

8. In the verses of chapter three a long description is given of the horrible punishments that will befall those who slander the Lotus Sūtra. How might such a harsh a passage like this be accounted for or explained?

I look forward to your responses to these questions.

4. In the verses of the “Life Span” chapter the Buddha states that his life span is immeasurable and that the power of his wisdom is like “beams of insight shining beyond measure.” How can this be related to by practitioners in terms of their daily lives and practice?
5. The Lotus Sūtra teaches that there is only One Vehicle and not a second or third (such as the vehicles for the hearers or private-buddhas or a bodhisattva-vehicle in contradistinction to those) . What might the One Vehicle mean for present-day Buddhist practitioners?
6. In chapter ten of the Lotus Sūtra the Buddha states that anyone after his extinction who rejoices even for a moment upon hearing a gāthā or phrase of the sūtra will be assured of their future attainment of Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi. In chapter seventeed the Buddha states that anyone who hears about the longevity of his lifespan and understands it by faith for even a moment will obtain a hundred or a thousand times more merit than practicing the first five pāramiās for 80 eighty billion nayuta kalpas. What would you teach in regard to such claims in the Lotus Sūtra about the unsurpassable merit of a single moment of faith in the sūtra’s teaching?
7. In chapter twenty-six of the sūtra a demoness and her ten daughters utter dharani for the protection of the teacher of the Lotus Sūtra. They promise terrible retribution on those who would attack such a teacher, including splitting the heads of the offenders into to seven pieces. The Buddha responds by telling them that their merits will be immeasurable for thereby protecting a person who keeps only the name of the Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. How might a passage like this be accounted for or explained, both in regard to its harshness and the importance placed on merely upholding the sūtra’s title?

images and themes, “Hokke-ten-Hokke.” In light of this, I would like to find out how the Lotus Sūtra is regarded by modern North American Sōtō Zen teachers, and how certain passages would be interpreted or put into practice (or perhaps even set aside or negated) .

The responses will be used in an article for Nichiren Shū’s Modern Religion Research Department. I want them to get an understanding of how American Buddhism regards the Lotus Sūtra and its practice and hope in the future to ask similar questions to those in other forms of Buddhism (such as Tibetan, and Vipassana derived movements) .

Here are the questions:

1. Would you regard the Lotus Sūtra as the “word of the Buddha” ? And if so, in what way can it be regarded as such?

2. How would you rate the importance of the Lotus Sūtra in comparison with other sūtra passages that are used liturgically in Sōtō Zen, such as the Heart Sūtra or the various Dharani, or even non-sūtra works like the “Harmony of Difference and Equality” or the “Precious Mirror Samadhi” ?

3. The verses of the “Universal Gateway” chapter promise that “by mindfully invoking Avalokiteshvara’s power” one can relieve suffering or avert disaster. The prose half of the chapter specifies calling upon the name of that bodhisattva in order to be saved from suffering or even to gain the benefit of the birth of a virtuous child. How might such statements be understood by present-day Buddhist practitioners in North America?

teaching Buddhism, it can be said that the *Bukkyō no Kyōe* and the Nichiren Shū clergy that I have met are careful to go over basic Buddhist teachings that are assumed but not described in detail in the Lotus Sūtra. So when it comes to teaching Buddhism I do not see that Nichiren Shū is any more narrow or exclusive than Zen, though of course our focus differs. Practice is the real difference. Though Zen may at times recite sūtras, including the Lotus Sūtra, it is only as an adjunct to silent meditation. Nichiren Shū is the reverse, in that we may practice silent meditation (for instance as part of shodaigyo) it is only as an auxiliary practice to the recitation of the Lotus Sūtra and Odaimoku. And though there is certainly a meditative or contemplative component to the practice of chanting, it is a practice that is expressly devotional and focused upon the Lotus Sūtra. Can such a practice that is devotionally centered upon a sūtra gain widespread appeal in North America? I think the responses from the Zen teachers show that North American Zen practitioners can gain a devotional and wholehearted engagement with Buddhism and Buddhist practice. It remains to be seen however if such a devotional engagement focused on a particular sūtra can ever gain a widespread appeal in North America.

Questionnaire Regarding Lotus Sūtra

The Lotus Sūtra seems to be held in high regard in the Sōtō Zen lineage. The Sōtō School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice includes two passages from the Lotus Sūtra for recital: the “Verses of the ‘Life Span’ Chapter” and the “Verses of the ‘Universal Gateway’ Chapter. Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō is replete with allusions to and citations from the sūtra, and one chapter in particular deals with it’s major

Buddhism besides the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nikāya Buddhism does not recognize that we can achieve buddhahood, and Mahāyāna Buddhism besides the *Lotus Sūtra* does not admit that the *pratyekabuddhas* and *śrāvakas* could ever become buddhas. Under these circumstances, to revive the original will of Śākyamuni Buddha, the creators of the sūtra put his purpose into a beautifully adorned narrative form and called it the *Lotus Sūtra*.” It further states: “However, despite the criticism, the creators and promoters of the *Lotus Sūtra* did not flag in their attempts. Due to their efforts, the basic will of Śākyamuni Buddha has been revived. Through their hands, Śākyamuni Buddha continues to live on, and continues to actively try to save others. Their confidence in this belief has supported those who expound the *Lotus Sūtra* over the years.”

