

The Three Periods of Propagation: the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law

Today, let us study a passage from the Gosho about the three periods of propagation, and then repay our debts of gratitude to the True Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin. In *Questions and Answers between a Sage and a Foolish Man* (Shōgu mondō-shō), the Daishonin states the following:

As for the periods [of propagation], there are the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law. As for the Law, there are both Mahayana and Hinayana teachings. As for the practices, there are shōju and shakubuku. If one carries out shakubuku during the period when shōju should be practiced, this will be inappropriate. On the other hand, if one performs the practice of shōju during the era when shakubuku must be used, this will be an offense. Thus, it is of foremost importance to know first whether the present time is for shōju or shakubuku. (*Gosho*, p. 402)

First, Nichiren Daishonin states:

As for the periods [of propagation], there are the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law.
(*ibid.*)

Shakyamuni expounded in the Sutra of Great Assembly (*Daishik-kyō*) and other sutras that following his own entry into nirvana, there would be three periods of time in the propagation of Buddhism—the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law. Depending on which sutras we read, there are discrepancies of 500 years or 1,000 years, but Second High Priest Nikko Shonin teaches us the following in *The Order of the Three Periods of Propagation of the Sutra* (Sanji gukyō no shidai):

The order of propagating Buddhism:

- One-thousand years of propagation in the Former Day of the Law: Hinayana, provisional Mahayana
- One-thousand years of propagation in the Middle Day of the Law: The theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra
- Ten-thousand years of propagation in the Latter Day of the Law: The essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra

Nichiren Daishonin states the following in *The Selection of the Time* (Senji shō):

In the Sutra of the Great Assembly (*Daishik-kyō*), Shakyamuni Buddha addressed Bodhisattva of the Moon Storehouse and presented a prediction of the time to come in the future. Specifically, he said that the first Five-hundred-year Period after his passing will be the age of emancipation (*gedatsu kengo*), and the next Five-hundred-year Period will be the age of meditation (*zenjō kengo*), which will add up to one thousand years. The next Five-hundred-year Period will be the age of reading, reciting, and listening (*dokuju tamon kengo*). And the next Five-hundred-year Period will be the age of building temples and stupas (*tazō tōji kengo*)—which will account for two thousand years. In the next Five-hundred-year Period following that, conflicts and disputes will occur among those who follow his teachings, and the pure Law will become obscured and lost. (*Gosho*, p. 836)

Here, the Daishonin divides the three periods into five, five-hundred-year segments. The first one thousand years of the Former Day of the Law was a time when the teaching, practice, and proof of Shakyamuni’s doctrines correctly existed. The people who sought the Buddha’s way to enlightenment were all capable individuals who had amassed good karmic causes in the past. Therefore, they were able to attain the true effects through Shakyamuni’s teaching.

Of the five, Five-hundred-year Periods, the first was the age of emancipation and the second was the age of meditation. These two constituted one thousand years. The last word of those ages, “*kengo*” in Japanese signifies that the characterized conditions of each age were firmly established.

During the first period, the age of emancipation, the people were sincere and honest in spirit. Thus, Shakyamuni’s teachings were correctly transmitted, and the people could attain Buddhahood by performing the Buddhist practices and obtaining the Buddha’s wisdoms.

In the second period, the age of firm meditation, the people practiced the Mahayana teachings and entered into a state of intense concentration through meditation (*samādhi*). They calmed their minds and focused on meditation, as they performed their Buddhist practice and strived to attain enlightenment.

The masters and teachers of propagation at this time were characterized by the likes of Mahakashyapa (Jpn. Kashō) and Ananda (Jpn. Anan), the disciples of Shakyamuni, who thoroughly spread the Hinayana teachings. Thereafter, Hinayana Buddhism was denounced by individuals such as Ashvaghosha (Jpn. Memyō), Nagarjuna (Jpn. Ryūju), and Vasubandhu (Jpn. Tenjin), who propagated the Mahayana doctrines. Thus, the 24 successors who received the transmission of the heritage of the propagation of the teaching from Shakamuni were active at

the center during the Former Day of the Law. Furthermore, around this time, Buddhism received the protection of King Ajatashatru (Jpn. Ajase-ō) and King Ashoka (Jpn. Ashoka-ō) and the scriptures were collected, and Shakyamuni's teachings spread widely throughout India.

Next, during the one thousand years of the Middle Day of the Law, even though teaching and practices of Buddhism partly remained, no true effects could be attained. It was a time when the empty formalities of the Former Day of the Law were all that remained. For this reason, it is known as the period of *zōbō*, literally the image or reflection of the Law [of the Former Day].

