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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



The *Lotus Sūtra* begins, like almost all Buddhist sūtras, with the statement, “Thus have I heard” (3). This is meant to indicate its authenticity, as something heard by the narrator from the Buddha himself. The narrator is typically considered to be Ānanda, the Buddha’s cousin and personal attendant, the monk who was most often in the Buddha’s presence and thus heard his many teachings. When Ānanda agreed to serve as the Buddha’s attendant, he asked that the Buddha repeat to him any teachings that he might not have been present to hear. According to tradition, after the Buddha’s death, a council of five hundred enlightened monks was convened to compile his teachings. Ānanda was asked to recite all of the sūtras that he had heard; he is said to have heard 84,000 teachings, which took seven months to recite. He began his recitation of each sūtra with the phrase, “Thus have I heard.”

The words “Thus have I heard” at the beginning of the *Lotus Sūtra* are thus hardly surprising, except for the fact that Ānanda did not hear the *Lotus Sūtra*. In fact, scholars are unsure as to exactly what Ānanda heard, as nothing that the Buddha taught was written down for some four centuries after his death. Although accounts of the so-called first council at which Ānanda’s prodigious memory was on display have likely been highly mythologized, most scholars assume that at least some of the teachings preserved in the early canons derived from the Buddha himself. The *Lotus Sūtra*, however, was not composed until

long after the Buddha's, and Ānanda's, time. As we shall see, the *Lotus Sūtra* is obsessed, perhaps above all, with its own legitimation, with an almost palpable anxiety to prove that it was spoken by the Buddha. That obsession is evident from the first three words of the Sanskrit text: *evaṃ mayā śrutam*, "thus have I heard."

The next standard element of a Buddhist sūtra is a statement of the location where the Buddha delivered the discourse. There are a number of standard places, including Jetavana, a grove in the city of Śrāvastī, as well as the Gabled Hall in the Great Wood near Vaiśālī. Many sūtras are said to have been taught on Vulture Peak (Gṛdhrakūṭa), near the city of Rājagṛha in the kingdom of Magadha. Traditional etymologies say that it was so named because it is shaped like the head of a vulture or because many vultures inhabited a nearby charnel ground. Translations from the Chinese or Japanese often render this name as Eagle Peak. In a second effort at legitimation, the preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* (like the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras) is set at Vulture Peak.

A third element in the opening to a sūtra is a description of the audience. Here the *Lotus Sūtra* again follows the conventional form, stating that the audience comprises twelve thousand monks, all of whom have achieved the state of the *arhat*, or "worthy one," someone who has followed the path to its conclusion, has destroyed all causes for future rebirth, and will enter final nirvāṇa at death. To provide specificity, twenty-one of these twelve thousand are mentioned by name. They include the Buddha's most famous disciples, such as Mahākāśyapa, who would convene the first council to compile the teachings after the Buddha's death; Mahāmaudgalyāyana, the monk foremost in supernatural powers; Śāriputra, the monk foremost in wisdom; and Rāhula, the Buddha's only son, conceived before he

renounced the world. Also in attendance is the Buddha's foster mother Mahāprajāpatī, who had convinced him to establish the order of nuns and who had become a nun, and an arhat, herself. She is accompanied by six thousand attendants. Also present is Yaśodharā, the Buddha's former wife, who is also a nun and an arhat. Another two thousand monks are also in attendance, some who have reached the rank of arhat and others who have not.

Up to this point, the members of the audience would be entirely familiar to those who knew the canon, the texts accepted as authoritative by the Buddhist mainstream. What is different is the numbers. Works in the Pāli canon, for example, do not include such multitudes when describing the audience of a sūtra. Readers of the text who had visited the sacred sites would know that Vulture Peak is more hill than peak; it is difficult to imagine a crowd of twenty thousand monks and nuns seated at its small summit, or how the members of such a huge assembly could hear the Buddha. The size of the *Lotus Sūtra's* audience is the first sign of something extraordinary. A second sign is a second constituency within the audience: eighty thousand bodhisattvas.

