

The Experience of Growing Older

by Nichiko Niwano

As students of Japanese learn, each *kanji* character has its own meaning. Regarding the character for “elder” (pronounced *ro*) associated with Respect for the Aged Day, the Japanese holiday honoring the elderly celebrated every September, it indicates people over seventy years old, while another character (pronounced *ki*) is used for those over the age of sixty.

Both of these characters convey the concept of growing older. When we are involved in our daily lives we may not notice that our bodies are gradually aging, until the use of certain words reminds us that we are getting older, and then we begin to understand what is happening.

Shakyamuni said, “People who merely gain in years have grown old futilely and aged without meaning” and clearly stated that “those who have become filled with sincerity, virtue, and consideration for others—people of such deep compassion—are considered ‘elders.’” In Buddhism an elder is a practitioner of great virtue.

Shakyamuni also left us these rather harsh words: “Those of little learning grow old like cattle. They gain in flesh without increasing in wisdom.” According to Masahiro Yasuoka (1898–1983), a renowned Japanese authority on Eastern thought, aging is the process that leads us to accumulate experience, deepen our thinking, and complete our lives, and to this end becoming older offers us the opportunity to develop our mental proficiency while continuing to learn something new.

No matter what age we reach, making the effort to overcome our faults and

shortcomings, and showing consideration toward others based on the wisdom we have already attained—that is part of aging that should come along with the passing of years.

The Joy of Becoming Older

Having said that, it is a fact that many people seem to resent and strongly resist accepting the inevitability of growing older.

Shakyamuni explains the law of impermanence with calm detachment in such passages as “Time passes as day turns into night. The beauty of youth gradually takes leave of us.” This is because he has such a compassionate mind and heart that encourage us to firmly grasp the lesson of birth, old age, sickness, and death—the Truth of this world, so that if we do so, we need not fear the coming of old age and death, and can live each day to the fullest.

Professor Ko Hirasawa (1900–1989), a president of Kyoto University, thought of birth, old age, sickness, and death not as the four kinds of suffering but as the four joys. He commented that just as the year has four seasons, it is noteworthy that we experience birth, old age, sickness, and death and are able to find joy in each of them.

Concerning death, Professor Hirasawa said, “Life received from nature returns to nature—it returns to being a part of nature, and again takes part in nature’s development. Death is not a return to nothingness but a renewed participation in nature’s continuing

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development.” He accepted old age and death as representing the compassion of the Buddha. When we are able to consider these stages with acceptance as he did, we can perceive the significance of growing older and take joy in it.

For example, when we have reached an advanced age and deepened our thinking and increased our understanding of life, we are able to say without hesitation things that could not be easily spoken when we were younger. In that regard, one of the roles of the elderly should be to bear in mind the important lessons they have learned and pass them on to the younger generations.

Transmitting to future adults the joy of having been born in this world as a human being, along with gratitude and respect for the sanctity of all life, is a manifestation of the deepest consideration for others. This is a shining example of bodhisattva practice that we can perform verbally no matter how old we may become and even if we become enfeebled.

Our attitude of striving to continue advancing in order to attain the wisdom that will enrich us spiritually as we gain in years generates a dynamic power that results in joy and an appreciation for the meaning of life that lasts a lifetime. □

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Restoring Interpersonal Ties in an Ultra-aging Society

by Waichi Hoshina

Japan is becoming an ultra-aging society. According to a 2013 government estimate, one out of four people in Japan is now sixty-five years old or older.

Years ago, it was already clear that the aging of society would constitute a very pressing issue for members of Rissho Kosei-kai. After taking a close look at the shift toward fewer children and more elderly people, in 1999 Rissho Kosei-kai initiated a program for the training of social welfare specialists so that every Dharma center in the country would have someone with knowledge and technical expertise in social welfare issues and services. These social welfare experts serve each Dharma center by helping members who face difficulties in daily life to receive elder care. While serving in the spirit of honoring the buddha-nature in all people, the specialists give practical assistance that puts to use the social welfare resources available in each local community.

In 2009 Rissho Kosei-kai's Social Ministry Group published a "Ten-Year Social Welfare Plan for Our Ultra-aging Society" and sent it to all Dharma centers. This plan calls on everyone to respect elderly members for their personal experience of the faith, to value opportunities for interacting with elderly members, and to create a sangha where every single elderly member can continue with his or her life of bodhisattva practice with hope and a reason for living. Each Dharma center is now trying to put these concepts into practice through activities for elderly members in ways appropriate to the local context.

We tend to lump the elderly together, but each individual has a unique set of abilities, level of physical strength, and living environment. Even so, elderly people tend to find themselves alone, but at the same time, they possess a certain self-respect as a result of all they have experienced and overcome in life. Apparently, what such elderly people want more than anything is "someone to talk to"—moreover, someone with a friendly attitude who will lend an ear with true sincerity.

Many Dharma centers have a "friendly visit" program, in which members regularly visit and listen to the stories of their Dharma center's elderly members who can no longer go out. Some elderly members also ask for visiting members to hold memorial services or *hoza* meetings at their homes, providing an opportunity for both visitors and the elderly person to reaffirm their faith and give each other encouragement.

Generational exchanges between the elderly and their grandchildren's generation are also being promoted. Some Dharma centers that hold religious services designed for elementary school children during summer vacation ask elderly members to offer the children guidance and to help them officiate at and conduct these services.

Longevity in Japan is the highest in the world, but at the same time the number of suicides in Japan is also among the highest in the world. These trends starkly reveal the warped nature of modern Japanese society. I believe that at the root of this distortion is the weakening of interpersonal ties.

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In the past the young and old, both men and women, were all connected in their local community, and they lived by helping and protecting one another. With urbanization and the popularization of nuclear families in Japanese society, relationships in which people trust each other and can ask for help from one another have become rare or attenuated, not only in the cities, but in rural areas as well. The result is that it is easy for people to become isolated.

One thing we can do within the Rissho Kosei-kai sangha to help society return to a state in which people can live secure lives as they approach their elder years is actively try to create generation-transcending ties among members. We can also try to help foster a larger network of cooperation that includes local self-government associations, businesses, and social welfare councils. We can work with members of other religious groups, go out and meet the elderly and the destitute living in our communities, and try to restore interpersonal ties. Rissho Kosei-kai makes an important contribution when its members volunteer to create new relationships among people in their community. This is what I am hoping for—to work toward restoring community ties that can, with time, grow into a society where all people can live with a sense of security and with hearts full of hope. □

Buddhism and Japan's Aging Society

by John W. Traphagan

If children are the ones expected to carry on ancestor rituals and the number of children is dropping precipitously, then there is an inherent problem looming in terms of the capacity to perform the rituals in the future.

Among the more widely reported aspects of contemporary Japanese society in both the popular media and scholarly work on Japan is its comparatively aged population. Japanese represent the longest-lived people in the world, and the population of Japan as a whole has been aging at an unprecedented rate for some time. As of 2013, over 23 percent of the population is aged sixty-five or older. Predictions for the coming years estimate that proportion at almost 39 percent

by 2050 (Japan Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, [<http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c0117.htm#c02>]). The most immediate reason for this is a long-term trend of decreasing birthrate and increasing life expectancy at birth that has continued over several decades. Today the total birthrate hovers around 1.3 children per woman during her childbearing years, placing Japan in the position of 208 out of 224 countries (CIA *World*

Factbook). At the same time, the life expectancy at birth as of 2013 is about eighty-one for men and eighty-eight for women. This has resulted in a population pyramid that increasingly looks upside down. The larger percentage of population is toward the middle and the top rather than the bottom, the latter of which is what one would expect for a normal age distribution in any population. In other words, there should be fewer older people than younger people (see fig. 1).

These demographic patterns have resulted in the unprecedented situation for an industrial society that the population is now in decline, although Japan is one among many nations that are beginning to encounter this phenomenon or will do so in the near future. As of 2013, the Japanese population had decreased by 263,727 from 2012, or 0.21 percent of the total population, representing approximately a 50 percent increase in the number of individuals lost over the previous year. At the same time, the Japanese government reports that the number of births for 2012 was the lowest on record, while the total number of deaths represented a new high. These trends are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Today teens represent a little over 13 percent of the population, while, as mentioned earlier, those over the age of sixty-five account for more than 23 percent. Indeed, government projections have shown that if demographic trends continue unchanged, the current population of about 126 million will be at least half of what it is today

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by the end of the twenty-first century.

Japan's demographic transition raises an important question: What are the implications of population aging, and the decline in the overall number of Japanese, for the individual practice of Buddhism and for Buddhist institutions over the next few decades? The answer to this question rests not only in predictions about the Japanese demographic future but also in a clear understanding of the function of Buddhism in Japanese society.

Japanese Buddhism

When American students enter my classes about religion in Japan, they often expect to hear lectures on the deep meaning of the Lotus Sutra, the use of koans in Zen, or the concept of satori. Although I do talk about these aspects of Buddhism to some extent, usually my first lecture aims at pointing out the fact that the practice of Buddhism for many Japanese often has little to do with the philosophical side of the religion and is much better understood in relation to a set of ritual practices and beliefs about the afterlife that focus upon care of the deceased. In general, to be a Buddhist in Japan means to participate, or more precisely to be a member of a family that participates, in rituals for the dead that are carried out both in the home and at the family gravesite through prayers and offerings (John W. Traphagan, *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan* [Carolina Academic Press, 2004]).

The extent to which people engage in the more philosophical side of Buddhism is largely left up to the individual. To practice Buddhism in Japan it is unnecessary to be concerned with, or even particularly aware of, the conceptual elements of Buddhist philosophy that are found in religious texts or the types of meditation practices followed among monks at Buddhist temples.

The reason for this is that, for the most part, Japanese emphasize religious practice over belief (Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* [University of Hawaii Press, 1998]). Much more important than worrying about belief in

the doctrinal and philosophical teachings of Buddhism, the focus for Japanese is on the *doing* of Buddhism through the performance of rituals, almost all of which are focused on the dead.

Most Japanese homes in which an immediate relative has died have a family altar, known as a *butsudan* (see fig. 2), at which family members perform rituals intended to care for the dead through prayer, the burning of incense, the offering of food, and in some sects chanting. Although anyone in the family can perform these rituals at any time, usually one person (often the eldest woman in the household) carries out the task on a regular basis. However, the frequency of these rituals varies enormously from

one household to another (Robert J. Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* [Stanford University Press, 1974]). Some do them daily, some monthly, others only at important times during the year such as the equinox or New Year. Similar rituals are performed at the family grave (see fig. 3), both on an ad hoc basis and during the vernal and autumnal equinox and the summer festival of the dead, known as *obon*. There is also a schedule of special rituals that are performed over the course of thirty-three or fifty years (depending upon the region of Japan) following the death of a family member that over the long run mark the transition of the deceased from an identity as an individual ancestor to a member of the collectivity of ancestors that form a lineage traced back to the origination of a particular family.

For our purposes here, the specifics of these rituals are less important than a simple point: Buddhism for most Japanese is about caring for and memorializing the dead. It involves the performance of rituals that express caring, concern, and love for deceased relatives (and sometimes friends) and provides a framework through which people can keep the dead alive in their own memories. Many of the people I know in Japan have explained that these rituals, while focused on the dead, are also about the living, because they offer a way to think about lost loved ones on a regular basis and, through the rituals, to calm one's inner self with memories of those loved ones.

