

# What does the *Lotus Sutra* Say?

## Chapter 2: Myself Living at This Moment

### “Hell” is in This World...What is “the buddha-world?”

The world of Buddha is not depicted as a pure land in the *Lotus Sutra*. According to the Buddhist world-view, the world in which we are living is regarded as Śākyamuni Buddha's world, and in the description of that world, “hellish conditions” are included. This is also the view of the *Lotus Sutra*. When the Sutra describes the basic conditions of a “buddha-world” it says that “the realm of hell” is present in it. It should be carefully noted that what is being described is vastly different from the image of a “paradise.”

In chapter one, Origin, eighteen thousand buddha-worlds in the eastern direction have become visible—by means of Śākyamuni Buddha's wondrous capabilities—to everyone present in the assembly at Mount Vulture Peak, and the living conditions of the “beings” in those buddha-worlds could be clearly seen in detail:

“And now, from this place, there I have seen...  
Everything about the beings...  
In the six realms of existence of those lands—  
Their various karmic actions and aftermaths  
Recognized in their conditions of ease or distress.”

The word “beings” means sentient beings (i.e., living beings), but I assume that human beings are being particularly implied. The Sutra says that all those beings were seen in the circumstances of the “six realms of existence” (i.e., living in the realm of hells, the realm of hungry spirits, the animal realm, the beastly realm, the realm of humans, and the realm of the heavens), and that the results of their life-related actions (karmic actions and their effects), whether good or bad, were seen. The Sutra is clearly saying that the living conditions of people in a buddha-world are not always ideal.

As a cultural aside, Japanese people have long been thinking that hell is a living condition of this world. One hears various expressions—from “The hell of this world” to “Even the treatment in hell can be altered by the power of money.” One also hears, however, “People developed such conceptions later on. What Buddhism originally taught about hell is that doing bad things throughout life will result in rebirth into hellish conditions.” Based on belief in rebirth (or reincarnation), people's main concern regarding the six realms of existence was into which condition they would be reborn. It may be quite natural that this kind of thinking developed. As a matter of fact, until the Edo era, illustrations of people in agony, spewing blood, and being stabbed with iron rods by demons in hells used to be exhibited in many temples. I live in an area named “Tsukuda.” It is famous for a tasty dish called *tsukuda-ni* (shellfish or small fish boiled in sweetened soy sauce), and the area still retains the

flavor of traditional housing and culture. A traditional song at the Tsukuda area Bon festival (an annual memorial festival for ancestors held during the summer) contains the phrase “at the end of this life you will fall into hell.” The song is written in a minor chord and is sung in a slow tempo. The accompanying dance is also not a cheerful one.

In the latter part of the sutra’s first chapter, the story of a former life of Monjushiri Bodhisattva is related as an important key point—which means that *Lotus Sutra* also recognizes the concept of reincarnation. Prior to that story, however, and without any reference to reincarnation, the sutra described the six realms of existence as being distinctly visible conditions of existence in the buddha-worlds that were revealed. Thus, in the *Lotus Sutra*, Śākyamuni Buddha is reminding us to note that these six realms—of hells, hungry spirits, animals, beasts, humans, and heavens—are the presupposed living conditions in the world of a buddha. Moreover, according to the sutra, the world in which we now live is regarded as Śākyamuni Buddha’s world; such conditions exist in this world as well.

Then why is a world with such conditions called a “world of a buddha?”

The *Lotus Sutra* describes a buddha’s world as being a world in which, after the extinguishment of a buddha, [after a buddha's pari-nirvana]—after a buddha has physically left the world—that buddha’s teachings remain, the teachings are accepted and followed by people who seek and aspire to awareness, and those people then incorporate awareness into their daily lives and actively engage themselves in society.

A person who quests for awareness and then seeks to incorporate it into his or her daily life is called a “bodhisattva.” From the beginning of the *Lotus Sutra*, Śākyamuni Buddha emphasizes that a buddha's world is one in which bodhisattvas are actively engaged.

## **Threefold World as a Burning House:**

### **This World as a Burning House: Awakening to a “dog-eat-dog” world**

In this section I would like to take a look at the depiction of a burning house as a metaphor for three realms of existence. This depiction appears in chapter three of the *Lotus Sutra*, “Metaphor.” Among the many allegories in the sutra, this metaphor of comparing this world to an old burning house has attracted the most attention.

The following selection is from the colorful verse portion of Kumārajīva’s previously mentioned 5<sup>th</sup> century translation of the sutra. The selection I have chosen is rather long because I would like readers who are unfamiliar with the sutra to experience a little of its flavor. Readers may choose how thoroughly they would like to engage themselves in the quote.

