

KITAGAWA Zenchō 北川前肇

The Words of the *Lotus Sutra* in Nichiren's Thought

The history of Buddhism reveals a range of attitudes toward language and the written word. Some voices within the tradition revere the words of the sutras as the direct expression of the Buddha's enlightenment, while others are critical of the limits of language and hold that the Buddha's insight transcends the scriptural text. This article examines the attitude toward language, especially the language of the *Lotus Sutra*, found in the writings of Nichiren (1222–1282). In particular, it analyzes Nichiren's claim that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* is a living Buddha and contains the entirety of the Buddha's teachings within itself. Nichiren argued on the basis of the nonduality of form and mind that the written words of the *Lotus Sutra* are the Buddha's mind or intent made visible, a conviction that informed his equating of the *Lotus* with the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

KEYWORDS: *Lotus Sutra*—language—voice—scripture—nonduality—Zhiyi—Nichiren

KITAGAWA Zenchō is a professor in the Faculty of Buddhist Studies at Risshō University.

AMONG THE leading figures of medieval Japanese Buddhism, Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) maintained that the *Lotus Sutra* represents the Buddha’s final, ultimate teaching. He classed all other sutras preached before the *Lotus* as those accommodated to the audience’s understanding (*zuita’i* 随他意) and revered the *Lotus* alone as a direct expression of the Buddha’s own intent (*zuiji’i* 随自意). However, when contrasting Buddhism with Confucianism or other external teachings, Nichiren said of the Buddhist sutras that “each word and phrase is true; not a single passage or verse is false” (*Teihon* 1: 538). In other words, at the initial level of comparison, he did not discriminate among the various sutras but regarded them all as true and golden words spoken from the Buddha’s mouth. Among the “true words” of the Buddhist sutras themselves, however, he distinguished varying levels of profundity and accorded the *Lotus* highest place. Such was his approach. Nichiren embraced an absolute confidence in the written words of the sutras. He did not regard the sutras merely as the Buddha’s “skillful means,” that is, as glosses on the Buddha’s awakening or as guidebooks to enlightenment. Rather, Nichiren revered the sutras, and the *Lotus Sutra* in particular, as the Buddha’s very words, or, we might say, the Buddha’s edicts. This absolute confidence in the sutras is consistent with his interpretive stance of “relying on the dharma and not on persons” (*ehō fuenin* 依法不依人), a phrase taken from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. If we had to sum up Nichiren’s attitude toward the written words of the sutras in a succinct expression, we could call it one of “faith.”

In the history of Buddhism, we find varied attitudes toward the written word. These can be broadly divided into two categories: one attitude regards each word of the sutras as the Buddha’s teaching, or even as the Buddha himself, while the other maintains a distinction between the Buddha’s insight and the scriptural text and in its extreme form even asserts that “the Buddha never taught a single word.” These opposing stances are attested in the sutras themselves. For example, the *Wuliangyi jing* 無量義經 (Sutra of immeasurable meanings), the introductory scripture to the *Lotus Sutra* group, describes itself as “true and correct in words and principle” (T 9.386a). In his commentary on this passage, Saichō, founder of the Japanese Tendai school, interprets “words” as the “terms and phrases that

* Translator’s note: This article abridges Part I, chapter 1, section 2 (“Kyōten e no shinkō” 經典への信仰) of KITAGAWA’s *Nichiren kyōgaku kenkyū* (1987). I would like to thank Professor Kitagawa for permission to translate and adapt his essay for this volume.

expound the true aspect [of the dharmas],” and “principle,” as “the principle of the true aspect, which the words illuminate. Because the words expound the real aspect, they are called ‘true’; because the principle is that of the Buddha’s inner awakening, it is called ‘correct’” (DZ 3: 616)—thus suggesting that the words of scripture are precisely the true aspect or face of reality (*moji soku jissō* 文字即実相). Similarly, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* states, “Speech and written words are all the marks of liberation. Why? Liberation is neither internal nor external, nor is it in between. Words, too, are neither internal nor external, nor are they in between. Therefore, Śāriputra, there is no preaching of liberation apart from words. Why? Because all dharmas are the forms of liberation” (T 14.548a).

On the other hand, some Mahāyāna sutras stress the impossibility of expressing the Buddha’s insight in words, or maintain that the truth he realized is independent of scripture. We could point, for example, in the same *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, to Vimalakīrti’s famous silence, which Bodhisattva Mañjūsri praises, saying, “Excellent, excellent! Where there are no more written words or speech, one enters the dharma-gate of nonduality” (T 14.551c). Similarly, the *Diamond Sutra* states, “This teaching is called the diamond of the perfection of wisdom; by this name should you receive and keep it. Why? Subhūti, the perfection of wisdom expounded by the Buddha is not the perfection of wisdom. Subhūti, what do you think? Are there teachings expounded by the Tathāgata, or not?” Subhūti replied to the Buddha, ‘Lord, the Tathāgata does not expound anything’” (T 8.750a). And the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, in an often-cited passage, says that from the time of his awakening until his entry into final nirvana, the Buddha “never preached a single word” (T 16.498c). This critical view of language is especially well known from the early Chan (Jp. Zen) tradition, with its claims to “not rely on words and letters” and to represent “a separate transmission outside the scriptures.”

Both positions are represented among the Buddhist thinkers of medieval Japan. Eisai 栄西 (1141–1215), revered as the founder of Japanese Rinzai Zen, maintained the standpoint of “not relying words and letters,” while Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), who established the Japanese Sōtō school, was harshly critical of this view and revered the sutras as teachings transmitting the “eye and treasury of the True Dharma” (*shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏). In medieval Tendai circles, the dominant intellectual current stressed the standpoint of mind discernment (*kanjin* 観心), a realm of awakening said to precede verbal and conceptual distinctions and to transcend the scriptural text. Emphasis on *kanjin* was accompanied by the proliferation of oral transmissions from master to disciple, said to convey inner or secret meanings not made explicit in the sutras. But what about Nichiren, whose entire teaching centers on absolute faith in a sutra, namely, the *Lotus*? Below I would like to consider some aspects of Nichiren’s reception of the *Lotus Sutra*, focusing on his concept of speech and writing in general; his attitude toward

the *Lotus Sutra's* written words; and in particular, his claims that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* is a living Buddha and contains the entirety of the Buddha's teachings within itself (on Nichiren's view of scripture and language, see also WATANABE and KITAGAWA 1985, 61–87).