A second point is also important here. For most Japanese, the people charged with the responsibility of carrying out these rituals are one's children. The normal pattern and cultural expectation is that each generation eventually takes over performance of ancestor memorialization rituals from the elder generation. As a result, children are an important element in rituals associated with ancestor memorialization, because

it is one's descendants who will eventually perform the Buddhist practices that focus on caring for one's own ancestral spirits. Indeed, the youngest members of a Japanese household often have only limited involvement in Buddhist ancestor rituals, only to find that as they grow older and their grandparents or parents die, their own role in the performance of these rituals increases or becomes central.

Buddhism and Demographic Change

The consequences of population aging and decline for this type of ritual system are fairly obvious. If children are the ones expected to carry on ancestor rituals and the number of children is dropping precipitously, then there is an inherent problem looming in terms of the capacity to perform the rituals in the future. Fewer children means fewer descendants available to visit the family grave or to take care of the family altar. With many Japanese never marrying and having no children, there is a significant proportion of the population for whom there are no descendants to take on this responsibility. This problem is exacerbated in a modern, mobile society such as Japan's, where children often move far from their natal homes in order to pursue education and a career.

A variety of solutions to this problem have emerged in recent years. Some Buddhist temples have provided a service in which, for a fee, a temple priest will see to it that daily ritual memorialization is performed for those who either lack a descendant or do not want to burden their children with perpetual care.

Others have sought novel approaches to coping with death by developing new rituals that may be inspired by aspects of Buddhism but are not actually directly connected with a Buddhist institution.

In her book *Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites* (University of Hawaii Press, 2010), the anthropologist Satsuki Kawano of the University of Guelph in Canada has explored one example of these novel approaches to dealing with the afterlife in which people have begun moving away from traditional Buddhist practices that involve interment of cremated remains in a common family grave. Instead, some Japanese are choosing to have their ashes scattered in the ocean or in mountain areas without a traditional gravestone. And in some cases, "cemeteries" have emerged in which cremains are buried and a tree is planted above them without a specific marker indicating whose ashes rest beneath. Family members who know where the grave is can visit and perform rituals that usually follow a pattern associated

with more traditional Buddhist practice, but in the long run the location will be forgotten and the rituals will come to an end. This is quite different from the expectation in traditional Buddhist memorialization rituals in which the rituals are assumed to be performed indefinitely by one's children and their descendants.

Population Aging, Decline, and the Future of Japanese Buddhism

The combination of Japan's aging population and population decline presents a variety of challenges for the future of Japanese Buddhism. Some of these challenges are already being faced in rural parts of the country, where, owing to the intersection of low birthrate and out-migration of young people to urban areas, population aging and loss are well ahead of the country as a whole. Indeed, in some rural parts of Japan, such as the Tohoku region, which was struck by the tsunami-earthquake-radiation disaster in March of 2011, there are villages and towns that have already reached the point where more than 35 percent of the population is over the age of sixty-five.

From an institutional perspective, declining population can present major problems for Buddhist temples that, in a way similar to churches in other parts of the world, have parishes (*danka* in Japanese) that consist of a group of families that belong to a given temple. These families will often have their family grave at the temple cemetery and will contribute both money and work (in activities such as weeding temple grounds) for maintenance of both the temple building and the family of the priest. Unlike Buddhist priests in other Asian countries, in Japan it is normal for the temple priest to marry and have children. In fact, it is common for a child, normally the eldest son, to inherit the position of temple

priest from his father in much the same way children in other families inherit the family business (although another son or daughter may take on this role if the eldest son is unable or unwilling to do so). Members of the temple parish are often deeply involved with the family of their priest and will contribute funds that support the priest's family. For example, if the priest's son departs to study at a Buddhist college, with the intention of eventually taking over the temple, parish families may contribute money to pay for that child's education, with the expectation that he will return to become the head priest and perform the ancestor-related rituals needed for the families.

But fewer children means reduced options in terms of children who might take over the temple duties. It is not uncommon to find temples in which the priest and his wife have no children or their child is unwilling to take on the career of Buddhist priest. When this situation arises, the couple may adopt an adult who is interested in taking over the job of temple priest, but this can be difficult (particularly in rural areas), as many young people in Japan have interest neither in living in rural areas nor in running a Buddhist temple.

Declining population as a result of low birthrate and out-migration also means that the size of many temple parishes is shrinking, leaving temples with reduced funds to take care of building maintenance and thus placing financial burdens on the families that remain, many of whom consist of elderly couples who live on a fixed income and have little extra that can be used to support the temple. Some priests with whom I have spoken expect that in the not-too-distant future their temple will be forced to merge with another temple in order to continue operating, because there simply are not enough member families in the parish to maintain the temple and support its priest. One such priest I know is the head of a temple that has been in

existence for approximately eight hundred years, and he thinks that the temple may be forced to merge in the next twenty years or so as the members of the parish die out.

Another problem that some priests are facing is an increase in the number of abandoned graves left behind by families that have permanently moved away. This can mean increased work for the priest, who will need to maintain the grave, and also raises the issue of what are known as *muenbotoke*, or unattached spirits. This term has various meanings for Japanese, ranging from simply describing ancestors who are not ritually cared for to invoking a sense of wandering, hungry spirits who are lonely and thus inflict difficulties on the living, particularly on members of their family who have abandoned them. Because the cultural values associated with ancestor memorialization in Japan create an expectation of permanent, ongoing ritual care of the deceased, graves that are left uncared for cause disquiet among those living nearby because of uneasy feelings about the lack of care and, for some, the fear that angry spirits may be lurking in the area.

The intersection of population aging and decline will clearly have profound implications for Japanese Buddhism over the coming decades. Both individual Japanese and Buddhist institutions are faced with a problem of how to continue traditions associated with ancestral memorialization in a changing demographic climate where the future seems quite uncertain. In many ways, the most serious challenge facing Buddhism as a religious institution in contemporary Japan is related to the process of demographic change and the necessity to innovate and adjust in a climate where the number of parish members is shrinking and many individuals are looking for new ways to deal with the afterlife that put reduced burden on future generations. □

Longevity, Aging, and Meditation

by Lewis Richmond

The last third of a life is an ideal time to turn toward spiritual practice, and . . . the teachings and worldview of Buddhism are particularly pertinent to the challenges of aging.

People alive today will live substantially longer than any other people in history—a revolutionary development, one with far-reaching implications. The causes are many: health care, pure drinking water, safe childbirth, and healthy diet, to name a few. This change has occurred within a very short period of time. In the United States, the life expectancy in 1900 was forty-eight; today it is nearly eighty. In other countries—Japan, for example—life expectancy is even higher. Today, there are

an estimated one billion people over the age of sixty worldwide, and the fastest growing age group is the centenarian cohort—people over one hundred.

As a Buddhist priest and meditation teacher, I am particularly interested in the spiritual implications of this newfound longevity—implications that I have explored at length in my recently published book on aging and spiritual practice. The core premise of the book is twofold. First, the last third of a life is an ideal time to turn toward spiritual

practice, and second, the teachings and worldview of Buddhism are particularly pertinent to the challenges of aging.

There are many social trends associated with increasing longevity, among them isolation (in the United States, 40 percent of people over eighty live alone), the loss of elders' traditional role as sources of guidance and wisdom, and a sense that their value and meaning to society has eroded. In a recent article in *This Week*, Karina Martinez-Carter points out that in societies that have traditionally honored and valued elders—China, Korea, and Japan, for example—elders are more respected than in Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. But she reports that even in societies based on the “filial piety” of Confucian ethics, elders are not as well integrated or taken care of as in previous eras. Each society must address these issues in its own way, but elders themselves can also marshal their own inner resources by exploring the spiritual aspects of their lives. That is the mission of my book and of my teaching on aging.

At the beginning of the book there is a story about my first Buddhist teacher, Shunryu Suzuki. Suzuki was a Soto Zen priest who had come to America in the late 1950s to lead a Japanese-American congregation in San Francisco. Before long Suzuki had attracted a following of non-Japanese Americans who were interested in learning Zen meditation, myself among them. Most of Suzuki's meditation students were young, while Suzuki himself was about sixty.

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One day after a lecture, someone asked, “Suzuki Roshi, why do we practice *zazen* [Zen meditation]?”

Suzuki laughed and replied, “So you can enjoy your old age.”

We laughed with him, thinking he was joking. Actually, Suzuki was simply being honest, speaking from his own experience as a lifelong meditator. He had been ill that previous winter and was still weak from his illness, coughing and hoarse. Yet he laughed frequently; his whole demeanor radiated joy and contentment. How could this be? What was his secret? His answer and its implications highlight the connection between his meditation practice and his ability to face suffering, illness, and even impending demise with composure and equanimity.

The teaching of the Buddha begins with the fact that everything we know and love, including our precious selves, is destined to change, age, and eventually pass away. Because of this universal impermanence, human life is inevitably marked with loss (the Buddhist term is *dukkha*). We cannot stop these losses; they occur throughout our life and only increase with each passing decade. But we can see beyond loss to the gifts and spiritual lessons that are contained within it. This is essentially what the Buddha taught in the Four Noble Truths: loss is inevitable, there is a reason for loss, there is a way to transform this loss, and there is a path to achieving that transformation. The Buddha taught these truths long ago, but as we enter a new millennium of

increased longevity, these venerable teachings have fresh applicability.

Fundamental Meaning

People at every age need two essential nutrients for mental and spiritual health: meaning and connection. Without these two factors, our life quickly becomes stale; we lose vitality and can lapse into sadness and even depression. When we are young, the world offers both of these factors to us naturally—through parents and family, school, job, career, intimate relationships, and friendships. When we are older, on the “downhill” slope of life, these youthful sources do not flow as naturally and become harder to sustain; we have to work to preserve and reinvent them.

There are two kinds of meaning: “worldly” and “fundamental.” Examples of worldly sources are past accomplishments, current activities, personal relationships, and future plans. Fundamental meaning points to the spiritual realm, and practices such as meditation can provide fundamental meaning even when worldly sources falter. The worldly sources are important, of course. Elders derive meaning and comfort from looking back at their life accomplishments. A recent *New York Times* article by John Tierney highlighted research showing that, contrary to conventional wisdom, “nostalgia” can improve mood and lift spirits. Erik Erikson, author of the 1950s classic *Childhood and Society* and creator of the theory of the eight life stages of human development, had a term for

this looking back: he called it integration. Erikson felt that integration was key to successful aging. However, reviewing the past can also bring up sadness and regret for mistakes made, for paths not taken, for dreams not attained. In the same way, elders sometimes see the future as fraught with worry—financial, relational, familial, medical. The other worldly sources of meaning—present activity, relationships, and future plans—can also falter or be found wanting.

It is in the unconditional ground of the present moment that elders can find their deepest meaning—a meaning apart from what they have done, failed to do, or can no longer do. This is what Suzuki meant when he said the purpose of meditation was to enjoy your

old age. He also said, “That you are here right now is an ultimate fact.” We experience this ultimate fact directly whenever we sit in meditation, focusing on the flow of breath and resting in the ebb and flow of present-moment awareness. I call this awareness vertical time, in contrast to the more familiar horizontal time of past memories and future concerns. When older people practice vertical time, they often report a sense of comfort and ease in simply resting in the “ultimate fact” of breath. The breath has no past, present, or future. This moment’s breath is the same as the first breath you ever took and the last breath you will ever take. Breath is life itself. That is why the Buddha taught mindfulness of breathing as the ground of spiritual life.

In the classic eight Eriksonian life stages, integration was considered the final stage. But recently Erikson’s successors have proposed a ninth stage, called gerotranscendence. This is the stage of spiritual journey, transcending the daily travails of declining health and vitality. Meditation is a form of gerotranscendence. Experiencing the ultimate fact of breath, feeling the flow of being alive and being in this moment regardless of circumstance, transforms loss and opens the heart to compassion for ourselves and others.

