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The *Lotus Sutra* as the Core of Japanese Buddhism Shifts in Representations of its Fundamental Principle

Much of the foundational thought of Japanese Buddhism derives from the *Lotus Sutra*. This article explores how the sutra's essence or fundamental principle was variously understood by some of its foremost interpreters. It examines the Chinese Tiantai master Zhiyi's concept of "three thousand realms in a single thought-moment" (*ichinen sanzen*) and its reception in Japan; Saichō's notion of all dharmas as Suchness according with conditions (*zuien shinnyo*); and Ennin's reading of Saichō's concept of suchness in terms of the esoteric A-syllable as the ground of all phenomena. Lastly, the essay turns to Nichiren, who made Zhiyi's "three thousand realms in a single thought-moment" the foundation of his doctrine and practice, equating this principle with the *daimoku* or title of the *Lotus Sutra* and the Wonderful Dharma (*myōhō*) itself.

KEYWORDS: *Lotus Sutra*—Zhiyi—Zhanran—*ichinen sanzen*—Saichō—Nichiren—*zuien shinnyo*

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I WAS BORN into a temple family of the Nichiren sect in Nagasaki, and I have devoted my academic life to the study of the Nichiren Buddhist faith. In my twenties, having read through the entirety of Nichiren's writings, I resolved—perhaps one could say I made a vow—to read all of the works that Nichiren himself had read. Unfortunately, although I am now in my eighties, I have still not fulfilled that aspiration. Nichiren was extraordinarily well read. The dramatic persecutions he encountered and his bold speech and actions may be the images that first come to mind when he is mentioned, but when we look carefully into his writings, we can understand that his conduct stemmed from thorough reflection grounded in his vast reading.

Of course there are various opinions about Nichiren's writings. But when we view them in the context of the history of Japanese Buddhist thought, we can see, for example, how he both analyzes the doctrines of individual sects and also makes evaluations based on a comprehensive perspective, at times displaying superlative insight. Through Nichiren's writings, one can gain an overview of the general contours of Japanese Buddhist thought.

Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) understood the prior history of Buddhist thought in India, China, and Japan—especially the history of Buddhist thought based on the *Lotus Sutra*—from the perspective of the Tendai *Lotus* teachings, while at the same time systematizing it from the unifying standpoint of his own, distinctive interpretation of the origin teaching (*honmon* 本門), the latter fourteen chapters of the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren was among the last of the teachers of the new Buddhism of Japan's Kamakura period (1185–1333), and, in pinning down the essentials of the eight or ten schools of Japanese Buddhism that had spread up until that point—the six Nara schools; Tendai and Shingon, established during the Heian period (794–1185); and also Zen and Pure Land—he set forth a classification of teachings and an explanation of practice based on the origin teaching

*Translator's note: Professor Asai Endō (1927–2004) of Rishō University was a preeminent scholar of Japanese Tendai and Nichiren Buddhist thought. His death was a great loss to colleagues and students everywhere in the fields of Japanese Buddhism and *Lotus Sutra* studies. This article is based on a lecture delivered to the Nihon Bukkyō Sōgō Kenkyū Gakkai (Association for the Interdisciplinary Study of Japanese Buddhism) that was subsequently edited for publication in the association's journal (ASA1 2003). I have translated the essay as it appears there, with slight modifications for clarity. References to Chinese and Japanese sources given in parentheses in the text appear in the published Japanese version; references to English-language sources and the notes are my additions. I would like to thank Mrs. Asai Yasuko, the late Professor Asai's wife, for permission to translate this essay, and to Professor Minowa Kenryō of the University of Tokyo for his kind help in arranging it.

of the *Lotus Sutra*. If we study his writings in detail, we can grasp almost all the essential points of Japanese Buddhist thought up until his time.

The Kamakura new Buddhist movements were born out of the Tendai Lotus School established by Saichō 最澄 (766/767–822), which has its headquarters on Mt. Hiei. Along with Saichō, the other preeminent figure of Heian Buddhism was Kūkai 空海 (774–835), who promoted Shingon Esoteric teachings. Saichō incorporated the Esoteric teachings in which Kūkai specialized into the Tendai Lotus School. In so doing, he took as his textual basis the *Darijing shu* 大日經疏 (later revised as the *Darijing yishi* 大日經義釈), a commentary on the Esoteric scripture *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* by the Chinese monk Yixing 一行 (684–727) based on oral teachings given by the Tripiṭaka Master Shanwuwei 善無為三蔵 or Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735). In China, Esoteric Buddhism had already been fused with *Lotus* thought since Śubhakarasiṃha's time. Given this fact, along with Saichō's incorporation into Tendai of the Esoteric teachings, we could say that the essentials of Japanese Buddhist thought since the Heian period come almost entirely under the umbrella of *Lotus Sutra* thought.

Here I would like to adopt precisely that perspective, namely, that Japanese Buddhism developed with the *Lotus Sutra* as its core. The content of the *Lotus* is quite diverse, but what is its fundamental principle? In the following pages, I explore how that fundamental principle has been understood as well as shifts in how it has been represented within Japanese Buddhist thought.