In the Middle Day of the Law, the third Five-hundred-year Period was the age of reading, reciting, and listening. The sutras were transmitted to China, where they were translated into Chinese, and lectures were presented, and the doctrines were studied. In the next era, the fourth Five-hundred-year Period, the age of building temples and stupas, numerous temples, stupas, and Buddhist statues were created. It was a time when the propagation of Buddhism existed in form only.

During the Middle Day of the Law, the principal masters and teachers of propagation were such people as Kumarajiva (Jpn. Rajū-sanzō) and Tripitaka Master Xuanzang (Jpn. Genjō-sanzō), who worked assiduously to provide the Chinese translations and to present lectures. In China, Tiantai propagated the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra of the Mahayana doctrine, and in Japan, Dengyō propagated the Lotus Sutra. However, heresy such as the pre-Lotus Sutra, provisional doctrines of the Zen, Nembutsu, and Shingon sects spread, and the power of Shakyamuni's teachings gradually began to decline.

The last period, the Latter Day of the Law, refers to the time more than two thousand years after the passing of Shakyamuni. In this period, the power of Shakyamuni's Buddhism is extinguished. It is the final stage of the extinction of the Law, when the hearts of men deteriorate and conflict and fighting ceaselessly exist in the world.

In this age, only the teaching exists. The practices and true effects are lacking. The fifth Five-hundred-year Period corresponds to the time when conflicts and disputes will occur, and the pure Law will become obscured and lost. This is the period when Shakyamuni's power of the Buddha and the Law will disappear. Conflicts and natural disasters will occur at this time, one after another.

In this age of the Latter Day of the Law, when the entire world is full of chaos and confusion, Shakyamuni's teachings will become obscured and lost. Nichiren Daishonin's Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō will make its advent into such a world, to fundamentally save all people from the darkness of the Latter Day of the Law.

Shakyamuni expounded this in the Bodhisattva Medicine King (*Yakuō bosatsu*; twenty-third) chapter of the Lotus Sutra:

After I pass into extinction, in the last Five-hundred-year Period, you must spread it abroad widely throughout Jambudvīpa and never allow it to be cut off.

(*Hokekyō*, p. 539; *Lotus Sutra*, Watson, p. 288)

Thus, he predicted that at the end of the fifth Five-hundred-year Period—in the Latter Day of the Law—Nichiren Daishonin, the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, would make his advent into this world. Without any interruption, he will widely propagate Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, hidden in the depths of the Life Span (*Juryō*; sixteenth) chapter of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

The teaching of the three periods of the Former, Middle, and Latter Days of the Law is a way to divide the time following Shakyamuni's demise into three segments and to show the differences in the practices and their effects, based on the doctrines that are preached. Therefore, we can understand that it is not correct for us to practice just any religion that strikes our fancy, or to arbitrarily create our own doctrines or modify or supplement the teachings in any way. It is essential for us to grasp the significance of the times and sincerely follow the Buddha's teachings.

Nichiren Daishonin explains the correct practice to carry out in the Latter Day of the Law:

As for the practices, there are *shōju* and *shakubuku*. If one carries out *shakubuku* during the period when *shōju* should be practiced, this will be inappropriate. On the other hand, if one performs the practice of *shōju* during the era when *shakubuku* must be used, this will be an offense. Thus, it is of foremost importance to know first whether the present time is for *shōju* or *shakubuku*. (*Gosho*, p. 402)

The two forms of Buddhist practice to propagate the teachings are *shōju* and *shakubuku*. *Shōju* is an abbreviation of *shōin yōju*, which literally means gradually leading a person to the true Law while temporarily not challenging his erroneous thoughts or faith. It is the practice in which we acknowledge the beliefs and opinions of people according to their capacity and gradually lead them to true Buddhism.

By contrast, *shakubuku* literally refers to the practice of refuting heresy and promoting acceptance solely of true Buddhism. It is the practice in which we teach the people that erroneous doctrines and religions are the root cause of unhappiness and suffering. We refute the heretical doctrines and beliefs that people uphold, and we enable them to achieve true happiness by leading them to the true teaching.

During those times when *shōju* is appropriate, one employs the “four peaceful practices” (*shi anrakugyō*):

1. Peaceful practice by deeds: to avoid worldly temptations and to practice in a quiet and secluded place, such as a mountain forest.
2. Peaceful practice by words: to teach the Law in a calm tone, without criticizing others.
3. Peaceful practice by thoughts: not to harbor jealousy or contention toward others.

4. Peaceful practice by upholding vows: to nurture compassion and to make a vow to save all people.

These practices were appropriate during the lifetime of Shakyamuni and during the Former and Middle Days of the Law. They are not Buddhist practices for the current age of the Latter Day of the Law. Thus, it is extremely important to know the times—whether it is appropriate to practice shōju or shakubuku.

