

# Refining Our Hearts and Minds

by Nichiko Niwano

Most of us lead our lives with the hope of becoming people whose minds and hearts have been refined, and with a character that is purified—the kind of people who are able to make others happy.

For us who are Buddhists, it is important to learn the Buddha's teachings—to study and practice the Dharma—but are you aware that, even if we do not seek some special opportunity to engage in learning, we are in fact already doing so to a certain extent from one day to the next?

Morning and evening reading of the Lotus Sutra is an important regular practice for us. On some occasions, we may not give it our full attention, or we may be distracted, but when we are able to read the sutra from a desire to deeply understand the heart and mind of the Buddha, then such reading naturally becomes the process for nurturing our hearts and minds. In other words, at those times a positive influence is at work.

In Japanese, the word for “learn” shares the same root as the words for “emulate” or “follow.” Therefore, learning the Buddha's teachings is to emulate Shakyamuni, and to follow the words and actions demonstrated by Shakyamuni. The Buddhist sutras explain the teachings realized by Shakyamuni as well as the working of his heart and mind, and so, in the midst of our recitation, we are drawing deep inspiration from the heart and mind reflected in the sutra and emulating Shakyamuni.

Eizon (1201–90), a Shingon Ritsu monk during the Kamakura era, said, “We study in order to rectify our hearts and minds,” and indeed, the distortions,

confusion, and mistakes that assail us are removed through studying and our hearts and minds are returned to their original normal state. Kukai (774–835), also known as Kobo Daishi, left us these wise words: “Recite well and speak well; even a parrot can do that well,” which means that, no matter how much of the Buddhist sutras we read, unless we refine our hearts and minds through this and link it with our daily practice, our effort is wasted.

## Oneness with the Life of the Buddha

What is meant by refining the heart and mind?

Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) told us that “learning the Buddha Way is learning about the self,” and so that is what refining the heart and mind really is.

What, then, is the self about which we are learning?

Simply put, the source of all life is one, and so all living beings are in and of themselves manifestations of the Buddha-nature. That is our essential nature, in other words, our true self. Being aware of this is a key part of learning about the self—in other words, that studying and emulating contribute to refining the heart and mind.

As the Buddha's heart and mind are always filled with compassion, it follows that we, too, through these actions become not self-centered but full of consideration for others.

In some instances, though, we have a nearly uncontrollable desire to get something we want, become angry when

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matters do not go as we wish, and grumble, complain, and think about things from a self-centered viewpoint. Then friction arises with other people, and we bring suffering and worry upon ourselves. Therefore, we should learn from the Buddha every day, embrace his heart and mind, return to our “innate self,” and be inspired to make diligent progress.

Because we take refuge in the Lotus Sutra, we learn to live as humane individuals through recitation of the sutra. As the chords in the hearts and minds of different people are struck by different things, not only the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism, the Christian Bible, and the literature new and old of East and West, but even the manga that move so many people these days can become our subject, as long as this helps us to refine our own hearts and minds.

For some people, reading the sutra and refining the heart and mind may seem like difficult things to do, but what is essential is that we become caring and warm-hearted people who show consideration for others. To have no reservations about extending a helping hand in response to the suffering of another person—that is what is meant by refining our heart and mind, and putting this into practice is something we must keep continuing to learn. □

# DHARMA WORLD

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## Religions Coping with Prejudice

*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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#### Correction

The introduction to Brendan Leahy's essay in the July–September issue should have read as follows:

It is important to underline how many of the new movements and communities in the Catholic Church are involved in dialogue with other Christians, with members of other religions, and indeed with people of nonreligious convictions but committed to peace and universal fraternity.

# Prejudices of Our Own

by Norio Yamakoshi

Discriminating against people isn't right. Everybody knows that, so why do we discriminate? Sad to say, people of faith, whose virtues should include compassion and love, also have discriminated. A statement made in 1979 at the Third World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace is an example. At that conference in Princeton, New Jersey, one of the Japanese delegates denied there was a problem of discrimination in Japan, saying there was no longer any discrimination against people from communities called *buraku* (a minority group dating to feudal times).

Discrimination against *buraku* originated with an older kind of discrimination and is considered to have become entrenched in Japanese society when the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) made it part of a social structure to establish a system of government. People who lived in certain areas came to be contemptuously called *buraku-min* and were treated as subhuman. Although this discrimination was outlawed in 1871 by the Meiji government's Emancipation Edict, prejudice and discrimination against *buraku* remained in social practices.

The statement made at the conference in 1979 was much criticized in Japan by human rights groups and in the mass media. In response, in 1981 traditional Buddhist organizations, Christian organizations, and new religious organizations formed the Doshuren league to tackle human rights issues, including discrimination against *buraku*. It is a league of

religious people who reflect upon their own tendency to discriminate. Rissho Kosei-kai has been an active participant since the league's establishment. In our case, group leaders, trained in discrimination issues, tour our Dharma centers all over the country holding study sessions for the general membership on these issues.

Once, when I was speaking at one of the Dharma centers, a member said to me, "That may be all well and good, but . . ." and went on to tell me that even though he could understand theoretically the importance of human rights, he still ended up rejecting *buraku* people emotionally. I thought about the meaning of his remark. Looking back on it, I realized that for me there are at times a discrepancy between an ideal attitude and my actual feelings.

For example, when I see effeminate TV personalities that are all the rage these days, or blatant homosexuals, I feel ill at ease. I was born male and have lived as a man without feeling out of place, so I couldn't understand homosexuality or the problem of gender identity disorder.

What changed my feelings was a Doshuren workshop. One day we heard directly from a person with gender identity disorder. This person lived a life of suffering. I felt empathy that caused me to listen to that person not with my head but with my heart, thinking, "I must take this to heart."

Doshuren marked its thirtieth anniversary last year. At present it consists of sixty-four religious organizations

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and three supporting organizations. The league helps religious people inspire and educate each other through its workshops and lectures, furthering their knowledge of discrimination.

Since we have entered the twenty-first century, blatant discrimination has decreased. But discrimination is still quietly passed down from parent to child, and even today some people are discouraged from marrying because of their *buraku* birth.

Insofar as humans have earthly desires, our views are warped, and we cling to those desires. We fear what we can't understand, and reject it. When we tackle the problem of prejudice, I think how crucial it is for me to be aware that I too have that shortcoming. Now as I reflect every day on my own words and actions, asking myself, "Have I looked upon other people as children of the Buddha, whose precious lives are to be revered?" I feel that all of this is a practice that brings us closer to the Buddha.

When we learn from each other about discrimination, gaining true wisdom, we are also looking at our own attitude, which is a source of discrimination. I serve in my present position so that Shakyamuni's teachings are understood not only as concepts but inspire us to act according to our hearts. I want to be a person beyond prejudice who stands by those who suffer. That is what I try to be. □

# Buddhism and Prejudice: Ancient and Modern Responses to Hatred

by Christopher Queen

***Over the past sixty years, Buddhists have begun to explore new approaches to overcoming prejudice. As part of a larger movement that has reverberated throughout Asia and the West, “socially engaged Buddhists” have sought to root out the many institutional forms of hatred, greed, ignorance, injustice, poverty, and environmental destruction that have magnified the scope of suffering in the world.***

Buddhism is widely regarded as a religion of tolerance, love, and compassion. The first followers of the Buddha, like those of Jesus centuries later, came from all walks of life. The Buddha admitted persons of all castes and conditions to his order—Brahmins, princes, merchants, laborers, untouchables, women, even a serial killer—surprising his admirers and disturbing some of his critics. Likewise, Jesus seemed to go out of his way to serve the poor and powerless—lepers and the blind, madmen, women of ill repute, even Samaritans, the social outcasts of the day. One may find such tolerance and spiritual openness in the other great religions as well: the Muslim pilgrims who crowd into the holy city of Mecca each year for the ceremonies and devotions of the hajj represent nearly every ethnicity, nationality, language, and social class. They wear white garments to signify their equal value in the eyes of Allah.

*Tolerance* is perhaps too weak a term to describe the active embrace of marginalized and suffering individuals and groups by the great religious founders. Love and compassion—*mettā* and *karuṇā* in Pali, *agapē* in Greek, *bhakti*

in Sanskrit, *maḥabbah* in Arabic—are active virtues that entail personal encounter and profound transformation in the lives of those touched by a teacher or by God. For Jesus, the encounter often involved sharing a meal or healing an illness through the laying on of hands. For the Buddha, the encounter often involved a challenging task and a spiritual breakthrough—like the discovery by the grieving young mother Kisagotami of other families who had suffered the death of a child, after the Buddha directed her to seek a mustard seed from any house that had not known tragedy. Or the shock of recognition that the serial killer experienced when the Buddha, after effortlessly eluding the rampaging murderer, met his eyes and calmly said, “Stop, Angulimala. I have stopped, now you stop too.”

Prejudice is the opposite of tolerance, love, and compassion. With its corollaries—hatred and violence—prejudice is “a judgment or opinion formed before the facts are known” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*), “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization . . . directed toward a group or an individual of that group” (Gordon Allport), and a

view of society that is typically passed down from generation to generation. We associate prejudice with religious and ethnic hatreds, racial bigotry, and the disrespect and discrimination directed to certain groups in history: the Roma, or “gypsy,” people of Europe; the *bura-kumin*, or “village people,” of Japan; and perhaps the most enduring of all, the ‘Apiru, or Hebrew seminomadic people of the ancient Near East and their descendants, the Israelites, Judahites, and Jews, now dispersed throughout the world.

In recent times more and more groups, locked in mutual prejudice, have attracted international attention: Protestants and Catholics in Ireland; Sunni and Shiite Muslims in the Middle East; Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats in the Balkans; Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda; and countless others facing and committing oppression and violence. Each year brings new cases to light, such as the Rohingya, the hated Muslim minority in Buddhist Myanmar, who have become hated refugees in Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia—more than a million souls that the UN calls “one of the most persecuted minorities on earth.” The results of chronic prejudice are numbingly predictable: random violations of human rights, systematic terrorism, civil war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Buddhist societies have not been immune to prejudice. The thousand-year war of Sinhalese Buddhists against the Hindu Tamil minority on the island of Ceylon and the bloody persecution of the Rohingyas by Burmese and Thai Buddhists are but two examples. At the



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same time, the Buddha Dharma offers extraordinary resources for combating prejudice. Aside from setting an example of universal tolerance and openheartedness in the founding of the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* sanghas—the world’s first orders of monks and nuns—the Buddha offered a detailed model of the way in which mental formations arise and techniques by which hatred, greed, and delusion, the most dysfunctional of these formations, can be transformed into acceptance, generosity, and wisdom.

## Constructing and Dismantling Prejudice

Before prejudice hardens into tribal vendettas and intramural wars, it arises in the minds of individuals. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and how it arises—something that the Buddha and his followers took very seriously. The mind, along with the body and the experience of personality, is a dynamic process made up of interactive functions. These flows of energy and information are evolutionary and emergent, never static and dead. At the same time, they are impermanent (*anicca*), lacking in fixed identities and essences (*anattā*), and disorienting and unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) to those who, out of ignorance, crave stability and permanence. In Buddhist psychology, these functions are referred to as physical sensations, feelings, perceptions, intentions, and consciousness. The interaction of these five aggregates (*khandas*) of energy and information—with each other and with the environment—produces the

vivid experience of being a living self or person.

Were this all, however, we would not have to worry about prejudice or other afflictive states. The ever-changing self would accurately and neutrally mirror its surroundings and its own internal process; persons that we encounter as “different” would simply be different, not threateningly different or hatefully different. But the Buddha’s larger purpose was to explain the universality of suffering, *dukkha*, its grounding in craving and ignorance, and its healing by ethical and spiritual practices. He used powerful metaphors and wordplay to describe the distortion of the knowing process by hatred, greed, and delusion. He referred to the omnipresent feeling of disorientation and dissatisfaction as “thirst” (*taṇhā*) and likened it to a raging fire (*aggi*) that consumes everything it touches. He spoke of four types of “food” (*āhāra*) that support appetitive thoughts and behaviors—actual food, sensations, intentions, and consciousness itself; in other words, real food plus three of the aggregates that make up the psychophysical personality. All of these are governed by a fundamental hunger for “more,” based on a sense of lack, incompleteness, and impermanence.

Summing up this philosophy of mind in a recent study of the earliest Pali records, Richard Gombrich writes, “The basic drive of the Buddha’s teaching was to ethicize the world and see the whole of life and experience in ethical terms, as good or bad” (*What the*

*Buddha Thought* [London: Equinox, 2009], 123). Here we see the setting both for the rise of prejudice and for its dismantling in Buddhist psychology. For if other persons and groups are perceived as threatening the material and social resources (“foods”) of life, as in the case of territorial enemies and marketplace competitors, or as the means to increased wealth and power, as in the case of economic vassals, slaves, employees, and consumers, then prejudice is already at work. And more profoundly, if differences of the others’ appearance, culture, and behavior further challenge our craving for permanence, security, familiarity, and kinship, then prejudice springs up like an invasive species.

While these reactions result in the suffering of both subject and object of prejudice, the Buddha taught that they

*Aham avero homi*  
 May I be free from enmity  
*Abbyapajjiho homi*  
 May I be free from ill will  
*Anigho homi*  
 May I be free from distress  
*Sukhi attanam pariharami*  
 May I keep myself happy

may also be the occasion for spiritual practice. The Four Noble Truths hold that the raging fires of suffering may be extinguished in a state of psychological peace and freedom, literally “coolness” (*nirodha* or *nirvāṇa*, Pali *nibbāna*, “blown out”). The sufferer need only embark on a systematic program of mental and moral rehabilitation called the Eightfold Path: efficacious views, aspiration, conduct, speech, vocation, exertion, mindfulness, and concentration. These teachings are supplemented in the earliest texts by the Five Precepts of lay morality, enjoining from hurtful behavior, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxication; the Boundless States (*brahma-vihāras*) of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity; and the Perfections (*pāramis*) of generosity, morality, tolerance, energy, contemplation, and wisdom—programs that promise to guide the practitioner in overcoming prejudice, hatred, and greed. The *dhmma* of the early scriptures is not primarily a religion of “faith” but one of practice, effort, and “works.”

Like a physician, the Buddha prescribed a powerful antidote to the fever of prejudice. In the loving-kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), the practitioner begins by directing loving attention to his or her own state of being, repeating this formula in Pali or in one’s own language:

In a fashion similar to Christians’ endeavor to love others as oneself, the meditator then extends these wishes step-by-step to others—to a beloved parent or teacher, to a dear friend, to a neutral or unknown person, and finally, to a person perceived as hateful, threatening, or inferior. “May that person be free from enmity, ill will, and distress; may that person be happy.” In this way is the suffering of prejudice extinguished.

## Engaged Buddhists Confront Caste Prejudice

Over the past sixty years, Buddhists have begun to explore new approaches to overcoming prejudice. As part of a larger movement that has reverberated throughout Asia and the West, “socially engaged Buddhists” have sought to root out the many institutional forms of hatred, greed, ignorance, injustice, poverty, and environmental destruction that have magnified the scope of suffering in the world. The Vietnamese Thien master Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term *engaged Buddhism* in the 1960s to describe the activism and sacrifice of fellow monks in the antiwar movement in his country, while Nobel Peace laureates Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, and Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar continue to lead struggles for democratic self-determination in their countries today. In 1958 Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne founded the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement to alleviate village poverty in Sri Lanka, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand have redefined

the ethical precepts of Buddhism to encompass social as well as psychological suffering and its alleviation. In Taiwan, practitioners of the “Humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao*) have redefined the Pure Land (Skt., *sukhāvatī*) to mean a society marked by love and tolerance, helping assistance in the face of natural disasters, and outreach to the poor and neglected. And in Japan, the Nichiren-inspired organizations Rissho Kosei-kai, Nipponzan Myohoji, and Soka Gakkai have devoted more than five decades to peace activism and cultural exchange around the world.

Engaged Buddhists have affirmed their place in the ancient practice vehicles, or *yānas*—the Theravada or Hinayana traditions of South Asia; the Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren practices of the East Asian Mahayana schools; and the Vajrayana traditions of the Tibetan plateau. At the same time, they have expanded the traditional Buddhist analysis of suffering to include the myriad sufferings caused by conditions external to the sufferer—social injustice, political and economic oppression, cultural and educational degradation, and environmental destruction. While faithfully observing the first precept of nonviolence, practitioners of the New Vehicle (Navayana) have stressed the importance of collective action to address collective sufferings. These actions—in essence new ways of practicing the Dharma—include peace walks and sit-ins; boycotts of harmful products and exploitive corporations; political protest; the “ordaining” of trees to slow the destruction of rain forests; and the deployment of rescue teams in the wake of natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, and freak weather.

Perhaps the most notable mass movement to combat institutionalized prejudice in the past half century is the engaged Buddhism of millions of formerly untouchable, or Dalit, Buddhists in India. According to Human Rights Watch, more than one-sixth of India’s

population, some 160 million people, are still treated as “untouchables,” or *dalits* (broken people), and denied access to economic and educational opportunities. In a report on caste violence against untouchables, the humanitarian organization found that

Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused or killed at the hands of the police and higher-caste groups that enjoy the state’s protection. Dalit women are frequent victims of sexual assault. In what has been called India’s “hidden apartheid,” entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislation and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the “pollution line.” (Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s “Untouchables”* (1999), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,HRW,,IND,4562d8cf2,3ae6a83f0,0.html>)

During the last century, the anti-Brahmin movement initiated by low-caste activists during colonial times and a resurgent interest in Buddhism by Indian intellectuals and social reformers came together in the person of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), the fourteenth child of untouchable parents in central India. Ambedkar earned doctoral and law degrees in New York and London, launched a civil rights movement for untouchables in the 1920s, was appointed first law minister and principal draftsman of India’s constitution after independence in 1947, and converted to Buddhism in the last weeks of his life.

