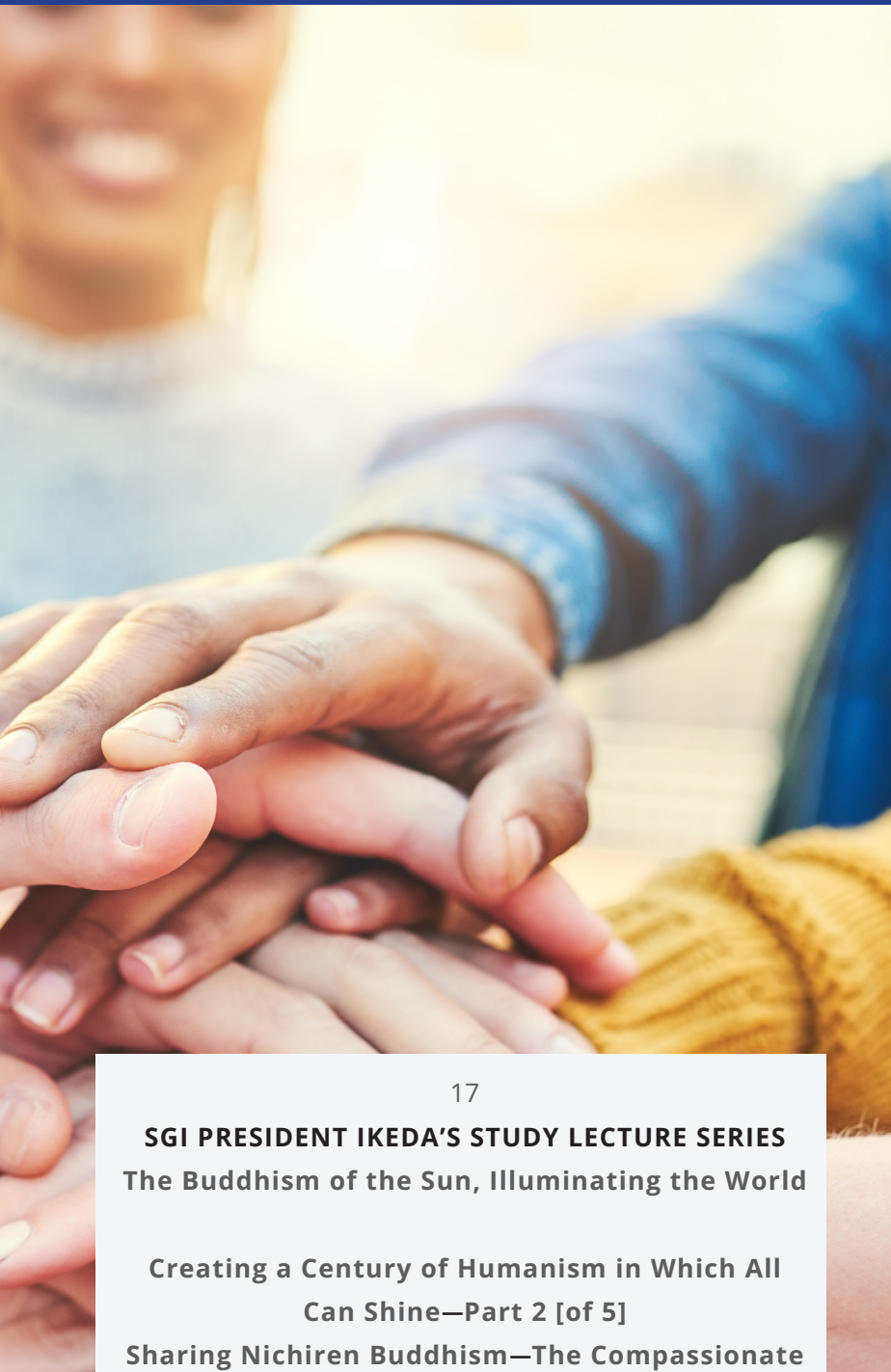


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# **Nichiren Daishonin: A Great Compassionate Vow for the Happiness of Humanity**

