

A Cultural History of the Lotus Flower Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra 24

This is the twenty-fourth installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra between SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the January 1997 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

The “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter describes the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as being unsoiled by worldly things “like the lotus flower in the water” (LS15, 222),¹ that is, like blossoming lotus flowers that appear in the midst of a muddy swamp. The discussion this time turns to the symbols of the lotus and the sun; the significance of Nichiren’s name; the “world of empty space underneath the saha world” (LS15, 213) where the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are said to have dwelled previously; and other topics relating to the lotus flower, an important symbol in Buddhism and in many civilizations of the world.

Katsuji Saito: This is our second discussion on the “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter. It is the chapter in which, by way of praise, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are compared with lotus flowers. In the sutra they are said to be “like the lotus flower in the water” (LS15, 222). I’d like to suggest, as a way to deepen our understanding of the chapter, that we narrow the focus of our discussion this time to an examination of the lotus flower.

Daisaku Ikeda: That sounds fine. The lotus is indeed a mysterious flower. In the Buddhist canon, it has deep and important significance. However, if we were to focus solely on a discussion of the various doctrines that pertain to the lotus flower, we could fill dozens of volumes. That would mean that this series of conversations would never end.

Therefore, I propose we begin by taking a look at how people in different parts of the world have viewed the lotus flower throughout history—a sort of cultural history of the lotus. Let us save for another occasion a more detailed study of the profound principles of Buddhism as they relate to the lotus flower.

Takanori Endo: I agree and since this discussion will appear in the first issue of the new year [of the *Daibyakurenge*], I think it might be nice to steer clear of difficult doctrinal issues insofar as possible.

Saito: That’s a good idea. Culturally people in different places and ages most certainly must have viewed the lotus flower very differently from one another. To begin with, I suspect there are quite a few young people these days who have never actually seen one.

Haruo Suda: In Japan, the lotus is associated with funerals and the annual Festival of Lanterns.² At the same time, however, since ancient times the lotus has been taken to symbolize that which is noble. In China, for example, it was

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known as the “flower of nobility.”

Endo: In modern Japanese, there is an expression comparing a beautiful woman to a cotton rose (Jp. *Fuyo*); originally, however, the word for the flower in this expression meant the lotus. Similarly, I understand that in India there is an expression comparing the beauty of a woman’s eyes to the lotus flower.

Saito: In Japan today it would be rare for one to associate a woman’s beauty with that of the lotus flower. But even if someone did, few women would consider it a compliment.

Ikeda: India and Japan are two different cultures. That brings to mind something that happened during my first visit to Portugal. I went to a flower shop with the intention of buying some chrysanthemums to present to a guest, but the local people there discouraged me from doing so. In Japan, chrysanthemums are symbols of elegance and refinement, but in Portugal they are used primarily at funerals and are taken as a sign of sadness and grief. People’s perceptions of flowers vary widely from one country or culture to the next.

The Lotus and the Waterlily

Ikeda: Why don’t we conduct a little quiz? Since the three of you are always giving other people tests, it wouldn’t hurt for you yourselves to be tested once in a while.

The Japanese term *renge* (lotus flower) refers to two general varieties of flowers: the lotus (Jp. *hasu*) and the waterlily (Jp. *suiren*). What is the relation between these two?

Endo: All right. In terms of its botanical classification, *renge* refers to the waterlily (*Nymphaeaceae*) family, which contains the lotus (*Nelumbo*) genus and waterlily (*Nymphaea*) genus. The Chinese characters for the waterlily genus by the way mean “sleeping lotus.” Among such waterlilies, there are some that bloom during the day and some that bloom at night. They are called sleeping lotuses because, in either case, when the proper time arrives they fold up their petals as though falling asleep.

Saito: There is also a type of waterlily native to Japan called ram grass (Jp. *hitsujigusa*; pygmy waterlily). This species is so called because it opens its petals at the time known in Japanese chronology as “the hour of the ram,” which is around 2:00 p.m.

Endo: Such day-blooming lilies close up and “go to sleep” when the sun sets.

Suda: It seems that the plants of the lotus genus also open their petals around dawn and close in the afternoon.

Ikeda: While the lotus and waterlily seem similar, they differ in a number of ways. What about their appearance?

Suda: In the case of the lotus, both the stem and the lotus rhizome, or root, are hollow. The rhizome has joints, and it is from these joints that the leaves and flower emerge. The stem grows out above the surface of the water, and the bud blossoms atop it. It then produces seeds from this position suspended above the water.

By contrast, neither the stem nor the roots of the waterlily are hollow. Its roots are solid like those of a potato. The flowers float on the surface of the water and it is there that they bloom; when the flowers wither, they sink down and then seed underwater.

Saito: In the general Buddhist canon, *renge* may refer to either the lotus or the waterlily. But in the Lotus Sutra, it refers to only the lotus, and to the white lotus in particular.

Ikeda: How many different varieties of lotus and waterlily are there?

Endo: From a botanical viewpoint, there are only two kinds of lotus. There is the strain that is prevalent in Asia and Oceania, and there is the American lotus or water chinquapin of North America.