Nichiren's Concept of Language

In the education and guidance of his followers, Nichiren verbally explained the *Lotus Sutra's* teachings and also expressed its salvific world by means of a great number of essays and letters. The large body of his writings that survives to this day would seem to underscore an overall trust on his part in the efficacy of words as the medium for transmitting his teaching.

Of course, he also writes, “Words cannot be exhausted in writing, and writing cannot fully express one's thoughts” (*Teihon* 1: 327). Thus we know Nichiren recognized that disjunctures exist among words, writing, and thoughts that are difficult to transcend. Nonetheless, this passage suggests that, even while conscious of this difficulty, Nichiren inwardly acknowledged words, writing, and thoughts as clearly existing categories. I believe that, although aware of its limitations, Nichiren placed absolute confidence in language, including both speech and written words, to disseminate the *Lotus Sutra's* liberative message.

For example, in “Hōmon mōsarubekiyō no koto” 法門可被申様之事, a letter written to his disciple Sanmi-bō 三位房 when the latter was studying in Kyoto, Nichiren admonished Sanmi-bō not to mimic the accent of the imperial capital. “When speaking,” he wrote, “use your own dialect” (*Teihon* 1: 449). In this way Nichiren showed confidence in his own, eastern dialect to give shape to his spirit and convey his everyday thoughts and reflections. We can understand this as an expression of his trust in words, even when spoken in a provincial accent.

Nichiren's attitude toward written language in general is expressed in the following passage:

Written words are the forms expressing the mental dharmas of all living beings. Thus by means of what someone writes, we can know that person's mind. Since the dharmas of mind and the dharmas of form are nondual, a piece of writing can also tell us whether the person who wrote it is impoverished or fortunate [in character]. In short, words express the nonduality of form and mind with respect to all living beings. (*Teihon* 1: 30)

From this passage, we can glimpse Nichiren's understanding of written words as existents having form (Skt. *rūpa*) that express the mind (*citta*) of sentient beings. This logic, that form is none other than mind, and mind, none other than form, is rooted in the concept of the nonduality of [physical] form and mind (Jp. *shikishin funi* 色心不二), one of the “ten nondualities” of traditional Tendai doctrine. It is vital to recognize that Nichiren employed this logic of the nonduality

of form and mind in interpreting of the significance of written words. Because he saw written words as standing in an inseparable relationship with the human mind, he held that they express the whole of living beings.

But how did Nichiren understand spoken words? Here, too, as in the relationship between the mind and written words, he employs the logic of the nonduality of form and mind, with mind corresponding to mental dharmas, and voice to physical dharmas, or dharmas having form. In his essay “Mokue nizō kaigen no koto” 木絵二像開眼之事 (On opening the eyes of wooden and painted images), he writes:

People produce speech on two kinds of occasions. In one case, although one does not believe it oneself, one deliberately says something false, intending to deceive others. This is the voice “according with others’ minds.” [At other times,] one speaks to express one’s own thoughts. Thus, one’s intent finds expression as voice. Intent belongs to the category of mental dharmas, and speech, to the dharmas of form. Mind finds expression in form, and by hearing a voice, one knows the mind [that gave rise to it]. Physical dharmas express mental ones. While form and mind are nondual, they nonetheless manifest these two aspects. (Teihon 1: 792)

Here Nichiren identifies two categories of speech: that “according with others’ minds” (*zuita’i*) and that “according with one’s own mind” (*zuiji’i*). In other words, when one gives utterance to one’s thoughts, one entrusts them to words, and one’s intent (mental dharmas) becomes voice (dharmas of form). Because one’s mind is known via one’s speech, the voice (dharmas of form) expresses the mind (mental dharmas). Thus mind is none other than voice, and voice, none other than mind; while fundamentally nondual, they nonetheless find expression in these two registers. Taken together, the above passages tell us that Nichiren understood both written words and spoken conversation in general in terms of the logic of the nonduality of form and mind.

How then did he understand the sutras, which represent the pure voice (*bon’ōnjō* 梵音声) of the Buddha? In Nichiren’s view, the words of the sutras were not merely characters written in black ink but the Buddha’s pure voice, taking form as the written words of teachings that work to save living beings. This understanding affirms the statement of the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–597) in his *Fahua xuanyi* (Profound meaning of the *Lotus Sutra*), “The voice does the Buddha’s work; this is called *kyō* 經 or *sutra*” (T 33.681c). Nichiren quotes this passage from Zhiyi in his *Ichidai shōgyō taii* 一代聖教大意 (The cardinal meaning of the Buddha’s lifetime teachings) in interpreting the character *kyō* (*sutra*) of the *Lotus Sutra*’s title, *Myōhō-enge-kyō* 妙法蓮華經 (Teihon 1: 69).