In the early Buddhist tradition, and in what scholars have come to call "mainstream Buddhism" (that is, non-Mahāyāna), there are three paths to enlightenment. The first is the path of the *śrāvaka* or disciple (literally, "listener"), one who listens to the teachings of the Buddha, puts them into practice, and eventually achieves the state of the arhat, entering final nirvāṇa at death. The second is the path of the *pratyekabuddha*, or "solitary enlightened one." *Pratyekabuddhas* are rather enigmatic figures in Buddhist literature, said to prefer a solitary existence, achieving their liberation at a time when there is no buddha in the world. Having achieved their enlightenment, they do not

teach others. The third path is that of the bodhisattva, a person capable of achieving the state of an arhat but who instead seeks the far more difficult and distant goal of buddhahood, perfecting himself over many billions of lifetimes so that he may teach the path to liberation to others at a time when it has been forgotten. Thus, a bodhisattva only achieves buddhahood at a time when the teachings of the previous buddha have faded entirely into oblivion, a process that takes many millions of millennia. Different versions of the tradition say that Śākyamuni Buddha, the buddha who appeared in India some two thousand five hundred years ago, was the fourth, the seventh, or the twenty-fifth buddha to appear in our world during the present cosmic age. There is a bodhisattva, Maitreya, said to be waiting in the Tuṣita (“Satisfaction”) heaven to be the next buddha, who will appear in our world when the teachings of our buddha have been completely forgotten, something that will not occur for millions of years. Śākyamuni and other, prior buddhas were bodhisattvas before their enlightenment. In the present age, mainstream Buddhism essentially recognizes only a single bodhisattva: Maitreya. The audience of the *Lotus Sūtra*, however, has eighty thousand bodhisattvas. The sūtra tells us that these eighty thousand bodhisattvas have “paid homage to countless hundreds of thousands of buddhas” (3), far more than four, seven, or twenty-five. The text lists eighteen of these bodhisattvas by name. They include two who would become the most famous in the Mahāyāna pantheon: Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī. And they include the only bodhisattva whose name would have been recognized and whose existence would have been accepted by all: again, Maitreya. Thus, on the first page of the sūtra, a reader familiar with the canon would have been comforted by the familiar opening phrase and the familiar setting, only to be dumbfounded, and perhaps confounded, by the

size and composition of the audience, an audience that grows even further as one reads on, with all manner of gods and demigods arriving from their various heavens, each with hundreds of thousands of attendants. Also present is one human king, Ajātaśatru, apparently after he had repented the murder of his father, the Buddha's patron and friend, Bimbisāra, king of Magadha.¹

With the audience having been enumerated, the Buddha then teaches a Mahāyāna sūtra identified in Sanskrit as *Mahānirdeśa*. However, nothing of the content of that teaching is provided, and *mahānirdeśa* is a generic term that simply means "great instruction." Kumārajīva's Chinese translation, however, renders this as "a Mahāyāna sūtra named *Immeasurable Meanings*," and by the fifth century, a text purporting to be this very sūtra was circulating in China, also with the name *Sūtra of Immeasurable Meanings* (Ch. *Wuliang yi jing*), said to have been translated by a monk named Dharmāgatayaśas. No Sanskrit original, or reference to the Sanskrit original, has been located, nor are any other translations attributed to Dharmāgatayaśas, leading scholars to consider the text to be a Chinese apocryphon, a work composed in China that purports to be not only of Indian origin but spoken by the Buddha himself. It achieved canonical status in China, where it is regarded as the first of three sūtras comprising the so-called threefold *Lotus Sūtra*. The text itself is short, not quite thirty pages in English translation, and has only three chapters. The first describes the bodhisattvas present in the assembly and reports their lengthy praise of the Buddha. In the second, the Buddha praises the importance of the *Sūtra of Immeasurable Meanings* and then gives the actual teaching, which is that, although buddhas teach immeasurable meanings, they all originate from a single dharma, which is without form. Also in the chapter the

Buddha says, “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.”² East Asian commentators would find great meaning in this statement, for it serves to position the *Lotus Sūtra* as the Buddha’s final teaching. The third and longest chapter is devoted to ten benefits accruing to those who hear one verse of this sūtra or keep, read, recite, and copy the sūtra.

After expounding this sūtra, we read, the Buddha then enters a state of deep meditation (*samādhi*). In the Mahāyāna sūtras, such states often have specific names, and this one is called “abode of immeasurable meanings” (5). This causes various celestial flowers to rain from sky. The audience is filled with joy.

