

A Short History of Buddhism

Shakyamuni, the first historically recorded Buddha, lived around three thousand years ago in India. He was born a prince, but renounced his secular life and devoted himself to finding a solution to the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. He attained enlightenment through meditation and then taught for over forty years, according to the circumstances and understanding of the people he met. His teachings are therefore many and varied, and sometimes paradoxical.

In the last eight years of his life he gave his most profound teaching, the Lotus Sutra, despite the fact that he knew many people would not immediately understand it. When he taught this sutra, he urged his disciples to 'honestly discard expedient means'¹. By this, he meant them to discard his previous teachings, which had been preparatory. This did not happen, partly because many of his followers did not understand, and partly because many had already departed and were spreading his earlier teachings.

This is why so many different forms of Buddhism exist today. Moreover, the teachings were added to, or modified, according to the culture and understanding of the people. This is only natural, since Buddhism is not a religion of dogma, but of action. It is a practical philosophy which relates to the time and place.

After Shakyamuni's death, Mahayana Buddhism² gradually spread to China, and from there, to Korea and Japan. This took place over a period of roughly one thousand five hundred years. During those periods when Buddhism flourished, peaceful and prosperous societies were established: in India during the reign of Ashoka the Great, China during the T'ang Dynasty and in Japan during the Heian period.

During the next five hundred years, established Buddhism started to decline. It had become formalised and ritualised so that

only monks, or those with independent means, could undertake the lifetime of austerities involved. It had lost its effectiveness for ordinary people and it was now time for a revitalisation of the Buddhist teachings.

Shakyamuni had foretold this gradual decline and predicted the appearance of a Buddha who would reveal the correct teaching for the time beginning two thousand years after his death, which is known in Buddhism as the Latter Day of the Law. He also predicted the many persecutions this person would experience. Nichiren Daishonin underwent exactly these persecutions, and this is one of many specific reasons for calling him the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law.

Nichiren Daishonin (Daishonin means great sage) was born in Japan in 1222. He was the son of a fisherman and was educated at a local temple, a common practice in those days. He chose to enter the priesthood and studied Buddhism widely before declaring, on 28 April 1253, that Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is the correct teaching for this time period.

Nichiren Daishonin spent the rest of his life expounding his teachings, teachings which enable ordinary people, living ordinary lives, to attain the same enlightened state as he did. On 12 October 1279, he inscribed his enlightened life-condition on a great mandala called the Dai-Gohonzon, dedicated to the happiness of all humankind.

Nichiren Daishonin declared that the Lotus Sutra is supreme amongst Buddhist teachings. This is mainly because of two points: it teaches that everyone without exception has Buddhahood, and it reveals that life is eternal. The Lotus Sutra describes the magnificence and wonder of life. However it is unlikely, were we to read it, that we would be able to understand it. The sutra was expounded at great length, using metaphors and parables. From his enlightened life-condition, Nichiren Daishonin was able to 'read between the lines' and declare the ultimate teaching.

Although Shakyamuni described the wondrous state of enlightenment, he did not define the fundamental law of the universe. Nichiren Daishonin revealed this Law as Nam-myoho-rence-kyo (see p.79) and taught a specific practice by which all people can attain enlightenment (see p.91).

Everything has its essential point and the heart of the Lotus Sutra is its title, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo... A law this easy to embrace and this easy to practise was taught for the sake of all mankind in this evil age of the Latter Day of the Law.³

1 *The Lotus Sutra* trans. Burton Watson, p. 44.

2 Mahayana literally means 'greater vehicle'. 'Vehicle' indicates a teaching or means to carry people to enlightenment. After Shakyamuni died, differences of opinion amongst his disciples led to two main streams: Mahayana, which stresses the importance of leading all people to enlightenment, and Theravada (later termed Hinayana, literally 'lesser vehicle', by Mahayana believers). The Theravadins held strictly to doctrine and ritual, as formulated for the monastic order. This stream spread mostly south and south-east of India to Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

3 *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Vol. 1, p. 222.