The Fundamental Principle Found in the Lotus Sutra by Zhiyi

The Buddhism in Japan that is based on the *Lotus Sutra* takes Saichō as its historical founder, but the patriarch of the Tendai Lotus School that Saichō established was of course Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597). Zhiyi's teachings on the *Lotus Sutra* took shape as lectures that were edited into the so-called “three great works of the Tendai Lotus School”: the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 (Profound meaning of the *Lotus*), *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 (Words and phrases of the *Lotus*), and *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 (Great calming and contemplation). In the course of his teaching, Zhiyi identified the “three thousand realms in a single thought-moment” (*ichinen sanzen* 一念三千) as the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Zhiyi's three major works on the *Lotus Sutra* contain a number of complex explanations, and if one reads them casually, there is a great likelihood of losing sight of what he was trying to say or where his real intention lay. For that reason, the sixth patriarch of Chinese Tiantai, Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), systematized Zhiyi's *Lotus* thought. Zhanran is known as a “restorer” of Tiantai Buddhism and was also the teacher of Daosui 道邃 (c. 804) and Xingman 行滿 (c. 804), with whom Saichō studied when he traveled to China. While specific points in Zhanran's exegesis of Zhiyi have drawn both approval and also

some disagreement, his commentaries on Zhiyi's three major works still remain vital to their interpretation. If we seek to understand the fundamental principle that Zhiyi discovered in the *Lotus Sutra* by following Zhanran's indications, we can see that it corresponds to the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. Zhiyi's *Great Calming and Contemplation* reads:

Now one mind [that is, a moment of thought] comprises ten dharma-realms, and each dharma-realm also comprises ten dharma-realms, giving a hundred dharma-realms. A single realm comprises thirty kinds of worlds; hence a hundred dharma-realms comprise three thousand kinds of worlds. These three thousand are contained in a single moment of thought. Where there is no thought, that is the end of the matter, but if there is even the slightest thought, it immediately contains the three thousand [realms]. (T 46.54a)

In other words, the thoughts that arise in daily life from one moment to the next are each endowed with the potential of the ten dharma-realms, that is, the realms of hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras, humans, gods, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. Moreover, each of these dharma-realms or states of existence contains the potential for all ten within itself, so our mind at each moment is endowed with a hundred dharma-realms—a principle also known as the mutual encompassing of the ten realms (*jikkai gogu* 十界互具). Each of these dharma-realms also possesses ten “suchlike” characteristics or aspects of reality: appearance (outward form), nature (inner quality), essence (the embodiment unifying appearance and nature), power (inner or potential energy), function (the outward display of that power), cause, condition, effect, recompense, and their ultimate consistency from beginning to end—that is, the essential unity of all nine from “appearance” to “recompense.” Each dharma-realm may also be understood as endowed with three “worlds” (*seken* 世間) or categories into which all existents may be analyzed: the world of living beings, or individuals who may be distinguished by specific names; the world of the five aggregates, the physical and mental constituents that unite temporarily to form individual living beings; and the world of the land, or the space that living beings occupy. Thus ultimately, our mind at each moment is said to be endowed with three thousand worlds or realms. If we have even the slightest thought, in that moment our mind contains all three thousand kinds of realms—that is, the whole of existence.

Zhiyi explained the realm of ultimate awakening expounded in the *Lotus Sutra* as this principle of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. In his commentary on Zhiyi's *Great Calming and Contemplation*, Zhanran gave this concept the specific name “three thousand realms in one thought-moment” when he interpreted the passage just quoted, saying: “You should know that person and land both encompass three thousand realms in one thought-moment. Thus, when we realize the way, in accordance with this principle, our body and

mind at each instant pervade the dharma-realm” (*Mohe zhiguan buxingzhuan hongjue* 摩訶止觀輔行伝弘決, T 46.295c).

Here Zhanran explains that the person of the practitioner and that person’s surrounding environment or land are both endowed with the fundamental principle that is three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. (Of the three worlds, one’s person corresponds to the world of living beings and the world of the five aggregates, while one’s surroundings correspond to the world of the environment or land). Thus if we advance in practice and attain the way, then, in accordance with this fundamental principle, our body and mind—that is, our person—in a single moment pervade the dharma-realm. In other words, in Zhanran’s reading, the entire outer world that surrounds us and our own body and mind become one. (One could also interpret this passage to mean that when Śākyamuni Buddha achieved awakening, his body and mind filled the entire universe, and therefore we too are endowed with the Buddha-realm.) The initial passage cited above from Zhiyi’s *Great Calming and Contemplation* interprets the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment in terms of our daily lives, while the second, from Zhanran’s commentary, interprets it in terms of the moment of awakening. In the same text, Zhanran goes on to say:

When he [Zhiyi] at last clarified the method of calming and contemplation, he also employed the three thousand realms as a guide. In other words, this [principle] represents his final, complete, and ultimate exposition. Therefore [Guanding’s] preface [to the *Great Calming and Contemplation*] states, “[In this treatise,] he [Zhiyi] expounds the dharma that he practiced in his own mind.” There is good reason for this statement. I hope that those who study and seek to understand this work will not allow their minds to become distracted by other matters. (T 46.296a)

According to Zhanran, only when Zhiyi arrived at the point of explaining the practice of calming and contemplation (that is, the practice for stilling one’s mind and discerning its nature), in chapter 7 of the *Mohe zhiguan*, did he first articulate the principle of the single thought-moment being three thousand realms, a principle Zhanran identifies as the guide for the whole of Tiantai doctrinal teachings. Here the word Zhanran uses for guide (*shinan* 指南)—literally “compass” or pointer to the south—means an indicator of the proper direction in which to proceed. By taking the three thousand realms in one thought-moment as the normative definition of the fundamental principle, one can arrive at an understanding of the entire body of complex Tiantai teachings on the *Lotus Sutra*. In ancient China, there were human images mounted on carts that were designed always to point south. We might say that the concept of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment serves as a reliable “compass cart” pointing toward an understanding of the Tiantai *Lotus* doctrinal teachings.

