

# DHARMA WORLD

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## FEATURES: Manga, Anime, and Contemporary Religion

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

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Photo: AFLO

Photo: Courtesy of Daikyoji

# Manga, Anime, and Contemporary Religion

by Hiroshi Munehiro Niwano

**The affirmation of life seen in the works of Tetsuya Chiba and the concepts of universality and timelessness in the works of Leiji Matsumoto are also found in the message at the core of religion.**

I grew up as a boy under the influence of manga and anime. One of my favorites was *Play Ball*, which appeared in *Weekly Shōnen Jump*. This manga tells the thrilling story of a boy called Takao Taniguchi who gives up playing baseball after fracturing a finger in junior high school. He resumes playing in senior high school after managing to heal his finger, and his weak school team is transformed into one that can hold its own against the very strongest. I learned from Taniguchi and his friends that I too could stand up to the strongest of opponents by exceeding my own limits through devoted practice.

*Play Ball*'s creator, Akio Chiba, had an older brother, Tetsuya Chiba, who was famous for illustrating the manga *Ashita no Joe* (Tomorrow's Joe). Originally written by Ikki Kajiwaru under the pen name Asao Takamori, *Ashita no Joe* tells the story of a boxer called Joe Yabuki. The Chiba family was living in what was then Manchuria when World War II ended, and Tetsuya Chiba drew on the harrowing experiences of their return to Japan to create the character background for one of Joe's opponents. Chiba has explained that the final scene of *Ashita no Joe* was intended to depict Joe in the moment that he burned out and "transcended life and death" (*Chiba Tetsuya ga kataru "Chiba Tetsuya"* ["Tetsuya Chiba" in

his own words] [Shueisha, 2014], 150). According to the writer Shizuka Ijūin, "the fundamental belief in humanity" and the "truly believable, flesh and blood affirmation of humanity" that permeate all of Chiba's works are the result of his experiences in Manchuria, and "every one of his works exhibits both a contemporaneity and a universal 'affirmation of life'" (*Sō-tokushū, Chiba Tetsuya mangaka seikatsu 55 shūnen kinengō* [Special issue to commemorate Tetsuya Chiba's fifty-five years as a manga artist] [Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2011], 189).

One of Tetsuya Chiba's old friends was Leiji Matsumoto, the original author of the space opera anime *Space Battleship Yamato*. Matsumoto's father was a major and army air corps pilot during World War II who was tormented until his dying days by the thought that so many of the men under his command had lost their lives in battle. Throughout his life, Matsumoto's father used to say that "people were not born to die, they were born to live," and these words later became a refrain of *Space Battleship Yamato* ("Ginga tetsudō 999 shinsaku happyō Matsumoto Reiji-san" [New work in Leiji Matsumoto's *Galaxy Express 999* series released], *Tokyo Shimbin*, March 17, 2018, evening edition, culture section). Matsumoto, who has a strong fan base overseas, feels that "anime and manga are borderless." When

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drawing manga, therefore, "you have to make sure that your work is informed by an awareness of ideas, religions, beliefs, national sentiments . . . and history." This is because "depending on the country, people may sometimes feel insulted. . . . I do not create works to hurt people" (*Seitan 80 shūnen kinen kanzen hozon ban Matsumoto Reiji meisaku anime dai kaibō* [Leiji Matsumoto's greatest works dissected: The complete collector's edition to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of his birth] [San-ei Shobo, 2018], 15).

Matsumoto's other great masterpiece is *Galaxy Express 999*, the theme of which is the "never ending journey." Boarding the *Galaxy Express 999* is like embarking on "an eternal journey without end" and setting out together on a journey into the infinity of time and space (*Matsumoto Reiji mugen sōzō kidō 80th ANNIVERSARY kuronikuru* [Eightieth anniversary chronicle of the trajectory of Leiji Matsumoto's infinite creativity] [Shogakukan, 2018], 172).

The "affirmation of humanity" and "affirmation of life" observable in the works of Tetsuya Chiba, the theme of "being born to live" observable in the works of Leiji Matsumoto, and the "universality that transcends national borders" and "timelessness that transcends time and space"—all of these things may also be found in the message that lies at the core of religion. □

# Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan

by Jolyon B. Thomas

***Rather than seeing popular illustrated media as tools that transmit “pure” or “adulterated” religious content to passive audiences, I think it is more productive to think of manga and anime as a set of representational techniques designed to trigger visceral responses, elicit emotional reactions, and prompt intellectual reorientations.***

Contemporary Japan is a paradox as far as religion is concerned.

On the one hand, Japan appears overwhelmingly religious. By the latest numbers compiled by the Japanese government, there are 180,853 discrete religious organizations in Japan that boast around 181,164,731 adherents. In other words, there is approximately one religious organization for every thousand people in Japan, and the total number of religious adherents in the country equals about 1.4 times the national population. Combined with the ubiquitous physical markers of Japanese religion—atmospheric shrines and imposing

temples, meticulously maintained roadside shrines (*hokora*) and rough-hewn crossroads deities (*dōsojin*)—these numbers make Japan seem like one of the most religious places on earth.

On the other hand, research surveys about individuals’ religious beliefs reveal a very different picture. According to these numbers, only about 10 to 20 percent of Japanese people describe themselves as “religious,” and very few describe religion as being important. A majority of Japanese people regularly participate in the cycle of events that punctuate the calendar year (*nenchū gyōji*), visiting shrines on New Year’s Day or cleaning ancestral graves at Buddhist temples on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (*ohigan*), but most prefer to use words like *custom* or *tradition* to explain such behavior. If the official governmental statistics suggest a country that is overwhelmingly religious, the survey data about religious belief suggest that Japan is one of the least religious countries in the world. To further complicate things, the same surveys that suggest that Japanese people are not very religious also reveal that very few Japanese people are atheists, and a slight majority affirm the existence of ghosts, deities, or supernatural phenomena.

Photo: The Yomiuri Shimbun

*Dazaifu Tenmangū, a Shinto shrine in Dazaifu, Fukuoka Prefecture, annually draws in some 2 million worshippers during the New Year’s holidays. Photographed on January 2, 2014.*

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I chose to study Japanese religions because I was fascinated by this conundrum. I wanted to know how things that looked “religious” to me would be interpreted by people who did not think of themselves as particularly devout. I thought that looking at religion in a seemingly unlikely place—popular illustrated media—might elicit some clarity about how people could be irreligious and yet be attracted to religious ideas or actively involved in ritual practices. I began my investigations by trying to find religious vocabulary and imagery in manga and anime, presuming that Japanese audiences were acting or thinking religiously even if they did not use that word. But I soon realized that even though finding seemingly religious content in illustrated media was easy to do, my approach to the question was fundamentally flawed.

## Framing the Question

Like other fiction and film, manga and anime have no shortage of seemingly religious characters such as ghosts, deities, wizards, and priests. Settings include

Studio Ghibli director Takahata Isao checks the computerized data of an animated film.

places like hell (the television series *Hōzuki no Reitetsu*, season 1 directed by Kaburaki Hiro, ©2015 Sentai Filmworks); protagonists include religious founders such as Jesus and Buddha (Nakamura Hikaru, *Seinto☆Oniisan* [volume 1, Kodansha, 2008]); and story lines involve apocalyptic climaxes. Because religious ideas are an expedient way to endow characters with magical powers, it is quite common for protagonists to discover that they are *kami* (*Kamichu!*, anime, directed by Masunari Kōji [2005]) or that they alone have the power to save the world. In many cases, the religious ideas and imagery provided through manga and anime are irreverent and even satirical rather than pious or devotional. For example, artists turn bodhisattvas into pugilists who fight for justice (Takei Hiroyuki, *Butsu-zone*, in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* [Shueisha, 1997]) and make *kami* into wandering beggars (Adachitoka, *Noragami*, in *Monthly Shōnen* [Kodansha, 2011]). Because anime directors and manga artists often take artistic license with religious terminology, audiences may absorb somewhat distorted versions of classical mythology (e.g., *Kojiki*, compiled 711–12 CE), Buddhist didactic tales (e.g., *Nihon Ryōiki*, compiled between 787 and 824 CE), or illustrated folktales (e.g., *Otogi-zōshi*, ca. 14th–16th c. CE).

Not everyone is so cavalier. Famed Studio Ghibli director Takahata Isao (1935–2018) was deliberate in using anime to connect young people with Japan's religious heritage. For example, his 1994 film *Pom Poko* made explicit allusions to classical Japanese

folklore and Buddhist devotional art. Morita Shūhei's anime short *Tsukumo* (*Possessions*, 2013) is a fairly faithful rendition of an old tale about possessed objects (*tsukumogami*). Some religious organizations also use anime to proselytize. Happy Science (Kōfuku-no-Kagaku) has produced numerous anime films that blend high production values with somewhat tendentious explanations of doctrine, for example, and the Nichiren Buddhist temple Ryōhōji has partnered with a production company to create promotional animated music videos. Manga also serve as venues for authors and audiences to critique religion. After the 1995 Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attacks, for example, several manga artists linked marginal religious movements to violence and abuse (Yamamoto Naoki, *Believers* [2 volumes, Shogakukan, 2000]); Urasawa Naoki, *20th Century Boys* [22 volumes, Shogakukan, 2000–2007]).

For many observers, the story of manga, anime, and religion ends here. Some view manga and anime as vessels that keep religion alive in an age when most people are estranged from their own cultural and religious heritage. Other researchers are more skeptical, seeing manga and anime as degenerate forms that debase “real” religious content.

But the story is probably more complicated than either of these perspectives suggests. Thinking about manga and anime simply in terms of their religious vocabulary and imagery does not explain, for example, how fans develop

ritual practices such as pilgrimage (*seichi junrei*) to the real-world settings of anime scenes. Accordingly, rather than seeing popular illustrated media as tools that transmit “pure” or “adulterated” religious content to passive audiences, I think it is more productive to think of manga and anime as a set of representational techniques designed to trigger visceral responses, elicit emotional reactions, and prompt intellectual reorientations.

## Drawing Audiences In

The point I want to stress here is that the techniques whereby manga and anime are made (composition, perspective, layout) and the mediums with which they are made (paper, ink, celluloid) help us think about how religion may be a matter of technical craft and technological apparatus at least as much as religion is a matter of abstruse doctrine or programmatic ritual. Rather than applying the logic of religion to manga and anime by asking whether they demonstrate fidelity to some canonical source or doctrinal creed, it is far more productive to apply the logic of illustration and animation to religion: How do people tell stories? What specific representational techniques persuade audiences to identify with a protagonist? How do audiences come to think of empirically unverifiable events as having significance for “real” life?

I ask these questions because in recent years scholars in my field have moved away from describing religion in terms of belief and affiliation, trying instead to show how religious commitments and behavior emerge as a product of affect (visceral reactions such as attraction and revulsion), emotion (states such as joy or sadness, which may reflect or be created by bodily habits), intellect (the ability to perceive and interpret the empirical world), and imagination (the capacity to ask the question “What if . . . ?” and the corresponding

ability to act *as if*). Manga and anime are helpful for thinking in such terms because artists and directors deliberately elicit visceral reactions and emotional responses in audiences, who in turn may respond to fictional material as if it were real. And what is religion if not a willingness to act *as if*, either temporarily or over the long term?

## Get Your Mind in the Gutter

Consider any multipanel comic. Within each panel, stereotyped visual cues and various kinds of text provide dialogue, third-person omniscient commentary, and onomatopoeia (*giongo* represent sounds, while *gitaigo* represent sensations and states of being). Patterned backgrounds can indicate characters' emotional states, while a character's position in the panel can provide a first-person perspective or break the fourth wall. These compositional techniques rely on the sense of sight to create a synesthetic, immersive experience replete with virtual textures, smells, and sounds. They also foster emotional identification with some characters and revulsion toward others.

Composition is crucial to making an effective comic, but the real magic lies between panels in a space that comics theorists call "the gutter." For comics to work, readers have to imaginatively stitch together the content of one panel with another, filling in the gaps so that the story makes sense. Most of us do this fluidly and intuitively. We backtrack, skip forward, and rapidly scan the entire page until the story makes sense. Manga artists facilitate this interpretive work through varied brush strokes, different types of crosshatching, and creative panel layouts. In the beautifully drawn and wholly engrossing manga *Vagabond*, for example, artist Inoue Takehiko deftly switches from ink pen to watercolor to charcoal, juxtaposes panels that cascade and tumble over one another during

Photo: Alamy / PPS

*One of the exhibited works of Urasawa Naoki, a Japanese manga artist, displaying a multipanel comic with gutters, during an event titled "This is MANGA" held in London by Japan House London from June 5 through July 28, 2019.*

thrilling sword fights, oscillates rapidly from photorealistic to abstract representation, and draws several successive pages—even entire chapters—with no spoken dialogue. Artists also play with time, indicating a flashback by changing the background color of a page (as in Oda Eiichirō's *One Piece* [Shueisha, 1997]) or by subtly rounding the corners of panels (as in Yamamoto Naoki's *Red* [8 volumes, Kodansha, 2007–14]).

## What Does Any of This Have to Do with Religion?

Juxtaposing two or more panels takes imaginative work on the part of both the artist and the observer: the artist must convince the observer that the panels make an intelligible story, while the observer must use visual clues (perspective, juxtaposition, onomatopoeia) to make sense of the panels. Reading manga can feel effortless and even relaxing, but it requires suppressing our awareness of the space between panels so that we can allow ourselves to be drawn into the story. This active and willing suspension of disbelief is indispensable for engaging with illustrated fiction in the first

place; a secondary imaginative maneuver helps us interpret fictional stories as having takeaway implications for real life. Crucially, interpreting as real the empirically unverifiable claims that we usually associate with religion also requires a willing suppression of the gap between shared empirical experience and our subjective assumptions and commitments.

To be sure, few people would describe their engagement with manga as a matter of belief. But they act *as if* the static images on the page tell a story, and at times they even interpret that story as having significance beyond its narrative frame. In most cases, the vicarious experience provided by illustrated fiction helps audiences see the world slightly differently, but only temporarily; it does not necessarily transform their lives in a conversion-type experience. But occasionally the magic of manga prompts lasting changes in perspective.

Manga have even given birth to religions. For example, horror manga artist Kuroda Minoru established the religious corporation Subikari Kōha Sekai Shindan in 1980, with membership largely coming from fans who were attracted to his manga. Similarly, Miuchi Suzue's manga *Amaterasu* (4 volumes, Kadokawa Shoten, 1987–2001) paired

*Walt Disney gives a painter advice on painting on the transparent cels, which will be photographed to make a film. Photographed in 1943 at Burbank, California.*

Photo: Alamy / PPS



Shintō themes with the author's own mystical experiences; Miuchi now leads an informal network of fans who are interested in paranormal events.

## The Magical Multiplane Camera

Just as manga techniques can draw readers into a story, animation has its own engrossing logic that is dictated by the apparatus used to make it (see Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009], esp. 3–44).

Most hand-drawn cel (celluloid) animation is shot with a multiplane camera, a contraption that allows animators to break a single image apart into several layers. Each layer is painted on a transparent cel, and cels are then superimposed atop one another to give the original two-dimensional image actual depth. Moving the individual layers up and down and side to side while taking a series of still images, animators maintain a realistic sense of perspective while also giving static images the illusion of movement. This allows directors to engender a sense of verisimilitude that is difficult to achieve by simply juxtaposing a series of slightly varied two-dimensional drawings (as in a flipbook).

This ingenious animation technique has side effects, however. To give the illusion of an object moving through space, for example, cel animators usually show spaces moving laterally past objects. Because drawing thousands of cels is time-consuming and expensive, animators also cut corners by regularly reusing the same cels and by shooting at a slower frame rate: animators might shoot only eight frames per second as opposed to the standard twenty-four frames per second used by most film directors. This “limited animation” technique saves on costs, but it also creates a distinctive sense of time: moments

*Citizens of Hida City, Gifu Prefecture, go into a municipal culture hall where the anime Your Name. is shown for citizens. Hida City includes several locations where the story takes place, that became popular as pilgrimage sites for anime fans. Photographed on November 6, 2016.*

stretch as the camera pans across faces or as characters hang frozen in midair.

Cel animation therefore has its own distinctive grammar. Even though most animators working today use computers rather than painstakingly drawing thousands of cels by hand, the visual logic of the multiplane camera continues to influence how directors build their worlds: Shinkai Makoto's computer-generated 2016 smash hit *Your Name.*, for example, features the lateral motion common to cel animation in the many scene transitions featuring sliding doors.

## So What Does the Visual Logic of the Multiplane Camera Tell Us about Religion?

Just as directors superimpose cels to create a sense of verisimilitude, audiences imaginatively superimpose the illustrated worlds of anime on everyday reality. This is particularly evident in fan pilgrimage, or “contents tourism.” When fans of *Sailor Moon* visit the Hikawa Shrine in Tokyo's Azabu Jūban, the real-world shrine becomes its fictional counterpart (also called Hikawa Shrine), and the character Sailor Mars (a shrine maiden in the anime) becomes an object of devotion. Similarly, *Lucky☆Star* fans' patronage of Washinomiya Shrine has changed not only the economy of the town of Washimiya (now part of Kuki City, Saitama Prefecture) but also local rituals: Since 2008, fans have paraded a

*Lucky☆Star* shrine next to the official portable shrine at the annual Hajisai festival. Recently, ardent fans of *Your Name.* have visited Hida Sannōgū Hie Shrine in Gifu Prefecture to walk in protagonist Mitsuha's shoes as she runs down the shrine's steps and begs the deity to be reborn as a handsome boy living in Tokyo.

## A Medium Theory of Religion

I have focused on manga and anime as artistic mediums because it allows for thinking about religion not in the misleading terms of belief or affiliation but, rather, as a matter of technique and imagination. Manga and anime show us how even irreligious people can treat empirically unverifiable stuff—a narrative premise, a religious doctrine—as meaningful, inspiring, even “real.” Rather than cramming manga and anime into the constraining category of religion by investigating how these illustrated media preserve or adulterate religious content, I think it is more fruitful to see how our understanding of religion becomes more capacious and robust if we think according to media logic: How do technical practices like composition facilitate the imaginative act of superimposing fictive worlds on empirical experience? How can engaging with empirically unverifiable claims be both frivolous and serious? Answering these questions can probably tell us much more about religion in Japan than statistics ever will. □

# The Quest for Selfhood in Manga and the Spirituality of Contemporary Japanese

by Hara Takahashi

**Given that religion does not serve as a point of reference for the Japanese, . . . manga such as these that tell the stories of youngsters who discover themselves in the context of their ties with others provide a useful starting point from which to explore the spirituality of the Japanese.**

The need for spirituality in medical and nursing care has come to be accepted in Japan, as elsewhere, in recent years, and spiritual care now even appears among the topics covered by textbooks for nursing students. Proponents define *spiritual* in various ways, however, and the term has entered use without a consensus on its meaning. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” does not help explain what it means in a Japanese context, given that the overwhelming majority of the population are not religious in the first place. In Japan, therefore, people typically try to explain and understand the “spiritual” without making any reference to religion. Instead, reference is often made to “selfhood” (*jibun rashi-sa*) and the individual’s ties to others. Being oneself while affirming one’s ties to others thus appears to constitute an important element of Japanese people’s pursuit of spirituality.

Notwithstanding its ambiguity and amorphousness as a concept, the Japanese seem to be constantly seeking selfhood. For more than half a century, education in particular has espoused the ideal that everyone should live free and unique lives as individuals. However, pursuit of that ideal has been delimited by cooperation to maintain harmony

(*wa*) and pressure to conform. Thus while yearned for by Japanese people, selfhood remains an ideal that is hard to achieve. Now, in the twenty-first century, an increasing number of parents are giving their children *kira-kira* (glittery) names whose readings cannot easily be discerned from the Japanese characters used to write them, and this too appears to be a manifestation of their desire to give their children some kind of unique value that makes them one of a kind. Naturally this is not something that can be achieved simply by giving a child an unusual name.

