

# The True Way to Liberation

by Nichiko Niwano

***When we are aware of the happiness we enjoy, and give thanks for it, our awareness of the bounty of blessings we receive is itself a true path to liberation.***

Generally speaking, when we encounter some difficulty and feel worried or anxious, we ask the gods and the buddhas for some kind of help, as reflected in the saying, “Any port in a storm.” Regarding this matter, in chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Eternal Life of the Tathagata,” Shakyamuni says: “Ever making this my thought: ‘How can I make living beings / Obtain entry into the unsurpassable Way / And quickly accomplish embodiment as buddhas?’” Here, the meaning of the scripture is that the Buddha always wants to somehow lead everyone to the Way of the Buddha, have everyone quickly reach the realm of the Buddha, and thereby attain true happiness.

Simply put, the Buddha always wishes to liberate us.

Those seeking liberation may think that when their load of suffering is lightened, they are being given encouragement to live. But when we look at things from the perspective of the Buddha, who wishes that we all “quickly accomplish embodiment as buddhas,” simply seeking relief from suffering is the wrong direction.

The reason that the Rissho Koseikai Members’ Vow includes the phrase, “We recognize in Buddhism a true way of liberation,” is to lead us to understand the meaning as the liberation of others as well as ourselves, and that this is

nothing other than what directs us to the basis of faith. Also, “a true way of liberation” is an important part of our members’ vow, demonstrating a distinguishing feature of Rissho Koseikai and the very spirit of the Lotus Sutra.

## Toward Living with Gratitude

When we hear the phrase “recognize in Buddhism a true way of liberation,” it may seem to describe something very difficult, but actually the meaning can be understood by anyone.

When we are aware of the happiness we are already receiving, accept it gratefully and give thanks for it, our awareness of the bounty of blessings being bestowed upon us is itself a true means to liberation.

We learn the teaching and in the course of practicing it, when the words “thank you” and “it’s all thanks to you” come naturally from our lips, then we are being liberated. Nevertheless, since we human beings are apt to complain or grumble at something the very next day, I think it is important that we make a habit of repeating our study of the teaching.

A Zen monk once said, “Our own hearts are, by nature, the Buddha, and when we realize this, we become buddhas; but when we are deluded, we are

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still living beings.” Becoming awakened and delusion are like two sides of the same coin. In other words, the Buddha and a living being are also opposite sides of the same coin, existing as one in a single individual, and once we open our eyes to this fact, then and there we find a way to liberation.

When we are fully aware of this fact, a lifestyle of wanting things—“I want this,” “I wish I had that”—changes to a lifestyle of being grateful for all things—“Thank you,” “It’s all thanks to you.”

Shakyamuni teaches us that “In the world, everything does not happen according to our wishes.” Yet he also teaches us that we can exercise control over ourselves. Therefore, even though we change ourselves, we cannot make others change according to our wishes. Buddhism is, after all, based on the realization that every one of us must make ourselves the light by making the Dharma our light.

Happiness and liberation are not far away. We are already receiving so much happiness, we are already being showered with blessings and, when we realize this in our daily lives, we see that these gifts exist in our own hearts and minds. □

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- 1 The True Way to Liberation  
*by Nichiko Niwano*
  - 3 Our Buddha-Nature  
Is a Seed That Grows  
*by Norio Sakai*
  - 4 How Buddhist Practice  
Grounds Social Action  
in a Secular World  
*by John Makransky*
  - 8 The Great Hesitation and  
the Great Liberation:  
The Long and Short of  
Karmic R/Evolution  
*by Mark Unno*
  - 12 What's Wrong with Me?  
Resolving the *Lack* of Self  
*by David R. Loy*
  - 16 The Conception of Suffering  
and Lotus Sutra Faith in Two Stories by Kenji Miyazawa  
*by Sarah M. Strong*
  - 21 An Answer to "What Can I Do Right Now?"  
*by Hitoshi Jin*
  - 24 Spiritual Liberation in Contemporary Society *by Yifa*
  - 27 Japanese Buddhist Responses to the Earthquake and Tsunami  
*by Miriam Levering*
  - 32 Learning the Truth through Repetition  
*by Ryojun Shionuma*
  - 34 Natural Disasters and Religion: In Search of an Alternative  
Way of Life *by Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne*
  - 38 Telling the Rest of My Story *by Nikkyo Niwano*
  - 40 Social Reform Based on Buddhist Insight—Examining Western Values  
*The twenty-eighth Niwano Peace Prize commemorative dialogue*
- THE THREEFOLD LOTUS SUTRA: A MODERN COMMENTARY**
- 44 The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law  
Chapter 19: The Merits of the Teacher of the Dharma (3)

# Our Buddha-Nature Is a Seed That Grows

by Norio Sakai

“Wonderful! Wonderful! All living beings possess the wisdom and the virtuous sign of the Tathagata, but they do not realize this because of their attachment to desires and illusions.” This, it is said, was Shakyamuni’s first utterance after attaining enlightenment.

Although it is possible for all living beings to attain the same enlightenment as did the Buddha, their minds are clouded by delusions, they live wrongful lives, and they suffer. Shakyamuni, realizing this, began a long journey of more than forty years to liberate all living beings. Human suffering varies in many ways, as do individuals’ capacities to understand the teachings. If one tries to explain the depth of enlightenment without any preparation, it will not be easily understood. On the contrary, it might even bring on delusions and suffering. With this in mind, through instruction in suitable, appropriate steps (skillful means) to liberate each and every person, Shakyamuni expounded many teachings right up to the moment of his entrance to nirvana. His teachings are said to contain “eighty-four thousand Dharma gates,” and although Buddhism has a huge number of sutras, all of the teachings come down to Shakyamuni’s one desire: to lead all the people of the world back to their original state of buddhahood.

Religions in general, not only Buddhism, have a strong magical element, and there are any number of people who believe that their wishes will come true if they chant something with all their might. I don’t think that relying in such a way on the divine protection of

the gods and the buddhas was the original Buddhist attitude.

My understanding is that true spiritual liberation through Buddhism comes first by thoroughly learning the teachings of the Buddha, and then by practicing them in thought, word, and deed. More specifically, one must adjust one’s lifestyle to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, among other teachings. Furthermore, so that not only you, but others, experience happiness, you must also devote yourself to the altruistic practices benefiting others centered on the practice of giving, which is one of the Six Perfections. It is through this that you will first sense the liberation that Buddhism can bring. All the teachings of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths and the Six Perfections, teach us to rise above profit and loss, to be like the Buddha.

Buddhism is not just about unrewarded effort, and the exact opposite is true. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, described the primary merit of faith in Buddhism as “having been able to be confident until today without ever doubting that the Buddha always watches over everything.”

That is why the founder was always cheerful and calm. Even when he was misunderstood or underappreciated, he never wavered from a straightforward approach, saying that “the countless buddhas and the heavenly spirits in the ten directions are all present among us and know our deep devotion.” He accepted and believed in everyone he met. He took the lead in doing good deeds and

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happily practiced giving. He was admired and beloved by many people.

When people devote themselves to their faith, their nature changes. They acquire a cheerful, fully self-confident, positive, and devoted nature. This shines through in their facial expressions, their words, and their actions, and their days change to a life of completeness. Relied upon by people, they may be blessed with good health and income. Yet such benefits of this world should not be the objective, since they will appear naturally as one seriously walks the path of the Dharma.

When we are blessed with material things or when we have our selfish desires satisfied, we do not feel true happiness. It is when we can be helpful to others and when we can delight another person that we can deeply savor happiness. That kind of action of the mind, that buddha-nature, which is the same as the Buddha’s, resides within us as well. When we become aware of our buddha-nature and serve others unconditionally, believing that the gods and the buddhas are observing us clearly, then even if our buddha-nature is as small as a seed, it will grow and put forth blossoms, like the magnanimous mind of the Buddha. I believe that living like that is what the spiritual liberation of Buddhism is. □

# How Buddhist Practice Grounds Social Action in a Secular World

by John Makransky

***Although many people in our modern, secularized world have rejected religious ways of thinking or have lost touch with spiritual resources previously available in their religious traditions, they search for a deeper grounding for living and serving that only spiritual disciplines can provide.***

Many people today who are deeply concerned about the world's suffering inhabit a secularized worldview in which it is assumed that religious understandings of salvation or spiritual liberation are irrelevant to the material needs and ways of thinking prevalent in our time. Such people, of course, do not see religious disciplines as a resource to help them respond to the suffering. And although moral teachings of mainstream Western religious traditions today continue to inspire their faithful to serve others in need, such traditions have largely lost touch with contemplative disciplines that were earlier maintained in monastic institutions. As many members of mainstream religions themselves report, the modern emphasis on service to others in their churches and synagogues can mask a lack of spiritual grounding necessary for such service to realize its fuller potential to empower, heal, and liberate both those who serve others and those served by them.

Yet, even as the world has become increasingly secularized in its rejection or forgetting of religious resources, people also increasingly long for what religions (at their best) have provided: access to a primal power of goodness that transcends the world's limiting attitudes and

structures of greed, apathy, and prejudice; liberates people to discover a greater potential in themselves and others; and empowers wise, compassionate, and creative responsiveness to the world's needs. This yearning to rediscover our connection to the primal or unconditioned ground of our being, so as to live, act, and serve others in a more deeply grounded way, takes expression in a host of modern desires that the materialism of the modern world does not address: the search for deep rest from the freneticism of modern life; the desire for a much deeper healing of body, mind, and spirit than health spas can provide; the wish to find a sustaining power of love for self and others in a hypercompetitive world; the desire for a renewed spirituality within or beyond mainstream religions; the urge to protect nature from the predations of our own consumerism; and the desire to relieve suffering and establish lasting peace and justice in a world of increasing possessiveness, apathy, and violence. Although many people today believe they have transcended religious ways of thinking, and indeed many blame religion as a major cause of the world's current problems, the same people often long for a deeper grounding for their lives and actions,

the kind of grounding that was accessed in the past through the spiritual disciplines of religious traditions.

The longing for a more grounded source for living and serving also manifests in the pressing needs that are commonly voiced by people who work to address the sufferings of the world in all areas of social service: the need to find a place of deep inner rest and replenishment so as to heal from the dynamics of burnout; the need for a more unconditional attitude to self and others that would sustain our service beyond "compassion fatigue" and empower others to see their own potential for change; the need to become more fully present to those we serve to better discern and evoke their hidden strengths; and the need for the wisdom, compassion, and courage to challenge oppressive structures without losing touch with the essential humanity of everyone involved. As Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh have taught, to bring more goodness into the world, we need to be in touch with the deepest goodness of ourselves and others. To help people find much more peace and well-being in their lives, we need to come from a place of deepest peace and well-being in ourselves. But such a grounded way of being and serving is not accomplished just by longing for it. Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh immersed themselves in disciplines of spiritual traditions that put them in touch with the depth of their being, from which they could respond to others in the depth of their being—helping many



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others to see themselves as deeply worthy and capable of great good.

A big challenge of our time, then, is to find access to the primal power of goodness that comes from the ground of our being within a secularized world that largely rejects traditional religious ways of doing so. It is for this reason, I think, that people of varying backgrounds and diverse faiths now take increasing interest in spiritual disciplines of Buddhism. In a way, thousands of years of Asian Buddhist history have prepared Buddhism to meet the modern longings and needs noted above. Although the Buddha's teaching has been interpreted diversely in different Asian cultures, early systematization of the teaching in Abhidharma traditions (purportedly modeled on practices of the

Buddha's early disciples) framed samsara and nirvana as a simple dualism. In these traditions, nirvana, an unconditioned (*asamskrta*) dimension of deepest freedom and peace, was said to be attained through the Eightfold Path, which liberates people from deluded emotions and karma that fuel samsara, freeing them from the round of birth and death. To become enlightened in this paradigm, then, involved putting a stop to one's participation in the conditioned world of suffering by a decisive realization of the unconditioned dimension that frees beings from that world.

In the later centuries BCE, diverse Mahayana Buddhist movements of India gave renewed attention to an alternative early paradigm that has taken on a new relevance for the world in our time:

the bodhisattva path of the buddhas. Drawing upon a variety of developments in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, ritual, and cosmology, early Mahayana movements conceptualized the bodhisattva path as a synergy of practices that liberated persons for enlightened participation *in* the world rather than a final release from the world. According to these traditions, all phenomena of life and experience are empty of separate, independent existence, lacking a reified, isolated mode of existence, since they arise only interdependently. Just as the impermanence of transitory things itself does not change, the empty nature of things (suchness), the basic space of reality that penetrates all things (*dharma-dhatu*) is unconditioned, unchanging. To realize the empty, unconditioned nature of this world (the nirvanic nature of samsara, or buddha-nature) was to see deeply into the world's patterns of reification, karmic reaction, individual and social suffering, liberating the bodhisattva from such patterns while empowering him or her to respond compassionately to such patterns in others (skillful means). In other words, to realize the unconditioned, empty ground of being (*dharmadhatu*) was to be liberated into a power of unconditional love and compassion for the world. The bodhisattva in Asian cultures was said to draw on ritual and meditative disciplines to realize the unconditional compassion and creative energy of the empty ground of his or her being, both to impart ways of enlightenment to others and to direct the power of ritual and

meditation to help meet deep-felt needs of Asian peoples: for protection, healing, help in dying and rebirth; to avert epidemics, floods, famine, and pestilence; to promote harmony in society and the cosmos; to promote prosperity; to provide ethical systems for social stability and well-being; and to support beneficial new kinds of learning in literature, poetry, medicine, philosophy, and the arts. Since, within the bodhisattva paradigm, nirvana is found in the empty nature of all worldly phenomena, the bodhisattva was said to disclose beneficial powers of nirvana for living and dying by drawing on the full range of human experience and learning. In this sense, Buddhist traditions have been tutored for centuries by Asian societies in how to reformulate teachings and practices so as to help people of diverse backgrounds and cultures gain access to creative powers for good that come from the very ground of their being.

Part of the meaning of *skillful means* in bodhisattva traditions, then, is the ability developed through spiritual disciplines to draw on the *unconditioned* (empty) ground of being for access to *unconditional* powers of love, compassion, energy, and creativity—the very powers for service and action that so many people now seek in a

secularized world that has forgotten how to access them.

During the past ten years I have been asked to teach meditation practices of compassion and wisdom from Tibetan Buddhism in adapted forms made newly accessible for people of diverse backgrounds and faiths. Besides offering such practices in Buddhist retreat settings, I have presented them in a variety of secular and interfaith settings: for social workers, educators, therapists, health care givers, hospice volunteers, prison chaplains, community development workers, and social justice activists. These include people who work with at-risk families and youths, addicts, prisoners, secondary and college students, the mentally ill, the physically ill, the dying, and those who work to protect people who live in oppressive conditions and to protect the natural world. Many of these people tell me they attend such retreats because they seek, through Buddhist practice, a way they can seriously consider, engage, and open to a deeper dimension of their being beyond the reactivity of everyone's egos, to find refuge in a more reliable and stable source of inspiration, inner peace, and power to serve others than their secular educations and socially conditioned habits of reaction have permitted.

Many who attend such retreats tell me that they have found the theistic religions in which they were brought up oppressive, that they have rejected religion, and that they are attracted to Buddhism, in part, for its lack of theistic dogmas. Many others who attend these retreats, in contrast, are devout Christians or Jews who seek from Buddhism rigorous contemplative disciplines of a sort unavailable in their churches and synagogues. Through such disciplines they hope to find an experiential encounter with the deepest reality of their being and world (understood by them as God) that would replenish their spirit, strengthen their motivation, and empower greater discernment for serving others in need.

There is a renewed yearning in our time to find greater access to the depth of our being, to find within us a source of profound wisdom, loving connection, and creative responsiveness. From my Buddhist perspective, this is a yearning to return to the empty ground of our experience (suchness), where all conditioned patterns of self-clinging thought and reaction are discovered to be already embraced in the primal energy of unconditional compassion, the energy of primordial buddha-nature. There, all such patterns can be deeply healed and self-

released in the ground of our awareness, where a potential for deep inner freedom lies. This is the *unconditioned* (empty) ground of our being that makes *unconditional* love and compassion for self and others possible. From this ground can emerge a purer vision of people that senses their intrinsic worthiness, great potential, and fundamental mystery, beyond all the reductive labels and ideologies of our societies. It is from this place that we can sense our underlying unity with others, commune with them in the original goodness of their being, listen deeply to them, and respond creatively and wisely with reverence. But to find access to such depth requires immersion in disciplines that repeatedly turn our attention to the unconditioned ground of the depth of our being in order to help us become increasingly transparent to its qualities.