This same understanding of scriptural text pervades Nichiren’s writings. For example, in a letter to his follower Shijō Kingo 四條金吾, he writes:

The pure voice is the foremost physical mark of the Buddha.... The governance of this small country, the fact that all living beings of the three realms follow the great heavenly king Brahmā, and that the great heavenly king Brahmā, Indra, and other deities follow the Buddha, are in all cases due to the power of the pure voice. The pure voice became the body of sutras to benefit all living beings. And among the sutras, the *Lotus Sutra* is the written expression of Śākyamuni Tathāgata's intent; it is his pure voice transformed into written words. Thus its written words are endowed with the Buddha's mind. It is like the case of seeds, sprouts, shoots, and grain; though they differ in form, their essence is the same. Śākyamuni Buddha and the words of the *Lotus Sutra* are different, but their spirit is one. Thus when you look upon the words of the *Lotus Sutra*, you should think that you are encountering the living Śākyamuni Tathāgata. (Teihon 1: 666)

Here Nichiren extends the logic of the nonduality of mental and physical dharmas to Śākyamuni and the Buddhist scriptures: the Buddha's mind took form, both as the Buddha's pure voice, and as the written words of the sutras. In particular, Nichiren understands Śākyamuni and the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha's highest teaching, as nondual and of the same essence. Thus he asserts that the words of the *Lotus Sutra* are none other than the living Śākyamuni Buddha.

Another passage in Nichiren's writings with very similar purport occurs in the *Mokue nizō kaigen no koto*, cited above, and reads:

The written words of the *Lotus Sutra* manifest the Buddha's pure voice, which is invisible and coextensive, in a form that is visible and non-coextensive, having both color and form. The pure voice that once vanished finds expression again as written language to benefit living beings.... While form and mind are nondual, they nonetheless manifest these two aspects; thus the Buddha's intent took form as the written words of the *Lotus Sutra*, and these written words in turn become the Buddha's intent. Therefore, those who read the *Lotus Sutra* must not regard it as mere written words, for those written words are precisely the Buddha's mind. (Teihon 1: 792)

Here, Nichiren draws on traditional abhidharmic categories classifying physical dharmas as "visible or invisible," or "coextensive or non-coextensive," in equating the Buddha's pure voice with the written words of the *Lotus Sutra*. Again, he identifies both voice and sutra text with the Buddha's mind or intent, in accordance with the logic of the nonduality of form and mind.

As is well known, Nichiren took the doctrine of Zhiyi as foundational. How did Zhiyi understand the words of the sutras, and of the *Lotus* in particular? As noted above, Nichiren cites the passage from Zhiyi's *Fahua xuanyi*, "The voice does the Buddha's work; this is called *kyō* or sutra" (T 33.681c). Also, in his *Shoshū mondō shō* 諸宗問答鈔 (Questions and answers on the various sects), Nichiren

writes: "After all, sutras are written words, and Tiantai [Zhiyi] interprets those written words as the vital life of all buddhas of the three time periods" (*Teihon* 1: 31). From the perspective of ordinary worldlings, the written characters of the sutras are merely forms in black ink, but because they encompass the true aspect of the dharmas, or the realm of the Buddha's awakening itself, they are fundamentally connected to the "life" of all buddhas of the past, present, and future.

In calling this Zhiyi's interpretation, Nichiren refers to fascicle five of the *Fahua xuanyi*, where Zhiyi discusses the five preliminary stages of practice (*gohon* 五品) of the Perfect teaching (*engyō* 円教) for the period following the final nirvana of Śākyamuni Buddha—appropriate joy, reading and reciting the sutras, preaching the dharma, preliminary practice of the six perfections together with contemplation, and practice of the six perfections proper—correlating them with the five methods of stilling the mind (*gojōshin* 五停心). This passage reads in part:

At the first stage one directs total faith throughout the dharma-realm. Upwardly, one places faith in the buddhas, and downwardly, one places faith in living beings, and in all cases arouses appropriate joy. In the lineage of the Perfect teaching, this is equivalent to stilling the mind by compassion, as it counters envy with respect to the dharma-realm. The second stage is reading and reciting the written words of the Mahāyāna [sutras]. These written words are precisely the vital life of the dharma-body. In the lineage of the Perfect teaching, accomplishment in reading and reciting the sutras is equivalent to stilling the mind by breath-counting, as it counters [hindrances to contemplation posed by] the coarse and subtle discursive mental workings [*jueguan* 覺觀] with respect to the dharma-realm. (T 33-733c)

Here, in explaining the second of the five initial stages of practice for the period following the Buddha's nirvana, that of reading and reciting the written words of the Mahāyāna sutras, Zhiyi explains that those written words encompass the fundamental life of the dharma-body. We can take this to mean that, because the words of the Mahāyāna sutras are none other than the true aspect or Suchness that the Buddha has realized, the dharma-body inheres in every word.

Zhiyi based his discussion of the five stages of practice, including the second stage, that of "reading and reciting sutras," on the "Discrimination of Merits" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which states, "All the more is this true of one who reads, recites, and embraces [this scripture], for such a person carries the Tathāgata on his head" (T 9.45b). This passage equates the sutra with the person of the Tathāgata. Similar passages occur in the "Dharma Preacher" chapter, which extols those who can "embrace, read and recite, explain, or copy even a single verse of this *Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma*, or even gaze with reverence upon a roll of this scripture as though it were the Buddha himself" (30c), and also says that a stupa erected to the *Lotus Sutra* need not

enshrine Buddha relics, for it by definition already contains the “whole body” of the Tathāgata (31b).

In commenting on Zhiyi’s statement in the *Fahua xuanyi* about the words of the Mahāyāna sutras being the “vital life” of the dharma-body, Zhanran states:

This is just like the body, possessing outflows [of passions], of beings in the realm of desire; while the breath abides, life abides, and when the breath ceases, life ceases. The same is true of the dharma-body. As long as there are the sutras, which communicate the teachings, the dharma-body also abides. But if the teachings of the Mahāyāna should be lost, then how could the dharma-body continue? Thus, at the stage of appropriate rejoicing, even if one inwardly contemplates the dharma-body, without the reading and recitation in whose breath the life of wisdom is sustained, the dharma-body will in effect be destroyed by the coarse and subtle discursive mental functions [that obstruct contemplation]. (T 33.888c)

Here Zhanran too stresses that the dharma-body is present in the sutras, which have the function of instructing. At the stage of appropriate rejoicing, even if one apprehends the dharma-body via the verbal teachings of the sutras, unless one grasps the wisdom of the dharma-body through the act of reading and recitation, that apprehension will be destroyed by the discriminative mental functions that obstruct the stilling of the mind.