In addition, Zhanran identifies the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as Zhiyi's "final, complete, and ultimate exposition"—the culmination of his teachings set forth at the conclusion of his lectures that became the *Great Calming and Contemplation*. Parenthetically, within the Nichiren sect in Japan, the eleventh chief abbot of the head temple at Mt. Minobu, Gyōgakuin Nitchō 行学院日朝 (1422–1500), endorsed a reading of this sentence that slightly alters its grammar so as to say, "[This principle represents] the finality, the completion, and the ultimate exposition," in order to stress the supreme status of the three thousand realms in one thought-moment (*Kanjin honzon shō shiki* 観心本尊抄私記, NSZ 16: 123). Nichiren himself drew on Zhanran's assertion as well as the main purport of each of Zhiyi's three major works—especially Zhiyi's thinking about the *Lotus Sutra* as the "subtle" (*myō* 妙) teaching, able to open and integrate all others within itself (*kaie* 開会)—and in this way deepened his own confidence in the three thousand realms in one thought-moment as the fundamental principle of the *Lotus*.

The Fundamental Principle in Saichō's Thought: Suchness According with Conditions

Saichō, the founder of Japanese Tendai, sought to establish a comprehensive Buddhism encompassing the Perfect teaching (that is, the Tiantai *Lotus* teachings), Zen, the precepts, and Esoteric Buddhism. The scripture central to this endeavor was clearly the *Lotus Sutra*, as indicated by Saichō's summation of his many-faceted doctrinal teachings under the rubric "Tendai Lotus School." Nonetheless, Saichō took as his fundamental principle a doctrine originating in Huayan or Kegon thought, that of "Suchness according with conditions" (*shinnyo zuien* 真如隨緣). Many passages from his writings will substantiate this (ASAI 1975, 172–77). In *Shugo kokkaishō* 守護国界章 (Treatise on the protection of the country), a work representative of his ideas, Saichō writes:

[My opponent Tokuitsu, the feeder on coarse food, says, "The *Nirvāṇa Sutra* states,] 'Those without Buddha-nature refers to fences and walls, tiles and pebbles, because they are insentient beings.' In accordance with this principle [adduced above], they should all have the seeds of Buddha-nature and be able to become buddhas. Your assertion resembles that of Master Bao." Now in refutation I say... The positions of these two teachers [Fabao 法宝 and Tokuitsu] may seem reasonable, but neither approaches the true meaning. Why is that? Master Bao did not establish Suchness according with conditions; therefore his argument remains confined to the realm of the *ālaya* consciousness, which is subject to birth and extinction. (DZ 2: 510, 588).¹

1. Translator's note: See ASAI 1975, 149–50, and TAMURA 1992, 64, 71–72, 257, and 265–66. Tamura identifies the "two teachers" as Fabao and Tokuitsu (72, 257); ASAI 1975 identifies them as Fabao and his critic, the Faxiang scholar Huizhao 慧沼 (650–714), whom Tokuitsu revered. However, the present article appears to follow Tamura (ASAI 2003, 4–5).

Here Saichō first cites his opponent in debate, the Hossō (Ch. Faxiang) monk Tokuitsu 徳一 (n.d.). Saichō refers to him as one who eats coarse food (*sojikisha* 麤食者), meaning someone who cannot taste the subtle flavor of the Perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* but subsists only on “coarse dharmas,” or incomplete Buddhist teachings. He cites Tokuitsu as criticizing his (Saichō’s) assertion that even insentient objects such as fences and walls, tiles and pebbles have the Buddha-nature and can become buddhas. Tokuitsu says that this resembles the position of Fabao (n.d.), a disciple of the Chinese scholar and Tripiṭaka Master Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), as set forth in Fabao’s *Yisheng foxing jiujiing lun* 一乘仏性究竟論 (Treatise on the one-vehicle Buddha-nature as ultimate; on extant versions of this treatise, see TAMURA 1992, 258–59, and GRONER 2000, 94, note 27). However, Saichō criticizes the position of Fabao—and of Tokuitsu himself—as not yet fully correct. Even though, unlike Tokuitsu, Fabao asserted that all beings have the Buddha-nature, he posited this solely as a potential based on the *ālaya* or storehouse consciousness, which is imperfect, changing, and subject to birth and death. In contrast, Saichō argued that Suchness manifesting in accordance with conditions is precisely the active Buddha-nature (*gyō busshō* 行仏性).² In other words, Saichō followed Fazang 法藏 (643–712) of the Huayan school as well as Zhanran in positing a theory of Buddha-nature based on Suchness according with conditions (for relevant passages, see Fazang’s *Huayan wujiao zhang*, T 45.494b, 499a, and *Dasheng qixinlun yiji*, T 44.255b, 264b, as well as Zhanran’s *Jingangbei lun*, T 46.783b).

In the *Eizan Daishi den* 叡山大師伝 (Life of the great teacher of Mt. Hiei), a biography of Saichō by his disciple Ninchū 仁忠 (c. 824), we read,

Now the Great Teacher [Saichō], whenever he could obtain the texts, would peruse the commentary on the *Awakening of Faith* as well as the five teachings of Huayan and other works, and [through them] came to revere Tiantai as a guide. Whenever he read these passages, he would weep unawares.

2. Translator’s note: for Tokuitsu as a Hossō scholar, Buddha-nature as principle (*ri busshō* 理仏性) is equivalent to unchanging, immutable Suchness and does not manifest itself in the phenomenal world. Therefore the universality of Buddha-nature in this quiescent sense does not mean that all beings can attain Buddhahood; realizing Buddhahood depends on “active Buddha-nature” (*gyō busshō*) or the presence in the *ālaya* or storehouse consciousness of untainted “seeds,” which—according to Hossō doctrine—not all beings possess. Against this position, Fabao argued that all beings can achieve Buddhahood, but he, too, seems to have understood immutable Suchness as mediated by the *ālaya* consciousness. Saichō in contrast maintained that universal Suchness, while having the aspect of unchanging principle, at the same time manifests the phenomenal world in accordance with conditions, and this dynamic aspect of Suchness is equivalent to “active Buddha-nature.” From this perspective, there is no need to posit seeds in the *ālaya* consciousness as the cause for realizing Buddhahood; since Suchness in both aspects is universal, all beings can realize Buddhahood.

