

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

AUTUMN 2023 Vol. 50

Religion and the Family





First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970



Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974



Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979



Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984



Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989



Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace was established in 1970 as an international nongovernmental organization. It obtained general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1999. As an international network of religious communities encompassing over ninety countries, the Religions for Peace family engages in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and other peace-building activities through dialogue and cooperation across religions.

Religions for Peace Japan was established in 1972 as a committee for the international issues supported by Japanese Association of Religious Organizations. Since then it has served as the national chapter of Religions for Peace.

Purpose

1. Calling on religious communities to deeply reflect on their practices, address any that are exclusionary in nature, and engage in dialogue with one another in the spirit of tolerance and understanding.
2. Facilitating multireligious collaboration in making peace initiatives.
3. Working with peace organizations in all sectors and countries to address global issues.
4. Implementing religiously based peace education and awareness-raising activities.

Activity

Religions for Peace Japan promotes activities under the slogan: "Caring for Our Common Future: Advancing Shared Well-Being," which include cooperating and collaborating with Religions for Peace and Religions for Peace Asia; participating in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference; cooperating and collaborating with both international and local faith-based organizations; and building networks with various sectors (politics, economics, academics, culture, media, and so forth). Religions for Peace Japan also promotes various programs related to peace education that include hosting peace research seminars and peace university symposiums.



Sixth World Assembly in Rome and Riva del Garda, Italy, 1994



Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999



Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006



Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013



Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

Religions for Peace Japan Different Faith, Common Action

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DHARMA WORLD

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FEATURES: Religion and the Family

Dharma World presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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Photo: Shutterstock



The Place of Religion and the Individual in the Home in Rissho Kosei-kai

by Masashi Hashimoto

“Does religion inevitably divide families?”

This autumn issue of *Dharma World* is devoted to religion and the family, and I have been asked by the editorial team to introduce this topic, in the limited space available, using Rissho Kosei-kai as a case study. In this paper, therefore, I would like to explore religion and the family at Rissho Kosei-kai, which has historically adopted a family-based system of household membership. In so doing, I will be focusing on the question of second-generation membership of new religious movements, while keeping in mind the movement’s community aspects.

Growth After World War II

Rissho Kosei-kai grew rapidly as an important source of support for rural migrants drawn to the cities during Japan’s postwar economic reconstruction (Fujii 1974). Drawing on comparative international data, Lipset and Bendix (1959) argued that the large mass of unorganized workers drawn from rural areas to the big cities during this boom period, sparked by demand from U.S. forces fighting in the Korean War in 1951, filled the lower rungs of the occupational ladder. This allowed native urbanities to climb the ladder on the backs of these migrant workers, and some scholars have argued that the resentment arising from feeling used in this way was a major engine behind the formation and growth of new religious movements (Ōmura 1996).

The denial of divinity by the emperor of Japan in 1946 generated acute anomie* among a population already stunned and traumatized by the country’s defeat in 1945. The myths and beliefs that had sustained the old social norms collapsed almost overnight, and the resulting state of spiritual collapse was one of the factors that caused new religious movements to spring up like bamboo shoots after a rain-storm. The sociologist Kiyomi Morioka (1989) referred to the decade following the war as a period of “acute onset of and recovery from anomie.” According to his analysis, “Kosei-kai’s ancestral memorial services appealed to people who had lost sight of where they were headed due to the collapse of their core identity. [Kosei-kai] made major gains in the first half of the decade . . . and rather than running out of steam when anomie declined in the second half of the decade, it continued to grow rapidly as its teachings concerning ancestral memorial services resonated with the reassessment of traditional values then underway.”

Those who migrated to the cities in those days did not build urban-style relationships in the form of personal connections between individuals. Instead, they formed tightly closed, village-style communities within the cities founded on the *kaisha* (company) or nuclear family (Hiroi 2009), and Rissho Kosei-kai was no exception to this phase of village-style community development.

Rissho Kosei-kai’s ancestor appreciation services were a way for workers who had to leave their patriarchal extended families in their hometowns to become aware of the continuity of life, including the continuity of their existence with their parents and past generations (i.e., their ancestors), amid the nuclearization of the family in the cities, and to give thanks for their own existence in the here and now. In this sense, it was very much a “household” religion.

Japan’s rapid economic growth enabled Rissho Kosei-kai to demonstrate that it was thanks to its teachings that its members were able to successfully cope with the realities of poverty, illness, and strife. However, it goes without saying that its disseminating activities aimed above all to use life’s hardships to open people’s eyes to the teachings of Buddhism. Naturally, Rissho Kosei-kai itself also matured as a community as the middle class grew in tandem with Japan’s economy and the despondency felt by the majority of migrants to the cities eased from the second generation onward (Ōmura 1996).

Nowadays, in the case of Germany, the Catholic and Protestant churches function as “regional monopolies” in certain regions. In effect, the churches sit at the center of religious pillars that have their own educational institutions (from kindergarten through university), mass media outlets, labor unions, business owners’ associations, and so on. These pillars serve as closed systems with homogenous norms that unify local communities (Kazufumi Manabe and



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Wolfgang Jagodzinski). Parallels may be observed between the situation in Germany and that in Japan in the Edo period (1603–1868), when the temples of traditional Buddhist orders served in a public capacity through their contributions to education, entertainment, spiritual care, tourism, and even personal identification (due to the requirement that everyone had to be registered with a temple under the *tera-uke* system). In the case of Japan, however, the role of temples in local communities was transformed and weakened by government efforts to make Shintoism the national religion, which led to the separation of Shinto and Buddhism and the destruction of temples in the years following the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

As a new religious movement, Rishso Kosei-kai appeared to be passing through the phase of a closed village-type community itself, in terms of its social recognition. The Rishso Kosei-kai *samgha* (community) was originally a gathering of people of the same faith who sought to refine one another's souls and deepen their faith. However, the organization's ideal was to integrate its *samgha* into the local communities in accordance with contemporaneous circumstances, just as in Germany. This can be seen in two action policies unveiled by Rishso Kosei-kai at the sixtieth birthday celebrations of the founder, Nikkyo Niwano, in 1966. The first was the "Bring Faith to All the Nation" movement, the aim of which was to open the door of faith to all people and lead them to a way of life based on the truth, and the second

was the plan to build Fumon Hall as a central venue for the popularization of Buddhist teachings. These were initiatives that looked outward "from the liberation of the individual to the liberation of society," and were pursued in the form of two major movements: the "Brighter Society Movement" and the "Religions for Peace" platform for inter-religious cooperation (formerly called the World Conference on Religion and Peace). The spirit of the bodhisattvas, which is directed inward and outward in faith, is captured in the phrase "searching for enlightenment above and transforming living beings below," and it is necessary to fully recognize the importance of the coexistence or balance of these two complementary actions in the management of religious movements.

Religion of the Family and of the Individual

In his exploration of the relationship between individuals and groups in the evolutionary process, primatologist Masao Kawai states that in monkey society, male monkeys are not involved in child-rearing, and that human fathers who are involved in child-rearing are social beings who only came into existence when we began to form families. Mothers, on the other hand, possess the duality of being both biological and social beings. The family is established by embracing the attributes of the father, which may be quite different from the relationship between mother and child. In other words, observes Kawai, instead of the individual being directly

connected to the whole group, humans developed a novel multilayered structure in which the family intermediates between the individual and the group (Kawai 1990, p. 178).

The family has undergone a transition from the family under the *ie* system, which was established under the Meiji Constitution and gave authority to the head of the household until the pre-war period, to the nuclear family modeled after the modern American family, and since the late 1980s, the family has exhibited a more individualized aspect. In a case study of Rishso Kosei-kai's local Dharma centers, Masako Watanabe (1979) observed that "the subject who joins a new religion is always an individual." This observation has assumed greater importance today, and Watanabe has cited as "a particular reason for targeting the family" the fact that "as most bearers of the faith are women acting in the role of mother, wife, and/or daughter-in-law, it is more appropriate to regard their experiences of deprivation (more specifically poverty, illness, conflict, and death) as issues faced by the families to which these women belong, rather than as matters that concern them solely as individuals." While it was developing, Rishso Kosei-kai was dubbed an "apron religion," because responsibility for dissemination work was left to women who were housewives. This provides evidence that women were motivated to join Rishso Kosei-kai by the problems of the families to which they belonged, and that the "family" community was absorbed directly into the

“Dharma center” community in the form of household membership.

According to the Christian Bible, Jesus said: “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” (Matthew 10:35–37) Jesus’s religious movement was at odds with the traditional family. The same can be seen with the contemporary new religious movements that intrude into the “family,” which points to the universal challenges posed by the relationship between family and religion.

But does religion inevitably divide families? Rissho Kosei-kai members who had been awakened to a “true way of liberation” through Buddhist teachings as a result of their personal experiences of suffering often found themselves away from home as they devoted themselves to their dissemination work, and it is a fact that some families were consequently left behind. At the same time, however, at the core of its teachings was a spirit that cherished the continuity of life in the family, both present and past, in the form of filial piety for living parents and ancestor appreciation services for the dead.

On November 16, 2003, Nichiko Niwano, president of Rissho Kosei-kai, convened a meeting of the organization’s leaders on the theme of “setting one’s house in order” (*seika* 齊家). This is derived from *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*)—one of the Four Books of Confucianism, attributed to Confucius’s disciple Zengzi—which contains a passage that states, “[A person] should make his mind right, cultivate himself, then regulate the family, then govern the state, and finally lead the world into peace.” The president said that “putting family relationships in order” was now more important than ever. He addressed the

significance of the phrase in the president’s New Year’s guidance in the following year, and the phrase has since formed part of the organization’s basic guidelines. What it signifies is that it is mainly between families that the “lamp of Dharma” (faith) is transmitted from generation to generation, and that this is also crucial to the survival of the organization. However, it is worth reiterating that just as Rissho Kosei-kai came into being as a *saṃgha* community that functioned as a metaphorical family rather than one held together by blood ties, it has sought to transform the family from a natural foundation for relations rooted in blood ties to a spiritual foundation for relations rooted in Dharma ties. Jesus’s words in the Gospel of Matthew must in fact have been intended to achieve just such a shift in the meaning of the “family” from being an entity based on blood ties to one based on spiritual bonds.

As above, the Japanese family has since the late 1980s grown more individualized in character. In the twenty-first century, however, another term has emerged to describe the contemporary Japanese family: the coalition family (*renritsu kazoku*). This is the family in which individuals, while conjoined as members of the same family, are equally respected as independent individuals who enjoy an appropriate sense of distance from one another (Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living 1998). While household membership of Rissho Kosei-kai is still acceptable under present circumstances, we would suggest that it should be recommended (though not required) that members who have inherited the faith from previous generations be given individual membership, in recognition of their autonomous and conscious membership as a person of faith. This would be achieved by removing their household membership at some point after they reach adulthood. The times are shifting to individual issues for both men and women, and we must respond in kind. □

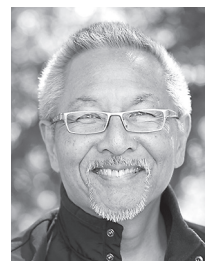
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* The society-wide disappearance of the norms, solidarity, and order generated by authority resulting from the collapse of that authority.

On Family, Freedom and Enlightenment (Queerly)

by Larry Yang



As the Buddha did, we have a choice to stay exactly who we are, where we are, as we are.

Our stressful and often oppressive world gives frequent messages, both insidiously subtle and explicitly harsh, for us to be someone who we are not, to do things with which we do not feel aligned, to think and feel in ways that do not make sense to us, in ways that harm ourselves and others. This is especially true of communities outside the mainstream, dominant, hetero-normative culture, such as LGBTQIA+ folks, whose different life experiences evoke everything from passive indifference to dismissal, or stereotyping of our lives, our relationships, and our needs—and at worst, can spark the vitriolic expression of aggressive hostility and trans- and homophobic violence that still is very present—from the bullying in our schoolyards to the hateful rhetoric and physical violence of our larger culture.

Unfortunately, “the Family”—that is, families of biological origin—are no exceptions to this kind of oppression and suffering. Families of such origin can be experienced as the worst perpetrators of trans- and homophobic injuries. It is both the personal and collective unconsciousness that we transform every moment that we, as folks who identify as LGBTQIA+, live with authenticity and a deep knowing of who we truly are. Each moment that we are mindful and openly accepting of who we are—living a life different

than that which is proclaimed by the false prophetic, often “spiritual” messages that seek to portray an unequal and unjust society as a wise and beneficial one. This living differently is what is called, in the teachings of the Buddha, “going upstream”—living our lives fully, totally, and transparently, despite the unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) manipulative delusion that surrounds us, even in our families of biological origin.

The transformative power of the teachings of the Buddha, along with many other worthy and profound spiritual lineages, guides us to live in this present moment—meeting this very moment of our lives with kindness, compassion, and openness. This gentle acceptance is a complete acceptance—not just of this present moment but also of who we are. Meeting the present moment as it is with loving attention is the same as meeting the person we are with that same kindness. Our direct life experience is an integral part of this present moment of life. We are indivisible from life. All of us—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more—are the very expression of life. And we are an integral part of this web of life, even if we are told otherwise by others who would judge us, or through our own self-judgments that deny an aspect of our true nature.

Larry Yang has retired from teaching the Dharma after thirty years, and has a special interest in creating access for diverse multicultural communities. Larry is one of the founders of the East Bay Meditation Center and the Insight Community of the Desert in Palm Springs, California, and was on the Teachers Council of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center for 15 years. He is the author of Awakening Together: the Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community. He is currently the senior advisor for the Kataly Foundation, which provides grants to encourage mindfulness within multicultural-practice communities.

What is “true nature”? Sometimes this term is invoked in order to point to the experience of emptiness (*shunyata*) or non-attachment to a sense of self (*anatta*) as the goal of spiritual practice. However, I have found that experiencing our “true nature” is not so much a marker of our spiritual progress or an answer that we are expected to have in order to achieve Freedom or Enlightenment. Rather, the insight of our “true nature” emerges from the gentle yet persistent exploration of the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” in this current life experience.

And there is nothing outside of this exploration—including our sexualities, our gender identities, and our orientations, among many other beautiful expressions of identity. If the path toward freedom and our spiritual heritage is not available through our families of origin,



A detail from an illustration of Shakyamuni's temptation by Mara. Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, in Gansu Province, China. Tenth century. Painting on silk.

then what many oppressed communities have created are Families of Choice. We choose to be with those with whom we feel a sense of safety, a sense of belonging, and a sense of responsibility, along with the heart connections of compassion, love, and joy.

Of what benefit is this practice of accepting who we are, as a Family of Choice? The benefit is the progressively deeper knowing that regardless of what other people think, do, or say to us, we are fully human, we are fully entitled to all of our human rights, and we are fully entitled to our humanity. As this becomes unshakable in our direct experience, there is a Freedom in knowing who we are and how connected we are to this life (and all of our lives). This Freedom is independent of any external circumstances—political, social, or cultural. This is the Freedom that the Buddha himself experienced in the archetypal story of his Enlightenment.

After years of searching for a spiritual path, Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, decided with unwavering resolve

to sit in meditation and not rise until he experienced the wisdom of the true nature of his existence. Before his achievement, Mara—the supreme foe who tempts all beings into unconsciousness—was determined to prevent Siddhartha's liberation from occurring. Mara amassed all of his powerful armies to force Siddhartha out of his contemplative state. It is said that Mara caused unimaginable forces of destruction to arise and attack the future Buddha.

Mara called upon maelstroms of tornadoes and torrential downpours to wash away and drown the meditating prince, but the floods did not dampen him by so much as a dewdrop, nor even cause the edge of his robes to ruffle. There were showers of rocks the size of mountain peaks, hot coals, and every conceivable destructive weapon assailing Siddhartha—yet they all were transformed into celestial flowers, cascading elegantly to his feet. After nine unsuccessful attempts to unseat the future Buddha from his path toward liberation, an enraged Mara again gathered his army of hundreds of thousands.

With the roar of their screams in the background, Mara demanded to the Buddha-to-be: “Get out of that seat! You are nothing and nobody! That seat belongs to me! These are my witnesses to this truth!” And there arose a deafening roar from his armies extending in all directions—“Yes, we are his witnesses! You do not belong here!” And Mara continued, “You, Prince, sit alone. Who is your witness?”

Then the Prince, close to his liberation, undisturbed by any obstacle created by Mara, reached down with the simplest possible gesture, filled with the gentlest of ease, to touch the ground with the middle finger of his right hand. This is the moment represented by so many sculpted images of the Buddha. This is the moment that the Buddha called upon Mother Earth to witness his inalienable right to his Dharma seat—to his place in the world, and to his belonging to this life. So brilliant was the power of the Mother Goddess when she appeared that Mara and his armies were dispelled into all corners of the Universe.

When we feel assailed because of who we are, we each can invoke the strength of the Buddha and the courage of all peoples who have lived through experiences of suffering and oppression. And as the Buddha did, we can anchor in the deep knowledge that we have a choice to stay exactly who we are, where we are, as we are. The choice to stay in that place is an act of Freedom. Just like Prince Siddhartha, we all have a Dharma seat—a place in this life—that cannot be taken from us. There may be distractions or painful experiences that try to knock us off our seat, but no one can take that seat away. Regardless of how innumerable Maras may tempt or torture us, we do not have to relinquish our seat; we don't have to move from a place where we always belong. And even if we leave that seat, it will be there whenever we choose to return.

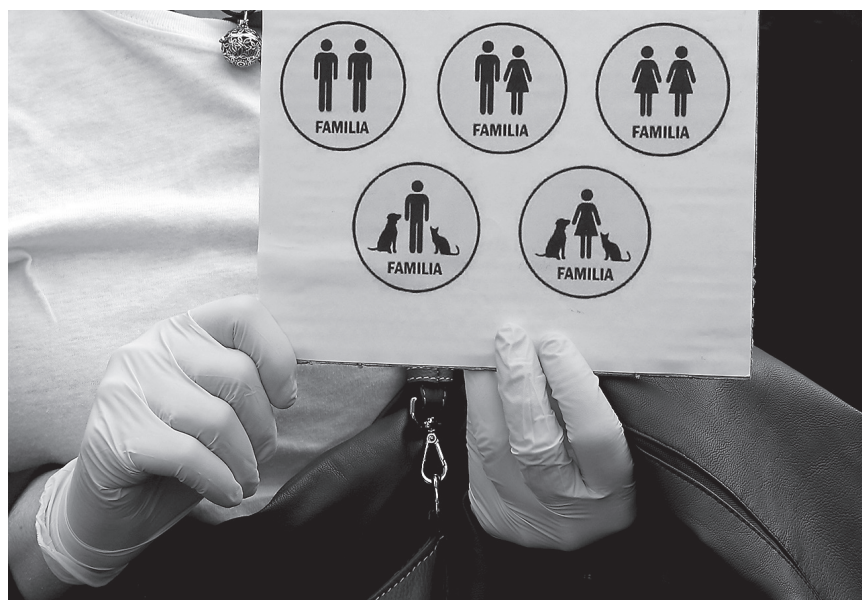
It is true of the Buddha's path that he, too, left his family of origin in a dramatic way, without notification to his parents, relatives, or even his wife and newborn child. Was it only because he was drawn to the ideal of Awakening? Was it that clear to him, or was it because he *also* could not be who he felt he could be in his lifetime within the confines of his family of origin? Perhaps the Buddha was gay, perhaps not, or perhaps the descriptors are irrelevant for an asexual being—in any case, his path is remarkably similar to those of us in the LGBTQIA+ community. He created his families and communities of choice within the Fourfold Sangha (monastic women, monastic men, lay women, lay men—unfortunately excluding those who identify as Gender-Fluid or Trans). Perhaps (knowing that this suggestion will feel blasphemous to some traditionalist Buddhists), the Fourfold Sangha was the Queer Buddha's brilliant method of transmitting the possibility of Freedom to future generations—using both families of origin and Families of Choice, without being dependent on either.

These possibilities of Freedom are so precious to pass on to future generations of LGBTQIA+ individuals, families, and communities. Within that experience, there is no primacy of the family of origin, particularly if it is oppressive and does not serve awakening into Freedom for all beings. In a broad sense, many Asian families take for granted the primacy of biological families of origin. There is a respect for ancestors and lineage of the family tree. That is totally and deeply appropriate, valid, and meaningful—until it is not. To rigidly idealize “the Family” does not acknowledge or remedy the potential for abuse(s) therein. This reification and promotion of only one convention of human relationship is not in alignment with the Precepts, which are about non-harming, or the experiential truth of Impermanence.