In this way, the *Fahua xuanyi*’s statement, “These written words are precisely the vital life of the dharma-body,” is interpreted in terms of a correlation drawn between reading and reciting among the five initial stages of practice and the breath-counting meditation among the five methods for stilling the mind. We may conclude that both teachers, Zhiyi and Zhanran, took the position that the true aspect of the dharmas and the dharma-body, or Suchness, are expressed by the written words of the *Lotus Sutra*.

In particular, Zhiyi’s assertion that the words of the Mahāyāna contain the vital life of the dharma-body would seem to be deeply connected to the faith and practice that lead to liberation, mediated by the Buddha’s teaching in the form of written words. For example, in commenting on the “Conjured City” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* in his *Fahua wenju*, Zhiyi remarks: “From the standpoint of provisional wisdom, there really are no vehicles, because they are mere provisional constructs set forth in the Buddhist teachings. But from the standpoint of the true wisdom, there are vehicles, because liberation is not expounded apart from words” (T 34.103a). Thus Zhiyi asserts that the path to liberation cannot be set forth without language. In a similar vein, Zhanran says in his commentary on the *Mohe zhiguan*, “Written words can convey the three kinds of enlightened insight or wisdom (*prajñā*). By contemplation and illumination, the three kinds of wisdom are cultivated and obtained, and in the true aspect, the three kinds

of wisdom are originally inherent” (T 46.368c–369a). In interpreting these three kinds of wisdom, Zhiyi says in his commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*:

The wisdom that is the true aspect is nature as principle, and constantly abides. The wisdom that is contemplation and illumination destroys the five abiding afflictions. And the wisdom that is written words corresponds to the freedom of liberation. These three are neither vertical nor horizontal, neither equivalent nor distinct, but constitute the secret treasury [of the Buddha's teachings].

(T 33.75a)

Here Zhiyi asserts that wisdom as written words has the function of leading to the unfettered realm of liberation. He also correlates these three kinds of wisdom with the three bodies, as follows:

The three bodies of the Buddha are also like this. The [wisdom of] the true aspect is none other than the dharma-body, as set forth in the “Vajra Body” chapter of the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*. [The wisdom of] contemplation and illumination is none other than the recompense body; it is like the vajra samādhi that destroys all defilements. And [the wisdom of] written words is none other than the manifested body, limitlessly benefiting beings everywhere in accordance with their capacity].

(T 33.75a)

Here Zhiyi equates the written words of the sutras with the manifested body (*nirmāṇakāya*, *ōjin*), the person of the human Buddha who appeared in this world. Zhiyi attributed the categories of the three kinds of wisdom to the *Dazhidulun*, as he explains:

The *Dalun* states, “There are three kinds of *prajñā*: that of the true aspect, that of contemplation and illumination, and that of written words. *Prajñā* as the true aspect is principle as object, the truth that is the cardinal meaning. *Prajñā* as contemplation and illumination is the wisdom gained by the practitioner. And that wisdom apprehends the true aspect. The elucidation of wisdom and what wisdom attains are both called *prajñā*. Written words communicate *prajñā* and also constitute *prajñā*. Therefore it is said that there can be no liberation apart from written words. These [three kinds of *prajñā*] are three names but a single essence and together form the secret treasury.”

(T 33.75b)

In other words, because *prajñā* as written words illuminates both wisdom and the true aspect that is grasped by wisdom, liberation is not to be sought apart from what is expounded in written words.

Of course, as is well known, Zhiyi was critical of those who became attached to words for their own sake, failing to internalize their meaning (see *Mohe zhiguan*, T 46.52b and 98a, as well as Zhanran's *Mohe zhiguan buxingzhuān hongjue*, T 46.382a). But in light of the interpretations cited above, it appears that

he had profound insight into the significance of language as well as confidence in the written words of the sutras.

Nichiren, who belongs to the intellectual lineage of Zhiyi and Zhanran, took an absolute view of the written words of the *Lotus Sutra*. Not content merely to identify the sutra's written words with liberation, or the true aspect, or the manifested body as Zhiyi had done, Nichiren further developed the standpoint that they represent "the vital life of all buddhas of the three time periods." This interpretation accorded with his own understanding that all buddhas of the past, present, and future take the *Lotus Sutra* as their teacher. For Nichiren, the *Lotus Sutra* and Śākyamuni Buddha always exist in a mutually encompassing and inseparable relationship. When we consider Nichiren's understanding of the object of worship from this perspective, we must conclude that it encompasses the two aspects of dharma and Buddha. The dharma and the Buddha—the five characters *myō hō ren ge kyō* that comprise the *daimoku* or title of the *Lotus Sutra* and the primordially awakened Śākyamuni of the origin teaching (*honmon* 本門) of the *Lotus Sutra*—cannot be separated.¹

Each Character is a True Buddha

Above we have seen that Nichiren regarded the written words of the *Lotus Sutra* as forms inseparable from the Buddha's mind and that, based on the nonduality of form and mind, he equated the *Lotus Sutra* with the living Śākyamuni Buddha. At the same time, however, he embraced the view that each phrase, indeed each character, of the sutra is a true Buddha.

Two perspectives underlie Nichiren's thinking in this regard. One is the idea that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* contains in itself the merit of all sutras and all buddhas; the other is a perspective of faith that understands each character of the *Lotus* as the living Śākyamuni Tathāgata. The first perspective, that each character is a cluster of merits, can be traced back as early as Nichiren's 1259 essay *Shugo kokka ron* 守護国家論 (On the protection of the country), which states, "The words of this sutra are not like those of other sutras. If one recites even a single character, the words of the eighty thousand precious treasures are thereby included, as are the merits of all buddhas" (*Teihon* 1: 111). This concept of the all-inclusive merit of each character of the *Lotus Sutra* would prove important to the formation of Nichiren's thinking concerning the title of the *Lotus Sutra* as encompassing all merits within itself.

