

Lotus Sutra, Lecture No. III-1

[Third Lotus Sutra Series]¹

Monday Evening, October 20, 1969

Zen Mountain Center

As many of you are students who joined our training—this training period, and perhaps many of you didn't join the last training period—so I think I must tell you about the spirit of the Lotus Sutra because it is rather difficult for someone who wants to read it as you read the Bible or Confucianism. The Lotus Sutra is not like a chronicle of a great sage—a chronicle of sayings or actions of a great sage like Christ or Confucius. It is something like *The Divine Comedy*. I don't know how you call it: *Divine Comedy of Dante*. Or, it is something like great music. It is actually something to feel when you read it.

So, in Japan, whether or not they understand it, they repeat the Lotus Sutra over and over again, until they get the feeling of the sutra. If you think it is great music, maybe, you will appreciate this sutra. So, if you read it chapter by chapter, it doesn't mean anything. It is like to see a big building, part by part. Sometimes you will see just the strange foundation of the big building. Although it is something big, it is not so interesting. It may be a big, big stone or concrete, but if you see the building from a distance, it may be a beautiful building. So, until you read it over and over again and appreciate the whole structure of the building, it is not so interesting a sutra. It looks like a kind of mess which is written in great scale.

This is the difference between Hinayana—I shouldn't say “Hinayana”—maybe original Buddhism and more developed Buddhism from original so-called Hinayana Buddhism. For instance: You are very much interested in Zen. But, Zen is maybe largely mysticism in one way. When we put emphasis on enlightenment, and when we talk about enlightenment [laughs], it is something beyond actually what we are saying. You will feel the spirit of it by a koan or by a story or by *Shobogenzo*. You will feel some burning—something very hot inside. It is like a blue flame—it is very hot. And very direct. That is the characteristic of Zen.

So, we say it is something beyond words. After Mahayana Buddhists expressed their spirit in a big, big scale, Zen started to express Buddhist spirit in a more direct and completely different way. But, it is very difficult to understand anyway what it means actually. What kind of spirit is hidden in it is difficult. That is why koan study is difficult.

The same thing is true with Mahayana scriptures. Unless you feel the hidden spirit in it, it is rather difficult to appreciate it. And, it may take a pretty long time to understand it, because it is a pretty voluminous scripture. And for Zen students it takes a pretty long time. We say, “sudden enlightenment” [laughs], but actually after practicing very hard with intensity and with firm conviction, you will understand the hidden spirit.

Zen is very practical. We say it is—it is so. But, how it's practical is quite different. It is not like to

keep a bank account. To keep a bank account is very practical work. But [laughs] when we say Zen is very practical, it is closely related to our everyday life, we say. But, Zen is not something like a way of living or a moral code. If you think: if you follow Zen teaching, you will have some advantage. If you understand in that way, that will be a great misunderstanding. The real purpose of zazen or reading of scriptures is to understand the lofty idea of Buddhism and to be encouraged by the Buddhist spirit. You can enjoy your life in—that is what we mean when we say stress Zen in our everyday life. If you do not—if you haven't attained this kind of spirit by yourself, you should practice our way with some teacher who has that kind of spirit.

The same thing is true in studying the Lotus Sutra. My mother,² always recited this sutra. When I was young—when she was taking care of me, she sometimes recited the Lotus Sutra, so I know very well how to recite it. And [laughs] when I became 12 or 13, I thought this is very—I couldn't understand it. I could understand what she was saying, “even if you are tossed off a cliff of some high mountain, you will be safe.” Or, “Even if you jump into a fire, you will not be burned.” Or, “If you drift in a black stormy sea, you will be saved.” Something like that. “If someone wants to kill you with a sword, the sword will break in pieces.” Something like that. I [laughs]—when I could understand what she was saying, I doubted it, you know. I thought my mother was a very superstitious person. I didn't like to hear mother reciting.

But, I cannot forget [laughs] her attitude—her way of reciting the sutra. And, it is a kind of encouragement for me always, when I think of my mother reciting the Lotus Sutra.

In monastery also we recite this sutra at some certain periods, over and over again.