## **Installment 2: Seeking Spirit**

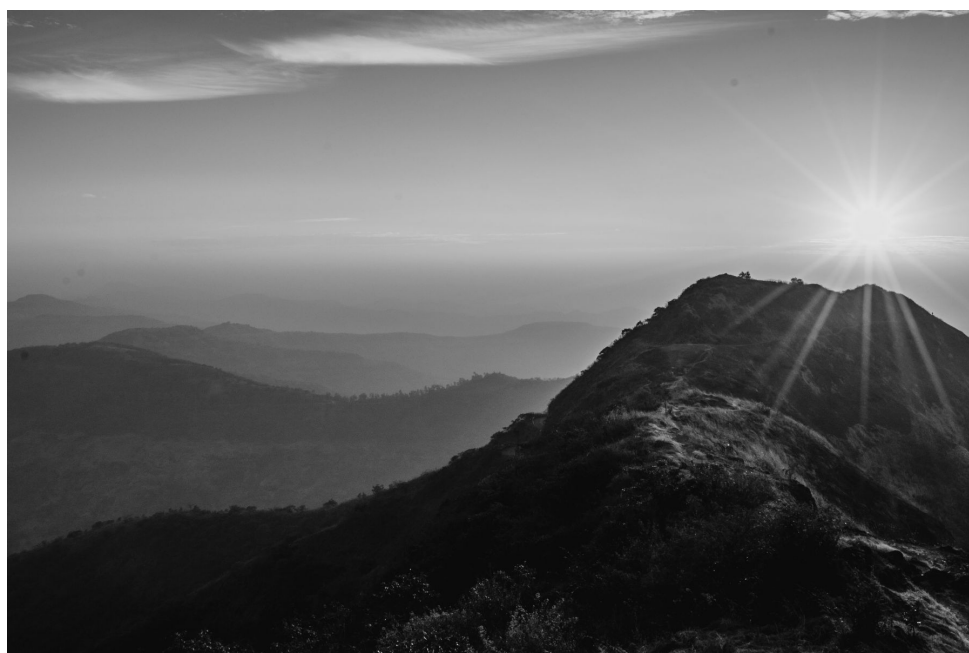


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Nichiren Daishōnin entered Seichōji temple to study at age twelve and prayed to become “the wisest person in Japan.” Receiving what he described as a “great jewel” of wisdom “as brilliant as the morning star” (“Letter to the Priests of Seichō-ji,” WND-1, 650), he then embarked on a journey to seek the truth of Buddhism.

By Nichiren’s time, Seichōji had become a temple of the Tendai school<sup>16</sup> and had incorporated the Pure Land teachings, which had spread widely throughout Japan. Many of its priests, including Nichiren’s teacher, Dōzen-bō, chanted the Pure Land mantra “Namu-Amida-butsu,” an expression of devotion to Amida Buddha. As he studied Buddhism in this setting, Nichiren came to question why the various Buddhist schools each considered their school alone to be correct.

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<sup>16</sup> Seichōji became a Tendai school temple when Ennin (794–864), also known as Jikaku, came to engage in practice there in 836. After Ennin, however, the Tendai school began to place emphasis on the esoteric teachings, and Seichōji also developed as a center of Tendai esotericism in the Bōsō area (the peninsula east of Tokyo Bay that is present-day southern Chiba Prefecture). In addition, it seems that the tradition of mountain asceticism was strong at Seichōji, and that a number of halls were established there for that purpose, each with its specialized ascetic practices.

Nichiren wrote later that while wondering what to do, he vowed that he “would not heed the claims of these eight or ten schools”<sup>17</sup> (“On Repaying Debts of Gratitude,” WND-1, 692). We can read this as his declaration that, wanting to follow the spirit and intent of Shakyamuni Buddha, he would consider only what the Buddhist sutras themselves teach and not let the interpretations of later priests mislead him.

At the time, Buddhist schools viewed the teachings of their Chinese or Japanese founders as absolute, developing their doctrines from there. Nichiren, however, returned to and grounded himself on the original Buddhist teachings, pursuing his studies with the compassion to seek a way to save people from their suffering. Consequently, he must have set his mind on exploring the essence of each school’s teachings.