Something analogous is posited in many world religions, which teach variously that there is, at the core of our being, an unconditioned ground that empowers us to respond in unconditionally ethical and creative ways to our suffering world. The word *God* in theistic traditions refers, in part, to the unconditioned ground of all creation (and thus all creativity), in light of which humans can find their deepest purpose as creatures in working for the benefit of all creation. Analogously, Buddhist traditions speak of unconditioned suchness, buddha-nature, *dharmakaya* as that which empowers us to realize our lives as finite expressions of an infinite reality of wisdom and compassion—fullest enlightenment. As a Buddhist teacher in frequent interaction with religious Christians and Jews involved in social service, as well as with committed atheists, it seems clear to me (as a Buddhist) that they are searching for the unconditioned ground of their being to empower a more unconditional attitude of love and responsiveness for themselves and others. For this reason, I believe, when Buddhist teachers

find new ways to help people of diverse faiths and backgrounds open toward that ground, they are not merely introducing people to Buddhist ideas but implicitly reintroducing them to the deepest source of compassionate and creative energy that their own spiritual and religious heritages have drawn upon. It is for this reason, from my point of view, that when I share Tibetan methods for people to tap the innate potential of compassion and wisdom in the ground of their experience (their buddha-nature), people of diverse faiths frequently report that elements of their religious formation as Christians or Jews suddenly return to them—rediscovered in light of Buddhist practice as newly meaningful and life-giving. This is not uncommon at all. I hear from many other Western and Asian teachers of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Pure Land, and other Buddhist traditions that the same phenomenon of interreligious revelation is a frequent occurrence in their teaching settings as well.

For example, after learning practices adapted from Tibet to find rest in the unconditional compassion of the mind's ultimate ground, many Christians and Jews have told me they discover more of the meaning of their relationship to God and neighbor. One young Christian woman reported in her journal: "Today after meditating, I spontaneously wrote: 'If you steer from fear, and cling to no thing, you'll find freedom to give and joy to sing. You'll know who you are, held from above; you'll know the Truth that God Is. . . . You'll know God is Love.'" An older Catholic man told me of his long anger at a local church official who had been accused of allowing child abuse to occur on his watch. After immersing in practices of compassion and primal awareness adapted from Tibet, he reported that, to his amazement, he found himself holding the same official and all others involved in the situation in an unconditional wish of compassion that had the power to challenge

the official's actions without any trace of hatred for him. After years of rage and blame, he felt as if he were being reintroduced, through Buddhist methods, to the divine unity of love and justice of his Christian tradition. In another example, a Jewish scholar who had attended many retreats on Buddhist meditations of love and wisdom introduced these practices to Jewish groups in his area. He did so, he said, to further inform and empower Jewish commitment to "repairing the world" and to help Jews experientially reengage ancient teachings like Rabbi Akiba's, which identified love for neighbor as "the greatest principle of the Torah." He had been returned to resources of Jewish tradition with new eyes through Buddhist practice, he said, and was helping other interested Jews do the same.

In sum, although many people in our modern, secularized world have rejected religious ways of thinking or have lost touch with spiritual resources previously available in their religious traditions, they search for a deeper grounding for living and serving that only spiritual disciplines can provide. When we adapt Buddhist teaching and practice for widening participation by people of diverse backgrounds and faiths, non-religious people have the chance they seek to explore more of their human potential for impartial compassion, profound discernment, and creative responsiveness to the world's needs. And devout people of non-Buddhist faiths can experientially rediscover, in light of their Buddhist practice, a life-giving potential and depth in their own traditions that was previously unavailable to them. When such people speak from a place of fresh awakening (through Buddhist practice) to elements of their non-Buddhist faiths, they point out to us, as Buddhists, ways that the creative, liberating potential of our own tradition (as in past centuries) is opening people's hearts anew, transforming their lives and their world. □

# The Great Hesitation and the Great Liberation: The Long and Short of Karmic R/Evolution

by Mark Unno

*Each of us individually and all of us collectively are responsible for the difficulties our species faces. That we are in this together, that we vow to take this journey together, not blaming one another but, rather, embracing our collective karmic responsibility, with a long view to its positive outcome, may be one way to approach the path to our liberation.*

Historically, Buddhism has been a religion of liberation, but *liberation* is an English word, a translation of *mokṣa*, which in the traditionally Buddhist context has carried a distinct religious meaning, having to do with release from suffering, in particular the suffering of existence itself, defined as release from the continual cycle of rebirth. Liberation in the Western context has also signified release from suffering, but in the modern context this has often carried the connotation of liberation from social, political, and economic oppression.

These two senses of liberation are not mutually exclusive. There have been Asian Buddhists who have worked to liberate suffering beings from forms of worldly oppression within the framework of its traditional soteriology. In the modern context, Western forms of social and environmental activism have combined with Buddhist thought and practice, resulting in what is known as Engaged Buddhism. This has led to the development of Buddhist movements to address social inequality and the creation of specific programs in such areas as Buddhist chaplaincy, hospice, and the empowerment of Buddhist nuns.

Now may be an opportune moment

to reexamine what *liberation* signifies as Buddhism continues to evolve. In particular, this is so because global society may be at a crossroads regarding some of the assumptions that have driven the development of human culture. It is not news to say we face many challenges, including climate change, peak oil, water shortages, nuclear radiation fallout, overcrowding, and the global financial crisis. Even compared with a few decades ago, many experts concur that the challenges we face today are formidable. Leading organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have delivered assessments that it is already too late to avoid impending drastic, negative consequences of our collective cultural actions.<sup>1</sup> Even if we were able to implement the best available technology, it would not be enough. Add to this the cultural and political obstacles we face, and there remains limited hope of stemming the tide of destructive consequences that the human species has unleashed.

## A Problem of Karma

The modern mind-set is a problem-solving one. In many ways, the human species in our technological, information,

and Internet age has become the most successful problem-solving species in the history of evolution, but we may be reaching the limits of this approach to life.

Among the millions of species that have come and gone, we have come to dominate the earth's resources in unprecedented fashion. What took the ecosystem hundreds of millions of years to produce—crude oil—we have likely consumed half or more within just a century or two. We are the largest force bringing accelerated changes to the climate, and these changes are occurring so quickly that we may not be able to adapt to them. Is the human species so exceptional that we can consume planetary resources to such an extent and yet expect to continue on our current trajectory?

From a Buddhist perspective, we can view the current situation in terms of karma. Although we knew of many of the impending problems decades ago, as a species we have failed to address our karmic circumstances. Whether because of greed or ignorance, we have failed to act, in our own best interests or in the interests of the biosphere. Buddhist conceptions of karma suggest that there are possibilities for reframing our dilemma.



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## Time and Karmic Evolution: The Long View

When we consider the history of Buddhist thought, the current turn of events is not entirely unexpected. Both in the early teachings of the Nikaya literature<sup>2</sup> and in the later Mahayana, the predominant theme is of karmic decline over time, not progress. This stands in contrast to the modern Western view of history, which has generally been progressive. The current crises appear to be overwhelming because they raise serious questions about our progressive expectations that we will always be able to create a better world for future generations. Thus, the Buddhist view of decline may be easier to reconcile with current trends in such areas as climate change and resource depletion. Yet, how can Buddhists remain optimistic if their dominant narrative has been one of continual karmic decline?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand the assumptions behind the modern Western view of time, that time is (1) real, (2) linear, and (3) progressive. (1) Time, and in particular history, for the modern consciousness is imbued with a sense of ontological reality: historical events really happen in a permanent way, so that once something happens, it is a fact that cannot be undone. (2) Time is linear, so that once something happens, it becomes a permanent part of the past, upon which the future is built.

(3) Although there are ups and downs, the predominant tone of Western history is that there is real progress, in technology, economic prosperity, and social equality.

Buddhist views of time, especially as found in East Asian Mahayana, tend to differ dramatically. (1) It is perceived that time is illusory, a human construct, and therefore not fixed but fluid. (2) In the long view, time is generally described in cyclical terms, so that events in time have a repetitive, rather than unique, character. (3) In the current phase of time, we are in a period of karmic decline. References to karmic decline begin with the early Nikaya literature and become formalized in the later Mahayana Buddhist notion of the Three Dharma Ages:<sup>3</sup> the period of the True Dharma, followed by the Semblance Dharma, and then the Final Dharma (Ch., *mofa*; Jpn., *mappō*), in which there is not even the semblance of proper practice. In this Final Age, there is corruption in Buddhist institutions, social disorder, and even disruptions in climate, all caused by human folly and excess. Exceptional individuals may be quite enlightened; it is the *collective* karma of the species that dooms it to self-destruction.<sup>4</sup>

In Buddhism the long view of human karmic evolution is positive, since all beings eventually attain buddhahood, having exhausted the karmic inertia of rebirth, but this long view is potentially cosmic in scale. This combination of shorter-term karmic decline but longer-

term awakening can have a salutary effect on present awareness: all karmic actions still matter; no matter what one does, actions still carry consequences. Good actions beget positive results; destructive actions beget suffering. However, one cannot predict when these consequences will result. They could occur within one lifetime, or they could take many lifetimes.

One might suppose that since all beings inevitably attain enlightenment, one can do anything one wants. Yet anyone with a conscience surely wants to do good and wants one's efforts to make a difference. For most people, consequences do matter. Ultimately, expanding the scope of the consequences of one's actions into future lifetimes, out to a cosmic scale, makes one realize that the worthiness of the action itself is what matters, not the expectation for an immediate result. Because one cannot control when the consequences will bear fruit, one can focus only on the *quality* of the action and the attention one gives it in the present moment. Results do matter, but they will take care of themselves.

## The Buddha: The Great Hesitation and Karmic Revolution

The view of human karmic limitations in the present that complements the long view of karmic consequences became formalized in the theory of the Three Dharma Ages, but precursors can be seen in the earliest history of

Buddhism, beginning with the Buddha himself. One of the most intriguing moments occurred immediately after his enlightenment, as the Awakened One contemplated his future direction. When, after six long years in search of enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama awoke from his meditation under the Bodhi tree and became Śākyamuni Buddha, his first impulse was not to go out and share his realization of liberation. Rather, his initial response was to remain silent, living out his days as a wandering mendicant, having broken the bonds of attachment to a self he discovered never existed in the first place. According to the account found in the Nikaya literature,

when the Blessed One was newly Self-awakened . . . this line of thinking arose in his awareness: “This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. . . . For a generation delighting in attachment, . . . this/that conditionality and dependent co-arising are hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, . . . the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; Unbinding. And if I were to teach the Dhamma and if others would not understand me, that would be tiresome for me, troublesome for me.”<sup>5</sup>

This was the moment of the Buddha’s Great Hesitation immediately following his Great Awakening, which, if he had remained there, would have resulted in a world without Buddhism. This hesitation can be seen in terms of his karmic awareness. On the one hand, he may have understood the karmic limitations of his circumstances, the inability of those he would teach as well as his own inability to lead them: “For a generation delighting in attachment, . . . this/that conditionality and

dependent co-arising are hard to see. . . . if others would not understand me, that would be . . . troublesome for me.” On the other, the Buddha’s awareness of karmic limitations may have been inseparable from his sense of karmic responsibility. The deeper he became aware of others’ and his own attachments and ignorance, the more he became aware of his responsibility for liberating all beings. Finally, he made the determination to go forth and teach, taking cosmic responsibility for the unending chain of karmic consequences.

The concerns he expressed in his moment of great hesitation turned out to be prescient. As the sangha grew and the Buddha continued to teach, he faced many difficulties. He witnessed the invasion of his father’s kingdom by the larger, neighboring Kosala kingdom. At first the Buddha was successful in peaceably turning back the Kosala army, but the army returned repeatedly, and eventually it would not be denied.<sup>6</sup> Within the sangha, his own cousin Devadatta plotted to usurp the Buddha’s authority and to steal away his monks.

Of course, the Kosala army’s aggression was not his fault; neither were his cousin’s jealousy and ambition. Yet, one could say, the Buddha saw them as belonging within the larger circle of his karmic responsibility. If he had been the perfect teacher, might he have been able to show the Kosala army the meaninglessness of their aggression? If he had been a truly great teacher, might he have been able to diffuse Devadatta’s jealousy and lead him to enlightenment? If indeed the Buddha had his karmic limitations as a teacher, then how much more so the sangha as a whole as it grew larger, more complex, composed of individuals with varying degrees of spiritual maturity.

Perhaps the Buddha, in the moment of his awakening, had already anticipated the potential troubles that would

follow and the eventual decline of the sangha and society. Nevertheless, what began as a moment of Great Hesitation became the moment of Karmic Revolution, the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, in which the Buddha took the long view, the cosmic view, of his karmic responsibility and of the fact that each karmic action, however great or small, would bear the stamp of his commitment to help liberate all sentient beings.

## Bodhisattva Devadatta

The figure of Devadatta, the Buddha’s evil cousin, became emblematic in Mahayana Buddhism of the sense that the karmic chain of cause and effect ultimately includes everyone, that one’s own liberation is inseparable from that of all others. For example, in the Lotus Sutra, Devadatta appears as a holy seer who becomes a bodhisattva. The Buddha expounds:

Throughout those many eons I was a king who vowed to seek unexcelled awakening. . . .

Then a seer came to the king and said: “I have a [Mahayana] sutra named the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma. If you will obey me, I will explain it for you.” Hearing what the seer said, the king became ecstatic with joy. . . .

The king at that time was me and the seer was the present Devadatta. Because Devadatta was a good friend to me I was able to become fully developed in the six transcendental practices, in kindness, compassion, joy, and impartiality. . . . That I have attained impartial, proper awakening and saved many of the living is due to my good friend Devadatta.<sup>7</sup>

If we read this account of Devadatta as the Buddha’s teacher or bodhisattva and reflect on the earlier Nikaya account, we might say that in the moment of the

Buddha's karmic revolution, in his commitment to the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, deep down he vowed to follow his cousin until he could see his cousin's karma as his own, such that the Buddha's true liberation could not occur without Devadatta's. At a practical level, it would not do to condone Devadatta's insurrection, for the sake of either the sangha or Devadatta. At the level of religious awareness, however, to simply treat Devadatta as evil (and the Buddha as good) would be to fail to see the deep karmic intertwinings between the Buddha's own life and his cousin's.

Similarly, Shinran, the Japanese Pure Land teacher, interpreting the story of Devadatta, states in the preface to his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

I reflect within myself: The universal Vow difficult to fathom is indeed a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross. . . . Thus . . . when conditions for the teaching of birth in the Pure Land had matured, Devadatta provoked Ajātaśatru to commit grave crimes. And when the opportunity arose for explaining the pure act by which birth is settled, Śākyamuni led Vaidehī to select the land of peace. In their selfless love, these incarnated ones—Devadatta, Ajātaśatru, Vaidehī—all aspired to save the multitudes of beings from pain and affliction, and in his compassion, Śākyamuni . . . sought indeed to bless those committing the five grave offenses, . . . and those lacking the seed of Buddhahood.<sup>8</sup>

Like the rendering of Devadatta in the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha's cousin appears to Shinran against the cosmic background of the Buddha's karmic responsibility to "transform our evil into virtue" of those "lacking the seed of Buddhahood." As a teacher who brings this lesson to sentient beings,

Devadatta is said to act out of "selfless love."

The moment of karmic revolution is the moment in which the separation between the Awakened One and the evil cousin is dissolved in the mutual embrace of karmic responsibility, in which one is able to take the long view of karmic evolution that renders meaningful each act of karmic responsibility and its lasting consequences. Good deeds will not go wasted, destructive action will inevitably bear consequences.

In terms of the great challenges of our day, each of us individually and all of us collectively are responsible for the difficulties our species faces. That we are in this together, that we vow to take this journey together, not blaming one another but, rather, embracing our collective karmic responsibility, with a long view to its positive outcome, may be one way to approach the path to our liberation.

## Conclusion

According to the Buddhist view presented here, which is only one of many possibilities, we cannot "fix" the world or "save" the planet any more than we can save ourselves from our collective folly. Rather, by seeing through the illusion of a separate world in need of fixing to a world beyond the categories that separate ourselves from others, we may be able, each in our own small way, to attend to each being and situation within the great circle of our karmic responsibility. That does not mean abandoning our efforts to contribute to a world in need or going back to a traditional view of Buddhism that refuses to recognize the suffering in this world. Whether one takes a more traditional approach or one like that of Engaged Buddhism, this essay simply aims to stimulate reflection on what liberation might mean in light of the Buddha's Great Hesitation and of the long and the short of karmic r/evolution.

