

BODILY READING OF THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

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ONE OF THE most influential scriptures in East Asian history, the *Lotus Sūtra* has been received and read in different ways by Buddhist followers through the ages. This essay focuses on “bodily reading of the *Lotus*” (*Hokke shikidoku*), a term associated with the life and teachings of the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist prophet Nichiren (1222–1282).¹ In the opening section, I present a rough sketch of how the *Lotus Sūtra* was received, read, and regarded in Buddhist history as a scripture imbued with both spiritual and worldly powers.² In the next two sections, I lay out the philosophical and religious underpinnings of Nichiren’s way of reading the *Lotus*, gleaned from his own writings, and consider some of its hermeneutical implications. In conclusion, I look at some modern Japanese Buddhists influenced by Nichiren and analyze briefly how their own readings of the sūtra framed their self-understanding and worldview.

THE POWER OF THE BOOK

An underlying theme of the *Lotus Sūtra*, beginning with Chapter 10, concerns upholding and propagating the sūtra as the direct way to supreme, perfect enlightenment (Skt.: *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*). This teaching played a key role in Nichiren’s doctrine, which focuses on the *Lotus Sūtra*’s salvific power, accessed by individuals through the recitation of its title (Ja.: *daimoku*).

Chapter 10 of the *Lotus*, “Preachers of Dharma,” signals a shift away from a motif appearing in the first nine chapters, in which venerating stūpas containing the Buddha’s relics is enumerated as one of the forms of practice leading to enlightenment. For example, Chapter 2, “Expedient Devices,” says, “When the buddhas have passed into extinction, / Persons who make offerings to their *śarīras* [bodily relics], / Shall erect myriads of

millions of kinds of *stūpas* [reliquary structures] / . . . Persons like these / Have all achieved the buddha path” (Hurvitz, 36). But from Chapter 10 on, the *Lotus Sūtra* itself is equated with the body of the Tathāgata and presented as an object of veneration in its own right. For example, among several passages in this chapter referring to the sūtra’s reception and propagation, we read:

If a good man or good woman shall receive and keep, read and recite, explain, or copy in writing a single phrase of the *Scripture of the Dharma Blossom*, or otherwise and in a variety of ways make offerings to the scriptural roll with flower perfume, necklaces, powdered incense, perfumed paste, burnt incense, silk banners and canopies, garments, or music, or join palms in reverent worship, that person is to be looked up to and exalted by all the worlds, showered with offerings fit for a Thus Come One. Let it be known that that person is a great bodhisattva who, having achieved anuttarasamyaksambodhi, taken pity on the living beings, and vowed to be reborn here, is preaching the *Scripture of the Blossom of the Fine Dharma* with breadth and discrimination.

(HURVITZ, 160)

Several other passages enumerate these meritorious acts (keeping the sūtra, reading it, expounding it, and so forth) destining the practitioner to supreme, perfect enlightenment, and they, too, emphasize the same underlying attitude of devoted reception and readiness to proclaim the *Lotus Sūtra*’s teaching.³

Such devoted reception of the *Lotus Sūtra*, leading to its proclamation and exposition, calls forth the very presence of the Buddha himself in bodily form:

Wherever it may be preached, or read, or recited, or written, or whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a stūpa of the seven jewels, building it high and wide and with impressive decoration. There is no need even to lodge *śarīras* in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One. This stūpa is to be showered with offerings, humbly venerated, held in solemn esteem, and praised with all manner of flowers, scents, necklaces, silk banners and canopies, music skillfully sung and played. If there are persons who can see this stūpa and worship and make offerings to it, be it known that these persons are all close to anuttarasamyaksambodhi.

(HURVITZ, 163)

The significant point to note here is the identification of the sūtra's physical scrolls with the body of the Tathāgata (Thus Come One), deserving the very same reverence and veneration. Through such veneration of the sūtra text, manifested in the meritorious acts this passage enumerates, the devotee is destined to realize supreme, perfect enlightenment. The key phrase "no need even to lodge śarīras in it" marks the transition from the first part of the *Lotus*, which includes veneration of the Buddha's relics as a way to enlightenment, to the second part, which emphasizes instead the importance of upholding the sūtra and expounding it on behalf of others as the cause for enlightenment. In short, it is now the physical text of the *Lotus Sūtra* that is venerated, on the same level as the relics of the Tathāgata, and considered as no less—or perhaps even more—soteriologically efficacious.⁴

The underlying attitude prescribed in the series of meritorious acts directed toward the sūtra (including reading it) is one of accepting and upholding it with reverence and devotion. It is the devoted reception of the *Lotus*, upholding it as the beacon and guide of one's life and religious practice, that ensures achieving supreme, perfect enlightenment. And this devoted acceptance is inseparable from the readiness to proclaim its teaching to all, so that they may also accept it and attain enlightenment themselves.

