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Authors' Introduction



In the vast literature of Buddhism, the *Lotus Sūtra* stands as one of the most inspiring, and the most controversial, of Buddhist texts. As a Mahāyāna sūtra, a sūtra of the “Great Vehicle” tradition, the *Lotus Sūtra* was not accepted by the Buddhist mainstream of its own time as “the word of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*). It is not accepted as the word of the Buddha by the Theravāda traditions of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia today. But in East Asia, especially in China and Japan, perhaps more than any other text, the *Lotus Sūtra* has come to define what distinguishes the Mahāyāna from the teachings that preceded it. Indeed, one might say that the *Lotus Sūtra* both explains that difference and then seeks to explain it away, asserting that the Mahāyāna and the earlier tradition both sprang from the Buddha’s single intent.

Arguably, the *Lotus Sūtra* has been the most influential Buddhist scripture in East Asia. It has been read, recited, copied, enshrined, and explained. It has been the subject of intense doctrinal debates. Two influential Buddhist schools—the Tiantai (Kor. Cheontae; J. Tendai) school originating in China and the Hokke (Lotus) or Nichiren sect in Japan—are based on it. The *Lotus Sūtra* has also permeated the larger religious culture, and its parables, imagery, and teachings have inspired centuries of poetry and artwork.¹ It was the first Mahāyāna scripture to be translated from Sanskrit into a Western language (Eugène Burnouf, *Le lotus de la bonne loi*, 1852), and its study has helped to shape the modern scholarly discipline of Buddhist Studies. It is one of very few Buddhist scriptures (along with the

Diamond Sūtra, the *Heart Sūtra*, and a few others) to have gained sufficient fame in the English-speaking world to be widely known by an English title.

The fame of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the West has grown over the last half century, not only through academic Buddhist Studies, but also through the activities of *Lotus*-based practice groups. Soka Gakkai International (SGI), which claims a membership of several million households worldwide, is perhaps the best-known group. This lay Buddhist organization traces its origins to the thirteenth-century Japanese monk Nichiren, who argued that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the pinnacle of the Buddha's teachings, superseding all other sūtras. Other lay societies based on the *Lotus Sūtra* are Risshō Kōseikai and Reiyūkai. There are also traditional Nichiren Buddhist orders that include both clerics and laity, such as Nichirensū, Nichiren Shōshū, Honmon Butsuryūshū, Kenpon Hokkeshū, and Nipponzan Myōhōji. Tendai Buddhism has a presence in the West, and there are also unaffiliated *Lotus* practitioners.

There is now a growing body of English-language scholarship, both books and articles, on the *Lotus Sūtra*. These include studies of particular themes in the *Lotus* (such as “skillful means,” a term that forms the title of one of the sūtra's twenty-eight chapters); examination of its literary forms (such as the sūtra's famous parables); analyses of its doctrines; and historical studies of its associated schools and practices. There are sociological treatments of new religious movements based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, and studies of *Lotus*-based art. There are also books in English written from an “insider” perspective, aimed at encouraging the faith and practice of *Lotus* devotees. English-language commentaries on the sūtra to date generally fall into this last category. What has not appeared thus far is a detailed guide, written from a scholarly perspective, to the sūtra's

individual chapters. The first aim of this study is to provide such a guide.

A chapter-by-chapter road map through the *Lotus Sūtra* is something helpful to have; the sūtra is not transparent. Its teachings are not presented in a clear, discursive fashion but, rather, unfold through parables, fantastic events, and mythic imagery. This can be frustrating to the modern reader, who sometimes fails to see how extraordinary the sūtra really is. The autobiography of the Japanese Zen master Hakuin (1686–1769) provides a similar example. Recounting his early efforts to study the Buddhist teachings, Hakuin wrote:

People who are suffering in the lower worlds [of rebirth], when they rely on others in their efforts to be saved, always ask that the *Lotus Sūtra* be recited for them. There must indeed be profound and mysterious doctrines in this sūtra. Thereupon I picked up the *Lotus Sūtra* and in my study of it found that, other than the passages that explain that there is only one vehicle and that all phenomena are in the state of nirvāṇa, the text was concerned with parables relating to cause and effect. If this sūtra had all these virtues, then surely the six Confucian classics and the books of all the other schools must be equally effective. Why should this particular sūtra be so highly esteemed? My hopes were completely dashed. At this time I was sixteen years of age.²

But sixteen years later, after long years of meditative training and the experience of awakening, Hakuin wrote, “One night some time after, I took up the *Lotus Sūtra*. Suddenly I penetrated to the perfect, true, ultimate meaning of the *Lotus*. The doubts I had held initially were destroyed and I became aware that the understanding I had obtained up to then was greatly in error. Unconsciously I uttered a great cry and burst into tears.”³

Without expecting its readers to burst into tears, this volume explores the rich contents of each of the sūtra's chapters, a richness that is difficult to appreciate by simply reading the text in translation without supporting explanation. The authors of the *Lotus Sūtra* were deeply learned in the language of Buddhism, and the text is filled with all manner of allusions to, and radical reinterpretations of, the Buddha's teachings. A second goal of this book, therefore, is to focus on what was at stake in the compilation of a Mahāyāna sūtra—what it meant to compose a revelation of a new teaching, to legitimize that revelation as the Buddha's words, and then to use it as a polemic against the established tradition. Readers accustomed to the traditional claim held by many devotees, that the *Lotus Sūtra* is the teaching of the historical Buddha expounded in the last eight years of this life, may initially find this perspective challenging. We suggest, however, that one's appreciation of the brilliance and power of the *Lotus Sūtra* is only enhanced when the historical circumstances of its composition are taken into consideration. That is, the genius of the *Lotus Sūtra* becomes fully apparent only when one engages with the kinds of questions the compilers themselves were compelled to address

The phrase “two buddhas seated side by side” (Jpn. *nibutsu byōza*), the title of our book, occurs in medieval Japanese writings and refers to a defining moment in the *Lotus Sūtra*, when Prabhūtaratna, a buddha of the distant past, suddenly appears at the *Lotus* assembly, vibrant and alive within his stūpa, to bear witness to the sūtra's truth. He then invites the buddha of the present, Śākyamuni, to enter the stūpa and share his seat. The scene of the two buddhas seated together overturns two conventional ideas. The first is that only one buddha can appear in the world at a time. The second is that once a buddha has passed into nirvāṇa and his relics have been entombed in a stūpa, he is

inaccessible. This scene, which exemplifies the mythic imagery by which the *Lotus* conveys its radical message, has been represented in painting and sculpture for more than fifteen hundred years. A Chinese example, commissioned in 609 by a filial daughter on behalf of her deceased parents, appears on the cover of this volume. Interpretations of the two buddhas seated side by side are discussed in Chapter Twelve.

