

DHARMA WORLD

For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue

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Cover photo: The bodhisattva Manjushri (Monju Bosatsu), a painting by Ryusen Miyahara.

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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DHARMA WORLD is published in cooperation with the lay Buddhist association Rissho Kosei-kai. Rissho Kosei-kai welcomes access from readers of DHARMA WORLD to its English-language website, which provides up-to-date information about current events and activities of the organization. Anyone interested can browse it by accessing the URL:

<http://www.rk-world.org/>

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The Buddha Encouraged His Disciples to Spread the Teaching

by Norio Sakai

Buddhism is commonly understood as a religion that teaches us how to gain deliverance from delusions and suffering and to attain enlightenment. Of course, this is one of Buddhism's aims. However, I think it would be a grievous error to assume that it is its only aim.

After Shakyamuni discovered the path to enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, he proceeded from there all the way to Deer Park, a considerable distance, where he spoke about attaining one's own enlightenment to five ascetics with whom he had formerly practiced religious training. This was "The First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma." Shakyamuni is said to have felt great joy when these five ascetics understood the Law.

What did Shakyamuni's joy signify? When he first discovered the path to enlightenment, he is said to have been uncertain whether he should reveal it to other people or not. The meaning of enlightenment was so profound that he doubted whether the people of India at that time could understand it.

However, Shakyamuni eventually decided not to keep his enlightenment to himself, and instead he began to expound it to others. When the five ascetics understood the Law, it gave Shakyamuni great joy to know that this truth could be communicated to others; it also deepened his confidence in his own enlightenment.

I think that Shakyamuni's hesitation, his decision, and his action in this First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma illustrate the true essence of humanity, which consists in

our inability to be completely satisfied even when we have obtained our own peace of mind and happiness. Once we have obtained peace of mind, tasted happiness, and met with a true religious teaching in which we can securely place our faith, it is human nature to want to share this with others. I think that Shakyamuni's actions show this essential attribute of human nature, in which our own peace of mind, happiness, and belief in the truth become more profound when we share it with others.

After this, Shakyamuni's disciples multiplied until they numbered sixty. Shakyamuni is said to have called them together and told them the following:

"Bhikkhus, . . . Go forth for the good of the many, the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the people of the world, for the good and happiness of gods and human beings. Let not two of you take the same road [so that the greatest number of people will be exposed to the teaching]. Preach the teaching that is good at the beginning, good in the middle, and good at the end, in spirit and letter."

Historically, the notion of "bodhisattva practice" is said to have taken root and come into universal knowledge together with the development of the Lotus Sutra and other Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. However, I think that we can see Shakyamuni's act of encouraging his disciples to spread the teaching as having already established the importance of bodhisattva practice.

Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, concisely expressed the spirit of the encouragement Shakyamuni gave to his disciples when he said that "every member is a disseminator of the faith," and that we can "learn through guiding others." In this way he directed members to proceed on the same path that Shakyamuni indicated: when we communicate whatever it is we have understood of the Law to others who have not yet had any contact with Buddhism, we deepen our own understanding and help both ourselves and others along the road toward happiness.

Searching for one's own deliverance and enlightenment and showing others the way toward peace of mind, happiness, and truth are not two different things; they are one and the same. I would like everyone in the world who is interested in Buddhism to understand this and to see that this is what constitutes bodhisattva practice in pursuit of buddhahood. □

Norio Sakai, former chairman of Rissho Kosei-kai, is now an honorary executive board member of the organization. He also serves as a trustee of the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

The Three Institutional Poisons

Challenging Collective Greed, Ill Will, and Delusion

by David R. Loy

Many of our social problems can be traced back to a group ego when we identify with our own gender, race, nation, religion, and so on.

Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, lived at least 2,400 years ago. Buddhism began as an Iron Age religion, and all of its important teachings are premodern. So can Buddhism really help us understand and respond to contemporary social problems such as economic globalization and biotechnology, war and terrorism (and the war on terrorism), and climatic change and other ecological crises?

What the Buddha did understand is human *dukkha*: how it works, what causes it, and how to end it. *Dukkha* is usually translated as “suffering,” but the point of *dukkha* is that even those who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a dis-ease, that continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, with one problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of our unawakened minds to be bothered about something.

According to Pali Buddhism, there are three types of *dukkha*. Everything we usually identify as physical and mental suffering—including being separated from those we want to be with, and stuck with those we don’t want to be with—is included in the first type of *dukkha*.

The second type is *dukkha* due to impermanence: the realization that, although I might be enjoying an ice-cream cone right now, it will soon be finished. The best example is our awareness of death, which haunts our appreciation of life. Knowing that death is inevitable casts a shadow that usually hinders our ability to live fully now.

The third type of *dukkha* is more difficult to understand. It is *dukkha* due to “conditioned states,” which is a reference to *anatta* “nonself.” My deepest frustration is caused by my sense of being a self that is separate from the world in which I am living. This sense of separation is illusory—in fact, it is our most dangerous delusion. A modern way to express this truth is that the ego-self has no reality of its own because it is a psycho-social-linguistic construct. This fact is very important because it allows for the possibility of a deconstruction and a reconstruction—which is what the spiritual path is all about. We are prompted to undertake such a spiritual quest

because our lack of reality is normally experienced as an uncomfortable hole or emptiness at our very core. We *feel* this problem as a sense of inadequacy, of *lack*, which is a source of continual frustration because it is never resolved.

In compensation, we usually spend our lives trying to accomplish things that (we think) will make us more real. But no matter how hard we try, our anxious sense-of-self can never become a *real* self. The tendency is to identify with and become attached to something *in* the world, in the belief that it can make us feel whole and complete. “If I can get enough money, . . . if I become famous, . . . if I find the right lover, . . .” and so forth. None of these attempts succeed, however, because the basic problem is spiritual and thus requires a spiritual solution: realizing the true nature of the emptiness at our core, which transforms that core and enables us to stop clinging.

But what about our *collective* selves? Don’t we also have a group sense of separation between ourselves “inside” and the rest of the world “outside”? We Americans (Japanese, Chinese, etc.) *here* are separate from other people *over there*.

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Our country (culture, religion, etc.) is better than their country. . . .

This insight has a startling if uncomfortable implication. If my individual sense of self is the basic source of my *dukkha*, because I can never feel secure enough, what about collective senses of self? Is there such a thing as collective *dukkha*? Collective karma?

It seems that many of our social problems can be traced back to such a group ego when we identify with our own gender, race, nation, religion, etc., and discriminating our own group from another group. It is ironic that institutionalized religion often reinforces this discrimination, because religion at its best encourages us to subvert such problematic dualisms between self and other. In contrast, Buddhist nondiscrimination does not involve privileging *us* over *them*. Selflessness provides the foundation for Buddhist social action too. In some ways, however, our situation today has become quite different from that of the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Today we have not only much more powerful scientific technologies, but also much more powerful social institutions.

The Three Roots of Evil, Institutionalized

The problem with modern institutions is that they tend to take on a life of their own as new types of *collective ego*. Consider, for example, how a big corporation works. Even if the CEO of a transnational company wants to be socially responsible, he or she is limited by the expectations of stockholders. If profits are threatened by his sensitivity to environmental concerns, he is likely to lose his job. Such corporations are new forms of *impersonal* collective selves, which are very good at preserving themselves and increasing their power, quite apart from the personal motivations of the individuals who serve them.

There is another Buddhist principle that can help us understand this connection between collective selves and collective *dukkha*: the three unwholesome roots, also known as the three poisons—greed, ill will, and delusion. The Buddhist understanding of karma emphasizes the role of intentions, because one's sense of self is composed largely of habitual intentions and the habitual actions that follow from them. Instead of emphasizing the duality between good and evil, Buddhism distinguishes between wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala/akusalamula*) tendencies. Negative motivations reinforce the sense of separation between self and others. That is why these three poisons need to be transformed into their more wholesome and nondual counterparts: greed into generosity, ill will into loving kindness, and delusion into wisdom.

That brings us to a very important question for socially engaged Buddhism: do the three poisons also operate collectively? If there are collective selves, does that mean there are also collective greed, collective ill will, collective delusion? The short answer, I believe, is yes: our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutional-

izes ill will, and our corporate media system institutionalizes delusion. To repeat, the problem is not only that the three poisons operate collectively, but also that they have become institutionalized, with a life of their own. Today it is crucial for us to wake up and face the implications of these three institutional poisons.

Institutionalized greed. Despite all its benefits, our present economic system institutionalizes greed in at least two ways: corporations are never profitable enough, and people never consume enough. To increase profits, we must be conditioned into finding the meaning of our lives in buying and consuming.

Consider how the stock market works. It tends to function as an ethical "black hole" that dilutes the responsibility for the actual consequences of the collective greed that now fuels economic growth. On the one side of that hole, investors want increasing returns in the form of dividends and higher share prices. That's all that most of them care about, or need to care about—not because investors are bad people, but because the system doesn't encourage any other kind of responsibility. On the other side of that black hole, however, this generalized expectation translates into an impersonal but constant pressure for profitability and growth, preferably in the short run. The globalization of corporate capitalism means that such emphasis on profitability and growth is becoming increasingly important as the engine of the world's economic activity. Everything else, including the environment and the quality of life, tends to become subordinated to this anonymous demand for ever more profit and growth, a goal that can never be satisfied.

Who is responsible for the pressure for growth? That's the point: the system has attained a life of its own. We all participate in this process, as workers, employers, consumers, investors, and pensioners, with little if any personal sense of moral responsibility for what happens. Such awareness has been diffused so completely that it has become lost in the impersonal anonymity of the corporate economic system. In short, greed has been thoroughly institutionalized.

Institutionalized ill will. Militarism continues to plague the modern world. The United States has been an increasingly militarized society since World War II. In the twentieth century, at least 105 million people, and perhaps as many as 170 million, were killed in war—most of them noncombatants. Global military expenditures, including the arms trade, amounted to the world's largest expenditure in 2005: over a trillion dollars, almost half spent by the U.S. alone. To put this in perspective, the United Nations, including all of its agencies and funds, spends about 10 billion dollars a year.

From a Buddhist perspective, the "war on terror" looks like an Abrahamic civil war. Despite being on opposite sides, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden share a similar understanding about the struggle between good and evil, and the need to destroy evil. Ironically, however, one of the main

causes of evil historically has been the attempt to get rid of evil. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were all attempting to purify humanity by eliminating what they saw as its negative elements (Jews, kulaks, landlords).

Most recently, the second Iraq War, based on lies and propaganda, has obviously been a disaster, and the war on terror has been making all of us less secure, because every “terrorist” we kill or torture leaves many grieving relatives and outraged friends. Terrorism cannot be destroyed militarily because it is a tactic, not an enemy. If war is the terrorism of the rich, terrorism is the war of the poor and disempowered. We must find other, nonmilitaristic ways to address its root causes.

Institutionalized delusion. The word Buddhism literally means “wake-up-ism,” which implies that we are usually dreaming. How so? Each of us lives inside an individual bubble of delusions, which distorts our perceptions and expectations. Buddhists are familiar with this problem, but all of us also dwell together within a much bigger bubble that largely determines how we collectively understand the world and ourselves. The institution most responsible for molding our collective sense of self is the mass media, which has become our “group nervous system.” Genuine democracy requires an independent and activist press that can expose abuse and discuss political issues. In the process of becoming megacorporations, however, the major media have abandoned all but the pretense of objectivity.

Since they are profit-making institutions whose bottom-line is advertising revenue, their main concern is to do whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. Thanks to clever advertisements, my son can learn to crave Nike shoes and Gap shirts without ever wondering about how they are made. I can satisfy my coffee and chocolate cravings without any awareness of the social conditions of the farmers who grow the crops used to make those commodities for me, and, even more disturbingly, without any consciousness of what is happening to the biosphere: global warming, disappearing rainforests, species extinction, and so forth.

An important part of genuine education is realizing that many of the things we think are natural and inevitable (and therefore should accept) are in fact conditioned (and therefore can be changed). The world doesn’t need to be the way it is; there are many other possibilities. The present role of the media, however, is to foreclose most of those possibilities by confining public awareness and discussion within narrow limits. With few exceptions, the world’s developed (or “economized”) societies are now dominated by a power elite composed of the government and big corporations including the major media. People move seamlessly from each of these institutions to the other, because there is little difference in their worldview or their goals—primarily economic expansion. Politics remains “the shadow cast by big

NASDAQ sign in Times Square, New York.

business over society,” as John Dewey put it a long time ago. The role of the media in this unholy alliance is to “normalize” this situation, so that we accept it and continue to perform our roles, especially the frenzied consumption necessary to keep the economy growing.

Realizing the nature of these three institutional poisons is just as spiritual and just as important as any personal realization we might have as a result of Buddhist practice. In

fact, any individual awakening we may have on our meditation cushions remains incomplete until it is supplemented by such a "social awakening." Usually we think of expanded consciousness in individual terms, but today we must dispel the bubble of group delusion to attain greater understanding of dualistic social, economic, and ecological realities.

If this parallel between individual *dukkha* and collective *dukkha* holds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the great social, economic, and ecological crises of our day are also *spiritual* challenges, which therefore call for a response that must also have a spiritual component.

A Buddhist Solution?

So much for the problems, from a Buddhist perspective. What can Buddhism say about the solution to them? We can envision the solution to social *dukkha* as a society that does not institutionalize greed, ill will, or delusion. In their place, what might be called a dharmic society would have institutions encouraging generosity and compassion, grounded in a wisdom that recognizes our interconnectedness.

So far, so good, but that approach does not take us very far. Is a reformed capitalism consistent with a dharmic society, or do we need altogether different kinds of economic institutions? How can our world demilitarize? Can representative democracy be revitalized by stricter controls on campaigns and lobbying, or do we need a more participatory and decentralized political system? Should newspapers and television stations be nonprofit, or more carefully regulated? Can the United Nations be transformed into the kind of international organization the world needs, or does an emerging global community call for something different?

I do not think that Buddhism has the answers to these questions. There is no magic formula to be invoked. The solutions are not to be found, they are to be worked out together. This is a challenging task but not an insuperable one, if men and women of good will can find a way to work together, without the deformations of pressure groups defending special privileges. Needless to say, that is not an easy condition to achieve, and it reminds us of the transformative role of personal spirituality, which works to develop men and women of good will. But Buddhist principles can contribute to the development of solutions.

The importance of a personal spiritual practice. The basis of Buddhist social engagement is the need to work on oneself as well as on the social system. Why have so many revolutions and reform movements ended up merely replacing one gang of thugs with another? If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill will, and delusion, our efforts to address their institutionalized forms are likely to be useless, or worse. If I do not struggle with the greed inside myself, it is quite likely that, if I gain power, I too will be inclined to take advantage of the situation to serve my own interests. If I do not acknowledge the ill will in my own heart as my own

problem, I am likely to project my anger onto those who obstruct my purposes. If unaware that my own sense of duality is a dangerous delusion, I will understand the problem of social change as the need for me to dominate the socio-political order. Add a conviction of my good intentions, along with my superior understanding of the situation, and one has a recipe for social as well as personal disaster.

Commitment to nonviolence. A nonviolent approach is implied by our nonduality with "others," including those we may be struggling against. Means and ends cannot be separated. Peace is not only the goal—it must also be the way. We ourselves must be the peace we want to create. A Buddhist awakening reduces our sense of duality from those who have power over us. For example, the Hindu reformer Gandhi always treated the British authorities in India with respect. He never tried to dehumanize them, which is one reason why he was successful. Buddhist emphasis on delusion provides an important guideline here: the nastier another person is, the more he or she is acting out of ignorance and *dukkha*. The basic problem is delusion, not evil. If so, the basic solution must involve wisdom and insight, not good destroying evil.

Awakening together. Social engagement is not about sacrificing our own happiness to help unfortunate others who are suffering. That just reinforces a self-defeating (and self-exhausting) dualism between us and them. Rather, we join together to improve the situation for all of us. As an aboriginal woman put it: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together." The point of the bodhisattva path is that none of us can be fully awakened until everyone "else" is too. The critical world situation today means that sometimes bodhisattvas need to manifest their compassion in more politically engaged ways.

To sum up, what is distinctively Buddhist about socially engaged Buddhism? Emphasis on the social *dukkha* promoted by group-selves as well as by ego-selves. The three collective poisons of institutionalized greed, institutionalized ill will, and institutionalized delusion. The importance of personal spiritual practice, commitment to nonviolence, and the realization that ending our own *dukkha* requires us to address the *dukkha* of others as well.

Present elite groups and institutions in power have shown themselves incapable of addressing the various crises that now threaten humanity and the future of the biosphere. It has become obvious that those groups and institutions are themselves a large part of the problem, and that the solutions will need to come from somewhere else. Perhaps a socially awakened Buddhism can play a role in that transformation. If Buddhists do not (or cannot) participate in this transformation, then perhaps Buddhism is not the spiritual path that the world needs today. □

Mount Sinai and Mount Fuji

The American Jewish Fascination with Buddhism

by Harold Kasimow

"Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from all."

—Pirkei Avot

"Hear the truth from whoever has uttered it."

—Moses Maimonides

"The Dalai Lama taught us a lot about Buddhism, even more about menschlichkeit, and most of all about Judaism. As all true dialogue accomplishes, this encounter with the Dalai Lama opened us to the other faith's integrity. Equally valuable, the encounter reminded us of neglected aspects of ourselves, of elements in Judaism that are overlooked until they are reflected back to us in the mirror of the Other."

—Rabbi Irving Greenberg

Martin Buber (1878–1965), the well-known Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century, wrote a fascinating essay on Zen Buddhism and Hasidism¹ in which he tells the tale of Rabbi Eizik, son of Rabbi Yekel, who travels from Krakow to Prague in search of treasure. He ultimately discovers, after meeting with a Christian, that the treasure is in fact buried in his family's home in Krakow. Thus, it is a member of a different religious tradition who helps Rabbi Eizik to find the treasure in Judaism, to perceive more profoundly the depth and uniqueness of the Jewish tradition. That is precisely the point that Rabbi Greenberg, one of the outstanding rabbis of our generation, makes after meeting with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama himself, whose strong commitment to nonviolence and belief that every human being "can develop a heart of compassion," has played an instrumental role in attracting many Americans, including many Jews, to the study and practice of Buddhism.

Since the end of World War II, a large number of Ameri-

can Jews have been attracted to the Buddhist tradition. While Jews make up only two percent of the American population, it is estimated that at least one-third of Western Buddhists in America are Jewish by birth. Moreover, many of the leading Buddhist teachers in America come from Jewish families, including Bernard Glassman, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Norman Fischer, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Natalie Goldberg, Thubten Chodron (Cherry Greene), Sylvia Boorstein, Alan Ginsberg, and Lama Surya Das (Jeffrey Miller), to name just a few. Ginsberg and Surya Das studied with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, one of the most influential Tibetan teachers in America, who had so many Jewish students that he called his school "the *oy vey* school of Buddhism." I have also read that more than one-fourth of the professors teaching Buddhism in American colleges and universities were born Jewish.

What has drawn so many Jews to Asian religions, especially to the meditative schools of Buddhism? I believe the reason that so many Jews have turned to Asian forms of spirituality in the last fifty years has to do both with the way the Jewish tradition has been presented to American Jews and also to the appealing message of Buddhism that has been brought to the West in the past hundred years.

Clearly, many Jews turned away from Judaism because they found it difficult to accept the traditional supernatural Jewish concept of God. Already in 1940 Albert Einstein, in a paper entitled "God's Religion or Religion of the Good," called on religious leaders to have the courage to give up the God idea because he viewed the concept of God as a great danger to human freedom and responsibility. He asked, "Given the existence of such an almighty being, how can one hold people responsible for their actions and thoughts?" The idea that God takes away from human freedom is one that I have often heard from my students at Grinnell College,

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where I have been teaching courses on the world's religions since 1972. The idea of a personal supernatural God was also problematic to Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement in Judaism. Kaplan spoke of God as the "power in nature and in man which makes for man's this-worldly salvation." Kaplan's new concept of God diverges radically from any traditional Jewish concept.

The Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, is not concerned with a creator God. For the Buddha, speculation about the existence or nonexistence of God does not lead us to liberation. This may be the most radical distinction between Buddhism and Judaism. There is, of course, a great deal of diversity within the Buddhist tradition, but the forms of Buddhism that have enticed Americans, including American Jews, are not concerned with a Western notion of God. The meditation-centered Buddhist groups, which include Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism, all stress that we must save ourselves through our own power. For Western Jewish Buddhists, the Buddha, which means "the awakened one," was just a human being who attained enlightenment without help from any God or supernatural force.

The difficulty with a supernatural God is not the only factor that drove Jews to Buddhism. In the 1960s and 1970s a large number of American students, including a disproportionate number of Jews, began to enroll in courses on Asian religions in colleges and universities all over the United States. They were introduced to the fundamental Buddhist ideas and practices that many found very attractive. Central to all Buddhism is the idea that we can put an end to suffering. We can be liberated from suffering. The Buddha said, "I teach but two things—suffering and the release from suffering." It is true that the Buddhist tradition places a great stress on pain, on grief, and on sorrow, and especially on impermanence and death. But there is the promise that one can bring suffering to an end, that through the practice of meditation one will gain insight into one's own mind, which will lead to seeing things clearly and will bring an end to suffering. In one of the most widely used college texts, titled *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpola Rahula claims that the person who attains enlightenment will be "the happiest being in the world, . . . free from anxiety, serene and peaceful."

The Jewish tradition has also been deeply troubled by the pain and suffering of humanity since biblical times. Perhaps there is no sacred text that has wrestled more honestly with the human experience of suffering than the Book of Job. In the Jewish tradition, we find numerous reasons for suffering. However, many of the traditional biblical and rabbinic responses have become totally unacceptable in a post-Holocaust world. In the end, suffering is really inexplicable. Suffering, according to Judaism, can only be overcome in the afterlife. The Buddhist promise to end suffering in this life, and its use of a special technique (meditation) for accomplishing this, seems to me to be a major reason why so

many young Jews in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s turned to Buddhism.

For our book *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, which I edited in 2003 with John and Linda Keenan, we interviewed Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. We asked him, "Do you think the Shoah [Holocaust] has somehow been a factor in Jews' being attracted to Buddhism?" He answered "Yes," and then went on to tell us how Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach responded to this same question: "Look—six million corpses can make you mighty angry at God. So we couldn't learn from our own people. But God is merciful, so he sent us teachers from the Far East, to whom we could listen." And Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi commented, "I think there is a deep truth in there."

There are radical differences between Judaism and Buddhism. Yet at the same time there are quite a few affinities, which may also have been a factor in creating an interest in Buddhism among some Jews. In 1961, U Nu, the prime minister of Burma, and David Ben Gurion, the prime minister of Israel, had a conversation with Edward R. Murrow (1908–65), the pioneering U.S. radio and television journalist, regarding the similarities and differences between Judaism and Buddhism. Ben Gurion said, "[Judaism] is similar and different. It is similar in that Buddhism wants people to live in peace, love each other, and help each other, to draw away hatred. This is almost the same as our Torah, which teaches that you should love your fellow man as yourself." David Ben Gurion, who had a deep interest in Buddhism and is said to have practiced Buddhist meditation, was certainly aware of the stark differences between the Buddhist and Jewish traditions. However, from this statement, it is clear that he saw Buddhism and Judaism as two similar paths in their aims of making human beings truly human and of creating peace in the world.

There are other Buddhist ideas that Jewish students have found very attractive, including the Buddhist stress on generosity and compassion and on the need to free ourselves of greed, hate, and jealousy; Buddhism's openness and respect for other religious paths; and its equality between men and women. The Buddhist idea that moved me and many of my students perhaps more than any other was the idea of the bodhisattva, the ideal person in most forms of Buddhism. The major characteristic of bodhisattvas is their great love and compassion for all human beings. The foremost Buddhist scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, Robert Thurman, calls bodhisattvas "Buddhist messiahs." Although there are major differences between the concept of the messiah and bodhisattva, there are also essential affinities. Like the Jewish messiah, a bodhisattva aims to create a world of earthly bliss and moral perfection for all of humanity. The bodhisattvas, therefore, make a vow to save all beings. They do not separate their own enlightenment from that of other beings. That is the meaning of compassion. For the bodhisattvas, there is no wisdom without compassion. A bodhisattva will not rest until all people are saved. The Tibetan tradition

even teaches that the bodhisattva path entails treating all human beings as if they were our mother. Clearly, the aim of this ideal person in Buddhism is to bring about a complete transformation of humanity. The idea that we can be radically transformed, either through our own power or with the help of the “skillful means” of a bodhisattva, is certainly very attractive to many Westerners.

The doctrine of the bodhisattva, which is central to most branches of Buddhism, seems to me to be very similar to the central Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, “perfecting the world” or “transforming the world,” which also aims at the transformation of the human being. The stress in Judaism is on the perfection of the world, while in Buddhism it is on the perfection of the individual. But the goal is the same. The way of the bodhisattva reminds me of the statement by Rabbi Bunim, a great Hasidic teacher, who said: “Seek peace in your own place; you cannot find peace save in your own self. When a man has made peace within himself, he will be able to make peace in the whole world.”

Like Rabbi Bunim, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), founder of the Buddhist lay movement Rissho Kosei-kai and of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, placed great stress on finding peace in oneself as a path to world peace. For Rev. Niwano, as for Rabbi Bunim, the way to peace is not by turning away from the world and all its pain, but by acting in the world to alleviate the pain and suffering of all human beings. He believed that all human beings have the potential to become bodhisattvas. His own path to peace was through religious cooperation, to which he devoted a good part of his life.²

There are many other reasons that Jews turned to Buddhism. But to my mind the major reason was the failure of the Jewish community’s teachers and leaders to fully present the spiritual dimension of Judaism during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. We must understand that the Jews had just experienced the most traumatizing event in their history, with the murder of one-third of the Jewish people in the world. It is no surprise, then, that the Jewish leaders devoted the bulk of their energies to the physical survival of the Jews and to the creation of the state of Israel. Moreover, the major schools of higher learning did not focus sufficiently on *aggadah*, that is, the spiritual aspect of Judaism, emphasizing rather the *halakhah*, or legal aspect of the tradition. They concentrated on the mind rather than the heart. Another issue in Judaism that was very troubling for many young Jews in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was the inequality between men and women in all branches of Judaism. For many women, Judaism did not seem to offer a meaningful spirituality.

In the 1950s, my teacher, Abraham Heschel, professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, was just beginning to write his great works, arguing that *halakhah* without *aggadah* is taking the life element out of Judaism, that religion must be concerned with the inner life. But Heschel was ignored, even at his own school. It is little

wonder then that some of the most spiritual Jews felt that Judaism was not nurturing their souls, that it was not really a serious spiritual path. And thus they turned to Buddhism.

The response of the Jewish leadership to this entire phenomenon has been mixed. There are some who believe that Buddhism and the other Asian religions are forms of idol worship, that even the study of Buddhism is problematic. They believe that Jews should study only the Torah, claiming that it contains all the knowledge that a Jew should be preoccupied with. Exploring other religious traditions, even if undertaken to enrich one’s own spiritual path, is seen to be against the will of God. Other members of the Jewish community have realized that the study of Buddhism and the practice of some forms of Buddhist meditation do not lead to a negation of God, but to a more spiritual Jewish life. In spite of these very different reactions, and there are many more, all Jews believe in the unity of the Jewish people and are sad that many young Jewish men and women do not find spiritual fulfillment in their own tradition. Jews would be thrilled to have these young spiritual people return to Judaism, but at the same time many Jews are happy that they have found a meaningful life in Buddhism.

Lama Surya Das, who describes himself as a “Jewish boy from Long Island,” claims that “Buddhism made me a *mensch* and brought me happiness” and further states that Buddhism helped him to “find my place in life and the universe.”³ Like Lama Surya Das, many of the best-known Buddhist teachers in America, who were born Jewish, are helping many Jews to deepen their quest for the Jewish tradition. This is especially the case for Zoketsu Norman Fischer, who together with his friend Rabbi Alan Lew founded Makor Or, a Jewish meditation center in San Francisco, where they teach Jews both Buddhist meditation and Torah and Jewish prayer.

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, another well-known teacher of Buddhism, one who has remained within the Jewish tradition, speaks of her encounter with Buddhism: “The impact of Buddhism on my life as a Jew has been to give me a new lens with which to interpret and understand the sacred teachings of my people and more deeply apply those teachings to my life. To what end? To live with more awareness, more compassion, more wisdom, and more love.”⁴ □

Notes

1. See Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*. Ed. and trans. by Maurice Friedman. New York: Harper and Row, 1960. Hasidism was a great eighteenth-century revivalist mystical movement in eastern Europe founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Besht.

2. See Nikkyo Niwano, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace*. Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1977.

3. Quoted in Jane Lampman, “American Buddhism on the Rise,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 14, 2006, p. 15.

4. Sheila Peltz Weinberg, “The Impact of Buddhism,” in *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, eds. Harold Kasimow, et al. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003, p. 111.

The Japanese and the Buddhist Home Altar

by Kokan Sasaki

It was the grandparents who were most responsible for the culture surrounding the family altar. With the increase in the number of nuclear families, who is looking after the altar and how is it prospering?

Recently, more than ever, it seems that hardly a day goes by without us seeing or hearing news about brutal events. Without any qualms, children kill their parents, parents kill their children, and children kill each other. In particular, the dreadful news of a sixteen-year old who hired a fifteen-year-old friend to kill his mother for 300,000 yen sent shock waves throughout educational and religious circles in Japan. "Do not kill" is the one great premise of social ethics around the world and it has been education and religion that have been most closely involved in upholding it. And like murder, theft, and fraud are also on the increase in Japan.

Buddhism has traditionally stressed not only the precept against killing but also other injunctions against stealing and lying. These comprise the fundamental creed for a Buddhist's daily life. If these precepts cannot be kept, and murder, theft, and falsehood are allowed to run rife in society, not only will that society sink into decline, but religious (in this context, Buddhist) ethics will collapse.

How do thinking people in Japan understand the background of, and the reasons for, this social breakdown?

According to a recent police report, in 2005, the reasons

children gave for having killed a parent were because they were scolded because of their dating relationships or they were victims of parental abuse, but in 2006 a large number of children said it was because they were reprovved over their performance in school or their attitude toward life. On hearing this report, one commentator on educational affairs remarked, "The bipolarization of society is continuing, with the anxiety of parents who don't want their children to fail, further contributing to the acceleration of criminal acts" (reported in the *Asahi Shimbun*, October 14, 2006, evening edition).

At present, the social gap is causing both political and economic problems for Japan, and seeing the many murders that occur to be the result of social problems certainly holds up. However, I think that there is an important aspect that is completely left out in the implication that parents expect too much of their children, and children who cannot live up to those expectations are the ones who kill their parents—the social gap is behind these high expectations. The comments of thinking people in the media share the view that murders are increasing because society has become corrupt, which seems to have become part of the general understanding. But whatever the viewpoint, we must not forget that the precept not to kill remains paramount.

Behind the phenomenon of youth committing murders and robberies lies the problem of the "hearts" of the young. We must seriously consider the intrinsic importance of rearing our children so that they have "hearts" that are aware of the value of the lives of others. Is it not the role of religion (Buddhism in particular, in the case of Japan) to do so? Why don't we hear any voices raised among the thinking public asking what people of religion are doing about the problem?

The Buddhist Home Altar

"Do not kill," "Do not steal," "Do not lie" are all included within the Japanese injunction "Do not do what is bad." In the past, there existed within each home, almost without exception, a Buddhist home altar, which had the power to instill in the hearts of the young, before they were able to

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distinguish clearly between right and wrong, the idea and sentiments of not doing anything bad. The altar serves as a channel between our visible world and the invisible world beyond. When children did something wrong, someone in the family, usually the grandmother, would drag them, sometimes by force and half in anger, to kneel in front of the family altar, and make them apologize to the Buddha. "However much you lie and try to hide what you've done, the Buddha sees everything. Now put your hands together in prayer and say that you're sorry," she would say. If the child refused, the grandmother would deliver a good smack.

Of course, the children had no knowledge of what the main image or the family mortuary tablets enshrined on the altar meant. However, when they knelt in front of the altar, with their hands placed together, and apologized, there can be no doubt that something that went beyond everyday experience resonated within their hearts. In other words, the action sparked the mind of the Buddha within the chil-

dren and roused feelings of awe and respect. As the children grew to adulthood, and their socialization advanced, it is not unreasonable to believe that the strengthening of the conviction that it was wrong to do bad things must have been sustained by the childhood experience gained in front of the family altar. The heart of a child who has encountered a realm beyond the everyday world by means of the family altar must surely have a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the pains and sorrows of others.

About five years ago, some Japanese who had been abducted and brought to North Korea some twenty years earlier were returned to Japan, and the first thing they did on reaching their family homes was to kneel before the family altar to announce, in tear-filled voices, that they had come back. One man, whose mother had died just a few months previously, after having waited so long for the safe return of her son, knelt before her photograph and mortuary tablet, crying, "Mother, I'm really sorry (for all the pain I caused you)!" Even after more than twenty years, the power of the family altar, fostered in him as a child, had remained strong.

The Last Stronghold of Japanese Buddhism

In the past, the family altar provided the center of the spiritual and emotional life of family members, and acted as a symbol of the family's unity. In happiness and sadness both, members would open the doors of the altar to report to the Buddha and the ancestors (through the mortuary tablets) and to ask for their protection. When presents were received, they were placed on the altar as offerings to the Buddha (and the ancestors) before being distributed among the family. Daughters going to their wedding ceremony would not leave the house before making their farewells at the altar. In truth, the family altar was the spiritual mainstay of the average Japanese and a necessity within their lives.

The people most responsible for the culture surrounding the family altar were the grandparents, in particular, the grandmother. With the increase of smaller, nuclear families in modern Japan, who is looking after the altar and how is it prospering? It is said that there are now many families in urban areas that do not possess a family altar, but I do not have any detailed data to support this assertion.

In the more traditional areas of the country, we find that the family altar remains the mainstay of many families. Let me give an example. S.Y. (a woman of eighty-one at the time she was interviewed) lives in a small fishing village on the outskirts of Kamaishi in Iwate Prefecture, in northeastern Japan. She is well-known as being a devout person. Her family are parishioners of a Zen temple and the family heads have acted as temple stewards for many generations. Both the family Buddhist altar and the Shinto altar in her house are large and lavishly decorated. Upon rising every morning, she and her two grandchildren light candles on

both altars and kneel before them, praying that they will live safely throughout the day under the protection of the buddhas and deities. And before they go to bed at night, they give thanks for having been protected throughout the day.

Her son and his wife both work for a company in Kamaishi, and her grandchildren are in primary school, so she is usually alone during the day. She says, though, that she is never lonely, because she is in the company of the buddhas and deities. As she has lived her whole life without serious incident thanks to their protection, she is happy and well and says, "It doesn't matter when I die." The two grandchildren who join her before the family altar every morning are unconsciously absorbing the culture of the family altar and spontaneously gaining a sense of awe and respect for the buddhas and deities. Surely they will show a strong spirit of compassion toward others as they grow to adulthood. It is difficult to conceive that such children could be capable of murder, theft, or falsehood.

Recently, in addition to murder and theft, an increase in bullying has created another social problem. Bullying is generally thought of as the physical or emotional intimidation of a weaker person by a stronger one. It has existed in schools in all ages, but recently it has taken on a more vicious and persistent form. Bullying is the very antithesis of thoughtfulness. What we call bodhisattva practice in Buddhism is the activation of the Buddha mind in behavior. From where does this Buddha mind, or heart of Buddhist compassion, emerge, and how is it fostered? I believe that an important element in its nourishing is the culture of the family altar. It is in this sense that I am in broad agreement with Nobuyuki Kaji, who wrote: "The last stronghold of Japanese Buddhism is the family altar. Temples and sects wane in importance before it. It is the Japanese family's best support. If we lose it, what meaning do temples and sects then have?" (*Chinmoku no shukyo, jukyo* [The Silent Religion, Confucianism], Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1994). □

Japanese Buddhist Folktales

Where Hell Exists

Long ago, a lord invited a priest he knew well to dine at his castle and have a friendly conversation.

"Priest, they say that both hell and paradise exist, but no one has ever returned from either. How can we know that they are real?"

"Hell and paradise are everywhere. They may exist before our very eyes."

"If that is so, priest, then show me hell." The lord, who thought the comfortable life he led in the castle was paradise, was interested in hell.

"Very well, I will." The priest bowed respectfully before him and then stood up and started slapping the lord on the head.

"Priest, have you lost your senses? I ought to cut you to pieces. Sit back down!"

His face red, the lord stood up, waving his fist with a furious look. Quite unconcerned, the priest said with a cool expression on his face: "Lord, here is the boundary between hell and paradise."

Turning toward the lord whose shaking fist was still raised high, the priest continued to speak. "Your mind, lord, which is consumed by such anger that you are about to kill is now in hell. But the meal we were enjoying just moments ago, that was paradise."

When the lord heard this, he took a deep breath and sat down again with deep emotion. "In all my life, I have never

been so angry. That was, indeed, hell. Truly, you have shown me the hell and the paradise in my mind."

The lord put his faith in the priest, and thereafter, deeply revered the Buddha. □

(A story from Tochigi Prefecture)

The Hell of Flames, part of the Jigoku zoshi (Scroll of the Hells), painted in the twelfth century. National Treasure. Tokyo National Museum.

Engaged Lotus Buddhism in Medieval Japan

by Lucia Dolce

The influence of Nichiren's reading of the Lotus Sutra reached far beyond his lifetime, and in later ages his Buddhism would be taken as a model for active participation in religious, social, and political life.

At the turn of the twentieth century, several books in English presented Japanese Buddhism as a religion that lacked social involvement and expressed its attitude to the world in escapist tones: "Buddhism, brought face to face with the problem of the world's evil and possible improvements, evades it." "Buddhism did indeed teach kindness to animals, making even the dog sacred. . . . Yet human beings suffer. Buddhism is kind to the brute and cruel to man"¹ The image of meditating monks closed in their monasteries sustained this perception of Buddhism. Yet modern observers also dedicated several pages to the activities of a medieval monk, Nichiren, whose Buddhism they described as an embodiment of the realism of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren's emphasis on Shakyamuni appeared to their eyes as a rejection of mythical buddhas and imaginary paradises and an attempt to positively root Buddhism in the soteriological activity of the historical Buddha, "insisting that it is necessary for man to work out his own salvation."² According to these Western interpreters, Nichiren's contribution to Lotus Buddhism was not so much at the philosophical level, but on the religious side, "attempting as he did to make the truths of the Lotus gospel live in the hearts

of his followers as matters of individual experience, through active practice and earnest loyalty to Sakyamuni."³

Who was Nichiren and to what extent did his Buddhism represent a form of social concern based on the Lotus Sutra, albeit in the particular shape that this could take in medieval Japan? Nichiren (1222–82) is perhaps better known for his exclusive faith in the Lotus Sutra, but the large textual corpus he left also reveals that his interpretation of the Lotus Sutra was firmly rooted in the awareness of the *hic et nunc* of the world in which he lived and that he was deeply concerned with embodying the meaning of the scripture in society. The influence of his reading of the Lotus reached far beyond his lifetime, and Nichiren's Buddhism would in later ages be taken as a model for an active participation in the religious, social, and political life of Japan. It may be of interest, therefore, to explore how Nichiren constructed what we might call today an "engaged" Lotus Buddhism.