Thus, in the *Lotus* itself, reading the sūtra is to be understood in terms of this total attitude of devoted reception and willingness to offer oneself for its propagation. This attitude of upholding (Skt.: *dhāraṇā*) scriptures as the efficient cause for attaining supreme enlightenment is also taught in the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature. Some sūtras in this group are thought to have been composed earlier than the *Lotus* and may well have influenced it in this regard. Certain passages in the *Eight Thousand Verse Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* on the merits of upholding and reading the sūtra in fact closely resemble those in the *Lotus*.⁵ Through the centuries in East Asia, however, the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras have not been as popular as the *Lotus* as a focus of devotion and veneration.⁶

In sūtras such as these, upholding a scriptural text—that is, accepting it with devotion and reverence—is said not only to ensure one's realization of supreme, perfect enlightenment but also to yield various kinds of merit and worldly benefit. This view opens the way to a significant line of development regarding the reading of sūtras. I refer here to the practice of reciting *dhāraṇīs* (incantations), a practice that flowered later, especially in the context of esoteric Buddhism.

Chapter 21 of the Sanskrit *Lotus Sūtra* (Chapter 26 in Kumārajīva's Chinese version) deals with various *dhāraṇīs*, whose recitation is considered efficacious for achieving different kinds of worldly benefit. These benefits include the prevention or cure of illnesses, protection from dangers and calamities, and so on. Some scholars consider this chapter, as well as other passages including references to *dhāraṇīs*, to be a later addition to the text. Be that as it may, the significant point in this chapter is that the protection from various calamities ensured by reciting the *dhāraṇīs* is bestowed on those practitioners who maintain an attitude of upholding the sūtra.⁷ The connection underscored here by the common linguistic root between "upholding" the sūtra (*dhāraṇā*) and "incantatory phrases" imbued with spiritual power (*dhāraṇīs*) would figure prominently in Nichiren's understanding of the power of chanting the daimoku of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

We also find a tradition, especially prominent in East Asian Buddhism, of reading and reciting sūtras, a practice deemed particularly effective in transferring merit to the deceased, as well as bringing about worldly benefit for the reader or reciter and for those to whom he or she wishes to transfer the merits of this practice.⁸ Reading and reciting the *Lotus Sūtra* were widely conducted as popular devotional practices in China, Korea, and Japan, for example, in association with the cult of the bodhisattva Guanyin (Korean: Kwan Um, Ja.: Kannon). Worship of Guanyin was also expressed in chanting the "great compassion *dhāraṇī*" (Ch.: *dabei zhou* or *dabei xin tuoloni*), which was said to confer various kinds of worldly benefit on the reciter.⁹

One indicator of how the *Lotus Sūtra* was received and read is the eleventh-century Japanese tale collection *Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sūtra from Japan* (*Dainihonkoku Hokekyō kenki*, or simply *Hokke genki*). Many of these stories center on the practice of *Lotus Sūtra* recitation as conducted by holy ascetics (Ja.: *hijiri*). These are individuals who have withdrawn from the mainstream of society as well as from established Buddhist institutions and who endeavor to live the teaching of the *Lotus*. The stories in this collection relate wondrous episodes of healing, superhuman acts of valor, and other kinds of miraculous phenomena that occur for the benefit of individuals in situations of distress or need—all attributed to the power of the *Lotus Sūtra* as mediated by the devoted ascetic, who has accumulated untold merit through his sūtra recitation.¹⁰

When Nichiren came upon the scene in thirteenth-century Japan, there was thus already a well-established tradition of special reverence for the *Lotus* as a religious icon endowed with power, capable of dispensing spiritual