It would seem then, that the view expressed by the *Bukkyō no Kyōe* that the Lotus Sūtra cannot be taken as the literal teaching of the historical Buddha and yet can be taken as expressing the original will or true intent of the Buddha’s teaching is similar to that expressed by the Zen teachers I interviewed. Furthermore, the *Bukkyō no Kyōe* also teaches that through the Lotus Sūtra the Buddha and his teachings continue to live on for us. Therefore, I would not say that Nichiren Shū will have any problem in finding a way to present the sūtra to North American Buddhists who take a more modernist or post-modernist approach to Buddhism.

There is a difference however, in that the Zen perspective is more eclectic, in that it does not focus on the Lotus Sūtra alone, and its teachings and practice are centered on the practice of silent sitting meditation rather than the chanting of the Odaimoku or passages of the Lotus Sūtra. Insofar as

meditation traditions, it does seem as though it will at least serve as a source of inspiration for those involved in Sōtō Zen practice.

How different, actually, is the view of Nichiren Shū as currently taught from the views expressed by these North American Sōtō Zen teachers? Here I would like to make a comparison with what is written about the Lotus Sūtra in the *Bukkyō no Kyōe: Shaka to Nichiren Shōnin*, the study guide for Nichiren Shū ministers. The *Bukkyō no Kyōe* is rather forthright in stating that the Lotus Sūtra cannot be taken as the literal teaching of the historical Buddha. In Chapter 3 section 1.2 it states: “There is a belief that the *Lotus Sūtra* was taught over eight years at the end of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. From the standpoint of the believer, this position is fine. However from an academic standpoint, we cannot assert such a thing. A Buddhist historian would assert that there is no evidence that the historical Śākyamuni Buddha taught the *Lotus Sūtra*. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* is not a direct record of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha’s teaching.” In the Conclusion of chapter 3 is the following statement: “However, we cannot say that every word, every phrase and every story of the *Lotus Sūtra* are Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings. These are too fictional to be Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings.”

The question is then raised in the Conclusion of chapter 3: “What then is the original will of the Buddha? ‘All living beings can become buddhas. There is no living being who cannot become a buddha.’ Since they understood that this was the will of Śākyamuni Buddha, the creators of the *Lotus Sūtra* probably felt that a great gap had developed between the original will of the Buddha, the teachings of Nikāya Buddhism, and those of Mahāyāna

particularly helpful.”

I asked Myō that if one sets aside the object or focus of that moment of faith, what would he think of the idea that a single moment of faith could have that much power. He said, “I am convinced that is so and that it is a karmically pivotal moment. The lifestream actually turns at such moments. It pivots towards liberation. Even if the person has no clue that it is possible or is happening, karmically that is extremely powerful. I think tradition supports that. I would say so.”

Based on these interviews it would seem that the Lotus Sūtra will continue to be revered in American Zen, but not as the literal word of the historical Buddha. And though it may be given the pride of place as the “king of sūtras,” it is very unlikely that it will be given any more focus or attention than other sūtras or Buddhist literature. In addition, its teachings are regarded both metaphorically and more broadly. In other words, passages that speak of the infinite life of the Buddha are seen as pointing to a timeless dimension of practice or as the presence of the Buddha in our own practice rather than simply as a literal affirmation of the Buddha’s presence as a kind of divine being who will save the practitioner. Likewise the threats and promises made in the sūtra can be taken as a way of rhetorically underscoring the impact in one’s life of turning away or turning towards the Three Treasures and Buddhist practice. Passages in the sūtra that could be interpreted as exhorting readers to devote themselves to the Lotus Sūtra as a text are instead interpreted to encourage devotion to the Buddha Dharma as realized in and through practice. Though it may not become the exclusive basis of widespread devotional practice among those attracted to Buddhism’s

Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism (Indiana University Press), around pp. 100-102. To paraphrase, all who rejoice in a phrase of the sūtra are seen by the future Buddha they are to become as a past of a Buddha, so all beings are Buddha, from some viewpoint. I would say, this is not 'belief' in some text, but an expression of awakening as a reality/possibility available omnipresently through practice experience."

