

5] “Simile and Parable” and “Belief and Understanding” Chapters

Chapter Three: Simile and Parable

Nine important points

Point One, regarding the “Simile and Parable” chapter

Words and Phrases, volume five, says [regarding “simile and parable” (Jpn *hiyu*)], “*Hi*, or simile, means to compare one thing to another; *yu*, or parable, means to enlighten and instruct. . . . The Buddha’s great compassion is unceasing. And . . . his clever wisdom is boundless. . . .”

The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings says: “Great compassion” is like the mercy and compassion that a mother feels for her child. At present it is the mercy and compassion of Nichiren and his followers. (OTT, 43)

Parables Are Expressions of the Buddha’s Great Compassion and Wisdom

[...] In this installment, we will focus on the sutra’s third and fourth chapters, “Simile and Parable” and “Belief and Understanding”¹. [...]

In the above passage from *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, Nichiren Daishonin comments on a quotation from T’ien-t’ai’s² *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*. [...]

Parables are more than just illustrative stories; they are expressions of—and, indeed, the crystallization of—the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion. In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni says: “The living beings in [this threefold world] are all my children” (LSOC3, 106). As these words indicate, the Buddha’s parables are rooted in his deep concern for all people as if they were his own children, and his ardent wish to protect them and lead them to enlightenment.

The Daishonin describes the “great compassion” of the Buddha, who wishes for all living beings to attain enlightenment, as being “like the mercy and compassion that a mother feels for her child” (OTT, 43). This “great compassion” is absolute and unconditional, naturally emanating from the

¹ The “Simile and Parable” (3rd) chapter of the Lotus Sutra begins with Shariputra declaring that he is filled with pride and joy to know that he will attain Buddhahood in the future, after learning in the preceding “Expedient Means” chapter of the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world—namely, to enable all people to attain enlightenment. After bestowing a prophecy of enlightenment on Shariputra, Shakyamuni then proceeds to preach the parable of the three carts and the burning house to explain “the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle.” Starting from the second half of this chapter and continuing through the next three chapters—“Belief and Understanding” (4th) chapter, “Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” (5th) chapter, and “Bestowal of Prophecy” (6th) chapter—he bestows prophecies of the future enlightenment on the four great voice-hearers, Mahakashyapa, Maudgalyayana, Katyayana, and Subhuti. In the “Belief and Understanding” chapter, these four disciples rejoice and, to attest that they have understood the teaching, preach the parable of the wealthy man and his poor son, declaring their delight at having received this supreme treasure.

² T’ien-t’ai (538–597): Also known as Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai or Chih-i. The founder of the T’ien-t’ai school in China. His disciple Chang-an (561–632) compiled what are regarded as T’ien-t’ai’s three major works: *Great Concentration and Insight*, *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*, and *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*.

Buddha's state of being. And the Daishonin adds: "At present it is the mercy and compassion of Nichiren and his followers" (OTT, 43).

Through the power of his great compassion, the Daishonin continued his struggle to spread the Law widely, triumphing over every obstacle and even life-threatening persecution to free all people from suffering. Soka mentors and disciples, carrying on the Daishonin's selfless struggle, have spread the Mystic Law throughout Japan and the world with unwavering faith, translating compassion into courageous action. The Soka family is a noble gathering of ordinary people who embody "the mercy and compassion of Nichiren and his followers" (OTT, 43).

Our members, even if experiencing difficulties of their own, are always praying and taking action wholeheartedly while thinking of others' problems. [...] They genuinely listen to and acknowledge others' worries. Their warm support and care activate the inherent strength of those who are struggling. This is an expression of compassion; it is the bodhisattva way of life. Our members, on their own initiative, dive in among the people and put such compassion into practice.

The parables of the Lotus Sutra are stories of revitalization. They are dramas in which the Buddha's creative wisdom and compassion reveal the Buddha nature hidden within all people and each person's supreme dignity and worth.

Our members' rich variety of experiences in faith attest to the power of the Mystic Law. They are the stories of human revolution that inspire and offer direction for people in all different walks of life and circumstances. Buddhism teaches the principle of "voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma"³—that we have chosen to be born into this world with all kinds of problems and that it is our mission to overcome them and show actual proof of changing our karma through Buddhist practice. Our experiences of such transformation are inspiring and uplifting dramas of victory, testifying to the dignity of each person's life. They have the power to relieve others' suffering and impart joy.

