

Buddhas Live in the Lotus Sutra: A Reflective Essay

Nichiren's Analogy: Buddhas and Their "Environment" in the Lotus Sutra

Nichiren Daishonin, the 13th-century Buddhist teacher, wrote that *"The Indian lizard kṛkalāsa eats in the wind; it won't grow if there is no wind. A fish lives in the water, and a bird makes a nest in the tree. Likewise, Buddhas live in the Lotus Sūtra. As the moon's reflection resides in the water, Buddhas reside in the Lotus Sūtra. Therefore, you must remember that where there is no Lotus Sūtra, there are no Buddhas."* This vivid analogy compares the dependence of various creatures on their natural element to the relationship between Buddhas and the **Lotus Sutra**. In his letter *"Reply to the Mother of Lord Ueno,"* Nichiren explains:

- Frogs can only grow by hearing the sound of their mother's voice; without it, they fail to thrive.
- An insect (the *kalakula*, identified as the Indian lizard *kṛkalāsa*) lives on the wind, and will not grow if the wind does not blow.
- Fish must have water to survive, and birds need trees in which to build their nests.
- **Likewise, the Buddhas depend on the Lotus Sutra as their source of life, nourishment, and dwelling – as fish live in water and birds dwell in trees, so do the Buddhas "live in this sutra."** In a land where the Lotus Sutra is absent, "there can be no Buddhas." ¹

Through these metaphors, Nichiren conveys a profound point: **the Lotus Sutra is the essential environment or medium for Buddhahood**. Just as those creatures cannot live or grow without their sustaining element, **Buddhas cannot appear or attain enlightenment without the Lotus Sutra** ². In other words, all Buddhas "live" in the truth and teachings of the Lotus Sutra, and apart from this **Wonderful Dharma** there are no true Buddhas. This elevates the Lotus Sutra to a uniquely crucial status – it is not just one scripture among many, but the very **realm of life** for enlightened beings.

Nichiren even calls the Lotus Sutra *"the father and mother of the Buddhas of the three existences and the ten directions,"* as well as their *"wet nurse and their lord."* In his view, **the Lotus Sutra "gives birth" to the Buddhas, nourishes them, and reigns supreme over their lives** ³. This is a bold assertion that all Buddhas of past, present, and future attained their enlightenment by means of the Lotus Sutra's teachings. It reflects the Lotus Sutra's own message that **full enlightenment (Buddhahood) is universally accessible and is the ultimate truth underlying all Buddhist teachings**.

The Lotus Sutra as the Ultimate Teaching and "Home" of Buddhas

Why did Nichiren stress that Buddhas reside only in the Lotus Sutra? It is rooted in his conviction that the Lotus Sutra represents the culmination of Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings – the final, complete truth after which nothing higher remains. In the Buddhist canon, Shakyamuni preached many sutras, but the *Lotus Sutra* (Sanskrit: *Saddharma Pūṇḍarīka Sūtra*, often translated as *"Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma"*) is, according to Nichiren, the **supreme teaching**. All earlier teachings are like a scaffold or preparatory steps, set up only to pave the way for the Lotus Sutra's revelation ⁴ ⁵. Once the "great

pagoda" of the Lotus Sutra was built, the lesser scaffolding could be discarded. In fact, Nichiren uses exactly this image: other sutras are the scaffolding, and the Lotus Sutra is the great tower or pagoda. *"No one would ever dream of discarding the pagoda and worshipping the scaffolding,"* he remarks, yet people who cling to earlier or partial teachings while ignoring the Lotus Sutra are doing just that ⁵.

Nichiren therefore **warned of the foolishness of following teachings other than the Lotus Sutra**, declaring that only the Lotus Sutra perfectly accords with the Buddha's true intent ⁶. He taught that all the provisional sutras (and even non-Buddhist philosophies) were *"merely preparations"* for this one Great Dharma ⁶. What is so special about the Lotus Sutra? According to Nichiren (and the sutra's own text), the Lotus Sutra reveals **the ultimate reality that all beings can attain Buddhahood**. It proclaims the *"Wonderful Dharma"* that even those previously thought excluded or unworthy – women, evil-doers like Devadatta, people in the evil ages – are all assured of becoming Buddhas in the end ⁶. In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha emphasizes that he *"now must reveal the truth"* and *"honestly discard expedient means"*, teaching only the One Vehicle to enlightenment for all ⁷ ⁸.