Below, I explore two twenty-first-century manga series by female artists—*Nodame Cantabile* (2001–2010) by Tomoko Ninomiya and *Forest of Piano* (1998–2015) by Makoto Isshiki—from the perspective of young people’s struggles surrounding selfhood. Both manga have huge followings and have been adapted into anime. (*Nodame Cantabile* has also been made into a live-action television series.) A theme of both is self-expression through music.

Megumi “Nodame” Noda, the protagonist of *Nodame Cantabile*, is a piano student at a music college. She is hopeless at cooking and cleaning, and sometimes even steals people’s packed lunches.

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*His published books include Yungu no shūkyō-ron—Kirisutokyō shinwa no saisei [Jung’s theory of religion: The restoration of Christian myths] (Senshu University Press, 2005).*

Thus she is far removed from the traditional ideal Japanese woman. However, she is a piano prodigy and, despite not being able to read music properly, can play even the most challenging pieces of music in her own rough-and-ready way. She shuns tackling orthodox classical pieces in earnest and tends, instead, to play only pieces for children, as she wants to become a kindergarten teacher. This is because of her traumatic experience of learning to play the piano at an extremely strict school as a child.

It is the other leading character of the series, Chiaki, who makes her realize the importance of knuckling down to practice the basics and learn to read music. Chiaki, who attends the same college as Nodame and later becomes her boyfriend, is a handsome, outstanding musician who wants to become a conductor. A highly strung perfectionist, he arrogantly lords it over his less-talented peers.

Although Chiaki at first dislikes Nodame, he finds himself drawn by her

Nodame Cantabile in serialized volumes. It was originally serialized in the comic magazine *Kiss* (published by Kodansha) from July 2001 to October 2009, and was later published in twenty-three volumes.

talent as a pianist and struggles vainly to somehow turn her into a genuine musician. As the story unfolds around their steadily deepening romance, a key theme emerges. It is Nodame's inability to find the freedom that is right for her, in the true sense, despite playing the piano her own way just as she likes. After learning to read music, mastering form, and talking over and over again with composers, she at last discovers the genuine originality that allows her to express her talent fully and truly enjoy music.

This conflict between mastery of form and liberation from form has actually long been a concern of discourse on the performing arts in Japan, and it can be traced back to Zeami Motokiyo's fifteenth-century treatise *Fūshikaden* (Transmission of the flower through mastery of form). It has also appeared as a theme of works of popular entertainment, such as the rakugo story "Nakamura Nakazō" and the hugely popular *shōjo* (young girl) manga *Glass Mask* by Suzue Miuchi. The respective woes of a genius protagonist and a hard-working supporting character are a commonly tackled theme in the world of manga.

Nodame's boyfriend Chiaki develops his talent through hard work and

study. Being a conductor, he sees himself reflected in Nodame with all her apparent faults and the members of the orchestra with their instruments as he takes on the challenge of exploring his own selfhood. His struggle plays out alongside the themes of overcoming the trauma of an airplane crash landing when he was a small child and reconciliation with his father, who left home and abandoned Chiaki and his mother. His perfectionism is a mask that, little by little, falls away as he talks to others and matures. Many of the other young characters mature in similar fashion, and the dramatic portrayal of their setbacks and growth is no doubt what has made this series so popular.

The hero of *Forest of Piano*, Kai Ichinose, is the unruly young son of a prostitute. Kai, who grows up with a broken piano as a playmate—which he found abandoned in the forest—meets the piano's former owner, the erstwhile piano prodigy Sōsuke Ajino, and eventually he becomes a renowned pianist. Like Nodame, Kai has the gift of being able to play difficult pieces beautifully by ear, despite being unable to read music. While his unconventional style goes unrecognized at competitions, in time the appeal of his piano playing silences his conservative opponents, and he ultimately wins

the International Chopin Competition. His victory serves to free his mother and her friends from a world in which they face discrimination and leads his teacher, Ajino, who threw away the piano, to become a pianist again.

A particularly intriguing supporting character in this series is Kai's friend Amamiya, who first enters the story as Kai's hardworking rival. Despite being known for his ability as a pianist since childhood, Amamiya is overwhelmed by the magnetism of Kai's piano playing, which he is unable to surpass no matter how perfectly he performs, and he eventually grows to hate his own performances and stops playing the piano.

Amamiya's anguish exactly mirrors that of his father, who was tormented by jealousy of Ajino's prodigious ability. Amamiya eventually realizes that his father plays the piano with a warmth that, despite lacking the touch of genius, is widely loved. Although Amamiya is never able to beat Kai in competition, he manages to find peace with himself and recover his friendship with Kai through discovering his own style of playing the piano.

The protagonists of *Nodame Cantabile* and *Forest of Piano* are both judged unfairly in music competitions, where competitors are judged on their ability to produce a technically accurate performance following a musical score. When released from the bounds of the school into the wider world, however, their innate talent as pianists blossoms. This contains a message of courage and succor for Japanese people, who find themselves crushed within a small world in which the opinions of others take precedence and importance is attached to following forms and rules. These series thus offer convincing stories about the positive discovery of innate selfhood, and they tell readers that they do not have to remain forever bound in a scholastic system where rules have to be observed and people are judged on the basis of their grades.



Both series feature youngsters who struggle under the burden of their parents' excessive expectations and fight back against their teachers' methods of instruction. The adults are angry with the youngsters' failure to do as they are told and tighten their control over them. In the end, however, they change how they think and learn to compromise with the youngsters as they struggle to be more true to themselves. While this is the age-old story of intergenerational conflict, it also gives pause for reflection and encouragement to parents and teachers in Japan who have lost confidence in how they raise and teach their children. The sound of the piano played by youngsters putting everything into their performances softens the hearts of those who hear it. The youngsters are freed from the spell that has bound them, and parents and teachers, too, are rewarded for their past struggles.

I would like to briefly consider one other manga, *Terpsichora* (2000–2006) by Ryoko Yamagishi. This minimalistically but elegantly drawn ballet manga tells the story of the setbacks and growth of Yuki. Like the stereotypical protagonist of a *shōjo* manga, Yuki is an innocent, scatterbrained young girl. Her older sister Chika is a beautiful, talented perfectionist who had striven to become a prima ballerina. Driven to despair by a tragic medical error and bullying, however, Chika commits suicide. The weight of the parents' expectations then falls on Yuki's shoulders. Yuki has feelings of inferiority about her own ability as a ballerina. However, rather than seeking to become a prima ballerina, the pinnacle of the profession for all young dancers, she finds fulfillment in the role of a choreographer, who is assessed on the basis of her ability to produce original new ideas.

This series, too, tells the story of the unbridled creativity that emerges when the protagonist discovers a method of expressing herself in her own way rather than worrying about winning acclaim

according to the common standards that apply to everyone. Rather than making this discovery all on her own, Yuki does so assisted by a process of dialogue with parents, teachers, rivals, and her own dead sister.

Another theme may be observed to run through these works. This is that the search for selfhood is pursued not just for the purpose of self-realization and self-help; it is also a journey that provides relief to those (the protagonists' parents, teachers, and friends) who had been unable to lead the lives they had aspired to and reconciles people whose rigid relations with others had locked them in conflict. This sends the message that the talents that people are born with are not the possession of the individual alone. Rather, they are gifts that can take root and flourish only in the wider world with the support of numerous others, and their fruits should be widely shared.

Herein lies the true appeal of these manga as a mode of expression: their ability to express solely through text and pictures the intrinsic power of music and dance to convince, comfort, and provide succor in ways that defy rational explanation.

In the works considered here, the protagonists are ultimately recognized for their abilities, as in the case of Kai, who wins the International Chopin Competition, and they are widely congratulated. While this no doubt gives readers a sense of catharsis, the real appeal of these works lies in the fact that they are also stories of salvation for the losers. Moving beyond winning or losing, the characters find their own answers to the question of selfhood, and readers, superimposing themselves on the characters, reflect on their own lives as youngsters, parents, and teachers as they seek their own selves. It can thus be seen that the quest for selfhood itself serves as the light of salvation that illuminates the lives of not only individuals but also those around them.

Japanese people may not be the only ones to embark on this challenging quest for selfhood. Given that religion does not serve as a point of reference for the Japanese, however, manga such as these that tell the stories of youngsters who discover themselves in the context of their ties with others provide a useful starting point from which to explore the spirituality of the Japanese. □

*Participants in the 2008 World Cosplay Summit pose at the Osu Kannon temple in Nagoya, Japan. The summit is an annual meeting of cosplayers from around the world that has been held in Japan since 2003. Cosplay is a performance art in which participants wear costumes to represent a specific manga or anime character.*

# Manga: Fiction and Reality—the Case of Hayao Miyazaki’s *Shuna’s Journey*

by Martin Repp

***This popular genre of Japanese “youth manga” commonly tells the story of a brave young hero or heroine fighting for justice, a humane society, or the survival of humankind when facing catastrophic disasters on a global scale. Adults mostly appear as people who submissively accept their fate and do not challenge it and do not dare to take risks in order to gain freedom.***

## Preliminary Note

For many years I have been intrigued by Hayao Miyazaki’s works. When I wrote the essay “War, Environmental Destruction, and Religion: The Spiritual World of Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*” for *Dharma World* in 2005, I was not aware that his story’s postindustrial setting of an earth being “transformed into a sterile wasteland,” of “fouling the air, and remolding

life-forms,” which I quoted then, would become reality in the Fukushima region because of the TEPCO nuclear disaster in 2011. Therefore, in my view, this artist challenges us to reconsider the relationship between fiction and reality. Certainly, anime and manga are, first of all, forms of art that are created to entertain. However, Hayao Miyazaki also expresses his social and political concerns through his artwork. Hence, when reading his *Shuna’s Journey* (*Shuna*

*no Tabi* [Tokuma Shoten, 1983]), for example, we have to pay close attention to the interaction between fiction and reality.

## The Story

The initial setting of *Shuna’s Journey* is a small community living somewhere in a valley high up in the mountains. The people here were struggling hard with their fieldwork in order to survive in such a harsh environment, with its cold climate and stony soil. Along with these difficulties they possessed only a poor kind of seed to sow. One day, Shuna, the king’s son, found an elderly traveler from a foreign country who had collapsed on the road. He brought him home to take care of him, but it was too late. Before passing away, however, the foreigner showed Shuna a pouch containing big seeds which Shuna had never seen before. The old man confided to him that he was a prince from a small kingdom in the far east, and that at a young age he had received the seed from somebody who told him that such golden grain could be found in the “far west” at the edge of the earth and could nourish human beings plentifully. By this means the old man wanted to free his people from starvation. However, the grain he possessed was not fertile anymore because its skin had peeled off already.

Shuna soon became determined to set out in search of the golden grain in order to save his people. His father and the elders tried to prevent him from

Photo: SPL / PPS

*The tsunami caused by the massive earthquake on March 11, 2011, breaches the sea defenses of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station on Japan’s Pacific coast. The tsunami damaged the nuclear power station, triggering events that led to the meltdown of three of the nuclear reactors and a serious discharge of radioactive material.*

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taking this dangerous trip, but he “broke the law” of his community: secretly prepared his gun, ammunition, and food; saddled his mount Yakul (a large antelope-like animal); and left the valley toward the west. He traveled through a desert and an uninhabitable area with ruins of an ancient civilization; he was attacked by strange warriors; and he had to make great effort to continue his search. Soon he encountered huge cars pulled by large animals; they carried cages containing slaves being brought into a city further west. Shuna followed them into town and met two enslaved young sisters. He would have liked to buy their freedom but was unable to do so. Here he learned that the inhabitants traded the slaves for grain from the “divine people” (*shinjin*) further in the west. But this grain was for consumption only and could not be used as fertile seed for sowing and harvesting. Only in previous times, Shuna learned, had the people here possessed the kind of golden grain that they could sow and harvest by themselves, but now the “divine people” kept the sowing grain for themselves and prevented other people from entering their land and getting the seed. Whoever tried it never came back again.

When Shuna found out that the two girls were being transported to their next destination, he followed the car, attacked and killed the slave traders, and liberated the girls. Slave traders from town soon pursued them, but the three young people managed to escape by riding on the back of Yakul for a few days. However, when they arrived at a

Photo: Alamy / PPS

*Hayao Miyazaki, born in 1941, is a Japanese animator, filmmaker, screen writer, author, and manga artist.*

steep cliff, Shuna asked the sisters to flee separately on Yakul’s back toward the north. He hid himself in a hole of stones, and after the pursuers had passed, he drove them from behind to plunge into the abyss.

Then Shuna climbed down the steep rock cliff. Below was a wild sea, which he crossed, and eventually he arrived at a land with a deep forest. It was inhabited by many animals which had become extinct elsewhere. This forest possessed a peaceful atmosphere. From there he proceeded to the land of the “divine people.” As Shuna had learned before, he had to keep his distance from them for safety reasons. Now he found that the “divine people” were green giants who, when they went into the forest, were eaten up by the animals. Then he came to a huge colossus that, during the night, consumed human beings, namely the slaves previously mentioned, and then gave birth to the green giants. Finally Shuna discovered the giants planting the golden seeds for which he had searched so long.

The grain was fertile, it sprouted, grew, bloomed, and brought forth new ears. And it all happened at an incredible speed. Shuna also experienced such rapid transformations—with his gun, which had suddenly become rusty, and with his clothes, which had become shabby. “The progress of time was different here from other places.” Then Shuna reached out to the ears of barley and—with a lot of courage—seized some golden grain quickly, because the giants started to react immediately. At this moment, “a fierce shock ran through his body and a sharp pain pierced his heart.” Swiftly he fled through the forest, just in time, and then crossed the dangerous sea again.

Now the scene abruptly shifts back to the two sisters: The older one, Te’a, is seen steering a plow while the younger sister leads Yakul, which is pulling the plow in a field. A year has passed since both had fled from slavery and arrived in an impoverished village in the north. An old widow, who had lost her sons, offered them a poor shelter

*An elementary school child reads Shuna’s Journey, a watercolor-illustrated graphic novel written and illustrated by Hayao Miyazaki. The novel was published as a single softcover booklet in 1983 by Tokuma Shoten.*

in exchange for work. The food was scarce, like for every villager, but all worked hard. Since their parting, Te'a could not forget Shuna. One day she suddenly thought she heard him calling for help. She went out and found a shabby man straying around outside the village and looking like a ghost. It was Shuna, but "his eyes were hollow," he "had lost everything . . . his memory, his words, his name, and even his emotions." Te'a took him secretly into the storage hut where she lived and took care of him. He "feared the sun" and he "could only eat and crouch in the dark." The single matter he cared about was a pouch hanging around his neck. Te'a opened it carefully and discovered the golden grain!

During the following winter Te'a fed and nursed Shuna while continuing to hide him from the old woman and the villagers. When the spring came, Te'a secretly prepared a small field in a wild area, built a hut for Shuna there, and continued to take care of him. One day Shuna began to plant the golden seeds in the field, which after some difficulties began to sprout. From that time on Shuna started to recover.

The old woman wanted Te'a to marry a young man from the village. She did not agree, but the widow prevailed, so that the groom was to be chosen during the next midsummer festival. However, Te'a set the condition that her future husband had to be able to ride and handle Yakul properly. When it turned out that nobody was able to do so, the younger sister introduced a young stranger who could handle Yakul. The villagers accepted the new couple. One day a hailstorm threatened the seed in the small field. Shuna and Te'a were able to protect it by covering it with a piece of cloth. When the storm ended and the blue sky appeared, Shuna suddenly called Te'a by her name; this deeply touched her heart. Subsequently, "Shuna recovered, like the crops gradually change color and bear fruit."

Shuna and the two sisters stayed in the village for one more year. Together with the farmers he fought the slave hunters and drove them into the desert. Shuna and the two sisters expanded the barley fields, and the harvest increased considerably. When the three finally departed, they handed over half of the golden seed to the villagers. The journey to Shuna's home valley was dangerous and lasted long; however—as the author states at the end—this account was to be told in another work.

In his postscript, Hayao Miyazaki explained that his story is based on the Tibetan folktale "The Prince Who Became a Dog." According to this tale, a prince was worried about his poor and hungry people because the grain was not sufficient. Therefore the prince searched for better seed, found it in the dragon king's palace, and stole some. Thereupon, the dragon cast a spell on him and changed him into a dog. However, the love of a woman saved him in the end, so that he could bring the grain to his people.

## Social and Economic Realities

Most people holding *Shuna's Journey* in their hands just enjoy reading it and viewing its beautiful pictures. As such it certainly provides a very pleasant entertainment. However, one may also read this story in the context of our contemporary society. We may interpret it against the background of today's social, economic, and political situation, because Hayao Miyazaki was concerned with these issues. The central theme of the story is the lack of sufficient nourishment for human beings. This is not only a local issue but also poses a grave global problem today. Nutrition is threatened by harsh environments, just as in our story, and especially by climate change and environmental deterioration. Furthermore, food production can be monopolized by a few agents, as the

"divine people" in *Shuna's Journey* do, and thereby keep human beings in continuous dependence. Closely connected with monopolizing and merchandizing the seed is slavery. The slave traders catch human beings, deprive them of their freedom, enslave them, and sell them to the "divine people" in exchange for seed. However, this grain is deprived of its fertility, it is already "dead." Thereby the vicious circle of slavery, economic dependence of people, and the merchandizing and monopolizing of food is perpetuated indefinitely. In short, the deification of a few human beings—that is, their achieving absolute power in this world—is closely connected with the objectification of so many people: the deprivation of their subjecthood.

Such a dire mechanism would have proceeded without end if the young hero and heroines, Shuna, Te'a, and her little sister, had not appeared. Their behavior; their communications; and their open, kind, yet determined faces reveal their character and their ethical values: a pure, sincere heart; honesty; mutual trust; and friendship. These are the values generally characterizing the young heroes of the *shōnen manga*, the "youth manga." This popular genre of Japanese manga commonly tells the story of a brave young hero or heroine fighting for justice, a humane society, or the survival of humankind when facing catastrophic disasters on a global scale. Adults mostly appear as people who submissively accept their fate and do not challenge it and do not dare to take risks in order to gain freedom. (A recent impressive example is the confrontation between the schoolchildren's movement Fridays For Future and the political, business, and industrial establishment.) However, a very few old people turn up in important roles: they teach, give significant inspirations, and encourage the future young heroes.

Shuna is male, but his face and gestalt very much resemble Nausicaä, the heroine of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. Whereas this latter story

treats the interconnection between progressive environmental destruction and warfare among people, *Shuna's Journey* treats the interaction between the objectifying of nature and the objectifying of human beings. The seed is either strictly controlled by monopoly or traded as “dead grain” to others. The slave traders have lost their human shape, and the human beings are turned into the commodity of slaves, first for exchange for dead grain and then for consumption by the colossus.

