

## The Date of Shakyamuni's Death: When Did the Latter Day of the Law Begin?

IN "This Person Will Practice Among the People," Nichiren Daishonin states, "The present time corresponds to the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law" (MW-6, 285). He is referring to the concept of the three time periods of Buddhism—the Former, Middle and Latter Day of the Law (or Shakyamuni's teachings). These are the three consecutive stages into which the time after Shakyamuni Buddha's death is divided.

During the Former Day of the Law, the pure spirit of Buddhism remained intact, and people could attain enlightenment through its practice. During the Middle Day of the Law, Buddhism became firmly established in society. However, the emphasis was on formalities and fewer people could benefit from it. In the Latter Day of the Law—the present age—the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness taint people's lives and Shakyamuni's Buddhism has lost the power to lead them to happiness.

There are several views on the length of the three periods. The Daishonin adopted the explanation found in the Sutra of the Great Assembly (Jp. *Daishutsu Sutra*), which describes five consecutive five-hundred-year periods following the Buddha's death. The first two five-hundred-year periods are regarded as the Former Day of the Law, and the following two five-hundred-year periods as the Middle Day of the Law. The fifth five-hundred-year period is regarded as the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law, which continues indefinitely. The concept of the three time periods explains that as time passes, the conditions and capacity of the people also change and an appropriate teaching must be spread for each of the three periods.

THERE are several views regarding the date of Shakyamuni's death and when the Former Day of the Law began. Old legends and theories set it somewhere in the range between the eleventh century B.C.E. to the sixth century B.C.E. Chinese historians adopted 609 B.C.E. Recently, scholars have estimated Shakyamuni's death to have been around 480 B.C.E. or 380 B.C.E. This estimate is based on the discovery of a monument to King Ashoka in India. Inscriptions on the monument indicate the year when King Ashoka was enthroned. Since King Ashoka is believed to have been enthroned either 100 or 200 years after Shakyamuni's death, there is a 100-year variance in this estimation. Generally, it is now accepted that Shakyamuni lived in the fourth or fifth century B.C.E.

Nichiren Daishonin adopted the generally accepted view of his day—that of 949 B.C.E.—and estimated his time period, the thirteenth century, as 2,200-some years after Shakyamuni's death; this was 200-some years into the beginning of the Latter Day of the Law. But if we base our calculation on recent findings, the Daishonin's time would be only 1,600 or 1,700 years after Shakyamuni's passing.

WHEN examining this discrepancy, it is important to note that the Daishonin

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took a close look at the conditions of religion and society in light of statements in various sutras. This fact is more significant than simple arithmetic. Therefore, it can be said that the Daishonin was living in the midst of conditions that could best be characterized as those of the Latter Day of the Law. Thirteenth-century Japan presented many characteristics of the Latter Day as described in the sutras—a strife-ridden period when the essence of Buddhism is lost and Buddhist priests become corrupt. The Sutra of the Great Assembly states that it will be an “age of conflict” when monks will disregard the precepts and feud constantly among themselves, heretical views will prevail and Shakyamuni’s Buddhism will perish.

IT was under these circumstances that the Daishonin spread the Law in the Lotus Sutra—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—and faced numerous persecutions as predicted in the sutra. He spread the Mystic Law in an age of corruption and confusion, following Shakyamuni’s injunction in the Lotus Sutra: “After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred year period you must spread it abroad widely and never allow it to be cut off, nor must you allow evil devils, the devils’ people ... to seize the advantage!” (LS-23, 288). In contrast to other sutras, the Lotus Sutra views the Latter Day as the time when the essence of the Lotus Sutra, transferred to Bodhisattva Jogyo at the Ceremony in the Air, will be propagated.

It is important to keep in mind that whatever hypothesis we adopt regarding the date of Shakyamuni’s passing, the time period in which the Daishonin lived was a reflection of predictions characteristic of the Latter Day. It was under horrific conditions that the Daishonin spread the Mystic Law and established the true object of worship, the Gohonzon. In 1273 he wrote, “Now is when the Bodhisattvas of the Earth will appear in this country and establish the supreme object of worship on the earth” (MW-1, 81).

The Daishonin’s view of the Former and Middle days is not simply based on the number of consecutive years following Shakyamuni’s death, but rather on the migration of Buddhism through India, China and Japan.

In “The Selection of the Time,” the Daishonin explains that the Former Day of the Law is the period in which Shakyamuni’s Buddhism is spread by the twenty-four successors in India—those who inherited the lineage of his teachings (MW-3, 94–96). It was a time when Buddhism flourished in India—a view in accord with historical records. Aryasimha, the last of the twenty-four successors, is believed to have lived in central India during the sixth century. From around the seventh century, Buddhism became more esoteric and began to decline in that country.

IN his discussion about the migration of Buddhism into China in “The Selection of the Time,” the Daishonin explains that in the fifteenth year of the Middle Day of the Law, Buddhism was brought to China and that for one thousand years thereafter, it spread in China and Japan (MW-3, 96). Buddhism was imported into China in 2 B.C.E. or 65 C.E. So the beginning of the Middle Day, according to the Daishonin, falls around the beginning of the Common Era. Therefore, the

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Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai (538–597) lived around the middle of the Middle Day of the Law.

FROM his description in "The Selection of the Time," the Daishonin clearly did not view the transition from the Former to the Middle Day as a simple time-line. Rather, he thought of the Former and Middle days as the migration of Buddhism through India, China and Japan. Although the last several centuries of the Former Day in India and the first several centuries of the Middle Day in China overlap, this does not discount the merit of the Daishonin's view of the 2,000-period of the Former and Latter days.

In "On the Buddha's Prophecy," the Daishonin states: "The moon appears in the west and gradually shines eastward, while the sun rises in the east and casts its rays to the west. The same is true of Buddhism. It spread from west to east in the Former and Middle Days of the Law, but will travel from east to west in the Latter Day" (MW-1, 114). According to the Daishonin, the Latter Day of the Law is when Nam-myoho-renge-kyo will spread from Japan to the rest of the world. The SGI is fulfilling the Daishonin's prediction for the Latter Day of the Law as its members are introducing Buddhism to their friends the world over. □

(By the SGI-USA Study Department)

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