As for the waterlily, there are approximately forty strains throughout the world. While most of these are tropical, there are temperate varieties. Included among them are the white waterlily originally from the Mediterranean region (which has spread widely across the Eurasian continent) and Japan's ram grass.

Suda: In South America's Amazon basin, there is a strain of waterlily called the water platter or victoria lily. This plant is so large that its floating pad can support the weight of a small child on the water.

Ikeda: That's right—I recall hearing about that. By the way, do you suppose there are lotus flowers or waterlilies in Europe?

Endo: The white waterlily that I mentioned a moment ago is native to the Mediterranean region and grows wild in Europe. However, it seems that there are no wild lotus plants, although there are fossils of lotus from the region.

Ikeda: The lotus has existed since very ancient times. As I recall, they have been traced as far back as the Cretaceous period (or about 135 million years ago). It seems they flourished immediately after the appearance of seed plants or spermatophyte.

Suda: In Europe, the white waterlily is a symbol of chastity. In the language of flowers, the waterlily signifies inner purity and faithfulness.

Ikeda: Speaking of European waterlilies, the paintings of waterlilies by the French Impressionist Claude Monet (1840–1926) are well known. The Tokyo Fuji Art Museum has one of them in its collection. I once discussed Monet's waterlilies with the noted French art historian René Huyghe.

What about in Africa then?

Saito: There are waterlilies in Egypt. The waterlily is in fact Egypt's national flower. Many waterlilies grow along the banks of the Nile River. These include both night-blooming white waterlilies and day-blooming blue waterlilies, with the latter the more numerous.

Ikeda: The clusters of blue and white waterlilies floating on the Nile make a beautiful scene. I think it was the fifth-century-B.C. Greek historian Herodotus who wrote that parts of the lotus plant were used for food in ancient Egypt.

Endo: That's right. In his *History*, Herodotus makes reference to the lotus as a type of lily.³ It is also known as the waterlily in English.

Suda: Another type of *lily* is the lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), which leads me to wonder if the name *lily* itself has any special significance.

Endo: It seems that *lily* is a generic term given to flowers that are especially fresh and beautiful. Lilies have long been regarded as symbols of purity.

Saito: The white lily, appropriately, is the symbol of the Soka Gakkai women's division.

Ikeda: How about lotus plants? Or did ancient Egypt only have waterlilies?

Endo: There are indications that lotus plants did grow in ancient Egypt. A source mentions "a type of lily resembling a rose," but little is known of the details.

Simultaneous Production of Flowers and Fruit

Ikeda: Next, why do you suppose the lotus is called *hasu* in Japanese? What is the derivation of this word?

Saito: In olden times, lotus (the lotus genus or *hasu*) were called *hachisu* in Japan, which is short for *hachi-no-su*, or "bee's nest."

When a lotus flower opens, a fruit shaped like an inverted shower-head appears. Because of its resemblance to a beehive, this part of the plant was called *hachi-no-su*, which was later shortened to simply *hasu*. It is this part of the plant that is referred to by the Chinese character *ren* (of *rengé*).

Ikeda: That's right. Technically, this part is known as the receptacle. The lotus seeds are found inside the holes of this "bee's nest" (to which the petals, stamen, pistils and other parts attach).

Suda: Because it contains the seeds, we can think of this part of the plant as the fruit.

Endo: The unique feature of the lotus flower is that its fruit (the receptacle) develops even before the flower blooms. In most plants, the flower blooms first and the fruit appears some time later. If we associate this with cause and effect, flowers represent the cause, and fruit the effect. Ordinarily, the cause comes first and the effect later. But in the case of the lotus flower, the flowers (cause) and the fruit (effect) develop at the same time. That's why the lotus flower is used as a metaphor for the Lotus Sutra's doctrine of the simultaneity of cause and effect.⁴

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth Signify Eternal Advance

In this manner these sons
study and practice my way and Law.
And in order that day and night with constant diligence
they may seek the Buddha way,
in this *saha* world
they dwell in the empty space in its lower part.
Firm in the power of will and concentration,
with constant diligence seeking wisdom,
they expound various wonderful doctrines
and their minds are without fear. (LS15, 220)

Ikeda: The simultaneity of cause and effect is an extremely profound doctrine. I propose that we discuss it in detail another time.

For the time being, I'd just like to point out that the causality referred to here specifically indicates the causes and effects pertaining to the attainment of Buddhahood. The state of Buddhahood is the effect, and the practice to attain that state is the cause. The idea that these two could coincide seems counter-intuitive; the usual assumption is that by carrying out Buddhist practice (the cause), a person later attains Buddhahood (the effect).

But when we practice Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (the True Cause for attaining Buddhahood), our practice already encompasses the world of Buddhahood (the True Effect). Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is at once the True Cause and the True Effect of attaining Buddhahood. This marvelous teaching of the Mystic Law embodying the simultaneity of cause and effect is compared to the lotus flower. The important point here is that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth manifest this simultaneity of cause and effect in their lives.

Saito: Because outwardly they are bodhisattvas, they are still in the process of

making causes to attain Buddhahood. But in terms of their inner lives, they are Buddhas, that is, they have already gained the effect of Buddhahood.

