

Striving To Be a Votary of the Lotus Sutra: Nichiren Daishonin's Self-identity

IN "Letter to Ko-ama Gozen," Nichiren Daishonin identifies himself as "a votary of the Lotus Sutra in the evil age of the Latter Day of the Law" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 139). Identifying himself in this way was important because it directly led to how he lived his life. Our self-image influences our action. Depending on his relationships within society, the Daishonin, as we all do, assumed different identities—a man, subject of the shogunate government, priest, teacher, son and so on. Throughout his writings, however, he sees himself most as a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

If we examine the Daishonin's image of a votary of the Lotus Sutra, it can provide a meaningful guide on how to practice the Daishonin's Buddhism, as well as how we view ourselves.

The Daishonin views a votary of the Lotus Sutra as someone who fulfills the Buddha's prophesy, that is, the widespread propagation of the Lotus Sutra. In the form of a pledge by Shakyamuni's disciples, the Lotus Sutra foretells the spread of its teachings: "After the Buddha has passed into extinction,/in an age of fear and evil/we will preach far and wide" (*The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, chap. 13, p. 193). In the sutra, Shakyamuni also instructs the bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "After I have passed into extinction, in the last five hundred year period you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvipa and never allow it to be cut off" (LS-23, 288).

The Daishonin rhetorically asks: "Who, then, in this present age will be the votary of the Lotus Sutra and fulfill the prophesy of the Buddha?" (MW-2, 195). The foremost qualification of a votary of the sutra is his or her devotion to the spread of the humanistic ideals expounded in the Lotus Sutra—the sanctity, equality and freedom of all lives. The Daishonin sees a votary of the Lotus Sutra as someone who actualizes the sutra's ideals.

Furthermore, the Daishonin explains that votaries of the sutra undergo various difficulties on account of their efforts to spread the sutra's teachings. He states: "If there exists a votary of the Lotus Sutra, then the three types of enemies are bound to exist as well" (MW-2, 195). Here "the three types of enemies" refer to verbal and physical abuses from lay people ignorant of the sutra, attacks by arrogant priests, and finally government persecutions incited by religious authorities (LS-13, 193–95).

The Daishonin explains that since the votaries of the sutra uphold and spread the sutra's ideals, which are alien to many and threatening to those in power, they are bound to experience those difficulties. He describes his reaction when he hears of imminent persecutions: "Hearing of this, I rejoiced, saying that I had long expected it to come to this" (MW-1, 175). Because he saw himself as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, his difficulties—even a failed execution attempt and exile to a remote island—became a source of joy and pride. The Daishonin's self-awareness and action as a votary of the Lotus Sutra enabled him to attain Buddhahood.

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The Daishonin's life is also an example for his disciples to follow. The Daishonin in fact teaches that those who share his desire for the sutra's widespread propagation and act in the same way he does are also votaries of the Lotus Sutra. He explains: "No matter what, maintain your faith as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and forever exert yourself as Nichiren's disciple. If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth" (MW-1, 93). Here the Daishonin views faith as one's confidence in his or her identity as a votary of the Lotus Sutra. He also equates a votary of the Lotus Sutra with a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

It is interesting to note that the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth that appear in the Lotus Sutra are symbolic of Buddhist practice. They are bodhisattvas Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices. A votary, in other words, is a person of practice, of action. According to the Daishonin, those four bodhisattvas also respectively represent the four virtues of a Buddha: true self, eternity, purity and happiness. Put another way, a votary of the Lotus Sutra is a Buddha in action.

Although the Daishonin often emphasizes the fearless practice of a votary of the Lotus Sutra in the midst of difficulties, we must not overlook his or her warm humanistic side, as the Daishonin demonstrates in "Letter to Ko-ama Gozen." In this letter, the Daishonin writes to an elderly woman who would probably never see her dear teacher again: "Whenever you yearn for me, Nichiren, look toward the sun which rises in the morning and the moon which appears in the evening. I will invariably be reflected in the sun and the moon. In the next life, let us meet in the pure land of Eagle Peak" (MW-4, 143). Here the Daishonin teaches that neither distance nor time presents an obstacle in the realm of faith. He reassures us that the bond between mentor and disciple in Buddhism transcends time and space. In this regard, SGI President Ikeda states: "It was not authority that united the Daishonin and his followers; nor was it their concern for profit. They were united by the heart. For this reason, their bond was indestructible. For this reason, their lives overflowed with benefit and their connection was lofty and eternal" (*Learning from the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin*, pp. 118–19).

Through the care and concerns that he extends to his disciples, the Daishonin demonstrates that being a votary of the Lotus Sutra is to be someone who appreciates human relationships, someone who understands the hearts of others. Compassion is the spiritual foundation for a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

We fulfill many roles in our lives—husband, wife, student, employee, friend, etc.—including practitioners of Buddhism. But which self-image is our fundamental identity? Which self-awareness will lead us to Buddhahood? Since how we view ourselves affects how we behave, our self-image can determine the quality of our lives. The Daishonin's life, based on his confident self-awareness as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, guides us in our search for our own fundamental identity. □

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