The body of a buddha is famously adorned with the thirty-two marks of a superman (*mahāpuruṣa*), among which is a small tuft of white hair between his eyebrows, called the *ūrṇā*. In the Mahāyāna sūtras, the Buddha often shoots a beam of light from it, and he does so here at the beginning of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The light illuminates eighteen thousand worlds in the east, extending as far up as Akaniṣṭha, the highest heaven of the Realm of Form, and extending as far down as Avīci, the lowest and most horrific of the many Buddhist hells. The light reveals all of the beings who inhabit these realms, all the buddhas who are teaching there, as well as the monks, nuns, male lay disciples, and female lay disciples who are practicing their teachings. The audience can see bodhisattvas following the bodhisattva path and buddhas who have passed into final nirvāṇa, together with the jewel-encrusted stūpas that enclose their relics.

As we have noted, Maitreya will be the next buddha. He has reached the end of the bodhisattva path and, like all future buddhas, spends his penultimate lifetime as a god in Tuṣita heaven, the fourth of six heavens of the Realm of Desire, where he

awaits the appropriate moment to be born in the world of humans, achieve buddhahood, and teach the dharma. As such, Maitreya, having perfected himself over many lifetimes, should be endowed with wisdom surpassed only by the Buddha himself. Yet, in one of the inversions used so skillfully in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Maitreya is here made to play the fool. He does not understand why the Buddha has performed this miracle of illuminating vast reaches of the cosmos. And so he asks a wiser bodhisattva, indeed, the bodhisattva of wisdom himself, Mañjuśrī, “What is the reason for this marvelous sign, this great ray of light that illuminates the eighteen thousand worlds in the east and renders visible the adornments of all the buddha worlds?” (6). As noted above, Maitreya was the only bodhisattva of the present time familiar to the non-Mahāyāna, mainstream tradition of Buddhism. But he does not understand the Buddha’s miracle and so he is made to ask a bodhisattva unknown to that mainstream. Here again, this would give the traditional reader pause. The question that would typically open a sūtra is a question addressed to the Buddha from an unenlightened person. Here, the question is asked by an advanced bodhisattva, a bodhisattva a mere one lifetime away from buddhahood, and it is addressed to another bodhisattva, one not part of the mainstream Buddhist tradition. As we shall see, such things occur throughout the *Lotus Sūtra*, where something or someone familiar appears in a way that also seems unfamiliar, evoking recognition but also hesitation. Something is not quite right; indeed, the ground has shifted, and conventional expectations no longer apply.

But before asking his question, as the text says, “Thereupon the bodhisattva Maitreya, wanting to elaborate the meaning of this further, spoke to Mañjuśrī in verse” (6). Over the next seven pages, Maitreya asks, in verse, why the Buddha has

emitted a ray of light from between his eyebrows. One wonders why Maitreya here in effect bursts into song, a rather redundant song, a pattern that occurs regularly throughout the first twenty-one chapters of the sūtra. However, this is not *The Lotus Sūtra: The Musical*. Instead, the verses may provide an important clue to the text's origins, a clue that is invisible in translation, as Eugène Burnouf pointed out in 1844.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is written chiefly in what the Indologist Franklin Edgerton called “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit,” that is, Sanskrit containing grammar and vocabulary common to Indian vernaculars of the period. Much scholarly debate has surrounded the relative dating of the verse and prose sections. One theory has maintained that, although presented in the *Lotus* text as “elaborations” on the prose, at least in the oldest stratum of the sūtra, the verse sections may have been compiled first, with the prose portions being added later.³ Whatever may be the case, to the dismay of generations of undergraduates, one cannot simply skip over the verse sections. One loses little of the plot by doing so but sacrifices much of the richness of the text. In the case of Maitreya's speech here, the bodhisattva describes in often moving detail all of the things that he sees occurring in the various worlds illumined by the Buddha's light.

In response to Maitreya's question about why the Buddha has illumined the worlds, Mañjuśrī responds that he has seen this happen before. That is, he remembers something that Maitreya does not, suggesting that the power of his memory to encompass distant space and time—one of the markers of enlightenment in Buddhism—surpasses even that of Maitreya. It also suggests that Mañjuśrī has been cultivating the bodhisattva path far longer even than Maitreya, who was said to be but one lifetime away from achieving buddhahood. This is but one of many moments in which the *Lotus Sūtra* reverses conventional

hierarchies by revealing hitherto unimagined expanses of the past.