Nichiren was born in Awa Province (Chiba Prefecture), at that time a remote area of eastern Japan, in a crucial moment in Japanese history, when the military government had consolidated its power in Kamakura at the expense of the imperial court. Nichiren was in close contact with the military class from a young age, and among his followers many would be lower- and medium-rank samurai. In 1253 Nichiren proclaimed his belief in the excellence of the Lotus Sutra by invoking the title of this scripture, *Namu myōhō renge kyo* (I take refuge in the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law)—a practice that would become distinctive of his school and of all other movements inspired by him. Nichiren's tribulations began early in his career: he was forced to leave his home temple because of a conflict with a local landlord; he started preaching in Kamakura, but soon encountered opposition and began a life of exile. In 1261, after sending a treatise to the government in Kamakura, where he discussed the current situation of Japan, he was arrested and sent to Izu, where he remained for two years. In 1271 he was nearly executed, and eventually he was once again sent into exile, on the island of Sado in the Sea of Japan, where he spent years of great hardship. Released in

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Nichiren being taken by warriors in 1271 to Tatsunokuchi in the present-day Kanagawa Prefecture, where he was nearly executed. Eventually he was sent into exile on the island of Sado. A part of the Nichiren Shonin Chugasan, a scroll with an illustrated text on the life of Nichiren, owned by the temple Ikegami Honmonji in Tokyo.

1274, he returned to Kamakura, to leave again, this time of his own will, for Minobu, a mountainous area near Mount Fuji, where he would remain for the rest of his life.

This personal experience and the difficult times in which he lived may have made Nichiren acutely aware of the conflicting reality in which Buddhism had to operate. Yet he did not develop a pessimistic or a passive view of the world; on the contrary, he sought to transform this world so that it could become a mirror-image of the realm of the Lotus Sutra.

Nichiren's thought was born out of an original evaluation of the Lotus scripture in relation to particular ages and individuals. One of his early works, *Kyo-ki-ji-koku sho* [The Teaching, Capacity, Time, and Country], written during the Izu exile, presents five criteria for understanding the value of a Buddhist scripture. These include not only the doctrinal content of the text, but also the time in which this is propagated, the country that upholds it, the karmic capacities of the people to whom it is addressed, and the teacher who propagates it. The essence of these principles is that, while the Lotus Sutra is a supreme teaching because it offers ultimate buddhahood to everyone, its significance is fulfilled only if the doctrine of salvation expressed in the Lotus Sutra is realized concretely. To achieve this, it is necessary to take into account the spatio-temporal coordinates of the place where buddhahood is to be actualized. Nichiren mapped a tangible entity, the Japan of the thirteenth century, as the object of his concern.

Awareness of Time and the Capacity of Man

Nichiren presented Japan as being in the final ages of the Dharma (*mappo*), when destruction and decline are inevi-

table. In this he followed a Buddhist theory of time that conceived the historical distance between the origin of Buddhism in India and its contemporary reality in an Eastern country as a time of progressive detachment from an immediate realization of buddhahood. In Nichiren's understanding, however, this "end of time" was not just an unavoidable, apocalyptic moment in history; it was an indispensable condition for a new age to start.

Nichiren expressed this idea by using different concepts. First of all, he reevaluated the negativity that was inherent in the idea of *mappo* by claiming that the most complete teaching of the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra, was meant for the most degenerate period, and for the ordinary people who live in the midst of the ugliness and confusion of the period of humanity's decline. He proposed a new way of reading the Lotus Sutra, not according to the natural order of the chapters, but in the reverse order, starting from the conclusion, that is, the section that outlines the merits that will be produced by the practice of the Lotus Sutra. In one of his writings, pondering what kind of people the Lotus Sutra had been expounded for, he explained that, if one reads the sutra from top to bottom, those who benefit from the preaching of the Lotus are first, the bodhisattvas; second, the shravakas; and third, the ordinary beings. However, if one reads the central chapters of the scripture, "The Teacher of the Law," "The Emergence of the Treasure Tower," "Devadatta," "The Admonition to Embrace the Sutra" and "Peaceful Practices," in the reverse order, one will understand that the sutra is fundamentally aimed at the beings who live after the demise of the Buddha, and, in particular, among these, at those who live in *mappo*.⁴ In other words, Nichiren recognized that the historical condition of human

beings born in corrupted times gave them no hope of salvation. Yet it is they who are the focus of the preaching of the Buddha, rather than those who were already sure of their salvation, either because they were destined to it or were prophesied to attain it.

But Nichiren's affirmative evaluation of *mappo* was not confined to the theological level. He highlighted the causal relationship between concrete events and history and the concept of *mappo*. "You may detest this world, but you cannot escape it," Nichiren wrote in a letter to two of his followers. "It is evident that the people of Japan are going to encounter great sufferings, you see it in front of your eyes. . . . In the tenth month of Bun'ei 11 the people of the islands of Iki and Tsushima perished at once [because of the Mongols' attempt to invade Japan]. How could one regard this solely as other people's concern? How miserable the soldiers who went off to confront the invaders must feel! They had to leave behind their aged parents, small children, young wives."⁵

Nichiren emphasized the responsibility of man, not the inevitability of the cosmological process. Declining conditions of life were also the outcome of human action, within the community itself. Nichiren spoke of wicked monks that were the internal cause for the misfortunes of his country, and used a metaphor to explain it: even if one were to set fire to Mount Sumeru and allowed it to burn for a long time, it would not be damaged in the least; but if the fire started from within, Mount Sumeru would be burnt and destroyed in a minute.⁶ In other words, it was people's ignorance that provoked degeneration. Nichiren vindicates a particular idea of human responsibility in a historical sense. If man realizes the cause of the decay, he has the possibility to halt the degeneration of his history. Capacity thus means understanding, but its dimensions are historical.

Nichiren pointed at the significance of one's historical time as a turning point for a better life of the community. In this way, time acquired a soteriological function, and history, as the space in which social actions unfold, became the producer of salvation. Here Nichiren displays the characteristics of a millenarian prophet, who sees in the final ages the moment for the institution of a new religious world. His concern with the actual conditions of his society and the solutions he offered are similar to the "civic millenarianism" of Girolamo Savonarola, a fifteenth-century Italian monk, who explained contemporary political events in the light of the decline of Christian faith and sought a solution in a closer adherence to the religious and social values indicated by his interpretation of Christianity, which he said had to be carried out by all members of society, starting from the king.

Creating a Pure Land on Earth

Nichiren stressed this present existence and the necessary struggle to turn it into a positive experience, through the

teachings of the Lotus Sutra, rather than focusing on a paradise that would take shape after death. At a doctrinal level, we can say that Nichiren conceived only one reality, both for man and for the Buddha: the *saha* world. Vulture Peak, the place on earth where the Lotus Sutra was taught, represented in his eyes both this world of ours and the most perfect world, the only possible paradise. Nichiren considered the assembly on Vulture Peak as a symbol of those who, having received the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, were able to transform this *saha* world of ours into a "resplendent land," the Pure Land of Bliss. In Nichiren's hermeneutic, the "original land" thus equals the human world. Since the world where man lives is also the original world in which the Buddha attained his buddhahood, the concrete reality of man becomes the ground of the most complete enlightenment, the ultimate reality. This world, while appearing tainted and corrupted, is a pure land if it becomes the place of action of human beings enacting the bodhisattva path as expounded in the Lotus Sutra: "A hundred years' practice in the Pure Land of Bliss does not equal the merit of a single day's practice in this defiled world."⁷

Keeping the Country at Peace

Nichiren's ideal of salvation was not confined to the individual's inner life or to the subjective world, but was an imperative to engage oneself actively in the transformation of the place where one lives into a more perfect society. The referents of his discourse were therefore not only his followers, but also the rulers and other political agents, whose actions had the greatest consequences for society.

Nichiren purported to clarify the religious meaning of the historical experience of Japan. He started his speculation on *mappo* wondering on the reasons for the political events of his time, for instance the defeat of the imperial armies at the hands of the Kamakura warriors, and the grief and sorrows that wars and daily hardship had caused among the populace. In his writings one reads equally of the concern for the fate of Japan as a country, and for the individuals who had to cope with wars, death, epidemics, and earthquakes. Nichiren engaged in a continuous correspondence with his followers, where he offered spiritual guidance for their problems, religious or not, but he also attempted to speak to the government. The most famous example of his attitude is perhaps the *Rissho ankoku ron* [Treatise on the Establishment of the Correct Teaching for the Protection of the Country], which he submitted in 1260 to the retired shogunal regent Hojo Tokiyori. Nichiren presented the social conflicts of his time as essentially different from others that had taken place in the history of Japan, and warned that fateful calamities, including internal revolts and invasions from foreign countries, afflicted Japan because its rulers did not embrace Buddhism as expressed in the Lotus Sutra. The fact that this treatise was presented to the most influential person in the government attests to Nichiren's realistic perception of the conse-

quences of political action for society. His discourse on the relation between religion and political power drew on the traditional notion of the mutual dependence of the "law of the king" and the "law of the Buddha," and presented the authority of the Lotus Sutra as a principle to which even rulers were to subordinate themselves. But Nichiren was also convinced of the necessary role of the country for the accomplishment of Buddhism: "Nations prosper thanks to the Dharma, and the Dharma is honored because of the people. If the country disappears and the people die, who will venerate the Buddha and who will trust in the Dharma?"⁸

In medieval Japan, the country was the spatial container wherein Buddhism could realize its path, and thus Nichiren elected Japan as the Buddha-land in which an ideal Buddhist world could be constructed. This concern was also, in his own words, a way of repaying his debt to the place of his birth, since his being born in Japan during the *mappo*

A statue of Nichiren that stands inside the precincts of the temple Shishinkaku on Mount Minobu, Yamanashi Prefecture.

period allowed him to put into practice the Lotus Sutra. In thirteenth-century Buddhist culture, one could not expect a discourse on peace of global dimensions. Yet Nichiren did not speak of peaceful existence in abstract terms; he envisaged it in the specific reality he lived, and endeavored to construct a peaceful country of Japan.

A Lotus Activism?

Nichiren felt that his responsibility as a practitioner of the Lotus was not to achieve his own happiness but to help the entire country of Japan to achieve it. The emphasis of his teachings was not on a future world wherein salvation would eventually take place, but on the need to adapt Buddhism to the temporal vicissitudes of the community, in accordance with the necessities of the time—an expression that recurs often in his writings. By conceiving the spatio-temporal reality in which he lived as the moment of the realization of the truth, he offered a way to overcome the present as only a temporarily negative reality. He also clearly indicated the elements that were necessary to bring into the present the qualities of eternity: an awareness of the historical situation, discomfort in accepting it as it is, and the will to improve it,

both at the individual and social levels, at the cost of personal loss.

It would not be true to history to idealize Nichiren as a social or political reformist, but it is interesting to note that the history of Nichiren's Lotus Buddhism is dotted with chronicles of engagement in social life, from the movements of the *machishu* in Kyoto in the Muromachi period to the several modern intellectual and political movements that have been influenced by Nichiren's hermeneutics of the Lotus.⁹ A term, Nichirenism (*Nichiren-shugi*), has even been coined to indicate currents of thought that have taken it as a model of Buddhist participation in history. This includes both ultranationalists and socialist ideologues, who often interpret Nichiren in contrasting terms—from spiritual guide of the military enterprises of prewar Japan to model of pacifist democratic ideals based on Buddhist principles, to a religious reformer comparable with Martin Luther. In all their diversity these read-

ings point to the social dimension of Nichiren's interpretation of the Lotus Sutra. □

Notes

1. W. E. Griffis, *The Religions of Japan*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895, pp. 187, 315–16.
2. Ibid., pp. 280–81. See also A. Lloyd, "The Developments of Japanese Buddhism," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, vol. 22, 1894, pp. 337–506.
3. J. B. Pratt, *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, London: Macmillan, 1928, pp. 646–47.
4. *Hokke shuyoshō* [On the Essential Meaning of the Lotus Sutra], *Showa teihon Nichiren shōnin ibun*, 4 vols., Rissho Daigaku Nichiren Kyogaku Kenkyūjo, ed., Minobu: 1989 (hereafter *Teihon*), p. 813.
5. *Kyodaisho* [Letter to Two Brothers], *Teihon*, p. 925.
6. *Senjisho* [Treatise on the Selection of Time], *Teihon*, p. 1050.
7. *Hoonscho* [On Repaying One's Obligations], *Teihon*, p. 1249.
8. *Rissho ankoku ron*, *Teihon*, p. 220.
9. For an overview of several historical figures who were influenced by Nichiren's interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, see Yoshiro Tamura and Eishu Miyazaki, eds., *Kōza Nichiren 4: Nihon kindai to Nichiren-shugi* [Modern Japan and Nichirenism]. Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1972.

Rissho Kosei-kai's Social Contribution: Bodhisattva Practice Today

by Masahiro Nemoto

*The role played by lay religious movements is valuable,
in that they offer people a way to avoid being caught up
in the current prejudices about religion.*

Rissho Kosei-kai was founded in 1938 as a lay Buddhist movement; now approaching its seventieth anniversary, it is still in its youth as a religious movement or group. In the history of religious movements, I expect that there are very few examples that match the scale of the growth and development of every aspect of its work, including its organization and activity programs, over as short a period as only seventy years.

What made this growth and development possible? The unique social environment of Japan during and after World War II when Rissho Kosei-kai was starting out no doubt had an influence, as did the superior leadership of both Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder, and Mrs. Myoko Naganuma, cofounder. The faith inspired by the founder and cofounder also led lay leaders to zealously pursue dissemination work.

At the same time, I also feel that people were drawn by Rissho Kosei-kai's emphasis on striving together for individual perfection, that is, the revelation of each person's buddha-nature and the attainment of buddhahood, by thoroughly carrying out bodhisattva practice in all aspects of daily life, as stated in the Members' Vow. I am confident that the dynamic message of everyday bodhisattva practice was the fundamental energy source that fueled Rissho Kosei-kai's aston-

ishing growth and development, and that this will continue to be so in the future.

The Role of Lay Buddhist Activities

I, personally, belong to a second generation of believers; through my family's membership in Rissho Kosei-kai, I was exposed from my earliest youth to the teachings of the Buddha, and I grew up in an environment in which I was able to take part in a variety of faith-related activities. I think that many members, including myself, would have ended up living our whole lives without having much to do with religion had we not encountered lay religious activities such as are practiced at home in Rissho Kosei-kai.

This is because Japan, unlike many other countries, is an environment where fixed concepts and prejudices about religion are deeply rooted, meaning that people do not develop a meaningful interest in religion unless they have some special motivation to do so. The most probable outcome for most people is to live their entire lives without a correct understanding of the profound aspects of religion, and in ways far removed from the path of trying to practically apply "bodhisattva practice" or the concepts of love and compassion in their lives.

The vivid, living religions and religious feeling that in former ages formed the foundation of Japan's culture and moral system were gradually lost due to factors such as the introduction of the *danka* system of registering every family with a specific Buddhist temple, introduced in the Edo period as a way of suppressing clandestine Christianity, and government repression of Buddhism during the early part of the Meiji era in order to promote Shinto as the state religion. Most unfortunately, one result was that people came to regard religion as something weak and depressing. It seems to me that these factors helped create the diluted religiosity that prevails in Japanese society today.

In this context as well, I think that the role played by lay religious movements such as Rissho Kosei-kai is valuable, in that these movements offer many people a way to avoid

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being caught up in the current prejudices about religion, and instead encourage efforts toward a way of life that takes a square look at religion and is founded in religious feeling. Lay religious movements also have an extremely important mission from the altruistic point of view of promoting religious feeling that aims to restore morality and an ethical outlook to society at large.

I feel fortunate that, in my own life, I have been able to avoid being influenced by prejudice and fixed concepts about religion, and was instead given the opportunity to directly receive the message of Buddhism. As a branch head, I am presently working to put my Buddhist faith into practice together with everyone in my district, focusing on dissemination work and bodhisattva practice as each one of us strives to reveal our buddha-nature. Since I started out as a staff

The second is egoism. People are behaving selfishly on every level—as individuals, families, ethnic groups, religions, and nations. The attitude that “All is well as long as life is good for me and mine” gives rise to confrontation.

The third is a tendency to focus on the past and/or the future while forgetting to give proper attention to living the present moment.

When I see these tendencies being played out in the world and in Japan, I feel very strongly that religion, and especially the message of Buddhism, has an increasingly important role and mission to fulfill in guiding our age away from confrontation and toward peace.

First, Buddhism above all teaches us the value and preciousness of life. It teaches that our lives are part of the great life force of the universe that causes us all to live. It also

In April 1991, the author, then a staff member of Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters, monitors living conditions in a refugee camp in Iran, during his investigation tour to the Middle East after the Gulf War.

member at twenty-two, until I was made a branch head in my late forties, I have been working at Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters. During that time I have been given many opportunities to participate in interreligious dialogue/cooperation and social welfare/peace movements, both inside Japan and abroad. Based on these experiences, I would like to take a look at bodhisattva practice today, the social responsibility of Buddhism, and how this relates specifically to our organization.

What Buddhism and Bodhisattva Practice Mean to Me

First, I would like to describe several phenomena that today's world and Japanese society seem to me to have in common. The first is the belittlement of the dignity of life. In every region of the world, many disputes, civil wars, and acts of terrorism are going on, with innocent people being slaughtered nearly every day. In Japan, murders and assaults are happening nearly every day, with no letup in sight.

teaches us how to use this precious gift of life. That is, to use it not only for ourselves, but also for the benefit of other people and the society at large. All of us can live because we are supported by the whole, and thus we should live to benefit the whole. It also teaches us to put our hearts into what we are doing in the present moment.

A worldview that perceives our individual lives as part of the great life force can function as a core belief appropriate to our present age and conducive to creating peace and security in our future. It is our mission and obligation to communicate to the world the truth of the message that to harm or take the lives of others also harms and gnaws away at our own lives. By the same token, when other lives are alight with vitality, this lights up our lives as well.

To put it in Buddhist terms, to devote our lives to others—that is, to engage in bodhisattva practice—is the best way to use our lives. Another important Buddhist message advises us not to get wrapped up in the past or be overly anxious

about the future, but rather to concentrate on carrying out bodhisattva practice every day and every moment, living wholeheartedly in the present time. When we speak of dissemination activities, what we mean is the work of communicating these messages to others inside Japan and abroad.

At present, I am using my own life as a branch head to try to communicate this Buddhist way of life and to invite as many people as possible in my local community to walk together with us on the Buddhist path. This might seem like rather a long way around, but in fact I think that this is the surest and shortest way of achieving the goal of a peaceful society in a peaceful world. This is because all human groups—families, societies, ethnic groups, and nations—are made up of individuals, and when individuals awaken to the preciousness of life and devote themselves to others, this brings peace both to the individuals and to the large entities of which they are part.

Learning from Hands-on Experience

As a staff member of Rissho Kosei-kai, I have worked mainly on providing support to international refugees, a direction that originally grew out of a visit I made to the scene of a major famine in Africa in the 1980s. Since then, I have been involved in helping victims of drought in Ethiopia, Somali refugees, refugees and displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia, Afghan refugees, and Kurdish refugees. For three years in the latter half of the 1980s, I was stationed at the headquarters of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva.

My most formative experience was in Ethiopia late in 1984. When I saw so many children with their stomachs distended from malnutrition and no hope for tomorrow, I felt enraged that such a thing had been allowed to happen, but at the same time utterly powerless.

After that, I felt that I wanted to do something for these people, and in that spirit I started trying to help them. However, as I continued this work, the feeling that I was “doing something for them” underwent a change. Many employees of the UNHCR call the refugees “friends.” With friends or family, we naturally try to find out what is happening to them, how they feel, and what they need. To put yourself in another’s place and look at things from his or her point of view is expressed in English by the word “understand,” a combination of the two words, “under” and “stand.” I learned that when you place yourself below the other person in a position of humility, this opens the door through which heart-to-heart communication can then take place.

The Japanese language has adopted the word “volunteer” from English, but the most fundamental point of the Buddhist doctrine of “taking refuge in the Three Treasures of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha” is that one takes refuge voluntarily. I think that the attitude that leads one to voluntarily work for the benefit of others and our world is common to all the people who work in the United Nations and

in nongovernmental organizations, as well as to people who engage in religious activities. I learned that this spontaneous desire to act is the key factor in these fields.

As a member of the Buddhist faith starting out with refugee support work and also participating in various social and peace movements, the most important thing I learned was a feeling for life, which showed me that all lives do in fact arise from the same great life force, are connected with one another, are all equally precious and originally a unified phenomenon in which self and other are not separate.