The Freedom we experience, whether through spiritual practice or lived experience, we pass on as our legacy to our own children in our roles as LGBTQIA+ parents, to our families of choice—include friends, spouses, partners, mentors, teachers, students, colleagues, soul companions, and LGBTQIA+ comrades along the

spiritual path—in the Fourfold Sangha. We pass our LGBTQIA+ practice onward to the future generations of LGBTQIA+ movement builders and LGBTQIA+ activists who seek to transform our human condition, not just our personal well-being. And as Families of Choice, we learn to follow our human spirit with the highest intentions, and when our religions of origin do not serve us, we shift our experience and attention to Religions of Choice, which do serve the benefit and freedom of all beings, in all directions.

This Freedom is what our spiritual practice can bring to our experience as LGBTQIA+ communities in the larger world. In these times of cultural chaos and confusion, when ethical truths are difficult to discern from false facts, there will likely be escalating polarities in an already combative social discourse. Taking the time and space to *remember* who we really are (a quality of mindfulness), regardless of the messages that are thrown at us, will assist and support all our diverse communities (LGBTQIA+ and many others), to go against the torrential stream of any form of oppression and supremacy. □



A woman holds a sign representing different kinds of families during a march to protest the World Congress of Families, a congress under the auspices of a United States organization that defines family as strictly centering around a mother and father, in Verona, Italy, on March 30, 2019.

Photo: AP/AELO

A Battle for the Hearts and Minds of American Youth

by Liz Wilson

Being non-religious or even anti-religious, if done with others in a consistent, institutional way, can be classified as a kind of devotion, and therefore, arguably, as a kind of religion.

Over the past two decades, Americans have been leaving Christianity in record numbers. Demographers argue about the future of religious affiliation in the U.S., but one trend is clear: Christianity is losing ground to non-religion. Christians and other groups are working hard to win the allegiance of young people. This essay delineates the roots of the decline in adherence to Christianity in America and describes current battles to win the hearts and minds of young Americans, paying special attention to the tactics of one colorful, media-friendly group that caters to their tastes. Youth culture reaches across national borders, proliferating through mass media and technology that knows no borders. It's possible that trends seen in America will illuminate tactics likely to appeal to youth in other countries. In places around the world where religious

and non-religious groups engage in this struggle, splashy American groups and their tactics may prove worth watching.

How Did Christianity Lose Ground in America?

Many nineteenth-century intellectuals predicted that religion would be a thing of the past by the twentieth century. Viewing religion as an antiquated way of seeing the world that was bound to be replaced by scientifically based thinking, scholars like Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx declared that atheism would prevail as humans saw the value of rationality in improving human life. The great majority of Americans, however, tenaciously held on to their religious identities well

into the twentieth century. Polls taken at the beginning of the twentieth century showed Americans taking religion seriously. About 90% of Americans told poll-takers that they believed in God and belonged to an organized religion. The vast majority of Americans identified themselves as Christian. In the middle of the twentieth century, American politicians invoked God and the Christian religion as part of a strategy to fight what they regarded as the evil of “godless communism” dominant in the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and countries aligned with these communist powers.

Well past the middle of the twentieth century, Americans continued to identify with organized religion, giving researchers reasons to doubt predictions about a mass movement toward secularism. Religious adherence continued through the tumultuous 1960s, a time of social experimentation and sexual revolution. It proceeded well into the 1980s, an era when the pursuit of personal liberties became the goal of many Americans and a “me-oriented” attitude prevailed. Religious adherence in America held steady until the 1990s. At this time, however, Americans began leaving Christianity in droves. Mainline Protestant denominations like Methodism and Presbyterianism experienced the greatest losses. The number of people who described themselves as “spiritual but not religious” began to rise. The religiously unaffiliated—a group that includes atheists, agnostics, and people who describe their religion as “nothing in particular”—has grown

The author writes, “By 2020, one out of three Americans were declaring no particular religious affiliation (scholars call them the ‘nones’).”

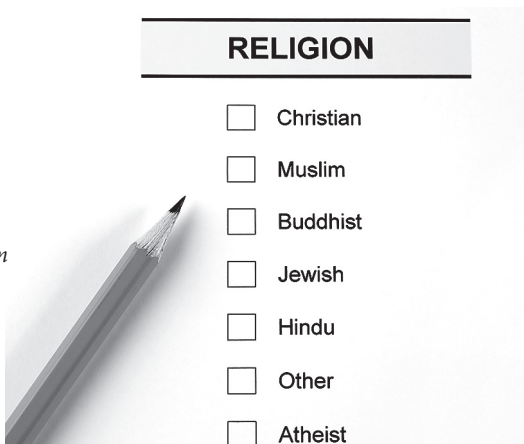


Photo: Shutterstock



Dr. Wilson holds a Miami University Distinguished Teaching Award for Excellence in Graduate Instruction and Mentoring. She has been an award-winning scholar from early in her career, receiving the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion’s First Annual Young Scholars Award for 1995–96. In her first book, Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature (University of Chicago Press), she studied the role that women’s bodies play in Buddhism—the diseased, dying, or dead bodies of women—as objects of meditation for male monks. In recent years, Dr. Wilson has been turning to more public-facing scholarship. She is currently collaborating on An Educator’s Guide to Religious Literacy, a reference work for K-12 educators.

by 1% per year over the last 15 years. By 2020, one out of three Americans were declaring no particular religious affiliation (scholars call them the “nones”).

What caused this turn away from organized religion? The end of the Cold War, a decisive movement toward the Christian right by the Republican party, and the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, are all causal factors. Without a “godless” enemy to oppose, Christians had one less rallying cry. Conservative Christian Republicans continue to vote for measures that restrict what people can do, claiming that it is unchristian to have sex before marriage or to seek an abortion. Conservative Christian Republicans have taken unpopular stands on social issues such as the rights of LGBTQIA+ Americans. Because of this alliance of Christianity with conservative politics, the former came to be associated by some with values out of step with what most Americans believe. Finally, with geo-political struggle and terrorism being carried out in the name of religion on 9/11, many Americans found they wanted nothing to do with organized religion.

Will religious nones who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” soon outnumber Christians in America? Scholars and pollsters are watching trends carefully. There are many factors that make predicting the future difficult, but the phenomenon of “religious switching” stands out as the trend most likely to influence what religion looks like in America decades from now. Younger Americans aged 15–29 are apt to test

out other religions. Starting in their late teens, Americans are prone to walk away from the beliefs and practices of their families in order to explore alternative ideas and practices. But by the time they reach the age of thirty, most Americans have developed a core identity with stable values and practices.

In many cases, it is marriage and family formation in their twenties that encourage Americans to adopt fixed worldviews or religious identities. In any case, experts in “religious switching” tell us that this can take vastly different forms—hence the difficulty of predicting future outcomes. Some Americans raised as Christians switch between different denominations of Christianity. Others leave Christianity for another religion. And others leave organized religion altogether. But it is also the case that Americans raised by parents of no particular religion sometimes convert to Christianity. Researchers with the Pew Research Center (a nonpartisan fact tank) estimate that around 21% of

non-Christians convert to Christianity.

Another factor that complicates the task of prediction: Christians tend to have more children than adherents of other religions. This might give Christians hope for the future. But the data indicate that the high birth rate among Christians is not enough to offset the trend of religious switching away from Christianity, which happens at a rate of 31%. In other words, around one in three American children raised as Christians have left or will leave the religion. Even though the difference between 21% and 31% may seem minor, it is in fact quite significant. Many more Americans are raised as Christians at present (64% of the population in 2020), while the number of those raised without any particular religion is much smaller.

Christians Respond to the Trend

Christians have mobilized to retake ground they’ve lost to groups like



International newspapers’ headlines about the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Photo: Shutterstock



Formal group photograph of the Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States (from October 27, 2020 to June 30, 2022). The author writes, “Six of the nine judges ruled in favor of the coach . . .”

atheists, agnostics, and other “nones,” as well as to those that practice other religions. By voting for Republican politicians who identify as conservative Christians; by donating money to conservative think tanks like the Manhattan Institute that craft Christian-friendly policies; by getting themselves elected to their local school boards; and by similar measures, Christians have organized to promote the centrality of their religion in the American public sphere and ensure that American children are exposed to Christian teachings.

While running for the office of president of the United States, candidate Donald Trump appealed to conservative Christian voters. Although he had no established record of devout Christian behavior, once in office in 2016 Trump fulfilled his promises to the Christian right, in part by packing the Supreme Court with conservative Christian judges. In a number of recent decisions, these judges have overturned legal precedents established in the mid-twentieth century that enforced the strict separation of church and state.

In 2022, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a high-school football coach named Joe Kennedy, who sued the school district that had disciplined him when he repeatedly prayed at the 50-yard line following games and refused to stop this practice when asked to do so. Six of the nine judges ruled in favor of the coach

in *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, writing in the majority opinion that Coach Kennedy should be able to exercise his religion freely. They said that this would not promote Christianity as the state religion, which is prohibited in the “Establishment Clause”* of the U.S. Constitution, because he was praying as an individual and not as a function of his duties as a coach.

While the six judges voting in favor of Coach Kennedy described his actions as unobtrusive and private, a dissenting Justice wrote that the coach had led students in locker-room prayers for many years. Coach Kennedy’s prayers were so popular with student-athletes and fans that players from both teams were in the habit of going on the field to join him in prayer. Emboldened by *Kennedy v. Bremerton* and other Supreme Court rulings favorable to Christians who have argued that their freedom to practice religion is under threat, conservative Christians around the country have begun to test the limits of the strict separation of church and state.

Schools have become ideological battlefields. Although the battle for the hearts and minds of American youth takes place on multiple fronts, public schools have received a huge amount of attention. Judicial successes like *Kennedy v. Bremerton* have brought Christian prayer and other practices back into public schools, overturning legal precedents from the 1960s that barred teachers,

administrators, and other school representatives from advocating for their religion and institutionalizing it in public schools. Conservative Christian Republican governors in Florida, Texas, and other states have won victories for conservative Christian voters with legislation banning school textbooks offensive to Christian sensibilities, as well as advancing other laws that limit what public school teachers can say about controversial topics like gender identity and sexuality. In response to judicial and legislative wins by conservative Christians, those who oppose the elevation of Christianity to a place of prominence in the public sphere in general and in public schools in particular have organized their own groups.

Anti-establishment Groups Fight Back

As Christians have successfully engaged the legislative and judicial branches of the U.S. government in support of Christianity, groups invoking the time-honored principle of the separation of church and state have responded with alarm. Humanists, atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, and a variety of other groups who oppose what they consider to be Christian hegemony in the public square have been galvanized by the successful outcomes that conservative Christians have recently enjoyed. While these groups differ quite a lot in the values they endorse, what they have in common is distress about perceived violations by Christians of the Establishment Clause.

These “anti-establishment” groups have their own think tanks and their own political representatives, as do the groups that seek to elevate Christianity’s place in the public sphere. There are many anti-establishment groups that could be examined by those interested in what strategies are being used to capture the ground that will determine America’s religious future. But what interests me

most as a scholar of religion is a particular kind of group within the fold of anti-establishment groups: those who have sought and won recognition by the government as *religious groups* but who do not practice what appears to be a conventional organized religion.

Much that is philosophically non-religion presents itself sociologically as religion—one of the paradoxes that make the study of non-religion so fascinating. Religious studies scholars, especially those who define religion as a social matter, tend to see religion operating in various social spheres, including secular spheres, of American public life. Religion is about social connections nurtured in spaces built for fellowship. It is not exclusively about belief in a transcendent reality or the worship of deities. Many Americans who are “spiritual but not religious” atheists or agnostics assemble together in buildings, hold meetings that resemble religious services, offer values-based education to their children, collect funds for charitable projects, and otherwise engage in activities that resemble conventional organized religion.

Being non-religious or even anti-religious, if done with others in a consistent, institutional way, can be classified as a kind of devotion, and therefore, arguably, as a kind of religion. In the mid-twentieth century, U.S. courts began to treat as legitimate the claims of such groups that they should be regarded as religions. Religious humanists, for example, have had success in getting recognized by the government as religious people. They’ve won exemptions from mandatory military service on account of their sincerely held conviction that war is evil. Organizations of religious humanists have won exemptions from paying taxes, getting themselves classified as religious organizations. They do not claim to believe in God or any deity, but religious humanists have all the markers of a religious group and have won legal rights to be treated as such.

Colorful Tactics

When it comes to unorthodox tactics that succeed with young people, there is no group that compares to the Satanic Temple. This group does not actually advance the worship of Satan. Rather, it uses the figure of Satan (whom Christians regard as a fallen angel) as a metaphor for rejecting tyrannical authority. Appealing to common sense and empathy, the Satanic Temple opposes the visible presence of Christianity in U.S. public life by offering attention-getting alternatives. “We will beat you at your own game,” the Satanic Temple says. “If you are going to erect a display of the 10 Commandments outside the courthouse, we are going to erect a giant statue of a bare-chested, horned pagan deity. If you are going to focus on the vulnerability of children to secular forces and insist that a return to old-time religion will set them right, we are going to depict children frolicking around an eye-catching statue of a pre-Christian deity. That’s the old-time religion that will save the children! If you are going to establish after-school Bible study clubs in public schools, we are going to establish after-school Satan clubs in public schools. And we will use those club meetings as occasions for kids to engage in activities no longer funded in many public schools: music and art!”

In the Satanic Temple’s after-school Satan club meetings, environmental studies are central. The Satanic Temple wisely avoids controversial topics like sexuality and gender expression. It designs fun, student-centered programs that center around issues of importance to young people, like how to document global warming and other signs of environmental degradation. The Satanic Temple makes use of the courts, without doubt. But its primary goal is to win in the court of public opinion. The Temple has borrowed

civil disobedience tactics from twentieth-century American protest groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). In the 1980s, ACT UP dramatically highlighted the plight of gay men dying alone, abandoned by their families and by society at large. In 1987, members of ACT UP chained themselves to the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange to protest the exorbitantly high price of the only AIDS drug that had been approved at the time. The Satanic Temple draws from this playbook. The organization knows how to make political work theatrical, cheeky, and fun. Scholars describe the tactics of the Satanic Temple as serious play. Their horned deities standing in public spaces parody the idea that the courthouse is a place where the state should be erecting religious monuments and pronouncing moral codes. When Christians are perceived to be flexing their civil power in ways that may be unconstitutional, members of the Satanic Temple flex their own.

American youth who appreciate breezy non-compliance are drawn to the tactics of groups like the Satanic Temple. Feeling ravaged by a global pandemic; high rates of loneliness, anxiety, and mental illness; and high costs of living in many cities—the lives of many young people in America are gloomy. They want a better world, and despair about having the energy to fight for it. Groups like the Satanic Temple offer tactics that appeal to American youth. Will similar tactics work to win over young people in other places? It’s a fascinating question. □

* The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution stipulates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

If Wishes Were Horses: Religious Conflict within Families

by Kath Weston

If an adult child wants to explore other religions (or none at all), what's an elder to do?

As anyone who has ever tried parenting knows, children often have their own ideas about how things should go. With religion, as in all areas of life, they face a double challenge. They need to find their way in the world; at the same time, they are constantly negotiating the push-pull of relatives who saddle them with hopes and expectations. Sometimes children go along. Sometimes they rebel.

A child may be raised by adults with strong religious convictions who feel it is their duty to pass along those beliefs to the next generation. A child may be raised by adults who do not concern themselves with religion, or who are fiercely anti-religious. Grandparents and other relatives may have their own aspirations for the child, which may or may not coincide with those of the parents.

Conflicts over religion within families are also shaped by the tremendous cultural variation in family arrangements around the world—not to mention differences in who counts as a relative. Many Indigenous groups regard specific plants and animals as relatives. Joint families, in which multiple generations live together, are common in places such as India. Children in the blended families formed after divorce and remarriage often move between households and receive guidance from multiple

adults. Friends sometimes co-parent within chosen families, a kind of family closely associated with LGBTQIA+ communities that has since gone mainstream. Intentional communities are also on the rise. Quite often, the adults living communally in these communities share work responsibilities, including childcare.

When there are diverse stances toward religion, as there often are among the adults in such diverse and elaborate kinship networks, what is a child to do? That's a whole lot of relatives to please!

Nor are tensions within families over religion confined to the childrearing years. Many a child has grown up to fall in love with someone from a different religious community. Adult children have shared many painful stories about the conflicts and uncertainties that ensued. When they decided to pursue a romantic interreligious love over relatives' objections, they worried that their families would despise or disown them. If they planned to have children, they wondered how to raise them with respect to religion. Those who had sacrificed romantic love for the love of the relatives who raised them frequently harbored resentment. Even in societies with arranged marriage, the adults doing the arranging have to decide whether to make religion a key criterion for a match.

In practical terms, how should adults respond when young children resist practicing along with other family members? If an adult child feels strongly about entering into a union with someone from a different religious background, or no religious affiliation at all, is it wisdom, cruelty, or foolishness for elders to oppose the match? Such dilemmas only become more poignant when leaders incite hatred for religious minorities and political developments harden the lines that societies draw between religious communities.

There are no simple answers, and every case is different. It helps to remember that many children oppose the wishes of their elders on occasion. It also helps to note, along with anthropologist Janet Carsten, that to some degree, all marriages bring people of different backgrounds together. The challenge lies in skillfully negotiating those differences.

Perhaps the metaphor of "saddling" children with one's own hopes and expectations provides a clue as to how (not) to proceed. Many proverbs about horses offer hints about how to handle relationships with people. The Japanese saying *uma ga au*, for instance, applies to people who get along easily and share interests. *Uma ga au* literally refers to horses that are well-met or well-matched. It might seem like this saying depicts the best-case scenario, the one parents long for: like-minded children who grow up to share the religious inclinations of their elders without conflict or fuss. Suppose, however, your family includes a child who doesn't go along easily with



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what other family members are doing. Is this simply a hopeless case of being badly matched?

To consider this question, try looking at things compassionately, from the child's point of view. As an elder, how carefully are you listening to what the child is trying to tell you, with or without words? Are you locked into preconceived narratives about the child's character, jumping to conclusions instead of trying to approach each new development with a fresh and open mind? Problems that manifest in a parent-child relationship may be a symptom of unresolved conflicts among adults that need attention. A child who is trying to satisfy demanding relatives with incompatible religious views may give up trying to get along at all, since it seems an impossible task. Yet that same child may yearn for circumstances to change so that they, too, can be well-matched.

Another saying about horses offers a bit of advice for parents who keep trying to force their children into religious practice: *If you want to control your horse, give it a bigger pasture.* Too often, when parents feel control of their children slipping away, the impulse is to tighten up and grasp harder. This tactic may appear to be effective, but in the long term, it often leaves the child seething inside, closed instead of open to whatever religion might have to offer. Children pick up on subtle tensions that creep into a parent's body and become worried or anxious. Too much tension may damage a parent's health. Parents can become so attached to their own

wishes for their children that they do not perceive the irony involved, especially if they are committed to Buddhism, which teaches non-attachment!

Instead of demanding obedience or participation, this proverb suggests, why not see what happens by giving the horse room to run? This does not mean abandoning all limits. The corral is larger, but still enclosed. A bigger pasture encourages a young horse to explore and notice more about its surroundings. It becomes inquisitive, instead of focusing obsessively on defying the fence-builders and the fence.

This approach to childrearing takes root in spaciousness and generosity. When I was growing up, at a certain point my parents agreed to relax their religious expectations. I was raised Roman Catholic by parents who expected their children to join them in religious observances that were often quite strict. Yet my mother had ended up Roman Catholic due to a compromise by a parish priest who was willing to put aside a rigid interpretation of church doctrine in favor of a creative solution to a problem raised by intermarriage. My great-grandfather was Lutheran and my great-grandmother Roman Catholic: both Christian, but from different sects. The Roman Catholic church required that a partner of a different faith convert to Catholicism. This my great-grandfather could not bring himself to do. The local priest agreed to marry my great-grandparents anyway, with one stipulation: that their daughters be raised Catholic and their sons Lutheran. This

is how Roman Catholicism came to me, as my great-grandmother's daughter's daughter's daughter.

As a teenager, I began to chafe under the restrictions of a stern Catholic upbringing. I also became curious about other religious traditions and spiritual philosophies. Two of my high school friends and I decided to ask our parents for permission to attend religious services other than our own on the weekends, in order to explore the diversity of religious practice. I learned a lot. Our parents must have felt a bit threatened by these excursions, since the outings took us far afield from their own beliefs. I will be forever grateful to them for allowing



Photo: Bridgeman Image / AFLO

A detail from The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece by the early Netherlandish painter Rogier van der Weyden and his workshop. Painted from 1445 to 1450. This work is now in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Antwerp.

us to cultivate the kind of curiosity and introspection that the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, encouraged. One of us ended up staying in her family's pasture, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. My other friend and I became Buddhists.

