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.
2. The Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra.
3. The wording of the original text is expanded here for the sake of clarity.
4. Lotus Sutra, chap. 10.
5. The three True Word sutras are the Mahāvairochana, Diamond Crown, and Susiddhikara sutras. The three Pure Land sutras are the Buddha Infinite Life, Meditation on the Buddha Infinite Life, and Amida sutras.