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Lotus Sutra Episode 10  
Five Periods of Teachings Based on Capabilities

All Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appeared in the world for one great cause: to help all sentient beings realize and enter the Buddha's wisdom.

Such wisdom is possessed by all sentient beings. But they are lost and unaware, and thus fall into cyclic existence.

The Buddha realized this cause and He resolved to attain Buddhahood, to reveal all [teachings] to sentient beings.

He established the five periods of teachings. Though He spoke of the provisional and the true, manifested the slow and the quick methods, His original intent has always been [to reveal the Dharma to sentient beings.]

◎諸佛世尊，出現於世，唯為一大事因緣，開示悟入，一切眾生佛知佛見。

◎蓋此知見，眾生等有，迷不自知，故淪落生死。

◎佛於因中悟此，發願成佛，普示眾生。

◎故今五時設教，雖言有權實，顯有遲速，原其本意，唯為此一大事因緣也。

“All Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appeared in the world for one great cause: to help all sentient beings realize and enter the Buddha's wisdom.” This is the cause for which the Buddha appearing in this world.

「諸佛世尊，出現於世，唯為一大事因緣，開示悟入，一切眾生佛知佛見。」這是佛陀來人間的一大事因緣。

Let us consider this. Why did the Buddha come to the human realm? From the sutras, we know that the Buddha has been enlightened since Beginningless Time. Beginningless Time is the limitless past. He has been a Buddha since Beginningless Time, so why would He descend once again manifest the “eight aspects of becoming enlightened,” starting with going from Tusita Heaven into that earthly palace? This shows us that before becoming a Buddha, we each have to go through this spiritual training ground, which is the world of Bodhisattvas. Due to everything He saw and experienced in the human realm, including humans' states of being, He decided to become a monastic, to study and to thoroughly understand the principles of the human realm to teach them to sentient beings.

想一想，佛陀為什麼要來人間？常常在經典中我們都知道，佛陀成佛以來是無始。無始就是無邊際的以前、以前。無始以來他就已成佛了，為什麼又再另外一個「八相成道」——

下兜率、降皇宮……。意思就是要告訴大家，人人要成佛之前必須經過這個道場，這個道場完全就是一個菩薩的世界，他經過一段人世間，所看到的事事物物、人生的生態，所以想出家去研究人間道理，要將人間道理如何透徹來教導眾生。

Did He need to study them? He had already attained Buddhahood. He already had a clear enlightened nature. This is another one of His manifested forms. If we want to become enlightened, we must go through this type of cleansing. After experiencing the delusions of the material world, we must then work hard and attain realizations. This passage teaches all of us that if we walk the same path as the Buddha, we can have the same spiritual state and also attain enlightenment. This is how the Buddha leads by example. He does not only use words to teach; rather, He teaches by example.

需要去研究嗎？本來就已成佛了，本來覺性明朗，這也是一種示相。我們想要覺悟，一定要經過這番好好的洗練，經過這番人事物的迷，然後才用功、才覺悟。這就是要教導我們人人，若跟他一樣走過這條路，同樣也有心靈世界，也可以覺悟。這就是佛陀用身教；不是只有用言教，他是用身教。

So this is the great cause for which he came to the human realm, to figure out how to teach sentient beings. He must demonstrate that His life and their lives are no different, no matter the time period, no matter how people

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think, no matter how complex the mind. He must accommodate each time period so as to break through the contradictions of that era. So, this is why He comes. Those contradictions are actually passed from generation to generation in the human realm. During the time of the Buddha, people were divided into four castes. Do these no longer exist? Today we still have divisions in class and wealth. These are the unresolved afflictions that prevent the mind from being liberated. So, the Buddha manifests Himself according to the sentient beings and afflictions of the time and for this great cause. His methods were to “open, reveal, realize, enter.”