Fundamental Connection

Connection, or belonging, is equally important in the elder years. As with meaning, there are several forms of worldly connection. One example would be belonging to social groups, especially church or community groups. My book cites a research study showing that elders who belong to a church or spiritual group live an average of seven years longer than those who don’t. That is a striking result. The study’s authors did not hypothesize a cause for this difference, but it does demonstrate that

connection sustains us not just mentally and emotionally but physically.

However, the law of impermanence is inescapable. Over time, connections fray and fade, and in aging especially, we cannot rely on them as permanent or fixed treasures. As with meaning, there is the deeper and more lasting treasure of fundamental connection that arises naturally in spiritual practice. In the Metta (Loving-kindness) Sutta, the Buddha teaches, “With a boundless mind should one cherish all living things, suffusing love over the entire world, above, below, and all around without limit; so as we meditate let us cultivate an infinite goodwill toward the whole world.”

For Buddhists this has always been a matter of religious conviction. But recent science agrees. In the July 5, 2013, issue of the *New York Times*, Dr. David DeSteno, professor of psychology at Northeastern University, reported on an experiment he conducted to see if meditation did indeed lead to increased compassion and connection. He had a group of people with no prior experience in meditation take a six-week meditation course. Then, one at a time, he had each

of these subjects enter a waiting room with three chairs, two of them already occupied. As the subject sat down in the one remaining chair, a fourth person entered—a woman with a cast on her foot, on crutches, moaning audibly in pain. (Actually this woman was an actor working for the experimenters.)

The two people already seated (also actors) when the subject entered did not react or respond. Dr. DeSteno requested this nonresponse to create the “bystander effect,” a well-known psychological phenomenon that inhibits a person from helping someone else if the person sees that others in the situation (bystanders) are taking no action. Dr. DeSteno used the bystander effect to create an additional barrier for the subjects of the experiment to respond to the woman in pain.

Among subjects in a control group that had not taken the meditation course, only 17 percent offered their seat to the woman—“an admittedly disheartening fact,” Dr. DeSteno comments. But among the new meditators, 50 percent gave up their seat. Dr. DeSteno is not certain why such a short exposure to meditation led to the threefold increase in compassionate response, but he says,

“My favored explanation . . . derives from [meditation’s] ability to foster a view that all beings are interconnected.”

This is Buddhism’s conclusion too. This effect does not depend on life circumstance or other worldly connections of friends and family. Fundamental connection is intrinsic, it is part of being alive, and no matter how old or infirm we become, on each breath and in each moment—even in our last moment—we can feel one with the universe and everything in it. This is what the Buddha teaches, and if we accept Dr. DeSteno’s results, this is what modern science confirms.

Conclusions and Gratitude

Increased longevity presents a multidimensional challenge that will require a variety of solutions, including the spiritual. From a search of the online and written literature on aging, it seems that the spiritual aspects of aging are just now starting to be identified and addressed, and every spiritual tradition and faith has something to offer. My book provides many contemplative exercises, some drawn from non-Buddhist traditions, and in workshops and lectures I teach these exercises to a variety of audiences. Recently I have been teaching this material in Christian churches, where it has been enthusiastically received.

Many of the spiritual values invoked by the contemplative exercises are universal. For example, gratitude is a potent counterweight to loss. For each instance of loss, we have the opportunity to focus our attention on what we have not lost—on the gifts that remain. To invoke gratitude, I teach a simple practice called the thank-you prayer. It consists of my reciting the words “thank you” four or five times, with pauses in between for people to notice what images or thoughts spontaneously arise in the mind. Some people’s experiences are

quite striking. One man, grieving from a recent divorce, said that what came into his awareness was the taste of cinnamon. He had sustained a great loss, but the taste of cinnamon endured for him and arose in his mind as a gift. I also teach people how to take a gratitude walk, combining exercise in nature with noticing things in the surroundings to be grateful for. For one person, seeing wild blackberries evoked gratitude. That is but one example; it can be anything.

I typically conclude a day of teachings with a short prayer. I call it the *metta* prayer of aging, since it is adapted from the Metta Sutta:

As I grow older, may I be kind to myself;

As I grow older, may I accept joy and sorrow;

As I grow older, may I find contentment in all of my days.

As each of us grows older, may we be kind to ourselves;

As each of us grows older, may we accept joy and sorrow;

As each of us grows older, may we find contentment in all of our days.

As all beings grow older, may they be kind to themselves;

As all beings grow older, may they accept joy and sorrow;

As all beings grow older, may they find contentment in all of their days.

As is traditional in Buddhist practice, we apply the prayer first to ourselves, then to the group, and finally to all beings—acknowledging that while we ourselves are aging, we are not aging alone. The people close to us are aging too, and elsewhere on the planet a billion other human beings are aging with us.

Though this prayer has a Buddhist source, it is a practice that people of all faiths can appreciate. Many members of the churches where I have taught recite this prayer daily and derive solace and encouragement from it. Whatever our faith, whatever our culture or background, the fact of aging is universal. Ours may be the first generation to experience the new longevity, but we are surely not the last. This is the new normal for human life, and it behooves us all, young and old, to embrace it fully as we strive to become, in the words of the Dalai Lama, “sincere human beings.”

May it be so. □

Germany's Aging Society: What Does This Mean for Us?

by Maren von der Heyde

The aging population and the fall in birthrate pose great challenges not only for Germany but for all industrialized countries. . . . Who will care for us if we need care and attention?

For a long while it has been well known that the age pyramid has been changing substantially in the industrial countries. From a population structure in which a sufficient number of young people “carried” a few aged, there are now a proportionally small number of younger employees who “carry” an increasingly older population. What certainly looked like a pyramid in 1900 has become the shape of a mushroom. Like Japan’s population, Germany’s is also shrinking. Excluding potential immigration, 30 million fewer people will live in Germany in 2050, according to estimates.

How will that happen? Following the baby boom in Germany during the late fifties and early sixties, since the seventies an average of only 1.4 children are being born per woman of childbearing age. This decrease is related to a different economic structure as well as to the changing role of women in society. In contrast to preindustrial times, care for aging parents no longer depends on the number of their own children providing direct support. In addition to that, our life expectancy is about a third higher than that of our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers, thanks to better living conditions.

The aging population and the fall in birthrate pose great challenges not only for Germany but for all industrialized

countries. Who will still be employed when older people retire? Do we accept being an immigration society and poaching other countries’ workforces? Who will care for us if we need care and attention? How do we handle a growing number of people with dementia? What sort of jobs will keep people employed after reaching retirement age?

However, apart from all of those worries and questions, it should be emphasized that from a Christian point of view, longevity is a great gift, particularly because not only do we grow much older than did our great-grandparents but we also grow old quite differently. The West Germany of the 1970s knew something like full employment. Social security funding was sufficient. The income level wasn’t bad. Life expectancy increased. Now, a report by the Federal Ministry of Economics confirms that people above the age of eighty have more disposable income than all generations before them. For years, travel agents have wooed the elderly as “silver agers.” They are the ones who can afford expensive holidays.

For both women and men, reaching retirement age does not mean saying good-bye to social life or any other meaningful activity. Besides those who accept a higher retirement age, there are those who want to work beyond the

retirement age or who go to court to get their old jobs back. In many cases later retirement might also reflect financial needs. Whatever the case may be, there is a noticeable trend to work for more years, particularly if the work is pleasant and independent. Old age in Germany is as colorful and diverse as the rest of life.

In 2009 the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) edited a booklet that deals with all of these issues for guidance (*Im Alter neu werden können: Evangelische Perspektiven für Individuum, Gesellschaft und Kirche* [Becoming new in old age: Evangelical perspectives for individuals, society, and church]). In addressing the trend for later retirement, EKD states that a person’s age should not be defined only in physical or temporal terms. Considering people only in terms of their age can lead to discrimination and therefore violate their human rights. In many cases, seventy-five-year-olds today do not want to be called “old,” nor would they even call friends ten years older than they are “old folks.” In their eyes, old age begins only when a person starts to need care and attention. The status of the elderly should therefore be studied more closely. Moreover, the diversity of lifestyles cannot be adequately described by a specific phase in life or by the specification of any given age. According to a recent study by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research, for example, some people are athletic even at a ripe old age. Today’s retirees in Germany are sprightlier than ever. They rely on a healthy diet, exercise, and sufficient sleep.

Maren von der Heyde was born in Hamburg and studied theology at the University of Hamburg and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is married and a mother of three adult children. Rev. von der Heyde was ordained in 1988 and has served in a rural parish and as Asia Secretary for her church; she is now the head of diaconal services in the western part of Hamburg.

Sometimes the issue of physical fitness poses drawbacks for those who seek to live a long, successful, fulfilling life. A performance-oriented society shows no mercy to those who can't keep pace. According to public opinion, whoever can't stay fit is beyond help and just ages prematurely. This way of thinking might not be a far cry from scary scenarios about entitlement to appropriate medical treatment or care only for those who have always been fit and can therefore recover easily. Many German politicians, for instance, have sought votes by advocating fitness requirements or age limits for hip replacement at state expense.

An Aging Society— What Does That Mean for Christian Churches?

Issues of aging also impose new tasks on the churches, which have so far regarded old age as loss and diminution, even though the Bible itself offers many positive images of old age. A survey of parish pastors has shown that they themselves prefer not to think about getting old.

It is important to make visible the manifold facets and faces of life in old age and to understand what it might mean to renew ourselves at every age, even when we are wrinkled. Instead of aiming for a change of attitude toward old age only, Christianity should make clear that people are always changing and on the move as long as they live.

The knowledge that we will always depend on others is deeply rooted in

biblical faith. The ability or inability to do something is not based on the extent to which someone can live life independently. The greater vulnerability of the elderly can be seen as a special gift because it shows clearly that we are always at the giving and receiving ends at the same time. This insight might soften us up. It might bring more respect for old age. It could teach the “key players” an alternative view of life. But for this we must be ready now to value our vulnerability differently. Independence mustn't remain the only worthwhile aim.

In the Bible there are people who grow old and wise. I think of Simeon and Anna in the New Testament, who see the little child and recognize the Messiah. I remember Abraham, who had already given up the expectation of having a child with his wife, Sarah. Though

feeling very old, he and his wife finally had the long-awaited child. Probably they were not really very old. Large numbers in the Bible are often amazing hyperbole, and the Bible teaches that longevity allows frequent renewal. There can also be amazement that life is so short.

It is therefore necessary to picture old age in ways that are appropriate for us today. We need a new understanding of nursing and elder care, which leads us beyond health care alone. Churches must advocate that. It is necessary to develop forms of housing that connect a caring environment with the possibility of elders taking over self-chosen tasks, as well as bringing together people of different age groups. We need a positive understanding of immigration and cultural diversity; otherwise, we as the elderly, with only a few young ones left, will have a lonely old age.

The Diaconal Challenge: Care

Caring for the sick and elderly is a basic concern of the church. This concern arises from the biblical traditions of the first Christian congregations, which took care of the poor, the widows, the children, and the sick according to the example of the Jewish communities. This led to the first ecclesiastical hospitals and houses for the poor—in monasteries or in institutions founded by early lay movements (such as the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem in the Middle Ages) as well as by religious orders in many countries, including Germany.

In 1836, in the midst of industrialization and the growing impoverishment of people in industrial centers and in response to the need of urban dwellers in general, Theodor and Friederike Fliedner founded in Kaiserswerth the first Protestant sisterhood. It offered vocational training for young women for work in social and nursing professions. With this, health care became a concern of the Protestant faith. In the more than 175 years since then, health care as a profession has become a major concern of the Protestant church. It has taken many forms.