1. Translator's note: Kitagawa alludes here to a controversy in the history of Nichiren doctrinal studies as to whether Nichiren intended the object of worship to be primarily the *Lotus Sutra* (dharma) or the primordially awakened Śākyamuni (Buddha). Kitagawa himself takes a position stressing the nonduality of the two. See KITAGAWA 1987, 32–38.

Nichiren's 1266 *Hokke daimoku shō* 法華題目鈔 (On the title of the *Lotus Sutra*) reads:

Each character of this sutra contains all sutras in the dharma-realms of the ten directions. This is just like the wish-granting jewel, which contains all treasures, or like empty space, which encompasses myriad forms. Thus the single character *kyō* or sutra [in the *Lotus Sutra*'s title] surpasses all the other teachings of the Buddha's lifetime, and the other four characters *myō hō ren ge* therefore likewise surpass the eighty thousand dharma treasuries.

(*Teihon* 1: 396)

In the same essay, Nichiren interprets the character *myō* as follows:

Beneath each of the 69,384 characters [that comprise the *Lotus Sutra*] lies the single character *myō*, making altogether 69,384 *myō*s. *Myō* is called *sat* in India and *miao* in China. It has the meaning of "endowed," which in turn means "perfect and complete." Each character of the *Lotus Sutra* contains in itself all 69,384 characters [that comprise the sutra], just as a single drop of water from the great ocean contains the water of all rivers, or a single wish-granting jewel, while no bigger than a mustard seed, can nonetheless rain down the treasures of all such wish-granting jewels.

(*Teihon* 1: 397–98)

Here Nichiren asserts that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* is perfectly endowed with all merits, and this all-encompassing quality is the particular function of the character *myō*.

This idea forms the basis for his statement in the *Kaimoku shō* 開目抄 (Opening the eyes), interpreting the initial word *sat* or *sad* of the *Lotus Sutra*'s Sanskrit title, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*:

Sat means true (Jp. *shō* 正). *Shō* is equivalent to *myō*, and *myō* to *shō*; hence [the two Chinese translations of the sutra's title] *Shō hokke* 正法華 and *Myō hokke* 妙法華. And before the title *Myōhō-rence-kyō* are placed the two characters *na-mu* 南無, giving [the invocation], *Namu myōhō-rence-kyō*. *Myō* means endowed and perfect. Six² indicates the six perfections (*pāramitās*), which represent the myriad practices. [In chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra*, Śāriputra and the other auditors] wish to hear of the way perfectly endowed with the six *pāramitās* and the myriad practices of the bodhisattvas. "Endowed" means that all ten dharma-realms [from hell to Buddhahood] are mutually encompassing, and "perfect" means that because each realm contains all ten, all other realms are inherent in each realm just as it is. This has the meaning of being complete and perfect.

(*Teihon* 1: 570)

2. Translator's note: Nichiren identifies six with *myō* or *shō* here because the same character 薩 is used in transliterating both *sat* (true) and *ṣaṭ*- (six, in compound form) and because the number six was also said to represent perfect endowment. See also *Kanjin honzon shō*, *Teihon* 1: 711.

Thus Nichiren understood the character *myō* as meaning “endowed and perfect” or “complete.” In this vein, his major treatise *Kanjin honzon shō* 観心本尊抄 states succinctly: “Śākyamuni’s causal practices [for attaining Buddhahood] and their resulting virtues are all contained within the five characters *Myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō*” (*Teihon* 1: 711). Nichiren’s conviction that all merit is encompassed by the five characters of the *Lotus Sutra*’s title appears to be supported by the idea that a single character of the *Lotus Sutra* is equivalent to all sutras and also to all buddhas. We can find this idea stated in his writings as early as the *Shugo kokka ron*, cited above, which asserts that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* contains all dharmas and therefore, all merits as well. The analogy of the wish-granting jewel employed in this treatise also appears in Nichiren’s personal letters of encouragement to his lay followers. For example, the “Nichimiyō Shōnin gosho” 日妙聖人御書 states,

One character [of the *Lotus Sutra*] is really two characters, because two buddhas, Śākyamuni and Many Jewels (Prabhūtaratna), have attested to it. Again, one character is really countless characters, because this sutra has been verified by all buddhas of the ten directions. This is just like a wish-granting jewel, which—though only a single jewel—can rain down the treasures inherent in two or even countless such jewels. The characters of the *Lotus Sutra* are such that the single treasure of each character is simultaneously the countless treasures of countless characters. (*Teihon* 1: 644)

Or again, in the “Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji” 四條金吾殿御返事: “The merits of a single character of the *Lotus Sutra* are such that each character contains in itself the merits of Śākyamuni, Many Jewels, and all buddhas of the ten directions. This is like the case of the wish-granting jewel: one jewel contains as many treasures as a hundred such jewels (*Teihon* 1: 665).

Thus we can see that Nichiren interpreted each character of the *Lotus Sutra* as encompassing, all-inclusive, complete, and perfectly endowed. Underlying such interpretations is the fundamental position that written words are none other than the true aspect (*moji soku jissō*).