所以他來人間，這就是一大事因緣，要如何教育眾生，他要顯示跟眾生的生活都一樣，在什麼樣的時代，人類是什麼樣的思想，心靈如何的複雜，他就要配合那個時代，去突破那個時代的矛盾。所以，這也就是一大事因緣。那種矛盾，其實人間代代相傳。佛陀的時代四姓階級的分別，我們現在難道就沒有嗎？現在也有貧富貴賤的分別。這就是我們人生的心靈煩惱打不開，所以解脫不出來。所以佛陀是按照時代眾生煩惱，這一大事因緣來示現，所以用「開、示、悟、入」。

The doors to sentient beings' hearts are closed and [their minds are] darkened, so clear, bright wisdom cannot penetrate them. In each of our minds, there is Buddha-nature. That is why He first “opens (and reveals)”; the Buddha wants to open the door to our minds so we can all recognize that we each have an intrinsic Buddha-nature. Then we can “realize” the principles of the world and “enter” the Buddha's spiritual state. So, the Buddha “opens and reveals,” and sentient beings “realize and enter.”

因為眾生的心門關閉著，黑暗了，真正清朗光明的智慧無法透徹；否則，人人心中皆有佛性。所以他就用「開（示）」——

要打開眾生的心門，告訴大家，讓大家都好好知道，我們人人本具佛性。如此我們才能去「悟」世間的道理，我們才能「入」佛心靈的境界。所以「開、示」在佛，「悟、入」在眾生。

This applies to all sentient beings. Every single one of us has Buddha-nature. However, we are deluded so we do not realize or know it. The Buddha wants to help people realize that “all sentient beings possess the Buddha's wisdom,” that everyone inherently has such wisdom, they just do not realize or know it.

所以，這就是一切眾生，我們人人都是有佛性，只是我們迷而不覺、不知。所以佛陀要讓「一切眾生」能夠悟入「佛知佛見」· 要讓大家知道· 眾生的「知」與「見」本來就有· 就是我們自己不覺、不知。

“Such wisdom is possessed by all sentient beings. But they are lost and unaware, and thus fall into cyclic existence.”

「蓋此知見，眾生等有，迷不自知，故淪落生死。」

Such wisdom is what the Buddha wants to open and reveal so we can realize and enter them, so we know that this is common to all sentient beings. Sentient beings do not only refer to humans. Any being that is alive, no matter its size, shape or form, has them. Since they are “possessed by all sentient beings,” all living beings have Buddha-nature. Don't I often say, “All beings, no matter how small, have Buddha-nature,” even ants, mosquitoes, bees. I have also said that in one life, the Buddha appeared in the form of a queen bee. Even in that form, He possessed Buddha-nature. Whether ant or insect, what being does not have it? So, as long as a creature has awareness, it knows when it feels pain, when it needs to flee for its life. [They think to themselves,] “There is a human disturbing me. This is bad for me. I need to run away!”

這個知見，佛陀要來為我們開示悟入這個知見，這就是要告訴我們，普遍的眾生都有。所謂眾生，不只是指人類，只要有生命，不同形態的身體，只要有生命同樣都有，所以「眾生等有」，所有的眾生都皆有佛性。不是常常說，「蠢動含靈皆有佛性」，就連螞蟻、蚊子、蜜蜂。我們也說過，佛有一生就是顯示蜂王的身形，所以哪怕是一隻蜜蜂，牠也有佛性。螞蟻、蟲，哪一種沒有呢？所以說，只要牠有知覺，知道我這是痛，我要趕快逃命——「有人來動我，有人類來動我，對我不利，我要趕快逃啊！」

Look at an ant hill. Thousands of ants live inside it, but if you disturb it just a little, they will disperse in all

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directions and run for their lives. Similarly, when people sense unrest in a country, there will be a wave of refugees because they also want to flee immediately. Even the smallest animals are just like humans. They are living beings, just like us. So sentient beings, humans and otherwise, are all living creatures, and all have a nature equal to that of the Buddha. However, sentient beings are born into different physical realms based on their karma and according to their “circumstantial retribution.”