But what about children who seem completely disinterested in religion? What if your young horse dozes off every time you mention chanting, meditating, praying, or going together to your temple, shrine, synagogue, church, or mosque? There's a Tibetan proverb to cover this eventuality: *You can wake up a sleeping horse, but you can't wake up a horse that is pretending to be asleep.* In this case, it is important to discriminate between the two states.

What is going on when a child will not wake up to the value of a religious practice that the adults in the child's life can see so clearly? Is the child truly sleeping: unaware, unenlightened? Or is the child pretending to be asleep as a way of contesting the adult's authority?

What is going on when the adult insists on waking up the child? Is the adult truly concerned with passing on something precious and important about religion, or are they more preoccupied with asserting their authority? Sensing this, children who are pretending to sleep may not be resisting religion as such, but rather the attempt to coerce them into religious practice.

Buddha Shakyamuni never forced people to follow him. He did not ask people to subscribe to fixed beliefs. He never suggested that people should take his teachings on authority. Instead, he encouraged people to inquire into his teachings and see for themselves. He understood that no one can browbeat someone into waking up. If someone is truly asleep, others can guide them in a way that may help free them from delusion, but it's just guidance. What happens next is out of the parent's or the teacher's hands.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Usually, people



Photo: Shutterstock

The author writes, "But you might loosen the reins from time to time, and in doing so leave room for change."

quote this proverb to emphasize that force doesn't work. Like recalcitrant horses, humans may outwardly comply, but inwardly they tend to hold something back. There is another important lesson conveyed by this saying that people tend to overlook. In order to find out if a horse is ready to drink or not, you have to provide something to drink. Don't forget the water!

A moral foundation for action—what some Buddhist texts call *sila* or "right conduct"—is as important as water for children who may not even realize they are thirsty. Regardless of whether children follow their elders when it comes to religion, a sense of right conduct will help them tame their distracted heart-minds. How they treat others will be influenced accordingly. One way to acquaint children with *sila* is through religious instruction. But children also learn by example, as they watch elders draw on their own understandings of religion, spirit, and morality. What children build upon this foundation will vary, but the foundation itself will serve them well, whether they become "religious" or not.

Still having a hard time letting go of the desire to see the next generation

take up religion with the same fervor you might feel for your own practice? Keep in mind that at the societal level, enthusiasm for religion waxes and wanes. Postwar Japan experienced "the rush hour of the gods," as more and more people turned to religion to cope with adversity. In contrast, in the United Kingdom at the moment, developers are turning churches into residential flats because there are not enough devout practitioners to keep the buildings open otherwise. Humans are social beings, born into ever-shifting historical circumstances. It's not all down to upbringing within families. For religion to thrive, the causes and conditions have to be right.

If adults could figure out how to raise kids to be just like themselves, families would end up reproducing the world exactly as it is. Look around. Is this world—with its wars, inequities, and ecological damage—the one you want future generations to inhabit? If not, as a "good ancestor," by all means lead the young ones in your family to the spring and offer them something to drink. But you might loosen the reins from time to time, and in doing so leave room for change. □

The Importance and Impact of Religion on Children

by Huma Ikramullah



“If you feel pain, you are alive, but if you feel other people’s pain, you are a human being in the truest sense.”

The importance of religion and religious institutions in our lives is hard to deny. Religion is a source of strength for much of humanity. Our belief in religion provides an inner strength and serenity that help us to counter and face manifold problems in our lives.

The fact is that recognizing the existence of an omnipotent presence in the shape of God can be a mainstay and bulwark allowing one to lead a life of contentment and happiness.

Different religions recognize this and call their Maker by different names. All religions believe in goodness and rebuke evil; this is the base of the religious concept.

Religion thus gives us an inner enlightenment and spiritual upliftment—an awareness to praise and worship our Creator, and to follow the tenets of religion set for us, leading to the salvation of our soul so we can face our Maker with pride and honor on the Day of Judgment.

Definitely, religion is a mainstay for families—a guide toward a purpose of life beyond merely performing day-to-day functions. It gives meaning to our life, reinforcing social unity and stability.

Religion also serves as an agent of motivating people to unite and work for positive social values and togetherness,

creating better human beings, and stressing the values of love, respect, empathy, and harmony with all of mankind.

The foremost religions of the world are Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, among the religions of the world, and their holy books—the Quran, Bible, Gita, Torah, and Tripitaka, respectively—give religious instruction for humans to follow, and serve as a guide in their spiritual journey.

However, all religions clearly indicate that there is no dictation in religion. All religions are followed voluntarily, as religion is a personal choice between a person and his or her Maker.

Children grow up and see their parents follow a particular faith. The choice must be theirs to choose and worship. Only then will they be strong spiritually and recognize and love the strength and serenity that is the mainstay of religion.

Faith can move mountains, and our prayers to an omnipresence are a source of strength and salvation for us following the tenets of religion—an important part of faith.

Places of worship also play a very important role in shaping the religious inclination of children.

The first cradle of religious awareness is the family, and seeing parents

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perform their religious duties encourages children to follow in their footsteps. Later, as the children grow older, they are taught to worship in mosques, churches, temples, and so forth, which exist to support and strengthen religious sentiment. People of the same religious group gain strength from one another, as well as a stronger religious identity.

Religious unity is also very important as an expression of mutual respect for all religions. Such people are often staunchly religious and set an example for their followers.

It is said that places of worship have existed from time immemorial, before any sort of government came into existence. These are places in which one can practice the worship of an omnipotent presence and follow the path of goodness against cruelty and evil.

Children, perhaps above all else, need religion to give them strength and meaning and purpose in their lives. Religious involvement is correlated with well-being, happiness, hope, and self-esteem, as well as lower rates of depression and loneliness. A religious child can become a well-adjusted and happy individual, close to his or her Maker, with the strength of religious belief.

In Islam, education is not limited to bookish knowledge but includes moral and religious training also. It means healthy all-round growth of a child's personality by giving them both religious and bookish—or we can say worldly—knowledge.

A famous hadith of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is: “The best of you is one who gives a good education (intellectual and moral) to his children” (Tirmidhi hadith 4977).

I believe that no one has the right to coerce religious adherence. It is absolutely an individual right. Internationally, the right of parents to educate their children according to their traditions was recognized by Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Parents have the right to educate their children by choosing the type of education to be given to them. However, Article 15, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1988, specifically acknowledges the freedom of children to practice the religion of their choice.

Regarding this, the Islamic scholar Sheikh Uthaimen says, “Children are joys of life as well as sources of pride, seeds of arrogance, the cause of distress and allurements. Therefore, we need to be very focused and careful about their upbringing. Children are dependent on their parents, and Islam clearly emphasized on [sic] their responsibility on forming the child's personality. Islam pays particular attention to the upbringing [of] children in a proper manner. Parents will be held accountable for this trust on the Day of Judgment. Parents are responsible for the moral, ethical,

basic, and essential religious teachings of their children, which is their responsibility” (*The Rights of Children*).

Allah Almighty says in the holy Quran: “And those who believed and whose descendants followed them in faith—We will join with them their descendants, and We will not deprive them of anything of their deeds. Every person, for what he earned, is retained. . . .” (Quran 52:21).

Sheikh Uthaimen continues, “Children's responsibility is not only on father but also on mother, as mentioned by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in one of his hadith in these words: ‘Take care! Each of you is a shepherd and each of you shall be asked concerning his flock; a leader is a shepherd of his people, and he shall be asked concerning his flock; and a man is a shepherd of the people of his house, and he shall be asked concerning his flock; and a woman is a shepherd of the house of her husband and over their children, and she shall be asked concerning them’ (Al-Bukhari). Parents' right to receive respect from their children is correlated to the children's right to the loving care and guidance of their parents. The future of children depends on the teachings given to them by their parents” (*The Rights of Children*).

Religion is a matter of choice for the children and youth of today. It is observed that they are greatly influenced by their elders' religion and so follow their religious beliefs and traditions. That is the norm followed by almost all countries of the world—a tested precedence of many generations past, up to the present day. That is why major religions exist today and have numerous devout followers, worshipping in congregations worldwide.

As Islamic Newspaper Editor Aisha Stacey writes, “Caring for and raising children in the proper manner is a duty on parents and it is not always easy. In fact, God reminds us in the Quran that children may even be a great trial for their parents. The triumphs and

tribulations of life are a test and children are no exception. They can bring great joy, and at times, they can bring great sadness as well. God, in His infinite wisdom, never leaves a human being alone and unable to face all of life's trials. . . . ‘Your wealth and your children are only a trial, whereas God, with Him is a great reward (Paradise)’ (Quran 64:15). Following the teachings of Islam enables a believer to face all life events. The correct Islamic advice for raising and rearing children covers all aspects of life. Just like Islam itself, it is holistic advice. Physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being are all of equal importance. It is interesting to note that Islam has always covered the rights of children” (*What Islam Says about Children. Part One. Religion of Islam*).

Religion is also synonymous with the spreading of peace and goodwill, and today many countries have joined together in uniting different countries of the world on the basis of religion, even if they come from different walks of life. Religion can be a common path to salvation, as it counteracts the degradation of any nation and provides inner peace, harmony, and love for a higher power.

Together, people of different religions can face world challenges, as a close-knit religious community that can be an instrument of salvation and peace for mankind.

The Islamic scholar Sheikh Uthaimen also said, “Children are a trust given to parents by God. . . . Children are entitled to education, religious learning, and spiritual guidance. Their hearts must be filled with faith and their minds entertained with proper guidance, knowledge, and wisdom” (*The Rights of Children*).

If you feel pain, you are alive, but if you feel other people's pain, you are a human being in the truest sense.

That is what religions teach us: to be a good human being in order to avoid evil and follow the truth, with a heart full of love for a higher power and His creation: humanity. □

The Evolving Concept of Family in Renunciant Communities

by Katsuhisa Nakashima



“For one who takes care of the sick differs not from one who takes care of me.”
—Shakyamuni Buddha

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Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, is said to have “abandoned his extended kin group” (*mahantaṃ nāti-saṃghaṃ ohāya*) (*Dīgha Nikāya* I, p. 115). The renunciation of the world by Shakyamuni and his disciples may be translated literally from the Pali scriptures as “going forth from home into homelessness” (*agārasmā anagāriyam pabbajati*). Here, *agāra* (“home”) appears to have referred not only to kin but also to society. Among the monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhunī*) who had renounced the world (*pabbajā*) to seek individual liberation gathered to form communities (*saṃgha*), rules on communal living emerged. During the forty-five years of missionary activity that followed Shakyamuni’s attainment of enlightenment, there arose a need for care of the sick within the Shakyamuni Order as many of its members grew old and frail. In this paper, I will explore the background to development in the order of a new concept of family tied closely to *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pali) in what was originally a family-less religion. I will do so by focusing on the rules on life that gradually evolved to deal with the discordances that arose between the ideals and realities of community life in a *saṃgha*.

The *Suttanipāta* (v. 339), one of the earliest texts in the Buddhist scriptures, contains the following teaching: “Robes, food from alms, the necessities of life,

and shelter—for these things have no craving (*taṇhā*.” According to the *Paramattha-jotikā*, a commentary on the *Suttanipāta*, the necessities of life (*paccaya*) consisted of “necessities for the sick” (*gilāna-paccaya*), or medicines. This verse seems to have later taken root in the form of the “four resources of *bhikkhu*” (*cattāro nissayā*) that prescribed the basic way of life of renunciant monks. The prescribed resources were (1) discarded rags for robes (*paṃsu-kūla*), (2) bowl alms for food (*patā-piṇḍa*), (3) the foot of a tree for a dwelling (*rukka-mūlikatta*), and (4) cattle urine for medicine (*pūti-mutta*).

The *Paramattha-dīpanī* commentary on the confessions of Mahākassapa the Elder (v. 1057) in the *Theragāthā* explains exactly what the four resources were. *Pūti-mutta*, for example, was described as “*harītaka* (*terminalia chebula*) mixed with cow urine.” The Shakyamuni Order was so dedicated to the pursuit of liberation from material existence (*moksha*) and nirvana that the performance of medical works was even considered a sin in the *Mahāniddeśa* (p. 382). Such were the rigors of the ascetic life imposed on renunciants by the order in its early years.

Renunciants were taught about the four resources *after* ordination. This is because there were some who abandoned the idea of becoming a renunciant when

they heard about the four resources beforehand. However, the four resources were only laid down as a basic principle, and they were later relaxed as the order developed. As a consequence, renunciants were permitted, as an “extra allowance” (*atirekalābha*), to accept invitations to meals, wear new robes, live in temples, and use tree roots as medicines. Nevertheless, these dispensations remained exceptions rather than the rule.

A history of the medicines permitted to be kept and used in the Shakyamuni Order is given in the chapter on medicines (“*Bhesajakkhandhaka*”) of the *Vinayapiṭaka*, which laid down rules on how the *saṃgha* should be run. The medical environment improved to such an extent (illustrated by, for example, the fact that Jīvaka, court physician to the king of Magadha, also served as physician to the Shakyamuni Order [“*Civarakkhandhaka*” 1.15]) that some sought to become monks in the hope of having access to medical treatment far superior to that available to lay people. Although the study of healing (*vejja-kamma*) was supposed to be prohibited in the order, there was debate over the possession of various medicines that crossed this line.

As ordination arrangements in the Shakyamuni Order evolved, a system of assigning preceptors (*upajjhāya*) to

teach novice monks emerged. These preceptors took the place of parents and were responsible for caring for and teaching the monks in their charge for the rest of their lives. While it was not clear who would care for a sick *bhikkhu* before this system was established, however, we find examples of arrangements in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, 44–7 (T. 2, p. 766 b), and the chapter on robe cloth, entitled “Cīvarakkhandhaka” of the *Vinayapīṭaka*. (Although the sick *bhikkhu* concerned is not named in these texts, the *Dhp.aṭṭhakathā* commentary on the *Dhammapada* refers to him as “the elder Tissa of the smelly body” [vol. 1, pp. 319–322]).

A certain *bhikkhu* was so ill that he was unable to get up from his sickbed, and his clothes were soiled with feces and urine. He ceaselessly resented being so exhausted that he could not receive the mercy of Shakyamuni. Hearing this with heavenly ears, Shakyamuni visited the sick *bhikkhu* and inquired about his condition.

The *bhikkhu* explained to Shakyamuni that in the past, when he was healthy, he never visited his teachers, disciples, or sick colleagues. Shakyamuni told the *bhikkhu* that this was why he had no one to take care of him now that he himself was sick. Then he removed the sludge with a broom, washed and dried the *bhikkhu*’s clothes, bathed him, and then fed him by hand. “Now you must renounce the sickness of the recurring cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*),” he preached, and at last the *bhikkhu* attained the state of awakening called *arahant*.

Shakyamuni had his attendant Ānanda gather the *bhikkhu* of the area in a lecture hall and preached to them: “You should be a united community (*samagga-saṃgha*) because you have been ordained by the same master, so why don’t you take care of each other? From now on, you should take care of each other. If a sick *bhikkhu* does not have a disciple, take turns to care for them as a group. For one who takes

care of the sick differs not from one who takes care of me. The blessed rewards of caring for the sick are no different from those achieved by making offerings to me and the buddhas of the past.”

It might incidentally be asked what happened to *bhikkhu* when they died. In India, the rich cremated their dead, but the common practice was to wrap the corpse of the deceased in a white cloth and leave it in a graveyard. Rags were taken from the decomposed corpse and washed to make monks’ robes. *Bhikkhu* who valued meditation lived in cemeteries and practiced “reflections on repulsiveness” (*paṭikkūlamānasikāra*) to eliminate their attachment to the body.

In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Kṣudraka-vastu* (T. 24, p. 286c), there is an account of a *bhikkhu* who was the son of a wealthy merchant in Sāvattihī. He died of a sickness and was left, to the disapproval of the local laity, by the roadside with his robes and bowl. In such a situation, Shakyamuni permits a *bhikkhu* to be cremated, to be buried in a river when there is no firewood, or to be buried in the earth when there is no river. The Ten Recitation Vinaya (*Daśa-bhāṇavāra-vinaya*, T. 23, p. 284b) describes how the disciples applied to Shakyamuni for permission to build an *arhat* tomb—a tomb for the enlightened—for the monk who had guided them, and Shakyamuni granted them permission. Elsewhere, there is an account of a tomb fit for a disciple of Shakyamuni having been built even before such permission had been granted.

When the elder of the “group of six nuns” who were contemporary with the Buddha (*chabbaggiyā bhikkhuniyo*) died, her body was taken to a cemetery and cremated, and a mound-like structure called a *thūpa* was erected to contain her remains (*Bhikkhuni-vibhaṅga*, *Pācittiya*, 52). According to the *Samyukta Nikāya* (SN. vol. 5, p. 161), when the Buddhist saint Sāriputta died, one of his disciples—a novice monk

called Cunda—delivered his robes and bowl to Ānanda. The aforementioned *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Kṣudraka-vastu* (T. 24, p. 289c), on the other hand, states that Cunda cremated his teacher Sāriputta and delivered his ashes, robes, and bowl to Ānanda. It would thus appear that, with a system of monk discipleship comparable to a parent-child relationship having been established, the need for someone to perform funeral services and erect an *arhat* tomb emerged as an extension of the question of who would care for the sick in the *saṃgha* of renunciant monks, and measures were therefore put in place in the *saṃgha* to see to these needs.

The fact that the Shakyamuni Order forbade self-sufficient living and required that food be obtained through begging for alms was intended to ensure that the *dharma* that it taught would circulate between the ordained and the laity. As well as *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*, which mean “one who lives by alms,” there were *upāsaka* (male) and *upāsikā* (female), meaning “one who comes near to serve” *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*. The evidence also points to the existence of *upaṭṭhāka*, who diligently served a particular *bhikkhu*, and *upaṭṭhāka-kula*, who served *bhikkhu* as a family.

The *Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya* (T. 22, pp. 478c–479a) states that when Koṇḍañña, one of the first five disciples of Shakyamuni, died, a herding couple who were lay believers cremated his body and went to the king to have the monk’s robes and bowl appraised. While a deceased *bhikkhu*’s robes and bowl were naturally the property of his *saṃgha*, this account in the *Mahāsaṅghika Vinaya* suggests that the relationship between ordained and lay believers had deepened to such an extent that those who had abandoned their homes (*agāra*) formed new families consisting of ordained and lay believers bound by the *dharma* through the ascetic life. They formed, in other words, *saṃgha* in the broader sense of the word. □

A Fourfold Approach to Peacebuilding

by Rajagopal P. V.

The Niwano Peace Foundation awarded the fortieth Niwano Peace Prize to Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India, in recognition of his lifelong work in the services of justice and peace through nonviolent methods, and his commitment to care for the environment. The award ceremony took place on May 11, 2023, at the International House of Japan, Tokyo. The recipient's address follows.

May I begin by recognizing the honorable guests and other dignitaries, as well as friends from other countries, and all of those participating in this fortieth Niwano Peace Prize ceremony.

Let me thank the Niwano Peace Foundation for recognizing my work as being worthy to receive this award. I want to thank the President, the board members, and those from the screening committee who have given me this honor. I take note of the fact that there may be some in the audience who have already received this award. I feel proud to join this fraternity and I look forward to the opportunity of walking with such luminaries on the path of peace.

From a distance, I have admired the kind of peace promotion that has been carried out in Japan since the war because it has had a deep resonance globally. I mean by this that the devastation brought about by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became a reference point for abandoning the production and use of nuclear weapons. It became an integral part of global peace education. Although after three generations, we continue to see some nuclear weapons states using the nuclear threat, I believe this is for the sake of deterrence. The costs are well-known, thanks

to the persistence of the Japanese peace movement.

My own peace journey began from brutal conflict. This occurred in the Chambal Valley, a place in India that is 300 kilometers southwest of the capital, New Delhi. In working with senior Sarvodaya workers, I was confronted with the violence of dacoits, a group of rebels who would have been labeled as a terrorist group today. I lived and worked among them for a period of time, persuading them to give up their arms, and by serving jail sentences, getting reconciled back into society. We had the fiftieth anniversary of the surrender [of dacoits in the Chambal Valley in 1972] last year, and saw how the most hardened criminals could become votaries of peace. This transformation from violence to peace was possible for most of the 578 dacoits. It was time-taking, yet the proof was in the pudding.

After this experience, I moved to other places in India where I could address some of the root social problems that had led a small number of people to take up arms. I began to appreciate that direct violence or the use of arms was a result of structural violence or injustice. By removing the injustice, the physical conflict reduced. In other words, I moved

from resolving “direct” or physical violence to what may be called “indirect” or systemic violence. I believed that the cause of hatred, injustice, and brute force needed to be resolved deep within the social structures. Only through such attention to poverty, discrimination, and exclusion could peace flourish.

