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# DHARMA WORLD

## For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue

CONTENTS

### Religion and Prayer





Cover image: Abinitio Design

The Spiritual Language of Each Human Being 17

Religion Can Unite People and Alleviate Alienation 21

Buddhism: The Way to Dialogue 35

The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Modern Commentary 42

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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# Prayer Brings Out the Buddha-Nature in Yourself and Others

by Hiroe Kikuchi

In this world, some problems are simply beyond our power to solve. Indeed, our world seems to be just the sort of place where things do not work out in the way we planned. When we come up against trouble without remedy in this contrary world of ours, for many of us there is only one recourse in the face of the inevitable—prayer. The fact that we pray may be considered as evidence of our belief in the action of invisible gods and buddhas. I think that we pray because, deep in the bottom of our hearts, we firmly believe in the existence of the gods and buddhas who have given each of us life and continue to watch over us. However, prayer does not mean just asking the gods and buddhas to save us or grant our wishes.

In the case of Buddhists, from the depths of our prayers for salvation, a state of mind emerges in which we are willing to leave everything to the discretion of the Buddha. This means that we are ready to place our spirits in the Buddha's hands and act in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. The results of such acts tend to throw even greater light on those teachings, and our own spirits begin to reflect that light as we start to live as the Buddha taught us.

Also, through prayer we can reach deeper levels of introspection and loosen our attachments, and this gives us peace of mind. Studying the Dharma also helps us progress toward abandoning our own subjective values and accepting the Buddha's worldview as a natural part of our existence. This helps us recognize that even in the here and now we have already been granted salvation. This recognition gives rise to gratitude for the gift of life, and the prayers we raise to the gods and buddhas become prayers of thanks.

All the various religions of the world include prayer and worship as parts of everyday life. In the case of Rissho Kosei-kai, members carry out regular morning and evening sutra chanting and devotional services, which can be said to correspond with the daily prayer practices of other religions. In the morning we sit before our home Buddhist altars, pray to the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni, and offer prayers of thanks to our parents and ancestors who transferred the precious gift of life to us. In the evening we reflect on what we said and did during the day, and offer prayers of repentance and gratitude to the people we encountered. Performing these devotions nurtures compassionate hearts that sincerely desire to transfer to others any merit gained through practicing the Buddha's teachings, and this is what brings salvation to ourselves.

Rissho Kosei-kai also carries out what we call the Donate-a-Meal Movement, in which members skip a meal and donate its cost to help those who are suffering. This movement is grounded in the spirit of feeling the pain of others; it is essentially an offering of sympathy for the sorrows and suffering of people affected by poverty or armed conflict and of prayers that happiness will come to all people of the world. To further members' understanding of the significance of the movement, field trips are organized mainly for young people to let them meet the people involved and see for themselves how the activities supported by the fund are progressing on-site. Many young people who go on these tours learn by direct observation why there is a world peace movement.

Writer Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933) breathed life into the teaching of the Lotus Sutra in his many poems and children's stories. One of his best-known statements is: "Unless the world as a whole can achieve happiness, there can be no happiness for an individual." All of us possess the buddha-nature, that is, the spirit that makes us sincerely wish to help others. The Donate-a-Meal Movement involves everyday actions in the context of the family or local community that are essentially prayers for the happiness of people around the world, and this serves as one way to help us awaken to the buddha-nature in ourselves and in others. This is our peace movement, and what makes it work is hearts that are praying for the happiness of the whole world.

The annual Week of Prayer for World Peace, held in October, started out as a series of yearly events held by various religions around the world to pray for world peace, and Rissho Kosei-kai also participates in this movement. If all the various religions truly pursued the aims of religion, world peace would finally be achieved. However, in reality, religious differences still fuel unending conflicts in many regions of the world. It is important to transcend the confines of religions or religious sects to pray together, because through such prayer, people can awaken to the fact that, even though we might have different viewpoints, we are all human beings, living proof of the precious gift of life, and thus we can share a common desire for the happiness of all the people of the world and work together toward that end. As people one by one build up peace in their hearts through prayer, in time a great tidal wave of peace will be created—this is the hope that drives us on. ❑

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# Scripture and Prayer

by Joseph S. O'Leary

*Today our spiritual reading of scriptures requires a critical discernment between what is obsolete in the old texts and what can still speak to us and challenge us.*

Sacred scriptures are a terrifically unwieldy inheritance from the past. Even the most beloved scriptures—be it the Gospel of Luke or the Bhagavad Gita—will have many problematic aspects: fantastic and incredible incidents, morally shocking claims, extreme remoteness from present outlooks. I wish to propose that scriptures really exist as scriptures only when they are being used by the community today, and used in such a way as to demonstrate their wholesome efficacy as skillful means. They are "inspired" and "inerrant" only when the community uses them in an inspired and unerring way. This means that scriptures are prayer texts and exist as such only when they are being recited, sung, or listened to contemplatively, and when they elicit a response of prayer from the community. Such a take on scriptures is the antidote to fundamentalism, which fetishizes the dead letter of a scripture, manhandling it with such violent purpose that it never gets a chance to breathe, to become a vehicle of the "Spirit that gives life" (2 Cor. 3:16), and to open up the wide horizons of prayer.

The prayerful appropriation of scripture includes a dimension of critical discernment, as we see already in the way it quietly overcomes fundamentalist tendencies. One way that scripture was handled prayerfully, discerningly, in the past was by the use of allegory. This could lend deep significance even to the most unpromising texts. It could smooth away the scandal caused by other texts, such as those recording divinely sanctioned genocides (Num. 31, 1 Sam. 15), and now be read as spiritual tales about Christ's conquest of evil passions. Today we have a more realistic grasp of the historical background of scriptures, and our spiritual reading of scriptures takes on a critical discernment between what is obsolete in the old texts and what can still speak to us and challenge us. This discernment is already implicit in the selection the community makes of texts for actual use. Vast tracts are left to the curiosity of scholars, while particularly meaningful texts are given prominence, often becoming familiar landmarks in the life of the community.

The prayerful reception of scripture also implies critical discrimination in that it is a struggle to overcome oppressive religious ideas and to know God or the Buddhist Dharma as forces of liberation. Zen meditation is perhaps the most famous form of critical prayer, for it exposes the very texture of religious thinking to a serene analysis, bringing it back to bedrock reality again and again. "If you meet the Buddha, slay the Buddha!" The burden of false religious perceptions, coming from obsolete or misunderstood scriptures, must be overcome so that the true perceptions these scriptures convey can be recovered. Scriptures are themselves critical interventions within their traditions—consider the role of the Gita within the *Mahabharata*, and more generally within Indian spirituality, or consider how in the vast library of books we call the Bible, later authors and redactors are constantly correcting the work of earlier ones, led by a deeper grasp of the divine as liberating. If a history of the Mahayana sutras can ever be written, it will reveal not only how the Mahayana in general corrects or enlarges earlier Buddhist vision but also how among these sutras themselves and among the earlier and later layers of a given sutra, such as the Lotus Sutra, this critical self-corrective dialectic is going on, led by prayerful attention.

## Prayer of Petition

The simplest and most basic form of prayer is petition. Indeed the Greek word for prayer, *euchē* (more commonly *proseuchē* in New Testament usage), means precisely a wish or demand (though it was originally a cultic word, carrying

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Then the Lord Answered Job out of the Whirlwind, *from William Blake's* Illustrations of the Book of Job, *published in 1825.*

also the sense of "vow"). In the Synoptic Gospels, prayer of petition is the only kind of prayer Jesus teaches, and he urges strongly that the disciples should never give up bothering God with their requests. This may seem a far cry from the mindful attention taught by Zen, but in fact prayer of petition can lead one further than one expects, opening up horizons of wisdom.

Humans are always in a situation of need, want, suffering. Prayer of petition lights up this situation, makes one better acquainted with the First Noble Truth. Then it connects one with one's fellow sufferers in a bond of compassion, as in the case of the woman who came to the Buddha asking to have her child restored to life, only to discover that death is universal and that all of her neighbors had suffered similar bereavement. Prayer of petition sets right one's relations to friends and enemies, establishes a perspective, brings one close to a God's-eye view of things, to a sense of harmony with the loving purposes of the Creator. Texts for such prayer abound in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, notably in the Psalms. In Mahayana scriptures, bodhisattvas live by the petition "May all living beings be free from suffering." Here prayer for others becomes an act of devoting oneself to others. Prayer of petition thus develops into something like practice of the four Brahma-abodes (*brahmavihāra*) of early Buddhism: benevolence or loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

Equanimity would be called in Christian terms "resignation to the will of God." Prayer may not win what it begs, but it may enable one to bear with the lack of it, turning a loss into spiritual gain. Yet the Bible does not urge easy reconciliation, the cool Stoic idea of prayer as accord with an impersonal destiny; angry complaint against a highly personalized God fills long chapters in the Book of Job. Perhaps one might speak of a pedagogy of trust: a naive childlike trust in the Father who will grant all of one's wishes is the beginning of a path that ends in Job's awe before the inscrutable but still trustworthy God, who speaks from the heart of the whirlwind. Job would never have made that progress unless he had the freedom to struggle with God, in questioning and even revolt.

In Buddhist piety, too, a childlike belief in Kannon, who reaches out to help everyone everywhere, may ripen into an internalization of the bodhisattva spirit, so that to pray is to become one with Kannon, "perceiver of the world's cries," reaching out in imagination to all those in need. Buddhist prayer does not seem to involve a Job-like wrestling, though we see something like this in the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the Gita. Perhaps this is because Buddhism takes personalized representations of transcendent figures lightly. However, there is a wrestling in Buddhist prayer, reflected in the subtle dialectics of the sutras, whereby one learns to leave behind a childish clinging to substantial security as one becomes more thoroughly acquainted with the truths of impermanence, nonself, dependent co-origination, emptiness, and thus freer to think and act in a compassionate and enlightened way. Both the Bible and the Buddhist sutras offer a long apprenticeship in paths of spiritual thought, paths followed not in sophisticated cogitation but in the thorough enactment of each stage of thought in prayer and meditation.

Prayer is not a hit-or-miss affair, a technique that some-

times "works" and sometimes fails. "We know that the prayers offered by a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra will be answered just as an echo answers a sound, as a shadow follows a form, as the reflection of the moon appears in clear water, as a mirror collects dewdrops, as a lodestone attracts iron, as amber attracts particles of dust, or as a bright mirror reflects the color of an object" (Nichiren, *Kitō-shō*). Yet the certainty of prayer is shot through with uncertainty, just as one might take a medicine, confident in its virtues, but with no clear vision of what the effect will be. Even the simplest prayer of petition is a leap in the dark. For no matter how well our theology and religious culture have defined the images of those to whom the prayer is addressed—be it the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or the Sacred Heart of Jesus or the Blessed Virgin or Amida Buddha or the bodhisattvas Kannon or Jizō—the fact remains that all of these are invisible presences and that in the eyes of a skeptical observer we will seem to be holding colloquy with fantasies or talking to ourselves.

## Flimsy Rafts

It may be that mystics in former times had a more secure, unquestioning relationship to the addressee of their prayer. Saint Jean-Marie Vianney used to feel that when he prayed, it was Christ dwelling in him who was praying to the Father. Modern believers may tend, in contrast, to think of their gestures of prayer as a skillful means, effective and energizing, but of obscure import. It is clear that our images of the addressees of prayer are very largely the product of imagination and that our gesture of calling on these addressees is an act of confessed inadequacy, of which one might have to say, with a sigh of resignation: "It's the intention that counts." We boldly claim the space of imagination that the scriptures have opened for us and take up our dwelling therein. This enriches the resources of prayer immensely, and one is grateful for any useful props that can get prayer going. But we may also feel that our clutching at these scriptural traditions is a makeshift business, that they provide only a flimsy raft, liable to break down at any moment.

And yet the raft does seem to be navigable. Adopting the postures of prayer the scriptures prescribe, we sense that they connect us with a beyond. Just as most airborne travelers cannot explain what keeps a flimsy machine moving so powerfully through the vast sky, so we cannot explain why or how prayer works. The image of a divine ear turned to every prayer is very much at odds with our habitual secularized image of the cosmos. Yet we persist, persuaded that there are modes of reality to which prayer attunes us, and using for that purpose whatever traditions or methods come to hand.

Even if modern culture tends to wear down habits of prayer, whether individual or communal, a nostalgia for prayer remains, a sense that prayer puts us in touch with the core truth about ourselves and the world. "We are always praying in the depths of our soul," the philosopher Proclus claimed. If so, prayer is the native language of the soul, and when we are able to pray we feel we are coming home. The English poet George Herbert (1593–1633) caught this in his sonnet "Prayer":

> Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angels's age,
> God's breath in man returning to his birth,
> The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
> The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth. . . .
> Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
> The land of spices, something understood.

Scriptures claim to speak from that home ground, proclaiming the core truth about God and the soul, with a great panoply of stories and metaphors and hyperbolic claims. Contemporary prayer, in more critical and questioning style, will pick up the nub of those claims, internalize them in a quieter way, and thus give the scriptures a new lease on life under conditions vastly different from those of the ages of faith in which they were composed. Today we can see all scriptures in historical and interreligious perspective with unprecedented clarity. This vision is likely to impinge increasingly on the prayer life of believing communities. Scriptures are products of human cultures, vast textual machines creating a scenario enabling transcendent entities to speak to us and enabling us to speak to them. Viewed from one aspect, all of this is a "supreme fiction"; viewed from another, it is a rich reservoir of skillful means, energizing and liberating the human spirit when put into practice, and conveying a sense of a gracious power at work in our lives.

Some people are afraid that the fantastical worlds of scripture involve them in magical thinking, and they seek to replace prayer with a mental hygiene, simply attending to the indubitable phenomena that present themselves to consciousness. Prayer then becomes basic mindfulness, and ideas and words flowing from religious imagination are set aside. The accompanying physical gestures are no longer a ploy to call the attention of deities but become a wholesome exercise justified by its benefits to mind and body. A humanitarian value is added through the cultivation of positive mental attitudes.

But even such a minimalist idea of prayer lies open to epiphanies that fill one with joy or enlightenment and that are a kind of secular analogue of what believers experience when they are addressed and claimed by the words of a scripture. The flamboyancy of scriptures is not all that far from the sobriety of mindfulness. Read in the key of mindfulness, scriptures become pointers to phenomena that are manifesting themselves, phenomena that are often of a "sublime" order or what Jean-Luc Marion calls "saturated phenomena," which overwhelm the receptive capacities of the rational mind. The words of the scripture can resound in one's mind with an unbearable pregnancy of meaning, or can flood the heart with light, as one is brought into accord with the spiritual phenomena they name. Perhaps it is

because of such experiences that scriptures continue to be treasured, rather than because of their dogmatic claims or their venerable traditional status.

Moreover, as beautifully translated or illustrated or set to music by artists throughout the centuries, scriptures are encrusted with familiar associations that give them a hold on the heart. Scriptures are landscapes shaped by practices of prayer, channels in which the waters of contemplation may again flow if one can find the right access to them. The barriers that translation and hermeneutics must struggle to overcome can sometimes seem so formidable that people prefer to rely on modern prayer texts, with the risk of enclosure in the pious jargon of a narrow, willful religious culture (that of Catholic devotions in the Tridentine centuries, for example). Scriptures justify their exalted status by the claim to be the very word of God, or the very word of the Buddha, but nowadays we are more likely to seek their justification in their practical worth as building up a habitable universe of faith. We are learning to use them and appropriate them freely, as powerful skillful means, putting aside old worries about canonicity, authority, or infallibility. If the essence of a scripture lies in its effective use, then one might say that a scripture is really a scripture only when it becomes prayer. ❑

*Frontispiece of one of Lotus Sutra scrolls. The painting in gold and silver ink depicts Shakyamuni preaching the Lotus Sutra on Divine Eagle Peak.*

# Zen and the Art of Prayer

by Ruben L. F. Habito

*All the classic forms of prayer are fully activated as we sit in silence, breathing in and breathing out. Zen practice in this way can be considered a form of prayer that does not have recourse to words.*

In my current role of guiding people in Zen practice at our Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas, Texas, I am sometimes asked in earnest by persons who come from a Jewish or Christian background: Is Zen prayer? At the orientation talks, beginning practitioners are taught the basics: Zen is about sitting in silence, paying attention to the dynamic reality of the present moment, and maintaining this mindful attention throughout the various activities of one's day-to-day life. If by *prayer* one means "conversations with God" (as the title of a bestselling series of books puts it), then the practice of Zen would not qualify as such. For one, it is not about conversation, since Zen "does not rely on words or letters."[1] For another, the term *God* is not in the operational vocabulary of Zen, which is agnostic and noncommittal on the matter of whether God exists or not.[2] So a firsthand answer to the question would appear to be: No, Zen is different from prayer.

But let us look at it from another angle. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul exhorts his followers to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks" (5:16–18). What does Paul mean by this injunction to "pray without ceasing"? Evidently this cannot be taken in the narrow sense of "conversing with God," or "reciting prayers," for a human being cannot conceivably continue in this activity without having to stop to do something else, like take a break, eat, drink, take a walk, meet friends, work to earn a livelihood, and other mundane things that human beings need to do from day to day.

There is the story of a young man who liked to chew bubble gum, who entered the seminary to begin studies for the priesthood. He continued the habit even in the seminary, where the daily schedule was a rather structured one, including an hour's time for formal prayer in the morning, and specific times allotted for doing chores, going to classes, studies, meals, rest and recreation, and so on. One day he went to Father Superior and asked, "Father, may I chew bubble gum while I am praying?" The answer was a big, resounding "NO, of course not!" The young man followed obediently, chewing bubble gum only outside of formal prayer time. After a few days, he went back to Father Superior, and this time asked, "Father, may I pray when I am chewing bubble gum?" And the answer was, "Of course, my son. That is an excellent thing to do. And by all means, pray not only as you chew bubble gum, but as you do your chores, your studies, and everything else besides!"

The wise father superior had an important point here. His answer to the seminarian's second question resonates with what Paul enjoined his followers about praying "without ceasing." Now one may ask: What's the difference between "chewing bubble gum while praying" and "praying as one chews bubble gum"? There is a Zen saying to the effect that "even a tiny hairsbreadth of a difference is the distance between heaven and earth," and here indeed is a tiny hairsbreadth that makes all the difference. The first case, chewing bubble gum while praying, is trying to do two things at the same time, thereby dividing one's attention and rendering the prayer into a halfhearted and ineffectual effort. The

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*Saint Paul preaching to the Thessalonians. Wood engraving by Gustave Doré.*

second case, praying as one chews bubble gum, is letting *the very act of chewing bubble gum* become one's prayer.

For further elucidation, let us take a look at traditional Catholic teaching on different kinds of prayer, given in Sunday school catechism to children as well as to adults learning about the Catholic faith. Prayer, the instruction goes, can be of four kinds: praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and petition.

