

Words Connect Us with Others

by Nichiko Niwano

We humans are unique among all living beings, as we are the only ones to communicate with words. There is no denying that our being able to encounter the Buddha Dharma is thanks to the many people who have transmitted the Truth and the Dharma through words over the course of some twenty-five hundred years.

Precisely because we have benefited from their efforts at transmission we can now lead lives worthy of human beings and follow the Buddha Way, but we usually take this for granted.

Broadening the topic a little, someone once said, about human beings having a heart and mind, “There is no denying that, even allowing for the theory of evolution, human beings were born from the original principle of the heavenly and the natural known in Japanese as *tenchi shizen*, and that it is possible to think of humans as its agents to reveal their hearts and minds.” This means that human beings are able to think about things and talk about their thoughts because the original principle of the heavenly and the natural, that is the gods and the buddhas, entrusts us with those thoughts and enables us to put them into words.

Buddhism teaches us that when each and every one of us awakens to our own wisdom and cultivates the heart and mind of compassion, we are able to pursue life with a true sense of purpose. If we really think about this, there is no greater use of the generous gift of being able to communicate with words than to understand the true nature of things, which is wisdom, as well as to practice

the compassion based upon that wisdom that brings peace of mind to other people. Because the use of words can lead us to wisdom, they are important tools of liberation.

For that reason, we should now take this opportunity to ponder our gratitude for words, as it is important that we employ this precious gift from the gods and the buddhas to show consideration to those around us. Doing so is, in and of itself, one way of transmitting the Dharma to them.

Words that Reach the Heart and Mind

We should not forget our gratitude for the gifts received by human beings, including words. What we should do first of all, in order to show our thankfulness, is not to lose sight of the real importance of “self.”

In the past, I was profoundly impressed by the phrase, “The self is one’s portion of the natural world,” and in light of what I have mentioned above, for us human beings born of the original principle of the heavenly and the natural, this fact encourages us to realize that the self is only one tiny piece of the entire universe.

Once we realize that as human beings we are just a small fraction of the whole and that our lives are sustained by the gods and the buddhas, the words from our mouths become imbued with the heart and mind of gratitude, as we naturally say “thank you” or refuse to take credit by saying, “It’s all thanks to others.” When we make mistakes or have behaved

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rudely, we bow our heads and sincerely apologize by saying, “I’m truly sorry.” The exchange of such expressions back and forth makes social actions go smoothly, and human relationships become warm and gracious. It is such words of gratitude that connect human hearts and minds.

However, here I must add one more important point: it does not matter what kind of words you use, but rather what kind of “you” speaks those words. Frankly, what matters is whether your words match your actions. Whether what you say reaches the heart and mind of the other person depends on this. For words to inspire confidence in others depends upon the way of life of the person who speaks them.

Also, there is no one among us who can know everything about this world, and even if someone spent eternity trying to do so, it still would be impossible. Seen from the eyes of the Buddha, we are all novices who can attain but a little knowledge, so when we are talking with other people, we should never forget our humility.

From long ago in Japan, we have said that words have the power to bring happiness. And one way they do so is through our working to transmit the Truth and the Dharma that we hope will liberate as many people as possible from their worries and suffering. □

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Buddhism and Language: The Lotus Sutra

by Gene Reeves

Broadly speaking, I think there are at least two reasons behind the Lotus Sutra's positive view of language, behind its admonition to have faith in and seek to understand the truthful words of the Buddha: its positive view of nearly everything, and its teaching of skillful means.

I don't know that this has been true in all times and places, but in general, it seems to me, Buddhism has been highly ambivalent about language, about words, whether written or spoken. Very often sutras and their written words have been objects of religious devotion, representing a very positive view of language. Perhaps the Chan/Zen tradition has been most consistent in using language to denigrate language, using a lot of words to disparage words. Many Zen Buddhists have spoken of a dharma transmission that exists apart from, and even in contrast to, written sutras. But negative views of language can also be found almost everywhere in Buddhism, including in the Lotus Sutra.

The Vimalakirti Sutra

This ambivalence is rather stark in the Vimalakirti Sutra. On the one hand, we find "The wise are not attached to letters, and therefore they have no fear" (quotations from the Vimalakirti Sutra are taken from the translation of Kumarajiva's Chinese version [Taishō, vol. 14, no. 475] by John R. McRae in *The Sutra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion's Roar and the Vimalakīrti Sutra* [Numata

Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004], p. 90, Taishō 540c; Taishō references are also provided for convenience). In this sutra there is the famous scene in which Manjushri Bodhisattva tells Vimalakirti that he should explain how a bodhisattva enters the gate of nonduality. In response Vimalakirti remains silent, saying nothing at all. And Manjushri responds, "Excellent, excellent! Not to even have words or speech is the true entrance into the Dharma gate of nonduality" (ibid., p. 159, Taishō 553c). This has been widely interpreted as advocating a transcendence of language or words.

On the other hand, in the same sutra we find the following:

The goddess said, "Speech and words are entirely the characteristics of emancipation. Why?

"Emancipation is neither internal, nor external, nor intermediate. Words are also neither internal, nor external, nor intermediate. Therefore, Shariputra, the explanation of emancipation does not transcend words. Why?

"All *dharmas* have the characteristic of emancipation." (Ibid., p. 128, Taishō 548a)

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In other words, there can be no teaching or preaching of liberation or emancipation apart from words.

The idea of a language beyond language, the idea of a kind of super-language that transcends ordinary language, is not exclusive to Zen or to Buddhism. Richard Kearney, an Irish American Roman Catholic philosopher, wrote recently that to truly understand another religion, we must seek "at the root of each religion, a silent, speechless openness to a Word which surpasses us. If it is true that all religions involve a special acoustic of obedience to a Word beyond our finite language, this may lead to a modest ability to listen to Otherness."

And even within Zen traditions we can find very positive views of language. Dogen, the great thirteenth-century early Zen master and founder of the Soto school of Japanese Buddhism, wrote, "All buddhas and patriarchs are able to voice the Way"; that is, to express the truth of the Buddhist path in words.

Nichiren

In contrast to Zen traditions of skepticism about the efficacy of language, traditions based on the Lotus Sutra have been generally positive about language. Perhaps the most positive view of language, and not only of the words of the Lotus Sutra, is found in Nichiren. Of Buddhist sutras in general he once wrote that “each word and phrase is true; not a single passage or verse is false.” Nichiren explained this very positive view of language in a brief essay on ceremonies for the dedication of new Buddhist images called “Opening the Eyes of Wooden or Painted Images.” He wrote:

The written words of the Lotus Sutra express in visible and non-coextensive form the Buddha’s pure and

far-reaching voice, which is itself invisible and coextensive. They therefore express the two physical aspects of color and form. The Buddha’s pure and far-reaching voice, which once vanished, has reappeared in the visible form of written words to benefit the people. (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4 [NISC, 1986], p. 31)

According to Nichiren, when not intending to deceive,

a person gives voice to what he truly has in mind. Thus his thoughts are expressed in his voice. The mind represents the spiritual aspect, and the voice, the physical aspect. The spiritual aspect manifests itself in the physical. A person can know

another mind by listening to his voice. This is because the physical aspect reveals the spiritual aspect. The physical and the spiritual, which are one in essence, manifest themselves as two distinct aspects; thus the Buddha’s mind found expression in the written words of the Lotus Sutra. These written words are the Buddha’s mind in a different form. Therefore those who read the Lotus Sutra must not regard it as consisting of mere written words, for those words are in themselves the Buddha’s mind. (*Ibid.*, p. 32)

Nichiren held a nondual view of mind and speech, a view that he inherited from the Chinese Tiantai master Zhiyi. The contemporary Nichiren scholar Zenko Kitagawa writes:

In Nichiren's view, the words of the sutras were not merely characters written in black ink but the Buddha's pure voice, taking form as the written words of teachings that work to save living beings. This understanding affirms the statement of the Tiantai master Zhiyi (538–597) in his *Fahua xuanyi* (Profound meaning of the *Lotus Sutra*), "The voice does the Buddha's work; this is called *kyō* 經 or sutra" (T 33.681c). Nichiren quotes this passage from Zhiyi in his *Ichidai shōgyō taii* . . . (The cardinal meaning of the Buddha's lifetime teachings) in interpreting the character *kyō* (sutra) of the *Lotus Sutra's* title. ("The Words of the *Lotus Sutra* in Nichiren's Thought," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies: The Lotus Sutra in Japan*, 41:1 [2014]: 29)

The Buddha in the Text

In Rissho Kosei-kai's Great Sacred Hall, the central image and object of devotion, the Gohonzon, is a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha surrounded in the nimbus with images of Abundant Treasures Buddha in his treasure stupa and the four leading bodhisattvas of chapter 15 of the *Lotus Sutra*. Inside that statue is a set of scrolls with the entire *Lotus Sutra* hand-copied by Founder Niwano. Thus the *Lotus Sutra* is in the Buddha, yet almost everything that Rissho Kosei-kai knows about Shakyamuni Buddha

is from the *Lotus Sutra*. In other words, Shakyamuni Buddha is in the *Lotus Sutra*. This involves a version of the Tendai idea of interpenetration. The ideas of the sutra in the Buddha and the Buddha in the sutra are not in conflict; they mutually support each other.

Thus many generations of *Lotus Sutra* followers have understood that the sutra is the Buddha or at least fully represents the Buddha, the Buddha actually embodied in a text, in words. When this happens, and it is by no means exclusive to the *Lotus Sutra*, the text itself becomes an object of religious devotion, for the text embodies the Buddha, or at least the Buddha for us, for those who can see and encounter the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra*. Potentially, it is the Buddha for anyone.

The Lotus Sutra

The *Lotus Sutra* does not have much to say directly about language. There are passages in it suggesting limitations of language. For example:

This Dharma is indescribable.
Words must fall silent.
Among other kinds of living beings,
None can understand it,
Except the bodhisattvas,
Whose faith is strong and firm.
(Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* [Wisdom Publications, 2008], pp. 76–77)

But such passages are not common, and even in this case, the claim that bodhisattvas, at least those whose faith is strong and firm, can understand the dharma is hardly negative.

There are also passages expressing a generally positive view of language: "Shariputra, all of you should believe, understand, and embrace the words of the Buddha with all your hearts, for in the words of the buddhas, the tathagatas, there is nothing empty or false" (*ibid.*, p. 85).

Similarly:

Only because they trust the Buddha's words,
Can any of the shravakas
Follow this Sutra—
Not because they have any wisdom
of their own. (*Ibid.*, p. 131)

Chapter 16 begins:

At that time the Buddha said to the bodhisattvas and to all the great assembly, "Have faith in and understand, all you good sons, the truthful words of the Tathagata." Again he said to the great assembly, "Have faith in and understand the truthful words of the Tathagata." And yet again he said to the great assembly, "Have faith in and understand the truthful words of the Tathagata." (*Ibid.*, p. 291)

Broadly speaking, I think there are at least two reasons behind the *Lotus*

Sutra's positive view of language, behind its admonition to have faith in and seek to understand the truthful words of the Buddha: its positive view of nearly everything, and its teaching of skillful means.

Buddhist Positiveness

The Argentinian Buddhist scholars and translators of Buddhist texts (including the Sanskrit Lotus Sutra) Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti recently published a book on the Lotus Sutra called *Buddhist Positiveness* (Motilal Banarsidass, 2009). While I am not entirely happy with the very rarely used English term *positiveness*, I think that the idea behind this use of the term is quite appropriate.

The Lotus Sutra is positive or affirmative about almost everything it discusses. Shravakas are not merely backward or wrong, they are to become buddhas. While Devadatta, apart from the Lotus Sutra, is generally known as an epitome of evil, in the sutra nothing at all is said of his being evil. Instead we are told that he was once a teacher for the Buddha and will himself become a buddha in the future.

All stories in the Lotus Sutra end on a positive note: children saved from their burning house ride off in magnificent carriages; pilgrims completely discouraged by the very long road recover and resume their journey after experiencing a magically conjured city; a poor son inherits his rich father's wealth; children stricken by poison recover after hearing of their father's death; the entire family of a non-Buddhist king happily joins the following of their buddha; and so on.

Perhaps most important, despite its lack of interest in metaphysical issues or speculation about ultimate matters, the Lotus Sutra affirms the reality of the things of the everyday world, implicitly rejecting transcendental notions of ultimate reality. The Lotus Sutra, in

other words, is positive about this *saha* world and nearly everything in it. Even the idea of this being the *saha* world, a world in which suffering has to be endured, is transformed in the Lotus Sutra view of it to a world in which suffering can be endured with good effect. In the Lotus Sutra, suffering is more an opportunity than a liability.

The Lotus Sutra is so positive about things that one is tempted to say that it is positive about everything. But, in fact, it is not positive about those who disparage followers of the Lotus Sutra. Probably they, too, can become buddhas, but not without a good bit of overcoming the effects of bad karma. Still, such negative judgments are relatively rare in the Lotus Sutra.

The sutra's generally positive view of our world and nearly everything in it naturally leads to a positive view of language. But behind this positive view of the world and language is another idea that is never articulated directly in the Lotus Sutra but runs through it from beginning to end—the idea of buddha-nature.

Buddha-Nature

Buddha-nature narrowly interpreted affirms the potential of every living being, especially of human beings, to become buddhas. But it also has a broader meaning, in which something positive, indeed something of the Buddha himself, can be found in anything at all.

Skillful Means

Since the tranquilly extinct character of all things
Cannot be put into words,
I used the power of skillful means,
To teach the five ascetics.

This is called "turning the Dharma wheel."
Then I made distinctions
Using such words as "nirvana,"

As well as "arhat," "dharma," and "sangha." (Ibid., p. 99)

In the Lotus Sutra, words are, or at least can be, skillful means for teaching Buddha-dharma.

But we should not understand this to mean that words are *mere skillful means*. Though Western scholars are inclined to make much use of the term *mere skillful means*, such an idea is nowhere to be found in the Lotus Sutra itself. This is at least in part because scholars are well aware of the two-truth theory attributed to Nagarjuna, according to which there are inferior truths that are provisional, expedient, and partial, while above them there is ultimate truth, which is final and complete. But the authors and compilers of the Lotus Sutra did not read Nagarjuna, who lived later, and were completely unaware of this two-truth theory.

Accordingly, for the Lotus Sutra, skillful means are never, ever "mere" skillful means. On the contrary, in the sutra they are the means by which the Buddha, or his stand-in, saves people. They are always wonderful.

Thus we can conclude that the central theme of the Lotus Sutra, the idea that everything has a potential to become a buddha, leads to a generally affirmative, positive approach to whatever we encounter in life. Though language is very inadequate for fully expressing our ideas, inspirations, feelings, passions—even our sensations—language provides an opening, a skillful means both for understanding the Buddha's words as found in the sutras and for understanding the world around us, including the minds of our neighbors.

Thus we are encouraged by the Lotus Sutra to delight in language; to become fluent in the use of language, especially in teaching Buddha-dharma; and to be grateful to those who have used language to teach us and lead us to the teachings of the Buddha. □

Embodying Buddha-Speech

by Natalie Gummer

If “reading” can lead to . . . radical transformations—if reading is a process of incorporating buddha-speech—then it entails much more than silent engagement with the meaning of the text. The practices advocated in the sutras offer the listener a pathway toward the progressive incorporation of the text, one that invites repeated and ever-more-intense engagement with its words.

What happens to us when we read? Mahāyāna Buddhist sutras present us with some provocative answers to this question. The sutras reflect keen awareness of the ways in which language shapes us and our world and offer striking alternatives to commonplace representations (at least in English) of language as a mere vehicle or tool for conveying human ideas. And while they were composed in times and places where “reading” as we know it in our digital and print culture didn’t exist, they set forth sophisticated techniques for engaging with the power of language. Contemporary readers, Buddhist or not, have something important to learn from these ancient texts—both from the metaphors they use for their own power and from the practices they advocate. This essay explores the potent resources offered by the Sutra of Golden Light, the Teaching of Vimalakīrti, and the Lotus Sutra for rethinking our own agency in relation to language and for reexperiencing that relationship. The metaphors and techniques employed in these sutras vary, but they share with one another a conception of reading (broadly defined) as effecting physical

as well as cognitive and emotional-aesthetic transformation.

The metaphors and techniques set forth in the Sutra of Golden Light, for instance, represent reading (including listening, studying, holding in memory, reciting, and preaching to another) as a process of incorporation. The sutra’s own oral substance is *dharmāmṛtarasa*, the liquid essence of the immortalizing nectar of the dharma (see especially chapters 6 and 10 of the Sanskrit text). This essence is like a perfect food that enters listeners and fills them with life, energy, prosperity, and pleasure. They want to hear it over and over again, and as they do, they begin to glow with the golden luminosity of the sutra.

A number of figures, including the Buddha himself, testify to the process that ensues thereafter: an avid listener of the sutra becomes a speaker and, eventually, a buddha—the ultimate speaker—with an immortal golden dharma body. And that body, the sutra tells us, is none other than the sutra itself. This is the transformation offered by the Sutra of Golden Light.

The core metaphor of consumption and incorporation here deserves

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closer examination. Eating involves taking something that is not oneself into one’s own body. The process of digestion—understood in ancient South Asia as the progressive refinement of nutritive essences in a series of internal fires—makes food part of the body, but it also changes the body: the body now contains, incorporates, the food consumed. So if we consume a great deal of a particular food, our bodies are actually scented by it. When we eat, our food becomes part of us, but it also changes what we are. We become more like it. So it is with the sutra: it infuses its listeners with its golden light and eventually transforms them into buddhas whose bodies are identical with the sutra. And those bodies invite us to read the metaphor as alchemical as well: the liquid essence of the sutra is also mercury, which immortalizes those who embody it by transforming them into gold.

The metaphor of the dharma as transformative food is literalized in the Teaching of Vimalakīrti. In chapters 8 and 9 of the Sanskrit text, the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti sends a golden-bodied bodhisattva to a distant buddha-field called Sarvagandhasugandha (Where All Scents Are Sweet) to fetch an inexhaustible bowl of delicious-smelling food from the buddha Gandhottamakūṭa (Pinnacle of Finest Perfumes). Vimalakīrti and his entourage consume the ambrosial meal and emanate its exquisite scent throughout a forty-nine-day period of digestive cooking. At the end of this time, all those who partook of the food have advanced significantly on the path to buddhahood. As Ānanda remarks, the food accomplishes the work of a buddha. The food is like the sutra, the teachings of the Buddha, and the sutra is like the food, entering the bodies of its audiences and furthering their progress on the path to buddhahood.