Now let’s consider some of Nichiren’s concrete statements equating each character of the *Lotus Sutra* with a true Buddha. In his earliest extant treatise, *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsugi* 戒体即身成仏義 (The meaning of the essence of the precepts and the realization of Buddhahood with this very body), compiled when he was twenty-one, Nichiren writes, “The *Lotus Sutra* in its entirety comprises eight rolls, twenty-eight chapters, and 69,384 characters. Among all these characters, there is none that does not fully embody the principle of opening and integrating [all provisional teachings in the one-vehicle]; each is the unproduced subtle form that is the constant abiding of the true aspect” (*Teihon* 1: 8). We can understand this to mean that each word of the *Lotus Sutra* can open the possibility of Buddhahood to persons of the three vehicles, the five vehicles, or the nine

dharma-realms from hell-dwellers to bodhisattvas; each represents the subtle and inconceivable form of the Buddha, that is, the ever-present true aspect or face of reality. In other words, Nichiren saw each word of the *Lotus Sutra* as possessing the function of opening and integrating (*kaie* 開会) all provisional teachings in the one true vehicle and as endowed with a Buddha's superior physical marks. Concerning the concept of opening and integrating, Nichiren writes in his 1258 *Ichidai shōgyō taii*:

The *Lotus Sutra* has two aspects: that which is opened, and that which opens. The sutra passage on “opening, demonstrating, causing all to realize and to enter into [the Buddha wisdom]”; the passage “all have attained the Buddha way”; and the character *myō* underlying each character in the entire sutra with its eight rolls, twenty-eight chapters, and 69,384 characters all represent *myō* as that which opens. (Teihon 1: 73–74)

Here Nichiren says that in comparing the *Lotus Sutra* and the provisional sutras preached before it, the “four flavors” of the provisional teachings are what is opened, while the *Lotus Sutra*, the teaching of absolute subtlety (*zetsudaimyō* 絶対妙), possesses in every character the function of *myō*, or opening the provisional to reveal the true. This manner of interpretation rests on Nichiren's recognition of absolute subtlety as the superior principle of the *Lotus Sutra*. He harshly criticized as false that interpretation of doctrinal classification equating the Perfect teaching as an element in other sutras with the Perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, regarding the *Lotus Sutra* alone as the only pure, Perfect teaching (Teihon 1: 201, 488).³ For Nichiren, the words of the *Lotus Sutra*, each encompassing the inconceivable function of *myō*, were expounded in accordance with the Buddha's own awakening, and he regarded every one as the living form of Śākyamuni himself.

Parenthetically, as the above-quoted passages indicate, Nichiren believed the *Lotus Sutra* to comprise 69,384 characters and regarded each one as a Buddha. His understanding in this regard may have been influenced by the *Ryaku Hokekyō* 略法華經 or “Abbreviated *Lotus Sutra*,” attributed to Zhiyi, whose text

3. Translator's note: Kitagawa refers in this paragraph to several categories in traditional Tiantai/Tendai classifications of the Buddhist teachings. The schema of “five flavors”—milk, cream, curds, butter, and ghee—arranges the Buddha's preaching of the sutras into a chronology of five stages, likened to the steps in producing ghee or clarified butter from fresh milk. Here ghee represents the *Lotus Sutra*, and the other four flavors, the provisional teachings preached before the *Lotus Sutra*. The “Perfect teaching” is one of the “four teachings of conversion” (*kehō no shikyō* 化法四教) or doctrinal strands found within the sutras: the Tripiṭaka, Shared, Distinct (or Separate), and Perfect teachings. While some of the sutras preached before the *Lotus* are said to contain elements of the Perfect teaching, the *Lotus Sutra* is regarded as the sole, wholly Perfect teaching. As indicated here, Nichiren took strong exception to the doctrinal position that regarded these two categories of “Perfect teaching” as identical. I have abridged some technical terminology in this passage.

in verse reads: “Reverently I bow to *Myōhorengekyō*/the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*,/ its one box, eight scrolls, and forty-seven [sic] chapters/comprising 69,384 characters./ Each character is a true Buddha./ A true Buddha preaches to benefit living beings,/ and the beings have already all attained the Buddha way;/ therefore I bow and venerate the *Lotus Sutra*.”⁴

Although attributed to Zhiyi, we cannot say definitively that the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* is his composition. As for the number of characters in the *Lotus Sutra*, Kabutogi Shōkō notes, “The tradition that the *Lotus Sutra* contains 69,384 characters is well known. It is said to derive from the *Ryaku Hokekyō*, which has been transmitted as Zhiyi’s work. The Tendai monk Chūsan (or Chūzan 中算/仲算, 935–976 or 899–969), in his *Myōhōrengekyō shakumon* 妙法蓮華經釈文 (Interpreting the words of the *Sutra of the Lotus Blossom of the Wonderful Dharma*), also cites the *Zishi* 字釈 (Interpretation of characters) of the Sui-dynasty monk Tanjie 曇捷 as saying that the characters in the *Lotus Sutra* number 69,384 [T 56.144b]; thus this calculation may date from the Sui dynasty.” However, as he goes on to explain, the *Lotus Sutra* that we use today contains somewhat more characters (KABUTOGI 1982, 322–23).⁵

In any event, Nichiren seems to have drawn on the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* in the passage from his *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsugi* cited above, where he asserts that each character of the *Lotus Sutra* is the unproduced subtle form of the constantly abiding true aspect. Revering each character of the *Lotus* as a true Buddha rep-

4. Portions of the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* are cited in the *Tendai jikizō* of the Tendai scholar-monk Jun’yō 順耀 (fl. 1120/1123) and the *Jurin shūyō shō* 鷲林捨葉鈔 of Sonshun 尊舜 (1451–1514), both of whom attribute it to Zhiyi. Thus we may presume that within Japanese Tendai, the *Ryaku Hokekyō* was regarded as Zhiyi’s verse. However, the *Honge seiten daijirin* edited by Tanaka Chikagu notes that there never was a clear basis for this attribution (SHISHIŌ BUNKO HENSHŪBU 1988, 1: 180–81, s.v. *ichi ichi monmon ze shinbutsu* 一一文文是真仏). See also KITAGAWA 1987, 71, note 21. [Translator’s note: I suspect the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* may be a medieval Japanese Tendai apocryphon. Occasional inclusion of obvious inaccuracies—such as the *Lotus* having forty-seven chapters—is a characteristic of this literature and may have carried tacit significance. According to the *Nichirenshū jiten*, there were multiple short texts known as *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra*, often read in prayer rituals (NICHIRENSHŪ JITEN KANKŌ INKAI 1981, 958d).]