看看螞蟻窩，一堆螞蟻在那裡，只要你動一動牠，就四散，牠們也會各自逃命。就像現在的人，哪一個國家若不平靜，那個地方就造成難民潮，他們也趕緊要逃命。人類和很微生的動物都一樣，牠們也有生命，跟我們人類一樣。所以說來，人類與眾生是同樣的生命，同樣有與佛平等的本性，只是眾生隨著業力，在不同的形體世界「依報」出生。

Humans are more blessed than other beings. Therefore, we must uphold precepts and create blessings. Because we had slightly more blessed retributions than other living beings, we were reborn as humans. No matter how painful things are, as long as we are in the human realm we will have a chance to repent, a chance to repay the debts we owe and a chance to see good and evil in this world. Those with limited capabilities and poor causes and conditions will be influenced and tempted by evil. If they practice doing small good deeds, and have a small amount of merits, a benefactor will naturally appear. So even after a lifetime of wrongdoings and evil, they may still meet a benefactor and experience blessed conditions. Naturally, regardless of their circumstances, they can be guided onto the right path because of this karmic connection.

人總是比其他的動物有福多了。所以說，我們人要守戒、要造福，是因為人類總比其他生物類多了微分的福報才會來做人。因為人類再怎麼苦，自然有機會能去懺悔、有機會欠債還債、有機會能看到善惡人間。根機比較鈍劣的、因緣比較不好的，就受惡的影響，這樣拉過去。若是微善、微福，自然他命中有貴人，他的人生過去的錯誤、過去的惡，他的生命中遇到貴人、遇到福緣，自然不管他在什麼樣的環境，就有這分緣遇到，就會讓人把他引導過來。

At Tzu Chi, we often hear of cases in which a person who has done a lot of evil in the past had to first experience a period of hardship before eventually encountering the good causes and conditions that brought him here. These allowed him to transform his heart and behavior, and guided him on a blessed course toward doing good deeds. So to attain enlightenment, we need to be in the human realm. In this world, there is good and evil, and blessed and negative retributions. Negative retribution is pain and suffering; such suffering is unbearably painful and continues lifetime after lifetime. To be reborn as humans does not mean that we will necessarily have the chance to repent. Without the causes and conditions for doing evil, we may be reborn as other living beings according to our circumstantial retribution. If we have a tiny bit of goodness, we have a chance to be reborn human and may attain deliverance.

我們在慈濟是不是常常聽到，不管他做過多少惡，他也要有一番的折磨，才能夠間接、輾轉遇到好的因緣，把他接引進來，改變他的心，改變他的行為，引導他向福的方向去造善；這就是人生。要成佛就是要在人間，人間有善惡，有福與惡的報。惡報者，就是苦難，受苦難堪忍耐，一世經過一世。而且不是再來當人，有這個機會讓他懺悔；已沒有這個因緣繼續造惡，未來就是其他的生靈，依報去出生了。人還有一點點微分的善，還有機會能再回來做人，看看什麼樣的因緣，可以得度否。

Therefore, we sentient beings all have Buddha-nature, but we are deluded and do not know it. Because we are all lost, we do not know this. We have already heard the Dharma and know and believe that everyone has Buddha-nature. This includes ourselves and every person we encounter. We know that everyone has Buddha-nature. But despite this knowledge, we still have not rid ourselves of habitual tendencies. Each of us knows we have Buddha-nature, but we have not eliminated our habitual tendencies. When we listen to the teachings, we understand the principles but we are lost and unaware. Not only may we not have faith in others, we may also slander them. So, because we do this, we fall into cyclic existence.

所以說起來，我們眾生皆有佛性，只是迷而不知。我們都是迷，才會不知道。儘管我們已經聽經聞法，知道了，

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相信了，相信人人都有佛性；包括我自己，包括任何一個人，人人都有佛性，我知道了。不過，我們知道，卻是習性未除。我們人人都知道有佛性，只是習性還未除。聽經的時候，知道有道理，但是迷不自知，他不只是不相信，還要毀謗，所以因為這樣他就要墮落生死。

Where does this transmigration take place? Is it only transmigration through human lives? Not necessarily. Even if people return to this world, they must repay [the debts that created] negative karma and affinities. To repay these [debts], they had to return to this world to suffer much pain and torment. They may even have to face other types of “circumstantial retribution.” Therefore, falling into cyclic existence is [being immersed] in the Six Realms, where the suffering is unbearable.