Like the Sutra of Golden Light, the Lotus Sutra evokes alchemical processes to depict its transformative power. It represents its own oral performance not as mercury, however, but as the fire through which listeners are transformed (literally, “cooked to perfection”; *pari-pac* in Sanskrit—a term that occurs more than forty times in the sutra). The golden-bodied bodhisattvas who emerge from the cracks of the earth in chapter 15, for instance, have been forged in the fire of the Buddha’s preaching of the sutra. Images of heat and light abound in descriptions of the sutra’s effects on its listeners and in the praise heaped on those preachers of the dharma (like Pūrṇa in the eighth chapter) who are particularly skilled in perfecting beings through their performance of the sutra. Preaching the sutra has even more astonishing physical effects than hearing it: witness the remarkable bodily transformations listed in chapter 19.

As with the redolent meal in the Teaching of Vimalakīrti, the metaphor is literalized in the story of the

bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja’s fiery self-sacrifice. The bodhisattva wishes to make an offering to the Lotus Sutra and to Candravimalasūryaprabhāsaśrī (Luster of the Spotless Moon and Radiant Sun), the buddha of his time, so he, like Vimalakīrti’s entourage, digests fragrant substances. After twelve full years of consumption, he has constituted himself as the perfect offering and sets himself alight. When he is subsequently reborn at the time of the same buddha’s parinirvana, he is again inspired to make of his body a fiery offering: he burns off his arm. But by making a truth statement, he both restores the arm and gains a golden-colored body. The transformative effects of powerful language in this story mirror the effects of hearing the sutra itself. The story goes on to assert that even bearing in mind a single verse of the Lotus Sutra is just as powerful and meritorious as burning parts of one’s body: the fire of the sutra is the ultimate technology for self-perfection.

The consequences of these representations of what it means to engage with a sutra are several. First, our attention is drawn to the material qualities of language, especially spoken language.

We generally recognize (if sometimes with difficulty) that words on a page have material form, but the invisibility and evanescence of sound make it seem quintessentially insubstantial. The sutras, in representing their own oral substance as a kind of nourishment or a fiery crucible, challenge this assumption and help listeners to sense the sound as it enters them, to taste the sutra’s sonorous substance or feel its transformative heat. They encourage speakers to cultivate an awareness of the visceral presence of the spoken sutra in the body as it resonates in the chest and pours forth from one’s mouth to enter the ears of others. And it draws attention to its material effects, both manifest (a shiver down one’s spine, hairs suddenly standing on end) and hidden (the changes wrought in one’s mind through this encounter with language).

Second, the view of language in these sutras turns on its head the conventional metaphor of language as container or conduit for the communication of ideas. By contrast, the image of sutra language as food or fire represents the listener as the vessel or vehicle, filled with and transformed by the language of the sutra. Agency is located not in

the listener or speaker but in the potent words that he or she embodies. In this way, the different practices advocated in the sutras—hearing, reciting, holding in memory, and so forth—can be powerful techniques for eroding the delusion of self and self-power. Paradoxically, then, agentive engagement with the sutra ideally leads to a kind of surrender to the text and its agency.

If “reading” can lead to such radical transformations—if reading is a process of incorporating buddha-speech—then it entails much more than silent engagement with the meaning of the text. The practices advocated in the sutras offer the listener a pathway toward the progressive incorporation of the text, one that invites repeated and ever-more-intense engagement with its words. Moving from listener to speaker necessitates committing the sutra to memory so that it literally becomes part of the mind. And that process epitomizes the paradox of agency: the volitional act of memorizing a sutra—no small feat, in most cases—results in a loss of control over the text. As Charles Malamoud notes in *Cooking the World*, “a text, once learned by heart . . . cannot be consulted, leafed through, put aside and taken up again like a book. It asserts its unmoving presence and ripens in the mind that welcomes it without that mind being aware of the stages of its maturation” ([Oxford University Press, 1996], 256–57).

Notions of the sovereign self are

undermined in yet another way by engagement with these sutras: through the connection formed to all others, past, present, and future, who have engaged or will engage in the same bodily practices. The sutras themselves (especially the Golden Light and the Lotus) draw attention to this connection by anticipating their future audiences (including those now present) and recalling those of the past. In the world of the sutras, and in many contemporary contexts involving sutras, “reading” is a communal practice, one that enhances the formation of human relationships through shared ritual performances. When people chant together, they are both listeners and speakers, both producers and consumers of the food or fire of the sutra’s sound. And by embodying the text together, they all become part of the perfect dharma body that is the sutra.

Significant strands of Buddhist thought identify language as the source of delusion, leading us to misperceive the constant flux of experience as discrete, nameable entities with static essences, separate from one another and from our “selves.” The sutras illuminate the other side of the same coin: if language is so powerful as to obscure reality, then it is also powerful enough to liberate. In this sense, metaphors are never “just” metaphors. They make possible new experiences and understandings and draw attention to aspects of our experience that we might not have paid attention

to before. Depicting the sound of the sutra as an ambrosial liquid enables listeners and speakers to taste it; depicting it as fire enables them to feel its golden glow. Depicting it as the body of the Buddha makes possible a series of practices aimed toward progressively erasing the distinction between one’s own body and that of the Buddha/the sutra.

Recent research in the neuroscience of reading (see, for instance, Paul B. Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain* [Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013], and Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid* [Harper, 2007]) indicates that this activity we take so much for granted involves nothing less than the ongoing transformation of our brains: the creation of new neural pathways and structures and the development of new capacities for experience. Even works we no longer recall having read have left their mark on us, shaping us in ways of which we are largely unaware. In an important sense, everything we read changes who we are and what we are able to think and experience. But Mahāyāna Buddhist sutras had no need of a concept of neuroplasticity to recognize the tremendous power of our engagement with texts—the power to delude but also to liberate, to burn but also to illuminate, to poison but also to invigorate. The metaphors of transformation in these sutras suggest that when it comes to reading practices, you are what you eat. □

A Buddhist Paradigm of Language

by Dennis Hirota

For Pure Land Buddhists, the way leads not through dispelling discriminative thought and speech by meditative praxis but precisely in and through language.

Language has always been at issue in Buddhist traditions, for Buddhists have never assumed the transparency of the word. The fundamental problem is suggested in the narrative of the aftermath of Gotama Buddha's awakening. While enjoying the bliss of enlightenment, he pondered whether he should try to impart his realization to others. Doubting he would meet with understanding, he was inclined to remain silent within the joy of his own awakening. It was only after the god Brahma entreated the Buddha to teach the dharma, assuring him that there would be beings who would benefit—lotuses rising above the pond's surface undefiled—that the Blessed One rose from meditation and

set out to convey the path to others. It is not that the teaching is abstruse and difficult to grasp intellectually but that our ordinary language use is tied to a delusive grasp of things. Nirvana transcends the conceptual horizon of unenlightened beings.

Buddhist masters of the various traditions have, down through history, cautioned practitioners about the need for an appropriate *mode* of understanding the teaching. Nagarjuna's well-known formulation admonishes: "Rely on the meaning, not on the words. . . . Rely on wisdom, not the working of the mind." Words, he states, are but the finger pointing to the moon: "Why do you look at the finger and not at the moon?"

Language is the medium in which our existence in the world takes shape and our thoughts are formed; it ordinarily functions in the lives of unenlightened persons to affirm a false, ego-centered apprehension of the self and world. At the same time, as the Chinese Pure Land master Tanluan (476–542 CE) states: "Great bodhisattvas, having awakened to formless reality, constantly abide in profound *samādhi*. For this very reason, they are able to display freely in all worlds numerous and diverse bodies, supernal powers, and ways of communicating truth."

Language, which ordinarily forms the tissue of our delusive perceptions and judgments, can paradoxically become the vehicle of awakened ones for guiding beings to truth.

In the following, I will focus on the Japanese Pure Land tradition, for it is here that the contrary aspects of language—as medium of false, conceptual thought and as manifestation of truth—emerge most sharply. In many Buddhist paths, the mind is stilled and delusive language use eradicated through the performance of meditative practices and disciplines, so that the practitioner touches suchness or reality. In the Pure Land traditions as developed in Japan, however, persons of the *nembutsu* say the Name of Amida Buddha, entrusting themselves to Amida's vow to bring all beings to enlightenment in his Pure Land. Practitioners do not extricate themselves from the realm of delusional language use but, instead, in encountering Amida's vow, simultaneously

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awaken to their own ineluctable finitude and incapacity—the impossibility of transcending the false discriminative thought and language of human existence. In this way, their lives come to embody the Buddha's practice in the form of the linguistic act of saying the Buddha's Name.

Modern Conceptions of Religious Language

Despite the concern with language throughout Buddhist history, this topic offers at present a fresh opportunity for casting light on Buddhist traditions in a contemporary context. This is because recent philosophical thought has focused much attention on language and often presents resonances with Buddhist thinking that allow us to appreciate anew the role of language in Buddhist paths. Some thinkers have sought to effect a kind of Copernican transposition of perspective with regard to the relationship between the speaker and language. This is an aspect of the deconstruction of the notion of the autonomous self—the self as transcendent, reified subject that perceives itself as the center of the world, grasps and appraises all things from that standpoint, and employs language as an instrument for expressing its thoughts. It is argued instead that language itself, not our subjectivity, at once conditions and enables our apprehension of things.

Before turning to language in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, I will mention three aspects of a common

understanding of engagement with sacred texts, whether the words of the Buddha or the revelation of God in scripture: teaching, faith, and truth.

First, regarding the teaching, it is often assumed that the significant contents of religious texts are truths regarding the sacred, human existence, and the proper conduct of life, and further, that this teaching can be set forth in a series of propositions.

Second, the reception of the teaching is often understood in terms of “faith” or “belief.” To have faith is understood to mean accepting that what is written in sacred texts accords with what is the case, even though we may be unable to verify this correspondence through direct experience.

And third, this notion of accord between the assertions of the teaching and the way things actually are is often taken to be the meaning of *truth*. In other words, truth is a matter of correctness. It comes to us as though a kind of possession transmitted by means of language.

Language in Japanese Pure Land Buddhist Tradition

The Pure Land path—as a textual tradition teaching Amida Buddha and his vow of compassion—is often regarded as exemplifying this commonsense model. In this view, people who have faith in the teaching accept as true that they can attain birth into Amida's Buddha-field in the afterlife through saying the *nembutsu*.

We find in Buddhist traditions, however, another kind of functioning of language, offering a correspondingly distinct paradigm of religious engagement.

Pure Land Buddhist thinkers in Japan focused on the issue of authentic practice. In the formulation of the Buddhist path as the three pillars of teaching, practice, and awakening, one first encounters the dharma as teaching and embraces the aspiration for buddhahood. Then, in accord with the teaching, one undertakes practices and disciplines, and by incorporating the teaching into one's existence through practice, one is able to attain enlightenment. Practice forms the nexus by which the dharma taught in the tradition comes to be embodied in the practitioner's life.

As long as the practitioner's will is tainted by ambition or self-attachment, however, even though the aim may be enlightenment, the practice becomes futile. Yet it is to purify one's existence of such self-will that practice is necessary. This contradictory circularity in religious endeavor is not restricted to Buddhism, of course. In a sermon on the genuine poverty that the Bible teaches as blessed, Meister Eckhart indicates a negative example: “That man has a will to serve God's will—and that is not true poverty! For a man to possess true poverty he must be as free of his created will as he was when he was not” (*The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'C. Walshe [Crossroad, 2009], 421).

In the Pure Land tradition, self-will aimed at religious attainment is termed

“self-power,” and Shinran characterizes it as “calculative thinking” (*hakarai*). The question, of course, is how it may be possible to cast off self-will without becoming entangled more deeply in the web of one’s own intentions. For Pure Land Buddhists, the way leads not through dispelling discriminative thought and speech by meditative praxis but precisely in and through language. Here we may draw on resonances with recent philosophical thought. I will touch on three aspects. Regarding the first two, I refer to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

A Buddhist Paradigm of the Functioning of Language

First, there is the recognition of the linguisticity of human existence. In contrast with the modern notion of the transcendent ego-self that stands apart from the world of objects and employs language as a tool to communicate its inner thoughts, Gadamer depicts language as encompassing and informing the entire sphere of human existence. Further, just as existence as human is social, so language is thoroughly social in its acquisition and use, and because it functions as the medium of human apprehension, our grasp of things is wholly conditioned historically and culturally. In Buddhist terms, the finitude of human subjectivity that Gadamer portrays is understood in terms of discriminative thought and perception, craving and abhorrence. When the Pure Land tradition speaks of “the foolish, unenlightened person possessed of afflicting passions,” this may be understood in terms of the linguisticity of human awareness.

Second, the Pure Land path may be summarized by borrowing a phrase of Shinran’s in *Tannishō*: “the attainment of Buddhahood by the person who is evil” (*akunin jōbutsu*). Even while habituated to false discrimination and afflicting

passions, a person may, through the language of the path, encounter what is true and real. It is in our home ground of language that wisdom-compassion emerges to engage us. This cannot, however, be in the manner of our usual, ego-centered notions of faith and practice. Gadamer identifies the vital quality of language that allows it to lead toward awakening when he speaks of its “I-lessness.” He means that when we consider our everyday engagement with language, we see that our ordinary experience is quite removed from the abstract image of the isolated individual marshaling words like counters to represent already-formed ideas. Rather, “to speak means to speak *to* someone.” Speaking is not self-centered but belongs “in the sphere of the ‘We.’” Thus, “the spiritual reality of language is that of the *Pneuma*, the spirit, which unifies I and Thou” (“Man and Language,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge [University of California Press, 1976]).

Gadamer describes our typical experience of language as dialogical. Our conversations are a dynamic process, possessing their own flow like a game that carries its participants along, so that “it is no longer the will of the individual person” asserting private ideas that dominates. Thus, what is necessary for participating in the interaction of language is “that we free ourselves from the customary mode of thinking that considers the nature of the game from the point of view of the consciousness of the player.”

The language of the Pure Land path likewise functions, not as a monological exposition of creeds for intellectual assent, but in the manner of coming near through dialogue. Thus, Shinran speaks of the Primal Vow “calling to and summoning us” in the Name of Amida, and of the practitioner’s saying the Name in response to that call. This dialogical engagement uproots us from our customary mode of egocentric, calculative

thinking in a moment of beckoning and heeding, and the interchange continues, so that “to say Namu-amida-butsu is to praise the Buddha . . . to repent all the karmic evil one has committed since the beginningless past . . . to give this virtue to all sentient beings.”

Truth as an Event of Disclosure

Finally, truth in the Pure Land Buddhist path is not a matter of the correctness of assertions. Rather, it is an event of disclosure in and as language. Thus, Shinran states that the truth of the Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life, which teaches Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, is shown not by literal correspondences but by its emergence from Shakyamuni’s deepest *samādhi*. He emphasizes that Amida “comes forth” into the world of forms “from suchness” or formless reality, and that out of “dharma-body as dharmanature,” form is manifested, giving rise to the Primal Vow and the Name.

Further, he uses the term *jinen*—“naturalness,” unwilling spontaneity—to indicate reality in its working as wisdom-compassion to bring all beings to awakening: “Supreme Buddha is formless [beyond conceptual understanding], and because of being formless is called *jinen*. . . . In order to make it known that supreme Buddha is formless, the name Amida Buddha is expressly used. . . . Amida Buddha fulfills the purpose of making us know the significance of *jinen*.”

Engagement with the Pure Land Buddhist path is not the common notion of belief but entrance into a mode of existence in which the self and the things of the world are experienced as finally porous and ungraspable. It is the emergence of our universe in which our language is at once inescapable and untrue, and of which Shinran nevertheless can say, “My thoughts and feelings flow within the dharma-ocean, which is beyond comprehension.” □

Subverting Words: Impasse and Breakthrough in Zen *Kōan* Practice

by Ruben L. F. Habito

Kōans are not about doctrinal content, nor are they moral guidelines or ritual performance. Rather, they are to be taken as configurations of words whose entire function is to overturn the conventional use of words and lead a spiritual seeker toward a transformative experience.

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The Zen (Ch., *chan*) literature handed down through centuries of tradition includes collections of *kōans* (Ch., *gong an*, literally, “public document or record”) used in the practice of seated meditation. A *kōan* can consist of a story, verbal exchange, anecdote, short statement, or simple question meant to bring about an intellectual impasse and lead a practitioner to an experiential breakthrough in the spiritual path.

(For a masterly treatment of the subject, I recommend the essay by G. Victor Sōgen Hori, “*Kōan and Kenshō* in the Rinzaï Zen Curriculum,” in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright [Oxford University Press, 2000], pp. 280–315.) *Kōans* are not about doctrinal content, nor are they moral guidelines or ritual performance. Rather, they are to be taken as configurations of words whose entire function is to overturn the conventional use of words and lead a spiritual seeker toward a transformative experience ushered in by subverting the power of the words themselves.

The Emperor Meets Bodhidharma

Let us consider a well-known case or story of Bodhidharma meeting with the emperor Wu in imperial audience upon his arrival in China, the opening case of the collection *Hekiganroku* (Ch., *Piyenlu*, “Blue Cliff Record”).

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master Bodhidharma, “What is the first principle of the holy teaching?”

Bodhidharma said, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.”

The Emperor asked, “Who is this before me?”

Bodhidharma said, “I don’t know.” The Emperor did not understand.

Bodhidharma then crossed the Yangtze River and went on to the kingdom of Wei.

Later, the Emperor took up this matter with Duke Chi. Chi said, “Your Majesty, do you know who that was?”

The Emperor said, “I don’t know.”

Chi said, “That was the Great Guanyin, conveying the mind-seal of the Buddha.”

The Emperor felt regretful, and wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma to return.

Chi said, “Your Majesty, don’t say you will send someone to bring him back. Even if everyone in the whole country were to go after him, he would not return.” (Translated by Robert Aitken, with adaptations)

The emperor Wu is said to have been a devout follower of this religion of Buddhism that came from India and took root and received wide support in China after several centuries of its transplantation. A generous benefactor

who lavished financial support for the construction of temples, endowments for monastic communities, and other Buddhist projects, he was apparently asking an earnest question of this reputed sage who came from the western parts. “Tell me please, sir, what is the ultimate teaching of the Buddhist religion?”