Ikeda: Buddhahood is not a fixed or static condition. Just as the fruit and flowers of the lotus mature at the same time, the effect, or the world of Buddhahood, develops in our lives simultaneous with our carrying out our Buddhist practice for kosen-rufu. In that sense, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth signify eternal advance and eternal growth. Conversely, if a person ceases to advance in faith, he or she is no longer a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

The Thousand-Petaled Lotus

Ikeda: Why don't we continue our discussion of the cultural history of the lotus flower? What is the history of the lotus in Asia? Let's look first at Japan, and then China and India.

Suda: Japanese, too, have had fond associations with the lotus since olden times. References can be found in such early Japanese works as the *Nihon Shoki*⁵ and *Man'yōshū*,⁶ which date from the eighth century. As Buddhism spread, many splendid varieties of lotus flowers were brought here from China for people to admire.

Endo: It seems that lotus have grown in many areas of Japan since ancient times. And indeed the names of many locations are related to the lotus.

Ikeda: That's right. According to one explanation, Chiba [literally, "thousand petals"], the modern name of the region where Nichiren Daishonin was born, comes from the term *thousand-petaled lotus*.

Saito: According to a classical literary source, there was once a body of water called Ikeda Pond in which thousand-petaled lotus flowers bloomed. This is reportedly the origin of the name Chiba.

[The Myōken Jitsuroku Senshūki (*Thousandfold Collection of Mysteries Seen and Factually Recorded*) says: "The Ikeda Pond is a pure and clear pond. In this pond there bloomed thousand-petaled lotus flowers."]

Suda: I wonder, President Ikeda, if there is some relation to your name.

Ikeda: I'm not really very clear on the matter, but someone has suggested that my family has its roots in the Ikeda area of Chiba Prefecture.

Also, I gather that the Chiba prefectural office roughly marks the spot where this Ikeda Pond once stood.

Saito: I understand that "thousand" in thousand-petaled lotus does not simply mean

many, but is to be taken literally.

Endo: I wonder whether lotus flowers with a thousand petals have ever actually existed. The “Devadatta” (twelfth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra also mentions a thousand-petaled lotus.

Ikeda: Bodhisattva Manjushri is described as being “seated on a thousand-petaled lotus blossom big as a carriage wheel” (LS13, 185).

As to whether thousand-petaled lotus have really existed, I understand that lotus flowers usually have between twenty and twenty-five petals. Flowers with a single set of such petals are usually referred to as “one-layer bloomers.” But there are lotus flowers with multiple layers, some with enough to have a hundred or even as many as three hundred petals per flower. Also, there is a variety called the many-headed lotus, so called because the receptacle puts forth multiple flowers—one after another. I understand that the number of petals on these may range from 3,000 to 5,000.

While I personally have never seen a thousand-petaled lotus, I will always remember the lotus pond near a house where I lived as a child. I think it was when I was in the fifth year of elementary school (1938). The Sino-Japanese War had begun shortly before (in 1937), and my older brothers were drafted; also, my father’s health had declined. As a result, we had to vacate the large house where we had lived until then and moved to this house, right next-door to a lotus pond. There must have been easily several hundred lotuses there. I cannot forget the scene as their flowers bloomed here and there one after another. We would eagerly look forward to that season each year.

We were eventually forced to evacuate that house, too [due to the intensifying air raids on Tokyo]. It seems that the pond no longer exists today. Everything around us changes with the passage of time.

But getting back to our discussion, what about lotus flowers in China?

Suda: Let me see, as for writings in praise of lotus flowers in China, there is a famous text by the Song Dynasty (960–1127) author Zhou Dun yi (Chou Tun-I, 1017–73) (titled *Ai Lian Shuo* [On Love for the Lotus]). In it, the author cites a number of reasons for people’s fondness for the lotus flower. These might be summarized as follows: (1) They emerge from a swamp but are not stained by the muddy water, reminding us of the description in the sutra, “unsoiled by worldly things like the lotus flower in the water” (LS15, 222); (2) they are cleansed by pure wavelets and are free of anything unpleasant; (3) their stalks are hollow on the inside, and perfectly straight on the outside, having neither tendrils nor branches; (4) their fragrance carries long distances, and becomes more refreshing at greater distances; (5) they grow in an upright and orderly arrangement, and thus should be enjoyed from afar rather than from close by.

He further praises the lotus for its purity as the “flower of nobility.”⁷

Ikeda: I see. So the lotus flower represents all that is pure. In Buddhism, too, the lotus represents purity.

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Incidentally, why aren't lotus flowers discolored by the muddy water in which they grow?

Saito: According to the Japanese botanist Dr. Tomitaro Makino (1862–1957), it's apparently because the fine hair-like filaments of its leaves repel water.

Endo: It seems that it was due to the influence of Buddhism that lotus flowers came to be associated with purity in China. Before Buddhism came to that country, the lotus was a symbol of fertility and prosperity. Also, we may attribute the reason for lotus flowers having come to symbolize love and affection to the similarity between the pronunciation of the character for *lotus* (Chin. *lian*, Jp. *ren*) and such words as *love* (Chin. *lian*, Jp. *ren*) and *pity* (Chin. *lian*, Jp. *ren*).⁸

Also, in China parts of the lotus plant are used as food or medicine.

Ikeda: People have indeed had a close relationship with the lotus since ancient times.