Mañjuśrī goes on to tell a rather elaborate story about a buddha named Candrasūryapradīpa (“Lamp of the Moon and Sun”) who lived incalculable eons, or *kalpas*, in the past. He was followed by another twenty thousand buddhas in succession, all named Candrasūryapradīpa. Before the last Candrasūryapradīpa renounced the world to seek the way, he fathered eight sons. At the end of his life, Candrasūryapradīpa taught a sūtra called *Immeasurable Meanings* and then entered a state of deep meditation; flowers rained down from the sky. Then he emitted a ray of light from his *ūrṇā*, the tuft of hair between his eyebrows. After that, he taught a bodhisattva named Varaprabha and his eight hundred disciples, in a discourse that lasted for sixty intermediate eons. The name of that discourse was the *White Lotus of the True Dharma* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, rendered as *White Lotus of the Marvelous Law*, in the Kubo–Yuyama translation), that is, the *Lotus Sūtra*. He then passed into final nirvāṇa. Varaprabha preserved and taught this *Lotus Sūtra* for eighty intermediate eons, and served as the teacher of Candrasūryapradīpa’s eight sons, each of whom would become a buddha. The last of the eight became a buddha named Dīpaṃkara. Among Varaprabha’s eight hundred disciples was a somewhat avaricious man named Yaśaskāma (“Fame Seeker”), who recited the sūtras but forgot most of what he recited. However, over his lifetimes, he had paid homage to many billions⁴ of buddhas.

In Buddhist literature, when the Buddha tells a story of the distant past, he often ends the story by identifying members of his present circle as the contemporary incarnations of the figures in the story. Mañjuśrī does this here, explaining that in a past life, he had been the esteemed Varaprabha, and Maitreya,

the next buddha, had been the rather disreputable Yaśaskāma. Based on what he had witnessed so many eons ago, Mañjuśrī concludes that the Buddha is about to teach the *Lotus Sūtra*.

There is much to ponder here, as the *Lotus Sūtra* makes a powerful claim for its own authority. The sūtra, which no one has ever heard before, is not new. In fact, it is very old, so old that it has been all but forgotten. It was taught many eons ago, by a buddha so ancient that his name does not appear in the standard list of the previous buddhas. The only familiar name in the story is Dīpaṃkara (16), the first buddha in the list of twenty-five buddhas of the past, according to the Pāli tradition.⁵ In that tradition, it was at the feet of Dīpaṃkara that Sumedha, the yogin who would one day become Śākyamuni Buddha, vowed to follow the long bodhisattva path to buddhahood. It was Dīpaṃkara who prophesied that Sumedha would become a buddha named Gautama. Hence, the first buddha known to the collective memory of the tradition was the last son of the last buddha Candrasūryapradīpa to become enlightened. This means that the story told by Mañjuśrī is about events in a past so distant that no record of them exists. In other words, prior even to the time of the buddha Dīpaṃkara, under whom the buddha of our world, Gautama or Śākyamuni, first took his bodhisattva vows, another buddha, Candrasūryapradīpa, taught the *Lotus Sūtra*. Furthermore, Candrasūryapradīpa was Dīpaṃkara's father, placing him in a position of authority, both in age and in lineage, to the first buddha named by the tradition. The *Lotus Sūtra* is therefore older than any teaching previously known.

The bodhisattva Varaprabha, the teacher of Dīpaṃkara, was Mañjuśrī in a previous life, meaning that a bodhisattva in the audience of the present buddha was, at least at one time,