In asking the question, the emperor seemed to be conscious of his own status as ruler of this empire that this sage had come to settle in, presumably to spread the holy teaching of Buddhism. An undertone of this exchange was that he was seeking affirmation of his meritorious deeds in supporting this religion, which would earn him a good rebirth in the next life and auspicious blessings in this one. In any case, he had an open mind seeking to learn from a wise teacher, perhaps with the thought that he might provide him with support in the latter’s endeavors in spreading his Buddhist teaching.

But Bodhidharma’s response takes him aback. “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.” What is this? This is one of the subverting words among those found in this *kōan*. Bodhidharma throws the emperor off his guard entirely with such an unusual response. Contrary to what the emperor had been taught to believe, it seems he is being told that all of his good deeds, all of his meritorious acts, are all a “vast emptiness,” that there is no such thing as can be called “holy.” All the money gone to the temples and the support of the monks in his domain: down the drain. His whole worldview and belief system is challenged, subverted, by this response. He stands at an impasse and now does not know what to do with this “holy” man who was before him in privileged imperial audience.

He is led to question the very identity of this purported sage in speaking to him like this. “Who is this before me?” Who are you, saying such things to me, ruler of this great empire, who

has the authority over your fate as long as you are in this land?

Bodhidharma’s response to this second question is another setback and heightens the impasse. “*I don’t know.*” With this, the emperor dismisses the man from his sight. Bodhidharma quickly takes leave.

Who Is the Emperor?

Kōan practice takes us beyond discourse about historicity or related matters. Whether this is about an actual historical person or not, and whether, if indeed there was a ruler called Emperor Wu of the kingdom of Liang, that ruler had such an encounter with a sage from India named Bodhidharma, is beside the point insofar as *kōan* practice is concerned. The story is presented in the context of the practice of seated meditation (*zazen*) to one engaging in this practice motivated by nothing less than the resolution of the Great Matter of Life and Death. The practitioner is to put him- or herself in the place of the emperor, asking, “What is the highest principle of the holy teaching?” In other words, the practitioner “merges” with the emperor, asking in earnest, “What is the Matter of Great Importance?” “What is the point of it all?” Ultimately, “Who *am* I?”

Being confronted by such a question is likened to having one’s hair on fire. One cannot find peace unless this fire is quenched. We are not dealing with an abstract philosophical theme calling for a conceptual answer but with an existential question of ultimate import—indeed, a matter of life and death. In being confronted with such a question, one is called to engage it with no less than the totality of one’s being, toward its resolution.

Bodhidharma’s response goes right to the heart of the matter: “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.” This is no academic discourse about “the first principle of the holy teaching.” It is a subverting

word pointing directly to the Matter of Great Importance.

Vast emptiness, nothing holy. What? Is this telling me that my entire life, my whole purpose of being, is just vast emptiness, that there is nothing holy at all in this life, or in any life, here or hereafter? Impasse upon impasse. Our intellectual quest is stopped in its tracks. We are disappointed. We are dumbfounded. All becomes vast emptiness, no holiness.

Who Is Bodhidharma?

The only viable way to take this response of Bodhidharma’s is to continue sitting in stillness, paying attention with each breath, in and out, and letting the mind come to a point of stillness and letting it resonate in that stillness. The question looms in the horizon of one’s mind: “Who am I?” Bodhidharma’s answer to the emperor’s second question jumps to the fore. “*I don’t know.*”

The *kōan* has the emperor asking, “Who is this before me?” Seated in stillness, paying full attention, the practitioner is now asking: “Who is this that is breathing in and breathing out and paying attention, hearing that sound from outside the window, feeling a pain in the knee, an itch on the back?”

Bodhidharma’s “*I don’t know*” resonates in the silence. His response to the emperor’s first question reverberates throughout. “*Vast emptiness, nothing holy.*” As these two responses merge into one, a breakthrough can occur, opening up to a boundless horizon, setting everything in the universe in luminous clarity. What is the Matter of Great Importance? Who am I? *I don’t know!* *Vast emptiness, nothing holy!*

Let us go back to the story. After the departure of Bodhidharma, the emperor is approached by a confidant, Duke Chi. “Your Majesty, did you realize who that person was who just left from our midst?” The emperor gives an honest and forthright answer. “*I don’t*

No reliance on words or letters
A special transmission outside of
Scriptures
Directly pointing to the Mind
Seeing one's true nature, becoming
Awakened.

In proclaiming “no reliance on words or letters,” Zen, through centuries of tradition, has developed skillful ways of using words that subvert those very words themselves in a way that may trigger a breakthrough in a practitioner's way of seeing. *Kōans* are ways of using words that overturn the conventional meaning of those words, leading to an impasse, whereby there is no way to move forward as long as one remains caught in the web of meaning or conceptual content of those words. What we have referred to as subverting words are also called turning words in Zen discourse.

In this case we have considered, every word of the emperor, every word of Bodhidharma, as well as the words of Duke Chi, can become a turning word. Overturning conventional meanings of the words used, and having sapped them of their intellectually enchanting power, the *kōan* creates a conceptual impasse. The seeker is stumped, left facing a blank wall of meaninglessness, and with nothing to hold on to. It is this impasse that can thereby usher an earnest seeker into a wide and open horizon that is beyond the boundaries of time and space, the realm of *vast emptiness, nothing holy*.

The *kōan* could have ended right there, with Bodhidharma's response to the first question, and would have done its work. But it goes a step further and, with grandfatherly kindness, gives an added hint, using Duke Chi as a ploy. “Who is this before me?” The one you seek with all your heart, that is, Guanyin, Hearer of the Sounds of the World. Beyond the impasse, the floodgates open out to the Ocean of Compassion. □

of the world.” Guanyin is one who sees and hears freely and without restriction in space and time across the entire universe, with eyes and ears of compassion (in Sanskrit, Guanyin is Avalokiteśvara, meaning literally, “the sovereign who gazes down [at the world]).” In Buddhist iconography, Guanyin is portrayed as having eleven faces that enable her to see in all directions and a thousand arms that extend throughout all the regions of the universe,

offering a hand in response to every situation of need. To the hungry, food; to the thirsty, drink; to the lonely, companionship; to the grieving, comfort; and so on. To be Guanyin is to embody the dynamic activity of compassion itself in one's very being.

The emperor is told: no matter how hard you try, no matter if everyone in this country went after Guanyin, there is no way she would come within your grasp. The more you try to grasp, all the more will she flee from you. All that is left is vast emptiness, nothing holy!

In Conclusion

Zen is a school of spiritual practice among the Buddhist family of traditions, distinguishing itself with four hallmarks, summed up in the following verse:

know.” This again leads to an impasse. The emperor gives an answer from the heart. It comes from a place of humility, of total openness, of willingness to receive the Dharma. A seeker who is able to say, from the heart, “I don't know,” is now ripe for a breakthrough.

The wise Duke Chi tells the emperor, and us, that is no other than the great Compassionate One, Guanyin, who embodies the heart and mind of the Buddha. Here again an important hint is offered. That one who, when asked, “Who is this before me?” replied, “I don't know,” and the one being asked about, to whom the emperor (qua the practitioner) refers in saying “I don't know”—that is the same One. Subject and object merge, and the entire universe of *vast emptiness, nothing holy* merges with *I don't know!*

Who is Guanyin? The characters for *Guanyin* mean “hearer of the sounds

Buddhism and Language: Thoughts on the Relationship between Word, Writing, and Performance in Buddhist Cultural History

by Brian Ruppert

Just as the Gospel of John offered a new interpretation of language with its discourse of logos at the time of its completion near the end of the first century CE, the appearance of the Mahāyāna sūtras constituted a watershed moment in the history of the ritual and narrative role of language in Buddhist belief and practice.

One of the initial difficulties when considering the relationship between Buddhism and language concerns the connection of such an investigation to modernity. That is, what do we mean by “language” and related concepts such as “scripture”? Moreover, more basically, how do we understand “religion” as the unspoken backdrop for such an enterprise?

Of course, language, scripture, and religion are originally Western concepts and thus in a sense foreign to the pre-modern Buddhist world. However, given that we are communicating in English and our traditions of religious study—both academic and otherwise—began with reflections on Christianity, it makes sense that we employ these concepts so long as the social phenomena we analyze have characteristics that prominently approximate these. In what we call Buddhist traditions, we find what is clearly of use as well as reflection on issues directly related to language, such as translation and practices of textual interpretation. Similarly, we find that Buddhist traditions have variously seen certain individual works and groups of texts as more central than others and thus, by implication, have attributed

something akin to the authority of scripture to them. Moreover, Buddhist traditions focused on one or more figures who were seen as having awakened to a complete understanding of certain truths regarding our world, and institutionally, these traditions featured professional practitioners (that is, the *saṅgha*) who were trained in the tradition and guided lay believers who supported them—all characteristics common to prominent religious communities historically, such as Christianity.

One thing to recognize initially is that there seems to have been no effort among followers of the Buddha to find or create a single sacred written or ceremonial language to be used in ritual, such as Vedic Sanskrit, later Hindu Sanskrit, or Latin. It is thought that the Buddha taught in his local language of Māghadhī rather than Sanskrit, apparently partially in connection with the fact that Sanskrit was the language of the Brahman priestly class (Rupert Gethin, *Sayings of the Buddha: A Selection of Suttas from the Pali Nikāyas* [Oxford University Press, 2008], xxiv; Robert E. Buswell Jr., and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* [Princeton University Press, 2014], 612b). Moreover, although Pali

was the consistent language of the earliest texts (circa second to first centuries BCE), texts associated with Mahāyāna traditions written in Sanskrit began to appear within decades thereafter, and Buddhist texts were routinely translated into Chinese from the second century CE, if not a bit earlier.

Among the so-called Three Baskets of the Pali scriptures promoted by groups we now call the Thera school (Theravāda)—the only complete early canon extant—it is clear that the *sutta* (Skt., *sūtra*; hereafter *sūtra*) basket was, together with that devoted to the precepts (*vinaya*), the oldest set of sacred texts. Although the *vinaya* included numerous and very old stories concerning the Buddha, the *sūtras*, as discourses by Śākyamuni Buddha given at distinctive times and places—embodying the Buddha’s Dharma and also authenticating it through a kind of historical attribution by the reporter-hearer Ānanda (marked by the phrase “Thus have I heard”)—arguably held the highest authority among scriptures.

With the Mahāyāna movements, which began to appear at roughly the beginning of the Common Era, however, the power of *sūtras* became all the more prominent. Written in Sanskrit rather than Pali, the Mahāyāna *sūtras* emphasized the ritual and illocutionary force of the Buddha’s words as much as their referential meaning. *Sūtras* such as the Lotus Sutra, the Heart Sutra, and others included spells (*mantras*) or longer mnemonic incantations (*dhāraṇī*) that often invited the protection of buddhas,

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bodhisattvas, and guardian deities. These invocations would become part and parcel of esoteric Buddhist *sūtras* and *tantras* (so-called Vajrayāna) later, perhaps in part related to the fact that the semantic meaning of their content was typically obscure or incomprehensible, but they were common much earlier in the Mahāyāna scriptures.

Just as the Gospel of John offered a new interpretation of language with its discourse of *logos* at the time of its completion near the end of the first century CE, the appearance of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* constituted a watershed moment in the history of the ritual and narrative role of language in Buddhist belief and practice. Although this began in India, it would soon prove extremely influential in East Asia, where Mahāyāna Buddhism came to greatest prominence. Figures such as the particularly active central Asian monk Kumārajīva (344–ca. 413) translated works such as the Lotus Sutra into Chinese. However, it is significant to note that they did so in a variety of ways, albeit almost invariably through the patronage of sovereigns and, often, with the help of groups of unnamed translators (Tōru Funayama, *Butten wa dō kanyaku sareta ka* [How were Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese?] [Iwanami Shoten, 2013], 55–57). Kumārajīva’s translations are known for the beauty of their classical Chinese style, while other translations reveal varying tendencies to use, for example, Buddho-Daoistic language (an amalgam of Buddhist and Daoist terminology and the like)—borrowing

Daoistic vocabulary to suit the Chinese context—or to directly transliterate rather than translate significant elements in the *sūtras*, including invocations retaining their Sanskrit or Hybrid Sanskrit pronunciation. Indeed, as Victor Mair has noted, the Buddhist texts were engaged not only with issues of translation but also with vernacular Chinese, and it is evident that even in the earliest period of translation, vernacular Chinese was included in varying degrees in the Buddhist works in China—and that, moreover, the voluminous Buddhist works of medieval China (circa first to seventh centuries CE) incorporated vernacular language to a far greater extent than did “secular literature” (Victor Mair, “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 3 [1994]: 709–10).

At the very least, as Mair and many others in Buddhist studies have emphasized, the Buddhist concept of expedient devices (Skt., *upāya*), most clearly represented in the Lotus Sutra (chapter 2), would help enable us to understand that Buddhists would make the effort to present the Buddha Dharma in ways accessible to local audiences. That is, the Buddha is thought to have consciously used language accessible to those around him, skill in means being implied in the Pali scriptural corpus in parables like that about the raft constructed to cross to the “other shore”—where the importance of nonattachment to the teachings is emphasized (Buswell and Lopez, *Princeton Dictionary of*

Buddhism, 942b). Although, as noted, this concept is more famous in the Mahāyāna, it was also present in the Pali. By implication, the Buddha consciously chose to teach in a language different from that of the elite Brahmans (Richard P. Hayes, “Buddhist Philosophy of Language,” in *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. [Macmillan Reference USA, 2004], 451b), a practice that would match the general strategy of translation of Buddhist works later.

It is well known that the Buddha, according to Pali texts, taught the truth of *nirvāṇa* as beyond all linguistic distinctions—in fact, transcending finitude, the world of duality. It does not seem, however, that he was suggesting a “revealed” truth but that he was instead using language at what is sometimes called the level of relative truth to point toward absolute truth that is nondual in character. Thus discourses of the Buddha in Pali literature about *nirvāṇa*, which are few, most commonly use negative rather than positive terms—for example, the absence of or cessation of *dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction), which is undoubtedly related to what David Kalupahana called the Buddha’s “anti-essentialist” position focused on language as an activity rather than a signifier. Kalupahana noted, moreover, that the Buddha had made clear distinctions reflecting that position concerning languages in countries outside his own (David J. Kalupahana, *The Buddha’s Philosophy of Language* [Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 1999], 49, 51).

We can see, for this very reason, that there seems to be a common discursive and, presumably, practical thread in the Pali scriptures and those of the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, including the esoteric traditions: teachers communicate to their disciples that, when ultimately understood, the world of karmic relativity that is referred to in Pali textual traditions as dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) can be seen as essentially empty (Skt., *śūnya*) in character, lacking an ongoing individual identity (essence) distinct from the surrounding world or rebirth. Although there is a series of scholastic debates about these concepts, it is clear that the discourse that came to be called the Two Truths offers an implicit answer to thorny questions concerning the connection between enlightened understanding and life in the finite world. The most succinct presentation of the notion that language/thought (relative) and enlightenment (absolute) are, despite a seemingly infinite gap, ultimately nondual is that of Nāgārjuna (second century), who wrote: “Whatever is dependently co-arisen / That is explained to be emptiness. / That, being a dependent designation, / Is itself the middle way” (Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* [Oxford University Press, 2002], 174, translation of *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 18).

Although the historical Buddha might be described as anti-essentialist in his general view of language, with the appearance of Mahāyāna Buddhist *sūtras*, which included invocative spells (Skt., *mantras*) and typically longer mnemonic formulas/incantations (Skt., *dhāraṇī*), a mode of ritual language became increasingly prominent in the Buddhist world. The Buddha is described in a Pali *sutta* to have forbade the use of *mantras*, which were associated with Brahmanical practice and views on language, but it is thought that his focus was not on their use per se but on efforts to use them to gain financial

profits; in other words, he presumably did not object to their use if it were for appropriate purposes (Hayes, “Buddhist Philosophy,” 452a). The very verbalizing of Abhidhamma (Skt., Abhidharma) commentaries was seen as having a kind of talismanic power in Buddhist traditions (Rupert Gettin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* [Oxford University Press, 1998], 204). The Mahāyāna formulas, for their part, were used in connection with the notion that *sūtras* had not only referential capacity but also, when properly enunciated, talismanic, medicinal, or other powers, and the notion was thus presumably related as well to the “cult of the book.” The Chan (Kor., Son; Jpn., Zen) lineages would attempt to harken back to what might be called the anti-essentialist position of the historical Buddha, but it is important to recognize that even a figure like the Sōtō lineage proponent Dōgen (1200–1253) held *sūtras*—especially the Lotus Sutra and the Heart Sutra—in very high regard and would not have questioned the use of *mantras* or *dhāraṇī* in the works nor, presumably, their liturgical use.

Thus, as has been recently noted, it would be incorrect to associate the use of *dhāraṇī*, for example, primarily with tantric, that is, esoteric Buddhist traditions such as in Tibet or the Shingon (Chn., Zhenyan) school of Japan. These devices indeed seem to have been pan-Buddhist historically, since even the non-Mahāyāna Dharmaguptaka lineage in early India featured *dhāraṇī* (Buswell and Lopez, *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 242a). And as we saw above, study of Pali works suggests that the historical Buddha accepted *mantra* use, if used for positive purposes. Moreover, although *mantras* are technically distinct from mnemonic incantations, the terms were often used interchangeably, and so we see an evolving tradition of incantation, dating from the period of earlier Indian schools of Buddhism to the rising prominence of Mahāyāna *sūtras* to the varied lineages of East Asia and Tibet.