For many women, training in a health care profession was their first chance to lead an independent life. As “classical community nurses,” they rode through the community on bicycles, making regular visits and offering nursing services, which was at the same time one of the most successful models for the promotion of community life in parishes. Today many communities and Christian parishes wish to reestablish that kind of community care in their neighborhoods. They seek an answer to a society in which most people live alone, for which it is necessary to establish new ways and forms of low-profile neighborhood care.

With the introduction of the Nursing Care Insurance Act in 1995, as the most recent example, the classical community nurse was superseded by highly professionalized community health and social service centers run by churches, welfare organizations, or private entrepreneurs, responding to society’s increased demand for outpatient care. Outpatient care (provided by nurses in patients’ homes) needed to become professional and be restructured and self-financing. At the same time, everyone whose life is at risk should be guaranteed nursing

care and, even in the final stages of life, nursing care should also be available at home. What seems to be reasonable on the one hand reflects as well on the other hand the sometimes unreasonable expectations of individuals, which will become difficult to meet in future. This is a direct expression of a changing society. Today’s patients demand services and do not wish to wait for compassion.

Even though 70 percent of the elderly in Germany receive nursing care (which is a high percentage of the population), home nursing is no longer performed by family members, because they rarely live together. Women of the younger generation have outside jobs, because the young as well as the old and women as well as men desire independent lifestyles. Consequently, society has increasingly fragmented into microfamilies and single persons. The elderly who need nursing care also want to take active part in societal development and live independent lives.

Nursing care has become a legal right in Germany and is no longer a matter of charity. As much as this right seems self-evident, it has far-reaching consequences for society. Today community health and social service centers provide health care by staff with various professional qualifications. Besides professionalism and quality in health care, the quality of a human presence is at the core of all services. For church-run

health care services, this means upholding the dignity of every person and respecting his or her God-given uniqueness as well as preserving the person’s independence and self-reliance.

Church-run health care has an advantage over that of private providers, because nonprofit organizations are not obliged, and not even allowed, to make a profit or use more money than needed to operate their services. This is definitely an advantage in our eyes, meaning that every cent can be spent on care in all its dimensions (patients, quality, nurses, doctors, houses, administration, and so on). Churches are not allowed to subsidize their services from the church tax (levied in Germany and some other European countries), but support may come through the parish. Nevertheless, church-run services are exposed to competition. Like everyone else in that field, church-run health care needs enough money to meet operating expenses, to maintain high standards, and to pay reasonable salaries. This is difficult. Contributions from health insurance are small. Expectations for nursing care are properly high. Since the introduction of the Nursing Care Insurance Act, there are standards and a mechanism for the control of health insurance companies.

Nevertheless, the public image of nursing care is often negative. Most people do expect to need nursing care in old age. Distrust is great. Therefore it is not the scarcity of young people alone but also a lack of appreciation for this profession that may contribute to an acute shortage of nursing personnel in the near future.

It is obvious that caring for a person can also be emotionally difficult for the person receiving care. Generally speaking, nursing care risks making the beneficiaries feel that their individual human

rights are being violated. In Germany no sphere of life is so legally regulated as elder care. Quality, thorough training, and regular supervision of personnel are given high importance. Critics demand time and again that nursing care be checked for compliance with human rights standards.

The Diaconal Challenge: How Do We Become a Dementia-Sensitive Church?

Still another dimension must be added to the issue of elderly health care. In our society of longevity, dementia will more and more become the main form of geriatric illness. Recent calculations show that more than 1.4 million people in Germany already suffer from dementia. Every year about 300,000 new cases are added. According to experts, the total number will increase to about 3 million by 2050. A third of people over the age of eighty-one are affected, and the number of younger people (over the age of fifty) with dementia is steadily increasing. It is assumed that very soon every family will be concerned with dementia in one form or another.

Dementia is therefore an issue concerning all of us, and it challenges Christian churches in a particular way. Many people with dementia live right among us—as relatives, friends, or neighbors. Some have been involved in their parishes for many years. Now they are dependent on our help as attentive people who meet patiently with those who are afflicted, respect their dignity, and offer them orientation and protection.

Dementia seriously changes the lives of its victims. All the people affected, whether the sick or their relatives, are rapidly isolated. This illness confronts us as church members and people of faith with basic questions: What constitutes a human being? What makes a person in God's image: the spirit, the

intellect, the ability to relate, the capacity to speak? Is a person with dementia still able to believe in God?

Christian faith is rooted in the word, in language and understanding. What is left if words aren't understood anymore and if meaning cannot be comprehended anymore?

Christian faith lives with memories—the Bible is a book full of stories in which people remember and reflect on their experiences of God. What remains if memories slip away?

And Christian faith is based on relationships, including the relationship between God and human beings, and confidence in this relationship. What remains if the ability to relate is lost, because one no longer recognizes family members or oneself?

We should earnestly reflect on our self-understanding as the Christian Church and foster the development of a dementia-sensitive church that can serve as a role model for other groups in society in dealing with the issue of dementia. This would mean

- not ostracizing people with dementia and their relatives but incorporating them into congregational life;
- making active companionship a bulwark against isolation, anxiety, and resignation;
- not avoiding affected persons and their families by regarding people with dementia only as sick and referring them to "experts" and "special services";
- recognizing that human diversity is a blessing and that segregation as long-lasting experience does not correspond to human existence; and
- opening up to uncertainties and considering them as resources and catalysts for the necessary processes of change.

In Hamburg, therefore, a pilot office (*Lotsenbüro*) has been in operation for more than ten years, resulting from the

initiative of one parish. It offers advice and support to relatives of persons with dementia, help in understanding the effects of dementia, and the chance to engage themselves in an honorable capacity. The demands on this place have increased so much over the years that we have had to find a way to give the part-time staff permanent employment. Finally we have been able to do so. Moreover, several offices of the Christian church in Hamburg have joined and engaged in a campaign for fall 2013 to sensitize society to issues of elder care. □

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Religion and Longevity in Society

by Vera Araújo

In all the great religions—Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so on—the older person has been placed at the center, as the bearer of values, spirituality, and wisdom; as a living witness of life; as a guardian of the cultural and religious memory of the people.

Living longer is markedly on the rise in postindustrial societies. In fact, it is one of the most evident changes taking place. In the abstract, it is considered to be one of the most desirable accomplishments in every cultural context, but it is also becoming a “problem” to be faced and resolved.

How can we explain this apparent contradiction?

In ancient societies, longevity was seen, experienced, and lived as a sort of cultural wealth. The elderly were the keepers of the society’s traditions, knowledge, and values and were tasked with transmitting this heritage to the young in order to guarantee the future. Therefore, elders were revered, honored, and seen as authoritative figures.

Now, in our globalized, postindustrial society, epochal changes are occurring. Deep transformations are taking place within organizations and social institutions, in the multiple dimensions of human life, and in the roles of the different social actors in their various phases of life: infancy, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age. These roles are in the process of finding new content and establishing new equilibrium. The phenomenon of urbanization, with its metropolises and megalopolises,

has forged a type of human coexistence where information and technological elements are creating new ways of relating and of establishing social bonds, still all to be explored and better understood (Bauman 2006, Giddens 2000).

I believe, however, that the most profound and disturbing changes are of a cultural, ethical, and spiritual nature. A great intellectual and lived effort is required to arrive at an understanding of the new culture that is emerging. This new culture imposes its own way of thinking and acting and uses its own scale of “values,” imprinting them on people’s behavior.

It is more clear now than ever before that with the increasingly free and fast circulation of goods, services, jobs, and different forms of capital and information also come imparted ideas and different mentalities, cultures, and lifestyles. The globalized society thus *transports* culture—but it does not limit itself to this, as it also *produces* culture. It is itself culture, that is, a new way of understanding and experiencing work relations, of establishing human relations as well as relations between states and communities of peoples. This is all permeated with the “logic of the market economy,” which imposes “its own criteria, its own values” (Archer 2006, Touraine 2009).

The essential traits that come largely into relief in this culture are the value of efficiency—whatever renders more in terms of productivity and material development—and the primary importance of technological innovation, societal consumption, and social image. These create a frenetic and problematic competition, as is characteristic of today’s economy and societal life (Giddens 1994).

Another fundamental characteristic of postmodernity is the role and function of technology and information, which have completely overturned the means, the instruments, and the very character of relations among human beings. New means of communication have opened up that were once unimaginable. We can now communicate in real time with people in every corner of the globe. We can now reach, by virtual means, the farthest and least-known regions of the world. The scientific community can share progress and research questions by working online. One can buy and sell products without leaving home. People can move huge sums of money without impediment (McLuhan and Powers, 1998).

Throughout history, humanity has never lived so close together, crowded in cities, one person next to the other. Never have we seen so much loneliness in homes, in buildings, in offices, in factories, and on the streets. Certainly, we form a mass, and groups and associations of every sort are available, but we often fail to recognize each other as men and women, as human beings who think and love.

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This analysis, this vision of mine, may seem negative, but is not meant to be. I wish only to be realistic and even optimistic, because I want to discover and highlight in our modern and globalized society the potential and positive values, as well as the new conditions, that can allow men and women today to take a leap of quality in their lives.

The new status of the world offers unheard-of opportunities to live and build solidarity, communion, and interdependence on a global level. The borders of national states are enlarged to the dimensions of the universal family, where sentiments and practices of mutual help are connected to a new awareness of the ties that unite us all as brothers and sisters in our humanity—beyond the diversity of race, language, ethnicity, faith, and religion, which are experienced as mutual enrichment and not as signs of contrast and division. It is a “unique and new opportunity to be taken, inventing the suitable instruments for this new adventure” (Araújo 2009).

The condition of old age in this type of society has changed profoundly in both the public and the private spheres of life, in the meaning attributed to the “autumn of life” today, in the role that the older adult is asked to assume, and in the difficulties that each individual encounters in facing the many changes taking place.

The exaltation of productivity and efficiency, along with the accelerated pace of daily life, brings the older person to live in a state of alienation, marginalization, and solitude. This reality

poses a challenge that should be faced and overcome by the various economic, political, cultural, and religious forces (Bauman 2003).

For this model of society, we must once again underline and promote a type of old age that is free from the predominant image of passivity and unproductiveness and is, rather, full of valuable resources for the growth and maturation of society.

We need to launch a whole series of public policies that not only respect the dignity of the elderly but also provide support for the typical needs of old age, policies that are able to grasp and welcome the abilities, qualities, and values of older people.

The material wealth that modern life is able to produce, despite the cyclical economic crises, is useful and well spent when it improves the living conditions and quality of life of every member of society, beginning with the weakest and most defenseless: children and the elderly. It is in this that we can gauge—among other things—the level of civilization of any political community in any part of the world.

When the United Nations proclaimed 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, it also stated that the progressive aging of the world population would represent one of the priorities of the twenty-first century. Yet we must admit that the problematic world of the aged is still the least known while also being the most urgent one to face. (On the occasion of the World Day of the Older Adult in 1998, UN Secretary-General

Kofi Annan stated in his message: “A society for all ages, a society that far from depicting older people as ill and retired, considers them instead as agents and beneficiaries of development.”)

The issues involved are known to many both from the studies and the profuse statistics published by national and international institutions and from the daily experience of each of us in our personal, family, and social life. (According to the figures and estimates of demographic studies, the United Nations foresees that the number of eighty-year-olds and older that were present in the world at the beginning of the current century (66 million) is destined to grow to 370 million by 2050, when among them there will be 2.2 million centenarians.)

The challenge is a global one, as it regards not only the highly developed nations but also those that are still developing.