Today, many of us take for granted the use of smartphones, the wireless Internet, and all of our other convenience appliances as if we had always had them. But really, they are recent inventions, as is the human species itself, and our time on this planet may be briefer than we think. Our existence within the great life of this planet and the vast arc of the universe is but a blink of an eye. What will we do with our moment as homo sapiens, within the larger scope of our karmic trajectory? □

## Notes

1. IPCC, [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/ar4/syr/en/spm.html](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/syr/en/spm.html), accessed January 8, 2012.
2. *Samyutta Nikaya: An Anthology* by M. O'C. Walshe, SN 16.13, <http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/walshe/wheel318.html#passage-23>, accessed January 7, 2012.
3. See, for example, D. M. Brown and I. Ishida, trans., *The Future and the Past: A Translation and Study of the Gukanshō, an Interpretative History of Japan Written in 1219* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
4. It is not only Buddhism that takes a declining view of time. Many other Asian religions, including Hinduism, Confucianism, and Daoism, take a similar view, harkening back to a Golden Age in the past and describing a trajectory of spiritual and social decline thereafter.
5. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Ayacana Sutta," *Samyutta Nikaya* 6.1, <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn06/sn06.001.than.html>, accessed January 7, 2012.
6. D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1988), 128–29.
7. Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 247–49.
8. Dennis Hirota et al., trans., preface to *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, in vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 3.

# What's Wrong with Me? Resolving the *Lack of Self*

by David R. Loy

***Our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is being open to, and an expression of, something more than I usually understand myself to be.***

*When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom.*

*When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love.*

*Between these two my life turns.*

—Nisargadatta

What is the most important Buddhist teaching for us today? I believe it is the essential connection that Buddhism emphasizes between *dukkha* (suffering) and the delusive sense of self. Our usual sense of being a separate self—the feeling that there is a “me” *inside* that is separate from the rest of the world *outside*—is not only a dangerous delusion, it is the heart of our *dukkha*.

The original Pali term *dukkha* is usually translated into English as “suffering,” but that is too narrow unless we understand suffering in a very broad way. The point of *dukkha* is that even those of us who are wealthy and healthy experience a basic dissatisfaction, a *disease*, which continually festers. That we find life dissatisfactory, one damn problem after another, is not accidental, because it is the nature of an unawakened sense of self to be bothered about something.

The claim that there is no substantial self seems very strange and counterintuitive, but today we can benefit from

what modern psychology has discovered, that the sense of self is a *psycho-social* construct: psychological because the ego-self is a product of mental conditioning, which creates habitual ways of thinking and acting; and *social* because as children we develop a sense of self in relation to other constructed selves, usually our parents.

Despite these similarities, Buddhism differs from most Western psychology in two important ways. First, Buddhism emphasizes that there is always something uncomfortable about the constructed sense of self. Traditional psychotherapy is usually concerned to help us become “well-adjusted.” The ego-self needs to be repaired so it can fit into society and we can play our social roles better. But a socially well-adjusted ego-self can still be a very sick ego-self, for, as long as one feels separate from others, there is *dukkha*.

This suggests the other way that Buddhism differs from modern psychology. Buddhism agrees that the sense of self can be reconstructed and that it needs to be reconstructed, but it emphasizes even more that the sense of self needs to be *deconstructed* to realize its true “empty,” nondwelling nature. Awakening to our constructedness is the only real solution to our most

fundamental anxiety. Ironically, the problem and its solution both depend upon the same fact: a constructed sense of self is not a real self. Not being a real self is normally very uncomfortable. Not being a real self is also what enables the sense of self to be deconstructed and reconstructed, which is what the Buddhist path is about.

Why is a constructed sense of self so uncomfortable? This is the crucial point. “My” sense of self is not a thing but an ever-changing cluster of processes, composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, acting, reacting, remembering, intending, and so forth. The way that those activities interact with each other gives rise to the sense of being a self that is separate from other people and the rest of the world. If you strip away those psychological and physical processes—or let them fall away, which happens when we meditate—it’s like peeling off the layers of an onion. When you get to the end, what’s left? *Nothing*. There’s no hard seed or anything else at the core. And what’s wrong with that? *Nothing*. The basic problem is, we don’t want to be nothing; we don’t like the fact that we lack any fixed identity. What is, in effect, a gaping hole at one’s core is quite distressing. Another way to say it is that my nothingness means my constructed sense of self is not only ungrounded but ungroundable, which in turn means that my self-awareness is haunted by a basic sense of insecurity and unreality.

Intellectually, this situation is not easy to understand, but I suspect that



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most of us have some innate awareness of the problem. In fact, if our sense of self is truly empty in this way, we *must* have some basic awareness of this problem—yet it's a very uncomfortable awareness, because we don't understand it or know what to do about it. I think this is one of the great secrets of life: each of us individually experiences this sense of unreality as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” Growing up is learning to pretend along with everyone else that “I'm OK, you're OK,” yet this doesn't solve the problem. We learn to ignore it—but that feeling is still there, and we become aware of it when we're not distracted by other things. A lot of social interaction is about reassuring each other and ourselves that we're all really okay even though inside we feel somehow that we're not.

Here another modern psychological idea is helpful: repression. Although Freud's legacy has become quite controversial, his concept of repression, and “the return of the repressed,” remains very important. Repression happens when I become aware of something uncomfortable that I don't want to deal with, so it is “pushed away” from consciousness. Freud believed that our main repression is sexual desires. Existential psychology shifts the focus to death: our inability to cope with mortality, the fact that our lives will come to an end and we don't know when. Buddhism, however, implies that our main repression is a little different. Fear of death focuses on what will happen in the future, while there is a more basic problem that we

experience right *now*: this uncomfortable sense of unreality at our core, which we don't know how to deal with. Naturally enough, we learn to ignore or repress it, but that doesn't resolve the problem. The difficulty with repression is that it doesn't work. What has been repressed returns to consciousness one way or another, in a disguised or distorted fashion. This “return of the repressed” is thus a *symptom* of the original awareness that we didn't want to deal with.

Our repressed sense of unreality returns to consciousness as the feeling that there is something missing or lacking in our life. What is lacking? How I understand that depends upon the kind of person I am and the kind of society I live in. In itself, the sense

that something is wrong with me is too vague, too amorphous. It needs to take more specific form if I'm to be able to do something about it, and that form usually depends upon how I've been socialized. For example, if I grow up in a modern developed (or “economized”) society such as the United States, I am likely to understand my lack as not having enough money—regardless of how much money I already have.

Money is important to us not only because we can buy almost anything with it but also because it has become perhaps our most important *reality symbol*. Money not only represents the possibility of satisfying all desire, it is generally believed to be the best way to secure oneself/one's self—that is, to gain

*“Traditional psychotherapy is usually concerned to help us become ‘well-*

a solid identity. In more religious cultures people visit temples and churches to ground themselves in a relationship with God or gods. Today we invest in “securities” and “trust funds” to ground ourselves economically. Financial institutions have become our most important shrines.

But there’s a karmic rebound: the more we value money, the more we find it used—and the more we use it—to evaluate *ourselves*. We end up being manipulated by the symbol we take so seriously. In this sense, the problem is not that we are too materialistic but that we are not materialistic enough, because we tend to be so preoccupied with its symbolism that we end up devaluing life itself. We are often infatuated less with the things money can buy than with what those possessions say about *who we are*: we identify not so much with the power and comfort of an expensive car as with what owning a Mercedes-Benz says about *me*. “I’m the kind of guy who drives a Mercedes. . . .”

Another example is fame. Why are so many people so obsessed with it today? It makes sense as a solution to our sense of lack—to the feeling that I’m *not real enough*. If I am known by lots and lots of people, then I must be real, right? In a world now so permeated by print and digital images, where the media determine what’s real, being anonymous sometimes feels like being *nothing* at all, for one’s lack of being is constantly contrasted with all of those real people whose pictures dominate the screens and whose names keep appearing in newspapers and magazines. In his book *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy describes “the living death of being unknown,” and he sums up the problem well: “The essential lure of the famous is that they are somehow more real than we are and that our insubstantial physical reality needs that immortal substance for support . . . because it is the best, perhaps the only, way to *be*.” Yet the attention of other people,

who are haunted by their own sense of lack, can’t really fill up our own sense of lack. If you think that fame is what will make you real, you can never be famous enough, because no matter how famous you might become, the sense of lack is still there as long as you have a sense of self that feels separate from other people and the rest of the world.

This approach gives us insight into karma, especially the Buddha’s revolutionary understanding of karma, which emphasized the role of motivations and intentions. If my sense of self is actually composed of habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving, then karma isn’t something I have, it’s what “I” *am*. Just as my physical body is composed of the food eaten and digested, so my sense of self is composed of consistent, repetitive choices, which eventually become habituated mental attitudes. People are “punished” or “rewarded” not so much for what they have done as for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. The most important part of the self is the intentions behind what we do, for they most affect how we experience the world and how the world experiences us. I change my karma by changing who “I” *am*: by reconstructing my habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and behaving. The problematical motivations that cause so much trouble for me and for others—greed, ill will, and delusion, the three unwholesome roots also known as the three poisons—need to be transformed into their more positive counterparts that work to reduce *dukkha*: generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

Whether or not you believe in karma as something magical, as an objective moral law of the universe, on a more psychological level karma is about how habitual ways of thinking and acting tend to create predictable types of situations. If I’m motivated by greed, ill will, and delusion, then I need to be manipulative, which tends to alienate

other people and also makes me feel more separate from them. Ironically, I’m busy trying to defend and promote the interests of something that doesn’t exist: my self. (And because the sense of self is not a real self, it’s always in need of defense and support.) Yet acting in that way reinforces my delusive sense of self. When I’m motivated by generosity and loving-kindness, however, I can relax and open up, be less defensive. Again, other people tend to respond in the same way, which in that case works to reduce *dukkha* for all of us.

Transforming our karma in this way is very important, but most fundamentally Buddhism is about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and its lack of any fixed self-identity. If changing karma involves *reconstructing* the sense of self, *deconstructing* the sense of self involves directly experiencing its emptiness. Usually that void at our core is so uncomfortable that we try to evade it by identifying with something else that (we hope) can give us stability and security. Another way to say it is that we keep trying to fill up that hole, yet it’s a bottomless pit. Nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack.

So what happens when we don’t run away from that hole at our core? That’s

what we're doing when we meditate: we are "letting go" of all the physical and mental activity that distracts us from our emptiness. It's not that easy to do, because then one's sense of lack (insecurity, groundedlessness, unreality) is felt more strongly. Meditation is uncomfortable, especially at the beginning, because in our daily lives we are used to taking evasive action. So we tend to take evasive action when we meditate too: we fantasize, get distracted, make plans, feel sorry for ourselves. . . .

But if I can learn not to run away from those uncomfortable feelings, to become friendly with them, then something can happen to that core. The curious thing about "my" emptiness is that it is not really a problem. The problem is that we think it's a problem. Our ways of trying to escape it make it into a problem.

Some Buddhist sutras talk about *paravritti*, a "turning around" that transforms the festering hole at my core into a life-healing spring that flows spontaneously from I know not where. Instead of being experienced as a sense of lack, the empty core becomes a place where there is now awareness of something other than, greater than, my usual sense of self. I can never grasp that "greater than," I can never understand what it is—and I do not need to, because "I" am an expression of it. My role is to become a better manifestation of it, with less interference from the delusion of ego-self.

So our emptiness has two sides: the negative, problematic aspect is a sense of lack. The other aspect is being open to, and an expression of, something more than I usually understand myself to be.

The original Buddhist term usually translated as emptiness (Pali, *shunyata*) seems to have this double-sided meaning. I find it suggestive that it derives from the root *shu*, which means "swollen." There is the swollenness of a blown-up balloon but also the swollenness of an expectant woman, pregnant with possibility. So perhaps a more accurate translation of *shunyata* is emptiness/fullness, which describes quite well the experience of our own spiritual emptiness, both the problem and the solution.

To sum up, what our Buddhist practice works to develop is a more permeable, less dualistic sense of self, which is aware of, and comfortable with, its empty constructedness. We are reconstructed into less *self-ish*, more compassionate beings devoted to the welfare and awakening of everyone.

# The Conception of Suffering and Lotus Sutra Faith in Two Stories

by Kenji Miyazawa

by Sarah M. Strong

*Miyazawa's familiarity with the Lotus Sutra and his faith in its saving power had a discernible influence on many of his stories: on their imagery, expressed concepts, and emotional tonality.*

The biographical record of the poet and storywriter Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933) tells us that he had a profound encounter with the Lotus Sutra in 1914 when he was eighteen years old. It is said that he was especially moved by the sixteenth chapter, “The Life Span of the Thus Come One,” the reading of which caused his “body to tremble ceaselessly.”<sup>1</sup> Beginning with that initial experience, faith in the Lotus Sutra profoundly shaped his life. There are indications that Miyazawa saw his writing as a means of propagating the faith. Nonetheless, explicit references to the Lotus Sutra are not common in Miyazawa’s literary works. It is mentioned with much more frequency in his letters. A few of his poems refer to specific items in the sutra, but in his stories, perhaps the most popular part of his oeuvre, the Lotus is explicitly referenced in only one piece, “The Shining Feet” (Hikari no suashi),<sup>2</sup> where he refers to the title of the sixteenth chapter.

Despite the absence of much explicit reference, we can argue that Miyazawa’s familiarity with the Lotus Sutra and his faith in its saving power had a discernible influence on many of his stories: on their imagery, expressed concepts, and emotional tonality. One story in which I discern a probable yet inexplicit Lotus influence is “The Diamonds of Ten

Powers” (Jūriki no kongōseki).<sup>3</sup> While the dating of this and most of Miyazawa’s stories is not definite, it seems likely that this narrative was written comparatively early in his career and near the same time as “The Shining Feet.” My investigation of the influence of Miyazawa’s Lotus Sutra faith will focus on these two narratives.

The devastation caused by the earthquake and tsunami in northeastern Japan in March 2011 has brought the issue of human suffering to the forefront of the consciousness of many people both in Japan and around the world. In light

of the current heightened awareness of issues of suffering, I will focus my examination of Lotus Sutra influence on Miyazawa on two questions: (1) how suffering is viewed in these stories and what is shown—or suggested to be—the means of release from suffering; and (2) the settings—the landscapes and their attributes—in which characters seem able to find release from suffering. I feel that paying attention to the kinds of spaces—both natural spaces and spaces evocative of the sacred—in which suffering and release from suffering occur can tell us something about how Miyazawa perceived suffering in cosmological and other religious terms.

## “The Shining Feet”

“The Shining Feet” tells the story of two brothers, Ichirō and Narao, who set out from their father’s charcoal-making hut in the mountains to walk back to their home in the village and on the way encounter a violent snowstorm that claims the life of the younger brother, Narao. The framing sections of the story depict the this-worldly setting of mountainous rural Iwate in the 1920s, including the mountain hut, a snowy trail through the mountains, and a high, snowbound pass. The middle sections of the tale depict what appears to be an otherworldly realm beyond death that the two brothers enter together but from which only the elder, Ichirō, returns. The world beyond death in this story is depicted as two strikingly different



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spaces. First there is the hellish, dimly lit land that is marked by a painfully uneven ground of thorns and agate splinters that mercilessly cut the bare feet of the two brothers and other children as they walk. Devils (*oni*) are also present in this dimly lit land. The devils yell at the children and lash them with whips to force them to walk on the lacerating ground, thus increasing their suffering. Second, in the world beyond death, there is a pleasant land where a radiant person with shining bare feet is present. This second otherworldly location is marked by characteristics of a buddha land (*buddha-kṣetra*), as depicted in the Lotus Sutra, and includes such significant attributes as being level, vast, and filled with jewels, pleasant fragrances, abundant light, and the presence of both celestial and enlightened beings. I will consider the story's depiction of a buddha-land setting in more detail later, but for now it is important to note that while in this story these two areas within the world beyond death are shown to be radically different, especially in terms of the presence and absence of suffering, they occupy the same spatial area. The profound difference in the way the world beyond death is perceived is dependent on the karmic and spiritual state of the perceivers, the children, especially Ichirō (289).

In the land of the living, in this story, it is the innocent figure of the younger brother, Narao, who in particular is shown to suffer. The immediate cause of Narao's suffering lies in the unavoidable forces of nature—wind, snow, and

cold. His suffering elicits a response of concern in the other characters, most especially his older brother. Ichirō is not able to prevent Narao's suffering, but his efforts in trying to relieve it—warming Narao's cold chapped hands in his own, comforting him when he expresses fear, wrapping Narao in his own cape—indicate a compassionate nature. The narrative in this section seems to suggest that while the suffering caused by forces of nature is daunting, compassion, such as that shown by Ichirō, is an appropriate response.