5. In addition to the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra*, we should also note art historical evidence for the understanding of each character of the sutra as a living Buddha. Some *Lotus* transcriptions from the late Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods depict each character seated on a lotus pedestal or inside a stupa, or with a Buddha beside each character (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1979, 124–30, nos. 63–69; see also KURATA and TAMURA 1981, nos. 85–87, or 66–68, in Crawford’s English translation). Such transcriptions attest that the idea of each character of the *Lotus Sutra* as a living Buddha predated Nichiren. A transcription of the *Lotus Sutra* on tiles dating to the Kamakura period, in which each character is drawn inside a seated Buddha, was also unearthed from the temple Gakuonji 楽音寺 in the Asago district of Hyōgo Prefecture, suggesting that this idea was fairly widespread (NARA KOKURITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1979, 200, no. 27).

resents one pattern in Nichiren's understanding of the *Lotus Sutra*, a pattern that appears to have remained constant throughout his life. The *Kaimoku shō*, which he wrote much later, in 1272, says, "This sutra in its entirety comprises eight rolls, twenty-eight chapters, and 69,384 characters. Each of these characters incorporates the character *myō*, thus becoming a Buddha with thirty-two major and eighty minor excellent marks" (*Teihon* 1: 570). This passage suggests that each word of the *Lotus Sutra* is endowed with the body and mind, cause and effect, of Śākyamuni Buddha and thus perfectly encompasses Śākyamuni's great compassion, or in other words, the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment (*ichinen sanzen* 一念三千) that is the Buddha's enlightened reality. That is the reason, we may presume, why Nichiren speaks of each character as endowed with the Buddha's thirty-two major and eighty minor physical characteristics.

In a letter to his disciple Hōren 法蓮, in stressing the profound merit to be gained by reciting the verse section of the "Lifespan" chapter of the *Lotus* to benefit Hōren's deceased father, Nichiren writes:

Now the characters of the *Lotus Sutra* are all living buddhas. Since we have only the fleshly eye, we see them as written words. Hungry ghosts perceive the Ganges River as fire, humans see it as water, and heavenly beings see it as the nectar of immortality. The water is the same, but the beings perceive it differently in accordance with their karmic recompense. The blind do not see the words of the *Lotus Sutra* at all. The fleshly eye sees them as black shapes. Persons of the two vehicles see them as empty space; bodhisattvas see them as various forms; and those in whom the Buddha seeds have matured see them as buddhas. Thus the sutra states, "If there is one who can hold this sutra, he thereby holds the Buddha's body." Tiantai [Zhiyi] says, "Reverently I bow to *Myōhorengekyō*/.../its one box, eight scrolls, and forty-seven (sic) chapters/ comprising 69,384 characters./Each character is a true Buddha./A true Buddha preaches to benefit living beings." When we consider this, every morning [when you recite the sutra], golden characters issue from your mouth. The characters [comprising the verse section of the "Lifespan" chapter] number 510. Each transforms and becomes a sun disk, and the sun disks transform, becoming Śākyamuni Buddha. (*Teihon* 1: 950–51)

Here, in the context of sutra recitation as a memorial offering, Nichiren again explains that the words of the *Lotus Sutra* are equivalent to the living body of Śākyamuni Buddha; recited, they illuminate the deceased with the Buddha's compassion, wherever that person may be.

We should also note Nichiren's statement that, although ordinary people see the words of the *Lotus Sutra* merely as black shapes, "those in whom the Buddha seeds have matured see them as buddhas." In other words, when one reads the words of the *Lotus* with the Buddha eye, they are none other than living buddhas. The *Contemplation of Samantabhadra Sutra*, regarded as the closing

scripture to the *Lotus*, reads, “This *vaipulya* sutra is the eye of all buddhas. By means of it they obtain the five kinds of eyes” (T 9.393a). That is, the *Lotus Sutra* encompasses the five kinds of perception—the fleshly eye; the divine eye; the eye of the wisdom of persons of the two vehicles, which discerns all things as empty; the dharma eye of bodhisattvas, which discerns the appropriate liberative applications of concrete phenomena; and the Buddha eye. Thus when we take faith in the *Lotus Sutra* and revere it, via the medium of our faith we receive it as the living Śākyamuni Buddha. This would seem to be underscored by Nichiren’s quotation in his letter to Hōren of the passage from the “Apparition of the Jeweled Stupa” chapter: “If there is one who can hold this sutra, he thereby holds the Buddha’s body” (T 9.34b).

We should also note that, to substantiate his claim that each character of the *Lotus* is equivalent to Śākyamuni, Nichiren again quotes here from the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* attributed to Zhiyi. Several theories have been put forth concerning the provenance of this verse, but Nichiren regarded it as Zhiyi’s composition and took it as a basis for his faith that each character of the sutra is a true Buddha. We can already glimpse its influence in his earliest extant work, the *Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi* cited above.

In a letter to Myōshin-ama 妙心尼, similar in purport to his letter to Hōren, Nichiren writes:

The [*Lotus*] *Sutra* states, “One who holds this sutra thereby holds the Buddha’s body.” The Great Teacher Tiantai [Zhiyi] states, “Each single character [of the *Lotus*] is a true Buddha.” The character *myō* is precisely the Tathāgata Śākyamuni, perfectly equipped with a Buddha’s thirty-two major and eighty minor excellent marks. Our own vision being inadequate, we see it simply as a written character... [but] the character *myō* is itself a Buddha.

(*Teihon* 2: 1748)

Here Nichiren again cites the “Jeweled Stupa” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra* attributed to Zhiyi to establish that the single character *myō* is the Tathāgata Śākyamuni, possessing all of a Buddha’s distinguishing physical marks. He uses this assertion to explain to Myōshin-ama that the *daimoku* is equivalent to Śākyamuni Buddha and encompasses all merits.