What is the prayer of praise? A most common form of this kind of prayer is the use of words to extol the goodness and the glories of the Holy, unnameable One: "I will sing your praises, for You are good. You are great. You are holy." Irenaeus of Lyons, a second-century Christian theologian, suggests another way of giving praise, in his famous saying, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." In other words, the greatest praise we human beings can give to that "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) is by living our humanity to the full, being *fully there*, from moment to moment as we go through the various ups and downs of our human life on this earth. Getting up in the morning, taking breakfast, going to work, taking a walk, taking a rest, standing up, sitting down, laughing, crying, making love, chewing bubble gum. Cultivating an attitude of paying attention in and through the various events of our day-to-day life lifts up everything we think, say, and do to become a prayer of praise, without using words to say it as such. Sitting in silence, just breathing in and breathing out, cultivating full attention in each here and now, is a magnificent way of embodying this prayer of praise.

The prayer of thanksgiving arises in our hearts when something good comes our way and our most natural human response is to say "Thank you, thank you!" But more than mere words, we can convey this gratitude through the way we live our lives and the way we comport ourselves toward that One to whom gratitude is owed. "Don't talk of love, show me," Eliza Doolittle sings in *My Fair Lady*. In the same way, we may repeat the words *thank you* or a variety of the same a thousand times, but it would not be as meaningful if that gratitude did not become manifest in our life and action. Living out its implications in our daily life and in making choices that set our entire life along this direction of gratitude is a much more cogent way of embodying the prayer of thanksgiving. The practice of sitting in silence can indeed be a powerful experience of this gratitude simply beholding the wonder and goodness of things just as they are: trees stand tall, flowers bloom, rain falls. A cool breeze blows on a moonlit night. A dog barks. A bird chirps. "Flocks of birds and herds of deer, / Oxen and sheep and goats and cows, / Soaring birds and darting fishes, / All that swims the paths of the seas" (Psalm 8)[3]. And the heart overflows with gratitude for all of this, for each and everything, just as it is.

A poem by the monk Saigyō (1118–90), said to have been composed as he was visiting a Shinto shrine, comes to mind. "Not knowing wherefore or why, / Tears of gratitude pour forth from my eyes." (My translation of "Nanigoto no owashimasu wo ba shiranedomo, / Katajikenasa ni namida koboruru.")

Another form of prayer is that of repentance. This is when we acknowledge that we have fallen short of the mark or when we admit that we have said, thought, or done things that we now come to regret. It is our selfishness and narrowness, our greed, anger, and ignorance, that make us think, say, or do things that hurt others and ourselves as well. So when we stop in our tracks, and in a moment of clarity, come to realize this fact, sincere repentance wells up from our hearts, moving us to ask for forgiveness. "Happy is the one who is forgiven, whose wound is healed. Happy the one restored to your harmony, in whose spirit there is no more deceit" (Psalm 32). Repentance is a big step beyond mere regret. Regret is a sentiment that comes when we realize we should have done otherwise, but it tends to stop there in bittersweet sentimentality; regret becomes genuine repentance, and becomes a prayer, as it envelops my whole being, moving me to ask forgiveness, and brings forth a resolve to make amends and never do such things again, ever.

A fourth, and most well-practiced, form of prayer is that of petition. Finite and needy beings as we are, we seek material and other kinds of things, so we ask for what we need or

want. Prayers of petition are offered not just for our own needs or wants but more often in behalf of others. A friend is sick, and we pray for healing. A friend has fallen into hard times, and we pray that he or she be given strength to get through those difficulties. Many of our fellow human beings live in situations of poverty and destitution and suffering, and we pray for their well-being, whoever and wherever they may be.

We find this kind of prayer in early Buddhist scriptures, notably in the Metta Sutta, or Treatise on Loving-kindness. One who follows the path of the Buddha exclaims: "May all beings be happy, may all beings be at ease." This is a prayer that underlies the very practice of sitting in silent meditation, as one does so not only for one's own awakening and liberation from suffering but also for the awakening and ultimate liberation of all beings, beginning with oneself.

There is a fifth form of prayer that we need to recognize. This is the prayer Jesus himself expressed as he was dying on the cross, his body wracked with tremendous pain, his spirit weighed down to the lowest pits, with the world's suffering and violence and evil weighing down upon him, upon his very body: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22). This is a cry of anguish of one who is at his limits, in near despair, with no one to turn to except to cry out, "O, why have you forsaken me?" You may have experienced this kind of situation in your own life, or if not, may come to it sooner or later. This is a point where everything we have ever held dear is taken away from us, as happens to Job in the Hebrew scriptures, and we feel so isolated and dejected. Or our eyes may be opened to the unbearable suffering and injustice borne by so many of our fellow human beings in this world, and in empathy we can only cry out to the heavens, "Why, why?" "Out of the depths I cry. . . ." (Psalm 130). If we look at what is happening in the world today, we will see so many things that evoke this cry from the depths. In this actual world we live in, with all the technological advances we can all be proud of, we are informed by the World Health Organization that every year some twelve million children, which is around thirty thousand each day, die from malnutrition and related causes that could otherwise have easily been taken care of. Millions are forcibly made to leave their homes in different parts of the world, due to political, economic, social, and other causes, and become refugees living in dehumanizing circumstances. So many of our fellow human beings suffer and die through violence in many forms, due to racial, ethnic, political, and even religious factors. People seeking basic rights and demonstrating for those rights are gunned down by authorities like animals. We cannot even begin to imagine the anguish of those confronted by the violent death of a loved one in these situations. We are left speechless, in deafening silence, with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the face of all of this. What can we do but cry out in anguish from the depths of our being: "Why, Oh why have you forsaken us?"

As one sits in silence in Zen practice, this sense of solidarity with the suffering and pain of all sentient beings wells up and envelops one's entire being. The practitioner can only melt and turn into an unceasing flow of tears, tears, tears. But at the same time as one lets go and gives way to this flow of tears, something arises from deep within, assuaging the tears. It is the voice of the bodhisattva in us all, pronouncing the four vows:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to cut them.
The Dharma gates are innumerable. I vow to master them.
The Enlightened Way is unsurpassable. I vow to embody it.

As one utters these vows, the sense of powerlessness is transformed into a great resolve, that is, to give one's entire being, in all that one has and all that one is, toward the alleviation of the suffering of all, not (yet) necessarily in some grandiose scheme of a global systemic change that will fix everything and set it straight, but in and through little thoughts, words, and acts of random kindness and compassion offered to each and every one encountered in daily life.

Bridgeman / PPS

Death Taking a Child, *from the Dance of Death series, engraved by Hans Lützelburger, ca. 1526–28. At the anguish of those confronted by the death of a loved one, we are left speechless.*

Photo by Toshinobu Takeuchi / Haga Library

*Young monks seated in* zazen *at Eihōji, a Japanese Rinzai Zen temple in Gifu Prefecture.*

In sum, then, all of those classic forms of prayer—praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and petition—and lamentation as well, are fully activated right there as we sit in silence, breathing in and breathing out, though we may not explicitly say or even think about them as such. Zen practice in this way can be considered an *apophatic* form of prayer, that is, one that does not have recourse to words. This is in contrast with *kataphatic* forms, those that make full use of words in expressing their intent.

An inevitable question then comes: *To whom* is this prayer addressed? As noted in the beginning, Zen is agnostic and noncommittal with regard to the existence or nonexistence of God. If Zen practice is indeed a form of prayer, albeit an apophatic one, to whom then is this prayer addressed?

For this, I turn to my friend Norman Fischer, Zen master and poet.

> For some years I had been giving thought to the question of who the audience of my poetry actually was. I came to see that I was not writing for ordinary persons, not for colleagues, not for poetry lovers. The person to whom my poems actually seemed to be addressed was someone much more silent and much more profoundly receptive than any human being could possibly be. This person wasn't a person at all. It was nobody, nothing, and it wasn't anywhere or at any time. It was even beyond meaning. So poetry is important to me not because it gives me a chance to express myself or to communicate, but because it is an encounter with that which is both close to me I can't see it and so far away I can never reach it.[4]

In conclusion, we can perhaps say that prayer is to ordinary people what poetry is to poets—the art of life itself.

**Notes**

1. This is one of the four marks of Zen. The other three are as follows: Zen is a special transmission outside of scriptures; it is transmitted from mind to mind; it is about seeing into one's true nature and becoming awakened (that is, a buddha).

2. This noncommittal stance is to be distinguished from a robust atheistic position that actively denies the existence of God. Following the Buddha's own way of dealing with metaphysical questions as depicted in the famous parable of the poisoned arrow, Zen would simply maintain silence as a response to the question.

3. Translations from the Psalms are from Norman Fischer, *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms* (New York: Viking Compass, 2002).

4. Fischer, *Opening to You,* xx.

# The Islamic Concept of Worship and Prayer

by Kazuko Shiojiri

*A scholar of the theology of Islam describes the Islamic view of humanity and the role of worship in that faith and points out that it is possible to see in the religion's fundamental beliefs a common concept with those held by Judaism and Christianity.*

Prayer is an appeal to, or a dialogue with, the object of our religious devotion, and for the believer it can be service or practice. Although the words used and how prayer is conducted have a unique quality that is linked to the view of humanity presented by a particular religion, I believe there is a common spirituality in all believers, those who do the praying, that supersedes the framework of dogma and tradition in any religion.

In Judaism, which has the belief of the Jews' being the chosen people, the daily morning and evening *Shema* prayer services recite, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God! The Lord is One!" declaring repeatedly that God is the God only of the people of Israel, the chosen people. In the Christian faith, the representative Lord's Prayer begins with the words "Our Father, Who art in Heaven . . . ," taking a direct, personal tone, with God as a "supreme father figure." In Islam, on the other hand, the most fundamental prayer is Sūra [chapter] 1 of the Qur'an, which begins, "In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. . . ."

The complete text of this prayer is:

*In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
Master of the Day of Judgement,
Only You do we worship, and only You do we implore for help.
Lead us to the right path,
The path of those You have favoured
Not those who have incurred Your wrath or have gone astray.*

This short prayer can be compared to the Lord's Prayer of Christianity, but it expresses the essence of Islam. It is frequently said that Islam is a monotheist religion with a severe God, but from the beginning God (Allah) is described as having an existence suffused with love. "Lord of the Worlds" signifies that God is the creator of the world and the entire universe, and "Master of the Day of Judgement" contains the warning that he will also be the supreme judge of people on the Last Day of Judgment.

If one were to concisely express the distinguishing characteristics of Islam (*al-Islām*), they would include "absolute obedience to God," "equality," and "mutual aid." The original meaning of the Arabic word *islām* is "obedience," and so the term that means "absolute obedience to God" became the name of the religion. Claiming that *islām* also means "peace" and "calm," one hears Muslim followers and scholars asserting that Islam is the religion of peace, but that is not the original or essential meaning of the word. To be certain, *islām* does contain a sense of "enforcing peace" or "subjugating," but when the Japanese think of peace they generally do not think of subjugation. What this interpretation points to is this: If humanity absolutely submits to the laws of the all-surpassing God, wars and rebellions will disappear from the world and God's will shall prevail widely.

When we hear the phrase "absolute obedience to God," we might feel it means stubborn subordination or blind

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obedience, but it is the same creed as Judaism's and Christianity's "love of God" and "belief in God," or Buddhism's "absolute refuge in the Buddha." By submitting to God and following his teaching, human beings can save their souls, and their minds can attain tranquillity.

Accordingly, it is worship and prayer that embodies, for both mind and body, "absolute obedience to God." In Islam, there is a clear distinction between obligatory prayer (*salāt*) and private prayer (*duʿā'*). Obligatory prayer must follow a formula and be carried out in Arabic, but private prayers do not have to be in Arabic; use of the mother tongue of the believer is permitted.

## The Role of Worship

In Islam, obligatory prayer is performed ritually at five prescribed times of day. The fundamental creed and religious rites of Islam can be summed up in the phrase "Six Articles of Faith, Five Pillars (Duties)." The Six Articles of Faith are belief in the existence of God, belief in the angels, belief in the holy books, belief in the prophets, belief in the resurrection, and belief in God's plan (destiny). The Five Pillars are the fundamental religious duties incumbent on all Muslims—the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Obligatory prayer is ranked second among them.

Photo by Peter Sanders / Haga Library

*Muslims celebrating the end of Ramaḍān at Makkah, Saudi Arabia.*

The five daily times at which obligatory prayer must be performed are sunset (*maghrib*), evening (*'ishā'*), dawn (*fajr*), noon (*ẓuhr*), and afternoon (*'aṣr*), while facing in the direction of Makkah (Mecca), in Saudi Arabia. Valued above all is the group prayer service held in mosques at noon on Fridays. Following a prescribed purification of the body, worship is conducted with established procedures and gestures, and the words recited are also established, with the first Sūra of the Qur'an always being recited. As long as prayer is performed facing in the direction of Makkah, it can be done anywhere. Group prayer at a mosque is often led by the prayer leader (imam), and everyone, leader and congregation, faces in the direction of Makkah, the holiest city in Islam.

The fact that obligatory prayer is conducted at set times of day on the basis of prescribed ritual indicates that in their prayers believers are attached to the greater community of Islam. When, at the end of formal prayer, they look to the right and the left and recite, "May peace be with you," one can say this has the meaning of praying for peace for fellow believers and of raising awareness of equality and solidarity.

The sight of Muslims of a particular region gathering to worship in a prescribed manner at a set time might seem odd to many people in Japan, where attachment to religion has greatly decreased. In Judaism and Christianity, however, prayer services conducted following a prescribed form are not unusual. Even today, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches follow a church calendar and hold Sabbath services on Sundays. Even if two people do not speak each other's language, they will be able to worship together, if the liturgy and gestures always follow established forms.

Obligatory prayer in Islam is conducted throughout the world in Arabic only not just because Arabic is the sacred language of God but also because it links Muslims throughout the world in a community of faith through prayer. Even Muslims who do not speak Arabic learn the words used in worship. This is much like the way in which ordinary believers chant the sutras in Sanskrit in Buddhist services. Words that are not always understood are not a problem for devoted believers.

## Private, Voluntary Prayer

In addition to the obligation to worship five times a day, Islam has many types of voluntary prayer that are considered to achieve more merit than obligatory prayer.

Private prayers can be expressed in many forms, such as requesting something from God, asking for protection, and offering thanks. They resemble obligatory prayer in having a certain degree of formality, but believers can freely choose the words, the number of times the prayers are recited, and when they are said, and can pray in their own language. Although private prayer is often offered immediately following obligatory prayer, the believer can choose other times.

*Worshipers at the Karamanli Mosque in Tripoli, Libya, purifying themselves before prayer. Photo by author.*

Generally, private prayers are performed with the elbows slightly bent and pressed to the sides, the hands lifted to chest level with the palms open and turned upward. When the prayer is finished, the palms lightly stroke the cheek from the forehead down.

Although God is generally the object of the prayers, in regions where saints are popular and revered many pilgrimages are made to shrines, and prayers may be offered to a familiar saint rather than to a transcendent God.

There is also a type of prayer that is somewhat of a change from the form of obligatory prayer. This is Nafl prayer, said as an extra prayer following the obligatory prayer. There are also voluntary prayers said in the middle of the night, prayers said every night during the fasting in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (Ramaḍān), prayers for rain, and some others. There are also special prayers, such as those recited during solar or lunar eclipses, prayers for success on the battlefield, and funeral prayers said before the deceased is buried.

In the prayers particular to Sufism, a mystical form of Islam, there is repetition of the beautiful names of God in a short chant (*dhikr*), or a master and disciple face each other and pray to deepen meditation.

## The Spirit of Praying Together

As in Judaism and Christianity, Islam holds that human beings are creatures of God and that all things in nature and the entire universe were made by a single creator, working alone. God created humankind as his representative or steward on earth, with the role of abiding by God's will. But God likewise assigned to nature the role of symbolizing the existence of the Creator. In other words, all natural phenomena, including the existence of humankind, are proof of the existence of a creator, a divinity that transcends the human intellect.

This view of humanity is similar to those found in Christianity and Judaism, which along with Islam are the Abrahamic religions that have a shared tradition. One can also see a common concept in their teaching of God's love and other fundamental beliefs. Islam's doctrines of "equality" and "mutual assistance" are not so different from Christianity's teachings that all human beings are equal in the sight of God and that one should love one's neighbor. In Islam, however, "love of one's neighbor" is prescribed in the form of the third obligatory act of worship, almsgiving (*zakāt*), a practice that funds mutual assistance for believers.

Today a large number of Muslims are inevitably caught up in the disruptions and conflicts caused by the confusing policies of international society. Through worship and prayer they obtain the strength to accept their harsh fate and face another day together, shoulder to shoulder, under the rule of an omnipotent, all-knowing God. Whether obligatory or private, prayer relieves people's spirits, strengthens ties with fellow believers, and is a method of affirming love of one's neighbors. Whether people believe in a special creed or not, it can generally be said that they pray for happiness and to live another day. The worship and prayers of Islam are no different from ours.

For there to be mutual understanding and a peaceful world through dialogue between cultures and religions, we must spare no effort in making it objectively understood that the harsh criticism, filled with ill will, toward Islam and Muslims that seems to appear daily in the mass media is wrong. Considering the suffering and sorrow of all innocent followers of the Islamic faith, I want to emphasize the need for a spirit of praying together. ❑

* *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version,* trans. Majid Fakhry (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1997), 5.

*The Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque) in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by author.*

# Prayer in Spiritual Caregiving

by Vimala Inoue

*When we feel hostile toward the person we are trying to love and care for, we need prayer as a way to forgive ourselves and give ourselves time to let kind feelings revive within us.*

When people are caught up in a maelstrom of suffering, they pray to be relieved of their pain and released from that suffering. In the same way, when we see the suffering of someone else, our hearts grieve and we pray that the person's suffering will be relieved. In such a situation, while we are of course hoping that the other person's distress will be alleviated, we are also wishing for a return to peace of mind for ourselves. In this essay, I would like to examine prayer as an expression of the feelings of a person who is empathizing with the spiritual pain of someone else by keeping watch over the sufferer and hoping the pain can be eased.

In actual situations where spiritual care is being given, quite often keeping watch is the only care possible, although caregivers may be feeling aggrieved at the client's pain. Even though caregivers may be aware of and embrace their own spiritual pain, which arises from being able to do nothing but keep watch, just the act of empathizing with the client—not avoiding the person but staying with him or her—constitutes a kind of prayer that transcends words and defies description.

This kind of prayer, which arises when the client is not left alone but is watched over by someone sharing the sufferer's presence, creates a kind of contained space or vessel of warmth and security. Within this spiritual vessel of security, clients (even if unconscious) can reencounter themselves on a deep level, call into account the meaning of their lives, and search for words and images appropriate to their own personal truth. Meeting with one's true self, attempting to accept that truth, and groping toward an appropriate expression of that truth constitute the client's prayer.