Endo: Lotus root, leaves and stamen are used to stop bleeding. In China, these have been combined with other herbal remedies and used to treat gastric ulcers, metrorrhagia (uterine bleeding), hemorrhoids and other conditions.

Suda: I hear that in India people eat lotus seeds raw, and may pickle or fry the root. In Indian medicine, too, the lotus has long been put to various uses.

The Robust Vitality of Lotus Seeds

Endo: In China, lotus seeds are regarded as both having nutritional value and as medicine for restoring health and strength. They are extolled for increasing vigor and curing ills of all kinds, and if taken consistently over time are thought to retard the aging process and confer longevity. Since they are as hard as rock, they are referred to in Chinese as "rock lotus seeds."

Saito: Speaking of hardness, the scientific name of lotus is *Nelumbo nucifera*. *Nucifera* means "having hard fruit." The seed has a shell that is hard as a rock. (*Nelumbo* means "lotus" in Sri Lankan.)

Ikeda: Because they are so very hard, lotus seeds can withstand harsh conditions and still bud and produce flowers. The famous Oga Lotus sprouted from a seed that had lain dormant for at least 2,000 years; some scientists estimated the period of dormancy at more than 3,000 years. That is phenomenal. There are now lotus plants descended from the Oga Lotus growing at the Kansai and Tokyo Soka Junior and Senior High Schools, and at Soka University.

Endo: According to Dr. Oga, lotus seeds can remain viable after so long a time because of their hard and thick shell. Moreover, because the seeds respire extremely slowly with very little exchange of moisture or gases, it takes an extremely long time before they are smothered by the carbon dioxide that they produce.

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Ikeda: This gives a sense of the lotus flower's awesome life force.

The Lotus Sutra is the "seed" for attaining Buddhahood. The Lotus Sutra is great because it contains the seed of Buddhahood enabling all people to become Buddhas. This seed of Buddhahood of the Lotus Sutra is compared to a diamond; like a diamond, it cannot be damaged or broken. It will not be destroyed even if one should fall into the state of hell or any of the evil paths.

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth have the "virtue of never losing the seed of Buddhahood." That's because, since the remote past, they have been inwardly embracing and outwardly practicing Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the seed of Buddhahood, which is the Lotus Sutra's essence.

Suda: The fact that this teaching is named the "law of the lotus" reflects the wisdom to discern that the seed of the lotus flower is strong and long-lived.

Endo: The Oga Lotus bloomed in 1952, an auspicious year marking the 700 anniversary of Nichiren Daishonin's establishment of his teaching. Moreover, its seeds were discovered in Chiba Prefecture, Nichiren Dai-shonin's birthplace.

Ikeda: That's right. Also, I recall that around the same time there were reports in the news that a big, pale crimson flower bloomed from a lotus seed that had lain dormant for tens of thousands of years in a national park in Washington D.C.⁹ Thus, in the year marking the 700 anniversary of the founding of the Daishonin's Buddhism, lotus flower seeds thousands and tens of thousands of years old bloomed in both East and West. Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, interpreted this as a wonderful sign portending the revival of the Great Pure Law.

[On September 30, 1952, President Toda remarked: "The single great desire of people who are wallowing in the muddy swamp of suffering is for the appearance of the one great Buddhist teaching. Now is the time when this great Buddhism—sublime and true, clearly elucidating reward and punishment, and worthy of anyone's trust—has to appear. Lotus flowers have now bloomed in both East and West, sprouting from the mud to put forth beautiful blossoms, having awakened from a slumber of thousands or tens of thousands of years. Now, in the swamp of the Japanese people, the supreme Buddhism of the original Buddha of the Latter Day has suddenly burst into bloom, breaking the slumber that has prevailed from the distant past and, more recently, for the past seven hundred years. If these lotus flowers blooming in both East and West are not a sign that the teaching of the original Buddha of the Latter Day is about to gloriously blossom, then what are they?]10

I was 24 at the time. It helped me solidify my determination to dedicate myself to spreading the supreme "law of the lotus" in Asia, the United States and throughout the world.

The Lotus Flowers of the Lotus Sutra

Ikeda: And so we come at last to India. In India, lotus flowers have been widely

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known since ancient times, and occupy an important place in the Hindu canon.

Suda: That's right. Lotus flowers are mentioned in the *Rigveda*, India's oldest extant religious text.

Ikeda: Just what kinds of lotus appear in the Lotus Sutra?

Saito: A line in the "Benefits of the Teacher of the Law" (nineteenth) chapter mentions "red lotus flowers, blue lotus flowers, white lotus flowers" (LS19, 255).

When we look at the corresponding terms in the Sanskrit text of the sutra, we find that "red lotus flowers" is a translation of *padma*. This is a white waterlily, but it seems there are pink varieties, too. "Blue lotus flowers" is a translation of the blue waterlily known as the utpala (*nilotpala*). And "white lotus flowers" is a translation of the white lotus called *pundarika*. The term *pundarika* is used in the sutra's Sanskrit title.

