

Lectures on the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” Chapters of the Lotus Sutra 1 Preliminary Thoughts

Impressions of My Mentor’s State of Life

TO this day, memories of my mentor, Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, lecturing on the Lotus Sutra, come vividly to mind like scenes in a great painting.

After World War II, the Soka Gakkai was in a state of ruin as a result of the campaign of suppression waged against it by the militarist government. At that time, President Toda began efforts to reconstruct the organization by delivering lectures on the Lotus Sutra to a handful of members.

I was a participant in the seventh series of lectures he gave, which began on September 13, 1948. That was in the autumn of my twenty-first year. The venue was the old Soka Gakkai Headquarters in Nishi-Kanda, Tokyo.

“I see that everyone’s arrived,” he began. There were fifty to sixty people present. President Toda, his eyes sparkling behind his glasses, gazed around the meeting place, which consisted of two small rooms. Then he cleared his throat and began lecturing in a frank and open manner.

I was instantly awestruck, electrified by the profound ideas, the great and intense confidence, the compassionate cry of concern for the world and humankind that seemed to gush from his very being.

President Toda would never make things deliberately difficult or complex. His lectures were intelligible, straightforward and lucid. Yet, they glowed with the light of extremely profound truth. They conveyed philosophy rooted directly in life experience and in the Law that pervades the infinite universe. They were filled with breathtaking drama and joyous music. At one point, as I listened to him speak, the sun seemed to rise in my heart, and everything became illuminated brilliantly before my eyes.

That night, still filled with the thrill and excitement I felt during the lecture, I wrote a poem in the pages of my journal:

*How I marvel at the greatness and profundity of the Lotus Sutra.
Isn't it the path to salvation for all humankind?
The teaching that enlightens one to the origin of life and the universe,
The fundamental principle revealed to enable all people to acquire the loftiest character
and happiness.*

*I am 21 years old.
Since setting out on my journey of life, what did I contemplate, what did I do, what
did I make the wellspring of my happiness?
From this day on, I will advance bravely.
From this day on, I will live resolutely.
I will live within the life of the Great Law, win over my sufferings.
True sadness inspires one to lead a great life.
I now see the true Great Path and perceive the true nature of life.*

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Preliminary Study Sutra Thoughts

Astonished at his profundity and breadth of knowledge, someone once asked President Toda, “When did you study these things?”

Smiling warmly, he replied: “While in prison during the persecution, I chanted sincere daimoku, and I studied. As a result, these things seem to have come back to me. The eighty thousand sutras in fact refer to my own life.”

These lectures arose from the vast state of life of President Toda, who had awakened to the essence of Buddhism while in prison.

The Lotus Sutra of the Former, Middle and Latter Days

LATER on, President Toda developed the format for his lectures on the Lotus Sutra. He instituted beginners classes on the “Expedient Means” (Hoben) and “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” (Juryo) chapters specifically for those who had recently taken faith.

His lectures, so brilliant and full of conviction, planted the essence of Buddhism in the hearts of his listeners, even without their being aware of it. For these persons new to faith, many of whom thought of Buddhism only in terms of Shakyamuni, President Toda began each series of lectures by emphasizing that the Lotus Sutra is expressed differently according to the age—depending on whether it is the Former, Middle or Latter Day of the Law.

President Toda used to say:

Everyone casually assumes that the Lotus Sutra indicates the twenty-eight–chapter text by that name. But there are in fact three kinds of Lotus Sutra.

The first is the Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni. This is the twenty-eight–chapter sutra of that name; this Lotus Sutra benefited people during Shakyamuni’s lifetime and during the Former Day of the Law. Presently, in the Latter Day, however, even if you should carry out the practices [of the Former Day] of reading and reciting this sutra and copying it out, you will gain no benefit thereby. Our recitation of the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters during morning and evening gongyo, however, has a different significance.