superior to this previous buddha. And the bodhisattva who is honored by the mainstream tradition as the future buddha, Maitreya, turns out to have been his least worthy disciple. The inversion of authority with which the *Lotus Sūtra* proclaims its priority here not only makes the best of bodhisattvas the least of bodhisattvas, but also explains what happened in the distant past to make it so. In Mañjuśrī's response we also encounter the first instance of a device that occurs in many Mahāyāna sūtras but which is employed most famously, and most head-spinningly, in the *Lotus*: self-reference. In this, the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Mañjuśrī explains that in the distant past, the buddha Candrasūryapradīpa taught the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The literary device of *mise en abyme*, in which a work makes reference to itself, is familiar to readers of such modern authors as Borges and Calvino. It has a much longer history. In Chapter XXIX of Part Two of *Don Quixote*, the knight errant and his servant and squire Sancho Panza encounter a duke and duchess who have read *Don Quixote* and are familiar with their previous adventures. Also, they overhear travelers at an inn regaling each other with stories of Don Quixote that do not appear in the novel. Don Quixote confronts them and points out their error, telling them that he never did the things they said he did. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is present at the court of Alcinous when the blind poet Demodocus sings first of the feud between Achilles and Odysseus at Troy and later of the Trojan Horse, each time causing Odysseus to burst into tears, betraying his identity. In medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation, Mary is often depicted reading, with a book in her hand or on a nearby table, as Gabriel enters with the news that she will give birth to the messiah. That book is most often a codex rather than a scroll, although the codex was not in use in Palestine at

the time of Jesus. But this is merely an anachronism. In the fifteenth-century Merode Altarpiece, Mary has two texts on her table: a scroll, meant to be the Old Testament, and a codex, meant to be the New Testament, although the New Testament, in which the story of the Annunciation is told in the Gospel of Luke, could not have existed until after the birth, death, and resurrection of the child that Gabriel had come to announce.

However, Cervantes wrote Part Two of *Don Quixote* a full decade after he wrote Part One, after Part One had become a sensation and after another author had published a sequel, to Cervantes' great indignation. And while the story of Achilles that Demodocus sings occurs in the *Iliad*, the story of the Trojan Horse does not appear there. Like Don Quixote, Odysseus is present when his own tale is told, but those tales are not *Don Quixote Part Two* or the *Odyssey*. And in the case of the Virgin Mary, that Mary is reading a book that had not yet been written serves any number of purposes, including as a visualization aid to medieval women who imagined themselves as present in the scene.⁶

Something much stranger occurs in the *Lotus Sūtra*, raising the question of who is speaking, who is the "I" of "Thus have I heard"? At this point in the text, Śākyamuni Buddha has not yet spoken, but when he eventually teaches the *Lotus Sūtra*, does he include the first chapter? And when Candrasūryapradīpa taught the *Lotus Sūtra* so many cosmic ages ago, did he include the first chapter, set, from his perspective, in the far distant future? Like *mise en abyme* in which an object is placed between two mirrors, causing the object to be reduplicated into smaller and smaller forms, the *Lotus Sūtra* constantly refers to itself, placing it not at the abyss, but at the very origin of enlightenment. It is at this point that the reader asks the question that haunts the reading: What is the *Lotus Sūtra*?

Roughly a thousand years after the *Lotus Sūtra*'s compilation, in an entirely different cultural sphere, the Buddhist teacher Nichiren maintained that now in the time of mappō, the entire sūtra was encompassed in its daimoku or title, and that chanting the title was the chief practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* for the present era. "Whatever sūtra he expounded," Nichiren wrote, "the Buddha assigned it a title expressing its ultimate principle."⁷ Today we know that the historical Buddha did not preach, let alone name, the *Lotus Sūtra*, but the idea that a sūtra's title embodies its essence was well established in Nichiren's time. One of the great scholar-monk Zhiyi's two *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries, the *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra* (Ch. *Fahua xuanyi*, J. *Hokke gengi*), devotes the greater part of its space to interpreting the five characters *myō*, *hō*, *ren*, *ge*, and *kyō* (as pronounced in Japanese) that comprise the *Lotus Sūtra*'s title in Kumārajīva's translation. The practice of chanting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra* also predates Nichiren. Before lecturing on a sūtra, the lecturer would intone its title, and the audience of *Lotus Sūtra* lectures in premodern Japan would have heard the daimoku in that context. Narrative literature of the latter Heian period contains occasional examples of people reciting the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*. *Namu Myōhō-rence-kyō* was also the mantra employed in the Tendai esoteric *Hokke hō* or Lotus rite. Esoteric notions of mantras as "meditation containers" that encapsulate the powers of awakened states were an important source for Nichiren's thinking about the daimoku.⁸

We have already seen how, when Maitreya asks Mañjuśrī to explain the meaning of the earth shaking, the flowers falling from the sky, and the ray of light emitted from the Buddha's forehead that illuminates the eastern part of the universe, Mañjuśrī expresses his confidence that Śākyamuni Buddha, like the buddhas of prior ages just before they entered final nirvāṇa,

will now preach a sūtra called *White Lotus of the True Dharma* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*). This was the first time, Nichiren wrote, that sentient beings of this world had heard the name of the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁹ This introductory chapter marks a convenient place in the present study to say more about Nichiren’s understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s title.