In the dimly lit land, Ichirō and Narao are in the company of other children, all of whom suffer horribly from the cuts and whiplashes they receive. While Ichirō shares in the suffering of Narao and the other children, his compassionate response to Narao continues,

and he does his best to shield him from the devils' whips. The suffering here is more intense than in the previous "this-worldly" section of the story. The devils here play a key role in bringing about the children's suffering, but they also offer indications as to why the suffering is happening, its ultimate cause. For instance, when a devil lashes Narao when he stumbles and Ichirō then clings to the devil's hand, asking the devil to whip him instead, the devil responds, "Tsumi wa kondo bakari dewa nai zo" (The sin is not just of this time, I tell you) (286). The devil's gruff explanation points to sin (*tsumi*) and, by extension, the negative karma it creates, as the cause of Narao's and the others' suffering. The statement that the sin is not "just of this time" strongly suggests that the devil sees the negative actions

as ones committed in other, previous lifetimes as well as this one. In other words, the devil is pointing to the origin of the children's suffering in *pūrvakarma* (*shukugō*).

This explanation is reinforced later when Narao asks a fellow child why they have met with such hardship. When she responds that she does not know, the devil howls an explanation: "Minna kisamatachi no dekaishi kotta" (You all brought all of this on yourselves) (287). In this way, this section of the story locates the origin of suffering—even the suffering of young children—in the past actions of those who suffer. This teaching of the root cause of suffering in negative karma is a foundational one in Buddhism and strongly underscored in the Lotus Sutra.

The dimly lit world is not only a place where past karma has effect; here, too, Ichirō's compassionate actions in response to Narao's suffering appear to establish the conditions for the introduction of the source of relief from karmic suffering. Ichirō is unflinching when whipped by a devil as he tries to shelter Narao in his arms. As the devil raises its whip to strike a second time, Ichirō asks for his brother to be spared and exposes both his arms to the whip in order to protect his brother. It is as he exposes himself to the whip a second time in order to prevent his brother's suffering that the saving words of the title of the sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra appear in the narrative. This passage in chapter 16, "Nyorai Juryō Bon Dai Jūroku" (The life span of the Thus Come One) reads:

As he struggled to shield Narao, from somewhere, ever so softly, as though it were a breath of wind or perhaps a scent, Ichirō sensed this phrase. Then, somehow, it seemed that everything around him became a bit more bearable, and he tried repeating the phrase in a whisper. "Nyorai Juryō Bon." As he spoke,

one of the devils who was moving up ahead stopped and looked around at Ichirō in amazement. The line of children stopped as well. Although it was not clear why, the cracking of the whips and the shouting voices ceased. A hush settled over the group. When they looked, they saw that the edge of the dimly lit field of red agate had become a golden expanse, and a person, looking very tall and splendid, was walking across it headed in their direction. For some reason, they all felt a sense of relief. (283)<sup>4</sup>

The "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter teaches that the Tathāgata (Thus Come One) Śākyamuni has been enlightened for incalculable ages, that his *parinirvāṇa* is an expedient means, and that he is and will be present in the world for incalculable ages to come. It is important to note that in this scene the sacred words of this Lotus Sutra chapter title do not initially appear through Ichirō's direct agency; rather, they "come to him from somewhere" as a breeze or a scent. It is only then that Ichirō utters

them himself. His voicing the sacred words seems to change the karmic circumstances, not only of himself, but of all the children.

The rest of the story makes it clear that while Narao's and the other children's suffering came about through their own actions, their suffering is relieved through a power other than their own, one readily available to all. The radiant person with shining feet—perhaps a portrayal of the Buddha Śākyamuni himself—explains to the children: "There is nothing to fear. If we compare your sins to the power of the great virtue that envelops this world, it is like the difference between the tiny dewdrop that clings to the tip of a thistle thorn and the light of the sun" (289). The story does not give a clear identification of the source of the "power of the great virtue that envelops this world," but given Miyazawa's Lotus Sutra faith and his earlier referencing of the "Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter, it seems reasonable to assume that the great virtue is connected to the Buddha and the marvelous Dharma of his teaching. Soon after

the person with shining feet makes this statement, he pats Narao on the head, and at his fragrant touch all of the children are healed of their cuts.

The relief from suffering and change in perception that occurs when the words of the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter are spoken and the children encounter the person with shining feet allows the children to see the place they are in as a buddha land. The attributes of the world they now see include a blue stone surface of utter smoothness like the undisturbed surface of a lake, trees that appear to be made of precious stone, colored lights, a rain of flower petals, jeweled pagodas, pleasant music, and the presence of heavenly beings (289–90). While these can be seen as attributes of Pure Land depictions in many Pure Land scriptures, they resonate well with the passage in the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter, which depicts the buddha land that always exists where the Buddha’s presence is perceived:

When living beings witness the end  
of a kalpa  
and all is consumed in a great fire,  
this, my land, remains safe and  
tranquil,  
constantly filled with heavenly and  
human beings.  
The halls and pavilions in its gar-  
dens and groves  
are adorned with various kinds of  
gems.  
Jeweled trees abound in flowers  
and fruit  
where living beings enjoy them-  
selves at ease.  
The gods strike heavenly drums,  
constantly making many kinds of  
music.  
Mandarava blossoms rain down,  
scattering over the Buddha and the  
great assembly.<sup>5</sup>

At the close of the story, Ichirō leaves this radiant world to return to

the everyday world of the living. In this story, then, the two realms—the world that is like a buddha land and the everyday world—are not explicitly depicted as coterminous. The next story we will examine, “The Diamonds of Ten Powers,” takes a different approach and closely examines the interpenetration of the ideal world of the Buddha’s presence and the everyday world. As we will see, this difference in arrangement of related cosmological schemes between the two stories gives readers an additional context for understanding Miyazawa’s faith-based conception of suffering and its relief.

## “The Diamonds of Ten Powers”

The setting of this fantasy story is an unnamed kingdom in a land with a climate and flora similar to Miyazawa’s own Iwate Province: oaks and birches grow in the woods; gentians, bog stars (*umebachisō*), and wild roses are found in the grassy fields. The plot is a very simple one. Two noble youths, a prince and the son of a high-ranking minister, escape the care of their guardians one misty morning to go in search of precious stones. They seek both the ruby paint dish they have heard can be found at the base of a rainbow and diamonds that they understand can be found at the top of a hill. In the process of their search, they encounter changing conditions of precipitation, including misty rain, a sudden downpour, sunlit rain, and hail. They also become lost as they seek to find the base of the rainbows they see. Before long they arrive at a magical place, the Hill of Light, which is magical in the sense that its plants and birds can talk and also in the sense that the precipitation there falls as gemstones, not rain or sleet, and its plants are made of precious stones. As noted above, plants composed of precious stones are also one of the hallmarks of buddha-land imagery. The Hill of Light also invites the parallel with a buddha

land in its openness and the presence there of abundant light. The two noble boys are delighted by the beauty of the Hill of Light and its gemstones but find it impossible to collect the gems to take home. At the close of the story, a dew falls as evening approaches. This dew, the Diamonds of Ten Powers, is joyously welcomed by the flowers, trees, and sky of the Hill of Light. While it is clear that these residents of the Hill of Light consider this dew to be far more exceptional than any other precipitation, it appears as ordinary dew, and as it falls, the Hill of Light returns to an ordinary, nonmagical state in which the plants are real plants, not gems, and no longer speak. At the close of the story, we hear the voices of the king’s ministers coming in search of the two boys while the boys themselves kneel with expressions of devotion at the top of the hill.

Its association with attributes of a buddha land might lead us to assume that the Hill of Light in its magical state is a place untouched by suffering or sadness, but that is not, in fact, the case. As the rain stops and the sun shines brightly, a gentian, a bog star, and a wild rose all sing songs that indicate the Hill of Light to be a place of either sadness or loneliness. For example, as a breeze blows, causing the topaz drops that have collected in its amazonite blooms to spill out, the gentian sings:

The topaz dewdrops tinkle, *tsaran tsari rurin*,  
Spilling down, they sparkle, *sangu sangarin*  
While dwelling on the Hill of  
Light,  
What could be as sad as this? (194)

The two boys are puzzled that these plants find the beautiful Hill of Light to be a place of sadness. Their question as to why this is so is finally answered by a song sung by all of the plants and flowers together, and by the wild rose, who explains to the two boys that the reason

for the sadness is that the Diamonds of Ten Powers will not be coming (196).

It is the name for this longed-for nourishing dew that inserts a specifically Buddhist set of meanings into the narrative. “Ten Powers” (Jpn., *jūriki*; Skt., *daśa-bala*) refers to the powers of a buddha, powers that include such omniscient abilities as “knowing the karmic causality at work in the lives of all beings past, present and future.”<sup>6</sup> While *Ten Powers* is a term widely used in Buddhist scripture,<sup>7</sup> it is also used in the Lotus Sutra, where it appears three times. Although *Ten Powers* is technically a reference to the particular powers of a buddha, it is also used to refer to one who possesses those powers, that is, the Buddha himself.<sup>8</sup> The diamonds are the gift of the Buddha—the Ten Powers One—falling freely on the hill and nourishing and invigorating the plants.

The story makes clear the transcendent, nondualistic nature of the dewdrops/Diamonds of Ten Powers as both real literal moisture that does not “flash unpleasantly like ordinary diamonds” (196) and the life-giving gift of the Buddha that both nourishes the plants and makes “the apple cheeks of children shine” (197).

The Lotus Sutra repeatedly represents the place of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s teaching of the true Dharma as the *sahā* world, our familiar world of endurance and suffering, but it also states that this same world is the Buddha’s “safe and tranquil land,” a “pure land” that “is not destroyed.”<sup>9</sup> The concluding scene of “The Diamonds of Ten Powers” presents readers with just such a nondualistic cosmological strategy. This is overtly expressed when all the trees, grasses, flowers, and even the blue sky itself realize that the Diamonds of Ten Powers will indeed come that day and joyfully sing the following song in the traditional meter of a hymn (*wasan*):

The flames of death and decay flare  
up,  
engulfing both earth and people,  
but I make this into a tranquil  
land,  
and the light fills the people full,  
the whole world filled with light.  
(198)

The first three lines of this song especially closely parallel the passage from the sixteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra cited above: “When living beings witness the end of a kalpa / and all is

consumed in a great fire, / this, my land, remains safe and tranquil.” Miyazawa understands this “tranquil land” to be available to all beings. As he writes in “The Shining Feet,” those who, through the burden of bad karma, are prevented from seeing this suffering-free world can be relieved of that burden and have their eyes opened through the “power of the great virtue that envelops this world.” In this short song, as well as in the entire text of both of these stories, Miyazawa seems to express both his compassion for the suffering of erring sentient beings in the *sahā* world and his faith-based understanding of that same world’s freedom from suffering in the merit of the Buddha and his teaching. □

## Notes

1. Tada’ichi Sakai, *Hyōden Miyazawa Kenji* [Critical biography of Kenji Miyazawa] (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1975), 69–70.

2. Kenji Miyazawa, “Hikari no suashi,” in *Kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* [Variorum edition of the complete works of Kenji Miyazawa] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1973), vol. 7, 270–93. Hereafter references to page numbers for passages in this text are inserted parenthetically after the reference.

3. Kenji Miyazawa, “Jūriki no kongōseki,” in *Kōhon Miyazawa Kenji zenshū*, vol. 7, 185–99.

4. With a few minor changes, this translation follows mine in Kenji Miyazawa, *The Shining Feet*, trans. Sarah M. Strong (Tokyo: International Foundation for the Promotion of Languages and Culture, 1997), n.p.

5. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 230–31. Text in T 262 IX. 43c7–11.

6. Burton Watson, glossary in Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 339.

7. See Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* [The treatise on the great virtue of wisdom] (Louvain: Université de Louvain Institut Orientaliste, 1970), 1505–66.

8. Hajime Nakamura, *Bukkyō-go daijiten* [An encyclopedic dictionary of Buddhist terms] (Tokyo: Tōkyō Shōseki, 1981), 661.

9. Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 230–31.



# An Answer to “What Can I Do Right Now?”

by Hitoshi Jin

***Rather than cling to a particular religion’s protocols, ceremonies, and doctrines, we should be like Mother Teresa and simply ask ourselves how we can best help the people we meet.***

The hope to liberate others from the pains of birth, old age, sickness, and death: upon achieving enlightenment, Shakyamuni is said to have taken this great hope to heart and set out on a journey of dissemination.

During my infancy and youth—“birth,” according to those four stages of life—my very existence was one of painful insecurity. I am also a person who made the decision to live as a result of my encounter with the teaching of Shakyamuni.

I started training for the priesthood at the age of thirteen. I am presently active with the Zenseikyo Foundation for Youth and Child Welfare, through which I try to help, in the spirit of Buddhism, young people with problems of suicide, bullying, *futoko* (refusal to go to school because of bullying, social anxiety, or other reasons), *hikikomori* (young people who shut themselves in their rooms and refuse most human contact), and so on. Our foundation cooperates with some two thousand Buddhist temples in Japan to hold Sunday school classes and carry out research on the problems of youth. We are working in many directions to extend a safety net for young people. For example, concerned people associated with these temples who have

received training in concentrated listening act as youth counselors, and some temples cooperate with local NGOs to run alternative schools.

It warms my heart to see a smile break out on a child’s formerly expressionless face. This may be because it reminds me of myself in the past. To care and work for others brings me new life every day.

## A Life Bereft of Meaning

The pain of living. When I was only a year old and knew nothing of such things, an uncle whom I loved very much died. At only twenty-six years of age, he chose suicide. The adults’ feeling of loss hung over us like a fog that failed to disperse, and this atmosphere penetrated my skin. When I was six years old, my parents divorced and the family broke up. At this time I had a younger brother just a year old, and he went to live with my father and his second wife. I had just started elementary school and was sent alone to live with relatives of my father in Yamanashi Prefecture.

At this age I was still very much in need of parental affection, particularly from my mother, but I was suddenly sent to live in an unfamiliar environment.

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Young as I was, my feelings of insecurity and isolation led me to suffer psychosomatic symptoms.

When I was ten, I was returned to my mother and we were able to live together, but she had also remarried. In time my younger brother also came to live with us; fifteen years had passed before we became able to live together as brothers. When so much time has passed, it is not easy to fill in the gaps.

Now an adolescent, for a long time I worried myself every day thinking deeply about the question “What is the meaning of life?” Everything I did seemed empty, and I trusted neither people nor society. However, underneath my mistrust of people and society lay the fear of isolation, and the tension between these feelings wore down my nerves. I distanced myself even from my friends and for six months sequestered myself at home in a state of acute social isolation.

What liberated me from that situation was an encounter with a certain book by Masahiro Mita, a winner of the Naoki Prize (a semiannual Japanese literary prize). In this book, he looks back on his own troubled adolescence and describes the world opened to him by the teaching of Shakyamuni. In this book I read that Shakyamuni affirmed our solitary existence, saying, “You must walk the Way by yourself.” My thoughts turned more and more toward Buddhism and the teaching of Shakyamuni.

## A Ray of Hope

An undeniable change in my spirit was effected by Buddhism’s concepts of transience and dependent origination. Simply put, these concepts teach that there is nothing fixed in this world but that all things are constantly changing. All things ceaselessly change because they are linked interdependently and affect one another.

Even though I had felt that my family bonds had been severed and I was alone in the world, I realized that this situation itself was changing. I realized that through dependent origination I

was in fact linked with my family, with other people—in fact, with all the people of the world, all mutually having effects on one another. When I realized that I was living in a network of bonds that further linked me to greater beings beyond the human realm, such as the gods and the buddhas, and that I was being protected by my many ancestors, I was enveloped in a feeling of security. A person with these thoughts may not be experiencing pure Buddhism, but for me at about twenty years of age, they allowed me to recognize the pain that comes from seeing the world as fixed, when in fact it is constantly changing, and to experience the warm currents of feeling flowing through the network of dependent origination.

In my quest to understand Shakyamuni’s teaching and read the original texts of the sutras, I learned Sanskrit and Pali and studied abroad at a graduate school in Benares, India. Without studying the original texts, and without perceiving with my own senses the natural features and cultural climate of the country where Shakyamuni lived, I could not correctly understand his teaching. Or so I thought.

If I were asked whether or not I understood Shakyamuni’s teaching by going to India, I would have to say I returned to Japan still without having done so. Most of the Buddhism being taught in India has long since been Hinduized, and the bits of Theravada teaching that remain have been secularized. Confrontational tensions among India’s various religions are high, and just walking through a dangerous zone in a priest’s robe could easily invite injury. The chaotic state of modern India surpassed the understanding of the youth I was at that time.