Myō expressed amusement at yet another expression of the Mahāyāna penchant for hyperbolic rhetoric. "Oh the Mahāyāna!" He then expressed his take on it. "Again, Buddhism, as is the case with other faiths, has a certain culture of the book. It could even be called the 'cult of the sūtra,' a focus on a particular text as a dynamic sacred entity all its own that has saving power residing in the text. I don't think that traditional Asian view has crossed the water to the US. So instead, when it says the Lotus Sūtra I hear Buddha Dharma. The Lotus Sūtra may be the quintessential expression of Buddha Dharma but its not the book itself but the Buddha's teaching that is referred to. The Lotus Sūtra expression thereof is particularly magnificent, but the notion of this enormous merit accruing to people's expression of faith basically refers to people who have made the gesture of going for refuge to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The Lotus Sūtra is one of many doors or windows. That is what's being referred to, not the pages on which it's written. I am sure there are people who regard it that way. I don't think that is what was intended, but of course that's my Western middle-class Buddhist point of view. You get that in the Diamond Sūtra too: 'If one should take a single verse and recite it...' To believe that its only referring to that particular text is not supported by Buddhism as I understand it. There is the cult of the sūtra, and you can take it that way, but I don't think that's

than what one could do to oneself. I am not inclined to take literally passages about exploding heads and so forth but the notion that it is karmically destructive, again here is another pivotal moment but now you're turning away from liberation and towards bondage or even worse turning other people in that direction that is karmically as serious as it gets. I think these images come from that place. There are probably people that take that literally but its hard for me to see that is what was actually meant.”

Passages that emphasize the unsurpassable merit of a single moment of faith in the sūtra's teaching can be found in chapters ten and seventeen of the Lotus Sūtra. In chapter ten the Buddha states that anyone after his extinction who rejoices even for a moment upon hearing a gāthā or phrase of the sūtra will be assured of their future attainment of Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi. In chapter seventeen the Buddha states that anyone who hears about the longevity of his lifespan and understands it by faith for even a moment will obtain a hundred or a thousand times more merit than practicing the first five pāramiās for eighty billion nayuta kalpas.

In regard to such promises, Gregory said, “I wouldn't dispute it. Verses are a contact point for the full expression of energy and motivation. But this can be used to pollute the teaching.” Gregory's worry is that such passages could be used to justify antinomianism, the pernicious doctrine that one can act in an immoral manner without fear because salvation through faith transcends any moral considerations or good works over time.

Taigen responded, “I like very much what scholar Brook Ziporyn says about this in his remarkable new book, *Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential*

spirit without taking it all literally. As an authorized Dharma teacher, my job is to translate/interpret traditional Dharma teachings for contemporary cultural context. I do not necessarily agree with every passage in Dōgen either.”

Gregory did not reject the passages but warned that, “They can be misrepresented through materialist frame of reference.” He explained that these passages served the function of protecting practitioners from their own doubts, because it is the doubt of the practitioner’s that can send them to hell. In other words, their doubts keep them locked into a hellish state of mind and prevent progress. He also explained, “The Shaolin monastery (少林寺) was an open university where a rapport was created among the practitioners so that each could add to the Sangha. This was of great advantage in meditation, martial arts, calligraphy, natural relations, and shared experiences. Success however could lead to politics and control. So these teachings warn people not to pollute the vitality of a successful group by trying to appropriate it.” He explained that it was important that the Buddha’s teachings, even the name of the teaching, such as the name Lotus Sūtra, “should not be defiled or misappropriated.” The dire warnings in the sūtra against slander of its teachings, therefore, can be taken as a way of protecting the teachings from being coopted for self-serving purposes and for the protection of the integrity of the Sangha.

Myō said of the threatening passages, “It doesn’t make much impression on me. I tend to understand or contextualize that karmically, given what’s at stake, to disparage these teachings is a grave karmic error and for other people to hear that disparagement and be effected thereby is even worse

sense, the Buddha never left. Of course, the Tibetans and others talk about emanations of enlightened beings who may no longer be visibly present but are continuing their salvific work in more subtle ways. Of course we are responsible for that. We can't sit back and wait for some emanation to take care of things. We are the emanations. Again I'm sure that if you showed this to numerous East Asians they'd shake their heads sadly and say, 'This person has no faith.' Well, I can't help it. I have the faith a Westerner has."

The interview next turned towards passages that are especially difficult for Western Buddhists to accept, since many have turned away from the faith-based traditions they have grown up with and embraced Buddhism specifically because it is perceived as more rational and rooted in self-cultivation. Passages in the sūtra that either threaten unbelievers with dire punishments or make extravagant promises about the efficacy of a single moment of faith would be the most problematic. For instance, in the verses of chapter three a long description is given of the horrible punishments that will befall those who slander the Lotus Sūtra. In chapter twenty-six of the sūtra a demoness and her ten daughters utter dharani for the protection of the teacher of the Lotus Sūtra. They promise terrible retribution on those who would attack such a teacher, including splitting the heads of the offenders into seven pieces. The Buddha responds by telling them that their merits will be immeasurable for thereby protecting a person who keeps only the name of the Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma.