The Lotus Sutra of the Middle Day of the Law is T’ien-t’ai’s *Maka Shikan* (Great Concentration and Insight). The Lotus Sutra for this period of the Latter Day is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the “seven-character Lotus Sutra” hidden in the depths of the “Life Span” chapter. You need to understand that there are three kinds of Lotus Sutra and how they are related to one another.

In addition to these, there is another Lotus Sutra that, while not historically substantiated, was recognized alike by Nichiren Daishonin, Shakyamuni, T’ien-t’ai and Dengyo; this is the “twenty-four–character Lotus Sutra” expounded by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (Fukyo).

SHAKYAMUNI of India taught the “twenty-eight–chapter Lotus Sutra” for those alive during his lifetime and in the Former Day. T’ien-t’ai of China expounded the *Maka Shikan* for human beings of the Middle Day of the Law. And Bodhisattva

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Never Disparaging expounded the so-called “twenty-four-character Lotus Sutra” for the people of the Middle Day of the Buddha called Awesome Sound King (Ionno).

President Toda explained that despite the differences in the age and the form in which the teaching was expressed, these are all in fact the same Lotus Sutra. President Toda called the Lotus Sutra as thus conceived the “manifold Lotus Sutra.”

The Lotus Sutra, therefore, is not simply the “Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni.” It is also the “Lotus Sutra of T’ien-t’ai” and the “Lotus Sutra of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.” This was a stunning perspective that only President Toda, who had become enlightened to the essence of the Lotus Sutra, could have revealed.

In the course of listening to his broad-ranging lectures, his listeners, as a matter of course, could engrave distinctions between the “Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni” and the “Lotus Sutra of Nichiren Daishonin” in their lives.

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo Is the Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day

WHAT do the different expressions of this “manifold Lotus Sutra” have in common? Ultimately, it is the teaching that “everyone equally has the potential to attain Buddhahood.” There are, however, great differences in the forms whereby Shakyamuni and Nichiren Daishonin expressed this teaching.

Whereas Shakyamuni expressed it as the “twenty-eight- chapter Lotus Sutra,” Nichiren Daishonin, to enable all human beings of the Latter Day to attain Buddhahood, revealed the ultimate truth of the Lotus Sutra as Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

In the “Essence of the Lotus Sutra” (Hokke Shuyo Sho) the Daishonin says: “I, Nichiren, have abandoned the comprehensive and the abbreviated, and selected the essential. The essence is the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo transmitted to Bodhisattva Superior Practices (Jogyo)” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 336).

The five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo, which constitute the Lotus Sutra’s essence—that is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo of the Three Great Secret Laws—are the Lotus Sutra appropriate to this age of the Latter Day of the Law. President Toda therefore termed the Daishonin’s teaching the “Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day.”

The Lineage of Votaries of the Lotus Sutra

ONE who expounds a teaching that can enable all people to attain Buddhahood is certain to encounter persecution. Even Shakyamuni underwent a succession of great persecutions.

Moreover, the Lotus Sutra itself states that whoever spreads the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day of the Law is certain to encounter numerous persecutions even greater than those Shakyamuni faced. This is clearly shown in such phrases as: “Since hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even when the Thus Come One is in the world, how much more will this be so after his passing?” (LS10, 164); “It [the Lotus Sutra] will face much hostility in the world and be difficult to

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believe" (LS14, 207); "the three powerful enemies" (LS13); and "the six difficult and nine easy acts" (LS11).

A votary who endures all of these great persecutions and perseveres in spreading the teaching among the people embodies the heart of the Lotus Sutra. Enduring persecution to spread the teaching to others is, in fact, an expression of compassion.

Just as the sutra predicts, the life of Nichiren Daishonin, who appeared in the Latter Day, was a succession of great persecutions. The Daishonin, noting that he had encountered persecutions matching in every respect those that the sutra predicts will befall its votary, declares himself to be the "votary of the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day" and the "Buddha of the Latter Day."