In this way, we can see how Nichiren stressed the significance of reading and reciting the *Lotus Sutra* and of chanting the *daimoku* by concretely asserting that each character of the sutra is none other than the living Śākyamuni Buddha. Moreover, when he received clothing and other donations from his followers, he praised the merits of these gifts as offerings to the buddhas represented by each character of the *Lotus Sutra*. For example, in a letter to Sajiki Nyōbō 棧敷女房, he writes:

For an ordinary worldling, to offer one’s only, unlined robe to the votary of the *Lotus Sutra* is equivalent to peeling off one’s own skin as an offering to the

Buddha. Because that robe has been offered to the 69,384 buddhas who are the characters of the *Lotus Sutra*, it is equivalent to 69,384 such robes. And since these 69,384 buddhas each encompasses the sutra's 69,384 characters, it is as though you had offered that many robes to each one.... Though only a single garment, it has been offered to all the buddhas who are the characters of the *Lotus Sutra*. (Teihon 2: 998)

Or, in a letter to an unidentified follower:

I put on the robe you sent and went before the Buddha to read the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Lotus Sutra* consists of 69,384 characters, and each one is a golden Buddha. Thus, though this robe is only one, it has been offered to each of 69,384 buddhas. (Teihon 2: 1107)

And again, in another letter, possibly to the wife of Toki Jōnin 富木常忍:

Though the robe you sent is [only] one, you have offered it to the *Lotus Sutra*. The *Lotus Sutra* consists of 69,384 characters, and each one is a Buddha. These buddhas take as their heart the revival of the seeds of Buddhahood in those for whom they have been destroyed; as their life, the revelation of Śākyamuni's original awakening in the remotest past; as their throats, the constantly abiding Buddha nature; and as their eyes, the subtle practice of the one vehicle. It is said that the provisional forms that the Buddha manifests in order to teach others are not the real Buddha. This means that, rather than the Buddha who possesses thirty-two major and eighty minor excellent marks, the characters of the *Lotus Sutra* are the real Buddha. (Teihon 2: 1111)

These passages show that, for Nichiren, offerings made to the *Lotus Sutra* are at the same time offerings to the person of Śākyamuni, identified with the buddhas who are the individual characters of the sutra text.

It is possible that Nichiren emphasized to his lay followers a realm of faith in which the characters of the *Lotus Sutra* are none other than living buddhas because this idea, as seen in the *Abbreviated Lotus Sutra*, already existed in the religious culture that formed the ground for their reception of his teaching. Or, from another perspective, being aware of the limits of ordinary people to carry out contemplative practice or to devote themselves to the sutra and Śākyamuni Buddha, Nichiren may have actively stressed that the Buddha does not exist apart from the sutra text. In any event, on the evidence of his writings, we can understand that he regarded each character of the *Lotus* as a living Śākyamuni Tathāgata, recognizing a realm in which written words are the Buddha and the Buddha is written words, Buddha and sutra (dharma) together forming a single Suchness.

The weight Nichiren placed on the sutra text is also related to the admonition found in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* and mentioned at the beginning of

this article: one should “rely on the dharma and not on persons”—that is, upon teachers other than the Buddha. For example, among those of Nichiren’s writings that survive only in fragments, we find the following:

The Buddha admonished that one should rely on the dharma and not on persons. But in this later age, people all rely on persons and not on the dharma. The Buddha warned that one should rely on sutras whose teachings are complete and definitive, and not on those whose teachings are incomplete. But people in this polluted age all rely on sutras whose meaning is incomplete and not on the sutra whose meaning is complete. *(Teihon 3: 2494)*

This attitude on Nichiren’s part is consistent with his emphasis on the importance of written words as proof texts, rather than the authority of particular teachers or lineages. Another fragment reads:

Question: If “relying on persons” constitutes an error, then why do you yourself rely on Zhiyi, Zhanran, and Saichō?

Answer: I do not venture to rely even on those great teachers. But I do rely on the proof texts they cite. To illustrate, when in governing the realm the ruler administers rewards and punishments in accordance with the three histories and five classics compiled by the three kings and five emperors, he will not fall into the evil realms for the sin of punishing someone, not even someone said to be a sage or worthy. But if out of partiality he administers a light punishment to a heinous criminal or fails, under the influence of some evil, to reward someone who has rendered service, then in this life he will be known as a devious person; his country will be destroyed; and he will leave a bad name to posterity. The difference between wisdom and folly depends upon whether one relies on trustworthy writings rather than [the opinion of] persons, or relies on persons and ignores writings. Most monastics and lay people today take persons as their basis and not the writings of the sutras. *(Teihon 3: 2495)*

This passage reveals a deep trust in the sutras and is critical of attempts to relegate them to peripheral status in favor of the interpretive authority of particular teachers, as seen, for example, in contemporaneous claims to the oral transmission of secret meanings not revealed in scripture or to mind-to-mind transmission outside the teachings.

Nichiren took the *Lotus Sutra* as a clear mirror and placed absolute faith in it. Above, I have briefly considered how he understood the significance of its written words in terms of the relationship of the *Lotus Sutra* and Śākyamuni Buddha, or in other words, the dharma and the Buddha. As others have pointed out, Nichiren regarded the words of the *Lotus Sutra* as the expression of Śākyamuni Buddha’s mind and—based on the logic of the nonduality of form and mind—asserted that the *Lotus Sutra* is none other than Śākyamuni Buddha and that Śākyamuni Buddha is precisely the *Lotus Sutra*. Herein we can discern the rea-

son why Nichiren often refers to the *Lotus Sutra* in personified terms. This is especially important to bear in mind when we consider his understanding of the object of worship of the origin teaching as both the *Lotus Sutra* and the primordially awakened Śākyamuni.

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