When I was on the verge of losing my motivation for further study, my younger brother died of a drug overdose. His death might even be called a suicide. He was twenty-seven years old. On top of that, my stepfather suddenly fell ill and after a while passed away.

My brother’s death in particular was a shock. I felt as if he had taken away the suicide contemplation that had remained in my heart since infancy by substituting his own self-caused death. Seeing my mother now left alone brought me to the realization that my own position in life had changed. The time to seek

for myself alone the answer that would bring liberation had now ended.

Until then, I had been seeking my own liberation in religion, but because I had continued to seek it outside myself, I was unable to find satisfaction. In fact, the important thing was what and how I myself believed and lived. Because I happened to encounter Buddhism, that is where my faith found refuge, but I think the same truth can also be found in Christianity and Islam. All religions teach the way of life that can make people truly happy. That “truly” is the important part. Rather than cling to a particular religion’s protocols, ceremonies, and doctrines, we should be like Mother Teresa and simply ask ourselves how we can best help the people we meet. As a Buddhist priest, I decided to pour my energies into grass-roots volunteer activities.

However, I suppose I must be by nature rather inept. While throwing myself into volunteer work, I failed to realize how tired I was becoming and five years ago experienced burnout.

With that, I learned the lesson that I must care for myself while also caring for others. The self and others are one and the same, and I now try not to forget that what I am doing for others I also

do for myself. And because everything is transient, I do not think much about tomorrow but on each and every day try to be flexible in responding to the question, “What can I do right now?”

## **Creating a Society Where We Feel Truly Happy**

The disastrous earthquake and tsunami that occurred in Japan in March 2011 claimed nearly twenty thousand lives and left a great many more people without homes or jobs. Since then our foundation has actively worked in the disaster

areas to support victims with care for both body and soul. We have worked to improve living conditions at temporary housing facilities and hope to continue our ongoing efforts to secure a happy future for children from the areas affected by the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. For example, we have been working with mothers to find Buddhist temples to which they can be evacuated away from the disaster zone in order to protect their small children from radiation exposure. Also, I feel we have a role to play as Buddhists in communicating the true meaning of life to people living now as well as to the generations yet to be born, which I trust will constitute memorial services for those who lost their lives.

In present-day Japan there is a powerful trend toward judging one’s happiness by measuring one’s economic wealth and comparative advantage over others in aptitudes and abilities. We need to create a society where a person can more easily choose a way of life that is rooted in spirituality and affirms the value of thinking about what constitutes true human happiness as a part of everyday life. Our role as Buddhists should be to create the motivation for that shift within society. I feel this would be the true way to remember and pray for the many people who lost their lives in the disaster. □

# Spiritual Liberation in Contemporary Society

by Yifa

*Seeking spiritual liberation in modern times does not require isolating oneself from society. . . . The whole world and our society are the arena for Buddhist practice.*

In Buddhist teaching, there are three poisons that lead to all the suffering of all sentient beings: greed, hatred, and ignorance. When we reflect on what challenges and crises we face in the twenty-first century, this teaching is never too old and is still true for our times. The expansion of consumerism to every corner of the world reflects people's craving for the material rather than the spiritual. The conflict between Islamic terrorists and the Western world has invited a series of antiterrorist movements. The dramatic climate changes that threaten the destruction of the ecosystem are due to human ignorance and greed as well. For all Buddhists, "to blow out" the flame of desire, hatred, and ignorance is the goal of liberation—to attain nirvana. Nirvana does not mean death but the diminution of the three poisons, even when one is still alive here on earth.

## Liberation from the Desire for Material Goods and Vanity: Anticonsumerism

In Shanghai, China, on December 23, 2011, walking along Nanjing West Road, I passed by brand-name shops and stores, one after another. My friend,

a Shanghainese, proudly told me that Shanghai was a hub for all the world's brand names. I have started to be concerned for the people here, especially in the low-income class, who face so much consumer temptation. All the billboards show young men and women with pretty faces, and most of them are Westerners.

China is a new market for the world, and people there have the right to enjoy the advanced consumer culture just as people in the rest of the world do. However, I still lament that the streets in business districts are bombarded by brand-name shops and stores and that the terminals of all the airports that I frequent look the same. Nowadays we cannot even tell which city we arrive in or depart from because the terminals are all full of the same brand-name shops.

The introduction of commercialism changes the concepts of social value and the life goals to be pursued by the younger generation. Commercialism has little to do with their own culture and tradition but, rather, represents Western materialism. The goal for the youth of today is to strive to carry a Louis Vuitton bag, to drive a BMW, and to live in a mansion with a swimming pool. Is it not sad to set a life goal for material things like these, which may

bring only a few moments of sensual pleasure? We are represented by the clothes we wear, the car we drive, the house we live in, and the friends we associate with. But what represents who we really are?

There is a Zen story shared within monasteries about a Zen monk who was denied entrance to a banquet held by a warlord. He was permitted to enter only after he changed into lavish clothes. During the banquet, the Zen monk put some of the delicious food into the sleeves of his robe. The warlord asked, "Why are you feeding the food to your clothes?" The Zen monk replied, "It is obvious that what people notice is what kind of clothes I wear, not who I am."

Is not this the cause of the expansion of consumerism? People neglect what is inside a person and focus on what a person wears or possesses. The more we possess, the higher our social status. But this is misleading, because the more possessions we have, the more burdens we put on ourselves and, more important, on the earth. Reflecting on the transitoriness of the sensual pleasures that material things can bring, is it worthy of us to devote our entire life to this pursuit or to sacrifice the lives of other sentient beings to it? Unless desire is restrained, craving and greed can be like a bottomless well. However, the satisfaction gained from material things is only temporary. From a Buddhist point of view, our mind is the real treasure, boundless and unlimited. People forget to pursue the inner elements that



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really represent who they are, such as humility and compassion, and these things are what can raise the value of our society and ourselves. How do we stop pursuing external material things to satisfy our wants and turn to seek the treasures that are inside, which we need?

In the Platform Sutra, described by Sixth Patriarch Huineng, we learn that our inner nature is more important than the material things in the world outside us because

The Essence of Mind is originally pure;  
The Essence of Mind originally neither arises nor is annihilated;  
The Essence of Mind is originally fulfilled;  
The Essence of Mind is originally imperturbable;  
The Essence of Mind embodies all the dharmas.

This is exactly the opposite of the conditions that we find in the material objects that surround us and the mental and emotional states that are connected with them.

## **Liberation from the Passions of Hatred and Revenge**

In New York on September 11, 2001, two hijacked airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, and two of the tallest buildings in the world collapsed. (Of course, on the same day, another plane

crashed into the Pentagon, and another went down in Pennsylvania.) There is no better demonstration of impermanence than the collapse of the Twin Towers. The experience of watching them fall, and the video recordings of this that we often saw afterward, seemed unreal, like something in a movie.

The attacks of that day continued the offensive actions between the United States and the Islamic terror organizations, which go back more than two decades, but these destructive actions are more accurately described as the results of human passion for hatred and revenge than a desire for justice. On May 2, 2011, U.S. Navy SEALs hunted down and killed Osama Bin Laden. In all of these actions, both sides, al-Qaeda and the United States, have claimed their actions were taken in the pursuit of justice.

Right after the events of September 11, I wrote a book entitled *Safeguarding the Heart: A Buddhist Response to Suffering and September 11*.<sup>1</sup> I questioned whether both sides were seeking revenge rather than pursuing true justice. The world operates according to justice, but it also functions according to the law of cause and effect. The world is not a function of human justice, because human justice is conditioned. This is why justice needs to be thought of as separate from punishment. Punishment is what the hijackers wished to inflict on America—to punish the United States for its perceived transgressions. Punishment as justice merely perpetuates a cycle of

more punishment as justice. Violent actions invite violent reactions. But true justice is not about punishment; it is about being aware of cause and effect. Each happening is definitely not an isolated event. To put this more accurately, all events are interconnected. In the sphere of time, one event happens after another event; they are connected in causality. Each happening is caused by the previous one and will affect the future one. In the sphere of space, our life is no longer functioning regionally but globally. Even if you do not live in the United States, your life is still affected by the results of September 11—the increased security at airports, terror activity, militarism, and decreasing civil liberties, for instance.

The issue of the confrontation between Israel and the Islamic world in the Middle East is like a time bomb that could explode anytime and destroy the rest of the world in a nuclear war. When I took a peace walk in Israel and Palestine with my friend William Ury on his Abraham Path Initiative in the spring of 2011, I began to think more and more about how much common heritage Israel and Muslim countries share, such as their spiritual ancestry and the origins of their faiths. If they can build from these commonalities to recognize the benefits of coexistence, they can create a common economic union, like those of Asia and Europe, ensuring that all the nations in the Middle East, not just Israel, can pursue well-being, democracy, and happiness.

## Liberation from the Destruction of the Earth and Our Ecosystem

In Palestine on March 11, 2011, while we were undertaking the peace walk, we witnessed the televised tsunami in Japan engulf cars, boats, buildings, and people, after the magnitude 9 earthquake hit the eastern part of Tohoku, Japan. Besides the suffering caused by the earthquake and the tsunami, there was the threat of meltdown at the nuclear power plants. In recent years, destruction by tsunamis has been sending a warning signal to us. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, 275,950 people lost their lives in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This is a clear reminder that the earth is constantly in flux; it is impermanent. While we are wondering “Why me?” we need to understand that nature functions according to the physical law of cause and effect. Physical laws are not moral laws, and to understand them in this way represents people’s ignorance of the law of cause and effect.

Further, from the law of cause and effect we need to understand that healthy causes and conditions bring about the results and effects of health. If we have the causes and conditions for wealth, the results of wealth likewise will be brought about. Even though the earth itself is changing every second, human inputs will definitely contribute to its course of change. However, modern consumerism has brought about mass production, excessive consumption, and massive waste on a whole new scale, and these have become an ever-increasing burden on Mother Earth.

Our society has become rich and prosperous, but we have planted the causes and conditions for exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants. Now we are facing the results and effects of these actions. In Buddhism, the environment we are born in, associate with,

and depend on, such as our country and family, is called the retribution of dependence or environmental retribution (*yibao*). The formation of one’s environmental retribution is according to one’s karma or deeds. The earth is the human being’s *yibao*. So how we treat the earth will determine the environment in which we and others are born. This is a reason for conservation, which is implicit in Buddhist thought but is also a virtue taught in all the world’s traditions.

## Liberated by Being Engaged Socially—That Is a Bodhisattva Path

Seeking spiritual liberation in modern times does not require isolating oneself from society. On the contrary, one needs to be diligently engaged with this world to bring more awareness to our interaction with other people, other sentient beings, and our Mother Earth. The whole world and our society are the arena for Buddhist practice. To attain one’s own liberation, in a Mahayana Buddhist view, is to enlighten or awaken all sentient beings. The Platform Sutra says:

Buddha Dharma is in this world.

One cannot leave this world to seek enlightenment.

Seeking enlightenment by leaving this world

Is like someone searching for the horn of a rabbit [which does not exist].

To practice Buddhism is to attain liberation, that is, enlightenment. To attain enlightenment one needs to serve all sentient beings, which is the bodhisattva path. Ultimate practice in Mahayana Buddhism is the path of the bodhisattva—the one who vows to enlighten all sentient beings by helping others. At the beginning of the Surangama Sutra, one of the Mahayana texts circulated

most in the Chinese Buddhist community, it says:

By presenting this deep heart as the offering to the universe,  
This is what is called repaying gratitude to the Buddha.

I humbly bow to the World-Honored One as my witness.

I vow to enter this world that is fulfilled with the Five Degenerations.<sup>2</sup>

If there is still one sentient being left unenlightened,

I will not attain nirvana in this world.

The symbol of Buddhism is the lotus flower, rooted deeply in the mud. The flower blooms above the surface of the water. Our physical body is engaged with society, but our spirit is not stained by the mud.

Finally, Chinese Buddhists also love this verse from the Diamond Sutra:

All the conditioned dharmas are like

A dream, a mirage, a bubble,

Like dew, and lightning as well.

We should contemplate in this way.

Many people interpret that to mean that since all the dharmas or phenomena are transitory, let’s not work too hard, since everything will end. This is an incorrect understanding. Since things are transitory, we need to cherish their moments of existence. Like a good actor, we will try to do our best, even though time is short. □

## Notes

1. Yifa, *Safeguarding the Heart: A Buddhist Response to Suffering and September 11* (New York: Lantern, 2002).

2. The Five Degenerations: the decay of this *kalpa*, the deterioration of views, the delusion of *klesas*, the decline of sentient beings, and the diminishing of life span.

# Japanese Buddhist Responses to the Earthquake and Tsunami

by Miriam Levering

***One aspect of Japanese Buddhists' response to the March 11 earthquake is an appreciation of its reminder that everything is impermanent. The "normal" life we take for granted is fragile, and thus not really normal.***

The responses of Japanese Buddhists to Japan's March 2011 double disaster give us an opportunity to reflect on the modern and contemporary understandings of *salvation* and *liberation* among Japanese Buddhists.<sup>1</sup> When a major disaster happens, such as the Sumatra earthquake and tsunami of 2004 that killed 250,000 people in Indonesia and another 47,000 elsewhere in Southeast Asia or the gigantic earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan's Pacific coast in 2011, Buddhists are often asked by the news media how they understand what caused the terrible losses. In Southeast Asia and elsewhere, Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching about karma is often invoked: each person's actions in this life or past lives brought about each person's loss, and liberation is liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. But as we saw in March of 2011, things are not so simple for Buddhists in Japan.

First, modern Japanese are considerably shaped by a Confucian-Buddhist worldview in which karma is both individual and social. In response to a catastrophic earthquake that struck Japan in his own day, the Zen monk and poet Ryokan (1758–1831) wrote this haunting Confucian-Buddhist poem, titled "Poem Composed Following a Terrible Earthquake":

Day after day after day,  
At noon and midnight, the cold was  
piercing.  
The sky was thick with black clouds  
that blocked out the sun.  
Fierce winds howled, snow swirled  
violently.  
Wild waves stormed heaven, buf-  
feting monster fish.  
Walls trembled and shook, people  
shrieked in terror.  
Looking back at the past forty years, I  
now see that things were racing  
out of control:  
People had grown lax and indif-  
ferent,  
Forming factions and fighting among  
themselves.  
They forgot about obligations and  
duty,  
Ignored notions of loyalty and  
justice,  
And thought only of themselves.  
Full of self-conceit, they cheated  
each other,  
Creating an endless, filthy mess.  
The world was rife with madness.  
No one shared my concern.  
Things got worse until the final disas-  
ter struck—  
Few were aware that the world was  
star-crossed  
And dreadfully out of kilter.

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If you really want to understand this  
tragedy, look deep inside  
Rather than helplessly bemoan your  
cruel fate.

Beginning in pre-Han China, Confucians in East Asia made a connection between the morality of the ruler or the ruling elite and the occurrence of what we call "natural disasters." Heaven ordains all things. When immorality rules in the human realm, Heaven responds with signs such as two-headed cows and disasters such as earthquakes and floods. Ryokan, a Buddhist in a Confucian-dominated era, extends this correspondence beyond the ruling elite; if people in general are lax and indifferent, forgetting about obligations and duty, loyalty and justice, then the world is out of kilter and disaster will strike. In March of 2011, when the massive earthquake and tsunami struck on the island of Honshu's northeast coast, the governor of Tokyo commented that by sending the earthquake

and tsunami, the gods made known their response to the self-centered thinking of present-day Japanese. This comment, soon heard around the world, struck this same note.<sup>2</sup>

To-san, a wise Japanese Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhist friend in Tokyo, responded to the earthquake in accord with Ryokan's poem: "We don't know why the people in the northeast have been given such horrible suffering, but our best response is to search our own hearts and repent." As for Ryokan, but based explicitly on the Buddhist idea of interconnectedness expressed in Rissho Kosei-kai in terms of Tiantai Zhiyi's doctrine that there are "three thousand worlds in a single thought," the causes of a disaster are shared. Whether we were directly affected by the disaster or not, our impure hearts helped cause it, and purifying our hearts will help everyone.

Not all Buddhists in Japan sought an explanation in karma, shared or unshared. Rev. Tesshu Shaku, chief priest of Nyoraiji temple, a Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land sect of Buddhism) temple in Ikeda City, Japan, responded in this way:

Buddhism is called a religion with no god. So we don't think God caused

this, according to the Buddhist way of thinking. We think of the law of cause and effect, searching for a cause. It is the same approach as science. The cause of this earthquake is the friction between the North American plate and the Pacific plate.