and worldly benefits to devotees who follow its prescribed practices of upholding, reading, reciting, expounding, and copying the sūtra text.¹¹ For Nichiren, reciting the title of the sūtra (*Myōhō renga kyō*, the title as translated by Kumārajīva in its Japanese pronunciation) encompassed all these practices. In Nichiren's teaching, chanting the title assumes a twofold efficacy: it ensures both the attainment of perfect enlightenment and also protection from harm as well as other kinds of worldly benefit. Nichiren's emphasis on the practice of reciting the sūtra's title, which he developed over the course of his career, brings together the *Lotus Sūtra*'s own teaching on upholding the sūtra as the path of attaining enlightenment and well-established thinking concerning the power of incantatory phrases (*dhāraṇī*) to bring about worldly benefit. Nichiren was heir both to the popular tradition, found across social levels, that regards the *Lotus* as a sacred object imbued with miraculous and salvific powers, and to the intellectual tradition of *Lotus*-based metaphysics as expounded by Tiantai masters in China and continued in the Japanese Tendai school by Saichō (766 or 767–822) and his successors at the Tendai center on Mount Hiei. In short, Nichiren united the traditions of devotional practice and theoretical speculation centered on the sūtra in an integrated vision grounded in religious praxis. His "bodily reading" of the *Lotus* opens the horizon of his comprehensive religious vision of the universe, as laid out in his teaching on the "three thousand realms in a single thought-moment" (*ichinen sanzen*).¹²

NICHIREN'S RELIGIOUS VISION AND BODILY READING OF THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

One of Nichiren's early treatises, *On Protecting the Country* (*Shugo kokka ron*), written in 1259, sets forth a systematic account of his religious project: propagating faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* as the only effective way for ensuring the protection of the land and the salvation of the people. Nichiren composed this treatise after more than twenty years of spiritual pursuit that involved sojourns for study at the great Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei as well as other major religious centers of the period, where he had pored over sūtras and commentaries. His central purpose in this quest was to determine which among the many Buddhist scriptures and schools of Buddhist thought handed down through China and Korea to Japan represented Śākyamuni's supreme teaching.

The following passage from *On Protecting the Country* offers us an initial insight into how Nichiren understood the practice of reading the *Lotus Sūtra*:

The Great Teacher Miaole [Zhanran] writes: "If foolish and ignorant persons of the latter age practice the *Lotus Sūtra*, they will behold the bodhisattva Universally Worthy (Skt.: Samantabhadra), as well as the buddha Many Jewels (Prabhūtaratna) and the buddhas of the ten directions," thus proclaiming that [the *Lotus*] represents the easy path. He also says, "Even with a dispersed mind, without entering into *samādhi* [concentration], one should recite the *Lotus Sūtra*, and, whether sitting, standing, or walking, one should single-mindedly keep the words of the *Lotus Sūtra* in mind." The point of this commentarial passage is that [the *Lotus*] was intended to save the foolish and ignorant persons of the final age [of the dharma]. "Dispersed mind" is the opposite of "mind in *samādhi*." To "recite the *Lotus Sūtra*" refers to one who reads and recites the eight scrolls, or one scroll, or one letter, or one stanza, or one verse, or its title [daimoku], or to one in whom arises a single moment of rejoicing [at hearing even one verse of the sūtra], up to the fiftieth person in succession. "Sitting, standing, or walking" means that one does not discriminate among the four postures. "Single-mindedly" refers neither to the mind of *samādhi* nor to the mind as universal principle, but to the single thought of a mind ordinarily dispersed in everyday life. To keep the "words of the *Lotus Sūtra* in mind" means that the words of this sūtra are different from those of all other sūtras. Even if one reads only a single character, the eighty thousand treasure chambers of characters [that compose the Buddha's teachings] are thereby included, as are the merits of all buddhas.¹³

Elsewhere in the same treatise, Nichiren affirms the idea that "practicing the *Lotus*" in and of itself is "beholding the Buddha." Citing Chapter 28, on the bodhisattva Universally Worthy, he says: "Again, it is written, 'If there is anyone who can receive and keep, read and recite, recall properly, cultivate and practice, and copy this *Lotus Sūtra*, know that such a person has seen Śākyamuni Buddha, that he might have heard this sūtra preached from the Buddha's very mouth. Let it be known that such a person has made offerings to Śākyamuni Buddha.' According to this passage, the *Lotus Sūtra* and Śākyamuni Buddha are one and the same."¹⁴

This, then, is the first point we can note about Nichiren's understanding of reading the *Lotus Sūtra*: to do so is no less than to be placed in the presence of Śākyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* was, for Nichiren, the very embodiment of Śākyamuni himself, meriting the same homage and devotion. To read the *Lotus Sūtra*, then, is not simply to peruse the words of the text in order to understand what meaning is conveyed, but rather to engage oneself in an entire cycle of acts

that issue from the fundamental attitude of receiving and keeping the sūtra, including reciting, copying, expounding it to others, doing homage to it with offerings of flowers and incense, and so on.¹⁵ To uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* is, by that very act, to receive and keep Śākyamuni Buddha himself in one's heart and being.