Nichiren Daishonin states in the Gosho, *On Practicing According to the Buddha's Teachings* (Nyosetsu shugyō-shō):

If you exert yourself now in shōju, by carrying out the four peaceful practices, will it not be the same as sowing seeds in the winter and expecting to harvest in the spring? When a rooster crows at dawn, it is helpful. But if it crows in the evening, it is disquieting. It is nonsense to seclude yourself in the mountains without refuting the enemies of the Lotus Sutra and carry out the practice of shōju at a time when the Lotus Sutra and pre-Lotus Sutra teachings are confused. You only will lose the opportunity to practice the Lotus Sutra. (*Gosho*, p. 673)

Thus, in our Buddhist practice, confusing the appropriate times for shōju and shakubuku is like sowing seeds in the winter and expecting to reap a harvest in the spring. It is also like the rooster that normally crows to announce the arrival of morning suddenly crowing in the middle of the night. Not only is it not productive, it can actually be harmful.

In the same Gosho, the Daishonin states:

“The Lotus Sutra is the teaching of shakubuku, the refutation of the provisional doctrines.” Since these are the golden words [of the Buddha], eventually every person who clings to the provisional teachings will surrender [to the true Law] and become a follower of the Buddha. Then, all the people throughout this world will discard the provisional teachings and take faith in the one vehicle of Buddhahood. When the mystic Law (*Myōhō*) alone prevails in the land and the entire nation chants Nam-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō, the wind will blow gently without causing the branches to rustle, and the rain will fall softly without breaking a clod. The world will become like the times of Fuxi and Shennong. The people will be able to drive away disasters and misfortune and gain the ability to live long lives. The principle of the eternity and immortality of both the person and the Law will be revealed. Be assured that all of these events will occur. There is no doubt about the written evidence [in the sutra] of, “peace and security in this lifetime.” (*Gosho*, p. 671)

The Daishonin teaches us that we must carry out shakubuku and lead as many people as possible, and then, we will be able to create a world free of disasters, where everyone will be able to live in peace.

In the Gosho, *Establishing the Four Leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as the Object of Worship* (Shibosatsu zōryū-shō), Nichiren Daishonin states the following about our attitude in doing shakubuku:

Those who claim to be the disciples of Nichiren and practice the Lotus Sutra must do as I do. (Gosho, p. 1370)

As Nichiren Daishonin instructs us, kōsen-rufu and enlightenment in this lifetime can be achieved without fail when we put forth our utmost efforts into doing shakubuku and promote our own growth in faith and practice and help others develop their faith and practice.

High Priest Nichinyō Shōnin gave us the following guidance:

In other words, the teaching of the Lotus Sutra is in itself shakubuku. We must each be thoroughly mindful that, in fact, in the Latter Day of the Law, there is no way other than doing shakubuku to achieve the worldwide propagation of the Buddhism of the True Cause throughout the entire world. Thus, the Daishonin states the following in *The Selection of the Time* (Senji shō):

Single droplets of water accumulate to form the great seas. Specks of dust pile high to form Mount Sumeru. When I, Nichiren, initially took faith in the Lotus Sutra, I was like the first drop of water and the first particle of dust in the entire nation of Japan. When two, three, ten, hundreds, thousands, ten-thousands, and hundred-millions and an infinite number of people chant the Lotus Sutra and share the teaching with others, they will compose Mount Sumeru of the final stage of enlightenment and the vast sea of great nirvana. You must not seek any other way to attain Buddhahood. (Gosho, p. 868)

We all must embrace these golden words, and each and every one of us in the Hokkeko must together form a solid unity between priests and lay believers, based on many in body, one in mind (*itai dōshin*). We must perform the actual practice of shakubuku with single-minded devotion, as we refute heresy and reveal the truth. It is most essential to vigorously advance forth with devotion toward achieving our objective in 2021 of establishing a Hokkeko organization of 800,000 believers.

(Dainichiren, No. 848, p. 56)

Now, in the Latter Day of the Law, we must propagate Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism—Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo of the Three Great Secret Laws—the Object of Worship of the Essential Teaching, the High Sanctuary of the Essential Teaching, and the Daimoku of the Essential Teaching. Furthermore, we must devote ourselves to doing shakubuku and promoting our own growth in faith and helping others develop their faith and practice. As a result, our land will become peaceful and safe, and we, our families, and all people will become truly happy.

Together, let us all work assiduously to improve and strengthen our faith and practice for ourselves and for others and advance with great success to establish a Hokkeko organization of 800,000 believers by 2021, the 800th anniversary of the advent of our founder, Nichiren Daishonin.