For example, in the course of pursuing Rissho Kosei-kai’s work in the former Yugoslavia, it was because we were standing on the Buddhist worldview that considers all lives as equally precious and part of a greater life force, that we were able from the very start to provide uniform and completely unprejudiced support to the three mutually antagonistic groups of Croats, Serbs, and Muslims. This was an extremely valuable experience for me, as it allowed me to directly see that although building bridges between antagonistic social groups is an almost insuperably difficult task, it is not totally impossible.

Buddhism’s Contribution to Society

In August 2006, a total of over 2,000 religious leaders from all over the world gathered in Kyoto for the Eighth World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace; it was a historic conference in the overall context of the thirty-six-year history of Religions for Peace. Here, the world’s religious leaders expressed their profound and heartfelt determination not to be daunted by any kind of violence, but rather to muster their courage and wisdom, join hands with one another, and face up to it, for the sake of bringing peace to everyone on Earth. Many of the leaders had come from areas of conflict at great personal risk. Each religion may express it differently, but all teach love of one’s fellow man, brotherly love, and compassion.

At the conference, one Jewish leader called on everyone to remain mindful of the angel that lives within every person. A Christian leader made a tearful appeal, saying that Israeli children, Palestinian children, and Iraqi children are all the irreplaceable children of God. As a Buddhist, I am also in the process of learning the importance of being alive and remaining mindful of and worshiping the Buddha within me and every other person. All people are in the process of learning this lesson as they do their best to live.

The social responsibility of religions, including Buddhism and Rissho Kosei-kai, is to communicate the truth about life, and to help as many people as possible to learn how best to use the irreplaceably precious gift of life and realize that others’ happiness is one’s own happiness, and other’s suffering and sorrow is one’s own suffering and sorrow. I think that religions exist to help people make the effort to live their lives so as to bring happiness to the whole world. It is my deep conviction that this is Buddhism’s social responsibility and the meaning of bodhisattva practice today. □

Backburner Zen at Mount Equity Zendo

by Jacqueline Ruyak

Located in a tiny old Quaker settlement in Pennsylvania, this American Buddhist center is attracting increasing interest with monthly weekend retreats for adults and Dharma School for children.

One rainy Sunday morning at Mount Equity Zendo, in Pennsdale, Pennsylvania, Rev. Patricia Daien Bennage is leading a group of children and parents in an upbeat ditty called *There's Old Buddha*. Its contagious beat carries a message for all ages. The old buddha sits like a wise old frog under a tree, undisturbed by anything—watermelon, bees, ice cream—that comes floating by. It might be a good song to play in traffic, car windows open wide. This August morning, though, I am humming along at the monthly Dharma School.

Started in spring 2006, the school's classes are held on the last Sunday of the month, from 10:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. More than twelve children, five of them adopted, now take part;

their ages are four to twelve years. There is only one condition for participation. "If children are able to enjoy quiet to some degree," says Rev. Bennage, "they may find more quiet here to enjoy. If they don't, this is not the place for them."

That does not mean that the morning is squirm-free, but the six or so children present are by and large attentive. In good weather, time is spent outside, under the huge old linden tree in front of the *zendo* (meditation hall), or perhaps picking berries. Rain keeps all inside today, watching a short documentary about a five-year-old Tibetan boy who enters a monastery. At its end, Rev. Bennage gently elicits reactions from even the youngest children and draws simple lessons on sharing with others and not hitting. She then talks to them about the environment. The topic is water: how to conserve it by using a "pencil" of water rather than a gushing flow from the tap and about pollution caused by the plastic bottles now common for drinking water.

Later, upstairs, while younger children color, older ones

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Rev. Daien Bennage.

practice writing the Chinese character for water, under the tutelage of Rev. Bennage and her assistant, Rev. Eric Daishin McCabe, who has been at Mount Equity for eight years. Sitting on *zafu* cushions on the floor, all chant a “mindfulness meal meditation” before eating lunches brought from home. Two adopted Indian girls become momentarily absorbed in watching Rev. Bennage clean each plastic tub used for her lunch. Not the least of the morning’s activities is “egg-timer *zazen*,” done in three-minute segments that sandwich *kinhin*, or walking meditation. Later, everyone helps tidy up.

In no time, it is one o’clock and parents are bundling their children into cars. Still in its infancy, the school is a work in progress. “We’re finding our way,” says Rev. Bennage, who clearly relishes the challenge of channeling the energy the children bring. The school got its start when a woman from Taiwan, who lives in the area, asked Rev. Bennage about Buddhist training for her eight-year-old daughter. Soon other parents active in the *zendo* wanted to bring their children, then children wanted to bring friends, and the numbers grew.

An old Quaker settlement, the tiny hamlet of Pennsdale is a fifteen-minute drive from Williamsport, the famed home of Little League baseball. Just down the road from Mount Equity is a 1799 Quaker meeting house. Pennsdale was also on the Underground Railroad, an escape route to Canada and freedom for slaves during the American Civil War. The *zendo* was originally the home of Mercy Ellis, a Quaker widow and clerk at the Quaker meeting, of whom it was recorded, “Nothing gave her greater joy than to entertain clergy.” The original stone building was built in 1810; the widow’s son added a stone front section in 1861; his son added a wooden section in 1882. After World War II, the beautiful old building was divided into nine apartment units. In 1962, Rev. Bennage’s parents moved into one of them.

One afternoon in September I talked with Rev. Bennage in the central room of the *zendo*. She sorts through delicately colored samples of calligraphy to give her students. Unlike traditional calligraphy, done with brush and ink, these are

done with wilted iris blossoms. Rev. Bennage happened on the technique six years ago when she noticed the colored puddles left in a sink by blooms snipped from a flower arrangement and tried using the blooms as she would a brush.

One iris, she learned, yields different colors, as well as fibers and iridescent streaks. The lesson is, she says, “You don’t have to be young to epitomize life’s beauty. All ages have a grand statement to make.” Iris calligraphy is a lovely but ephemeral art; the colors eventually fade. To preserve them, she has started photocopying the originals, with rewarding results.

Born in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 25 miles from Pennsdale, Patricia Bennage went to university in Fort Worth, Texas, to study classical ballet. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 had just been enacted, and it was not a good year to be a northerner in Texas. The young dancer found friends in the bookstore, in books on Zen by D. T. Suzuki. She quickly realized that she didn’t understand anything at all about Zen while simultaneously understanding everything, without understanding how she understood it. The paradoxical feeling deepened with every book on Zen she read in the following seventeen years.

In 1963, then married, she went to Japan with her husband on a three-year company assignment. There she lived “like Siddhartha in the palace,” remote from the Japan that

Rev. Bennage leading children and their parents in singing a song.

interested her. When the assignment ended, she decided to leave her marriage and return to Tokyo. Working as a ballet dancer, she lived for nine years in student lodgings. In August 1975, almost twenty years after her first encounter with Zen, she began sitting *zazen* under Sogen Omori Roshi, a Rinzai master who instructed her to sit *shikan-taza* rather than do *koan* practice.

"Oh, I was a real backburner case, but it was a slow simmer, making a delicious stew," says Rev. Bennage, with a

Children learning calligraphy.

laugh. "When I finally started sitting, then plunged in full-time, being ordained and sent off to monasteries that were unending boot camps, I could stick it out because of all those years of knowing that the Dharma was my way. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said that to be a good monk, one should not be too clever or too stupid. I was lucky to fall into that category."

Three years later she reached a crossroads. No longer able to dance professionally, she pondered returning to the United States to teach classical ballet or staying in Japan to pursue Zen training. To decide, she went on a six-week pilgrimage around Shikoku. Between temples 82 and 83 she noticed a sign reading "Kappa Dojo." The arrow led to a mountain temple whose buildings were huge upside-down soy sauce vats, complete with doors and windows. There was also a white bus, stripped of its seats, with an altar set up in back, and *zafu* cushions stacked in the overhead racks.

"The scales fell from my eyes," says Rev. Bennage. "I realized I didn't need an expensive temple. I needed nothing but to be a real true-blue teacher. A double-decker bus is OK, a garage is OK. What counts is that I get to be a teacher." The temple belonged to Daito Noda Roshi, then a priest of thirty-one. (Noda Roshi last year retired as the training master of Sojiji, one of the two head temples of the Soto sect, in Yokohama.) She stayed there for three days, then asked to become a student.

No, came the swift reply, you have to be ordained. Further, he set three conditions for ordination: (1) sit down, (2) shut up, and (3) live on alms for ten years. The first of course meant *zazen*. The second referred to her being a foreign woman in Japan; as an ordained priest she was certain to attract media attention. Catering to it would only hinder her study and understanding. The third was a caution that the temple was poor; all he could offer were the precepts and hand-me-down shirts. "If you have a heart for the way," he told her, "you will always have enough to eat and wear. If you do have the heart, nothing will substitute for it."

After a short trip home, she decided that Zen was the way

Rev. Bennage leading a service.

and returned to Japan to study at Kappa Dojo. On March 21, 1979 she was ordained and Noda Roshi became her lineage master. To her dismay, she was next told to go to Nagoya to study for a year at a training center for women, headed by Shundo Aoyama Roshi. She took a ferry from Shikoku to Osaka, then walked the old Tokaido post road to Nagoya.

That one-year program became another two, then another three, and eventually seven in all. Years of ballet had meant rigorous training, discipline, and perseverance, but life at the training center was still difficult. "A couple of times I really wanted a way out but couldn't find one," says Rev. Bennage. "So how did I get through it? Left foot, right foot. Tuesday follows Monday, Wednesday follows Tuesday. I'm going home tomorrow, I'll stay one more day. I think I said that daily for three years."

The first foreigner to complete the training, she was then invited to take *shikei* training, the senior-most training given. It took four years of study, done at various temples with male priests. At the end of that time, her choices were to teach or to find a temple. She realized, though, that her widowed mother needed help and in 1990 returned to Pennsylvania, taking an apartment in the same building. She decided that if she could take care of her mother, perhaps she could take care of students. In 1991, she founded Mount Equity Zendo. Her mother helped out at the *zendo* and with students, eventually taking the precepts as well. She died in October 2005 at age eighty-nine. "I was blessed with my mother and lost a tremendous sounding board," says Rev. Bennage.

Shortly after returning to Pennsylvania, she was asked to do counseling at Pendle Hill, a noted Quaker study center outside of Philadelphia, which she did for a month. Bucknell University, in nearby Lewisburg, invited her to lead meditation there, which she did for twelve years. Lewisburg is also home to a federal penitentiary, one of five prisons in the region. In 1992 she was asked to lead meditation at the penitentiary in Lewisburg. She did that, too, twice a month

Students of Rev. Bennage sitting in a zazen session.

for twelve years, giving the precepts to six men and even holding one-day retreats. When one of the prisoners committed an inadvertent discipline infraction, however, the sessions were abruptly ended.

In 2000, the *zendo* had an opportunity to buy the apartment house. With her students, Rev. Bennage worked non-stop to raise the funds; in Japan, Shundo Aoyama Roshi rounded up contributions. At the last moment, a local benefactor stepped in and donated the remaining amount needed for the purchase. The house is again being used, as in Mercy Ellis's day, "to entertain the clergy." *Zazen* sessions are held twice a week; services and discussions, once a week. Around ten people from the area participate. Most have found the *zendo* by word of mouth. Weekend retreats are held monthly and draw people from Philadelphia, New York, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg, as do two yearly week-long retreats. In May 2005 Mount Equity Zendo was formally registered as a Soto sect temple and Rev. Bennage was installed as its head. In tandem with the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, the *zendo* was asked to start a training program for fifteen American novices.

Frugality remains the rule of *zendo* life. Rev. Bennage did indeed live on alms for ten years in Japan. While at the training center, she had to pay for her own food, health insurance, and personal expenses. The only way she was able to do that was through monthly alms rounds, in addition to the group ones practiced by the temple.

When I first visited Mount Equity, Rev. Bennage had a short thatch of hair. A woman with a shaved head, she explains, is simply too odd for most people in this rural area. The next time, she had again shaved her head for an upcoming Zen event. "But we really have to find out what speaks to people here and now," she says with some urgency. "How should we make this work? At sixty-seven, how many years do I have to teach disciples, to prepare a successor, to teach people in the area? Nobody knows. So I need to look at what will work for people here, people now." I recall her previous words, "It's a slow simmer but a delicious stew." □

Protecting the Dignity of Every Human Being

Dialogue Commemorating the 23rd Niwano Peace Prize

The 23rd Niwano Peace Prize was awarded last year to Rabbis for Human Rights, an Israeli group of ordained rabbis and rabbinical students working to defend the rights of both Jews and Palestinians. In May 2006, three representatives of the group, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, executive director, Rabbi Ma'ayan Turner, chairperson, and Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann, treasurer, exchanged views on the sanctity of all human beings in a commemorative dialogue with Rev. Nichiko Niwano, president of the Niwano Peace Foundation.

Fundamental Activities of Reformers of the Human Spirit

Interviewer: First, I would like to ask President Niwano to describe for us the activities of Rabbis for Human Rights.

Niwano: The members of Rabbis for Human Rights are not simply active as a group working for the protection of human rights; more than anything, they have devoted themselves to bringing about, within today's society, the true nature of religious concepts such as "the dignity of every human being" and "the sanctity of life," for which I wish to express my deepest respect.

I would like to take a look at several important features of the activities of Rabbis for Human Rights.

First, going beyond the relativistic viewpoint of seeing someone as friend or foe, they extend their help to *all* people, whether Jewish or Palestinian. I believe that this is a stance that is born out of the concept that "all human life is precious," a religious conviction upon which they place great importance.

Second, they do not seek to gain settlement through power; from first to last, they proceed in nonviolent activities based upon love and justice. This is an extremely important attitude for people of religion.

Third, while conducting such concrete activities as inter-faith dialogue, education, nonviolent fieldwork, and legal campaigns, they always aim at achieving the goal of bringing about a reform of the human spirit.

Therefore, we are pleased to have had the honor of presenting the 23rd Niwano Peace Prize to Rabbis for Human Rights, which is now expanding its religious activities.

Ascherman: First, we would like to say, "Thank you very much for this wonderful honor." One of our central prayers, the watchword of our faith, is *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." These words from our Torah are recited

by religious Jews at least two times a day. We believe that the existence of the Niwano Peace Foundation and your commitment to peace, which the prize represents, demonstrates one of the central teachings of these words: *Echad meached*, "God's oneness unifies all existence."

There are perhaps many prizes, but what is special about this prize—being chosen by religious leaders of different faiths from around the world—is that it is living proof of this unity that we seek. For all the differences between beliefs and religions—and we believe that the differences are also valuable—it is important to see what unites us.

A great Jewish philosopher of the last century, Martin Buber, gave a parable, which, I think, has versions in many traditions. He spoke of six people with blindfolds over their eyes, touching different parts of an elephant. Each of those people feel something different; they describe something entirely different from all the others. But if they take away their blindfolds, everyone realizes that everything they experienced was part of a greater unified reality.

So we are very honored by receiving this prize, which confirms this truth. We are humbled because we know that we did not achieve this by ourselves; in reality, we must receive it in the name of many people throughout the generations and also our partners today who have worked and prayed and studied and dreamed with us. And as it is given, we are challenged when we realize how little we have done in terms of what still needs to be done.

In *Pirkei Avot* (The Ethics of Our Ancestors), which we read at this time of year, we are taught that it is not incumbent on anybody to complete the task, but neither are any of us free to resist, and you have given us a push to keep on working on the task.

The Fundamental Cause of the Discrimination Prevalent throughout the World

Interviewer: There are various types of discrimination prevalent all over the world, involving nationality, ethnicity,

Rabbi Ma'ayan Turner

financial condition, and gender. What do you feel is the fundamental cause of such discrimination?

Niwano: Buddhism teaches us that from the very beginning of time, humankind has always been in the thrall of desire, hatred, and delusion—what are known as the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. Since most discrimination seems to arise from the desire for monopolization and the lust for domination, surely its cause could be said to be found within the three poisons. Because humans do not know the truth, they cannot see the whole picture, the ultimate reality. Also, I think that because they always place themselves in the center, they always see things in relativistic or opposing terms.

Turner: First of all, my opinion is not too different from what you have already said. In fact, my first response to your question is that people are stupid. It's something that, I think, starts very young: a psychological process that we all begin with from the time that a baby starts to recognize that this is my family and that is not my family.

Human beings like to make distinctions. We spend a lot of our time saying this belongs to me, and this is outside of me. And when the problem of greed particularly comes into play, then it is not just about who is mine and also what is mine, but also what I want to keep, and therefore what there won't be any of for you. I see it at work with my son, who is four and a half years old, when he is in a competition with a friend; when he wins, he says, "I won," and when his friend wins, "We both won." We want it to be our own.

Perhaps a number of problems are expressed in one of our early Bible stories about the first murder in human history.

It is about the first children in history, the two sons of Adam and Eve, the first human beings—one kills the other.

Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann

And our tradition asks why this happened, because in the Bible itself it is not very clear what happened. Among the possible answers that are given, one says that they were fighting over a woman. Another opinion says that they were fighting over the land. Yet another opinion sees that they were fighting not so much about the land, but the things on it. And a further opinion, one that perhaps proves a little closer to the original Bible, takes it that they were arguing about religion—about whom God loves more.

It's a little bit like the story of the elephant. It's not necessarily that one of those answers is correct, but perhaps all of them are teaching us something about the kinds of things that promote dissonance between people and that can in the end lead to murder, and that can lead to inhuman behavior—all of those things are possible reasons. That is the very beginning of our Bible and the stories continue and there continue to be a lot of difficulties, but we hope through the progression of our religion and other religions that perhaps we can achieve an answer that starts with this murder but brings us to a place of peace.

Led by the Truths of Impermanence and Egolessness

Interviewer: Isn't it true that the basis for the activities of the members of Rabbis for Human Rights is that all human life is precious? Taking the concept that humans are stupid, the premise of your organization seems to lie at the opposite extreme from this problematic condition of human nature. Whence does your profound respect for the dignity of human life come?

Grenimann: Well, in the very beginning of the Bible—it's called *Bereshith*, "In the beginning," (Genesis)—in the ancient myth or the description of how the universal God

Rabbi Arik Ascherman

creates humanity, the text says that God created mankind in his image. It actually continues and says that male and female created He them. God is neither male nor female, but both. And there is much discussion in Jewish philosophy as to what the meaning of the image of God in mankind might be.

One opinion, by the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who lived in Egypt in the medieval period, is that it is the ability to choose, to make a choice, between good and evil. Maimonides says that this is the essential characteristic of human beings—the freedom of choice.

The interpreters of the Bible, in the books called the Talmud, discuss at great length what this image of God in man is, but they definitely learn one clear message from this verse, and that is the idea that all human beings have a spark of the Divine in them.

So even if human beings are often foolish, they have the choice not to be foolish. And that is what is essentially human in them, and that is the reason why every human being, even when he has been foolish, should be respected and given the dignity that is coming to him as someone who is created in God's image.

With your permission, I would like to add one more teaching that connects with this idea. Connecting with the story about the first murder in the Torah, there is a rhetorical question in the text that in Hebrew reads "When God asks the one brother 'Where is your brother?'" God says, in the text, to the murderer, *Demey achicha tsoakim elay min-ha'adamah* ("The voice of your brother's blood is shouting out from the ground." Gen. 4:10). The rabbis notice that the word used for "blood" is not *dam*, which is singular, blood, but *demey*, which is plural.

There is more than one way to say blood. The word used for your brother's blood is shouting out from the ground is given in the plural. The one who committed the murder

Rev. Nichiko Niwano

asks a question, and the answer is between the lines. You learn from the silence of the text; he asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9).

The text is saying, and it continues through the Torah very clearly, that the answer is "Yes, every human being is responsible for all other human beings."

They learn from the plural, "much blood," that when you murder one human being, you murder all the coming generations, because all mankind came from one man.

Also, when judges discuss the court proceedings with the witnesses, they warn them in a murder trial, "Be careful about the evidence you give, because someone might be executed by your evidence," and they quote this: "your brother's blood, . . ." and they end with the saying: "He who saves one human life, it's as if he saved all humanity. He who destroys one human life, it's as if he destroyed all of humanity."