When I went to the East Coast this time, I was almost all the time in Vermont. And, I went to Vermont first and then Rochester. And, I stayed in New York just two days and came back. I saw beautiful mountains and beautiful old deserted stone walls in Vermont. And, I felt as if I were some old, old country. And I was dreaming about many things. Sometimes I felt as if we have a big, big monastery [laughs] deep in the mountains. My trip was a kind of a dreamy trip [laughs]. And, I met many people, but I think I was not so practical [laughs]. Maybe I am talking about some dream of Zen Center or something like that. But, I didn't feel I was talking about my dream. To me it was very practical and very realistic to have a beautiful zendo in Tassajara or to have a beautiful building in the center of San Francisco. It was not a dream any more, after I saw many mountains.

And, I saw the owner of the property, and most of them who I met wanted us to build a zendo in Vermont or on the East Coast. So, I thought if we fix our mind, they may give us some property [laughs], but maybe that is my dream, but it was very realistic to me at that time.

If someone says, “He is a daydreamer,” maybe I am a daydreamer. But, if you have some confidence in realizing your ideal, I don't think that is a dream. Even though you have a small, monastery, it will be a big, big monastery if you have Buddhist spirit. It is not actually a matter of big or small. If we express our spirit in a big scale, it may be a Lotus Sutra. If we express our spirit in one word or very simple words, it may be toilet paper [laughs] or three pounds of hemp

or a grain of rice. If you say when you are asked—what is our spirit? —“three pounds of hemp,” that is Zen. If you recite the Lotus Sutra, that is Mahayana teaching. So, it is necessary for you to have some spirit to appreciate the hidden spirit of Mahayana teaching when you study the Lotus Sutra.

This scripture was written—no one knows exactly when, but we don't think that the scripture was written by some particular person. Maybe while they were reciting something which was written by someone, I think this scripture became more and more popular, and expression of it became more and more refined. And, maybe between 200 B.C. and 100 B.C., this scripture supposedly became this style. And, if you want to know how Buddha's teaching developed into Mahayana teaching, I want you to read the *Wind Bell*.³ I think you will understand what kind of historical background this sutra has, and how Buddhism developed into Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhist scholars say Hinayana or Theravada teaching put emphasis on the form of expression, because Theravada teaching is more rigid and literal—more like chronicles of sayings or activities of sages. So you can understand it literally. So, even if you read just one sentence, you will be encouraged, and you will understand it. But Mahayana scriptures put emphasis on the nature of the teaching or the spirit of teaching, many scholars say.

So, Mahayana Buddhists do not understand things literally. For instance, we have precepts like “Don't kill.” For Theravada or Hinayana Buddhists to kill some bugs is a violation of the scripture—the precepts—because they stick to the moral code. But, for a Mahayana Buddhist, if he sticks to the word—if he understands precepts literally and sticks to them, it would be a violation of the Fifth Precept: “Don't be intoxicated by sake.” Sake also is not just wine. Even though it's the teaching—if you stick to it, and if you are intoxicated by it, that is wine also. [Laughs.] So, the way of observing precepts is also very different.

The same thing is true in understanding of those scriptures. For instance, the Fourth Precept is not to tell a lie. But in the Lotus Sutra,⁴ Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva, he told a lie to his family. And, he said “I am going to die.” Oh, no no—he said, “I want to go—I want to make a trip. Perhaps I may not come back.” So some of the children who were not spoiled completely by their father thought, “Oh, now my father is not here, and he will not come again. So, we must study hard.” And, some of them started to study hard. But, some of them who were completely spoiled by their father did not study hard. But, when they learned their father was no more, then they were awakened. And, the scripture says, “Who criticizes this father who told a lie to his children?” It is because he told a lie to make them awake and to study hard. That was why he told a lie. This kind of story is everywhere.

So, the true way must have both sides. We must sometimes understand scripture literally and follow scripture literally like Theravada Buddhists—sometimes. But, sometimes we should not follow, or we should not quote the teaching literally. So, we say, especially—Dogen Zenji's way is to understand Buddhism with Mahayana spirit by Hinayana practice. That is actually Dogen Zenji's way.