At the same time, the Daishonin also designates Shakyamuni, T'ien-t'ai and Dengyo as votaries of the Lotus Sutra of their respective ages. They were all predecessors who expounded the Lotus Sutra out of their desire for the people's happiness, and who were persecuted as a result.

In addition, in many places in the Goshō, the Daishonin praises and offers the greatest encouragement to his followers by calling them "votaries of the Lotus Sutra." One such follower was Shijo Kingo, who struggled to overcome great difficulties and persevered in faith without begrudging his life. To one woman (the mother of Oto Gozen) who visited him in exile on the island of Sado, bringing her young daughter with her on the arduous journey, he goes so far as to say, "You are undoubtedly the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra among the women of Japan" (MW-3, 52). And he gives her the name Nichimyo Shonin (Sage Nichimyo).

Buddhism Means Taking Action Among People and in Society

THE Daishonin also writes, "At the time of kosen-rufu, all people in the entire world will become votaries of the Lotus Sutra" (*Goshō Zenshu*, p. 834). He thus indicates the principle that anyone in the world may become a votary of the Lotus Sutra.

"Votaries of the Lotus Sutra" refers to those who dedicate themselves to the mission of saving all people throughout the entire world and over the ten thousand years and more of the Latter Day of the Law. And "kosen-rufu" indicates a situation in which individuals, basing themselves on the Mystic Law, contribute to others and to society as "votaries," that is, as people of action.

Accordingly, the Soka Gakkai's first and second presidents, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, who struggled against the country's militarist regime and propagated the True Law for the people's happiness without begrudging their own lives, certainly have a place in this lineage of votaries of the Lotus Sutra.

The sixty-fifth high priest, Nichijun, lauded President Makiguchi as "an emissary of the Buddha from birth," and he praised President Toda as "the forerunner of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth."

President Toda initiated the great struggle to spread the "Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day" for those laboring in extreme distress under the conditions that ensued following World War II.

“I want to banish the word *miser*y from this world.” “I want to rid the world of poverty and sickness.” This passionate cry of my mentor, who had stood up alone after the war, still resounds in my ears. This cry of the spirit is none other than the “heart of the Lotus Sutra.”

Buddhism always means action and practice. Enabling people to overcome their difficulties and establish lives of supreme happiness requires dialogue, thoroughgoing dialogue. In such action and practice beats the “heart of the Lotus Sutra.”

The ‘Buddhism Hidden in the Depths of the Sutra’ Is Open to All

IN the course of his lectures, President Toda often spoke as follows:

Nichiren Daishonin read the Lotus Sutra from the standpoint of its most profound depths. The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai read the surface or literal meaning of the Lotus Sutra and interpreted its passages and phrases most skillfully....

When I say Nichiren Daishonin read the Lotus Sutra, bear in mind that he was not reading the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni expounded just as it was, he was reading it in terms of the meaning contained in its depths, from his state of life as the Buddha of the Latter Day. This is what he indicates when he refers to “the theoretical teaching as I read it” and “the ‘Life Span’ chapter from the perspective of my enlightenment.”

In his lectures, President Toda strictly distinguished between the literal, surface meaning, or the interpretation from the standpoint of Shakyamuni and T’ien-t’ai, and the implicit meaning, or the interpretation from the standpoint of Nichiren Daishonin, and he explained the correct way to read the sutra in the Latter Day.

Just what does it mean to read the sutra in terms of its implicit meaning in the ‘Life Span’ chapter? In a nutshell, it is to read the sutra from the standpoint of the vast state of life of the original Buddha, who desires to enable all people of the Latter Day to attain true happiness.

The Daishonin “read the Lotus Sutra with his life” by practicing with the spirit of not begrudging his life. The essence of the Lotus Sutra the Daishonin risked his life to propagate is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, or the “Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day,” the “Lotus Sutra hidden in the depths of the sutra.”