Ambedkar launched nonviolent civil disobedience protests in Gandhian fashion to obtain access to drinking water and entry into Hindu temples for untouchables. Yet many of these

battles ended in defeat or stalemate, and Ambedkar concluded that caste prejudice blinded the Brahmins and other upper-caste Hindus to the sufferings of the Dalits and that the ancient dogmas of karma and rebirth provided religious justification for social discrimination.

In 1936 Ambedkar announced that, while he was born a Hindu, he would now seek a religion that taught liberty, equality, and fraternity. In his speeches and writings over the next twenty-two years, he began to draw on his extensive library of Buddhist scriptures and commentaries to demonstrate the role of caste in promoting prejudice and social dysfunction. In his final work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (first published in 1957), Ambedkar noted that the Buddha’s teachings are consistently rational, socially beneficial, and definitive. How then did the teachings of karma and rebirth, which have the effect of blaming the victims of social injustice, have such powerful currency in the Buddha’s time and today? “The only purpose one can think of is to enable the state or society to escape responsibility for the condition of the poor and lowly. . . . It is impossible to imagine that the Buddha, who was known as the Maha Karunika [Great Compassionate One], could have supported such a doctrine” (242–48). Ambedkar concluded that later editors had inserted the doctrines of karma and rebirth into the record.

On October 14, 1956, Dr. Ambedkar led nearly five hundred thousand of his Dalit followers in a refuge-taking ceremony that launched the largest single mass conversion to Buddhism in history.

In the following decades, tens of millions of former untouchables converted to Buddhism and declared the end of hatred, greed, and delusion. The Navayana, or Ambedkar, Buddhists of India have fought nonviolently but implacably for human rights and *manuski*, a sense of dignity and equality before the law and their fellow citizens. For them, the words of the Buddha serve as the greatest bulwark against prejudice and hatred:

Who is tolerant to the intolerant,  
peaceful to the violent,  
free from greed with the greedy—  
him I call a Brahmin.

He from whom lust and hate, and  
pride and insincerity falls down like  
a mustard seed from the point of a  
needle—him I call a Brahmin.

He who speaks words that are  
peaceful and useful and true, words  
that offend no one—him I call a  
Brahmin.

He who is powerful, noble, who lives  
a life of inner heroism, the all-seer,  
the all-conqueror, the ever-pure, who  
has reached the end of the journey,  
who like Buddha is awake—him I  
call a Brahmin.

(J. Mascaro, trans., *The Dhammapada* [Penguin, 1973], 90–93. Cited in B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, critical edition [Oxford University Press, 2011], passim.) □

# Religious Prejudice, Diversity, and Living Together in Europe

by Stein Villumstad

***Prejudice is by definition judgments made before the facts are known. Increasing knowledge about ethnicity, cultures, and religions among children and youth is of utmost importance to counter prejudice.***

Human fear is often translated into intolerance and bigotry. Religion is seen by many as a main carrier of these less-than-desired qualities. We hear fearful messages from public voices about religions that Katherine Marshall has condensed into the four-D message:

Religions are *divisive*, creating conflict: you are either with me or against me. Controversies and harsh words are heard and seen around us, and religion is in the midst of them. They are *dangerous* and anti-democratic. We all hear the accusations about “religion and terrorism.” Religions are *defunct*, since they are irrelevant, and *delusive*—building on emotions rather than rational thinking. We hear the sharp messages of the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens: religion is irrelevant and counter to science. (Katherine Marshall [presentation at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, July 2006])

The four Ds cannot be dismissed outright. Religions have throughout history been open to abuse and have been hijacked, appearing as divisive,

dangerous, defunct, and delusive. In the spirit of honesty, we also have to admit that our holy texts include passages that condone and sometimes seem to prescribe violence.

The four Ds contribute, nevertheless, to building a sense of prejudice against religion by oversimplifying and stereotyping religions into eye-catching categories, based on examples of religions’ being hijacked by extremist ideologies.

The disturbingly misguided individual who bombed government buildings in Oslo and massacred more than sixty participants in the summer camp of the Labor Party youth movement on a nearby island on July 22 last year targeted the Norwegian labor movement. Why particularly this movement? He has expressed his deep opposition to the Labor Party’s multicultural political agenda. His extreme anti-Islam attitude and affinity with the Knights Templar of the Middle Ages had brought him into a mental state of war. In his mind Norway is about to be destroyed by alien influences and taken over by Arab-Islam forces (the Eurabia conspiracy theories). While this is an extreme expression of a “Christian” ideology, voices in the social media and statements by certain political leaders indicate that

elements of his distorted ideology resonate somewhere deep down.

Extremist groups in Europe are rare and few in number. Prejudice within and against religion exists, however, far beyond the extreme subcultures. This is not least linked with certain practices that are popularly attributed to religions. Female circumcision, forced marriages, discrimination against women, and “honor codes” are examples that create tensions in European communities. Actions are typically taken in the name of religion by those who defend a religion, and reference is made to religion by those who condemn such opinions and actions. Strong arguments are made that there is a serious conflict between religious teachings and human rights.

These practices are real and alive in certain cultural groups in Europe. Statements made by various individual representatives of religious traditions and by commentators in the media and otherwise in the public sphere contribute to the uncertainty about what represents the position of religions. Therefore it is essential that religious leaders across religious traditions come together to address the issue and clarify that there is no contradiction between religion and human rights. The European Council of Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace (ECRL) has made a clear statement in this regard:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an expression of shared values which are recognized across religions and cultures, and which we



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as leaders of diverse religious traditions emphatically support. (ECRL, “Declaration on Advancing Human Dignity through Human Rights and Traditional Values” [Moscow 2011], <http://www.rfp-europe.eu>)

Practices attributed to religions, such as the examples mentioned above, are frequently expressions of traditions and cultures rather than of religions. Since traditions tend to be closely related to religions, these prejudices are understandable. Therefore, unwanted traditions should be distinguished from religions. ECRL states:

Traditional values . . . are to be distinguished from those traditional practices which harm human dignity and are often in contrast to genuine religious values and principles. . . . General recognition of the importance of some traditional values should not imply the acceptance of all, since they vary both within and across cultures. (Ibid.)

Religious prejudice goes beyond cultural practices and needs to be seen in a broader religio-political context. The United States has a relatively short (shallow) history with a significant population. Most ethnic, cultural, and religious groups represented in the United States have only two to three hundred years of history in that country. A multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious American reality has developed—with tensions—over a relatively short time.

There is not, as in Europe, a historically old population that, in spite of centuries of conflict and internal migration, has broadly defined its identity around certain values and common heritage. Only of late has Europe seen an increasing number of “newcomers.” European societies with a deep history have had to adapt to a new reality. Tensions between the “original and true” European heritage and the “imported” and “alien” cultural and religious elements exist. A recent Europe-wide opinion poll showed that four out of ten of the respondents were negative to the level of “newcomers,” although the estimated population in this category is not more than 10 percent. This negative attitude is obviously not entirely directed toward religious affiliation, but other studies indicate that most people grossly overestimate the portion of newcomers that have a Muslim background. This indicates a particular prejudice against Muslims. The 2009 Swiss referendum that prevents

erecting minarets on mosques seems to support this assumption.

Secularism has fundamentally influenced European political and academic discourse, but the significant growth of Islam and “new” religions in the European context has added to the debate about the role of religion in the public sphere. At the same time, a significant revival of religious life in countries of central and eastern Europe, including Russia after the collapse of the communist regime, has created a new role of religion in this part of Europe. Tensions between major historic religious institutions and new religious movements have been part of the eastern Europe religious revival. Laws and regulations that limit religious minority groups from operating have been introduced in a number of countries under the pretext that they represent “dubious sects” or “extremist groups.” (The organization Human Rights without Frontiers regularly reports on cases

of religious intolerance and prejudice: <http://www.hrwf.net>.)

In western Europe mainline religious institutions are under pressure. Jean-Paul Willaime observes that “in the religious sphere, as in other spheres, people want to carve out their own paths independently and be free to have their own experiences” (Jean-Paul Willaime, “Reshaping Religion and Religious Criticism in Ultramodernity,” in *Science and Technique of Democracy*, no. 47: *Blasphemy, Insult, and Hatred* [Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2010], 136). Traditional religious institutions are custodians of doctrines and traditions and find themselves abandoned by people who find their traditional and doctrinal positions untenable. These may be about gender, sexual orientation, abortion, evolution versus creationism, and perceived institutional rigidity. The institutions are also under pressure from secularists who generally reject religious doctrines and fight historical privileges still given to churches in Europe. Religious prejudice is therefore probably directed toward religious institutions as much as toward the idea of religion itself.

Followers of religious traditions too often develop distorted or uninformed opinions about followers of other religious traditions. This is particularly the case among the Abrahamic traditions that are truth-claiming religions. If my truth is *the truth*, other religions by implication profess a falsified version of religious truth. Representatives of the respective religions will typically give a narrative that represents the “best” in their own tradition, while the mystified

and dubious elements of the other traditions are highlighted. Since the emphasis is given to the superiority of one’s own tradition, there is often a perceived self-interest in maintaining distorted or unfavorable opinions of other religious traditions.

A particular aspect of prejudice is a persistent anti-Semitism. Among Christian churches this can historically be traced back to the allegation that Jews condemned Jesus to death. Prejudice against Jews was for many years expressed in legal terms, including national constitutions that prohibited Jews from entering the country (for example, the Norwegian constitution of 1814). In the post-World War II period, prejudice against Jews is influenced by the contemporary politics of successive governments of Israel. There is evidence that anti-Semitism is on the increase in Europe. A 2012 survey in Norway shows that one in eight people believes that Jews are themselves responsible for being discriminated against and persecuted. Prejudice against Jews is therefore not necessarily based on religion but on ethnicity and politics. Religious communities, including churches and mosques, have struggled at times with their response to anti-Semitism. Their difficulty tends to be how to distinguish their criticism of contemporary Israeli politics toward Palestinians, and in particular the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories interpreted as being in breach of international conventions, from unwavering condemnation of anti-Semitism. The European Council of Religious Leaders has found it timely to address anti-Semitism:

Demonising and discrimination of Jews is contrary to the values of all the religions which we represent. As religious leaders we acknowledge our responsibility to address such tendencies, especially if they occur within our own faith communities. (ECRL Statement from its council meeting in Berlin, 2008)

Combating religious prejudice is a global task, not limited to religious followers and institutions. Political action on all levels is needed. A global political approach to religious intolerance has, however, been impaired by the decade-long controversy over “defamation of religion.” From the European Union’s perspective, priority was given to the consolidation of the consensus on the need to fight religious intolerance, while avoiding the concept of claiming defamation of religion as a human rights standard as promoted by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such a notion, which aims at protecting religion itself rather than persons being discriminated against because of their religion or belief, was seen as detrimental to other core human rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to freedom of religion or belief. A breakthrough came in 2011 when a consensus was reached in the United Nations, emphasizing combat against discrimination and violence against “persons based on religion or belief” (Human Rights Council 2011, resolution 16/18: “Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence, and violence against persons based on religion or belief”). This created a new platform

for broad actions to counter religious intolerance and prejudice.

Religious leaders from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe made the following pledge as a follow-up of actions taken in the United Nations:

We will lead our religious believers in dialogues aimed at building understanding and good will among our respective communities. We will work together to resist any manipulation of religion for non-religious purposes. We will also work to educate our believers about their solemn responsibility to stand in solidarity with all the vulnerable religious communities. ("The Marrakesh Declaration and Commitments to Action: Engaging Historic Faiths to Advance the Common Good in the Middle East and North Africa Region" [Marrakesh, November 16, 2011])

Besides the EU, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe are also quite committed to antidiscrimination, combating hate speech, and promoting freedom of religion and belief. They monitor national laws that regulate religion and belief and observe and address cases that contradict human rights conventions. All three organizations welcome civil society participation in their processes, and religiously based organizations, including Religions for Peace, play important roles as partners in the implementation of agendas that are at the heart of combating religious intolerance and prejudice.

Constructive processes in intergovernmental organizations, combined with multireligious commitments, are examples of complementary strengths being mobilized to combat religious intolerance and prejudice.

Prejudice is by definition judgments made before the facts are known. Increasing knowledge about ethnicity, cultures, and religions among children and youth is of utmost importance to

counter prejudice. Different policies are pursued around Europe. Overall there is a trend toward confessional curricula that *teach religion* being gradually replaced by curricula that *teach about religions*. This is encouraging, since knowledge across cultures and religions is essential for harmonious coexistence.

Academic training of European religious leaders should be done and rooted in the specific European context, instead of importing religious leaders and teachers that have practiced and been trained in cultures that are quite different from the European context. A contextualized training of religious leaders and teachers will potentially help connect religion to societies in which religions are to be practiced by putting traditions, cultures, and religions in perspective. It is therefore encouraging that a growing number of European academic institutions offer training for imams, for example.

Cooperation for peace among the world's religious communities can be powerful, both symbolically and substantively, in overcoming religious prejudice.

The symbolic power of cooperation is especially important in circumstances where religions are implicated, such as situations marked by intolerance and contribution to conflicts.

But cooperation does more. It also provides a powerful way to engage the enormous—and still underutilized—assets of the religious communities to advance unity in diversity and respect for

otherness. Although Europe is a rather secular society, religious communities have well-developed and interconnected social infrastructures. When mobilized and equipped, these religious communities can be harnessed for needed advocacy and the delivery of important services related to the challenges of peace and constructive coexistence.

Moreover, cooperation among religious communities establishes a mode of operation that can facilitate the establishment of strategic partnerships with other public institutions and agencies committed to addressing similar concerns, without at the same time engaging those public institutions in advancing particular sectarian beliefs.

When religious leaders and communities want to engage in dialogue and joint action systematically, it is important to develop instruments for these actions. Multireligious platforms, which bring together religious communities under the leadership of their respective leaders, are such instruments. In Religions for Peace there are three kinds of multireligious platforms: interreligious councils on local and national levels, women-of-faith networks, and youth-interfaith networks. These instruments can be significant tools for developing knowledge, attitudes, and policies that promote a true living together in the European diversity. Religious prejudice can be countered when knowledge is shared, respect for religious diversity is accepted, and common action for human flourishing is systematically pursued. □

# Religious Prejudice: What Makes It Worse and What Helps

by Wakoh Shannon Hickey

***Prejudice occurs along a spectrum: from negative comments and jokes, to avoiding members of a group, to discriminating against them by denying opportunities and services, to physically attacking them or damaging their property, to trying to exterminate them altogether. Stereotyping is both a cause and a consequence of prejudice.***

At their best, religions inspire some of humankind's most noble aspirations; our most courageous and selfless acts; our most spectacular and profound works of art, literature, music, architecture, and engineering. At their worst, religions fuel war, crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, slavery, terrorism, and genocide.

Conflict seems to be a fact of life: resources are limited; those who have power are not always willing to share it; and sentient beings want different, frequently incompatible, things. When examining religious conflicts, it quickly becomes clear that they are rarely—if ever—just about religion. They are thoroughly entangled with other issues, such as competition for political and economic power, racial dynamics, arguments about gender roles and sexual behavior. A discussion of religious conflict as if it were separable from other power dynamics would obscure more than it reveals.

For example, when millions of Catholics, Jews, Mormon converts, and Chinese and Japanese Buddhists immigrated to the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they increased competition for land, jobs, housing, and natural resources,

and sometimes altered the balance of political power. Many crowded into dense urban ghettos, where poverty and unsanitary conditions bred illness and crime. Such problems, combined with various forms of racism, fueled fear, stereotypes, and even mob violence—both by dominant groups against minorities and among competing minority groups.

Sexual politics play a role in many religious conflicts as well. Some groups believe celibacy is unnatural, for example; others believe it is essential to spiritual awakening; still others advocate unconventional sexual relationships. Groups have different ideas about the social roles

of men and women, as well. These differences produce conflicts, especially when a group believes its approach is divinely authorized. Women who have challenged male religious authorities and social expectations about their roles as wives and mothers have been expelled by religious communities, imprisoned, confined to mental hospitals, and even executed as witches or heretics. Today, fundamentalist groups appeal to some because they provide clear gender roles and strict sexual norms at a time when attitudes about sex, gender, and sexual orientation are changing rapidly. In order to understand religious conflicts, it is important to notice such underlying political, economic, racial, and sexual dynamics.

When disagreements become infused with religious fervor, however, the level of violence and bloodshed can increase exponentially, because opponents get characterized as not merely wrong but evil. Perhaps if we can decrease religious



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tension and misunderstanding, and avoid demonizing antagonists in religious terms, we can address other conflicts in less bloody ways. At least, that is my hope as a person who teaches religious studies.

## The Nature of Prejudice

Religious prejudices, like other forms of prejudice, arise from a fundamental act of the mind: our ability to distinguish "me" from "not me." We cannot navigate our environment without this. When we organize into groups, we distinguish between "us" and "them." The very meaning of community implies insiders and outsiders. There is nothing inherently wrong with group identifications; they help to orient us in the world by telling us who we are, to whom we belong, and where "home" is (Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006]). However, such distinctions all too easily become xenophobia, racism, sexism, heterosexism, social-class biases, religious animosities, and so forth.

In *The Nature of Prejudice*, a classic study of the subject, psychologist Gordon Allport defined prejudice as "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958, 8). Prejudice occurs along

a spectrum: from negative comments and jokes to avoiding members of the group, to discriminating against them by denying opportunities and services, to physically attacking them or damaging their property, to trying to exterminate them altogether. Stereotyping is both a cause and a consequence of prejudice.

Social-group biases help us cope with fear, anxiety, and insecurity by enhancing our sense of "self" in relation to others. They also cause us to make discriminatory decisions, to avoid contact with people different from ourselves, to resist information contrary to our prejudices, or to react defensively when confronted about our biases, and to rationalize them by blaming the objects of our dislike.

Subsequent scholars in the field have elaborated and nuanced Allport's theories. They have noted, for example, that not all prejudice involves hostility toward members of a group. It can manifest as resentment about a group's demands for parity. It can also include paternalism, in which members of a dominant group express affection for subordinates, who they believe are less intelligent and capable and therefore need protection. It can manifest as denial that a group faces structural inequalities in access to political power, employment, housing, credit, education, medical care, and so on. Those who deny structural inequality might argue instead, for example, that members of the "down" group just aren't motivated enough.