Building a peaceful society based on justice using nonviolence, I came to understand, is a step-by-step process. This has been the driving force that has kept me going for all these years. Undoubtedly in this process, I was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his “talisman” when he said: “Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [or woman] whom you may have seen in your life, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [or her].”

This focus on the people at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy was also reinforced by others whom I knew within the Gandhian circle, such as Vinoba Bhave, J. C. Kumarappa, Radha Krishna Menon, Subba Rao, and others. Ironically, I was living in a country whose culture had been shaped by Buddha, Mahavir, Kabir, and Vivekananda, yet there was a need to continue to liberate the marginalized sections from poverty and deprivation and persuade more



Mr. Rajagopal P. V. delivers his acceptance address during the presentation ceremony on May 11, 2023, at the International House of Japan, Tokyo.

affluent sections of society to take up this form of peacebuilding.

I would not be honest in my statements if I did not acknowledge the contribution of thousands of people across India (and from select other countries) who have stood with me all these years in order that we could attain what we have achieved. These include those from the marginalized communities that participated in many difficult actions, the team of workers who took pains to design and shape a large number of important events, a considerable number of middle-class friends, and political workers and officials that helped us to carry our dream forward of making change at the policy level. In fact, this award will be shared by all of these friends. It became apparent after receiving the announcement of the award in the press, how much joy and jubilation was expressed by individuals and organizations. This truly has been a shared effort.

To summarize then the first part of my journey, I have used some of Gandhi's ideas and philosophies to reach out to the poorest section of society, and in the process, helped them to liberate themselves from poverty, injustice, and inequality. I saw their advancement not only in terms of material gain, but also in their belief in nonviolence. Nonviolence

is a practical tool for those that face so much violence and reprisals. Their non-violence gets manifested in their struggle for access to land and livelihood resources. But in the process of their nonviolent actions, they also advance with regards to interreligious and caste harmony, gender inclusion, and respect for diversity. Such a change at the bottom has an impact on the entire society.

Learning from what we did, I want to elaborate on what we are doing at present. We have taken up a fourfold approach to peacebuilding that includes: (1) nonviolent governance, (2) nonviolent social action, (3) nonviolent economy, and (4) nonviolent education.

(1) Nonviolent governance

With the advancement in many fields, like science and technology, one would suppose that there would be more civilized behavior by those holding positions of power. Unfortunately, as we look at leadership in so many countries, we find that this is not the case. In responding to making governance more nonviolent, we have been working to make decision-makers more accountable to the most marginalized communities. In many places, we have taken up a kind of people's-based advocacy. We have encouraged dialogue as a way to solve

problems rather than employing police and security forces to silence dissenting voices. We have worked with many policy makers to frame socially-inclusive policies, especially with regard to the land, forest, and water issues in India.

We have not stopped at policy change, we have also established a Department of Peace in one state in India and continue to advocate for Ministries of Peace in India and outside. Any peaceful and nonviolent governance comes from systems that enhance collaboration between people and the state; in this way, people are in a better position because they have greater autonomy to solve their own problems. If one of the aims of the fourfold approach is to create a peaceful society and a peaceful world order, then collaboration between institutions and people is essential for solving conflicts.

(2) Nonviolent social action

In the present times, there are many crises impacting the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, what we are calling structural violence. People are responding by getting organized and demanding justice. We are concerned that there are more protests today that are turning violent, and people are not able to achieve their goal. This is leading to increasing popular discontent. Those who are leading social actions should have a deep understanding of nonviolent methods. In the absence of this understanding, people can be provoked to use violence.

Nonviolent social action was the main strength of Mahatma Gandhi in India's Freedom Struggle. Vinoba Bhave, his associate, organized large nonviolent movements for land reforms. These methods of nonviolent social action were adopted by our organization many years ago. We were able to train a large number of young people to organize marginalized communities at the grassroots level. Much of the success through these various actions is a direct result of this method.

I want to digress for a moment to tell a small story. In our 2007 large nonviolent

action, when 25,000 people marched from Chambal to New Delhi, a 350-kilometer walk over one month, we were led by a group of Japanese Buddhist monks who were drumming and praying at the front of the march. The goal of this *padayatra* was for landless people to access land and livelihood resources—especially forest land to indigenous populations. The spiritual dimension of the march brought by the monks not only attracted attention but gave us a greater depth in the practice of nonviolence. Social action is more than civil disobedience, for when it includes nonviolence, it highlights the willingness of people to suffer and sacrifice in the process of affirming life. It appeals to the generosity of the human spirit.

(3) Nonviolent economy

Mahatma Gandhi, J. C. Kumarappa, and E. F. Schumacher suggested that the economy could be more participatory and “bottom-up,” in the sense of self-organizing communities coming together to create an economy. In contrast, an economy that gives opportunity to a few and promotes poverty and misery for millions cannot be a “good” or inclusive one. The livelihood opportunities that the indigenous people, fisherfolk, refugees, slum dwellers, farmers, and farm laborers are accessing today are often daily wage earning, which is not secure. The economy does not work in their favor.

In the fourfold approach—the experience of having many small and local producer groups coming together to market their products, while building a sense of cooperation—reflects that they are building a more nonviolent economy. We can see a transition happening where many micro-activities such as organic and natural farming, handloom, and hand-based production are creating a “macro-narrative” distinct from that of the global economy that is largely controlled by large corporations. As Mahatma Gandhi said: “The world has enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed.”

The nonviolent economy is also a response to the climate emergency that is affecting large populations, and it is time for us to revisit the ways we produce, exchange, and consume, in order to be more sustainable and nonviolent to the earth. J. C. Kumarappa, another of Gandhi’s associates, said that it is necessary to build a permanent economy—an economic vision that is pro-people, pro-poor, and pro-environment.

(4) Nonviolent education

Today young people seem to believe in brute force rather than in peace force, because the kind of toys, social media, and films reinforce a behavioral pattern. Children haplessly fall victim to such negative influences or believe that through violence they can better achieve their goals. Parents are rather focused on getting their children into schools, colleges and universities so that they will become upwardly mobile and therefore more affluent, without considering how their children can build peace for society.

Peace and nonviolence education is an important intervention we are trying through teacher training. The teachers are encouraged to set up programs like community service activities and peace studies within the curriculum, with the aim of improving students’ behavior and making them more responsible. Young people are encouraged to set up peace clubs. We are trying to create a network of organizations that would take up this agenda on a larger scale that would broad-base peace and nonviolence in as many educational institutions as possible.

In addition to classroom and extracurricular activities, we are advocating with various state governments to see if they can establish Peace Ministries (or Departments) that would incentivize nonviolence education in multiple self-supporting ways. Children and youth would learn to value peacemaking rather than expecting peace to be brought by the police or the armed

forces. Peace education is central to peacebuilding, and only if we can have a deep resonance globally can this fourfold approach be widely implemented.

Having presented to you this fourfold approach, I am aware that there are many skeptics who are doubtful about the impact of nonviolence as a way of doing peacebuilding. To them I say, it is important to reflect on critical moments in history when wisdom was combined with our human advancement.

Albert Einstein said in a letter to Gandhi in 1931: “You have shown through your works, that it is possible to succeed without violence even with those who have not discarded the method of violence.” In 1950, he also spoke of Gandhi on the radio, “I believe that Gandhi’s views were the most enlightened of all the political men of our time. We should strive to do things in his spirit: not to use violence in fighting for our cause but by non-participation in anything you believe is evil.”

Nelson Mandela, in receiving the Bharat Ratna in 1993, which is the most prestigious award given by the Government of India, said: “The Mahatma is an integral part of our [South African] history because it is here that he first experimented with truth; here that he demonstrated his characteristic firmness in pursuit of justice; here that he developed Satyagraha as a philosophy and a method of struggle.”

Let me conclude by saying that Gandhi saw nonviolence as the instrument of the strong. This realization has come to me after many years of working with the most marginalized communities in India. It is for this reason we have developed the Fourfold Approach to Peacebuilding.

Although this award is being given to me as a person, we have decided to create a “Peace Fund” that will help support the Fourfold Approach to Peacebuilding in different parts of the world.

Again, my thanks for your kind attention to these remarks. □

Engaged Buddhism in Japan: Historical Perspectives & Contemporary Exemplars

by Jonathan S. Watts

Engaged Buddhism in Japan, volumes one and two, by Jonathan S. Watts, were published earlier this year. These works are the culmination of sixteen years of research and engagement in the growing Socially Engaged Buddhist movement in Japan, by the International Buddhist Exchange Center (IBEC) of the Kodo Kyodan Buddhist Fellowship in Yokohama. The following is a summary of these volumes by the author.

For the growing international tribe of those who love all things Japanese, Japan's Buddhism is epitomized by the mysterious stoicism of Zen and the various highly cultivated arts associated with it. For those with a deeper exposure to Japanese Buddhism, however, there is a sense of darkness and corruption, from warmongering Zen masters to present-day evangelical Buddhists, to completely secularized priests who drink, smoke, and cavort with no mind to the traditional monastic rules. All these images have a mark of truth but veil perhaps the most complex historical development of Buddhism found in Asia. To understand all these unique forms of modern Japanese Buddhism that Buddhists from countries as nearby as Taiwan and Korea, not to mention those of more distant Theravadin countries, dismiss as heretical and out of hand, a proper understanding of how Buddhism entered Japan and developed there is essential.

Volume I offers a unique perspective outside of the normal scholarly or sectarian historical presentations of Japanese Buddhism. To understand any

religion properly, one must understand it in the socio-political context of its day. For example, when one studies the radical teaching of not-self (*anatta*) by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, one appreciates it not only as one of the deepest expressions of non-theism but also as a direct rebuke of the abuses of Vedic Brahmanism that built a society of graded inequality based on caste. As such, to reject the modern secularized Japanese priest as inauthentic is to fail to understand how the ideal of lay Buddhism under the revolutionary spirit of the Mahayana bodhisattva is central to the origins and development of Japanese Buddhism. It also fails to recognize in the critical period of Kamakura Buddhism (1185–1333) the same impetus of the Buddha to reject ossified and institutionalized religion to develop an accessible form of liberation for the common person. The first third of this volume offers such a socio-political-cultural perspective of Japanese Buddhist history, referring frequently to the insights of two of Japan's most important contemporary Buddhist scholars: Nakamura Hajime and Kuroda Toshio.

The shift from tribal or archaic forms of religiosity dominated by men and class elites for the perpetuation of their power to a universalized spirituality for “all sentient beings” has been called “axialization”—a process that occurred in the Middle East with Christ and Muhammad's universalization of the original tribal faith of the Old Testament, by the Buddha toward Vedic Brahmanism in India, and by Lao-Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and Confucius in creating a universal but non-theistic ethics in China. The great question by numerous authors, specifically the renowned Israeli sociologist S. N. Eisenstadt in his deeply insightful *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View*, is: Has Japan, with its importation of all of these traditions, minus Islam, been truly able to develop such an axial civilization and move beyond the clannish and archaic confines of their island nation?

The Kamakura Buddhist Reformation provides an affirmative “yes” to this question, yet Japan's entry into the modern world based on a revival of the ancient imperial cult leading to a disastrous period of colonialism and war might answer this question as “no.” Over seventy years of postwar capitalism, under the watchful eye of the United States, has seemed to get Japan no further in finding a modern identity. Such an identity needs to be universal enough to find connection with other nations of the world—especially its closest neighbors, China and Korea, who continue to harbor resentments from the war. It also needs to be indigenous enough to



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maximize the potentials of Japan's long historical development, rather than the postwar Japanese liberal capitalism that has washed the nation up on the deserted shore of the Disconnected Society (*mu-en shakai* 無縁社会)—a term best exemplified by the suicide pandemic that has beset Japan since 1998.

With a 1500-year history in Japan, Buddhism would seem to offer Japan just the type of indigenous yet axial resource with which to find its own identity within the modern world. This is a struggle that other Asian nations and regions colonized by the West have also been struggling with, as the very concept of “modernity” is fundamentally defined by European civilization. This struggle for an “axialized Buddhism” can actually be found throughout Asia, in what is known as the Socially Engaged Buddhist movement. Beginning in the late 1800s as a response to European colonialization, it spread throughout Asia and has emerged in the post-colonial era in a growing variety of fields in which Buddhists seek to bring the inner teachings of mind to the outer world of society in a harmonious balance of human and social development. For the most part, Japanese Buddhism has not produced the sort of name-brand Engaged Buddhist leaders as other countries have—such as the Dalai Lama (Tibet) or Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnam)—or powerful social movements, such as the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya movement or the Thai development monk movement. The middle third of this volume, however, documents the wide array of progressive and critical

Japanese Buddhist voices in the early modern period—such as Takagi Kenmyo (Jodo Shin Pure Land) in the late 1800s, Uchiyama Gudo (Soto Zen) in the early 1900s, and Seno-o Giro (Nichiren) in the 1920–50s, whose lives and activities paralleled and sometimes intersected with renowned Socially Engaged Buddhists in other parts of Asia such as Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) in Sri Lanka, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) in India, and Master Taixu 太虛大師 (1890–1947) in China.

While Socially Engaged Buddhism flowered in Southeast Asia and South Asia as an alternative social, political, and economic movement for social justice in the immediate postwar era, Japanese Buddhism was rarely an active participant in the dynamic people's movements for peace and greater democracy in Japan at this time. The traditional denominations were in a state of chaos, having to rebuild many of their temples destroyed in the war and facing numerous internal schisms in the general democratization of society. These internal disputes only further spoiled the image and trust of Buddhism in the public eye, feeding the lay-movement boom in the new religions. What remains striking in this period is how little influence the alternative visions of Asian modernity that developed in the Socially Engaged Buddhist movements of South and Southeast Asia had in Japan, compared with liberal and socialist visions from the West, as well as archaic Japanese ones that continue to predominate Japanese public discourse.

The final third of Volume I documents this problem of establishing a principled form of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan that could offer a new vision for the nation. It examines the ideological ferment of the 1950s and 60s, in which Buddhists rarely played a role, while also examining the rise of the large lay Lotus Sutra movement. This movement has become known among Western scholars as the Socially Engaged Buddhism of modern Japan, yet this volume raises critical questions about such a designation by examining the full-spectrum political stances found in the conservative Soka Gakkai, the liberal Rishso Kosei-kai, and the leftist Nipponzan Myohoji. The volume also examines the Buddhist NGO movement emerging out of efforts by grassroots priests from traditional Buddhist denominations. Finally, it presents a few key Socially Engaged Buddhist thinkers who attempted to translate and transmit the ideas and activities of Socially Engaged Buddhists in the South.

Despite such efforts, by the end of the twentieth century, Japanese Buddhism came to be commonly referred to as Funeral Buddhism (*soshiki-bukkyo*) for its focus on funerary ritual, and thus, appropriately, appeared to be a dying tradition. Yet something new and different has taken place in the first two decades of the new millennium. As the contradictions and dislocations of liberal capitalism grew into the Disconnected Society after the financial crises of 1997–98, a new sort of Buddhist began to emerge from an

immersion in the growing ill-being (*dukkha*) of Japanese society. We begin to discover priests taking phone calls late into the night by desperately suicidal people; or wandering the streets at night to find the abandoned, homeless laborers who had built the Japanese material dream; or journeying into places where earthquakes and tsunamis had left families homeless to offer meals, tea, and counsel; or raising a voice, as so few do, to question the use of nuclear energy and to build a new vision of development based on Japan's rich natural environment; or bearing witness at the United States military bases within Japan and in front of the National Diet as the endless regime of the Liberal Democratic Party has sought to erode the foundations of Japan's "peace constitution." These are some of the engagements of a new generation of Japanese Buddhists committed to ameliorating the suffering of their citizens, curious to understand the causes of them, and developing new, creative ways to overcome them and build a new vision for Japanese society. This vision is being drawn from their indigenous Buddhist roots—especially the Kamakura Buddhist revolutionaries who continue to provide inspiration. However, as the movement is fundamentally broad-minded, ecumenical, and axial, it is beginning to create bridges with the dynamic international Socially Engaged Buddhist movement. Volume II documents this now vast and growing network in Japan that is bringing forth perhaps one of the most important reformations in Japanese Buddhist history—and, as only time will tell, may perhaps help guide Japan to a significant new, post-modern historical era.

These trans-sectarian movements and the wide range of individual Buddhists documented in Volume II mark a significant change in the character of Japanese Buddhist social engagement in the post-war era. First, the priests show a strong sense of self-awareness and self-criticism

in addressing the character and identity of their own Buddhist institutions. While the priests of the Buddhist NGO movement of the 1980s and 90s also held such a critical view, their response in engaging in overseas material-aid work did not reflect upon or impact their marginalized role within Japanese society. This point leads to the second critical shift, in the willingness of priests to take on contentious social issues within Japan and to risk their own comforts to get intimately involved with the suffering of people on a spiritual and emotional level. A third shift is away from the denominationally focused activities of Buddhists, as seen even in denominationally affiliated Buddhist NGOs, which often seem to reflect an interest in self-promotion and social legitimacy as much as in truly serving society.

Many of this new generation started as isolated individuals acting on their own, sometimes even to the denigration of other priests in their own denominations. Hence they have much more openly created trans-sectarian connections with other priests committed to these issues to build cooperative, like-minded organizations and networks. In the chapter on the poverty and homeless issue, we note:

An important part of this kind of engagement is how these kinds of Socially Engaged Buddhist groups and networks are small, ecumenical, grassroots-based, and horizontal. They differ from the kinds of campaigns and activities cooked up at the headquarters of big denominations where large amounts of funds are used on setting up a bureaucratic mechanism and on promotion through advertising. As such, they seem to gain the trust and solidarity of citizen NPOs that do not see them as groups engaged in religious propaganda but actually serving the people. In this way, they are also gaining the acceptance of the

usually rigid, secular government bureaucrats.

As such, we can identify the entirety as a Socially Engaged Buddhist *movement*, as opposed to activities hailing from any individual denomination as uniquely or representatively socially engaged—something that has been done with previous studies and characterizations of Engaged Buddhism in Japan. This wider movement is now characterized by a number of smaller movements that form the basis of the chapters of this volume: 1) the Vihara and end-of-life care movement; 2) the suicide prevention movement; 3) the interfaith and Buddhist chaplaincy movement; 4) the anti-nuclear *energy* movement; and 5) the holistic development (*kaihotsu*) movement. A sixth movement surrounding peace and anti-nuclear *arms* was presented in Volume I since it was most prominent in the postwar era, while still ongoing today. The five sub-movements of the twenty-first century manifest the principles of Socially Engaged Buddhism promoted by its international historical exemplars as broad-minded, ecumenical, grassroots, and focused on ending the suffering of all sentient beings, rather than on the promotion of sectarian teachings and identities.

The activities of this new movement are analyzed and evaluated using the methodology, or rather praxis, of many Socially Engaged Buddhists in the classical formulation of the Buddhist path of the Four Noble Truths. This formula, not only as a method of spiritual practice but as a system for analyzing society, has been adopted by Socially Engaged Buddhists in various eras both inside and outside of Japan, often without reference to one another. The Socially Engaged Buddhist approach to the Four Noble Truths provides a particularly effective tool for looking at Buddhist social action. Sulak Sivaraksa, the Thai founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), has over the years



The Niwano Peace Foundation awarded the twenty-eighth Niwano Peace Prize to Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand in Kyoto on June 23, 2011, in recognition of his unflinching contribution based on the core principles of his Buddhist faith to his new understanding of peace, democracy, and development and to his advocacy for environmental protection.

criticized the conservative nature of East Asian Engaged Buddhist activities. He has labeled them as charity or “social welfare” work that only confronts the suffering (*dukkha*) of the First Noble Truth while allowing the root systems of structural and cultural violence to remain intact and thus not providing a true resolution to them in terms of “social transformation.” As such, Sivaraksa is known to have further defined Thich Nhat Hanh’s term “Engaged Buddhism” as “Socially Engaged Buddhism” to emphasize the need to go beyond individual engagement and into a collective engagement in social systems.

As with their predecessors in the postwar era of the latter twentieth century, today’s Socially Engaged Buddhists in Japan often lack the kind of critical insight into and engagement with social systems—a problem that haunts mainstream Japanese society in general. This has been clearly evidenced in the reticence of most Buddhist organizations to

take on the Fukushima nuclear disaster, dubbing it a “political” issue that religions should not speak out on. Though Japanese Socially Engaged Buddhism still may have not reached its full flowering in a robust critique of Japanese structural issues and a subsequent response in articulating new social development models, we are nonetheless seeing the influence of the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths. This teaching begins in a deep encounter with suffering, leads gradually to an investigation of the deeper causes of it, and eventually an activism that goes beyond the limitations of emergency aid to building a dharmic society.