[He lamented,] “Although the general outline is clear, it is in vain that I have perused these traces of Tiantai teachings, [being unable to pursue them further].” At that time, meeting by chance with someone who knew where Tiantai texts were to be had, he was able to copy and obtain [Zhiyi’s treatise on] sudden and perfect calming and contemplation [*Mohe zhiguan*], the *Profound Meaning of the Lotus*, and also the commentary on the *Words and Phrases of the Lotus*, as well as the *Meaning of the Fourfold Teachings* [*Sijiao yi* 四教義] and the *Vimalakīrti* commentary. These texts were brought [to Japan] from Tang [China] by the venerable Ganjin 鑑真. Thus by chance he was able to obtain these texts, and he exerted himself in studying them.

(DZ 5: *Furoku* 5–6)

In other words, Saichō valued the Kegon doctrinal studies he had learned from his teacher Gyōhyō 行表 (722–797). After entering Mt. Hiei, his solitary learning and practice began with his study of the *Dasheng qixinlun yiji* 大乘起信論義記 (Commentary on the awakening of Mahāyāna faith) and the *Huayan wujiao zhang* 華嚴五教章 (Essay on the five teachings of Huayan) by the third Huayan patriarch Fazang. Through references in these texts, he was able to learn of the existence of Tiantai commentarial works. Thus Kegon teachings formed Saichō’s initial foundation in Buddhist study, which is why he was well versed in the principle of Suchness according with conditions.

In addition, Saichō treasured Zhanran’s *Jingang bei lun* 金剛鉞論 (Diamond scalpel treatise), which employs the principle of Suchness according with conditions to argue that trees and rocks are sentient beings. Saichō composed a commentary on this treatise (the *Chū Kongōbei ron* 註金剛鉞論, in DZ 4), which praises Zhanran’s exposition. The *Diamond Scalpel Treatise* contains this passage:

The myriad dharmas are none other than Suchness, because it is unchanging. Suchness expresses itself as the myriad dharmas, because it accords with conditions. Isn’t your belief that insentient beings lack Buddha-nature the same as saying that the myriad dharmas do not participate in Suchness?

(T 46.782c, cited in DZ 4: 17; see also PENKOWER 1993, 463–64)

The *Diamond Scalpel Treatise* takes the form of a dialogue between a host and his guest. The host, who represents Zhanran, asserts that even insentient trees and rocks have Buddha-nature. He explains that the myriad dharmas (all existents) are precisely Suchness. As principle, Suchness is unchanging; that is to say, no matter how much the phenomena of the actual world may shift and change, their essential nature, which is Suchness, never changes. But at the same time, Suchness is precisely all dharmas, because it responds to conditions, manifesting the diverse forms of the phenomenal world. The host instructs his guest, say-

ing, “If you believe that insentient beings lack Buddha-nature, isn’t that the same thing as denying that all dharmas are Suchness?”

According to Sakamoto Yukio 坂本幸男, Fazang explained that Suchness manifests all dharmas but evidently did not make clear that all dharmas are themselves Suchness (although later there seems to have been some mutual influence between Chengguan 澄觀 [738–839], revered as the fourth Huayan patriarch, and Zhanran on this point).³ However, when one acknowledges both perspectives, one can identify Suchness responding to conditions with the Perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, which sets forth the mutual encompassing and perfect interpenetration of the myriad dharmas, or all things in the world. The view that all dharmas arise out of Suchness is a Huayan reading of dependent origination. From the Tendai perspective of the Perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, Suchness is none other than the forms of all dharmas unfolding as they mutually encompass and pervade one another. We could say that Saichō took the perspective, not of the Distinct teaching of Huayan, in which all dharmas emanate from Suchness as a pure original principle, but rather, that of the Perfect teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*; following Zhanran, he acknowledged that “all dharmas are precisely Suchness” and by implication, that all existences, including both sentient and insentient, have Buddha-nature. Herein, I believe, lies Saichō’s intent.⁴

But did Saichō then fail to inherit the principle of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra* as Zhiyi conceived it? It would be a mistake to think so. As noted above, Zhanran was the one who asserted this as the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra* and the pinnacle of the Tiantai teachings. It is hardly conceivable that Saichō, who received dharma transmission from Zhanran’s disciple Daosui, the seventh patriarch of the Chinese Tiantai School, would not have been instructed in this principle. However, in all of Saichō’s collected works, we find no discussion of it. Related terms such as “three thousand worlds” occur but are used only in a

3. Translator’s note: source unidentified. See, however, ASAI 1975, 172.

4. Translator’s note: Asai alludes to the traditional Tiantai classificatory schema (*panjiao* 判教) of the “four teachings of conversion” (*huafa sijiao*, *kehō no shikyō* 化法の四教), in which Huayan represents the “Distinct teaching” and the *Lotus Sutra*, the “Perfect teaching” (see for example CHAPPELL 1983, 129–45; DONNER and STEVENSON 1993, 13–17; and PENKOWER 1993, 386–87, note 3). Huayan thought sees all things as emanating from an originally pure mind that, coming into contact with the defilements, produces the distinctions of the phenomenal world—a position identified in this schema with the “Distinct teaching.” In contrast, Tiantai holds that the mind is not originally pure and undifferentiated; rather, the distinctions of the phenomenal world (that is, the three thousand realms) are inherent in the mind from the outset, a position identified with the “Perfect teaching.” Here Asai indicates that although Saichō was indebted to Huayan teachings for the doctrine of Suchness according with conditions, he appropriated it in a way that accorded with a Tiantai, rather than a Huayan, perspective. See also ASAI 1975, 760.

sense that is virtually identical to “all phenomena.” Only once, in the fourth of ten questions on unresolved issues in Tiantai doctrine that Saichō addressed to Daosui in China, do we find the following exchange, related to the principle of three thousand realms in one thought-moment:

Saichō asks: In the passage, “Whatever is made to be the object, it is the Middle,” the meaning of the word “make” is not clear.