In addition, Nichiren also wondered about recent historical events: the drowning of the child emperor Antoku in 1185 in the Genpei War<sup>18</sup> and the exile of Retired Emperor Gotoba and his two sons after their defeat in the Jōkyū Disturbance of 1221, despite their having conducted prayer ceremonies for victory based on the True Word teachings (see “Rulers of the Land of the Gods,” WND-2, 614–15). These incidents spurred Nichiren to question how Buddhism was being practiced in Japan.

## A Quest for Learning

What teaching truly embodies the Buddha’s intent to save all people from suffering? Nichiren sought the answer, but he writes, “Since [Seichōji] was located in such a distant and outlying province, there was no one there who was capable of giving me proper instruction” (“Questions and Answers on the Object of Devotion,” WND-2, 794).

Young Nichiren’s passionate seeking spirit to study Buddhism led him to surpass even the senior priests. Wanting to understand the present state of Buddhism, he traveled to study in Kamakura, Kyoto, and other centers of Buddhist learning.

He writes that, after leaving Seichōji, “for a period of some twenty years . . . I traveled from province to province, from temple to temple, visiting Kamakura, Kyoto, Mount Hiei, Onjōji, Mount Kōya, and Shitennōji” (“Condolences on a Deceased Husband,” WND-2, 767). In the process, he learned the essential doctrines of all the major Buddhist schools.

Though details are unclear, it seems that he first traveled to Kamakura and, for one or two years after entering the priesthood at sixteen, thoroughly studied the Pure Land teachings (see “Encouragement to a Sick Person,” WND-1, 81). It appears that by 1242, when he was twenty-one, Nichiren had been staying again at Seichōji before leaving to study at Enryakuji temple on Mount Hiei, northeast of Kyoto.

Enryakuji originated in 785 when Great Teacher Dengyō set up a small dwelling at Mount Hiei and, in 788, built a small temple known as Ichijō Shikan’in. The imperial court officially declared it a Buddhist school in 806.

The Tendai school, also known as the Tendai Lotus school, derived from the Chinese Tiantai teachings based primarily on the Lotus Sutra. However, Enryakuji, the Tendai head temple, became a center of general Buddhist education, offering a comprehensive curriculum in the four major streams of Buddhist thought—Zen, the Buddhist precepts, esoteric Buddhism, as well as the Tendai doctrines. Priests such as Hōnen, Shinran, Eisai,<sup>19</sup> and Dōgen, all of whom greatly influenced Japanese Buddhism, also studied there.

<sup>17</sup> The eight schools are the six schools of Nara, which flourished in that capital during the Nara period (710–94) (the Three Treatises, Establishment of Truth, Dharma Characteristics, Dharma Analysis Treasury, Flower Garland, and Precepts schools) plus the Tendai and True World schools. The ten schools are the eight schools plus the Zen and Pure Land schools.

<sup>18</sup> The Genpei War (1180–85) led to the downfall of the Taira clan and the rise of the Kamakura shogunate.

<sup>19</sup> Eisai (1141–1215), also known as Yōsai, was the founder of the Rinzai sect, one of the major Zen schools in Japan

## Pointing Out Slander of the Law

In his travels to study Buddhism, Nichiren came to grasp the essence of each school's doctrines (see "Letter to the Priests of Seichō-ji," WND-1, 650).

He concluded that people tended to feel the various Buddhist teachings represented a single truth and that diligent practice of any would enable them to break free of the sufferings of birth and death. And yet, if they were to approach and practice the Buddhist teachings incorrectly, they would likely "fall into the great pit known as

slander of the Law"<sup>20</sup> ("Condolences on a Deceased Husband," WND-2, 767).

Nichiren set about ranking the various Buddhist scriptures based on the "five periods," Great Teacher Tiantai's<sup>21</sup> system of doctrinal classification (a method of assessing and interpreting the contents of the various sutras' teachings).