Today we observe similar deadly vicious circles in the domain of agribusiness. For example, the American company Monsanto sells its genetically manipulated seeds worldwide to farmers, maintains its monopoly, and forces them increasingly into economic dependency. According to media reports from India, for example, the outcome between 2001 and 2011 was that three hundred thousand farmers went into bankruptcy and knew of only one way out: to commit suicide. We must hope that in the end justice will prevail, as in the recent court cases against Monsanto in which it was concluded that its weed killer Roundup (glyphosate) may cause cancer. (Internet links regarding Monsanto: <http://naturalsociety.com/monsanto-caused-291000-suicides-india/>; <https://seedfreedom.info/how-monsanto-wrote-and-broke-laws-to-enter-india/>; <https://seedfreedom.info/monsanto-vs-indian-farmers/>)

Compared with other mangas, there is one more peculiarity in *Shuna's Journey*, which derives from that Tibetan legend “The Prince Who Became a Dog.” Both stories may be called variations of the ancient myths about culture heroes. A culture hero may be a deity or a human being who in mythical times made basic elements of culture available to human beings, such as fishing, sowing, weaving, or hunting. Thereby human life and social life were made possible. The meaning of such myths is that basic skills such

*Activists gather in Union Square in New York on May 24, 2014, as part of a worldwide protest against Monsanto and the genetically modified food it produces.*

as sowing and weaving are not at all a matter of course but had to be invented or discovered and made available to human beings. Hence the Tibetan tale and the Japanese manga treat the theme that the good fertile grain had to be (re)discovered and brought to the people. Like the other myths of this type, both Asian narratives also tell us that such a heroic deed cannot be achieved without undergoing grave dangers; in fact, it cannot be accomplished without the self-sacrifice of the hero. This is the meaning of turning the Tibetan prince into a dog or of Shuna's long mental *absentia* after his successful escape from the land of the “divine people.” The narrators of both tales were convinced that fertile grain is not a matter of course or simply “natural.” Rather, it is a gift for which we have to be grateful and have respect, and regard as a living being, as a subject in its own right, which must not be turned into a monopolized commodity or a genetically manipulated thing under any circumstances whatsoever. In this way we may also understand the cryptic sentence from the beginning of *Shuna's Journey*, which says that the time of the story, whether it occurred in the past or will occur in the future, cannot be determined.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Miyazaki that characterizes his own ethical stance and attitude without being rigidly moralistic: “I don't like a society that parades its righteousness. The righteousness of the U.S., the righteousness of Islam, the righteousness of China, the righteousness of Greenpeace. . . . They all aim to be righteous but they all try to coerce others into complying with their own standards” (quoted by Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* [Stone Bridge Press, 2002], 185).

The same attitude applies also to Hayao Miyazaki's heroes and heroines.

(The author is indebted to Prof. Dr. Galen Amstutz for kindly correcting the English of this essay.) □

*The World of Ghibli Exhibition in Shanghai, August 28, 2018, marked China's first formal exhibition of Hayao Miyazaki's famous characters. Many of the animator's classic images are on display on the windows of the Observation Deck of the Shanghai World Financial Center.*



# Wild Words and Pointy Pictures: Hōben in Jirō Kuwata's Lotus Sutra Manga

by Jon Holt

**To help readers understand how to read the Lotus [Sutra] today, [Kuwata] uses his iconic manga characters and imagery to visually reveal in easy steps how to read and understand the sutra's main points. What he argues for is a personal connection where we can hear its true, deeper voice (koe). If we do this, then the Lotus can best help us reconceptualize our understanding of reality.**

As the Buddha famously preached in the “Medicinal Herbs” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “Everything rained on by the same cloud in keeping with its nature gains in size, and its blossoms and fruit spread out and bloom. Though produced by the same earth, and moistened by the same rain, the grasses and trees all have their differences.” The Buddha’s teachings are equal, but we who receive them are not the same. Just as with those grasses and trees, we are endowed with different natures. So the Buddha uses *upaya*, or expedient means (*hōben*). “The Buddha presents the teaching in a fashion suited to every individual,” Nikkyō Niwano writes, “thus delivering all from the toils of life and setting everyone upon the right road of spiritual progress” (*A Guide to the Threefold Lotus Sutra* [Kosei Publishing], 58). The Lotus Sutra, certainly the most important sutra in Japanese culture—having permeated it for centuries—has appeared in various forms throughout time, including visual art, plays such as Noh theater, novels, children’s stories, and even comic books.

Given the love that contemporary Japanese have for manga, it is not

surprising to find comic book versions of the Lotus and other important sutras. Among the many manga and illustrated-book versions of the sutras and the Buddha’s biography that exist, it is not uncommon to find productions by high-caliber manga artists. Perhaps the most famous contemporary introduction to Buddhism is the great multivolume biography *Buddha* by Osamu Tezuka (1928–89). Translated into multiple languages, it is both a true signpost of Tezuka’s creative genius and a testament to Buddhism’s enduring importance in Japanese society today.

Another important comic artist who explores Buddhist teachings with his masterful manga style is Jirō Kuwata (1935–). He published his manga-essay explication of the Lotus Sutra in 1998, which continues to survive in multiple reprintings, most recently in a repackaged two-volume version by Manga Shop entitled *Manga de tokiakasu Hokekyō* ([Figuring out the Lotus Sutra with manga], 2011). Kuwata’s hybrid commentary-plus-manga Lotus Sutra is designated a figuring-out (*tokiakasu*) text, similar to other graphic-novel guides to important works of literature, canonical

authors, or foundational thinkers. For example, think of Robert Crumb’s superb visual illustrations in David Zane Mairowitz’s *Kafka* (Fantagraphics, 2007). Equally talented, Kuwata greatly leverages his skill to create iconic images that immediately provide keys for discussing difficult passages in the Lotus, most notably the sections in the text on *hōben*. At the same time that Kuwata helps readers “figure out” the Lotus, he also provides his own interpretation of the sutra, thus making his *Hokekyō* a very personal interpretation of its ideas and stories.

Kuwata’s career in manga is long, and he is a widely respected author. As a thirteen-year-old boy growing up in Osaka, Kuwata won early notoriety when his four-panel comics were printed in the local newspaper. Widely known for his adventure manga, including *Eitoman* ([8-Man], 1963–65); *Gekkō kamen* ([Moonlight mask], 1958–59); and even the Japanese version of DC Comics’ *Batman* (1966–67), published by Shōnen Gahōsha in English as *Batmanga*, Kuwata has been successful in the industry on many levels. Nonetheless, he maintains a humble attitude and shows respect for the giants of manga, such as Osamu Tezuka, to whom Kuwata said he could not compare himself: “Aiming at his level still feels to me like trying to approach the sun” (“Questions for Jiro Kuwata,” interview in *Bat-Manga!: The Secret History of Batman in Japan*, pages unnumbered).

In Kuwata’s later years, he almost exclusively turned to adapting the Heart, Lotus, and Kannon Sutras into manga

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#### Illus. 1

From the book *UNDERSTANDING COMICS: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud. Copyright © 1993 by Scott McCloud. Reprinted by permission of William Morrow Paperbacks, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

#### Illus. 2

forms. Curiously, Kuwata finds some fault with Tezuka’s multivolume epic treatment of the Buddha’s life, hinting that *Buddha* is not an exploration of Buddhist ideas as much as it is “a very well-made fiction drama. It is truly interesting and wonderfully constructed. But I would reckon it as something different from what would explain the Buddha’s philosophy” (“Questions for Jiro Kuwata”). To understand how Kuwata himself would explain the Buddha’s ideas, one need look no further than Kuwata’s *Hokekyō* for its hybrid manga-textual commentary.

In this manga, illustrated with extremely iconic images, Kuwata

attempts to explain in very spare terms the messages of the Lotus Sutra chapter by chapter. However, the effect is that Kuwata’s work doesn’t read as a narrative; instead, he presents a series of symbolic images or idea flowcharts alongside his own textual commentary to present a new visual way to access the messages of the Lotus. Kuwata has a number of tools to persuade readers to aid him in his interpretation. Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, his seminal analysis of the genre, describes how comic artists can use the universal “vocabulary” of comics to allow for greater reader connection with characters by drawing them in a cartoony, or

“iconic,” fashion [Illus. 1]. Characters like Disney’s Mickey Mouse, for example, transcend age, gender, and ethnicity boundaries because they have a basic design that appeals to all readers’ desires to see ourselves in the characters: “When you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself” ([Harper Perennial, 2004], 36). Writing about Japanese manga versions of religious texts, Jolyon Baraka Thomas observes, “While vicarious experience is inherent in most forms of fiction, in manga it is sometimes enhanced through the iconic protagonist” (*Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* [University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012],

Illus. 3

49). So when Kuwata employs iconic comic characters to stand in for the reader, the design is extremely minimal, sometimes featuring only a boldly outlined humanoid character with a puzzled or enlightened facial expression (or a darkened figure with a devilish look). Drawn in a highly iconic way, Kuwata's characters are nearly impossible to question or refute—they absolutely embody their truths (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 47) [Illus. 2].

As Kuwata explains in the preface, he seeks to newly understand the *hōben* of the Lotus Sutra, saying that he will demonstrate how readers fail to grasp the meanings of the text because they are trapped by its old, difficult language. “To swallow the text whole” (*u-nomi*) is for Kuwata the most critical mistake readers make, because they try to read the sutra too literally (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 88) [Illus. 3]. To help readers understand how to read the Lotus today, he uses his iconic manga characters and imagery to visually reveal in easy steps how to read and understand the sutra's main points. What he argues for is a personal connection where one can hear its true, deeper voice (*koe*). If one does this, then the Lotus can best help us reconceptualize our understanding of reality. Kuwata himself does this through his manga—because the manga images can provide

commentary on important Lotus episodes and, vice versa, the Lotus Sutra episodes inform Kuwata's phenomenological views of reality.

Kuwata's *Hokekyō* truly is a hybrid work—both a manga and a textual commentary. Yet it certainly leans more toward the latter. Nonetheless, even if it is not a full manga narrative, Kuwata

makes use of his exemplary cartooning skills to provide a crisply visual guide to the larger ideas of the Lotus. Page after page, Kuwata's cartoons resemble illustrated flowcharts more than cartoon adaptations of stories from the sutra. In their discussion of hybrid visual and textual forms, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen define the flow chart as one important type of visual-representational form: unlike taxonomical visual diagrams, a flow chart “describes the world in terms of an actively pursued process with a clear beginning and an end (or ‘input’ and ‘output,’ ‘source’ and ‘destination,’ ‘raw materials’ and ‘finished product’). It has a sequential progression and is goal-oriented” (*Reading Images* [Routledge, 2006], 84). Reading from top right to bottom left, like a manga, Kuwata's pages often show cartoon representations—not of people but of mental states—growing in awareness and often getting close to extremely iconic images of the Buddha, who is often depicted floating in heavenly clouds near the

Illus. 4

Illus. 5

top of most left pages. There is a “clear beginning and end,” as Kress and van Leeuwen describe, with Kuwata clearly marking the progress toward a goal of enlightenment.

Sometimes Kuwata’s illustrations of enlightenment (or the obstacles thereof) include actual arrows, showing the reader how to flow from one iconic idea to another. In the following example from chapter 3, “Parables,” the practitioner (bottom center, drawn in a highly iconic or everyman form), is guided by the “soul essence” atop the sutra (depicted in black-and-white monolith shape) past its “Riddle-Like Hōben” (which is the meaning [*imi*] of the voice one can hear from the Soul Essence) to grasp the Truth of Life (*inochi no shinri*). The following steps literally lead the reader up into the beyond (*chōjigen*) of the Buddha, and by extension, Kuwata’s Soul Essence [Illus. 4]. Of course, none of this terminology is used anywhere in the Lotus, so we must recognize that all of these steps for understanding truth are entirely Kuwata’s invention. Whether or not one agrees with his interpretation (or inspiration), what Kuwata has achieved is a visual step-by-step description of phenomenological discovery. More than recontextualizing the ideas of the Lotus within itself, for example, or within Nichiren’s thought, Kuwata reminds readers of the provisional reality of life—of one’s life (*inochi*)—against a larger transcendental (*chōjigen*) reality

Illus. 6

that he calls *tamashii* (the soul), often synonymous with the Buddha. Kuwata often describes this process as something that happens in meditation (*meisō*), where eventually one can tap in to the “voiceless voice” (*koe to wa itte mo, koe ga aru wake de wa naku*) to experience the world beyond, what is buddha-nature or “tamashii” (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 52).

For example, when Kuwata adapts the Burning Mansion parable (*kataku no tatoe*), he concisely describes the parable in two pages but spends the other thirty-six pages describing how the parable is a parable, for we often need false stories to make sense of the illusions of the world, or a *hōben* for a *hōben* (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 103) [Illus. 5]. Kuwata draws a series of simple illustrations of the “three carts,” labeling and further iconizing them for their ideas: the

sheep cart represents the voice hearers; the goat cart, the self-enlightened ones; and the ox cart, the bodhisattvas [Illus. 6]. Similarly, the silhouette of the burning house is imprinted with a large caption, “Our Life in this World” (*kono yo no inochi*), and dismally hovering above the house are the words “Misfortunes” (*wazawai*) and “Passions” (*bonnō*) [Illus. 7]. At this point, Kuwata does not significantly differ with others’ interpretations of the parable. Nikkyō Niwano summarizes the points from the parable thusly: “To imagine attractive playthings to oneself means that one has already entered into the mental state of the *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, or bodhisattva. To run out of the burning house means that one is already seeking after the Buddha’s teachings” (*Buddhism for Today* [Kosei Publishing, 1976], 59). However, Kuwata

Illus. 7

Illus. 8

draws his Rich Man with more detail than other cartoon figures in the chapter and has large captions above his character, reminding the reader he represents “The World Beyond—Outside the House” (*ie no soto: chōjigen*): the Rich Man represents the “Buddha” (*Hotoke*); he represents “Spirit” (*tamashii*). These latter two terms are synonymous throughout Kuwata’s text. Niwano and Kuwata differ in their interpretations of the larger point of the parable. Niwano writes, “People then strive, each in accord with the individual lesson, to cultivate themselves, but as they practice and advance to higher levels, they discover that far ahead all the ways become one,” or the great white ox cart the Rich Man (Buddha) gives them (*A Guide*, 47). Niwano emphasizes practice in addition to understanding. On the other hand, Kuwata stresses phenomenological insight. Thus, Kuwata re-encodes the Lotus with his own terminology to produce a highly personal interpretation of the text.

Carl Bielefeldt reminds us that “the burning house [parable] has been the

source of choice for interpretations of the implications of the teaching of the one vehicle. Unfortunately, although a relatively simple tale on the surface, on key points, the parable is notoriously problematic and subject to readings that take the one vehicle in sharply different directions” (“Expedient Devices, the One Vehicle, and the Life Span of the Buddha” in *Readings of the Lotus Sutra* [Columbia University Press, 2009], 66). I lack the space here to explore how other Japanese writers and artists—including other manga artists—have variously taken the burning house parable and found their own conclusions about its meaning. Suffice it to say, the text is quite open, so interpretations like Kuwata’s are not unheard of.

If we look deeper at his take on chapter 3, it is clear that Kuwata uses parable as his own expedient means to persuade readers to accept his “Spirit” worldview. “When you see that *hōben* have deep meanings that express the next dimension of ‘Spirit’ [*tamashii*], then far from falling into the trap of

superstition, the words change into something with value for you, pointing you to the truth of ‘Life’ [*inochi*] *no shinri o sashishimesu*]” (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 88). Thus, his idea of expedient means in chapter 3 allows people to see past hardened, illusory language and understand the figurative truth of “Spirit” or “life” that words can suggest but will never reveal. Perhaps far more important, pictures, like *hōben*, can directly point to Spirit. And in Kuwata’s Lotus, they often literally do.

In another illustration for “Parables,” Kuwata depicts how the average person can fail to miss the truth of the sutra’s stories. By clinging to the “Words of a Sutra Explanation” (another monolithic but less authoritative rectangular text), Kuwata’s iconic everyman declares, “This, here, is my enlightenment!” (*Kore zo, satori!*), even though the monolith has additional helpful signs reminding him “it’s just an expedient means!” (*hōben desu yo!*), and another sign—a finger-pointing hand—trying to get him to look up to a higher truth. Kuwata demonstrates with his manga flow chart how readers can easily (and comically) fall into the trap of taking either the sutra or its commentary (*kyōsetsu*) too literally and miss the path to real awareness that is right under their nose (*Hokekyō*, pt. 1, 94) [Illus. 8].

Whether one agrees or not that Kuwata’s *tokiakasu* commentary is helpful in making sense of the Lotus, one cannot underestimate the skill of Kuwata’s visual rendering of the perception process. For Kuwata, manga is a perfect tool for revealing these truths. What Kuwata’s text indicates is that writers and even manga artists understand the need contemporary Japanese readers have for these guides to help them investigate important texts of their cultural and religious traditions. In that sense, Kuwata’s *Hokekyō* manga commentary may point the way for new artists in the future to visually engage with the words of the Lotus. □



# “Translating” the Lotus Sutra in the University Classroom

by Aaron P. Proffitt

*I try to model for my students a balanced wisdom-and-compassion approach to the study of religion in which we ask critical, skeptical, even suspicious questions of our material while also seeking to place ourselves in the shoes of those people who compiled or composed the texts we are reading.*

## Introduction

What is the Lotus Sutra? Is it the recorded speech of Śākyamuni Buddha himself, transmitted down to us faithfully through the generations? Is it the secret teaching revealing for those with ears to hear the true intent of the Eternal Buddha, that cosmic force that guides all beings to awakening? Was the Lotus Sutra the product of revelation, appearing, as the text seems to indicate, some five hundred years after the life of Śākyamuni Buddha? Was the Lotus originally something akin to literature, even visionary literature, a product of altered states of consciousness by solitary meditators in the mountains and forests? Was the Lotus Sutra a later apocryphal text, or even a forgery, a tool used by self-aggrandizing Mahayana evangelists seeking to wrest power away from the arhats? Does the Lotus Sutra present a snapshot of sorts, a window onto a diverse Buddhist environment to which we have little to no historical access? There are many different ways to study the Lotus Sutra, and how one studies the text may determine how one answers these questions. In this short article, I will discuss some of the issues that arise when “translating” the Lotus Sutra into the North American university classroom.

Every spring at the University at Albany, SUNY, I teach an undergraduate seminar on the Lotus Sutra. Some of the students who take this class have previously taken my other classes, such as Introduction to Buddhism or Introduction to Japanese Religions, but many others have no background in Buddhism whatsoever, and their encounter with the Lotus Sutra is their first encounter with Buddhism. We spend the first half of the semester reading the sutra closely and the second half reading articles about the impact it has had upon East Asian Buddhism and the world. The class is structured in this way so that students have enough time to really understand what the Lotus Sutra says. Then they learn about what the Lotus Sutra *does*, or perhaps, what people have done with the Lotus Sutra. In this way students come to appreciate the Lotus, and perhaps other religious texts as well, as dynamic sites of human activity and not simply inert objects with set ideas and teachings. We go from Zhiyi to Tina Turner and do our best to cover everything in between. The literary value and readability of this text, especially when compared with other Mahayana sutras, is obvious. The Lotus Sutra is at times scary, at times challenging, at times

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inspiring, and certainly interesting to read. Moreover, there are numerous features of the text that make it extremely useful in the religious studies classroom context.

The way we go about studying the Lotus Sutra in a state university in North America may differ in some ways from the study of the text in more traditional theological contexts. In traditional theological contexts—in other words, contexts where Buddhist professionals “translate” a text into contemporary life and practice—faith in the power and veracity of the Lotus and the power of the Buddha found therein may be taken for granted, or assumed from the outset, and ultimately undergirds the very act of inquiry into the text and its role throughout history. Despite my sincere interest in the Buddhist theological sphere of inquiry (or, I suppose, as some call it now, critical-constructive Buddhist studies), and the fact that many of my closest friends and colleagues are ordained Buddhist priests, my own teaching and research at present tend toward the critical-historical academic study of religion, not Buddhist theology. This is not because I find the theological approach lacking in value but is simply

a product of my training as a scholar and my own understanding of the role of the humanities in the university setting. In the theological context, it can generally be assumed that the teacher is a Buddhist, if not a Buddhist priest, and that the students themselves are interested Buddhists. From this perspective one purpose behind historical and textual inquiry is to apply the insights gained from such an endeavor to one's own life. However, in the context in which I usually teach, the religious identities of neither teacher nor student can be taken for granted. In other words, the religious studies classroom becomes a place where anyone, regardless of background, may engage seriously in the study of a religious tradition.

As a critical-historical scholar of religion seeking to translate this text into the context of a university classroom, I tend not to ask questions such as "What does the Lotus Sutra *really* mean?" or "How might this passage apply to your life today?" Rather, I ask questions of this sort: "What does this passage reveal to us about Buddhism at the time of the Lotus Sutra's compilation?" or "How has the Lotus Sutra been 'translated' into different contexts?" I discuss with my students not only what the Lotus Sutra says but also what people have done with the Lotus Sutra. While we know comparatively little about the origin of this text (or the Mahayana as such), we know for certain that Buddhists throughout the world look to this text as the center of their faith, a source of inspiration for how they enact the Buddha Dharma in the world. In other words, the Lotus Sutra has not only been translated from one language to another but is also continuously being translated into action in the world.