The Role of Commentary

Despite its influence, exactly what the *Lotus Sūtra* means has remained elusive. Over the centuries, great scholar-monks have penned thousands of pages of commentary in an attempt to explain it. Sermons, didactic tales, literary appropriations, artistic depictions, even the applications of *Lotus* teachings in the lives of practitioners could also be considered “commentary,” broadly defined. In one sense, the present volume is yet another commentary, with motivations and aims both shared by, and different from, the scores of commentaries that have come before.

Commentary, and the status of commentary, are vital issues in religions that are based upon texts. One thinks, for example, of debates in Islam over the “closing of the gates of *ijtihād*,” that is, the question of whether legal interpretation had been exhausted by the great jurists of the past, or whether it was still possible to exercise original or independent reasoning in legal issues not specifically covered by the Qur’an, Hadith, or scholarly consensus.

In Buddhism, one could perhaps say that, in a certain sense, all scripture is commentary. That is, all Buddhist traditions hold that the Buddha’s enlightenment was complete, that he attained complete knowledge of the state of liberation and the path to it

during his meditation on that full-moon night. Thus, everything that he spoke thereafter was in a sense an articulation of that experience, adapted for the audience he was addressing. This is one reason why the events immediately following the Buddha's enlightenment, the period of forty-nine days in which he savored the experience of his enlightenment without speaking, is the focus of so much interest in the tradition. Should he teach? If so, whom should he teach? And what should he teach them? These questions appear in the earliest renditions of the story of the Buddha's awakening, and they reappear, with important refinements, in the second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. So important was this question of what the Buddha first taught after his enlightenment that one of the most important Mahāyāna sūtras, the *Flower Garland (Avataṃsaka)*, presents itself as the Buddha's very first teaching, assigning that pride of place to itself.

The various accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment, from those in the Nikāya traditions of mainstream Buddhism, to the various accounts in the Mahāyāna sūtras, and later the tantras, all acknowledge that the Buddha adapted his teachings to his audience, that he did not teach the same thing to everyone. This immediately raises some questions: If the Buddha accommodated what he taught to the needs and abilities of his audience, what did he really mean? What was his true teaching, unadulterated and unmodified? Is it something that can even be spoken? And, if so, when did he speak it, and to whom? These questions gave rise to the long-standing distinction between those teachings that are final and definitive (*nītārtha*), and those requiring further explication (*neyārtha*), though there has often been disagreement over which was which. Questions about the Buddha's true intent have also historically placed a burden on the commentator, who must not only explain what the

words mean but also determine whether the Buddha “really” meant them. Yet, who, other than a buddha, can make such a determination?

These questions have haunted the tradition of Buddhist commentary from the beginning, so much so that the authors of some Mahāyāna sūtras had the Buddha address them himself. One such text is the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, whose title confronts the problem directly; it means “Explanation of the [Buddha’s] Intention.” Here it is explained that the Buddha turned the wheel of the dharma not once but three times, with the first two turnings being “provisional” and the last turning being “definitive.” However, the most famous and influential case of the Buddha commenting on his own teachings appears in the *Lotus Sūtra*, where Śākyamuni announces that his previous teaching of three vehicles leading to liberation had been an accommodation. In fact, there is but one vehicle, and it will convey all beings to buddhahood.

Historically, the Buddhist tradition has *not* regarded all scriptures as commentary: the sūtras hold a special status as the Buddha’s word. By definition, a commentary composed by someone who is not a buddha cannot be anything new; it can only be an elaboration of the Buddha’s enlightenment, as expressed in the sūtras. This lends at least the appearance of literary conservatism to Buddhist commentary, where innovation has sometimes been condemned as a presumption, not praised as a virtue. And yet Buddhist commentary has often been a profoundly creative endeavor, a major vehicle by which interpreters introduced and disseminated their own original insights, even while appearing to hew closely to the words of the sūtras and to humbly explicate their meaning. Buddhist commentary therefore forms a huge and essential element of the Buddhist canon, often of equal or (in Tibet, for example), of greater

influence than the sūtras themselves. Indian Buddhist monks composed hundreds of commentaries, drawing from the refined categories of Sanskrit scholasticism to attach to the name of a sūtra (or another commentary) words like *ṭīkā*, *bhāṣya*, *vyākhyā*, *vṛtti*, *pañjikā*, and *vārttika*, all rendered rather blandly into English with a single word: commentary. Chinese commentaries on the *Lotus* and other sūtras were produced in great numbers, especially during the fifth through tenth centuries. Through commentary, and other forms of interpretation as well, the sūtras were given innovative readings and made to speak to issues specific to the interpreter's own time and place. Thus, a third aim of the current volume is to explore this living interface between text and commentary in Buddhism, using the *Lotus* as an exemplar.