So that I could better understand this, Ven. Zhiru Ng, a Buddhist *bhiksuni* (nun) and scholar of Buddhist history, sent me to the Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw's explanation of karma. He writes:

According to Buddhism, there are five orders or processes (*niyama*) that operate in the physical and mental realms. They are:

1. *Utu niyama*—physical inorganic order, for example, seasonal phenomena of winds and rains. The unerring order of seasons, characteristic seasonal changes and events, causes of winds and rains, nature of heat, and so forth, all belong to this group.

2. *Bija niyama*—order of germs and seeds (physical organic order), for example, rice produced from rice seed, sugary taste from sugar cane or honey, peculiar characteristics of certain fruits, and the like. The

scientific theory of cells and genes and the physical similarity of twins may be ascribed to this order.

3. *Kamma niyama* (Skt., *karma niyama*)—order of act and result, for instance, desirable and undesirable acts produce corresponding good and bad results. As surely as water seeks its own level, so does karma, given opportunity, produce its inevitable result, not in the form of a reward or punishment but as an innate sequence. This sequence of deed and effect is as natural and necessary as the way of the sun and the moon.

4. *Dhamma niyama*—order of the norm, for example, the natural phenomena occurring at the advent of a bodhisattva in his last birth. Gravitation and other similar laws of nature. The natural reason for being good and so forth may be included in this group.

5. *Citta niyama*—order or mind or psychic law, for instance, processes of consciousness, arising and perishing of consciousness, constituents of consciousness, power of mind, and so forth, including telepathy, telaesthesia, retrocognition, premonition, clairvoyance, clairsaudience, thought reading, and such other psychic phenomena that are inexplicable to modern science.

According to Mahasi Sayadaw's explanation, every mental or physical phenomenon could be explained by these all-embracing five orders or processes that are laws in themselves. Karma as such is only one of these five orders. Like Rev. Shaku, quoted above, one could point out that the earthquake and resultant tsunami were results of the *utu niyama*, physical causal processes, and not of the *karma niyama*. Physical plates of the earth's solid crust interacted.

Some of my Buddhist friends insisted that the five *niyamas* are only descriptive



distinctions, and the various processes of causation are united, making karma affect all the other processes. Others insisted that disasters arise codependently with disturbances in the mind. Among my Buddhist friends in Japan, the view that the earthquake and tsunami were merely natural phenomena was widespread. One can see why this would be the case: Does one really want to say that the people who live in earthquake or tsunami zones have all done worse actions and therefore suffer worse karmic fruits than those who live in geologically more tranquil zones?

This is all the more the case in Japan because Japanese Buddhists in general and Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhists in particular do not strongly believe that a person can expect a long series of radically different lifetimes. Rather, at death one becomes and remains a living ancestor in the family in which one has lived. Liberation is not liberation from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. Rather, liberations take place repeatedly in this life as we free ourselves from self-centered, grasping responses to daily situations. The dead, too, can be liberated from the suffering caused by self-centeredness

through posthumous ordination as the Buddha's disciples. Through such liberation they become happy, generous ancestors.

Rather than devoting much thought to the karmic causes of the March 11 disaster, my Japanese Buddhist friends focused on compassion. The pressing issue was how we could open ourselves to feel and respond to the pain and the needs of others. As Rev. Shaku also said:

The Japanese are more focused on relationships as opposed to faith, feeling the pain of others. I have witnessed this at the time of the Hanshin Awaji earthquake. [In 1995 the Great Hanshin earthquake on the island of Awaji, known in the West as the Kobe earthquake, killed about sixty-five hundred people.] There were many people who came to the affected area to help and volunteer. There is a word, "earthquake children," for people whose perspectives were affected by the disaster. They became very active in community service or became Buddhist monks. So people will be more spiritual, feeling the pains and joys of others.

Undamaged Buddhist temples belonging to the traditional Japanese Buddhist sects and the Dharma centers of Buddhist groups among the "new religions," such as Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai, opened their spaces to the refugees left homeless by the tsunami or the nuclear-related evacuation. Large traditional Buddhist denominations and Buddhist new religions delivered massive donations of needed goods and sent volunteer teams to help with the refugees and the cleanup. These efforts continue and will do so for some time.

Since March 11, 2011, for Japan's Buddhist priests and Rissho Kosei-kai members in the northeast region, the most compelling need has been for services and prayers to benefit the dead—those who died in the earthquake and tsunami and those who have died since in evacuation centers. In Japan the overwhelming majority are buried according to Buddhist custom: cremation and interment in a family plot. With many bodies swept away in the tsunami, many Japanese have had to come to terms with having to forgo rituals that they know help the dead. For one thing, without a body or definite news, one doesn't feel right giving up hope that the loved one is still alive. Japanese Buddhist priests are doing what they can to offer collective services for survivors who lack the comfort of seeing the body and holding a cremation. The American scholar of Japanese religion John Nelson said: "In the days ahead, you'll see people praying, with hands folded, for the spirits of those killed. It goes back to a really early understanding of human spirits and rituals designed to control those spirits, which can take 49 days or, depending on the type of Buddhism, could go on for up to seven years."

One sad fact of the harsh conditions in the northeast has been that bodies are so numerous and electricity so lacking that bodies have been buried in mass graves or cremated without the full Buddhist ceremony. The reporter

Steven Jiang met a Buddhist priest at the centuries-old temple Senryuji just outside the twenty-kilometer perimeter that defines the “no-go” or evacuation zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. He wrote:

Sweeping its immaculately kept ground—complete with a sand garden and a fish pond—was Shinkoh Ishikawa, a 58-year-old Buddhist monk who offers a rare sanctuary to a community ravaged by a succession of disasters. The government had advised residents between the 20- and 30-kilometer zones to move away or remain indoors. “Religion is not something distant, it stays next to you,” Ishikawa explained his decision to stay after seeing hundreds of bodies of tsunami victims cremated at the local funeral home without a proper Buddhist ritual. “I hope people understand that death is not the end of one’s life, but a revolving step where lives meet again.” . . . Lighting a candle in the temple’s main hall where eight boxes of cremated remains lay on a table, Ishikawa chanted prayers for the dead.

One concern at death for both established Buddhist sects and Buddhist new religions is that the deceased receive an ordination name, or *kaimyo*, after death. Rissho Kosei-kai, a Buddhist new religion, for example, immediately gave those known and unknown who died in the northeast from the earthquake and tsunami a collective posthumous ordination name so that merit from prayers and sutra chanting could be sent to them in the realm between death and rebirth or, in another more common way of thinking, during their transition from living being to ancestor.

The transfer of merit that occurs at the end of every Rissho Kosei-kai service throughout Japan usually sends the merit from the service to various buddhas and bodhisattvas, gods, spirits, the

founders of the lineage, current teachers, one’s own ancestors, and those of other members.

Since March 11, the transfer-of-merit portion of the recitation now sends all the merit from the service to all of the above except the members’ own ancestors and others on the members’ family tree. Instead, the service is defined from the beginning as a memorial service for the collective dead of the March 11 earthquake and as an occasion of prayers for the safety of those in nuclear-accident-struck Fukushima and those in all the northeastern prefectures burdened by sorrow, loss, or fear.

Although one’s own ancestors and the deceased members of one’s family will still gain merit from the service offered, for explicit resumption of transfers to them, one’s own ancestors and deceased members of one’s family tree will have to wait till the dead of the earthquake and tsunami have been helped to reach a peaceful and happy state as *hotoke*, or buddha ancestors. The transfer of merit to the victims is carried out so that “they may delight in the taste of the Dharma and quickly accomplish the wonderful fruit of supreme awakening,” that is, be liberated to become *hotoke*.

One aspect of Japanese Buddhists’ response to the March 11 earthquake

is an appreciation of its reminder that everything is impermanent. The “normal” life we take for granted is fragile, and thus not really normal, as one of my Rissho Kosei-kai Buddhist friends in Tokyo pointed out. This became abundantly clear immediately in Tokyo, where trains stopped running; bread, toilet paper, and milk disappeared from store shelves; and cell phone networks stopped working. For me, too, the quake left behind a strong awareness that everything and everyone is precious.

Buddhists around the world teach that life in this moment is both infinitely valuable and the only life we have—at least as far as this life goes. Thich Nhat Hanh is quoted as saying, when asked about the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan:

An event such as this reminds us of the impermanent nature of our lives. It helps us remember that what’s most important is to love each other, to be there for each other, and to treasure each moment we have that we are alive. This is the best that we can do for those who have died: We can live in such a way that they can feel they are continuing to live in us, more mindfully, more profoundly, more beautifully, tasting every minute of life available to us, for them.

Japanese Buddhists would not agree that this is the best we can do for our beloved dead or all of those who died in the tsunami: ordination names and merit transfer are important. But they would agree with the first half of Thich Nhat Hanh's statement. Accepting the truth of impermanence and interconnectedness but also the goal of living together as one family; treasuring each other; opening our hearts in compassion; treating each moment of our life as an opportunity to see, act, and value truly; relying on a teaching that points to values grounded in truths that lie beyond this world—these are Japanese responses as well. In my understanding, in Rissho Kosei-kai this is the practical meaning of *liberation* for those who experience a growing liberation even while not yet having become full buddhas.

Accepting the truth of impermanence and the goal of living together as one family with openheartedness and compassion is relatively easy to do when living a prosperous and secure-seeming life. It must seem nearly impossible when overwhelmed by death and disaster. Yet the principles apply there as well. President Nichiko Niwano of Rissho Kosei-kai wrote about cheerfulness, kindness,

and warmheartedness in his report on his experiences while visiting the disaster areas:

Cheerfulness is part of the Buddha wisdom and means never being swayed by emotion but living bravely by making the Dharma our light. Kindness includes sympathy, and warmheartedness includes compassion. That phrase means that we should go forth on the path of mutual liberation in the light of the Buddha wisdom, cultivating compassion and human warmth. . . . [These are] things that we have to care about in the situation we are in right now.

Among the people in the disaster areas being evacuated from their own neighborhoods because of the tsunami or nuclear accidents, some have lost family members, homes, or jobs and have no hope for the future. However, they can carve their future by living a day at a time. I urge them to encourage and help one another, making the most of the people and things around them. There is a saying, "The muddier the water, the bigger the lotus flower." No one has any idea how long it will take for the disaster victims

to overcome their burden of hardship or sorrow. However, I believe that if we remember sayings like the one about the lotus flower, we will not only think of this catastrophe as a great tragedy but accept it as an opportunity for everyone to grow as human beings. I think this is exactly the right way to honor those who perished and to live as they would wish us to live.

When asked what kind of growth he had in mind, President Niwano said:

In the nearly seventy years since the Second World War, Japan has become materially advanced as one of the world's great economic powers. However, we have forgotten our true heritage and have indulged in excesses of every kind, with overconsumption and waste. We need to reflect on our sense of values and lifestyle and think anew to move forward into the future.

And so we come back full circle to Ryokan's mood, if not exactly Ryokan's point. In President Niwano's thought, the earthquake was not explicitly blamed on our excesses. But in light of our heightened awareness of impermanence and the suffering of others and our new desire to be one family with each other, we may choose not to go on as we have done, somewhat thoughtlessly as it now seems. We have been given an opportunity to reflect, a chance to reshape the future. The more we can do that, the more we experience a liberation that we can share with others. □

## Notes

1. For pictures of the effects of this double disaster, see <http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2011/03/earthquake-in-japan/100022/>.

2. The governor publicly apologized for the remarks a day later, but I am sure many older Japanese did not think an apology was required.

# Learning the Truth through Repetition

by Ryojun Shionuma

***There is valuable meaning in doing the same things, in the same way, and as devotedly as you can. If you do this, the Way will most assuredly open up.***

Some people ask me, “Exactly what made you want to do the *sennichi kaihogyo* [thousand-day mountain circumambulation practice]?” I’m not sure myself.

Around the time I was in elementary school, I saw the practice of the *ajari* (most holy priest) Yusai Sakai on Mount Hiei on television, and from that moment on I had a pure longing to perform that ascetic practice. That must have been the start of it.

I didn’t grow up in privileged circumstances, but my mother and grandmother were always praying at the Shinto and Buddhist altars in our house. There was a feeling of gratitude for things that

the eye could not see. I grew up sensing this wordlessly. This may be the reason that, even though we lived in poverty, in my child’s mind I had a strong desire to work for the benefit of the world and other people.

After graduating from high school, I spent my novice period at Kinpusenji, the head temple of Shingon Buddhism, on Mount Yoshino in Nara Prefecture. I remember the master once said to me, “Monks should try to avoid frivolous talk about working for the world and other people.” After I finished the Omine Thousand-Day Circumambulation Practice, it dawned on me what he meant,

and it really sank in. He meant that it is very important to focus on benefiting others (humanity) and that should be my ultimate aim. You should throw yourself wholeheartedly into each task at hand, carrying it out consistently and dispassionately.

I came to realize that this was the essential way to live.

## The Feeling of Immersing Yourself in Suffering

Kinpusenji was founded thirteen hundred years ago in the first year of the reign of Emperor Temmu (672 CE) by En-no-Gyoja (En-no-Ozunu). The Omine Thousand-Day Circumambulation Practice begins each day with a midnight departure from Kinpusenji on Mount Yoshino, a twenty-four-kilometer climb into the mountains to the top of Mount Omine, and back. The vertical climb is more than thirteen hundred meters (about 4,265 feet). The round trip of forty-eight kilometers on the trail takes about sixteen hours. If one makes that trek every day during the four months from May to September for nine years, one will have walked for a thousand days.

The practice brings risks at every moment. If you are bitten by a pit viper, for instance, your practice is over right then and there. You can also come across bears. You can be caught in heavy rains and find yourself in the middle of violent thunderstorms. The slightest carelessness or overconfidence can mean death. If the



*After graduating from high school in 1986, Ryojun Shionuma entered the monastery at the temple Yoshino Kinpusenji in Nara Prefecture in 1987. He completed the hundred-day circumambulation of Mount Omine in 1991, and in 1999 he became the second person in history to complete the Omine Thousand-Day Circumambulation Practice. In 2000 he completed “the practice of the four deprivations.” He is now the head priest of Jigenji temple in Sendai.*

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worst happens and the circumstances are such that you cannot continue the practice, then there is the strict rule to apologize to the gods and the buddhas and then commit suicide.

Even under extreme conditions, such as having a fever or a physical injury, you must walk single-mindedly every day, taking everything and anything that nature throws at you. You press forward dispassionately, feeling as if you are immersed in suffering. When you do that, the mind gradually becomes very clear.

During the height of my practice, when I tried to feel enlightened or act in a certain way, it did not work. But when I became able to walk in a relaxed way, without pointless effort, I could sense how small my own existence was in the context of nature. As I became aware of this, with each step I recited over and over in my mind, “Be humble, submit, be humble, and submit.”

There were times, when I would stop to rest to eat an *onigiri* (a rice ball with pickles), that I shed tears of gratitude. I was thankful for the many blessings I had received, because of which I was able to lift the *onigiri* to my mouth. That sort of feeling would well up in me. It may be that truly deep joy is being able to be really grateful for the most ordinary things.

I completed the practice in 1999, the year of the thirteen-hundredth anniversary of the passing of En-no-Gyoja. I feel that this was some mysterious, karmic connection and that somebody had to do it. In the following year I completed

the practice of the four deprivations (no food, no water, no sleep, and no lying down for nine days straight).

## Embracing the Ordinary

It is said that for religious practitioners, practice among other people is more important than practice in the mountains. After I finished my practice, I returned to my hometown of Sendai.

It gives me joy to be able to share with many people the lessons I learned from my experience in a natural setting.

When asked what my circumambulation had taught me about the most important things in life, I said gratitude, self-examination, and consideration for others.

Gratitude is an attitude of knowing one has enough. It's an attitude of being thankful for what has been given. Self-examination means reflecting upon oneself daily. For example, it is important

to ask yourself in bed at night, “Did I hurt someone today by saying something thoughtless?” Consideration for others is treasuring your relationships and surroundings. The reason that I had a full, satisfied heart during my solitary ascetic practice might be because I felt affection for even the trees and the insects.

It may seem at first glance to be an easy thing, but if you neglect the ordinary things, you will also neglect your life.

