

# HISTORY OF NICHIREN BUDDHISM

## FROM SHAKYAMUNI TO TODAY

SGI-UK Study Department  
Introductory Study Programme

### Shakyamuni Buddha and the Lotus Sutra

Shakyamuni, also known as Siddhartha Gautama, was the founder of Buddhism. He lived in the fourth or fifth century BCE in a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas south of what is now central Nepal.

He was a prince of the Shakya clan, and was destined to succeed his father, King Shuddhodana, but as a young man he became aware of, and was deeply troubled by the problem of human suffering. He longed to leave his comfortable life in the royal palace and to seek a solution to the four sufferings common to all people: birth into this troubled world, sickness, old age and death. He renounced his wealth and titles and, after years of

effort, near the town of Gaya, he experienced a profound enlightenment to the essential nature of life and all things; to the cause of suffering and how to resolve it.

He then spent the next fifty or so years travelling through India, sharing his insight with others. After he died at the age of eighty, his disciples continued to spread his teachings through Asia. People tend to associate Buddhism solely with the teachings of Shakyamuni, but this neglects developments which occurred in later periods.

Shakyamuni's key message is contained in his highest teaching, the Lotus Sutra. This states that Buddhahood, a condition of absolute happiness and freedom from all fear and illusions, is inherent in all life, and is eternal. This means that 'the Buddha' is nothing other than an ordinary person who is aware of this state in his or her life. 'The Buddha' is not a special or divine being. The development of this inner life state can enable all people to overcome their problems and live a fulfilled and active life, engaging fully with others and with society.

### After Shakyamuni

Shakyamuni taught many teachings on the way to teaching the Lotus Sutra. After he died Buddhism took different forms as it spread. It spread in two main forms, the Theravada (or Hinayana – 'lesser vehicle') and the Mahayana ('greater vehicle'), and travelled into China along the commercial Silk Route. The sutras were translated into different languages and the teachings were adopted and merged into different cultures in Asia. This is the origin of the great variety and diversity of the Buddhist teachings which currently exist across Asia today.

When these diverse teachings reached China, people were uncertain which among them was the true teaching of the Buddha. Great thinkers, such as T'ien-t'ai and Chang-an studied the Lotus Sutra and confirmed its status as the greatest of the Buddha's teachings, because of its teaching that everyone can reveal the Buddha state in their daily lives.

Nevertheless Buddhism later reached Japan in many different schools each declaring the supremacy of their own teaching.

### Nichiren Daishonin- life and spirit

Nichiren Daishonin was born in Japan on 16th February 1222 in a country that was rife with conflicts and calamities which took a heavy toll on the ordinary people. He entered the priesthood as a boy, and it is said that while he was studying at Seicho-ji Temple he prayed to become the wisest person in all Japan, so that he could make sense of the Buddhist teachings, and lead his parents, and indeed all people, to enlightenment.

For 14 years he travelled around the main temples of Japan to conduct his research and became convinced that the key to

transforming people's suffering and enabling society to flourish lay in the Lotus Sutra, and particularly its title, Myoho-Renge-Kyo. On 28th April 1253 he declared that the correct Buddhist practice in this age is to chant the phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which enables everyone to attain enlightenment and true happiness throughout their lives, manifesting inherent Buddhahood and gaining the strength and wisdom to challenge any adverse circumstances.

Nichiren Daishonin challenged the established schools of Buddhism which served the interests of the powerful and encouraged passivity in the suffering masses. After this a series of persecutions began, which served to confirm that the Daishonin was acting in accordance with the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, which include a warning of the difficulty of spreading its teaching of fundamental respect in future ages. In 1260 he submitted his treatise 'On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,' to the most powerful figure in the government, urging the government to take responsibility for the suffering of the people, and to use his philosophy to remedy the situation.

Nichiren Daishonin was exiled twice by the government suffered violent attacks, and a number of his disciples were executed. He refused to compromise his principles to appease those in authority. During his second exile on Sado Island he continued to write letters of inspiration and encouragement to his followers, among which are counted some of his most important works. In 1274 the government freed him, stating that he was not guilty of any wrongdoing, and he retired to Mount Minobu where he continued to train his disciples, and write letters of encouragement to those who practiced his teachings. He inscribed the Dai-Gohonzon on 12th October 1279 so that all people could have the means to reveal their inherent Buddha nature. He died surrounded by his closest disciples on 13th October 1282.

## The Kosen-rufu movement-Soka Gakkai International

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism was passed from generation to generation, in Japan, for some 700 years until a lay society which became known as the Soka Gakkai (Value Creating Society) started to spread its teachings in 1930. Soka Gakkai was founded by the educators Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, who found parallels in the Daishonin's teaching with their philosophy of education. They challenged the militaristic government during the Second World War, and were imprisoned; the society's first president, Makiguchi, died in jail on 18th November 1944. Toda realised during his imprisonment that this modern age is the very period of conflict that the Lotus Sutra was taught to resolve.

After the war, the Japanese constitution allowed for the freedom of religion, for the first time, and Toda reconstructed the Soka Gakkai as a movement for people in all aspects of society, not just in education. By the time he died on 2nd April 1958 the organization had grown beyond his target of 750,000 households and even had members elected to the Japanese Parliament.

Daisaku Ikeda became the third President on 3rd May 1960 when he was 32. Under his leadership the organization grew rapidly and expanded abroad. In 1975 Soka Gakkai International was established and he became its first president. There are now more than 12 million members in 188 countries and territories, and Daisaku Ikeda has conducted dialogues with scholars, cultural and political leaders around the world. He also founded the Soka University and the Soka Schools, the Min-On Concert Association, the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy. The SGI continues its development as the organization of 'human revolution,' the individual's inner reformation, and

establishment of Buddhahood as the core life state, based on Nichiren Daishonin's teachings.

## Buddhism for today

In the Lotus Sutra, the goal of those who were to spread its teachings throughout the world is encapsulated in the phrase 'kosen-rufu'. This means 'to teach and spread widely' the Buddhist law. This is also the goal of the SGI, to teach the universal law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo around the world.

The following are quotations taken from recent articles by Daisaku Ikeda, where he explains the meaning of 'kosen-rufu':

'To become happy not only ourselves, but to enable others to become happy as well. To bring harmony to our local communities. And to help our nations flourish and bring peace to the whole world. The lives of those who pray and work to achieve these goals pulse with faith that is dedicated to realizing kosen-rufu.' (NL 4584)

'Kosen-rufu is an undertaking that we must pursue in society, in the real world. Kosen-rufu is an indomitable struggle for peace and justice in which we must fight unceasingly against the negative and destructive forces found in the real world.' (NL 4744)

'If we're going to live this life, we must not waste it on trivial, self-centered pursuits, but instead live for a lofty ideal. And the most lofty ideal is worldwide kosen-rufu. Those who continue to uphold a great philosophy, a great ideal, and a great religion are unsurpassed victors as human beings.' (NL 5226)

Buddhism is a religion that dates back almost three thousand years, yet its practical philosophy

means that it is even more applicable in today's difficult times. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, as spread through the SGI movement, teaches individual empowerment and inner transformation which at the same time contributes to global peace, enabling people to develop themselves and take responsibility for their lives, no matter what their circumstances or background.

**Introductory study  
programme materials**  
**Version 2.0** for use from  
July 2004

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