Taigen is particularly dismissive of such passages. He said, "I choose to ignore, or at least not take literally, the portions of the sūtra that are about terrible retribution for non-believers. I appreciate much of the Lotus Sūtra's

“Imaginal world” is a reference to a realm or mode of perception that mediates between the mundane world of the senses and a transcendent reality that is not bound by time and space. According to Gregory, in meditation, one is able to become aware not just of one’s own tanden (腹), or of the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, but also of the imaginal world that is more than just mere imagination and allows one to encounter the unborn and deathless nature of the Buddha spoken of in chapter 16 of the Lotus Sūtra.

Taigen said of the Buddha’s long lifespan, “I speak about this regularly in my Dharma talks. Following up on Dōgen’s interpretations, I talk about Buddha’s inconceivable lifespan and Buddha being alive in our practice, and how our current practice keeps Buddha and awakening alive in our world, including our need to respond to the systemic suffering in our world.”

Myō said, “In certain Buddhist traditions, Buddha only refers to that historical figure from 5th or 6th century BCE in northeast India, but I remember one of my teachers in graduate school saying that, in a way, as soon as the bodhisattva ideal began to spread and catch people’s imagination, Śākyamuni Buddha was in trouble. That’s kind of true because if in fact the model presented by Śākyamuni is to get yourself enlightened and escape from samsara forever, period, well, then there’s the small matter of all these other suffering beings who are left behind. Is it right to have no concern for them at all? In that sense, the Buddha’s infinite or near infinite lifespan is through us, as I was alluding to earlier. It is through our lifespan as practicing Buddhists generation after generation after generation. That is where Buddha’s teaching continues to be expressed and to evolve. In that

that you have turned your attention away from the superficial manifestations which are so attractive to sentient beings so you can realize that there is in fact only one Buddha-Truth and that everyone is welcome to participate, to practice, and that membership really has nothing to do with it.”

Myō agreed that the One Vehicle teaching can thereby be used to undercut elitism, sectarianism, and alienation from others. He said, “I would say so. I think that’s the point if I may so speak. And of course not that there have not been sectarian folks in Buddhism, goodness knows, but if so they have kind of missed that point and the Lotus Sūtra makes it very clear. Dōgen says the gate of liberation stands open for everyone. He says that in his comments on the Bodhisattva Precepts called the Kyōju Kaimon.”

Myō is referring to Dōgen’s commentary on the precept not to take what is not given. Dōgen says, “The self and objects are such as they are, two, yet one; the gate of liberation stands open.”

Gregory’s response stressed the aspect of trust in one’s practice. He said, of the One Vehicle teaching, “Trusting it. ‘It’ is that phrase or capacity to trust mind itself. The power of metaphor one has to trust mind itself can invoke a physiological gate. Otherwise it has no meaning. But this is indispensable.”

And what about the teaching of the Buddha’s unquantifiably long lifespan?

Gregory stated that, “Timelessness is essential. One must have an awareness of the imaginal world that opens up into what transcends time and space.”

was an old Chambers Brothers song, about a train to Jordan. It's an ancient song. Anyway, one of the lines is 'You don't need a ticket, you just get on board.'"

Checking up on the song that Myō referred to, I found that it was called "People Get Ready." It was originally a hit song in 1965 by a group called the Impressions, but it was covered by many other bands, including the Chambers Brothers. Though it was a gospel or Christian, inspired song, one can see how the lyrics might also reflect the idea of the One Vehicle as taught by the Lord Buddha. For instance, the first verse states: "People get ready there's a train a-comin'/ You don't need no baggage you just get on board/ All you need is faith to hear diesels a-humming/ You don't need no ticket you just thank the Lord."

Myō continued, "That's my sense of this One Vehicle business. Everyone is included. Everyone is invited. You don't have to express some special allegiance or cut off your fingers and write sūtras in the blood or anything like that. Everyone is included. The vehicle is vast enough to include all beings. Even if they're not aware that they're necessarily on it."

Asked to clarify what this might mean in terms of practice, Myō said, "Well, nothing really. That's the attitude with which we should regard one another in practice and anyone we encounter - that they are already within this salvific ambit of this single vehicle. And sure there are lots of other presentations but those are all the helpful stories invented by daddy outside trying to get the kids out of the house. So yes there are various traditions and so forth, but in fact, once you get out of the house it basically means

is naturally how we are going to express our own spiritual faith rather than in this sort of literalist approach which I find quite alienating myself. Certainly as its applied to Christianity. As I say though, I certainly don't see that applied so much to Western Buddhists."