Rather than taking on the impossible task of cataloging the long tradition of commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* across Asia, we focus on the Japanese figure Nichiren (1222–1282), who stands among the greatest of the *Lotus Sūtra* interpreters. Nichiren lived roughly a thousand years after the *Lotus Sūtra*'s compilers in India, at the extreme opposite edge of Asia. By that time, through the work of East Asian exegetes, the *Lotus Sūtra* had come to be understood as providing the key that revealed the diverse body of Buddhist teachings to be unified in a single, underlying salvific program. Many people of Nichiren's age, however, understood themselves to be living in an era of decline predicted in Buddhist scriptures, a time when the burden of human delusion would be heavy, and enlightenment would be difficult to achieve. Massive natural disasters, civil strife, and the threat of Mongol invasion seemed to confirm this prophecy. Pitting himself against opponents who argued that the *Lotus Sūtra* was too profound for the deluded persons of this evil era, Nichiren asserted that only the *Lotus* represented the Buddha's

ultimate message, a message that could lead even the most sinful and ignorant to liberation.

Nichiren's fierce insistence on the sole efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra* has not endeared him to modern scholarly commentators, who have often dismissed him as narrow and intolerant. Yet another aim of our volume is to show how Nichiren's reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* made compelling sense in the context of his received tradition and his understanding of his own time; it illustrates how much can be at stake in the interpretation of scripture. Through his example, we demonstrate how what *Lotus* followers regard as an ancient and timeless revelation came to be deployed in a specific time and place—thirteenth-century Japan—in an effort to understand, and to transform, that time and place. Focusing on Nichiren allows us to provide a kind of case study of how an ancient Buddhist text was appropriated by someone in a very different historical and cultural context to address questions undreamed of by the sūtra's compilers.

This volume takes the form of a chapter-by-chapter discussion of the twenty-eight chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*. We consider the significance of each chapter from the perspective of two historical moments: what it may have meant in the first centuries of the Common Era in the Indian cultural sphere as the *Lotus Sūtra* came to take its present form, and how it was read by Nichiren in Japan roughly a thousand years later. Rather than divide the volume into two sections, the first commenting on the *Lotus Sūtra* itself and the second introducing Nichiren's reading, we have intentionally alternated our discussion of the *Lotus* text with Nichiren's comments in each chapter, to avoid as much as possible a somewhat artificial division between the original text and Nichiren's later interpretations. For devotees of the *Lotus Sūtra*, text and interpretation have been

inseparable—in effect, parts of the same scripture—as has been the case with many great religious texts over the course of history.

The *Lotus Sūtra* in India

Although the Buddha's precise dates remain contested, current scholarly thinking places him roughly in the fifth century BCE.⁴ According to traditional accounts, he lived for eighty years. Like other teachers of his time, the Buddha did not leave written teachings. The teachings or sūtras of the Buddha (the Sanskrit term *sūtra* means “aphorism”), like the Hindu Vedas, were memorized and recited. The first evidence of Buddhist sūtras being committed to writing did not appear until some four centuries after his death, and then not in India but in Lanka (present-day Sri Lanka) to the south and in Gandhara in what is today parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the north.

Around the time that the texts previously transmitted orally were being recorded on palm leaves in the south and birch bark in the north, something new occurred, for reasons that scholars do not entirely understand. Groups of monastics began to compose their own sūtras, representing these not as their own compositions but as records of the Buddha's teaching, although he had passed into nirvāṇa centuries before. These texts, which would eventually become known as “the Mahāyāna sūtras,” present a different vision of the Buddha and of the path than that espoused by the mainstream Buddhist tradition—which is sometimes disparaged in these works as the “lesser vehicle” (Hīnayāna). For the mainstream, the goal of Buddhist practice was nirvāṇa, stopping the wheel of birth and death by eradicating craving and delusion. The Mahāyāna sūtras extol the ideal of the bodhisattva, who seeks to liberate all beings from

suffering and rebirth by following the long path to buddhahood. Produced over the course of several centuries, they constitute a highly disparate group of texts. An early group, the “perfection of wisdom” or *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras (which include the *Diamond* and *Heart* sūtras), is renowned for its exposition of the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*); the *Lotus Sūtra*, which was completed somewhat later, proclaims a new vehicle that will carry all beings to buddhahood. New findings have overturned or complicated earlier theories about the origins of the Mahāyāna. For example, characterizations of the Mahāyāna as a distinct school or sect, or as promoted chiefly by the Buddhist laity, have been rejected. One intriguing line of inquiry suggests that the Mahāyāna sūtras may have been shaped in part by visualization meditation, in which practitioners envisioned themselves as being in the presence of a buddha and hearing his teaching.⁵ Given both the complexity and fragmentary nature of the evidence, scholars have become increasingly reluctant to make general statements, yet we may note one crucial historical fact: almost all of the Mahāyāna sūtras purport to be the word of the historical Buddha, yet none is. They are later works that introduce important innovations in Buddhist thought, even while devising elaborate strategies to demonstrate their authenticity as the Buddha’s words; they legitimate the new by representing it as old.

One way to think about the Mahāyāna is not as an internally consistent movement, but as an intertwining of texts made up of threads of varying circumference, weight, and texture. Among those threads, none is more luminous than the *Lotus Sūtra*, in part because of its influence and in part because so many things that we associate with “the Mahāyāna” are found there. Yet it is also a distinctive text with its own psyche and its own legacy of influence and interpretation. Indeed, the

brilliance of the *sūtra* only becomes clear when one considers (or at least imagines) the circumstances of its composition, and the questions its authors wrestled with.

Little is known about the origins of the *Lotus Sūtra*. It was compiled somewhere in the Indian cultural sphere, which reached from what is now Sri Lanka in the south to Afghanistan in the north. The earliest Chinese translation was made in 286, from which we may assume that some version or versions of it were circulating before that date. Like many Buddhist *sūtras*, the *Lotus Sūtra* evolved over time, possibly quite a long period of time. By analyzing various elements of the *sūtra*, including its language and the contents of its translations in Chinese, scholars speculate that the *Lotus Sūtra* as we have it today passed through at least three major stages in its compilation. Chapters Two through Nine represent the earliest stratum, focusing on the teachings of the one vehicle and of skillful means. At the next stage, Chapter One, entitled “Introduction,” was added, as well as Chapters Ten through Twenty-Two (except for Chapter Twelve, “Devadatta”).⁶ These chapters focus on the bodhisattva path, the transmission of the *sūtra* to the future, and the revelation of the Buddha’s inconceivable lifespan, set forth in Chapter Sixteen. One artifact of this stage of the compilation process is that the end of Chapter Twenty-Two reads like the conclusion of a *sūtra*. In the final stage, the remaining portions of the *Lotus Sūtra* as we now know it were gradually added: Chapter Twelve was inserted in the middle, while Chapters Twenty-Three through Twenty-Eight, which chiefly deal with individual bodhisattvas, were added at the end. Several of these chapters seem to have circulated independently.⁷