The abbot [Daosui] replies: “Make” here means to arrive at. One arrives at principle; therefore, [the object of contemplation] is precisely the Middle. The practitioner of the Perfect teaching, in contemplating the single thought-moment, [perceives that] the mind arising through causes and conditions is at once endowed with the ten realms. The ten realms are mutually encompassing, making a hundred realms. And these each are endowed with the nature and appearance of the three thousand realms. [Of these realms,] two thousand pertain to primary recompense [that is, one’s person] and one thousand, to dependent recompense [one’s environment or land]. The three thousand are all contained within a single moment of thought, and the mind is perfectly endowed with them all. Sentient and insentient are originally nondual. If one says that they are two, then that would mean there are dharmas apart from the mind, and if there are dharmas apart from the mind, then that is not the contemplation of the Perfect teaching. The single thought-moment is the nonduality of person and environment. When one observes this by means of the threefold contemplation, that is the dharma-realm. It is also the storehouse of the *tathāgatas*. The dharma-nature is none other than the Buddha-nature; they are not different. Therefore the *Flower Garland [Sutra]* states, “Countless realms preach the dharma. The land preaches the dharma. And living beings preach the dharma.” (DZ 5: 44)

Here Saichō raises a question about how to interpret the character “make” (zō 造) in a passage from the “perfect and sudden” section of Guanding’s introduction to the *Great Calming and Contemplation*, which states, “The Perfect and Sudden [method of calming and contemplation] involves taking the true aspect [of reality] as the object from the very beginning. Whatever is made to be the object [of contemplation], it is the Middle; there is nothing that is not truly real” (T 46.1c; trans. SWANSON 2004, 21, slightly modified). This passage means that, in the perfect and sudden contemplation method, the practitioner forms a connection with the true aspect of reality—that is, the realm of true awakening—from the very beginning stage of practice, and, on arriving at the correct discernment of the object of contemplation, what one perceives is entirely the enlightened realm of the Middle Way; there is nothing that is not true reality. However, if one takes the character “make” here literally to mean “produce” or “create,” then the sense of the passage is obscured. Hence Saichō’s question about how to read this character.

Daosui replies that it should be read as to arrive at, that is, to reach, or to master—as one masters an art—in the sense of arriving at the ultimate principle. At that point, whatever one takes as the object of contemplation is none other than the Middle. Daosui proceeds to explain that, in the contemplation of the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as performed by the practitioner of the Perfect teaching, sentient and nonsentient are nondual, person and environment are nondual, and the Buddha-nature is universal; following the *Huayan jing* (Flower garland sutra; T 9.422b, 611a, 10: 262a), he explains that lands themselves preach the dharma. But this reference to the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment occurs in Daosui's explanation; it is not Saichō's own statement.

Why then did Saichō establish his theory of Suchness according with conditions independently of the traditional Tiantai teaching of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment? In considering this question, we should recall that Tokuitsu's polemical aim in his debate with Saichō was to point out fallacious and unnecessary aspects of Tendai teachings. Saichō may therefore have deemed it inappropriate to use Tendai doctrine as a means to establish the orthodoxy of Tendai doctrine. One may well imagine that, in order to counter on its own ground the Hossō school's doctrine of Suchness only as unmoving and inert (*gyōnen shinnyo* 凝然真如), he based himself on the concepts of both Suchness as unchanging and Suchness according with conditions. Of course, as I have mentioned, Saichō was already well versed in these dual concepts of Suchness.

Saichō probably argued from the basis of Suchness according with conditions out of necessity in his debate with Tokuitsu, but this stance then became habitual to him. We can confirm that he took this argument as foundational even in writings unrelated to his debate with Tokuitsu. In his commentary on the *Sutra of Innumerable Meanings*, the introductory scripture to the *Lotus Sutra*, Saichō comments on the passage from that sutra which reads, "...neither sitting nor lying nor walking nor standing still ... neither blue nor yellow nor red nor white" (*Wuliangyi jing*, T 9.385a). In interpreting this passage, as well as another that says, "[The Buddha's] body is formless and yet has form, and the bodies of living beings are also like this" (T 9.385a), Saichō uses the principle of Suchness according with conditions to explain the relation of the Buddha's dharma body, the formless body that is his inner enlightenment and coextensive with the dharma-realm, with his physical body, or the body having form (*Chū Muryōgikyō* 註無量義經, DZ 3: 581–82, 593). And in commenting on other passages from the same sutra that state, "Profoundly penetrating all dharmas ... the bodhisattva in this way discerns the four aspects [of arising, abiding, changing, and perishing] and knows them completely from beginning to end," and "Innumerable meanings arise from a single dharma" (both at T 9.385c), Saichō interprets fundamental concepts from that sutra—such as the four aspects, good and evil dharmas, and

innumerable meanings arising from the one dharma—in terms of the two aspects of Suchness as both unchanging and according with conditions (DZ 3: 613–14).