Such prayers are improvised, unlike the formulaic or ceremonial prayers of religion, and can be seen as prayers of spiritual meaning.

## Origins of the Hospice Movement

Such spiritual care has its origins in the hospice movement. Dame Cicely Saunders (1918–2005) is recognized as the founder of the modern hospice movement (she was elevated to knighthood in 1979). She set up the first modern hospice, Saint Christopher's Hospice, in London in 1967. Starting out as a nurse and qualified as a medical social worker, she became a doctor and studied the pain-relieving qualities of morphine. Ms. Saunders established the hospice movement based on three principles: (1) effective pain relief, (2) a team approach enabling whole-person/patient care aimed at a better quality of life for the patient, and (3) ongoing educational activities involving research and sufficient communication of results among staff to provide care suited to the individual needs of patients.

The practical implementation of the hospice movement consists of communication and care for patients based on these principles and is not dependent on the existence of buildings or other facilities. Spiritual care is an important part of whole-person/patient care stemming from these principles of the hospice movement and has in recent years attracted considerable attention.

The word *hospice* is derived from the Latin term *hospes,* which encompasses the meanings of both guest and host. *Hospes* expresses in just the one word the entire set of cyclical human relationships that involve giving and receiving, welcoming and being welcomed. Because there are those who receive, we can give, and I think that ideal care and communication occurs when the person receiving the care can do

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so without feeling ashamed or belittled. In this, many caregivers entrust themselves to the spirit of Christianity that recognizes the existence of God within other people and considers service to others acts of devotion to God. In such a situation, prayer directed at the God recognized within other people will be embodied as the performance of actual service and care.

### Prayer as Vessel for Embracing Ambivalence

In a different direction, the word *hospes* is also related to the word *hostis*, meaning enemy. When we attempt to accept other people just as they are, their existence effects a change in us, and we become a different person compared with who we were before. This can give rise to anger and aggressive impulses. Somehow, we come to regard as an adversary the person we were trying to accept and welcome. This internal battle of emotions is an unavoidable destiny for people involved in the work of trying to help others.

When we feel hostile toward the person we are trying to love, when we want to get away from or even harm the person, I think we need prayer as a way to forgive ourselves and give ourselves time to let kind feelings revive within us.

We have both the desire to be kind and the desire to hurt, the desire to be close and the desire to run away, but I believe that we can find a vessel or space in which we can catch, hold, and keep an eye on this kind of polarized emotional energy. In psychology this space is called an environment for accepting ambivalence, in Buddhism it is regarded as seeing things as they really are from the viewpoint of the Middle Path, and in Christianity it is expressed as an awakening to the love of God that forgives human sin.

Wisdom and powers of insight that are joined by loving-kindness are expressed in religion as compassion, the love of God, or unconditional love; these things are indispensable for prevailing in the emotional battlefield that is inevitably encountered in the work of caring for other people, and exercising them can be thought of as prayer. This is a kind of life-protecting prayer not unlike embracing, calming, and protecting from harm a small child who is throwing a terrific tantrum.

Those who care for others cannot survive harrowing clinical drama without this kind of prayer: by prayer in this context I mean approaching the client with a pure heart, understanding and accepting the client as he or she is, and tolerating both a reality that does not accord with your own wishes and your own imperfect self.

### Care as True Expression of Human Nature

From child care to terminal care—from the time the spirit enters the body until the time it leaves—people cannot survive without accepting the care of others. Compared with other animals, human infants are born relatively undeveloped, meaning that we are born into a state of absolute dependence and will be able to survive into maturity and acquire language and culture only if we receive care from other people. This was the evolutionary strategy developed by our species.


*A granddaughter comforting her grandfather in a hospital room, while her mother speaks to them.*

Professionals who give spiritual care in the course of watching by the deathbed come to hold the opinion that the human spirit has a tendency to try to solve any unsolved problems as the end of life approaches. These problems can usually be placed in five categories: (1) finding the meaning of life, (2) forgiving oneself and forgiving others, (3) saying "thank you" to those who have given one support, (4) saying "I love you" to loved ones, (5) saying good-bye.

The problems of clients who are exhibiting spiritual pain can often be identified by referring to these five categories in an attempt to see whether there remains something unresolved between the client and his or her family or friends. The spiritual pain that can prevent caregivers from being able to draw close to their clients' pain or cause them to burn out also tends to originate in these same kinds of unresolved life issues.

People can take good care of others only to the extent that they can take good care of themselves. The five categories mentioned above also serve to indicate in what areas we need to take good care of ourselves, take good care of others, and live better lives.

Dr. John Bowlby (1907–90), a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who advocated "attachment theory" in regard to the relationship between mother and child, said that the process through which an individual's personality is built up is the most important factor regulating how he or she will react later on in life to adverse conditions, especially rejection, separation, and loss. I find this suggestive of the connections between the beginning and ending of life.

If caring for others is an important part of being human, the spirit that gives rise to feelings of mutual sympathy and concern and acts of hands-on care must also be arising from the working of life itself rooted in true human nature. Working in the field of spiritual care has led me to think that prayer is in fact the working of the spirit rooted in this way in true human nature. ❑

# The Spiritual Language of Each Human Being

by Alberto Quattrucci

*Prayer as a source of peace is a complex theme. The circumstances in which we live make a difference. How can we be united in prayer, how can prayer be a source of peace for us?*

The first and the main "action" of each religion is prayer. Prayer, we can affirm, is the original act of the man and the woman of faith; it is what makes the difference between one religious experience and every other human intellectual, rational, or perceptive activity. Prayer, even if different according to various ritual attitudes and cultural traditions, is always the spiritual language of each human being. Everyone, young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, European or Asian, graduate or ignorant, everyone is always—until the last breath—able to express a personal prayer toward God or the Buddha or the Almighty. To pray is for all people the best activity to preserve their own humanity. Praying is what differentiates the human being from the beast.

When we talk about prayer, there is no doubt that it includes the one who is praying, the believer, and the one who listens, God. To man as the most perfect of God's creatures, created in his own image and his own likeness, has been given the ability and the freedom to communicate with his Creator. This communication starts with the same words the Creator taught him, like a real and good parent. The miracle in the creation of man is not his ability to talk but his ability to communicate in a conversation with God.

Rightly, then, prayer can be considered a conversation with God. The prayer, as conversation with the creator of the universe, is the biggest privilege that has been given to man.

Conversation implies dialogue, knowledge, trust, esteem, and so on, like any other relationship that we, as people, know and live every day. But not only this: Jesus taught his disciples to relate to God as their parent with the word "Father" (Matt. 6:9–13). The prayer, as conversation with the Creator, is, in the end, fellowship with the Father.

Let's imagine a group of primary school children when they meet face-to-face with the headmaster. They instinctively feel at the same time insecurity and fear, except one of them: he is the headmaster's son. Behind the figure of the headmaster, serious and sometimes strict, he sees the beloved person for him, his father. Headmaster and father; a strange combination, but for a child it is not complicated at all. His father is the headmaster, and the headmaster is his father; it's as simple as this.

What do we want to say with this?

God is our Creator, he is holy, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, and so on, but he is most of all our Father; it's as simple as this. In the Gospel, according to the Christian tradition, Christ tells those who are listening to him that to enter the kingdom of heaven they need to become like children (Matt. 18:2). The relationship with God asks first of all for honesty, simplicity, and confidence even from "grown-up" people.

God and the believer, the Creator and the creature, the Father and the child; God in his majesty becomes small and in his limitlessness becomes limited, in his transcendence becomes tangible, and this, brothers and sisters, becomes real through prayer. Prayer is man's cry to the Creator, it's his cry to the Father: "O Lord, God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee." This is the old prayer of

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the Psalms, according to the Jewish tradition. Man feels the compelling need to communicate with his Creator. His goal is to meet him; his completeness is the union with him; his longing is satisfied only in his presence.

We could think of man's pilgrimage on earth as a quest to find the Father, his goal being to come back to him, to stay near him. In this trip, a person is not alone. In his search for God, man is not lost: the Father himself is looking for the person. During his journey, the believer feels the help and the strength God is giving him, feels the courage and the support derived from him.

Prayer, as the strength of the believer, is rooted in this relationship of fatherly love. In prayer the believer turns to his heavenly Father, he feels his presence, he is confident that his prayer is being heard. He knows that the Father listens to all his sighs; he is convinced that even in frustration and despair his Father will be there to help and comfort him.

In prayer—in the Christian religious experience as in every other religious attitude—is hidden much love. Evagrio the Recluse considers prayer to be "the flower of kindness and of the freedom from anger." In prayer, mothers find the answer for their children, artists their inspiration, the faithful their strength. There is hidden the mystery of salvation, there is hidden God himself. In prayer we find what we have lost, the one we have been longing for. Here is wonderfully explained the mystery, and I believe we all will agree that the most beautiful prayers are those of children.

It's a bit strange, but every time we think back on things and concepts that we think are very familiar and clear for us, we find out the opposite!

We can ask ourselves: "What is prayer?" Is it a request, praise, or an obligation? We all agree that it is all of them. But I would not disagree if someone answers that prayer is also "the way." It helps us not only to ask properly, not only to learn some rules or to shape an interior discipline. In prayer all of these things can rightly be considered means through which we come to that which is most important: knowledge.

I would like to talk about prayer as knowledge, as an effort, as a quest of the believer to discover God, to know the Father as his parent. Our research is concrete; our journey has a concrete destination; the person we want to meet

*An international meeting organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Aachen, Germany, September 7–9, 2003. Some six hundred leaders of the world's major religions from fifty countries participated in the gathering held under the theme, "War and Peace: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue."*

is real and living. There the believer finds the security of his salvation, discovers the meaning of his life and of his existence, and feels the divine love and the eternal joy that cannot be compared with worldly feelings.

Rightly so, prayer directs us to the Creator, moves us closer to him, and keeps us in his presence. Through prayer we are illuminated and become light. For this reason prayer could be considered the greatest occupation, the most precious engagement, the most fully human activity. It guides us to knowledge, it reveals things in simplicity, and in it everything is hidden. Prayer lifts the believer from the depths of the earth to the heavenly realms. Prayer, as conversation with God, as fellowship, as a journey, as knowledge, is the motive of the believer, is his strength.

Mostly referring to the extraordinary and peculiar experience of the International Meetings—Peoples and Religions, promoted since 1987 by the Community of Sant'Egidio in order to continue to live and to spread the "spirit of Assisi" (the historic World Day of Prayer for Peace summoned by Pope John Paul II in 1986, in the city of Saint Francis), I would like to stress the significant and deep link that exists between "prayer" and "commitment to peace."

In all the yearly Appeals for Peace, proclaimed at the conclusion of each interfaith meeting promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio, it is very strongly remarked that religions are for peace and against every kind of war. We can read in the last Appeal (Cyprus, November 18, 2008) the following: "Regardless of their differences, our religious traditions strongly testify that a world with no spirit will never be human: they cry out that spirit and humanity should never be trampled on by war; they beg for peace. They want peace, they beg for it, they implore peace from God through prayer. Religions are aware that talking of war in God's name is meaningless and blasphemous. They are convinced a better humanity will never come from violence and terrorism. They do not share the pessimistic belief in the inevitable clash of religions and civilizations. Religions hope and pray that a true community of peace will be established among peoples and within humanity."

Thus prayer as a source of peace is a complex theme when we consider the circumstances in which we live. It certainly makes a difference if we live in Iraq, in the Palestinian territories, or in tranquil Nordic countries. But we all long for peace in our lives. How can we meaningfully pray together and be united in prayer, how can prayer be a source of peace for us?

In the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions, God is the orientation point of prayer. Praying is coming before God. We also have in common that peace is a name for God. God is Peace. But the peace of God is not tranquillity at a distance from a troubled world and our chaotic lives. The God of Peace is involved in our lives, in the matters of our world.

In the Buddhist tradition we can see that "hatred is never conquered by hatred; hatred can only be conquered by nonhatred." Buddhist prayer embodies the noblest healing power, coming from the Buddha's heart and the wishes of all living beings. In Buddhism, we speak of prayer as the great vow of the Buddha. In the Lotus Sutra, a Mahayana Buddhist sutra of the greatest importance to us, the Buddha makes a vow of his wish that all living beings attain buddhahood, awakening to a state of perfect freedom and working to help other beings. This wish is something that everyone possesses deep inside. Thus, the Buddha's vow is the same as the wish that springs forth from one's innermost being.

How, then, is the Buddha's vow related to peace? The Buddhist ideal state of perfect freedom, nirvana, is interpreted as harmony or peace. In this sense, the Buddha makes a vow that all living beings shall live in harmony. "Harmony, or peace, is essential for human life. The existence of all life depends on the crucial notion of harmony. Harmony is a hope that all human beings hold deep in their hearts." So prayer must be prayer for the overcoming of hatred and violence. With nonviolent attitudes, we should have reverence for our neighbors, even those who seem wicked, as in the case of enemies.

Where there exist injustice, social inequality, hatred, distrust, and vanity among nations that threaten world peace and where there is intolerance of other human beings, religions do their utmost to contribute to peace and avoid conflict. As such, every true religious experience cannot avoid participating in multinational dialogues concerning peace, freedom, brotherhood, love, and justice in society as well as between nations. This has been done so that it can enlighten people in the spiritual realm and serves the purpose of uniting people worldwide. We strive for dialogue between nations and vigorously promote the idea of human rights on a religious base. The unity of the human race springing from the archetypal couple of creation creates a fountain of the virtues of freedom, fairness, brotherhood, and justice in society. We believe that the murder of human beings by any means and especially by wars is contrary to their dignity and to the holiness of God. All human beings are sacred because they have been created in the image and likeness of God the Father. We thus seek to preserve and foster the common good of society, which sometimes may require that we render would-be aggressors harmless and unable to inflict suffering and pain, which are the result of wars they may perpetrate.

Wars and conflicts are to be condemned, as they bring injustice and evil with them, and should be avoided at all costs. Religions must be the custodians of peace, and peace is synonymous with justice. We underscore the fact that spiritual gifts depend to a large extent on human cooperation. The Spirit provides spiritual gifts when the human heart lifts itself toward God, when there is atonement, and when people request the justice of God in their lives.

Religions have to support peoples in all parts of the world who are deprived of peace and who are driven away from their homes because of their beliefs. Religions do not therefore hesitate to declare that they are totally against all forms of arms procurement and military buildup, because this in

itself will lead to the destruction of creation and remove all vestiges of human life. Especially nuclear war must be outlawed, not only because of millions of deaths that will inevitably result, but also because of the destruction of the environment. Nuclear war will result in never-before-witnessed disease and sickness and genetic changes that will afflict humanity and all life for centuries, so that forthcoming generations will live a life not worth having. Nuclear war will create a nuclear winter where the climate will change life on earth as we know it, and all life will perish.

I would like to underline something regarding the Christian and, more in general, the monotheistic religious traditions. God as the king of justice condemns any stance of humans toward fellow human beings that is inhumane. In his kingdom, which begins here on earth and has a spiritual character, there is no place for ethnic intolerance and hate, no matter what enemies may exist. We maintain that those who serve in the armed forces of nations are in truth the servants of freedom and security and can contribute to the common good of society at large. We pray that God will guide them in all their activities so that they may be honorable members of society. We condemn war, as it indiscriminately destroys towns and cities and lays waste to vast tracts of land while killing millions of people. It is a crime against God and humanity. The Christian faith, more specifically, believes that God created all the races from common blood and that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor freeman, male nor female, but all are equal in Jesus Christ. The church does not accept any division in any shape or form between the human races and their rights, which should be the same: all the inhabitants of the earth are equal.

In conclusion: if God is the orientation point of prayer, and God is Peace, how can we then come before him without being changed and transformed by him—into peace receivers and peacemakers? As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard used to say: "Prayer does not change God, but it changes those praying." Saint Francis of Assisi taught us to pray:

> Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
> Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
> Where there is injury, pardon;
> Where there is doubt, faith;
> Where there is despair, hope;
> Where there is darkness, light;
> And where there is sadness, joy. ❑



*Saint Francis of Assisi praying in the Church of San Damiano. Detail of a fresco painting by Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1266–1337) at the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Italy.*

# Religion Can Unite People and Alleviate Alienation

**An interview with Ms. Shirley Alphonse, spiritual leader-healer of the T'Sou-ke Nation**

*Ms. Shirley Alphonse visited Japan in June 2009 for cultural exchange with the Japanese people and to share T'Sou-ke tribe and Shinto ceremonies. She spoke and performed the T'Sou-ke smudge ritual on the University of Tokyo main campus and also at Tanashi Shrine in Tokyo. The following interview took place via e-mail after her around-the-clock schedule during her visit to Japan had ended.*

***Please tell us in detail about your role as a healer in your community.***

My role in the community is spiritual leader-healer. I do all the prayers for all the events concerning the T'Sou-ke Nation. I visit the homes, as was done in former times, without appointment times, as time allows. The people understand and accept this arrangement. I sit with the family when there is a death. I say prayers with the family and assist them in the decision making for the funeral arrangements. The funeral is held on the fourth day. A vigil is held in the evening before, which I preside at—if the family wishes. I also do the funeral the next day; otherwise I arrange to have a priest preside. I also do graveside burials, prayers, singing, blessings. I go to the homes to do cleansing and blessing of the entire house and have a prayer circle with the family. I sit with individual members to help them through grief or trauma by listening to them, and in the sharing I provide flower essences according to the need. The essences are supplied in dropper bottles. I do smudge circles for community gatherings. Cedar, sage, sweetgrass, and juniper are used in a shell specifically for this, and I use an eagle feather in a brushing motion to clear the aura.

***In a religious sense, we Buddhists believe that everything, both animate and inanimate, is a manifestation of the great life force of the universe. Does your tradition share this concept of life?***

Yes, we believe that all has life, that all holds energy and is a witness to whatever takes place.

***Is ancestor veneration part of your culture? If so, how do T'Sou-ke religious rites, especially prayer, venerate ancestors?***

We acknowledge ancestors in prayer to thank them for helping us and for giving us the teachings for us to follow. There is a ritual of Burning after a funeral. A complete meal is prepared early on the morning of the funeral—complete meals also for two to four members of the family on the other side. Specific family members are called separately to come to the table to be with and support their newly deceased family member. In the middle of the table, food is set especially for the ancestors. The table where the meals are set faces east. During the Burning there is silence and keeping still—praying in silence. After the Burning is complete, an area beside it is prepared to burn four complete sets of clothing for the newly deceased and any of his or her favorite belongings. The sets of clothes are hung on a pole over a fire, and the sets are burned one by one. There is always an old one/ancestor who comes to help, that is, being there as support for the newly deceased. A blanket is offered to them in the Burning to say thank you. After the Burning, messages are shared with the family that were received at that time.