A short concluding chapter considers the horizon of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan from the third decade of the twenty-first century. Volume II was written during the global Covid epidemic of 2020–2022, which serves as an excellent marker for circumscribing the contents of this volume to the first two

decades. In many ways, there is hope for the epidemic serving as a means to “wake up” or attain a certain level of new enlightenment about the meaning of life on this increasingly fragile planet. While cynics and doomsayers feel the opposite, we are in fact noticing shifts here in Japanese society. They may not lead to substantive change in the economic and political firewall of central governance in Japan, but one does sense a shift in values and attitudes toward others in one’s immediate society: a shift toward trying to reach out to others and remake karmic connections.

I surmise that the new Socially Engaged Buddhist movement is playing a role in this shift, although at this time it is difficult to draw a final conclusion as to what extent. Thus, we consider the next stages of the movement, which at present has become wrapped up in the debate over the Social Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. In typical fashion, many Buddhist denominations are hopping on the trendy bandwagon of this movement, which in Japan seems to be as much about corporate and government public-relations campaigns as actually addressing pressing social issues like child poverty.

At the same time, the fact that social, economic, and political development has even become a topic for mainstream Buddhist denominations provides an opportunity for alternative voices to step in and raise issues that traditionally have been ignored. The most prominent of these is Japan’s persistently low level of women’s empowerment in all social sectors. For the Japanese Buddhist world in particular, there is the unique issue of the wives of modern day priests called *ji-zoku*, who continue to live in the shadow of “fictitious celibacy” and a lack of fundamental rights within temples and denominations. We will examine some new activities by Buddhists to address this issue and consider it as the next major movement in Japanese Socially Engaged Buddhism. □

The Bodhisattva, Christ, and the Meaning of Discipleship

by Peter Feldmeier

“Selfishness diminishes the self, while selflessness divinizes the self.”

What is the relationship between Buddhist spiritual practice and the suffering of others? Is the Buddhist path not, in fact, rather a concern only for oneself and one’s own liberation? In the Sangarava Sutta, the Buddha himself was challenged with this by the priest Sangarava who depicted Brahmin sacrifices as beneficial for “countless beings.” In contrast, he saw the Buddha Dharma as “one that benefits only one being.” The Buddha responded by pointing out that his Dharma led to “countless hundreds of thousands” of followers being liberated (AN 3:61). One might also add that short of attaining nirvana, how could it be selfish to become increasingly free from anger, greed, and ignorance, and to lead others in the same manner? Or even, how could it be selfish to realize nonself (*anatman*)?

And yet, the issue did not vanish, even from within Buddhism itself. The development of Mahayana returned to this issue in critiquing the Theravada tradition. In the Theravada canon the Buddha showed little to no interest in encouraging others to become buddhas. Nirvana was available to anyone karmically ready to engage the three-fold practice of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. To realize at an absolute level the qualities of existence (impermanence, nonself, and dissatisfaction) was to be from karmic production and

thus liberated from samsara to attain nirvana. This is the arhat. To become a Buddha involved superlative advancement in the ten perfections (generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, determination, truthfulness, lovingkindness, and equanimity) as well as supramundane powers, e.g., knowing the karmic past of all beings. This would take innumerable more lifetimes. Even Buddhahood is differentiated between a nonteaching Buddha (*pratyekabuddha*) and one who actively works for the liberation of others. The bodhisattva path—that is, one where an aspirant vows to become a buddha—seems unnecessary. The *summum bonum* is nirvana, available to arhats, nonteaching buddhas, and teaching buddhas alike.

The Mahayana response to the Theravada vision varied. In the Questions of Rastrapala Sutra we find it argued that the above-mentioned candidates actually attain different nirvanas, and thus it urges the aspirant to pursue that most sublime nirvana of a teaching Buddha. As the Mahayana literature matured, e.g., The Lions Roar of Queen Shrimala Sutra, we find claims that arhats and nonteaching buddhas do not actually attain any kind of nirvana. They must continue the path until they become fully teaching buddhas. The Theravada texts themselves give us some clues as to why being a Buddha is the most authentic

pursuit. All of the additional excellences of a Buddha, compared to those of an arhat, are geared toward helping others. Compassion for and service to others is correlated with the greatest aim of nirvana.

This takes us to the Mahayana version of the bodhisattva vow. In the West, it is typical to see this bodhisattva vow as renouncing one’s own nirvana in order to spend virtually eternity serving all sentient beings and attaining nirvana only after all other beings have done so. This is simply not true. As I noted in a previous publication, “If numerous beings have taken the bodhisattva vow, how would any, save one, achieve it? . . . Or consider the odd scenario: everyone who has *not* become a bodhisattva would attain nirvana; this before bodhisattvas . . . A further problem would be what to make of buddhas who have indeed attained nirvana. Were they less compassionate than bodhisattvas?”¹ In both Theravada and Mahayana the bodhisattva vow seeks full Buddhahood—this is the singular quest. But in Mahayana this desire is exclusively concerned with serving all sentient beings. In the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra we find: “Great compassion . . . takes hold of him. He surveys countless beings with his heavenly eye, and what he sees fills him with great agitation. . . . And he attends to them with the thought that: ‘I shall become a savior to all those beings. I shall release them from all their sufferings!’”²

The most influential text describing the perspective and training of



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the bodhisattva path comes from the eighth century master Shantideva and his *Bodhicaryavatara*, popularly known as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. It begins stressing the need for *bodhicitta* (awakened mind/heart): “For when, with irreversible intent, the mind embraces *bodhicitta*, willing to set free the endless multitudes of beings, at that instant, from that moment on, a great and unremitting stream, a strength of wholesome merit, even during sleep and inattention, rises equal to the vastness of the sky” (1.18–19). Armed with the activation of *bodhicitta* one understands the arduous path as something beautiful as well as necessary:

“With joy I celebrate the virtue that relieves all beings from the sorrows of the states of loss, and places those who languish in the realms of bliss . . . and every action for the benefit of all: such is my delight and all my joy” (3.1–4). The great joy exists because service to all is exactly what constitutes Buddhahood.

Some of the most moving verses in the *Bodhicaryavatara* come from this section whereby the emerging bodhisattva vows to become a treasure ever plentiful. “Nirvana is attained by giving all, nirvana the objective of my striving” (3.8–12). Shantideva seeks nirvana and is thereby willing to “abandon” all things, while also willing to give everything away in virtual eternal service:



Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Shantideva.jpg

A painting of Shantideva. Artist unknown.

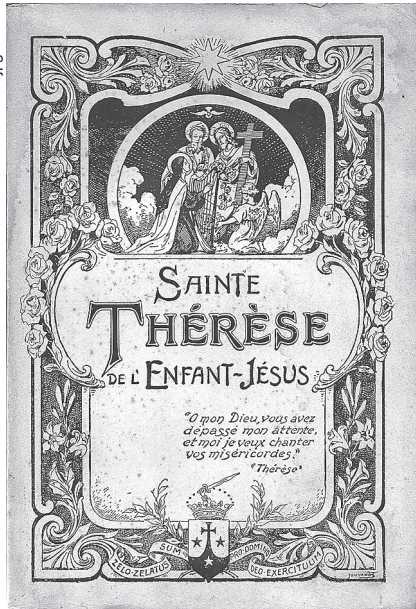
“May I be a guard for those who are protectorless, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a boat, a raft, a bridge. May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall, and a lamp for those who long for light; for those who need a resting place, a bed; for all who need a servant, may I be their slave” (3.18–19).³

Reflecting on the bodhisattva mission, I ask my students who this sounds like and many of them see the connection: It sounds like Jesus Christ. Recently, one student, a devout Christian, made a striking claim. She said, “It seems even more heroic. Jesus suffered and offered his life for the

sins of the world, but it only took a couple of days. After his resurrection, he lived a gloried life. The bodhisattva is doing this for eternity.” Actually, Jesus’s ministry does continue. The Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus’s eternal ministry: “But he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:24–25).⁴ Jesus’s ministry of reconciliation and spiritual healing never ends. Further, like Jesus’s glorification, so too when the bodhisattva path is perfected, he or

she can engage the universe compassionately as a glorified Buddha—that is, without suffering. Paul Williams describes it thusly: “The Tathagatas [buddhas] consecrate our Bodhisattva to full Buddhahood. He can now put into one atom of dust an entire world region or put innumerable sentient beings into one pore of his skin, without their suffering injury or indeed noticing. He can manifest all the deeds in the early life of a Buddha as many times as he wishes throughout innumerable worlds.”⁵

The parallels between the ministry of Jesus and that of the bodhisattva do not stop in the recognition that their lives are marked by radical and virtually



Cover page of *Histoire d'une Âme* (*Story of a Soul*) by Thérèse of Lisieux. Edition 1940. This is her spiritual memoir, a compilation of three separate manuscripts.

eternal self-offering. The very nature of ministry aligns these traditions. It begins with a paradox: selfishness diminishes the self, while selflessness divinizes the self. Shantideva writes, “All the joy the world contains has come through wishing happiness for others. All the misery the world contains has come through wanting pleasure for oneself. . . . To free myself from harm and others from their sufferings, let me give myself away, and cherish others as I love myself” (8.129–36). Jesus preached similarly: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mat 10:38–39).⁶ So crucial is this paradox that Jesus expresses his self-offering on the cross as an expression of his and the Father’s glory (Jn 12:23, 17:1). The cross itself is magnetic: “And when I am lifted up from the earth [his crucifixion], I will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32). Further, discipleship necessarily becomes one of aligning one’s heart with God’s. There is a real kind of dying to self when the Christian message is taken seriously. St. Paul writes of

baptism, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (Rom 6:3)? And what is the result? “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:19–20).

I have often wondered how deeply Christians understand the radicalness of authentic discipleship. Every Catholic Eucharist intends the community and each member personally to offer themselves to God along with Christ’s original self-offering. Dare we ever take communion with a good conscience? It is daunting stuff. I’ve also noticed something similar in Zen dharma centers where each aspirant regularly chants the bodhisattva vow. Are they aware of the magnitude and implications of such a vow?

Most Christians imagine our path as living an engaged faith during our lifetime on earth and spending eternity in communion with God and all those who have been saved. For most, our ministry ends when our life on earth ends. But why should our ministry end then, or at all? We might even ask, can it? If we have truly been *Christified* by our baptism and ongoing sanctification, then in this life and the next we are “joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). Living the divine life with Christ must mean that we take on Christ’s ongoing eternal ministry. St. Therese of Lisieux anticipates this. Shortly before her death she writes, “I feel that my mission is about to begin—my mission of making others love God as I love Him. My mission of teaching my little way to souls. . . . My heaven will be spent on earth up until the end of the world. Yes, I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.”⁷

I want to end this reflection on a personal note. Over the last several years my own spiritual life has changed a bit, at least in emphasis. Overwhelmingly, my experience of God and God’s transformation of me has focused on divine love.

This is hardly unusual. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16). The shift has been toward divine compassion. Periodically at church we sing as a communion song *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy*. I cannot help but cry every single time we sing it. I even got a tattoo on my shoulder of the Sacred Heart. I also regularly mourn the death of my niece who tragically took her life a few years ago. I have made a personal vow to seek her out in the next life and bring her to communion with God. Of course, she could already have this communion and it may be that she would actually be guiding my soul. Over the past six months I’ve been contemplating a kind of bodhisattva vow to spend my existence until the end of time doing nothing but guiding lost souls to divine communion. In all this, my vision is wholly Christian. But I must confess, the idea would not have occurred to me without Shantideva and the *Way of the Bodhisattva*. □

Notes

1. Peter Feldmeier, *Experiments in Buddhist-Christian Encounter: From Buddha-Nature to the Divine Nature* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 92–93.
2. Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 238–39.
3. All quotes from the *Bodhicaryavatara* come from Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2003).
4. All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
5. Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2009), 207.
6. Each of the four gospels has a form of this teaching, often repeatedly. See Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35–37; Luke 9:24, 17:33; John 12:25.
7. St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), 263.

To Live with Peace of Mind

by Nichiko Niwano



“Good health,” according to the World Health Organization, “is not the absence of disease and infirmity, but a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.” This mirrors the definition of happiness.

I must admit, though, that when we consider current global conditions, they are tantamount to nearly no one being able, in the true sense, to lead a healthy and happy life. Around the world, the political reality is being controlled by military power. Countries are keeping each other in check by expanding their military preparations, using their military power as a deterrent. Therefore, we could say that even countries and regions that at first glance appear to be peaceful are constantly exposed to these military tensions.

However, this did not start just now. In 1982, Founder Niwano sounded the alarm, saying, “The present world is in a state of crisis, as World War III might break out at any moment.” He also told us that, “all armaments come from the mind of fear. Distrust and the fear of being invaded by another country are spurring on the arms race,” in his appeal for the significance of the campaign, then underway, to collect signatures for a petition to abolish nuclear weapons and call for arms reductions.

That said, merely thinking about our own country being invaded and destroyed by another country makes us feel uneasy. Moreover, protecting your country is an extension of the desire to protect your own life and the lives of your family members, so we could say

that depending on armed resistance is a part of human instinct. Even so, we certainly cannot say that it is healthy to feel afraid of an invasion by another country or have the mind of hostility and vilification. In that sense, in order for us to live truly healthy and vibrant lives, we need to protect our own countries without depending on military expansion and the like, which means, in other words, that we must try to find and realize the means to ensure that all countries will not be destroyed.

Just As You Love Yourself

“In the month of August— / The Sixth, the Ninth, / And the Fifteenth.” This poem about the tragic atrocities of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan’s defeat in World War II, oozes with remorse and sorrow for the war and the desire to console the spirits of the dead. Seventy-eight years after the end of the war, it still deeply moves me deeply. Therefore, I cannot help but hope, from the bottom of my heart, for our world to be one in which all people everywhere can truly live with peace of mind.

Founder Niwano said, “War and conflict arise from the mind of selfishness. They arise from the mind of discrimination. They arise from hatred and envy. Until we suppress or weaken such ugly minds, conflict will not disappear from the human world.” And he clearly stated that, “Transforming the human mind through religious faith is the great,

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direct path toward peace.” Buddhism places the greatest value on compassion while in Christianity it is love, and surely other religious faiths have similar teachings. According to these teachings that lead to harmony, all human beings should love and respect the lives of others as they love and respect their own irreplaceable lives. I believe that religious people have been entrusted with the mission of building such a world. The goal of collaboration and cooperation for that purpose gave birth to Religions for Peace.

In reality, though, it is difficult for ordinary people like us to stop war. However, by improving our minds through faith, we can help move our societies and nations in a better direction. This means seeing yourself and others with the mind of compassion, expanding and broadening that mind to see that you, your local community, and your country are together forming one existence, and sharing that truth with other people. Making many more friends, whether they have faith or not—friends who love and care for the countries and people of the world as they do for their own country—leads to the realization of a world in which everyone can live with peace of mind. □

Seeing Everyone as Purna

by Dominick Scarangelo

In terms of their phenomenal experience of daily life, Buddhists can appreciate those who display the three poisons as Purna, that is, as bodhisattvas who lead them to awakening, and in doing so, have gratitude for even those unpleasant experiences, avoiding the trap of making dualistic, egocentric distinctions between what is good and what is bad.

Introduction

One of the most prominent features of the first third of the Lotus Sutra is Shakyamuni Buddha's bestowal of "assurances of buddhahood" on many of his great disciples. In most cases, these predictions of the disciple's buddhahood generally follow the same repetitive pattern and contain little in the way of narrative or doctrinal content, so I suspect that many people who read the Lotus Sutra end up skipping over or skimming most of them. Shakyamuni's bestowal of buddhahood on Purna, which comes in chapter 8, differs from the previous assurances, however. First, Shakyamuni Buddha reveals that Purna—whom everyone has assumed is an arhat, just like the other great disciples—has actually been a bodhisattva all along, introducing the notion of a hidden or "undercover" bodhisattva. Second, the Buddha shockingly declares that Purna and other disciples lead people to liberation by manifesting the appearance of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance, which, are usually considered the very problems that Buddhist practice seeks to eliminate. The thought of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rishso Kosei-kai, provides some interesting

perspectives on both of these oddities. From the first point, he develops practical advice for leaders of the sangha and people who work to help others and strive to make the world a better place. In the case of the second point, Rev. Niwano's demystification of the Buddhist bodhisattva helps us shift away from predictable discussions about the ethics of skillful means and suggests a new, practice-oriented perspective that I will attempt to flesh out through a conceptual exercise.

Assurances of Buddhahood

First, I should explain "assurances of buddhahood," because it may be a new term for many readers. An assurance of buddhahood (Skt., *vyākaraṇa*) is a confirmation that a buddha gives to an individual promising them that they will become a buddha in the future. In the stories passed down about Shakyamuni Buddha, he is said to have made a vow to become a buddha in a past life, when he was called Sumedha. When Sumedha met Dīpaṃkara, the buddha of that age, he made an offering of his body by laying himself down on the road so that

the buddha could walk across his body instead of the mud. Dīpaṃkara is said to have stopped and told Sumedha that in the next age he would become a buddha named Shakyamuni. This story becomes the model for the beginning of the career of a bodhisattva, or buddha-to-be: the future buddha meets the present buddha, makes a vow to likewise become a buddha, and then receives an assurance from that buddha to the effect that, after many eons of practice, they will indeed fulfill their vow.

In mainstream Indian Buddhism, the term bodhisattva referred to former lives of Shakyamuni during which he practiced to become Buddha, or, it indicated Maitreya, who was said to become the buddha of the next age. In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism, which arose between the first century BCE and the first century CE, held that many people could surpass the awakening of an arhat (one who has freed themselves from endless rounds of cyclic existence) to become a bodhisattva, and eventually, after ages of practice, a fully awakened buddha. While some traditions of Mahayana posed the existence of "*icchantikas*," people incapable of awakening, as well as the notion that people had fixed natures that predisposed or limited them to specific levels of awakening, the Mahayana tradition broadly accepted that all people could become buddhas, at least in principle. This tradition encouraged Buddhists to become bodhisattvas—that is, to bypass the awakening of the arhat by developing the altruistic intention



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to become a buddha for the purpose of liberating living beings. Since it was thought that the arhat left cyclic existence upon death, never returning to this world, attaining the awakening of arhat was a dead end that eliminated all possibility of becoming a buddha. In the Discourse on the Ten Stages,

attributed to Nāgārjuna (the second century CE) and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (344–409/413), it was better to fall into hell, from which one can eventually escape, than become an arhat, which the author of the text called “the death of the bodhisattva” because “the Buddhist Path will be blocked forever”

(Inagaki 1998, 35). The belief that the awakening of an arhat was a dead end and something to be feared probably made obtaining an assurance of buddhahood, a proof that the practitioner had attained a level of awakening from which there would be no regression to “lesser vehicles,” all the more important.

I think this background will help readers of the Lotus Sutra appreciate why the text’s assurances of buddhahood for the Buddha’s arhat disciples are given such a high profile. We today, born in a world where the equality of all human beings is a fundamental value—even if far from a concrete reality—may fail to grasp the radical notion of the Lotus Sutra’s assurances of buddhahood, and it’s easy for us to overlook the importance of these scenes in the text. Assurances that the path to buddhahood for the arhat “dead enders” was not blocked radically deviated from the conventional thinking of both mainstream Buddhism and earlier stages of Mahayana thought, and is one of many elements that made the Lotus Sutra an iconoclastic text. This is also probably one reason why the Lotus Sutra’s narrative begins with Shakyamuni Buddha convincing Shariputra that the arhat’s awakening he had attained was really just a waystation on the path to buddhahood, and that without knowing it, he had actually been a bodhisattva all along. After demonstrating his understanding of this teaching of the “One Buddha Vehicle,” Shariputra, the paradigmatic arhat, receives the first assurance of buddhahood.

Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Dipamkara Jātaka. Bezeklik Cave 9, Furfan, China. Ninth–eleventh centuries. Wall painting.png



Dipamkara and Sumedha. In this painting, Sumedha is shown kneeling down, laying his hair under the feet of Dipamkara. A mural painting in the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves, a complex of Buddhist cave grottos near the ancient ruins of Gaochang in the Mutou Valley, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. Ninth–eleventh centuries.

But the Lotus Sutra doesn't stop there.

After having bestowed assurances of buddhahood upon his main disciples and many other living beings in the assembly, in chapter 10, "Dharma Teachers," Shakyamuni Buddha bestows an assurance on anyone in the future who simply hears the sutra in a way that resonates with their hearts: "Moreover, I also bestow the assurance of Supreme Perfect Awakening upon those people who, after the passing of the Tathagata, hear even a single verse or a single phrase of the Wondrous Dharma Flower Sutra and thereby experience even a moment of rejoicing" (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 207). Later, the Lotus Sutra surprises once again in chapter 12 with another assurance of buddhahood when Shakyamuni declares that the infamous Devadatta, his archenemy who is said to have repeatedly attempted to assassinate him, will also become a buddha in the future.