All of this starts in daily life: talking with people, preparing a meal, greeting someone. Embracing everything in your daily conduct, one thing at a time, is actually the most difficult, the most valuable and important thing to do. If you make this your own practice, courteously, you put down your own roots. There is valuable meaning in doing the same things, in the same way, and as devotedly as you can. If you do this, the Way will most assuredly open up. □

# Natural Disasters and Religion: In Search of an Alternative Way of Life

by Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne

***There are three factors at the root of all of our personal, national, and global problems. The first is greed; the second is hatred; and the third is ignorance, or delusion. These three evils within our own minds have become so well organized that they bring about all the man-made and, I believe, even natural disasters we are facing at this time.***

I have come to Japan at the invitation of Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism) of Japan, which graciously selected me to receive the forty-fifth Cultural Award for the Promotion of Buddhism. The award ceremony, which was to be held on March 17, 2011, was postponed to October 12 because of the unfortunate triple tragedy that the Japanese people had to face, namely, the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident. We were with you in spirit at that time, but besides doing religious activities to give you strength to face this situation and doing meritorious activities in the name of the victims and the deceased, we were helpless to be of any concrete physical assistance because of the great distance that separates us.

The theme of this symposium, “Natural Disasters and Religion,” is very timely and appropriate. So is the subtheme, “In Search of an Alternative Way of Life,” which, according to my thinking, is closely linked to what we call natural disasters.

I was born to a Buddhist family. My parents and other elders in the family were very devoted practicing Buddhists. My home was next to our temple, and from my infancy I had the good fortune of associating with and learning from very learned and disciplined Buddhist monks. I received my primary, secondary, and higher education mostly in Buddhist schools, colleges, and universities. When I started teaching, I spent most of my teaching days in a premier Buddhist college known as Nalanda. It is from there that the now internationally famous Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement started fifty-three years ago as an experiment in building a society that works for all according to the teachings of the Buddha.

So everything I say at this symposium is based on five decades of experience in translating the Buddha’s teachings into development action and attempting to restructure more than fifteen thousand village communities of Sri Lanka. Our objective was to develop a self-governed community model integrating the

spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic, and political lives of rural communities. We call it a *gram swaraj*, a community self-governance model.

I begin my comments on the theme “Natural Disasters and Religion” in the light of the Buddha Dharma as I understand it. The reason that a bodhisattva struggles through innumerable cycles of birth and death is to find a way to end the suffering that all beings are subject to, who are caught in the samsaric cycle. Finally he discovers the Four Noble Truths, namely, the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha*, and *maggā*). So disaster, in whatever form it comes or in whatever way it is caused, is a part of this suffering, which cannot be prevented as long as we wander in the samsaric ocean. The only way to end all suffering is by attaining the supreme bliss of nirvana.

However, if we follow the Buddha’s teachings in our day-to-day life, with the ultimate goal of attaining nirvana while living a life founded on *sila* (morality), *samadhi* (concentration), and *panna* (wisdom), it is my strong conviction that as individuals we can escape from becoming victims of any kind of disaster. We have learned from Buddhist teachings the principle known as “*dhammohave*

This article is based on Dr. Ariyaratne’s keynote address at the symposium on “Natural Disasters and Religion: In Search of an Alternative Way of Life” at Zojoji temple in Tokyo on October 10, 2011. The symposium was organized by the Executive Committee of the Symposium on Natural Disasters and Religion 2011.

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*rakkhathi dhammachi*,” which means “those who conduct themselves according to the Dharma will be protected by the Dharma.” We often hear of certain cases of people who have had miraculous escapes when others faced with the same disastrous situation perished. These are instances where the law of karma has come into effect for those who have accumulated powerful, meritorious, or positive karma.

In Buddhist literature we come across five cosmic laws, or *pancha niyama dhammas*, which function above all man-made laws. *Kamma niyama*, or the law of karma, is only one. There are others known as *bija niyama*, the cosmic laws pertaining to our genes or genetic formation; *utu niyama*, the cosmic laws governing seasons and climates; *citta niyama*, cosmic laws determining the effects of volitions on the psychosphere as a whole; and *dhamma niyama*, the cosmic laws that control everything else pertaining to our conduct toward one another, our relationships with other living beings, and the natural world itself. When one deeply contemplates these five natural laws, one wonders whether most of what goes under the label “natural disasters” is really caused by nature’s “misconduct” or man’s misbehavior, caused by his own endless greed, aversions, and ignorance.

Some educated people are of the view that religion is a personal matter and it should not be mixed up with social, economic, or political organizations. As a Buddhist I cannot accept

this view. On the contrary, I am totally opposed to this narrow perception of religion.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha advised us of the importance of cultivating right views (*samma ditti*), right thoughts (*samma sankappa*), right words (*samma vaca*), right actions (*samma kammanta*), right livelihood (*samma ajiva*), right effort (*samma vayama*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*), and right concentration (*samma samadhi*). It is quite clear even from a glance at these eight noble steps that one has to follow all of them simultaneously for total self-realization at all times. A Buddhist cannot have a dual life or a split personality. His personal life and his public life should work in total harmony so that in his thoughts, words, and deeds he rids himself of greed, aversions, and egoism.

When we think of cultivating right views, the Buddha’s basic teachings of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction), and *anatta* (non-self) come to mind. When we look at the lives we live as human beings, we can always see that what motivates most people throughout their lives are the false views of *nicca* (permanence), *sukha* (comfort), and *atta* (ego). So, the entire human society seems to be absorbed in this ignorance of reality, and hence, when disasters occur, they come as totally unexpected incidents that interfere with people’s lives, which are basically a lifelong ego ride toward a permanent and affluent lifestyle they foolishly believe in.

Earlier I suggested that some of the unfortunate disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, floods, droughts, lightning strikes, and so on, which we attribute to nature, are perhaps not created by nature but by man himself. When human beings violate the *pancha niyama dhammas*, the dynamic stability of planet Earth and its related fields, such as the oceans, the atmosphere, the stratosphere, and so on, will also be affected adversely.

There are numerous Jataka stories relating to how under a righteous ruler societies prospered in a very friendly and healthy natural environment where people lived in peace and harmony. When kings or rulers become evil, nature itself rebels against that nation by creating droughts, floods, earthquakes, civil commotions, and other disasters, such as communicable and noncommunicable diseases. Generally, for good governance, kings and other rulers should follow the Ten Principles, which are known as the Dasa Raja Dharma. They are sharing or beneficence (*dana*), ethical conduct (*sila*), recognition and promotion of talent and being charitable to the needy (*pariccada*), straightforwardness (*ajjava*), impartiality and composure (*tapan*), nonhatred (*akrodha*), nonviolence (*avihimsa*), patience and forgiveness (*kanthi*), and nonrevengefulness (*avirodhitha*). If we look at present-day rulers, how many of them are following these principles of good governance? I am not surprised that natural disasters have a relationship with the conduct of humans toward their own kind, toward

other creatures and nature, and finally toward Mother Earth.

What we call natural disasters are, therefore, largely man-made. Disasters such as droughts, floods, desertification, landslides, climate change, global warming, the melting of icebergs at the poles, nuclear accidents, famines, many communicable and noncommunicable diseases, such as AIDS, and bloody conflicts, violent crimes, and wars are certainly caused by the spiritual degeneration of human society.

At this point I must explain my views about religions and spirituality. We have in our world a large number of organized religions that people profess. Some of these religions have degenerated like most secular organizations, promoting divisions among human beings and even giving rise to religious wars. If religions are really to be of service to humankind, then they should lead their followers along a path reducing their greed for material wealth and power or recognition and their aversions toward other religions, races, or communities and should encourage them to always follow a path of overcoming their egocentricity. In other words, religions should

work as a means to the spiritual awakening of humanity.

Let us face the true reality of our present way of life. As individuals, most of us want to achieve a lifestyle with which we can have maximum gratification of our five senses. For the past five centuries, Europe and Britain and, more recently, the United States, have set a wrong example of imbalance in their pursuit of material progress over spiritual development. Japan and other Eastern countries have followed their wrong example. While we have continued to have our religions in name, in actual fact, besides rituals and other paraphernalia, we have lost the spiritual content of religious teachings.

The two most important organs that have the greatest influence on society, namely, political and economic structures, have completely distanced themselves from religious principles. Gradually social institutions, particularly those related to education, have also dropped spiritual teachings hitherto treated as the most essential component for developing human personalities and for maintaining justice and peace in society. Even humanitarian disciplines have

acquired materialistic frameworks. In the case of medicine, this has completely destroyed healing systems thousands of years old. There have also been failures in agriculture, irrigation, environmental protection, ecological stability, and the protection and use of safe and sustainable energy sources. Today in all of these fields, we are going through crisis after crisis. I am not saying that we should go back to where we were five centuries ago. Certainly we can take a fresh look at our present problems, going beyond economic indicators and the state of the stock markets, and start thinking anew and taking corrective action.

We are living in the first year of the second decade of the twenty-first century. We have committed sufficient blunders in every field of human activity and we have come to a decisive point where we have to decide whether we are going to bring about the destruction of our own societies and other nations' by a self-centered approach, or whether we are going to survive as a human species by being unselfish.

The Buddha taught us that there are three factors at the root of all of our personal, national, and global problems. The first is greed; the second is hatred; and the third is ignorance, or delusion. These three evils within our own minds have become so well organized that they bring about all the man-made and, I believe, even natural disasters we are facing at this time. Unless we begin by enlightening ourselves to the causes that have brought our human civilization to this critical stage—namely, greed, ill will, and ignorance—we can never hope to become a sustainable and peaceful global society. Why are we subjected to these three evils? It is because we have forgotten to realize the existence of the three fundamental laws of nature: the law of impermanence (*anicca*), the law of suffering (*dukkha*), and the law of nonself (*anatta*).

I think this period, when Japan is trying to resolve the problems caused



by the tragedy that took place in March 2011, should be used for an entire reevaluation of the post–Second World War period up to the time this triple tragedy took place. In actual fact, not only the government and the people of Japan but also all governments in the world and global citizens alike should look back on the past six decades and try to understand, not the successes we achieved, but the failures we encountered that have brought about the present global crisis.

If we look back to the period before the Western expansion and the dawn of the industrial age, we find that in spite of all kinds of armed conflicts within and between nations, our societies still continued to be sustained as a whole on the bases of community organizations and peaceful, cooperative lifestyles.

Whatever external improvements we made to make our lives more comfortable, we still attached great importance to personal spiritual awakening by following the principles of a variety of religions. In Asia the teachings of the Buddha influenced our civilizations one after another. Even today, in spite of all the scientific and technological revolutions that have taken place, the Buddha's teachings remain like a beacon to dispel the ignorance we have created.

Many scholars point out that the present global crisis is the result of a spiritual and moral decline of the human community. Hence, a transformation of the human consciousness should be brought about initially, followed by economic and political transformation.

Sarvodaya is helping the poor and powerless to awaken their consciousness, develop their full potential, and build institutions and self-development structures. We aim at encouraging individuals and communities to invest in beneficence. We believe in people's power, supported by the strength of the Dharma—the Dharma that they are trained in and that ensures that they

act with clarity of purpose, mindful of the difficulties of others, and without harming the environment. Though, on the one hand, the Dharma does not offer a monocultural formula for all the ills in the world, on the other hand, its followers have released an integrated series of processes in the manner described above by sheer hard work. In each of the fifteen thousand villages where Sarvodaya has been active, a program based on self-reliance, community participation, and a simple plan decided upon by the people themselves has been implemented. Activities have been planned and implemented for preschool to elementary school children, for young mothers, farmers, and other adults. A village-level Sarvodaya Shramadana Society is organized in due course and legally registered with the government. These societies have opportunities to engage themselves in economic activities that benefit the village people. Also, the innovative and nonviolent power of the people as a whole improves the quality of life in the way they want, strengthened by the process of working together in a variety of fields that affect their lives.

The village, for its basic-needs-satisfaction program, needs a variety of trained personnel, such as preschool workers, health care workers, nutrition workers, community shopkeepers, savings and credit organizers, rural technical service workers, agricultural promoters, and so on. The workers are trained at divisional level, district level, and national level development-educational centers.

At present there is a struggle between violence and nonviolence going on in all corners of the globe. Sarvodaya does not believe in violence or terror. It believes in the building of a critical mass of peace consciousness and cultivates nonviolent and just attitudes within nations and between them. To achieve this we have to work in three interrelated sectors: consciousness, economics, and power. Transformation of consciousness

is a spiritual process; transformation of the economy is a development exercise; and transformation of the power structure is a political and constitutional matter. In all three sectors we are working to build a critical mass of transformation.

We help the villagers to go through psychological, social, legal, and economic infrastructure-building phases and also a political self-governance phase, all of which begin at the village level. These are based on an alternative lifestyle where simplicity and need-based local economies are promoted. Greed-based economic pursuits are discouraged. Use of less energy, practicing organic agriculture, protecting the natural fertility of the soil, conservation and protection of natural water sources, and caring for the environment are some of the features of the new way of life that Sarvodaya is promoting.

When a community of people is thus organized, they can become a part of the solution to national and global problems. We first begin with ourselves, to understand our own personality awakening—from infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age up to the dying moment when we learn to breathe our last with right awareness. A human being who fails to understand the physical, mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual processes that his or her own personality is going through at every moment will never find true happiness and the joy of living in this life. For all the stages of human development, we have scientifically developed practical programs that are daily benefiting thousands of people. No man-made divisions among human beings will interfere with these learning processes, and hence the human consciousness will progressively revert back to its original pure form to realize the highest goal of human evolution—the realization of the truth that all living beings are interconnected and interdependent and we should live for the well-being of all. □

# Telling the Rest of My Story

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). In many of its pages he describes development of Rissho Kosei-kai after 1958, the year it experienced a great turning point as a Buddhist organization. In that year, the twentieth anniversary of the organization's founding, Founder Niwano declared the Manifestation of the Truth, affirming that the focus of devotion for Rissho Kosei-kai members is the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni. The book is also a lively account of the life of Founder Niwano as a pioneer of interreligious cooperation, who dedicated himself to liberating all people from suffering with firm faith in the Lotus Sutra. Dharma World will publish excerpts from the book in installments.***

On my eighty-fifth birthday, on November 15, 1991, my position as president of Rissho Kosei-kai, which I had held since the foundation of the organization, passed to my eldest son, Nichiko, in the ceremony known as the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma. It ushered in a new age for Rissho Kosei-kai.

At the time, Nichiko expressed his resolve as follows:

“For a Buddhist organization, the Inheritance of the Lamp of the Dharma has the very important meaning of ‘May the righteous law of the Buddha last forever.’ However wonderful the teachings are, if there is no one who can bear witness to them and make them live within everyday life, it is as if they do not exist. A religious organization must foster people who, in any age, are able to accept and keep the True Dharma correctly and bear witness to it, and so continue the task of sending out such people into the community. If the religious organization stops doing this, the True Dharma will be lost and cease to exist.”

I believe that a living religion must be one that transmits the immutable truth to as many people as possible through a way of teaching that is most relevant to each one of its hearers in the time in which they live. My prayer in founding Rissho Kosei-kai was that as many people as possible might come to know how to live a truly human life, as revealed in the Lotus Sutra, and so attain true happiness. Everything I have done has grown out of this. The history of Rissho Kosei-kai belongs to all of those who have devoted themselves to the same aspiration and have spared themselves nothing to realize it.

Quite a long time ago, I wrote about the first half of my life in the book *Niwano Nikkyo jiden: Michi o motomete nanajunen* (An autobiography of Nikkyo Niwano: Seventy years in the quest of the Path). It described my life from my early years down to 1957, centering on my coming to Tokyo and founding Rissho Kosei-kai; on my dissemination work in close association with the cofounder, Mrs. Myoko Naganuma, whom we all

know as Myoko Sensei and who more than anyone else shared my sentiments; and on the main events of the early years of the organization. My purpose in writing this new book is to record, through my own eyes, how Rissho Kosei-kai has become what it is today, thanks to the assiduous religious practice of its members and the support of many people, not least from people of religion both within Japan and abroad.

In this ever-changing world, we cannot relieve people's suffering if we remain stuck in the ways of the past and do not teach according to the demands of the present. Everyone is now keenly aware that Japanese society, which continued to experience high economic growth after World War II, is currently, like the rest of the world, approaching a difficult turning point. Problems are now surfacing from every corner of society.

Since his inauguration, the second president has drawn attention to what Rissho Kosei-kai should be aiming toward and to the form members' religious activities should take. He set forth

*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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his convictions in *Shinden o tagayasu*, which was published earlier this year. [The English translation, *Cultivating the Buddhist Heart: How to Find Peace and Fulfillment in a Changing World*, was published in 2008.—Ed.] I hope that in turn my new book will help members understand the president's ideas more deeply.