***Prayer is often interpreted as an act of supplication to God. We often pray to God or the Buddha for health, good for-***

Mark Gauti

*Shirley Alphonse is a spiritual leader-healer of the T'Sou-ke Nation on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, where she was born on one of its reserves. She has devoted her life to relieving the emotional suffering of fellow members of the nation and helping them find peace and love, and reconnect to their Creator. She also conducts funerals for the nation.*

***tune, and other benefits that bring happiness, rather than offering praise or thanksgiving to the Divine, which is another definition of prayer. How does your tradition interpret prayer?***

Talking to the Creator—making connection to the Creator by acknowledging the Creator with our hands lifted in the gesture of the *Hych-guh,* "thank you"—being still and quiet in reverence. We acknowledge that all has life and we are all connected—to be grateful always.

***Nowadays it is said that many people feel isolated, often because of unemployment or breaches with family members. Does the T'Sou-ke Nation share this phenomenon with other modern societies?***

Yes, we do have the same problem—unemployment was a huge issue with the decline of the logging and fishing industries. Now that we have the Solar Energy Project, there are employment opportunities available for the T'Sou-ke band members, and it is looking positive. We are a small community and there are family issues. I do my best to help families by being a liaison and being mutual.

Mark Gauti

*Ms. Alphonse performing a purification rite for the interpreter of her lecture at the University of Tokyo on June 25, 2009.*

Mark Gauti

*Ms. Alphonse offering prayer for the participants in a performance of the First Nation's smudge ceremony, which was held in the main hall of Tanashi Shrine in western Tokyo, on June 30, 2009.*

***Can religion, which is supposed to unite people and link them to the divine, help alleviate the sufferings of alienation?***

Yes, I definitely believe that religion can unite people and alleviate the sufferings of alienation. Our religion is our teachings. The care and kindness and generosity of our people are phenomenal, especially in a crisis. Also, in a time of a person walking a dark and isolated road, the family gathers and has a table for that person, meaning a family meal shared. They gather to encourage and give guidance from a caring heart. The member is blanketed to let the person know that he or she is loved and supported and honored and to uplift his or her spirit.

***The T'Sou-ke Nation has a great tradition of respecting nature. The environmental crisis is one of the most serious problems we face today and is believed to have been caused by human activities. How do you cultivate a reverence for nature besides offering environmental education in schools?***

By having the children witness and take part in the ceremonies and rituals, and by explaining to them the importance of respect—the actions we take. The actions we take all have an effect on the well-being of ourselves and Mother Earth. ❑

# Forging Ties with the Buddha

by Nichiko Niwano

*When we are first able to put our hands together reverently for ourselves, then we can truly put our hands together reverently for others, and understand the preciousness of the lives of others.*

Buddhism's worldview is based on the doctrine of dependent origination. This can be basically understood as the relationship between causes and conditions. In other words, it can be expressed in the familiar formula: "When this exists, that exists; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not exist; with the cessation of this, that ceases."

Through one of the basic practices of Rissho Kosei-kai—guiding someone new to the faith, sharing the teachings with other members, and participating in *hoza* sessions—we can experience the law of dependent origination.

"Guiding" means forging ties with the Buddha. "Sharing the teachings" means inviting other members to opportunities for getting in touch with the Dharma. "Participating in *hoza* sessions" provides the chance to reflect with fellow practitioners on oneself and others in accordance with the teachings.

The three elements can be understood as one, and what is common to them all is to value the importance of encounters and to learn from them.

When we visit someone for guiding and sharing the teachings, we sometimes are not well received by that person. If this happens repeatedly, calling upon others can become burdensome. If our wish to help someone find happiness is not understood by that person, our consideration for that person may weaken.

However, such occasions can provide us with a golden opportunity to learn from the relationship we have with such a person.

Our encounters with others should be accepted as appropriate chances to objectively examine ourselves and our attitudes. Through such self-reflection, we will gradually receive the Dharma and make it our own.

## Putting Our Hands Together in Reverence

Since we grasp the teachings of the Buddha through our interactions with others, the reality is that all of us will sometimes meet people with whom it is difficult to get along.

In order to be able to put our hands together reverently before people with whom we do not get along, the fact that we are first able to put our hands together reverently for ourselves is of great importance. When we can do that, then we can truly put our hands together reverently for others.

From the viewpoint of the doctrine of dependent origination, every one of us is equal to each other in receiving the gift of precious life from heaven and earth. And since all living beings are permeated by the law of impermanence, we all certainly will die. When we look squarely at this fact, we come to understand the preciousness of our lives and so naturally understand the preciousness of the lives of others. We then can truly put our hands together reverently before everyone.

When we are able to put our hands together reverently before everyone we meet, we receive the "eyes of wisdom" by realizing that all life is interconnected. This means we can then truly worship, with hands folded reverently, before the Eternal Buddha. ❑

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*Nichiko Niwano is president of Rissho Kosei-kai and the Niwano Peace Foundation, a president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, and special advisor to Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan).*

# The Lotus Sutra and Interfaith Relations

## A Report on the Thirteenth International Lotus Sutra Seminar

by Joseph M. Logan

From China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the United States they came—twelve scholars, specialists in Buddhist or religious studies, who made their way to an island paradise earlier this year to participate in the thirteenth of an ongoing series of Lotus Sutra seminars sponsored by Rissho Kosei-kai. As Dr. Gene Reeves, one of the founding fathers of this conference series, stated in his remarks to open the first meeting on Wednesday, March 18, "to accommodate the Japanese love for Hawaii," and to take advantage of the marvelous Rissho Kosei-kai Retreat Center facility in Kona (on Hawaii's Big Island), "we thought we'd try Hawaii this year." Based on the smiling faces of the assembled scholars, it was quite clear that no one had seriously objected to the choice of venue.

The presentation and discussion of individual papers—some eloquent in their simplicity, others elegant in their complexity—under an overall theme of "The Lotus Sutra and Interfaith Relations" was conducted in a challenging schedule of morning through evening sessions (with informal parties at the end of the day to wind down from all-day concentration) at the Retreat Center, beginning on the eighteenth and continuing to midday of March 20. As each participant had received advance copies of all papers, the bulk of each seventy-five-minute session was dedicated to open discussion following an introductory summary by the author of the subject paper and comments by a designated respondent. While there was an umbrella theme, the topics, as might be expected, varied according to the specialization of the presenter, and papers (not appearing here in actual order of presentation) seemed to sort themselves into three broad subthemes: "The Lotus and/or Its Advocates Explored"; "The Lotus and Other Religious Traditions"; and "The Lotus's Interfaith Connections."

### The Lotus and/or Its Advocates Explored

"A View on the Formation of the Lotus Sutra," by Dr. Shiro Matsumoto (Komazawa University, Tokyo), asserted that in order to grasp the fundamental position or stance of the Lotus Sutra, it is necessary to examine the formation of the text itself and through such examination to discern the earliest parts that come closest to the Buddha's original teachings. Dr. Matsumoto stated his belief that the central message of the Lotus Sutra is the attainment of buddhahood by all sentient beings inclusively. Yet in chapter 3, "Parable," one can find the statement that only bodhisattvas can attain buddhahood, while *sravakas* cannot. Given this apparent contradiction, Dr. Matsumoto made his case that the original message of the sutra—void of distinctions or exclusions—was not a thread woven consistently throughout the text, that the sutra was gradually formed, that chapter 2, "Tactfulness," is the oldest part of the sutra, and that the prose portion is the oldest part of that chapter. Noting that the words *mahayana* and *bodhisattva* do not appear in the Sanskrit text of chapter 2, and that the *ekayana* (i.e., the *buddhayana*, which Dr. Matsumoto considers to be the expression of the central message of universal attainment of buddhahood) is advocated in chapter 2, he offered that the term *mahayana* was introduced into the sutra in chapter 3 by means of the parable of the burning house, and in his opinion, that *buddhayana* was then replaced by *mahayana* as the content of *ekayana*. Among others, these were central considerations in his argument that the prose portion of the "Skillfull Means" chapter should be considered the oldest part and the original form of the Lotus Sutra.

*Joseph M. Logan is a senior fellow at the Essential Lay Buddhism Study Center in Tokyo. His work as a member of the center's translation team focuses on English wording and cadence with the goal of making recitation in English a more effective practice for internalizing a sutra's teachings.*

In "A Lotus Practitioner and Interfaith Dialogue: Yamada Etai, the Lotus Sutra, and the Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei," Dr. Steven Covell (Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo) outlined the life of Etai Yamada, who became the 253rd head priest of the Tendai denomination of Buddhism in 1974. Dr. Covell focused on Yamada's interpretation of Lotus Sutra and Tendai Lotus teachings, enumerating the concepts that Yamada considered to be fundamentally important. The Lotus Sutra was "a guidebook for everyday life" for Yamada, and he valued the practice of "forgetting self and benefitting others," which he grasped from the early writings of Saicho, founder of Tendai in Japan. Based on that concept, according to Yamada, "group identities can be overcome, allowing individuals to cooperate to bring about peace and happiness," and it was one of the principal elements of Yamada's determination that led to the realization, as a practice of the Lotus Sutra, of the 1987 Religious Summit on Mount Hiei to mark the twelve hundredth anniversary of the opening of Mount Hiei by Saicho. A key point that emerged in the general discussion was Yamada's great emphasis on the power of prayer: people's general impressions of Buddhism often reflect the aspects of tranquillity and peaceful sitting but not prayer. Dr. Covell stated that Yamada placed great faith in the power of prayer and in connecting through prayer to bodhisattvas, and to buddhas and deities, and then being able to draw on that to effect change in the world.

Dr. A. Charles Muller (Toyo Gakuen University, Tokyo and Nagareyama, Chiba Prefecture) profiled the life and work of Wonhyo, a Korean Buddhist scholar, in his paper "Wonhyo on the Lotus Sutra." Wonhyo was an independent scholar and a prolific writer who "conducted extensive research on most of the major Mahayana scriptures and treatises of his time, along with their associated doctrines." His distinctive way of approaching analyses of texts was that of reconciliation of disputes, or "harmonization," and his writings were intended to deal with what he perceived to be particularly interesting, problematic, or controversial aspects of a given text. Wonhyo singled out the relationship between the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicle teachings in the Lotus Sutra as his point of departure to discuss the issue of that relationship in various Mahayana traditions—in Wonhyo's way of thinking, since the Buddha spoke of both of them, they both had to be correct. His primary approach to dealing with arguments and differences between doctrinal systems of a scripture was to test their agreement with the basic Buddhist principle of cause and effect. Thus, regarding the Lotus, the "doctrines of attainment of the effects (i.e., realizations) of the three vehicles, and of the one vehicle, must also be shown to be commensurate with basic karmic principles." Responding to Dr. Muller's paper, Dr. Sun Jin Song eloquently brought the essence of the paper into the realm of the theme of the seminar, noting that "one's affection for and loyalty to one's religion must not lead to precluding the need to critically reflect on the doctrines of one's religion," nor must it lead to neglecting "the responsibility to understand other religions as fairly and deeply as possible."

### The Lotus and Other Religious Traditions

"Taoist Influence on Buddhist Mummification," by Dr. Haiyan Shen (Shanghai University), discussed the concept of the "flesh-body bodhisattva" in Chinese Buddhism and explored the Lotus Sutra's influence on the tradition within the process of Buddhism's cultural transformation in China. "Flesh-body bodhisattva," a peculiar phenomenon in Chinese Buddhism, refers either to eminent living Buddhist monks who, because of their diligent practice and great religious achievement, are regarded as living, that is, "flesh-body," bodhisattvas, or to accomplished monks, now deceased, whose bodies became mummified "purportedly entirely on their own" as a result of their spiritual practice and whose images became objects of veneration.

Dr. Shen noted that the ancients attached great importance to the flesh-body, in part through funeral rituals, and it was also their task to keep the flesh-body of the dead uncorrupt for the purpose of securing the soul's eternal life—thus the importance of mummification. Suggesting contributing influences to the flesh-body phenomenon from the prevalence of the Lotus Sutra, Dr. Shen noted that a connection between the sutra and incorruption and immortality stems from an incident concerning incorruption of the tongue related to the great translator Kumarajiva in the fourth century CE, who allegedly made a vow that after his death his tongue would survive his cremation as a testimony to his correct translation of Buddhist scriptures; the tongue, indeed, was not burned. A further notion of the incorruption of the tongue found in the sutra is its declaration of the merits of expounding, from which one attains perfection of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, with perfection of the tongue surpassing that of the rest of the organs (from chapter 19, "Blessings of the Dharma Teacher": see *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], pp. 259–61; *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Gene Reeves [Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008], pp. 330–32).

In "Liquid Light: The South Asian Ritual Cosmos of (and in) the Lotus Sutra," Dr. Natalie Gummer (Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin) offered that the Lotus Sutra effectively adapts ideas, practices, and terminology of "sacrificial cooking" from the Vedic tradition in the way the sutra represents its own powers to transform. Vedic cosmology is founded in the relation between fire and fluid, a relationship that can metaphorically be seen at three levels: a macrocosmic level at which fire (representing the sun) cooks everything in the world; a mesocosmic level at which sacrificial offerings to the gods are cooked by a sacrificial fire; and a microcosmic level of "digestive cooking" through which the nutrients from the sacrifice are processed and distributed. Dr. Gummer

asserted that these three levels of the "culinary cosmos" are reflected in the Lotus Sutra: when the Lotus Sutra is preached, for example, it is like a "fiery fluid" that "cooks" the bodies of the hearers, as in the process of Vedic sacrifice. One of many references to such cooking in the Sanskrit version of the sutra is found in chapter 14, "The Emergence of Bodhisattvas from Clefts in the Earth," wherein the Buddha tells his audience that the emergent bodhisattvas "from the beginning were incited, inflamed, completely cooked, completely transformed by me" (see Watson, p. 219; Reeves, p. 286).

Responding to Dr. Gummer's paper, Dr. Matsumoto noted that the verb *paripacayati,* translated in the paper as "completely cook[ed]," and denoting the Vedic cosmological idea of cooking or kitchen, "is normally translated by Buddhist scholars as 'to ripen completely,' a translation also supported by Kumarajiva's Chinese translation." In the discussion, Dr. Reeves mentioned that he was "a little troubled" by the use of the word *cooking:* "I think, normally, we only cook things like food, and medicine, and you seem to put together all burning as cooking." Thus began quite a few minutes of lighthearted banter regarding symbols and metaphors across various religious traditions used to indicate development and transformation involving fire, heat, ripening, and cooking, and as this was actually the first paper presented, the table was effectively set for a feast of culinary wordplay throughout the rest of the program.

Sixth-century Chinese Buddhist philosophers and practitioners Huisi and Zhiyi looked extensively at the meditative aspect of the Lotus Sutra, which Dr. Ching-wei Wang (National Yunlin University of Science and Technology, Douliou, Yunlin County, Taiwan) discussed in her paper, "The Meditation Aspect of the Lotus Sutra and the Role of the Lotus Sutra in the Social Purification Movements Initiated by the Dharma Drum Chan School." Dr. Wang offered that the connection between the Lotus Sutra and meditation is also attested by the Dharma Drum Chan School, a connection superficially seen in the organization's having named itself after a passage in the Lotus Sutra and having created, as its symbol, a huge Lotus Bell on which the complete Lotus Sutra is carved.

An example of specific mention in the sutra of the need to do meditation is found in chapter 14: "[a bodhisattva should also] constantly take pleasure in sitting in meditation, being in quiet surroundings and learning to still his mind" (Watson, p. 198; Reeves, p. 262). Seeking to identify what type of meditation is essential, Dr. Wang cited chapter 4, "Belief and Understanding," where the following comment to the Buddha from a disciple is found: "It has been a long time since the World-Honored One first began to

*Twelve specialists in Buddhist or religious studies carried on rewarding discussions on the Lotus Sutra and interfaith relations in a challenging schedule at Rissho Kosei-kai's Retreat Center in Kona.*

expound the Law. During that time we have sat in our seats, our bodies weary and inert, meditating solely on the concepts of emptiness, non-form, and non-action. But as to the pleasures and transcendental powers of the Law of the bodhisattva or the purifying of Buddha lands and the salvation of living beings—these our minds took no joy in" (Watson, p. 81; Reeves, p. 141). According to Dr. Wang, this showed great arhats and bodhisattvas' being differentiated by the types of meditation that they practice: arhats focusing only on the three *samadhis* of emptiness, nonform, and nonaction; bodhisattvas being involved in a much more active type of meditation—purifying the buddha-lands and saving living beings. An animated discussion arose over whether or not the bodhisattvas' activities in the example passage were meditative practices. It was claimed that their actions were, of course, based on meditation but did not consist of meditation as normally conceived. In counterargument it was noted that Zhiyi talked of Tiantai meditation as "not thinking, not acting," that is, that active meditation consists of whatever one is doing.

What is the Threefold Lotus Sutra's concept of ultimate reality? Are there theistic ideas in the sutra? How does ultimate reality in the sutra work for our salvation? What is the sutra's understanding of the nature of authentic human existence? In "A Theological Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra," Dr. Sung Jin Song (Methodist Theological University, Seoul) derived a Christian perspective from the Lotus Sutra: "The ultimate reality of the Threefold Lotus Sutra has many characteristics in common with the God of Christian religions," and it "has many elements in common with Christian thought." Central to Dr. Song's interpretation was seeing the meaning of *dharma* as "being" (derived from phenomena, things, facts, or existences) rather than "Law" or "Body of the Teachings."

Thus, the *saddharma* of the Lotus is a truly real being—"subtle and mysterious," "hard to comprehend and describe"—comparable to the God of Christianity. Salvation was seen as a realization of authentic human existence, that is, a personal faith relationship with the Wonderful Being: as the Wonderful Being is always the "parent" of all sentient beings, salvation consists of an existential realization that everyone without exception can realize and is thus a universal possibility open to all human beings. The nature of God as understood by the Christian faith also calls for the idea of the universal possibility of salvation. Dr. Song suggested that the Lotus Sutra's own mention of many Lotus Sutras, preached at different times and in different contexts, could be taken to mean that the sutra's essence is that of representing the *saddharma*, the Wonderful Being, in ways in which we can perceive this being's role in our salvation. When asked in the general discussion if there was a particular purpose to be served by having such a Christian interpretation of this Buddhist text, Dr. Song simply (and perhaps inadvertently motivatingly) replied, "This is basically me having a sincere conversation with the Lotus Sutra. I'm listening to what the Lotus Sutra says to me."

## The Lotus's Interfaith Connections

In "Truth and Illusion in the 'Parable of the Phantom City' and its Significance in the Context of Interfaith," Dr. Hans-Rudolf Kantor (Huafan University, Shihding, Taipei County, Taiwan) sought to uncover strategies developed or used by religious traditions to mitigate the tension between truth and falseness and suggested that the Lotus Sutra can be mined for such information because it "expresses an evaluation of falseness and truth," and it has inspired Chinese Buddhist traditions like Tiantai to elucidate the value of falseness with regard to salvation. The teachings of the Lotus Sutra are composed in a way that allows followers to avoid attachment to them, and there are no direct and clear statements that exactly define ultimate truth; thus its teachings, its similes and parables—and even the Buddha—only point to it. Though not the ultimate truth in themselves, these methods are regarded as truly skillful means that allow one to move toward an individual experience of the ultimate meaning, and Dr. Kantor offered that such a differentiation between skillfulness and the ultimate truth, akin to a relationship between falseness and truth, is at the heart of the sutra's intent to lead followers toward salvation.