Niwano: In Buddhism, there is this saying: "All living things have the buddha-nature." All living things are expressions of the truth, which sanctions the existence of all things. Human beings appear in this world and undergo evolution of the mind and of the spirit, and in India a person like Shakyamuni appeared, and in other places a great number of holy personages and prophets have appeared. With that evolution of the heart as a common outcome, our eyes are opened and we learn the importance of love and compassion and gain the wisdom that all things must be esteemed.

In Buddhism, we are taught that all things are impermanent, and also that all things are devoid of self. While all things are completely interrelated, at the same time they are undergoing constant change. All things change, which means that they will not always remain the same, which also means that it is very difficult and precious for us to have human

life here and now. It is from the awareness of this most fundamental truth that I believe we are led to the idea of "the sanctity of human life."

Interviewer: How, then, should people of religion accept the differences of others in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or religion?

Niwano: Mahatma Gandhi left behind these words: "Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, there is one religion—human religion—but any number of faiths." Differences in nationality, ethnicity, and culture come about through various factors, such as differences in the climate and the environment. Therefore, the fact that there are differences is not in itself bad; if anything, it should be respected. Just as in the allegory of the elephant mentioned earlier, the viewpoint of each individual is not wrong. But it is important that we have a correct view of the whole picture.

Grenimann: Judaism is a monotheistic religion. Very central to it is the belief in one God, as Rabbi Ascherman mentioned earlier. There is a problem with monotheism. And you see it in the practice of monotheism. Let me make a point. On one hand, the belief in one God leads to a conclusion of one humanity. That's very positive. On the other hand, the teaching of one God leads to a belief in absolute truth—our religion has the truth.

The Jewish vision of balances is a belief in one God with an idea that there are many ways to this one God. Not everyone has to be a Jew to reach the one God. Our vision, which is expressed in one of our daily prayers, is that all peoples will, in the end of time, accept this true God and worship this true God in their own ways.

The biblical explanation for differences is interesting. The story tells of people who wanted to build a tower to heaven. They were so busy building the tower, and bringing bricks was so important, that it didn't matter if people died in the process. The main thing was their power and their creation.

The story goes on to say that God was angry at their pride and their greed and at this attempt to be like God. And he confounded their language so that people could not understand one another and could not build this tower to heaven. And so those people scattered and started different nations.

I think the story comes to teach that the differences among people should be understood from a position of humility. We are not God. That is the message of it.

Unless We All Respect One Another's Existence

Interviewer: The members of Rabbis for Human Rights continue to be very involved in nonviolent activities. There must have been a reaction by some who think that your activities are unrealistic or too soft. What would you like to say to such people?

Ascherman: This will be the most difficult question to answer briefly, because I could speak all day about personal stories relating to this topic.

We sometimes receive death threats from people who say that we are traitors or that we are betraying Israel because of our positions.

It would almost be funny if it were not so serious. I don't know how many times the story has repeated itself: when we've gone, for example, to rebuild a demolished Palestinian home, or to go to protect Palestinians, or help them harvest olives, then the Palestinian parents insist that their children meet us.

Many times they say the same thing. "Our ten-year-old son has just seen his home demolished in front of his eyes." "Our ten-year-old son has just seen his parents humiliated in front of his eyes." "What can we say when our ten-year-old son says, 'I want to grow up to be a terrorist'?" "We want him to know that *not* every Israeli comes with guns to demolish their homes, but that there are Israelis who come to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with us to rebuild our homes."

Even if we sign a perfect peace treaty tomorrow, that treaty cannot succeed if we continue to teach hate for one another, which is why we correctly get upset when we hear about the terrible things being taught about Israelis in Palestinian schools.

But if we are really concerned about that, then the question must be: What are we doing to empower the Palestinian parents who want their children to know something different?

We are totally dependent on each other. Only we Israelis can empower Palestinian peacemakers by breaking down the stereotypes that Palestinians have of Israelis; and only Palestinians can empower us to be heard by our own people.

A few years ago, I went to rescue a Palestinian boy who had been caught by the police and had been beaten. When I approached, the officer grabbed me by the throat, shaking me violently, banging my head, and he arrested me as well.

Both of us were then used for a few hours as human shields.

After this experience, who knows what this young boy thought about all Israelis and perhaps all Jews? Who knows what he was going through after this traumatic experience? I know he had nightmares every night at least for a month.

However, when he later retold this terrible story, he ended by saying, "and then a tall Jewish man in a *kippah* (yarmulke) came to my rescue and told me not to be afraid."

I have, on many occasions, been beaten up by Israeli security forces. I have been attacked by settlers. I have had my car stoned by Palestinians. But I will go through that again and again for that young boy who will say there was a tall Jewish man in a *kippah* who came to his rescue and told him not to be afraid, because it is the only hope for that coalition of hope that we must build, it is the only hope for his children and for my children. It is our only hope for sur-

vival. It is the essence of our security. And I am totally convinced that this is the only way to truly attain this.

Niwano: Your words echo within my heart. I was able to visit Israel twice, and there was always a feeling that the situation was urgent.

Grenimann: Yes.

Niwano: But I believe that, whatever circumstances we might find ourselves in, surely there is no one who does not hope for peace. The more we try to eliminate our enemies, the stronger their reaction will be. As long as two sides do not respect each other, conflict is sure to arise between

such a situation, holding onto so many people without rights, implodes into the schools and family. It is imported into everyday life from the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

So it is crucial that we no longer control the lives of so many Palestinians, and, on the level of education, teach young people tolerance and acceptance of the other—first and foremost, acceptance of each other—in the classroom.

And of course we hope that our Muslim brothers will apply the same approach in their schools.

Niwano: What is important in proceeding with religious education or education on peace is, I believe, to impart a universal sense of values. Recently, I have been thinking of things in terms of the viewpoints of universality, specificity, and individuality, which compose what should perhaps be called a “tripolar system.” Broadly speaking, universality relates to life; specificity, to all human beings; and individuality, to individual people. Similarly, universality is related to the world; specificity, to the nation; and individuality, to a nation’s people. It can also be said that, in a Buddhist context, universality is the Dharma, specificity is the Buddha, and individuality is the Sangha. I believe that it is of the utmost importance to teach about the things mentioned under universality, or things that are fundamental. It is not a case of just one person being correct; for we know that, from the beginning, we have all been in pursuit of the same universality. As the words of Gandhi that I quoted earlier indicate, we should understand that even though we all pursue the same universality, there are many different expressions of it. This needs to be taught now, especially to the younger generation.

A seminar on human rights held by Rabbis for Human Rights.

them. Thus, in the end, it will be seen that activities based on nonviolence, and that place great importance on love and compassion, are infused with the great power of God and the Buddha.

What Needs to Be Taught through Education for Peace

Interviewer: By listening to the dialogue up until now, I have been made aware once again of the great importance of bringing about a change of heart. Thus, in promoting education for peace, what is it that needs to be taught? What should the core teachings of such education be?

Grenimann: I think that we can summarize from things we said earlier some clear goals for Jewish education. They sound very simple, but I think they are profound. All human beings are brothers. All are responsible for one another. And justice should be pursued in all cases, even when there are conflicts of interests. Israeli schools today have the problem of a great deal of violence, unfortunately. The violence in

Moving toward Creative Change

Interviewer: Now, at the end of this dialogue, I would like to ask each participant to say a few final words.

Turner: I think perhaps a summary of so many of the things that we began to learn here from one another can be found in the words of another of our sages. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” or, in a literal sense, “If I do not care for myself, who will look after for me?” And, of course, this is true not only for us as individuals, but also for us in each of our groups—we need to look out for our own interests and be true to ourselves. And he continues the second part, “But if I am only for myself, what am I?” Once we have the strength of our individual selves, or our individual groups, we must reach out to the other and interact with the other. And the third part of what he says is, “If not now, when?” And I understand that as a call to action: it’s not enough for us to sit and talk; we must act.

Grenimann: I have learned a great deal today about the Buddhist approach. I have been in interfaith discussions be-

fore, and I think there are points of great difference between Judaism and Buddhism, but the value or preciousness of life is something we have in common.

One thing I would add is that during the twentieth century, humanity suffered from ideological visions of human unity through forcing people to be the same. And communism, I think, is the main example of that.

Part of Karl Marx's criticism was that religion is the opiate of the masses and that it is used to help the ruling class to control the poor. But the truth is that without the specific loyalties of family, community, religion, and ethnicity, the attempt to force humanity has ended with horrendous results, and it is clear to me that true unity lies in respect for diversity.

Ascherman: I would like to share two brief thoughts. The first is that if anybody ever says to you about Judaism,

where, sometimes it is easy to despair, to see that it looks as if it is impossible that things can be different or better. One part of faith is the belief that our actions have meaning and can make a difference.

The Talmud teaches us to look at all life on both the personal and the cosmic levels as two perfectly balanced scales. We never know what little, seemingly meaningless unimportant act that we take may be the act that tips those scales, one way or the other.

And so my hope and wish and prayer and blessing, both for ourselves and for all of your followers, is that we should always have the courage, the wisdom, and the faith to tip the scales in the right direction.

Niwano: I feel that all of you are truly courageous. This is a true courage that is firmly rooted within Judaism. Now, you have just said that the life of one person is as precious as

Representatives of Rabbis for Human Rights and Rev. Niwano during the dialogue that took place in Rissho Kosei-kai's Horin-kaku Guest Hall.

"Judaism says, . . ." a red warning light should go off because our tradition is too ancient and multilayered and based on debate to say one hundred percent "Judaism says" about almost anything. Part of what we do in Rabbis for Human Rights is to engage in the struggle for the soul of Judaism between different ideas that all have some basis in text and tradition.

I don't know enough about Buddhism, but I suspect that this is true of all religions, including Buddhism as well. And therefore I wish for all of your followers that they be engaged in the struggle for the soul of *your* religion, for the truth that you understand to be the deepest truth of your religion.

My final thought is that I know that when we look at the problems of our planet, be it in the Middle East or else-

that of the entire earth, and in Buddhism we have the phrase, *issoku issai, issai sokuitsu*, which means that "one is all, all is one." You have given me the chance to realize anew that there are truly several things that we share. You also told me of the saying "If not now, when?" and this, too, reminds me of a popular phrase in Buddhism: "Now, here, myself." This phrase is used to indicate the start of something, saying that it has to start right here with me, now at this very instant. Buddhism teaches that this is the most important point in trying to bring about creative change here on earth, and I am in complete accord with you in this regard.

I can only express my great respect and reverence for the courageous activities of Rabbis for Human Rights. Thank you very much for meeting with me today. □

Universal Sage

by Gene Reeves

In chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra, Universal Sage Bodhisattva promises that if anyone accepts and upholds the Lotus Sutra he will come to that person, mounted on a white elephant with six tusks.

The title of chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra can reasonably be translated as “Encouragement of Universal Sage Bodhisattva.” There is widespread agreement among translators about the term “encouragement” in this title, but not about the name of the bodhisattva, in Sanskrit known as Samantabhadra.

In Chinese he is consistently known as “P’u-hsien” (also written as “Puxian”) and in Japanese, pronouncing the same Chinese characters, he is known as “Fugen.” The first of the two Chinese characters in the name means “universal” or “universally.” It is the same character as that found in the title of chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, the chapter on the Universal Gateway of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva. In both cases, this universality has not so much to do with being everywhere as with being open or available to everyone.

The meaning of the second character in the name of this bodhisattva is slightly more problematic. It clearly can mean “virtue” or “virtuous,” and most often does. Thus, the name has been rendered as “Universal Virtue” or “Universal Good.” And, since to be virtuous is to be worthy, one translator has used “Universally Worthy.” The character in question can also mean “wise” or “wisdom.” And so the name has also been translated as “Universally Wise.” In an attempt to combine virtue and wisdom in a single term, like one other translator into English of the Lotus Sutra, I think “Universal Sage” is the most appropriate name in English, as a sage is both virtuous and wise. The excellent translation of the Lotus Sutra into modern French also uses “Sage.”

Five Bodhisattvas

In East Asian Buddhist temples and art one can find portrayals of many different bodhisattvas, but only five are found over and over again, in nearly all temples and museums. Their Indian names are Avalokiteshvara, Maitreya, Manjushri, Kshitigarbha, and Samantabhadra. In English they can be called Kuan-yin (from Chinese), Maitreya, Manjushri (both from Sanskrit), Jizo (from Japanese), and Universal Sage. All except Jizo are prominent in the Lotus Sutra, though in different ways. While both Kuan-yin and Universal Sage have entire chapters devoted to them, except for a mention of Kuan-yin as present in the great assembly of chapter 1,

they do not otherwise appear in the rest of the text, while Manjushri and Maitreya appear often, throughout the sutra. In typical Chinese Buddhist temples, where the central figure is a buddha or buddhas, to the right one can see a statue of Manjushri mounted on a lion, and to the left Universal Sage riding on an elephant, often a white elephant with six tusks.

While both Kuan-yin and Maitreya are said to symbolize compassion and Manjushri usually symbolizes wisdom, Universal Sage is often used to symbolize awakened action, embodying wisdom and compassion in everyday life. Above the main entrance to Rissho Kosei-kai’s Great Sacred Hall in Tokyo there is a wonderful set of paintings depicting Manjushri and wisdom on the right, Maitreya and compassion on the left, and in the middle, the embodiment of these in life—Universal Sage Bodhisattva.

Texts

Here we are concerned with chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra, but we should understand that the Lotus Sutra is not the primary textual source for accounts of Universal Sage. Long associated in East Asia with the Lotus Sutra as its “closing” sutra is the Sutra of Meditation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva. Though short, this sutra is a

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kind of visualization meditation in which there is a great deal of interesting symbolic imagery. But even that sutra is not the most important source for Universal Sage Bodhisattva. For that we would have to turn to the much larger and dramatic Avatamsaka Sutra, known in Japanese as the *Kegon-gyo* and often in English as the “Flower Garland Sutra” or just the “Garland Sutra” and sometimes as the “Flower Ornament Sutra.”

Though many bodhisattvas appear in the Garland Sutra, Universal Sage is by far the most important. There he is associated with and represents the Buddha Vairocana, known as “Dainichi” in Japanese, meaning Great Sun. This Buddha does not speak directly in the Garland Sutra but through bodhisattvas, especially Universal Sage. In this way, Universal Sage Bodhisattva reveals the interrelatedness of all things, the idea that all things are present in all other things as well as in a whole.

One of the things for which the Garland Sutra is famous is the ten vows of Universal Sage Bodhisattva. Among them, the fourth has to do with confessing one’s past errors and sins. Buddhists in East Asia have long held that before one can become truly awakened it is necessary both to confess one’s past errors and sins and to repent of them. In earlier times, special ceremonies were conducted for this purpose, especially for monks and those aspiring to be monks. The Sutra of Meditation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva includes a variety of repentance practices. Thus it is commonly known as the “Repentance Sutra,” and, in earlier times at least, it was before an image of Universal Sage Bodhisattva that Buddhist monks repented.

The Story

In chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra, Universal Sage Bodhisattva comes from the East accompanied by numerous other bodhisattvas and “surrounded by a great assembly of uncountable numbers of various gods, dragons, satyrs, centaurs, titans, griffins, chimeras, pythons, people, nonhuman beings, and others, all displaying divine powers, virtue, and dignity.” As usual in such stories, in all the lands through which he passed the land shook, lotus flowers rained down from the heavens, and marvelous music could be heard in the sky.

Arriving at Sacred Eagle Peak, he paid respect to the Buddha by prostrating before him and circling around him. He then explained to the Buddha that in a distant world he had heard Shakyamuni Buddha preaching the Lotus Sutra and had come to hear and receive it directly. Now, he said, he wanted to learn how people would be able to obtain this sutra after the Buddha’s death.

The Buddha indicated that four conditions would need to be met: (1) to be protected and kept in mind by buddhas; (2) to plant roots of virtue; (3) to join those who are determined to be awakened; and (4) to be determined to save all living beings.

Universal Sage then promised the Buddha that he would

protect anyone who receives and embraces the sutra in the last five hundred years of the evil age. Accompanied by other great bodhisattvas, he will go to such people mounted on a great white elephant with six tusks in order to “protect them, free them from weakness and disease, give them peace and comfort, and make sure that no one takes advantage of them.” And he will help them to learn the Lotus Sutra, reading and reciting it with them, and enabling them to remember parts they had forgotten.

Having seen him, people who are “seekers, accepters, embracers, readers, reciters, or copiers of this Dharma-Flower Sutra who want to study it and put it into practice” should completely devote themselves to it for twenty-one days. Then Universal Sage Bodhisattva will come to them on his elephant, filling them with joy and enabling them by seeing him to remember and understand the sutra and acquire various concentrations and incantations.

Then Universal Sage himself recited some incantations before the Buddha, and told the Buddha of the various wonderful rewards that will come to those who read, copy, recite, or keep the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma.

People who do no more than copy the sutra will be reborn in the heaven of the thirty-three gods, where eighty-four thousand goddesses, performing all kinds of music, will welcome and entertain them. And if there are people who receive and embrace the sutra, read and recite it, remember it correctly, and understand its meaning, when their lives come to an end the hands of a thousand buddhas will be extended to them, freeing them from fear and preventing them from falling into evil. They will go straight to the Tushita heaven where Maitreya Bodhisattva is surrounded by other great bodhisattvas and hundreds of thousands of billions of goddesses.

Then Universal Sage Bodhisattva promised that after the death of the Buddha, he would protect the sutra, making it possible for it to spread throughout the land and never come to an end. The Buddha, in turn, praised Universal Sage, especially for vowing to protect the sutra, and he promised to protect those who receive and embrace the name of Universal Sage.

Anyone, the Buddha says, who receives and embraces, reads and recites, remembers correctly, practices, and copies this sutra should be regarded as having seen the Buddha, heard the sutra from the Buddha, made offering to the Buddha, been praised by the Buddha for doing good, been patted on the head by the Buddha, and covered by the Buddha’s robe. They “will never again be greedy for or attached to worldly pleasures.” They will have no liking for scriptures of non-Buddhist or “other jottings,” nor ever again take pleasure in associating with such people or with other evil people. They will be virtuous in every way, completely untroubled by the three poisons or by such things as envy, pride, and arrogance. Their few desires will be easily satisfied, enabling

them to do the work of Universal Sage Bodhisattva. Unattached to things, they will be happy in this life. They will soon become supremely awakened buddhas. But those who abuse such a person will suffer horribly, while those who praise and make offerings to such people will be richly rewarded.

Four Conditions

Recently, Dr. Michio Shinozaki, president of the Gakurin Seminary of Rissho Kosei-kai, gave a Dharma talk entitled “Faith and Practice” in which he discussed the four conditions for fulfilling the Lotus Sutra found in chapter 28. It is interesting, I think, that all but the first of these four conditions can, indeed, be called practices. They are matters of action, things we do. At least to some extent we can choose to plant roots of virtue, choose to join those who are determined to be awakened, and choose to be determined to save all the living. The first of the four, on the other hand, is quite different. Being protected and kept in mind by buddhas is not a practice that we have to choose; rather, it is more like a gift. Faith, at least in one of its dimensions, is the trust and confidence that we are always under the care of buddhas.

Being under the protection and care of buddhas does not mean that no harm can come to us. We should know that even with the protection of buddhas, the world is a dangerous place. Shakyamuni Buddha, we should remember, was harmed more than once during his teaching career and died from food poisoning. We can never entirely escape from a whole host of dangers, including disease, aging, crime, and war. What the Lotus Sutra teaches is not that we can live completely free from danger, but that no matter what dangers we have to face, there are resources, both in ourselves and in our communities, that make it possible for us to cope with such dangers. By having faith in the Buddha, doing good by helping others, genuinely aspiring to become more and more fully awakened through wise and compassionate practice, and by extending our compassion not only to our family and our friends but to all living beings, the dangers we face will recede into the background. They will not go away, but we will not be dominated by them.

To have faith in the Buddha is to take refuge in the Buddha. It means that embodying the Buddha in our everyday lives is our highest good. This is to live in faith, to trust life itself. Such faith is not a license to stupidly do dangerous things, but it does make it possible to live an abundant life, without undue fear or caution, even perhaps in the eyes of the world to be a little foolish.