The growing longevity of the world population is linked to a number of contributing factors: above all, the decrease in fertility and birthrates, which causes the pendulum of most populations to swing toward a higher number of older adults. Growing longevity is also attributed to the improvements in general living conditions, especially in nutrition and hygiene. Lastly, it is also due to scientific advances, specifically in medicine. We can therefore speak of success, of a wonderful outcome for the life of society. Nowadays, to live to a ripe old age is more possible than ever—and even desirable. The other side of the coin, however, is the *quality* of old age. It is

not enough only to live many years; it is necessary to live them well, in acceptable conditions.

From the point of view of health care, especially in wealthier nations, clear progress has been made. The people who create social policies try their best—though they do not always succeed—to provide the necessary support for the typical illnesses of old age. Treatments, social service programs, home care services, and health care facilities are often efficient from a technical point of view but not always from a purely human perspective.

The well-known American sociologist Richard Sennett, besides deploring this lack of compassion, also forcefully calls for social services not only to offer financial aid but to be full of “respect” for the dignity of each person assisted (Sennett 2004).

However, it is precisely the role of older adults in both public and private life, with their typical and also indispensable contribution, on which the future of our model of society hinges.

A closer and deeper study cannot but realize that “confusing” the different ages of life (infancy, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age) can be devastating for the formation and maturation of each individual social actor—and, in fact, often is. It is the interdependence and reciprocity of roles that allows for a healthy and balanced growth. Each age group has to live its life experience in a different way. The presence of those who have more experience and wisdom in life is crucial for those who are going through more difficult and complex periods. Older people generally know how to dole out their time, respecting other people’s independence and intervening only when needed to offer guidance, clarification, support, affection, and friendship.

This human, cultural, and spiritual scenario calls for the contribution of religions, which have always been the playing field of positive human relationships

and, precisely for this reason, have been recognized as teachers of humanity.

In all the great religions—Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and so on—the older person has been placed at the center, as the bearer of values, spirituality, and wisdom; as a living witness of life; as a guardian of the cultural and religious memory of the people. From this awareness comes a corresponding practice of those internal and external attitudes that we should have in relating to older people in every place and every situation.

The Bible, the sacred book of Judaism and Christianity, views old age as a gift of God: “The just will still give fruit in their old age, they will be green and flourishing” (Ps. 92:15); “Their bodies were buried in peace, but their names will live on forever” (Sir. 44:14).

And it highlights the specific charism of the aged:

“How much is attributed to white hair and to old people knowing how to give advice! How much we attribute wisdom to old people, the discernment and giving advice to honored persons! The crown of the aged is a multiple experience, their pride is their fear of the Lord” (Sir. 25:4–6).

The doctrine of Buddhism affirms as its nucleus the existence of three realities that cannot be avoided: suffering, old age, and death. However, it also teaches how to face, manage, and live them so as to illuminate and transform them into a journey toward the final step for full enlightenment.

In Hinduism one supposes that old age is the privileged moment of life in which experience counts above all. So the older person feels invited to retreat from normal life to dedicate him- or herself totally to doing penance and practicing self-discipline in order to reach the supreme ideal of perfection and, in the end, the definitive liberation of the soul.

Both in Buddhism and in other Asian religions, the role of the spiritual teacher is fundamental, which often

also coincides with the state of old age. Both the guru and the bodhisattva, even though in different ways, play a determinative role in the life of the community and of their disciples.

In the first Christian communities (first century CE) we can find praiseworthy figures of older people such as Zecharia and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–25), Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:22–38), and the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20:17–37). Throughout the whole history of the church, older people had an important role and were revered, honored, and cared for by the others.

Now the task of religions for people of all ages in society is to broaden, comprehend, and set in motion a truly innovative stimulus for social change. It is not enough to continue to live according to one’s own vision of old age in one’s own community. Rather, it is a matter of *bearing witness*, of influencing and innervating the structures of the political institutions that assist older adults. This requires a greater presence of the members of one’s community in societal and political life—the fruit of the understanding that the structures of society today truly serve as mediators among people in public and also, to a certain degree, private life.

What is at play here is the recognition that the service that religions are called on to render to the world is not just in regard to major issues such as peace, environmental protection, human rights, the common good, and so on. Religions must also be the cohesive force of society, where relationships are or can become closer and where diversity—diversity of any kind—often provokes or can cause difficulties, suffering, and tensions.

This is a new task, broader and more universal, more encompassing of all humanity—and perhaps a more humbling one because more effective, more liberating, and a bearer of good.

I would like to conclude this reflection with two brief texts on old age written by two great figures of our time:

Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, a great mystic and bearer of the charism and spirituality of unity, who was active in every form of dialogue, including interreligious dialogue; and Igino Giordani, a politician, writer, journalist, and husband, one of the great figures of twentieth-century Europe and cofounder of the Focolare Movement with Chiara.

Giordani wrote:

The fate of the fruit tree bears some resemblance to the human being's lot, bearing fruit in due season. While it flowers there is birdsong and chirruping around the tree, warm winds and sunshine; and while it brings its apples to ripeness the whole of nature in a veritable orgy wraps it in warmth. Then its cultivators retire into their farmhouses and kitchens and after some brief show of life and color in the autumn, cold silence takes over, under a leaden sky, bringing the leaves, like last tears, down on to the dry ground. And so it happens to human beings, when they have passed the age of maximum yield. Delusions and friendships fall like leaves, an enveloping silence reigns, and the countryside becomes mournful: they are left gradually all alone to contemplate, as mute spectators, the progress of their own dissolution.

Nonetheless, just as in that cold and in that solitude, the tree is preparing for the new spring, gathering warmth and sap, so can human beings make of that winter ebb of friends and strength the gathering of a vigor fraught with a new existence: they can use that desertion by people to cling to God, to fill up that decline of the human element with divine grace: and then, within the silence that has been intensified to gigantic proportions by ingratitude and avarice, over their wasted and cold old age, they

can fill themselves with the warmth of God, mount inwardly to the extent that they sink outwardly, and yield people a harvest which is not reckoned by economics but is calculated by theology. In the human being's winter, God's spring begins. (*Diary of Fire* [New City Press, 1981], 32–33)

Chiara Lubich wrote:

Perhaps our eye is not trained to see beauty, or sees beauty only in a certain sector of human, and natural, life. For we have not trained the soul. But in God's sight, where is the greatest beauty: in the child who looks at you with innocent little eyes, so like the clarity of nature and so lively; or in the young girl who glistens with the freshness of a newly opened flower; or in the wizened and white-haired old man, bent double, almost unable to do anything, perhaps only waiting for death? The grain of wheat contains such promise when, more slender than a wisp of grass, and bunched together with fellow grains that surround and form the ear, it awaits the time when it will ripen and be free, then it is beautiful and full of hope! It is, however, also beautiful when, ripe at last, it is chosen from among others, it gives life to other ears of wheat—this grain that now contains life itself. It is beautiful; it is the one chosen for future generations of harvests. But when, shriveling underground, it reduces its being almost to nothing, grows concentrated, and slowly dies, decaying, to give life to a tiny plant that is distinct from it and yet contains the life of the grain, then, perhaps, it is still more beautiful. Does God see things in this way? Those wrinkles that furrow the little old woman's forehead, that stooped and shaky gait, those brief words full of experience and wisdom, that gentle look

at once of a child and of a woman, but better than both, is a beauty we do not know. It is the grain of wheat which, being extinguished, is about to burst into a new life, different from before, in new heavens. I think God sees like this and that the approach to heaven is far more attractive than the various stages of the long journey of life, which basically serve only to open that door. (*Essential Writings* [New City Press, 2007], 157–58) □

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New Lifestyles among Older Persons: Successful Aging in Japan

by Haruo Sagaza

Ikigai . . . is a unique Japanese term that signifies experiencing joy and purpose in life. . . . Ikigai may be described as an essential objective for successful aging.

Prior to Respect for the Aged Day, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications announced on September 15, 2013, estimates of the Japanese population as of that date. These show that while the population as a whole had declined by 240,000 from the previous year, the number of persons aged sixty-five and older had risen by 1,120,000 to 31,860,000, bringing their share of the population to 25 percent. This increase in the older population was due in large part to the baby boomers, born between 1947 and 1949, reaching the age of sixty-five. Also notable was a rise in the number of “old old” aged—seventy-five and over—by 430,000 to 15,600,000 (12.3 percent of the total population).

Older People’s Lifestyles in the Spotlight

The population is thus aging rapidly, and now that older people have grown to compose a social majority with an increased presence in society, both as recipients of social welfare services (such as long-term care and medical services) and as providers themselves of social welfare, older people’s lifestyles are under the spotlight more than ever before.

Alongside the fall in the birthrate, longevity has become commonplace,

and attitudes concerning the lives of older people have changed as their numbers have grown. Closely intertwined with this have been two developments: First, the idea that people can acquire new roles and lead active lives even as they grow old—in other words, belief in a process of development into old age—has become commonly accepted. And second, advances in gerontology in recent years have shown that older people do not experience decline in every aspect of their lives but that, instead,

intellectual decline, illness, and so forth can be avoided through improvements in medical care and individuals’ own efforts.

These developments point to ways in which older people can lead positive lives, and lifestyles informed by such thinking have come to be seen as desirable and are practiced by older people in contemporary Japan. In short, they are practicing what might be called “successful aging.”

Requirements and Purpose of Successful Aging

So what exactly is successful aging? To answer this question, let us first review

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how this term came into being. The concept was first put forward in American gerontology in the early 1960s. For some years previously, researchers on aging had been working to identify the conditions needed to raise feelings of satisfaction and well-being among older people, and it was as part of this trend that the theory of successful aging was proposed in 1961 in a paper by R. J. Havighurst, the well-known researcher of human development. Research on successful aging continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and extensive studies were conducted to explore the conditions required for successful aging, in the sense of growing old happily.

The conditions required for successful aging identified by E. B. Palmore were longevity, health, and satisfaction. J. W. Rowe and R. L. Khan similarly cited freedom from disease and disability (health), high cognitive and physical functioning, and social and productive engagement (activity) as necessary components of successful aging, and they also noted the inextricable relevance of quality of life in old age to subjective feelings of well-being.

In Japan, too, population aging from around this time was accompanied by growing interest in the subject of successful aging. In a work entitled *Eijingu no ningen kagaku* ("The human science of aging," 1993), I identified the following four factors as requirements for successful aging: health, longevity, activity, and satisfaction. These factors readily assist development into old age and are at the same time more likely to be met

by those who are well adapted to the developmental challenges of old age.

The conditions cited here do not themselves constitute successful aging but, rather, are the conditions that make successful aging possible. They are, in other words, independent variables. This leads us to the question of what state—that is, what dependent variable—arises from these conditions. I believe that it is ultimately a matter of *ikigai*, which is a unique Japanese term that signifies experiencing joy and purpose in life. Like well-being, *ikigai* is a subjective concept and is a value to be found embedded in the traditions of Japanese culture. *Ikigai* is a universal, positive feeling that can be experienced in every culture. In this sense,

ikigai may be described as an essential objective for successful aging.

Lifestyles and *Ikigai* of Older People in Japan

As Japanese society has aged, social mechanisms have emerged in response, as illustrated by the Japanese government's "General Principles Concerning Measures for the Aging Society." This is a new and revised version of an earlier government document under the same title and was adopted by the cabinet in 2012.

This document is intended to facilitate institutional action in response to the new circumstances that Japanese society faces, and it sets forth six basic

principles to guide such action: (1) changing how older people are viewed, (2) establishing a social security system to ensure peace of mind in old age, (3) utilizing older people's willpower and abilities, (4) enhancing local capabilities and creating stable communities, (5) creating safe and secure living environments, and (6) preparing people from a young age for a time when they can expect to live to be ninety and setting in train a "generation cycle." These guidelines propose the development of arrangements and living conditions that will allow new forms of successful aging in Japan.