A clear example of this is shown in chapter 7, "Phantom City," in which a wise leader (the Buddha) creates an illusion for his discouraged followers in midjourney toward a goal so that they might become refreshed and continue to strive until their ultimate goal is reached. Though the followers are told of the illusion used to inspire them, the ultimate goal—the ultimate truth, the Buddha-wisdom to be attained—is still not concretely explained, although an aspect of Buddha-wisdom is shown to be how an enlightened person acts and interacts with the unenlightened. The enlightened being, clearly seeing illusion as such, lives in the same illusory world as other sentient beings but, being constantly aware of it, is not affected by it. Instead, he or she is highly skilled at revealing and making use of the wholesome potential of falseness and illusoriness to respond to and transform sentient beings striving for awakening.

In "The Lotus Sutra's Inclusivism and the Dialogue of Religions," Dr. Hiroshi Kanno (Soka University, Tokyo) discussed how the Lotus Sutra can be understood within the frameworks of three theoretical approaches to interfaith relations and dialogues: pluralism, a view that all major religions are equally valid and lead to salvation; inclusivism, a view that one religion is uniquely true but salvation is accessible to those outside of that faith; and exclusivism, a view that there is only one way to salvation and therefore that one religion is uniquely and supremely true and others are not. While Dr. Kanno showed through various examples that it is possible to see all three approaches at work in the Lotus Sutra, he sees the sutra as being basically inclusive in

nature. Its pluralistic aspect can be shown in the idea that the Dharma can be realized by anyone, a perspective that "recognizes the dignity of all people" and is exemplified in the sutra by the practice of the bodhisattva Never Disparaging. On the other hand, descriptions of the woes that will befall those who slander the Lotus Sutra, seen in chapters 3 and 28, could be seen as reflecting a very exclusivist attitude. Seeing the Lotus Sutra from a broad perspective, Dr. Kanno suggests that it can be described as "Buddhist Inclusivism," an attitude particularly seen in chapter 2, wherein anyone who does the most trivial of good actions in the name of Buddhism is said to be destined to become a buddha, that is, to achieve Buddhism's ultimate purpose. Seeing chapter 14, "Easeful Practices," as a source of lessons from the sutra that can be taken to the table of interfaith dialogue, Dr. Kanno offered that, based on the concept of emptiness, we can see our own religion and other religions as changeable and fluid rather than fixed, that it is important to pay proper respect to others, and that religious dialogue is enriched by a commitment to bodhisattva-like compassion and forbearance.

"Let's make others recognize our absolute truth!" (proselytizing dogmatism). "Forget about it! We can't even *begin* to grasp absolute truth!" (nihilistic skepticism). "But everything is equally valid!" (tolerant relativism). "Why don't we just agree on what we can agree on and leave the other stuff alone!" (agnostic pragmatism). In "Truth's Past Remembered: Interdoxic Regard in the Lotus Sutra," Dr. Brook Ziporyn (Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois) suggested that if one looks at isolated parts of the Lotus Sutra, implications of all of these views can be found. Based on Kumarajiva's translation, however, if one looks at the Lotus Sutra as a whole—within a framework of specified fundamental interpretive principles—one may find a different way to mediate or bring together conflicting implications within interfaith relations.

The basic principles are (1) the Lotus is a Mahayana sutra; (2) the sutra suggests to us that it is perhaps meant to be taken as a whole; (3) the sutra promotes skillful means, and thereby the meaning of something can change in relation to a different set of circumstances; and (4) the sutra uses contexts of space and time within which people, things, and practices can assume different identities within different time frames. Under these guidelines Dr. Ziporyn fashions a kind of "holistic Lotus Sutra microscope" through which one might discern that (a) all sentient beings are potential Buddhists, even certified as buddhas-to-be, since all sentient beings can attain buddhahood who hear the Dharma—the teachings of Buddhism thought to describe the words and deeds of Shakyamuni Buddha; and (b) as all dharmas in the realm of experience are "referents" of the One Vehicle, to experience anything as a sentient being is to have contact with the Dharma; thus, (c) to see someone, that is, any being, who will become a buddha is to see such a person as a source of the very teaching one aspires to; and therefore, with regard to interfaith relations, (d) things that others are seen to do in pursuit of their ideal are things that are contributing to one's own realization, and vice versa; thus, (e) one can fully realize one's own identity by affirming another's identity as an integral moment and part of one's own realization process.

Through his microscope Dr. Ziporyn sees that buddhahood, the ideal of the Lotus Sutra, is the "point of convergence" of the universe of all values, beliefs, and practices, and that apparently conflicting values turn out to be additional attributes of one another—themselves becoming part of something greater—when each value is held fully and completely to its own convictions and explored to the very end.

"The nature of the sutra itself is skillful means," said Dr. Joseph S. O'Leary (Sophia University, Tokyo) in "Skillful Means and Religious Pluralism," an impassioned presentation that could well have been titled "An Ode to Skillful Means." According to Dr. O'Leary, understanding the Lotus Sutra as being a skillful means in itself increases rather than reduces its power, because seeing it as such shows its orientation and its purpose to bring salvation to sentient beings. The primary focus of skillful means in the Lotus Sutra is the topic of the three vehicles, which are seen as provisional expressions of the One Vehicle: "It is by my superior skillfulness that I explain the Law at great length to the world at large. I deliver whosoever are attached to one point or another and show the three vehicles" (chapter 2, verse 21, translation by Hendrik Kern; see also, Watson, p. 26; Reeves, p. 79).

Identification with one religious denomination or another can be a way of remaining attached to "one point or another," but an awareness of religious pluralism can bring release from this, particularly if one considers that "the plurality of religions testifies to a universal revelatory activity at work in all of them." The Buddha puts his perfection in skillful means to use because the Dharma cannot be grasped by human reasoning; one must instead open to it by "accepting the testimony of the numerous skillful means that speak of it."

In the sutra, skill in responding to skillful means is called *adhimukti*, that is, a disposition to let the sutra, the message, enlighten us: it is a trust that is an opening of the mind; it is a willingness to let the sutra do its work. Dr. O'Leary found this to be a challenge: "To me the big obstacle to having *adhimukti* is being an academic. An academic is going to treat the text in such a way that it by no means is going to conduce to enlightenment." Dr. O'Leary sees that religious teachings gain function and validity through a relationship of communication, and that they should therefore be listened to as the "Ultimate Truth" attempting to make itself known. Thus, instead of then asking if these messages are true, one should rather seek to determine what they are trying to say.

In "Interfaith Unity and Metaphoric Ontology—Speaking from the Lotus Sutra," Yifa (The University of the West,

Rosemead, California) drew upon her personal experience as a Buddhist nun actively engaging in interfaith dialogues to propose a Buddhist approach to interfaith unity. Working from the basic premise that all religions provide slightly different perspectives on the same underlying Truth, she isolated the fact that religions offer differing ontologies—different theories about what is real—as being the root cause of conflicts. Seeking possible points of compatibility with other religions from Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra, Yifa suggested that one such idea is that sentient beings possess the buddha-nature of awakening, which is seen as a universal Truth that holds for all beings; and a fundamental concept of Buddhism is that such Truth cannot be grasped by language or conceptual thinking, which puts it on common ground with Ultimate Truths of all religions.

Another compatible idea is that Buddhism is concerned with the elimination of the problem of suffering, a problem that also transcends barriers of faith or belief. As common ground for dialogue, Yifa offered that all teachings could be seen as paths to the Truth—as metaphoric ontologies—rather than as Truth itself, and that the only way to access Ultimate Reality is through direct personal experience that transcends the rational process of thought. A step to take toward improving interfaith relations would then be for all parties to treat all ontology as metaphoric means designed to guide one to an experience of God or buddha-nature.

To facilitate this it is helpful to distinguish Ultimate or Absolute Truth from conventional truth, which is limited to the world of actual experience that our concepts can concretely explain; differences in conventional truths therefore represent only differing experiences, which are differences that can coexist without conflict. The Absolute Truth that remains is still beyond conceptual grasp; it is pointed to by all the various religions in variously effective ways—or perhaps even in equally effective ways—through the particular experiences described in their conventional truths, and in the end, each can know Ultimate Truth, the Divine, through his or her own unique personal experience of it.

Individual presentations were completed during the morning session on Friday March 20, and the balance of the afternoon featured a tour to Pu'uonua o Hanaunau, a National Historic Park that was once the location of an ancient place of refuge and religious sanctuary where absolution could be gained by breakers of sacred laws (violations of which, intended or not, were capital offenses) who were fortunate enough to evade capture and arrive there safely. Returning to the Retreat Center in the early evening, the scholars were treated to an informative historical and organizational overview of Rissho Kosei-kai and its international activities by Rissho Kosei-kai staff members Michiko Tomizawa and Nick Ozuna. The crowning activity of the day for the seminar group was joining a "modernly traditional" Hawaiian luau—a feast of food and Pacific Island fashion and dance.

Saturday morning was devoted to travel, as everyone moved from Kona to Honolulu, on the island of Oahu. After arrivals, the afternoon was free for shopping and leisure, and the evening featured the last official activity of the seminar program, a shared event with Rissho Kosei-kai members at the Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma Center in Pearl City, during which seminar participants had the opportunity to introduce themselves to the members and briefly describe their presentations. An open discussion period followed, and many members demonstrated a keen interest in enriching their understanding of Buddhism with their concise and penetrating questions. An informal but intimate dinner and reception with the assembled members brought the seminar to a warm and successful conclusion.

While Sunday was departure day for most participants, those who had evening or next-day departure times had an opportunity to attend an optional event in the morning, the fiftieth-anniversary celebration of Rissho Kosei-kai in Hawaii. The event at the Dharma Center was a memorable one—a pageant of local color and culture blended with the formality of organizational rites and rituals of ceremony. It was at once solemn and joyous, emotional and uplifting, and clearly a heartfelt celebration by Rissho Kosei-kai members in Hawaii of their fifty years of perseverance and progress.

A few final words: Many thanks to all of the staff and members of Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan, Kona, and Honolulu, whose tireless background work and logistical support helped make the seminar successful in every regard. And a special "thank you" to Mr. Hiroshi Hirayama, the supreme master of cooking at the Retreat Center in Kona. ❑

# Shedding Light on Each Other's Beliefs

**An interview with Dr. Gotthard Fermor,
professor of systematic theology at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences, Bochum, Germany**

*In April, twenty-six members of a German interfaith dialogue group led jointly by Dr. Gotthard Fermor, visited Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo. They visited Japan to study religious- and humanity-related themes in Japanese culture and discuss them with Buddhists and Christians.* DHARMA WORLD *interviewed Dr. Fermor as follows on the significance of interreligious dialogue.*

***What are the aims of your visit to Japan, or what background leads you to Japan?***

Well, we are a group of people who are in different professions. There are lawyers, there are educators, there are teachers, there are theology professors, there are nurses, psychologists, and so on, and what brings these people together is the interest in practicing spirituality in Germany and in practicing spirituality in an interreligious way. So it is a dialogic spirituality. Most of the people in this group have trained in this spirituality for years. We have known them for quite some years, and it was a heartfelt wish to expose them to face-to-face dialogue. That means not only talking about Zen Buddhism or Taoism, which we do in the course work, but seeking face-to-face dialogue and meeting Buddhist organizations like Rissho Kosei-kai and others, to engage in direct dialogue. That is the main aim of this study trip.

***What image do Germans have of Buddhism?***

I think in general it is an increasingly positive image. We have to differentiate.

There are real Buddhist organizations that have a temple and practice according to the Lotus Sutra and other sutras, and meditate, and these are the confessional Buddhists. There is a growing number of Germans attending these temples.

And then Buddhist traditions like Zen meditation are becoming more and more popular in Germany. A lot of adult education programs do offer meditation; a lot of churches offer meditation in a Zen-like way. So because of that, Buddhism is becoming not a mainstream religious trend in Germany but quite well known among intellectuals. We have a growing number of people leaving the churches, who seek spirituality, and a lot of them find it in Asian spirituality like Buddhism. So I think it is a positive picture in total.

***What do you think people in general require of religion, especially in your country, Germany?***

I would approach this question as follows: In some terms, people speak of a secularized society. This is mostly misunderstood. *Secularized* does not mean "without religion"; it means people are distancing themselves from religious institutions like churches or even leaving them. So the membership of the Catholic and Protestant churches is decreasing and one-third of the population does not belong to a church. But this does not mean that these people are not religious. Many of them are spiritual seekers of a kind, and they need something for the practice of religion that they do not get from the church. This is why Buddhism, for example, is interesting for a lot of these people. It is spreading out in these "spiritual markets," so to speak, and they see what they can get.

And then other people have the expectation that churches should be open to a variety of spiritual approaches. So we do not really have a secularized society. We have a decreasing role of the church; that is true if you want to read "secularized" in that way, but not in terms of the religious seeking people do. I would say 80 percent of the people in Germany care about religion—having a confession or not. I am curious how many there would be in Japan.

***Do you think there are a lot of people without a faith?***

Maybe we can distinguish between religion and confession. If you ask people, "Do you have a confession?" in terms of

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*Gotthard Fermor obtained his PhD in practical theology at the University of Bonn in 1999, and was ordained as a pastor of the Evangelical Church in Rhineland, Germany, in 2000. He is the author of* Ekstasis *(Kohlhammer, 1999) and has published widely on religion and music.*

belonging to a Buddhist group or church, one-third would say no. If you ask them, "Do you care about religion?" at least two-thirds and maybe more would say yes. Recently Germany came up with a lot of surveys in empirical studies on religion, and they asked people, for example: "Do you believe in God?" Up to 70 percent say yes. So that is a lot. Then the next question is: "Do you believe in God as the Christian church describes him: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?" Only 18 percent of that 70 percent say yes. So this is the picture, and we have to open our eyes to the reality of that picture. There are some people who do not confess a faith, but they have some faith, and we have to engage in dialogue with them. That is my personal opinion. Or you may ask here in Japan: "Do you think we can believe that there is some higher awareness we can have access to, without naming this higher awareness?" Maybe some people will say, "Yes, if you do not say 'Buddha,' but if you just say 'higher awareness,' I agree."

***We face global warming and destruction of the environment. There will be a water shortage in the near future. How do you think we should cultivate our awareness of the world's realities?***

I have to say that what really convinced me following the discussion this morning is Rissho Kosei-kai's approach to everyday awareness of life. I think it is an educational purpose for the everyday life of communities to educate pupils at a very basic level; for example, where does water come from and what is happening to water, what is the difference between the taste of water without chemicals and, say, Tokyo's water. And human dignity. If all have buddha-nature and nature itself has this dignity, religion is a very good source for that kind of education. I think it is better to pursue it every day at a low community level than through a big political agenda. That is why we believe that if all people change at their own level, changing their own awareness, it may contribute to the changing of the world and maybe promote world peace.

***We of Rissho Kosei-kai believe that religion should be more involved in resolving social problems. What is your stance on this?***

I could speak for myself, but I will try to speak as someone with a church background as well, because I am an ordained minister and a theologian.

I think you cannot separate politics from religion, because if you are not political, that is, if you do not speak up, others will speak up more loudly. So I think, if you want to care for others, you have to also speak on the political level. That can be on the level of community services and local politics, but it must also be on a higher level. That is why the Protestant church, which I belong to in Germany, has an organized dialogue between the church and people in politics. Germany needs this voice of ethics in politics.

*Members of a German interfaith dialogue group receive an explanation of Rissho Kosei-kai's social work and the education of its seminary students from the headquarters officers at Kosei Library in Tokyo on April 6.*

We come from a certain tradition, and I have to explain that. In the past in Nazi Germany under Hitler the churches were not as political as they should have been, and after the war we made a confession of guilt, an official confession that Protestant and Catholic churches had not been political enough. For that reason, after that history, we cannot afford not to be political as religious organizations. It is in general very important to be aware of the guilt of the government through history. Though Germany is not really comparable, I think. We killed six million Jews. No country in the world ever did that.

Guilt is not resolved by forgetting it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer [1906–45], the famous German theologian, said that whoever is not raising his voice for the Jews is not allowed to

pray in a monastery. To pray and to resist, to practice spirituality and political activity—these both together are very important. And you can be a John Rabe, a German Nazi who changed and helped Chinese to flee from Japanese aggressors. Now being shown in Germany is a new international movie, *John Rabe,* which depicts this German Nazi helping Chinese people. So I would say, we as a church have to approve; it is good that this film is bringing up the topic and prompting a political discourse that is supported by education and that raises religious questions. Most wars are fueled by religious beliefs.

Jesus did not come up with a big political agenda but focused on the individual. He said people should purify their own hearts first and then point the way to others.

*What is your stance on interreligious dialogue and cooperation?*

In my own tradition I am obliged to interreligious dialogue, because, if we practice dialogue, we shed light on each other's beliefs, and we can strengthen them then. And when we encounter others, they ask questions we would not raise ourselves. From our own perspective alone we cannot get the whole picture. We need to encounter others to see more of the picture. For example, we have the mystic tradition within Christian tradition: practice in silence and the paradox of the unspeakable oneness, things we also find in Zen Buddhism. For example, the key dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity is about the concept of God. Is God a person or not a person? So if you ask us: "Can a person be the ultimate reality?" that's a good question, I say. And we ask you: "Can you think of ultimate reality without personal aspects, because you are a person?" So we need both questions, because neither is right by itself, to get further to the point of truth. We do not have a large tradition of dialogue practices of that kind through the centuries.

So when we encountered Zen Buddhism, we did not turn into Zen Buddhists, but we learned from them to be aware of our treasures of practice in silence, knowing the paradox, the unnameable, the one essence behind everything. So we profited from dialogue. And I think it works both ways. ❑

*The German interfaith dialogue group members receive an explanation of Tenryuji, a leading Rinzai Zen temple in Kyoto, on its precincts on April 15.*

*Rev. Sojo Kobayashi, director of general affairs of the Tendai Buddhist denomination, explaining for the group members the locations of the facilities of Enryakuji on Mount Hiei, Shiga Prefecture, which the group visited on April 14.*

# Promoting Dialogue for 'Shared Security'

*World religious leaders gathered in Rome on June 16 and 17 to work on recommendations to present to the leaders of the G8 leading industrialized nations, which was held July 8–10 in L'Aquila, Italy. The religious summit was hosted by the Italian Bishops Conference and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The World Conference of Religions for Peace participated as a partner. Almost 130 religious leaders of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, and so on from twenty-three countries attended. They adopted the following final statement.*

We, leaders of the world's religions and spiritual traditions gathered in Rome on the eve of the G8 Summit of 2009, are united in our common commitment to justice and the protection of human life, the building of the common good, and the belief in the divinely established and inviolable dignity of all people from conception to death.