## Translating the Lotus

There are several reasons for the Lotus Sutra translating well into the university

classroom. First, the Lotus contains within it many of the genre conventions we tend to associate with Mahayana Buddhism: a grand cosmology, repetition, elaborate description of divine beings on a cosmic scale, almost hip-hop style self-referentiality, the promotion of simple practices, and so on. Students often puzzle over these genre conventions, but once they become accustomed to them (and learn how to skim), they learn how to read the Lotus, and in my experience, they are then able to read other more-difficult sutras with ease. Therefore, the Lotus not only conveys some of the essential teachings of the Mahayana but also serves as an approachable primer for reading Mahayana sutras in general.

Second, the Lotus may reveal to the attentive reader some details about the time of its compilation and the values held by those compilers. This is important because we know surprisingly little about early Buddhism or the contexts within which Mahayana sutras first circulated or took their final form. It may very well be the case that some parts of the verse sections of the early chapters are very ancient indeed, we simply do not know. But there are features of the text, as we have access to it now and as Kumarajiva had access to it so long ago, that paint a picture of an embattled religious minority striking out at mainstream Buddhist culture, perhaps around five hundred years after Śākyamuni Buddha's passage into nirvana. These "human" features of the text include diatribes against the enemies of the Lotus, including those who express skepticism about a text they have never heard of; a consistently patriarchal view of the cosmos (Śākyamuni as eternal cosmic father) matched with a consistently misogynistic view of women; the praise of wealth and clear proselytization efforts directed at the wealthy class; the various narrative wrinkles and seams that indicate composition through accumulation, and so on. All

these features serve as grist for the mill of critical-historical inquiry.

Through close reading of the text, my students try to piece together basic information about the groups or communities who promoted this sutra in its current form. First we read closely to understand what the Lotus actually says, but ultimately the question becomes what does the Lotus *do*? Who stands to benefit? Who stands to lose if the claims made within the text are taken seriously? One might ask, who were the Mahayana preachers? What did they want? How are their agendas or biases represented in the text? How did later Buddhists translate the text into specific contexts? In the religious studies classroom, these kinds of questions form the basis of our critical-historical inquiry. One of the challenges that arise from this approach is that religious texts are typically seen as untouchable, powerful, revered. Asking tough questions of a text like this can at first appear impolite, even inappropriate or disrespectful. This way of reading religious texts sometimes surprises students, but it is essential to the academic critical-historical study of religion. I would also argue that this is one way of taking a text seriously, which in my mind is one of the greatest signs of respect one can pay to a text.

## Encountering Hierarchies and Difference in the Lotus

There are aspects of the Lotus that translate well for my students: universal salvation, the idea of the inherent buddha-nature within all beings, the heroic bodhisattva ideal, and so on. However, there are some aspects of the Lotus Sutra that do not translate well for my students. In particular, the role of women in the Lotus is a major area of concern. In reading Jan Nattier's article "Gender and Hierarchy in the Lotus Sutra" (Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline

*A wooden relief at the temple Daikyoji in Tokyo, depicting the story of the Dragon Princess in chapter 12 of the Lotus Sutra, “Devadatta.”*

I. Stone, ed., *Readings of the Lotus Sutra* ([New York: Columbia University Press, 2009], 83–106), the evidence is somewhat damning. Nattier demonstrates that, beginning to end, the Lotus Sutra indeed has a consistently misogynistic view of women. My students pick up on this early on in their reading of the Lotus, and Nattier nicely lays out the evidence to confirm this to be true. The compilers of the Lotus Sutra, whoever they may have been, were indeed participants in a traditional patriarchal Indian social environment in which women were regarded as less capable.

However, the point of this class is not simply to read what the Lotus Sutra says but to examine how the sutra has been used in specific contexts. What did people do with the Lotus Sutra’s view on women? In order to answer this question, I pair Nattier’s article with an article by Ryūichi Abé, “Revisiting the Dragon Princess” (<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/4400>). Abé confirms Nattier’s reading of the Lotus, that the text itself as we have it today has a decidedly and consistently negative view of women. However, through an examination of the Tiantai/Tendai commentarial tradition as well as popular Japanese literature, Abé also reveals that the Lotus has often served as the starting point, not the end point, for a variety of Buddhist systems, some

of which have a decidedly positive view of women. For much of the later interpretive tradition, the Dragon Princess attains Buddhahood *in this very body*, as a nonhuman, a female, and a child. The text indeed states that the Dragon Princess first becomes a man, but how that line was interpreted in the East Asian tradition is not so simple. Buddhist scripture, as a rule, is meant to be read on multiple levels. Certainly there are those who take a literal view, but by and large, especially among Buddhist scholiasts, any line of a given text may be reimagined in a particular context. There are numerous instances where that line is either ignored or recontextualized, the “becoming male” being merely for show, or something accomplished long ago, the gender binary revealed to be something that bodhisattvas are ultimately beyond. In this way, students encounter two excellent models for scholarship: what does the Lotus say (Nattier), and what did Buddhists do with that (Abé)?

Another useful example of something my students sometimes struggle with is the evolving universalism of the Lotus Sutra. Universalism, as I am using the term here, can refer to the common idea that “all paths lead up the same mountain” and so on. In popular Buddhist writing, students often encounter the idea that unlike

the monotheistic religions, Buddhism is more open and tolerant toward religious difference. Upon first encountering the Burning House Parable in chapter 3, this view seems to be confirmed, as students are impressed that the three vehicles are actually one. Similarly, when they encounter references to the power of buddhas and bodhisattvas to transform into whatever form beings may prefer (a god, a woman, a buddha, etc.), this as well seems to be a kind of universalism. However, I point out several different ways that the Lotus Sutra deals with religious difference. The text is not univocal, and the interpretive tradition does some very interesting things with the Lotus Sutra’s views on religious diversity.

First, the clear division between the arhats and bodhisattvas seems to assert a perspective that is distinctly exclusionary. The Lotus is the “secret” teaching that only those “in the know” will understand. Next, this perspective gives way to what I define as hierarchical universalism, a view wherein all paths converge on a single path, the bodhisattva path. All Buddhists are in fact on their way to full buddhahood along the bodhisattva path. (In class I sometimes describe this as the “everyone is welcome at the table, but don’t forget who sits at the head of the table” perspective.) At the next turn, the Lotus Sutra expands this view to include all beings and all paths, Buddhist or otherwise. Śākyamuni Buddha is revealed to be something much larger than the Indian prince who passed into extinction so long ago. All beings are in fact en route to buddhahood. There are no paths that are not ultimately expedient devices along the Way.

I have read the Lotus Sutra cover to cover many times in my life, and now I teach it in several of my classes, so now I read it at least twice a year. I do not know if the Lotus itself actually moves into a space that we might term true universalism, but it certainly points the

way. The East Asian Buddhist tradition in some sense takes the Lotus Sutra as a starting point for making sense not only of the diversity of Buddhism but the diversity of human experience. How do we all fit together? Perhaps taking the Burning House as a point of departure for thinking about religious otherness, the Tiantai/Tendai tradition follows that train of thought all the way to its post-logical conclusion, that all perspectives are but nodes in an interconnected web of causality wherein even the Buddha and Mara are interconnected. A Buddhist in dialogue with a Muslim, for example, does not necessarily need to construct the notion that Muslims are secretly bodhisattvas. *Sono mama*, exactly as he or she is, as a Muslim (not a Muslim who is secretly and unknowingly a bodhisattva), that person is a full participant in a greater reality.

In the two examples I gave here, one concerned with gender hierarchy, the other concerned with religious hierarchy, we can see that while the text presents one or several perspectives, the later Lotus traditions may take a different perspective. At this point, students ask a very important question: "So, the text says X, but Buddhists do Y? How does that work?" That a religious text may contain within it a teaching on XYZ does not necessarily mean that members of that tradition define their identity by X, Y, or Z. When/if members of a religion actually read their texts, they tend to use their texts selectively or dynamically, continually interpreting and translating that text into new contexts. The Buddhism of the Buddha is not the same thing as the Buddhism of Nagarjuna, is not the same thing as the Buddhism of Zhiyi, is not the same thing as the Buddhism of Saichō, of Nichiren, and so on. Each of these people translated their understanding of the Buddha Dharma into a new context and transformed it in the process. Translating the text into the university classroom is perhaps just

one more iteration of this process. In this sense, perhaps, the theological and historical-critical studies of Buddhism are not so distinct after all.

## Critical Approaches to Buddhist Studies

Students enter my class thinking Buddhism is cool. About halfway through, they are not so sure anymore. However, the Buddha that they like is for the most part the Buddha crafted by Western Buddhologists and propagated by Buddhist modernists. This Buddha was created by scholars who had little to no contact with the living Buddhist cultures of Asia. This Buddha seems to fit nicely with secular liberal ideals. This is the Buddha of American breakfast cereals and tattoos, dorm room lamps and posters, "McMindfulness," and so on. When confronted with the Buddha of the Lotus Sutra, however, students are somewhat taken aback. Some students simply do not like the Buddha of the Lotus Sutra. (Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016], 215.) The Buddha of Buddhist modernism, or as I sometimes call it, the Barnes & Noble Buddha, may spark a student's interest in my classes, but it does not provide them with knowledge about what Buddhism has actually been like; it does not inform them about the diversity of the Buddhist tradition, nor of the many ways in which the Buddha has been worshipped in historical contexts. Rather, this modernist Buddha drives a wedge between seekers of knowledge and the teachings they seek to learn and is the primary obstacle I encounter when guiding students through a close reading of the sutra. Ultimately, I think, it is through a close critical reading of both the Lotus Sutra and the history of Buddhist studies as a discipline that reveals for my students that the Barnes & Noble Buddha was but a mirage and that the Buddha of

the Lotus, continuously transforming in the history of East Asian Buddhism, is far more interesting.

In an effort to contextualize our reading of the Lotus Sutra and see through the mirage, I turn the lens around from the object of inquiry to the inquirer. I challenge my students to think about how we got here. How is it that in North America, in a university classroom, we can sit around studying an ancient Buddhist scripture in this way? Indeed, how we think about Buddhism, how we have come to have knowledge about this thing called Buddhism, has a history that must also be examined. Not only must we interrogate what the Lotus tells us about the period of its final compilation, not only must we inquire into the diverse ways in which Buddhists have used the Lotus Sutra, but we must also examine the history of the field we now call Buddhist studies. In the same way that we might examine the history of Heian Japan to understand the development of Japanese Tendai, or modern Japan to understand the development of Risshō Kōsei-kai, so too must we interrogate and contextualize the act of studying Buddhism as it is carried out in the North American academic environment. In this way the academic study of Buddhism itself can become an object of critical inquiry. I would also suggest that through critical inquiry into the origins of Buddhist studies as an academic field, we might also encounter new ways of thinking about the role of the theological study of religion and new ways of thinking about the Lotus Sutra.

Taking these insights into account, we can therefore read the Lotus Sutra with a more open mind. The Lotus is not merely the product of a late Mahayana movement but a node in a broader Buddhist literary net revealing to us the diverse views some early Buddhists had on the Buddha. I would like to propose as a hypothesis that the Lotus Sutra itself may have served as a tool for dealing with

Buddhist diversity. Perhaps, following the death of Śākyamuni Buddha, the Buddhist tradition spread along trade routes and blended into a variety of communities. In the process, stories of the Buddha grew in number and diversity. Over several hundred years through oral composition, a variety of Buddhisms developed. Eventually some Buddhist communities began to write down their stories about the Buddha. As these texts circulated, perhaps some Buddhists were shocked at just how different their Buddhism was from their neighbor's Buddhism. "Over here we worship this buddha, over there they worship that buddha. Over there they worship only Śākyamuni Buddha, over there they worship multiple buddhas." Some Buddhists developed inclusive Buddhologies, accommodating (and accumulating) buddhas of the past, future, and present, while others developed exclusionary Buddhologies, preferring to focus on Śākyamuni Buddha alone. As oral and written literature began to circulate in literary languages such as Pali and Sanskrit as well as various regional vernaculars, Buddhist diversity became a major area of concern. "The Buddha is like a doctor," we begin to hear, able to dispense medicine appropriate to any affliction. Is this claim originally an observation of the Buddha's pedagogical prowess, passed down through the generations, or an explanation later Buddhists developed to account for Buddhist diversity?

Furthermore, Buddhism never existed by itself. This question of religious otherness was certainly not limited to Buddhism but would also have included how Buddhists respond to non-Buddhist traditions, which would have happened constantly as Buddhism expanded. The problem is that we have little to no historical or documentary evidence by which to sketch the contours of the early Buddhist community, beyond the very texts themselves, and they are not always reliable. I am proposing this

narrative as an alternative hypothesis or framework for how we might think of the early Buddhist community, based on my reading of both contemporary scholarship on early Buddhism (which tends to present non-Mahayana and Mahayana as having significant areas of overlap) and the intertextuality of Mahayana sutras (the way Mahayana sutras seem to borrow from and refer to one another). This way of reading Buddhist studies scholarship against the grain perhaps preserves some of the mystery in the Lotus Sutra and may well serve as one way for critical-historical scholars of Buddhism and theological scholars of Buddhism to find some common ground.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, when I first began teaching this seminar, sometimes I would worry that this type of close

historical-critical reading of the Lotus constitutes the oft-maligned slander. We ask tough skeptical questions of the Lotus. Though not a theologian by trade, I try to model for my students a balanced wisdom-and-compassion approach to the study of religion in which we ask critical, skeptical, even suspicious questions of our material while also seeking to place ourselves in the shoes of those people who compiled or composed the texts we are reading. My students sometimes remind me that we repeatedly encounter passages praising the very act of reading, reciting, and copying the Lotus as a superlative form of Buddhist practice. Our primary in-class activity is sitting around the room reading and reciting passages out loud. Students download and thus make copies of the sutra. They turn in journals and term papers citing long text passages. Despite our academic approach, perhaps we are making tremendous merit after all. □

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# Given the Gift of Life and Sustained by the Buddha

by Dominick Scarangelo

***The Original Buddha of the Lotus Sutra is a personification of the omnipresent, ultimate truth. . . . It is neither born nor perishes, and it pervades all phenomena throughout the entirety of the universe, governing the arising of all things, including us. It is the great life force of the universe.***

In this issue we will explore an aspect of Rissho Kosei-kai practice that for many people is a source of bewilderment: the “Original Buddha” of the Lotus Sutra, and Rissho Kosei-kai’s characterization of this Buddha as the “great life force of the universe” that gives us the gift of life and sustains us. “Great life force of the universe” and similar ways of speaking about ultimate truth as the Buddha use language as soteriological devices and do not introduce an ontological theory by taking the Buddha as a substrate behind reality, nor do they seek to turn the Buddha into a creator deity. The point is to employ words and phrases as devices to transform the experience of the world in ways that liberate people from suffering or the malaise of their inability to become all that they could be. When we speak of the truth of all things—their absence of any fixed and unchanging nature—with affirmative language such as the phrases “great life force of the universe” or “given the gift of life and sustained,” we are able to realize that existence brings endless possibilities, and instead of “nothingness” we become aware of a dynamic openness and unimpededness, or the “fullness” of all things, including us.

## Introduction: “Lost in Translation”

Buddhism is a diverse faith, and in the twenty-five hundred years since the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni, it has developed into one of the largest and most widespread of the world’s major religious traditions. Starting with the Indian subcontinent, the southern extent of Buddhism is found on the island of Sri Lanka, off the coast of India, and its geographical range in Southeast Asia stretches from Myanmar across to Vietnam on the South China Sea, with smaller communities of Buddhist minorities scattered across the predominately Muslim countries of Malaysia and Indonesia. Moving north, Buddhism is found in Nepal and Tibet, and in Northeast Asia it has set down deep roots in the countries of China, Korea, and Japan. Buddhist geographical breadth is also matched by a distinctive multiplicity of orders, doctrines, and practices that have developed over the past two millennia. Readers are presumably familiar with the diversity of Buddhism, but I feel that sometimes we have to remind ourselves of the multiplicity of what we refer to with the single blanket term *Buddhism*. This is why some scholars prefer to use the plural

form *Buddhisms* to recognize that there is no single way of being Buddhist.

Many Buddhisms are now very much at home in the West, and as the various traditions slowly acclimate themselves to new cultures, they are beginning to develop qualities that, although shared among themselves in their new homes, distinguish them from their root traditions in Asia. For this reason, it is no longer a misnomer to talk of a Western Buddhism. But given the diversity of Buddhisms in Asia, it should be no surprise that not all are equally represented in the West. Despite its importance in East Asia, Western Buddhists remain comparatively unfamiliar with the Lotus Sutra, for example, and with the exception of the Japanese tradition Soka Gakkai, forms of Lotus Sutra-based Buddhism such as the Japanese Tendai order and Rissho Kosei-kai are just now beginning to make an impact in the Americas and Europe. Furthermore, in the realm of academic Buddhist studies, which is one of the primary sources of information about Buddhism for people around the world, there are relatively few scholars studying the Lotus Sutra and its associated traditions. I suspect these are some of the principle reasons that the Lotus Sutra has not had an influence on Western Buddhism commensurate to its importance in parts of Asia. A consequence of this is that the stories, ideas, and language of Lotus Sutra Buddhism may be unfamiliar to people in the West, including practicing Buddhists. Additionally, given that Western Buddhists are apt to emphasize the critical and ascetic aspects

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of Buddhist traditions, and often think of Buddhism as a demythologized system of beliefs and practices (Gomez 2000, 8), some of the lesser-known Buddhisms, especially those that are devotional in nature or whose discourse abounds in symbolism and religious metaphor, may even strike people as un-Buddhist.

In many cases, the distinctiveness of the Lotus Sutra's discourse creates the need to explain the concepts of Lotus Sutra-centric Buddhism or translate them into more widely familiar Buddhist words and phrases to make them accessible to international Buddhists. One example is the expression "the great life force of the universe" (Jpn., *uchū no dai seimei*, 宇宙の大生命). This and similar phrases became popular in early-twentieth-century Japan as modernistic ways of expressing the notion of the omnipresent, universal truth as a "body" of the Buddha that always abides in the world, and in some Buddhist groups, including Rissho Kosei-kai, this phrase is used to speak of the Original Buddha that is revealed in the second half of the Lotus Sutra. Rissho Kosei-kai practitioners often say that the Original Buddha "gives the gift of life and sustains all things," and many people encountering Rissho Kosei-kai for the first time find this phrase confusing. I have been told on several occasions that this way of talking about the Buddha sounds like Hinduism, or that such language turns the Buddha into a creator God along the lines of the monotheistic religious traditions.

I think both of these responses are misconceptions but also precious

feedback that tells us something is "lost in translation" and provides an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of our own tradition as we find better ways to share it with others. In this essay we will explore what is meant by this phrase, "the great life force of the universe," by first delving into the Lotus Sutra's story of the Original Buddha, which is the way the text personifies ultimate truth using narrative and literary imagery. We will also take a comparative look at some other Buddhist texts and traditions, which will show that Lotus Sutra-based Buddhism is not alone in giving affirmative expression to omnipresent truth with analogies to life and cosmological metaphors of universal buddha bodies. Next we will examine the specific origins of the expression "the great life force of the universe" and its historical continuity with ways of talking about the Buddha in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism dating back to antiquity. Finally, we will consider how such language and notions of the Buddha function soteriologically as religious symbolism to open new horizons of knowledge and experience, effecting a liberating transformation of one's awareness of oneself and the surrounding world—the *raison d'être* of Buddhism.