Importantly, the Lotus Sutra also reveals the concept of the **eternal Buddha** – that Shakyamuni *has* actually been a Buddha since the inconceivably distant past and continues to guide beings eternally (Lotus Sutra Chapter 16). Nichiren highlights this by saying the **ever-present Shakyamuni Buddha is constantly leading people to enlightenment** ⁶. In other words, the Buddha's compassionate guidance is always accessible through the Lotus Sutra. Thus, to Nichiren, **the Lotus Sutra is the very living presence of Buddhahood in our world**. When we embrace the sutra, we effectively *dwell* with the Buddha and activate the Buddha's presence in our lives. This is why he says unequivocally: *"Where there is no Lotus Sutra, there are no Buddhas."* Buddhas cannot manifest in a place or life that doesn't embrace this ultimate Law. Conversely, **where the Lotus Sutra is upheld, the Buddha's life-state appears, and enlightenment becomes a reality.**

Appreciating the Rare Opportunity to Embrace the Lotus Sutra

Given the Lotus Sutra's vital role, Nichiren urges us **not to take for granted our opportunity to encounter and practice this sutra** in our lifetime. Both Nichiren's writings and the Lotus Sutra itself remind us that meeting this teaching is extraordinarily rare and precious ⁹. In one passage, the Lotus Sutra uses a famous parable of a one-eyed turtle in the ocean: the chance of that turtle encountering a floating sandalwood log with a hole just the right size to rest in is astronomically small – yet that is *still* easier than encountering the Lotus Sutra! ⁹ The sutra also compares hearing the true Dharma to the blooming of the *udumbara* flower (which Indian legend says blossoms only once in 3,000 years). These metaphors drive home how **fortunate and hard-won our meeting with the Lotus Sutra is**.

Nichiren elaborates on this idea in his letters. He asserts that it is *only through enormous good karma and efforts over countless lifetimes* that one is able to now hear and embrace the Lotus Sutra. *"Could it be that Shakyamuni Buddha has entered your body, or is this the expression of your virtue accumulated in the past?"* he writes in praise of a follower's deep faith ¹⁰. He took it as axiomatic that if we have awakened faith in the Lotus Sutra today, it is because we created great causes and endured great hardships in the past to make this possible. Every past act of seeking the truth, every hardship overcome for the sake of the Dharma, has led us to this encounter with the Lotus Sutra's wisdom.

The **Lotus Sutra itself acknowledges the struggles and perseverance required to uphold it**. Many chapters (especially Chapter 13, "Encouraging Devotion," and Chapter 20, "Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva")

describe how practitioners will face slander, persecution, or isolation for the sake of this sutra, but that enduring these trials yields immeasurable benefit. In Nichiren's view, these descriptions weren't just ancient history or abstract parable – he **lived** them. Nichiren faced exile, threats of execution, and countless obstacles as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, which he saw as proof of the sutra's predictions and a cause for boundless joy ¹¹. While those specific hardships were Nichiren's own, we too in our personal lives may have overcome various obstacles (in this life or even in prior existences) to arrive at a point where we can embrace the Lotus Sutra.

Recognizing this **rare opportunity**, we can feel a sense of gratitude and responsibility. Rather than complacently thinking our faith is something ordinary, we realize it is the fruition of a long journey. Nichiren encourages us to treasure this encounter deeply and to make the most of it by genuinely "keeping and practicing" the Lotus Sutra. After all, if it took eons to finally encounter the Lotus Sutra, we would not want to squander the chance by treating it lightly or mixing it with lesser pursuits. **Appreciating the Lotus Sutra means valuing our own inherent capacity for Buddhahood** – our "true birthright," as Nichiren would say – and understanding how much went into bringing us to this awakening.

Transitory Attachments vs. the Everlasting Dharma

A key reflection arising from Nichiren's passage is the contrast between **transient worldly attachments** and the **enduring truth of the Lotus Sutra**. Nichiren suggests that if we "try to rely on the transitory aspects of our lives, we are surely disappointed." In our daily existence, it's easy to seek security and happiness in things that don't last – material comfort, social status, physical youth, or even intellectual teachings that lack ultimate depth. These are "*transitory*" not only because they are impermanent (subject to time and change), but also because they do not lead us to our true, unchanging goal of enlightenment. When we pin our hopes on such impermanent things, **disappointment is inevitable**. Wealth can vanish, relationships change, health declines, and even kindly teachings that address only superficial needs might eventually show their limitations.

In Buddhism, this insight is fundamental: all conditioned things are *anicca* (impermanent) and ultimately *dukkha* (unsatisfactory) when we cling to them. The Lotus Sutra amplifies this understanding by revealing that even the **provisional Buddhist teachings** which were not the full truth are ultimately "expedients" – useful for a time, but not the final refuge. If we stop short with those expedient teachings or with worldly values, we remain in the realm of transience, never quite resolving our deepest thirst for truth.