We speak from the heart of the great majority of the human family who are members of religions or spiritual traditions. In a time of economic crisis when many securities are crumbling, we feel even more acutely the need for spiritual orientation. We are convinced that spiritual life and the freedom to practice it is the true guarantee for authentic freedom. A spiritual approach can touch the hunger for meaning in our contemporary society. Materialism often expresses itself in idolatrous forms and has proved powerless in the present crisis.

We carry forward important work begun in multireligious meetings held just prior to the G8 Summits (in Moscow 2006, Cologne 2007, Sapporo 2008, Rome 2009) and building on earlier meetings in London. We have been convened by the Italian Bishops Conference, with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for whose assistance we are grateful. We greet the leaders of the nations gathered in L'Aquila, and we pray for them as they exercise their heavy responsibilities to confront the challenges facing the human family today.

We commenced our meeting in L'Aquila in solidarity with those who are suffering there from the devastating earthquake and in solidarity also with all of those around the world who are bearing the burdens of suffering.

We are convinced that the world politics needs a solid paradigm based on moral values to address today's challenges. Through the notion of shared security we can draw attention to the comprehensive character of our moral and religious concerns. In the light of this understanding of shared security we make the following comments on matters of the greatest importance. We are using the term *security* in a new way. We add the word *shared* to draw attention to a fundamental moral conviction: the well-being of each is related to the well-being of others and to our environment. Shared security focuses on the fundamental interrelatedness of all persons and the environment. It includes a comprehensive respect for the interconnectedness and dignity of all life and acknowledges the fundamental fact that we all live in one world. Ultimately we are convinced that to overcome violence, justice with compassion and forgiveness are necessary and possible.

Shared security is concerned with the full continuum of human relations from relationship among individuals to the ways that people are organized in nations and states. It follows that the security of one actor in international relations must not be detrimental to another. Those international leaders who are responsible for global decision making must act transparently and be open to the contribution of all involved.

The current financial and economic crisis weighs most heavily upon the poor. Addressing these related crises calls for a new financial pact that (1) addresses squarely the causes of the financial crisis, (2) acknowledges the need for basic moral principles, (3) includes all stakeholders, and (4) places at a premium the urgent need for sustained financing for development. We are convinced that in a time of economic crisis and spiritual disorientation for the men and women of our time, religions can and must offer a decisive contribution to the search for the common good. As we confront this crisis, there is the need for the spiritual wisdom entrusted to the great world religions so as to steer an ethical path to justice and human flourishing. Concretely, as part of the reform of the finance system, we urge concerted action to close down the unregulated offshore banking system. Regarding development assistance, we urge the inclusion as partners of civil society organizations, including especially religious communities and their organizations.

In continuity with previous world religious summits we continue to call for the fulfillment of the Millennium Devel-

*A general assembly held in the international conference hall of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, in which delegates to the religious summit meeting drafted the final statement that they would issue to the G8 Summit.*

opment Goals. Their completion has been promised for 2015, but progress has now fallen behind. The current crisis has worsened the situation of those whom the MDGs are designed to assist. We insist that it is an imperative for the lives of millions that the MDGs be fulfilled on schedule, and we commit ourselves to work together with the G8 leaders to that end.

Africa is already hard hit by the world financial crisis, and it runs the risk of being seriously damaged in its efforts against poverty with a negative impact on the economic growth of its countries. It is our hope that the international community place Africa at the center of policies for development by finding new sources for financing cooperation and favoring the involvement of states and civil societies of African countries in a perspective of rebirth of the whole continent. In this same context we would like to affirm that the time has come to commit ourselves decisively to the healing of the entire wounded continent. Seventy years from the beginning of the great tragedy for humanity that was World War II and the many subsequent conflicts, causing human suffering, injustice, and poverty, we call for nations to resist making war a means of international politics and to make every effort to establish a just peace for all. We believe that the attempt to militarily dominate the sea, space, neutral territories, or states creates obstacles on the way to nuclear and conventional disarmament. We also believe that conventional disarmament and efforts to ban military technologies and initiatives that could provoke a new arms race should go hand in hand with efforts to advance nuclear disarmament.

We call the G8 Summit to pursue rigorous implementation of nuclear reduction and nonproliferation policies leading to the goal of total nuclear disarmament. We call the five acknowledged nuclear-weapons states to work toward eliminating existing nuclear weapons step by step. States with nuclear weapons that have not acknowledged them must acknowledge their possession, make similar commitments to their elimination, and enter into the NPT. We press for prompt ratifications and entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and commit to take no action leading toward the reintroduction of any form of nuclear weapons testing.

We call attention to the plight of the ever-growing number of "illegal" immigrants and the absence of adequate and uniform standards designed to protect them. We urge that the full rights and dignity of people be respected and cost-sharing introduced where appropriate as states reevaluate their comprehensive policies for legal residents and immigration. We urge attention to the fact that immigration is growing and that ecological pressure may greatly accelerate it.

We representatives of world religions and spiritual traditions gathered in these days in Rome facing the threats and the challenges of a difficult time of crisis for our societies reaffirm our commitment to work with all people of good will for the realization of the common good. In this context we call for the establishment of mechanisms for dialogue between religious communities, political leaders, international organizations, and civil-society structures.

Our method and our strength, the strength of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, will always and only be that of the transformation of hearts and shared action through dialogue. Dialogue is an art that everyone must practice and cultivate within and between religions, culture, and politics, especially those who have power in the world. Dialogue requires courage and enables people to see each other more clearly, enabling us to offer life and hope to new generations.

This is our renewed commitment, this is the appeal we address to the world. We commit ourselves to meet again, in Canada, in June 2010. ❑

# Buddhism: The Way to Dialogue

by Pablito A. Baybado Jr.

*In a region of diverse cultures and religions, dialogue has to be both the way of life and the mission of each culture and religion if peace is to reign in Asia.*

In Asia, dialogue between Catholics and Buddhists is taking place on various levels. As early as 1979, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) had already noted and appreciated the improving relationship and significant changes in attitudes on both sides. There is now greater openness, easier contact, and more positive appreciation than ever before. At the same time, many have also recognized the existence of difficulties and obstacles to dialogue.[1]

Asia is home to diverse cultures and religions. Dialogue must be both the way of life and the mission of each culture and religion if peace is to reign in Asia. Furthermore, living in harmony with these cultures and religions is the preordained context of proclaiming Christ and of living the Christian life in Asia. Thus, Christians, who form a minority—about 2.2 percent, and less than 1 percent if we set aside the Christian-dominated Philippines—must learn to live together with other religions.

Recognizing other religions' various forms in dialogue, Dr. Alfredo Co emphasizes that "we try to find their true strength first and then secure the room for cohabitation with them and then proceed to support each other in the area of meaningful dialogue."[2] Dialogue, to be meaningful, must therefore include three elements: true strength, true strength of the other, and mutual support. The first element pertains to the foundational identity of a certain religion, while the second refers to the foundational identity of the other religion. Finally, the third refers to harmony between the two religions. Harmony is contributed to by both religions, emanating from their unique and distinctive "true strengths."

At the outset, we are faced with two distinct identities and are challenged to find the harmony that will bind them. Moreover, explicit in the principle stated above is a fact that it is the foundational identity, which is unique and distinct from the other, that will serve as the very "room for cohabitation." In short, in dialogue, the true identity should be neither compromised nor diminished. Rather, it is in the fullest appreciation and sincere recognition of, and total respect for, another religion's foundationality that we find the way to dialogue. The challenges that we face in this paper then are the following: Should this harmony come from within or outside the foundational elements of the two distinct identities? Is the quest for harmony also the search for the commonalities between these two distinct identities, which will bring the two into the same basket? In an attempt to answer these queries, the emphasis will be to indicate the possibility of the "room for cohabitation" in Buddhism.

## Dialogue of Foundational Identities

There are two major tendencies in the dialogue of foundational identities between Catholicism and Buddhism. These two tendencies can be characterized as either propositional truth or existential truth. In propositional truth, dialogue is the preponderance to seek commonalities in the sameness of understanding major concepts in each religion. Another possibility is to reread Buddhism entirely, according to the categories of Christianity, or vice versa. Existential truth, on the other hand, is the letting-be of each religion according to its uniqueness and "totality" as the manner of embracing

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*Leaders of different faiths offered a prayer together, holding lit candles, before a tea break during the seventh general assembly of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, at a hotel in Manila, the Philippines, October 17–20, 2008. Some four hundred people from twenty countries in Asia and the Pacific region representing Asia's principal religions took part.*

the other in its uniqueness and "totality." This kind of possibility, which I shall attempt to set out in the latter part of this paper, is my humble understanding of the "true strength" of Buddhism as the very "room for cohabitation."

## Liberative Praxis: From Propositional to Existential Truth

In the dialogue between Heng-ching Fa-shih (Fa-shih means "Dharma teacher") and Lee Mu-shih (Mu-shih means "pastor-teacher"), Lee Mu-shih, a Christian, claims that he is not satisfied with the "typical formulations of sin and salvation," and adds that "strange as it may seem, Buddhist teachings may provide new categories for me to reinterpret the central Christian doctrines of sin and salvation."[3] Initially, it appears that Lee Mu-shih is seeking understanding of his religion (faith) using the doctrines or categories of Buddhism. Yet, as one traverses the conversation between them, it becomes evident that the two are trying to find the commonalities in their conceptual rendering of their respective religions. Thus, what is called causality in Christianity is samsara in Buddhism; while good in Christianity is *kusala* in Buddhism. Although recognizing that their nuances are completely different, their sameness lies in their meaning toward understanding salvation and nirvana.

In the context of Japan, Joseph Spae traces the resemblance of sin and salvation in Buddhism and in Christianity. Sin and salvation, in the Christian context, are located in the social relationship between persons and God. Sin is considered to be the willful disobedience of the will of God. Salvation, therefore, is effected only by acceptance that the grace of God is bestowed upon the repentant. Clearly, salvation is not affected by the person's effort, neither can it be accomplished through a person's persistence and goodness. It can only come about as a gift given to anyone on whom God bestows his mercy and grace. Moreover, even realizing one's wrongdoings and the action of changing one's heart—*metanoia*—can be accomplished only when one surrenders oneself to the grace of the Almighty.

From the Buddhist point of view, Spae emphasizes *zaigo*, the Japanese-Buddhist technical term for sin as the equivalent of the meaning of Christian sin. *Zaigo* derives from *go*, which means karma.[4] And karma forces us to "sin."[5] If there exists a categorical denial of sin in Christianity, Buddhism tends to look at sin in the Middle Way, where "evil conduct, involvement with persons and things, can be an aid to enlightenment when such entities are perceived to be *ku*, empty, and thus apprehended as manifestations of the *busshin*, the ultimate reality and essence of all things."[6]

At the ontological level, we can at least identify two major differences between Buddhism and Christianity in the understanding of sin and salvation. First, in Christianity, the denial of sin means surrender to God—hence, the way to salvation—while in Buddhism, karma apprehended properly becomes the very situation that leads to enlightenment. Second, sin and salvation in the Christian sense are legitimized by a transcendental reality who is God, while in Buddhism,

this transcendental reality is absent as the ultimate fulcrum of desiring salvation.

Another ontological difference between Buddhism and Christianity regarding salvation is the object of salvation itself. In Christianity, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" of salvation are only Christ as the once-and-for-all Incarnate Son of the Father, the human revelation of God. On the other hand, in Buddhism, the historical Buddha is one among the many buddhas who have come—twenty-six to be exact—with an eschatological Buddha yet to come.[7] For Roccasalvo, what makes Christianity uniquely different from Buddhism is precisely the uniqueness and unrepeatability of Christ as the Savior.[8] This is if we assume that those two characteristics justify one to be better than the other.

The bias of reading Buddhism according to Christianity is also a strong tendency in doing dialogue. Henri de Lubac, in his discourse on the difference between Buddhism and Christianity on charity, discussed what he termed the selfish foundation of charity in Buddhism, which can be remedied only by Christianity. To wit:

> This brings us to our final point. Buddhist charity, being provisional and not final, and remaining a means extrinsic to the ends sought, vanishes inevitably when it is regarded from the point of view of absolute truth. Its teaching will always, therefore, be somewhat exoteric—if a doctrine about God was involved, we should say somewhat anthropomorphic. Here again it is in striking contrast to Christian charity. In His highest revelation, God revealed Himself as Love.[9]

Another way of reading the dialogue between religions is to define the commonalities of the foundational identities and structure them as universal values and norms, an example of which is the global ethics of Hans Küng. Global ethics pertains to the basic tenets of all religions, such as love, justice, the fundamental right to life, and care for the environment. The bringing together of these major themes of various religions provides a unitary solution of breaking the barriers and specificity of each religion. In fact, these are the key elements from which a true religion becomes true.[10]

So far, what we are dealing with here is the debate and exchange of concepts between the two and how they are related in the long run. The relationship, as has been noted, is intended to amplify the understanding of one's faith or religion via the unique categorization of the other. In so doing, it becomes a necessary consequence to reduce the one to the framework of the other. In an attempt to avoid this pendulum, the solution of Hans Küng is to create new taxonomies and parameters of harmony by deriving essential sameness from each religion. Yet this tendency clearly violates the very essence of dialogue: that is, "true strength" can come only from the foundational identity of each religion without compromising its integrity in the process of dialogue. This is dramatically expressed in the recantation made by one Buddhist, when he finally come to a realization.

> Unfortunately, some years ago, I too used the term [mysticism] in connection with Zen. I have long since regretted it, as I find [it] now highly misleading in elucidating Zen thought. Let it suffice to say here that Zen has nothing "mystical" about it or in it. It is most plain, clear as daylight, all out in the open with nothing hidden, dark, obscure, secret or mystifying in it.[11]

According to Aloysius Pieris, the core of any religion is the *liberative experience*.[12] At best, what is being implied here is the fact that the linguistic treatment, or *the language barrier*,[13] either exegetically or by way of textual analysis, brings out only the propositional truth. In the end, it is the truth of the statement juxtaposed with the truth of another statement of the other religion that creates dialogue. There is a strong caveat, however, that no matter how pure one's interest is in understanding one's faith from the categories of another faith, this can never shed light on the matter, because faith is necessarily experiential and historical. I shall mention this again when I refer to the strength of Buddhism as "room for cohabitation." In the meantime, it is sufficient to arrive at the conclusion that dialogue between propositional truths does not result in the dialoguing partners' entering into a genuine friendship. This is because, when reality is limited and encapsulated in language, the issue ceases to be the dialogue between partners as the presentation of their true strength. Rather, it becomes a competition revolving around whose categories can shed better light on the other's. What Pieris would consider a core-to-core dialogue is not that which is happening on the level of concepts and ideas and how they are related, albeit vague and at times characterized by forced sameness, but that which is the experience of being at home in one another's homes, because prior to arriving at somebody else's home, one is already at home in one's own religion. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar:

> The future planetary unity of people will find a truly human form neither in Western nor in Eastern ways, but perhaps only when the common point at which they correspond has been found.[14]

Correspondence is not about writing letters clarifying with greater intensity what each has actually meant by every word that has come out of their minds.[15] Correspondence, von Balthasar adds, is "conversation between worlds," "intermundane communication" between cultures, which is primarily concerned with their incomparableness.[16] As has been indicated above, dialogue requires rootedness, or what Dr. Co calls the "true strength" of each religion as a prerequisite of doing dialogue. Fidelity to one's religion is the fundamen-

tal demand of dialogue. Fidelity refers to the life that individuals have as the very incarnation of their faith or religion.

Religion is the professed faith in a given time, culture, and situation. The "true strength" of a religion, therefore, is necessarily historical and experiential. It is in these accents that the liberative praxis of religions takes place. In their historical situatedness, religions are incomparable to one another.

## The Strength of Buddhism

What is the true strength of Buddhism? And how can this true strength provide room for cohabitation? Dr. Co has succinctly described the liberative praxis of Buddhism as follows:

> In its great effort to help save humanity, Buddhism tries to counter the restlessness of the human heart by proposing the "Middle Way" between the two extremes of "ascetic life" and "worldly indulgence." Its teachings provide rules of holy life and moral conduct.[17]

Hans Waldenfels warns us that the Middle Way is not another position crafted between the "ascetic life" and "worldly indulgence." The middle is "beyond concepts or speech; it is the transcendental, being a review of all beings."[18] The Middle Way is not an epistemological construct, because knowledge is still rooted in samsara. It points to the very core of Buddhism, which is *sunyata,* or emptiness, the precondition of enlightenment.

*Sunyata* is not intelligible; neither is it a categorical characterization of the state of a person. To grasp it is to reduce it to an object of knowledge, while to categorize it as a state of being will be to contradict its very meaning. Although literally translated as "emptiness," *sunyata* is more of the dialectic between two opposites, perhaps even better, the combination of the empty and the nonempty.[19] The relation between the two, namely empty and nonempty, then, can be characterized as binary and conjunctive at the same time. It is binary because they are both distinct, and yet in an existential state, they are one and the same.

Emptiness is a state of awareness wherein samsara is already being transcended. This is the level of awareness in which the individual is no longer affected and influenced by interdependent origination. The concept of interdependent origination refers to the infinite causality of existence characterized as ephemeral, transitory, and contingent, in short, samsara. Reality cannot be based on samsara because this would mean that life is anchored from the outside, or from any of its parts, or from any of its accidental attributes. Emptiness is precisely the capturing of the stillness of life, but neither as an object nor as a subject (*anatman*). Such "stillness," or the state of enlightenment, is not the passage from one stage to another stage; neither is it an abrogation of one part and emphasis of the rest.

*Sunyata* is also nonempty. It means fullness. "The final state of the enlightened consciousness of a Buddha is not the mere realization of emptiness but the omniscience that provides the ground for the Buddha to altruistically and spontaneously help others."[20] Thereby, at the height of emptiness, one becomes full in the sense that one has become attuned to the plenitude of the world.