For Buddhists holding the mainstream views of the day, the Lotus Sutra's declaration that they were all essentially unknowing Mahayanists probably struck them as an imperious assertion. The hostile reaction of Buddhist practitioners, both lay and monastic, to Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect's declaration that they were all "practicing the bodhisattva way" and "will become buddhas" in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra may be a reflection of how some other Buddhists responded to what they may have seen as a presumptuous sense of religious inclusivism. Such scenes can be taken as indications of just how controversial the Lotus Sutra was when it first began circulating in the early centuries of the common era.

Purna's Assurance of Buddhahood

Purna's Silent Expression of his Understanding

Purna's assurance of buddhahood is one of the most peculiar that Shakyamuni Buddha gives any disciple in the Lotus

Sutra. First, despite being the most eloquent of all the great disciples, "first in preaching the Dharma," Purna is one of the last disciples that Shakyamuni recognizes with an assurance of buddhahood. Purna has heard the Buddha's explanation of skillful means and the parables the Buddha used to clarify the meaning of his words. Then, he witnessed the assurances of buddhahood given to the other great disciples. Finally, learning that the disciples had all been connected to one another, having practiced under the guidance of Shakyamuni Buddha in former lives over the span of many eons, Purna realizes the freedom the Buddha has to use his transcendent powers. All of this purifies Purna's mind, moving it to joy. As the sutra describes, Purna "Immediately rose from his seat, went before the Buddha, and bowed at his feet" (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 189).

But then . . . nothing happens. Without uttering a word, he withdraws to one side and just gazes upward at the face of the Buddha. Unlike many of the other great disciples, Purna remains silent with regards to the degree of his understanding, ruminating on it in silence:

He [Purna] thought to himself, "Through the knowledge and insight of skillful means, he [Shakyamuni Buddha] teaches the Dharma according to the natures and characteristics of the people of the world and thereby lifts living beings away from greedy attachments to various things. No words of ours can fully describe the Buddha's virtues. Only the Buddha, the World-Honored One, is able to know the original vow that is deepest in our hearts." (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 189)

Purna speaks these words to himself in silence, but he knows that the Buddha can see inside his heart. Why did he choose to silently reflect on his understanding rather than declare it for everyone to witness, like the other

disciples? One theory, offered by the Chinese commentator Zhiyi (538–597) in *Fahua wenju* (Words and phrases of the Lotus Sutra), is that the disciples who received their assurances earlier clearly expressed their understanding in words and explained it for the benefit of those who had still not grasped what Shakyamuni was saying. Now, by the time Purna receives his assurance of buddhahood, there is hardly anyone left who hasn't understood the Buddha's message, and with no one left to testify to, Purna eschews the use of words and remains silent. Why use words when they aren't needed? Silence is the most profound testimony to the realization of truth (*Fahua wenju*, 105a). But there is another reason why Purna remains silent about his awakening. Purna is not merely one of the great disciples of the Buddha who had achieved arhatship. He was in fact a secret bodhisattva. And just as it was the Buddha who had made it known that skillful means all lead to Supreme Perfect Awakening, it was properly the Buddha's place to disclose who Purna really was.

The Buddha Reveals Purna as an Undercover Bodhisattva

Purna lets Shakyamuni Buddha reveal his secret. Shakyamuni Buddha begins his assurance of buddhahood by asking the members of the assembly, "Do you see this Purna here, son of Maitrayani (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 189)?" But the Buddha is not merely inquiring whether they can find Purna in the assembly. Shakyamuni is posing the question: Can you see the real Purna? Do you know that his appearance as a shravaka is only his outer manifestation, and at his core he is really a bodhisattva . . . ?

Shakyamuni Buddha then continues by reminding the assembly that Purna is the foremost among teachers of the Dharma, but not only in this life. In previous lives, Purna had kept, protected, and helped proclaim the teachings of 90 million buddhas of the past—always



Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Sugawara Mitsushige Lotus Sutra, 02.jpg

Disciples gathered around the Buddha in the Lotus Sutra. Inscribed by Sugawara Mitsushige in 1257. Kamakura period. Handscroll; ink, color, and gold on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

as the foremost teacher of the Dharma. Given his preaching skills in his present life, the members of the assembly were probably not so surprised to hear that he was equally eloquent in past lives. But then Shakyamuni Buddha says something that should have raised some eyebrows: Purna is “in complete possession of the transcendent powers of a bodhisattva” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 190). “In order to purify buddha lands,” Purna also “did the work of buddhas, teaching and transforming living beings” (ibid).

Shakyamuni Buddha provides strong hints in the prose version of Purna’s assurance of buddhahood, but coming to his restatement of the assurance in poetic verse, he finally lets the cat out of the bag:

Knowing that living beings delight
in lesser teachings
And are daunted by greater wisdom,
The bodhisattvas therefore take the
form of
Shravakas and pratyekabuddhas.
Employing countless skillful means,
They transform every type of living
being,
Saying of themselves, “We are

shravakas,
Far removed from the Buddha Way.”
They liberate innumerable beings
Who will all have success.
Even the indolent and those with lesser
aspirations
Will eventually become buddhas.
Concealing their bodhisattva deeds
within
While maintaining a shravaka façade
Of few desires and a weariness of the
cycles of birth and death,
In truth they are purifying buddha
lands.
(Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 192)

As the members of the assembly should have suspected when Shakyamuni spoke in prose, Purna is truly a bodhisattva, but he conceals his true identity, claiming to be a shravaka—that is, a practitioner seeking the awakening of an arhat—and is nowhere close to the awakening of a buddha. By concealing his bodhisattva deeds and putting on the façade of a shravaka, Purna, and those like him, are able to contribute to the liberation of countless people.

Why would concealing the profundity of his awakening and his

transcendent powers have actually been better for helping many other people?

The Principle of Half a Step

The Twin Challenges Facing a Bodhisattva in Today’s World

People who aspire to devote themselves to the bodhisattva path of benefitting both self and other to make the world a better place, or, in the Buddhist language, “purifying the land,” face a difficult challenge. As Niwano explains:

In the case of individuals of such awe-inspiring dignity and virtue as Shakyamuni Buddha, even if those individuals never assume the slightest air of self-importance, everyone is naturally drawn to them, coming to listen at their feet and concentrate intently on their teachings. But people will not listen with such heartfelt devotion to someone who does not possess that same degree of dignity and virtue. If such a person persists in acting in a condescending fashion, others are liable to turn their back on them or find them

inaccessible. It is here that Purna's attitude provides a great example for us. (Niwano 2023, 175)

This challenge has two facets: first, the bodhisattva's actions may be taken as a kind of arrogance, and, second, many people who lack confidence in themselves may shy away from those who try to help them out of feelings of inferiority.

Let's consider the first challenge in the context of contemporary society. These days, it's truly difficult to give advice. As Rev. Niwano observes, if we come off to others as condescending, they will simply ignore us. As we all know, uninvited counsel is often rejected out of hand, even by close friends and family. Does anyone welcome unsolicited opinions? It strikes us as presumptuous and even offensive at times, because the giver unilaterally elevates themselves to a superior position from which to make judgments about us. Rev. Niwano exempts persons of obvious virtue and dignity such as Shakyamuni Buddha from this problem, but would even the Buddha's advice be so readily accepted in societies today? Today we prize individual choice and freedom of conscience, and nobody—at least not anyone outside of a very narrow range of recognized persons—has the right to make judgments for us about our lives. The public-private split and the separation of church and state mean that government employees or politicians have limited, if any, right to speak to people's private behavior that doesn't violate any laws, and the clergy have influence over only those who voluntarily choose to accept their guidance. Authority is given by those who are subject to it, which is essentially an extension of the notion of "consent of the governed."

I think that the degree of personal autonomy many people have today in societies across the globe is hardly something to regret, however. The individual's freedom from the judgments of

others protects non-dominant groups and minorities in particular, whether racial, sexual, cultural, or otherwise, to live true to themselves, but this freedom also extends broadly throughout contemporary societies, allowing so many of us to live more authentically than previous generations. At the same time, however, the present state of affairs makes it extremely difficult for those working to better the world and be of service to others. In this context, Mahayana Buddhism has traditionally considered bodhisattvas as leaders in the world and among the people. And if, as Rev. Niwano describes it, practicing the way of the bodhisattva is an activist path of practice, there is a danger they may be taken as arrogant and self-righteous do-gooders who presume to hold the moral high ground over others.

The second problem is those who strive to help others may drive people away from them if they are seen as inaccessible or unapproachable. The Lotus Sutra provides a classic example of this problem in the parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Son. The protagonist of this parable, often compared to the prodigal son, leaves home to pursue a life of fun and adventure but eventually ends up down on his luck, and turns to begging and searching for whatever meager day work he can get. One day he approaches a certain household to beg for alms or work, but, unbeknownst to him, the house is now the residence of his father, who in the ensuing years has been exceedingly successful and is now extremely wealthy. The poor son fails to recognize this man as his father, and moreover, he is in fact intimidated by the apparent power and dignity of the older man, because his feelings of self-loathing have robbed him of his confidence. His lack of self-confidence prevents him from accepting copious aid from the old man, much less claiming his rightful birthright. Even after many years he still keeps a certain distance from the rich old man.

Perhaps we have all been like this poor son at one time or another. Sometimes, when we meet a person who has the abilities and accomplishments we would like to attain for ourselves, and especially when that person is in a position to help us do so, we often shy away from their aid. When we compare ourselves to them, we feel embarrassed, and we put distance between us rather than try to learn from them because we can't bear to recognize the gap between ourselves and them. We also lack the confidence that we could ever really learn what they can teach us. So, we end up moving away from those whose lead we should actually follow. We feel most comfortable with people who are our equals—sometimes because their presence does not stir our inner feelings of inferiority.

This common tendency is the second great challenge facing those who work to make the world a better place by helping people, including doctors, teachers, parents, and leaders at Dharma centers and in the wider Buddhist sangha.

The Principle of Half a Step

Rev. Niwano observes "It is here that Purna's attitude provides a great example for us" (Niwano 2023, 175). Purna dealt with these twin challenges by being modest about his abilities and presenting himself as basically the same as the Buddha's other disciples. Well aware of how people are "daunted by greater wisdom," in other words, how being around their betters often touches the painful wounds of people's inferiority complex, Purna maintains an outer appearance that allows him to fit in with, and get close to, everyone else. Purna's story also resonates with how the rich man of the aforementioned parable got close to his day-laborer son by taking on the appearance of an ordinary worker. "He changed into clothes that were coarse, torn, and dirty," and joined the employees in clearing the dung on the farm (Rissho Kosei-kai

2019, 125). Rev. Niwano characterized Purna's approach as "the principle of half a step." As he writes: "fancying ourselves even as little as a step ahead of others carries dangers. In terms of our attitude, we must walk shoulder-to-shoulder with those around us" (Niwano 2023, 175–76).

The words "principle of half a step" remind me of when I was in Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), when I was in charge of several fellow cadets as a squad leader. Leading the squad in marching is a tricky, nuanced exercise. If you get too far ahead of the line, the unity and uniformity of the formation breaks down. But hanging back and not taking any lead at all causes confusion and indecision. Perhaps the proper lead was not even half a step, but a quarter or an eighth of a step. There are no hard and fast rules about it, however. It requires a constant moment-by-moment calibration with the other members of the squad. I think it's no different for a Buddhist teacher, someone with a role in a Dharma center, or a person who works with people trying to make a difference in the world. The calibration requires keeping your focus on the needs of others, while also remaining aware of where your head is at, through introspection, but also from the standpoint of the people you are with. "The principle of half a step" is certainly no easy task.

Liberating Living Beings by Showing the Attributes of the Three Poisons

One of the most puzzling aspects of Purna's assurance of buddhahood for readers is when Shakyamuni Buddha makes the following declaration:

When my disciples show themselves
to living beings as
Having the three poisons
Or the attributes of distorted views,

They are liberating living beings.
(Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 192)

Here, Shakyamuni Buddha tells the assembly that Purna does not merely conceal his "greater wisdom." We discover that Purna, like many other bodhisattvas, actually display the attributes of the "three poisons." The three poisons are the afflicted emotions of greed, anger, and ignorance. In Buddhism, these three are the basic, most fundamental causes of suffering in human life.

How can we make sense of this?

In ancient times, there was much speculation about how bodhisattvas, beings of virtue and goodness, could be present, or "undercover" like Purna, in realms of suffering and evil action. Since bodhisattvas have eliminated many of their delusions and practice for the benefit of living beings, how could they even perform such acts that are outer manifestations of inner defilement? If their seemingly deluded actions are motivated by compassion rather than products of the three poisons, does this change the ethical status of their actions? And practically speaking, what kinds of acts could a bodhisattva perform? Are there any limits?

If we think of Purna as "undercover," we can see why he would need to present himself as having the same characteristics and sharing the same problems as everyone else around him. We've all seen police dramas or films like *Donnie Brasco*, in which an undercover cop has to demonstrate his or her "street cred" by talking up their long "rap sheet." But in the case of narcotics officers, they are sometimes forced by circumstances to actually take illegal drugs to protect their cover and their lives. From an ethical standpoint, such situations are no doubt murky waters for an undercover officer, and in Buddhism, analogous questions have been discussed and debated for centuries, up until today.

Damien Keown has written that in the Lotus Sutras skillful means is largely "a

teaching about the nature of the Teaching" and not about practice (Keown 2002, 375). To be precise, this passage says literally that Purna and such bodhisattvas "show an image of oneself as having the three poisons," and does not say they actually commit actions that violate Buddhist ethical guidelines as, for example, the lay bodhisattva Vimalakirti does in the sutra of the same name. Even so, presenting an image or the attributes of greed, anger, and ignorance is very close to action, and, if we understand presenting an appearance of the three poisons from the principle of the ten suchnesses in chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra, "such an appearance" would be only one aspect of the entirety of a total phenomenon, which is always indivisible from the phenomenon's functioning, that is to say, inseparable from action that impacts the outside world. From the standpoint of the ten suchnesses, it becomes difficult to separate showing the attributes of a phenomenon from the very activity of that phenomenon.

Traditionally, however, the bodhisattva who uses skillful means was said to be at a very high level on the Buddhist path, capable of deep insight and in possession of transcendent powers. The bodhisattva's profound wisdom and transcendent powers could have allowed it to overcome such a problem. As Peggy Morgan writes, skillful means "is an attribute of those already perfect in ethics and insight," and thus, it "is not presented as a normative path for all to follow but as something manifest in the activities of Buddhas and great bodhisattvas" (Morgan 2002, 358).

Interestingly, the sutra itself seems to recognize the difficult ambiguities that readers of this passage will have to struggle with when, in the next few lines of verse Shakyamuni Buddha says: "If I completely explained / Their various manifestations and transformations, / Living beings who heard about it / Would harbor doubt and confusion" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 193).

An Experimental Understanding

Gene Reeves, translator of what is perhaps the most popular English version of the sutra, emphasized the practicality of the Lotus Sutra's notion of skillful means. For him, it was about results. And that is the direction I'd like to go—stepping away from philosophical ethics in order to think about what the text may have to say to a contemporary Buddhist practitioner whose first concern is the practicalities of praxis.

To make such a pivot, I'd like to begin with Rev. Niwano's final conclusion about these verses.

Bodhisattvas do not necessarily take on the appearance seen in Buddha statues or paintings. They manifest in society as real human beings of all shapes and sizes. However, even when explaining this, many people may remain skeptical. The reason for this doubt lies in the deeply ingrained notion that, due to an overabundance of reverence for bodhisattvas, they are perceived as beings distinct from ordinary humans.

If buddhas and bodhisattvas were supernatural entities, even Shakyamuni Buddha wouldn't have said things like "All sentient beings can become buddhas," nor would he have expounded the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra teaches that all humans can become bodhisattvas and ultimately attain buddhahood.

I'll reiterate: bodhisattvas are by no means supernatural beings. When



Photo: Heritage Image / AFLO

The Discourse of Vimalakirti and Manjusri. Artist unknown. Sixteenth century.

we engage in altruistic actions, we become a member of the bodhisattva community, and when we attain

awakening, we become buddhas. Therefore, there are indeed various all manner of bodhisattvas in this world. Some bodhisattvas even manifest the attributes of the three poisons or distorted thinking to awaken people to enlightenment. (Niwano 1989, vol. 5, 59–60)

Rev. Niwano's exegesis differs significantly from traditional commentaries at several points. First and most obviously, Niwano's vision of the bodhisattva stands in contrast to that cited by Morgan, above. In terms of the various ancient doctrinal explanations of the path structure, bodhisattvas were indeed considered to be very advanced practitioners who had already eliminated substantial categories of delusions, obtained transcendent powers, and because of these attainments even resembled buddhas in the eyes of ordinary living beings. For Niwano, however, bodhisattvas can be ordinary people. The bodhisattva is a person who practices by acting in the world altruistically. Elsewhere he describes the bodhisattva way as an activist path practiced by people who liberate themselves through helping to liberate others (Niwano 2023, 88). Anyone who practices in this way is a bodhisattva, including average, ordinary people.

Niwano sought a rational, down to earth understanding of the Lotus Sutra compatible with the contemporary world, and his demystification of the bodhisattva is part and parcel of that project. For him, this empowers regular people by making them the subject of the sutra, rather than magical, godlike beings. This

tendency also extended to his conception of buddhahood, which he described as the perfection of one's character, or actualizing the totality of one's potential. For Niwano, buddhas, too, are ordinary people that develop their human potential in its totality: "To manifest . . . the innate nature unique to that individual being is, in fact, the attainment of buddhahood for that being" (Niwano 1977, 50–51).

If bodhisattvas are indeed ordinary people who are thoroughly part of this world and act altruistically in order to make it a better place, and not necessarily beings perfect in ethics and insight, the implications should be clear. I don't think Rev. Niwano expresses it as clearly as he could have, but the way he describes bodhisattvas as "real people of all shapes and sizes," and then says "some bodhisattvas even manifest the attributes of the

three poisons," he seems to mean that, precisely because bodhisattvas are regular folk, there will be some who, as a function of their human fallibility, inevitably show aspects of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. This understanding is admittedly a significant departure from classical views of the bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra tradition, but it allows us to move away from a discussion of the ethics of skillful means, which I think is territory that has been well covered. Above, we were thinking of skillful means as a method that Buddhist practitioners employ, but conceiving of bodhisattvas as ordinary people, the question of how a perfect being could manifest displays of the three poisons becomes moot. We are left

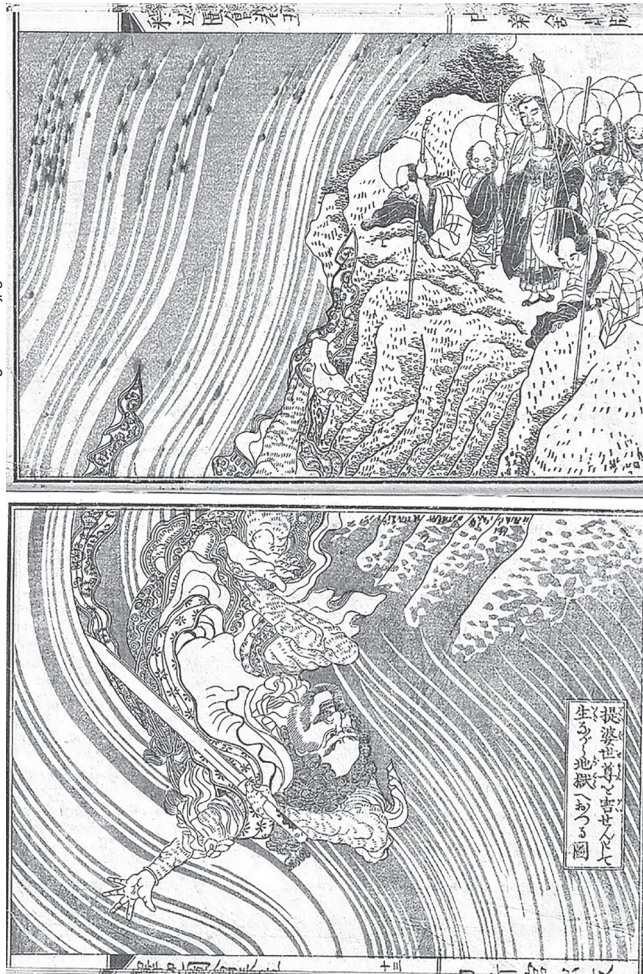
to accept that such displays of the attributes of the three poisons, even from bodhisattvas, are going to be part of our experience in this world as a matter of course. This turns us toward another understanding of skillful means that is very prominent in the Lotus Sutra tradition, and that we may be liable to forget: skillful means as a function of phenomenal experience.