Ikeda: I understand that in the Sanskrit text, lotus flowers are usually mentioned in the order of blue, yellow, red and white. The white lotus flower, which is mentioned last, is accorded the highest value and reverence. Because the Lotus Sutra is the highest teaching, its Sanskrit title is the *Saddharma-pundarika* sutra, or, literally, "Sutra of the White Lotus of the Wonderful Laws."

Suda: The Lotus Sutra, in addition mentions a night-blooming white or red waterlily called the *kumuda*. Also, the term *flower* in Pure Flower Constellation King Wisdom, the title of the Buddha in the world to the east where Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound dwells, is a red lotus called the kamala.

Ikeda: That's a lot of detail. What about yellow lotus flowers?

Suda: Chinese translations of the Lotus Sutra other than Kumarajiva's *Miaofa lianhua jing* (Myoho-renge-kyo) mention a yellow lotus.

[Yellow lotus flowers are mentioned, for example, in the eighteenth and the twenty-fourth chapters of Dharmaraksha's Zhengfahua jing (Jp. Sho-hokke-kyo).11]

In reality, however, it seems that there are no yellow lotus or waterlilies in India.

Endo: Yellow lotus do apparently exist; for example, in the American lotus or water chinquapin found in the Mississippi basin in the United States.

Suda: The so-called esoteric teachings of Buddhism, in addition to red, white, blue and yellow lotus flowers, describe an imaginary black-colored lotus.

Saito: That's a little hard to visualize.

Ikeda: Buddhist texts describe lotus flowers of such various colors. In one text, Shakyamuni reminisces about the blue, red and white lotus flowers that grew in the garden of the palace where he grew up.¹²

Lotus flowers give a sense of cool respite from the heat of summer. Since the summer heat in India is so severe, that association may have been even stronger.

Saito: Lotus flowers are described as growing in Anavatapta Lake (literally, “Icy Lake”), which appears in Buddhist literature and was supposed to be part of an ideal land. The Dai-shonin in fact refers to this lake in his writings (cf. MW-2, 140 [163]).¹³ A lotus pond was apparently an indispensable feature of such a place. The Pure Land of Perfect Bliss of Amida Buddha is also described as filled with lotus flowers.

Suda: It seems that the importance early Indians accorded to lotus flowers is part of a tradition that can be traced back to the civilization of the Indus Valley (which existed through 1500 B.C.E.). A statue resembling an earth goddess with a lotus flower on its head has been unearthed from the famous ruins of Mohenjo-Daro in southern Pakistan.

Ikeda: The ruins of Mohenjo-Daro are thought to be more than 3,000 or 4,000 years old. That the lotus flower was important so long ago is very interesting. Also, I am intrigued by the connection between the lotus flower and the earth goddess. Like the statue of the earth goddess, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth appearing in the Lotus Sutra also emerge from the ground as the “human lotus flowers.” It occurs to me that this image of emerging from the earth—irrespective of the profound meaning that attaches to it in Buddhism—may have resonated strongly with Indian cultural traditions. While nothing definite can be said, I look forward to what further research may reveal in this area.

Saito: We find the concept of an “earth mother” in many different cultures, and India is no exception. Many cultures have traditions that revere the earth as the mother or goddess that gives life to all things.

Endo: Perhaps we can say that the earth mother is the womb that gives birth to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

Ikeda: Their emergence suggests an image of lotus flowers emerging from the water stretching out as far as the eye can see. More precisely, the sutra describes the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as having existed in the “empty space in the lower part” of the earth. Let’s think about this a moment. Doubtless some will wonder what the sutra means by the “empty space” beneath the earth.

The “Empty Space” Beneath the Earth Is the Ultimate Origin

Endo: Ancient Indian cosmology presents the following view of the underground structure of the world: The ground on which we dwell is the

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surface of the earth wheel. Beneath that, there is a gold wheel, and below that, a water wheel. The border between the gold wheel and the water wheel is termed the “edge of the gold wheel.”

Ikeda: That’s very interesting. The edge of the gold wheel lies in the very depths; accordingly, the Japanese expression “at the edge of the gold wheel” (Jp. *konrinzai*) has the nuance of “to the last” or “absolutely” used emphatically in a negative sentence.

Endo: That’s exactly right. Beneath the water sphere there is a wind sphere. And this wind sphere is said to float above empty space.

Saito: From the time of the *Rigveda*, Indians have considered the question of the origin of all things in various ways. According to one philosophical poem, the creating deity, upon making the world, “placed water as a womb in the vastness of space.” This suggests that space is more fundamental even than water. In later commentaries, space comes to be revered as Brahma, the ultimate origin of all being.¹⁴ Viewed in light of this cultural tradition, the “empty space in the lower part” where the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are said to have dwelled formerly would seem to indicate the most primary realm of all and, hence, the origin of origins.

Endo: The idea that they were born from the “origin of origins” seems very close to what the Daishonin terms the “ultimate depths of life” or “absolute reality” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563). This association is, of course, far from conclusive.

Ikeda: The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the disciples from the remote past of the Buddha of the “Life Span” (sixteenth) chapter. These disciples from the remote past are born from the ultimate ground of existence. The “ultimate depths of life” and “absolute reality,” of course, refer to the ultimate truth, or the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Based on that recognition, it may be that the statement in the “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter that these bodhisattvas emerge from “the world of empty space underneath the *saha* world” (LS15, 213) reveals their origin in terms of space, while Shakyamuni’s remark that he has been teaching and converting them “ever since the long distant past” (LS15, 220) reveals their origin in terms of time.

The emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is a great drama of life and the universe. It suggests that the ultimate Law contained in the depths of the essential teaching (or second half) of the Lotus Sutra is the ultimate principle governing the universe.

The Silk Road Is a “Lotus Road”

Saito: Looking at things this way, I am impressed anew at how important a

symbol the lotus has been throughout the world.

Suda: The Egyptian hieroglyph of the lotus flower and the existence in Egyptian shrines of pillars carved with a lotus at the crown suggest that Egyptian civilization was a great center of “lotus culture.”

Endo: We could say the same of Greek civilization, which inherited a great deal from Egypt. For example, lotus flowers are seen in an arabesque pattern in the temple at Olympus.

Ikeda: Alexander the Great brought Greek civilization to India. Alexander’s expedition resulted in a melding together of the Greek civilization of the West with Asian civilization. The encounter of Indian and Western civilizations eventually gave birth to the brilliant Buddhist art of Gandhara,¹⁵ which spread throughout Asia by way of China, eventually reaching as far as the Korean peninsula and even Japan. While it is difficult to prove anything about the specific influence of the lotus, it is clear that in a sense the entire Eurasian continent was united by a grand Lotus Road.

Saito: The Silk Road was therefore also a Lotus Road.

Ikeda: The camel, known as the “ship of the desert,” was one of the principal means for traveling that road. The late Chang Shuhong, honorary director of China’s Dunhuang Relics Research Institute, observed that the hoofprints of camels resemble lotus flowers.¹⁶

Endo: So the Lotus Road was actually marked with a pattern of lotus flowers!

Suda: That’s a wonderful image.

Ikeda: Fragrant lotus flowers of human happiness similarly mark the road of kosen-rufu that we are now forging. And our lives likewise become a beautiful Lotus Road of value creation.

Lastly, why don’t we discuss the relation between the sun and the lotus flower? This is an extremely important point, in that it relates to Nichiren Dai-shonin’s name.

The Sun Is the Lotus Flower of the Heavens, the Lotus Is the Sun of the Earth

Endo: Well, to begin with, in Egypt the lotus flower is also associated with the sun. Because of the way its petals open out from the center, it was probably thought to resemble the rays of the sun. It seems the fact that many lotus flowers open in the morning and close by evening reinforced this connection with the sun.

Suda: According to Egyptian myth, at night the corolla of the lotus flower becomes the “cradle of the sun.” And at dawn it supposedly imparts new life to the sun.

Ikeda: The sun is regarded everywhere as a symbol of boundless vitality. Also, since it sets only to rise again the following morning, it is taken as a symbol of rebirth and eternal life.

Saito: Lotus flowers were placed atop mummies or used in funerals to express the wish for eternal life or rebirth. An Egyptian legend reportedly suggests that when a lotus born from primal waters bloomed, the newborn sun, represented as a beautiful child, appeared and created the world.

Suda: Also, the people of ancient Persia thought of lotus flowers as incarnations of the sun. These are depictions of the sun god wearing a robe of light and a crown of lotus flowers.

Ikeda: In the ancient Orient, the lotus flower seems to have been regarded as an “earthly sun,” and the sun as a “heavenly lotus.” The lotus flower was thought to give birth to, or contain, something sacred. It must have been looked upon as a divine plant.

Saito: In India, likewise, from ancient times the lotus was thought to give birth to something sacred. The thousand-petaled lotus mentioned in the Lotus Sutra that we talked about earlier is an example of this.

An early legend describes the creation of the universe as follows: In the beginning there was only water. From within this water a lotus flower floated to the surface, and then a thousand-petaled lotus shining with a golden light like that of the sun came forth. Within that lotus flower, which is described as a “golden womb,” Brahma, the creator of the universe, was born.

Suda: The “golden womb” is the origin of all things mentioned in the ancient Hindu text the *Rigveda*. It contains within it all things in embryonic form, and brings all things into being.

Endo: The receptacle of the lotus plant in Sanskrit is called the *garbha*, which literally means womb or uterus; this is probably because it produces the seeds. Also, the golden lotus is used to symbolize the sun.

Saito: The image of a thousand-petaled golden lotus also appears in Buddhist texts. In a miraculous account of occurrences at Shravasti,¹⁷ the dragon kings Nanda and Upananda make a “thousand-petaled golden lotus” as large as a chariot wheel and with a stem of jewels, and they present this to Shakyamuni.¹⁸

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The Buddha Is the Sun and the Lotus

Ikeda: Shakyamuni is addressed as “Sun of wisdom, great sage and venerable one” (LS2, 27). The image is that of a sun radiating the light of wisdom. In other words, Shakyamuni, the teacher who expounds the Law for all people, is the sun and the lotus. This is extremely important.

Saito: In the “Treatise on the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom” (Jp. *Daichidoron*), there are comments elucidating the connection between the “thousand-petaled lotus” and the “light of wisdom.” It says that when Shakyamuni is in *samadhi*, or profound meditation, he emits a great light. Each of the rays of this light, it says, becomes a “thousand-petaled lotus” made of jewels, and on top of each of these lotus flowers a Buddha is born.