Thus, the Buddha and Buddhist traditions seem to have promoted the use of translation and presentation of the faith in local language. They were always vigilant, bearing in mind the limitations inherent in language use, but meanwhile understood that language was necessary for communication of the Dharma. The Buddha lived in the late Vedic era (1000–500 BCE) in the Indian subcontinent and seems to have seen, in perhaps very practical terms, medicinal and other benefits of the use of talismanic and mnemonic incantation. Hence we see a series of traditions that, while they often emphasized the inability of discursive language to express that which is ineffable, recognized the need for its continued use as skillful means in teaching, whether in the case of Chan, Lotus Sutra–focused, Pure Land, or esoteric Buddhist traditions. They also respected the power of nondiscursive invocative language, with its liturgical and sometimes thaumaturgical power. It is precisely, I would suggest, for this series of reasons that we see that even the Chan (especially Zen) and esoteric Buddhist traditions (Tibet, Japan), which are known for their emphasis on direct transmission of enlightened realization—beyond language—from teacher to disciple, produced extremely large quantities of narrative and ritual texts. They understood, from their perspective, that using language in multiple modes is necessary along the Buddhist path. □

Why Gautama Buddha Hesitated to Preach: Challenging the Constraints of Language in Buddhism

by Hiroyuki Sato

Buddhism's establishment is . . . inextricably tied up with words in a relationship based not on the belief that everything can be conveyed through words but on the determination to push words to their limit precisely because Buddhism recognizes that words cannot convey everything.

As a religion, Buddhism places a strong emphasis on practice, as is evident from the life of its founder, Gautama Buddha, who attained enlightenment after renouncing the world to practice asceticism. Since then, wherever Buddhism has taken root, it has been historically closely associated with practice. This fact is clearly illustrated by the role ascetic disciplines and other monastic and lay practices—such as *zazen* and other forms of meditation, *nembutsu* (recitation of the name of Amida Buddha), and copying of the sutras—have typically played in the spread of contemporary Buddhism. At the same time, however, there exists a tremendous body of Buddhist writings called the *issaikyō* (Buddhist canon) or *daizōkyō* (great collection of Buddhist scriptures), leading to Buddhism's being likened to a “flood of words.” Some people set little store by words in comparison with practice in Buddhism, arguing that Buddhism cannot be understood solely from the written word; rather, it is understood through direct experience. That is, words are devalued and viewed merely as a means. In this essay, I will explore the question of words and language in Buddhism, taking as a cue the “hesitation” to preach—to expound

the Dharma—exhibited by Gautama after he had attained enlightenment in Bodhi Gaya.

The devaluation of words in Buddhism and the view that they are merely a means can be observed in the well-known Parable of the Raft. In this parable, a man comes to a river where there is no boat or bridge, so he builds a raft to cross. Once across, however,

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he should discard the raft rather than carry it with him, simply because it has no further use. The purpose of the raft was to get him somewhere and not to be a burden to carry. Like the raft, the teachings of Buddhism must also be discarded. The same lesson is given with the metaphor of a finger pointing at the moon, which reminds us that it is at the moon, and not the finger, that we should be looking.

Buddhism's view of words is readily apparent from these two metaphors, in which the raft and the finger are easily recognizable as representing words and language. Gautama attained enlightenment and expounded his teachings using words, but his teachings are, like the raft, something to throw away and, like the finger pointing at the moon, not something to be looked at. This rejection of teachings may very well be unique to Buddhism, found in no other religion, and it is undoubtedly one of Buddhism's major attractions.

The reason that teaching through words has come to be seen as a means that Buddhism discards is that Buddhism's objective, or end, is to achieve enlightenment. In other words, there is an element of Buddhism that places an extraordinary emphasis on experience, and this tendency is particularly pronounced in Zen and esoteric Buddhism. Further, the idea that teaching using words is a means to be abandoned is—viewed through the lens of the relationship between ends and means—an indication of the strong tendency to stress Buddhism's final objective. The end is important in itself, and the means of achieving it are just that—simply means. Buddhism may thus be regarded as a religion that emphasizes ends. In the course of its history, Buddhism has in fact evolved in various ways in each of the regions that it has reached, but these are all considered forms of Buddhism because common to all of them is an emphasis on the end, which is enlightenment. Buddhism may truly be described as consisting not only of teachings of the Buddha but also of teachings on how to become a buddha (the term *buddha* meaning “enlightened one”).

While there thus exists the Buddhist view that words are means, words have nevertheless played a crucial role in bringing Buddhism into being. Buddhism consists in essence of what are called the Three Treasures—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Not only are these three important in themselves as “treasures,” but each is also a prerequisite for Buddhism to exist. Without any one of the three, Buddhism would not have come into being. The Buddha element of the three was realized through Gautama's attainment of enlightenment under a bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. However, the other elements—the Dharma and the Sangha—arose only through the preaching of Gautama in Sarnath. In other words, Buddhism did not come into existence solely as a result of Gautama's attainment of enlightenment. It was brought into existence by preaching. For Buddhism, in a sense, Gautama's preaching is of even greater importance than his enlightenment. However, the stories of the Buddha's life tell us that he was hesitant to preach, because enlightenment to truth is not commonplace but subtle, profound, and hard to grasp. The foolish who are consumed by desire cannot understand this truth. Certainly the nature of Gautama's enlightenment is hard for us to grasp. However, his hesitancy to preach stemmed not only from this difficulty but also from another reason related to words.

Preaching consists of conveying to others what one has experienced, and this can be done in many ways. Experiences can also be communicated through song, dance, and painting, but Gautama chose words as his medium for conveying the experience of enlightenment. However, those with whom Gautama had to communicate had yet to have such an experience. Just how great a challenge this was becomes apparent when we consider the difficulty of communicating even quite ordinary experiences to those who have not had them.

Consider, for example, the impossibility of conveying in words the pain of losing a close relative to someone who has not had a similar experience. Similarly, it is impossible to explain in words what the color red is like to someone who is color-blind. It is through experiencing the death of a close relative or seeing the color red that one understands. Gautama's preaching was thus just like trying to communicate what it is like to lose someone close or see the color red to someone who has not had those experiences.

This is why Gautama was hesitant to preach. Rather than believing that what he had to say was too difficult to understand, he recognized that the constraints of language meant that he could not convey what he wanted even if he tried. The constraints of language arise not, moreover, from an inability to choose the right words but from the intrinsic limitations of the words themselves, since it is impossible to relate everything through words. Gautama understood this and so was hesitant to

preach. Recognizing this limitation, he was nevertheless undaunted and boldly decided to begin preaching, and his greatness lies in his determination to challenge the constraints of language. Gautama was not simply someone who attained enlightenment, nor someone who guided people to liberation from suffering. He was someone who sought to communicate through words. Had he not communicated through words and challenged the constraints of language, he would have been just an ordinary man called Gautama who happened to exist in the past, and Buddhism certainly would not have come into being.

Buddhism's establishment is thus inextricably tied up with words in a relationship based not on the belief that everything can be conveyed through words but on the determination to push words to their limit precisely because Buddhism recognizes that words cannot convey everything.

The idea that we must transcend words and that there is a world beyond language is an extremely enticing one and excites a yearning for an unknown world. However, I think we should be wary of assuming that there is a natural divide between a world expressible in words and a world beyond words, and of overemphasizing experience as a result of attaching too much value to the world beyond words. The world beyond words—or in Buddhist terms, the experience of enlightenment—is not something that can be so easily experienced, and it is for this very reason that Gautama chose to preach using words. Only Gautama had experienced what he had attained. In order to draw others to that state, he needed words. While words are not substantive, they are by no means unnecessary. This is indicated by the fact that even Zen, while it emphasizes practice and advocates *shikantaza* (“just sitting” or “single-minded sitting”)—suggesting that the essence of Buddhism is to be found in the maxims *furyū monji* (no reliance on

words and letters) and *kyōge betsuden* (independent transmission outside the written scriptures)—has also generated a huge body of classical Zen literature.

When considering Buddhism, therefore, we should perhaps pay a little more attention to words and language. We must be wary of interpreting Buddhism solely in terms of the world beyond

words, while yet recognizing its emphasis on experience. Naturally this does not mean that we should regard words as absolutes through which Buddhism can be understood. At the same time, however, we should not reject words but must accept that the essence of Buddhism cannot be grasped without a basis in language. □

Jewish and Buddhist Responses to Violence

by Harold Kasimow

In spite of the radical differences between the Buddhist and Jewish religious traditions, their responses to violence are surprisingly similar. The profound reverence for life that Nikkyo Niwano stresses in his book *A Buddhist Approach to Peace* is as central to Judaism as it is to Buddhism.

In spite of the radical difference between Judaism, with its stress on a commanding God, and Buddhism, which is not interested in a creator God, the two religious traditions have very similar responses to violence. This affinity may seem surprising, since the sacred texts of the monotheistic religions, including Judaism, contain more violence than do the sacred texts of Buddhism.

I will begin with a tale that illustrates a Jewish view of violence and helps us to understand the sanctity of the human being in the Jewish tradition:

During the First World War, the Czar's army needed troops to fight the army of the Kaiser. In order to help meet the draft quotas of the Russian army, Jewish students at many *yeshivot* were forced into service, and were sent for a brief but intensive basic training. The students of one particular *yeshivah* surprisingly proved themselves to be expert sharpshooters. On the target range at the training camp, they surpassed all other recruits with their marksmanship. Because of their skill, they were sent to the front-line trenches. They crouched with their rifles in the trenches gazing into the mist

that hovered over the field of battle. Without warning, the German troops began to charge, advancing toward their trenches. Seeing this, their Russian captain ordered them to fire. But the *yeshivah* students remained crouched in the trenches, their rifles cocked, but without pulling the triggers. Again, the Russian

captain ordered them to fire, and once more they did not fire. The Russian captain began to scream at the students, commanding them to fire their rifles, cursing them with every anti-Semitic epithet he knew, and listing the punitive actions that would be taken against them for refusing to follow orders. Finally, one of the students turned to the captain and said, "We'd be happy to fire, captain. But there are people in the way. As soon as the men running toward us get out of the way, we shall fire." (Byron L. Sherwin, *In Partnership with God: Contemporary Jewish Law and Ethics* [Syracuse University Press, 1990], 180)

Jewish views on violence are evident in the Talmud, especially in a discussion between two outstanding Jewish scholars on what constitutes the *klal gadol ba-Torah*, the great principle of the Torah. According to Rabbi Akiva, one of the shapers of Rabbinic Judaism, the great principle of Torah is found in Leviticus 19:18, which states: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Ben Azzai, a scholar known for his saintliness, wishing to stress the unity of all humanity, claimed that the great principle of Torah is found in Genesis 5:1: "This is the book of the generations of man. In the day that God created man, in the image of God created He him. Male and female created He them" (Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4).

The discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai took place soon after the

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destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Since that time the fundamental Jewish statement, the central teaching of Judaism, is that God created human beings in God's image (*bzelem elohim*). Every human being is of infinite value, is precious in God's eyes. To murder another human being is against the sixth commandment: *lo tirtzakh*, which means "you shall not murder," rather than the translation we sometimes find, "you shall not kill." According to Rabbinic Judaism, the classical source for the Jewish tradition, to murder another human being is to destroy the entire world. The rabbis raised the question "Why did God choose to create only one

human being at the time of creation?" They answered, "For this reason was man created alone: to teach that whoever destroys a single soul, scripture imputes to him as though he had destroyed an entire world. And whoever preserves a single soul, scripture ascribes to him as though he had preserved a complete world" (Sanhedrin 37a). For the rabbis, who stress that human beings are created in God's image and are holy, human life is precious and irreplaceable. For Rabbi Akiva, God is a god of pathos and is affected by what human beings do to each other. To use violence against human beings is to use violence against God. The rabbis stated: "Whoever sheds

blood, diminishes God's presence in the world" (Mekhilta d' Rabbi Yishmael, quoted in Sherwin, 174).

Such is the preciousness of human life that a person is even permitted to sin in order to save life. For example, a Jew would be permitted to eat pork in order not to starve. However, one may not commit murder even to save one's own life. The Talmud records the story of the man who came before the great Rabbi Raba, who lived in the fourth century, and said to him, "The governor of my town has ordered me 'Go and kill so-and-so, and if not, I will kill you.'" The rabbi replied, "Let him kill you rather than that you should commit murder. What reason do you have for thinking that your blood is redder? Perhaps his blood is redder" (Sanhedrin 73a).

This is the vision of Judaism to which I was introduced when I began my studies at Yeshiva Israel Salanter on Webster Avenue in the Bronx when I was a young boy. Israel Salanter (1810–83), one of the most influential Orthodox Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century, founded the Musar movement in Lithuania. It is an ethical movement in Judaism that is known for its stress on self-perfection. In my view the Musar movement has some strong affinities to the Buddhist tradition in its stress that the primary goal of human beings is to strive for spiritual perfection. (The Musar movement, like Buddhism, advocated meditation on death as a way to obliterate the ego. Israel Salanter believed that it is extremely difficult for human beings to change even a single character trait.

Yet he never gave up hope in the possibility of a radical transformation of the individual: “Yet let no one say: What God has made cannot be changed. He, may He be blessed, has infused an evil drive in me; how can I ever hope to eradicate it? It is not so. Man’s drives can be subdued and even changed. . . . It is within his power to conquer his evil nature and prevent its functioning, and also to change his nature to good by study and training” [quoted in Dov Katz, *The Musar Movement*, trans. Leonard Oschry (Orly Press, 1977), vol. 1, part 2, 65]. For the most accessible book on Musar, see Alan Morinis, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: One Man’s Rediscovery of a Jewish Spiritual Tradition* [Broadway Books, 2002]). The movement’s aim is to make a human being truly human, a mensch. For a mensch it is inconceivable to use violence. Teachers of the Musar movement encouraged their students to meditate on the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, one of the most difficult books of the Bible. Many of us are familiar with the constant refrain in Ecclesiastes that begins with, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ said the preacher. ‘Vanity of vanities. All is vanity’” (1:2). One of the reasons everything is vanity is that everything in life is impermanent. Musar places a great stress on impermanence and, like Buddhism, encourages people to go and meditate in the graveyard.

Yet Judaism, which teaches that “the whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace” (Talmud, Gittin

59b), does not teach absolute pacifism. We also find in Ecclesiastes the following statement: “A season is set for everything: a time for every experience under heaven. A time for being born and a time for dying. A time for silence and a time for speaking. A time for war and a time for peace” (3:1–8). The rabbis who shaped the Jewish tradition looked and prayed for the coming of the Messiah, who would bring complete peace: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

But until the Messiah comes, a human being is not permitted to murder anyone; he or she does have the right to self-defense. A well-known rabbinic statement on this issue says: “If a man comes to slay you, forestall by slaying him” (Sanhedrin 72a). You certainly may not kill the person who comes to kill you if you can somehow stop the person without killing him or her. But if that isn’t possible, as a last resort you may kill the person to protect your life. So violence may become

a tragic necessity. But when it does, it is always seen as a time of grief, not joy. The rabbis believed that not opposing evil and violence may in fact contribute to injustice and violence. So they were actually opposed to absolute pacifism.

The Buddhist tradition, with its stress on compassion, mercy, and peace, condemns all violence. Yet in practice, if not always in theory, the Buddhist response to violence has a strong affinity to the Jewish response. Although there are Buddhists, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, who teach total nonviolence, most of the Buddhists whom I have encountered seem to be open to the possibility that there are circumstances in which violence is permitted. In an article titled “War or Peace?” José Cabezón points out that “in some Mahayana texts, there are rare justifications for violence to protect the lives of others, but the person acting must be motivated by pure compassion and be very advanced on the path, so that in a sense we are no longer dealing with an ordinary act of violence” (*Tricycle* [Spring 2002]: 53). Professor Robert Thurman, an expert in

Tibetan Buddhism, in a conversation on war and peace, explains that the Buddhist perspective on nonviolence is complicated. He tells us how the Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva, had to kill a person to save five hundred people. Thurman claims that “if you stand by while one guy kills hundreds, and you can stop him, and you are not hating the person who is doing it, but on the other hand, you feel those 500 lives are valuable, and if you don’t take that kind of action, sitting there all lily white—from the Buddhist perspective you’re actually an accomplice. Of course, you should try to stop the guy without killing him. But, say, the only way you could stop him was killing him—then you are supposed to” (quoted in William Meyers, “War and Peace and New York City: A Conversation with Robert Thurman,” *New York Spirit* [April and May 2002]).

In his book *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Paul Williams cites scriptural support for Thurman’s and Cabezón’s positions. “In the Mahaparinirvana Sutra the Buddha describes how in a previous life he killed several Brahmins to prevent them from slandering Buddhism, and to save them from the punishment they might otherwise have incurred through continuing their slander” ([Routledge, 1989], 161). Williams also points out that “according to the Mahaparinirvana Sutra lay followers should take up arms to defend the monastic community” (159). His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the recipient of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, when asked, “Would you have also refused to take up arms against Hitler?” responded, “I don’t know.” He speculated that if he

were in Auschwitz and had a weapon, he might have killed a few SS men in order to save a large group of people (Dalai Lama, *Beyond Dogma: Dialogues and Discourses*, trans. Alison Anderson, ed. Marianne Dresser [North Atlantic Books, 1996], 111–12). In a recent conversation with Robert Thurman, the Dalai Lama stated, “Under particular circumstances, the violent method—any method—can be justified” (quoted in Thurman, “The Dalai Lama on China, Hatred, and Optimism,” *Mother Jones* [November/December, 1997]: 31).

In practice Buddhists and Jews may defend themselves or others to save life. However, as José Cabezón makes clear, in Buddhism it can be done only from a heart of compassion. The Jewish sources do not place as much stress on motivation, but to take a life is always a time of sadness and should not be done with hate in one’s heart.

My teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel supported the traditional Jewish response to violence. In his essay “The Meaning of This War,” written during World War II, Heschel teaches the right to self-defense, and he does not oppose the war against Nazism. However, Heschel, who viewed war as “a supreme atrocity” (“The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel [Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996], 225), states that “tanks and planes cannot redeem humanity” (“The Meaning of This War,” in *Moral Grandeur*, 211). He asks us to meditate on the words of the Baal

Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism: “If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him” (ibid., 209). Heschel felt that humanity had fallen into a pit: “The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God” (ibid.). Yet Heschel never gave up hope in the prophetic dream, “a dream of a world, rid of evil by the *efforts of man*, by his will to serve what goes beyond his own interests” (“Meaning of This War,” 212; my emphasis). This prophetic dream is fully supported by the lifework of Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of the Buddhist lay organization Rishsho Kosei-kai.

Let me make it clear that I am not arguing that Judaism and Buddhism are identical. However, with regard to the use of violence, the Jewish and Buddhist traditions are remarkably similar. □

The Brighter Society Movement and the Spirit of the “Universal Gate of Truth”

by Nikkyo Niwano

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

It was in 1969 that I made a proposal to set up the Brighter Society Movement. At a time when members of Japan's religious community were calling on religious leaders around the world to work for peace, I thought it would be shameful if my own country were spiritually impoverished.