Prejudice can also be positive. Women are often presumed to be nicer and more supportive than men—but

this positive prejudice is double-edged. Because women are supposed to be nice, they may be considered unsuitable for jobs requiring supposedly "male" qualities such as aggressiveness or competitiveness. Women also tend to be judged negatively if they display "unfeminine" qualities such as anger. Likewise, men may be considered unsuitable for caretaking roles and face prejudice for behavior perceived as "effeminate." Because both women and men experience positive prejudice for conforming and negative prejudice for deviating, we internalize gender-role expectations—and stereotypes, prejudices, and inequalities persist (Alice H. Eagly and Amanda B. Diekmann, "What Is the Problem? Prejudice as an Attitude-in-Context," in *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport*, ed. John F. Davidio, Peter Glick, and Laurie A. Rudman [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005], 19–35; Laurie A. Rudman, "Rejection of Women? Beyond Prejudice as Antipathy," in *On the Nature of Prejudice*, 106–20).

## What Makes Religious Prejudice Worse

Religions can fuel prejudice because they prohibit certain activities and sanction others: eating or not eating certain foods, engaging in particular sexual activities, wearing or not wearing certain attire, honoring particular gods—and thus they encourage antagonism toward people who do prohibited things. This is particularly true among those who emphasize exclusivist worldviews, believing

they possess absolute truth and that it applies universally. Religious exclusivists can be distinguished from inclusivists, who acknowledge that other religions contain some truth, but believe their own is preferable or superior in some way. Religious pluralists, on the other hand, tend to believe there are many kinds of truth, which can be true simultaneously. Of these three groups, exclusivists are most likely to see religious diversity as a threat.

Exclusivism can feed triumphalism: the idea that one's own perspective should eventually triumph over alternatives. Limited and superficial exposure to differing worldviews makes it easier to presume the "rightness" of one's own perspective. Exclusivism and triumphalism are not confined to religious worldviews, however: scientific materialists from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have argued that science can and should displace religions.

Even among educated people, providential religious beliefs can also worsen fear and prejudice. Providentialism includes the idea that "wrong conduct or heretical belief [stirs] God to anger, and that such anger [will] be expressed in . . . earthquake and fire, invasion and military defeat, famine and pestilence. Unless evildoers or wrong-believers [are] suppressed, society might perish altogether" (Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* [New York: HarperCollins, 2010], 26–27). One can find many examples of such beliefs, past and present. In recent years, conservative evangelical Christian leaders in the United States have attributed disasters such as the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center and Hurricane Katrina to God's anger about feminism, abortion, and greater acceptance of homosexuality. (See, for example: Joe Brown, "Religious Conservatives Claim Katrina Was God's Omen, Punishment for the

United States," September 13, 2005, MediaMatters for America, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200509130004>; Ted Olsen, "Weblog: As the World Prays, Falwell and Robertson Blame ACLU, Gays, and Others for 'Deserved' Attack," *Christianity Today* [2001], June 26, 2001, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/septemberweb-only/9-10-52.0.html?start=1>).

Ignorance is another major factor in religious prejudice: not knowing the basic teachings, histories, and practices of particular groups. Although the United States appears to be the most religiously diverse country on earth, with very high rates of religious adherence, religious illiteracy is rampant. In introductory college courses I teach on world religions, many students begin unaware that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are closely related and that practitioners of all three worship the same God. Some mistakenly believe that Islam is inherently violent, or that Jews killed Jesus, an idea that has fueled nearly two thousand years of violence against Jews. According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which conducts well-respected surveys:

Nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults say that religion is "very important" in their lives, and roughly four-in-ten say they attend worship services at least once a week. But the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey shows that large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions—including their own. ("U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, Executive Summary," Pew Research Center, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/U-S-Religious-Knowledge-Survey.aspx>)

On average, respondents gave correct answers to only half of the survey's thirty-two basic questions about major world religions. Very few ever

attended religious services anywhere but Christian churches. Such insularity breeds ignorance and allows acts of discrimination, harassment, vandalism, and violence against religious minorities to go unchallenged (Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005], 256).

Insularity and ignorance also make people more susceptible to propaganda. In the United States, fear and violence toward Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and other religious minorities have been fed by novels, films, editorials, cartoons, and other forms of mass media depicting these groups as dangerous, un-Christian, undemocratic, sexually deviant, and/or un-American. (For accounts of novels inciting anti-Mormon and anti-Catholic violence, see Terry Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*, Religion in America Series [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]; Nancy Lusignan Schultz, ed., *Veil of Fear: Nineteenth-Century Convent Tales* [West Lafayette, IN: NotaBell Books, 1999]. For information about the widely circulated anti-Semitic book *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, see the US Holocaust Museum Web site, <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/press/kits/details.php?content=protocols&page=01-time> line [accessed July 10, 2012].) Accurate information about the diversity and complexities within each group, as well as training to think critically and analytically about the information one receives, can make one less credulous about stereotypes, false claims, and fearmongering.

## What Helps to Prevent Religious Prejudice

Although religious conflict is bound up with other kinds of conflicts, it is possible to reduce religious misunderstanding, propaganda, and conflict. Four things seem to help: laws protecting minority

rights; education; personal relationships; and forms of religion or spirituality that emphasize compassion, human unity, tolerance for ambiguity, and openness to questions. Laws against discrimination help to change community norms and expectations and to increase tolerance for diversity over time. Research has also shown that the people least likely to express biases against members of other religions are the most educated; that they typically study the humanities and social sciences; and that they live in areas where they are more likely to interact with people of other faiths (Wuthnow, *Challenges*).

The academic discipline of religious studies, divorced from any sectarian perspective, is relatively young in the United States. It can encourage understanding and respect for religious similarities and differences and foster awareness of how religions function in society: both to promote equality, build community, and inspire and empower people, and to divide people by empowering some at the expense of others. Analysis of these dynamics tends to foster “criticism of exclusionary, divisive, and hierarchical forms of religion and often has the effect of holding religion to standards of humaneness and human flourishing. And this process of stressing religion in humanistic terms has the indirect effect of encouraging religious reform” (Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 207).

Studying religions humanistically also helps people to realize that their perspectives are *perspectives*, neither absolute nor universal, and to realize that even within a single religious tradition, people disagree. Academic religious studies help people to understand how the world can make sense from perspectives they do not share—including exclusivist and fundamentalist perspectives. As a pluralist, I take care to teach

my students that the vast majority of people who hold exclusivist beliefs are not violent and that fundamentalists offer some cogent critiques of modern society. I hope this kind of education will help students to distinguish between *ideas and practices* they may not accept, and the *human beings* who do accept them, because even human beings with wildly differing ideas and practices have other things in common.

Studying religions historically, analytically, and comparatively need not conflict with commitment to a particular religious tradition, but it does require tolerance for the contradictions, ambiguities, and nuances of one’s own tradition and other traditions. Nor is religious commitment necessary to develop an appreciative understanding of religious ideas, practices, texts, objects, and customs. To the extent that religious studies encourage critical thinking, they undermine dogmatism and promote questioning the sources of religious authority. Research also suggests that religious people who find wisdom in other traditions, value questions, and regard their spiritual lives as ongoing quests for open-ended truths are less likely to develop and maintain religious prejudices (Wuthnow, *Challenges*; C. Daniel Batson and E.

L. Stocks, “Religion and Prejudice,” in *On the Nature of Prejudice*).

Understanding other religions in the abstract and engaging in discussions about differences and similarities are only partially effective, however. Even more helpful are personal relationships with members of other religious groups. Dealing with people as individuals makes it harder to regard them merely as representatives of categories. Interfaith efforts are most successful when people focus on shared objectives and concrete tasks, working locally and informally (Wuthnow, *Challenges*; Batson and Stocks, “Religion and Prejudice”; Walter G. Stephan and Cookie Ehite Stephan, “Intergroup Relations Program Evaluation,” in *On the Nature of Prejudice*). A number of such efforts are under way: the United Religions Initiative and the Interfaith Youth Core, for example, both of which encourage small, interfaith groups to build relationships by collaborating on community-service projects. (See <http://www.uri.org> and <http://www.ifyc.org>.)

Christians, being members of the dominant religion in the United States, are in a position to promote such cooperative efforts, but many do not. Robert Wuthnow, a highly regarded sociologist of religions, found that

local church leaders are dealing with the increasing religious diversity of their communities largely by ignoring it or minimizing their contact with other religions. At least half of the nation's churches appear to be doing nothing to engage directly with interreligious discussions or interactions, while the activities sponsored by the remaining half are fleeting and often more symbolic than substantive. (*Challenges*, 255)

One reason for this is that many of the seminaries training Christian clergy require little exposure to other religions, if any. Doing so would certainly oblige Christians to rethink triumphalist Christian teachings in light

of religious diversity, a process that can be very uncomfortable.

Another reason stems from the nature of a pluralistic culture itself. Because religion is completely voluntary in the United States, groups must compete for members, funds, and other resources. This "religious marketplace" encourages diversity, but it also can discourage interaction. Wuthnow found that Christian leaders avoid contact with other religions not because they fear their members might convert to other religions but because members might

leave and join a different Christian congregation. Thus, [leaders] do not want to engage in any activities that may prove controversial to some of

their members. . . . Pluralism means that there are always competitors waiting to absorb members who may become disgruntled. It also means that slight annoyances can become a reason for switching to another church. Loyalties in pluralistic societies do not run deep. Any alternative that seems slightly more comfortable is sufficient reason to pull up stakes. (*Ibid.*, 253)

The very survival of religious groups and the livelihoods of their leaders depend upon members' loyalty. While groups that draw sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders may alienate some, they reinforce loyalty in others. The most loyal contribute the most time and money. But the consequence of insularity is ignorance, which fuels prejudice and sometimes violence.

Again, religious conflicts cannot be separated from political, economic, racial, and gendered ones. But given the increasingly globalized nature of the world and the increasingly pluralistic societies in which billions of people live, the cost of religious prejudice is increasingly high. In my own experience, deep and sustained encounters with religious "others" have actually *increased* rather than decreased my understanding and appreciation of the religion I practice *and* of religions I do not practice. It is not a zero-sum game.

In the Christian Gospel of Luke (10:25–37), Jesus tells a famous parable about a Samaritan—a member of a group despised by many of the Judeans in Jesus's audiences. After Judean religious leaders walk past a man who has been robbed and left for dead, the Samaritan helps the injured man to shelter and pays for his treatment. The moral of the story: one's neighbors include those who seem most "other." Those others may be the very people one needs most in times of trouble. This Buddhist writer endorses the advice with which Jesus concludes the story: "Go and do likewise." □



# What a Beautiful World— So Why Do We Insist on Destroying It?

by Gilya G. Schmidt

***All human beings harbor prejudice—thoughts and possibly actions that are not informed by knowledge but are the result of ignorance. . . . If we are sensitized through education to the suffering that thoughtless or mindless speech and action cause, we are less likely to inflict suffering on our fellow human beings.***

Every spring semester for the past twenty years I have been teaching a humanities course in which we explore the dark side of humanity. In the Jewish world, human beings are born with two inclinations—the good inclination (*yetzer tov*) and the evil inclination (*yetzer rah*). Throughout our entire life these two forces do battle with each other. One hopes that the good inclination will win out, for such a life will be worth living, making a positive contribution to society.

Likewise, all human beings harbor prejudice—thoughts and possibly actions that are not informed by knowledge but are the result of ignorance. We are born innocent as well as ignorant—knowledge results from learning, from education. If we are sensitized through education to the suffering that thoughtless or mindless speech and action cause, we are less likely to inflict suffering on our fellow human beings, unless we are just plain mean—and there are such people!

Ignorance of our fellow humans' values and traditions may be the cause of needless conflict. We may be prone to separating human beings of a different group or faith into "us" and "them," with the unfortunate result that one group will be seen as superior, while the

other is seen as inferior. Such categorization, as in the case of the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, the Bosnian Muslims in 1992, or the Armenians and the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, can be the beginning of what may end up as genocide.

Many of us know about the Holocaust, perpetrated by the German people under the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945. The Holocaust had just such a beginning, born in ignorance, all the way back to the fourth century CE, when Christianity became a world religion. The ignorance and resultant religious prejudice festered for fifteen hundred years, some would even say for nineteen hundred (since the time when Jesus was crucified), in the entire Western, Christian world. At first stoked by the church, a pernicious anti-Judaism developed, which was based on ignorance of Jewish ways and baseless accusations, such as those regarding blood-libel (killing of Christian children to use their blood as an ingredient in food like matzah), Jews as Christ killers (complicit in the crucifixion), desecration of the host (stabbing the sacramental wafer with a dagger to symbolically kill Jesus a second time), usury

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(exorbitant interest in moneylending) during the Middle Ages, and poisoning of wells during the time of the Black Death in the fourteenth century. When Jews were finally given civil rights at the beginning of the Second German Empire in 1871, the ignorance did not go away. Rather, added to it were fear and envy because the 1 percent Jewish minority was now able to move out of the ghetto; live where it wanted to; work in state positions, including the government; attend university; participate in public life—all of it leading to even more resentment and less desire to learn about Jewish traditions and values. The German backlash to civil rights for Jews in the 1880s and 1890s, though fought mostly in the press, was tremendous. German Christians after World War I found nothing wrong with accusing their fellow Jewish Germans of stabbing the nation in the back by

not serving in World War I. This was of course not true; many German Jews volunteered during World War I, the Jewish nation suffering wounded and dead in large numbers. Nevertheless, such ignorance by the population was grounded in the alienation that nearly two thousand years of separation into insiders and outsiders had spawned. A popular perception, though wrong, could not be reversed or redirected without massive public education. This process never happened, and when the Nazis played on all of the old fears and anti-Semitic tales, much of the population, in their ignorance, swallowed the poison without questioning its veracity.

In my class on the Holocaust and on other twentieth-century genocides, we study the pattern according to which genocide unfolds based on the pamphlet *1900–2000: A Genocidal Century*, developed by Dr. William L. Shulman of the Harriet and Kenneth Kupferberg Holocaust Resource Center and Archives at Queensborough Community College (New York: Queensborough Community

College, no year). This pattern consists of eight stages of genocide, stages that are discernible in most of the genocides that happened during the twentieth century. And there were many—the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks, the Ukrainian famine under Joseph Stalin, the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, the Bosnian genocide by the Serbs, the Rwandan genocide perpetrated by the Hutus, and of course the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany.

Following is a discussion of the eight stages:

Classification (1) into “us” and “them” is a powerful divider and quickly leads to symbolization (2). The Belgians, back in the 1930s, introduced a new idea into their mandate territory, Rwanda. Separating Hutus and Tutsis according to facial features, such as skin color and the shape of their nose, the Belgians divided an otherwise united population artificially, making the Hutus and the Tutsis carry identity cards. (See *A Genocidal Century* and Helmut Walser

Smith, ed., *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics*, a project of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission [Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006 (2002)], 201–22.) One of the approximately four hundred statutes passed by the Nazis to separate the Jews of Germany from their Christian fellow citizens decreed the wearing of the yellow Star of David (Magen David), a symbol that all European Jews were required to attach to their clothing starting in 1941. This was not a new idea but reminiscent of the round yellow patch that Christian as well as Muslim nations made Jews wear on their clothing during the Middle Ages.

Once the division was irrevocable through legislation—such as the Nuremberg Laws that revoked German Jews’ citizenship and forbade any inter-group relations because of the Jews’ perceived racial inferiority—the fire of hatred was stoked through the dehumanization (3) of the group that became the victims. German Jews who consorted with German Christians were called

race defilers and humiliated in public. Tutsis in Rwanda were characterized in terms of cockroaches. And once the concentration camps were established in Europe, those interned there were given a number for identification instead of a name.

It seems that once the level of dehumanization has been reached, turning back becomes harder and harder, for this stage is followed by a plan to organize (4) for the purpose of murdering fellow human beings without any moral inhibition. In Rwanda and in Germany, existing government organizations became tools of state-sanctioned destruction. In Rwanda legitimate work details were transformed into killing squads. In Germany political groups such as the SA (Brownshirts) and the SS (Blackshirts) became involved in the destruction of German Jews during Kristallnacht in 1938—burning, terrorizing, looting, and murdering their innocent fellow citizens at will.

Hate propaganda played a large role in the successful demonization of German Jews. Hitler's propaganda minister spared no effort to portray Jews as

inferior and Germans as superior. This polarization (5) was quickly seized on to intimidate the moderates in the in-group by threatening arrest and public exposure as "Jew lovers" and to secure the names of "the enemy," compiling lists in preparation for the terrorization (6) of German Jews, from civil exclusion to deportation via the German railroad to murder in concentration and death camps. The Wannsee Conference in January of 1942 was a ninety-minute meeting in a Berlin suburb during which the intended murder of the entire Jewish population of Europe was decided. At this point only massive internal protests or a united protest by the world community would have deterred those in the leadership from carrying out their evil plans. In the instances of the Armenians, the Jews, the Tutsis, the Bosnians, the Ukrainians, and the Cambodians, there were no loud internal protests, nor were there sufficient external voices, so that the seventh stage, which turns this human evil into mass extermination (7), could happen. During this stage there is no reason, there is no mercy, there is no humanity. The

world is drenched in blood. Innocent children and aged grandparents suffer the same fate as the able-bodied adults in the bloom of their life. There is only death, with an occasional survivor or two, who escape from the carnage by accident—the malfunctioning gas chamber; the shooter who misses his aim; the fall from a cliff, cushioned by the many dead bodies that had gone before. One out of millions.

- The Danes as a nation saved most of their seven thousand Jewish citizens by helping them escape across the water to Sweden. For two weeks boatmen risked their lives, journeying back and forth under the cover of darkness.

Why did Righteous Gentiles, known and unknown, feel compelled to help? The answer some of these heroes themselves give is simple—it was the human thing to do, the right thing, there was no question. The question that remains for us, then, is how did they know? What motivated them? What steered their moral compass? Why is it natural for some individuals to do the right thing but not for others?