According to the Tendai and Nichiren interpretation of the Lotus Sūtra, the two most important teachings found in it are that there is only One Vehicle and not a second or third (such as the vehicles for the hearers or private-buddhas or a bodhisattva-vehicle in contradistinction to those). The second and even more important teaching expressed in the Lotus Sūtra is that Śākyamuni Buddha's life span is revealed to be immeasurable and that the power of his wisdom is like "beams of insight shining beyond measure." However, if the sūtra is not necessarily the actual words of the historical Buddha, and its claims are not taken at face value by Western Buddhists, what meaning or impact do these two teachings have, if any?

In regard to the One Vehicle teaching, what seems to be most important to the three teachers I spoke with is the inclusivity of the teaching. Taigen said, "I prefer to see the One Vehicle teaching as championing inclusivity. To see arhats, for example, as ultimately bodhisattvas can be taken in a modern pluralistically religious world as respecting the helpful aspects of other religious traditions as supporting bodhisattva values. This does not mean ignoring and not speaking about the harmful, oppressive, self-righteous aspects of other religions, as well as portions of Buddhism."

Similarly Myō said, "In my understanding here in the West the One Vehicle's main strength or beauty is that it includes everyone - all beings. There

aspect of its reception here in the West. So is there a more figurative or metaphorical understanding? That would be Mind. Namely, what does it mean to call upon Avalokitesvara? To my way of thinking that does not mean Avalokitesvara is floating around somewhere and waiting for your phone call. It refers to Avalokitesvara as a personification of the compassionate mind or heart that is an aspect of awakening. Therefore this is not foreign to any human being. So to call upon Avalokitesvara really means to call upon our own compassionate heart or mind. That would mean, I think, this being Buddhism, that one is also willing to practice renunciation and non-attachment such that if you are literally praying for the sword of the executioner to break into a million pieces so that your escape can be effected - that's not quite how its supposed to be. If instead, one can give rise to compassionate mind, or, as I related during a Dharma talk on Saturday, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi tells us we should be ready to bow in our last moment. That is the heart or mind or spirit of the great compassionate bodhisattva. So even if the sword does not break into a million pieces for us to be willing to give rise to the mind of compassion even under those difficult circumstances that's what that refers to, not so much: 'Oh she's going to pluck me out of a traffic jam and carry me somewhere else.' I don't think so."

Myō further said, "I could be talking through my hat here. There may be people who are convinced that the Lotus Sūtra is literally true like some people think the Bible is literally true here in the West, but I don't think I've met any. In Asia, yes, probably. So this different way of interpreting spiritual truths that is part of our inheritance as Westerners with a rich tradition of science and psychological investigation and psychoanalysis and all that stuff

Given that the Lotus Sūtra is highly regarded, what can be made of its extravagant claims in regard to the efficacy of, for instance, “mindfully invoking Avalokiteshvara’s power” in order to relieve suffering or avert disaster as stated in the verse portion of chapter 25 of the Lotus Sūtra. The prose half of the same chapter says that a practitioner can simply call upon the name of Avalokitesvara (觀世音) Bodhisattva in order to be saved from suffering or even to gain the benefit of the birth of a virtuous child. How might such statements be understood by present-day Buddhist practitioners in North America?

Gregory replied, “By reciting a name we are answering the impersonal nature of emptiness with the solace of compassion. Both are necessary.”

Taigen said of these claims, “It might perhaps be taken literally by some, but also calling on the power of compassion as expressed and embodied by Kanzeon can not but be helpful (and certainly can’t hurt). We chant the “Universal Gateway” verse regularly at my temple. I know many American Sōtō Zen places do not.”

Myō said of these claims, “If there’s one aspect of East Asian Buddhism that doesn’t translate quite as well, it is this sort of fervent faith that you can see expressed, particularly among lay people. I don’t mean that in any pejorative sense. It doesn’t find quite a perfect match with religious sentiments that you encounter in the West among modern sophisticated, usually educated, middle-class people who seem to be drawn to Buddhism in the West. So I kind of doubt anyone’s taking it literally. I don’t think that’s a very likely

century after century. Of course the dramatic setting is the Buddha speaking from Vulture Peak and that was enough for many East Asians who assumed that this absolutely was spoken by Śākyamuni Buddha and that it represents his supreme teaching, particularly insofar as the highest Mahāyāna presentation of the path is reflected therein. So for Mahāyānists it is a wonderful mirror if you like, an echo of teachings that appear elsewhere. Sōtō Zen has absorbed some of the fame and radiance of the Lotus Sūtra that was conferred on it by Tiantai Zhiyi and others who for whatever reason read the sūtra and said this was the supreme stuff. I don't really know too much historically about that process. I don't know if any of the folks from way back when spoke about why they reacted to the sūtra in that fashion, but they clearly did and that has clearly made its way to Japan as well. I think that for many people even knowing that historically Zhiyi was being a little bit fanciful, not that he had much choice, still the sūtra reads that way to people. This is the quintessence of the Buddha's path. In that respect its not quite right to say it trumps the Heart Sūtra or the Avatamsaka Sūtra or any of those. As far as I know there are even some *dhāraṇī* that may have been extracted from the Lotus Sūtra. I think that a lot of Sōtō folks would still put the Lotus Sūtra at the top of the pyramid of scriptures."