While Japanese society had become materially rich during a period of high economic growth, people had become increasingly self-centered as a result of their single-minded pursuit of material wealth. To counter this social climate of spiritual desolation, in which social problems could be engendered by prosperity, I called on people to seek out a richness of spirit that matched material wealth and think deeply about what we could do to make our society rich in humanity. To set about achieving this goal, I advocated the Brighter Society Movement. I hoped that the leaders of other religious groups as well as local organizations would add their efforts to those of Rissho Kosei-kai, transcending particular ideologies and isms in order to combine our strength to make Japan a truly bright society.

I was convinced that there were in the wider society large numbers of people, both with a faith and without, who were seriously involved in solving society's problems, and I wanted to bring them together. Japan's one and only path in the world from now on, one that alone would allow it to contribute to the world at large, was to build a country with moral qualities that would win the trust of people around the world.

Even today, those ideas have not changed. Any person at all had to be able to have the chance to participate in creating the brighter society that would lead to building such a country. It was important that the movement's activities should begin close to home, brightening the immediate community, before expanding from there to the wider society. Japan's ability to sustain itself into the future would depend not on vain discussions of national politics or appeals for world peace, but on people realizing the importance of accumulating small individual actions, one by one over time.

This was not something that could be accomplished in a night and a day. We needed people from the grass roots of society who had the patience and

endurance to accomplish the groundwork, who would never give up. This was the task we asked of Rissho Kosei-kai members. Creating a Land of Eternally Tranquil Light within society as a whole would no longer be just a dream if only we could show people that true human nature consists of serving others and increasing the numbers of those able to do so. This represents keeping the Rissho Kosei-kai Members' Vow: “We pledge ourselves to follow the bodhisattva way to bring peace [the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light] to our families, communities, and countries and to the world.”

The first chairman of the Brighter Society Movement was Yoshinori Maeda, a former president of NHK, Japan's national public broadcaster, who was in agreement with my ideas. (The second chairman was Masaru Ibuka, the president of Sony; the third was a former prime minister, Takeo Fukuda; and the fourth chairman is the writer Shintaro Ishihara.)

The members of Rissho Kosei-kai supported my proposal and enthusiastically began appealing to regional leaders throughout the country.

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

but rather have become progressively vocal in their demands for more and more. As a result, however much time passes, they will never feel peace of mind. When we think only about material objects, our desires keep on growing until they escalate into conflict. True happiness is not found in things but in our spiritual and mental state. Buddhism teaches that all living beings are endowed with the buddha-nature. The road to true happiness lies in cultivating that buddha-nature, as does the path to brighten society.

I appealed fervently to people in this way wherever I went.

Building Fumon Hall

Chapter 21 of the Lotus Sutra, “The Divine Power of the Tathagata,” says: “So this man, working in the world, can disperse the gloom of the living.” “This man” refers to those who endeavor to liberate both themselves and others from suffering. As a result of the approaches by Rissho Kosei-kai members, people who sympathized with the idea of a Brighter Society Movement emerged in rapid succession all over Japan. Conferences of community leaders promoting the movement were held up and down the country.

I was invited to speak at a regional conference in the city of Takamatsu, in Kagawa Prefecture, in Shikoku, on April 27, 1969. I gave an address that lasted about an hour on the theme

“The Material and Spiritual Realms.” After that, conferences promoting the Brighter Society Movement opened at various places around Japan. I was invited to speak at many of them and talked about my anxiety concerning the times in which we were living. I said:

Shakyamuni saw ahead to the chaos of the present time, when he told us that, as knowledge grows, people become more and more egotistic and society more and more inhumane. The greatest cause of this is insatiable desire. Japan has the second-largest GNP among the countries of the free world. However, there are increasing numbers of people who are not grateful for this prosperity

The Brighter Society Movement as an organization was launched through a series of Brighter Society promotion conferences and Brighter Society conferences. They took shape in prefectures and cities on the initiative mainly of Rissho Kosei-kai members. That does not mean to say, however, that it was necessarily easy to gain the agreement of people in a community to the principles of the movement. There were those who warned that the movement was just a means of proselytization, so that Rissho Kosei-kai could increase its membership. However, when people saw how firm ordinary members at the grass roots of society were in their commitment to the religious practice of humbling themselves as they quietly

served their local communities, many came to understand the true intention of the Brighter Society Movement.

The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters tells us that “those who rejoice in seeing others follow the Way and aid them in it will obtain great karmic reward.” I wanted each and every member to experience inner joy and a sense of accomplishment by creating something good that would be of wide use among all members of society. The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters goes on to say that this karmic reward “is like a lighted torch whose flame is shared among all the torches carried by myriad people, who cook food and dispel darkness therewith, yet the original torch remains burning just the same.”

Hundreds, even thousands, of people come to a place where a fire burns. They light their torches from it to carry fire home. Even though they use the fire to cook food and light their houses, the original flame does not diminish but keeps burning brightly. Karmic reward (merit) is just like this.

As this metaphor suggests, each individual can make his or her community a comfortable place to dwell by taking some kind of action, however small, and then getting others to join in, one by one. Their combined strength will then be great enough to move politicians and local leaders.

About 10 percent of the people in a community are strongly committed to doing good, and another 10 percent to doing bad. The remaining 80 percent could go in either direction. Since the masses are drawn in the direction of those who have the greatest sway at any one time and are influenced by them, the character of the people in positions of leadership can alter society in a large way.

Ryotaro Shiba (1923–96), a popular Japanese essayist and author of historical novels, stated toward the end of his life that Japan’s future was at risk because it had lost its moral direction. My proposal

to set up the Brighter Society Movement stemmed from a similar concern.

I celebrated my sixtieth birthday on November 15, 1966. One’s sixtieth birthday is considered an auspicious occasion in Japan. On the day I received congratulations from the members of Risho Kosei-kai, I set out two objectives for activities for the following year—the development of the Faith to All People Movement and the building of Fumon Hall.

The Faith to All People Movement

was not directed just at those who already had an interest in beliefs and religions but was, rather, a call for people of all classes to learn how to live a truly human life, in peace and happiness with others. This was none other than the spirit of Fumon, the Universal Gate of Truth. By opening widely the gate of faith that had till now often been closed, the movement would lead people to a way of living based on the Truth. This had in fact been my ultimate aim from the time of Risho Kosei-kai’s founding.

To make the Faith to All People Movement a reality, as well as to foster interreligious cooperation, we had to be able to receive people from around the world. I proposed constructing Fumon Hall to meet this need. There are those who say that religion is not in its buildings but that it dwells within the human heart. Of course this is true, but I became aware of the importance of a building after the Great Sacred Hall was built. This is because the public's attitude to Rissho Kosei-kai changed greatly after the hall was completed.

However much members fervently seek the path of Truth and seriously practice their religion, outsiders see nothing of this. It is only when members' practice is made public in concrete form that the public becomes aware of members' efforts and can begin to sympathize with them. With the completion of the Great Sacred Hall, religious circles, as well as the public at large, gained a broad appreciation of Rissho Kosei-kai as a religious organization and saw its true value.

In this sense, in order to go one step further and open a gate to the world, developing our dissemination activities in order to open the Universal Gate of Truth to all people, a new building was necessary to express that spirit and provide facilities for those people.

An Opportunity for Japanese Religious Leaders

In April 1969 I was elected chairman of the board of directors of the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations (JAORO).

JAORO was made up of five member organizations: the Association of Shinto Shrines, the Federation of Sectarian Shinto, the Japan Buddhist Federation, the Japan Confederation of Christian Churches, and Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan). A representative of each of

these organizations sat on the board and took an annual turn as chairman. I had become chairman of Shinshuren in 1965, succeeding Rev. Tokuchika Miki, head of the Church of Perfect Liberty, and it was now my turn to act as chairman of JAORO.

That was also a dispensation of the gods and the buddhas.

At the Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace, held in Kyoto in 1968, it was agreed that preparations should be made to hold a conference where representatives of the world's religions could meet together for the sake of world peace and that regional committees should be set up in Asia, the Americas, and Europe. This was a golden opportunity to first strengthen the bonds between people of religion in Japan.

A committee was set up within JAORO to prepare for a conference of religionists for peace, to which the board of directors and the council gave their full cooperation.

Soon after I founded Rissho Kosei-kai, Myoko Sensei [Myoko Naganuma, cofounder of Rissho Kosei-kai, who died in 1957] said she had received a divine revelation that "around 1942 or 1943, people will all eat the same things, and soon fire will fall like rain from the heavens."

I could not understand at the time what this meant, but from around 1943 there was rationing of all foodstuffs. Then air raids grew more and more severe and incendiary bombs fell down on us like rain. Everywhere people were suffering from injuries, and many burned to death. Large numbers of people also lost their homes and possessions.

When conscripts came to the headquarters after receiving their draft notices, we sent them off only with prayers for victory, petitioning that they would be safe. In the air raids of 1945, more than half a million people died as a result of attacks by B-29 bombers

on Tokyo and other large cities around the country. The day after the deadly raid on Tokyo of March 10, large parts of the city had been reduced to ashes and countless pitiful dead bodies lay all around.

On the battlefields in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, tens of thousands of soldiers died from the twin afflictions of illness and starvation, while many young lives were lost by drowning during naval battles. People who barely escaped with their lives during the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still continue to suffer from radiation sickness.

With such tragic experiences still fresh in their minds, the Japanese yearned for peace from the bottom of their hearts. Religious leaders now bitterly reproached themselves for not having had the courage of their antiwar convictions to challenge the government but instead cooperating with the war effort by sending their followers off to fight.

After the Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace in Kyoto, Japanese religious circles became strongly convinced that the time was ripe for Japan to cooperate actively in a conference of world religious leaders, because they realized that they themselves had a role to play in work for peace and should do everything in their power to bring it about.

The Istanbul Conference

An interim advisory committee met in Istanbul [formerly Constantinople] in February 1969 to discuss when, where, and on what scale the World Conference on Religion and Peace [now the World Conference of Religions for Peace] should begin.

I was among the Japanese representatives at the meeting. The committee discussed, among other things, concrete issues such as the budget and how to run the preparatory committee.

More than sixteen hundred years have passed since the emperor Constantine established Constantinople as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. I saw that its Western-style buildings and the domes of the mosques were in surprising harmony with one another, and that Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews lived side by side.

When our group arrived at the Hilton Hotel, where the meeting was to take place, we were greeted by the outstretched arms of Dr. Dana McLean Greeley and Dr. Homer Jack. "Istanbul is exactly half way between Japan and America," Dr. Greeley said happily to me. "We are meeting again at the place where Asia and Europe come together."

Twenty-four religionists from seven countries took part in the meeting, including committee members, staff members, and observers.

During the three-day meeting, we discussed the topics on the agenda from early morning until ten at night. The schedule had been organized by Dr. Jack, the secretary-general of the consultative committee, and he ran the sessions in the American style, swiftly, precisely, and energetically.

The most important outstanding question to be decided was where to hold the world conference.

The suggested sites, besides Kyoto, which Japan proposed, were Geneva, Vienna, New Delhi, Bangkok, and London. Finally opinions narrowed down to Japan, from a number of points of view.

At a time when the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union had become the main threat to world peace, it was clear that if the conference were held in the United States, religious people from the Soviet Union would not be able to come. If the conference could not include representatives from both of those countries, it would be meaningless. Then too, Christian absolutism still had strong roots in the countries of Europe, and considerable

difficulties were foreseen in holding a conference where representatives from many different religions would take part. In the case of India and Thailand, it was felt that the local religious community of either country was not ready to cope with more than two hundred delegates from around the world.

Japan, by comparison, had friendly relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union, and its people were strongly opposed to nuclear weapons. Also, Japan's peace constitution renounced war. Another point in Japan's favor was its tolerant cultural environment, where all religions are viewed as one, which would enable Japan to welcome representatives from many different religions.

Kyoto, the old capital of Japan, known around the world as a Buddhist city, seemed to be a fitting place where religious leaders from all over the world could gather for a conference for world peace. I vowed to myself that Japan would take responsibility for the conference.

Gradually more of the other representatives grew more vocal in favoring

Japan as the site. On the second day, following careful scrutiny, Kyoto was unanimously elected.

The moderator of the conference declared, "In the autumn of 1970, the world conference will be held at Kyoto in Japan. I would ask that Japanese representatives act to convene the world conference." On behalf of the Japanese representatives, I replied, "We are very happy to accept. The success or otherwise of the conference will depend on the enthusiasm of the participants. We will put every effort into ensuring that success."

Dr. Greeley stood up. "As well as enthusiasm, we need wisdom and funding," he said.

I told myself that if we were to consider world peace seriously, besides passion and wisdom we would need funding more than anything, and exceptional perseverance too.

The conference's budget was around \$250,000. If Japan as the host country could contribute \$100,000 and the United States the same amount, it should have been possible for representatives from

the other countries to raise the remainder. "But the question remains whether Japan can actually provide the sum of \$100,000," I thought. At the time, the exchange rate was 360 Japanese yen to the US dollar.

Before we left Japan for the Istanbul conference, we had obtained an informal consent to hold the conference in Japan from the board of directors of JAORO, which was acting as Japan's representative in the planning. But could they undertake to raise the money required? Rev. Toshio Miyake, one of Japan's representatives, was deeply worried about it, but I was determined that we should be prepared. "Let's send our acceptance. I am sure everyone will support us."

Another major outcome of the Istanbul conference was our meeting with Athenagoras I, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, at the Church of Saint George, the city's principal Greek Orthodox cathedral. In 1054 the papal

legate to Constantinople excommunicated the Greek Orthodox patriarch, and the patriarch in turn excommunicated the legate. This was the beginning of a nine-hundred-year schism between the two Christian churches. In February 1964 Pope Paul VI and Athenagoras I had a historic meeting in Jerusalem and in the following year the so-called anathemas of 1054 were nullified.

The patriarch, with a long white beard that reached far down his chest, greeted us warmly when we visited the Church of Saint George, a smile wreathing his face. For an hour, we spoke together congenially. He said to me, "As a fellow religionist, I thank you deeply for your endeavor. All of our holy scriptures speak of peace. The task of priests is to bring people closer to God and to perform the work of God together. I too am a member of the human race." In the room where we were quietly conversing, there was a photo of the patriarch

at the time of his historic meeting with Paul VI. Seeing me look at it, he said, breaking into a smile, "Paul VI is a champion of peace."

When we landed at Tokyo's Haneda airport on our return from the Istanbul meeting, snow was flying in Tokyo. Seeing the snowy landscape, my secretary remarked, "It's a snow of purification, isn't it." It seemed to me to be an intimation of the difficult trials that lay ahead.

The decision of the Istanbul meeting to hold the world conference in Kyoto in the autumn of 1970 was reported by such news agencies as the Associated Press and United Press International throughout the world, and of course the news reached Japan as well.

I at once reported the decisions of the Istanbul meeting to the board of JAORO. At the Istanbul conference, I had been elected an executive committee member for convening a world assembly. If we were to hold an international conference, gathering representatives from religious groups around the world in one place, regardless of East or West, North or South, or religious differences, we had to look at inviting 250 people. Whom should we invite and how should we issue the invitations? This was our starting point.

We had absolutely no previous experience to draw upon. I decided to myself that we had to begin by meeting with the leading religious figures in Japan and urging upon them the importance of such an international gathering. By happy fortune, I had just been appointed chairman of JAORO and used the occasion to visit the head temples of the traditional Buddhist denominations and the headquarters of various other religious organizations to ask for their cooperation in holding the world conference.

And so began my peace pilgrimage. Through it I was able to meet a large number of leaders and like-minded people who recognized the importance of peace.

To be continued

The Prism of the Lotus Sutra (6)

by Atsushi Kanazawa

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The Bimba Fruit

The bimba is an annual or biennial climber belonging to the gourd family, and it is known for its small fruit, which turns red when it ripens and can be eaten. In Indian works of literature, the full, red lips of a beautiful woman have often since ancient times been described as being “like the bimba fruit.” In this connection one is reminded of the following passage in “The Story of King Resplendent” chapter in the Lotus Sutra, a somewhat unusual chapter, similar in structure to a *jātaka*, or a story of one of Shakyamuni’s previous incarnations.

“King Resplendent thereupon descended from the sky and said to the [Buddha Thunder Voice Constellation King of Wisdom]: ‘World-honored One! Rare indeed is [the sight of] the tathāgata; by his merits and wisdom the protuberance on his head shines brilliantly; his eyes are wide [open] and deep blue; the tuft between his eyebrows is white as the pearly moon; his teeth are

white, even, close, and ever shining; his lips are red and beautiful as bimba fruit.’”

(All excerpts from the Lotus Sutra are from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* [Kosei Publishing Company, 1975], with slight revisions.)

“World-honored” and “tathāgata” are among the ten epithets of a buddha. But at some point it became customary in the world of Buddhism to enumerate the (in a certain sense outstanding) physical characteristics of the Buddha as preacher of the Dharma in the form of thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, which are also found in the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings. The list in the latter includes “lips like the bimba fruit.” Does this mean, then, that someone without these characteristics can never attain buddhahood? No, there is no need for such pessimism. We should make it our practice, wherever we are, to think of the Buddha, the source of the true Dharma; to listen to his sermons with an open mind; and to digest them properly.

The Turtle

Readers may recall that in an earlier installment of this series I took up the udumbara flower, said to bloom only once every three thousand years. The topic this time is the turtle, which appears in a figurative expression of similar import, that of a blind turtle and a floating log. The turtle is a reptile with which all people are fairly familiar, easily coming across them along a

river or in a reasonably large park or garden. The turtle possesses the special ability to retract its head and legs into its hard shell when threatened, and it also appears frequently in folktales.

In a Buddhist context, the analogy of a blind turtle in midocean putting its head through a hole in a floating log is particularly famous. One might suppose that any living being could become a Buddhist and follow the path to buddhahood. But before he became the Buddha,

The “Virtues” chapter of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings says the Buddha’s “lips and tongue appear pleasantly red, like a scarlet flower.” Here, his “pleasantly red” lips and tongue are likened not to the bimba fruit but to a scarlet flower. In this connection I would like to point out only that, in scholarly terms, this passage provides an important clue for inferring the origins of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings. □

Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, was a human being with a human body. In the Therīgāthā, an early Buddhist text, we read: “Remember the parable of a blind turtle in the eastern seas thrusting its head through the hole of a yoke drifting from the west: so rare as this is the chance of human birth.”