Considered from this standpoint, the twenty-eight–chapter Lotus Sutra becomes in its entirety an explanation of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Reading the Lotus Sutra from the standpoint of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, hence, is to read it from the standpoint of its implicit meaning.

When we recite the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters during gongyo, we do so not from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra of the Former or Middle Day of the Law but from that of Nichiren Daishonin’s teaching of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

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Living Interpretation of Great Wisdom for People's Happiness, Rooted in Daily Life

NICHIREN Daishonin lectured on the twenty-eight–chapter Lotus Sutra from the standpoint of the teaching hidden in its depths, and Nikko Shonin recorded his lectures in the form of the “Ongi Kuden” (Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings). To revive the heart of the Lotus Sutra and enable all people of the Latter Day to attain Buddhahood, the Daishonin, out of his immense compassion, explains exactly how the passages of the sutra should be read.

Reading the Lotus Sutra in terms of its implicit meaning might be described as an “interpretation from the standpoint of the Daishonin’s enlightenment.” It is not simply a theoretical explanation of the sutra but an interpretation that articulates the spirit of the sutra passages from the single perspective of how to enable all people, who live amid the realities of daily life, to become happy.

In other words, it is a living interpretation of the Lotus Sutra—an interpretation for putting the sutra into practice in our lives; an interpretation from the viewpoint of the human being; an interpretation for ordinary people; an interpretation that focuses on people’s daily lives. It is not an interpretation merely for the sake of intellectual knowledge but an interpretation based great wisdom so as to ensure that the sutra’s teaching may be developed correctly and boldly in response to the needs of the times and society.

“Hidden in the depths” may give an impression of some mystery closed off to most people. But that is certainly not the case. On the contrary, the true value of the “Buddhism hidden in the depths” lies in its being widely opened to all people and becoming a living, pulsing force that invigorates the age and society.

The members of the Nikken sect have turned this basic tenet completely on its head. They twist the teaching of the “Buddhism hidden in the depths,” get hung up on merely exegetical interpretations, and cloak themselves in a shell of authority. They have turned the world of priests and temples into a world of special privilege, and they have turned the Gohonzon into a tool for controlling people. While not carrying out a satisfactory practice themselves, they spend their time in degenerate pursuits, allowing the roots of their humanity to decay. Their conduct is truly fearful. They have killed the Daishonin’s spirit.

In this series, with the “Ongi Kuden”—the Daishonin’s lectures on the Lotus Sutra—and the lectures of my mentor, President Toda, as my basis, I also hope to conduct my lectures in a way relevant to modern times and society.

The Benefit of Reciting the Sutra

AS you know, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, or the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra, is termed the “primary practice” and reading or reciting the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters is called the “supplementary practice” or “supporting practice.”

The twenty-sixth high priest, Nichikan, explains the relationship between the primary and supplementary practices by comparing them to food and seasoning,

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respectively. In other words, when eating rice or noodles, the “primary” source of nourishment, you use salt or vinegar as seasoning to help bring out, or “supplement,” the flavor.

The benefit from carrying out the primary practice is immense. When you also recite the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters, it has the supplementary function of increasing and accelerating the beneficial power of the primary practice. Our basic way of gongyo is to chant daimoku as its primary component and recite the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters as the supplementary.

The benefit of chanting daimoku is immeasurable and boundless. Indeed, there is infinite power in chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo just one time. The Daishonin says, “If you recite these words of the daimoku once, then the Buddha nature of all living beings will be summoned and gather around you” (MW-5, 112). Also, he teaches that the benefit of chanting one daimoku is equal to that of reading the entire Lotus Sutra, that of chanting ten daimoku is equal to reading the sutra ten times, that of a hundred daimoku is equal to reading the sutra a hundred times, and that of a thousand daimoku is equal to reading the sutra a thousand times.