而這個生死是在哪裡呢？是在人生在生死嗎？也不一定。即使來人間，惡業、惡緣就要還，還要還人間，所以他若再來人間，還要受很多苦磨。甚至他說不定還要淪落在其他的「依報」，所以淪落生死是六道，那就苦不堪言了。

This was the cause that led the Buddha to His awakening; “[He] realized this cause and He resolved to attain Buddhahood.” He became enlightened among humankind by manifesting a form in this world. His Buddha-nature is intrinsic and has existed since Beginningless Time, but the Buddha manifested among humans to show that, “the Buddha realized this cause and He resolved to attain Buddhahood, to reveal all [teachings] to sentient beings.”

所以佛，因在這中間覺悟，「於因中悟此，發願成佛」。佛陀就是在人群中覺悟，因為他現相來人間，佛性本具，無始以來就有，但是他就是示相在人群中，所以「佛於因中悟此，發願成佛，普示眾生」。

The Buddha realized this cause and He resolved to attain Buddhahood, to reveal all [teachings] to sentient beings.

◎佛於因中悟此，發願成佛，普示眾生。

The cause is that multitudes of sentient beings are deluded by suffering and remain unenlightened. So, the Buddha continues to return to this world to teach us how to become awakened, and how to transform other sentient beings after we are awakened. Therefore it is said, “He resolved to attain Buddhahood to reveal all [teachings] to sentient beings.” The Buddha manifests in this world to teach sentient beings with many kinds of methods. Because sentient beings have limited capabilities, the Buddha established five periods of teachings. In those five periods, there is the provisional and the true. The provisional refers to skillful means. The true refers to the ultimate truth. The Buddha originally intended to expound the true Dharma and teach it impartially, but sentient beings encounter the Dharma with varying capabilities. Thus, there are “five periods of teachings.” 在這個因，因為眾生芸芸，苦難迷而不悟，所以他不斷來人間，讓我們知道要怎麼樣覺悟，覺悟之後要如何去度眾生。所以說起來，「發願成佛，普示眾生」，他不斷不斷普遍去為眾生說法，這是佛陀示現來人間，為了眾生用種種的方法。所以眾生根機鈍劣，佛陀要設五時，就是五個時段，叫做「五時設教」，也就是在這五個時間有權有實——

權，就是方便法；實，是實相法。要說出佛陀心靈本懷的真實法，但是眾生面對這個法，其實佛陀說法是平等，是眾生的根機不同，所以叫做「五時施教」。

He established the five periods of teachings. Though He spoke of the provisional and the true, manifested the slow and the quick methods, His original intent has always been [to reveal the Dharma to sentient beings.]

◎故今五時設教，雖言有權實，顯有遲速，原其本意，唯為此一大事因緣也。

There are “five periods of teachings.” When the Buddha began expounding the Dharma, He taught the true teachings. These were the Avatamsaka teachings. The Avatamsaka teachings were expounded for only 21 days because they were only understood by Bodhisattvas with superior capabilities and wisdom. Heavenly beings, humans, etc., did not understand. Therefore He spent 21 days to transform Bodhisattvas who already

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had clear and superior capabilities and wisdom. But because He saw that sentient beings could not understand this, after 21 days, He began to expound the Agama teachings. He expounded the Agama teachings for 12 years and then the Vaipulya for eight years. And next, [He gave] the Prajna teachings for 22 years, following them with the Lotus teachings, which took eight years. These are the “five periods of teachings.”