Ikeda: The Buddha’s wisdom is called “wisdom light” and the Buddha’s compassion, “mercy light.” Thus, the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion are both compared to light. This suggests that the light of the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion is the “mother” that gives birth to all Buddhas.

We have to shed light on people, to give people light. We must also bathe ourselves in light. We must never remain in darkness, nor must we allow others to remain in the dark. Flowers will not bloom, the lotus will not blossom, in darkness. We have to send the light of the Mystic Law to all those we share a bond with. Doing so also increases our own light.

Countless Buddhas being born atop countless thousand-petaled lotus flowers—this is a magnificent image. The Lotus Sutra describes similar scenes. During the Ceremony in the Air, the two Buddhas Shakyamuni and Many Treasures (Jp. *Taho*) sit side by side in the Treasure Tower. And around the Treasure Tower gather the Buddhas of the worlds in the ten directions who are Shakyamuni’s emanations.

Suda: Yes. This congregation of Buddhas is likened to a “multitude of lotus flowers.”

All Teachings Arise From the “Lotus Flower”

Ikeda: Along the same lines, without going into a detailed discussion, the Kegon Sutra develops the idea that all beings are born from lotus flowers through the concept of the world of lotus-treasury.

Nichiren Daishonin says regarding the single character *ren* (or “lotus”):

It is the well-spring of all teachings. Ultimately, the doctrines of threefold contemplation in a single mind, the three thousand realms in a single moment of life (*ichinen sanzen*), the three truths, the six stages of practice, the fusion of wisdom and reality, and the essential and theoretical teachings all arise from one character “*ren*.” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p, 1364)

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He also says, "All teachings arise from the two characters *ren* [lotus] and *ge* [flower]" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 809). The lotus flower that produces all teachings is ultimately Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

We have not finished our discussion on the connection between the lotus flower and the sun, but I wonder if there are any other similar concepts.

Saito: There is a concept called the "lotus flower in the breast." According to one explanation, this refers to the heart. And the heart is at the same time likened to the sun.

Ikeda: The heart is probably compared to the lotus flower because its shape resembles that of a closed lotus flower. Moreover, the muscle striations in the heart give it the appearance of being divided into eight sections. Consequently, the heart is called the "eight-petaled lotus."

Endo: Ancient Indians viewed the human body as the "palace of Brahma," the place in which Brahma (the fundamental principle of the universe) dwells. And they conceived of the heart as the "small palace of the white lotus flower" within the palace of the body.

Ikeda: We have seen that the heart is likened to a lotus flower. But we still need to explain how it also represents the sun.

Saito: Yes. Both the human heart and the sun were thought to be held together by fine capillaries. The light of the sun provided nourishment for the activity of the *atman*, or self, within the heart.

Suda: In short, the implication is that the vital energy which gives life and causes the heart to beat comes from the sun.

Ikeda: From that standpoint, it accords nicely with the view of modern science. If we trace the food chain from its source, we find that the sun is the origin of all energy on the planet. The sun is the mother of all life on earth, and all human activities also ultimately depend on the beneficent rays of the sun.

In short, both the sun and the lotus flower represent the source of the energy of the universe. At the core the essence of both is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; the Mystic Law is itself both the sun and the lotus flower. In human terms, Shakyamuni is the sun and the lotus flower.

The Daishonin Is the Sun and the Moon and the Lotus Flower

Saito: The "Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One" (twenty-first) chapter, compares the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to the sun.

[It says, "As the light of the sun and moon / can banish all obscurity and gloom, / so

this person as he passes through the world / can wipe out the darkness of living beings” (LS21, 276).]

And so the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, like Shakyamuni Buddha, are compared to lotus flowers and to the sun.

Ikeda: That’s right. The Dai-shonin says that this passage in the “Supernatural Powers” chapter “means that the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law will witness the advent of Bodhisattva Jogyo [Superior Practices], who will illuminate the darkness of human ignorance and earthly desires....” (MW-1, 236). The Daishonin, who spread Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—the essence of the Lotus Sutra—in the Latter Day of the Law, thus suggests that he himself is the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Superior Practices.

He also says, “Names are important for all things.... Giving myself the name Nichiren [Sun-Lotus] signifies that I attained enlightenment by myself” (MW-1, 236).

Suda: This means that he attained the state of the Buddha on his own. The Daishonin himself is the Buddha, and the name “Nichiren” expresses his enlightenment.

Endo: In a letter to Shijo Kingo’s wife he says, “The Lotus Sutra is the sun and the moon and the lotus flower. Therefore, it is called *Myoho-renge-kyo* (the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Mystic Law). Nichiren is also like the sun and the moon, and also like the lotus flower” (MW-4, 87).

Ikeda: His taking the name Nichiren, the Daishonin says, signifies that he embodies the essence of the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin reveals that he is at one with the “sun” eternally illuminating the lives of all people in the Latter Day, and the pure lotus flower—or white lotus—giving life to all Buddhas.