In this understanding of skillful means, all phenomena that one comes into contact with—including people, places, things, and experiences—are all the workings of the Buddha, the cosmos itself, the One Vehicle, to lead people to awakening. From this perspective, the displays of the three poisons that bodhisattvas show to people, as all

other phenomena, are for the purpose of leading people to awakening, and as such, they are skillful means. The liberative capacity of negative experiences, in particular, is demonstrated several times in the Lotus Sutra, most notably in the Devadatta chapter, where Shakyamuni Buddha reflects upon how the hardships in a past life due to his relationship with his archnemesis, Devadatta, who tried to supplant him as leader of the sangha, and even murder him, provided the opportunity for him to complete his practice of the bodhisattva perfections, including forbearance. The Buddha describes Devadatta as his "good friend" (Skt., *kalyāṇa-mitra*), which in Buddhist texts means someone who is your spiritual guide.

Because Devadatta was my good friend, I was able to perfect the Six Paramitas as well as benevolence, compassion, sympathetic joy, and impartiality. I gained the thirty-two marks, the eighty kinds of beautiful features, the deep golden-purple hue, the ten powers, the four kinds of fearlessness, the four methods of good interaction, the eighteen unique characteristics, and the transcendent powers of the Way. I attained Perfect Awakening and extensively liberated living beings. All of this is due to the good friendship of Devadatta. (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 232)

As one ancient commentary, *Hokekyō jurin shūyōshō* 法華經鷲林拾葉鈔 (The Lotus Sutra: collection of leaves gathered from the groves of Divine Eagle Peak) puts it, this episode of the sutra



Devadatta sucked into hell, from the book entitled Shaka goichidaiki zue (*The life of Shakyamuni illustrated*). Illustration by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Edo period.

Source: Wikimedia Commons File: SHAKA GOICHIIDAIKI ZUE 1839 Devadatta falling into hell.jpg

shows how “Evil aids the good,” that “Good and evil are not two,” and “Wrong and right are as one” (*Hokekyō jurin shūyōshō*, 472). In other words, good and evil, are nondual and interrelated, and thus both are needed for the practice of the Buddha Way. Simply put, the bad is what provides the opportunity for the development of the good. As Rev. Niwano explains, “No matter the opposition and adversity we experience, if we face them with forbearance (patience) and continue to practice our spiritual disciplines, opposition, and adversity become conditions—opportunities that function as secondary causes—for our attainment of buddhahood” (Niwano 2023, 207).

By providing Shakyamuni with the opportunity to perfect himself, to help him attain Supreme Perfect Awakening, Devadatta was unwittingly acting as a bodhisattva—assisting in someone’s liberation. In this sense, can’t we consider Devadatta an “undercover bodhisattva”? The proof of this comes when, astonishingly, Shakyamuni announces an assurance of buddhahood for Devadatta, who, after infinite kalpas, will become a buddha named King of Heavenly Beings Tathagata. In other assurances of buddhahood in the text, Shakyamuni recounts the practices and merits that have brought the practitioner to the point where they are ready to receive an assurance of buddhahood, but in the case of Devadatta, his actions were merely those motivated by delusion, making it clear that his bad actions, which nonetheless facilitated Shakyamuni Buddha’s awakening, are the reasons for receiving an assurance of buddhahood. Interestingly, this does not exempt him from suffering the negative karmic consequences of doing evil, but when those karmic consequences are exhausted, he will surely attain buddhahood.

I think it’s fair to raise the objection that Shakyamuni is talking about “my disciples” in this passage in chapter 8, of

which Purna is one, and that such disciples inwardly have good intentions. That’s why we wouldn’t ordinarily put Devadatta, or people like him who do evil, in the category of “disciple.” But we should keep in mind that the Lotus Sutra also expands the notion of the disciple by universalizing bodhisattvahood, as “All those whom the buddha-tathagatas teach and transform are bodhisattvas” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 66). However, while Reeves concurs that Devadatta became a bodhisattva for Shakyamuni, even if that was not what he intended, the consequences of Devadatta’s actions do not retroactively transform his intentions into good ones (Reeves 2002, 383). Although he acted as a bodhisattva, Devadatta did not have bodhisattva intentions.

Seeing Everyone Who Manifests the Three Poisons as Purna

Practically speaking, however, from the standpoint of the practitioner in the world, people they encounter who display the attributes of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance are all bodhisattvas, and thus disciples of the Buddha, who provide the conditions for the practitioner to attain awakening. But practitioners must learn to recognize all such difficult people as bodhisattvas so that they do indeed take advantage of those opportunities to practice. I think for the committed Buddhist, this is a more useful and constructive takeaway from the passage. In terms of their phenomenal experience of daily life, Buddhists can appreciate those who display the three poisons as Purna—that is, as bodhisattvas who lead them to awakening—and in doing so, have gratitude for even those unpleasant experiences, avoiding the trap of making dualistic, ego-centric distinctions between what is good and what is bad. To see everyone as Purna would essentially lead

one to the practice of revering buddha nature like Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect in chapter 20, looking at all living beings with the thought: “I deeply revere you. I could never find you unworthy of respect or put myself above you. For all of you are practicing the bodhisattva way and all of you will become buddhas” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 322). □

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The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue

(4)

This is the 140th and the last installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

TEXT At that time the World-honored One spoke thus in verse: “If one has evil in his eye-organ / And his eyes are impure with karmic impediments, / He must only recite the Great-vehicle / And reflect on the first principle. / This is called the repentance of the eye, / Ending all bad karmas. / His ear-organ hears disordered sounds / And disturbs the principle of harmony. / This produces in him a demented mind, / Like [that of] a foolish monkey. / He must only recite the Great-vehicle / And meditate on the void non-aspect of the Dharma, / Ending all the long-standing evils, / So that with the heavenly ears he may hear [sounds] from

all directions. / His organ of smell is attached to all odors, / Causing all contacts according to lusts. / His nose thus deluded / Gives birth to all dust [of illusion] according to his lusts. / If one recites the Great-vehicle sutras / And meditates on all things as they are. / He will become free from his long-standing evil karmas, / And will not again produce them in his future lives.

COMMENTARY *And meditate on the void nonaspect of the Dharma.* This means to firmly meditate on all things as being “empty” and thus having no firm and specific forms.

• *His organ of smell is attached to all odors, Causing all contacts according to lusts.* Here, “organ of smell” represents all the senses. “Contacts” is used with the sense of “emotions.” “Lusts” refers to the illusory thoughts that cling to things.

TEXT His organ of the tongue causes five kinds / Of bad karmas of evil speech. / Should one wish to control them by himself, / He must zealously practice mercy, / And considering the true principle of quiescence of the Dharma, / He should not conceive discriminations.

COMMENTARY *Five kinds of bad karmas of evil speech.* The five kinds of evil speech are said to be (1) slander, (2) words that harm others, (3) words that cause suffering, (4) harsh words, and (5) ill-natured words.

• *Considering the true principle of quiescence of the Dharma.* The true principle of quiescence is the real and unshakable truth, that is, the emptiness of the first principle (the ultimate reality of all things). In terms of human beings, this truth asserts that all equally possess buddha nature.

TEXT His organ of thought is like [that of] a monkey, / Never resting even for a little while. / Should one desire to subdue this organ, / He must zealously recite the Great-vehicle, / Reflecting on the Buddha’s greatly enlightened body, / The completion of his power, and his fearlessness.

COMMENTARY The best way to regulate the mind is to reflect upon the Buddha. Thinking of and meditating wholeheartedly upon the Buddha, who attained great enlightenment, possessed the power of liberating all living beings, and preached his teachings fearlessly, will lead the mind to be communicating with that of the Buddha. At that time even the evilly inclined mind will be drawn spontaneously toward the correct path (subdued).

TEXT The body is the master of its organs, / As wind causes dust to roll, / Wandering in its six organs, / Freely without obstacles. / If one desires to destroy these evils, / To be freed forever from the troublesome dust of delusions, / Ever dwelling in the city of nirvana, / And to be at ease with a tranquil mind, / He should recite the Great-vehicle sutras / And reflect on the mother of bodhisattvas.

COMMENTARY This passage is noted for its superb literary expression as well as its content. It is well worth memorizing.

• *The body is the master of its organs.* Here, “body” does not mean simply the physical body but also includes the mind and indicates the entirety of the human being. Here, “mind” has been omitted because of the needs of the poetic

meter of the original Chinese. “Master of its organs” means that body-mind is the director of all the various functions.

• *Six organs.* Literally, the Chinese words used here for “six organs” mean “six traitors.” When the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind function correctly, all is well, but they cause people harm because the desires (traitors) emanating from them act of their own accord (wander) for selfish ends.

• *Tranquil.* This refers to a simple and frank disposition of a person who does not seek material goods, services, or thanks from others and does not expect reward for anything done for others. This is a condition of disinterestedness and tranquillity.

• *The mother of bodhisattvas.* This refers to the merit that is the base of bodhisattvas. There are many elements making up this merit, but the principal one is compassion. To think deeply upon acquiring the compassion of the Buddha gives birth (“the mother”) to bodhisattvas.

TEXT Innumerable surpassing means of tactfulness / Will be obtained through one’s reflection on the ultimate reality [of all things]. / Such six laws / Are called [the purification of] the six sense-organs.

COMMENTARY *The six sense-organs.* This is the same as the six organs (the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind). Implicit in the meaning of the phrase is that the six sense-organs will be rectified.

TEXT The ocean of all karmic impediments / Is produced from one’s false imagination. / Should one wish to repent of it / Let him sit upright and meditate on the ultimate reality [of all things]. / All sins are just as frost and dew, / So wisdom’s sun can disperse them. / Therefore with entire devotion / Let him repent of his six sense-organs.”

COMMENTARY This is a very beautiful passage. In its few short sentences we find the very essence of the Buddha’s teachings. I urge you to commit it to memory.

The errors contained in the entirety of human action (“karmas”), as deep and broad as an ocean, as well as the various hindrances of body and mind that result from those errors, are all caused by false imagination. As I have mentioned several times in the course of my commentary, having false imagination means to think false things are the Truth, considering everything in a self-centered way and discriminating among things that are originally equal. They are perverted thoughts born of ignorance, as well as that selfish state of mind that rises because of them. If we wish to rid ourselves completely of such karmic impediments, we must sit quietly, do away with illusory thoughts, and

meditate upon the ultimate reality of all things. Sins and faults (karmic impediments) have no original existence but are like a fog that surrounds one's buddha nature, or a dew-drop on the end of a leaf. They are no more than temporary manifestations born of human delusions. Therefore, they will disappear as soon as they are exposed to the sun of that wisdom that sees the ultimate reality of all things.

I would like now to discuss once again the teaching of the ultimate reality of all things (the Reality of All Existence), since it is the one great truth that is the fundamental teaching of the Threefold Lotus Sutra. First, in "Preaching," chapter 2 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings, we find the following passage:

The Innumerable Meanings originate from one Dharma. This one Dharma is, namely, nonform. Such nonform is formless, and not form. Being not form and formless, it is called the ultimate reality [of all things].

The Buddha here had still not clarified in specific terms what this "ultimate reality of all things" was. This is explained in "Tactfulness," chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra:

Only a buddha together with a buddha can fathom the ultimate reality of things, that is to say, all existence [has] such a form, such a nature, such an embodiment, such a potency, such a function, such a primary cause, such a secondary cause, such an effect, such a recompense, and such a complete fundamental whole.

"Can fathom the ultimate reality" means to discern the essential form of all things at the same time as observing their phenomenal appearances. It is, however, not possible to do so unless one has attained the state of the Buddha.

In the same chapter, though, the Buddha also stated that it is [only] on account of the one [very] great cause that buddhas appear in the world and that this one very great cause was to open the eyes of all living beings to the Buddha-knowledge, to show it to them, and to cause them to awaken to it and enter into its way. This Buddha-knowledge is the Buddha-wisdom that discerns the ultimate reality of all things and the state of the Buddha. Since the Buddha appeared in this world in order to open this state to all beings, to show it to them and cause them to awaken to and enter the Buddha's Way toward it, he asserts that living beings will in the course of assiduous religious training come to discern the ultimate reality of all things in the same way as the Buddha himself. This is clear from the Buddha's words "the buddha-tathagatas teach only bodhisattvas."

With this, those who had until now considered that the Buddha state was something far removed from their

aspirations were told by the Buddha himself that they were actually bodhisattvas, the stage preceding that of a buddha. Not only that, but the Buddha guaranteed that "Of those who hear the Dharma / Not one fails to become a buddha." Ordinary people, however well they might understand this intellectually, still find this exceedingly difficult to comprehend and realize from the depths of their being. Therefore, in "Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata," chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha revealed that his life is eternal, assuring us that he remains continually with us and practices together with us. In addition, he called us his true children, always in his embrace, and assured us that at the time of our attainment of the Buddha Way, we would reach the same stage as he himself. Furthermore, he told us that all people could attain buddhahood and perceive the ultimate reality of all things while still in the physical form of an ordinary person if only they truly believed. This is the state in which the saha world becomes identical in essence with the Land of Tranquil Light, and it represents the teaching of the "Three Thousand Realms in One Thought."

Then, in "Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue," the final chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha spoke of the acquisition of the four requisites: first, "to be under the guardianship of the buddhas"; second, "to plant the roots of virtue"; third, "to enter the assembly of [people of] correct resolution"; and fourth, "to aspire to the liberation of all the living." The Buddha gives us his protection in all places and at all times, as a result of which we cannot but act for the good of people and society. When we practice good, we naturally want to enter the company of those who have the same ambition. Once we are convinced that we are under the Buddha's protection and have entered the company of like-minded people to practice good, we think only of leading as many people as possible to happiness by welcoming them into our midst.

The full acquisition of these four requisites means that people realize that they are the children of the Buddha, that they attain the state of the Buddha, and that they acquire the Buddha-knowledge. In other words, they come to be able to perceive the ultimate reality of all things in the same way as the Buddha. When people truly believe that they are under the protection of the Buddha, the remaining three requisites arise of themselves and they will be in the same state as that of the Buddha. Thus the realization that they are the true children of the Eternal Original Buddha is the first principle of faith.

To be thoroughly convinced about this teaching that runs through the Lotus Sutra—which is, moreover, the Buddha's original vow—is nothing other than to "sit upright and meditate on the ultimate reality [of all things]." When we



Figure of the monk A-nan (Ananda). Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). The Freer Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

do so, “wisdom’s sun can disperse” all faults that arise from our behavior and all impediments. What is of importance here is to “believe deeply the causes and results of things.” This means to have thorough faith that if the causal action is bodhisattva practice, then what results must be the state of the Buddha. Bodhisattva practice, that is, to plant the roots of virtue becomes most important in our everyday life.

I hope that I have been able to bring you to some understanding of the significance of the teaching of the “ultimate reality of all things,” which runs throughout the Threefold Lotus Sutra. For this reason, I consider that the verse beginning with “The ocean of all karmic impediments” is an all-inclusive conclusion of the Threefold Lotus Sutra.

TEXT Having spoken these verses, the Buddha addressed Ananda: “Do you now repent of these six organs, keep the law of meditating on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, and discriminate and explain it widely to all the gods of the universe and men. After the extinction of the Buddha, if all his

disciples receive and keep, read and recite, and expound the sutras of Great Extent, whether in a quiet place or in a graveyard, or under a tree, or in a place of the aranya, they must read and recite [the sutras of] Great Extent, and must think of the meaning of the Great-vehicle. By virtue of the strong power of their reflecting on the sutras, they will be able to see me, the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures, the countless emanated buddhas from all directions, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the Bodhisattva Medicine King, the Bodhisattva Medicine Lord. By virtue of their revering the Dharma, these buddhas and bodhisattvas, abiding in the sky with various wonderful flowers, will extol and revere those who practice and keep the Dharma. By virtue of their only reciting the sutras of Great Extent, the Great-vehicle, the buddhas and bodhisattvas will day and night pay homage to those who keep the Dharma.”

COMMENTARY *Graveyard* literally means “among the mounds.”

- *A place of the aranya.* Aranya is a Sanskrit word meaning “wilderness.” It is often translated as “a tranquil place,” or “solitude,” or “a place far from the sounds of the world.” It refers to a quiet place suitable to the needs of the religious practitioner and, by extension, a temple hermitage.

- *By virtue of their revering the Dharma.* This is a phrase that well expresses the spirit of Buddhism’s respecting for the Truth. Because these buddhas and bodhisattvas revere the Wondrous Dharma, they will revere those who practice and keep it.

- *Pay homage to those who keep the Dharma.* One who reads and recites the Mahayana sutras is a person worthy of veneration, not only from other human beings, but from bodhisattvas and buddhas as well. Veneration from buddhas and bodhisattvas means to be praised by them and receive their cordial protection.

TEXT The Buddha addressed Ananda: “I as well as the bodhisattvas in the Virtuous Kalpa and the buddhas in all directions, by means of our thinking of the true meaning of the Great-vehicle, have now rid ourselves of the sins of birth and death during hundreds of myriad kotis of asamkhyeya kalpas. By means of this supreme and wonderful law of repentance, we have each become the buddhas in all directions. If one desires to accomplish Perfect Enlightenment rapidly and wishes in his present life to see the buddhas in all directions and the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, he must take a bath to purify himself, wear clean robes, and burn rare incense, and must dwell in a secluded place, where he should recite and read the Great-vehicle sutras and think of the meaning of the Great-vehicle.



Photo: Erich Lessing / K&K Archive / AFLO

Oath of the Bodhisattva Maitreya. Second–third centuries CE. Musée Guimet, Paris.

COMMENTARY Here again it is emphasized that the greatest repentance is to contemplate the ultimate reality of all things, which is the ultimate enlightenment of Mahayana.

- *The Virtuous Kalpa.* In ancient India, cosmic history was divided into four kalpas: the kalpa of formation (when the heavenly bodies like Earth were formed and life began on them), the kalpa of continuance (when the world maintains its present form), the kalpa of destruction (when all life comes to an end, the world is destroyed, and everything returns to a state of nothingness), and the kalpa of emptiness (when all that had form no longer exists). The cycle is repeated endlessly as the universe dies and is born anew throughout eternity. This vast cosmology even draws a nod of approval from modern science.

We, of course, live in the kalpa of continuance, and the present kalpa of continuance is especially called the Virtuous Kalpa because, in its course of billions of years, one thousand buddhas will appear one after another. Of the Seven Buddhas of the past that we mentioned above (see the 2022 Autumn issue), the first three appeared in a continuance kalpa of the past, while the other four have appeared in this, the Virtuous Kalpa. Shakyamuni Buddha is, therefore, the fourth buddha to have appeared in the present kalpa.

- *In a secluded place.* “Secluded place” has the same meaning as aranya (see above).

TEXT The Buddha addressed Ananda: “If there are living beings who desire to meditate on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, they must meditate thus. If anyone meditates thus, such is called one who meditates rightly. If anyone meditates otherwise, such is called one who meditates falsely.

COMMENTARY The Buddha here summarizes what he has taught. “Meditate thus” refers to everything he has taught about how we should consider things. More specifically, it results in the following passage: “The ocean of all karmic impediments / Is produced from one’s false imagination. / Should one wish to repent of it / Let him sit upright and meditate on the ultimate reality [of all things]. / All sins are just as frost and dew, / So wisdom’s sun can disperse them.”

TEXT After the extinction of the Buddha, if all his disciples obediently follow the Buddha’s words and practice repentance, let it be known that they are doing the work of Universal Virtue. Those who do the work of Universal Virtue see neither evil aspects nor the retribution of evil karmas. If there be any living beings who salute the buddhas in all directions six times day and night, recite the Great-vehicle sutras, and consider the profound Dharma of the emptiness of the first principle, they will rid themselves of the sins of birth and death [produced] during hundreds of myriad kotis of asamkhyeya kalpas in the [short] time it takes one to snap his fingers.

COMMENTARY *The profound Dharma of the emptiness of the first principle.* See the 2023 Spring issue.

- *They will rid themselves of the sins of birth and death [produced] during hundreds of myriads of kotis of asamkhyeya kalpas in the [short] time it takes one to snap his fingers.* Our buddha nature is obscured by delusion. Therefore once the delusions are removed and buddha nature is realized, in an instant all “sins” disappear. This is what is meant by “the attainment of buddhahood in this very body.” It may seem very simple, but it is in fact a difficult stage to attain. Unless we read and recite the Mahayana sutras and continue to strive to liberate people from suffering, thereby gradually purifying our minds, we will not create the capacity to achieve instant enlightenment. In all things, great diligence and persistence are needed to attain the highest stage. How much more is needed then to reach the mental state of the Buddha. “The attainment of buddhahood in this very body” is certainly probable, but we should not take these words lightly.