First, we might consider the individual words that make up the title. *Myō* has the connotations of “wonderful,” “marvelous,” and “inconceivable.” The use of this character in the title was Kumārajīva’s innovation; an earlier translation by Dharmarakṣa (230?–316) uses *shō* (Ch. *zheng*), meaning “true” or “correct.” Fayun (467–529), an early Chinese commentator on the *Lotus Sūtra*, took *myō* (*miao*) to mean “subtle” as opposed to “crude” or “coarse.” Zhiyi argued that *myō* has both a relative and an absolute meaning. From a relative standpoint, *myō*, denoting the perfect teaching, is superior to all others, which by comparison are incomplete. But from an absolute standpoint, *myō* is perfectly encompassing; there is nothing outside it to which it could be compared. This reading laid the groundwork for later understandings of the *Lotus Sūtra* as both superior to, and at the same time inclusive of, all other teachings.

Nichiren said that *myō* has three meanings. The first is to open, meaning that it opens the meaning of all other sūtras. “When the Buddha preached the *Lotus Sūtra*, he opened the storehouse of the other sūtras preached during the preceding forty-some years, and all beings of the nine realms were for the first time able to discern the treasures that lay within those sūtras,” he wrote. Second, *myō* means “perfectly encompassing”; each of the 69,384 characters of the sūtra contains all others within itself. “It is like one drop of the great ocean that contains water from all the rivers that pour into the ocean, or a single wish-granting jewel that, although no bigger than a mustard

seed, can rain down all the treasures that one might gain from all wish-granting jewels.” And third, *myō* means “to restore to life,” meaning that it revives the seeds, or causes, of buddhahood in those who have neglected or destroyed them.¹⁰

Renge means “lotus blossom,” and the Sanskrit *punḍarika* indicates a white lotus. Lotuses grow in muddy water to bloom untainted above its surface and thus represent the flowering of the aspiration for awakening in the mind of the ordinary, deluded person. The lotus plant also produces flowers and seedpods at the same time. To Chinese Tiantai patriarchs, as well as medieval Japanese Tendai interpreters, this suggested the simultaneity of “cause” (the nine realms, or states of those still at the stage of practice) and “effect” (the buddha realm or state of buddhahood), meaning that all ten realms are mutually inclusive. Nichiren draws on the analogy of the lotus to stress his claim that the *Lotus Sūtra* enables the realization of buddhahood in the very act of practice. As he expressed it: “The merit of all other sūtras is uncertain, because they teach that first one must plant good roots and [only] afterward become a buddha. But in the case of the *Lotus Sūtra*, when one takes it in one’s hand, that hand at once becomes a buddha, and when one chants it with one’s mouth, that mouth is precisely a buddha. This is just like the moon being reflected on the water the moment it rises above the eastern mountains, or like a sound and its echo occurring simultaneously.”¹¹

The last character, *kyō*, means “sūtra.” *Kyō* in the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren said, encompasses all the teachings of all buddhas throughout space and time.¹² *Namu*, which prefaces the title in chanting, comes from Sanskrit *namas*, meaning “reverence,” “devotion,” or “the taking of refuge.” Ultimately, Nichiren took it as expressing the willingness to offer one’s life for the dharma. Nichiren made clear, however, that the significance of

the daimoku does not lie in its semantic meaning. The daimoku, he said, is neither the text nor its meaning but the intent, or heart, of the entire sūtra.¹³ He defined it alternately as the seed of buddhahood, the father and mother of all buddhas, and the “three thousand realms in a single thought moment in actuality” (*ji no ichinen sanzen*)—a concept to which we will return in Chapter Sixteen. Nichiren’s interpretation of the entire *Lotus Sūtra* is grounded in his understanding that the “heart” of the entire sūtra is the wonderful dharma, instantiated in its title, which encapsulates the awakened state that buddhas attain and which opens that buddhahood to all who chant it, however meager their moral virtue or understanding. “To practice only the seven characters *Namu Myōhō-renge-kyō* might seem narrow,” he said, “but because those characters are the teacher of all buddhas of the past, present, and future; the leader of all the bodhisattvas in the ten directions; and the compass for all sentient beings on the path of attaining buddhahood, that practice is actually profound.”¹⁴