Planting the roots of virtue is a kind of metaphor for the general Buddhist interest in causality. It is based on the idea that, in general, good deeds produce good effects. In the Chinese and Japanese versions of the Lotus Sutra, there are three different terms, all of which I think mean practically the same thing. Here, and in other places in the Lotus Sutra, we

Bodhisattva Universal Sage (Samantabhadra), mounted on a white elephant. A Heian-period painting owned by the Tokyo National Museum. Colors on silk. 159.1 x 74.5 cm. National Treasure.

have “roots of virtue.” A little later in the chapter, and in other places in the sutra, we find “roots of goodness.” In still other places in the sutra we can see a different term that means “good roots.” Like roots of goodness, roots of virtue are typically planted in former lives. But the main point is that acts have consequences. Just as good roots are likely to produce good fruit, good acts are likely to produce good consequences. The metaphor is apt. Just as there is no guarantee that good apple tree roots will produce good apples, as many things can intervene, such as drought, insects, dis-

ease, or frost, so too there is no guarantee that good deeds will bear good results, as bad habits, greed, anger, stupidity and so on can easily intervene. In this sense, life is always precarious. What we think is doing good can always turn out to have been the wrong choice. But, if we plant roots of virtue, if we do what we believe is really good, the likelihood that good will result from our actions is vastly increased.

From the day we are born, each of us has resources to draw upon, resources provided by nature, by our mothers and fathers, by our communities, and by our ancestors. We do not start from nothing. Those who have preceded us as our biological ancestors, and those who are our religious ancestors and teachers as well, have laid foundations for our own lives. In the same way, we too can plant roots of goodness, seeking to make the world a more wholesome place for our descendants, for all those who will come after us. But the future is also tomorrow. What we do now is important for what will be tomorrow as well as for the more distant future.

Joining those who are determined to be awakened is the third of the conditions for fulfilling the Lotus Sutra. Here two things are involved: being determined to become awakened and joining similarly minded people.

Most simply, being determined to become awakened, the aspiration to awakening, called *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit, is a condition, because awakening does not happen by accident. The Lotus Sutra, and Buddhism in general, does not say that faith is enough. It teaches, as in the parable of the fantastic castle-city of chapter 7, for example, that the way is arduous and difficult and that we have to work to make our way toward awakening. Some traditions may hold that firm faith in an external power or powers is all that is needed. Others may hold the opposite—that one can only save oneself. But the Lotus Sutra teaches that both are needed—self-determination and the help of others. The need for self-determination is also strongly indicated by such teachings as the six bodhisattva practices—generosity, morality, patient endurance of hardship, perseverance, meditation, and wisdom. All require initiative and effort, which must come finally from within, from a powerful aspiration to become awakened.

This is why for the Lotus Sutra one of the worst failings of human beings is an arrogance that supposes one has arrived at the truth and has no more to do. For anyone who truly wants to fulfill the Lotus Sutra and become a bodhisattva or buddha for others, there is always more to do. Though the term is not in the Lotus Sutra itself, followers of the sutra refer to Shakyamuni Buddha as “Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni.” Those who have grown up in a Christian environment may misunderstand this appellation as meaning that the Buddha has arrived at his goal, is finished or perfect, and has no more to do. But in chapter 16, which is entitled “The Lifetime of the Tathagata” and is about the extremely long life of the Buddha, the Buddha says that he has been practicing the bodhisattva way, that is, helping others, for a

fantastically long time—and that he is not yet finished. In other words, the long life of the Buddha, rather than being an indication that he has arrived at some static nirvana, indicates nearly the opposite—that he still has a lot of work to do. It follows, of course, that if the Buddha has a lot of work still to do, so do we. And, for that, we have to remain determined to be awakened.

But the third condition not only calls for being determined to seek one’s awakening; it says that we should join others who are similarly determined to pursue awakening. Here as elsewhere in the Lotus Sutra, what is being stressed is the social context in which one pursues the Buddhist path, the “associations” of chapter 14. It is an expression of the obvious truth that it is much easier to live a wholesome life among others who live wholesome lives than it would be to live such a life amid a gang of thieves. But it is more than that—it is an expression of a basic Mahayana idea that our salvation, our liberation from attachments and bad habits, depends on others.

The Buddha invited his followers into a group of monastics, the *sangha*, reflecting the importance a community of people of similar aspiration had for him. As Buddhism spread, that community took on some different features in different cultural contexts, but remained remarkably similar throughout Asia. Later, particularly in East Asia, a different kind of Buddhist community would evolve to meet changed conditions—lay Buddhist movements such as the “White Lotus Teachings.” In both monastic and independent lay-Buddhist organizations, there is a recognition of the importance of having a community of like-minded people to encourage the aspiration and work of individuals. Even the practice of meditation, which is basically a highly individual practice, is often done sitting together with others.

In Risshō Kōsei-kai, *hoza*, literally “Dharma sitting,” which means sitting together to help one another apply Buddhist teachings to the problems of everyday life, is practiced as an important way in which people can be helped by others to fulfill the Lotus Sutra. Participation in *hoza* is voluntary, of course. No one can force another to participate actively in such a group, where one can listen to and learn from others.

In America, partly I think due to individualistic presumptions, but also due to geographic distances, it is often difficult for Buddhists to find groups of similarly minded people, either for practicing *hoza* or sitting meditation in a group, or for reciting or chanting together, or for any other communal Buddhist practice. Retreats, conferences, and such events in which people come together temporarily can help, but they probably cannot be a full substitute for an ongoing community. It remains to be seen whether such communities can be created on the Internet.

The fourth condition is to be determined to save all beings. What a fantastically simple, yet fantastically difficult, condition that is! Often known as “the bodhisattva vow,” in the Lotus Sutra it is at once the Buddha’s original vow, the vow

of a bodhisattva, and the vow that each of us should make. It is a good example of how the Lotus Sutra teaches that the bodhisattva way is for all, including the Buddha himself.

Determination to save all is reflected in the idea of the universal gateway found in the title of chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Universal Gateway of the Regarder of the Cries of the World." The sutra teaches that the sutra itself is such a universal gateway—a gateway that is open to all. It both announces the universality of the gateway and invites the reader or hearer in. But on the other side of the gate we will find not the end of the way but the beginning, the bodhisattva way of life, a way of life in which one is determined to save the whole world. Entering the Buddha Way is more like getting on a launching pad than entering a resting place. It is more of an opening than a closure. It's a destination that is a path, a new beginning.

If entering the bodhisattva way is a beginning, we should not expect to be finished any time soon. But we can expect that the way itself will be very rewarding, that it will enable us to experience the joy of seeing countless buddhas along the way.

The White Elephant with Six Tusks

When viewing Buddhist art one of the ways often used to identify a figure is by the animal on which the bodhisattva rides. In the paintings in the entrance to Rissho Kosei-kai's Great Sacred Hall mentioned earlier, Manjushri is riding a lion, Maitreya rides what I like to think is a cow (though others may say it is a bull), and Universal Sage is on a white elephant with six tusks.

In the chapter 28 story, Universal Sage Bodhisattva promises that if anyone accepts and upholds the Lotus Sutra he will come to that person, mounted on a white elephant with six tusks. This can be understood to mean that taking the sutra seriously gives one extraordinary strength or power. The elephant itself is often a symbol of strength or power, the whiteness of the elephant has been taken to symbolize purity, and the six tusks have been taken to represent both the six *paramitas* or bodhisattva practices and purification of the six senses. But if the elephant is taken to be a symbol of power, we should understand that this is not a power to do just anything. It is a power to practice the Dharma, strength to do the Buddha's work in the world, power to be a universal sage.

Though the image does not come from this story but from the much more involved visualization of the Sutra of Meditation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva, the elephant on which Universal Sage Bodhisattva rides is very often depicted as either walking on blossoming lotus flowers or wearing them like shoes. If the elephant is not standing, a lotus flower will be under the foot of Universal Sage. Such lotus blossoming should be understood, I believe, as an attempt to depict in a motionless picture or statue something that is actually very dynamic—the flowering of the Dharma.

Another interesting aspect of these elephants in Chinese Buddhist art is that they are often grinning or perhaps even laughing. We should understand, I think, that the elephant, one of the largest of all creatures and one of the most intelligent, is very happy to be carrying Universal Sage Bodhisattva, very happy to be contributing to giving strength to others, such that these elephants multiply as they do in the Sutra of Meditation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva.

It is significant, I think, that Universal Sage and his elephant come not to offer us a ride to some paradise above the masses of ordinary people but to bring the strength of an elephant for doing the Buddha's work in the world, so that the Dharma can blossom in us, empowering us to be bodhisattvas for others, enabling us to see the buddha in others and to experience the joy of seeing buddhas everywhere.

Buddha Dharma

Often Buddha and Dharma are separated, seen as two different realities. But we should recognize that there are many kinds of Dharma—teachings, truths, and correct ways of doing things. In the Buddha's time there were Hindu Dharmas and Jain Dharmas, Dharmas stemming from one's birth or caste, and Dharmas appropriate to one's stage of life. In many respects, the Buddha's teachings provided an alternative to conventional Indian Dharmas. Thus, in Buddhism, Dharma is always Buddha Dharma. In other words, Buddha Dharma is such that without the Buddha there is no Buddha Dharma and, since the Buddha is first and foremost a teacher, the Buddha is not the Buddha without Buddha Dharma. The Buddha and his Dharma, the Dharma and its teacher, cannot be separated into independent realities.

There is a very interesting passage in chapter 28: "If there are any who receive and embrace, read and recite, remember correctly, practice, and copy this Dharma-Flower Sutra, it should be known that they have seen Shakyamuni Buddha. It is as though they heard this sutra from the Buddha's mouth. It should be known that they have made offerings to Shakyamuni Buddha. It should be known that the Buddha has praised them for doing good. It should be known that such people have been patted on the head by the hands of Shakyamuni Buddha. It should be known that such people are covered by the robes of Shakyamuni Buddha."

The sutra itself, in other words, is an embodiment of Buddha Dharma, one of the ways in which the Buddha appears to and for us.

Rewards and Punishments

Universal Sage promises that anyone who receives and embraces, reads, recites, remembers correctly, and understands the meaning of the Lotus Sutra and puts it into practice as taught is doing the work of Universal Sage Bodhisattva and will receive many wonderful rewards, such as being touched on the head by a buddha. Even someone who merely copies

the Lotus Sutra will go to the heaven of the thirty-three gods right after death and be received by 84,000 music-making goddesses. And to anyone who receives and embraces, reads and recites, remembers correctly and understands the meaning of the Lotus Sutra, the hands of a thousand buddhas will be extended, preventing them from falling into evil realms, and they will be reborn in the Tushita heaven, where Maitreya Bodhisattva, the next Buddha already bearing the thirty-two features of a buddha, is accompanied by an enormous number of goddesses. The Buddha also promises rewards, including “never again being greedy for or attached to worldly pleasures,” becoming free from pride, conceit, or arrogance, enjoying happiness and gaining “visible rewards in the present world.”

That there are goddesses in the two heavens is interesting in light of the fact that in the paradise-like Buddha lands described earlier in the Lotus Sutra often there are no women. I can only speculate that while early chapters of the sutra were addressed primarily to monks, for whom female figures could easily be a problem, this chapter is addressed primarily to lay followers of Universal Sage Bodhisattva.

While all Chinese Buddhists at least know that Maitreya resides in the Tushita heaven, I believe that this is the only sutra in which that claim appears. Going there as a reward can be taken to mean that the Lotus Sutra has transformative power—that by following it one can become truly compassionate like Maitreya.

Terrible things—leprosy, missing or bad teeth, ugly lips, a flat nose, squinty eyes, deformed hands and feet, body odor, severe illness, and so on, often for many generations—will come to those who expose the faults of followers of the sutra. This passage is often used to show that the Lotus Sutra is extremely intolerant. But we should be careful about this. At least a couple of things need to be said.

One is that the context makes it clear that what is being talked about primarily is not evil doers but followers of the Lotus Sutra. The passage ends with “Therefore, Universal Sage, if anyone sees someone who receives and embraces this sutra, they should get up and greet them from afar, as if they were paying reverence to the Buddha.” The purpose of the passage is not, in other words, an attempt to describe consequences of evil actions; rather, it is to urge that special respect be given to those who embrace the sutra.

Second, the passage does not point to supernatural intervention or action to punish evil doers. It is not about punishment at all. At most, it should be taken to mean that actions have consequences. Thus, just as planting good seeds is likely to produce good results, planting rotten seeds by doing evil things is likely to have bad results.

Having said this, perhaps we should also take a quick look at an earlier passage, one in which it is said that those who follow the Lotus Sutra not only will no longer be attached to worldly pleasures, they will have no liking for scriptures of non-Buddhists or other jottings, nor ever again take pleasure in associating with such people or with other evil people,

be they butchers or those who raise pigs, sheep, chickens and dogs, or hunters, or pimps. The common thread here, of course, has to do with profiting from the sale of flesh, animal or human. It shows that Buddhists have taken very seriously the prohibition against killing or profiting from killing and, in this case, prostitution.

The Lotus Sutra, in my experience, is a wonderful flowering of Buddha Dharma. Whenever I pay close attention to some passage in it, something I had never seen before is revealed to me and I learn from it. But it is also a book that arose in a particular historical context and was composed and translated within particular social settings. It is not entirely free from error, or at least not free from perspectives that we now regard as deficient or even morally wrong. In saying that followers of the Lotus Sutra should not associate with butchers or those who sell meat, with those who raise animals for their meat, or with those who hunt, the sutra is reflecting values embodied in the Indian caste system, in which such people were despised.

Rather than taking such a view literally, we can understand it to be an exhortation to think carefully about whom we associate closely with. And this consideration brings us back to the third of the four conditions discussed earlier—the idea that we should be most closely associated with a group of people who are determined to follow the bodhisattva way as best as they are able. Having gained the strength that comes from meeting the four conditions and encountering Universal Sage Bodhisattva on his white elephant with six tusks, we need to have no fear of associating with butchers, ranchers, or hunters, or even with pimps. For it is the compassion of the Buddha, modeled for us in the Lotus Sutra by Kuan-yin, the Regarder of the Cries of the World, that will encourage us to be rooted in the suffering and misery of this world, shunning no one. And for some followers of the Lotus Sutra at least, this might mean, not only not avoiding those who are despised by the society in which we live, whether they be a racial minority, or a minority identified by disease or mental illness, or some other despised group, but actively being with and supporting such people.

Embodiment in Life

That this chapter comes last and therefore can be seen as a kind of conclusion to the sutra means that the Dharma is not complete without being put into practice—that is, without being put into action in everyday, concrete life. It is not enough to study and gain wisdom, not enough to feel compassion. One must also embrace the sutra by embodying it in one's life. Faith is not faith if it is only believed, or only felt; it must be lived. One must strive to become a buddha by being a bodhisattva for others, which means nothing more and nothing less than embodying Buddha Dharma by helping others in whatever ways are appropriate and in whatever ways one can. Among those ways is giving encouragement and strength to others, being Universal Sage Bodhisattva for them. □

The Buddha's Path

Between Otherworldliness and Presence

by Notto R. Thelle

As we hear the voices of life's suffering and pain, the vision of unity and interconnectedness expands to become a solidarity that breaks through all barriers to embrace all that suffers.

Buddhism seems to begin in a gloomy pessimism and otherworldliness, but it is nourished by a hope that ultimately leads back to the world.

"Everything is connected with suffering," we are told in one of the Buddha's classic discourses. Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering. Everything that makes us cling to life is suffering. We do not need a particularly vivid imagination to envision the poverty and distress in an Indian village 2,500 years ago. The Buddha saw the face of pain. He saw through the camouflage and made his pessimistic diagnosis. But he also believed that he had the solution to the puzzle of suffering. This is why his words, for all their heaviness, are colored by hope and expectancy.

The cause of suffering is the blinded passion that sets everything ablaze. "Everything is on fire," says the Buddha in his celebrated Fire Sermon. "The eye is ablaze, things visible are ablaze. All that the eye discerns is ablaze, all it sees is ablaze. . . . The ear is ablaze, the tongue is ablaze, the body is ablaze. It is set alight by the fire of desire, of hatred and of delusion, by birth, old age and death, by cares, laments, pains, troubles, and despair."

We are tied by desire to an existence in pain—not only in this life, but in an unending cycle of births and deaths. A person's destiny is formed by karma, the inflexible law governing human deeds: every deed entails a necessary consequence that forms that person's destiny. We reap the life we sow every day, and desire is the driving force that ties us to a life of pain. The only way out is to break the bonds that bind us, to extinguish desire, and thus to be set free from the cycle of births and deaths.

Hence, it is not surprising that a central element in Buddhism is withdrawal. The legend relates that Siddhartha Gautama, an over-protected prince, was deeply shocked by his encounter with the dark realities of life—sickness, old age, and death—and decided to leave the world and find an escape route from pain. After six years of hard discipline

among the holy men who lived in the woods, he gave up this extreme asceticism and continued his search by means of silent meditation. He abandoned both sensuous pleasure and self-torture, desire and disgust, love and hate. Withdrawn and without attachments, he waited for insight.

The great breakthrough came after a long night of affliction, when the morning star shone at daybreak. His eye had been purified, and was no longer darkened by blindness. The world was still the same, but he came to see things in a new way, just as things take on a new shape and outline in the light of morning. His withdrawal was necessary. It is only when one is set free from the world that one can see what the world truly looks like. The Buddha's statues have a peaceful face, an almost invisible smile, with eyes half open and half closed, that speaks more eloquently than any multitude of words about his withdrawn presence. The passion has gone, leaving only an infinite gentleness that does not tie anyone down.

The Buddha returned to human society in order to share

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his insight with others; but all the time, the harmony of his life clearly preserves an element of distance. If it is true that the origin of suffering is blinded desire, then it is clear that one must avoid everything that might stimulate desire. Monasticism became the ideal way of life, with rules and regulations intended to protect the monk against temptations and to make provisions for silence. The classic subjects for meditation were also meant to help the monk see through the emptiness of things in the world and to avoid the ties produced by the senses.

Accordingly, the highest ideal in early Buddhism was the monk who acquires the liberating insight in his withdrawn harmony, breaks out of the cycle of transmigration, and enters the peace of nirvana, where desire is completely extinguished. It is not for nothing that Buddhism has been accused of preaching flight from the world and an insulated spirituality.

The Buddha's path is unthinkable without withdrawal. But it does not stop there; it leads on into landscapes with new perspectives and vistas, as we see most clearly in Mahayana Buddhism—the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle—which particularly spread in Eastern Asia. Here, we still hear about suffering and desire. The Buddhist sees through the transitoriness and emptiness, but discovers at the same time that the world takes on a new meaning for the one who sees its true form. Escape from the world is not the end; after being liberated, one can return to the world and live a new life.

What perspective opened up the world and shed new light on life? It was no new insight, but a deepening of the central point in the Buddhist interpretation of life, namely the doctrine of karma, the law of causality. Karma offers an explanation of human destiny by locating the person in an unbreakable chain of cause and effect, thereby also providing the key to change and redemption. This can end up in a self-centered endeavor to break out of the cycle in order to enter the freedom of nirvana; but this path can also open out onto further dimensions.

If we look beyond the isolated individual and his self-centered striving, the doctrine of karma can reveal an interconnectedness in human existence that shatters all boundaries. The teaching of causality is developed in the basic principle called *pratitya samutpada* in Sanskrit, often translated as "interdependence" or "dependent origination." Everything is understood as the result of an endless process of cause and effect. Human beings and animals, things, situations, and phenomena come into being, are transformed, and pass away as the result of an endless network of causes and effects; in their turn, these become the cause of effects in new contexts. Everything is part of this process, from an amoeba to a god, from the tiniest speck of dust to the galaxies in the heavens, from the atom to the atomic bomb. This means that nothing exists in itself, independently of the network of cause and effect. One cannot take one eddy out of a river and look for its innermost substance! Nor can one cut one

mesh out of a net and draw up a description of its characteristics in isolation! In precisely the same way, one cannot understand the true nature of things by looking for some isolated "substance" in them. The only way to understand all that exists is to see the entire texture into which it is woven. To borrow the language of the Bible: it is not in God, but in relationships that "we live and move and have our being" (cf. Acts 17:28).