Because of their bearing on successful aging, let us now examine the attitudes of older people in Japan, beginning with their health. According to a survey of older people's views on community involvement conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2009, 50 percent of those aged sixty or older reported that they were in "good" health. If the 30.1 percent who said that their health was "average" are included, this yields a figure of 80.1 percent. Among those still working, 61.2 percent said that their health was "good" and 28 percent said that it was "average," yielding a total of 89.2 percent. In the case of individuals with many close friends and acquaintances, the corresponding percentages were 60.7 percent and 26.6 percent, yielding a total of 87.3 percent. International comparative studies similarly show that older people in Japan enjoy high levels of health. As the population ages, staying healthy will depend heavily not only on, of course, the spread of medical services but also on the efforts of older people themselves to maintain and improve their health.

Moving on to the question of *ikigai* among older persons, as many as 82.5

percent of the respondents (aged sixty or older) to the above survey reported that they experienced some degree of *ikigai*, and it is interesting to note that the proportion is higher still when only those whose health is "good," who have "many friends and acquaintances," and who have "participated in independent activity" are considered. Thus it is evident that the attitudes of older people in Japan contribute to their successful aging.

Gerotranscendence

I would like to conclude this article with some observations on living during the terminal phase of human life. As of September 15, 2013, there were 4,540,000 people aged eighty-five or older in Japan, accounting for 3.6 percent of the total population, and it is forecast that the number of these "very old" individuals will exceed 10 million, or 9.2 percent of the population, in 2035, when the baby boomers turn eighty-five.

The very old have, to date, formed a minority and may safely be said to have traditionally been considered irrelevant to the question of how older people live their lives. Their increase from now on, however, will expand demand for nursing and long-term-care services and, more broadly, for independent-living support

services. Behavioral trends and lifestyles among the very old, formerly regarded simply as potential sufferers of dementia and geriatric diseases, will become major issues of concern in the future.

The American psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson famously divided human life into eight stages of development, the last of which was "late adulthood." Erikson suggested that this stage is marked by a psychosocial crisis of "integrity" versus "despair and disgust" and that this is resolved through

wisdom. Now that this stage of life has grown so long, however, a ninth stage—gerotranscendence—has been added by Erikson's wife, Joan Erikson, since his death.

The concept of gerotranscendence was first put forward in the 1980s by the Swedish gerontologist Lars Tornstam and his colleagues, who defined it as "a shift in meta perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one." Gerotranscendence signifies the transcendent tendencies manifested in the behavior and psychology of the very old. Tornstam explains that the inspiration for the concept originally derived from Oriental Zen thought.

In essence, what this concept does is divide those older people who appear, in the conventional colloquial parlance, to be senile into those who are clinically ill and those who are not and redefine the latter as gerotranscendent. Gerotranscendence is, in other words, a transcendent state manifested in the terminal phase of human life as a normal part of the aging process. I would suggest that this might be described as a state of ecstasy, and Japan's transition to becoming a superaged society provides a fitting opportunity to test hypotheses regarding the developmental stages of this terminal phase. □

Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, and Human Suffering: Classical, Modern, and Contemporary Approaches

by Stefan Grace

This is a report on the 2013 International Lotus Sutra Seminar, sponsored by Rissho Kosei-kai and held May 27–June 1, 2013, at the National Women’s Education Center of Japan in Ranzan, Saitama Prefecture.

All of the past international Lotus Sutra seminars—made possible with the support of Rissho Kosei-kai—have seen the coming together of the world’s greatest scholars in Buddhism and the humanities. The level at which they converse, with their layers of rich scholarly thought, tends to confuse and confound everyday people like me. At the 2012 conference, for example, with the weight of the recent devastating earthquake and tsunami weighing heavily upon them, the scholars struggled with the meaning

of human suffering and searched for ways that academia could contribute to finding real-world answers. It was a celebration of human life in learning that sometimes it is not theory that is needed but, rather, the idea—put forward by Dr. Hiroshi Munehiro Niwano—of “simply being there for people.”

A quote that perhaps most clearly reflects the content and theme of that conference came from participant Dr. Jessica L. Main: “One of the problems that religion faces today is that any action

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that it takes in society is considered illegitimate, yet religions are expected to be ethical and to somehow—despite this limitation—contribute to their broader society. One of the main themes that came up in the conference was how Buddhists have challenged this limitation and tried to find ways to relieve suffering in all of its forms.”

The 2013 conference, however, took on a very different mood, and the participants turned the full force of their intellectual acumen toward investigating the very basis of the reality implied when we utter the word *suffering*. Every presentation was a tour de force that stood at the pinnacle of modern humanities studies. Many of the presentations required knowledge of at least three languages and decades of learning in the fields of art, religion, literature, and philosophy even to begin to comprehend those presentations’ scope and significance. Despite this, however, the themes that developed were ones we can all identify with. The discussion frequently

returned to questions of self-identity, personal perspective, and the meaning of one's place in society: that is to say, who is the "I" that suffers?

In addition to the participants who gave presentations, the group included representatives from Rissho Kosei-kai, including Dr. Gene Reeves, who established the series of international Lotus Sutra seminars in 1994.

Coincidentally, my wife has a booklet entitled *Who Am I?* (by Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi) sitting on her nightstand at this very moment. It is a question I have asked myself since childhood and one that I am sure all people have asked themselves at one point or another. As a teen, in what was meant as consoling advice from my elders and peers, I was constantly told to "just be myself." What on earth do they mean? I thought. The more I tried to "be myself," the more distant I felt I became. How can we learn to encounter and understand this "self"? Perhaps it is an answer that can never be fully given, but I feel that in some way this particular conference allowed me a new insight into this question. I will return to this issue later.

From my perspective, the ideological core of the 2013 conference could be found in participant Dr. Hsiao-Lan Hu's presentation.

"The Forms of Avalokiteśvara and the Forms of Human Suffering"

Hsiao-Lan Hu, University of Detroit Mercy, Michigan

Dr. Hu's paper discussed the different forms that Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Jpn., Kannon Bosatsu) takes in her efforts to help human beings overcome their suffering. However, referring to Avalokiteśvara using the pronoun *her* is somewhat misleading, as Avalokiteśvara is not only a "*her*" but manifests in myriad ways according to the individual's needs and therefore may be a him, a her, or even an it. Dr. Hu told us that the fact

that Avalokiteśvara is usually depicted as female is rather significant given the strongly male-dominated atmosphere of premodern times. However, as fellow participant Dr. Jacqueline Stone pointed out in another discussion, women were more fairly represented in the very early Buddhist texts, and it was in Japan, from the Heian period (794–1185) in particular, that there was a "long slow decline" in the way women were treated.

According to many texts whose ideology grew out of this period, a woman is suitable for nirvana/heaven only if she is first transformed into a man, and otherwise all women are bound for the Blood Pool Hell because of their so-called physical impurities. Thus one can see that from the perspective of many in the premodern tradition, following the Heian period, simply by being a woman one belongs to a minority that lies outside the boundaries of "mainstream" Buddhist salvation. Despite the negativity and sexism that can be read into some Buddhist narratives, however, Dr. Hu argues that Avalokiteśvara can be seen as a symbol for cultural acceptance of minorities and alternative identities. It may also be that Avalokiteśvara's appearances as animals are suggestive of a sort of racial acceptance, where other races are seen as being so different as to be like animals but yet equal to oneself in terms of their capacity to achieve Buddhist awakening. From today's perspective, this may appear almost more racist than the alternative, but given the social environment at the time, it can be interpreted as being very positive and inclusivist.

What Avalokiteśvara can teach us, says Dr. Hu, is that shifting our identities to suit our environment is not about shame or trickery but about nonattachment to a stubborn fixed idea of a "true self." This is, of course, one of the most important concepts in Buddhism (if not *the* most important): the *anātman*, or "lack of fixed substantive essence in one's self-identity and one's environment." Therefore, Avalokiteśvara takes

on the twofold role of (1) allowing us to affirm and take pride in the diversity of our cultural and personal characteristics, which she herself displays, and (2) helping us understand, in Dr. Hu's words, that "when one clings to one's own way of conceiving oneself, one subjects oneself to bondage." That is to say, when we lock ourselves into one stereotype, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to understand the world from other perspectives, and this goes on to cause suffering for both ourselves and others.

"Liberating Women from the River of Desire: The Anan kōshiki and the Lotus Sutra"

Barbara Ambros, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In this paper Dr. Ambros explores the influence of the Lotus Sutra on the Anan kōshiki, a chanted ceremonial that honors Ananda. The ritual carries a special significance for Soto Zen Buddhist nuns in Japan. Ananda, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, played many roles in Buddhism: he served as the Buddha's personal attendant and recited all the Buddha's sermons at the First Council. One accomplishment that is of special significance to female practitioners was his success in persuading the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, to accept women into the sangha. So it is that this ceremonial gives praise and thanks to Ananda. Dr. Ambros showed that the fact that the medieval sections of the Anan kōshiki do not say women must become men to attain salvation reveals that this androcentric concept did not arise until the late medieval and early modern periods. Indeed, the section of the ceremonial that was added in the Edo period (1603–1868) refers to women's physical and spiritual hindrances quite explicitly.

However, Dr. Ambros suggests that the nuns themselves may not have focused on this negative discourse

about their female bodies. Instead, the nun responsible for the ceremonial's early modern revival appears to have considered it more important, in Dr. Ambros's words, that "by taking the tonsure, women can escape engaging in sexual relationships with men and attain enlightenment, thus preventing suffering." Dr. Stone in a comment pointed out that women's suffering associated with reproduction, especially the physical dangers of pregnancy and childbirth and the stigma of infertility, should be given greater recognition. Monastic renunciation provided a socially acceptable alternative. Dr. Ambros showed how a Buddhist ceremony that takes inspiration from the Lotus Sutra celebrates a path to overcoming suffering.

"A Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Ordeals: The Role of Suffering in Nichiren's Thought"

Jacqueline I. Stone, Princeton University, New Jersey

Dr. Stone's own paper explored the fascinating relationship between the personal suffering of the Japanese Buddhist monk Nichiren (1222–82) and the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren is famous in Japanese history for taking an extremely strong doctrinal stance in opposition to the popular religious narrative of his time. His perspective on the unsurpassable importance of the Lotus Sutra led to aggressive condemnation that saw him exiled and also led to the execution of some of his followers. Despite such crushing pressure

from without, Nichiren never backed down from his stance and conversely built up an ideological structure that not only placed his own struggles in the context of the Lotus Sutra but also wove his life narrative into the sutra's story and significance.

Dr. Stone told us how Nichiren saw himself as a real-life protagonist in the story of the Lotus in that, as the Lotus predicted, he suffered not only because he advocated for the Lotus in this lifetime but also because he had slandered it in a previous lifetime. From this perspective, Nichiren did not think of himself as a mere reader of the Lotus; he saw himself as a living expression of its story and a full agent of his own experience. This allowed him to experience joy in his suffering. Dr. Stone went on to elaborate on the ramifications of this understanding from the perspectives of morals and soteriological metaphysics (that is, describing the process leading to an understanding of ultimate reality).

She concluded that seeing one's own suffering, caused by outside influences, as having arisen from one's own inner self is a powerful tool in expressing a positive religious understanding. On the other hand, using the same tool to evaluate others becomes a negative tool of destruction that produces, rather than alleviates, suffering. Here again, we were able to see the importance of perspective, something that is very closely tied to one of the main themes in the Lotus Sutra, *upāya*, or skillful means.