This tells us that we must first of all be grateful to be born human. In the Lotus Sutra, this analogy has been adapted as follows in “The Story of King

Resplendent”: “A buddha is as hard to meet as an udumbara flower, or as the one-eyed turtle meeting the hole in the floating log.” This hints at the complex history of the spread of Buddhism over a very long period of time, but it should also be noted that the “blind” turtle has become a “one-eyed” turtle.

Ever since the time of Prince Shōtoku in the early seventh century, the Japanese have set great value on the Lotus Sutra. I think it is interesting that the following love poem by Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241), who is renowned as the compiler of anthologies such as *Shin kokin waka-shū* (New

collection of poems ancient and modern), is based on this same analogy of the turtle and the floating log in the Lotus Sutra: “Am I the floating log for

the turtle out on the ocean, as in that simile? Unlikely to meet, still you have come on how many nights, wet with tears.” □

Bamboo

A thicket of lush green bamboo rustling in the breeze has a special charm all of its own. Today this has become a scene that is very rarely encountered in Japan, but in India at the time when Shakyamuni was alive it would have been more common. Consequently, bamboo and bamboo groves figure in many scenes described in Buddhist scriptures, and among the general populace, who at the time wished above all for the continuation of the family line, the word for *bamboo* was even used to signify “lineage” or “family line,” perhaps because the way in which bamboo grows straight up with regularly spaced nodes was thought to symbolize a family’s unchanging and continuous prosperity. All of this was inspired by bamboo’s vigorous rate of growth.

It is impossible to envisage a single bamboo stem growing in isolation. Since early times people have spoken of clumps or thickets of bamboo, and for better or worse, the various species of bamboo shoot up in next to no time. In a Buddhist context, the Bamboo Grove Monastery, which was offered to Shakyamuni by King Bimbisāra, is especially well-known. Nor should we forget the following passage near the start of the “Skillful Means” chapter in

the Lotus Sutra. Here bamboo, together with rice, hemp, and reeds, is used as an example of something that grows rampantly and abounds in great numbers.

“Indeed though the universe were full of beings like Śāriputra, and the rest of [my] disciples filled the world in every quarter, [who] with utmost thought combined to measure it, they also could not understand. Though pratyekabuddhas of keen intelligence, in their last faultless bodily stage, also filled every region of the universe, numerous as bamboo in the woods, [if] these with united mind through infinite koṭis of kalpas wished to ponder the Buddha’s real wisdom, [they] could not know the least part. Though newly vowed bodhisattvas who have worshipped countless buddhas,

have penetrated all meanings, and can ably preach the Law, [abounding] as rice and hemp, bamboo and reeds, filled the world in every quarter, [if] with one mind by mystic wisdom, through kalpas like the sands of the Ganges, all of these were to ponder together, they could not know the Buddha-wisdom.”

This passage explains that even if intelligent and able followers of the Buddha’s teachings such as Śāriputra, said to have been foremost in wisdom, were to spend interminable aeons exercising their wisdom all together, they would still have trouble understanding the Buddha-wisdom of Shakyamuni. We should also give thought to the role played by this statement in the Lotus Sutra as a whole. □

The Significance of Lay Buddhism in Japanese History

by Masazumi Shōjun Okano

The International Lay Buddhist Forum held its seventh world assembly April 23–29 at Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters in Tokyo. Some fifty people, including leaders of lay Buddhist organizations in Australia, Europe, North America, South Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, discussed “Varieties of Lay Buddhism.” The following is a keynote speech at the opening session by Rev. Dr. Masazumi Shōjun Okano, president of Kodo Kyodan Buddhist Fellowship, a lay Buddhist organization based in Yokohama.

My speech will give a brief history of Japanese Buddhism and discuss the significance of lay Buddhism in the history of Japanese Buddhism.

Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan from the Korean Peninsula and China around the sixth century. Over the centuries, Buddhism in Japan went through great changes. One of the prominent features of these changes was diversification.

There are two types of Buddhist organizations in Japan: traditional and lay.

Most of the traditional Buddhist denominations were founded between the sixth and seventeenth centuries. Those include Tendai, Shingon, Sōtō, Rinzai, Jōdo, Jōdoshin, and Nichiren. The Japan Buddhist Federation is an association of about sixty traditional Buddhist denominations. At least a dozen other traditional denominations are not members.

Many of the lay organizations have been founded since the beginning of the twentieth century. There are hundreds, including some with fewer than a hundred members. Some have very large memberships. Prominent among these are Soka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, Reiyukai, and Shinnyoen.

To explain how lay organizations came into being, let me first discuss the history of Japanese Buddhism, especially of the traditional denominations.

Unlike many other Buddhist countries, Japan has had no unified national sangha and no unified national ordination procedure. There are more than sixty traditional Buddhist denominations, and each has its own ordination procedure. Also, unlike in many other Buddhist countries, most of the ordained are not celibate, and only a very small proportion of them lead a monastic lifestyle. This means that almost no one in Japan follows the *vinaya* that is followed by the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of other Buddhist traditions.

Hereditary Priesthood in Traditional Denominations

Since the Meiji period (1868–1912), the priesthood in traditional denominations has become largely hereditary. A large proportion of traditional temples are small temples that are found in all corners of the country. Smaller temples are usually run by the priest and his family. In many cases, the priesthood

is handed down from father to son, or nowadays sometimes from father to daughter. The main social role of the priest is to perform rites, especially funeral and memorial rites for parishioners. Many priests think that their primary role is to maintain their temple physically, financially, and ritually. Only very few priests do spiritual training to attain nirvana.

Running the temple has become a family business, and the young successors of the temple priests may not have the right motivation to keep up the temple. As a family business, however, running a temple is not completely a bad thing. Many temples have closer relationships with the laypeople than do monasteries occupied by celibate monks and nuns. The wives of the priests especially play important roles in maintaining good relationships with parishioners.

If it were not for the hereditary system, many temples would have been forced to close down by now because of a lack of priests to run them. Factors such as secularization and institutionalization have contributed to the serious decline in the number of people wishing to become priests. Although the hereditary system does not guarantee

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the quality of the priests, it has at least secured the maintenance of the temples.

A recent development of the hereditary system in some denominations is the increasing role of priestesses. In these denominations, many daughters of temple families are succeeding to their temple's priesthood. In the past, the parishioners did not accept women as temple head priests, but this is changing.

The Problems Traditional Buddhist Temples Face

Although the conditions at traditional temples differ greatly, depending upon their geographical locations, their sources of income, and the quality of their relationships with parishioners, traditional temples in general are in decline, and the role of Buddhist priests and temples in society has been deteriorating.

Unfortunately, the future of many of these temples looks grim. This is especially so for those in rural areas. Excessive urbanization, falling birthrates, and a rapidly aging population have caused a big demographic change in Japan. Many traditional temples are in rural areas and for centuries have been supported by local residents. Rural areas, however, are suffering from depopulation, putting local temples in serious financial difficulty. Many priests need second jobs to maintain the temple and provide for their families. It is predicted that many of these temples will soon go bankrupt.

Ordination Procedure

Let me go back in history. Two centuries after the official introduction of Buddhism to Japan, the national ordination platform based on the traditional Four-Part Vinaya was established in the eighth century. It was established with the help of the renowned Chinese monk Jianzhen (Jpn., Ganjin). After that, however, it is said that many self-ordained monks were not trained within the official system.

In the ninth century, Saichō, the founder of the Japanese Tendai denomination, gained the government's permission to establish a new ordination platform based on the Mahayana bodhisattva precepts. This procedure was formed independently of the Four-Part Vinaya, so there were now two separate ordination procedures in Japan.

Many of the denominations that were established later in history adopted the bodhisattva precepts exclusively, and eventually the Four-Part Vinaya procedure was almost abandoned. In this process each denomination formed its own ordination procedure. Unlike many other Buddhist countries, Japan was never successful in establishing a unified national ordination system.

With this in the background but not as a direct result of it, today most of the ordained are no longer celibate and only a very small proportion of them lead a monastic lifestyle. Let me now discuss the history of how this came about, because it is relevant to understanding the emergence of new lay organizations in the twentieth century.

Buddhism and Political Authority

Let me first discuss how political authorities, especially since the seventeenth century, have subjected Buddhist denominations to strict political control. The feudal government skillfully incorporated Buddhist denominations into the political system during the Edo period (1603–1868). It banned Christianity and required every household in Japan to establish formal ties with a Buddhist temple to prove absolutely that none of its members was a Christian. Buddhist temples were ordered to become registrar offices of local villages. All births, deaths, marriages, and movements in and out of the village had to be reported to the local temple. The temples were thus assigned by the feudal government to oversee the local villagers. The villagers, in turn, were obliged to support their local temple financially. In this way, the temples were guaranteed financial protection—but in exchange for giving up proselytization outside their villages.

The feudal government set up this system to prevent the rise of rebellious religious movements that might try to overthrow the government, as had happened in previous eras. In this way, Buddhist priests within this system lost their skills and incentive to propagate the faith among the people. Instead, their religious role was confined to performing rituals for the local villagers, such as funerals and memorial services. In this way Buddhism during

this period became a “funerary religion.”

The Edo feudal government was overthrown by the new Meiji government in 1868. The new regime established a Western-style modern nation-state system for the first time in Japanese history, but at the same time it relied on more traditional sources of political authority. The Meiji government reinstated the emperor as the head of state for the first time in centuries and made Shinto the de facto state religion. Buddhism, on the other hand, was severely persecuted, and many temples were destroyed.

The Meiji government was intent on curbing the power of Buddhist denominations and succeeded by allowing Buddhist priests to marry and give up vegetarianism. The government encouraged priests not to follow their traditional precepts and monastic rules. The priests were not forced to violate their precepts but were just told by the secular authorities that they need not keep them. However, this was enough to change the nature of the Buddhist priesthood entirely. Eventually, many priests married and changed their way of life. In the process, they lost their spiritual power, because its legitimacy had been based on a spiritual lifestyle different from that of the laity. This loss of spiritual authority, especially in performing funeral rites, contributed partly to the emergence of major lay Buddhist organizations later, in the twentieth century.

Merit Transfer

The performance of funerals and ancestral liturgy by the traditional denominations is thought to have gained significant popularity among the public during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when it was offered by the new denominations that were successful in spreading their faith among the public. The holding of those rituals became common in all Buddhist denominations during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), regardless of their doctrines. Since then fees

for performing the rites have become many traditional temples’ main sources of income.

According to the Buddhist idea of karma, every action (karma) has consequences, either good or bad. Buddhism originally taught that all living beings are self-created and self-creating, meaning that their current state resulted from their past actions. Thus, they had to face the consequences of their actions.

But the idea of self-creation was modified when a theory developed that merit from virtuous acts could be transferred to someone else in order to lighten the person’s karmic burden. This is the idea of merit transfer. Although the Pali canons do not call it merit transfer, they contain the basic idea (Udana 8.9, the Mahavagga, and the Petavatthu). For example, the idea that when a lay devotee wishes to transfer merit to a recipient he is unable to contact directly, such as an ancestor, he should give alms to the sangha, which in turn transfers the merit of that act of charity.

These ideas were developed further in the Mahayana sutras. A sutra often referred to in Japan regarding the theory of merit transfer is the Ullambana Sutra (Jpn., Urabon-kyō).

The Ullambana Sutra indicates that an assembly of monks can transfer merit to other beings. As to the qualification

for merit transfer, Helen Hardacre points out the following:

The priest accumulates merit through observing the precepts, which require renunciation, notably of marriage. Renunciation is a source of power linked to the nonhuman worlds of existence. . . . This is the priest’s qualification for mediating between ancestor and descendant. The layman’s life is dedicated to the things of this world; he does not observe the strict precepts requiring renunciation of marriage, but he too can accumulate merit, by giving to the priests. To give with no expectation of return is *dāna*, . . . and such an act produces merit. Such a gift is understood to be a form of repentance for wrongdoing, which itself has the potential to undo the effects of karma. (*Lay Buddhism in Contemporary Japan: Reiyūkai Kyōdan*. ([Princeton University Press, 1984], p. 130)

Thus, regarding the practice of merit transfer, the clergy occupied a special position based on their observance of the precepts, and the laity had to depend upon them. However, as mentioned, in Japan the great majority of the Buddhist clergy now marry. In Japan the qualification for merit transfer is therefore no

longer based upon the clergy's renunciation of a worldly lifestyle but upon their special training in ritual.

Until some lay Buddhist movements emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the clergy in Japan monopolized the holding of funerals and other rituals for the dead. The lay movements advocated that there was no obstacle to the laity's transferring merit, since laypeople could meet the necessary qualification. Butsuryūkō, in the nineteenth century, was one of the first lay groups arguing that the clergy had in fact no special capability to transfer merit and that laypeople must take an active part in these rites, in the performance of which Butsuryūkō ascribed special potency to the Lotus Sutra. This philosophy was bequeathed to the later lay Buddhist movements based on the Lotus Sutra in the twentieth century, such as Reiyukai. Reiyukai emphasized the importance of laypeople's practice of merit transfer to the spirits of their ancestors.

Growth of Lay Organizations

Many of the lay organizations grew rapidly between the 1960s and 1980s, especially in urban areas. There were large-scale demographic changes during this time, especially in terms of urbanization and industrialization. For example, the urban-rural population ratio in 1950 was 3 to 7, but ten years later it was 7 to 3. Within these ten years a large number of people migrated to the urban areas, leaving behind their rural lifestyles. They left behind lifestyles based on an extended family system, closely knit local communities, and traditional religious cultures. These people settled in urban areas where they had no relatives or no prior communal and cultural ties. The new lay organizations functioned as new communities for these people. At the peak times, the largest groups had a membership of more than ten million people.

Lay Organizations' Decline

The situation has changed, however, in the past decade or so. With the exception of a few, many of these organizations are losing membership, for a number of reasons. Some of the factors are internal to the organizations and some of them are external. In fact, the same factors are also causing the decline of traditional denominations.

For both traditional and lay organizations, the main internal problem is institutionalization. Although I shall not go into the details, let me just point out that for the traditional organizations, the rigidified institutional structure creates a system that tends to keep the status quo rather than take on new challenges. Because of this they cannot undertake the drastic changes desperately needed to revitalize themselves.

The lay organizations are also suffering from institutionalization. Many of their members belong to families that have been members for three or four generations, and the organizations are losing the confidence and the motivation to propagate. Moreover, the membership is aging, and some older members are experiencing difficulties in transmitting their faith to younger generations. The organizations themselves are also having difficulties in dealing effectively with the changes in the wider society. Japanese society has become more complex, and new sets of social problems have arisen from the changes in the post-economic-growth period since the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, more than thirty thousand people have committed suicide every year since 1998, and Japan's suicide rate is one of the highest among industrialized nations. The number of people with mental illnesses has also increased greatly in the past two decades. The Japanese are also experiencing a widening gap between rich and poor for the first time in sixty years. In the 1970s and 1980s about 98

percent of Japanese considered themselves middle class. This has changed, however. Members of the lay organizations who were once effective in propagating cannot deal effectively with these new sets of social problems.

Traditional and lay organizations' loss of confidence for propagation is also attributed in large part to factors in the wider society. Let me discuss a few of these.

Separation of Religion and the State

Currently the most pressing issue in Buddhist institutions' relationship with the state authority is separation between religion and the state. The postwar constitution's separation of religion and the state was intended mainly to protect religious freedom. The constitution aims to defend religious practices and religious institutions against undue intervention by the state. It also protects them from the state's trying to use religion for its own political end and prevents the emergence of a state religion.

Nevertheless, the Japanese government, especially the bureaucrats, tend to misinterpret separation between the state and religion. Officials think it means only that religion must be excluded from the public sphere at all levels, including central and local government. For example, religion is not taught systematically at public schools at all. Some local governments prohibit the use of public buildings and facilities for religious purposes, such as for memorial services for those who perished in the March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami.

It must also be mentioned that reconstruction programs in some of the disaster areas have discriminated against religion. In the city of Sendai, the local government announced that it cannot use its reconstruction funds for rebuilding religious facilities, such as Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines,

that were destroyed by the disaster, since it would violate separation of religion and the state.

In another instance, residents of a highly contaminated evacuation zone in Fukushima were not allowed reentry when they declared that their purpose of reentry was to place family members' ashes in an ancestral tomb. They could obtain reentry permits to the zone only for brief visits to their homes. Visits to ancestral tombs were banned as religious activity. A government official told residents the government could not possibly "champion" religious activities because it would violate separation of religion and the state.

Since many civil servants are unaware that the purpose of separation of religion and the state is to defend religious freedom, they systematically exclude religion from the public sphere.

Secularization

The Japanese religious world cannot afford to leave this situation as it is because religion is rapidly losing its influence in society, which is widely secularizing. Religious worldviews and institutions have lost their influence on the general public. In Japan, secularization has gone very far—even further than in many Western European nations. The influence of not only religious organizations but also religious worldviews, religious culture, and religious customs has greatly diminished in contemporary Japanese society. The

decline of traditional village lifestyles brought about by drastic demographic changes has been a major factor. Religion was deeply ingrained in the cultures of traditional local communities. With urbanization, the proportion of people who were brought up in these communities has diminished. Instead, an increasing proportion of the population has been born in secularized urban areas. These people usually have very little chance to come in contact with religious customs, practices, and teachings. Secularization is accelerating even more because the government actively excludes religion from the public sphere.

The mass media have also been responsible for painting negative pictures of religion. This has been especially so after the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack in 1995. The incident drastically changed the public image of religion to something potentially antisocial and extremely dangerous.

For these reasons, it has become increasingly difficult to propagate the Buddhist teachings in contemporary Japanese society.

Lay Buddhism in the Secularized World

Let me conclude with a few remarks about the roles of lay Buddhism in a secularized society like Japan's.

It is evident that the ultimate goal of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis is nirvana. How about the goal for lay Buddhists? Traditionally the laity's goals have included rebirth in a better world, such as in a heaven or a wealthy human family.