Accordingly, we do not necessarily have to recite the sutra as we usually do in gongyo if, for example, we are sick. If, as a result of forcing ourselves to do a complete gongyo at such times, our condition should worsen, then, rather than increasing our benefit, it may in fact have the opposite effect of destroying our joy in faith and thus generating negative value.

At such times, it may be best to simply read the “Expedient Means” and verse portion (*jigage*) of the “Life Span” chapter and chant daimoku, or to just chant daimoku. Buddhism is reason. The important thing, therefore, is for each person to make wise judgments so that he or she can carry out a practice of gongyo filled with joy at all times.

The Lotus Sutra As Read From the Daishonin’s Standpoint

THE primary practice of the Daishonin’s Buddhism is to chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, the ultimate truth of the highest Buddhist teaching. Since we are carrying out the supreme primary practice, anything less than the highest supplementary practice would be of no help at all.

The supplementary practice the Daishonin chose is the recitation of the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters of the Lotus Sutra, the purpose of Shakyamuni Buddha’s advent in this world. Of the sutra’s twenty-eight chapters, these two represent “the essence of the theoretical teaching” and “the essence of the essential teaching,” respectively.

During the Daishonin’s time, as well, his followers recited these two chapters. In one Goshō, for example, he says:

Among the entire twenty-eight chapters, the [“Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters] are particularly outstanding. The remaining chapters are all in a sense the branches and leaves of these two chapters. Therefore for your regular recitation, I recommend that you practice reading the prose sections of

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the [“Expedient Means” and “Life Span”] chapters. (MW-6, 10)

He teaches that since the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters constitute the core of the Lotus Sutra’s twenty-eight chapters, these two should be read daily.

Gongyo and daimoku are the roots that, as it were, enable you to grow into a great tree. The tree of one’s life strengthens and thickens as a cumulative result of continuing the practice of gongyo and chanting daimoku. While it may not be possible to see any changes from one day to the next, because of the daily nourishment a consistent practice affords, our lives will one day become towering and vast like great trees. As we carry out a steady practice, we will develop a state of life of absolutely indestructible happiness.

As I mentioned earlier, however, it goes without saying that the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters we recite are those of the Lotus Sutra as seen from the Daishonin’s standpoint of the “teaching hidden in the depths.”

Nichikan explains that we read the “Expedient Means” chapter to “refute” its surface meaning and “borrow” its phrases, and that we read the “Life Span” chapter to “refute” its surface meaning and “use” the profound meaning implicit in the chapter. Reading these chapters from the standpoint of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, we refute their surface meaning; it is as though we are saying: “The Lotus Sutra of Shakyamuni has no power of benefit in the Latter Day.”

At the same time, from the Daishonin’s standpoint, we also recite the Lotus Sutra because it “praises the greatness of the Gohonzon.” This way of reading it corresponds to “borrowing” and “using” its words.

While there are meticulous arguments to support and substantiate this explanation, for the time being I will simply confirm the point that in reading the “Expedient Means” and “Life Span” chapters, we do so from the standpoint of the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Your Chanting Voices Reach the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

SOME of you, I imagine, may wonder how reading sutra passages you cannot understand could bring about any benefit. Let me reassure you that definitely there is benefit from carrying out this practice.

The Daishonin says:

A baby does not know the difference between water and fire, and cannot distinguish medicine from poison. But when he sucks milk, his life is nourished and sustained. Although one may not be versed [in various sutras] ... if one listens to even one character or one phrase of the Lotus Sutra, one cannot fail to attain Buddhahood. (MW-7, 104–05)

Just as a baby is nourished grows naturally of its own accord by drinking milk, if you earnestly chant the Mystic Law with faith in the Gohonzon, definitely your life will come to shine with immeasurable good fortune and benefit.

To cite another example: Dogs have a language in the world of dogs, and birds have a language in the world of birds. While people cannot understand these languages, fellow dogs and fellow birds can certainly communicate within their own species. Also, even though some people do not understand scientific jargon or a particular language, others can communicate very well through these languages.