In developing his teachings about the daimoku of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren drew upon and adapted earlier traditions of *Lotus* interpretation. Chinese exegetes had often employed a technique known as “analytic division” (Ch. *fenke*) or parsing that purported to uncover categories of meaning implicit within a particular sūtra, and thus, to reveal the Buddha’s true intent. Zhiyi, for example, divided the *Lotus Sūtra* into two sections: the first fourteen of its twenty-eight chapters, he said, represent the “trace teaching” (Ch. *jimen*, J. *shakumon*), which presents Śākyamuni Buddha as a “trace” or manifestation, that is, a historical figure who lived and taught in this world, while the second fourteen chapters constitute the “origin teaching” (*benmen*, *honmon*), which presents Śākyamuni as the primordial buddha, awakened since the inconceivably remote past. The intent of the

trace teaching, Zhiyi said, lies in opening the three vehicles to reveal the one vehicle, while the intent of the origin section is to reveal the Buddha's original awakening in the distant past. Nichiren also regarded these as the two great revelations of the *Lotus Sūtra*. For him, the trace teaching revealed buddhahood as a potential inherent in all beings, while the origin teaching presented it as a reality fully manifested in the Buddha's life and conduct. Nichiren saw the core of the trace and origin teachings as Chapters Two and Sixteen, respectively, and urged his followers to recite these chapters as part of their daily practice.

Chinese commentators also typically divided sūtras into three parts: an introductory section, the main exposition, and a "dissemination" section, urging that the sūtra be transmitted to the future. Zhiyi divided the *Lotus Sūtra* accordingly: Chapter One of the *Lotus Sūtra* represents "introduction"; Chapters Two through the first part of Seventeen represent the "main exposition"; and the latter part of Chapter Seventeen and the remaining chapters represent "dissemination." Zhiyi further divided each of the sūtra's two exegetical divisions, the trace and origin teachings, into these three parts.¹⁵ Nichiren expanded this threefold analysis in two directions. Zooming out, as it were, he applied it to the entirety of the Buddha's teachings: all teachings that preceded the *Lotus Sūtra* are "introduction"; the threefold *Lotus Sūtra* is the "main exposition"; and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which Tendai tradition regards as a restatement of the *Lotus Sūtra*, represents "dissemination." Zooming in, he identified all the teachings of all buddhas throughout space and time, including the trace teaching of *Lotus Sūtra*, as preparation, and the daimoku, *Namu Myōhō-enge-kyo*, the heart of the origin teaching, as the main exposition. Nichiren did not say explicitly what "dissemination" would mean in that case. His later disciples put forth various explanations, for example, that

it referred to the spread of *Namu Myōhō-rence-kyō* in the *mappō* era.¹⁶

Nichiren was initially moved to remonstrate with government authorities by the suffering he had witnessed following a devastating earthquake in 1257. It was then that he composed and submitted his treatise *Risshō ankoku ron*, his first admonishment to persons in power. Initially he saw that earthquake as collective karmic retribution for the error of neglecting the *Lotus Sūtra*. But over time it came to evoke for him the shaking of “the whole buddha world” (ξ) in the “Introduction” chapter presaging Śākyamuni’s preaching of the *Lotus*. Thus the 1257 quake assumed for him a second meaning as a harbinger of the spread of the daimoku of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the teaching for the Final Dharma age. “From the Shōka era (1257–1259) up until the present year (1273) there have been massive earthquakes and extraordinary celestial portents,” he wrote. “. . . You should know that these are no ordinary auspicious or inauspicious omens concerning worldly affairs. They herald nothing less than the rise or decline of this great dharma.”¹⁷ Just as the quaking of the earth had presaged the Buddha’s preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, a violent earthquake had preceded his own dissemination of the sūtra and the practice of chanting its daimoku. This is but one example of how Nichiren read the events of his own life and times as mirrored in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

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