## **The Original Buddha of the Threefold Lotus Sutra**

Chapter 15, the beginning of the second half of the Lotus Sutra, starts with a great

tumult. Just after hearing Shakyamuni Buddha's exposition in chapter 14, the bodhisattvas in the assembly, who have gathered from other lands throughout the cosmos, having been deeply moved by the Buddha's explanation of the merits of the sutra and his exhortation to disseminate it, all rise from their seats, and placing their palms together in reverence, they pledge to remain in this world and spread the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. To the shock of these bodhisattvas, however, the Buddha turns to them and says, "Say no more, my good children. There will be no need for you to protect and keep this sutra" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 262). These off-world bodhisattvas must have responded to the Buddha with stupefied expressions, for the Buddha continues: "Why is this? Because there already are, here in my saha world, bodhisattva-mahasattvas as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges, each of whom has followers as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges" (ibid.).

Just as the Buddha speaks, the ground on the summit of Divine Eagle Peak cracks open as if the shock wave of a huge earthquake were ripping the mountain apart, and out of the huge crevasses arise an incalculable number of great bodhisattvas, each possessing "golden-hued bodies, the thirty-two marks [of a great being], and immeasurable radiance." In response to the bewilderment of bodhisattva Maitreya, the Buddha says:

Since immeasurable kalpas ago,  
All of these great bodhisattvas have

been  
Studying and practicing the Buddha  
wisdom.  
I am the one who has instructed  
them all. (Ibid., 270)

The Buddha's explanation only confuses the assembly more, and Maitreya, wondering how Shakyamuni, who had only attained awakening some forty years before, could have trained all these magnificent bodhisattvas, and at the end of the chapter Maitreya presses the Buddha for further clarification. This sets up the climax of the Lotus Sutra in chapter 16, when Shakyamuni explains that while all his disciples assume that he had only become a buddha a few short decades previously, in fact the Buddha's life span is unfathomable and for all intents and purposes extends from time immemorial into the infinite future, and furthermore, that other buddhas who have appeared were actually Shakyamuni himself, responding to the unique needs of sentient beings in innumerable appropriate ways. In the verses that conclude the chapter, the Buddha tells the assembly that he is ever present on Divine Eagle Peak and all other places, describing the universe as his pure land, which is never destroyed, even though in the eyes of living beings the world systems throughout the cosmos appear to go through cycles of arising and destruction. This radical pronouncement shocks all the living beings in the audience listening to Shakyamuni's exposition, but hearing that the Buddha is never really extinguished, many are filled with profound joy and feel a deep sense of gratitude.

## What is the Original Buddha of the Lotus Sutra?

The Lotus Sutra communicates through stories and literary imagery and gives us little in the way of the doctrinal terminology we might expect to see in a Buddhist text. In this sense, it is like a

great work of literature or an epic poem, teaching us truths through narratives and symbolism without abstracting much in the way of systematic principles. On the one hand this makes the Lotus Sutra easier to read and absorb, and its literary imagery inspires the imagination, but this style also begs considerable rumination and commentarial exegesis in order to distill the text's basic ideas and articulate them in terms of common Mahāyāna doctrinal principles.

Buddhists in China and Japan call this ever-abiding Buddha revealed in chapter 16 the Original Buddha (Chn., *benfo*; Jpn., *honbutsu*, 本仏), an allegorical enunciation of the ultimate truth to which buddhas awaken, a truth that, as explained beginning in the earliest sutras, always abides in the world. This is because it is simply the law of the universe and, as such, is uncreated—it is never “born” in the conventional sense, and therefore neither does it “die.” Those who awaken to it, like Siddhārtha Gautama, do not formulate this truth or theorize it as if it were their own creation; they merely rediscover it and announce it to the world. Thus, in the final analysis, this truth to which the sages awaken is the source of all buddhas, and that is why it is called the Original Buddha.

What is this truth? In short, it is fundamentally the truth of emptiness, the corollary of causation, or interdependent origination. In chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra it is articulated twice: first through the sutra's unique teaching of causality and description of existence known as the ten suchnesses, and later in the verse portion of the chapter in a way that resembles similar statements first appearing in the Āgama/Nikāya Sutras and found in many later texts, including the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. The initial lines read:

The buddhas, the most honored of  
beings,  
Know that since all things are ever

without fixed nature,  
The seeds of buddhahood sprout  
from proper conditions.  
Therefore, they expound the One  
Vehicle. (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019,  
77)

All things that exist are without a fixed and unchanging nature or identity, and thus change incessantly. This is because they arise through causes and conditions, and dependent upon their environment, they are always changing. This way in which things exist is commonly called their emptiness, a somewhat confusing term that simply means that things are devoid, that is, empty, of any unchanging, eternal identity.

Everything that exists, including us, is dependent upon other things, literally everything else in the universe. Human beings, to give an example, are dependent upon oxygen, the elements and nutrients that settled in our world out of stardust, as well as sunlight, and also the actions of other living beings, including our parents who gave birth to us, all our ancestors, even the plants, birds, fish, and other animals whose lives have become our sustenance—each and every thing that exists is interconnected with us. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, the consequence of interdependence is that while everything is empty of a fixed, unchanging self-nature, it is paradoxically “full of everything else” (Thich 2017, 33). When we speak of emptiness with affirmative language in this way, we see that it implies endless possibilities for existence, and instead of nothingness, we become aware of a dynamic openness and unimpededness, or a fullness. When the proper conditions exist, this openness enables living beings to transform themselves to attain the state of perfection that we called buddhahood.

This passage continues with two more enigmatic verses also seen in earlier texts: “This teaching dwells in its inherent dharma position / and thus

all worldly attributes eternally abide” (ibid). In a nutshell, this teaching, that is, the true reality of all things as ever without fixed natures, which is to say, openness or unimpededness, is itself, ironically, fixed (Skt., *dharma-niyāmātā*) and stable (Skt., *dharma-sthititā*). It operates in the same way in the world in perpetuity, and because of the workings of this law, there is always a world, always a universe, which is ceaselessly changing, transforming, and developing. It is here that we can grasp the notion that ultimate truth facilitates the arising, development, and transformation of all things in the world. It is in this sense that ultimate truth gives us the gift of life and sustains us.

Here in the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra this truth is explained with reference to abstract Buddhist doctrinal terms, but the sixteenth chapter expresses it with narrative, literary imagery and cosmic metaphor. This ultimate truth ever abides in all places throughout the universe and never enters extinction. It is the Original Buddha, who has actually been enlightened since time immemorial (Chn., *jiuyuan shicheng*; Jpn., *kuon jitsujo*, 久遠実成), possessing an essentially infinite life span. To the degree possible in language, the sutra articulates this transcendence of time and space with analogies to the innumerable particles of planetary bodies and boundless distances of interstellar space. While the human Buddha, born in our world as the prince Siddhārtha Gautama, enters *parinirvāṇa*, the truth to which he awoke is fixed and abides everywhere, or as the closing verses of the chapter express it, the Buddha is always in our world on Divine Eagle Peak, and abides in all other places. Human, mortal buddhas come and go, but this truth to which they awaken is the fundamental Buddha, the Original Buddha. Although the text eschews difficult doctrinal terms here, many Buddhists have interpreted this Buddha of infinite life to mean the truth

body (*dharma-kāya*) of the Buddha, the ever-abiding truth imagined as the ultimate “body” of the Buddha.

The Original Buddha, or ultimate truth, is always present, and without the workings of truth in the cosmos as a universal law, there would be no buddhas, nor any phenomena, including you and me. In a sense, the Original Buddha is everything included in the fullness of which Thich Nhat Hanh writes. But the Original Buddha is not a creator deity or god that exists separate from us. The ultimate truth transcends conventional notions of inside and outside. As Rev. Nikkyō Niwano, founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, explains:

Because it is the truth that permeates the entire universe and everything within it, the Dharma transcends the distinction of inside and outside. Even our own bodies are formed in accord with this truth and sustained by it. Our minds, as well, arise through this truth and function in accord with it. All things—society, the heavens, Earth, plants, birds, and animals—come into existence and live in dependence upon this truth. (Niwano 2012b, 340)

We and everything else arise, abide, change, and transform into other forms according to this Dharma, but this does not imply that the Original Buddha is a creator god nor an unseen reality lying behind things like a substrate. The traditional term origin can be misleading, but what it really means is something like a “rule” or “principle” or “essence” that is never separate from its implementation or functioning. Because the truth is *not a thing* but rather the *way things function*, truth never exists apart from its expression. This is basically the point that the Heart Sutra makes when it famously tells us, “Emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness . . . all dharmas are defined by emptiness” (Pine 2004, 5).

To use an analogy, think of the phenomenon of creativity. Creativity is not a physical thing or material object, it is a principle that is expressed in the behaviors and creations of people. Aside from its manifestation, we cannot become aware of creativity. What we call creativity always appears together with its performance or manifestation. Similarly, truth and its manifestations are never separate and always coincide; there is no ontological gulf between them. This is why the Original Buddha is not prior to or separate from his manifestation in the world; he is not a thing, not a substrate or substance out of which everything in the world is born.

While the manifestations or traces of the truth—the workings of the Original Buddha—in principle include all phenomena, in common usage it often refers to people like Shakyamuni who, fully awakened to truth, embody it to the fullest extent and reach out to us to help us move toward the freedom of liberation from suffering. In a more modern and figurative interpretation, the “trace” can be a community of persons of faith who preserve the Buddha’s teachings and carry them out, seeking their own awakening while at the same time devoting themselves to the needs of others. These are people who embody the Buddha in our world. This is the Buddhist sangha. The Original Buddha is never separate from its various manifestations in the world: the “origin” and the “manifestation” (trace) are two but not two, distinct but never separate.

## Talking about the Ineffable: Negative versus Affirmative Language

I strongly suspect that confusion about the Lotus Sutra’s Original Buddha and the expression “the great life force of the universe” are also related to the impression that Buddhism is a nontheistic and analytical tradition that eschews

*The Great Buddha at Tōdaiji temple in Nara, an image of the omnipresent Buddha Vairocana as described in the Flower Garland Sutra.*

talking about reality in affirmative language. According to Luis O. Gomez, Westerners tend to emphasize the critical and ascetic elements of Buddhism, imagining Buddhism as a demythologized system of beliefs and practices, perhaps because these aspects of the tradition resonate with modern agnosticism (Gomez 2000, 8). Some traditions within Buddhism, especially those that are gaining popularity around the world, do indeed avoid affirmative language about reality. Borrowing a term from Christian theology, we could say that the discourses of such Buddhist traditions are *via negativa*, or apophatic—speaking primarily in negative terms about reality, saying only what it is not and emphasizing silence with regard to the ultimate. The Mādhyamika Buddhist philosophical tradition, for instance, is a well-known example of apophatic Buddhism. Mādhyamika is highly critical of making positive, affirmative statements about ultimate truth or the Buddha, and its reticence to use the discursive tool of language to speak affirmatively of ultimate truth and reality has had a strong

influence on some forms of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the Chan and Zen schools that have a significant presence in North America and Europe.

Much of East Asia's Buddhism strikes a different tone, however. As Jacqueline Stone observes, as Buddhism was transmitted to China, it became more kataphatic, or *via positiva* in orientation—using affirmative language and metaphor to speak about the ultimate (Stone 2003, 10). East Asians were often drawn to the more kataphatic traditions coming out of South and Central Asia, but in many cases they also accentuated these aspects over time. There are several highly influential texts that sparked East Asian traditions that teach buddha-nature, reveal cosmic buddhas, or encourage people to depend upon the power of a buddha to attain rebirth in pure lands, including the Nirvana Sutra, the Flower Ornament Sutra, the Threefold Pure Land Sutra, and Mantrayāna texts such as the Mahāvairocana Tantra. Two of the most important doctrinal treatises in East Asian Buddhism, the Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna and the Treatise

on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, also employ affirmative language and analogy with regard to the ultimate. Thus, although the discourse of the Lotus Sutra tradition might strike some readers as something of a curiosity or anomaly within Buddhism, in actuality, cosmological metaphors and analogies to life or vitality as ways of speaking about truth or the Buddha are not at all uncommon in Buddhism.

#### *Other Examples of Cosmic Buddhas and Analogies to Life in East Asian Buddhism*

Let's take a look at some examples from The Flower Garland Sutra and Mahāvairocana Tantra traditions, two highly influential varieties of Buddhism in East Asia that describe the body of the Buddha as consubstantial with the totality of the universe. First, let's consider these beautiful salutations from the opening chapter of the Flower Garland Sutra (Skt., *Avataṃśaka-sūtra*).

The Buddha body extends throughout all the great assemblies;  
It fills the cosmos without end.



Quiescent, without essence, it cannot be grasped;  
It appears just to save all beings.  
(Cleary 1993, 65)

The Buddha's body of pure subtle form  
Is manifest everywhere and has no compare;  
This body has no essence and no resting place;  
It is contemplated by Skillful Meditation. (Ibid.)

The Buddha body is like space, inexhaustible—  
Formless, unhindered, it pervades the ten directions;  
All of its accommodational manifestations are like conjurations;  
Sound of Magical Displays understands this way. (Ibid., 73)

The Buddha body is all pervasive, equal to the cosmos.  
It manifests in response to all sentient beings;  
With various teachings he is always guiding;  
Master of Teaching, he is able to enlighten. (Ibid., 73–74)

This vision of a cosmic buddha described in the Flower Garland Sutra is brought to form in the magnificent artistry of Japan's Great Buddha at Tōdaiji temple, in Nara, Japan. Completed in 751 CE, the Great Buddha towers some fourteen meters (forty-nine feet) in height, allowing visitors to ponder the vastness of the Buddha as universal truth pervading the cosmos. Erected in the capital at the head temple of Japan's ancient state-supported system of monasteries, the Great Buddha of Nara made an indelible impression on the national psyche, promulgating the Flower Garland Sutra's notion of an omnipresent Buddha.

The Mahāvairocana Tantra and its chief East Asian commentary, The Commentary on the Mahāvairocana

*The Womb World Mandala, a graphic representation of the universe as truth, in the center of which the Buddha Mahāvairocana resides. In possession of Tōji, a Shingon Buddhist temple in Kyoto. Ninth century. National treasure.*

Sūtra (Chn., *Dari jing yishi*, 大日經義積), describe the Buddha as the personification of ultimate truth in equally cosmological terms. The omnipresent buddha Mahāvairocana, the personification of ultimate truth in Mantrayāna, resides in the center of the Womb World Mandala, a graphic representation of the universe as truth; all the concentric layers of the mandala are populated by emanations that are conduits of his wisdom and compassion extending to all corners of the universe. In addition to the cosmic metaphor, the figure of Mahāvairocana also incorporates the analogy to life. This buddha's great compassion for all living beings is conceived of as the elemental qualities of earth, fire, water, air,

and space—activities that govern the way everything in the universe exists, making life possible.

Innumerable pathways naturally open when [this buddha] holds and supports [living beings] with the great compassion of earth, gives living beings the great compassion of fire's nurturing warmth, moistens living beings with the great compassion of water, develops the vitality of living beings with the great compassion of wind, and unobstructs living beings with the great compassion of space. It is thus like the gradual adornment of a plant [as it develops from] a seed through its root, stem, branches, and leaves. (Tendai

Shūten Hensanjo 1993, *Dainichi kyō gishaku*, 23)

These words paint the image of a living cosmos that cradles sentient beings in its warm, gentle hands, bathing and invigorating us with a refreshing breeze. All the phenomena in the universe are reaching out to us with compassion. As in Lotus Sutra Buddhism, this Mantrayāna tradition introduces us to a universe in which there are no phenomena that are separate from the Buddha Dharma. The Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai (空海; 774–835) taught that these elemental qualities of all things express the body of Mahāvairocana. Constantly in a state of union, or yoga, these virtues of all phenomena are the body of the Buddha articulated by the totality of the universe. In *Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence*, Kūkai writes of the Buddha: “He is analogous to great space; he is eternal, being unobstructed, and embraces himself in all phenomena.” Kūkai continues the cosmological metaphor, adding, “That is why he [Mahāvairocana] is compared to great space. Grounded in him, all things exist; therefore, the term ‘ground’ is used” (Hakeda 1972, 226).

This may sound like a mysterious Buddhist spin on the Gaia hypothesis, but it’s a way of apprehending the grand interrelatedness in which all things are interdependent and mutually supporting. The Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sūtra makes this explicitly clear by linking interdependent origination with the metaphor of the Buddha’s cosmic body, doing so by quoting a famous passage from the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra that I introduced earlier in this essay:

This [the reality of all dharmas] can only be realized between buddhas, and thus the Lotus Sutra says: “The Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, know that all things are always without [fixed] natures, [and thus] buddhahood is cultivated through

interdependent origination. For this reason, they teach the One Vehicle.” . . . When the practitioner sees all things arising from the Dharma of interdependent origination, all is [Mahā]vairocana as the body of the Dharma realm. At that instant the ten directions [of the cosmos] become a single buddha land. (Tendai Shūten Hensanjo 1993, *Dainichi kyō gishaku*, 380)

These words bring together the cosmological metaphor with the notion of arising, the analogy of coming to life. As in the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra, this tradition also sees phenomena’s lack of any fixed nature, or its emptiness, the corollary of interdependent origination, as the omnipresent truth, and the realization of this reveals an infinite Buddha that pervades the entire universe.

The Flower Garland Sutra and the Mahāvairocana Tantra are only two of several examples of traditions that envision ultimate truth as a cosmic buddha or use the analogy to life or the arising of life to envision the workings of universal law. Lotus Sutra Buddhism is clearly not alone in having such a vision of the Buddha and using kataphatic discourse to speak of the ultimate. In light of these other visions of ultimate truth as a cosmic buddha that facilitates the arising and development of all things, let us now reconsider the expression “the great life force of the universe.”

## Origins of the Phrase “Great Life Force of the Universe”

As we have seen, the Original Buddha of the Lotus Sutra is a personification, a way of being mindful of the omnipresent truth that transcends time and space. The inspiration for the analogies to life and cosmic metaphors used to speak of the Original Buddha, including the phrase “great life force of the universe,”

is inspired by the language of the sutra itself—the description of the Buddha’s “life span of innumerable kalpas” and his presence “in hundreds of thousands of millions of myriads of lands in other worlds,” “abiding in all other places.” The expression “great life force of the universe” is of relatively recent origin, but it is foreshadowed by the writings of the famous Lotus Sutra exegetes and votaries of the past.

The great Lotus Sutra exegete and meditation master Zhiyi (智顗; 538–97) put it as follows: “From the nonabiding origin all phenomena are established” (*Fahua xuanyi* [The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra], in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [The Buddhist canon, Taishō period new edition], vol. 33, 764b). Zhiyi’s language artfully expresses how, although neither a substrate nor a material thing, the Original Buddha as ultimate truth nevertheless facilitates the arising of all things in existence. The Original Buddha is a paradox: as the universal law, it is the foundation, the root, the basis of all things (Chn., *ben*, 本), but it is not a single material thing to which we can point. It is the principle according to which things function—Zhiyi also uses the Chinese notion of substance and function to explain it. The Original Buddha is an origin that is always in movement and never still. It is the baseless base from which all things arise and upon which they stand.

While drawing upon Zhiyi, the medieval Japanese Lotus Sutra popularizer Nichiren (日蓮; 1222–82) described the Original Buddha more vividly for his largely lay Japanese audience:

From a number of kalpas in the past as many as the particles of five hundred lands ground to dust, the *sahā* world has been the domain of our teacher Shakyamuni. Not even a portion of its great firmament, its expanse of space, its mountains and seas, nor its grasses and trees belong

to another buddha. Moreover, all living beings are the honored children of Shakyamuni, the World-Honored One. Say that in the kalpa of arising, a brahma king descends to give birth to the living beings of the six transmigrations. As that brahma king would be the parent of all living beings, Shakyamuni Buddha is also the parent of all living beings. Moreover, our teacher Shakyamni, the World-Honored One, is the brilliant teacher of all living beings in this land. We are indebted to our teacher even for knowing our parents. (Fujimoto 2014, 827–28)

Nichiren may have concretized the metaphor far too strongly for many people today, especially with his reference to the brahma kings, deities who in South Asian religion are oftentimes depicted as gods with the power of creation. But we should keep in mind that Buddhism also repeatedly criticized the notion of the brahma kings or other deities as creating things out of nothing, that is, without relation to causation, and instead of viewing Nichiren's words as an ontological theory, I think they are better understood as an analogy using common language and stories of the day to foster a positive embrace of the immanence of truth and to encourage a confidence in the possibilities of buddha-nature—of being children of the Buddha.