In contrast, in his major works on the *Lotus Sutra*, Zhiyi interpreted the phrase “single dharma” from the passage “Innumerable meanings arise from a single dharma” to mean the true aspect or face of reality (*shohō jissō* 諸法実相) (*Fahua xuanyi*, T 33.783b; *Fahua wenju*, T 34.27c). He also applied this passage to his project of doctrinal classification, identifying the “single dharma” with the one vehicle and “innumerable meanings” with the Buddha’s multiple skillful means, including the three-vehicles, which are set forth in the various sutras (for example, *Fahua xuanyi*, T 33.800b–c). Saichō, on the other hand, as we have just seen, interpreted this passage as a perspective on the dharma-realm in light of the theory of Suchness according with conditions. Herein we can clearly see the different interpretive stances taken by Zhiyi and Saichō.

The Fundamental Principle of the Lotus Sutra as Understood by Kūkai

Let us consider how the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra* was understood by the Esoteric master Kūkai, another pivotal figure in Heian-period Buddhism. Kūkai too recognized the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as the basis of Tendai doctrinal interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*. In his major work, the *Jūjūshin ron* 十住心論 (Ten stages of mind), he equated the Tendai Lotus School with the eighth stage, the stage of the mind abiding in the single way of the unconditioned (also called the mind that knows spontaneously in accordance with reality or the mind whose nature is emptiness without objects). There Kūkai states:

First, in contemplating the mind as the realm of the inconceivable: now one mind comprises ten dharma-realms, and each dharma-realm also comprises ten dharma-realms, giving a hundred dharma-realms. A single realm comprises thirty kinds of worlds; hence a hundred dharma-realms comprise three thousand kinds of worlds. These three thousand are contained in a single moment of thought. Where there is no thought, that is the end of the matter, but if there is even the slightest thought, it immediately contains the three thousand [realms]. One can say neither that the mind is prior and all dharmas subsequent, nor that all dharmas are prior and the mind subsequent. If one says that all dharmas arise from the one mind, then that is a vertical relationship. If one says that all dharmas are simultaneously contained within the mind, that is a horizontal relationship. Neither vertical nor horizontal will do. It is just that the mind is all dharmas and all dharmas are the mind. Therefore [the relationship of mind and dharmas, or of thought and objects] is neither vertical nor horizontal; they are neither the same nor different. This is profound and subtle in the extreme; cognition cannot grasp it nor words express it. That is why it is called the “realm of the inconceivable.”

(T 77.351b; KZ 1: 359–60)

Here Kūkai quotes virtually in its entirety the key passage dealing with the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment from fascicle five of Zhiyi's *Great Calming and Contemplation*. Could he have perhaps learned it from Saichō? Or did he discover it on his own? Perhaps he became aware of the doctrinal explanations set forth by Zhanran and his disciples while studying in Tang China. It is impossible to know whether or not Kūkai deliberately focused on this passage in order to contrast himself with Saichō, who did not actively foreground the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. In any event, the fact that Kūkai singled out this passage as the essence of the Tendai *Lotus* teachings is nothing short of remarkable.

Ennin's Theory of the Syllable "A" as the Fundamental Ground

As is well known, the fundamental principle of Kūkai's Esoteric teaching is that all things have as their basis the six great elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness) that pervade and constitute the entire universe (see Kūkai's *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* 即身成仏義 and other writings). Saichō incorporated the Esoteric teachings into the Tendai Lotus School, but the Esoteric teachings that he imported were incomplete. Thus, developing a mature form of Esoteric Buddhism was one of the vital issues confronting the Japanese Tendai school after his death. The first to shoulder this task was Ennin 円仁 (794–866). After visiting Tang China, where he endured a number of trials and hardships, Ennin returned to Japan and promoted Taimitsu 台密, a distinctively Tendai form of Esoteric Buddhism. In contrast to Kūkai's six-element theory, Ennin posited the theory of the syllable "A" as the source of all things. The syllable "A," as the root vowel of the Sanskrit syllabary, expresses the reality that is fundamental, unborn, and undying, which is none other than the inner enlightenment of the cosmic Buddha of the Esoteric teachings, Dainichi 大日 (Skt. Mahāvairocana). In short, Ennin identified the syllable "A" as the ground of the entire universe with the fundamental principle of the Esoteric teachings. Ennin's theory of the "A" syllable is undeniably indebted to his teacher Saichō's teaching of Suchness according with conditions. That is, Ennin defined the "A" syllable as the foundation of all things, the principle that is originally unborn and undying, which is none other than the principle of Suchness.

In the first fascicle of his commentary on the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*, Ennin defines the fundamental essence of that scripture as the syllable "A": "The originally inherent 'A' syllable is what the entirety of the sutra indicates and what unifies its various meanings. According to fascicle 2 of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, what is it that is termed the doctrine of Shingon? It is none other than the teaching of the syllable 'A'" (*Kongōchōkyō shō* 金剛頂經疏, BZ 15: 3c). In other words, in Ennin's reading, the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra* taken as a whole points to the principle

of the originally inherent “A” syllable, which encompasses all the sutra’s individual, subordinate meanings. And to substantiate his claim, he cites a passage from the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* to the effect that the Esoteric Shingon teachings in their entirety are none other than the syllable “A” (*Darijing*, T 18.10a). Moreover, for Ennin, the “A” syllable is the source of all phenomena, or all existents; in response to the conditions of either awakening or delusion, it manifests either the enlightened realm depicted by Esoteric mandalas or the deluded realm that is the actual experience of unenlightened people. We can take this as a restatement in Esoteric terms of Saichō’s teaching of Suchness according with conditions.

Next, Ennin asserts that the specific forms (or differentiated expressions of truth) discussed in the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra* correspond to the individual letters and sounds of the various Esoteric mantras. Ennin also maintained that the single syllable “A” expands into all syllables, which we may understand as an Esoteric application of the principle of Suchness manifesting in accordance with conditions.