Not all perpetrator individuals and nations have learned from their horrible path of destruction. While some nations eventually came around to owning up to the crimes against humanity that they committed, forming truth commissions or international tribunals such as the Nuremberg Trials or the trial of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic by the International Human Rights Court in The Hague, some nations, such as the Turks to this day, deny the accusations of genocide (8) leveled against them. Even in the case of nations who have made amends and have paid reparations to some of their victims, such as Germany, there is audible grumbling by individuals that “we have done enough.”

When it comes to human life, we can never do enough to rectify murder. We cannot bring the deceased person back to life. According to Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, drafted by the UN General Assembly with the support of Raphael Lemkin and passed on December 9, 1948, no individual or body has the right to commit acts “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Such acts include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of

A few, too few, were so fortunate as to encounter an angel. Such an angel was Chiune Sugihara, Japanese consul to Kovno, Lithuania, who took it upon himself to write transit visas for two thousand or more desperate Lithuanian Jews against the will of his government. They were spared, enabled to leave evil behind, escaping to Curaçao, a Caribbean country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and other places in the world where they were safe (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 239). In all, there are only about twenty thousand individuals worldwide who have been recognized as Righteous Gentiles by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial and Education Center. Out of a world population of slightly more than two billion in 1940, that is not a large percentage of human beings who chose to care. It is all the more important to recognize these brave and courageous people who provided a hiding place, a scrap of bread, false papers, money to pay for visas or for transportation to safety. Some of the better known among them were

- Czech businessman Oscar Schindler, who saved eleven hundred Jews by employing them in his factory, even if they were not qualified.
- Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish businessman and diplomat, who still in 1944 was sent to Budapest by the United States government to try to rescue some of the eight hundred thousand Jews in danger there. He managed to save about one hundred thousand by placing them in safe houses and giving them visas to safety. Unfortunately, after the war he disappeared behind the Iron Curtain and apparently died in Soviet hands.
- Feng Shan Ho, Chinese consul to Vienna, provided visas to Austrian Jews so they could emigrate to Shanghai. Today there is a room dedicated to his heroic deeds in the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum.
- Pastor André Trocmé and his wife, Magda, of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, took in Jews who knocked on their door, as did many of the families in this Huguenot village.



the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 147; Shulman, 1900–2000, 5).

Jewish tradition teaches that he or she who saves a life saves an entire universe. The question is, how should we live life so that our focus will be on the preservation, even prospering, of human life and not on its destruction? To date, none of our existing world philosophies or religions has succeeded in teaching us how to successfully “choose good” all of the time and not evil some of the time.

As a beginning, no action is too small. Ordinary people often underestimate the power of their actions. Students will say to me, “What can I do? I am just one person.” Simple steps such as inclusion—accepting someone of a different ethnic group, orientation, or religion as one of our own—are a good start. Actively resisting those who would drive a wedge between members of society is also a step in the right direction.

When Pastor Trocmé was ordered to reveal the names of the Jews the village was hiding, he refused, saying, “These Jews are my brothers” (Smith, *Holocaust and Other Genocides*, 82). Speaking out when an injustice occurs is crucial. In studying past genocides, it is often pointed out that bystanders were as guilty as perpetrators because their silence translated into complicity. Raising one’s voice is a social responsibility; anything less is cowardice. Helmut Smith, in *The Holocaust and Other Genocides*, points out that if “the Catholic Church would have spoken out forcefully and openly from the beginning [of the Holocaust], it would have given moral and spiritual encouragement to opposition groups” (252). Not creating, supporting, or even listening to media hype about members of a particular group is important. Helping to prevent hate speech or hateful action is imperative. Protecting the right of free speech for all people matters. If in doubt, following the Golden Rule in Leviticus 19:18, “Love your fellow human being as yourself,” is an excellent basis for a life that will respect others. This is not difficult to understand, as Pastor Trocmé and his wife, Magda, showed, as did the citizens of Denmark.

Prejudice, or bias, which at first glance seems to be a benign and ordinary trait common to most of us, can indeed be innocent. A baby who spits out green beans or spinach acts spontaneously. The vegetables don’t taste good. As we grow up, we recognize the value of green beans and spinach. How do we get there? We have learned about nutrition and understand the contribution green vegetables make to our health. Prejudice or ignorance concerning our fellow human beings stems from moral immaturity, which if tutored, will turn into understanding and appreciation. During the Holocaust, the citizens of Denmark refused to see a Jewish problem. Jewish Danes were no different from Christian Danes. Danes were

Danes. Why can we, each of us, not do the same thing, and say human beings are human beings? Where is it written that one person has to be more or less human than another?

On April 24 of every year, Armenians commemorate the Armenian genocide; on April 19, Jews worldwide commemorate the Holocaust (Europe commemorates the Shoah on January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz). This year for the memorial service I was asked to read some words written by Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz and a teacher. For a long time these words followed me because they speak about the future, our future, in relation to the past:

And now the boy is turning to me. “Tell me,” he asks, “what have you done with *my* future, what have you done with *your* life?” And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices. And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world *did* know, and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever, wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. . . . When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must, at that moment, become the center of the universe. (Elie Wiesel, via Jeff Gubitz, Knoxville Jewish Alliance Yom HaShoah observance, April 18, 2012, Knoxville, Tennessee. Emphasis mine.)

Such is the harvest of prejudice. It is a terrible responsibility to bear but also a great opportunity to do good. □

# Peace Building at the Community Level through Interreligious Engagement

by Jehan Perera

***Faith-based efforts hold immense potential to create peace in Sri Lanka. With the moral authority to decry conflict and the social networks to mobilize support and public action, religious groups could spread the message of peace in effective and sustainable ways.***

There is a broad consensus among historians and political scientists that the fundamental grievances of ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka predate the outbreak of armed conflict in 1983 (K. M. de Silva, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Ethnic Conflict, Ethnic Politics in Sri Lanka* [New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998]; A. R. M. Imtiyaz and Ben Stavis, "Ethno-Political Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Third World Studies* 25, no. 2 [2008]: 135–152). The military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 by the Sri Lankan government only eliminated a symptom of a much more pervasive and long-lived problem. The cultural pluralism found in Sri Lanka is an essential dimension of this conflict. The majority, about 75 percent of the population, is Sinhalese. The rest is divided among the Sri Lankan Tamils (11.4 percent), who compete with the Sinhalese for claims of historical entitlement to the land; the Sri Lankan Moors (8.2 percent), who trace their roots to Arab traders; and the Indian Tamils (5 percent), who were brought to the island as plantation workers by the British (Department of Census and Statistics, *Population by Ethnicity, Census Years* [Colombo, Sri Lanka: Department of Census and Statistics, 2008]). However,

it is important to note that ethnicity is one of multiple axes of identity, and its importance in conflict varies over time.

There have been increasing instances of religious intolerance and conflict in Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese have been very effectively mobilized through Buddhism; similarly, Tamil-speaking Muslims assert a more distinct identity for themselves based on their religion. Hinduism, another early religion of Sri Lanka, is associated with Tamil roots. The Christian population is less reliant on ethnic markers, as its membership includes both Sinhalese and Tamils. These interactions between ethnicity and religion suggest that even though race is the primary source of social stratification in Sri Lanka, people are always "aware of the religious identities associated with different communities" and realize that all religions have political elements (Shawn Flanigan, "Faith and Fear in Development: The Role of Religion in Sri Lanka's NGO Sector" [paper presented at the forty-ninth annual convention of the International Studies Association: "Bridging Multiple Divides," San Francisco, March 28, 2008]. Accessed: [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p254098\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p254098_index.html)).

The mobilization of religious identities plays a key role in the war's social

and political history. To maintain power, the traditional Sinhala elite politicized Sinhala-Buddhist identity and drew upon religio-cultural symbolism to unite the Sinhala-Buddhists into a base of electoral support. In doing so, the political elite ignored the needs of Sri Lanka's minorities, severely damaging its relations with them. In response to the increasing Sinhala-Buddhist dominance of political structures, Sri Lankan Tamils began to harden their own ethnic boundaries, eventually giving rise to a volatile form of Tamil nationalism around which the rebel group, the LTTE, was organized. Meanwhile, Tamil-speaking Muslims began to assert their own distinct ethnic identity, fearing that their particular sociopolitical and economic interests would be marginalized in a broader Tamil-speaking coalition.

The politicization of religion has also become a major impediment to peace building in Sri Lanka. In particular, the conflation of religious and ethnic identity has been a crucial dimension in Sri Lanka's civil war. Historical myths and narratives have been used to construct ideological justifications for Sinhala-Buddhist dominance. The sixth-century chronicle *Mahavamsa*, for instance, is heavily influenced by the view of the Buddhist clergy as protectors of Buddhism and "the island of Sri Lanka as the Buddhist Promised Land" (Tessa Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* [New York: Routledge, 2002]). Since the country is construed as the sacred stronghold of Buddhism, it becomes

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vital that it be protected from conquest or adulteration.

In the early postindependence era, sections of the Sinhalese political elite employed this notion of a sacrosanct Sinhala-Buddhist heritage to unite and mobilize the Sinhala people. Unfortunately, however, such politics also served to increase the country's ethnic divisions and precipitate its civil war. Furthermore, these historical myths have created a milieu that justifies the ascendancy and dominance of the political class and Buddhist establishment. This is manifest in the election of some sections of the Buddhist clergy to the parliament. (Several monks have run for public office as part of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, the National Heritage Party.) Their campaign platform emphasizes Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy and a strong commitment to a centralized, unitary governmental structure.

Although a centralized government would allow Sinhala-Buddhists to continue in their historically perceived roles

as political advisors, this vision conflicts with that of the nation's minorities, who would prefer to see a federal system of devolved government in which their own interests can be realized.

The connections between ethnicity and religion in the Sri Lankan Tamil community are more complex. The Hindu identity of the Tamils is sometimes utilized to speak out against the group's enemies. For instance, Muslims, on both ethnic and religious grounds, are excluded from the Tamil category (this practice is also tied to Muslim self-determination), while Christians who disagree with the ideals of Tamil nationalism are sometimes targeted through their religion.

Since both Sinhalese and Tamils feel that their existence is threatened, a large majority perceived the nationalistic conflict as a necessary evil. (The Sinhalese, though a majority in the nation, feel threatened by the large population of Tamils who surround them in the region. This "minority complex" of the Sinhalese

is theorized by K. M. de Silva in *A History of Sri Lanka* [Colombo, Sri Lanka: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2003, p. 513] to contribute to their need for political power.) In the current climate of Sinhala-Buddhist triumphalism and continued ethnic tension, it also becomes difficult for members of either group to speak of a peaceful reconciliation that included a political solution that addresses the roots of the ethnic conflict. It is important to keep these fears in mind when trying to establish an interreligious effort for peace. Those organizing such a project must understand that each religious group has its own specific concerns and that forming a unified idea of "peace" will be a difficult task.

## Peace-Building Efforts

There are currently a number of different religious and interreligious efforts to create and promote peace in Sri Lanka. The work ranges from development projects to humanitarian aid. Faith-based efforts hold immense potential to create peace in Sri Lanka. With the moral authority to decry conflict and the social networks to mobilize support and public action, religious groups could spread the message of peace in effective and sustainable ways. In particular, interreligious initiatives that aim to bridge ethno-religious divides and establish a discourse of understanding (even in the face of severe opposition) provide hope that a desire for peace is still alive.

Religious peace building in Sri Lanka is organized at two different levels. The

interreligious councils, headed by leaders of national religious organizations, hold interventions and publicly speak for humanitarianism and peace. Meanwhile, there are less-publicized efforts at the grass roots that are also powerful advocates for a sustainable peace.

At the institutional level, Sri Lanka's Congress of Religions is perhaps the most prominent of all exclusively interfaith efforts to date. An organization that enjoys the membership of powerful leaders from all four faiths, the congress convenes periodically to issue statements on national concerns such as violence at elections and matters of good governance. It has also used its influence to lobby the Sri Lankan political leadership and express its opposition to violence and injustice. The congress has increased its activities by forming a select delegation of goodwill ambassadors who, if they can maintain their commitment to these intensive roles, could become very effective advocates for the people. Their significant standing in social and political circles means that these ambassadors have access to sensitive information.

The Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace (SLCRP) is the local body of the international interreligious organization Religions for Peace. The SLCRP has many means of influence. The religious leaders who form its membership are prominent figures who are active in both politics and society; it receives substantial funding from its international funders; and it is promoted by influential civil society actors. One of the objectives of the SLCRP is to address directly the politics of Sri Lanka's conflict. This includes engaging in activities to transform the values of the political leadership, civil society, and its own politicized spiritual body toward a harmonious peace, while involving itself in multilevel diplomacy to encourage reconciliation between the country's ethnic groups. Much of the SLCRP's work in recent times has focused on

national and district conferences that bring together both the religious elite and the local religious leaders.

Collaborative efforts between top religious leaders, like the ones detailed above, are powerful, since they hold influence over the political sphere and have easy access to the public eye. However, as of yet, these organizations have not had a holistic impact on Sri Lankan society, since they have not been able to branch out into extensive, effective grassroots work. Neither have they been prepared to tackle frontally the political root causes of the conflict and the prejudice and biased notions of history, which stand in the path of a political solution. One cannot underestimate the importance of work at the community level in a country where decades of propaganda, and the fear and suspicion generated by war, have had a formidable impact.

Those organizations that attempt to work at the grassroots level often find that progress is discouragingly slow. It is widely believed that the people are politically apathetic and are too afraid of retribution to be involved in political affairs. This is a justifiable concern. However, it must also be remembered that much of the population remains in a state of poverty and does not have the opportunity to think about ideological issues when their very survival is so difficult to pursue. Furthermore, they have become subject to the nationalist propaganda regularly circulated by the media (especially state-owned media). Seminars, pamphlets, and other educational materials, though they may be useful, will thus have limited impact at the grassroots level.

Peace work at the grass roots must, therefore, include a means of empowering the people and improving their lives. While the institutional peace organizations recognize this in their attempts to address specific needs of the people, an organization that has taken this precept further is the Sarvodaya Shramadana

Movement. Working intensively at the grassroots level, Sarvodaya believes in "peace through development" and uses the concept of a common human spirituality to heal hostile relations and create and sustain community-based solidarity.

Although infused with Buddhist values, Sarvodaya works through a cross-cultural, interreligious attempt at bottom-up peace building. Since it views peace as one of many human needs, it organizes programs in which peace and village-level development go hand in hand. During these programs, people from many religious and ethnic backgrounds convene to work on a common project—building a road or clearing a local field, for example—that both enhances their community and builds strong human ties. Since people overlook barriers such as race, religion, and political affiliation to solve a mutual problem, it establishes a sense of a common humanity and allows for an empathetic understanding of the other to take place.

Sarvodaya's work highlights the positive effects of a grassroots movement for peace. Working in more than fifteen thousand villages all across the country (including the war-stricken northeast), Sarvodaya has been able to persuade both the people and their immediate leaders to support and maintain an active peace. Since it recognizes that a holistic effort is needed for full peace to occur, Sarvodaya also works at the district, zonal, and national levels. However, it is most recognized for its advances at the grass roots.

## Community Engagement

Another organization that has sought to work with clergy to achieve peace-building outcomes and reconciliation is the National Peace Council (NPC). The NPC started a project to promote cooperation among multireligious communities in Sri Lanka, focusing on groups that have been divided by the conflict.



Accordingly, in each target area, a district-level interreligious council (DIRC) was established. The overall objective of the NPC is to create peaceful relations among all communities in Sri Lanka's diverse population, contributing to a healing society in a postwar context. The intention is to promote multireligious community responsiveness of groups who have been divided by the conflict and enable them to find appropriate humanitarian solutions to care for conflict-affected women and children.

DIRCs, which are active in twelve districts, have direct access to grassroots communities, enabling DIRCs to understand and voice the concerns of the communities. The committee members have contacts with higher-level religious leaders and those with political command and are in a position to inform and influence them. By closely working with a grassroots organizing structure, the NPC has been able to empower local community-based organization leaders and maintain a bottom-up approach to finding solutions to humanitarian needs through a multireligious perspective. DIRCs have two primary roles in furthering peace at the grass roots. One is offering local religious communities opportunities to undertake multireligious action and advocacy for peace, and the second is to help local communities create a strong internal solidarity regardless of ethnic or religious division.

The NPC's work with its interreligious committees demonstrates that, by and large, people are open-minded and willing to see a different side if there is someone willing to show it to them. This is what was evident at an interreligious conference on June 16, 2012, that was the culmination of a two-year process of working together for reconciliation (National Inter-Religious Conference, Colombo, Sri Lanka, June 16, 2012; facilitated by the National Peace Council. See *Island* newspaper, June 29, 2012). The draft resolution that was approved by the two hundred-strong conference

was worked on a few weeks earlier by a drafting committee consisting of twenty-five persons. At that discussion there had been some areas that were difficult for the drafting committee to agree upon. The committee members came from twelve districts of the country, including the north and east, which were the most severely affected by the three-decades-long war. Those from the north and east in particular had strong feelings about the problems that continued to affect war victims there. They wished for a resolution with more demands and more bite in it. Others on the drafting committee urged a more restrained approach. They cautioned that the resolution needed to be ratified by a much larger group and so needed to be acceptable to all. There was a process of negotiation and give-and-take that serves as an example to the political society in the country.

Those who ratified the resolution were clergy from all four major religious communities and their lay adherents. They were aware that the resolution they were giving their assent to would be directed to those vested with the authority of the state, who had the power to act on their demands and recommendations and who could also view them with disfavor as being critical of the prevailing situation. The resolution that was approved at the conference would be an expression of thinking from the community level itself. It is an important indicator to the government of unfinished tasks in the area of resettlement and rebuilding of the lives of those affected by the war. It cannot be dismissed as the mere propaganda of an NGO or of any political party with a partisan political agenda.