The *Lotus Sūtra* was certainly known in India. However, like other Mahāyāna *sūtras*, it was regarded among the established Indian Buddhist schools as spurious, a late work that only

pretended to be the word of the Buddha. We know that the *Lotus Sūtra* circulated widely from the more than thirty surviving Sanskrit manuscripts or manuscript fragments. These have been classified into three main lineages, based on the locations where they were discovered: Nepal, Gilgit (in present day Pakistan), and Central Asia.⁸ The *Lotus Sūtra* is counted as one of the “nine doctrines” (*navadharmā*) of the Newar Buddhist community in Nepal. Its importance can also be gauged by its citation in other works, including compendia of sūtra passages by such famous figures as Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva, and Atiśa. However, other sūtras are more frequently cited in these works; the *Lotus* is but one of many Mahāyāna sūtras and did not enjoy any particular renown.⁹ Even among the Mahāyāna schools, its famous doctrine of a single vehicle was not universally accepted.¹⁰

Another way that scholars measure the influence of a text is by the number of its commentaries. For example, eight Indian commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* have survived. There is only one Indic commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*, attributed to the famous Yogācāra master Vasubandhu (late fourth to early fifth century), preserved in Chinese. However, because no Sanskrit manuscripts or Tibetan translations are known, its attribution to Vasubandhu has been questioned.¹¹ There is a single commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, ascribed to one Pṛthivībandhu. However, this commentary is a translation into Tibetan not from Sanskrit but from Chinese and is in fact the work of the famous Chinese monk Ji or Kuiji (632–682).¹²

The *Lotus Sūtra* in East Asia

In India, the Buddhist community had some sense of the historical development of the tradition. The fact that so many

texts—sūtras and, later, tantras—were posthumously ascribed to the Buddha could be seen as a legitimizing move, an acknowledgment that their authors knew, at least in a strict historical sense, that these texts were not his teachings. Or perhaps it reflects a genuine conviction that, in some way, they were. But whether or not one accepted the Mahāyāna sūtras as the Buddha's word, it was widely acknowledged that they had appeared long after his passage into nirvāṇa (the period of four hundred years was often mentioned). For their opponents, the sūtras were newly composed; for their proponents, they were newly revealed to the world of humans, having—for example—been hidden and safeguarded for centuries by gods and nāgas.

Things were very different in East Asia. The Mahāyāna sūtras were already being produced when Buddhism first entered China. The Chinese, at least initially, had little sense of the historical progression of the tradition, of what had transpired over the previous four centuries. Under the circumstances, the Mahāyāna sūtras were particularly appealing. Their teachings of nonduality resonated with indigenous notions of an integrated, holistic cosmos, while the bodhisattva ideal paralleled Chinese philosophical notions of human perfectibility. And the *Lotus Sūtra*, said to have been the Buddha's ultimate and final teaching, in which he explains his teaching method within the context of his traditional life story, came to hold a special prominence. Here Śākyamuni proclaims that the *Lotus Sūtra* not only supersedes all that he has taught before, rendering all his other teachings provisional, but also that it is the primordial teaching, taught by all the buddhas since the timeless past.

It was in China that the *Lotus Sūtra* assumed the textual form in which it came to be known throughout East Asia. Six Chinese translations were made, of which three survive: those by Dharmarakṣa in 286; by Kumārajīva in 406; and by Jñānagupta

and Dharmagupta in 601, a version that largely reproduces Kumārajīva's while including some additional material. Of these, Kumārajīva's translation, *Miaofa lianhua jing* (J. *Myōhō renga kyō*, "Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma"), proved by far the most popular. All English translations of the sūtra that have been made from Chinese (seven at the time of this writing, not counting revisions or multiple editions of the same translation) are based upon it. According to his biography, Kumārajīva (344–413), a learned scholar-monk from Kucha in Central Asia, vowed that after his death, his tongue, with which he had expounded the meaning of the Buddhist sūtras, would remain unburnt in the crematory fire, and indeed, although the flames consumed his body, his tongue remained untouched.¹³ This story expresses the confidence that Kumārajīva's translations faithfully captured the Buddha's intent. It was also in China that the *Lotus Sūtra* became "three-fold," being grouped together with an introductory sūtra, the *Sūtra of Immeasurable Meanings* (*Wuliang yi jing*, T no. 276), possibly a Chinese apocryphon, and the *Sūtra of the Practice of Visualizing the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* (*Foshuo guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing*, T no. 277).

Celebrated for its promise of eventual buddhahood for all, the *Lotus Sūtra* became the focus of widespread devotional practices not confined to any particular school: just as the sūtra itself enjoins, it was copied, recited, enshrined, and lectured upon for a range of this-worldly and transcendent aims.¹⁴ Its parables and fantastic scenes inspired painting and sculpture, and so-called miracle tales celebrated its salvific powers. At the same time, the *Lotus Sūtra* received sustained attention from scholar-monks, who discovered in it a path toward resolving a fundamental question that had plagued early Chinese Buddhists.

As noted above, the sūtras were introduced into China at random, and it soon became apparent that they did not necessarily agree and sometimes even contradicted each other. Yet for the Chinese, these were all the teachings of a single figure, the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, and were thus assumed to share a single, underlying salvific message. Commentators saw as their overriding task the uncovering of a sequence, order, or fundamental organizing principle that would show how the manifold Buddhist teachings related to one another and make clear their essential unity. These attempts led to rival systems of doctrinal systematization or *panjiao*.