這「五時施教」，其實佛陀一說法的時候是實教，是「華嚴」。「華嚴」說三七日而已，因為在這三七日間所說的，只是上根上智的法身菩薩聽得懂，天人其他都聽不懂。所以他用三七日的時間來化度上根上智，本來已有明徹之上根智的大菩薩。但是看到眾生無法接受，接受不到，所以三七日之後他就開始講「阿含經」。「阿含」說十二年，再下來就是「方等」講八年。再來就是「般若」二十二年，再接下來就是「法華」，法華是八年。這就是佛陀「五時設教」。

Indeed, we sentient beings are incapable of comprehending His kindness and compassion. Therefore He made a great effort to teach according to different capabilities by establishing various kinds of teachings. He did this out of kindness and compassion. In conclusion, though we are all human, the same Dharma expounded by the Buddha may be understood quickly by some people. Not only do they resonate with the Buddha's heart and His original intentions, they can also put [His Dharma] into practice. This process happens quickly. Whose with superior capabilities can believe [the teachings] and quickly put them into action.

真的是眾生，我們無法體會佛陀的慈悲，就得用他的心力來應眾生機，在世間設種種教法，這就是佛陀的慈悲。總而言之，我們人人同樣是人類，佛陀同樣在說法，有的人很快就可以接受到，不只是接受到與佛心契合，契合佛的本懷，這樣就可以身體力行，這就是速，很快。很好的根機、很利的根機，他相信之後，他能夠身體力行。

Some have average capabilities. They believe but find it hard to eliminate their habitual tendencies. Consider disciples such as Sariputra; though he knew what the Buddha said was good, he was worried that sentient beings were too stubborn and obstinate so he did not dare approach them. He focused only on his own self-enlightenment. If a being of inferior capability hears the Buddha's teaching and gives rise to doubts, he may wonder, “Is that right or wrong?” Not only does he have doubts, he cannot believe or accept it. With doubt comes the inability to believe or accept something. At the same time, he will commit evil deeds. This is how a person with low capability behaves. He will be adrift at times. It is not that he has not encountered the Buddha-Dharma. He has, but he is still uncertain and wavers between belief and doubt. A person like this has inferior capabilities and a dull, limited aptitude.

有的較中根機的，他相信，但是習氣難除。這就像舍利弗這些（聲聞）弟子，雖然他知道佛說的很好，但是他很擔憂，眾生剛強難調難伏，我不敢接近眾生，獨善其身。假如是下根機的，佛陀的開示，聽了，他的心懷疑到底是對或不對？不只是心中有懷疑，他還不能很信服，有懷疑就不會信服，同時還會造惡，這是很鈍劣的根機。有時候沉沉浮浮，並非沒有接觸到佛法，是接觸到了，但是浮沉不定，甚至信疑參半，這就是叫做下根器，鈍劣的下根器。

The Buddha says that because sentient beings have superior, average and inferior capabilities, the Buddha had to use “five periods of teachings.” Therefore, it was very taxing to come to this world for the sake of this great cause. The Buddha opens and reveals teachings for sentient beings to realize and enter. But because they are deluded, He has no choice but to use both “skillful” and “true” means, the small and great teachings, to adapt to sentient beings' varying capacities. He taught according to their superior, average and inferior capabilities. So, this was His one great cause.

所以佛陀說，因為眾生有上、中、下根，佛陀不得不用「五時設教」。就為了這個大事，所以來生人間，多辛苦啊！所以這就是佛陀開示悟入，這是因為眾生迷，他不得不用「方便」與「實」，有大、小的教法，應眾生大小根機，而有上、中、下根器來應眾生，所以這就是一大因緣。

Let us all hope that we all have superior capabilities. Or, we should at least strive to be average. Otherwise, if our capabilities are any lower, we may be adrift for a very long time. Do we really have time to wait in this life? The human realm is impermanent and fast-changing, so let us not be people of inferior capabilities. I hope we

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Wisdom at Dawn Transcript

The Lotus Sutra

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can be like Never-Slighting Bodhisattva, who had wisdom, became awakened, protected his intrinsic nature and respected others. If we can do this, this will happen faster. Therefore everyone, please always be mindful. 所以我們大家，希望人人都是上根器的人，至少我們也要保持在中（根機），假如再下去，可能浮沉很久的時間，是不是人命能夠等待呢？無常人間迅速，所以我們不要做下劣根機的人。希望人人成為常不輕菩薩，知見、覺悟，守好他的本性，也尊重別人，若能夠這樣比較快。所以請大家要時時多用心！