In Japan, however, this idea has not taken root. The Japanese lay groups instead have emphasized happiness in this life, especially in terms of improving their followers' material lives, curing illnesses, and being successful in society. Some groups have advocated that people could improve their karma in this life by merit transfer, repentance, or some magical means. I think that

we in Japan are at a juncture where we have to rethink the ways in which Buddhist teachings and practices for the laity are presented in a world that is rapidly secularizing.

It is generally thought in Buddhist societies that laypeople cannot attain the perfect enlightenment. This is not true, because there are descriptions in the old texts of the Buddha leading laypeople toward attainment of nirvana. Moreover, it is clear that the Buddha himself preached not for the sake of the few but for all humanity. In theory, it might not be impossible for laypeople to attain the perfect enlightenment, but it is very difficult. This does not mean, however, that it is a waste of time to train on paths to nirvana such as the Threefold Learning, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path. Many people would agree that these teachings and training practices are beneficial for laypeople.

Unfortunately, not many Japanese lay groups have emphasized learning and practicing the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The importance of understanding suffering as the means to overcome suffering is therefore conspicuously absent from their teachings. Meditation practices are also absent from their training. I think it is important for both lay and traditional denominations to go back to the roots in order to face current problems.

Let me conclude by saying that I hope the gatherings of *kalyāna-mitra* such as this, the International Lay Buddhist Forum, will help spread the teachings and practices of the Buddha so that the sufferings of all sentient beings will be relieved. As you know, *kalyāna-mitra* means "good friends"—the good friends who walk the Way together. In the Sigālovāda Suttanta, the Buddha teaches that "a genuine friend is one who is a helpmate, who is a friend in happiness and sorrow, who advises for one's welfare, and who is sympathetic." □

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 23

The Former Lives of the Bodhisattva Medicine King (2)

*This is the 118th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra
by the founder of Risho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

TEXT Having attained this contemplation [the Bodhisattva Loveliness] was very joyful and reflected thus, saying: ‘My attainment of the contemplation of revelation of all forms is entirely due to the power [resulting] from hearing the Dharma Flower Sutra. Let me now pay homage to the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance and the Dharma Flower Sutra.’

COMMENTARY *Reflected.* In the original Chinese text, the word translated here as “reflected” means literally “speaking to oneself.” It clearly shows how much people depend on words when they think. In this case, the bodhisattva silently affirms his devotion.

TEXT No sooner did he enter into this contemplation than [he] rained from the sky mandarava flowers, maha-mandarava flowers, and fine powder of hard and black

sandalwood, which filled the sky and descended like a cloud; [he] rained also incense of inner-seashore sandalwood; six karshas of this incense are worth a *saha* world. [All this he did] in homage to the Buddha.

COMMENTARY *Enter into this contemplation.* This contemplation is the *samadhi* of paying homage. The bodhisattva concentrated on offering wholehearted devotion and gratitude to the Buddha and the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

• *Mandarava flowers, maha-mandarava flowers.* These are flowers that bloom in the realm of the gods and are believed to be so beautiful that whoever sees them cannot help being delighted in spirit.

• *Fine powder of hard and black sandalwood.* Powdered sandalwood makes superior incense.

• *Inner-seashore sandalwood.* This is an extremely precious variety of sandalwood. In the ancient Indian view of the world, the center of the world is Mount Sumeru, which is surrounded by seas, in which there are four continents. The southern continent is where human beings live and is called Jambudvipa in Sanskrit. It was said that the “inner-seashore,” facing Mount Sumeru, was the coast of the continent of human beings, and along it grew sandalwood trees of exquisite fragrance.

• *Six karshas of this incense are worth a saha world.* Even six *karshas*, a light measure of weight, of this incense are as valuable as the earth itself.

TEXT “Having made this offering, he arose from contemplation and reflected within himself, thus saying: ‘Though I by my supernatural power have paid homage to the Buddha, it is not as good as offering my body.’

COMMENTARY *By my supernatural power.* This divine power is of a kind that can be manifested through contemplation, of a kind that causes the flowers of heaven or fine incense to come falling down.

• *Offering my body.* This means an offering of self-sacrifice. The most realistic manifestation of this is acceptance of hardships in practicing the teachings.

TEXT Thereupon he partook of many kinds of incense—sandalwood, kunduruka, turushka, prikka, aloes, and resin incense—and drank the essential oil of the campaka and other flowers. After fully twelve hundred years, he anointed his body with perfumed unguents, and in the presence of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance wrapped himself in a celestial precious garment, bathed in perfumed oil, and by his transcendent vow burned his own body. Its brightness universally illuminated worlds fully numerous as the sands of eighty kotis of Ganges rivers,

COMMENTARY *Kunduruka, turushka, prikka.* These are various kinds of incense.

- *Aloes.* This is a fragrant wood heavy enough to sink in water.
- *Resin.* This is also an incense from another variety of aromatic tree said to be similar to maples.
- *Campaka.* This is a fragrant flower from which perfume is made.

Burning many kinds of incense and drinking the aromatic oil of flowers symbolize purifying oneself. This symbolic deed teaches us that we must first purify our conduct before paying homage to the Buddha.

Here we learn that in his desire to obtain divine powers, he made offerings to the Buddha. The “transcendent vow” does not mean that he uses these divine powers for himself,

but for dissemination of the Buddha Dharma. Obtaining divine powers and freely proclaiming and spreading the teachings of the Buddha are the greatest homage one can pay to the Buddha.

TEXT whose buddhas simultaneously extolled him, saying: ‘Good, good! Good son! This is true zeal and the truest devotion to the Tathagata.

COMMENTARY *Zeal.* This means single-hearted devotion to an endeavor for a correct purpose in Buddhism. However much one might endeavor, if the goal is not good, it is not zeal in a good cause. However admirable one’s purpose, half-hearted efforts are not zealous. People today should give particular thought to this.

• *The truest devotion to the Tathagata.* As we noted earlier (see the October–December 2013 issue of *Dharma World*), there are various ways to worship the Buddha, and the truest is to vividly demonstrate the wonders of the Buddha Dharma to humanity through acts of self-sacrifice and inspiring devotion to him.

Before, we read that the Bodhisattva Loveliness immolated himself, and that the bright flames of his immolation universally illuminated worlds as numerous as the sands of eighty *kotis* of Ganges rivers. This means that the minds of people in that vast realm were purified by the beauty of the act of the Bodhisattva Loveliness, inspiring their devotion to the Buddha Dharma.

An act of self-sacrifice to spread the teachings of the Buddha lights up the darkness of this world and fills people with radiance. We should take very careful note of these words.

TEXT Offerings of flowers, scents, necklaces, incense, sandal powder, unguents, banners and canopies of celestial silk, and incense of inner-seashore sandalwood, offerings of such various things as these cannot match it, nor can the giving of alms, countries, cities, wives, and children match it.

COMMENTARY These words are of course a continuation of the praises of the various buddhas. They emphasize that “worship through offerings” and “worship through reverence,” which could be figurative—for example, offering one’s wife and children in the service of the buddha—do not surpass “worship through deeds” which is practice of the teachings.

TEXT My good son! This is called the supreme gift, the most honored and sublime of gifts, because it is the Dharma homage to the tathagatas.’

COMMENTARY This passage declares clearly the highest form of donation.

suddenly metamorphosed, sitting cross-legged in the house of King Pure Virtue, to [whom as] his father he forthwith spoke thus in verse:

‘Know, O great king!
Sojourning in that other abode,
I instantly attained the contemplation of
The revelation of all forms,
And devotedly performed a deed of great zeal
By sacrificing the body I loved.’

COMMENTARY We have discussed rebirth, or transmigration, in detail in an earlier section (the November/December 1998 issue of *Dharma World*), and in this instance the Bodhisattva Loveliness, in reward for his supreme act of self-sacrifice for the Dharma, is reborn as a prince.

That he was reborn sitting cross-legged, or in the lotus position, means symbolically that he was reincarnated with mastery of the Buddha Dharma and the possession of exalted virtues. His immediately speaking to his father in verse means that even as a child he had the power to instruct adults, such as his parents.

Therefore, we should not assume that our children are inferior or decide unilaterally that we should be leaders and our children followers. We are often taught and led by our children, so it is important always to listen with humility to what they say and watch over what they do.

- *That other abode.* This refers to the abode of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance.
- *Devotedly performed.* “To devotedly perform” means to do something diligently, wholeheartedly, and steadfastly.
- *By sacrificing the body I loved.* This is a truly significant expression. Everyone holds himself or herself dear. As a living being it is instinctual to think of oneself as the most important being in the world.

Human beings, however, differ from other living things in possessing a spirit and engaging in community life, which is based on mutual assistance, consideration, and prosperity for all. Since human beings are a higher form of life, they often must sacrifice that precious self. As I have just pointed out, whether to a greater or lesser degree, society is possible because people are willing to make sacrifices for one another. If we were not willing to do that, our way of life would be no different from that of birds, beasts, and insects.

TEXT “After uttering this verse, he spoke to his father, saying: ‘The Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance is still existing as of yore. Having first paid homage to that buddha, I obtained the dharani of interpreting the utterances of all the living, and moreover heard this Dharma Flower Sutra [in] eight

TEXT After making this statement they all fell silent.

“His body continued burning for twelve hundred years, after which his body came to an end.

COMMENTARY *Silent.* When we read this passage we are of course grateful for the Buddha’s preaching of the Dharma, but we are also struck deep within our hearts by the immeasurably deep meaning of the Buddha sitting silently.

This is important even in maintaining our daily practices. We should always set aside moments for sitting silently. At such times our consciousness deepens and concentrates on one thing that is invisible. It is a precious thing.

TEXT “The Bodhisattva Loveliness, after making such a Dharma offering as this, on his death was again born in the domain of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance, being

hundred thousand myriad kotis [of] nayutas, kankaras, vimbaras, akshobhyas of verses. Great King! I ought now to return and pay homage to that buddha.’

COMMENTARY *The dharani of interpreting the utterances of all the living.* This is the power of clearly understanding the spoken words of all living beings, which enables religious leaders to adapt their teaching to the capacities of all people so that they will keep what is good and discard what is evil.

- *Nayutas, kankaras, vimbaras, akshobhyas.* Each of these is an infinite large unit of measure. The Lotus Sutra clearly does not have an infinite number of verses. As I have noted repeatedly, the Lotus Sutra referred to in this instance is not the scripture but the quintessence of the Buddha’s teachings, the supreme Dharma which he taught. An infinite number of teachings spring forth from the Dharma, and because the Buddha is the one who imparts them, his teachings are referred to as the nayutas, kankaras, vimbaras, and akshobhyas of verses in the passage.

TEXT Having said this, he thereupon took his seat on a pedestal of the precious seven, arose in the sky as high as seven tala trees, and on reaching that Buddha, bowed down to his feet, and extolled the Buddha in verse:

COMMENTARY *Seven tala trees.* The tala is a variety of tall hemp palm. The tala was used in India as a unit of measure. Seven times the height of this tall tree would be, in other words, high up in the sky.

TEXT ‘Countenance most wonderful, / Radiance illuminating the universe: / Formerly I paid homage to thee, / Now again I return to be in close fellowship with the Buddha.’

COMMENTARY *Wonderful.* The Chinese for this word is *ch’i-miao*, which means rare, exceptional, beautiful, and precious beyond words.

TEXT “Then the Bodhisattva Loveliness, having uttered this verse, spoke to that Buddha, saying: ‘World-honored One! The World-honored One is still present in the world.’

COMMENTARY At a glance, this simply means that the World-honored One is still dwelling in this world. But included within these words is emotion beyond measure. The disciple’s unspoken longing desire, thirsting heart, and reverence for the Buddha permeate these simple words.

His feelings of longing for the Buddha and the Buddha’s compassion for living beings are perfectly blended in an exquisite state of religious exultation.

TEXT “Thereupon the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance addressed the Bodhisattva Loveliness: ‘My good son! The time of my nirvana has come. The time of my extinction has arrived. You may arrange my bed. Tonight I shall enter parinirvana.’

COMMENTARY This scene reminds us of the close relationship between Shakyamuni and his attendant Ananda in the Kushinagara forest when Shakyamuni died.

- *The time of my nirvana has come.* This is parinirvana, in other words, leaving this world.

- *The time of my extinction has arrived.* This also means that his life in this world is at an end and he will enter extinction.

TEXT Again he commanded the Bodhisattva Loveliness: ‘My good son! I commit the Buddha Dharma to you. And I deliver to you all [my] bodhisattvas and chief disciples, [my] Dharma of Perfect Enlightenment, also [my] three-thousand-great-thousandfold world [made] of the precious seven, [its] jewel trees and jewel pedestals, and my celestial attendants. I also entrust to you whatever relics may remain after my extinction. Let them be distributed and paid homage to far and wide. Let some thousands of stupas be erected.’

COMMENTARY *Commit.* As was explained in detail in chapter 22, “The Final Commission,” this means to entrust something into the care of another, to delegate to another a task that is arduous.

- *Dharma of Perfect Enlightenment.* This refers to the teaching for attaining the Buddha’s wisdom and enlightenment.

- *Jewel trees and jewel towers.* Of course this means wonderful trees and towers, but it also connotes a place where one awakens to enlightenment, as described at the beginning of the present chapter, “The Former Lives of the Bodhisattva Medicine King,” where the text says “under all these jewel trees bodhisattvas and shravakas were seated.”

- *Attendants.* This means those who attend the Buddha and perform various services. But this is following his extinction, so it is better to interpret this as rendering service to protect the Buddha Dharma and spread its teachings widely.

- *Stupas be erected.* The Buddha tells the Bodhisattva Loveliness to let his relics be distributed and receive homage far and wide, but he means to cause, through this homage, all living beings to cherish a deep longing, a thirsting heart, and reverence for the Buddha.

He also tells the bodhisattva to build stupas, and by this he means for all living beings to engrave the teachings in their minds. The stupas are to be built for the purpose of extolling the Buddha’s virtues. If a stupa is built with concern only for its form and appearance and without the

spirit of engraving the teachings in people's minds, the act of building it would not accord with the Buddha's mind. The Buddha is pleased by true substance rather than form, by actual practice rather than empty theory.

It is most regrettable that the stupas we find here and there today have degenerated into objects of art appreciation and tourist destinations. At the very least, it is to be hoped that people who visit and appreciate these stupas are told the true meaning of a stupa.

TEXT The Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance, having thus commanded the Bodhisattva Loveliness, in the last division of the night entered into nirvana.

COMMENTARY People who have attained great virtue through the accumulation of religious practices can become clearly aware of the approach of their own death. This is obviously true of buddhas, and was true of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance, who became extinct at the date and time he had predicted, as did Shakyamuni.

TEXT "Thereupon the Bodhisattva Loveliness, seeing the buddha was extinct, mourned, was deeply moved and distressed, and ardently longed for him. Then piling up a pyre of inner-seashore sandalwood, he paid homage to the body of that buddha and burned it. After the fire died out he gathered the relics, made eighty-four thousand precious urns, and erected eighty-four thousand stupas higher than a threefold world, adorned with banner towers, hung with banners and canopies and with many precious bells.

COMMENTARY "Eighty-four thousand" indicates a very large number. The teachings imparted by the Buddha are called "the eighty-four thousand doctrines." The bodhisattva's making of the eighty-four thousand precious urns and building a stupa for each one symbolizes his endeavor to establish the teachings permanently in every country so that everyone, everywhere, would revere, commemorate, and extol the virtues of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance.

TEXT Then the Bodhisattva Loveliness again reflected within himself, saying: 'Though I have paid this homage, my mind is not yet satisfied. Let me pay still further homage to the relics.'

COMMENTARY *Further homage to the relics.* He wishes to pay even deeper homage by superior means rather than only to pay homage once more.

TEXT Thereupon he addressed the bodhisattvas and chief disciples, as well as gods, dragons, yakshas, and all

the host, saying: 'Pay attention with all your mind, [for] I am now about to pay homage to the relics of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance.'

COMMENTARY *Pay attention with all your mind, [for] I am now about to pay homage to the relics of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance.* When we interpret these words, we see that they mean, "Everyone, consider this carefully. I will now pay homage to the relics of the Buddha Sun Moon Brilliance, and I want you to think very carefully about the meaning of my homage."

TEXT Having said this, he thereupon before the eighty-four thousand stupas burned off his arms, with their hundred felicitous signs, for seventy-two thousand years in homage to him, and led a numberless host of seekers after shravakaship and countless asamkhyeyas of people to set their minds on Perfect Enlightenment, causing them all to abide in the contemplation of revelation of all forms.

COMMENTARY *His arms, with their hundred felicitous signs.* His arms are beautifully adorned with every blessed sign.

The latter half of the passage above will be better understood in the following way. He "led a numberless host of seekers after shravakaship to set their minds on Perfect Enlightenment." That is, the bodhisattva encouraged shravakas, who had wished to study the Buddha's teachings in order to rid themselves of delusion and defilement, to seek a higher state, the supreme enlightenment attained by the Buddha.

Naturally, the "countless asamkhyeyas of people" are the innumerable bodhisattvas and he caused them "to abide in the contemplation of the revelation of all forms." In other words, these bodhisattvas were enabled to abide in that exalted state of contemplation.

It is certainly true that to extol the virtues of the Buddha worldwide, to spread his teachings and ensure that they will be preserved forever, is great homage to the Buddha. However, for true practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, that is still insufficient. Needless to say, the greatest homage they can pay to the Buddha is to practice his teachings assiduously.

Therefore, the Bodhisattva Loveliness burned off his arms. In other words, he devoted himself to practice of the teachings without thought of what might happen to him. His practice became a great light that illuminated the darkness of people's minds. People thereby came to recognize that they were mired in an unenlightened state of mind, and they aspired to and attained an exalted state.

This vividly shows us the great power of the merit of assiduous practice of the teachings.

TEXT “Then all those bodhisattvas, gods, men, asuras, and others, seeing him without arms, were sorrowful and distressed and lamented, saying: ‘This Bodhisattva Loveliness is indeed our teacher and instructor, but now his arms are burned off and his body is deformed.’ Thereupon the Bodhisattva Loveliness in the great assembly made this vow, saying: ‘Having given up both my arms, I shall [yet] assuredly obtain a buddha’s golden body. If this [assurance] be true and not false, let both my arms be restored as they were before.’