By contrast, **the Lotus Sutra represents the everlasting Dharma**, the ultimate Law that underlies the universe and our lives. It teaches the eternity of the Buddha's life and the permanence of the Buddha-nature in all beings. In Chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni reveals that his enlightenment is not a transient event of this lifetime, but that he has been enlightened since the remotest past and will always remain so, guiding countless beings. This means the *path to enlightenment is ever-present and always accessible*. When we rely on this true Law – encapsulated by the Lotus Sutra – we are no longer betrayed by impermanence. We align ourselves with something **timeless and unfailing**: the fundamental reality that all beings can become Buddhas.

Practically speaking, "keeping and practicing this sutra" in Nichiren Buddhism means chanting its title (*Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*), embracing its teachings with faith, and living in a way that accords with its principles. Doing so provides an anchor in the stormy sea of life's changes. Instead of being swayed by every rise and fall of fortune, one finds a deeper **inner stability and hope** by focusing on the Lotus Sutra's promise of

enlightenment. Nichiren teaches that our lives can become like the calm, vast ocean (the Buddha's wisdom) rather than a small boat tossed on the waves of change. He often cited the Lotus Sutra's assurance that those who embrace it will be "covered by the Buddha's robe of compassion and protected by all the Buddhas" ¹² ¹³. In other words, taking refuge in the Lotus Sutra is taking refuge in the everlasting life-condition of Buddhahood itself, which is beyond birth and death. Transitory troubles still occur, but they no longer devastate us, because we entrust ourselves to the greater Law that uses even hardships as fuel for enlightenment.

In our own reflections, we can ask: *Where am I seeking sustenance and security?* Is it in the "wind" of public opinion, the "water" of material comfort, the "tree" of personal relationships? While all those have their value, Nichiren's guidance is that only **the "Lotus Sutra" of our own Buddha nature** provides a truly reliable home. Worldly winds may cease, waters may dry, and trees may fall, but the truth of the Lotus Sutra – that our life is one with the Buddha's life – remains to nourish us forever. Realizing this, we naturally become less discouraged by life's ups and downs and more devoted to what truly matters: **the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and enlightenment in ourselves and others.**

Enlightenment as Our Birthright and the Buddha's Constant Guidance

Finally, Nichiren's passage points toward a very encouraging view of human potential: that **enlightenment is our true birthright**. By saying the Buddha leads us to our "*true birthright, the enlightenment he knows we and all beings can reach,*" the commentary highlights a core message of the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni Buddha's ultimate purpose, as stated in the sutra, was to reveal that *every* living being possesses the Buddha nature and can unlock it. In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha uses various stories and assurances to awaken people to this fact. For example, he predicts Buddhahood even for individuals like Devadatta (who was seen as an evil person) and for women (like the Dragon King's daughter) – startling assertions in the context of that time, meant to shatter the idea that enlightenment is limited to a select few ⁶. The sutra famously teaches that there is **only one vehicle (One Buddha Vehicle)** for all – in other words, ultimately everyone is on the same path to Buddhahood, just taking different routes up the mountain.

Nichiren was utterly convinced of this point. He taught that by embracing the Lotus Sutra and chanting its essence, anyone – regardless of their status or flaws – is tapping into the enlightenment of the Buddha within their own life. This is our *inheritance* as children of the Buddha. He often refers to practitioners of the Lotus Sutra as the **Buddha's true heirs** or the children of the Buddha, who will inherit "*the riches of the Law.*" Just as an heir has a birthright to their parent's legacy, all of us have a birthright to the boundless wisdom and compassion of Buddhahood. However, to claim that birthright, we must follow the Buddha's guidance and practice the Law he left for us.

The Lotus Sutra depicts the Buddha **actively helping and guiding those who uphold the sutra**. It describes how the Buddhas of the ten directions assemble to protect the Lotus Sutra's practitioners, and how the Buddha in lifetime after lifetime seeks to lead each being to enlightenment ¹³ ¹⁴. In the "Life Span" chapter (Chapter 16), Shakyamuni reveals his inner thought: "*At all times I am thinking, 'How can I cause living beings to gain entry to the unsurpassed path and quickly attain Buddhahood?'*" This assurance – that the Buddha is constantly working to guide us – is deeply personal and heartening. It means that when we practice the Lotus Sutra, **we are never alone**. We have the Buddha's vow and presence with us at each step.

Nichiren interpreted events in his life, even hardships, as the Buddha's compassionate strategy to strengthen his faith and bring him closer to enlightenment.

