

Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin
Living the Lotus Sutra
Week One: “What is the Lotus Sutra?”
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Hello, I am Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin. I'm the guiding teacher and head priest of Myoken-ji Temple in Houston, Texas, and I am also the bishop of the Nichiren Shu Order of North America. Today, I'm going to talk to you about the *Lotus Sutra* and the various practices associated with it.

I have been practicing this form of Buddhism for about 50 years, since I was about 11 or 12 years old. I'm interested in telling you about this tradition because I think there are so many misconceptions about what we practice, why we practice, and how we do it. It is a beautiful practice. It is one that can be so enriching in your life if you are open to it. So I think that it's time to clear up some of the misconceptions about Buddhism labeled “Nichiren Buddhism,” or “*Lotus Sutra* Buddhism.”

The *Lotus Sutra*, also known in Sanskrit as *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra*, is thought to be the highest teaching in the Nichiren school. It may not be considered so high in the rest of Buddhism. Its beginnings are India, though I believe there are very few commentaries in India about the *Lotus Sutra*. It traveled from India to China, where a Chinese scholar-monk, Kumarajiva, was one of the first to translate the *Lotus Sutra* into Chinese. He was thought to be such a gifted translator that he was imprisoned so he couldn't translate the *Lotus Sutra*. The sutra then traveled to Japan about 500 BCE and possibly to Korea.

It is in this region, East Asia, where the *Lotus Sutra* achieves its stature as one of the Buddha's major teachings. The *Lotus* became highly prized and respected in Japan in particular. It was used as a form of literature, people copied it, art rose around it, and it was found in many monasteries and convents throughout Japan. One of the commentators of the sutra, Prince Shotoku, even used it as a foundation for governance. In Chinese, the *Lotus Sutra* is known as *Miàofǎ Liánhuá Jīng*. The Japanese pronunciation is *Myoho Renge Kyo*. And in English, it is simply known as the *Lotus Sutra*.

One of the reasons that the *Lotus Sutra* is so important is because it is one of the early sutras to say that all beings could achieve that same enlightenment as the Buddha. Indeed, the Buddha's advent was simply to cause all beings to enter the way and quickly become buddhas. One could do this simply by being exposed to the *Lotus Sutra*: by reading it, by learning from it, by copying it. So, in Japan many people began to copy the sutra to gain merit and advance their lives. If one



thinks about this one could see that it was not available to everyone, because only a certain class of people had the resources and ability to copy it, read, share it, and create art. So, at that time it was a practice for those who were well equipped with financial resources and time. The *Lotus* was also well regarded by women specifically and, in the many convents, one of the major practices was writing or copying and making art about the sutra.

The *Lotus Sutra* also was the first teaching to talk about the *one* vehicle rather than three vehicles—the *shravaka*, *pratyeka*, and *bodhisattva* vehicles. The *Lotus Sutra* teaches that there is only one vehicle of which all of them are a part. The sutra also asserts that Shakyamuni has a timeless, eternal nature, that he is the eternal Buddha, and suggests that all other Buddhas are manifestations of the eternal Buddha. He neither born nor does he die; he is always in this world, continuously.

The sutra establishes five ways of practice: to receive and keep, to read, to recite, to copy, and to expound the teachings. All of these practices work together to implant the sutra in your life.

Now, what does it mean to receive and keep the sutra? Upon hearing or being given the sutra, you keep to the teachings of the sutra and study it carefully.

The second part of the practice is to read the sutra from cover to cover throughout the entirety of your life. Now, reading a sutra for your entire life may seem like an incredible goal. One of the practices is to read a chapter per day every month, so that every month you read the entire sutra. By this continuous exposure to the teachings contained therein, one begins to truly understand and keep the sutra.

Reciting the sutra means to chant the sutra in its entirety; or just in parts; or simply by chanting the title in either Shindoku—which is the faith language, the Japanese pronunciation of Chinese—or in one's native language. I think there's nothing more beautiful than hearing the sutra chanted in one's own language, be it English or Spanish or Italian. It is quite beautiful. And when one can chant in one's language then the relationship with the sutra becomes even more profound, because one can actually hear the words and capture its essence. The difference with chanting in Shindoku is that one doesn't necessarily understand what the words are saying, but one does capture the rhythm, the flow, and the sound of the sutra being chanted.



Copying the sutra is a very beautiful practice. Again, this can be done in one's native language, just by simply copying it word-for-word, or one can learn how to copy in Japanese calligraphy, sumi-e, or Chinese calligraphy. When you copy the words, the characters of the sutra, you are also writing the words into your life.

Finally, to expound means to share the sutra with everyone, not simply through words, but through one's life, and that goes back to keeping the sutra again. If you expound the sutra through your words, your thoughts, and your deeds, then you are keeping to the sutra.

Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra* is well-regarded around the world. It is known as the Kanzeon Chapter, or Kannon Chapter, or Avalokiteshvara, and the Hearer of the World's Cries. This chapter can be chanted or recited with followers around the world. It's important in many of the traditions that come out of the Japanese Buddhist Tradition; Nichiren, Zen, and others. I think the Jodo-shu schools are probably the only one that doesn't recite it.

Many say that the *Lotus Sutra* is very difficult to understand. And, for the most part, it could be said that that is true. There are many different versions of the *Lotus Sutra*. One popular version, the three-fold *Lotus Sutra*, includes additional chapters in the beginning and at the end. The one in the beginning is known as the *Sutra of Innumerable Meetings* and the one at the end is the *Sutra on Meditation*. Another popular version of the sutra consists of 28 chapters; there's the version that is popular in the Nichiren schools, which is the version done by Senchu Murano, a Japanese priest in the Nichiren tradition. There's also the Kern version, which is an English version. I would encourage anyone interested in reading these is to obtain copies of all of them because in reading the various versions one can get deeper into what the pure intention of the sutra is all about. My favorite version is the Murano version, because he outlines the bodhisattvas way of practice very clearly. Some parts of his version are just lyrical in their translation, in particular, the part that says, "I am always thinking how can I cause all living beings to enter the way and quickly become Buddhas."

Here's another passage:

The Lotus Sutra is called '*Zui-ji-i*' namely because it expounds the true mind of



the Buddha. Since the Buddha's mind is so great, even if one does not understand the profound meanings of the sutra, one can gain innumerable merits by just reading it. Just as a mugwort among the hemp plants grows straight and a snake in a tube straightens itself, if one becomes friendly with good people, one's mind, behavior, and words become naturally gentle. Likewise, the Buddha thinks that those who believe in the *Lotus Sutra* become naturally virtuous.

To sum up, the *Lotus Sutra* introduces the doctrine of the One Buddha Vehicle. It defines its goal as the Buddha's enlightenment and the ability of all beings to access that enlightenment. It addresses the eternal, timeless nature of the Buddha and the fact that all other Buddhas are manifestations of the eternal Buddha. Finally, the sutra establishes five ways of practice: to receive, to keep, to read-recite, to copy, and to expound the teachings.