*Sunyata* is not merely a concept. It is the achievement of the buddha-nature. We are told that the Buddha did not want his followers to follow him. *Sunyata* implies also killing the Buddha. To take the path of buddha-nature, the life of *sunyata,* means the cultivation of consciousness.[21] *Sunyata* is achieved through the clarity of consciousness. In fact, at the core of Buddhism is precisely this true form of consciousness. This is also the reason the Buddha is silent about any transcendental reality, other than the person himself, that would save a person or remove the person from samsara. The path to enlightenment is the story of consciousness. Buddha-nature is enlightened consciousness. To wit:

> The utmost consciousness that filled his mind at the time of enlightenment was that he was no longer the slave to what he calls "the market of the tabernacle," or "the builder of this house," that is *gahakaraka.* He now feels himself to be a free agent, master of himself, not subject to anything external; he no longer submits himself to dictation from whatever source it may come.[22]

Enlightened consciousness, however, is not a state of isolation. It does not mean "seeing the last of all desire," nor is it "the extinction of all desires." It is not even equal to annihilation. By means of *prajna,* consciousness achieves a higher level of understanding of the world of samsara. At that level, enlightened consciousness arranges and appreciates the world in which it properly belongs. "By enlightenment Buddha sees all things in their proper order, as they should be, which means that Buddha's insight has reached the depths of reality."[23] The Buddha has beautifully described this state of experience of enlightenment in the Majjhima Nikaya:

> Victorious over all, omniscient am I,
> Among all things undefiled,
> Leaving all, through death of craving freed,
> By knowing for myself, whom should I point to?
>
> For me there is no teacher,
> One like me does not exist,
> In the world with its *devas*
> No one equals me.
>
> For I am perfected in the world,
> A teacher supreme am I,
> I alone am all-awakened,
> Become cool I am, nibbana-attained.[24]

At this juncture, what we have pointed out as the Middle Way actually refers to Buddhism as "the philosophy of suchness, or philosophy of Emptiness, or philosophy of Self-identity. It starts from the absolute present, which is pure experience, an experience in which there is no differentiation of subject and object, and yet which is not a state of sheer nothingness."[25]

## Room for Cohabitation

Is there any room for other religions to cohabit with Buddhists? Cohabitation, as we have indicated above, must recognize, appreciate, and fully accept the true strength of other religions. Is there a possibility then of other religions' residing in their uniqueness and totality in the home of a Buddhist?

Buddhism as the Middle Way, expressed through the reality of *sunyata,* and achieved through the cultivation of the mind (*prajna*), is a state, according to Suzuki, where there is "no division between 'ought' and 'is,' between form and matter or content, and therefore there is no judgment in it yet."[26] At the level of enlightenment or pure experience, it is seen that religion, culture, truths, and language all fall short already in that they become categories that belong to samsara. An enlightened one no longer looks at an other according to a set of beliefs or in terms of rites and practices. There is nothing external that influences him or her, nor anything that can serve as a basis of reaching out to the other. The "principle" (for lack of a better term) of *sunyata* demands the Middle Way as a practice that dissolves binary opposites in the same basket. In fact, at the point of enlightenment, an enlightened mind does not even distinguish between nirvana and samsara. At that point they are one without dissolving their difference. It is at this stage that words do not determine the division of reality, because in the first place such division collapses:

> (1) There is no conceptual appearance; (2) there is no sense of subject and object, which are, instead, mixed like fresh water poured into fresh water; (3) there is no appearance of inherent existence; (4) there is no appearance of conventional phenomena—only emptiness appears; (5) there is no appearance of difference—although the emptiness of all phenomena in all world systems appears, they do not appear to be different.[27]

A Buddhist (in the sense that his nature achieves buddhanature) is necessarily a person of dialogue. This is because his nature is such that not only is all (*the plenitude of reality*) incorporated into his being but he is also one with them by way of his intuition, his deepest understanding (*prajna*) of reality. It is here that I find dialogue most closely associated with the Middle Way. For the Middle Way can be paraphrased as the gathering together of the true strengths of the various realities. A Buddhist naturally welcomes and embraces the wholeness of all others. This welcoming and embracing, in the end, are what Buddhists call compassion. As already cited above, at the height of the experience of enlightenment, a Buddhist altruistically and spontaneously helps, accepts, and loves others. ❑

### Notes

1. See the final statement and recommendation of the first assembly of the Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA), Bangkok, October 18, 1979, in *For All the Peoples of Asia,* vol. 1, ed. G. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 109.
2. Alfredo Co, *Philosophy of the Compassionate Buddha* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2003), 158.
3. Peter K. H. Lee and Shih Heng-ching, "A Christian-Buddhist Dialogue on Causality and Good and Evil," *Ching Feng* 30, no. 2 (May 1987): 39.
4. Joseph Spae, "Sin and Salvation: Buddhist and Christian," *Ching Feng* 30, no. 3 (September 1987): 123.
5. Ibid., 124.
6. Ibid.
7. Joseph Roccasalvo, "Toward an Atheism of Reverence: The Special Case of Buddhism," *Chicago Studies* 41, no. 2 (2002): 217.
8. Ibid.
9. Henri de Lubac, "Retrieving the Tradition: Buddhist Charity and Christian Charity," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15 (Winter 1988): 504–5.
10. See Hans Küng, "What Is the True Religion?" *Ching Feng* 30, no. 3 (September 1987).
11. Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,* trans. J. W. Heisig (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 126, quoted in *The Eastern Buddhist* I, no. 1: 124.
12. Aloysius Pieris, "Christianity in a Core-to-Core Dialogue with Buddhism," *Japan Missionary Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (1988): 31–44.
13. Ibid., 31.
14. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Buddhism—an Approach to Dialogue" (editorial), *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15 (Winter 1988): 409.
15. See D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist,* The World Perspectives Series, vol. 12 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 53.
16. Von Balthasar, 409.
17. Co, *Philosophy,* 162.
18. Waldenfels, 18.
19. Ibid., 20–21.
20. Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman, *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 22–23.
21. Ibid., 23.
22. Suzuki, *Mysticism,* 45.
23. Ibid., 46.
24. *The Middle Length Sayings* (Majjhima Nikaya), vol. 1, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Pali Text Society, 1976), 214–15.
25. Suzuki, *Mysticism,* 69.
26. Ibid., 70.
27. Mitchell and Wiseman, *Gethsemani Encounter,* 25.

# The Model Way of Life

by Nikkyo Niwano

*This essay is part of a continuing series of translations from a volume of inspirational writings by the 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.*

We usually say that progress occurs when situations develop into something better. Some people may also think of progress as the new surpassing the old, or as change and development from the past.

I for one, though, believe that there is something lacking in this way of thinking. Real progress is achieved after first looking around and perceiving what needs to be improved and what people really require and then producing it based on a fixed rule. In other words, it is creating what people in general regard as being valuable or beneficial to them. What I call a "fixed rule" is the Buddhist law of cause and effect. Progress has to be based on, and firmly rooted in, this law. If we do not look at progress in this light, simply thinking that any type of "progress" at all has to be good, then it will inevitably turn out that we have regressed. Environmental degradation is a good example of this.

What then should we do to achieve genuine progress? Some people think that it can be brought about by revolution. Revolution, however, prioritizes political interests, which aim for progress and reform in terms of a top-down approach in the social system. The problem with this approach is that it usually tends to make demands on opposing groups and often involves coercion.

What I contend is that for both society and individuals to make progress, we have to turn our minds to "giving," not the "demanding" to which we may be accustomed. Politicians and government officials, as well as ordinary working people and those who stay at home, should be thinking, "What steps can I take to make others happy?" rather than wondering, "What should I be requesting to benefit myself?"

Such an attitude is exactly the spirit of donation (giving) taught by Buddhism. At present there are many people with this spirit who have achieved great success in their lives. I believe that this is the mind-set that is essential for the betterment of society from now on.

So as I have noted, if we seek true progress, it is important first to possess the spirit of giving. Then we need to have the basic resolve to follow through to our target, and here human life itself and the truth that pervades the universe are very important. This accords, I feel, with the Six Perfections of Buddhism, the first of which is donation, followed by morality, forbearance, endeavor, meditation, and wisdom. The Six Perfections thus provide the modern person with a model for living; by practicing each of these virtues in a balanced way, we will learn to guide people toward true progress. When every living person becomes filled with a love for everyone else like a mother's love for her child, unstintingly acting to help others, and when a spirit of cooperation grows in the hearts of all, lasting world peace will come to fruition.

In the past the image of a saintly religious person was of a solitary one with a profound personal faith that silently revealed itself in a high moral character that naturally influenced others. This is truly the figure of a sincere and deeply devoted believer, but in this day and age, that may not be enough. We cannot guide people by the power of suggestion only; rather, we must be proactive and positive in our outlook and thrust ourselves among other people. Think of the great thirteenth-century Buddhist priest Nichiren and his fiery roadside preaching. We have a lot to learn from his dedicated fighting spirit. Now is the time for us to carry out a modern version of that roadside preaching.

Practically speaking, it is not easy to bring about a change

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*Nikkyo Niwano, the 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.*

in people's attitudes and beliefs. All the same, we have to try to shift their consciousness, and so we should not ignore the campaigns that seek to do this. There are many examples of such movements, such as those aimed at stopping wasteful spending, recommending a simpler lifestyle, using public transportation instead of our own cars, and reducing the amount of waste we create, to name just a few. We should take a positive role in organizing and participating in these movements and in encouraging others to join. To do this we have to bring into play the full-power cooperation of what the Lotus Sutra calls "people of correct resolution."

No one enjoys being burdened with rules and regulations. Most of us think personal freedom is ideal. But is there such a thing as real freedom in the world today? You are "free" to walk into the middle of a busy road, but you may well be struck and injured or killed by a car. You are "free" to take a loaf of bread from a shop if you are hungry, but you would risk being apprehended and arrested. Complete freedom exists in your heart alone, and it occurs only when you walk a righteous path. Your heart is free when you use the sidewalk, and at ease when you abide by the necessary rules. Therefore, meaningful rules and regulations are needed as long as we live in this world. That is why Buddhism requires that the precepts be strictly observed. ❑

*Founder Niwano delivers a Dharma talk to youth members on the occasion of the Youth Pilgrimage to the headquarters in Tokyo held in March 1985. During that year, Rissho Kosei-kai organized pilgrimages in March and November and some forty thousand young members visited headquarters.*

# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 15

## Springing Up out of the Earth

## (2)

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

TEXT Each of these bodhisattvas / Leads on a retinue / Whose numbers are beyond compute, / Like the sands of the Ganges. / There are also the great bodhisattvas / Leading [followers numerous] as sixty thousand Ganges sands. / Such mighty hosts / With one mind seek the Buddha Way. / These great leaders [in number] / As sixty thousand Ganges sands / All come and worship the Buddha / And guard and keep this sutra. / Some, still more numerous, / Lead [followers numerous] as fifty thousand Ganges sands, / As forty thousand, or thirty thousand, / As twenty thousand, down to ten thousand, / As a thousand or a hundred and so forth, / Down to the sands of one Ganges, / As half, one-third, one-fourth, / As one part of the myriad kotis [of a Ganges' sands]: / Those who lead a thousand myriad nayutas, / Or a myriad kotis of disciples, / Or even half a koti [of disciples]; / These [leaders] are still more numerous than the above, / [The leaders of] a million or ten thousand, / A thousand or a hundred, / Or fifty or ten, / Or three, two, or one; / Single ones with no following, / Who enjoy solitariness, / Have all come together to the Buddha, / In numbers even greater than [the leaders] above. / Such are these great hosts that / If a man kept tally / Through kalpas numerous as Ganges sands, / He still could not fully know them, / These great, majestic, / And zealous bodhisattva hosts. / Who has preached the Law to them, / Instructed and perfected them? / From whom did they get their start? / What Buddha Law have they extolled? / Whose sutra received, kept, and practiced? / What Buddha Way have they followed?

COMMENTARY *Kept tally.* The literal meaning of the Chinese phrase is "counted using a counting device." This ancient device, called a *ch'ou,* employed about two hundred small pieces of wood on a board. Using it, one could perform calculations impossible with an abacus.

• *Great, majestic.* This means to be endowed with great dignity, so that one can move people's minds. "Majestic" has no connotation of swaggering power but rather suggests the power of influence.

• *From whom did they get their start?* Who aroused their minds to seek the Buddha Way? The expression "arouse the mind" is used in Japan to describe the decision to undertake a certain path of study seriously, but it was originally a Buddhist concept.

• *What Buddha Law have they extolled?* "Extol" usually has the sense of praise, but here it means to praise inwardly rather than orally. To praise inwardly is to be in sympathy with one's object and full of admiration for it. "Extolled" as used here means to comprehend the teachings and to praise them for their greatness. When we extol the teachings, we must be sure that we do so out of inward sympathy with them and in admiration for them, otherwise our words will be empty mouthings and cheap praise. This applies to all things, not just the Buddha's teaching.

• *What Buddha Way have they followed?* Here "followed" has the sense of "absorbed" and "practiced over and over again." Both actions are essential when undertaking religious training. It is not enough simply to repeat something mechanically; unless it is done attentively, it is meaningless. Repetition is important for maintaining the edge of what has been absorbed. Unless practice is continually honed, regression will occur. Thus "followed" as used here is of great importance.

TEXT Such bodhisattvas as these, / With transcendent powers and great wisdom, / In all quarters of the riven earth, / All spring forth from its midst. / World-honored One! From of yore / We have never seen such things; / Be pleased to tell us the name / Of the domain from which they come. / Roaming constantly in many domains, / I have never seen such a host, / And amid all this host / I know not a single one / [Who] suddenly springs from the earth. / Be pleased to tell us its cause. / This great congregation now

present, / Innumerable hundred thousand kotis / Of these bodhisattvas and others, / All desire to know this matter. / Of all these bodhisattva hosts, / What is the course of their history? / World-honored One of measureless virtue! / Be pleased to resolve our doubts!"

COMMENTARY *Roaming.* Here "roaming" has the sense of "traveling to spread the teachings."

• *What is the course of their history?* The literal meaning of the Chinese text is "What are the first and last causes?" "First" refers to the main cause, and "last" refers to the final cause. The first cause is the initial awakening of the aspiration for buddhahood, and the last cause is the bodhisattvas springing up out of the earth. In between those two events numerous causes and conditions must have been in play. The connections among them are here termed "history."

TEXT Meanwhile, the buddhas who had emanated from Shakyamuni Buddha and had come from innumerable thousand myriad kotis of domains in other quarters sat cross-legged on the lion thrones under the jewel trees in every direction.

COMMENTARY *Sat cross-legged.* This refers to the lotus position, in which the left foot is placed on the right thigh and the right foot on the left thigh. This is the position employed for Zen meditation (zazen).

TEXT The attendants of these buddhas each beheld the great host of bodhisattvas who, in every direction of the three-thousand-great-thousandfold world, issued from the earth and dwelt in space. And each spoke to his own buddha, saying: "World-honored One! This great, countless, illimitable asamkhyeya host of bodhisattvas—whence have they come?"

Thereupon each of those buddhas told his own attendants: "Good sons! Wait a while! There is a bodhisattva-mahasattva whose name is Maitreya, and who has been predestined by Shakyamuni Buddha as the next buddha; he has already asked about this matter. The Buddha is now going to reply to him, and from his reply you will hear for yourselves."

COMMENTARY Reliable records attest that the bodhisattva Maitreya was an actual person. He was the son of a court minister in Varanasi (Benares) and became a follower of the Buddha early in his ministry. Shakyamuni soon recognized Maitreya's outstanding character and prophesied that in 5.67 billion years' time, when the Buddha Dharma would have been forgotten, Maitreya would appear in the world as the Buddha to save it.

Maitreya is considered to be the embodiment of compassion. He is not a heavenly being who will descend to extend compassion to all people, but a human being who has experienced the joys and sorrows of human life, who has accumulated various forms of religious practice to attain enlightenment, and who will liberate the people of the world on the basis of his enlightenment.

In the discourses of the Lotus Sutra there is always a group of bodhisattvas that questions and replies to the Buddha and other bodhisattvas on behalf of the assembly in general, thus setting the scene for the discourse. Maitreya always takes the same position as those bodhisattvas: In chapter 1, "Introductory," he asked Manjushri Bodhisattva why a radiant light was emanating from the circle of white hair between the Buddha's eyebrows, and here he asks the Buddha about the origins of the bodhisattvas who have sprung up out of the earth.

TEXT Thereupon Shakyamuni Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva: "Good, good! Ajita! You have well asked the Buddha concerning so great a matter. Do you all, with one mind, don the armor of zeal and exhibit a firm will, [for] the Tathagata now intends to reveal and proclaim the wisdom of buddhas, the sovereign and supernatural power of buddhas, the lion-eagerness of buddhas, and the awe-inspiring forceful power of buddhas."

COMMENTARY Here begins the main part of the realm of origin, in which the Buddha explains what a buddha is and the nature of the original form of the Buddha (Shakyamuni) who has appeared in the world. That he is happy to be asked the question is apparent in his praise of it: "Good, good! Ajita! You have well asked the Buddha concerning so great a matter."

• *Ajita.* This is another name of Maitreya.

• *Don the armor of zeal.* "Zeal" means "diligence," one of the Six Perfections. It connotes that which is pure, without adulteration. Zeal is usually interpreted as unwavering effort to achieve a goal, but here the nuance is a little different: With a pure heart unattached to preconceptions, listen well to what I am about to tell you and consider it carefully. What the Buddha is about to relate cannot be understood according to normally held ideas, being a profound truth.

• *Exhibit a firm will.* You must have a strong belief and display unwavering effort so that you will not be rocked by doubt or suspicion.

• *The sovereign and supernatural power of buddhas.* This refers to the supranormal power of absolute freedom possessed by all buddhas. This power is thought of as strange and mysterious, but it is in fact the manifestation of the Buddha's compassion, which seeks to liberate all living beings.

• *The lion-eagerness of buddhas.* The liberating power of the Buddha is compared to the great strength of a lion. The basis of this power will be revealed during the discourse.

• *The awe-inspiring forceful power of buddhas.* This refers to the power of great virtue belonging to buddhas, which converts all beings. The basis of this power, too, will be revealed during the discourse.

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

"Be zealous and of one mind. / I am about to expound this matter. / Have no doubts or disquietude. / Inconceivable is the Buddha wisdom. / Do you now exert your faith; / Be steadfast in the virtue of endurance;

COMMENTARY The teachings of the realm of trace, the first half of the Lotus Sutra, the theoretical teachings, can be understood intellectually; those of the realm of origin, the second half, the essential teachings, cannot be understood by intellectual means alone; an element of faith is necessary. Faith does not mean illogicality, for it is based on truth. Because this truth is profound, however, it is difficult for people to understand, used as they are to judgments based only on tangible phenomena. To understand the truth perfectly is to gain the Buddha's wisdom, which is beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. This is the meaning of the phrase "Inconceivable is the Buddha wisdom."

The Buddha requires us to believe. Modern people are rather skeptical about believing in a religious sense, though many have no trouble believing the theories of Marx and Lenin. To believe, it is essential that we deeply admire the person who is teaching. Shinran (1173–1262), founder of the Jodo Shin sect of Pure Land Buddhism, wrote about his teacher, "Should I have been deceived by Master Honen and, saying the *nenbutsu,* were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets." Complete confidence in another gives rise to strong belief. Thus people are led to the truth through belief in the words of another. Trust in a person becomes trust in that person's teachings. Unfortunately, all too often people place their trust in someone unworthy of it and believe in teachings of little value. This, however, is another problem.