The formulation of the resolution was an indicator that it is possible to reach agreement on matters that affect the lives of people through a consultative process where there is goodwill and trust. This will be a source of encouragement to the political authorities in dealing with

the early warning signs of new conflicts, especially in the area of religion.

In some ways, such community level work may be more effective in changing attitudes and in promoting peace than similar work among those at the national level. Unlike the more national level leadership, the people have no concrete roles or agendas that prevent them from committing to a wholehearted stand for peace. Peace through the grass roots is also comparatively more stable, since it builds up a movement rather than trying to persuade multiple levels of the political, social, and religious hierarchies from the leadership down. Most important, working at the grass roots bypasses the need to work through the very political structure that opposes peace. At the same time, it promotes a change in the hearts of the people, who together have the power to elect new leadership and change the state of the nation. □

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# Overcoming Islamophobia

by A. Rashied Omar

***Is there a global and hegemonic discourse that seeks to attribute violent acts committed by Muslims to Islam yet construes acts of atrocity committed by perpetrators such as [Anders] Breivik as motivated by political, economic, or cultural factors? . . . If indeed Islamophobia is a reality in the world today, how can we mitigate such prejudices against Islam and Muslims?***

The July 22, 2011, terrorist attack in Norway, which left more than seventy people dead, shocked the world. Within hours of the massacre, even without a single thread of evidence, most talking heads and “counterterrorism experts” were quick to speculate about the possible involvement of Muslims. Norwegian police subsequently charged Anders Behring Breivik, a thirty-two-year-old Norwegian citizen and self-proclaimed Islamophobe. The media displayed an obvious lack of responsibility by jumping on an Islamophobic bandwagon and reporting false information about these attacks. What is even more astounding is that after the identity of the perpetrator was revealed, international media no longer referred to this massacre as a terrorist attack, and neither was religion implicated.

As Breivik’s terror trial continues in Norway, we are left to ponder a number of critical questions: Can this atrocity be dismissed as an isolated act of a madman? Why are numerous news outlets quick to target Muslims for any terrorist attack? Is there a global and hegemonic discourse that seeks to attribute violent acts committed by Muslims to

Islam yet construes acts of atrocity committed by perpetrators such as Breivik as motivated by political, economic, or cultural factors? More important, for the purposes of this essay, if indeed Islamophobia is a reality in the world today, how can we mitigate such prejudices against Islam and Muslims?

While we search for answers to these troubling questions, it is indisputable that this Norwegian attack has exposed more than ever before the ideological underpinnings of the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe, in

the United States, and elsewhere in the world. According to one of the foremost scholars of Islam in the world today, John Esposito, Islamophobia did not suddenly come into being after the attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001. Esposito argues that “like anti-Semitism and xenophobia it has long and deep historical roots” (John L. Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, eds., *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], xxii). One of Europe’s most prominent Muslim leaders, Mustafa Ceric, the supreme head (*reis-ul-ulema*) of the Islamic community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, sounded the alarm more than two decades ago in the midst of the Bosnian genocide of the early 1990s. In trying to make sense of the Bosnian genocide, Ceric claimed that Serbian anti-Muslim prejudice was part of a larger global discourse: “a logical consequence of the

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dominant stereotype in the West that sees Islam as a hideous, bloodthirsty, intolerant, and aggressive cult” (interview with Mustafa Ceric, May 15, 2002). In support of this contention, Ceric cited the work of Stephen Schwartz and Bruce Lawrence. Schwartz argues that “Muhammad has an evil reputation among Westerners that . . . sets him apart from Moses and Jesus” (*The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa’ud from Tradition to Terror* [New York: Doubleday, 2002], 2. Ceric makes this same argument in “Judaism, Christianity, Islam: Hope or Fear of Our Times,” in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. James L. Heft [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004], 46–47.). Lawrence observes that “the stereotype that Islam is inherently violent, and that Muslims are prone to violence amounts to a slur” (*Shattering the Myth: Islam beyond Violence* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 4. Emran Qureshi and Michael Sells argue that “once Islam is defined as inherently violent and intolerant, modern conflicts involving Muslims can be reduced to a single cause” [Qureshi and Sells, eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5].). Ceric strongly believes that

this violent image of Islam is etched in Western perceptions of Islam. It is the same consciousness that has contributed in no small measure to the ethnic cleansing campaign

against Bosnian Muslims and is currently conditioning academic analyses of the Bosnian war such that the Christian perpetrators of the violence are obscured by the so-called objectivist strategy of assigning equal blame to all parties to the conflict. (Interview with Mustafa Ceric, May 6, 2003)

These are strong views coming from one of the leading Muslim religious figures in Europe. (Ceric serves as a senior member of the European Council of Religious Leaders [UCRL]. It is a participating body of the World Conference of Religions for Peace.) Ceric’s views are, however, not idiosyncratic. This denial of the religious motivation behind violence perpetrated by Christians, Jews, Hindus, and adherents of other faiths, in combination with the avowal that Islam sanctions violence perpetrated by Muslims, is now one of the serious breaches of communication between religious communities. Many Muslim leaders and laypersons now repeatedly and publicly announce this double standard in the way Ceric stated it. (For a similar argument, see the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 6, 2002, “Unfair to Direct Blame at Islam.” In this article, Duke University Islamic expert Ebrahim Moosa argues that “a pattern is emerging. When Jeffrey Dahmer, David Berkowitz or Adolf Hitler killed people, they were held accountable as individuals. But if Mohammed Atta or John Allen Muhammad kill, then suddenly all of Islam is culpable.”)

Ceric prefers to refer to this phenomenon as “Islamophobia.” (This has been a persistent refrain by Ceric. During an acceptance speech on receiving the 2003 UNESCO Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize, Ceric warned of the growing threat of Islamophobia in Europe and around the world. Visit [http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-478/\\_nr-90/\\_p-1/i.html?PHPSESSID=9cd1b25a8bedb466c25e163002f0e45c](http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-90/_p-1/i.html?PHPSESSID=9cd1b25a8bedb466c25e163002f0e45c) [consulted in April 2012].) But how accurate is Ceric’s judgment? To what extent is Islamophobia a real problem in Europe, the United States, and the world at large?

## The Challenge of Islamophobia

The term *Islamophobia* was coined in the mid-1990s to express the range and depth of antipathy toward Islam and Muslims found particularly in Western Europe and the United States since the end of the Cold War, which only increased after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The term became popularized after the Runnymede Trust, an independent research and social policy agency in Britain, established the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1996. The commission’s report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, was published in November 1997 and defined Islamophobia as “the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs

to Muslims” (London: Runnymede Trust, 1997). Esposito and Kalin in *Islamophobia* have usefully summarized the Runnymede Trust’s findings on Muslim stereotyping as follows:

- Exclusion from economic, social, and public life
- Discrimination in the blatant form of hate crimes and subtler forms of disparagement
- The perception that the religion of Islam has no common values with the West, is inferior to the West (or to Judaism and Christianity), and that it really is a violent political ideology rather than a source of faith and spirituality, unlike the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity

The Runnymede report was followed by a wider European investigation instituted by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) following the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. The EUMC report, which came out in 2002, made a similar finding that “Islamic communities and other vulnerable groups have become targets of increased hostility since September 11.” (For a summary, see Christopher Allen and Jorgen Nielsen, eds., *Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September: Summary Report* [Vienna: EUMC, 2002]. For a

strategic response to Islamophobia, see Barry Van Driel, ed., *Confronting Islamophobia in Educational Practice* [Stoke on Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 2004].) The then United Nations secretary-general, Kofi Annan, called on the international community to acknowledge and challenge this latest form of prejudice.

In 2004 Annan recognized Islamophobia as a global problem and consequently convened a UN conference on the theme “Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding” (Esposito and Kalin, *Islamophobia*, xxiii). In his opening address, Annan characterized the challenge of Islamophobia as follows:

[When] the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry—that . . . is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with “Islamophobia.” . . . Since the September 11 attacks on the United States, many Muslims, particularly in the West, have found themselves the objects of suspicion, harassment and discrimination. . . . Too many people see Islam as a monolith and as intrinsically opposed to the West. (Ibid., xxiv)

A 2009 Gallup Center for Muslim Studies telephone survey found that 43

percent of Americans admitted to having negative feelings or at least “a little” prejudice against Muslims.

## Three Proposals for Overcoming Islamophobia

Finally, I would like to make three modest proposals that may help in overcoming prejudices against Islam and Muslims. My suggestions emerge primarily from my own assessment of the current geopolitical realities and the corresponding problem of Islamophobia.

First, Muslims must not become weary of stating again and again, loudly and unequivocally, that acts of wanton violence and barbarism are contrary to the teachings of Islam. And the news media must do more to make sure their voices are heard. In Islamic ethics, the end does not justify the means. Religious extremism has no virtue in Islam and was unequivocally condemned by the prophet Muhammad. He is reported in an authentic prophetic tradition (hadith) to have declared thrice, “The extremists shall perish” (this prophetic tradition is found in the famous compilation *Sahih Muslim*; translated into English by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui). For contemporary Muslims, this means to acknowledge, no matter how painful it is, that they do have extremists (*mutatarrifun*) in their ranks. This is, of course, not unique to Islam. What is peculiar to Islam is that the number of extremists appears to be disproportionate, not least because of the proclivity of the media for sensationalism. Muslim leaders have an especially onerous challenge of condemning violent overreactions and not allowing misguided individuals to be recognized as members of Islam who have acted in a thoroughly reprehensible and depraved way in response to perceived provocations against Islam.

Second, we need to work hard at developing what religious-studies scholar Diana Eck calls “theologies of religious



pluralism.” A number of contemporary analysts concur with Eck and have claimed that religion is often implicated in deadly conflicts because of its inherently exclusivist claims. The Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, argues that “the sense of superiority which religions, certainly not excluding Christianity, have in fact repeatedly shown proves to be one of the greatest obstacles to the human cohabitation of different religions within the same state frontiers, as is increasingly the case in our day” (“Documentation: Religion and Violence,” in *Concilium* 4 [1997]: *Religion as a Source of Violence?*, ed. Wim Beuken and Karl-Josef Kuschel [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books], 130).

The challenge for religious and spiritual leaders is to champion theologies that are authentic and yet do not deny the right of others to hold beliefs and views that are radically different from their own. Applying this to the Islamic tradition, I would contend that a denial of the right of others to hold beliefs and views that are different is tantamount to a denial of God himself. In support of my contention, the Glorious Quran, chapter 10, verse 99, declares: “If your Lord had so desired, all the people on the earth would surely have come to believe, all of them; do you then think, that you could compel people to believe?”

The challenge that the principle of freedom of belief and thought holds for Muslims is to amplify this Quranic teaching and to work hard to make it an integral part of the fabric of contemporary Muslim culture.

Third, we need to build interreligious global action campaigns. We will not be able to overcome Islamophobia unless we work toward a just global order.

Interreligious activists need to consistently highlight the fact that the current iniquitous global conditions do not lend themselves well to a credible Muslim or any other peace initiative. A number of scholars have already pointed this out. For example, John Esposito has

ominously warned in his most recent book, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, that “if foreign policy issues are not addressed effectively, they will continue to be breeding ground for hatred and radicalism, the rise of extremist movements, and recruits for the bin Ladens of the world” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 157). In line with this analysis, interreligious activists need to support the call for a public debate concerning the most effective means to counteract Muslim and other forms of extremism. Interreligious activists need to join the many voices all over the world that are questioning the wisdom of the current strategy pursued in the “war on terrorism.” They also need to back the call for a serious reassessment concerning the controversial US foreign policy that abets authoritarian Muslim regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere and is uncritical of Israel, too often giving unilateral support for Israel’s present policies (support for this view is presented in Graham E. Fuller, “The Future of Political Islam,” *Foreign Affairs* [Council on Foreign Relations, New York], [March/April 2002]: 60). The belligerent environment that is currently being engendered is not helpful in ameliorating the root causes that provide a fertile ground on which extremism thrives. On the contrary, it is generating conditions that favor extremism, thus rendering the task of eradicating Islamophobia extremely difficult. More important, such an unequivocal call for justice in the Middle East and elsewhere, coming from Jewish and Christian institutions and leaders, would help rebuild trust and confidence in the beleaguered initiatives of Muslim peace builders and their support bases.

## Conclusion

Let us return to the July 2011 Norwegian terrorist attack orchestrated by Anders Behring Breivik, a self-proclaimed Islamophobe, which left more than

seventy people dead. This tragic incident is a stark reminder that all religious communities struggle with their lunatic fringes, who consciously and skillfully manipulate religious and nationalist symbols and texts in order to obtain acquiescence and submission to their profane and expedient political objectives. For people of faith—whatever our tradition—such horrific events must serve as a reminder of our need to continue to bear witness against intolerance and violence and to bear witness to our parallel commitment to assist in the building of theologies of pluralism. There exists a dire need for the followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as all other traditions, to retrieve our common humanity and to end the horrific dehumanization that is currently taking place on such a wide scale. We call upon the global interreligious movement to take decisive action against hate groups and those who promote forms of bigotry, racism, and xenophobia. □

# Cross-Cultural Bridging for the Lotus Sutra

by Malcolm Pearce

***As an international advisor to Rissho Kosei-kai, the author gave presentations in November 2011 on Rissho Kosei-kai's cross-cultural dissemination of the teachings of Buddhism, at the International Dharma Missions Symposium and a meeting of Rissho Kosei-kai's International Advisory Committee, at Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters in Tokyo. The following essay is based on the two papers he presented.***

For the greater part of the past two thousand years, the Lotus Sutra has contributed to the shaping of Mahayana Buddhist culture right across East Asia. It has generated volumes of scholarly literature and inspired many great works of art. At times it has provided an impetus for social reform, and most significantly, it has infused the lives of millions of people with meaning and purpose. However, despite its prominence within its own sphere of influence, the sutra is scarcely known of in the wider world, much less understood. This situation is happily beginning to change in recent decades due in large part to the endeavors of Rissho Kosei-kai to disseminate Founder Nikkyo Niwano's socially relevant and humane interpretation of this vital work.

As often remarked upon by the founder, the Lotus Sutra is a text with many extraordinary features, among these being a pronouncement in chapter 2 that has no parallel in any other Buddhist sutra or in any other piece of foundational religious writing. This is the Original Vow of Shakyamuni Buddha, stated in the following words: "I originally took a vow wanting to enable all

living beings to be fully equal with me. In accord with that Original Vow, all is completely fulfilled."

The implications of this statement are far-reaching. In fact they are nothing short of cosmic. One inference must be that if the vow is already completely fulfilled, then all beings at any given moment are, in their essence, manifestations of buddha-nature. Founder Niwano exemplified this realization in his commitment to the sincere honoring of the buddha-nature within all people, regardless of their race or social status or doctrinal affiliation. This same practice continues to be pivotal in the lives of all active members of Rissho Kosei-kai.

The founder extensively promoted the Lotus Sutra, not only out of his reverence for the buddha-nature in people, but also out of his compassion for them. With these same warmhearted motivations, Rissho Kosei-kai has reached the threshold of a new phase in its mission. This is the establishment of its influence in new and diverse cultural contexts. It is taking root in the United States; in Europe; in Sri Lanka, India, Mongolia; and in other social environments that

are markedly different from the one in which it was born.

As Rissho Kosei-kai moves further into this new phase, it faces important questions of adaptation. To be successful as a vehicle for dispensing the sutra's message on a worldwide scale, there is a need for the organization to have Dharma teachers trained to be sensitive to the manifold attitudes, values, and beliefs that are integral to cultural diversity and to be capable of actively engaging with that diversity.

As an essential contributing factor to this, a Rissho Kosei-kai transcultural Dharma teacher should be fully aware of his or her own cultural conditioning and be able to view this objectively. It is necessary to have insight into what stands on both sides of a culture gap if the intention to reach across it is to bear good fruit.

Positioned on one side of any such cultural divide, Rissho Kosei-kai has its legacy of a universally relevant interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, but conjoined with this it has cultural features that were shaped in a Japanese environment as it existed fifty or more years ago. It is very possible that to new generations of Japanese people, some of these features may appear old-fashioned, while to people in non-Japanese societies, there are some that may seem disconcertingly exotic. Some remodeling of a few of these details might be worth considering.

In Buddhist terms, a successful cross-cultural bridging calls for the application of appropriate means. This entails

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the exercise of wisdom, compassion, and an abundance of flexibility, as demonstrated in the life of the founder and as explicitly stated in these words from chapter 2 of the sutra: “I know the nature and desires of living beings and I teach them these doctrines in appropriate ways, causing all living beings to attain joy and gladness.”

Many years ago I was helped to gain some understanding of the appropriate-means principle during a visit to Australia by a Rissho Kosei-kai staff member, Kotaro Suzuki, who is now minister of the Hiroshima Dharma Center. One evening he and I were preparing to speak to a small gathering of people new to Buddhism. We were both sitting at one end of a long room, and the visitors had all seated themselves at the far other end. With my best attempt at a friendly smile, I said to them, “You are all sitting a long way from us. Would you like to move a bit closer?” Some of the people moved, but several did not. After the meeting Suzuki-san commented, “Instead of asking them to move toward you, you should have moved toward them.” He was correct, of course. The visitors’ choice of position in the room was one that provided them with a sense of security. They were not ready to draw closer.

That incident became for me a metaphor for the general application of appropriate means. It is often the case when teaching people about religion that we require them to understand and accept our points of view, our beliefs, our experiences of life. That approach is rather

like our asking them to move across the room toward us. A more appropriate alternative would be for us to first show an appreciative interest in their existing points of view. That would then be like our moving across the room toward them. Applied in a cross-cultural situation, we would be asking ourselves, “What are the people in these other cultures already doing that could be nurturing to their spirituality and expanded upon?”

This principle applies very well to questions of crossing cultures in a temporal sense. Cultures differ not only across locations but also from what they previously were as they evolve with the passage of time. This leads to our asking how Rissho Kosei-kai should address itself to younger people who are the main contributors to this ongoing cultural evolution.

In Japan, the United States, Europe, and many other parts of the developed world, the second half of the twentieth century was a period of accelerated change. Continuous innovations in technology and shifts in popular fashion greatly affected the attitudes and general outlook of rising generations. They became ever more inclined to question established values and old ways of doing things.