"The Lotus Sutra and Expedient Means: The Philosophy and Politics of Enlightenment"

David Gardiner, Colorado College, Colorado Springs

Dr. Gardiner's paper recasts the term *skillful means* as *useful fiction* in a philosophical experiment to examine the result of intellectually inverting the positive interpretation of the Lotus Sutra. To put it more simply, Dr. Gardiner's paper explores the negative implications of the seeming open-mindedness and inclusivity of the Lotus. In this way, Dr. Gardiner sought not only to fulfill the brief in terms of the conference's theme but to involve the participants in a role-playing, through their actual debate, of the Buddhist concept of "two levels of truth."

Dr. Gardiner showed how the positivity of the Lotus narrative in which all religions take "different paths to the mountaintop" actually implicitly suggests that the "mountaintop" in question will always be a Buddhist one—thus showing that Buddhist religious inclusivity could just as easily be interpreted as proselytizing (that is, designed to recruit new members to the Buddhist sangha). Dr. Gardiner told us "religious pluralism is a blossoming topic—as is a discourse supportive of cultural pluralism in general." It was clear to all that Dr. Gardiner's work formed an important introduction to that topic.

In an excellently counterbalancing response, Dr. Hiroshi Munehiro Niwano

drew his own argument from the perspective of religious practice, showing that although a multiplicity of approaches may have logical worth from a scholarly perspective, the other side of the coin of Buddhist understanding (that is, “the other truth”) lies in actual practice—that is to say, practice that ignores the complicating influence of overtly intellectual analysis.

“Side by Side: Iconological Observations on the Twin Buddhas in Medieval Japanese Stone Carving”

Hank Glassman, Haverford College, Pennsylvania

Highlighting the importance of the concept of cooperating/contrasting pairs in Asian Buddhism, Dr. Glassman introduced the participants to a rich analysis of the significance of “twin buddha” stone carvings. The presentation was accompanied by a wealth of pictorial examples that highlighted the theme of duality. The overt or suggested sexual nature of many of the carvings showed the importance of the pairing of male and female in early Buddhist thought and harkened back to the Chinese Daoist symbology seen in the yin-yang schema. There, as well, we see opposites depicted as being fully realized only when they are positioned as intertwining and interdependent.

Dr. Glassman pointed out the event in chapter 11 of the Lotus Sutra where two buddhas miraculously occupy the same time and space, and he explained how this symbolizes the message of the two truths—according to which the things we see as physical manifestations in the everyday world always have two aspects to their “personalities.” One is in their fleeting and ever-changing nature, as one can see in the life span of everything from tiny ants to massive stars and planets. The other is in their shared and everlasting aspect, that is, as a “child of the Buddha” (as the auditor at the seminar Rev. Shoko

Mizutani, director of Rissho Kosei-kai International, referred to it).

Dr. Lucia Dolce also made the interesting remark that several of the commentaries on the Lotus tend toward an interpretation of the twin buddhas as existing in a sort of trinity. Here the two aspects are absorbed into a third category that contains and expresses both aspects.

Dr. Glassman concluded his paper by opining that “the identity of the two buddhas or the theological implications of the different pairings are not essential to understanding their clear message of love, companionship, caring, and acceptance.”

Thus we see that while having “two truths” can make the world seem separated into female and male or scholarship and practice, one can interpret the point of differentiation in the Lotus as a celebration of the coming together of mutually conditioning opposites.

“Process for Overcoming Suffering in the Lotus Sutra: Application of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Six Perfections”

Hiroshi Munehiro Niwano, Rissho Kosei-kai Gakurin Seminary, Tokyo

Dr. Niwano focused his paper on an outline of Rissho Kosei-kai practice and its foundations in the early teachings of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. It is said that Shakyamuni’s first sermon was recorded in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (the sutra that sets the Dharma wheel turning). There he discloses the reason for, and the answer to, all human suffering. This schema came to be known as the Four Noble Truths and is said to be a condensation of the Buddha’s entire understanding of causality and the interrelationship of all phenomena. Thus, Dr. Niwano explained to us, Rissho Kosei-kai’s understanding of the bodhisattva path and the way to perfect

religious consciousness is also outlined in a four-part schema that progresses from the stage of ignorance in regard to the causes of one’s own sufferings to a perfection of self through devotion of oneself to the happiness of others.

To illustrate how this ideology is actually put to use and manifests very real results, Dr. Niwano shared with us a story of a survivor of the 2011 Japanese tsunami disaster. She lost her home and her husband in the terrible circumstances of that day, but through her faith, she allowed herself to turn her suffering into motivation to help others. Through this, she was able not only, to some degree, to release others from their suffering but also to overcome some of her own.

By seeing our suffering as an opportunity given to us by the Buddha to see how we can help others, we are able to bring new meaning to our existence. Through the example of the Parable of the Burning House in the Lotus Sutra, where a father uses white lies to draw his children out of a fatal situation, Dr. Niwano showed how the use of *upāya*, or skillful means, can help us to understand others better and to learn to place less importance on our own ego. In this way Dr. Niwano implied that sometimes it can be perspective rather than struggle that leads us to freedom.

“Practices Related to the Lotus Sutra in Yanshou’s Zixing lu”

Yi-Hsun Huang, Fo Guang University, Taiwan

Dr. Huang’s paper shows that despite the strong sectarian demarcations seen in modern East Asian Buddhism—particularly in Japan—many monks in the developmental phases of Chinese Buddhism took a more syncretic approach and were far less inclined to stress the importance of one particular practice over another. Dr. Huang showed that for the Chinese monk Yongming Yanshou (904–975), Lotus Sutra–based meditation was a means to attaining rebirth in the Pure

Land of Amitābha (Jpn., Amida). Those with a knowledge of modern sectarian divisions will know that many Lotus Sutra-based traditions would eschew the sutra's use as a sort of meditational tool intended to induce a transcendental *samādhi* experience—preferring practical bodhisattva-style or praise-giving devotional-style practices.

Additionally, it may be opined that many Japanese True Pure Land sect adherents would object to the idea of the Lotus Sutra's being used as a tool to reach the land of their sect's figurehead, Amitābha. However, the discussion that developed highlighted the point that the Lotus actually provided Yanshou with a framework for bringing various practices together. Respondent Dr. Hu pointed out that this approach has historical precedents in Buddhism and that in Indian history it is more common to integrate other thought processes than it is to openly reject them. Shakyamuni himself incorporated many Hindu aspects into his thought system, and so one can see that Yanshou's position is, in fact, not unique. Dr. Huang pointed out that, interestingly, for Yanshou the Buddhist path does not end with birth in the Pure Land. Rather, the bodhisattva should then go on to cultivate his or her understanding of the meaning of emptiness. This brings us back to the theme of the Buddha's egolessness and also reflects Rissho Kosei-kai's stance on the importance of interfaith dialogue and suggests that sometimes strong self-identity can hinder us from fully perceiving reality.

“The Tantric Lotus Sutra: Another Lotus Tradition?”

Lucia Dolce, SOAS, University of London

Dr. Dolce's paper explores the way in which esoteric readings of the Lotus Sutra developed from the Heian (794–1185) and into the medieval period in Japan. Although meditational practices

involving the Lotus *samādhi* existed in Tang China, it was not until Buddhism started to take root in Japan that esoteric practices merged with the non-esoteric tradition of Tiantai/Tendai to become the Japanese Taimitsu school.

Dr. Dolce explained how the doctrinal and ritual uses of the Lotus Sutra are usually discussed in the context of Tiantai/Tendai Buddhism, but then showed how this is not the only way in which the Lotus has been understood in Japan. The important role that the sutra played in esoteric Buddhism implies that the classical material supporting this interpretation might be thought of as a category unto itself: that is, an “esoteric canon of the Lotus.”

Dr. Dolce told us how, among others, Nichiren's understanding of the Lotus was greatly influenced by esoteric interpretations of Buddhism. She also showed how mandalas (symbolic visual representations of the Buddhist teachings for practice and ritual) that represent Lotus thought are not purely confined to the Shingon—as they are prone to be described—but also appear in Nichiren's literature. Dr. Dolce concluded that “the construction of a Tantric tradition of the Lotus Sutra was a complex Japanese phenomenon” that “was sustained by the predominance of esoteric patterns of religious practice throughout the medieval period.” However, Dr. Dolce asserted that “the Lotus Sutra played a role in the reformulation of the category of the esoteric” and therefore “its esotericism was different from

the Tantric transformation that other scriptures underwent.” Thus, Dr. Dolce's paper added greatly to the discussion on how traditions are defined and what that means in terms of how they come to be perceived.

“The Role of the Lotus Sutra in Taixu's (1890–1947) Creation of Humanistic Buddhism”

Eric Goodell, Vinaya Translation Project, Taiwan

The way in which a thinker defines reality, and the factors taken into account—and equally important, the factors that are omitted—can have a significant impact on the way his or her system of thought develops and the way it is received by society. This point was highlighted in Dr. Goodell's discussion of the efforts of the twentieth-century Buddhist reformer Taixu. Just as a certain portion of our identity is a product of the times, Buddhist institutions have historically taken on many faces, depending on the era's social and political climate.

For example, as was seen in some of the other presentations, early Japanese Buddhism was notable for its use of invocation rituals, but Buddhism has become more closely identified with funeral rites in modern times. Buddhism in China has also undergone many changes over the centuries, facing particularly strong challenges in the early twentieth century.

During the time in which Taixu was active in promoting Buddhism, there was another school of thought that held that on a practical level in the twentieth century, what China needed most was the guidance of Confucian principles. Dr. Goodell explained how Taixu, on the other hand, drew from the Lotus Sutra and asserted the efficacy of Buddhism on multiple levels of human life, including the social and moral levels at which others thought Confucianism excelled. Taixu argued

that material development should be tempered by Buddhist ideals, and he worked to create a modified form of Buddhism that redefined Buddhist practice as being founded in the practice of morality, not only to lead China in a more healthy and prosperous direction but also to preserve the highest Buddhist ideals.

Dr. Goodell's paper made it clear that the way in which information is "packaged" can have a large effect on its spread and influence.

"Buddhist Faith in the Face of Death: The Lotus Sutra in the Life of a Chan Master"

Albert Welter, University of Winnipeg, Canada

Also on the theme of humanism in Buddhism, Dr. Welter took a complementary approach to that of Dr. Huang in his own discussion of the work of Yongming Yanshou.

Welter explained that later Chinese Tiantai-based Pure Land movements claimed Yanshou as one of their patriarchs, while Yanshou saw himself as a Chan master. However, Dr. Welter proposed that Yanshou's identity be modified as "Lotus Chan" or "bodhisattva Chan" owing to his devotion to alleviating suffering by doing good. It was because of Yanshou's decision to misappropriate government funds in order to purchase and free living beings that he himself became a focus of worship. Dr. Welter argued that this was a manifestation of Yanshou's understanding of the altruistic bodhisattva ideal as outlined in the Lotus Sutra. Although condemned to death for his crime, at the last minute he was reprieved because of his commitment to his stance and his refusal to beg for mercy. Seeing Yanshou's escape from death as the power to avoid falling into a Buddhist hell, his followers made him an object of reverence. Even today people engage in the ceremonious release of animals to follow his example.

According to Dr. Welter, Yanshou's actions—eschewing the showy and paradoxical displays of Chan understanding and seeking to provide real-world help to those who are suffering—show the seriousness of his commitment to the bodhisattva ideal. Perhaps the lesson we might learn from Dr. Welter's depiction of Yanshou's openness to a range of Buddhist practices is that foregoing one's own identity and remaining open to different viewpoints does not mean letting go of one's morals. In fact, it means that having a more diverse understanding allows us more easily to reach the moral goals we all pursue. Moreover, Yanshou's willingness to defy death, predicated on a faith in Buddhist altruism based on the Lotus Sutra, was much more challenging to the social and political order than the alleged antics of classic Chan masters like Linji Yixuan.