So, why this sutra is important is this scripture expresses both ways. According to this scripture, even one leaf of grass is Buddha. Everything is Buddha. Whatever you do, that is the expression of Buddha's way. So this scripture puts emphasis on each being or our everyday activity. Whatever we do, we should make our best in what we do, day by day.

And, on the other hand, things we do or things we see in everyday life should be understood with a great spirit. So, this scripture puts emphasis on a big spirit in the smallest things: something near-at-hand. This scripture includes both sides. That is why this scripture is called the "King of All Scriptures." I think that is why Dogen Zenji liked this scripture, and he referred to this scripture so many times in *Shobogenzo*.

So, I want you, whether you understand it or not—it may be a good practice to repeat it. Then, naturally you will have some spirit which is hidden in this scripture.

Do you have some questions? I think we have some more time. Hai.

Student A: Will all of your lectures during this practice period be on the Lotus Sutra?

SR: Ahh. I don't know. I want to explain maybe some important chapters. So I don't think it will take so long. If I have more time, I will start something else. Do you have some questions? Hai.

Student B: While we're studying the Lotus Sutra, how do we apply mental effort?

SR: Oh.

Student B: You said that we should just maybe repeat it over and over again.

SR: Mm-hmm. That's all, you know. It is rather difficult to apply this sutra directly to everyday life. To have a big spirit, we read this sutra.

Student B: How should we try to penetrate it while we're reading it?

SR: Mm-hmm. How?

Student B: Yeah.

SR: Just read it. You know, if you [laughs]—it may be tedious sometimes. It will make you sleepy sometimes [laughs]—I think so. But if you read it over and over again, then you will have this kind of Mahayana spirit. It doesn't work directly. I think you study something, so that you can apply the teaching directly to your everyday life. It doesn't work in that way.

Maybe we can recite a part of it in the morning chant or evening chant, instead of Hannya shingyo⁵ sometimes.

Do you have some more questions?

[Sentence finished. Tape turned over.]

I will start from the chapter of “Good Means”—Chapter II. So it may be better if you have the book—better to read it. It is rather difficult for me to explain it. But I will try, and if you read it before in study time, it will help.

Some more questions? No?

Student C: I have a question.

SR: Hai.

Student C: It sounded like your mother had faith in the Lotus Sutra.

SR: Uh-huh.

Student C: Could you speak about faith and Zen?

SR: Faith and Zen. Oh. You know, it's not “faith.” I think it was a kind of prayer, maybe, for her. She felt maybe very much encouraged when having some problem in her mind. Because she had some difficulty—not “some difficulty”—actually she had a lot of difficulty as a wife of a priest at that time. So, I think she couldn't help, reciting a sutra like this.

Most—all the Buddhist priests had a very, very difficult time at that time. That was the second part of the Meiji Period.⁶ The policy of the Meiji government penetrated all over Japan. And so, Buddhist temples almost—Buddhism was almost dying at that time. And, priests had a very difficult time. And, people were very much interested in Western civilization. And, the policy of the Meiji government was to encourage Shintoism, and to make Japan's army stronger, and believing in Shintoism, and to have hard study of Western culture to catch up with advanced countries, and to make the country stronger. That was the policy of the Meiji government.

So, Buddhists had a very difficult time at that time. When [laughs] it rained, my parents used an umbrella inside [laughs] and boiled tea. The roof was leaking badly [laughs, laughter]. And the temple—financially they had a very difficult time. So, they had to sell the property, little by little. But during my father's time there was no property at all at that time, because the priest who was in that temple before my father had sold almost all the property. They had no money. The people didn't support the temple. So, there was no way to mend the roof or building. The tatami⁷ was almost broken. I remember exactly.

So, when I went to school, I was a small hippy [laughs, laughter]. My head was always shaved by him [laughs]. When we had ceremonies at school, they wore *hakama*,⁸ usually. But, I had no *hakama* [laughs]. I didn't like to attend festivals or ceremonies at all because I couldn't dress up

as my friends did. I didn't mind so much as my mother did. I can imagine how she felt. She had always that kind of feeling or problem. So she was just reciting the sutra [laughs]. Ahh.

But, I criticized her when I could understand what she was reciting. I think maybe for her that was a kind of prayer. She was reciting Chapter 25 always,⁹ where it repeats some miraculous powers of saving people—the power of Avalokitesvara in saving people.