Perhaps the most influential figure in this systematizing endeavor was Zhiyi (538–597), revered as the patriarch of the Chinese Tiantai school of Buddhism, whose work profoundly influenced East Asian Buddhist thought and practice. Zhiyi is credited with two *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries: the *Profound Meanings of the Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhau jing xuanyi*; hereafter, *Fahua xuanyi*, T no. 1716), an elucidation of the sūtra's major principles, and the *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhau jing wenju*; hereafter, *Fahua wenju*, T no. 1718), a commentary on specific passages, both compiled by his disciple Guanding (561–632) from the latter's notes on Zhiyi's *Lotus Sūtra* lectures.¹⁵ Zhiyi drew on the *Lotus Sūtra*'s claim that the Buddha's various teachings were all his "skillful means," or teaching devices, preached in accordance with the capacity of different individuals but all ultimately united in the fundamental principle of the one vehicle.

What was that fundamental principle? Zhiyi described it as the "threefold truth," or "threefold discernment," of emptiness, conventional existence, and the middle. Discerning all phenomena as "empty," lacking self-essence or independent existence, frees the practitioner from attachment to desires and

intellectual constructs. It collapses all categories, hierarchies, and boundaries to reveal an absolute equality and nondifferentiation. This insight corresponds to the wisdom of persons of the two vehicles of the “Hīnayāna,” those who seek the goal of nirvāṇa, stopping the wheel of birth and death, as well as the wisdom of novice bodhisattvas. However, from a Mahāyāna perspective, it is one-sided. Though empty of fixed substance, all things nonetheless exist conventionally in dependence upon causes and conditions. The discernment of “conventional existence” reestablishes discrete entities and conceptual distinctions as features of commonsense experience but without false essentializing or clinging; it frees the practitioner to act in the world without bondage to it. This corresponds to the wisdom of more advanced bodhisattvas. Finally, phenomena are neither one-sidedly empty nor conventionally existing but exhibit both aspects simultaneously: at each moment, every existent, without losing its individual character, permeates and contains all others. This insight, termed “the middle,” encompasses both poles of understanding—emptiness and conventional existence—without dissolving the tension between them. The bodhisattva path culminates in the simultaneous discernment of all three truths as integrated in one.

Zhiyi analyzed the Buddhist teachings in their entirety according to how they lead to the understanding of the threefold truth, dividing them into four strands. The tripiṭaka teaching, corresponding to the so-called Hīnayāna, sets forth basic teachings such as the four noble truths and the impermanence of all phenomena, leading to renunciation of *saṃsāra*. The shared teaching, common to both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, stresses the truth of emptiness, that all things are without fixed substance. And the distinct or separate teaching, taught solely for bodhisattvas, emphasizes the return from discernment of

emptiness to the phenomenal world, allowing bodhisattvas to cultivate the wisdom necessary to negotiate specific circumstances in saving others. These three strands of teaching each set forth partial aspects of the threefold truth and emphasize a gradual, sequentialist approach to cultivating their respective insights. Only the fourth, the “perfect teaching,” reveals the integrated threefold truth all at once, in its entirety. This is the one vehicle spoken of in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, the threefold truth for Zhiyi not only expresses how the *Lotus Sūtra* encompasses the three vehicles in the one vehicle, but also makes clear the underlying structure of the entire Buddhist system of thought and practice.¹⁶

Chinese doctrinal classification systems tended to adopt some presumed chronological sequence for the Buddha’s teaching, moving from shallow to profound. Early commentators disagreed as to whether the *Flower Garland (Avataṃsaka) Sūtra*, the *Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa (Mahāparinirvāṇa) Sūtra*, or the *Lotus Sūtra* represented the Buddha’s highest teaching. The Tiantai school that claimed Zhiyi as its founder developed a highly influential chronology, dividing the presumed fifty years of the Buddha’s teaching career into “five periods” with the *Lotus Sūtra* as its culmination (see discussion in Chapter Four). In this schema, the Buddha first prepared the way through provisional teachings, and in the last eight years he expounded his ultimate message in the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* sūtras. This claim was supported by a passage from the *Sūtra of Immeasurable Meanings*, regarded as an introductory scripture to the *Lotus*, which states, “For more than forty years I have expounded the dharma in all manner of ways through adeptness in skillful means, but the core truth has still not been revealed.”¹⁷

Because of what we now know about the long process by which the Buddhist canon was compiled, classification schemes

such as the “five periods,” —chronological sequences by which the Buddha himself supposedly set forth the entirety of the sūtras—can no longer be viewed as based in historical fact. Nonetheless, as efforts to systematize the whole of the Buddhist teachings and place them within an overall soteriological program, they represent a monumental achievement.

The Tiantai system provides room for both an inclusive reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as encompassing all teachings within itself, and a hierarchical or even exclusive one, in which the *Lotus Sūtra* supersedes all others. Zhiyi himself did not view the *Lotus Sūtra* in exclusive terms, because each sūtra, being suited to persons of a particular orientation, has its own role to play in the Buddha's grand soteriological design and could thus not be categorically designated as higher or lower.¹⁸ However, later Tiantai thinkers such as the sixth patriarch Zhanran (711–782), who lived in a time of increased sectarian rivalry, organized the sūtras into a hierarchy with the *Lotus Sūtra* at the apex.¹⁹ We can find both perspectives in the writings of later Tiantai thinkers in China and Japan.

Nowhere has the *Lotus Sūtra* flourished as in Japan. Monastics and lay devotees alike recited and copied it, not only for the supreme goal of buddhahood, but also for a range of other benefits including healing and prosperity, peace in the realm, and the well-being of the deceased. As on the continent, scholar-monks wrote doctrinal commentaries, lectured upon, and debated its teachings; artists depicted its narratives in painting; and literati celebrated its virtues in tales and poetry. It was also the central scripture of the influential Tendai school established by the monk Saichō (766/767–822), who had journeyed to China and brought back Tiantai teachings. Saichō envisioned a grand synthesis that would unite the diverse strands of Buddhist doctrine and practice under the umbrella of the one

vehicle of the *Lotus*. Enryakuji, the temple complex that he founded on Mount Hiei north of the imperial capital of Heian-kyō (today's Kyoto), became a leading center, not only of Buddhism, but of learning more broadly.