Throughout this process there has been a sense among members of older generations that young people were becoming rather alien to them in their manner of behaving, in the language they used, and in their beliefs about meaning and purpose. Fruitful dialogue across

the generations was becoming for some older people rather like attempting a conversation with beings from another planet. To describe this phenomenon, the term *generation gap* was coined during the 1960s in the United States.

One outcome of this generational change process has been that in many parts of the developed world, traditional religions that have disregarded the emergence of the generation gap have largely lost the interest, support, and participation of younger people. These religions have experienced continuously diminishing membership and are at some risk of fading into eventual obscurity. This trend is markedly under way in the United Kingdom, with very adverse effects on traditional religious bodies. Shrinkage of attendance has led to the Church of England’s permanently closing the doors of more than fifteen hundred of its houses of worship since 1989. The Methodist Church, even more severely affected, has closed down around eight thousand of its chapels, leaving a mere hundred or so still active across the country.

Religious entities that can best survive in such ongoing cultural turbulence are those that can most effectively apply the principle of “crossing the room” toward younger generations and asking, “How can we speak to these young people in ways that would be meaningful to them in the context of their existing interests? What are they doing in their lives now that could be channeled toward their spiritual awakening?”

In the Lotus Sutra we see the answer

to this question brilliantly illustrated in the story of the burning house. Here we have the image of a crowd of very young people engaged in noisy frolic inside a house that has caught on fire. The youngsters, carried away by fun and excitement, totally ignore the calls of their father to come outside to safety. The frolicking children are seemingly beyond all help, but this proves not to be so because the father wisely recognizes that the children's preoccupation with play is the very thing that can save them. He calls out to them in terms of what makes sense to them. He offers them attractive playthings, and delighted at the prospect of having these, the children hurry outside to the safety of the open air. Here they are rewarded with gifts far exceeding anything they could previously have imagined.

A strategy very similar to that employed by the wise father has been applied in Australia by the Hillsong Church, which in recent decades has been attracting capacity crowds of youthful attendees. Hillsong accomplished this remarkable achievement by looking at what younger people most liked to do and finding, not surprisingly, that enjoyment of contemporary popular music was a favorite activity. Responding to this observation, the founders of Hillsong created youth services that superficially resemble popular concerts. Singers and bands perform religious songs on a brightly lit stage in musical expressions greatly enjoyed by the youthful congregation. Young members of Hillsong have identified among the essential elements of their church participation a sense of "transcendence conveyed through music and the arts."

There is some food for thought in this phenomenon. If the teachings of the Holy Bible can be rendered into a musical idiom popular with young people, is it too outlandish to think that something similar might be done for the Lotus Sutra? A project of this nature might begin with songwriting

and performance competitions organized by the young people themselves. Such a project need not be seen as trivializing the sutra in any way.

Cross-cultural bridging in a spatial sense can follow similar principles. We can look at societies outside Japan to discover existing features that Rissho Kosei-kai might engage with to promote its message. Modern France is of interest in this regard, for here is a country where Buddhism is becoming substantially established in a wide variety of forms. Within the French population, there is a growing interest in Buddhist teachings, and to cater to this, French TV carries a weekly program entitled *Wisdom of Buddhism* that regularly draws a quarter of a million viewers. France has the special distinction of being the first European nation to have the Lotus Sutra translated into its own language, an achievement made by Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) in 1844. Since that time other translations have been made into French, and several commentaries have been published in that language. These are all indications that France might be fertile ground for the growth of a form of Rissho Kosei-kai tailored in appearance to French conditions.

Outside of France there are other locations where Buddhism is a new and growing interest. All of them are potential environments where a culturally adapted Rissho Kosei-kai could exercise appropriate means of dissemination. However, these appropriate means might need to be quite different in each location.

Cultures separated by their geography rarely have complete uniformity in their attitudes to religion. Even the English-speaking world is far from being a cultural monolith in this regard. As an example, it is a political imperative in the United States for a politician seeking popular support to affirm openly a belief in God. By contrast, in Britain or Australia such an affirmation by a public

figure, other than clergy or a member of the Royal Family, would generally be thought of as indiscreet and would invite criticism. This is a "tip of the iceberg" indication that, even within one linguistic grouping, a religious stance that may sit easily within one population may not do so in another. This principle can be stated metaphorically as "one size shoe will not fit every foot."

One issue worth considering in this way relates to the responses that might be forthcoming to the distinctly Japanese look of some Rissho Kosei-kai practices. In non-Japanese populations, there would be people who might be very much attracted by these practices, but this would probably not apply in general. A specific case in point would be the Japanese mode of presentation in the detail of ancestor veneration, a practice that in Rissho Kosei-kai is intimately intertwined with the daily exercise of Lotus Sutra recitation.

Apart from its specifically Japanese style of expression, the essential meaning of this practice might not be very easy for people in some cultural contexts to appreciate. The prevailing culture of the West would be one example. The distinctive worldview that supports the revering of ancestors is largely absent from mainstream Western religious thinking. In the contemporary Western world, the general attitude to deceased persons is summarized in these words of Kenneth Dale: "In the West the dead are given a sacred burial rite. The dead are then erased from fellowship with the living." This observation tends to be true among people of European origin as well, and yet, rather significantly, it was not always so.

In ancient times, the veneration of ancestors was imbedded in the religious culture of western Europe and other adjacent regions. In private homes across the entire Roman Empire, a shrine to a family's ancestors was a focus for regular devotional rituals. This practice, termed *mos maiorum* (ancestral custom), was



services in Japan. Recent moves to discontinue the New York practice have provoked strong protest from family members.

These examples suggest that the concepts underlying ancestor veneration may not be entirely beyond the comprehension of Westerners. This would be especially so among those familiar with Buddhist conceptions of interconnectedness. Such people may accept that it is worthy to cultivate an appreciation of our dependence on our forebears as the source of our present life.

In Rissho Kosei-kai the practice has further dimensions of meaning, because in a special Buddhist sense, the ancestors are still living. To support the innate aspiration for spiritual awakening that they share with all other living beings, they are offered the merits arising from reciting extracts from the Lotus Sutra. In making this offering, members of Rissho Kosei-kai are engaging in a bodhisattva practice by giving their ancestors inspiration, comfort, and happiness.

The beautiful essence of this activity could be adopted in many societies and integrated with existing customs such as the all-night vigils held in Peru on All Souls Day (Día de los Muertos), but to achieve such an integration, there are issues of cultural style to be addressed. Should details of the practice as introduced to Peru be in full accordance with Japanese custom? Would it be efficacious or not for non-Japanese people in places like Scotland or Lebanon to be allocated *kaimyo* (posthumous Buddhist names) in the Japanese manner? There may be alternative modes of expression that might sit more easily within these very divergent societies.

As we can see, acknowledging the reality of cultural diversity is much easier than engaging with it, but assuming that Rissho Kosei-kai holds to the endlessly flexible principles of the Lotus Sutra, it will no doubt find innumerable ways to establish acceptance of its

message across the globe. Many people in many societies could be led thereby to discover more meaningful ways of living, contributing significantly to establishing peace, harmony, and spiritual friendship throughout the world. □

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an essential element of Roman family life, especially among the upper echelons of society. It was discontinued in the fourth and fifth centuries CE with the spread of early Christianity across Europe.

In the recent history of the West, a religion has emerged in the United States that has reestablished a sense of respectful consideration for ancestors. This is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are required to research the names of past generations of family members and to participate in rituals of vicarious baptism for them.

There are other instances of recently established activities in Western societies that are not too dissimilar in sentiment from ancestor veneration. In several Western countries on Mother's Day every year, numerous people visit the graves of their deceased mothers with gifts of flowers. At these occasions, informal expressions of remembrance and affection are made in words spoken directly to the deceased parent. Many people similarly observe Father's Day.

Another very recent innovation is the solemn commemorative reading of deceased victims' names held annually at the World Trade Center site in New York on the anniversary of the attack in September 2001. This ceremony has some resonance with the name-reading observances at *o-higan* and *o-bon*

# The Period of Skillful Means and Divine Revelation

by Nikkyo Niwano

***In March 1999 an autobiography of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, 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 an international lay Buddhist association 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.***

The twenty years between 1938, the founding of Rissho Kosei-kai, and 1957 are called by our organization the period of skillful means. It was a time when divine revelations to Myoko Sensei [*sensei* is Japanese for “teacher”; Myoko Naganuma was the cofounder of Rissho Kosei-kai], severe guidance about attitudes, and unequivocal repentance served as principles for our religious practice. But even if it was a time of employing skillful means, our practices were undeniably centered on benefiting others, on putting others first. We did not consider, before we began, what effect religious practice would have on our lives. Rather, we were engaged earnestly in doing away with all reliance on our own judgment and becoming people who could unreservedly leave everything to the witness of the buddhas and other heavenly deities. Rissho Kosei-kai's expansion was rapid, although its growth did not depend on careful planning.

At that time we did not teach

Buddhist doctrine in any great detail, so there was much misapprehension. However much we explained that Rissho Kosei-kai does not cure illnesses but cures the heart and mind, society often looked on us as an organization that cured physical diseases and ailments. When Kosei General Hospital was built in Tokyo in 1952, the thinking of Rissho Kosei-kai was that physical diseases are the province of a hospital and spiritual problems the province of *hoza*.

Myoko Sensei had spiritual powers that enabled her to be responsive to the gods and the buddhas. She showed me these powers in a variety of ways. Sometimes she had revelations that left me utterly unconvinced, and I would always accept or reject them in the light of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, which I had been studying so carefully. Sometimes, too, I would have serious disputes with the deities she invoked, perhaps because her “divine revelations” may have issued from her subconscious

in their name. All the same, she often penetrated the very depths of my mind. I remember a particular instance: As time passed, people from various classes of society started joining Rissho Kosei-kai. Wanting to teach them the Dharma in ways that would stimulate their understanding, I developed a strong desire to study many kinds of things. When I was considering reading a book about religion that had received a great deal of attention at the time, I suddenly had a divine revelation: “What use will such a book be in taking Rissho Kosei-kai to the world?” I was very surprised. As I have written before, I had been told through a divine revelation not to read magazines and newspapers for a certain period but rather to concentrate on my study of the Lotus Sutra. This made me apprehensive that I would be isolated from the current of the times. During this period, I once thought that there should then be no harm in reading the works of Nichiren, which do not change with the times. One night after returning home I surreptitiously [without Myoko Sensei's knowledge] began reading them. But the following morning, a divine revelation through Myoko Sensei gave me a severe scolding, saying, “Niwano, you had delusions and read the works of Nichiren, didn't you?” She saw through me like a surveillance camera. But rather than being bothered by this, I felt a sense of gratitude that I should be so protected by the deities.

Though I don't consider it necessary for young people to understand the

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

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divine revelations that were part of the history of Rissho Kosei-kai for a time, I think it might not be useless for them to know what actually happened. The present cannot exist without the past. There is no need to erase the past, for it is by speaking honestly about it that we can understand the present correctly. Through such understanding, we will come to know what the organization should rely upon as it faces the twenty-first century and what it should become in the future. If we shut our eyes to the past, we will not be able to understand why Rissho Kosei-kai moved from the period of skillful means to the age of the manifestation of the truth.

Similarly, there may be people who think it odd that Rissho Kosei-kai, a Buddhist organization, should have a history of divine revelations. However, chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, “The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarding the Cries of the World,” tells us that the Bodhisattva Kanzeon [Kannon] saves people by transforming herself into various protector deities, and so naturally many deities appear in the sutra. There is thus no discrepancy between the Lotus Sutra and divine revelation. Further, since there is a chapter on *dharanis* in the sutra, it is undeniable that the aspects of magic were likely to be highlighted. Looking at early postwar Japan, a time when the country was in a state of confusion, it is not at all strange that sometimes the magico-religious side of faith was dominant.

In the early stages of Rissho Kosei-kai, divine revelations brought members

both awe of that which is beyond human knowledge and humility as human beings. For members prone to delusion, it acted as a preventative, stopping them from straying from the Way. At a time when there was no Members’ Vow, it could also be said to have given a measure of order where there had been none.

But at all events, it is easy from our present viewpoint to criticize that unsophisticated and innocent time. However, while a religion that speaks only of the mystical and spiritual is lacking in something, a religion based exclusively on reason and without faith is equally unsatisfactory. When both aspects, the mystical and the rational, are in harmony within our hearts and are employed freely, we are able to know the true joy of faith, the genuine, wonderful Dharma. The Nirvana Sutra says: “Faith without discernment causes ignorance to grow rampant, while discernment without faith causes wrong views to gain the upper hand. It is when a person is endowed with both faith and discernment that true religious practice comes about.” Faith alone is not enough, but neither is intellectual understanding by itself.

I may be beating around the bush, but there is one more point I would like to touch upon here, and that concerns the revelation that “the truth and spirit of the Lotus Sutra will spread over all the world through Rissho Kosei-kai’s efforts.” Myoko Sensei received it nearly thirty times altogether. I have referred to it at various times, but I have not talked

very much about the severe words that followed: “Niwano, you have a mission to manifest the buddha-nature.” Often, too, I was told, “Like the Bodhisattva Never Despise, train tirelessly, whatever the hardships and however much you are beaten with clubs, sticks, potsherds, or stones, and practice veneration in order to manifest the buddha-nature in all living beings.” These words gave me the comfort of feeling protected by the buddhas and all the good heavenly deities, and I can go so far as to say that they enabled me to live my daily life convinced that I had to make those words mean something. When I think back to that time, the need to prove them true lay behind the effort I gave to my religious practice. In that sense, therefore, the revelations were divine messages entrusted to me by the buddhas and heavenly deities telling me their will.

## **Cofounder Myoko Sensei**

Myoko Sensei was not, of course, simply a person with powerful spiritual abilities. The Threefold Lotus Sutra never left her hands even for a second, and she wrote so many notes in it that its pages were black. But more than anything else, Myoko Sensei was a religious practitioner. Every task she undertook in her daily life was illuminated by the Dharma, and no one was more strict in religious practice.

When Myoko Sensei was present, there was no small talk. She spoke only of the Dharma, and all she thought of

was how to save someone or make someone happy. Her impact was all the stronger because her guidance was so severe. When she thought that a particular person was the genuine article, she would pay minute attention to his or her every action. But when people could not comprehend what she was teaching, however much she explained, she would thrust them away and refuse so much as to open her mouth again.

Nevertheless, what was wonderful about Myoko Sensei was that her severity arose from a deeply compassionate heart. Those who received her guidance felt this strongly. She would take people into her heart and was thoughtful and considerate. Thanks to her, the senior members were able to conduct themselves well, both in their domestic lives and in their role as leaders of Rissho Kosei-kai, their actions firmly based on the Dharma. Myoko Sensei fully took on what was sometimes a distasteful and unrewarding role out of her determination to reform people.

I am rather an optimistic type of person, and I thought that if I showed people what the Dharma was and explained the Great Way to them, there would be no need to go into small details, since

they would be able to understand these themselves and work hard to put what I said into practice. Myoko Sensei, however, worried about each and every member as if they were her own children. She was like a parent scolding an errant son or daughter. "You shouldn't do that," she would say; "that's no good." She would take them by the hand and teach them how they should approach their daily lives, from cleaning the house and tidying up after meals to greeting and interacting with visitors.

When she felt alarmed that senior members experiencing only her gentle side might become indolent, she would show how unrelenting she could be. She thought only of others. "Since I've been liberated through the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, I have to teach them to everyone so I can bring them happiness too. The teachings do make people happy," she would say. She was completely selfless.

When Rissho Kosei-kai first began, I would give Myoko Sensei a ride on the luggage carrier of my bicycle when we went around visiting the homes of members. All the way, right until we arrived at the entry hall of a house, we would

debate how we should guide or show people the way to liberation. However, once we stepped into the house, Myoko Sensei would say to the people there, "There is absolutely no mistake in what Kaicho Sensei [the president and teacher] is telling you."

Members would even come in the middle of the night knocking loudly on my door and, their faces pale, implore



me, “My child has a high temperature and has gone into convulsions. Come quickly!” Immediately, I would head to Myoko Sensei’s home and put her on the luggage carrier of my bicycle, and we would hurry to the house. We were like doctors being called to someone’s bedside. On cold winter nights, Myoko Sensei’s legs would get so chilled and numb that even after we arrived at our destination, it took her some time before she could walk again. But despite her discomfort, she would sit beside the bed of the sick child and perform the *kuji* rite of purification with utter devotion. By the time the child had quieted down and begun sleeping peacefully, the faint light of dawn would already be creeping through the glass of the front door. I would then return home and start my milk round. This happened time and time again.

We did not immediately return home when we had treated an illness but waited for a result. We did not take one step from the place until the fears of the parents were relieved. We spent every day in real earnest. It was like stepping over finely honed blades—a

succession of enthusiasm and tension.

Just as some Christians call Jesus Christ “Doctor Jesus,” it is natural in the world of religion and belief that there should be curing both of the spirit and of the physical body. The history of Buddhism in Japan reveals that the Medicine Buddha, Yakushi, was venerated deeply from very early on because people had faith that he would alleviate illness. Belief begins with such needs, and I realized this through my own experience.

Speaking of the teachings only in an abstract way cannot save those people who are suffering. We have to start by acting to relieve them of what troubles them. First deliver the person from the pain he or she is suffering at this very moment: this is done by skillful means. To save all people from suffering, an infinite variety of skillful means is necessary, as employed by Shakyamuni himself. What is needed is proof, not disputation.

First, start with the skillful means of relieving suffering, then gradually lead the person toward the truth of the Buddha Way. The term *skillful means* is a translation of the Sanskrit word *upaya*,

whose original meaning is “draw near,” “come alongside,” “reach.” Skillful means, therefore, is the step-by-step approach that leads a person ever nearer to the truth. It is not unique to Buddhism and is, in fact, essential to all religious faiths.