Furthermore, in a section of his commentary discussing in question and answer format the essence of the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*, Ennin states, “Now in dependence upon the conditioned arising of the dharma-realm, which is itself the dharma-nature, the realm of the Tathāgata’s inner enlightenment is established” (BZ 15: 4c). That is, in his commentary on the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*, following the definitive statements made in the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* and its commentaries identifying the “A” syllable as the basis of the Esoteric teachings (*Darijing shū*, T 39. 651b; *Darijing yishi*, ZTZ, *Mikkyō* 1: 185a), Ennin affirms that the “A” syllable is also the scriptural essence of the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*. But in the question and answer section, he says that the realm of the Buddha’s enlightenment, that is, the ocean assembly of the vajra realm mandala described in the sutra, is established on the basis of the conditioned arising of the dharma-realm. “The conditioned arising of the dharma-realm, which is itself the dharma-nature,” here means in essence that the “A” syllable, the fundamental source of the myriad things, manifests in accordance with various conditions to form the phenomenal world. Ennin continues: “If now in the same manner we establish the doctrine of the Buddha-nature of insentient beings ... we simultaneously establish the doctrine of Suchness according with conditions” (BZ 15: 4c). In this way, Ennin stressed the originally unborn syllable “A” as a teaching having the same purport as the doctrines of the Buddha-nature of the insentient and Suchness according with conditions; if one takes the principle of the originally unborn “A” syllable to be the scriptural essence of the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*, then the other two principles are likewise established.

A careful investigation of Ennin’s writings reveals his constant awareness of indebtedness and gratitude to his teacher Saichō as he strove to develop and promote Saichō’s doctrine. Ennin can be seen as a paradigmatic example of those who carried on and developed Saichō’s teaching of Suchness according with conditions.

*Nichiren and the Doctrine of
Three Thousand Realms in a Single Thought-Moment*

Of the fundamental principles established by Japanese Tendai doctrinal studies, those most representative of the early period are Saichō's doctrine of Suchness according with conditions and Ennin's teaching of the syllable "A" as the fundamental ground, which appropriates Saichō's idea from an Esoteric standpoint. After Saichō and Ennin's time, the study of Zhiyi's three major works on the *Lotus Sutra* progressed, a doctrinal debate tradition developed, and medieval Tendai original enlightenment thought (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想), which may be seen as a product of the Esotericizing of *Lotus* Buddhism, appeared. Along with these developments, an emphasis on innovative oral transmission gained prominence, although we also find a contrasting scholastic approach stressing close textual exegesis. Elements from Zen, nenbutsu, Shinto, Shugendo, and other traditions were incorporated into Tendai, and in the Kamakura period, movements known collectively as the "new Buddhism" emerged in succession from within Tendai Buddhism and became independent.

Of course there were scholars who continued to promote the study of foundational Tiantai doctrine as exemplified by Zhiyi's three major works and their commentaries by Zhanran. But until Nichiren, it would appear that no one in Japan accorded a central place to the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra*.

As early as age thirty-seven, Nichiren was conscious of this doctrine as the very core of the Wonderful Dharma (*myōhō* 妙法) of the *Lotus*. We see this in his *Ichidai shōgyō taii* 一代聖教大意 (The cardinal meaning of the Buddha's lifetime teachings), written in 1258, shortly after he began to advocate faith in the *daimoku* 題目 or title of the *Lotus Sutra*. This work survives in a copy made by Nichiren's immediate disciple Nichimoku 日目 (1260–1333), which is kept at Hota Myōhonji in Chiba Prefecture. A relevant passage reads:

Question: What does it mean to say that the Wonderful Dharma is the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment?

Answer: The Great Teacher Tiantai [Zhiyi], after awakening to this doctrine, composed the *Profound Meaning* in ten fascicles and the *Words and Phrases* also in ten fascicles, and expounded many other teachings, including those of the *Samādhi of Maintaining Awareness of the Mind* [Jueyi sanmei 覺意三昧], the *Lesser Calming and Contemplation* [the *Xiaozhiguan* 小止觀], the *Commentary on the Vimalakīrti-sūtra* [Jingming shu 淨名疏], the *Four Bases of Mindfulness* [Sinianchu 四念処], and the *Gradual Meditation Method* [Cidi chanmen 次第禪門], but in these texts he did not set forth the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. He explained only [some of its component principles, such as] the doctrines of the ten realms, hundred realms, and thousand

suchlike characteristics. But then in the fourth month of his fifty-seventh summer, at a temple called Yuquansi in Jingzhou, he expounded it to his disciple, the Great Teacher Zhang'an 章安 [Guanding 觀頂] and had him write it down. This is the *Great Calming and Contemplation* in ten fascicles. [Even there,] in the first four fascicles he held back, expounding only the doctrines of the six identities and four kinds of samādhi. But in the fifth fascicle, he established the ten objects and ten modes of contemplation and set forth the doctrine of the three thousand realms in one thought-moment. The Great Teacher Miaole [Zhanran], in recommending this teaching to persons of the latter age, said that “[when Zhiyi at last clarified the method of calming and contemplation], he also employed the three thousand realms as a guide.... I hope that those who study and seek to understand this work will not allow their minds to become distracted by other matters.” The many doctrines set forth in the sixty fascicles and three thousand pages of Tiantai teachings are [in themselves] inadequate for understanding; rather, one should simply master these first two or three lines [of the relevant passage, as follows]: fascicle 5 of the *Great Calming and Contemplation* states, “Now one mind comprises ten dharma-realms, and each dharma-realm also comprises ten dharma-realms, giving a hundred dharma-realms. A single realm comprises thirty kinds of worlds; hence a hundred dharma-realms comprise three thousand kinds of worlds. These three thousand are contained in a single moment of thought.” (*Teihon* 1: 71)