One reason our founding president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, focused on discussion meetings to advance kosen-rufu was because, in a sense, they embody the power to enlighten and instruct, just like the Lotus Sutra's parables, or illustrative stories. He always placed importance on sharing personal experiences in faith, rather than engaging in difficult, abstract theoretical discussions.

Offering concrete proof of the benefit of practicing Nichiren Buddhism is convincing and inspiring to people who are struggling with real-life challenges; it rouses their courage and fills them with the strength to tackle their karma head-on. Soka Gakkai discussion meetings, where members vibrantly share such experiences, are modern-day assemblies of the Lotus Sutra brimming with the conviction, joy, and vitality of faith.

Chapter Four: Belief and Understanding

Six important points

Point One, concerning the "Belief and Understanding" chapter

³ Voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma: This refers to bodhisattvas who, though qualified to receive the pure rewards of Buddhist practice, relinquish them and make a vow to be reborn in an impure world in order to save living beings. They spread the Mystic Law, while undergoing the same sufferings as those born in the evil world due to karma. This term derives from Miao-lo's interpretation of relevant passages in "The Teacher of the Law" (10th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra: "Medicine King, you should understand that these people voluntarily relinquish the reward due them for their pure deeds and, in the time after I have passed into extinction, because they pity living beings, they are born in this evil world so they may broadly expound this sutra" (LSOC10, 200).

(...) Belief represents the value or price we attach to a jewel or treasure, and understanding represents the jewel itself. It is through the one word “belief” that we are able to purchase the wisdom of the Buddhas of the three existences. That wisdom is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Belief is the source of wisdom and belongs to the stage of hearing the name and words of the truth. (...)

Now when Nichiren and his followers believe in and accept Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, they are gaining possession of a great precious jewel; in the words of the “Belief and Understanding” chapter, “This cluster of unsurpassed jewels / has come to us unsought” [LSOC4, 124]. (OTT, 54–55)

Attaining a Boundless Life State through Belief and Wisdom

Next, let’s examine a section from *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* on the “Belief and Understanding” (4th) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. [...]

Belief, or faith, is what makes it possible to attain Buddhahood in one’s present form.⁴ [...]

“Understanding” means fully grasping the Buddha’s teachings. The Daishonin states: “‘Understanding’ is another name for wisdom” (OTT, 54).

He explains this using the following analogy: “Belief represents the value or price we attach to a jewel or treasure, and understanding represents the jewel itself. It is through the one word ‘belief’ that we are able to purchase the wisdom of the Buddhas of the three existences” (OTT, 54).

With the value of our belief or faith, we can acquire the wisdom that is the great treasure of the Buddhas of the three existences. [...]

The faith described in the Lotus Sutra, however, is not blind faith. Faith that renders people incapable of thinking or reasoning for themselves makes them weak and vulnerable. [...]

Faith as taught in Nichiren Buddhism values our ability to reason and is deepened by our intellect and knowledge. The Daishonin sums up the relationship between faith and understanding in *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*: “Where there is belief or faith, there is understanding, and where there is understanding, there will be faith. However, it is faith that makes it absolutely certain that one will attain Buddhahood” (OTT, 144). [...]

Through our faith in the Mystic Law, we can freely bring forth the boundless wisdom of the Buddha to overcome all manner of hardships. Those experiences will strengthen our conviction and certainty and reinforce and deepen our faith, which in turn will spark in our hearts an even greater passion to realize kosen-rufu. [...]

Point Five, on the words “This cluster of unsurpassed jewels / has come to us unsought” [LSOC4, 124] (...)

(...) And now in the minds of Nichiren and his followers, what is unsurpassed is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Among all the things that are unsurpassed, it holds the highest position of all.

It is the Wonderful Law [Nam-myoho-renge-kyo] that is described . . . as a “cluster of unsurpassed jewels,” a cluster of jewels that represents all the paramitas,⁵ the ten thousand religious practices and ten thousand good deeds of all the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future.

⁴ Attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form: In contrast to earlier sutras that assert long eons of arduous practice across many lifetimes are required to attain Buddhahood, the Lotus Sutra teaches that all people can attain the state of Buddhahood in this lifetime, just as they are.

⁵ Paramitas: Practices required of Mahayana bodhisattvas in order to attain enlightenment. The Sanskrit word paramita is interpreted as “perfection” or “having reached the opposite shore,” i.e., to cross from the shore of delusion to the shore of enlightenment.