Myō clarified that he would not say the Lotus Sūtra trumps the other sūtras because that might imply that the other sūtras can be dispensed with. He said of the canon, "Because if its an actual pyramid, if you start pulling the bricks out it falls down. Then whatever was on top isn't up there anymore." In other words, the Lotus Sūtra does not replace or subsume the other sūtras but can be regarded more like the capstone of the canon.

Dongshan Liangjia (807-869, 洞山良价), the founder of the Caodong (曹洞) school? Gregory responded that the sūtras and verses that are recited in Zen do not come to life and have transformative power if they are considered separately. “These passages are related and interact and intertwine.” It would seem that the meaning emerges from the synergy created by all of them in the context of practice.

Taigen stated that, “Lotus Sūtra was unquestionably the most important scripture for Dōgen.” However, he also said in regard to sūtra passages and verses of the past ancestors of the Sōtō lineage, “I see no reason to rate the importance of these various sources, as they are all of one piece. The Chan/Zen tradition is part of the Mahāyāna movement inspired by the Lotus Sūtra. I deplore the segments of American Zen that are ignorant of how much the tradition is a product of the Lotus Sūtra and the Mahāyāna.” So while acknowledging the importance of the Lotus Sūtra to Dōgen and the Zen tradition as a whole, like Gregory, Taigen also regards all of the sūtras and Zen writings as “one piece.”

Myō’s statements about the popularity and importance of the Lotus Sūtra shows that some Zen teachers would acknowledge that, at least traditionally, the Lotus Sūtra has been regarded as the most eminent sūtra in the East Asian Buddhist canon. “Of course the Lotus Sūtra stands out. Its not overwhelmingly long like the Avatamsaka Sūtra (華嚴經). It is of more manageable length and includes all kinds of things that people respond to. It has narrative aspects. It has beautiful descriptions. It has ways in which people can find inspiration for their own practice and lives. So it checks all the boxes in terms of what it take for a religious document to survive

himself, but actually it appeared about seven hundred years after Buddha passed away. So historically, we cannot say that Buddha told this sūtra. If we ask who told it, or if you ask if all of the sūtra was told by Buddha, the answer may be 'Only a part of it was told by Buddha.' But it will not be exactly the same as he told it. Even the Hinayāna sūtras, or suttas, were not handed down by Buddha's disciples exactly as he told them; even they were not told by Buddha. The Mahāyāna sūtras cannot have been told by Buddha. But we say Buddha because this sūtra was not told by the Nirmānakāya Buddha, or historical Buddha, but by the Sambhogakāya Buddha. It was told a long, long, long time ago - a long time before Buddha, who knew that there was this kind of sūtra before him and told about the sūtra which was told by the Sambhogakāya Buddha, or Vairocana Buddha. We can say that Vairocana Buddha told the sūtra a long, long time before. The sūtra is constructed accordingly; it does not say that it was attributed to the historical Buddha." Further on he also said, "The point is not whether the Lotus Sūtra was told by the historical Buddha or by some other person. That is not the point. As long as you get attached to the historical Buddha you cannot understand Buddhism. Buddha was great because he understood things in this way."

Mahāyāna sūtras such as the Lotus Sūtra can, therefore, be taken as the "word of the Buddha" in the sense that it is expressive of the Buddha's intentions as expressed by the Sangha as the fruit of their practice and realization down through the ages. As Gregory put it, "It is the experience of the practitioners that conveys the truth of the Buddha's life." How then, does it compare to other sūtras and texts used by the Sōtō Zen tradition, such as the Heart Sūtra (心經), or "The Precious Mirror Samadhi" (寶鏡三昧歌) by

argument to make, but from the broader Mahāyāna point of view I would say it clearly is the word of the Buddha and that Buddhist teaching is not limited to the few historical remnants that we have. It is certainly not the case that any of the various canonical collections can actually claim to be absolutely what Buddha said, although of course various adherents of one or another Buddhist traditions would insist that it is so. Particularly the Theravadins are convinced that they have the original utterances of Śākyamuni Buddha but there is no support for that actually. So the question is: Does Buddha speak through members of the Buddhist Sangha ever since his day? My thought would be yes. The Buddha continues to speak through his followers, the practitioners of the path, and the path is such that it supports that phenomena and Buddhism is continually being worked and developed and expressed even today.”