Here is another example from The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings (*Ongi kuden*, 御義口伝), a collection of verbal commentary on the Lotus Sutra attributed to Nichiren and recorded by his disciple Nikkō (日興; 1245–1332), who is acknowledged as the founder of the Nichiren Shōshū order of Nichiren Buddhism. Missing from the earliest catalogs of writings associated with Nichiren, this text, the attribution of which is disputed, is not read by all Nichiren Buddhists, but it has been extremely influential in some branches

of Nichiren Buddhism and Buddhist lay movements and is thus familiar to many people. A passage near the end of the text says of the critical sixteenth chapter:

“The Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter deals with the original life of the living beings of the Ten Worlds. This chapter is called the *hommon*, or essential teaching because it is the gateway (*mon*), or teaching, by which one enters into what is essential or original (*hon*). The flesh-and-blood bodies and minds of ordinary beings are described in this chapter as essential or inherently eternal, and therefore this is called the essential teaching. (Watson 2004, 233)

This passage asserts that the original life (Jpn., *honmyō*, 本命) or boundless life of the Original Buddha, who is neither born nor extinguished, is shared by living beings, that is to say, the Buddha's body is concomitant with living beings. This enigmatic claim derives from what we discussed above: the omnipresent truth pervades or marks all things, and all things exist according to this law, which is none other than the workings of the Original Buddha.

With this in mind, we can see that the passage has two implications. First and most simply, from the past immemorial into the infinite future, living beings are inherently enlightened, they are buddha-nature, and their buddhahood is assured. The second implication is a little more difficult to grasp. That people's bodies and minds share the original life, or “essential eternity” (*hon'u*, 本有), of the Original Buddha does not mean that each individual is, just as they are, immortal but implies something more like our contemporary idea of the conservation of energy or matter—energy or matter is never lost, nor does it disappear; it only transforms. For example, when a piece of wood is burned,

its energy is released, and the wood transforms into smoke, various chemicals, soot, and ashes. While the wood no longer remains as wood, it does not simply vanish into nothingness; it transforms into something else. In Buddhist terms, our bodies and minds lose their present form at death, but their material does not disappear into nothingness. On the contrary, they transform into other shapes, becoming parts of other forms of life (Ikeda 1972, 899–900). In this sense, while ever changing, we are at the same time always a drop of water in the eternal flow of the river of existence. This is the life we share with the Original Buddha.

These are just a few of many premodern historical precedents for the phrase “great life force of the universe,” which actually dates to the early twentieth century. This phrase appeared at a time when *life* (Jpn., *inochi*, 命; or *seimei*, 生命) had become a buzzword of sorts and a popular metaphor in Japan (Maegawa 2010, 191–92; Miwa 2015, 360–70). In those days some Buddhists, especially those concerned with the dissemination and revitalization of Buddhism, began to use a combination of analogies to both life and the cosmos in this fashion to give contemporary Japanese a way to envision the Original Buddha using easily understood popular language. In a sense, it was a way to update Buddhism for the twentieth century by creating new expressions to replace the older, classical Chinese-based terminology. Buddhist teachers used a number of variations on this phrase, and it seems that it was within the Nichiren Buddhist sects and related lay movements where this language gained the most traction.

While space does not permit exhaustively retracing the development and lineage of this way of speaking of the Original Buddha, the earliest indications may be found in *Hokekyō yōgi*, 法華經要義 (Essential meanings of the Lotus Sutra), a popular book by the

Godō no tsuki (*Moon of Enlightenment, also referred to as Finger Pointing at the Moon*) by Yoshitoshi Tsukioka (1839–92), widely recognized as the last master of the *ukiyo-e* genre of woodblock printing and painting.

influential activist monk and Lotus Sutra exegete Nisshō Honda (本多日生; 1867–1931). Although published shortly before his death in 1929, this work was actually based on Honda's lectures on the Lotus Sutra given in 1905, which may indicate the time in which such expressions first appeared. Later in the teens and twenties, variants are found in the writings of the Nichiren scholar-monk Chiō Yamakawa (山川智応; 1879–1956) and the works of prominent thinkers of the various Nichiren lay movements (Maegawa 2010). Phrases like “the great life force of the universe” were by no means limited to Nichiren Buddhism, however, and they retained currency in Japan for the remainder of the century, often showing up in popular books on Buddhism written by academics or scholar-monks such as the Tendai monk and academic scholar Kyōjun Shimizu dani (1891–1979)

(see Shimizu dani 1977, 109–11) and the eminent Buddhist scholar Shigeo Kamata (1927–2001) (see Kamata 2008, 269), to give only two examples.

The most prominent recent example in popular literature of this kind of language for understanding the ultimate truth as Buddha is best-selling Japanese novelist and devout Pure Land Buddhist Hiroyuki Itsuki's book, *Tariki: Embracing Despair, Discovering Peace*, in which Itsuki describes the Pure Land buddha Amida as “a characterization of the infinite life force and the light of truth” (Itsuki 2001, 78). Itsuki's use of this expression indicates that in contemporary Japan “life force of the universe” and similar constructions are still common and effective

ways to relay the difficult notion of the workings of an omnipresent principle by which all things, including us, arise and are sustained.

## The Original Buddha as the “Great Life Force of the Universe”: A Form of Mindfulness of the Buddha

One day while Shakyamuni Buddha was staying at the Bamboo Grove in Rājagaha, he received a message that his disciple Venerable Vakkali lay dying and wanted to pay final homage to the Buddha, but bedridden as he was, Vakkali was unable to do so. When hearing of Vakkali's dying wish, out of compassion the Buddha donned his robe, took up his begging bowl, and

set out for where Vakkali was staying. Upon arrival the Buddha quizzes his disciple as to why he wanted to see “this foul body” and then utters one of the most famous passages of scripture in Buddhism, preserved in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*:

One who sees the Dhamma sees me;  
one who sees me sees the Dhamma.  
For in seeing the Dhamma, Vakkali,  
one sees me; and in seeing me, one  
sees the Dhamma. (Bodhi 2000, 939)

What Shakyamuni sought to teach Vakkali with these words was that his flesh body, like Vakkali's own, was impermanent, and by seeing impermanence when looking at the flesh and blood body of the Buddha, Vakkali would fully awaken to the truth of the Dharma and achieve liberation. Shakyamuni's words here call to mind the various methods of meditating on the impermanence and uncleanness of the body. This is the apophatic side of Buddhism, the *via negativa*.

There is another way of meditating on the body of the Buddha, however: being mindful of the Buddha by visualizing what are called the thirty-two marks, the distinguishing physical characteristics of buddhas that manifest their virtues. Each physical mark expresses a spiritual quality of the Buddha that practicing Buddhists aim to make their own. Ultimately, it is the absence of any fixed nature or identity that allows the buddhas, and us, to develop these qualities. However, this type of meditation focuses on the merits that arise precisely because of emptiness, when the causes and conditions are appropriate, that is, when we practice the Buddha's teaching. Looking at the body of a buddha and ruminating on that buddha's virtues is a kataphatic, or *via positiva*, approach to ascertaining truth.

But what of the Original Buddha, who the Threefold Lotus Sutra tells us

is “present in all places”? How can we be mindful of an abstract philosophical principle? And even if we can focus on the truth of reality as emptiness, isn’t there a danger that we may fall into the trap of overnegation and end up feeling that our lives are meaningless and inconsequential? Rev. Nikkyō Niwano was concerned with just this problem, observing that “when we think about our existence in this way, our lives seem precarious. Life is ‘empty,’ brought into existence through the contact of causes and conditions, and thus it feels like our life is the trivial product of mere chance” (Niwano 2012b, 345–46). How can we attain, within the fiber of our being, the realization that emptiness and interdependence do not limit us but, to the contrary, animate us, sustain us, and facilitate our endless capacity for positive transformation?

Being mindful of the Original Buddha as the great life force of the universe is a response to these soteriological challenges. Mindfulness of the Original Buddha as a buddha who gives us the gift of life and sustains us helps us accept and embrace with gratitude the truth that might otherwise be thought of as simply a cold and abstract principle. As Rev. Niwano explains:

People who find that “truth” feels somehow coldly abstract can instead think of it as the “great life force”—a great life force that causes everything in the universe to exist and live. Only when we are firmly aware in the depths of our minds that we are given life by this great force that permeates the universe, do we obtain true, unwavering peace of mind. (Ibid., 340)

The Dharma is the principle that animates our lives and everything about us, so it does not feel like a coldly rational scientific principle but something full of vigor and bursting with life. (346)

How does one gain this awareness?

Needless to say, it is by studying the teachings of the Buddha again and again, and rooting them deep within our mind by meditating upon them. This entails concentrating tenaciously on the realization that our life, our buddha-nature, and the life force of the universe, or Buddha, are one and the same. This mindfulness is what meditation from the religious perspective is all about. (340)

Rev. Niwano urges us to study the teachings of the Buddha over and over again so that they are etched on our hearts, and when we do, we begin to see the world around us in their light. This includes, first and foremost, the three seals of the Dharma, including nonself and impermanence, but when we think of these truths as a life force or facilitator of our existence, it helps us gain an awareness that we are brought to life and sustained by our interconnectedness with everything else. It should be clear here that the expression “the great life force of the universe,” or the notion that we are given the gift of life and sustained by the Buddha does not run counter to the truth of causation but is instead a positive and affirmative metaphorical manner of framing it. These ways of apprehending the Buddha are soteriological devices that open the path for us to realize the truth that Shakyamuni Buddha taught.

## The Workings of Religious Metaphor

Just exactly how would being mindful of the Original Buddha as the great life force of the universe work soteriologically? To think about this, we should consider how religious symbols work. The theologian Paul Tillich explains that we cannot do without religious symbols. “Man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express

the ultimate” (Tillich 1957, 41). Tillich identifies four characteristics of religious symbols that I think are also applicable in the case of Buddhism. The first is that they “point beyond themselves.” In Buddhism, this can be likened to the famous image of the Buddha pointing toward the moon. His finger aims beyond itself to the ineffable truth, represented by the moon. The Buddha cannot put the content of his enlightenment fully into words but can give us signposts indicating the proper direction. The Original Buddha revealed in the second half of the Lotus Sutra, who was enlightened a number of ages in the distant past greater than the particles making up “five hundred thousand million myriads of three-thousand-great-thousandfold worlds” (Risshō Kōsei-kai 2019, 277), is also a “finger” pointing us toward ultimate truth. This cosmic analogy of the life span of the Original Buddha leads us toward realizing the ever abidingness of ultimate truth, which, because it neither arises nor ceases, is difficult to describe in language. We lack adequate words to express something that transcends our conception of time. Words like *eternal*, for example, fail us, for we are used to thinking of time in a linear fashion and thus envision infinity in only a single direction. While we have no words to express the complete transcendence of time, the story of the Original Buddha in the Lotus Sutra provides the proverbial finger pointing toward this truth.

At the same time, a symbol participates in that to which it points, which is the religious symbol’s second quality. Tillich (1957, 42) gives the example of a flag. “The flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation for which it stands.” Similarly, the Lotus Sutra’s Original Buddha Shakyamuni encapsulates wisdom and compassion as the workings of ultimate truth in our world. The teaching on the Original Buddha is the revelation of a cosmos in which all things are interconnected, mutually bringing one another to life

and sustaining one another, and in this sense all dharmas are equally Buddha dharmas. The Original Buddha is a way of packaging in one accessible symbol the positive and affirmative notion of emptiness and interdependence as an awareness of being given the gift of life and sustained by all things.

Tillich's third and fourth qualities of the religious symbol are that it "opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us," and "unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality" (ibid). The Eternal Original Buddha Shakyamuni is a way of helping us transform how we see the ever-changing realities of our world, in which things arise, abide, change, and then transform into something else. Instead of seeing an empty, meaningless world where all things are destined to pass away, we learn to perceive the endless possibilities that interdependent origination brings, that we are given the gift of life and sustained by all things. We grasp the workings of the cosmos as the Original Buddha, and this reenchants the world around us and imbues it with new significance.

Unlocking this reality, revealing this aspect of the stuff of ordinary life, is referred to as the opening of the contingent to reveal the ultimate. In the Lotus Sutra it is a transformative experience for those at the assembly, and even a momentary glimpse of the ultimate is the harbinger of unlimited merits. All in the Lotus Sutra assembly are completely filled with joy, and many attain the stage on the bodhisattva path known as non-regression (Skt., *avaivartika*); that is to say, their awakening has so radically propelled them in the direction of perceiving and experiencing everything in the cosmos as the workings of wisdom and compassion that there is literally no going back to their former state of ignorance.

The narrative of the sutra also depicts the unlocking of the closed-off dimensions of us of which Tillich speaks. The

initial realization that all dharmas are equally Buddha dharmas, which the Original Buddha personifies, is also thought of as the first glimpse of the buddha-nature of self and other. This peek at buddha-nature, however momentary, is an insight into the inherent dignity and limitless possibilities of the human being, including us, and also the knowledge that when seen through the eyes of the Buddha's wisdom, the world, just as it is, can be experienced as a luminous and beautiful place. We realize that we can find significance and happiness within the stuff of ordinary life, despite its ups and downs. This is the intuition that also motivates people to set out on the path of bodhisattva practice. As a religious symbol, this is how the Original Buddha, who gives us the gift of life and sustains us, unlocks our buddha-nature, opening our eyes to it, demonstrating it, helping us realize it, and allowing us to embark upon its Way.

## Seeing the Buddha, Seeing the Dharma

To return to the story of the dying Vakkali, it was important for him to gaze upon the body of the Buddha, the Buddha of physical form. While Shakyamuni Buddha seems to have thought, at least from his awakened perspective, that there was no need for Vakkali to see him in person, out of his compassion, he set out to meet Vakkali as soon as word came to him. Shakyamuni recognized the need ordinary living beings have for a medium in order to access truth, especially one that can be seen. The literary imagery of the Lotus Sutra that reveals the Original Buddha, and mindful awareness of the Original Buddha as the great life force, is a means of accessing truth. But even if we gain an appreciation of and gratitude for the Dharma as an animating principle, unlike Shakyamuni Buddha's body, it cannot be seen. For most unenlightened beings like us, this can present a problem. How do we turn and

face the ultimate truth? How could we press our palms together in reverence to it? If we visualize it, what do we envision? "Even we today just can't wrap our minds around the concept of infinity," Rev. Niwano wrote, "unless we have some finite standard for comparison" (Niwano 2012a, 178). Many people may indeed be capable of a highly abstract meditation upon a formless principle, but the truth is that like Vakkali, most of us need a visual image of truth, truth in shape and form. In Buddhist doctrinal terminology, we need a *samādhi* using phenomenal characteristics. As embodied human beings living in a world of form, it is difficult for us to be mindful of something that is formless and invisible. We require truth manifested through form in order to apprehend it.

This is why practicing mindfulness of the body of the buddhas using paintings and statues, or even mandalas, originally developed and continues today in many forms of Buddhism. As Shakyamuni Buddha no doubt understood when he acceded to the request of Vakkali, for embodied beings like us, the most convenient and effective visual mode of access is that suggested by the sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra: an anthropomorphic image of the Buddha. This is why Rissho Koseikai—as do other forms of Buddhism—uses an icon to give expression to the Original Buddha and serve as a concentrative support, as Rev. Niwano, founder of Rissho Koseikai, explains.

In what form can we imagine *suchness* [the truth of reality] appearing when we try to envision it with our human minds? We naturally conceive of an anthropomorphic being of absolute power. When we think that this person—*suchness* personified—has always existed in this world, from the infinite past and into the infinite future, and causes all of us to live, we can feel the warm caress of the Buddha's giant hands

of compassion. We can only guess what form *suchness* takes when it appears to living things other than human beings, but for us, *suchness* truly becomes a redemptive force when it appears in human form. (Ibid., 361)

For many of us, religious meditation on the ultimate truth as the Original Buddha is not attainable or firm until we can envisage a Buddha of human form who ever abides in our world, always reaching out to living beings with arms of compassion. The anthropomorphic image of the Buddha helps our mindfulness of the ultimate truth as the Original Buddha, the great life force of the universe that gives us the gift of life and sustains us, because it allows us to feel ultimate truth, to wrap our minds around it. It gives us a directionality, a focus toward which we can press our palms together in reverence and take refuge. For members of Rissho Kosei-kai, the focus of devotion that provides a focal point for religious meditation upon the Original Buddha as the great life force of the universe who gives the gift of life and sustains us is the giant statue of Shakyamuni in the Great Sacred Hall, the head temple of Rissho Kosei-kai.

## Conclusion: Language and Liberation

In this essay we've explored an aspect of Rissho Kosei-kai practice that for some people is a source of bewilderment: the Original Buddha of the Lotus Sutra, and Rissho Kosei-kai's characterization of this Buddha as the great life force of the universe that gives us the gift of life and sustains us. People around the world today often understand Buddhism to be a nontheistic, demythologized system of practices that critically deconstructs our assumptions about reality and us with apophatic discourse and that is reticent to make affirmative declarations about

*Young Rissho Kosei-kai members carry an offering of flowers to the altar before the image of Shakyamuni during a ceremony in the Great Sacred Hall at the organization's Tokyo headquarters.*

ultimate truth and reality. But there are some forms of Buddhism that are kataphatic, or *via positiva* in orientation, including the Lotus Sutra and its associated traditions. The Original Buddha of the Lotus Sutra is a personification of the omnipresent, ultimate truth, the principle that all living beings who attain Buddhahood, like Shakyamuni, discover and embody, and teach to the world. As the true reality of all things, it is neither born, nor perishes, and it pervades all phenomena throughout the entirety of the universe, governing the arising of all things, including us. In this sense, in the Lotus Sutra as well as several other traditions of Buddhism, the ultimate truth is an "original buddha" transcending time and space, and it is spoken of using cosmological metaphors and analogies to life, envisioned as a cosmic buddha whose facilitation of the coming into existence of all phenomena is grasped as universal great compassion. In early-twentieth-century Japan, it became common to describe this conception of a fundamental or original Buddha as the life or life force of the universe, a practice that Rissho Kosei-kai inherits.

"Great life force of the universe" and similar ways of speaking about ultimate truth as the Buddha use language as soteriological devices and do not introduce an ontological theory by taking the Buddha as a substrate behind reality, nor do they seek to turn the Buddha into a creator deity. The point is to employ words and phrases as devices to transform the experience of the world in ways that liberate people from suffering or the malaise of their inability to become all that they could be. When we speak of the truth of all things—their absence of any fixed and unchanging nature—with affirmative language such as the phrases "great life force of the universe," or "given the gift of life and sustained," we are able to realize that existence brings endless possibilities, and instead of nothingness we become aware of a dynamic openness and unimpededness, or the fullness of all things, including us. The words *great life force of the universe* encapsulate this way of looking at the reality of all things. And as Buddhists have always done, we meditate upon this universal buddha "body" through anthropomorphic form, not to render the Buddha a god, but to



assimilate the Buddha's virtuous qualities in a human way through accessible, familiar imagery and metaphor. When we do so, the Original Buddha ceases to be something alien to us and becomes someone we can see when we look in the mirror, as well as in the faces of others, and also in the workings of everything in the world around us.