If we want to break through the barriers of the period we live in, we cannot withdraw into ourselves but must move beyond what has happened in the past. At the same time, we must always look very carefully at the foundation upon which we take our stand.

Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the government instructed primary

and middle schools to black out certain sections in the prewar history books that were then still in use. Even if there were parts that should have been rewritten, surely those books would have been a truer record of history without the deletions and with explanatory notes. It is in this sense that I would like to set down here, for the sake of those who come after, an unembellished description of the path that Rissho Kosei-kai has trodden. With this in mind, I have, for the past five or six years, been looking through my old diaries and have little by little pieced together an unvarnished portrait of both myself and Rissho Kosei-kai. Inevitably there has been some overlapping with what I wrote about in my earlier autobiography,

but I have not let the fear of duplication deter me. I have also added things here and there to my original speeches and writings and incorporated a variety of contemporary materials.

I cannot begin to count the number of honored teachers who have guided and encouraged me on my spiritual journey. It is difficult to express in words the gratitude I feel toward all of those who have given themselves unstintingly to support me and toward all of those members who have literally laid down their lives for the sake of their religious practice to make Rissho Kosei-kai what it is today. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Early summer, 1998 □

# Social Reform Based on Buddhist Insight— Examining Western Values

The twenty-eighth Niwano Peace Prize commemorative dialogue between Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa and Rev. Kinjiro Niwano

*The twenty-eighth Niwano Peace Prize was awarded to Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai Buddhist leader, who was honored for his contributions to promoting a new understanding of peace, democracy, and development and for his advocacy of environmental protection, firmly based on the core principles of his Buddhist faith. In this commemorative dialogue with Rev. Kinjiro Niwano, chairman of the Niwano Peace Foundation, on the theme “Social Reform Based on Buddhist Insight—Examining Western Values,” held on July 22, 2011, in Kyoto, he emphasized the necessity of becoming more humble and compassionate to others and also the importance of promoting dialogue with suffering people.*

**Niwano:** Mr. Sulak, you are well known throughout the world as an “engaged Buddhist.” You have worked for Buddhism-based social reforms in many arenas, such as poverty, development, education, and the environment, not only in your country but also internationally on a broad scale.

I particularly endorse your thinking when you say, “Even when we advance our economic development, increase our consumption and income, and advance our technology, we cannot conquer suffering. The sources of suffering are desire, hatred, and the delusion that consumerism will bring about abundance. The key is to have abundance in our hearts and minds.”

I expect to hear some very good opinions and many suggestions from you today for Japan, as we are looking for new values and new ways to live in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami last March.

**Sulak:** It is, of course, a great honor to receive the Niwano Peace Prize because I think this is the best award in Asia. I think it is known as the Nobel Peace

Prize for Asia. I have known some of the awardees personally, and I admire some of them tremendously. They are much better than I am. I cannot be compared to them.

Mr. Nikkyo Niwano, after whom the prize was named, was always kind to me. He was very compassionate toward me, particularly at the World Conference of Religions for Peace. I admire his work in Rissho Kosei-kai and his work for religion and peace in the Asian community. He did wonderful work. He was a great man. He was very humble, a true Buddhist, with a wonderful sense of humor.

**Niwano:** The theme for today’s dialogue is “Social Reform Based on Buddhist Insight—Examining Western Values.” I would first like to hear your thoughts regarding the path of Westernization taken by Japan and whether it has truly led to the happiness of the Japanese people.

**Sulak:** Japan and my country, Siam[Thailand], are the only two countries in Asia never colonized by the West.

But Siam and Japan have different philosophies. Siam wants the West to recognize that Siam is not inferior to the West. But Japan wants to show to the West that Japan can even be superior to the West. The Russo-Japanese War at the beginning of the twentieth century, of course, led to the Second World War.

I am not quite sure now whether Japan has changed deeply, whether it still wants to compete with the West, but the powers that be in Japan and in Siam do not really question fundamental Western philosophy, which can be traced back to Newton and Descartes. According to Newton, everything must be scientific, nothing spiritual, nothing transcendental. Descartes said, “Cogito ergo sum,” meaning, “I think, therefore I am.”

So in a way, thinking is very important. *Ergo*—ego becomes very important and leads to individualism and selfishness. *Cogito* means “I think”—about how to compete with others, how to overcome others: other races, other nations, other genders, other human beings, other sentient beings.

I think if we follow the West, there’s going to be more and more destruction.



The latest nuclear destruction here and the latest tsunami here are due to the damage we've caused in our efforts to overcome nature. I think this is where the teaching of the Buddha would be very helpful.

In the West, thinking is very important. It could be useful, it could be harmful thinking, but one thing Westerners don't learn is how to breathe. I've told Westerners that breathing is the most important element in life. If you stop breathing for five minutes, you are dead. But we breathe in and we breathe out daily, seven days a week, nonstop. We breathe in anger; we breathe in greed; we breathe in delusion. The Buddha taught us how to breathe mindfully. With proper breathing, we can change greed into generosity. We can change anger into love and kindness. We can change delusion into wisdom, into a clear understanding.

You don't need to be Buddhist to do that. You can be a Christian; you can be a Muslim; you can be an atheist. Everyone has to breathe. If you breathe properly, you will become a spiritual

being, and then you discover buddha-nature. We all have buddha-nature. I am happy to say I think that even in the West now, people are thinking more in these terms.

My latest book, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*, was first reviewed last month [in June] in England. My little book became very popular in England because even the West knows Western civilization is coming to an end. We can't go on with the latest technology and scientific knowledge; we must turn to being spiritual, environmental, interrelated. We are all friends, not only with human beings—we are friends of the trees, of the earth. I think that will save us.

**Niwano:** I grew up in the postwar era, and my education was greatly influenced by Western ideas. On the other hand, I have also inherited the particularly Japanese spirituality in which I am rooted, putting my palms together in revering the gods and the buddhas, venerating nature, and giving thanks for its blessings.

The scholar of religious studies Tetsuo Yamaori has said that the state and religion are in harmony in Japan and that this is evident in its multireligious system, which has Shinto and Buddhism coexisting, and in its unique system of government, which is represented in the current national ethos by the emperor as a symbol of the unity of the people. He says that it is exceedingly rare to find the kind of peaceful syncretistic fusion that is exemplified by indigenous Shintoism and imported Buddhism in Japan. And he asserts that Japan has entered an era in which it will move from exporting things to exporting the spirit that developed these systems.

And in the same way as you stress the importance of spirituality, I feel that we must honor the fact that Japan is a land that attaches great importance to its unique spiritual nature.

**Sulak:** When I first went to England, I joined the Buddhist Society there. The society was founded by Mr. Christmas Humphreys, a well-known Buddhist and a disciple of Dr. D. T. Suzuki. But Mr.

Modern Buddhists must understand the social structure, which is violent and helps the rich but does not help the poor. The social structure has also destroyed the environment. In my new book, I spent so much time on social structure. If you take the first three steps of Engaged Buddhism seriously—meditating, being mindful, and transforming ourselves and society—you should challenge the government on why it spends so much money on arms. In my country, they make people become soldiers, and once you become a soldier, you have the right to kill. I feel that to be a modern Buddhist, one must be a little bit more radical but must also remain nonviolent.

**Niwano:** With that in mind, this must be considered from both the aspect of putting it into practice on an individual level and the challenge of having even more people understand it. I think there is very great significance in having religions work together hand in hand and act together.

Mr. Sulak, in pushing for change, you are once again stressing the importance of education, aren't you?

**Sulak:** In the West, religious organizations become big institutions, and they use education to control people. That's why the church in the West failed. That's why education in the West becomes entirely secular. Once education becomes secular, it cannot teach about goodness.

Whereas in Buddhist education there is no control. We have no church. You see, the idea is how to grow. If you start by learning how to breathe properly, then you learn not to exploit yourself, not to exploit others. You learn to be humble; you learn to be self-sufficient; you learn to be generous; you learn to be mindful; and you learn to be interconnected. We learn that others are our friends; teachers are friends; students are friends. The

teacher must learn from the student and vice versa.

A good friend will tell you what you don't want to hear. A good friend becomes your external voice of conscience. Education needs good friends; you learn about the external voice of conscience, then you develop your consciousness. You learn how to transform your consciousness from being selfish to becoming less selfish, and how to become selfless. I think this is how I understand Buddhism and education, and I try to do it in my small way.

**Niwano:** When I was involved in education at the Kosei-gakuen Junior and Senior High School, my elder brother [President Nichiko Niwano] taught me a very important word. That word is *kyoiku*, meaning "mutual education." It means that the person teaching and the person being taught learn from each other, and they both grow in their mutual relationship. This attitude fits the true principles of Buddhism.

**Sulak:** As Buddhists, we are taught to learn that we are interrelated. Everyone is related to us as friends, as relatives, as a father or mother. But these relationships are being uprooted from our culture. We follow the West, so we pollute water, we break down mountains to get the rock for sale, cut down our trees for money. I think we must change, and we must go back deep down.

**Niwano:** In the earthquake many people died, and there have been great losses, both material and spiritual, not only in the disaster areas but in the nation of Japan as a whole. This experience should absolutely not be wasted. We must learn as much as possible from this sacrifice; that is the impression I have. We must essentially review how we will live as people from this point on and seriously get to work on living those lives. I have a feeling that many people are thinking the same thing.

Humphreys said, "To become Buddhist, you must have only meditation, no social action." I said, "If you have only meditation without social action, it's escapism, not Buddhism."

That's why I joined Thich Nhat Hanh, coining the term Engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism means that we should, of course, meditate, we should breathe properly, we should be mindful, but at the same time, we must transform ourselves and transform society. But nowadays, transforming society is more difficult than it was in olden days.

In olden days, we learned not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to tell lies, not to take intoxicants. I think most schools of Buddhism agree. But nowadays we don't need to kill; we allow the government to kill for us. We don't steal; we allow the banks to steal for us, particularly the World Bank. Sexual misconduct is promoted by television, by the media everywhere. Again, lies are told, as in advertisements, in the words of politicians everywhere. And likewise, an intoxicant is not only alcohol or a drug. Advertisements, ideology, anything that dulls the mind, are intoxicants.

**Sulak:** This is a very wise outlook. You already have a crisis. People suffer. Of course, it's wonderful that your social work helps people, but deep down you must question, What is the alternative?

That is the way of changing.

When the Buddha-to-be saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk, he called these heavenly signs. He changed. He left the palace and went to seek truth. I think this recent disaster is a heavenly sign.

The crisis here in Japan is very serious but most politicians, scientists, and technologists feel that they have overcome it. They want business as usual.

I think we need something spiritual, not business as usual. We have to change personally, socially, globally, and environmentally, and I am happy to say that some people are now trying. Even top economists are challenging the mainstream economy; ordinary people are challenging the yardstick of gross national product, replacing it with gross national happiness. Some people

are promoting Buddhist economics. We also need Buddhist political science. All of our learning is too Western. To eliminate violence, we must rid ourselves of delusion, and I think we need to seek wisdom.

We need to be more humble, compassionate. That would enable you to lead Japan and could also enable you to lead the world—not as the Japanese powers that be, but as humble Buddhists in Rissho Kosei-kai.

We should teach people to understand that society is violent and how to overcome that nonviolently with wisdom and skillful means. I think that would be something wonderful that your founder would have been proud of. This would be good for Japan and good for the world.

You send people, you send money and goods to help many parts of the world, but you should also have more dialogue and learn from those people—suffering people. I think they will be your good friends, learning from each other.

**Niwano:** Mr. Sulak, your words have been very valuable for us today, and I think that once again I've been able to understand deeply the world that you are aiming for. I pray that you may continue your efforts in good health. □

# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 19

### The Merits of the Teacher of the Dharma (3)

*This is the 108th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra  
by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

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

“Pure is this man’s organ of tongue, / Never receiving ill flavors: / Whatsoever he eats, / All becomes as nectar. / With a wonderful voice, profound and pure, / In the assembly he preaches the Dharma; / With references to past events and with parables, / He leads on the minds of the living. / All his hearers rejoice / And make him the best of offerings. / Gods, dragons, and yakshas, / Asuras and others, / All with reverent minds / Come in company to hear his Dharma. / If this preacher desires / To make his wonderful voice / Fill the three-thousandfold world, / He is able at will to achieve it. / Great and minor wheel-rolling kings / With their thousand children and followers, / With united palms, reverent minds, / Constantly come to hear his Dharma.

**COMMENTARY** A truly superb teaching actually spreads throughout the world in this way. This is a passage to be savored.

**TEXT** Gods, dragons, and yakshas, / Rakshasas and pishacas / Also with joyful mind / Constantly rejoice to come and worship. / Brahma kings and Mara king, / Ishvara

and Maheshvara / And all such heavenly host / Come constantly into his presence. / Buddhas and their disciples, / Hearing his preaching voice, / Ever contemplate him and protect him, / At times revealing themselves to him.

**COMMENTARY** *Yakshas.* These are demons who live on the ground or in the air and that are held to possess supernatural powers. They sometimes torment human beings, but sometimes protect the teachings of the Buddha.

• *Pishacas.* This refers to a type of demon; a variety of hungry spirit.

A person of wholehearted faith, if he preaches the true Dharma with great persuasive power, will invariably be able to convert even these sorts of demons. Even when applied to the present world, we can quickly grasp the meaning.

From ancient times various buddhas have appeared as the times required and we have the experiences of the devout to prove it. But even without such an experience, average believers can have the conviction that the Buddha is always safeguarding them. This is a realm of religious exultation that only those religious persons who have entered deeply into faith can savor.

Next, the Buddha preaches the merits of the body.



**TEXT** “Further, Ever Zealous! If any good son or good daughter receives and keeps this sutra, and reads, or recites, or expounds, or copies it, he will obtain eight hundred merits of the body; he will obtain a pure body like lapis lazuli which all the living delight to see. Because of the purity of his body, the living beings in the three-thousand-great-thousandfold world, as they are born or die, superior or inferior, fine or ugly, born in good or in bad conditions, all will be manifested in [his body]. And Mount Iron Circle, Mount Great Iron Circle, Mount Meru, Mount Maha-Meru, and other royal mountains, and the living beings on them, will all be manifested in [his body]. Downward to the Avici hell, upward to the Summit of Existence, all things and living beings will be manifested [in his body]. Shravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas preaching the Dharma will all manifest their forms and images in his body.”

**COMMENTARY** This passage explains that those who fully undertake the five practices of teachers of the Dharma will become so undefiled as human beings that the real aspect of all things will be manifested in their bodies. In other words, such people will be free from the idea of self. All forms and images in this world will be reflected in their bodies just as they are, with no distortion or obscurity.

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

“If [anyone] keeps the Dharma Flower Sutra, / His body will be utterly pure, / As that pure lapis lazuli; / All the living will delight to see it. / And as in a pure, bright mirror / Every form and image is seen, / The bodhisattva, in his pure body, / Sees everything in the world. / He himself alone sees clearly / What others do not see. / In the three-thousandfold world / All the common multitude, / Gods, human beings, asuras, / Beings in hell, demons, animals— / All such forms and images / are manifested there in his body.

**COMMENTARY** *The common multitude.* This refers to living beings.

**TEXT** The palaces of the gods, / To the Summit of Existence, / [Mount] Iron Circle and [Mount] Meru, / Mount Maha-Meru, / Great oceans and waters, / All are manifested in his body. / Buddhas and shravakas, / Buddha sons, bodhisattvas, / Alone or preaching among the multitude, / All are manifested [in him]. / Though not yet possessed of the faultless, / wondrous body of the Dharma-nature, / Yet in his pure ordinary body / Everything is manifested.”

**COMMENTARY** *Possessed of the faultless, / wondrous body of the Dharma-nature.* “Faultless” means that the

defilements are completely gone. Dharma-nature means the Dharma of fundamental truth (Thusness, or *tathata*) itself. “Wondrous” refers to the body so superb that no words can describe it. Therefore, “the faultless, wondrous body of the Dharma-nature” means the body of Thusness itself, namely, it can be said to be true attainment of buddhahood, the ultimate nirvana. This is the highest state that a bodhisattva can attain through religious practice.

Next, the Buddha preaches the merits of thought.

**TEXT** “Further, Ever Zealous! If any good son or good daughter, after the extinction of the Tathagata, receives and keeps this sutra, or reads, or recites, or expounds, or copies it, he will obtain twelve hundred merits of thought. With this pure organ of thought, on hearing even a single verse or phrase he will penetrate its infinite and boundless meanings. Having discerned those meanings, he will be able to preach on that single phrase or verse for a month, four months, even a year. And all that he preaches, according to their meanings, will not be contrary to the real aspect [of all things].