It is this network of cause and effect that explains the transitoriness, emptiness, and pain of things. But it also makes possible a vision of reality that is life-affirming, for if it is true that all things come into being in a continuous process of cause and effect, this means that they are bound together in an unbreakable unity. The various branches of Mahayana Buddhism offer almost ecstatic visions of the unity and interconnectedness of all things, employing both philosophical speculations and the symbolic language of poetry to show us the universe as an organic whole where all things, from the smallest particle to the infinite galaxies, are woven together in a living network. We discover true life when we find our own place in the larger context and play our part in life's great symphony.

This symphony does not consist exclusively of harmonious and optimistic melodic themes high in the descant. There are also deeper notes in the bass, a *de profundis* ("out of the depths") which echoes life's crazy discords. As we hear the voices of life's suffering and pain, the vision of unity and interconnectedness expands to become a solidarity that breaks through all barriers to embrace all that suffers. If there is indeed a unity that binds together all sentient beings, we cannot be isolated from those who live in pain. The condemned of the earth are bound by a thousand ties to the blessed of the earth, and one cannot separate the lives of the unsuccessful from the lives of the successful. In the last analysis, this means that there is no salvation for the individual, for the simple reason that nothing and no one exists in isolation from the totality. The wish to break out and acquire salvation on one's own is an impossibly egotistic dream; the real path to salvation does not lead us out of the world, but back to the world. The world is not denied; on the contrary, we rediscover the world as the place where one can give one's own life to lead *all* life to salvation.

This is why the ideal of piety in Mahayana Buddhism is not the monk who has attained enlightenment and left the world behind him, but the enlightened person who returns to the world to share his insight with others there. The highest expression of this ideal is the idea of the bodhisattva who, although he has reached the stage where he can leave the cycle of births and deaths and enter the peace of nirvana, swears by his own enlightenment and salvation that he is willing to renounce this highest good, unless all life reaches redemption along with him.

This, then, is how Buddhism understands the true nature of things. The world is transitory and is in pain. Withdrawal

“Taming the Ox” (left) and “Returning to the Origin and Source of Life” (right), two of the Ten Ox-herding Pictures, a series depicting Zen training of one’s mind using the symbols of a man and an ox. Twelfth century. Shokokuji temple, Kyoto.

sets one free from ties; but once one’s eye has been purified, flight from the world is transformed into a new vision of universal unity, and withdrawal is replaced by a merciful presence.

A classic series of ten pictures, known and loved throughout Eastern Asia, offers an eloquent expression of this movement back to the world. They portray a man’s search for his true self as a relationship between a cowherd and an ox. The first pictures show how he seeks its tracks, finds the ox, tames it, and leads it home. He has found what he was looking for.

But the series continues. First, the ox disappears from the picture, then the man too. The identity for which he had longed, and the ego that carried out the search, cease to be interesting. This is indicated by a large empty circle: the world is open. The man finds the way back to the origin and source of life, symbolized by running brooks and blossoming trees. It is only in the last picture that the man is seen again, now in the midst of a throng of people in a village square. The protagonist is back where he began his search. Daily life is the same, the people and situations are the same, but the perspective has changed. The man who sought himself has now forgotten himself, and he discovers his true place in the selfless service of others.

“Buddhism has taught me to forget myself,” said one of my Buddhist friends. He was nearly one hundred years old, and was trying to sum up the wisdom acquired during a

long lifetime. I had discovered long ago that he certainly did not live up to his own words; but then, what Christian believer could ever point to his own self (unless he was blessed with a good sense of self-ironic humor) as an example of the transforming power of faith and insight? After many years in the East, I have never seen more than glimpses and hints of what the realization of the Buddhist visions would mean. To a large extent, oriental Buddhism is shaped by forces that are much more worldly and commercial than contemplative withdrawal and merciful presence! But no one should doubt that the ideals are still alive.

The Buddha’s path has lost nothing of its challenge. The Buddhism of the Great Vehicle is so demanding that few follow it seriously; even fewer take this path to its conclusion. But Jesus too did not expect that many would follow him on his path.

The Buddha’s path and Christ’s path—the two are described in words so different that one sometimes believes they are located in separate worlds. The strange thing is that they often intersect, and that those who attempt to take these paths are surprised to see how much they have in common when they talk about their experiences and share their longings and dreams with one another. □

This essay is a translation from the author’s 1991 book in Norwegian whose title translates as “Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West.”

The Lotus Sutra and Lay Buddhist Movements

by Daniel Friedrich

The eleventh International Lotus Sutra Seminar was held in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China, June 26–29, 2006. The theme of the conference was “The Lotus Sutra and Lay Buddhist Movements: Past and Present.” The Lotus Sutra, as is well known, has had an incredibly vast influence upon Buddhism in East Asia, and the papers presented and the ensuing conversation reflected the great number of ways in which the Lotus Sutra has been understood in East Asia. Given this tremendous diversity, an extended overview of the papers and discussions would be ideal. However, as there is not enough space to offer such a review in the following paragraphs, I shall seek to briefly introduce the papers and a small portion of the discussions that followed. I shall conclude with a short summary of the trip that conference participants took to Mount Tiantai, the birthplace of Tiantai (T’ien-t’ai) Buddhism.

Conference coordinator Gene Reeves explained that the theme of this year’s seminar was inspired by the question of what it means to be a lay Buddhist movement. Reeves explained that, from its very beginning, Rissho Kosei-kai was a lay Buddhist movement, although a number of priests were counted as members of the movement. Reeves continued by pointing out that historically lay Buddhist movements in both China and Japan have both included and been founded by priests. In other words, being characterized as a lay Buddhist movement does not necessarily exclude monastics from participating or having leadership roles within the movement.

This raised two questions that participants would return to often in the ensuing conversations: (1) What do we mean when we talk about a movement as being lay or monastic; and (2) Who were/are the people taking part in lay Buddhist movements?

Following Reeves’s introduction, Daniel Getz (Bradley University, Peoria, IL) presented his paper, “Rebirth in the Lotus: Zongxiao’s *Fahuajing xuanying lu* [*Fa-hua-ching hsu-an-ying lu*] and its Lay Typology.” In his paper, Getz explored a collection of biographies written by the Tiantai monk Zongxiao (Tsung-hsiao, 1151–1214) with a particular focus on Zongxiao’s biography of the lay scholar Liu Chengzhi (Liu Ch’eng-chih, 354–410) who had studied at Mount Lu and was later a founding member of the White Lotus Society, a group devoted to seeking rebirth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. Getz concludes that given the prominent place it is accorded within the entire collection of biographies, in his writing of Liu Chengzhi’s biography, Zongxiao was promoting Liu Chengzhi as the ideal lay Buddhist in Song (Sung) China. Further still, Getz points out that from these biographies we can see that the Lotus Sutra was understood as the path to the Pure Land, and that monastic leadership within lay societies was considered important.

Responding to Getz’s paper, Jiang Wu (University of Arizona, Tucson) reflected on the tension surrounding the mediation between the monastic and the lay. This reflection shaped the following discussion as conference participants noted that within the categories of lay and monastic there are a number of divisions, as well. Liu Chengzhi, as Getz pointed out, was a member of the literati, and thus would have had a different level of access to monastics as evidenced by the time he spent studying at Mount Lu.

Continuing in this vein, Daniel B. Stevenson (University of Kansas, Lawrence), presented a paper entitled “Production of Manuals for the Rites of the Tiantai Four Samadhis in Later China: The Case for an Inter-Textual Clerical and Lay Ritual Discourse.” Stevenson explained that at issue in his paper is how we think about lay versus clerical Buddhism. Stevenson noted that we typically think of ritual as belonging to the realm of the monastic. Throughout his paper, Stevenson provided evidence of the convergence of ritual practice into the life of the laity. Furthermore, Stevenson noted that the line between monastic and lay is oftentimes not clear and that rites and rituals often thought of as being monastic in actuality reflected the needs of the larger Buddhist community, including lay patrons and the local public. Moreover, certain rites and rituals were often streamlined and performed publicly or even in one’s home. Based on this, Stevenson concluded that both lay followers and monastics were engaged in rituals that were often—at least in the case of repentance rituals—more similar than dissimilar.

The following morning, Jennifer Eichman (Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ) presented a paper on the “releasing-life” societies in Ming-dynasty China. Eichman explained that in the late Ming era, China saw a rise in the number of private societies including literary, religious, charitable, and intellectual groups. Eichman described these societies as being a place where monks, lay Buddhists, and even non-Buddhists intermingled. The discussion that followed Eichman’s paper focused on a number of issues, including what defines lay Buddhist activities. Chun-fang Yu (Columbia University, New York) pointed out that the definition of lay Buddhist activity is dependent upon what era is being discussed. Further-

Daniel Friedrich had been awarded an M.A. by the Institute of Buddhist Studies/Graduate Theological Union at the time of the Lotus Sutra seminar. He is currently furthering his studies in Sumoto, Hyogo Prefecture.

Participants in the eleventh International Lotus Sutra Seminar.

more, she noted that within the releasing-life societies the relationship between the monastic community and the laity varied, with some groups being quite close to the monastic community and others rejecting their authority.

Following Eichman, Jiang Wu presented his research concerning lay commentaries on the Lotus Sutra. Wu explained that there were few lay commentaries written by lay people. Describing the quality of these commentaries, Wu noted that they were usually poor in quality and often appended to commentaries written by monks. This does not mean that lay people had little or no interest in the Lotus Sutra. It only points to the fact that lay people have most often been interested in the Lotus Sutra as a devotional text.

Haiyan Shen (Shanghai University), continuing the discussion of the Lotus Sutra and the impact it has had on Chinese Buddhism, presented her paper, "All Have Attained the Buddha Way: The Inspiration of the Lotus Sutra in Chinese Lay Buddhism." She began with a brief overview showing how the role of lay people has been a source of tension throughout Chinese Buddhist history. As an example, she explained how the Sangha has at times been interpreted in narrow terms as referring only to monks and nuns. However, this has been contested, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by lay Buddhists such as Yang Renshan

(Yang Jen-shan) and Ouyang Jian (Ouyang Chien). Regarding how the Lotus Sutra has been used, Shen noted the influence of the chapter on skillful means. She noted that in Ningbo, the site for this year's seminar, we can find one of China's most impressive lay Buddhist organizations. Shen reported that the Ningbo Lay Buddhist Gathering is actively involved in carrying out the bodhisattva path by: making guest speakers available so that all can hear the Dharma, providing a place for sutra recitation, being actively involved in charitable work, and running a non-profit home for the elderly. Shen's paper fostered a lively discussion in which participants sought to learn more about lay Buddhist activities in present-day China. The timing of Shen's paper was also quite appropriate, in that following lunch, conference participants enjoyed visits to the Ningbo Lay Buddhist Gathering and the Seven Pagoda Temple.

Refreshed from wonderful visits in the afternoon, conference participants gathered in the evening to discuss Lizhu Fan's (Fudan University, Shanghai) paper, "The Lay Buddhists in Shenzhen: Vegetarian Restaurants as New Communal Settings." As Fan was unable to attend the conference, Gene Reeves presented the paper on her behalf. Fan has presented a descriptive account of Buddhist gatherings that occur in vegetarian restaurants in Shenzhen, in the free economic zone on the bor-

der between mainland China and Hong Kong. Of particular note is the fact that these restaurants are not formally affiliated with temples, although on occasion monks or nuns may be invited to speak at these gatherings. Moreover, Fan reports that participants choose which group to be involved with, and at what level of commitment. Motives for joining these groups seem to be a longing for a sense of community and a hunger for religious experience to aid in understanding life's daily struggles. Discussing this paper, participants questioned to what extent we can consider these activities to be Buddhist or a manifestation of New Age culture. Shen noted that participants do not take refuge in the Three Treasures, while Reeves noted similarities with popular religion in Hong Kong.

The following morning, Chun-fang Yu presented a paper entitled "Lay Buddhists: College Students' Societies for the Study of Buddhism and the Revival of Buddhism in Taiwan." Yu explained that this research began with the question of why women become nuns. Yu found that a number of women became interested in Buddhism through participation in lay Buddhist societies while in college. Of particular interest here was the fact that these societies, in addition to studying the teachings of Buddhism, also study those of Confucianism and Taoism as well. These societies also provide a diverse array of social activities in which members can take part. Thus, these societies promote the holistic well-being of individual members. Yu noted that the societies were not founded with the goal of propagating teachings or even increasing the monastic community. Yet, this is exactly what has happened, as the number of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan has increased.

Yu's paper elicited a number of responses. Charles B. Jones (Catholic University of America, Washington, DC) noted that increased educational opportunities for women have seen the monastic community of Taiwan become increasingly educated. Yu reminded participants that the women who choose to become nuns do not explicitly cite the university curriculum, but rather the extracurricular societies to which they belonged. Jones noted that in-

creasingly educated lay populations are often seen as a challenge by the monastic community. Zhiru Ng (Pomona College, Claremont, CA) also noted that another challenge faced by the monastic community is Christianity, which has forced Buddhists to become increasingly evangelical.

Throughout the conference, it was often quite surprising how smoothly discussion of one paper flowed into another. Following Yu, Charles B. Jones presented his paper, "The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation: Lay Buddhism in Modern Taiwan." Jones's paper focused largely on Ven. Cheng Yen (b. 1937), the charismatic founding figure of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. Jones analyzed Tzu Chi as a Buddhist response to modernity in Taiwan. Jones notes that Tzu Chi has been a transitional organization with a constantly evolving mission. Tzu Chi began as a local group of thirty women who put aside a few cents every day to help the poor obtain medical care; it gradually developed into what is at present a foundation with a staff of over 500 people, claiming 5 million supporters and providing aid to people in need the world over. Jones sees Tzu Chi's success as a result of the devotion of followers of Cheng Yen, who believe her to be a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kuan-yin. Jones concluded that Cheng Yen's success, as represented by Tzu Chi, is in the reinterpretation of traditionalism, that is, Buddhist values, in light of modernity.

Immediately after the discussion of Jones's paper, Zhiru Ng presented another view of Cheng Yen and Tzu Chi. Ng's paper, "Visualizing the Lotus World: Tzu Chi's Hall of Still Thoughts and the Taiwanese Re-imagining of Lay-Centered Buddhism," examined how Cheng Yen reinterpreted Buddhist doctrines in order to promote altruism. In the Hall of Still Thoughts, Ng reports, Cheng Yen visually depicts the mission of Tzu Chi and the world as presented by the Lotus Sutra. Ng explained that the Lotus Sutra lends itself to visual depictions, which in the case of Tzu Chi become the means by which religious ideals can be conveyed to all

people. Ng's paper led to a fascinating discussion by participants concerning the function of artwork in religious practice and its use as a means to convey religious teachings. At the conclusion of this discussion, participants enjoyed an afternoon trip to Tiantong Temple.

That evening concluded with a paper by Susumu Shimazono (University of Tokyo) entitled "Bodhisattva Practice and the New Religions of the Hokke-Nichiren School: The Concept of Integration Based on Horizontal Solidarity." Shimazono's paper began by questioning why new religious movements have been so successful in modern Japan. By exploring the Buddhist-oriented new religious movements of the Hokke-Nichiren School, of which Rissho Koseikai is a part, Shimazono delineated three characteristics that account for their success: (1) the concept of integration through horizontal solidarity; (2) the principle of self-reliance; and (3) a this-world orientation. For Shimazono, the concept of integration through horizontal solidarity refers to the fact that new religious movements attempt to help all people not only to learn more about themselves, but also to develop relationships with other individuals. The principle of self-reliance encourages people to be active in practicing the bodhisattva path. This-world orientation describes the fact that members of new religious movements are encouraged to find salvation in this world. Due to time limits, Shimazono had to limit his analysis to the first of these three principles, although he acknowledged that the three principles are interrelated. Shimazono concluded by arguing that the concept of integration through horizontal solidarity allows for the continuous evolution of the Hokke-Nichiren School in order to meet the needs of modern society.

The fourth and final day of the conference portion of the seminar had two papers scheduled, free time for the participants to explore Ningbo, and a presentation by representatives of Rissho Koseikai. The first paper of the day was presented by Michio T. Shinozaki (Rissho Koseikai Gakurin Seminary), who explored the problem of "others" in the Lotus Sutra. Beginning with the

statement that the Lotus Sutra teaches that all living beings have the potential to become buddhas and, thus, the awakening of one's self depends upon the awakening of others. He concludes that the Lotus Sutra postulates a two-fold relationship wherein a buddha is one who leads individuals to be like the Buddha, and sentient beings are likewise entrusted to lead others by teaching the Dharma.

The final paper of the conference was presented by Yukio Matsudo (Heidelberg University), who explored the role of the Lotus Sutra as being the basis of Soka Gakkai's reformative movement. Matsudo argued that the Lotus Sutra has provided the inspiration for a number of reform movements throughout Japan, beginning with Nichiren and continuing until the present. In arguing this, Matsudo challenged the belief that Buddhist reform movements can be understood as analogues to Christian Protestant movements as well as showing that Buddhist modernism has happened independent of Christianity. Rather, the modern aspect of Soka Gakkai, according to Matsudo, is derived from the egalitarian teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

With this, the completion of four days of discussing the Lotus Sutra's relation to lay Buddhism ended. Participants in this conference no doubt came away from it with a greater understanding of the Lotus Sutra itself, and the varied ways in which the laity throughout history have understood and put into practice the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Following the conclusion of the formal part of the conference, participants were invited to travel to Mount Tiantai. While there, participants visited a number of temples and shrines, and had the opportunity to meet with monks and lay people alike engaged in a variety of practices. After the conclusion of the conference and visit to Mount Tiantai, it was clear that this conference had been successful on a number of fronts: participants all came away with a greater understanding of the conference theme, old friendships were restored, new ones made, and a plethora of ideas and questions for further research were raised. □

The Realm of the One Vehicle

by Nikkyo Niwano

This essay is part of a continuing series of translations from a volume of inspirational writings by the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai. DHARMA WORLD will continue to publish these essays because of their lasting value as guidance for the practice of one's daily faith.

In chapter 2, "Preaching," of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings, Shakyamuni explains that over the past forty years he has preached the Law with a certain aim and in a certain order and manner, according to the natures and desires of living beings, and avers that "the truth has not been revealed yet." He says, however, that all of his teachings so far have been true and important because they have all originated from one underlying truth. This is the teaching of the "innumerable meanings."

The term "innumerable meanings" has been historically understood in two senses. The first concerns the "real aspect" of all phenomenal things. This is the true universe that underlies the phenomenal world that we see around us with the naked eye. Because the "substance" of this reality is unfathomably vast, we call it the "infinite body (of the Buddha)." The second tells us that all true teachings should of course be according to, and come from, the real aspect of all things, whose workings therefore are similarly infinite and unfathomably complex. For this reason we call this condition the "infinite workings (of the teachings)."

Putting these ideas together, we get the following. The various limitless realities that appear in our phenomenal universe all spring from an underlying truth that we call the "real aspect." Conversely, if we track these realities back to their roots it will become evident that they reach deep into the one realm of the real aspect. The Buddha's teachings are all founded upon the principle of becoming aware of—that is, enlightened about—the nature of this "real aspect." Countless teachings have sprung forth from the one single truth, or to put it another way, these innumerable teachings all return to the one truth, that is, the "real aspect" of all things.

When we are able to understand the Buddha's teachings deeply, we know that this world is without any contradiction at all, so that although the feelings to which we cling and the conditions, customs, and circumstances we live among will incline us to form prejudices, we must separate ourselves from these and return to the great Way of the Buddha. If we have a narrow outlook, our world becomes narrow

and filled with suffering, so that eventually we lose sight of our reason for being. To avoid this we must go forward with a serene and open mind, always striving to learn from everything that is able to teach us.

I have met with people of religion from around the world. From speaking with those who are leaders of their respective faiths, I have learned that in the original, basic essence of religion, that is, a belief in God or the Buddha, all faiths are in fundamental agreement, even if they express it using different terms.