The words *great life force of the universe* are a paradox, but Buddhism has always spoken in paradoxical terms. The very nature of our existence is something of a mystery: as Shakyamuni taught us, we cannot avoid the painful experiences of birth, aging, sickness, and death. But the transcendence of such suffering is found not in avoiding them but in embracing and accepting them, to find that there is happiness within suffering, and that not only is life worth living but being, or existence, is good. This is the *via positiva*, life-affirming approach of the Lotus Sutra. Many people today no doubt favor *via negativa*, or apophatic religious discourse, and distrust language, preferring to think of ultimate reality as ineffable, and desire to say no more, as words can entangle us in discriminative thinking. Anything that can be said of ultimate reality is, given the conceptual nature of language, only provisional, and many people believe that what is provisional is, in the final analysis, deceptive.

But here is another paradox: even if language can be an impediment to liberation, language is at the same time the facilitator of liberation. Nāgārjuna (2nd–3rd centuries CE) tells us in his Verses on the Middle Way that the teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional and ultimate, and the ultimate is not taught independently of the customary ways of talking and thinking (Sideris and Katsura 2013, 273). According to Nāgārjuna's interpreter Candrakīrti (ca. 600–650 CE), "Ultimate truth cannot be taught without reliance on conventional truth. Candrakīrti likens conventional truth to the cup that a thirsty person must use in order to satisfy

a need for water" (ibid., 274). The imagery and metaphors of the Lotus Sutra and the ways that Lotus Sutra Buddhism speaks of the ultimate as the Original Buddha who gives us the gift of life and sustains us are like Candrakīrti's cup: a vessel that can convey relief to people seeking the water of liberation that cools the burning embers of human suffering. □

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*A standing statue of the Buddha Amida presently in the possession the Tokyo National Museum. Thirteenth century.*

# Because We Are Different

by Nichiko Niwano

Among the poems that Ki no Tsurayuki (872–945) included in *The Collection of Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, the first imperially-sponsored anthology of waka poetry, is his own love poem: “The way of this world, / Like the winds / Blowing across it, / Is to think lovingly / Of someone unseen.”

Reading this as a love poem, it can be understood in its own way. However, someone has proposed that this poem is actually about a truth of which we are hardly aware: that, at the bottom of our hearts, we love and feel goodwill toward all things existing in the world.

In reality, though, we can see that conditions are not as this poem describes. Different ways of thinking and seeing things leads people to argue, show hostility, and cut ties with one another. It even leads countries to fire weapons at each other. Unfortunately, conflict between religions still exists as a real problem—many people suffer and worry because they are unable to accept that other people are different from them, even going so far as to enter into futile fights with them.

In these conditions, one thing we can do is make it our personal norm to acknowledge that other people are different from us and accept those differences simply as differences. To do this, we should first realize that “I, too, have feelings of love for all things in this world and a kind heart.” By doing so, we will start to see the nobleness of the differences between ourselves and others.

## The Meaning and Nobleness of Our Differences

We were all born due to different causes and conditions. In addition, as we’ve grown up, we have gone through experiences unique to each of us that have built the character traits that form “me.”

Therefore, it is quite natural that your way of thinking and seeing things, to say nothing of your ethnicity and appearance, are different from other people. To make these differences into a reason to fight with or exclude others is tantamount to denying your own individuality.

In the world of religion, it is natural that, according to their karmic conditions, people take different paths toward liberation. Some people find liberation through the teachings of Christianity and others through the teachings of Islam or Buddhism. People seeking serenity have many teachings to look up to and believe. In order to bring peace of mind to all of the people living here on Earth, different religions and religious denominations have developed specific characteristics that complement each other.

Religions are bound together in their teaching of love and compassion in order to guide people toward peace of mind. Then, when the love and compassion that come from religion work on us and consequently “the love for others and a kind heart” buried within us is unearthed, we cannot stop ourselves from putting it into practice. In terms of Buddhist teaching, this is the bodhi-sattva way of life.

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When I participate in international conferences and encounter someone with a different opinion, I feel it is splendid that he or she has a way of thinking that I do not. After all, through that difference, I have the opportunity to learn that there is still so much that I myself do not yet know.

Instead of loudly insisting upon our own opinions and trying to ram our horns through the shields of each other’s differences, aren’t we all happier when we acknowledge our differences, accept them, get along with each other, and create the harmony that brings us all joy?

To quote from chapter 5 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs”: “The Dharma taught by the Tathagata is of a single flavor and a single attribute.” Thinking about the goal common to religions as well as the kind heart harbored deep down inside each and every one of us, we are all fellow passengers on spaceship Earth who can say—in the sense that we are promised peace of mind and happiness—that the truth of the universe is of a single flavor and a single attribute. Indeed, we have been entrusted with the mission of proving this to the world. □

# The Third Shift: The Long Journey to Unite Humanity and Heal Our Woundedness

by John Paul Lederach

*The Niwano Peace Foundation awarded the thirty-sixth Niwano Peace Prize to Dr. John Paul Lederach, a professor emeritus of International Peacebuilding at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, in the United States, in recognition of his role in the development and teaching of peace theory and strategy, as well as his on-the-ground peacebuilding work around the world, including in Colombia, Nepal, Northern Ireland, and the Philippines. The award ceremony took place on May 8, 2019, at the International House of Japan, Tokyo. The recipient's address follows.*

I want to thank the Niwano Peace Foundation for this extraordinary recognition. Your commitment to faith-inspired peacebuilders and emphasis on interreligious cooperation are deeply appreciated.

Across nearly four decades I have worked in places portrayed as war zones. While human suffering was ever present, courageous and compassionate people kept hope alive with patient and unwavering conviction that change for good was possible.

In Magdalena Medio and Montes de Maria, in Colombia, I found local communities that, in the midst of armed fighting, set out to establish zones of peace and committed to dialogue over violence.

In Wajir, Kenya, women decided they could make their local market safer for people from all backgrounds to buy and sell. Their initiative grew into a broad network of unusual alliances that together ended the war in their area.

In Nepal, I found people from all castes and ethnic backgrounds who decided to share and protect their forest and water sources through careful

preparation of community-wide dialogues transforming decades-old violent conflicts.

These people, in the midst of violence, chose to see their humanity and share the resources of their communities. They are pioneers, innovative geniuses of survival against the odds.

When we look back at peace scholarship and practice, two historic shifts seem apparent.

The first shift came in the period of the great World Wars of the last century. Peace studies initiated research into how wars emerge, how the international order could prevent interstate conflict, and how to promote cooperation between nations.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proliferation of internal armed conflicts, peacebuilding expanded its strategies. This second shift increasingly focused on civil wars and national peace processes. We slowly learned that durable, flourishing peace compelled recognition of local agency. Peace practices expanded to face the challenges of multitiered sustained dialogue, transgenerational trauma, reparative and restorative justice, social healing, and reconciliation.

In 2019, we are now witness to a third shift in peacebuilding.

If the first part of the last century let loose two World Wars addressed by the question of international order among independent nation-states, the first part of this century has unveiled questions of how humanity will survive. How will we face planetary fragility? How will we address the fundamental right to “belonging” in an age of massive human mobility? How will we shape a global politics of sustenance in service to dignified life while facing deep polarization and authoritarian impulses that manipulate fear and seek exclusionary control?

In 1539 Menno Simons, for whom my Mennonite faith community is named, wrote that faith requires us to respond to the suffering of fellow humans, “it feeds the hungry, does good to those who do it harm, and binds up what is wounded.” Centuries later Desmond Tutu noted, “My humanity is bound up with yours, for we can only be human together.”

Today we have deep wounds across our global family, and we live on a wounded planet. To survive this

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woundedness, we need an ethic of peace guided by healing and Earth-bounded dignity.

An Earth-bounded ethic compels us to imagine ourselves as a profoundly interdependent global family. It invites us to tap healing wells that feed social courage and the compassionate resilience necessary to shift away from systems devouring the future of our yet-to-be born. It requires that we rally the all-embracing resources of our richly diverse humanity.

## Earth-Bounded Humanity

Local communities that have survived violence, these pioneers of healing change, had a common starting point: people imagined themselves in a web of relationships that included their enemies.

In Colombia one group coined this with the phrase “We have no enemies.” In south Sudan a group of youth expressed this as “We are sixty-four tribes with one mother.” This imagination opens toward seeing our common humanity far beyond our immediate fragmentation. These groups found ways to unite humanity through boundless love and boundaryless belonging.

We find this same impulse in spiritual and religious origin narratives, particularly from indigenous wisdom. Gratitude and awe for the fragile beauty of life and creation provide resources from which humility, care, and love bubble and offer a clear ethic: we are called to treat others as we would wish to be treated.

*The Niwano Peace Foundation’s honorary president, Rev. Nichiko Niwano, presents the prize certificate to Professor John Paul Lederach on May 8, 2019, during the award ceremony at the International House of Japan, in Tokyo.*

As stated by Saint Benedict, this ethic invites us to “incline the ear of the heart” as the pathway of rehumanization, the capacity to touch our shared humanity. As friends in Magdalena Medio say, “we will seek to understand those who do not understand us.”

In my Mennonite tradition I have found a parallel teaching: faith is less about words than the life we choose to lead, exemplified by service, compassion, and love. Mennonite practices suggest that the quality of God’s love for humanity finds its clearest expression in how we respond to and care for others, including those who may wish us harm.

For me, the deepest aspirations of my faith tradition have provided inspiration to move beyond barriers and boundaries. The infinite, boundless, and audacious love of the Divine toward humanity stirs us to notice and learn from this gifted diversity, to build lasting and improbable friendships across our brokenness, and to fearlessly seek

to understand and respect those with whom we disagree. I have found myself drawn not to judge others in the midst of difference and conflict but to come alongside our challenges and seek alternatives to violence together.

This understanding has provided the insight to engage in interreligious cooperation, for here we find the spiritual resources to imagine Earth-bounded peacebuilding. Our most significant challenges require us to imagine and move beyond borders and boundaries.

We know this to be true: Walls have no capacity to address pandemics of disease or halt human-engendered eco-spheric and climatic shifts. Borders have precious little capacity to address the conditions driving human mobility in the search of well-being and belonging. National boundaries cannot stop the flow of ideas, instant communication, and technology, nor the rivers of extractive global economies. On their own, state-drawn frontiers have proven

*Professor Lederach delivers his acceptance address during the award ceremony.*

incapable of containing the ceaseless flows of weapons, drugs, and human trafficking.

In our fragmented world today, too often filled with suffering and displaced humanity, we need the resources that permit us to rehumanize, to be grounded and bounded together even amid conflict and fear.

This planetary moment reveals that no nation on its own can assure the well-being of people within its borders without equal concern for the well-being of the most vulnerable beyond those borders.

To rise to our challenge, we need a wholeness of compassionate presence and social courage. We must tenaciously weave a deep inner strength with equity and dignity across diverse relationships that truly bind our wounds, embody the right to belong, and unite humanity.

## Tapping Healing Wells

In *The Cure at Troy*, Northern Ireland's Nobel Laureate poet Seamus Heaney penned extraordinary lines when he wrote:

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

In the midst of violent conflict, I have always found remarkable people carving their way toward that far side of revenge. At a personal level I also

understand that intellectual and professional skill cannot be disembodied from inner preparation. The quality of our *inner works* ties intimately into the quality of *dignified relationships* we need to forge if we are to shift systems that perpetuate harm.

## It Matters How We Show up

Over time, I have discovered that interreligious accompaniment and an appreciative approach to spiritual wisdom have strengthened my Mennonite vocation and faith. This is my first extended visit to Japan, though I have long appreciated the inspiration I have gained from the haiku and *haibun* of the master poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–94). Allow me to share how I experienced this interreligious gift.

I start with a story I first read about a conversation between Bashō and his disciple Takarai Kikaku (1661–1707). One morning, following a walk in the fields, Kikaku shared a haiku he had composed.

Take a pair of wings  
From a dragonfly you would  
Make a pepper pod.

Bashō responded. “This is not haiku. You kill the dragonfly. Haiku gives life. The haiku is this.”

Add a pair of wings  
To a pepper pod you would  
Make a dragonfly.

From Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi*, “The Narrow Road to the Interior,” I learned *haibun*, the practice of the haiku pause embedded in the daily journey. I slowly began to appreciate how this simple form of poetry offered a resource I experienced as both internally healing and externally revealing. For me, haiku became a daily peace practice.

I now teach haiku to my university

students. We leave the classroom and walk across the campus. We explore the emergent and complex conversation between our immediate experience of nature, the human senses and spirit, and the creative act, all as elements giving life to both the peacebuilder and the long journey of weaving peace.

Haiku provoked me to notice with all my senses. I could practice being awake in every moment.

Haiku prepared me to be touched by beauty. I could practice being open to awe.

Haiku required me to hold the full complexity of the moment in its simplest form. I could practice humility, the ceaseless search for deeper essence.

Haiku invited me to wander and wonder. I could practice the purity of childlike curiosity.

Haiku allowed me to play. I could practice creativity and wandering mind.

Haiku let the poet inside me summon experiences that I had not named. I could practice voice rising from the unspeakable.

Bashō reportedly said near the end of his life that he had written only five or six haiku, a surprising statement, as he surely had written thousands. The *haibun* found in “The Narrow Road to the Interior” provide two grounded yet profoundly spiritual understandings of *oku* as travel into the interior.

First, *oku* symbolizes the pathway Bashō followed into the interior of this great country. He sought to be present to the spirit, rooted in the story and the people of each place along his journey, a profound commitment to the wisdom of the local. Second, for Bashō, *oku* infers the steady and intrepid journey into the vast inner world of consciousness, the search for locating one's place in the world, and the yearning to belong. “The journey itself is home,” Bashō wrote in the opening lines of *Oku no Hosomichi*. It is in the search for home that the meanings of *oku* integrate into grounded wholeness that acknowledges

shared place while tendering belonging. This was the healing well I received from Bashō. The long journey to forge a shared home can have daily pause, joy, and clarity.

## The Full Richness of Our Beautiful Humanity

Let me conclude with a final appeal. We cannot attend to the complexity of our planetary fragility unless we are able to mobilize around the blessing of diversity.

Local communities transcending violence have taught me that peacebuilding is not about a single person but, rather, how whole collectives cohere, how communities rise and respond to challenges. These communities embraced every human resource they could mobilize, respected equity while forging unexpected alliances, and led from their intuitive acumen of survival genius. Innovation often emerged because they recognized and followed the courageous and resilient leadership of youth and women.

If peacebuilding is to become survival relevant, I am convinced that we must pursue the simple 50/50 principle in everything we do: 50 percent of decisive leadership participation should be youth under forty years of age and 50 percent should be women.

In Nepal I saw the power of this principle applied in a small group of people committed to protecting forests, the Federation of Forest User Groups. They required that all local community user groups have 50/50 shared leadership of women and men in a local chapter. Starting with a handful, they grew to a national network of millions and have retained this principle at every level of their work. I found clarity and pragmatic brilliance in the Women of Wajir, who led their community toward transforming long patterns of violence in Northeast Kenya. We witnessed the extraordinary commitment of the Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres in Colombia; the Women's

Photo: Alamy / PPS

Oku no hosomichi angya no zu (*Matsuo Bashō and Kawai Sora on pilgrimage on the narrow road to the interior*), a scroll painting by Morikawa Kyoriku (1656–1715), who was among the most accomplished disciples of Matsuo Bashō. Property of Tenri Central Library in Nara Prefecture, Japan.

March for Peace threaded voices, memory, and hope, impacting both local communities and the national accord.

The same can be said of youth. I note that some of the most significant movements and advancements in human history share a startling fact and example. Martin Luther King Jr. was thirty-four years old when he gave his most famous “I have a dream” speech. Leymah Gbowee was in her early thirties when she helped colead Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, the movement that ended her country's second civil war. And lest we miss this point in reference to our religious traditions, Jesus's ministry that gave rise to Christianity began when he was thirty years of age. The Buddha is said to have been in his midthirties when he attained enlightenment.

The surprising shift we find in these examples comes from what I would call *in-between wisdom*. Commitment to intergenerational accompaniment opens us up to unanticipated insight and breakthrough that rise when extraordinarily diverse people commit to deep listening, mutual encouragement, and courageous joint action.

We do not approach the 50/50 guideline because we seek to fill a quota. We draw from and bring together the full richness of the creation blessing, our beautiful wayfaring humanity, because only in the sustained mix of our full

potential together will we find our way through and beyond the challenges of this century.

## Conclusion

Today we again face the rise of fear-driven and hate-based exclusionary politics that prefers building walls instead of bridges. But only love can transform fear. Only in recognition of our common humanity and shared belonging can we unleash the creativity and social courage necessary to bridge our deepest divides.

We need the courage of conviction that our global security is not determined by the size of our walls or the quantity of our weapons but, rather, is found in the quality of our relationships.

I return to the ever-youthful wisdom of Bashō and his most famous haiku.

The ancient pond  
A frog leaps in  
The sound of the water.

We sense the wisdom of ages.  
We notice the wonder of the beginner's mind.

We recognize the inclined ear of the heart, listening ever deeper.

We sense wholeness and healing.

We breathe the fullness of beauty nourishing the human spirit.

We feel our common humanity.

We seek and offer grace and kindness precisely because we are grateful, awed into humility for life on this extraordinary planet.

So again, I offer deep appreciation to the Niwano Peace Foundation. Your recognition gives us courage that our global beloved family can move beyond hate and division; that we can create the bonds that truly heal.

Led by spirit, we remain steadfast in the knowledge that only we, Earth-bounded together, can leave a legacy of healing and wholeness for generations to come. □



# Following Days

by Nikkyo Niwano

***In March 1999 an autobiography by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Koseikai, was published in Japanese under the title Kono michi: Ichibutsujo no sekai o mezashite (The path that we have walked: Aspiring to the world of the One Buddha Vehicle). The book is a lively account of the life of Founder Niwano as a leader of a global Buddhist movement and a pioneer of interreligious cooperation who dedicated himself to liberating all people from suffering with firm faith in the Lotus Sutra. Dharma World will continue to publish excerpts from the book in installments.***

Everyone knew that Nichiko was a man of few words rather than a fluent speaker, and that he had a down-to-earth personality. He is indifferent to fame or position and neither seeks to raise himself above others nor looks down on them. He stands in the same position as everyone else, acknowledging his inexperience. As a companion on the spiritual journey, it is a matter of action rather than words for him. I think this is the most important attribute for Nichiko to have, as a person of religion.

I have often thought that in religious organizations, people who can deal quietly with even one or two of the things they are told are more important than people who seem to understand everything from only hearing one part. It is people like these that organizations depend upon. Acute observers, on the other hand, may disrupt the Sangha by pushing their own way of doing things, unless they have good control of themselves.

I well knew that Nichiko had experienced his own form of training, unknown to others. During the decade my family lived separately in Suganuma, Niigata Prefecture, he was burdened, as the eldest

son, with the worry of what was going to happen between his parents but struggled on alone. Younger siblings should be able to depend on their big brother, but Nichiko couldn't confide in anyone, though there were people around who would have listened to him. He bore his worry all alone. Those ten years of training must have contributed something to the formation of his character. I wondered if this would slowly flower from now on.

Times change and people change, so the organization has to change too. Unless young people bring this about of their own volition, they won't be able to undertake religious activities that will bring salvation to the age. We have to leave things to the young, even though some mistakes will be made on the way. I had wanted Nichiko to be involved with the various administrative details of the organization and to know whether he was of a mind to be involved with our

*On November 22, 1991, an assembly of forty foreign religious leaders participated in the Commemorative Consultation for the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma, held in Fumon Hall at the Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters in Tokyo.*



*Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of Religions for Peace and honorary chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) at the time of his death in October 1999. He was awarded the 1979 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.*

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activities within Japan, so I had him work in a variety of roles at the headquarters. It was in March 1991 that I decided that at last the time was ripe for the succession.

On the second day of the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma, I formally announced the transfer of the presidency to Nichiko. Of course that was not the only purpose of the ceremony. Nichiko spoke of his awareness of its wider meaning.

“For a Buddhist organization, the key meaning of the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma is the eternal continuation of the Buddha’s teachings. If an organization stops teaching, then the True Dharma will die away and be lost. I believe it is Rissho Kosei-kai’s role to show forth the way of the original Buddhist Sangha and the correct teachings of Shakyamuni.”