Taigen took a more positive point of view, but with reservations, to the question of the Lotus Sūtra as the Buddha’s word. “Sure. Perhaps literally, it is composed of Śākyamuni Buddha’s words. Or in some way, it is an expression of the Dharmakaya, or the long-lived Buddha. The Lotus Sūtra as a whole is inspired by a profound spirit of awakening and its proclamation and expression. That said, I do not necessarily accept every passage of the text. For example, I dislike the Medicine King chapter and its self-immolation practices, which seem derived from pre-Buddhist Vedic sacrificial rites.”

All of these responses are very much in line with those of Shunryū Suzuki. In the very beginning of his talks given in 1968 he said, “This sūtra, the Saddharma-pundarika Sūtra, was supposed to have been told by Buddha

inclined to take the Lotus Sūtra as a verbatim record of a discourse by the historical Śākyamuni Buddha. The only exception was back in 1990 when I was an Ensign in the U.S. Navy and I was visiting the city of Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada. While there I remember visiting a Chinese monastery and speaking with several of the Chinese nuns there. They were astonished that I did not accept the Lotus Sūtra as a literal event in the life of the historical Buddha and yet still found it meaningful and the basis of the my practice. A much more common question for me from American Buddhist practitioners is one I received when I gave a seminar on the Lotus Sūtra at the Berkeley Zen Center in April 1999⁶. I was asked right at the beginning: “On a slightly skeptical note, do historical Buddhist scholars actually attribute this sūtra to Śākyamuni?” Another person asserted, “We do have the full knowledge that this teaching of the Lotus Sūtra was not in existence at the time of Śākyamuni’s teaching, even though it is being attributed to him by faithful tradition.” Even among Nichiren Shū practitioners of all ethnic backgrounds and my fellow Nichiren Shū clergy I have not met any who have ever tried to assert that the Lotus Sūtra was a verbatim record of a discourse by the historical Buddha, though there is certainly the belief that it is a faithful expression of the true intent of the Buddha’s teaching. I will return to specifically Nichiren Shū views on this and other issues after reporting the results of the interviews I conducted

In regard to the question of whether the Lotus Sūtra was taught by the historical Buddha, Myō responded, “Historically that would be a tough

6 The transcripts for this seminar are at <http://www.webring.org/1/rd?ring=easternphilosoph;id=1;url=http%3A%2F%2Fnichirenscoffeehouse%2Eenet%2Fhome%2Ehtml>, Accessed 24 March 2017.

Suzuki. Taigen is the guiding teacher and founder of the Ancient Dragon Zen Gate, a Zen temple in Chicago, Illinois. The second interview was conducted face-to-face with Gregory Wood, a student for the past 45 years of Zentatsu (禪達) Richard Baker, the first Dharma heir of Shunryū Suzuki. Gregory describes himself as a “true man of no rank” (無位真人). He is owner of a bookstore in Japantown in San Francisco called Forest Books, where he conducts three periods of zazen every Saturday. The third interview was conducted face-to-face with Myōyaku (命脈) Denis Lahey, the abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center. Myō Lahey is also a Dharma heir in the lineage of Shunryū Suzuki.

The first thing to be considered is in what way is the Lotus Sūtra regarded as the “word of the Buddha.” Even such a revered (and widely read) teacher as the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh in his English commentary on the Lotus Sūtra does not assume that the historical Buddha literally taught the sūtra. He says, “Like many Mahāyāna texts, the *Lotus Suūtra* was composed and compiled in stages over several centuries. We think of the Buddha delivering the *Lotus Sūtra* on Gridhrakuta Mountain (Vulture Peak) in India sometime toward the end of his lifetime (c. 485-565 B.C.E.). We also know from modern textual study and research that the sūtra was compiled, written down, and circulated about 700 years later, at the end of the second century.”⁵

I have rarely, in all the years that I have been studying, practicing and teaching the Lotus Sūtra in North America, encountered anyone who was

5 Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Opening the Heart of the Cosmos: Insights on the Lotus Sūtra*. Parallax Press, 2003, p. 1.

throughout the San Francisco Bay area, such as the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco.

In the fall practice periods of 1968 and 1969, Shunryū Suzuki gave lectures on the Lotus Sūtra to his American students⁴. The Editor's Introduction to the first series of lectures that were edited and published in the Wind Bell (the San Francisco Zen Center's newsletter) says of the Lotus Sūtra: "This sūtra, considered the "king sūtra" of Mahāyāna Buddhism, contains what many great teachers of the past have considered the quintessential teachings of the later Mahāyāna. As well as being the focal point of such schools as Tendai and Nichiren, the Lotus is central in virtually all sects of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is studied, chanted, and venerated in the temples and monasteries of both Sōtō and Rinzai schools of Japanese Zen." So from the very beginning of the establishment of American Zen the importance of the Lotus Sūtra was upheld and underscored. I will refer to Shunryū Suzuki's specific comments about the Lotus Sūtra further on in this article.