And without labor or trouble, without religious practices or good deeds, this cluster of unsurpassed jewels can come into our possession through the single word “faith” [i.e., faith in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo]. That is why the passage says that it has “come to us (*jitoku*) unsought.” (OTT, 58–59)

The Parable of the Wealthy Man and His Poor Son Related by Shakyamuni’s Disciples

Next, let’s examine the section of *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* about the Lotus Sutra passage “This cluster of unsurpassed jewels / has come to us unsought” (LSOC4, 124). This joyous exclamation is the starting point for the parable of the wealthy man and his poor son in the “Belief and Understanding” chapter. This parable is related by the four great voice-hearers—Mahakashyapa, Maudgalyayana, Katyayana, and Subhuti—as proof that they have understood Shakyamuni’s parable of the three carts and the burning house⁶ in the preceding “Simile and Parable” chapter.

The parable recounts how a man who left home as a youth wanders lost, living in poverty for 50 years, until one day, his wealthy father, who has been searching for him all that while, encounters him by chance. By that time, however, the son no longer recognizes his father and is awed and intimidated by him. He also has very low expectations for himself.

The father doesn’t reveal his identity to his son but offers him a job—at first, asking him to perform menial tasks and then gradually giving him work of greater responsibility and importance. Finally, he places him in charge of administering all his wealth and goods, and the son becomes trusted by all.

When the father is about to die, he calls together his relatives, the king of the country, and the king’s high ministers and announces: “This is in truth my son, and I in truth am his father. Now everything that belongs to me, all my wealth and possessions, shall belong entirely to this son of mine” (LSOC4, 122). The son is filled with joy at gaining this unsurpassed treasure, which has come to him unsought (see LSOC4, 123).

In the parable, the wealthy man represents Shakyamuni, while the impoverished son represents the voice-hearers, disciples who thought they could never attain enlightenment. It teaches us that the unsurpassed treasure of the Buddha nature is fundamentally inherent in all. [...]

The “cluster of unsurpassed jewels” represents all the benefits acquired through the good deeds and practices carried out by the Buddhas of the three existences in their efforts to attain enlightenment. The Daishonin tells us that all those immense benefits are inherent in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

“And without labor or trouble, without religious practices or good deeds, this cluster of unsurpassed jewels can come into our possession through the single word ‘faith’ [i.e., faith in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo]” (OTT, 59), states the Daishonin, underscoring how great and wonderful is our practice of chanting the single phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. It is extremely difficult, and at the same time astounding, to realize that the fruit of Buddhahood—a “cluster of unsurpassed jewels”—that so

⁶ This parable relates how a father lures his children from a burning house in which they are playing, heedless of the danger. He tells them that he has goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts waiting for them outside the house, but when they emerge he presents them with large carriages drawn by white oxen. The goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts represent the three vehicles of voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, and bodhisattvas, while the large carriages drawn by white oxen represent the one vehicle of Buddhahood, the Lotus Sutra. The father represents the Buddha, while the children are all living beings. The burning house is the saha world of suffering, in which, because of their mistaken views, they are plagued by delusion and earthly desires and repeatedly born in the cycle of the six paths, or lower six worlds—that is, the worlds of hell, hungry spirits, animals, asuras, human beings, and heavenly beings.

many seekers of the way had sought to gain through arduous practice over long eons in the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings—are all contained in the single phrase Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Just believing this requires an unceasing battle against fundamental ignorance. When we continue chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, no matter what our hardships and sufferings, we will come to enjoy boundless good fortune, as if accumulating all the treasures of the universe in our lives. [...]

The Lotus Sutra passage states: “This cluster of unsurpassed jewels / has come to us unsought” (LSOC4, 124). “Unsought” reflects the fact that the persons of the two vehicles—the voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones—had given up on attaining Buddhahood and no longer even sought to do so.

“Has come to us” means that these supreme treasures are not something distant or separate from our lives, but are found within us. [...]

Mr. Toda said: “People who joyously chant to the Gohonzon and joyously share Nichiren Buddhism with others are people of true faith. It is on such people that the Gohonzon bestows, though they do not seek them, unsurpassed treasures—namely, a strong life force and wonderful good fortune and benefit.”⁷

From the profound perspective of faith in the Mystic Law, we as Soka Gakkai members possess unfathomable good fortune. It is truly a cause for “dancing with joy”! [...]

⁷ Translated from Japanese. Josei Toda, *Toda Josei zenshu* (The Collected Writings of Josei Toda), vol. 1 (Tokyo: Seikyo Shimbunsha, 1981), pp. 92–93.