For us, reflecting on this can transform our attitude toward practice. We begin to sense that **our journey of faith is supported by countless Buddhas and bodhisattvas**. Every time we chant *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* or read a passage of the Lotus Sutra, it is as if the Buddha were "covering us with his robe" and cheering us on ¹². Our commitment to the Lotus Sutra enables the protective forces of the universe to manifest. In Nichiren's letter (the same one we've been discussing), he illustrates this with a story of King Rinda, who could only thrive when he heard the neighing of white horses, which in turn neighed only when holy men chanted the Lotus Sutra. This symbolizes that **society flourishes when the True Dharma is upheld**, and that the positive influence of the Buddha spreads wherever the Lotus Sutra is practiced ¹⁵ ¹⁶. When we uphold the sutra, not only do we inch closer to our own enlightenment, but we also invite the Buddha's wisdom and compassion to pervade our environment, benefitting others.

Thus, Nichiren's message "*where there is no Lotus Sutra, there are no Buddhas*" is not a lament, but a call to action and faith. It reminds us that if we want to see enlightenment in ourselves, in others, or in the world at large, **we must establish the Lotus Sutra in our hearts and communities**. The Buddhas "live" where this Dharma is embraced – meaning that in such a place, the qualities of Buddhahood (courage, compassion, insight, joy) will be vividly alive. In a sense, we give the Buddha a place to "dwell" by practicing the Lotus Sutra, and in turn the Buddha's presence illuminates our lives, leading us toward our inherent enlightenment.

Conclusion: Living in the Lotus Sutra

Nichiren's reflective words urge us to examine what we base our lives on. If we base ourselves on the **Lotus Sutra – the ultimate truth that Buddhas embody – we are effectively living with the Buddhas**. We create the causes for enlightenment to flower in our lives. This is a far more secure and meaningful foundation than the fleeting winds of fortune or the shifting sands of worldly attachments. Realizing this, we can feel deep appreciation that we have encountered the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's teachings in this lifetime. Instead of taking this "*wonderful Dharma*" for granted, we remember the long journey that made it possible and resolve to continue walking the path it lays out.

A reflective practitioner might conclude: *I will cherish the Lotus Sutra as the air I breathe and the ground I stand on*. Just as a bird builds its nest in a tree, I will **make my home in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra**. In doing so, I know that I am nestled in the Buddha's own realm, and that my growth toward enlightenment is assured. All beings have the potential for Buddhahood – it is our shared birthright – and the Lotus Sutra is the guiding light that helps us claim it. By keeping this sutra in our hearts and actions, we find the Buddha constantly at our side, leading us onward. This is the promise Nichiren fervently wanted us to remember: *where the Lotus Sutra is, there the Buddha is alive and well – and where we uphold the Lotus Sutra, there we will find the Buddha within us, illuminating the path to our enlightenment*.

Sources:

- Nichiren Daishonin, "Reply to the Mother of Lord Ueno" (1275). Nichiren affirms the Lotus Sutra as "*the father and mother... wet nurse and lord*" of all Buddhas, and uses analogies of frogs, wind-eating insects, fish, and birds to show that "*as fish live in water, so the Buddhas live in this sutra... where this sutra does not exist, there can be no Buddhas*." ³ ¹⁷

- Rev. Shinkyo Warner, *Lotus Jewels, Nichiren Shu News* No. 258 (2025). Commentary on Nichiren's writings explaining that all prior teachings are mere scaffolding for the Lotus Sutra's "Wonderful Dharma", which declares that "*all beings will attain Buddhahood*" under the constant guidance of the ever-present Buddha ⁶.
- **Lotus Sutra** (Chapter 14 "Peaceful Practices" and Chapter 27 "King Wonderful Adornment"). The Buddha likens the difficulty of encountering the Lotus Sutra to a one-eyed turtle finding a floating log, illustrating how rare and precious it is to hear this teaching ⁹. The sutra emphasizes that those who can encounter and uphold it have done immense good in the past and will be protected by the Buddhas in the present ¹³.
- Nichiren Daishonin, "The One-eyed Turtle and the Floating Log" (1279). Nichiren cites the Lotus Sutra's parable to stress the extreme rarity of meeting the Lotus Sutra, urging believers to recognize their good fortune and maintain strong faith ⁹.
- **The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin**, vol. I. Numerous letters (e.g. "*The Selection of the Time*," "*Letter from Sado*," "*On Practicing the Buddha's Teachings*") reiterate that only the Lotus Sutra leads to full enlightenment, and that embracing it in the Latter Day of the Law will invariably invite hardships that are in fact the trials predicted by the sutra. Nichiren sees these hardships as evidence of profound karmic ties to the Lotus Sutra and as honors to be borne for the sake of ultimate happiness ¹¹.

<http://nichiren.info/gosho/ReplyMotherLordUeno.htm>

⁶ LOTUS JEWELS (Nichiren Shu News NO258) | ARTICLE | Nichiren Shu Portal
<https://www.nichiren.or.jp/english/article/read/id307/>

⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ Background Info - The One-eyed Turtle and the Floating Sandalwood Log
http://nichiren.info/gosho/bk_Turtle.htm