Eight hundred fifty people, including religious figures from Japan and abroad, as well as people from political and business circles, attended the celebration marking the event. They included Rev. Etai Yamada, the head of the Tendai Buddhist denomination, Mr. Takeo Fukuda, a former prime minister of Japan, and Sir Paul Reeves, chairman of the international committee of Religions for Peace.

Rev. Yamada urged me not to fall into easy retirement once I had relinquished my presidency. “At eighty-five a person of religion has just completed his preliminary training,” he told me. “Now is the best time to make new departures. I hope that you will continue your peace

*Rev. Nichiko Niwano speaks as the new president of Rissho Kosei-kai during the consultation.*

activities through religious cooperation, as you have always done.”

Forty religionists from abroad, representing the many people who had sent congratulatory messages, spoke on the theme of “Rissho Kosei-kai’s Past and Future Contributions to World Peace” from a variety of viewpoints, evaluating Rissho Kosei-kai’s achievements and suggesting the direction it should take in the future.

The following day, the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma Commemorative Symposium was held, on the theme “Proposals to Rissho Kosei-kai.” Professor Yoshiaki Iisaka of Gakushuin University in Tokyo; Dr. Homer Jack, a former secretary-general of Religions for Peace; Mr. Kiyoyasu Kitabatake, director of the Planning and News Division of the head office in Osaka of *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper; Mr. Marco Vianello-Chiodo, the deputy executive director for external relations of UNICEF; Professor Yoshiaki

Sanada of Chuo University in Tokyo; and Rev. Yasusaburo Tazawa, patriarch of Shoroku Shinto Yamatoyama, gave Rissho Kosei-kai their frank advice.

Rev. Tazawa said, “This is a time when all people of religion must consider taking action regarding people’s beliefs, based on mutual religious understanding. I’d like to tell you about the story of ‘The Three Windows.’ The first window, the low window, reflected suffering and delusion. The second window, the side window, was the one that saw into the suffering and grief of the world and desired the realization of the Land of Eternal Tranquil Light. The third was the skylight, which broke down the mind that sees everything as commonplace. It is the devout mind that hopes, with gratitude, for the coexistence of all living beings. We must stretch out our hands to those who are anxious and in pain, leading them to hope and delight in the light streaming from the skylight.

“We can go up Mount Fuji to the fifth stage by car. People of religion must serve as guides from that point, encouraging all to reach the summit.”

Dr. Jack said, “I hope that Rissho Kosei-kai will further enhance the spirituality of followers by working in a more international and multifaith environment. An organized religion should comprise both clergy and prophets. In Rissho Kosei-kai, both the activities of the *hoza* group on one hand and Rissho Kosei-kai’s work at the United Nations on the other should be emphasized. Rissho Kosei-kai must offer peace and comfort to the individual and at the same time contribute to making both Japan and the world a better place. This balance is important. Don’t be afraid of innovation in order to retain this balance. It is important that Rissho Kosei-kai retains its traditions at the same time as daring to go beyond them, introducing new insights and rituals into its services.”

Professor Sanada spoke of Rissho Kosei-kai’s history down to the present as the modern renovation of the spirit of the Lotus Sutra. He divided its activities into three and expressed his hopes for its future work. “First is the practice of the One Vehicle of the Lotus Sutra, based on the spirit that at root all religions are one. Second are activities that play a large role in religion of the nation as a whole, extending the lay Buddhist movement to all classes of society. Third are peace movements based on the Lotus Sutra, like the Brighter Society Movement and Religions for Peace. In order to continue and develop these activities correctly, it is vital to establish a Rissho Kosei-kai doctrine that is able to respond to present-day issues in all fields, including the natural and social sciences and the humanities, and also to reinvigorate the organization. Rissho Kosei-kai has entered a period of stability, but this is the very time a tendency toward inflexibility, formalization, and weakening can occur. In view of this, it is important to

*Under the theme “Our Proposal to Rissho Kosei-kai,” a symposium commemorating Rev. Nichiko Niwano’s inauguration as Rissho Kosei-kai’s new president was held on November 23, 1991, in the Horin-kaku Guest Hall at the Tokyo headquarters.*

look again at the organization itself and at the cultivation of human resources so that Rissho Kosei-kai can maintain the activities of its founding and expanding periods.”

Professor Iisaka, too, proffered advice about the future direction of Rissho Kosei-kai. “It is said that the success or not of an organization lies in its subleaders in top and middle management. The Revelation of John 2:4 in the New Testament says, “You have forsaken the love you had at first.” Love at first is the purest and most passionate. It is compassion, the love born of the meeting between the individual and God and the Buddha. As our spiritual life continues, this love and compassion may cool and become stuck in a rut. I hope sincerely that you will vow in your hearts to strive not to forget this first love.”

Mr. Kitabatake then spoke on behalf of the press. “When broadcasting is used as an important means of dissemination, it is not possible to preach according to the individual capacities of listeners. The distinctive flavor of Buddhist teaching methods where, for example, white will be taught as black depending on the audience, or where a question will

be answered with silence, is in danger of being lost. There are many instances of the scope of activities narrowing or interchanges with other organizations becoming halfhearted when the leadership of an organization changes. Perhaps this is because it is more important to make sure of the internal situation of individuals and the organization than to pursue external activities and exchanges. It is not correct, however, to think in terms of a dichotomy between internal and external. Making efforts to have dialogue and cooperate with other religious groups will make you conscious of your own group’s identity.”

This advice from people who had observed Rissho Kosei-kai’s activities closely and had analyzed its present condition sharply was right on the mark and full of affection. I was grateful for their words and keenly felt the great hopes these people had for the future of Rissho Kosei-kai.

I want to add that the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma did not finish on November 15, 1991. I urge you to remember it will continue in all the days that follow.

*To be continued*

# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 27

### The Story of King Resplendent (1)

*This is the 132nd installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

**INTRODUCTION** This chapter seems to relate a fantastic story from a remote world and time, but actually it teaches a lesson that applies to our daily lives.

First, it concerns religion in a family, which is presented here as a case in which a parent and his children believe in different faiths. The problem is shown through a situation in which the father believes in a mistaken faith, while his sons have faith in a right religion, and the attitude of the mother, who must deal with both father and sons. This problem is a common one in today's society.

The story also concerns how those who are in a position of leadership should handle the question of personal faith. In society today, freedom of religion is guaranteed to every individual, and no authority can deprive him or her of such freedom. The religious beliefs of those who are in positions of authority inevitably exert an influence upon many other people, even though it is a private matter of personal faith. The actions of King Resplendent suggest this dilemma to us.

King Resplendent, his two sons, and his followers all renounce the world. In our time, however, religion and daily

life are not considered to be in opposition but are regarded as compatible. If we take literally the renunciation of the world and the king's abdication of his throne, we are liable to misinterpret this story.

The renunciation of the world by the two princes, who were in easy circumstances, indicates the idea that mental peace through one's spiritual life is far more important than satisfaction in material life. The story of King Resplendent's abdicating the throne in favor of his younger brother and entering the religious life expresses the idea that the spiritual kingdom established in the human mind is far more worthy than the worldly power of a king. We should not interpret the words "renunciation of the world" literally but take them as meaning the conversion of a person's spiritual life.

Now let us proceed to the text itself.

**TEXT** At that time the Buddha addressed the great assembly: "Of yore, in a former eon, infinite, boundless, and inconceivable *asamkhyeya* kalpas ago, there was a buddha named Thunder Voice Constellation King of Wisdom, Tathagata, Arhat, Samyaksambuddha, whose domain was

named Adorned with Radiance, and whose kalpa was named Joyful Sight. Under the spiritual rule of that buddha there was a king named Resplendent. The wife of that king was called Pure Virtue, who had two sons, one named Pure Treasury, the other named Pure-Eyed.

**COMMENTARY** *Tathagata, Arhat, Samyaksambuddha.* These are the first three of the ten epithets of a buddha in the original Sanskrit.

“Tathagata” means one who has reached, or has come from, Thusness, or absolute Truth (*tathata*).

“Arhat” is also translated as “worthy of respect,” meaning one who is entitled to receive the offerings of the world.

“Samyaksambuddha” means “the supreme, perfectly enlightened one” who has attained the unsurpassable enlightenment which constantly and correctly discerns the true aspect of this world, and it is translated as “All Wise.”

• *Under the spiritual rule of that buddha.* This phrase should be interpreted as “in the world where the teachings of that buddha are practiced, that is, in that reign.”

**TEXT** Those two sons possessed great supernatural power, blessedness, and wisdom, and had long devoted themselves to the ways in which bodhisattvas walk, that is to say, donation *paramita*, keeping the precepts *paramita*, forbearance *paramita*, effort *paramita*, meditation *paramita*, wisdom *paramita*, tactfulness *paramita*, kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, disinterestedness, and the thirty-seven practices conducive to enlightenment—all these they clearly understood.

## COMMENTARY

The Six Perfections

• *Donation paramita.* The original Sanskrit for donation is *dana* and *paramita* signifies “perfection, attainment, reaching the other shore.”

• *Keeping the precepts paramita.* The Sanskrit word for precept, or morality, is *shila*, and hence “attaining the observance of the precepts.”

• *Forbearance paramita.* The Sanskrit word for forbearance is *kshanti*.

• *Effort paramita.* The Sanskrit word for effort is *virya*.

• *Meditation paramita.* The Sanskrit word *dhyana* and the Pali word *jhana* are translated as “meditation,” but the word *zen* has been adopted in Japanese and is used as is.

• *Wisdom paramita.* The Sanskrit for wisdom is *prajna*.

The reader should already be fully acquainted with these six kinds of bodhisattva practice.

• *Tactfulness paramita.* Tactfulness signifies the appropriate, correct method and means. This is the state at which the actual action of leading and saving others is done in a

manner that is always appropriate for the person, the time, and the situation.

• *Kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, disinterestedness.* These are called “the four immeasurable contemplations.” We have already dealt with kindness and compassion. “Sympathetic joy” means a shared rejoicing in the delights of others. “Disinterestedness” means seeking no reward for the benefits one has bestowed upon others, forgetting whatever wrong has been done to one—the spirit that is indifferent and unattached.

• *The thirty-seven practices conducive to enlightenment.* The Six Perfections might be called the “compulsory (or required) courses” that are necessary for achieving the enlightenment of a buddha, and there are thirty-seven practices that support them.

**TEXT** They had also attained the bodhisattva contemplation—the pure contemplation, the sun constellation contemplation, the pure light contemplation, the pure color contemplation, the pure illumination contemplation, the ever resplendent contemplation, and the contemplation of the treasury of great dignity and virtue, in which contemplations they were thoroughly accomplished.

**COMMENTARY** *Contemplation.* The Sanskrit word for contemplation is *samadhi*, but the word is most often simply transliterated as *sanmai* (in Japanese) and used as it is. It is the practice to concentrate one’s spirit upon one thing. The word *samadhi* also refers to the mental state in which this is achieved.

• *Pure contemplation.* This is the practice to concentrate one’s entire spirit on purifying the mind, that is, removing all defilements absolutely and thoroughly.

• *Sun constellation contemplation.* This is a concentration of the spirit on the desire both to have the true wisdom that shines upon all things like the sun, and to make tactful wisdom bright like the stars in employing that true wisdom to teach and lead people.

• *Pure light contemplation.* This is a concentration of the mind upon the desire to attain one’s own virtues, and by the light of these pure virtues to brighten the people surrounding oneself.

• *Pure color contemplation.* “Color” means the physical body, so this is a concentration of the mind upon possessing pure virtues in the physical body itself, such as in one’s facial expressions, and in one’s behavior.

• *Pure illumination contemplation.* This is a concentration of the mind upon purifying the minds of surrounding people by means of the influence of one’s own pure meritorious virtues.

• *Ever resplendent contemplation.* “Resplendent” means

majestically beautiful. “Ever resplendent” means desiring to become resplendent for a long time, that is, desiring to be forever beautiful as a result of one’s noble virtue.

- *Contemplation of the treasury of great dignity and virtue.* “Great dignity and virtue” means meritorious virtue that is able to have a powerful influence upon all human beings. This type of contemplation is a concentration of the spirit upon the desire to accomplish that kind of meritorious virtue.

**TEXT** “Then that buddha, desiring to lead King Resplendent and having compassion for the living, preached this Dharma Flower Sutra.

**COMMENTARY** *Lead.* This is a translation of the Chinese term *yin-tao*, meaning “leading and guiding someone who is living to enlightenment.” This word is used today to address the last words at the funeral to a person who has died so that the person may attain enlightenment and enter the Pure Land.

- *Preached this Dharma Flower Sutra.* In this case, the sense is not that he preached, but rather that “it came to be that he will preach.”

**TEXT** Meanwhile the two sons, Pure Treasury and Pure-Eyed, went to their mother and, putting together their ten-fingered hands, spoke to her, saying: ‘We beg you, mother, to go and visit the Buddha Thunder Voice Constellation King of Wisdom. We also would wait on, approach, serve, and worship him. Wherefore? [Because] that buddha among the host of gods and men is preaching the Dharma Flower Sutra, and we ought to hear it.’

**COMMENTARY** *Putting together their ten-fingered hands.* They joined their hands together in prayer.

**TEXT** The mother replied to her sons: ‘Your father believes in the heretics and is deeply attached to the Brahman law. Do you go and speak to your father that he may go with us?’

**COMMENTARY** In fact, the mother is asking the impossible, in the knowledge that their obstinate (or bigoted) father, the king and ardent follower of Brahmanism, would certainly not go with them, much less allow his wife and sons to go to hear the preaching of the teachings of that buddha. Herein lies the tactful wisdom of the mother in having her sons invite him to come along.

- *Heretics.* From the viewpoint of the Buddha Dharma, all other non-Buddhist religions are referred to in this way. Since the word merely denotes “other religions,” the word itself contains no connotation of contempt or ostracism.

**TEXT** Pure Treasury and Pure-Eyed, putting together their ten-fingered hands, said to their mother: ‘We are sons of the Dharma king, though born in this home of heretical views.’

**COMMENTARY** *Sons of the Dharma king.* The Dharma king is the Buddha.

**TEXT** The mother spoke to her sons, saying: ‘You should have sympathy for your father, and show him some supernatural deed so that seeing it his mind will surely become clear and he will perhaps permit us to go to that buddha.’

**COMMENTARY** *Show him some supernatural deed so that seeing it his mind will surely become clear.* This “supernatural deed,” as will be explained later in detail, refers to the startling change in the everyday behavior of the sons.

Seeing such a reality, however stubborn a father might be, he would surely relent. This is the meaning of “his mind will surely become clear.”

**TEXT** “Thereupon the two sons, with a mind for their father, sprang up into the sky seven tala trees high, and displayed many kinds of supernatural deeds, walking, standing, sitting, and lying in the sky; the upper [part of their] bodies emitting water, the lower emitting fire, or the lower emitting water and the upper emitting fire; or enlarging themselves till they filled the sky, and again appearing small, or small and again appearing large; then vanishing from the sky and suddenly appearing on the earth, or entering into the earth as into water, or walking on water as on the earth; displaying such various supernatural deeds, they led their father, the king, to cleanse his mind to faith and discernment.

**COMMENTARY** That they are able to leap up into the sky and there display the ability to walk, lie down, or do anything else they want at will symbolizes that if one awakens to “emptiness” through the Buddha Dharma, one will attain a state of complete freedom, unimpeded by phenomena.

Emitting fire and water from the tip of the head or the ends of the feet signifies that the triple world is a manifestation of the mind alone. In other words, this is the teaching of the “Three Thousand Realms in One Thought,” which teaches that all phenomena can change in a multitude of ways by means of a single thought.

Becoming large enough to fill the sky, then smaller than a tiny seed, indicates the wondrousness of correctly regarding both aspects of human beings, their true nature and their reality. When one realizes that originally one is united with the Eternal Original Buddha, one is able to awaken to the fact that one’s own existence fills the universe. However,

when one sees oneself in reality as a single living being, one has a correct awareness of oneself as a truly small entity.

Vanishing in the air and then all of a sudden appearing on earth indicates a form of the Buddha Dharma, that is, those who practice the Buddha Dharma are not so taken up as to be swayed by emptiness and ignore reality, although they realize it. Rather on this basis of actuality they rectify their way of thinking and way of life.

The acts of entering into the earth as into water and walking on water as on the earth indicate that a person who has deeply awakened to the Buddha Dharma is able to lead and guide many people at will. Just as water is able to enter the earth, one will be able to enter the mind of any person no matter how stubborn he or she may be. And one will be also able to stabilize even a mind fluid like water and make it as firm as solid earth.

Confronted with such excellence of the Buddha Dharma, the mind of the king can do nothing other than be freed from the sway of illusions. This releasing of the mind is what is meant by “cleanse his mind.” He will surely be persuaded of the excellence of the teaching. This is the meaning of “faith and discernment.”

**TEXT** “When their father saw his sons [possessed of] such supernatural powers he was greatly delighted at so unprecedented an experience and with joined hands [saluted] his sons, saying: ‘Who is your master? Whose pupils are you?’

**COMMENTARY** We must pay attention to the fact that the father folds his hands toward his sons. Through his sons, he is placing his palms together toward the great entity that abides beyond them. Nonetheless, it is no easy thing to place one’s hands together toward one’s children. This is truly a hallowed scene of reverence.

**TEXT** The two sons replied: ‘Great king! That Buddha Thunder Voice Constellation King of Wisdom, who is now under the seven-jeweled Bodhi tree, seated on the throne of the Dharma, preaching abroad the Dharma Flower Sutra in the midst of the world-host of gods and men—he is our master, we are his pupils.’ The father then said to his sons: ‘I also would now like to see your master; let us go together.’

**COMMENTARY** At last the mind of the father goes out toward the Buddha. The sons’ sincerity has communicated itself and its efficacy has been manifested.

**TEXT** “On this the two sons descended from the sky, went to their mother, and with folded hands said to her: ‘Our father the king has now believed and understood, and been able to set his mind on Perfect Enlightenment.

We have done a buddha deed for our father. Be pleased, mother, to permit us to leave home and under that buddha pursue the Way.’

## COMMENTARY

### The world is not saved by idealism alone.

- *Has now believed and understood.* In this instance, the expression does not mean that the father, the king, has understood and come to believe the content of the doctrine of the Buddha Dharma, but rather that as a result of what he has seen, he has come to believe that the teaching must be good.

This is also very important. In religion it is of course ideal if one believes after fully understanding the content of the teaching, but idealism alone is insufficient for saving all the people of the world. There are many people who first must be drawn toward the teaching by means of tactfulness. In fact, such people may actually be in the majority.

Therefore, setting aside any religion that has been reduced to a mere shell, for a living religion that really hopes to save people, actual and concrete evidence is important. Only a handful of intellectuals are bound to find appeal in theory. Even that small group is bound to be even more strongly drawn to the teaching if shown actual evidence together with the theory. In order to bring forth interest among ordinary people, more than anything else, it is necessary to show actual proof.

This passage causes us to earnestly study this point anew.

- *Been able to set his mind.* The Chinese word for *kannin* in the original, which was translated here into “able,” means to endure and to hold firmly. Although a person may believe the Buddha Dharma and resolve to attain the Perfect Enlightenment of the Buddha (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*), if that resolution is shaky, there is danger that it will quickly crumble. The king, however, has reached the state where he will be able to hold it firmly.

- *A buddha deed.* Everything done in accordance with the original vow of the Buddha is called a buddha deed. In short, all actions of spreading the teachings, acts of instructing, and saving living beings are buddha deeds.

In present-day Japan, Buddhist memorial services are referred to as buddha deeds (*butsuji* in Japanese), but they constitute merely a small portion of buddha deeds and moreover are passive observances, whereas true buddha deeds are extremely active and filled with vigor. Not only acts of the Buddha, but also acts that we carry out on behalf of the Buddha Way are all buddha deeds. In this sense, the actions of the two royal sons are also buddha deeds.

*To be continued*