In this way, Nichiren understood the Wonderful Dharma as the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment. He notes that Zhiyi expounded the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment in connection with his exposition of the ten objects of contemplation and the ten modes of contemplation, that is, ten conditions of mind that may be taken as objects of contemplation and ten methods of contemplation practice for observing one's mind (see DONNER and STEVENSON 1993, 20–21). The method Zhiyi established for contemplating the mind is encapsulated in the term *kanjin* (Ch. *guanxin* 觀心), observing or discerning the mind. Nichiren also emphasizes Zhanran's recommendation, already noted, that persons of the latter age who study the *Great Calming and Contemplation* should take the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment as their guide (T 46.296a). He then asserts that command of the entire sixty fascicles of Tiantai literature—the Great Teacher Tiantai Zhiyi's three major works on the *Lotus Sutra* and their commentaries by Zhanran—does not go beyond mastery of the few brief lines in the fifth fascicle of the *Great Calming and Contemplation* outlining this doctrine.⁵

5. Translator's note: this paragraph abridges two longer paragraphs in the original, in which Asai paraphrases the preceding quotation from Nichiren in modern Japanese. The wording of the next paragraph has been expanded slightly for clarity. See also ASAI 1999, esp. 252–57.

As is well known, Nichiren equated the Wonderful Dharma of the *Lotus Sutra* with the five characters *Myō-hō-ren-ge-kyō* 妙法蓮華經 that form the sutra's title. Following the *Ichidai shōgyō taii*, Nichiren referred at every opportunity to his claim that the Wonderful Dharma and the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment are the same. But the full fruition of his thinking on this subject does not appear until his *Kanjin honzon shō* 観心本尊抄 (The contemplation of the mind and the object of worship), which he wrote in 1273 at age fifty-two while in exile on Sado Island. At the beginning of this essay he quotes verbatim the above passage from the *Mohe zhiguan* setting forth the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment and elaborates upon it to address the question of how it is that the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha, awakened since ages past, can inhere in the minds of ordinary worldlings of the Final Dharma Age. He also addresses the problem of whether grasses and trees and the land itself can attain Buddhahood. Finally, in his conclusion, he says that the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, the fundamental principle of the *Lotus Sutra*, is perfectly contained within the five characters of the Wonderful Dharma. These five characters are fully endowed with the merits of both the practices that Śākyamuni carried out since the remotest past (cause) and the Buddhahood that he achieved in consequence (effect); thus, when ordinary persons of the last age embrace the five characters of the Wonderful Dharma, those causes and effects—that is, the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment of the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha—are bequeathed to them; they are thereby enveloped in his timeless realm and become of one essence with him, realizing Buddhahood. Nichiren also draws on the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment in this writing to connect the question of the Buddhahood of grasses and trees to the efficacy of the object of worship (*honzon*). Nichiren devised as an object of worship for his followers a distinctive calligraphic mandala, representing the absolute realm of the primordially awakened Śākyamuni. He explains that, in light of the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment—which is nothing other than the five characters of the Wonderful Dharma—a spiritual property inheres in the material paper and ink, deriving from grasses and trees, from which the mandala is made; that is why it can manifest the Buddha's enlightened reality and serve as an object of worship. Being equated in this way with the five characters of the *Lotus Sutra*'s title and with Nichiren's calligraphic mandala, the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment assumes a different form in Nichiren's teaching than it does in those of Zhiyi or Zhanran. One could say that Nichiren expressed it in a form according with the time, establishing it as the “contemplation of the mind for the Final Dharma Age” (*mappō no kanjin* 末法の観心).

Broadly speaking, it would appear that Nichiren revived the theory of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment, following Zhiyi and Zhanran.

Between the time of Saichō and Nichiren, there were some teachers who gave attention to partial aspects of this doctrine. However, there is no prior example of anyone who developed it as extensively as Nichiren, or who posited it, as he did, as the truth of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Conclusion

Of the scriptures central to Japanese Buddhist thought—if we set aside the Pure Land sutras—the *Lotus Sutra* emerges as central. Even in the fundamental thought of the Zen teacher Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), we can glimpse the influence of the Tendai *Lotus* teachings. The *Hokke ten hokke* 法華転法華 (Lotus turns the Lotus) fascicle of Dōgen’s major work *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼蔵 is especially famous. Moreover, the *Jōdo wasan* 浄土和讃 (Hymns to the Pure Land in Japanese) of Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) contains the famous verse:

The Buddha Amida, awakened since the remotest past, having pity for ignorant beings bound by the five defilements, manifested himself as Śākyamuni Buddha, appearing in the city of Gāya. (T 83.658c; SSZ 2: 496b).

Shinran’s wording here derives from Zhanran, who first used the term “actual attainment in the remotest past” (*kuon jitsujō* 久遠実成) to describe the original awakening of the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha revealed in the “Fathoming the Lifespan of the Tathāgata” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (see Zhanran’s commentaries on Zhiyi’s *Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* [T 33.924c] and *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* [T 34.328a]). This is one of several instances in which Shinran applied to Amida Buddha the purport of various sutras, in this case, the *Lotus*. As even these few examples suggest, the teachers of the so-called Kamakura new Buddhism all have roots in the Tendai *Lotus* thought of Mt. Hiei. When we bear this in mind, it becomes possible to see Japanese Buddhist thought as having developed with the *Lotus Sutra* as its core. If we adopt that perspective and take an overview of the doctrinal explanations of those teachers who sought the *Lotus Sutra*’s fundamental principle, we can confirm an intermingling of one stream that sought to carry on Zhiyi’s idea of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment; another stream that valued and applied the Huayan-inspired doctrine of Suchness according with conditions; and yet another that incorporated Esoteric elements. Among these, I believe we can rank Zhanran in China and Nichiren in Japan as those who appreciated and expanded the significance of Zhiyi’s doctrine of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment.

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