Similarly, it might be said that when we are doing gongyo or chanting daimoku, we are speaking in the language of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Even though you may not understand what you are saying, your voice definitely reaches the Gohonzon, all Buddhist gods and all Buddhas and bodhisattvas over the three existences and the ten directions; and that, in response, the entire universe bathes you in the light of good fortune.

At the same time, it is certainly true that if you study the meaning of the sutra based on this practice and with a seeking mind, you can as a matter of course deepen your confidence and strengthen your faith still further.

A Practice for Revitalization

WHEN we do gongyo and chant daimoku, we conduct a ceremony in which we praise the Gohonzon and the great Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. On one level, it could be said that gongyo is a paean or a song of the highest and utmost praise for the Buddha and for Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the fundamental law of the universe. At the same time, when we do gongyo, we also praise the eternal life of the universe and the world of Buddhahood in our own lives.

President Toda once said:

When we turn to the east and salute the Buddhist gods, then and there the Buddhist gods within our own hearts appear in the universe around us. Then, when we face the Gohonzon during the second prayer, the Buddhist gods all take their seats behind us.

If I were to salute the Buddhist gods right now, then, regardless of whether it was night or day, they would all take their seats behind me and salute the Gohonzon. And these Buddhist gods would all start to work to fulfill my desires. This is how it works.

When we worship the Gohonzon, right then and there the doors of the microcosm within us open completely to the macrocosm, and we can experience a great and serene sense of happiness, as though gazing out over the entire universe. We savor tremendous fulfillment and joy, and gain access to a great and all-embracing wisdom. The microcosm that is encompassed by the universe in turn encompasses the entire universe.

Gongyo is an invigorating “ceremony of time without beginning” that revitalizes us from the very depths of our being. Therefore, the important thing is to do gongyo each day filled with a feeling of rhythm and cadence—like a horse galloping through the heavens. I hope you will do the kind of satisfying gongyo that leaves you refreshed and revitalized in both body and mind.

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The 'King of Sutras,' Which Makes People Strong and Wise

THE Lotus Sutra is the "king of sutras," the "scripture that calls out to all people." It is a scripture "living" right now; it embodies the Buddha's compassion and egalitarian outlook. It is a "renaissance scripture," overflowing with the spirit of revitalization, which makes human beings strong and wise. And the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters are the heart of the sutra.

No practice is as universally accessible to all people as the practice of reading the sutra and chanting daimoku set forth by Nichiren Daishonin. This is the Buddhist practice that is most wide-open and accessible to all people.

During the Daishonin's lifetime, both priests and lay people assiduously recited the sutra and chanted daimoku. In modern society, however, for many people in Japan, sutras have become something distant and remote; the only exposure that most people in Japan have to the sutras is when they hear priests intoning them at funerals.

This state of affairs, this tendency to depend on priests—which has come to be regarded as so natural that no one questions it—has produced a spiritual foundation of blind obedience to religious authority. And it is the "fundamental evil" that has allowed members of the clergy to grow arrogant and decadent.

Today, however, as a result of the development of the Soka Gakkai International, people not only in Japan but throughout the world joyously chant the Mystic Law and recite the "Expedient Means" and "Life Span" chapters. This is a grand undertaking wholly without precedent in the history of Buddhism. This represents the great religious revolution of the twentieth century.

Nichiren Daishonin's "Buddhism of the people" is generating a great light of peace and happiness throughout the world. Millions are experiencing the beneficial power of the Mystic Law and acting out the wonderful drama of their human revolution. More than anything else, this fact attests most eloquently to the correctness of the SGI, which carries on the spirit of the Lotus Sutra in the present age.

As I work on these lectures, I have images of these many friends in mind. I will proceed as though carrying on a discussion with each of you while gazing up into a clear, blue sky, or strolling leisurely along a path through a field filled with fragrant, blooming flowers. □

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