This system considers all of the sutras that had come to China by Great Teacher Tiantai's time to be the very words of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Great Teacher Tiantai categorized these sutras, based on their content, into periods according to the time or order in which he determined them to have been preached. In the Immeasurable Meanings Sutra, seen as having been preached just before the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni states, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth" (*The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, p. 15). The Immeasurable Meanings Sutra also identifies the true teaching as the Lotus Sutra, which the Buddha would preach next. The Lotus Sutra also says, "The world-honored one has long expounded his doctrines and now must reveal the truth" (LSOC, 59).

Based on these passages, Nichiren confirmed that the Lotus Sutra is the correct teaching that reveals the true nature of Shakyamuni's enlightenment.

## The Supreme Sutra

Nichiren emphasized that the Lotus Sutra was highest among all sutras that had been or would ever be preached, because it revealed the "one great reason" (LSOC, 64) buddhas appear in this world to enable all people to attain buddhahood.

The five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo, the daimoku (title) of the Lotus Sutra, constitute the essence of the Lotus Sutra as well as all the other sutras, and the correct teaching that all people should hold above any other (see "Repaying Debts of Gratitude," WND-1, 730).

The act of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo by a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra includes the virtues and benefits of all buddhas and bodhisattvas and all sutras. Without the workings of Myoho-renge-kyo, the workings of all the various buddhas and sutras would be ineffective.

20 Slander of the Law: To deny, oppose, disparage, or vilify the correct Buddhist teaching or those who uphold, protect, and propagate that teaching. Because it impedes people from attaining buddhahood, slander of the Law is identified as a cause leading to the life-state of hell. It is used in contrast to the idea of protecting the Law.

21 Tiantai (538–97), also known as Great Teacher Zhizhe. The founder of the Tiantai school. His lectures were compiled in such works as *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, and *Great Concentration and Insight*. He spread the Lotus Sutra in China and established the doctrine of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life."



Photo Credits: Canva



Nichiren discerned that the Lotus Sutra alone elucidates the essential Law that permeates all life and the universe and can relieve all people's suffering at its source. He revealed this Law to be Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the teaching most suited to people in the Latter Day of the Law.

## Nam-myoho-renge-kyo

What principles in the Lotus Sutra led Nichiren to conclude that it excelled over all other sutras?

First was the teaching that people of the “two vehicles” can attain buddhahood and, second, that Shakyamuni Buddha originally attained enlightenment in the remote past. “Expedient Means,” the second chapter, explains that people who dwell in the conditions described as the two vehicles (the worlds of voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones) can in fact attain enlightenment, even though other sutras regarded them as incapable of doing so. This principle, by extension, guarantees that all people in any of the Ten Worlds can attain buddhahood.

The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment in the remote past is described in the sutra's sixteenth chapter, “The Life Span of the Thus Come One,” which says that Shakyamuni did not attain enlightenment in his present lifetime [under the bodhi tree] as everyone thought. Rather, he attained buddhahood in the far distant past and since then has always been present in this sahā world,<sup>22</sup> teaching and guiding living beings.

Yet the Lotus Sutra text does not specify what teaching Shakyamuni practiced in order to become a buddha. Consequently, it remained unclear what teaching could enable people in the Latter Day to attain buddhahood.

It was Nichiren Daishonin who pursued this question and came to realize that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo was that essential teaching—the Law at the heart of the Lotus Sutra that would enable all ordinary people to attain buddhahood.

Regarding the concept that ordinary people can attain buddhahood, Ikeda Sensei writes: “It could be said that the enlightenment of ordinary people . . . represents the heart of the Lotus Sutra and the essence of Buddhism, and at the same time, the quintessential aim of religion.” He also writes: “The religious spirit is to see the eternal and absolute in human beings and to wish to make people's lives shine. Nichiren's Buddhism of sowing, based on the supreme Law hidden in the depths of the Lotus Sutra, is a teaching directly founded on this religious spirit.”<sup>23</sup>

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the name Nichiren gave to the fundamental Law that permeates the universe and enables all buddhas to attain enlightenment. It can resolve people's sufferings on the deepest level and enable them to achieve genuine happiness.