There are various profound teachings concerning the name Nichiren. The twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan Shonin, sums these up in his writing “*Nichiren no niiji no koto*” (On the Two Characters in the Name Nichiren). He observes in his conclusion that the Daishonin, by taking the name Nichiren, is making a great declaration that he is the votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law and in fact the original Buddha.¹⁹

Saito: This means that we who are the Daishonin’s followers also each have to become a “sun” and a “lotus flower” in our own right.

Ikeda: When we become a “sun,” all darkness is banished from our lives. Each day is filled with light and we can brightly illuminate the lives of others, too. When we become a “lotus,” we can change the muddy swamp of earthly desires into joyous enlightenment.

The “Emerging from the Earth” chapter describes the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as being “like the lotus flower in the water” (LS15, 222). As Bodhisattvas of

the Earth, we dwell in the “swamp” of society; we certainly do not seek to escape from reality. And what’s more, our lives are in no way stained or tainted by society. Why is this? It is because we never forget our mission.

The Daishonin says of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, “Their fundamental mission is to propagate Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the one great reason for the Buddha’s appearance in this world” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 833). It’s a matter of dedicating one’s life to kosen-rufu. It’s a matter of possessing the spirit to do *shakubuku*—to help others become happy through the Mystic Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. The spirit of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is found in the faith to dedicate oneself wholeheartedly to kosen-rufu. If people lose this spirit, then no matter how splendid their appearance, their hearts will be tainted by worldly affairs and concerns.

Suda: The Daishonin also says, “[Untainted by] the things of the world” indicates not being swayed even though one may receive lands or a court rank from the sovereign or a minister” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 833). This means that no matter what powerful people may do in attempting to entice them with wealth or status, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth absolutely never allow their faith to bend.

Ikeda: And they absolutely never betray their comrades. A treacherous individual is sure to meet a pitiful end. This is as true now as it was in the past.

The essence of the Lotus Sutra that Nichiren Daishonin revealed with his life is found in the spirit to treasure kosen-rufu even more highly than one’s life. When we advance with such a lofty spirit, the sun of the “greatest of all joys” rises in our heart, and our life, like a golden lotus or a thousand-petaled lotus, blossoms as a fragrant flower of happiness.

Kosen-rufu is a movement to cause the sun of compassion to rise and the lotus flower of happiness to bloom in society.

(To be continued)

1. Editor’s note: All quotations from *The Lotus Sutra* are from: *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). For purposes of convenience, all citations from this work will be given in the text and abbreviated as follows: LS followed by the chapter number, and then the page number.
2. Festival of Lanterns: A traditional festival for the deceased, held in mid summer. Also called the Bon Festival.
3. Technically, lilies belong to a different family, but the term is used in a generic sense to include all flowers resembling lilies.
4. This is termed the “figurative *renge*.” In the *Hokke Gengi* (Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra), Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China interprets *renge* of *Myoho-renge-kyo* in two ways: as the figurative *renge* symbolizing the Law, and as the entity of the Law itself.
5. *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicle of Japan): The oldest official history of Japan.

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6. *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves): The earliest extant collection of Japanese poetry.
7. *Hasu no Bunkashi* (Cultural History of the Lotus), ed. Kodai Miura (Koshigaya, Japan: Kado Sobo, 1994), pp. 167–68.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
9. "Lotus Blooms From Seed Centuries Old." *New York Times* Associated Press July 1, 1952: 26, Wirephoto. In Washington, D.C.'s National Capital Park, a plant grew from seeds tens of thousands of years old found in geologic deposits in Manchuria in 1950. The blossom measuring six inches in diameter opened in summer of 1952. And July 11, 1952, *Tokyo Shimbun*.
10. *Toda Josei Zenshu* (Collected Works of Josei Toda), (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 86–87.
11. Dharmaraksha's *Zhengfahua jing*: The earliest Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra, or the *Saddharma-pundarika-sutra*, consisting of twenty-seven chapters in ten volumes. This translation (dated C.E. 286) corresponds with Kumarajiva's *Miaofa lianhua jing* (C.E. 406) in most respects, except that it contains several parables that the latter omits.
12. Hajime Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha* (Gautama Buddha), bk. 1, *Nakamura Hajime Senshu* (Selected Writings of Hajime Nakamura), vol. 11 (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1992), p. 155.
13. Editor's note: Quotes from volume 2 of *The Major Writings* are from the second edition; the page number for the earlier edition is given in brackets.
14. Hajime Nakamura, *Upanishaddo no Shiso* (Upanishad Thought), *Nakamura Hajime Senshu* (Selected Writings of Hajime Nakamura), vol. 9 (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1990), p. 95.
15. An ancient country in northern India, located north of Punjab and northeast of Kashmir.
16. Chang Shuhong and Daisaku Ikeda, *Tonko no Kosai* (The Brilliance of Dunhuang), (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1990), p. 56.
17. Shravasti: The capital of the Kosala Kingdom of ancient India, located to the east of present-day Delhi. The Buddha is said to have made Shravasti his base of activities during the rainy season for twenty-five years, and to have converted many people there including King Prasenajit.
18. Akira Miyaji, *Gandara—Hotoke no Fushigi* (Gandhara—Wonders of the Buddha), (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1996), p. 252.
19. *Fujishugaku Yoshu* (Selected Works of the Fuji School), vol. 3, pp. 255–58.