“Imagine that there was a wealthy man  
Who owned a very large building.  
It was so extremely old

That it was on the verge of collapse.  
Its halls and quarters were dangerous,  
And its pillars were breaking down in decay.  
Its ridgepole and beams were slanted and warped.  
The stairwells and landings were falling apart.  
Its partitions and walls were splitting and cracked,  
And their coatings of mud were peeling away.  
Thatch on the roof was in complete disarray,  
And the rafters and eaves were drooping and gapped.  
The perimeter fence was crooked and bent,  
And there was garbage and filth in piles everywhere.  
There were some five hundred people  
Occupying the building inside,  
Along with kites, owls, hawks, eagles,  
Crows, magpies, pigeons and doves,  
Lizards, snakes, vipers, scorpions,  
Centipedes and millipedes,  
Geckos and great centipedes,  
Weasels, raccoon dogs, mice and rats,  
And various hordes of sinister bugs  
That were scurrying back and forth.  
The stench of excrement was pervasive  
In the places that were flush with filth,  
And dung beetles and various insects  
Alighted there in great swarms.  
Foxes, wolves, and jackals  
Bit and trampled on each other  
While gnawing and chewing on corpses  
In a riot over the flesh and bones,  
Which attracted opportunistic packs of dogs  
As thieving, snatching rivals.  
Hungry, lean, and agitated,  
They roved in search of food—  
Contentious, fighting, seizing, grabbing,  
Howling, and snarling at each other.  
Such were the abysmal and dreadful conditions  
Into which that building had fallen.  
All around and everywhere

Were monsters and ogres  
Or demons and *yakṣas*  
That fed on human flesh.  
Poisonous insects and similar things,  
And malicious birds and beasts,  
Hatched, or bore, and then nurtured their young,  
Each concealing and guarding its own;  
But marauding, infighting *yakṣas*  
Came around to seize them and eat them.  
When the *yakṣas*' hunger had subsided,  
Their evil penchant for violence increased—  
The sounds of their conflicts and quarrels  
Were horrific in the extreme.  
*Kumbhāṇḍa* demons,  
Hunched down on mounds of dirt,  
And would occasionally rise in the air  
One or two feet off the ground.  
They would wander leisurely, back and forth,  
Impulsively entertaining themselves:  
They might grab a dog by two legs  
And beat it into silence,  
Or pin it down by its neck with their feet  
To terrorize it for their own delight.  
And then there were other demons—  
Bodies very tall,  
Naked forms dark and gaunt—  
They were ever-present inside that place  
Making loud and malicious sounds,  
Shrieking and roaring in demand of food.  
Moreover, there were other demons  
With necks as thin as needles,  
And yet still other demons  
With heads like that of an ox:  
At times they ate the flesh of humans,  
At other times they devoured dogs;  
The hair on their heads was unkempt and disheveled;  
They were ruthless, dangerous, ferocious, and cruel;  
Driven by starvation and thirst,

They raced around uttering bellows and screams.  
*Yakṣas* and hungering ghosts,  
And various sinister birds and beasts  
Hungriily charged in every direction  
And peered out through the windows.  
Such were the multiple dangers,  
That fear and dread surpassed any gauge.  
This old dilapidated building  
Belonged to one particular man.  
He was out and about in the neighborhood,  
And had not been gone for long  
When the building  
Suddenly caught fire  
On all four sides at once.  
As the fires increased in intensity,  
Ridgepoles, rafters, pillars, and beams  
Trembled, split, snapped, broke up,  
And fell with explosive sounds;  
And walls also crumbled and fell.  
The various demons and spirits,  
Emitted powerful high-pitched screams.  
The hawks, eagles, and various birds of prey,  
The pigeons and the *kumbhāṇḍa* demons,  
Circled about in panic and fear  
Unable to make their escape.  
Evil beasts and poisonous insects  
Took cover in hollows and holes.  
*Piśācaka* demons  
Were there in that building as well.  
Because they were little inclined to benevolence,  
When hemmed in by the fire  
They savagely turned on one another,  
Devouring each other's flesh and blood.  
The bands of jackals and other such  
Had earlier succumbed,  
And the larger of the evil beasts  
Contentiously competed to eat them.  
Foul-smelling smoke rose up quickly,

Filling the building on every side.  
 The centipedes, millipedes,  
 Poisonous snakes and similar things,  
 Burning in the flames,  
 Fought their way out of their lairs;  
*Kumbhāṇḍa* demons, subsequently,  
 Scooped them up and ate them.  
 There were also hungering ghosts  
 With their heads engulfed in flame;  
 Thirsty, starved, tormented by the burning,  
 They chased around in agony and fear.  
 Such was the state of that building,  
 Horrific in the extreme—  
 Toxic, dangerous, and burning,  
 Its adversities were far more than one.  
 By that time, the owner of the building  
 Was standing outside its gate.  
 He then heard someone say:  
     ‘A little while ago your children  
     Playing games, enjoying themselves  
     Went inside this building.  
     In their youthful ignorance  
     They were totally focused on their play.’  
 In a state of alarm after he heard this,  
 The wealthy man entered the burning building  
 Intending to rescue his children  
 And not let them be killed by the fire.  
 Admonishing his children,  
 He spoke of many worrisome dangers:  
 The evil demons and poisonous insects;  
 The widespread fire and flames;  
 The sufferings, one after another,  
 That would continue without end;  
 The poisonous snakes, the lizards and vipers,  
 And the many *yakṣas* as well;  
 The *kumbhāṇḍa* demons;  
 The jackals, foxes, and dogs;  
 The hawks, eagles, kites, and owls;