Here Shakyamuni urges us to believe with all our might and with a pure and accepting mind, for from such an open mind is born the absolute certainty that our own enlightenment is assured. Those without the ability to believe are those who have had no exposure to the Buddha's teachings. In such cases we can do nothing but wait for belief to be aroused.

When we listen to those who are halfhearted and of doubtful character, it is natural to doubt what they say. But when the words are spoken by Shakyamuni, known to all as a man of incomparable enlightenment, people should be able to listen to his teachings with unconditional trust. For 2,500 years his teachings have been expounded and practiced by innumerable scholars, religious practitioners, and ordinary people. Today millions of people acknowledge Buddhism as the living truth for all humankind. For us today, it is certainly no mistake to believe before we understand. As we practice, based on our belief, we will come to understand.

This is the mental preparation necessary for approaching the essential teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Shakyamuni urged the bodhisattvas who were listening to him to exert all the power of their faith to understand the inconceivable Buddha wisdom and to be steadfast in it.

To "be steadfast in the virtue of endurance" means to maintain firm faith. "Endurance" here also has a strong connotation of mental concentration.

TEXT [For] the Law never heard before, / Now you all are about to hear. / I now [first] put your minds at ease; / Cherish neither doubt nor fear. / The Buddha has no words but the true; / His wisdom is beyond measure. / The supreme Law attained by him / Is profound and beyond discrimination. / Such [Law] let me now expound, / And do you all, with one mind, listen."

COMMENTARY *The Law never heard before.* What Shakyamuni is about to teach has not been taught by him before. It is the truth of the existence of the unborn and undying Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remotest past. Such a teaching will astound those who believe only in what they can see before their eyes, and they may doubt it or become angry.

• *The Buddha has no words but the true.* Since Shakyamuni is about to tell his listeners that he has existed from the limitless past, those who do not have firm faith may think that such a thing is impossible. This is why Shakyamuni says plainly that the Buddha does not lie.

• *His wisdom is beyond measure.* The Buddha's wisdom cannot be comprehended by the usual methods of understanding. When people try to do so, needless doubts arise. Shakyamuni therefore warns his listeners not to employ normal modes of cognition.

• *The supreme Law attained by him is profound and beyond discrimination.* The supreme Dharma that the Buddha has realized is profound and difficult to understand. It cannot be comprehended through common understanding. Therefore Shakyamuni urges his listeners to listen "with one mind," discarding all preconceived notions, accepting what

he will say directly and without argument, in order to understand his words in their hearts and respond at a level beyond intellectual understanding, that of deep faith.

TEXT Then the World-honored One, having spoken these verses, addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva: "Now I, in this great assembly, declare to you all. Ajita! All these great bodhisattva-mahasattvas, in innumerable and numberless asamkhyeyas, who have issued from the earth and whom you have never seen before, I in this saha world, after attaining Perfect Enlightenment, instructed and led them, all these bodhisattvas, controlled their minds, and caused them to set their thoughts on the Way.

COMMENTARY Here Shakyamuni speaks of the identity and nature of the bodhisattvas who have issued from the earth. This passage complements the beginning of chapter 16, "Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata," which tells of the true nature of the Buddha.

• *Controlled.* This means to control a disturbed mind and arouse it to follow the Buddha's teachings. In later times, in Japan, this expression was used in association with the exorcism of evil spirits and demons through magico-religious prayer and ritual and, even worse, the cursing of people. The original and correct meaning is, as we have seen, based on Buddhist teachings.

• *Set their thoughts on the Way.* This refers to the volition to achieve the Buddha Way, the determination to seek the Buddha's enlightenment.

TEXT All these bodhisattvas dwell in the space beneath this saha world, [where] they read, recite, penetrate, ponder, and discriminate the sutras, and correctly keep them in memory.

COMMENTARY *Penetrate.* This means to have a deep and thorough knowledge.

• *Ponder.* This means not simply to learn and understand the teachings but to think about them in the light of one's own wisdom. This is the indispensable means by which enlightenment is deepened. It is very important that those who guide and teach others do not forget this.

• *Discriminate.* Here the word means to analyze and understand, for example, to have a thorough understanding of what a particular teaching means in a particular situation, or what functions a particular person fulfills.

TEXT Ajita! These good sons have not found pleasure in talking among the crowd [but] have found their pleasure in quiet places, in diligence and zeal; they have not relaxed, nor clung to abodes among men and gods, but have ever taken their pleasure in profound wisdom, without let or hindrance, have ever rejoiced in the Law of buddhas, and with one mind have zealously sought supreme wisdom."

COMMENTARY *These good sons have not found pleasure in talking among the crowd [but] have found their pleasure in quiet places, in diligence and zeal.* Basically, "these good sons"—the bodhisattvas—do not enjoy the kind of lifestyle in which they preach the Law eloquently, constantly surrounded by crowds. They prefer solitary contemplation in a quiet place, intent on spiritual practice in search of enlightenment. Essentially, this is true of most people of religion. Bodhisattvas, however, seeing the suffering of ordinary people, are impelled to set aside their own preferences and teach the Law for the sake of people, devoting themselves to the task of instruction and conversion.

• *Nor clung to abodes among men and gods.* Here "cling" means "rely on." We should depend not on other people or the gods but on ourselves and the Dharma. Just before he died, Shakyamuni said to Ananda, "Make the self your light, make the Law your light." Truly these are eternal words.

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

"Ajita! Know thou! / All these great bodhisattvas, / From numberless kalpas, / Have studied the Buddha wisdom. / All of them are my converts, / Whom I have caused to desire the Great Way. / These are my sons / Who dwell in this [Buddha] world, / Ever practicing the dhuta deeds, / Joyfully devoted to quiet places, / Shunning the clamor of the crowds, / With no pleasure in much talk. / Such sons as these / Are learning the Law of my Way, / Always zealous day and night / For the sake of seeking the Buddha Way; / They dwell in space / Beneath the saha world.

COMMENTARY *These are my sons.* These are very important words. "My sons" can be interpreted simply as "disciples," but here it has the deeper meaning of "true children"—in other words, "my incarnations."

• *Who dwell in this world.* "This world" is the saha world. Here "dwell" has the connotation of remaining forever.

• *Ever practicing the dhuta deeds. Dhuta* has the meaning of exorcising all materialistic desires. To practice *dhuta* deeds means to live a purified life that transcends all passions and desires.

TEXT Firm in their power of will and memory, / Ever diligently seeking after wisdom, / They preach all kinds of wonderful laws, / Having no fear in their minds.

COMMENTARY *Having no fear in their minds.* The Sanskrit version of the Lotus Sutra has here "they teach with the self-confidence of knowing that they are my sons." It is very important to realize that this confidence is the root of fearlessness.

Our attitude to others changes according to how we see ourselves. If we think of ourselves as being weak, we will always be limited by our perception of our powerlessness

and never gain self-confidence. One way to build self-confidence is to belong to a larger group, whether a company, another kind of organization, or a nation. This is because we do not feel so small and isolated when we are part of a greater whole. The small self is absorbed into a greater self (a larger entity). As this sense deepens, we merge into the universe itself; when we realize that we are the children of the Eternal Original Buddha, we are filled with the Buddha's compassion, which gives rise to the greatest strength possible. We fear nothing, and have no hesitation. The realization that we are the Buddha's children gives us enormous self-confidence. This has a very important effect on how we live, for we are able to approach critical acts with courage. When we discard the small self and develop the self-confidence of knowing we are the Buddha's children, nothing can frighten us. I hope you will consider these words very carefully.

TEXT I, [near] the city of Gaya, / Sitting beneath the Bodhi tree, / Accomplished Perfect Enlightenment; / And rolling the supreme Law wheel, / I have then taught and converted them / And caused them first to aspire to the Way. / Now all abide in the never-relapsing [state] / And all will become buddhas.

COMMENTARY *The city of Gaya.* Gaya is a town situated in what is now the state of Bihar in India. In the Buddha's time it was an important center in the kingdom of Magadha. Shakyamuni spent six years practicing asceticism on the banks of the Nairanjana river, just outside the town, but becoming convinced that ascetic practices could not lead to enlightenment, he went for a short time to nearby Mount Pragbodhi, and then to a place about three kilometers upstream of where he had been before, where he achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. A great stupa has been built there to commemorate the Buddha's enlightenment, and the surroundings are dotted with pilgrim lodgings. The whole area is now called Bodhgaya. It is about ten kilometers south of the town of Gaya. All Buddhists are encouraged to visit this sacred place at least once during their lifetime.

TEXT What I now speak is the truth; / Believe me with single minds! / I from a long distant past / Have instructed all this host."

COMMENTARY This is very perplexing. Earlier, Shakyamuni said that he instructed the bodhisattvas after he gained enlightenment, but now he states that he has instructed them "from a long distant past." We cannot help feeling there is a contradiction here. The contradiction arises because we do not know whether we should regard Shakyamuni as the buddha of this world alone or as a buddha who has existed for all eternity. This apparent contradiction will be resolved later. It is because Shakyamuni realizes that what he is about to say will seem contradictory to his listeners that he poses the question, so that later he can resolve it cleanly and fix his teaching all the more firmly in people's minds.

TEXT Then the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva Maitreya and the numberless bodhisattvas and others were seized with doubt and perplexity, wondering at this rare [thing], and reflected thus: "How has the World-honored One, in so short a time, instructed such innumerable, countless asamkhyeyas of great bodhisattvas and caused them to abide in Perfect Enlightenment?"

COMMENTARY Here we see Maitreya's own doubt being expressed. He knows that the Buddha does not lie, but he is unable to explain such a strange fact.

TEXT Then, addressing the Buddha, they said: "World-honored One! The Tathagata, when he was a prince, left the Shakya palace and not far from the city of Gaya took his seat on the wisdom terrace, and attained to Perfect Enlightenment. From that time but forty years have passed. World-honored One! In so short a time how hast thou done such great Buddha deeds, and by Buddha power and Buddha merit taught such an innumerable host of great bodhisattvas to attain Perfect Enlightenment?

COMMENTARY *Left the Shakya palace.* The palace of the Shakyas was in Kapilavastu, the city that was the base of the Shakya clan. The Shakyas were a proud and distinguished people, and it is said that kings with their surname ruled eleven countries. Shakyamuni's father, King Shuddhodana, was one of the central figures of the clan. He ruled not as an absolute monarch but as "the first among equals" in a senate made up of aristocrats. He was more like a modern rajah. Shakyamuni was his father's heir. All the same, he abandoned the palace and became a wandering religious practitioner. "Left the Shakya palace" refers to this act.

• *Buddha deeds:* The task of a buddha is to teach, convert, save, and liberate all living beings, the most basic and important part of his work in this world. Later this expression came to mean making offerings to the buddhas and the ancestors. The change in usage came about as Buddhism declined and fell into disarray. We should do our best to perform Buddha deeds in the original sense of the expression, so that Buddhism may be returned to its former vibrant state. The "great Buddha deeds" referred to here indicate the Buddha's actions of teaching the innumerable bodhisattvas who sprang up out of the earth and bringing them to the Buddha's enlightenment.

TEXT World-honored One! This host of great bodhisattvas, even if a man counted them through thousands of myriad kotis of kalpas, he could not come to an end or reach their limit. All these from the far past under innumerable

*The great stupa at Bodhgaya in the state of Bihar, which was built to commemorate the Buddha's enlightenment.*

and countless buddhas have planted their roots of goodness and accomplished the bodhisattva way, constantly living the noble life. World-honored One! Such a matter as this the world will find it hard to believe.

COMMENTARY The bodhisattvas could not have accomplished so much in the short span of one lifetime that they would be endowed with the thirty-two primary marks of a buddha and would emit radiance from their bodies. They must have been practicing from long in the past under innumerable buddhas. Maitreya voices the feelings of all when he states that their accomplishment in such a short time is hard to believe.

TEXT "It is just as if there were a man of fine complexion and black hair, twenty-five years old, who pointed to centenarians and said: 'These are my sons,' and as if those centenarians also pointed to the youth and said: 'This is our father who begot and reared us.' This matter is hard of belief. So also is it with the Buddha, whose attainment of the Way is really not long since. Yet this great host of bodhisattvas, for numberless thousands of myriads of kotis of kalpas, for the sake of the Buddha Way have devoted themselves with zeal; they have entered deep into, come out of, and dwelt in infinite hundred thousand myriad kotis of contemplations, have attained the great transcendent [faculties], and for long have practiced brahma conduct; have been well able, step by step, to learn all kinds of good laws; they are skillful in question and answer, are treasures amongst men and of extreme rareness in all worlds.

COMMENTARY This is known as the parable of the young father with aged sons. For Shakyamuni to say that he has brought the bodhisattvas who sprang up out of the earth to enlightenment is like saying that a young man can have centenarian sons. It is a very skillful parable.

• *They have entered deep into, come out of, and dwelt in infinite hundred thousand myriad kotis of contemplations.* "Contemplations" is a translation of the Sanskrit *samadhi,* which means concentration on a certain truth or idea. It refers to a state of mind that cannot be disturbed or broken. There are as many different types of contemplation as there are truths and ideas. The first paragraph of chapter 27, "The Story of King Resplendent," lists "pure contemplation, sun constellation contemplation, pure light contemplation, pure color contemplation, pure illumination contemplation, ever resplendent contemplation, and contemplation of the treasury of great dignity." These are only a fraction of the total number of contemplations. The great bodhisattvas enter all these contemplations, emerge from them when they wish to, and dwell within them as they will. Being able thus to act with absolute freedom is proof of their outstanding ability. This is not a stage that can be reached in one or two lifetimes.

• *Learn all kinds of good laws.* Here "laws" refers to the teachings.

• *They are skillful in question and answer.* Here "skillful" is not used in the ordinary sense of the word, as in politicians skillfully parrying questions or skillfully memorizing the components of some theory or policy. True skill is the ability to answer any question put by any person with truth, in a way that the person can comprehend and be satisfied with. We should strive for such skill, not only when teaching Buddhism but in all our activities. This is the main motive power for creating a good society. Such skill does not come to a person overnight, however. As we can surmise from the fact that it is an ability with which all the bodhisattvas who emerged from the earth are endowed, its acquisition takes a great amount of religious training.

TEXT Today the World-honored One has just said that when he attained the Buddha Way he from the beginning caused them to aspire [to enlightenment], instructed and led, and caused them to proceed toward Perfect Enlightenment. It is not long since the World-honored One became a buddha, yet he has been able to do this great, meritorious deed. Though we still believe that what the Buddha opportunely preached and the words the Buddha uttered have never been false, and also the Buddha's knowledge is all perceived by us, yet if newly converted bodhisattvas hear

this statement after the Buddha's extinction, they may not receive it in faith and this will give rise to causes of wrong action to the destruction of the Law. So, World-honored One, be pleased to explain it, removing our doubts, and so that all [thy] good sons in future generations, on hearing this matter, shall also not beget doubt."

COMMENTARY *False.* The literal meaning of the Chinese term is "empty and nonsensical."

• *The Buddha's knowledge is all perceived by us.* However strange or paradoxical the words of the Buddha seem, they are imbued with deep meaning and correct reasoning, and are spoken in order to bring people to understanding of the Way. This Maitreya and the other bodhisattvas have come to realize.

• *This will give rise to causes of wrong action to the destruction of the Law.* "Destruction of the Law" means harm to the Buddha's teachings. This is not limited to an individual's disbelief in the teachings or defiance of them. When someone does not believe, he or she may well say bad things about the teachings when others show an interest, bringing up objections and trying to prevent them from believing. This effect on others is the most worrying part of disbelief, for its influence can cause the bud of the aspiration for enlightenment to wither and stop the true teachings from spreading. Thus "destruction of the Law" is a great wrong.

People hearing the teachings for the first time may find that a small doubt grows into a doubt about the teachings as a whole. It is important that such small doubts do not become the cause of harm to the teachings. That is why Maitreya, the embodiment of compassion, is so concerned that not even a small doubt should arise. At the same time, the Buddha knows exactly what he is saying and has planned his explanation meticulously.

TEXT Thereupon Maitreya Bodhisattva, desiring to announce this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse:

"The Buddha of old from the Shakya race / Left his home and near Gaya / Took his seat under the Bodhi tree; / From then it has not been long. / These sons of the Buddha, / Immeasurable in their number, / Have long pursued the Buddha Way, / And are firm in transcendent wisdom power; / They have ably learned the bodhisattva way, / And are as untainted with worldly things / As the lotus flower in the water; / Issuing from the earth, / All have a reverent mind / As they stand before the World-honored One. / This matter is hard to conceive; / How can it be believed?

COMMENTARY *They have ably learned the bodhisattva way, and are as untainted with worldly things as the lotus flower in the water.* To have thoroughly absorbed the bodhisattva way (the Mahayana teachings) and to remain uninfluenced by worldly things though living in the everyday world is likened to a lotus flower blooming in muddy water, its beauty and purity unaffected by the dirt. This passage aptly describes the character of a bodhisattva. It is no wonder that the great bodhisattvas, appearing to ordinary eyes as superior even to Shakyamuni, should appear before the Buddha and reverently pay homage to him.

TEXT It is but recently the Buddha has attained the Way, / And the things he has accomplished abound. / Be pleased to remove all doubts; / Explain and tell us the real [meaning]! / It is as if a young, strong man, / Just twenty-five years old, / Indicated centenarian sons / With white hair and wrinkled faces, / [Saying], 'These are begotten by me,' / The sons also saying, 'This is our father.' / The father young and the sons old— / The whole world will not believe it. / So is it with the World-honored One; / Very recently he has attained the Way. / [Yet] all these bodhisattvas are / Firm in will, dauntless, and strong, / And from innumerable kalpas / Have followed the bodhisattva way; / Skilled in answering hard questions, / Their minds are free from fear; / Decided in their patient mind, / Dignified and majestic, / They are extolled by universal buddhas; / Well able to reason and preach, / They rejoice not in the crowd, / But ever love to dwell in meditation; / For the sake of seeking the Buddha Way, / They dwell in the space [region] below.

COMMENTARY *Decided in their patient mind.* Even when derided, embarrassed, or persecuted by outside forces, they endure patiently. Similarly, if they are praised or flattered they feel no sense of exaltation but remain calm. Such is the mark of a fine person.

TEXT We, hearing it from the Buddha, / Have no doubts on this matter; / [But] we beg that the Buddha, for future [hearers], / Will explain that they may understand. / If any should doubt / And disbelieve this sutra, / He would fall into the evil path. / Be pleased to expound for them now / How these innumerable bodhisattvas / In so short a time / Have been instructed and converted / And abide in the never-retreating stage."

COMMENTARY *He would fall into the evil path.* The evil path refers to the four realms of hell, hungry spirits, animals, and asuras. I have already spoken of the danger of causing the grave sin of harming the teachings.

Maitreya's questioning ends the chapter. The following chapter, "Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata," answers it. That chapter is the very essence of the Lotus Sutra. We should consider the present chapter the introduction to it.

*To be continued*

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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.