COMMENTARY *‘Having given up both my arms, I shall [yet] assuredly obtain a buddha’s golden body.’* After sacrificing himself to practice the teachings of the Buddha, he has awakened to his own buddha-nature (the golden body of the Buddha), which is at one with the Original Buddha.

TEXT As soon as he had made this vow, [his arms] were of themselves restored, [all] brought to pass through the excellence of this bodhisattva’s felicitous virtue and wisdom. At that moment the three-thousand-great-thousandfold world was shaken in the six ways, the sky rained various precious flowers, and gods and human beings all attained that which they had never before experienced.”

COMMENTARY The restoration of the Bodhisattva Loveliness’s arms symbolizes that the self will never be harmed or lose anything through an act of self-sacrifice.

It is true that since people have physical bodies they are subject to physical laws, but their true nature, which is their buddha-nature, is not. So although the physical body may be harmed or diminished, the buddha-nature—the intrinsic quality of humankind—is neither harmed nor diminished at all.

People who fully realize this truth can remain serene because they are fully aware that however great their self-sacrifice, their true nature is the golden body that is the buddha-nature itself.

TEXT The Buddha [then] addressed the Bodhisattva Star Constellation King Flower: “What is your opinion? Was the Bodhisattva Loveliness some other person? It was indeed the present Medicine King Bodhisattva. His self-sacrifice and gifts were of such countless hundred thousand myriad kotis of nayutas in number as these.

COMMENTARY For the first time Shakyamuni revealed that these were things done by the Bodhisattva Medicine King in a past life. It signifies, in other words, that because the Bodhisattva Medicine King obtained these divine powers through that sequence of causes and events, he is freely

preaching the Dharma in this *saha* world and liberating multitudes of people.

After finishing this preliminary narrative, the Buddha teaches the following.

TEXT Star Constellation King Flower! If anyone with his mind set on and aiming at Perfect Enlightenment is able to burn off the fingers of his hand or even a toe of his foot in homage to a buddha’s stupa, he will surpass him who pays homage with domains, cities, wives, children, and his three-thousand-great-thousandfold land with its mountains, forests, rivers, pools, and all of the precious things.

COMMENTARY *Able to burn off the fingers of his hand or even a toe of his foot in homage to a buddha’s stupa.* To actually practice the teachings of the Buddha in a way that involves even a small sacrifice of the self is a significant way of paying homage to the Buddha.

Such homage is superior to every kind of material offering.

TEXT “Again, if anyone offers a three-thousand-great-thousandfold world full of the seven precious things in homage to buddhas, great bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, and arhats, the merit this man gains is not equal to the surpassing happiness of him who received and keeps but a single fourfold verse of this Dharma Flower Sutra.

COMMENTARY *Arhats.* Arhats are people devoid of all delusions and worthy of the world’s respect, and “arhats” here refers to shravakas, who are often mentioned with bodhisattvas and pratyekabuddhas.

• *A single fourfold verse.* This is a verse in four lines, like one we have just read:

‘Countenance most wonderful,
Radiance illuminating the universe:
Formerly I paid homage to thee,
Now again I return to be in close fellowship with the
Buddha.’

TEXT “Star Constellation King Flower! Suppose just as amongst all brooks, streams, rivers, canals, and all other waters the sea is supreme, so is it also with this Dharma Flower Sutra; amongst all the sutras preached by tathagatas it is the profoundest and greatest.

COMMENTARY Now begins a series of ten similes which signify just how wonderful the Lotus Sutra is. The series is known as “ten similes praising the Lotus Sutra.” The simile in this passage is the first.

No river, however large, can rival an ocean. Rivers by

their nature cannot compare with oceans. This is because an ocean swallows up the waters that flow into it from rivers large and small and makes them all one. Moreover, an ocean enriches the waters of the rivers, changing them into something deeper and heavier in content. The oceans spread all over the planet forming one continuous, boundless body of water and furthermore become the basis for all life.

In a similar way, all the teachings flow into the Lotus Sutra, where they blend together and are condensed. They become one great teaching of great benevolence and deep compassion which gives life to everything in this world. The Lotus Sutra is a body of teachings that is truly like a great ocean.

TEXT And just as amongst all mountains—the Earth Mountain, the Black Mountain, the Small Iron Circle Mountains, the Great Iron Circle Mountains, the ten precious mountains, and all other mountains—it is Mount Sumeru which is supreme, so is it also with the Dharma Flower Sutra; amongst all sutras it is supreme.

COMMENTARY According to ancient Buddhist cosmology, the Earth Mountain, the Black Mountains, the Small Iron Circle Mountains, the Great Iron Circle Mountains, the ten precious mountains, and Mount Sumeru were mountains in India. Mount Sumeru was not only the highest of these mountains, but was believed by ancient Indians to be the center of the universe.

The Lotus Sutra is not only the supreme and most noble of all sutras, but it contains the greatest of all the teachings, revealing and fostering their supreme value.

People sometimes become overzealous in their devotion to the Lotus Sutra to the point of self-righteousness, and disdain other teachings of the Buddha. But this is a major error, for the Lotus Sutra is not a sutra to rival or be compared with other sutras. Rather it is the core of all the teachings and helps them manifest their intrinsic value. Unless one is aware of the worldview of ancient Indians, who regarded Mount Sumeru as the center of the world, and delves deeply into this passage, it is easy to fall into such a misunderstanding.

TEXT Again, just as amongst all stars the princely moon is supreme, so is it also with this Dharma Flower Sutra; amongst thousands of myriads of kotis of kinds of sutra teachings, it is the most illuminating.

COMMENTARY There are countless stars in the heavens, but it is the moon that is closest to the human world and shines brightest on that world. The Lotus Sutra is precisely the same, a teaching that adheres closely to human life and brightens it.

Among other religions and even within the Buddhist teachings that preceded the Lotus Sutra, there are severe, pessimistic teachings that people are sinful and life is suffering.

But once we arrive at the Lotus Sutra, we see an unfathomable brightness which affirms humanity, glorifies life, and praises the buddha-nature. Further, the Lotus Sutra is not only the Dharma for Buddhist clergy, but for all people, without exception. It is a teaching through which all people may love life and cheerfully live it to the full. Consequently no other teaching shines on the world so brightly. It is surely true that among the many sutras, the Lotus Sutra is the most illuminating.

TEXT Further, just as the princely sun is able to disperse all darkness, so is it also with this sutra; it is able to dispel all unholy darkness.

COMMENTARY As we have repeatedly noted, darkness is nonsubstantial. It is merely a state in which there is no light. Consequently, when light shines, there is no darkness.

In similar fashion, sin and evil are unsubstantial. They are merely states in which wisdom is obscured, and goodness of mind is concealed. So when the rays of the sun of the teachings shine forth, wisdom reveals itself, the mind's goodness shines, and in an instant sin and evil vanish into thin air. The teachings of the Lotus Sutra are like the sun.

The appropriateness of this simile is unparalleled.

TEXT Again, just as amongst all minor kings the holy wheel-rolling king is supreme, so is it also with this sutra; amongst all the sutras it is the most honorable.

COMMENTARY The holy wheel-rolling king is the king who governs the world virtuously (see the November/December 1991 issue of *Dharma World*). In other words, he is a great king who does not govern by strength, but rather, with the power of exceptional virtue, he leads people in creating a peaceful country of their own accord.

Like the holy wheel-rolling king, the Lotus Sutra, with its great influential powers, leads all living beings imperceptibly to the Way of the Buddha. For that reason, it is the most precious of all the precious teachings.

TEXT Again just as what Shakra is amongst the gods of the thirty-three heavens, so is it also with this sutra; it is the king of all sutras.

COMMENTARY The so-called heavenly deities were originally the gods of Brahmanism and were believed to have great divine powers to control humans. Shakra (Indra), along with the Brahma Heaven, was held to be the main deity and

chief of the other thirty-two gods. The Buddha incorporated them all as benevolent deities that protect Buddhism, but there remained a folk belief, never strongly contradicted, that they possessed divine powers to save people from their sufferings on occasion and grant them good fortune.

Comparing the Lotus Sutra, which is the king of all sutras, to Shakra in the thirty-three heavens seems to suggest that all of the teachings of the Buddha have the extraordinary power to liberate humankind, but it means the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are the greatest of all.

TEXT Again, just as the Great Brahma Heavenly King is the father of all living beings, so is it also with this sutra; it is the father of all wise and holy men, of those training and the trained, and of the bodhisattva-minded.

COMMENTARY The Great Brahma Heavenly King was believed to be the chief deity of Brahmanism, and people believed him to be the father of all living beings.

In general in India, as in other countries, fathers are held in high regard, and even in the Lotus Sutra we find many such expressions as “I, too, being father of this world” (in a verse of chapter 16, “Revelation of the [Eternal] Life of the Tathagata,” in which the father is represented as guide and savior).

The same is true here. All people—whether they be sages, saints, trainees (*shaiksha*, practitioners who have more to learn about the Buddha’s teachings), the trained (*ashaiksha*, practitioners who have fully mastered his teachings), bodhisattvas—when they have resolved to attain the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha, have the Lotus Sutra as an august and affectionate father to teach and guide them to it.

The word father suggests this distinctive meaning.

One point should be clarified here. Ancient Indians believed the Great Brahma Heavenly King, that is, a god of a heavenly realm, was the father of all living beings; in other words, that he governed all the living. Such thinking is fundamentally incompatible with Buddhist ideas. Buddhism does not recognize the existence of any god in that kind of relationship with human beings and therefore strongly denies the idea that gods govern humans beings.

However, Shakyamuni does not impetuously attack this mistaken idea and oppose its adherents. Instead, he warmly embraces these gods of another religion as guardian deities of the Buddha Dharma.

This spirit is manifest here in his not opposing the error that the Great Brahma Heavenly King rules the living. Instead Shakyamuni taught ancient Indians that the Buddha Dharma, like the Great Brahma Heavenly King, was the spiritual father of all the living. It is characteristic of Buddhism that it embraces all correct religions and

gently leads ordinary adherents of other religions to the Way of the Buddha.

TEXT Again, just as amongst all the common people, *srota-apannas*, *sakridagamins*, *anagamins*, *arhats*, and *pratyekabuddhas* are foremost, so is it also with this sutra; amongst all the sutra teachings expounded by *tathagatas*, *bodhisattvas*, and *shravakas*, it is supreme. So is it also with those who are able to receive and keep this sutra—amongst all the living they are supreme.

COMMENTARY *Srota-apanna*, *sakridagamin*, *anagamin*, *arhat*. These are practitioners in the four stages leading to the enlightenment attained by *shravakas*. These practitioners seeking liberation after hearing the Buddha’s teachings ascend through these stages step by step from a beginner’s state of mind.

The *srota-apanna* is a “stream-winner,” who has just joined a group following the Way and has just begun to be carried along by the flow of his or her religious practice.

The *sakridagamin* is a “once-returner,” who is almost rid of delusion in the realm of desire and is guaranteed only no more than one rebirth in the realm of desire.

The *anagamin* is a “never-returner,” who will never return to the state of ordinary beings by being reborn in the realm

of desire. The anagamin is guaranteed to reach the stage of the arhat, the highest stage of shravaka enlightenment.

The arhat is known as “a killer of bandits” for having at this stage vanquished the “bandits of delusion.” Strictly speaking, such a person is called an arhattva, meaning one who is completely rid of delusion and has achieved liberation, deserving the respect of all humanity.

- *Amongst all the living they are supreme.* We should pay special attention to the final section of this passage, which says that among all living beings, those who can receive and keep the sutra are supreme. It is we who receive and keep the sutra, so it is we who are most exalted among living beings.

We must always cherish this pride deep within ourselves. That we believe in the supreme Dharma and actually practice it means that, however inferior to all others we may be in other aspects, in this one aspect we are superior. If we keep this self-confidence to ourselves and deal with everything confidently, we will be able to live with dignity, unconcerned by social position or material things.

Of course this does not imply that we should be arrogant or self-righteous, showing our feeling of spiritual superiority. Our self-confidence and pride remain within our hearts.

TEXT Amongst all shravakas and pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas are supreme; so is it also with this sutra; amongst all the sutra teachings, it is supreme.

COMMENTARY Bodhisattvas are not grouped with shravakas or pratyekabuddhas, so the meaning of “amongst all shravakas and pratyekabuddhas” should be understood to mean all the disciples of the Buddha.

TEXT Just as the Buddha is king of the teachings, or dharmas, so is it also with this sutra; it is the king of sutras.

COMMENTARY *The king of sutras.* In ancient times, kings were absolute rulers. The fortune of a nation depended largely on the king’s virtue. The Buddha is compared to a good king who brings happiness to all his people, and he is called the “king of the teachings” in the sense that he is the “ruler of the Dharma,” who expounds all the teachings, making free and full use of them to instruct and liberate all people.

In the same manner, the Lotus Sutra, which gives life to all the teachings and helps them fully manifest their life, is truly the “king of sutras.”

The following brings to a conclusion the ten similes praising the Lotus Sutra.

TEXT “Star Constellation King Flower! This sutra is that which can save all the living; this sutra can deliver all the

living from pains and sufferings; this sutra is able greatly to benefit all the living and fulfill their vows.

COMMENTARY “To benefit” means to bestow both material as well as spiritual blessings. If one is spiritually liberated, this will always be reflected in material ways as well.

It is wrong to associate the word “vows” with concrete ways of material liberation. “Vows” here does not mean efforts to gain material satisfaction or a comfortable life.

As explained earlier (in the July/August 2000 issue of *Dharma World*), a vow is made to accomplish an ideal goal in life. A vow, in Buddhist terms, however, is not quite the same as an ideal. A vow has two senses in Buddhism. The first is ultimately the altruistic endeavor to benefit humanity and the world. The second is a strong commitment to an ideal.

Hence, we must bear in mind that in the phrase “fulfill their vows,” “vows” is used in the first sense above. Some people misinterpret the meaning of vow in the Lotus Sutra as meaning the pursuit of immediate desires based on greed. Nothing is further from a correct understanding of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra than the belief that practice of its teachings brings immediate, worldly benefits.

TEXT Just as a clear, cool pool is able to satisfy all those who are thirsty, as the cold who obtain a fire [are satisfied], as the naked who find clothing, as [a caravan of] merchants who find a leader, as children who find their mother, as at a ferry one who catches the boat, as a sick man who finds a doctor, as in the darkness one who obtains a lamp, as a poor man who finds a jewel, as people who find a king, as merchant venturers who gain the sea, and as a torch which dispels the darkness, so is it also with this Dharma Flower Sutra; it is able to deliver all the living from all sufferings and all diseases, and is able to unloose all the bonds of birth and death.

COMMENTARY It is difficult to understand this passage, and one may even misinterpret it unless one understands India’s geography and daily life.

Take for example the expression “just as a clear, cool pool is able to satisfy all those who are thirsty.” In Japan one would use the word “spring.” But in India, rainwater is collected, and river water is drawn into reservoirs. The water is used for drinking and bathing, which are essential for life.

The merchants referred to here are in a caravan, and their leader is well acquainted enough with the territory to guide the caravan through boundless deserts or dense forests.

People today may not fully grasp the importance of a ferry, but anyone who visits northern India, where the Ganges and Indus rivers and their tributaries form a meshlike

network and there are virtually no bridges across them, will see how essential ferries are. Seeing these large rivers also makes it easy to comprehend the idea of “the other shore of enlightenment.”

“Merchant venturers who gain the sea” means traders. One may wonder why traders would be so appreciative of a sea route. The reason is that land travel in India is a series of unimaginable hardships—intense summer heat, empty waterless wastelands, and rugged mountains infested with beasts and poisonous snakes. A reader aware of these circumstances may feel great poignancy on reading this sonorous passage.

This passage in the Lotus Sutra is well known as the “benefits of the twelve similes,” which explain the benefits conferred by the Lotus Sutra. When we carefully examine each one, we realize that it does not merely extol the benefits of the sutra. The phrase “is able to unloose all the bonds of birth and death” has an especially important meaning.

“Birth and death” here refers to transmigration through the repeated cycle of birth and death. “The bonds of birth and death” means the snare of the sufferings of transmigration.

However, once people know the Lotus Sutra, which is the quintessence of the Buddha’s teachings, and receive and keep it, they can free themselves from those sufferings. In short, they can attain buddhahood.

In terms of daily life, this means that we can become free and attain true peace of mind, unperturbed by any of the changes around us.

Being “able to unloose all the bonds of birth and death” is truly wonderful.

TEXT “If anyone, hearing this Dharma Flower Sutra, either himself copies or causes others to copy it, the limits of the sum of merit to be obtained cannot be calculated [even] by the Buddha wisdom. If anyone copies this sutra and pays homage to it with flowers, scents, necklaces, incense, sandal powder, unguents, banners, canopies, garments, and various kinds of lamps—ghee lamps, oil lamps, lamps of scented oil, lamps of campaka oil, lamps of sumana oil, lamps of patala oil, lamps of varshika oil, and lamps of navamalika oil—the merit to be obtained by him is equally inestimable.

COMMENTARY *Lamps of campaka oil . . . lamps of navamalika oil.* These are votive lights which use scented oil taken from highly fragrant flowers.

Up to this point, the Buddha has commented on the greatness and the wondrous merits of the Lotus Sutra as a whole, and from now on he refers specifically to the merits described in this chapter, “The Former Lives of the Bodhisattva Medicine King.”

He emphasizes the merits of receiving and keeping this chapter because the teachings cannot be brought to life unless practiced, and this chapter extols primarily the holiness that one displays in one’s personal practice of the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

Therefore, we should on no account interpret his statement as urging us to receive and keep this chapter alone. Such a shallow interpretation often produces self-righteous faith. We cannot make this mistake if we devote ourselves to reading the sutra very carefully and deeply.

For example, we will later read that the buddhas say, “Excellent, excellent! Good son! You have been able to receive and keep, read, recite, and ponder this sutra in the Dharma of Shakyamuni Buddha and to expound it to others.”

The buddhas call our special attention to the importance of receiving and keeping, reading, reciting, and pondering this sutra, which belongs to Shakyamuni’s Dharma, and of preaching it to others without forgetting that this chapter is part of the Dharma.

Consequently, we always must receive and keep the Lotus Sutra in its entirety as representing the whole of the Buddha Dharma. This is especially necessary for us to remember when reading chapter 25, “The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World,” when I will reiterate this caution.

To be continued

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