It is significant that the Śākyamuni Buddha referred to here is not the historical Gautama but rather the Awakened One who occupies a realm beyond history—that is, the primordial buddha revealed in Chapter 16 of the *Lotus*, “Life Span of the Thus Come One,” who chooses to reenter history and engage in human events in order to save living beings from their state of misery and dissatisfaction. He is the constantly abiding Śākyamuni, the father of the world, who, as depicted in Chapter 3 of the sūtra, beholds his children trapped in a burning house and offers all kinds of expedient devices to free them.

A second vital point in Nichiren's understanding of the practice of reading the *Lotus* is his assertion that reading even one word of the sūtra is equivalent to reading the contents of the “eighty thousand treasure chambers” that make up the entirety of the Buddha's teachings and includes the merits of all buddhas. In affirming this, Nichiren simply draws on the teaching of the *Lotus* itself, which, as we have seen, asserts that the sūtra text is equal to the Buddha himself. Nichiren's exposition of the character *myō* (Ch.: *miao*, “fine” or “wondrous”) in *Myōhō renge kyō*, the five-character title of the sūtra in Kumārajīva's translation, develops the sūtra's teaching on this point: “The character *myō* derives from *sad* in the language of India and is rendered *miao* in Chinese. *Myō* means ‘endowed,’ and ‘endowed’ has the meaning of ‘complete and perfect.’ Every character of the *Lotus Sūtra*, each single one, contains within it all the other 69,384 characters that compose the sūtra, just as one drop of water from the great ocean contains water from all rivers [that flow into the ocean], or as a single wish-fulfilling jewel, though only the size of a mustard seed, can shower on one all the treasures of all wish-fulfilling jewels.”¹⁶

This notion that “one contains all” derives from Mahāyāna tradition; it is expounded, for example, in the *Flower Garland* (Skt.: *Avataṃsaka*) *Sūtra* and was developed in different ways by Chinese and Korean Buddhist commentators. One significant exposition of this idea is the Tiantai master Zhiyi's (538–597) concept of “three thousand realms in a single thought-moment” (Ch.: *yinian sanqian*, Ja.: *ichinen sanzen*), which Nichiren adopted as the central feature of his own religious understanding of reality. Nichiren refers specifically to this notion of “three thousand realms in a single thought-moment” in many of his writings, most famously in his major

treatise *On the Contemplation of the Mind and the Object of Worship* (*Kanjin honzon shō*), a work that he himself described as addressing “the sole important matter in my life.”¹⁷ For Nichiren, the principle of *ichinen sanzen* was the basis for the teaching that all sentient beings have the potential for buddhahood. He describes this principle as “the father and mother of all buddhas” and the “seed of buddhahood.”¹⁸ For Nichiren, this seed of buddhahood was not merely an abstract principle but assumed concrete form in the practice of chanting the daimoku, being equated in his thought with the five characters of the sūtra's title. Nichiren writes, “Manifesting great compassion for those who do not know this three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, the Buddha wrapped up this gem in a five-character phrase, which he placed around the necks of the childish beings of the latter age.”¹⁹

Reciting the five-character phrase *Myōhō renge kyō*—preceded by *Namu*, indicating an attitude of veneration and homage—thus becomes the concrete vehicle by which the principle of the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment is activated and realized. What easier way could there be to realizing buddhahood, Nichiren argued, than by reciting this phrase, which contains within itself all the treasures of the universe and all the truths in the teachings of all buddhas?

Nichiren himself not only recited the title with this understanding but also habitually read the sūtra text. Throughout the major part of his career, he carried with him a manuscript of the *Lotus* that he continually annotated in his own hand, inserting relevant passages from the Tiantai commentaries or from other sūtras. This annotated *Lotus Sūtra* served him as a concordance for use in his own preaching and writing. For his followers, he prescribed the simple recitation of the title, expressing homage and veneration. As noted, in Nichiren's understanding, this simple recitation opens to the reciter the infinite treasure store contained in the *Lotus*; it destines that person to supreme enlightenment and also assures the reciter of untold merit and worldly benefit.

Nichiren presented this practice as especially suited to a particular place within this earthly realm (the *Sahā* World), namely, the country of Japan, and to a given time in history, that is, the period of the Final Dharma age—in other words, Nichiren's own country and historical time. This represents a third important point to be noted in Nichiren's understanding of reading and practicing the *Lotus Sūtra*: his acute consciousness of the significance of the time and the place where that reading and practice were to be conducted.