People today are too preoccupied with the minor details surrounding basic issues, forgetting the single fundamental principle at their base. Bewitched by the insignificant interests of their everyday lives, they exist in contradiction to the supreme cosmic truth. The problems that the world currently faces, such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons, environmental pollution, traffic wars, and the constant build-up of waste materials, are signs of a kind of retribution for the human greed that has defied and destroyed nature in an unbridled hunger for personal profit. However much we use

Nikkyo Niwano, the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace and was honorary chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) at the time of his death in October 1999.

our intellect, we cannot change the fundamental truth, nor overcome the cosmic principle. We should acknowledge this and engrave it in our hearts. We must hasten to return to a way of life that corresponds to the cosmic truth—the single principle of the “real aspect” of all things.

I am sometimes asked by members of the Christian faith to speak about Buddhism. No doubt they are curious about our different ways. What I tell them is that the teachings of the Buddha are in no way at odds with those of the Christian faith or of any other religion. And I always say that this is what we learn from the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra describes that there are as many non-Buddhist teachings as there are grains of sand in the Ganges. Buddhism itself contains a wide variety of doctrines in its sutras. Of them all, the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are the most precious. It shows us how the world changes over time and calls upon all who are living in the midst of this flux to recognize that they are children of the Buddha.

This calls to mind the parable of the poor son and the rich father in chapter 4 of the sutra, “Faith Discernment.” After fifty years of roaming from country to country, the son returns to his father, but before he can be recognized to be his father’s son, he has to complete twenty years of labor (religious practice) in his wealthy father’s mansion. It is only when the father knows that his own death is approaching that he calls together his relatives and attendants and announces for the first time: “Know, gentlemen, this is my own son, begotten by me. Now all the wealth that I possess belongs entirely to my son.” When the son hears these words, he thinks, “Without any mind for or effort on my part these treasures now come of themselves to me.” The father (rep-

resenting the Buddha) waited all of seventy years for the coming of that day.

The Buddha’s intentions are the same for everyone. He discriminates against nobody, not against Christian, not against Muslim. When Shakyamuni said, “[M]ay all living beings achieve what I have achieved, and no different,” it was his wish that all should discover the peace that he found and one day attain buddhahood. For this very reason the One Vehicle is the only means of attaining buddhahood. There is no second vehicle, nor a third. Without exception, we are all traveling together in the same vehicle. We are all traveling toward salvation in the One Vehicle, whatever religion or creed we profess, though these be as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, if we strengthen our faith and train hard to correspond with the mind of God or the Buddha, we will eventually find ourselves to be as one, passengers on the One Vehicle. Thus, while the Lotus Sutra shows us clearly what results from our actions and what will happen if we act in a certain way, it does not set out to discriminate or condemn.

I have frequently had the opportunity to associate with religious representatives from around the world at assemblies of the World Conference of Religions for Peace and similar organizations. When I speak of the One Vehicle, I see a light in their eyes, struck as they are with admiration for this as an ultimate teaching that offers salvation to all humankind. The Lotus Sutra in which we believe is none other than the teaching of the One Vehicle. I am convinced, therefore, that it represents a universal faith transcending all political and racial boundaries. I know that this conviction will only grow as time passes. □

Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (center) with other participants in a preparatory meeting of the World Conference of Religions for Peace held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in July 1969.

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 12

Devadatta

(1)

This is the eighty-ninth installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

INTRODUCTION Wisdom is the main teaching of the first fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, centered on chapter 2, “Tactfulness.” This part of the sutra elucidates the nature of the universe and of human beings, and thus the correct way to live and to relate to one another. It shows us how to realize our full potential as human beings, based on the wisdom that comes of discerning the real aspect of all things. In chapters 10–14 the focus gradually narrows to the issue of the true nature, or essence, of human beings, and then narrows still further, to elucidation of the ultimate question: What constitutes true salvation?

In chapter 10, “A Teacher of the Law,” the Buddha teaches that the Lotus Sutra opens the gate of tactful means to reveal the truth and discusses the correct frame of mind of those who expound the teaching of the Lotus Sutra in future ages and the merits they attain by so doing. Chapter 11, “Beholding the Precious Stupa,” reveals the great truth that the buddha-nature is the true or essential nature of human beings. The chapter begins as the Buddha finishes speaking, whereupon a great jeweled stupa suddenly springs up from the earth before the eyes of the assembly. The Precious Stupa symbolizes the buddha-nature that all human beings possess equally. That the stupa does not descend from the heavens but springs up from the earth signifies that all of us, without exception, have the buddha-nature within us.

The central teaching of that chapter is the crucial importance of becoming aware that the buddha-nature is not to be sought outside ourselves but is to be found within. By extension, we realize that to become aware of our own buddha-nature is to attain enlightenment, and that to be enlightened is to be a buddha. It follows that anyone—even villains shunned by respectable society; even unlettered toddlers; even women, so often mistakenly regarded in ancient times as beings steeped in sin—who truly awakens to the buddha-nature within can attain buddhahood.

Chapter 12, “Devadatta,” is seen as the culmination of this teaching. The chapter consists of two parts. The first teaches

that evil people can attain buddhahood, the second that women can do so.

TEXT At that time the Buddha addressed the bodhisattvas, gods, men, and the four groups, [saying]: “Through innumerable kalpas of the past, I have tirelessly sought the Law Flower Sutra; during many kalpas I was long a king and vowed to seek the supreme Bodhi, my mind never faltering.

COMMENTARY Here the Buddha begins telling of his many travails as he sought the Way to enlightenment in a life in the far distant past. This story holds extremely important lessons for those of us who seek the truth today; we should not dismiss it as a mere legend but concentrate on its underlying truths.

- *I have tirelessly sought the Law Flower Sutra.* The sutra referred to here is not a specific scripture titled the Lotus Sutra but the teaching of the supreme truth. As already mentioned often, the Lotus Sutra stands for much more than a particular work by that name; it includes all teachings that indicate the true Way to the salvation of human beings and of the world.

- *The supreme Bodhi.* The Sanskrit word *bodhi* means Perfect Enlightenment, that is, enlightenment to the ultimate truth (Thusness) of the universe—in short, the Buddha’s enlightenment. It is called “supreme” because it is the highest enlightenment possible in this world.

- *Never faltering.* To falter, in this context, means to break off religious practice or backslide from the search for enlightenment. To retrogress in this way is the most spiritless, pitiable thing a seeker of the Way could do. Once one has aroused the aspiration for enlightenment, it is essential to resolve firmly never to stop partway or turn back. This attitude is called “the mind of nonretrogression.”

TEXT Desiring to fulfill the Six Paramitas, I earnestly bestowed alms with an unsparing mind—elephants, horses,

the rare seven, countries, cities, wives, children, male and female slaves, servants and followers, head, eyes, marrow, brain, the flesh of my body, hands, and feet, unsparing of body and life.

COMMENTARY *The Six Paramitas.* The Sanskrit *paramita* means “perfection,” that is, the state of having attained the absolute, universal truth and perfect insight into all relative, discriminative phenomena, of having crossed over from this shore of delusion to the other shore of enlightenment. The Buddha taught the Six Paramitas (*shat-paramita*), or Six Perfections, as the virtues that bodhisattvas must practice in order to attain true understanding of all the Buddha’s teachings, perfect the bodhisattva practice, and cross over to the other shore of enlightenment.

The first perfection, donation (*dana*), is the practice of self-sacrifice and service, giving of oneself for the sake of others and of the world. There are three forms of donation: donation of the Law, donation of assets, and donation of the body. Sometimes donation of fearlessness is taught instead of donation of the body.

Donation of the Law is spiritual giving; its highest form is teaching others the Law, or Dharma, and guiding them to the Way of the true Law. Donation of assets means giving one’s goods, property, or money to succor others and to impart energy to the community of believers, the religious organization to which one belongs. Giving in this way to the community of believers is important because that energy enables the community to move closer to the goal of world peace. Donation of the body includes social service as well as small acts of kindness—any giving that entails physical effort. Donation of fearlessness means giving in order to alleviate others’ anxieties, fears, and hardships. Because this kind of donation can involve the other kinds, it should permeate all forms of donation.

It is highly significant that donation is the first of the Six Perfections. Donation may not be all that important for those who, like shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, seek only their own salvation. But the essential mission of bodhisattvas is to save others and to save the world. And because this is also the ultimate objective of the bodhisattva’s aspiration to attain the Buddha’s enlightenment, donation is the most important virtue for bodhisattvas to practice.

The second perfection is keeping the precepts, or morality (*shila*). This, too, is an important virtue in the bodhisattva practice, for keeping the Buddha’s precepts, living correctly, and striving to perfect one’s character are what give one true power to save others.

The third perfection, forbearance (*kshanti*), means always being magnanimous toward others, patiently enduring whatever difficulties they may cause one, and also maintaining equanimity in the face of good fortune.

The fourth perfection, effort (*virya*), means striving single-mindedly to accomplish one’s mission, never letting oneself

be upset or deflected from one’s purpose by trivial phenomena. The importance of this virtue needs no elaboration.

The fifth perfection, meditation (*dhyana*), means remaining unperturbed no matter what happens. To attain this serene state of mind, it is necessary to practice concentrating the mind (*samadhi*) or meditation (*dhyana*) to remove attachment to self.

The sixth perfection, wisdom (*prajna*), means being able to discern the real aspect of all things. If one can attain this kind of wisdom, one will always be able to live correctly and will also be able to guide many others to the true Way. Obviously this is an indispensable virtue for bodhisattvas. Such wisdom can be gained through the practice of the five other perfections.

It is important to note that the king, the Buddha in a former life, devoted himself first to exhaustive practice of donation in his desire “to fulfill the Six Paramitas.” This is because the spirit of self-sacrifice and service is the hallmark of the bodhisattva, and it is the spirit of love for others that cultivates the true wisdom needed to promote human happiness.

We must not dismiss this account as just the practice of a legendary bodhisattva in the distant past. The spirit of self-sacrifice and service is the most important quality for people of religion today—indeed, for everyone in the world. How dreary and stifling the absence of this spirit has made the world! Insistence on one’s own rights alone, preoccupation with one’s own well-being, has weakened the links between people’s hearts and minds and has robbed society of much beauty and joy. Ironically, the pursuit of personal happiness regardless of others has actually made people unhappier. I hope people will rethink this approach and quickly awaken to the fact that the only way to gain personal happiness is to make others happy. This is humanity’s only hope of salvation. That is why the king dedicated himself to the practice of donation, that is, self-sacrifice and service, first and foremost.

• *The rare seven.* These substances are the same as “the precious seven” mentioned in chapters 2, 6, and 11: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, coral, crystal, moonstone, and agate.

• *Head, eyes, marrow, brain, the flesh of my body, hands, and feet, unsparing of body and life.* Willingness to give one’s body, even one’s life, sounds extreme. But the bodhisattvas of ancient times did not hesitate to make this kind of sacrifice in their zeal to seek the Way and to save others. The *jataka* tales of former lives of the Buddha describe many such sacrifices. (See the November/December 1992 issue of DHARMA WORLD.) Of course we today are not required to go to such extremes, but the world does need people who are imbued with this spirit and vigor.

TEXT At that time people’s lifetime was beyond measure. For the sake of the Law, I gave up the throne of my domain, deputed my government to the crown prince, and with

beating drum and open proclamation, sought everywhere for the Law, [promising]: 'Whoever is able to tell me of a Great Vehicle, I will all my life provide for him and be his footman.'

COMMENTARY The king was filled with such ardent resolution that he was prepared to do anything, even menial chores, for someone who would teach him the Law. Such fervor puts us to shame.

• *With beating drum.* In ancient India it was customary, when royal decrees were publicly proclaimed, to gain people's attention by beating drums and striking gongs.

TEXT At that time a certain hermit came to [me] the king and said: 'I have a Great Vehicle named Wonderful Law Flower Sutra. If you will not disobey me, I will explain it to you.' [I] the king, hearing what the hermit said, became ecstatic with joy and instantly followed him, providing for his needs, gathering fruit, drawing water, collecting fuel, laying his food, even turning my body into his seat and bed, yet never feeling fatigue of body or mind. While I thus served a millennium passed, [and] for the sake of the Law, I zealously waited on him that he should lack nothing."

COMMENTARY This passage describes vividly the deep reverence people of ancient times felt toward teachers of the Law. It is recorded that when King Bimbisara of Magadha and King Prasenajit of Kaushala and Kashi met Shakyamuni, they knelt and placed their foreheads on the Buddha's feet in veneration.

The same spirit of veneration for teachers of the Law was seen in ancient Japan, as the well-known saying of Emperor Shomu (r. 724–49) attests: "I am the servant of the Three Treasures [the Buddha, the Law, and the Sangha]." The famous priest Gyogi (668–749), a contemporary of Emperor Shomu, composed a verse that expresses this spirit succinctly: "It was because I served by collecting fuel, gathering greens, and drawing water that I gained the Lotus Sutra." Even earlier, the great statesman Prince Shotoku (574–622), a devout Buddhist, often lectured on the Lotus Sutra in the imperial palace. On the day he was to discuss chapter 12, "Devadatta," the emperor himself would reverently arrange the offerings on the altar, chanting Gyogi's verse over and over.

People today have become lamentably oblivious of the spirit of reverence. Teachers think of themselves as simply workers, and students have lost respect and affection for their teachers. Schools have become places where knowledge is doled out piecemeal. It is not necessary to serve teachers hand and foot, as used to be the custom; but if students lack the respect and affection that would impel them to want to do so, can they truly grow into people of character? Teachers, for their part, need to recall that the primary objective of education is character building, not simply the

provision of knowledge, and reawaken to their responsibility for guiding their charges. And they should bring to their calling the confidence and pride of the hermit in the passage above.

This approach to education, involving as it does mutual trust, would have a great impact on the future of nations, too. If teachers and students trust each other, schools will become vibrantly alive with enthusiasm for education, generating boundless energy that can be turned to making the world a better place. The trust between the king and the hermit described in this passage of the sutra provides a model we would do well to ponder and emulate.

TEXT Then the World-honored One, desiring to proclaim this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse:

"I remember in past kalpas, / When, to seek the Great Law— / Though I was a king in the world, / Yet coveted not earthly pleasures— / With toll of bell, I proclaimed to the four quarters: / 'Whoever possesses the Great Law, / If he will expound it to me, / To him I will become servant.' / Then there was the sage Asita, / Who came and said to the great king: / 'I possess the Wonderful Law / Rarely [heard] in the world. / If you are able to practice it, / I will preach it to you.' / Then the king, hearing the sage's word, / Conceived great joy in his heart / And thereupon followed him, / Providing for his needs, / Gathering fuel, fruit, and gourds, / And in season reverently offering them. / Keeping the Wonderful Law in my heart, / Body and mind were unwearied; / Universally for all living beings / I diligently sought the Great Law, / Not indeed for my own sake, / Not for the delight of the five desires. / So I, king of a great domain, / By zealous seeking obtained this Law / And at last became a buddha. / Now, therefore, I preach it to you."

COMMENTARY *Coveted not earthly pleasures.* The phrase "earthly pleasures" refers to what is termed "the delight of the five desires" later in the verse, that is, the pleasures of the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. To covet earthly pleasures means to live in insatiable pursuit of the pleasures of the five senses: to see beautiful things, hear pleasing sounds, smell fragrant odors, taste delicious foods, and touch pleasant textures. To want these pleasures is natural, and there is nothing wrong with them; but if we pursue them insatiably, the inevitable outcome will be disappointment and suffering.

We cannot gain true happiness if we are so preoccupied with sensory pleasure that we forget the pursuit of the most important human pleasure—spiritual pleasure. What is more, when everyone is absorbed in greed for sensory pleasure, invariably greed clashes with greed, giving rise to discord and conflict. This, in fact, is the root cause of all social strife.

In that the desire for sensory pleasure is natural, we cannot repudiate it; what is wrong is to crave such pleasure.

It is craving that brings unhappiness to both individuals and society. This is what the Buddha emphasizes over and over in his teaching. Those with high social status and great power should practice even more self-restraint than ordinary people, but the reality is just the opposite. The king was in a position to pursue “the delight of the five desires” to his heart’s content, but not only did he refrain from doing so, he even gave up his throne in the quest for a way to save all humankind. If people today could acquire even a fraction of this spirit, what a paradise the world would become!

TEXT The Buddha said to all the bhikshus: “The former king was myself and the sage at that juncture was the present Devadatta himself. Through the good friend Devadatta I was enabled to become perfect in the Six Paramitas, in kindness, compassion, joy, and indifference, in the thirty-two signs, the eighty kinds of excellence, the deep golden-hued [skin], the ten powers, the four kinds of fearlessness, the four social laws, the eighteen [special] unique characteristics, the transcendent powers of the Way, the attainment of Perfect Enlightenment, and the widespread saving of all the living—all this is due to the good friend Devadatta.”

COMMENTARY Most of the qualities and attributes of the Buddha listed in this passage have been discussed in earlier installments. For “kindness, compassion, joy, and indifference,” see the November/December 1997 issue; for “the thirty-two signs” and “the eighty kinds of excellence,” see the September/October 1992 issue; for “the ten powers,” see the July/August 1992 issue; for “the four kinds of fearlessness,” see the July/August 1992 issue; and for “the eighteen [special] unique characteristics,” see the September/October 1999 issue.

• *The four social laws.* These are the four virtues that enable the Buddha and the bodhisattvas to guide and instruct people in the Way through gentle means, accepting and guiding them with tolerance and compassion. The first social law is donation. The second, kind speech, refers to the ability to discern people’s feelings and teach them in easily understood language that will appeal to them. The third, helpful conduct, means benefiting people through the true Law. And the fourth, mutual service, means acting with people in order to guide them to do good.

In short, the four social laws refer to the gentle approach (*samgraha*) to instructing people in the Way, the exact opposite of the harsh approach known as “subduing” (*abhibhava*). The latter is sometimes necessary when dealing with people who are steeped in evil, highly recalcitrant, or adhering rigidly to false teachings; but the orthodox means of leading people to salvation is the gentle approach, as we can see from the fact that this passage, which enumerates almost all the qualities and attributes of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, makes no mention of “subduing.”

Of course correcting others’ wrong views is an essential part of teaching and spreading the Law, and in certain circumstances this calls for harshness. But “in certain circumstances” is the key phrase; this method is to be used only when truly necessary. In other words, the harsh approach is the exception rather than the rule. To think otherwise—to consider “subduing” the main bodhisattva practice and to make it one’s chief approach—is clearly a perversion of the Buddha Way.

Consider the many statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Their faces are always gentle, replete with compassion and tolerance. Some of their attendants, fierce deities and heavenly generals charged with the task of destroying false beliefs and protecting the Law, have angry visages, but never the buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves. This is evidence that the gentle approach of tolerance and compassion is the main Way of the Buddha.

We too must aspire to the state of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Of course, people’s temperaments differ and society is highly complex. One person in a hundred or in a thousand may have the role of a fierce deity or a heavenly general. But we must bear in mind that this anger always springs from compassion and is brought to bear as a last resort. In short, the ideal state to which we aspire as practitioners of the Buddha Way is buddhahood, and our basic approach to instructing others must be the gentle approach of tolerance and compassion.

• *Good friend.* There are many different kinds of good friends: friends who share our joys and sorrows, friends who comfort and encourage us when we are suffering, friends who self-sacrificingly help us when we are in need, and so on. But the best kind of friend is the one who opens our eyes to the correct way to live. This kind of friend is a rare treasure; and very often such a friend, when encountered, does not appear in the guise of what the world regards as a good friend but rather in the form of a hateful rebel or rival. Devadatta was that kind of good friend.

Whether we respond to a hateful rebel or rival with loathing or, suppressing our negative feelings, use him or her as a means to self-elevation is what sets apart the ordinary person and the sage. Shakyamuni, of course, was the latter. That is why he could praise and give thanks for the good friend Devadatta, who acted so treacherously and so egregiously flouted the Law. This is something we ordinary people can hardly hope to emulate; we can only bow our heads before the Buddha’s great magnanimity and his deep wisdom.

To be continued

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.