At that time when we visited the homes of members, we could not ignore the economic situation of the household. Myoko Sensei would often quietly leave two one-yen notes under a cushion when we got up to return home. A sash, a sutra book, and a name register came to one yen, thirty sen, which left seventy sen to buy incense and candles. This kind of consideration was typical of Myoko Sensei. Members were drawn to her, for she watched over them with both severity and compassion. There is absolutely no doubt that she was a great force in the growth of the organization.

Putting faith into practice above all else encompassed the whole of religious endeavor as far as Myoko Sensei was concerned. Following her example, members, too, abandoned everything to devote themselves to their training and reform themselves according to the teachings.

From around 1945, she became chiefly concerned with directing the training of chapter heads, while I immersed myself in the study of the Lotus Sutra in order to understand thoroughly the essential doctrines of Buddhism. As a result, I was able to read every part of the sutra with profound attention. It was during this time, however, that there was a growing deification of Myoko Sensei among members.

As the faith grew, various things had happened, but no one had thought them particularly strange. But now there were stories such as one of someone's being cured of an illness when she cooked rice that she had received from Myoko Sensei, and such tales spread rapidly.

A person who was particularly close to Myoko Sensei was Teijiro Okano, head of the Third Chapter. Mr. Okano was the president of a company that manufactured reading glasses. He was well built and a good speaker. He had a certain social standing and the time to immerse himself in the Dharma. He had previously been a member of another religious organization and was strongly attracted to religions that exhibited spiritual powers. He determinedly devoted himself to the Dharma. His enthusiasm and self-sacrifice were remarkable. However, he tended to devote himself exclusively

to his religious training and neglect his study. All the same, gradually his authority grew in the organization.

It was at this time of rapid growth that articles criticizing Rissho Kosei-kai started appearing in the national newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and their influence eventually developed to the extent that I appeared twice before the Judicial Affairs Committee to explain the situation. With the Yomiuri Incident as the motivation, I set up an advisory committee composed of advisors with academic experience from outside Rissho Kosei-kai to monitor the direction the organization was taking. This may have caused discontent among members.

## Discord and Ostracism

About the same time as the Yomiuri Incident, I began to notice a strange mood within Rissho Kosei-kai. When I went to the headquarters, chapter heads would immediately get up and leave. One day when I went to a chapter for a ceremony, I was told it had been held the previous day. These kinds of things happened repeatedly.

Even when I went to recite the *o-daimoku* before the focus of devotion at the headquarters, not a single person would strike the gong for me.

And when there happened to be someone who was striking the gong when I came to recite the *o-daimoku*, I learned later that she had been severely reproached by her leader.

I felt that I was being ostracized but accepted it as part of my religious training and continued as usual to teach the Dharma to ordinary members who happened to be present.

I said, "The Lotus Sutra tells us that when Shakyamuni decided to speak, five thousand people rose from their seats and left the assembly. Only twelve hundred remained to hear his discourse. Today there are more people who remain than those who have left their seats. This means the people of our time possess greater spiritual capacity."

While I joked in this way while teaching, those who had left the room strained from the shadows outside to catch what I was saying. The majority of the senior leaders did not know the situation. They had just been told to leave the room if the president entered and so were acting as instructed. Of course, the general membership was completely unaware of what was happening. The whole matter came to a head when I was presented with a document in the form of a written compact by senior leaders, which they wanted me to sign. It contained the following points:

1. The president of Rissho Kosei-kai and Myoko Sensei must always act in agreement.
2. The wife of the president is not allowed to interfere in Rissho Kosei-kai affairs.
3. Members of the inquiry committee from outside the organization may participate in Rissho Kosei-kai activities only with the unanimous approval of all the chapter heads.

The document had been signed and sealed by all 125 chapter heads from around the country as well as by Myoko Sensei and eleven directors. There was

a blank space for my signature and seal.

From the standpoint of Rissho Kosei-kai's senior leaders, it was my mission, as president of the organization, to disseminate the Lotus Sutra widely among the people. For me to perform this mission, they wanted me to abandon my position as a husband and head of a family and devote myself exclusively to Rissho Kosei-kai. Given the circumstances, it was a natural desire from their point of view.

It was my own intention to undertake religious practice as if I had no family ties, even though I was still a layperson. Yet it was completely reasonable for my wife to be concerned about her husband's abandoning his duty as the family's breadwinner.

When the organization first began, I was generally earning about 150 yen a month if working. At that time the starting salary for the average salaried worker was around fifty yen per month. As members increased, however, I was so busy guiding them that I had no time to work. My income dwindled until it was no more than thirty-five yen a month. We lived in this way for three years. To tell the truth, fish never passed my lips in all of that time.

On days when there was a formal event at Rissho Kosei-kai, I would redeem the *haori* and *hakama*, the formal

clothes I had pawned, and then, when the ceremony was over, I would return them to the pawnshop. The pawnbroker was sorry for me and suggested I use an account book instead of the ordinary pawn tickets.

If I had just worked, we would have had a good life. Since, however, I spent most of the day on religious matters, it was only natural that my wife should have told me that enough was enough. When she complained about my religious activities, I said, "You must stop thinking of yourself as the president's wife. Don't forget that you are a follower, just like everyone else, and the Buddha is watching over you."

I heard later that opinion among Rissho Kosei-kai members had been divided over the compact and that there was a highly volatile situation at Myoko Sensei's house, next to the former headquarters, where the compact had been drawn up. Also, I learned that many of the chapter heads who had signed the document had done so with no idea what it was about. A good number were instructed by the most senior leaders to sign it, and they simply put their seals to it, unable to voice any qualms. Later, people told me they would never have affixed their seals if they had known its intent, and by the time they regretted their action,

it was too late. Later we simply ended up laughing about it.

Since I had no particular reason to object to any of the three demands, I signed the document and affixed my seal to it. However, the situation did not end there.

A little while later, one of the directors came to me and proposed that Myoko Sensei be designated the originator of the teachings of Rissho Kosei-kai and I the president. I rejected the proposal on the spot.

One of the things that had motivated this movement was the fact that at the time, it appeared that Myoko Sensei was entrusted with all the guidance of members. Since I had explained, in the light of Buddhist teachings and in a way that senior leaders could easily understand, the authoritative words of the divine revelations she had received, it may have seemed that Myoko Sensei had originated some doctrines. However, insofar as Rissho Kosei-kai was a Buddhist organization that followed the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, the originator of doctrines could only be Shakyamuni, and the responsibility for teaching these doctrines to Rissho Kosei-kai members was mine, as president.

The names of the Niwano and Naganuma families appear in the "Transfer of Merit" section in the *Sutra Readings* book used by Rissho Kosei-kai, but this does not mean that the organization is something belonging to those families. The growth of Rissho Kosei-kai is due to the spiritual efforts of all members. However, I permitted the names to appear because if something bad happens, they call attention to the fact that the responsibility lies with those two families. I will be very happy if the names are removed when, in the future, the organization's structure and shape become more defined. I have spoken of this with Motoyuki Naganuma, the nephew of Myoko Sensei and special advisor to the organization as well as the former chief director.

## Myoko Sensei, Good Friend

After I rejected the proposal to designate Myoko Sensei as the originator of the teachings, some of the senior leaders came to urge me to reconsider, but I refused. Perhaps as a result of this, a movement then got under way to form an independent organization under Myoko Sensei, and its organizers went so far as to prepare a written compact. It was about this time, however, that Myoko Sensei's health began to fail and she became bedridden.

The person who was most grieved by the whole situation was Myoko Sensei herself. She could not turn her back on the person who had been her friend for so many years in the search for religious truth. Because of her illness, the secessionist movement gradually died away.

There was never anyone who was able to genuinely grasp the core of the Lotus Sutra and to practice it more thoroughly than Myoko Sensei. However fluent a speaker someone might be, no one could match her level of dedication

in practice. Somewhere or other, their own personal circumstances would interfere. Myoko Sensei would make no allowances for such circumstances, either in herself or in others. She would always say, "I have been born to act as the Tathagata Abundant Treasures for the president. I am here to bear witness to him."

Myoko Sensei had an operation for breast cancer in 1948, and this gave her a further lease on life. However, the cancer reappeared nine years later, in 1957, and she was admitted to National Daiichi Hospital in Tokyo. She soon left the hospital to return home, where she remained in bed.

Unless I was involved in essential services at Rissho Kosei-kai, I did not leave Myoko Sensei's side. I looked after her needs to make her as comfortable as possible. It was at this time that she began speaking in a way completely different from her former severity.

"If I had revealed what I had done, you would certainly have turned your back on me. Only the Buddha could have looked after me right to the end as you have done." When she revealed

everything that lay in the deepest recesses of her heart in this way and spoke of anything and everything, the pain that had until then been held in abeyance only by drugs completely disappeared. In her simplicity and innocence, it was as if she had returned to her childhood, and every day was filled with indescribable contentment.

She had all the money taken out of her safe and all of her clothing removed from her cupboards and divided them up, instructing that this should go to one person, that to another. Truly, she went peacefully to her end. My being able to watch over Myoko Sensei in her final days taught me again how priceless repentance is.

I think repentance means revealing everything of yourself and entrusting all to the Buddha. This surely is the ultimate practice of a religious person. Myoko Sensei had constantly taught us "Believe, pray, act." Having fulfilled her important role in laying the foundations of Rissho Kosei-kai, she has returned to the realm of the Buddha.

*To be continued*



# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 20

### The Bodhisattva Never Despise

(2)

*This is the 110th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

**TEXT** Great Power Obtained! The lifetime of this buddha, King of Majestic Voice, was forty myriad kotis of nayutas of kalpas, as many as the sands of the Ganges. The number of kalpas during which the Righteous Dharma remained in the world was equal to the atoms in a Jambudvīpa; and the number of kalpas during which the Counterfeit Dharma remained was equal to the atoms in four continents. After that buddha had abundantly benefited all living beings, he became extinct.

**COMMENTARY** *The Righteous Dharma.* This is the period when the teachings of the Buddha are carried out dutifully and properly. To be more precise, this is the time when the teachings of the Buddha are communicated without fault, when practice is perfect, and therefore its results (the proofs of the righteousness of the Buddha's teachings) increase and flourish.

- *Jambudvīpa.* This is one of the four continents mentioned below; the name for the world where human beings live.
- *The Counterfeit Dharma.* This is the period when the form alone of the Dharma resembles that of the period of

the Righteous Dharma. In form, the teachings are communicated without fault, and practiced outwardly and vigorously, but because the spiritual framework that supports practice has been lost, the results do not increase.

- *Four continents.* According to the ancient Indian view of the world, it was supposed that there were four worlds, or continents, with Mount Sumeru in the middle.

**TEXT** After the Righteous Dharma and Counterfeit Dharma had entirely disappeared, in that domain there again appeared a buddha. He was also titled King of Majestic Voice Tathagata, Worshipful, All Wise, Perfectly Enlightened in Conduct, Well Departed, Understander of the World, Peerless Leader, Controller, Teacher of Gods and Men, Buddha, World-honored One. Thus in succession there were twenty thousand kotis of buddhas who all had the same title.

**COMMENTARY** *After the Righteous Dharma and Counterfeit Dharma had entirely disappeared.* The time after these disappeared is the period of the Decay of the Dharma, the period when only the Dharma remains, and

the multitude loses sight of the truth of the Dharma. In consequence, the teachings are not practiced, so no one attains enlightenment (or awakening) through practice. That is to say, it is the period when the Dharma remains in form alone, and practice is abandoned, and enlightenment is unattainable.

However, when this age does come, the Lotus Sutra throughout tells us, some buddha will always appear and breathe new vitality into the teachings. The succession of “twenty thousand kotis of buddhas entitled King of Majestic Voice” refers to this.

**TEXT** After the extinction of the first Tathagata King of Majestic Voice and after the end of the Righteous Dharma, during [the period of] the Counterfeit Dharma, bhikshus of utmost arrogance obtained the chief power. At that period there was a bodhisattva-bhikshu named Never Despise.

**COMMENTARY** *Bodhisattva-bhikshu.* Bodhisattvas are laypersons and people who renounce the world. This reference is to the latter type.

**TEXT** Great Power Obtained! For what reason was he named Never Despise? [Because] that bhikshu paid respect to and commended everybody whom he saw, bhikshu, bhikshuni, upasaka, upasika, speaking thus: ‘I deeply revere you. I dare not slight and condemn you. Wherefore? [Because] you all walk in the bodhisattva way and are to become buddhas.’

**COMMENTARY** *I dare not slight and condemn you.* This means never condescending to anyone.

**TEXT** And that bhikshu did not devote himself to reading and reciting the sutras but only to paying respect, so that when he saw afar off [any members of the] four groups, he would specially go and pay respect to them, commending them, saying: ‘I dare not slight you, because you are all to become buddhas.’

**COMMENTARY** *Did not devote himself to reading and reciting the sutras.* The original Sanskrit says, “He did not preach or read the scriptures.” But it would be a mistake to conclude therefore that reading and reciting the scriptures or preaching the Dharma are not essential or significant practices in the Buddha Way.

What is meant is that doing reverence to people’s buddha-nature is the foundation of Buddhist practice and that it takes precedence over all else.

Let us give greater attention to this a little later.

**TEXT** Amongst the four groups, there were those who,

irritated and angry and muddyminded, reviled and abused him, saying: ‘Where did this ignorant bhikshu come from, who [takes it on] himself to say, “I do not slight you,” and who predicts us as destined to become buddhas? We need no such false prediction.’

**COMMENTARY** *Predicts.* Originally it is the Buddha who predicts someone’s buddhahood. Therefore, it is not the intention of the Bodhisattva Never Despise to make such a prediction. The bodhisattva has merely looked upon the buddha-nature that is intrinsic to all people, and venerated and extolled it.

Despite this, the people of this period, in their perversity, took his words as those of an ignorant bhikshu of unknown origin and identity.

**TEXT** Thus he passed many years, constantly reviled but never irritated or angry, always saying, ‘You are to become buddhas.’ Whenever he spoke thus, the people beat him with clubs, sticks, tiles, or stones. But, while escaping to a distance, he still cried aloud: ‘I dare not slight you. You are all to become buddhas.’ And because he always spoke thus, the haughty bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas, and upasikas styled him Never Despise.

**COMMENTARY** After reading this chapter thus far, you may sense its difference from previous chapters. The earlier chapters depicted realms of dreamlike beauty and horrific scenes of hells, quite unlike our own world. Most of the personages, including the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and great bhikshus, were described as majestic, noble, ideal beings beyond the human realm.

But this chapter is marked by a strongly human touch. Although no particular place is described, the setting of the Bodhisattva Never Despise makes us think of the ordinary kind of town we see today.

The characters appearing in the story are ordinary people such as we find everywhere. The words “bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas, and upasikas” do not necessarily refer to Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay devotees, but include people of all kinds and classes, such as foppish minor officials, raffish young men, middle-aged merchants with the look of men of mature judgment, and good-natured but strong-willed women. We can also imagine that mingling among such people are learned priests boasting of a complete knowledge of Buddhism, old monks who pride themselves on strict keeping of the precepts, and upper-class women and their attendants enjoying themselves in making the rounds of temples.

Even the Bodhisattva Never Despise, the leading character of the story, conjures up the image of a young monk

in the street, who has the air of an earnest, serious-minded man, yet has something unusual and noble about him.

The characters in chapter 4, “Faith Discernment,” also include ordinary people, but the setting is the grand residence of a great elder, the Buddha. In the current chapter, the majority of the characters are ordinary people, and the setting is an ordinary neighborhood.

All the chapters of the Lotus Sutra can be said to be literary, but chapter 20 is the most literary. It gives us a strong sense of humanity and of things familiar to us.

This sense is quite natural because it allows us to understand vividly how, just by practicing the virtue of revering others’ buddha-nature, an ordinary young man perfects himself as a human being and finally enters the way to supreme enlightenment.

Therefore, to read this chapter properly (as we should every chapter), we ought to put ourselves in the shoes of the Bodhisattva Never Despise, and read the chapter as if it were about ourselves.

**TEXT** “When this bhikshu was drawing near his end, from the sky he heard and was entirely able to receive and retain twenty thousand myriad kotis of verses of the Lotus Flower Sutra, which the Buddha King of Majestic Voice had formerly preached. Whereupon he obtained as above clearness and purity of the eye organ and of the organs of ear, nose, tongue, body, and thought.

**COMMENTARY** *From the sky he heard . . . verses of the Lotus Flower Sutra.* That the teachings of the Lotus Sutra echoed through space and he heard them means that he mastered and understood them on his own.

• *Twenty thousand myriad kotis of verses of the Lotus Flower Sutra.* As has been repeatedly mentioned, this does not refer to the Lotus Sutra as a scripture but rather to the Buddha’s teaching of the universal truth and of how people should live by it, as taught in the Lotus Sutra.

Since the universal truth is unchanging from the infinite past into the limitless future, it is not strange that some people should intuitively awaken to it and master it on their own.

Furthermore, as a scripture, the Lotus Sutra does not have as many as twenty thousand myriad kotis of verses. So we must understand this passage as not referring to the sutra as a scripture, but as the universal truth, which is the basis of the teachings for people to live by.

These kind of teachings, once one begins to impart them, can be discussed endlessly. They are teachings that can be extended without limit and that can be bound up as a single truth. This is the Buddha Dharma.

Therefore, the expression “twenty thousand myriad kotis of verses” is hardly an overstatement.

• *As above.* This refers to the merits described in chapter 19, “The Merits of the Teacher of the Dharma.”

**TEXT** Having obtained the purity of these six organs, he further prolonged his life for two hundred myriad kotis of nayutas of years, and widely preached this Dharma Flower Sutra to the people.

**COMMENTARY** When we calmly trace the course along which the Bodhisattva Never Despise reached this state, we cannot help keenly understanding it as a teaching with profound meaning. Let us, then, look in detail at the steps along that path.

First, let us list the stages through which the Bodhisattva Never Despise passed.

First and foremost, he held unshakable belief that all human beings possess the buddha-nature, and made this conviction the foundation of all his thoughts and actions.