The age of the Final Dharma (*mappō*) was believed by many people of Nichiren's time to have begun in 1052, that is, two thousand years after

the Buddha's final *nirvāṇa*, which was then thought to have occurred in 949 B.C.E.²⁰ The Final Dharma age was seen as a period of history when human beings, burdened by evil karma, would no longer be able to attain enlightenment through the traditional disciplines of meditation and precept observance. In Nichiren's understanding, the evil age after the Buddha's *nirvāṇa* was a time when people who think they are acting in accord with the dharma of Śākyamuni are in fact going against it, even persecuting those who are its true bearers, a time when many who appear to uphold the dharma actually malign and despise it. The *Lotus Sūtra*, he said, predicts precisely this situation where it states, "This scripture has many enemies even now, when the Thus Come One is present. How much more so after his *nirvāṇa*!" (Hurvitz, 162–63, slightly modified.) Behind Nichiren's claim we must note the widespread reception accorded in his day to the exclusive Pure Land teaching of Hōnen (1133–1212), who stressed abandoning all practices in favor of the *nenbutsu* (recitation of the buddha Amida's name). From the standpoint of the *Lotus*, as expounded in the Tendai teachings that Nichiren accepted and further developed, in this degenerate age, only the *Lotus Sūtra* could truly lead to liberation. Thus, engaging in practices such as the *nenbutsu* prescribed by Hōnen and his Pure Land followers was not only fruitless but also tantamount to slandering the true dharma.

Nichiren saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as uniquely suited not only to the present time but also to a particular place, that is, his country of Japan. We find this in his teaching on the "five points," or five perspectives from which he explained the superior efficacy of the *Lotus Sūtra*: the teaching, the capacity, the time, the country, and the sequence of propagation. The people of Japan, Nichiren asserts, have a capacity "suited solely to the [teaching of the] *Lotus*."²¹ In short, Nichiren understood himself to be located in the place to which reading the *Lotus Sūtra* was best suited and in the specific time in history when it was most efficacious. Yet he also saw that very place and time as characterized by slander of the dharma, by a widespread abandonment of faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* in favor of Hōnen's *nenbutsu* and other practices.

This brings us to a fourth point concerning Nichiren's teaching about reading and practicing the *Lotus*. Because he saw the *Lotus Sūtra* as uniquely efficacious for his time and place, and yet ignored in favor of practices he deemed inferior or useless, he called upon his followers to join him in denouncing other teachings and proclaiming the sole efficacy of the *Lotus*, even at the risk of their lives. For example, he wrote, "No matter what great good deeds one may perform, even if one reads and copies the

entire *Lotus Sūtra* a thousand or ten thousand times or masters the contemplation of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, should one fail to denounce the enemies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, one will not be able to attain the way."²²

In other words, in a situation where the *sūtra* is misunderstood, made light of, or maligned, true practitioners will not be content to ignore this fact and keep their practice of the *Lotus* to themselves. Rather, moved by compassion, they will regard such slanders with utmost seriousness and will not hesitate to denounce them. Nichiren continued, "To illustrate, if a court official, even one who may have served ten or twenty years, knows that an enemy of the ruler is in the vicinity but neither reports that person nor feels personal enmity toward him, then not only will the merits gained by that official [in his years of service] be erased, but he will instead be held liable for a crime."²³

I have identified four critical points in Nichiren's understanding of what reading the *Lotus Sūtra* entails. First, reading the *sūtra* is equal to encountering Śākyamuni face-to-face, in effect entering the very presence of the Buddha. Second, to read and recite even a single phrase of the *sūtra* is to be assured of attaining enlightenment as well as receiving various kinds of worldly benefit. And the single phrase that is most appropriate for reading and recitation is the title of the *sūtra*, which encompasses all the *Lotus Sūtra*'s meritorious contents. Third, reading the *sūtra* is an act that takes place in the context of a specific time and place, which in effect calls for a reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* that correlates its teachings with contemporary events and situations. And fourth, beyond the acts of mental or verbal reading or recitation, true followers of the *Lotus* are enjoined to lay down their very lives if need be for its propagation and the realization of its message in this world.

PRACTICING THE *LOTUS* AND ENGAGING THE WORLD

In *On Protecting the Country*, in setting forth his religious vision based on the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nichiren notes that he "looks at and listens to current social conditions" and correlates what he sees and hears of the actual events of his time with Buddhist scripture.²⁴ He opens his famous treatise *On Bringing Peace to the Land by Establishing the True Dharma* (*Risshō ankoku ron*), written in 1260, by vividly depicting the social chaos evident to anyone at the time, noting, for example, the "oxen and horses lying dead in the streets, skeletons sprawled in all directions."²⁵ At that