My teacher Kishizawa Roshi¹⁰ had hard skin here.¹¹ He was bowing always—I don't know how many times he bowed to Buddha. I think that was a kind of prayer. He wanted to be a good Zen master—Zen priest. But, he had too strong an ego [laughs]. He was too stubborn. And, he called himself “one-legged priest,” or—what do you call it if you cannot walk without a stick? When he wrote some calligraphy, his signature was “one-legged priest.”

Student D: “Peg-legged.”

SR: Hmm?

Student D: If you have a wooden leg, it's called “peg-legged.”

Student E: “Lame”?

SR: [Laughs.] “Lame,” maybe. “Crippled priest.” So, to conquer his ego he bowed to Buddha until he had [laughs] a callous here. Because of that he was scolded by his teacher¹² always. I think that was a kind of prayer. [Laughs.] Even though you know what is right, your mind doesn't [laughs] follow sometimes. There is no other way than to make prayer.

I think if you want to practice hard, I think prayer will follow. If you say, “That's all right. Everyone has ego—not only me. Everyone has ego, so it is all right for me to have some ego.” If you say or if you understand in that way, you will not conquer your ego. You say “egolessness” quite easily, but it is not so easy.

So, I think not to gain something, not to recover from illness—if you appreciate or if you understand the Buddhist spirit, I think you cannot help praying for your teachers or for the patriarchs—successive patriarchs who have been making the same effort.

Thank you very much.

[Tape recording was stopped and then restarted. Then Suzuki started reading from: *Saddharma Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, translated by H. Kern, New York: Dover, 1963 (an unaltered reprint of the 1884 edition of “The Sacred Books of the East,” Vol. XXI), p. 30.]

Chapter II: "Skillfulness"

The Lord then arose with recollection and consciousness from his meditation, and forthwith addressed the venerable Shariputra:

"The buddha-knowledge, Shariputra, is profound, difficult to understand, difficult to comprehend. It is difficult for all disciples and pratyekabuddhas to fathom the knowledge arrived at by tathagatas, and that, Shariputra, because the tathagata have worshipped many hundred thousand millions [myriads] of kotis of buddhas; because they have fulfilled their course for supreme, complete enlightenment, during many hundred thousand million—myriads of kotis of aeons; because they have wandered far, displaying energy and possessed of won-

[tape ends].

¹ The first series of seven lectures was given starting in February 1968; it was edited for the Spring 1969 edition of *Wind Bell*. The second series of at least 13 lectures was given starting in October 1968. This third series of six or seven lectures was given from October 20 to November 7, 1969.

² Yone Shima (d. April 1938). She married Suzuki-rōshi's father, Butsumon Sogaku Suzuki, circa 1901.

³ Suzuki may be referring to the Spring 1968 issue of *Wind Bell*, which printed a summary of six lectures on the Lotus Sutra delivered by Suzuki starting in February of 1968 at Tassajara (SR-68-02-00-A/G).

⁴ Suzuki-rōshi may be referring to the parable in Chapter 15 (Kern edition): "Duration of Life of the Tathāgatha."

⁵ Heart Sutra.

⁶ Meiji Period: 1868–1912.

⁷ Rigid floor mats of woven straw.

⁸ Traditional pleated trousers.

⁹ In the Kern edition of the Lotus Sūtra it is Chapter 24.

¹⁰ Kishizawa Minpo Ian-zenji (1865-1955): a leading interpreter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. He received dharma transmission from Nishiari Bokusan. Suzuki-rōshi attended him at Eihei-ji monastery. After Kishizawa-zenji left Eihei-ji, he founded and moved to Kyokuden-in, Shizuoka,

a temple close to Suzuki-rōshi's own Rinso-in. Suzuki-rōshi continued to study with Kishizawazenji from 1932 until Kishizawa's death in 1955.

¹¹ Kishizawa Suzuki had a callus on his forehead from bowing so often.

¹² Possibly Nishiari Bokusan or Oka Sōtan.

Source: City Center original tape. Verbatim transcript by Bill Redican (7/3/01). Lightly edited for readability by Peter Ford (9/2020).