And the various kinds of centipedes;  
The torment and urgency of their hunger and thirst;  
And the sufferings and hardships in that place  
That were horrific in the extreme,  
Even more so with the great conflagration.  
The children did not understand:  
Although they heard what their father had told them,  
They remained absorbed in their games  
And did not stop their play.

The following is the same verse portion translated from Sanskrit:  
(For this Web-Version, the verse portion translated from Sanskrit is omitted.)

The inherent nature of a living being to pursue life is a force that often drives it blindly, without regard to “good,” “bad,” “wise,” or “foolish.” Living beings driven by such a force are often heedless of whether there are drastic changes in their own environments, or if what they are being driven toward will bring them actual contentment or not. I’d like to quickly look again at a portion of the metaphorical verse describing the “goblins” that I think is suggestive:

...Those tremendously cruel-minded goblins,  
Stomachs filled with the living beings they had eaten,  
Their fully energized bodies charged  
By the flesh that they had consumed,  
Commenced severe battles among themselves.

In all likelihood, the “goblin’s” attitude is to wholeheartedly and single-mindedly scan its surrounding environment constantly to find and consume those weaker than itself. With such an attitude, however, and because of its narrow focus and unrestrained energy, it will, like it or not, be unwittingly caught up into conflicts, one after another. The metaphor implies that this is the only possible result. I feel that I myself, on occasion, am "unwittingly caught up in a daily routine," and that this description can be applied to the present-day society of Japan and also to the world at large. The one who became awakened, the Buddha, the one who exited the “burning house,” teaches that this situation is not wholesome.

With regard to the metaphor of “this world is a burning house," the focus in traditional thinking has been mainly on the children who were able to escape the building through the Buddha’s wise devices. But prior to chapter three, Great Vehicle,<sup>1</sup> in which this metaphor is expounded, in chapter two, "Shakamuni Buddha’s Method,"<sup>2</sup> it is said that those devices are meant for all living beings. In

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of chapter three in the translation from Sanskrit to Japanese by Dr. Tsugunari Kubo and Mrs. Katsuko Kubo. The title of chapter three in Kumārajīva’s translation is “Metaphor.”

<sup>2</sup> This is the title of chapter two in the translation from Sanskrit to Japanese by Dr. Tsugunari Kubo and Mrs. Katsuko Kubo. The title of chapter two in Kumārajīva’s translation is “Skillful Means.”

this case it means that all the beings like those mentioned—maggots, dogs, wolves, centipedes, snakes, savage beasts, goblins, *kumbhāṇḍa* demons, and hungry demons, for example—are also “living beings” that are supposed to become awakened sooner or later. This is what Shakamuni Buddha is suggesting in the *Lotus Sutra*. At least I cannot help but believe so.

Then how are we to understand this “awakening?” To what do we “open our eyes?” Each reader will come to his or her own conclusions from the preceding metaphor, but, in my case, the expression “self-measurement” comes to mind. And that is because I believe it is important to constantly re-evaluate oneself in light of two things: one's environment and one's own way of living within it. This might be obvious enough to be a matter of course. But, on the other hand, because it is so obvious, we tend to neglect a process of “checking ourselves out” as we get caught up in the “busy-ness” of our daily process of living. By means of the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakamuni Buddha is reminding us of such an important “obvious but overlooked thing” by stirring up our emotions.

### **On the bodhisattva path, “enlightenments” are realizations in daily living.**

As I wrote in the Introduction, enlightenment is commonly thought of as a “state,” or “condition”—in other words, the condition that the Buddha is in—and that followers of Buddhism are doing practices to achieve that state or condition. This is what conventional wisdom holds. The teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, however, is fundamentally different with regard this point. From the opening chapter it says that “enlightenments” are in our daily lives.