A buddha is someone who has embodied this Law in their own being, overcome all manner of obstacles and attacks in the process, and established a state of unshakable, absolute happiness. When we who live in the Latter Day believe in and practice Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can reveal the life of a buddha we inherently possess.

22 Sahā world: This world, which is full of suffering. In the Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, the Sanskrit *sahā* is translated as “endurance.” In this context, the sahā world indicates a world in which people must endure suffering.

23 Translated from Japanese. Daisaku Ikeda, “*Kaimokushō kogi*” (Lectures on “The Opening of the Eyes”), in *Ikeda Daisaku zenshu* (The Complete Works of Daisaku Ikeda), vol. 34, (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 2010), pp. 58–60.

## Evil Priests Lead People Astray

Nevertheless, people still rejected or ignored the Lotus Sutra and instead highly esteemed teachings that the Buddha had designated as mere expedient means. When Nichiren saw this, he recognized that such pervasive slander of the Law was the basic cause of people's unhappiness and society's instability. A particular source of such slander was the widely popular Pure Land teachings.

Hōnen, the founder of the Pure Land school in Japan, advocated rejecting all forms of Buddhist practice in favor of chanting the phrase *Namu-Amida-butsu*,<sup>24</sup> calling on the name of Amida Buddha with a wish to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land of Perfect Bliss. He directed people to abandon any attempt to create benefit through their own Buddhist practice and instead rely on Amida Buddha to save them.

In contrast, Nichiren believed that this world itself, the *sahā* world, was the pure land of Shakyamuni Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past. He felt that the Pure Land priests, who urged people to reject this world and seek a buddha land after death, had deviated far from the true spirit of the Lotus Sutra. He was outraged and saddened that Buddhist priests, who should have been guiding people to enlightenment, were instead leading them away from the Lotus Sutra, the direct path to attaining buddhahood.

24 *Namu-Amida-butsu*, meaning devotion or praise to Amida Buddha, is commonly known as the *Nembutsu*. Prior to Hōnen, the practice of *Nembutsu*, originally meaning to meditate on a buddha or buddhas, had been part of the meditative disciplines of the Tiantai tradition. It was a supplementary exercise to the primary practice of meditation for observing one's mind to attain buddhahood. Hōnen, however, viewed the people of the Latter Day as being of deficient capacity and therefore incapable of such meditative practice. He advocated that people instead discard all other teachings and devote themselves exclusively to chanting the *Nembutsu*—reciting the name of Amida Buddha in hopes of being reborn through his mercy into the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss.

Regarding this, Ikeda Sensei observes:

The Daishonin's studies resulted in his great vow for *kosen-rufu*. In addition to being connected with the vow he made when he was twelve, this vow also reflected the Daishonin's own clear awareness that he was carrying on the great wish of the Buddha articulated in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Nichiren's compelling desire to seek the truth led him to form a vow to save all people of the Latter Day from suffering. Having completed his journeys, Nichiren returned to his home province of Awa and began his efforts to spread the Mystic Law far and wide.

## From Ikeda Sensei's Guidance

*We can surmise that, based on his enlightenment, the Daishonin dedicated himself wholeheartedly to searching for a teaching that would enable all people to realize genuine happiness in the Latter Day of the Law. His investigation brought him to the conclusion that the Lotus Sutra was foremost among all sutras and was therefore the answer to his odyssey. The wisdom that welled forth from his life was the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra taught by Shakyamuni Buddha. He realized that this was the only teaching that could liberate the people of the Latter Day from the sufferings of life and death and that could transform this age of greed and conflict.*<sup>26</sup>

*(To Be Continued)*

(Translated from the April 2022 issue of the *Daibyakurenge*, the Soka Gakkai monthly study journal)

25 Translated from Japanese. Daisaku Ikeda, "*Gosho no sekai*" (The World of Nichiren Daishonin's Writings), in *Ikeda Daisaku zenshu* (The Complete Works of Daisaku Ikeda), vol. 32, (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 2009), p. 49.

26 *Ibid.*