As we have seen, Zhiyi and other Chinese Tiantai thinkers drew on the *Lotus Sūtra* to integrate the disparate Buddhist teachings into a coherent whole and to explain how all phenomena, being empty of independent substance, interpenetrate and “contain” one another in an interrelated holistic cosmos. Saichō and later Japanese Tendai thinkers took these ideas in new directions. One was the claim that practicing the *Lotus Sūtra* enables one to realize buddhahood “quickly.” We find some basis for this in the *Lotus* itself, and the idea had already been proposed in the Chinese Tiantai tradition. Zhiyi's teacher Huisi (515–577), for example, had written that *Lotus* practitioners awaken spontaneously and without proceeding through sequential stages of practice,²⁰ and Zhiyi, as we have seen, saw the possibility of sudden and full awakening to the threefold truth in its entirety as what distinguished the “perfect teaching” from the “distinct teaching”: where bodhisattvas of the provisional Mahāyāna must practice for three incalculable eons to achieve full awakening, practitioners of the sudden and perfect teaching, exemplified by *Lotus Sūtra*, can do so directly. Saichō also understood the *Lotus* as the “great direct path” that enabled the realization of buddhahood in only two or three lifetimes, or in some cases, in this very lifetime.²¹

Saichō's later followers incorporated esoteric Buddhist teachings (J. *mikkyō*) into their *Lotus Sūtra* interpretation, a development that distinguished Japanese Tendai from its continental forebear and promoted ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra* as offering rapid attainment. Saichō had received an esoteric initiation in China and established an “esoteric course” as one of two

training programs on Mount Hiei, the other being traditional Tendai doctrine and practice. His later disciples—scholar-monks such as Ennin (794–864), Enchin (814–891), and Annen (841–?) further interpreted the *Lotus* as an esoteric scripture. The buddha of the esoteric teachings is not the historical buddha Śākyamuni but the cosmic buddha who is timeless and omnipresent: all forms are his body, all sounds are his voice, and all thoughts are his mind, although the unenlightened do not realize this. Through the performance of the secretly transmitted “three mysteries”—the performing of mudrās or ritual gestures, the chanting of mantras, and the ritual use of maṇḍalas—the esoteric adept was said to unite his body, speech, and mind with those of cosmic Buddha, thus “realizing buddhahood with this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*). Esoteric Buddhism contributed to the rise, in Japan’s medieval period, of the Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku hōmon*). According to this doctrine, buddhahood is not a distant goal but the true status of all things: the purpose of practice is not to “attain” buddhahood as a future aim but to realize that one is a buddha inherently. These developments all helped to shape the context in which Nichiren would read the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Nichiren as Interpreter

The Japanese Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222–1282), arguably the *Lotus Sūtra*’s most famous interpreter, lived and taught in a historical and cultural milieu quite different from that of the sūtra’s original compilers. As Buddhism spread through the Sinitic world, the *Lotus* had come to be widely revered as Śākyamuni Buddha’s highest and final teaching, and Nichiren asserted that only this sūtra represented his complete message. Like his contemporaries, Nichiren believed he was living in the

age of the Final Dharma (J. *mappō*), a degenerate era when people are burdened by heavy karmic hindrances and liberation is difficult to achieve. Now in this evil era, he claimed, only the *Lotus Sūtra* leads to buddhahood; other teachings had lost their efficacy and must be set aside. Nichiren taught a form of *Lotus* practice accessible to all, regardless of social class or education: chanting the sūtra's *daimoku*, or title, in the formula *Namu Myōhō-rence-kyō*.²² By chanting the daimoku with faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, he said, one could realize buddhahood in this very lifetime. And, as faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* spread, the ideal buddha land would be realized in the present world.

We have chosen Nichiren as an example of a *Lotus Sūtra* interpreter for three reasons. First, Nichiren drew freely on traditions of *Lotus* exegesis that had preceded him and reworked them into his own, highly innovative reading. Though the entire history of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s reception across East Asia cannot be addressed in this short volume, examining Nichiren enables us to learn much about prior interpretations. A second reason is the extraordinary range of his influence. Nichiren's following developed into one of Japan's major Buddhist traditions, the Hokkeshū (Lotus sect), or Nichiren sect, as it later came to be called, which includes multiple branches and subsects. Today more than forty religious organizations in Japan, both traditional temple institutions and lay movements, trace their origins to Nichiren. Several have substantial followings in other parts of Asia, in Africa, and in the West. It is no exaggeration to say that Nichiren's followers dominate *Lotus Sūtra* practice today. And third, Nichiren offers an instructive case study in the hermeneutics, or principles of interpretation, by which great teachers have reinterpreted their tradition's sacred scriptures to meet the needs of their own time and place. Nichiren's reading, like all readings, was not a pure encounter with the text of the

sūtra but was mediated both by his received tradition and the social, political, and religious currents of his own time. Some aspects of his interpretation may not immediately resonate with contemporary readers, particularly, his claim for the exclusive truth of *Lotus Sūtra*, which can grate on modern sensibilities. Indeed, Nichiren challenges us, to a degree that other Buddhist thinkers may not, to step outside our own assumptions and enter his conceptual world, an effort essential to any good historian of religion. What follows is an outline of Nichiren's life and of several main points in his reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*, offered as a foundation for the more detailed discussion that follows in the individual chapters.