Second, he clearly revealed that conviction in action; that is, he revered all people for their buddha-nature.

Third, by revering their buddha-nature, he endeavored to awaken all people to their own buddha-nature.

Fourth, he concentrated his efforts on this one practice, patiently continuing with it over a long time.

Fifth, whatever persecution he faced, he endured it, never behaving rashly, but always maintaining an extremely flexible attitude in tenaciously clinging to his belief.

Sixth, his selfless attitude and accumulation of selfless acts awakened his understanding of the fundamental truth of this world.

First of all, let us look at these stages in their order.

We can look at the term *buddha-nature* from two angles.

First, there is the approach that it is the essential nature of a buddha. This essence of a buddha—as explained in “Virtues,” chapter 1 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings (See the May/June 1992 issue of *Dharma World*) and in “Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata,” chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra—(January–March 2010 issue of *Dharma World*) is the fundamental Dharma, called *tathata* (“Thusness” or “Absolute Truth”), which neither begins nor ends, and neither appears nor disappears. From the standpoint of religious faith, this *tathata* is the great compassionate and benevolent Buddha, who gives life to each and every being. In other words, it is the Eternal Original Buddha.

Second, there is the approach of the potential for becoming a buddha. The original meaning of the word *buddha* is “an enlightened one.” That is, a spiritually perfect person. Accordingly, the buddha-nature, being the potential for becoming a buddha, in ordinary language means the potential to become a perfect human being who has awakened to the ultimate, supreme truth.



The Buddha concluded that all human beings have that potential. The reason for that is that human existence is itself the buddha-nature in the first sense mentioned above.

It is just that because of the ignorance that has persisted during the hundreds of millions of years since the birth of humankind as a living organism, and the various defilements that arise from that ignorance, that the original buddha-nature has been obscured. Therefore, if a person simply awakens from that ignorance, his or her primary buddha-nature will infallibly shine forth.

Were it not for this teaching, one who felt himself to be a worthless, sinful person would be convinced that his worthlessness and sinfulness was his true nature, and he would be unable to arouse himself for reform. Doubtlessly his anguish, despair, and self-abandonment would destroy him entirely.

However, if through this teaching he can awaken to the truth that all sentient beings are born with the buddha-nature and the potential for infinite improvement, it is like the sudden opening of a window in the wall of a dark prison cell. Through the window comes a ray of bright light. Seeing this light, how encouraged one becomes. Certainly one would, in spite of oneself, begin to make efforts to be released from that mental prison.

Further, without this teaching, for example, if one saw evil in another, one might easily presume that person to be an evil person and hate him. Or if one saw a lethargic person, one might give up on him and want nothing to do with him.

If such hatred, distrust, and contempt ran rampant among all of the people of the world, weighing heavily upon oneself and others like a dark shadow, then the world would always be a cold, acrimonious place where disgraceful conflict would never cease.

If one can but come to the realization of the truth that the buddha-nature is also in everyone else and that they too have the potential for becoming worthy human beings, then the way one looks upon others will completely change.

For example, murderers are detestable. If one learned about a murder in the newspapers or on the radio and TV, one might succumb to the feeling that not even the death penalty would be punishment enough for the murderer.

However, if by chance the murderer had been a neighbor, and with one's own eyes one had seen him fondling his baby at home or being affectionate with his dog, one would beyond doubt harbor in one corner of one's heart a conviction that "he certainly didn't seem like the kind of person who would . . ." One would be utterly unable to give up on him or contend that he ought to be executed.

The reason one assumes this attitude is that one has glimpsed a sign of his buddha-nature.

We do not live next door to everyone in the world, so we do not see with our own eyes the manifestations of everyone's buddha-nature. But the Buddha's teachings can make us fully aware that all people have the buddha-nature. When we look at others from such a perspective, we can detect a fragment of humanity, or a fragment of the buddha-nature, in every person.

The discovery of this fragment of humanity and the manifestation and awareness of one atom of the buddha-nature bring great relief to oneself and others. This is because, while recognizing evil as evil and faults as faults, one can by the light through this small window see that the person's true nature is actually good.

If one glimpses even briefly the goodness of this true nature, then instead of the cold attitude of thoroughly hating, rejecting, abandoning, that person, a spirit of warmth and generosity will arise in us that accepts that person as a fellow human being.

If we treat others with generosity, we will naturally begin to want to help them develop their potential. This feeling is what we call compassion.

One has to understand that generosity and compassion, which Buddhism teaches are the greatest virtues in human relations, spring from the recognition of others' buddha-nature.

Consequently, we must realize that seeing the buddha-nature in ourselves and others is the true departure point and the most basic path for brightening the world and building world peace.

Merely becoming aware of the buddha-nature within oneself and others brings the merit described above. But to deepen and broaden that merit, it becomes necessary to cultivate the buddha-nature to which one has awakened.

Since ancient times in China, T'ien-t'ai Buddhism, which took root in Japan as Tendai Buddhism, has taught that the buddha-nature has three requisites for attaining buddhahood: *shoin*, *ryoin*, and *en'in*.

(1) *Shoin* means the buddha-nature inherent in all people. In other words, from the first, human beings have been at one with the Original Buddha (Thusness, or Absolute Truth).

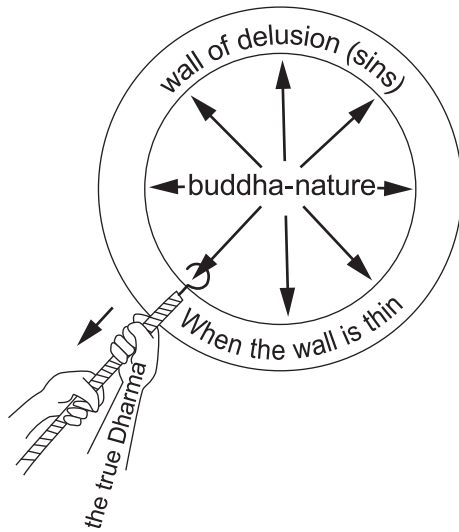
(2) *Ryoin* means the wisdom of discerning one's inherent buddha-nature in the light of the Dharma. This is why we must heed the Buddha's teachings and study the Dharma. If we do not, our precious buddha-nature could often remain buried and undiscovered.

(3) *En'in* means the merit of good deeds, which create conditions for the cultivation of *ryoin* and the development of *shoin*. We should understand good deeds in an extremely broad sense that includes the so-called self-discipline of living a correct life based on the Buddha's teachings and devotion to reading the scriptures and to contemplation. It also



Figure 1

**The gentle method of instruction**



includes the so-called altruistic practices of contributing to society or leading people to the Dharma. The Bodhisattva Never Despise accumulated merits and cultivated the altruistic practice of helping others discover their buddha-nature by honoring everyone he met.

We can sum this up as follows: We are born with the buddha-nature, but it is hard for us to realize this at the bottom of our hearts, so we have first to learn this truth through devoted study of the Buddha's teachings. By this means we must awaken to our own buddha-nature. Once we have awakened to our own buddha-nature, we must extend that awareness to discernment of the buddha-nature in others, revering the buddha-nature in everyone, and helping and guiding everyone to discover their own buddha-nature.

When we do this, the buddha-nature within oneself and others begins to shine, its workings gradually expand, and when the buddha-nature of the many people of the world shines forth brightly, the world will be perfected as the Land of Tranquil Light.

There are two ways to awaken people to their buddha-nature. One way is to recognize their virtues and that their virtues can work to overcome their faults. This is the *gentle* method of awakening people to their buddha-nature.

The other way is called the *severe* method, which is criticism of their faults. This helps bring out their many good points.

These two methods are two sides of a coin, and it is ideal if one can adroitly use the method better suited to the person and the occasion. But using these methods infallibly requires considerable teaching experience. So positive instruction is the more reliable method.

The gentle method is illustrated in figure 1. As the arrows indicate, the buddha-nature is always outward in manifestation.

Gentle instruction seeks to make use of this characteristic and draw it outward by giving it momentum.

It is normal for people to welcome appreciation of their good qualities. Praise lowers our defenses. Any feelings of inferiority or guilt, and the sins and delusions of greed, hatred, anger, and jealousy, which formed a hard crust around the buddha-nature, begin to soften and dissolve. The buddha-nature can then break through this crust and manifest itself.

Therefore, if you recognize and praise people for their good qualities, and point out the evidence of their buddha-nature, and if these people are amenable, they may suddenly be awakened to their buddha-nature and break down the walls of delusion.

Particularly in the education of children, one ought to use the gentle method, since children are generally pliable, and their minds are like blank slates for teaching by adults.

A child's character and abilities are malleable, and it is the parent and teacher's role to bring out a child's buddha-nature and cultivate and develop the child's abilities. This is gentle instruction, and adds strength to strength. Therefore, it nurtures children's good qualities, and their superior abilities increase rapidly.

Needlessly scolding or oppressing children tends to make them build a shell around their buddha-nature and withdraw. If this happens, the children's buddha-nature will never be manifested, and at worst they will grow up to lead a life of crime.

This being the case, it is better whenever possible to use the gentle method in teaching malleable children and amenable adults.

The gentle method alone is less likely to set people on the right path who are stubborn, warped, or fanatical in mistaken religious beliefs and ways of thinking. That is because the wall of delusion that masks their buddha-nature is so thick and hard that even if they try to break through it from within, it is very hard to break all the way through.

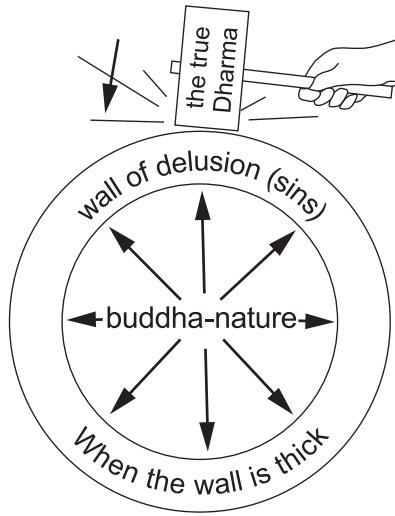
With people like these, only the severe method will work. Harsh criticism and strong arguments are needed to bring them to their senses and break down that thick, hard wall from the outside (figure 2). Harsh criticism can shock them into mending their ways. The shock can produce two kinds of reaction: self-awareness or resistance.

The shock of self-awareness is a sudden awakening to the buddha-nature that had until that moment been hidden behind a thick wall. In other words, the wall that could not be breached by the gentle method of instruction, is suddenly breached from within by the severe shock.

It is said that those who are strong in evil can be also strong in goodness. It is certainly true that some people with strong convictions are fanatical in their attachment to

Figure 2

**The severe method of instruction**



wrong practices, but once they awaken to the right way, they can often leap in one bound to a higher mental state.

Resistance means people reacting to a shock from the outside by making the wall around their buddha-nature more impregnable.

With people who resist, both methods should be used. We should tell them, “You have within you the precious buddha-nature, so you must be able to understand the Dharma.” The wall of delusion must be breached from within and without.

The same care is necessary in scolding a child. One should recognize the child’s essential goodness and say things like “You’re smart, so why don’t you know that?” and “You’re usually kind and gentle, so why did you do something so mean?”

This is the method of severe instruction and should be used with adults as well. When I wrote earlier that the gentle and severe methods are two sides of the same coin, I hinted at their subtle relationship. Still, the principal method should be gentle, since everyone likes praise, as I said earlier.

Wayward adults who have been totally corrupted may at first feel suspicious when praised, suspecting flattery. But if the praise is sincere, their suspicions will eventually go away. No matter how hard and closed off their mind may be, it will gradually open up.

The same thing may be said of those whom the Bodhisattva Never Despire honored and commended. At first they were angry with him, thinking mistakenly that he was making fun of them. They reviled him, threw stones at him, and tried to beat him with sticks. Yet the Bodhisattva Never Despire was never angered by their violence, but persevered, constantly repeating his compliments. His earnestness gradually softened the hearts of those who reviled him.

The very fact that they nicknamed him Never Despire is evidence of their change in attitude. If they had not had some friendly feeling for him, they would not have given him a nickname at all. Although at first they were angry with him, thinking that he was making fun of them or meddling in their affairs. But little by little they changed their attitude toward him.

They came to regard him merely as a peculiar bhikshu, thinking, “He never gets irritated or angry even if we throw stones at him or beat him with sticks. He constantly shows respect to us, saying that he dares not slight us.” In all likelihood, he was recognized as a popular figure about town. At the same time, the townspeople became vaguely aware of the greatness of Never Despire, seeing something noble in him. His forbearance finally brought him respect and awe.

This is very important. If a bhikshu regularly and unexpectedly honors everyone he sees, wholeheartedly and patiently, without being discouraged, however much he is persecuted, in the end his behavior is bound to move others and arouse awe and respect in their hearts.

Because people began to feel awe and respect for Never Despire, when he mastered the teachings of the Lotus Sutra on his own and began preaching the teachings to them, they all believed and followed him.

In about 1750, after thirty years’ work, the Japanese Buddhist monk Zenkai finished digging a tunnel about two hundred yards long through a rocky hill in Yabakei Gorge on Kyushu. He undertook the project to benefit local villagers. At first he was harassed as an eccentric, but when they saw him persistently swinging his pickaxe, ignoring their harassment, it finally made a profound impression on them, and they began helping him.

There have been many other instances of other people building roads, reclaiming wasteland, or digging irrigation ditches to benefit a community and going through the same kind of experience as Zenkai. All of these examples teach us the valuable lesson of what great results can come from doing what we think is right, wholeheartedly and with indomitable perseverance, no matter what happens.

These three traits in Never Despire brought him success in teaching others.

The next important teaching is conveyed in the following passage of the sutra: “Whenever he spoke thus, the people beat him with clubs, sticks, tiles, or stones. But, while escaping to a distance, he still cried aloud: ‘I dare not slight you. You are all to become buddhas.’” We can learn two lessons from these words.

The first is that the Bodhisattva Never Despire escaped to a safe distance whenever people used violence against him. Suppose that Never Despire never shrank, even when

he was beaten so severely with clubs that his arm was broken or when his forehead was cut open by a flung stone. Such an attitude may have great appeal to some people. But they may mistakenly understand the words expressed in chapter 13, "Spare not our body or life." If they understand the true meaning of the words, they understand them to mean that they should above all else devote themselves to the Dharma. When the Dharma is the most important thing in their lives, a strategic retreat is in order for the sake of preserving and teaching the Dharma. Thus the thought of retreating from persecution should not be considered as craven and egotistical.

Because we are determined to live as long as possible and persevere forever in preaching the Dharma, we may run from physical danger.

That is an especially important lesson for Japanese. For some reason, the Japanese seem to lack respect for human life. To be sure, sacrificing one's own life for the common good is extremely noble, but it is entirely different from taking one's life lightly. During World War II many lives were lost even when it was entirely unnecessary because of the belief in "no surrender" and "death for honor" for suicide attacks that had no chance of success.

This regrettable waste came from a biased view that escape is ignoble and surrender is the greatest possible shame. The war leaders lacked the flexibility and perseverance to realize that he who wins in the long run is the true victor, even if in the short run he must sometimes retreat. Instead, officers forced their men to charge the enemy in reckless attacks. Officers who ordered their men to die so-called honorable deaths are to be blamed for this.

In contrast, General Douglas MacArthur withdrew to Bataan when Manila fell, and when Bataan was falling, he escaped by submarine to Australia. Precisely because he escaped from the Philippines, he was later able to lead the offensive and finally even occupy Japan. Had MacArthur followed the Japanese pattern and given up his own life, the war might have developed differently. We must empty our minds of all preconceptions, take this reality to heart, and consider it seriously.

In ancient times, however, it seems that the Japanese did not believe that retreat was necessarily disgraceful.

For example, when Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336) and his army were surrounded by a larger force of government troops at Akasaka Castle, he made a quick escape from the castle to fight another day. Because of his strong belief in the Buddha's teachings, Kusunoki may have comprehended the importance of flexibility. Precisely because of his escape from Akasaka Castle, he was able to harass his enemy repeatedly at Akasaka and Chihaya castles, both in Kawachi (now in Osaka Prefecture), and on other battlefields.

The feudal lord Shimazu Yoshihiro (1535–1619), realizing the inevitable defeat of his western forces in the Battle of Sekigahara, broke through enemy lines and escaped, fleeing all the way to his domain, Satsuma province (now Kagoshima Prefecture) on Kyushu. Because of his escape, his clan prospered and became so strong that the Tokugawa shogunate acknowledged it as a force to be reckoned with. The Satsuma domain later became the driving force for the success of the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Come to think of it, Shimazu was also a devout believer in Buddhism.

Strangely enough, no Japanese despises Kusunoki or Shimazu as cowards. Everyone regards their escaping instead of dying in vain as good. When and why did the Japanese people lose their flexibility of thinking and acting?

Did this loss of flexibility result from the influence of Confucianism, which had as great an influence on the Japanese as Buddhism? Confucianism, however, teaches respect for human life, as with the teaching "the sage never courts danger." Since the Chinese are fundamentally realistic and persevering, it is hard to imagine this change in Japanese thinking being influenced by Chinese thought.

Is disregard for human life then simply a Japanese peculiarity? One can only assume this characteristic was somehow spurred on by the mistaken view of impermanence taught by Buddhists of the Heian period (794–1185) onward and furthered by the vanity of honor-conscious warriors in the peaceful Edo period (1603–1867).

If this is the case, then the Japanese ought to give serious reconsideration to respect for life and the flexibility of mind that is taught by true Buddhism.

Though the willow looks fragile, it bends in the wind without its branches being broken. The branches of the oak, on the other hand, may break in a storm despite their apparent sturdiness. Is it not most important for the Japanese to foster mental flexibility to set an example to the peoples of the world not only in economic terms but in the teaching of human values?

A true understanding of Buddhism is the shortest and best way to achieve this, I believe. This is because Buddhism teaches clearly flexibility of mind, and accordingly its true believers without exception become the possessors of flexible minds.

The life of the Bodhisattva Never Despise illustrates the ideal person living in this way.

*To be continued*

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