The word bodhisattva is an import into contemporary language of the Sanskrit compound made up of the words *bodhi* and *sattva*. *Bodhi* means “enlightenment.” *Sattva* means “living thing; living being,” but—as I will discuss later—in the *Lotus Sutra* it stands for “people; human beings.” In connection with the general understanding of enlightenment, a bodhisattva is generally interpreted as “a person who seeks [the Buddha’s] enlightenment. But, as I will also discuss, a bodhisattva is “a person who lives his or her life *feeling the significance of an enlightenment.*”

When we talk about bodhisattvas, the statues of bodhisattvas that we see in temples are commonly called “buddha-statues,” as if they were statues of buddhas. A famous bodhisattva like Kanzeon [Chinese: Kwan-yin] Bodhisattva is known to give almost the same impression as the Buddha. So it is quite natural that a bodhisattva would be regarded as being, at the least, quite different from an ordinary human being. However the bodhisattvas that appear in the description of the buddha-worlds in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* are “bodhisattvas in great numbers who are still in the process of practicing.” From what is said in this context, there is a clear understanding that among the people living in those worlds, there are people who are doing the practices of bodhisattvas.

That description of the buddha-worlds also speaks of the activities that bodhisattvas are engaged in, and in describing those activities, the expression “their enlightenments” appears. Moreover, it is mentioned that people, as bodhisattvas, “having produced an enlightenment, continue

to practice.” I will discuss these issues in detail in upcoming sections, but for now I just want to point that the *Lotus Sutra* focuses on what is going on in people’s everyday lives. It is saying that practices—the meaningful activities and behaviors of people in everyday life—lead to realizations that become foundations and links to succeeding activities and behaviors. Enlightenment is thus the “aha!” moments, the “I see!” moments in our daily lives. They are the realizations we come to—the awakenings we experience. The *Lotus Sutra* wants so make clear that when people carry out activities as bodhisattvas, it is a source of personal contentment as well as a driving force for the purification of society.

### **From successive realizations, new behaviors are born.**

Then what is the significance of the expression, bodhisattvas, ‘having produced an enlightenment, continue to practice,’ that I quoted in the previous paragraph? It means that once we experience an “aha!” moment of understanding, we can move on to subsequent actions based on that awareness.

When we examine various copies of Sanskrit texts of the sutra, especially the copies found in Nepal, this expression directly translates as “the bodhisattvas are producing enlightenment.” In a copy found in Central Asia the expression reads, “practicing in the midst of enlightenment.” Whatever the case, it is not implied that they are doing practices with expectations for enlightenment in the future. On the contrary, it is very clear that all of the texts are saying that the bodhisattvas experience enlightenment in their actual lives, while they are practicing. The expression “their enlightenments,” also mentioned in the same paragraph above, likewise relates to actual present life.

*The Lotus Sutra* that is well known in Japan is based on the Chinese translation by Kumārajīva<sup>3</sup>, and it is known as *Myō-hō-enge-kyō*. In this translation, this same portion is translated as “under all kinds of causes and conditions, [they] are seeking the pathway of buddhahood.” It is quite different. However, it is worth noting here that the expression “under various causes and conditions” is spotlighting the aspect that each person has his/her own background which brings that person to his/her own current reality. But there is no nuance of enlightenment in this particular rendering.

I think Kumārajīva’s use here of the phrasing “pathway to/of buddhahood,” rather than “the state of buddhahood” is an indication that his translation was based on an understanding that the original Sanskrit word for enlightenment, *agra-bodhim*, was not applicable only to buddhas but was something that also corresponded to bodhisattvas—that is, it was something that could actually be grasped by people who were on such a path. As I mentioned in the beginning, the *Lotus Sutra’s* concept clearly differs from the commonly accepted idea in Buddhism that enlightenment corresponds only to buddhas. The sutra says that enlightenment can be acquired in the process of bodhisattva practice, in other words, within ordinary human activities.

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<sup>3</sup> See page 2 of the Introductory chapter

Human beings have realizations in the process of their actions and activities; in other words they taste the experience of enlightenment. These awakenings, one-by-one, in turn become driving forces for their subsequent actions and activities. They may be joyous realizations, realizations of achievement, or sometimes realizations of previously unrecognized mistakes. Whatever the case, they will lead us to recognize the significance of living in concert with other human beings, and motivate us to move forward to the next step or stage.

At the outset of the *Lotus Sutra*, Shakamuni Buddha shows this important characteristic of the dynamic sphere of the human mind. The significance of individuals having enlightenments within their current daily life realities—and then acting based on those enlightenments—rather than having an expectation of enlightenment in some far-off future is pointed out right at the start. Thinking about our own daily realities, it is certainly very meaningful to live our lives based on the various realizations or awakenings that we gain from time to time. Otherwise we would not feel any sense of accomplishment even though we feel that we are putting forth great efforts while engaged in our daily routines.

Up to now, this phrase in the *Lotus Sutra*, “[bodhisattvas]...having produced an enlightenment, continue to practice,” has not received very much attention. And while it is a rather paradoxical statement according to the traditional understanding of Buddhism, I believe that it is clearly suggesting a very important point that should not be overlooked, especially for those living in the rapidly changing environments of present-day societies.