Nichiren was born in a small fishing village on the eastern coast of Japan. He drew his following, not from among the elites of the capital in Kyoto, but from mid- and lower-ranking warriors and farmers of the eastern provinces. He was ordained around age twelve (counted ordinarily, by East Asian convention) at a temple known as Kiyosumidera (a.k.a. Seichōji), an important center in eastern Japan of esoteric Buddhist learning and mountain ascetic practice. Little is known of his early life beyond a passion for study. He studied Tendai, Shingon, and other traditions and was initiated into esoteric lineages. As a boy, he prayed to the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha (J. Kokūzō), the chief object of worship at the temple, to become the wisest person in all Japan. "Before my eyes," he wrote, "the bodhisattva manifested himself as a venerable monk and bestowed on me a jewel of wisdom like the morning star."²³ Nichiren said he was then quickly able to master the essentials of Japan's eight traditional Buddhist schools as well as the new Zen and *nenbutsu* movements. Dissatisfied with the limited resources of his home temple, he traveled extensively for further study, both to Kamakura, site of the Bakufu, the shogunate or military

government, and across the country, to the major temples of the Kyoto and Nara regions. His earliest surviving essay, written when he was twenty-one, suggests that he already took the *Lotus Sūtra* to be the sole teaching of universal buddhahood; his subsequent studies enhanced and deepened this conviction. Throughout, he was guided by the words of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*—regarded in Tendai circles as a restatement of the *Lotus*—to “rely on the dharma and not on the person.”²⁴ For Nichiren, this meant that one should rely on the sūtras rather than the works of later commentators or the opinions of contemporary teachers, however eminent. And among the sūtras, one should rely above all on the *Lotus*, which is complete and final, and not others, which are incomplete and provisional. It is essential to bear in mind that for Nichiren, as for many of his contemporaries, the sūtras were literally the Buddha’s words; the stages of his fifty-year teaching career as mapped out in the Tendai doctrinal classification system represented historical truth; and the ranking of particular scriptures in the Tendai hierarchy of teachings directly mirrored their degree of salvific power. With this background, here we will introduce some key features of Nichiren’s approach to the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Nichiren saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as all-encompassing, containing the whole of Buddhist truth within itself. All other sūtras reveal but partial aspects of that truth. Or, in Tendai terminology, the *Lotus Sūtra* is “true,” while all other sūtras are “provisional.” What this meant for Nichiren in practical terms was that the *Lotus Sūtra* alone enables all persons without exception to become buddhas. Nichiren grounded this claim in the “three thousand realms in a single thought-moment” (*ichinen sanzen*), a principle first articulated by Zhiyi and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. In essence, this principle means that at

each moment the smallest phenomenon (“a single thought-moment”) and the entire cosmos (“three thousand realms”) mutually pervade and encompass one another. Where Zhiyi had introduced this idea only briefly, Nichiren developed it as the very foundation of his thought.

Ichinen sanzen is a complex and challenging concept, and in his doctrinal instruction, Nichiren frequently concentrated on one of its key component principles: the mutual inclusion of the ten dharma realms (*jikkai gogu*). Traditional Buddhist cosmology divides saṃsāra or the realm of rebirth for unenlightened beings into a hierarchy of six paths: hell dwellers, hungry ghosts (*preta*), animals, demigods (*asura*), humans, and gods (*deva*). Above these, Tendai doctrine places four more realms characterized by ascending levels of awakening: the two realms of the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who cultivate the aims of detachment and cessation of desire set forth in the so-called Hinayāna teachings, aiming for the goal of nirvāṇa; bodhisattvas, who strive for the liberation of all beings; and fully realized buddhas. In contrast to the buddha realm, which represents enlightenment, the other nine realms represent various levels of delusion, or states not yet fully awakened. Being empty of fixed, independent existence, all ten interpenetrate, meaning that each realm contains all ten within itself. Specifically, this means that the Buddha and all living beings are not separate; the buddha realm does not exist apart from oneself. Nichiren explains this in simple terms: “As to where hell and the Buddha exist: some sūtras say that hell lies beneath the ground, while others say that the Buddha dwells in the west. But close investigation shows that both exist within our five-foot body. For hell is in the heart of a man who despises his father and makes light of his mother, just as flowers and fruit are already present within

the lotus seed. What we call 'buddha' dwells in our mind, in the same way that stones contain fire and that jewels have value intrinsically."²⁵

For Nichiren, the *Lotus Sūtra* alone fully revealed the inherence of the buddha realm in all nine realms of unenlightened beings: By chanting its title, *Namu Myōhō-enge-kyō*, which instantiates the wisdom of all buddhas, even the most deluded person, he said, can manifest the buddha realm directly. Nichiren likened this to fire being produced by a stone taken from beneath the depths of water or a lamp illuminating a place that has been dark for millions of years.²⁶

Though he understood its truth to be universal, Nichiren saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as especially relevant to his own place and time: Japan at the beginning of the Final Dharma age. This idea can be traced to the Japanese Tendai founder Saichō, who argued that Japan had a special karmic connection to the *Lotus Sūtra*. Saichō understood himself to be living shortly before the arrival of *mappō* and wrote that now was the time when people's religious capacity was suited to the one vehicle of the *Lotus*.²⁷

Buddhist sūtras suggest that as the world moved farther and farther away from the time of the historical Buddha, his teachings would be refracted through an increasingly flawed mode of understanding; people would grow ever more deluded and liberation would become harder to achieve. In East Asia, this decline was said to span three successive periods: the age of the True Dharma (*shōbō*), the age of the Semblance Dharma (*zōbō*), and the age of the Final Dharma (*mappō*). Although chronologies differed, a rough consensus in Japan held that the first two ages had lasted a thousand years each and that the Final Dharma age had begun in 1052.²⁸

From a scholarly perspective, *mappō* represents a discourse, not a historical reality. Buddhism in early medieval Japan was

thriving: Buddhist institutions, learning, arts, and culture all flourished, and a wealth of new interpretations arose. Nonetheless, the idea that the age was in decline provided a ready explanation for political troubles and natural disasters; Buddhist teachers appropriated the idea of *mappō* in different ways to advance competing agendas. Some urged that because the times were degenerate, practitioners should be all the more conscientious in carrying out traditional Buddhist disciplines such as maintaining precepts, practicing meditation, and studying scriptures. Others, of whom Nichiren is one, drew on notions of *mappō* to legitimize innovations in Buddhist thought and practice.