TEXT Anyone doing this work is a real Buddha-child who is born from the buddhas. The buddhas in all directions and the bodhisattvas will become his preceptors. This is called one who is perfect in the precepts of the bodhisattvas. Without going through the ceremony of confession, he will of himself accomplish bodhisattvahood and will be revered by all the gods and men.

COMMENTARY *Preceptors.* The original Chinese for “preceptors” is the transliteration of the corrupted form of the

Sanskrit *upadhyaya*. Here expressed in Japanese as “*wajo*,” it is more commonly called “*osho*” (using a different character combination). Originally a title of one who gives the precepts, it is used as a courtesy title for higher-ranking priests in Japan. The Tendai and Kegon sects pronounce it *kasho*. The Zen and Pure Land sects use the form *osho*, and the Hosso and Shingon sects *wajo*. Only the Ritsu sect uses the compound “*wajo*,” with the same characters as in the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. A preceptor is usually considered to be a virtuous priest who instructs the people, but the term is also applied to a senior priest whose office it is to receive the vows of a newly ordained priest to keep the Buddha’s teachings. The buddhas and bodhisattvas will take on the role of preceptor. That must be regarded with gratitude and respect.

- *The precepts of the bodhisattvas*. This refers to the precepts governing the physical and mental actions of a bodhisattva, the three great conditions: doing no evil, practicing only good, and acting always to benefit others.
- *The ceremony of confession*. This refers to the Sanskrit *karma*, meaning “religious rite” or “ritual manners.” Here it refers to the ceremony conferring the bodhisattva precepts so that the qualification for a bodhisattva may be attained. The passage is saying here that such a ceremony is unnecessary, for one only has to do as he or she had been instructed for bodhisattvahood to be accomplished.

TEXT At that time, if the follower desires to be perfect in the precepts of the bodhisattva, he must fold his hands, dwell in the seclusion of the wilds, universally salute the buddhas in all directions, and repent his sins, and must himself confess his errors. After this, in a calm place, he should speak to the buddhas in all directions, saying thus: “The buddhas, the world-honored ones, remain forever in this world. Because of my karmic impediments, though I believe in [the sutras of] Great Extent, I cannot clearly see the buddhas. I have now taken refuge in the buddhas. Be pleased, Shakyamuni Buddha, All Wise and World-honored One, to be my preceptor! Manjushri, possessor of great compassion! With your wisdom, be pleased to bestow on me the laws of pure bodhisattvas! Bodhisattva Maitreya, supreme and great merciful sun! Out of your compassion for me, be pleased to permit me to receive the laws of the bodhisattvas! Buddhas in all directions! Be pleased to reveal yourselves and bear testimony to me! Great bodhisattvas! Through calling each upon your names, be pleased, supreme great leaders, to protect all living beings and to help us!

COMMENTARY *Be pleased to permit me to receive the laws of the bodhisattvas!* Here, rather than “permit,” the sense is

“to take by the hand and guide.” Therefore we should understand this phrase as “please lead me.”

- *Supreme great leaders*. This refers to those victorious ones with their great aspirations, that is, the great bodhisattvas.

That which the follower should intone continues.

TEXT At present I have received and kept the sutras of Great Extent. Even if I should lose my life, fall into hell, and receive innumerable sufferings, I would never slander the Righteous Dharma of the buddhas. For this reason and by the power of this merit, Shakyamuni Buddha! Be now pleased to be my preceptor! Manjushri! Be pleased to be my teacher! Maitreya in the world to come! Be pleased to bestow on me the Dharma! Buddhas in all directions! Be pleased to bear witness to me! Bodhisattvas of great virtues! Be pleased to be my friends! I now, by means of the profound and mysterious meaning of the Great-vehicle sutras, take refuge in the Buddha, take refuge in the Dharma, and take refuge in the Sangha.’

COMMENTARY *Even if I should lose my life, fall into hell, and receive innumerable sufferings, I would never slander the Righteous Dharma of the buddhas.* What great words these are! When faith can assert this, it is true faith. If we believe just because it makes us feel happy, any slight misfortune will cause our belief immediately to waver and give way to doubts about the teachings. A true believer is one who can state that he or she will always stand firm and never discard the faith, even should persecution become life-threatening, for his or her first duty is to hold and practice the teachings and extend them to others. Nichiren (1222–82) was the ideal model of such a believer. While it is extremely unlikely that one would fall into hell for holding and practicing the Mahayana teachings, pure faith must be able to assert that it could never be a party to the disparagement of the Dharma. Shinran (1173–1262), founder of the Jodo Shin sect of Japanese Buddhism, says, “I have nothing to regret, even if I should have been deceived by my teacher, Honen (1133–1212), and, saying the nenbutsu, fall into hell.” Such faith in his master, as well as the teachings, is a great and beautiful thing.

Faith is not logical, but being based on a principle, Buddhism itself is extremely logical and consistent. It would be good if one first has an intellectual understanding of Buddhism, which can be said to be the correct order, as what we first comprehend through our intellect gradually deepens and penetrates to the depths of the mind. It is when the understanding takes root and can no longer waver that faith first appears. Such faith is the function of our deliverance and differs from ethical or moral teaching. In “A Parable,” chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha says, “Shariputra! / Even you can enter into this sutra [only] by

faith; how much [more difficult] for the other shravakas.” Even Shariputra, the disciple foremost in wisdom, was able to grasp the key to understanding the profound teachings of the Lotus Sutra only after he gained faith in the words of the Buddha. When the merits of faith do not quickly appear, a person is likely to revile the Dharma, which is the same as losing one’s grip on the rope of deliverance. There can be no doubt that one who possesses faith so pure that he or she can hold to it even in the depths of hell will be liberated.

• *Teacher.* This refers to the *acharya* (Skt.), who is a priest of high merit and is able to act as a model to followers and correct their actions. During the precepts ceremony, the *acharya* acts as an assistant to the preceptor and gives guidance to the ordinands.

• *Be pleased to be my friends!* Here, “friends” has a meaning closer to “leader,” one who takes people by the hand and walks with them.

• *Take refuge in the Buddha, take refuge in the Dharma, and take refuge in the Sangha.* This refers to taking refuge in the Three Treasures.

TEXT The follower must speak thus three times. Having taken refuge in the Three Treasures, next he must himself vow to receive the sixfold laws. Having received the sixfold laws, next he must zealously practice the unhindered brahma-conduct, raise the mind of universally liberating all living beings, and receive the eightfold laws.

COMMENTARY *The sixfold laws.* These are (1) not to take life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit adultery, (4) not to lie, (5) not to drink intoxicants, (6) not to spread word of others’ faults.

• *Practice the unhindered brahma-conduct.* “Brahma-conduct” is pure practice, which, being unhindered, is not performed consciously or effortfully; it is the stage where one always acts freely and unrestrictedly. Since it is a stage hard to reach, we are taught to undertake our religious training with its attainment in mind.

• *The eightfold laws.* This refers to the sixfold laws mentioned above, plus (7) not to hide one’s own faults, and (8) not to focus only on others’ faults and criticize them.

TEXT Having made such vows in the seclusion of the wilds, he must burn rare incense, strew flowers, pay homage to all the buddhas, the bodhisattvas, and [the sutras of] Great Extent, the Great-vehicle, and must speak thus, saying: ‘I have now raised the aspiration to buddhahood: may this merit liberate all the living!’

COMMENTARY While bodhisattvas elevate themselves by seeking buddhahood, they strive to guide and liberate

ordinary people from suffering by descending to their level. These are the roles of bodhisattvas and make them worthy of being called bodhisattvas.

TEXT Having spoken thus, the follower should again further prostrate himself before all the buddhas and the bodhisattvas, and should think of the meaning of [the sutras of] Great Extent. During a day or three times seven days, whether he be a monk or a layman, he has no need of a preceptor nor does he need to employ any teacher; even without [attending the ceremony of] the *jnapti-karman*, because of the power [coming] from his receiving and keeping, reading and reciting the Great-vehicle sutras and because of the works that the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue helps and inspires him to do—they are in fact the eyes of the Righteous Dharma of the buddhas in all directions—he will be able, through this Dharma, to perform by himself the five kinds of Dharma-bodies: precepts, meditation, wisdom, emancipation, and knowledge of emancipation. All the buddhas, the tathagatas, have been born of this Dharma and have received the prediction [of their enlightenment] in the Great-vehicle sutras.

COMMENTARY *The jnapti-karman.* “*Jnapti*” means “announcement” or “declaration,” and “*karman*,” “proceedings”; “*jnapti-karman*” means that at the time of an ordination ceremony to give an ordainee a set of monks’ precepts, three teachers with seven witnesses as attendants discuss and resolve the written declarations of the ordainee’s mental and physical actions.

• *The works that the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue helps and inspires him to do.* This is not passive deliverance but active liberation, where the believer is heartened, strengthened, encouraged, and propelled by his bodhisattva actions.

• *The five kinds of Dharma-bodies.* The “Dharma-body” (*dharmakaya*) refers here to the spiritual as opposed to the physical body. The five kinds of Dharma-bodies refers to the spiritual stage considered in five parts: the precepts (maintain and do not deviate from the precepts of the Buddha), meditation (make the mind firm and do not waver), wisdom (hold to true wisdom), emancipation (remove the delusions completely), and knowledge of emancipation (be aware of your emancipation).

• *Received the prediction.* This means the firm guarantee of eventual buddhahood. Such a prediction can, of course, be received only from the Buddha. We know from the Lotus Sutra that many people received such predictions from Shakyamuni and that large numbers of buddhas, too, having attained enlightenment to the spirit of the Mahayana teachings, received their predictions, and eventually attained buddhahood following further religious

training and the accumulation of merits. They were not buddhas originally.

TEXT Therefore, O Wise One! Suppose that a shravaka breaks the threefold refuge, the five precepts, and the eight precepts, the precepts of bhikshus, of bhikshunis, of shramaneras, of shramanerikas, and of shikshamanas and their dignified behavior, and [also suppose] that because of his foolishness, evil, and bad and false mind, he infringes many precepts and the rules of dignified behavior. If he desires to rid himself of and destroy these errors, to become a bhikshu again and to fulfill the laws of monks, he must diligently read the sutras of Great Extent, considering the profound Dharma of the emptiness of the first principle, and must bring this wisdom of emptiness to his heart; know that in each one of his thoughts such a one will [gradually] end the defilement of all his longstanding sins without any remainder—this is called one who is perfect in the teachings and the precepts of monks and fulfills their dignified behavior. Such a one will be served by all gods and men.

COMMENTARY *The five precepts.* These are: (1) not to take life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit adultery, (4) not to tell lies, and (5) not to take intoxicants. They are the basic precepts for all followers of the Buddha.

• *The eight precepts.* These are the basic precepts for an ordained person: (1) not to take life, (2) not to steal, (3) not to engage in any sexual activity, (4) not to lie, (5) not to drink intoxicants, (6) not to enjoy music, dancing, or entertainments nor to wear cosmetics or ornaments, (7) not to sleep on a wide or elevated bed, (8) not to eat after the noon hour. Laypeople observe these on the six days of abstention.

The ordained must not, of course, take life nor possess anything, not even a blade of grass, that has not been given to them. While laypeople must engage only in lawful sexual conduct (this is forbidden on the six days of abstention), those who are ordained are forbidden all sexual activity. Like laypeople, they are forbidden to tell lies and to drink intoxicants, and these precepts are rigorously enforced. In regard to personal ornament, even today in Theravada Buddhist countries, ordained monks are forbidden to grow their hair, to use any form of shaving cream, or to wear anything except their robes, even a wristwatch. The ban on music and dance relates to the negative effect such recreation can have on spiritual concentration. Since monks originally took up their abode beneath trees or on rocks, they are enjoined to use only a simple bed or to sleep on the floor. Meals are to be eaten only during the morning hours and are to consist of limited portions of vegetable food (all animal food is banned, with the exception of milk and milk products). No food is to be taken after midday.

The monks of the early Sangha lived on the offerings received from lay supporters, and they themselves did no productive work in the sense of farming or manufacturing. Such conditions could prevail when there were only a handful of monks, but today, where in certain Theravada Buddhist countries, monks comprise a high proportion of the population. Thus, it is admirable that the monks in those countries maintain the precepts as meticulously as before and that the common people provide them food and give them their devoted respect for the monks.

• *The precepts of bhikshus.* A code of more specific precepts geared to the life of an ordained male. The most detailed of such codes contains 250 precepts.

• *The precepts of bhikshunis.* These precepts governing ordained women number 500. But actually there are no such number of precepts. At the time of the Buddha there were only male monks for the first time, but later the Buddha permitted women to enter the Sangha. There were no such numbers of precepts for men or for women in those days. As time passed the number of precepts increased. In the Theravada Buddhist countries, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, there are now no ordained female Buddhists. In about 100 BC the Buddhist Sangha was divided into two main streams: Theravada, who maintain strict precepts; and Mahayana, who preach the liberation of oneself and others. Mahayana Buddhism spread into such countries as China, Taiwan, and Japan. In those countries there are ordained female Buddhists. Depending on the sects, the number of the precepts differ. The fact that this number is double that for males indicates that women must strive twice as hard as men.

• *Shramaneras [and] shramanerikas.* These categories denote young men and women who have only recently received ordination.

• *Shikshamanas.* Shikshamanas are special women among the shramanerikas whose determination is firm and great and who have vowed to attain the ultimate in Mahayana teachings.

• *Dignified behavior.* Ordained priests, in their facial expression, in the way they carry themselves, and in their actions must be able to elicit the respect of all and be able to teach as much through their demeanor as through their words. This is the import of “dignified behavior.” Ashvajit, one of the five bhikshus instructed by the Buddha in Deer Park at the time of his first sermon, was counted as the disciple foremost in dignified behavior; Shariputra was drawn by Ashvajit’s demeanor in the City of Royal Palaces (Rajagriha) and realized that he must be a student of a great teacher. As a result Shariputra became a disciple of Shakyamuni.

• *Monks.* The Sanskrit for this word is *shramana*, which is translated into Chinese as meaning “one who seeks nirvana”

or “one who strives to follow the true Dharma and remove all defilements.” The term was originally applied to religious aspirants in general but later came to be confined to ordained practitioners.

- *Must bring this wisdom of emptiness to his heart.* This means that one must always bring this wisdom of emptiness into play in accord with mental movement. Those who are under training try to practice the “wisdom of emptiness” (universal and great wisdom) consciously in regard to each and every thing, but those who have brought it to their hearts are able to bring it into play naturally and unconsciously. For this reason, the words continue, “In each one of his thoughts such a one will [gradually] end the defilement of all his long-standing sins without any remainder.” In other words, each one of their thoughts becomes completely purified.

The above has referred to the ordained practitioner; next the Sutra speaks of the precepts required of laypeople.

TEXT Suppose any upasaka violates his dignified behavior and does bad things. To do bad things means, namely, to proclaim the errors and sins of the Buddha-laws, to discuss evil things perpetrated by the four groups, and not to feel shame even in committing theft or adultery. If he desires to repent and rid himself of these sins, he must zealously read and recite the sutras of Great Extent and must think of the first principle. Suppose a king, a minister, a Brahman, a citizen, an elder, a state official, all these persons seek greedily and untiringly after desires, commit the five deadly sins, slander the sutras of Great Extent, and perform the ten evil karmas. Their recompense for these great evils will cause them to fall into evil paths faster than the breaking of a rainstorm. They will surely fall into Avichi Hell. If they desire to rid themselves of and destroy these karmic impediments, they must be ashamed and repent all their sins.

COMMENTARY Sins committed by people of higher degree are graver than those committed by ordinary people, for the power of influence of the former is far greater than that of the latter.

- *The five deadly sins.* See the 2023 Spring issue
- *The ten evil karmas.* See the 2023 Spring issue.

TEXT The Buddha spoke, saying: “Why is it called a law of repentance of Kshatriyas and citizens? The law of repentance of Kshatriyas and citizens is that they must constantly have the right mind, not slander the Three Treasures nor hinder the monks nor persecute anyone practicing brahma-conduct; they must not forget to practice the law of the six reflections; they must again support, pay homage to,

and surely salute the keeper of the Great-vehicle; they must remember the profound doctrine of sutras and the emptiness of the first principle. One who thinks of this law is called one who practices the first repentance of Kshatriyas and citizens.

COMMENTARY *Kshatriyas and citizens.* Kshatriyas belonged to the second caste in ancient India, that of kings and warriors. “Citizens” translates as *grihapati* (Skt.) and refers to wealthy laypeople. Today we would call them the thoughtful laity.

- *The law of the six reflections.* This means to reflect upon the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the precepts, gift-giving, and heavenly beings. This is the same as the six laws. Here, “heavenly beings” refers to that state removed from the defilement as human beings.

TEXT Their second repentance is to discharge their filial duty to their fathers and mothers and to respect their teachers and seniors—this is called one who practices the law of the second repentance. Their third repentance is to rule their countries with the true Dharma and not to oppress their people unjustly—this is called one who practices the third repentance. Their fourth repentance is to issue within their states the ordinance of the six days of abstention and to cause their people to abstain from killing wherever their powers reach. One who practices such a law is called one who practices the fourth repentance.

COMMENTARY *The six days of abstention.* It was an ancient Indian custom that laypeople should abstain, physically and mentally, on six days every month (the eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, twenty-third, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth), living a pure life, reflecting on their sins, and performing good. To “abstain from killing” may be interpreted in the modern sense as “planting in people thoughts of reverence for all life.”

TEXT Their fifth repentance is to believe deeply the causes and results of things, to have faith in the way of one reality, and to know that the Buddha is never extinct—this is called one who practices the fifth repentance.”

COMMENTARY *Causes and results.* This is the law of cause and effect, which is also called the law of causes and conditions or the law of dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*), and this is the seal of the Great Dharma. Its basis is enlightenment into the “one reality.” Such philosophical realization is deepened through faith, until we are aware that the Buddha is never extinct but is constantly with us. This short passage contains the very essence of the teachings

of Buddhism. It is teaching us again that the highest form of repentance is nothing other than to realize that essence.

TEXT The Buddha addressed Ananda: “If, in future worlds, there be anyone who practices these laws of repentance, know that such a person has put on the robes of shame, is protected and helped by the buddhas, and will attain Perfect Enlightenment before long.” As these words were spoken, ten thousand divine children acquired the pure Dharma-eye. Also, the great bodhisattvas, the Bodhisattva Maitreya and others, and Ananda, hearing the preaching of the Buddha, all rejoiced and did [as the Buddha commanded].

COMMENTARY *Dharma-eye.* This is one of the five kinds of eyes.

Here the discourse of the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue ends amid great rejoicing.

Some readers may have found it hard to understand fully some parts of the sutra because it is very profound and

challenging in content. However, I may say in conclusion that “repentance” means to learn the teaching of the Great-vehicle and practice it. Repentance means not compromising with oneself, not having a lukewarm or equivocal attitude, but polishing one’s buddha nature by gradually removing illusions and defilements from one’s mind. Ultimately, we will come to realize the ultimate reality of all things as taught in the Lotus Sutra and that the practice of repentance consists in the bodhisattva practice of striving for the good of people and society.

As I have remarked already, repentance is an indispensable requisite of religious life. It is to be hoped that we will repeatedly read and recite this sutra on repentance, realize its essence, and put it into practice in our daily lives. □

In this series, passages in the **TEXT** sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the **TEXT** sections are omitted here for easier reading.

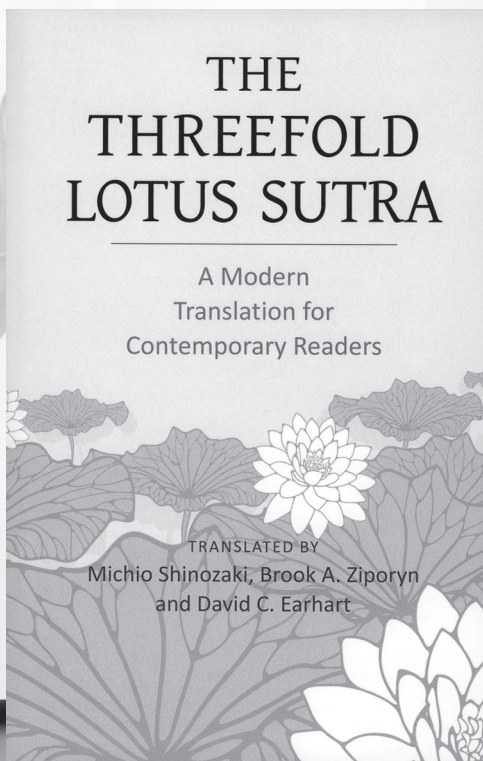


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