To discover how the Lotus Sūtra is currently regarded by modern North American Sōtō Zen teachers I conducted interviews with three teachers in the Sōtō Zen lineage in North America in order to find out how they personally would interpret the Lotus Sūtra. I was specifically interested in their reactions to claims made by the Lotus Sūtra that would be particularly challenging to the sensibilities of most North American converts to Buddhism. The first was an email interview with Taigen (太源) Dan Leighton, a Sōtō Zen priest, and Dharma heir in the lineage of Shunryū

4 Suzuki, Shunryū, *Lectures on the Lotus Sūtra: First, Second and Third Series*, Unpublished Transcripts from 1968 and 1969, Copyright 2001 San Francisco Zen Center.

visibility in North America that does draw upon the Lotus Sūtra liturgically and in its teachings. The *Sōtō School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice* includes two passages from the Lotus Sūtra for recital: the “Verses of the ‘Life Span’ Chapter” and the “Verses of the ‘Universal Gateway’ Chapter. Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* is replete with allusions to and citations from the sūtra, and one chapter in particular deals with its major images and themes, “Hokke-ten-Hokke.” Taigen Dan Leighton says of the founder of Sōtō Zen:

Dōgen often cites the Mahāyāna sūtras. Among these, he by far most frequently cites the *Saddharmaṃṣundarika Sūtra*, commonly known as the *Lotus Sūtra*. This sūtra was the scripture most venerated in the Tendai school, in which Dōgen was first ordained and trained. But even after his return from four years of Chan training in China in 1227, when he began to spread the Zen teachings in Japan (especially its huge koan lexicon, of which Dōgen had exceptional mastery), he continued to frequently cite and to venerate the *Lotus Sūtra* until his death in 1253.”³

In San Francisco, where I live, the Sōtō Zen school has a particularly strong presence since the incorporation of the San Francisco Zen Center by Shunryū Suzuki (鈴木 俊隆) in 1962. The San Francisco Zen Center comprises the Beginner’s Mind Temple in San Francisco, the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center several hours to the south of San Francisco, and Green Gulch Farm Zen Center less than an hour north of San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge. There are also several affiliated practice centers

³ Ibid, p. 4.

Nichiren Shū priest I have been wondering whether the Lotus Sūtra will play any role in the future of North American Buddhism as it develops.

The prospects for the Lotus Sūtra are not very good. Vipassana practice derives from Theravada Buddhism that does not accept any Mahāyāna sūtra as canonical. In any case, many involved in the mindfulness practice derived from vipassana are interested in secularizing the practice, in effect isolating it from traditional Buddhist devotional contexts. Tibetan Buddhists do include the Lotus Sūtra in their canon, but it is not a sūtra that plays any role in their teachings. In fact, Jan Nattier reports the following reaction from a student of hers who was a Tibetan monk.

One of the students was a young, accomplished Tibetan monk, holder of a Geshe degree, the monastic equivalent to a doctorate, who was steeped in the teachings of the long lifetimes of practice necessary to the bodhisattva path. But he was unfamiliar with the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is not studied much in Tibetan Buddhism. He became baffled, even shocked, as they went over the Lotus Sūtra text in class. Finally, one day in class after examining “promises that even a child who makes an offering to the Buddha will become enlightened, and the exhortations to put one’s faith in the sūtra itself - he simply shook his head in amazement and exclaimed, ‘I can’t believe the Buddha would say such things!’”²

Zen would seem to be the only tradition with mainstream availability and

² Leighton, Taigen Dan. *Visions of Awakening Space and Time*. Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 80-81.

研究・調査プロジェクト報告 2

The Zen of the Lotus Sūtra in North America

Ryuei McCormick

For centuries the Lotus Sūtra has held an important role in East Asian Buddhism, especially in the Nichiren Shu and Tendai Shu and among many of the New Religions in Japan. However, most North American converts to Buddhism have very little to do with the Lotus Sūtra or any devotional practices derived from Mahāyāna sūtras and are more focused on sitting meditation. The demographic situation is conveniently summarized by Charles Prebish in his article “Surveying the Buddhist Landscape” as follows: “With the exception of those American converts who have taken up the chanting practice of Soka Gakkai, the consensus is that American converts to Buddhism gravitate toward the various meditative traditions of Zen, Vajrayana and Vipassana, while Asian immigrant Buddhists maintain practices coincident with ritual activity or Pure Land observances, depending on the nature of the parent tradition.”¹ On surveying what is commonly available in bookstores in the San Francisco Bay Area, one easily finds books covering general, introductory, and even advanced topics about Zen, Tibetan, and mindfulness practices derived from Vipassana. Books dealing with any other Buddhist traditions such as East Asian Pure Land or Lotus Sūtra based practices are few and far between. Observing this, as a

1 Prebish, Charles. “Surveying the Buddhist Landscape.” lionsroar, <http://www.lionsroar.com/surveying-the-buddhist-landscape/>. Accessed 16 September, 2016.