For Nichiren, the problem of *mappō* was not simply a general decline of human capacity but a widespread rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of incomplete, provisional teachings such as Pure Land, Zen, and the esoteric teachings, which he deemed to be no longer efficacious in the present era. Nichiren first formulated this argument in debate with followers of Hōnen (1133–1212), the founder of the Japanese Pure Land sect (*Jōdoshū*). Hōnen had taught that people living now in the *mappō* era were too ignorant and burdened by evil karma to achieve liberation through their own exertions in traditional Buddhist disciplines. Rather, Hōnen urged, people should set aside all other practices and solely chant the *nenbutsu*, the name of the buddha Amitābha (J. Amida), relying on the power of Amitābha's compassionate vow to save all who placed faith in him. By entrusting themselves wholeheartedly to Amitābha, they could be born after death in his Pure Land of Utmost Bliss (Skt. *Sukhāvātī*; J. *Gokuraku Jōdo*), said to lie far away in the western quadrant of the cosmos. There they could hear Amitābha preach the dharma directly and attain liberation. Birth in a buddha's pure land was understood as a shortcut

along a bodhisattva's long path to enlightenment, and from well before Hōnen's time, people of all social ranks had aspired to birth after death in Amitābha's realm and carried out a variety of practices—reciting and copying sūtras, chanting mantras, performing esoteric rituals, keeping the precepts, and commissioning Buddhist paintings and statues—to achieve that goal. Among such practices, the chanted nenbutsu (*Namu Amida-butsu*) was accessible even to the poor and illiterate. Hōnen was by no means the first teacher to recommend it as particularly suited to sinful persons in the latter age, but he was the first to insist that the nenbutsu alone is efficacious and that all other practices should be rejected. Hōnen's later followers, with whom Nichiren engaged, criticized the *Lotus Sūtra* especially as too profound for the deluded people of this era. Those who attempted to practice it, they said, were like a small boy trying to wear his grandfather's shoes or a weakling trying to bend a stout bow or wear heavy armor. Such persons were bound to fail in their practice, thus losing the precious opportunity afforded by their human birth, and would fall after death into the lower realms. Rather, Hōnen's followers maintained, one should set aside the *Lotus* in this lifetime and chant the nenbutsu instead, achieve birth in Amitābha's pure land, and attain the awakening of the *Lotus Sūtra* there.

Nichiren fiercely opposed this argument. For him, Hōnen's focus on human limitations ignored the Buddha's own distinction between true and provisional teachings. The *Lotus* was the sūtra of which Śākyamuni himself had said, "For more than forty years I have expounded the dharma in all manner of ways through adeptness in skillful means, but the core truth has still not been revealed," and, "Having openly set aside skillful means, I will teach only the highest path" (45).²⁹ Precisely because the *Lotus Sūtra* is profound, Nichiren argued, it can save even the

most depraved individuals. He also maintained that the nenbutsu belonged to the lesser category of provisional Mahāyāna and did not represent the Buddha's final intent. He likened it to the scaffolding erected in building a large stūpa: once the stūpa (the *Lotus Sūtra*) has been completed, the scaffolding (the nenbutsu) should be dismantled.

Like Hōnen, Nichiren taught a universally accessible mode of practice, grounded in faith and centered on the chanting of a single phrase. But despite these outward similarities, the doctrine and attitude underlying the two practices differ radically. Rather than promising enlightenment after death and in a distant realm, the daimoku as taught by Nichiren offers direct access to a dimension in which the self opens to pervade the universe, and buddhahood is realized “in this body.” In his teaching, mappō is accordingly revalorized as the moment when the “perfectly encompassing path” of immediate enlightenment becomes accessible to all.

The Mission of Propagation

In Nichiren's understanding, abandoning the true teaching in favor of provisional ones not only cut off the path to buddhahood for individuals, but had dire consequences for society. Japan in his day was ravaged by calamities, including famine, epidemics, earthquakes, and the threat of invasion by the Mongols, who had already conquered much of Asia. Nichiren blamed these disasters on widespread rejection of the *Lotus Sūtra*, a theme he developed in many of his writings. The most famous example is his admonitory treatise *Risshō ankoku ron* (“On Establishing the True Dharma and Bringing Peace to the Realm”), which he submitted to the Kamakura Bakufu in 1260. In it Nichiren rebuked officials for their support of monks who

promoted incomplete teachings that, from his perspective, were no longer efficacious. He also cited passages from sūtras enumerating the disasters said to befall a country whose ruler fails to protect the true dharma and allows it to be neglected. These calamities, such as epidemics, violent and unseasonable storms, crop failure, famine, and ominous astrological portents, Nichiren noted, had all recently occurred in Japan. Only two disasters mentioned in the sūtras—internal revolt and foreign invasion—had not yet transpired. Unless the situation were rectified, he argued, those disasters would surely materialize as well. (A rebellion led by the shogunal regent's half-brother in 1272, and the Mongol invasion attempts of 1274 and 1281, seemed to bear out these predictions.) Conversely, Nichiren asserted that if the people as a whole embraced the *Lotus Sūtra*, the buddha land would be realized here in this world.

Nichiren's criticism of other Buddhist teachings drew the ire of Buddhist leaders, government officials, and ordinary devotees. Shortly after he submitted the *Risshō Ankoku ron*, a mob attacked his dwelling, forcing him to flee. The following year, he was arrested and exiled to the Izu peninsula. Reprieved two years later, he resumed his proselytizing in Kamakura and the surrounding provinces; on one occasion, his party was attacked, and he himself was wounded. As the country readied its defenses in preparation for a Mongol attack, Nichiren intensified his efforts, expanding his critique of provisional teachings to include Zen, the esoteric teachings, and movements to revive observance of the traditional Buddhist precepts. In the ninth month of 1271, possibly as part of the Bakufu's effort to rally the country's defenses by subduing dissidents, Nichiren was arrested a second time and nearly beheaded; ultimately, he was again banished, this time to the remote island of Sado in the Sea of Japan. There he endured hunger, cold, and the hostility of

(continued...)

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