"The Many-Petaled Lotus: Chan Lineages and Chan Teachings in the Kingdom of Wuyue (907–978)"

Benjamin Brose, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Dr. Brose made the concept of sectarian identification in Chinese Buddhism the central theme in his eloquent and thought-provoking presentation.

For us today, *Chan* (Zen) has become an everyday term and is used in many different ways, but it seems fair to assume that all of its usages are intended as pointing back to some fixed, "real"

entity. However, Dr. Brose explained that in actuality, before the Song period (960–1279) in China—that is, long after the passing of most of the legendary Chan masters such as Huineng (Jpn., Enō; 638–713) and Zhaozhou (Jpn., Jōshū; 778–897)—there is no way to distinguish Chan from other sects, no unity in practice, and no Chan institution per se. Studies in Chinese Chan tend to focus very heavily on the Tang (618–907) and Song periods. However, Dr. Brose argued that it was, in fact, during the intervening Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period that some of the most significant developments in Chan took place.

Dr. Brose explained that during that period, rather than sectarian affiliation, what identified Chan monks was their reliance on lineage claims (that is, who they claimed as their master) and what that meant in terms of patronage from wealthy supporters. Buddhism in many respects depended on patronage for its continued existence, and it may even have been that, at times, religious awakening took a back seat to a system of financial and protection-based exchange in which the patrons saw themselves as receiving something tangible in return.

Summarily speaking, in this period the practice of invocations was widespread and the power classes made use of the monks' services for magical charms and ceremonies to ward off evil and promote prosperity. Thus the career of a given monk depended not only on religious attainment but on his ability

to bring concrete results for his patrons.

From this perspective, we can see the verisimilitude of Dr. Brose's suggestion that the lineage of Chan monks grew out of a certification of the talents of a monk from almost any Buddhist tradition rather than being representative of one certain "school" within Buddhism. Dr. Brose's presentation brings up the question for us today of how to balance our financial and societal needs and responsibilities in relation to our spiritual needs and highlights the necessity of careful self-evaluation.

"Samantabhadra, the Lotus Sutra, and the Moment of Death"

Miriam L. Levering, Professor Emerita, University of Tennessee; International Advisor, Rissho Kosei-kai, Tokyo

Dr. Levering's paper focuses on the significance of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Jpn., Fugen; Ch., Puxian) and twenty-one-day repentance retreats as portrayed in chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra and in the Sutra of Contemplation of the Dharma Practice of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the lives and practice of Chinese lay devotees and monastics prior to and during the Tang dynasty.

The Samantabhadra Contemplation Sutra is known to all heirs of Tendai and Tiantai thought as the Lotus Sutra's "Closing Sutra" and is in origin closely related to chapter 28 of that sutra. In trying to unravel how the Lotus Sutra's chapter 28 and the Closing Sutra could be so important to Chinese laity and monks—and yet practitioners could leave out important details of that sutra when recounting its effects upon their practice—Dr. Levering discussed what religious texts mean to the everyday practitioner and raised the idea of an "actual canon."

Canon, in the Buddhist context, refers to the collection of texts that have been deemed orthodox expressions of Buddhist thought. However, as is the case in many other religions, the

"actual" texts that are referred to and the sections that are accentuated vary greatly depending on the historical and cultural climate that informs the reader with their unique perspective.

For example, in the Protestant tradition, proclamations against wearing mixed-thread garments of wool and cotton, as seen in Leviticus, are not as stridently upheld as other sections of the same scripture. Buddhists alike tend to ignore sections they find unpalatable or difficult to understand, and this gives rise to a limited, "personal" canon in the practitioner's mind, which contains only the sections practitioners find personally relevant.

This very human trait can actually be seen in the structure of the Lotus Sutra itself, where it is evident that different editors have modified the text over time in accordance with what were then social norms and even their own personal interpretation. Although in the subsequent discussion the term *practical canon* was floated as an alternative for defining the same phenomenon, what is important is that we as human beings learn to understand the limitations that our historical and social context places on us, defining us in relation to others and in some cases ascribing to us an identity to which we do not agree. As Dr. Brose also pointed out, the realities of the social situation can often conflict with our religious ideals. However, what we can learn from this is to have a greater understanding of ourselves and recognize that our truth may not always be the truth for others.

Postseminar

After the four days of presentations and discussions, the group was treated to a trip to the Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma center in Chichibu and sightseeing at Chichibu Shrine, both west of Ranzan, in Saitama Prefecture, near Tokyo.

At the Dharma center, one of the chapter heads, Mrs. Arai, shared a very

sobering story of real-world suffering but then showed how she was able to overcome her difficulties through attempting to embody a life of others-benefiting compassion. For me, as someone who finds it very difficult to understand the meaning of Buddhist compassion, this was an inspiring and moving experience.

I was also surprised and impressed with the eloquence of a talk given by the minister, Rev. Kazumasa Iizuka, despite his evident nervousness at speaking in front of a large group of foreign guests. The minister encouraged the practice of giving compliments—something that he said was rather foreign in Japan—but not in the simple way one might expect. He urged us to really observe those around us in our daily lives and look deeply into what makes them special and then have the courage to share that with them. We should not, however, just "identify" or "define" them by saying that they are "well-dressed" or "good-looking," or give some other superficial comment. Rather, we should take the time to really try to understand the way they are expressing themselves and encourage them to find beauty in that expression.

The point I took away from the seminar this time is that none of us is really anyone until we choose to define ourselves (or someone else does). While being defined by markers such as *mother*, *father*, *son*, or *daughter* may bring huge amounts of joy, being defined as *unintelligent* or *unattractive* or *different* may make life so unbearable as to feel that it is not worth living. We often don't get any choice in deciding how others define us, but we always have the choice to decide how we want to perceive ourselves and how much we really need to suffer from the opinions of others. So, to return to the question I brought up in the introduction above, "Who am I?" perhaps the best response is: "No one. But every day I have the potential to be someone better than I was yesterday." □

A Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Ordeals: The Role of Suffering in Nichiren's Thought (1)

by Jacqueline I. Stone

Because Nichiren's sufferings bore out the predictions of the Lotus Sutra, they legitimated his course of action; identified him as a person whose advent was foretold by the Buddha, endowed with a unique destiny to spread the Lotus Sutra in the evil latter age; and even served to establish the truth of the Lotus Sutra itself.

This article is based on a paper presented at the International Lotus Sutra Seminar held May 27–June 1, 2013, near Tokyo by Rissho Kosei-kai on the theme "Buddhism, the Lotus Sutra, and human suffering: classical, modern, and contemporary approaches."

In Japan, no name is more closely associated with the Lotus Sutra than that of Nichiren (1222–82). Known today as the founder of the sect that bears his name, Nichiren taught a doctrine of exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sutra, expressed in the chanting of its *daimoku*, or its Japanese title: *Namu Myōhō Rengekyō*. Nichiren had trained in the Tendai Buddhist tradition, which takes the Lotus Sutra as fundamental. He himself maintained that the Buddha had intended the teachings in this one scripture specifically for the present evil era. Other teachings, he said, were no longer efficacious. Over the course of his preaching career, Nichiren's "Lotus only" stance and his criticisms of other Buddhist forms invited the anger of leading prelates and government officials. Attempts were made on his life. He was exiled twice and experienced periods of great danger and physical privation. What did this Buddhist teacher, who endured so many trials for his convictions, have to say about the nature of suffering?

Some of the most moving passages in Nichiren's extant writings are letters of condolence to his lay supporters, in which—before offering any sort of encouragement in faith—he

acknowledges the protracted, dislocating grief that follows the loss of loved ones. To a woman whose husband had died more than a year before, he wrote:

A house without a man is like a person without a soul (*tamashii*). Whom can you consult about affairs? And to whom can you feed good things? Even a day or two's separation would make you feel anxious, but he departed on the twenty-first day of the third month of last year, and though you waited out the year in anticipation of his return, he did not come back. Now already it is the seventh month of this year. Though he himself does not come, why does he not at least send word? The blossoms that once scattered now bloom again, the fallen fruit forms again on the trees; the spring breezes are unchanged, the autumn scenery is the same as it was last year. Why has this one matter alone altered, never to be the same again? . . . Heaven itself should resent and the earth grieve that this man has gone and does not return! ("Sennichi-ama gohenji," *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun* [hereafter *Teihon*], ed.

Risshō Daigaku Nichiren Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, 4 vols. [Minobusan Kuonji, 1952–59; rev. ed. 1988], 2:1762)

And, to a woman who had lost her sixteen-year-old son:

The wealth in your coffers and [the service of] your family retainers were all for this child's sake. You must have believed that, when you died, you would be carried to the fields [for burial] and have no further concerns [having left everything in his hands]. But contrary to the proper order, he died before you. "How could this happen? Surely this is a dream, an illusion! I will wake up, I will wake up!" you must have thought. But you do not wake, and already another year has passed. . . . If told there was a place where you could meet him, then surely without wings, you would soar to the heavens, and without a boat, you would cross to China. ("Ueno-ama gozen gohenji," *Teihon* 2:1859)

Such passages suggest that Nichiren was keenly aware of the sufferings of impermanence inherent in the human

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condition. To his followers he stressed that by chanting the *daimoku* of the Lotus Sutra one could “cross the sea of suffering” (“Shijji Shirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:227–28), establishing an inner freedom and security of mind that is independent of whether one’s circumstances are favorable or adverse. “Recognize suffering as suffering, enjoy pleasures for what they are, and whether in suffering or joy, keep chanting Namu-Myōhō-Renge-kyō,” he encouraged one follower. “Then you will know the happiness of the Dharma for yourself” (“Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 2:1181).

Yet Nichiren did not elaborate theoretically on samsaric suffering (samsara being the cycle of death and rebirth before attainment of nirvana) in a general

sense. Nor did he address in any substantial way the kind of suffering that can be alleviated through ordinary relief measures, such as caring for the sick or feeding the hungry, representative forms of charitable work carried out by some Buddhist priests in his day. But he did reflect, write, and teach at length about the causes and significance of suffering connected specifically with the Lotus Sutra. This essay will explore two intertwined dimensions of suffering fundamental to his thought: the suffering that comes from rejecting the Lotus Sutra, and the suffering that comes from

upholding it—the latter being a category of suffering that, without losing its quality as suffering, is also happiness.

The Most Terrible of Sins

Nichiren took as given the law of karmic causality, according to which suffering is the consequence of one’s prior misdeeds. However, his writings show little concern with the karmic consequences of such ordinary evils as killing, theft, deceit, or sexual misconduct. Rather, they focus on what Nichiren understood as an evil of an altogether different magnitude: maligning or slandering the true Dharma (*hihō shōbō*, or simply *hōbō*). The term “slander of the

true Dharma” occurs in a number of Mahayana sutras, where it often means to speak ill of Great Vehicle scriptures and was evidently intended to deflect criticism from the Buddhist mainstream that the Mahayana was not the Buddha’s teaching (*Mochizuki bukkyō daijiten* 5:4327c–28d). The Lotus Sutra itself warns of the horrific karmic retribution awaiting those guilty of this offense, most famously in the verse section of the “Parable” chapter, which represents the Buddha as saying: “One who, not believing, / maligns this scripture, / thereby cuts off the seeds of Buddhahood in all the worlds. . . / Such persons, at life’s end, / shall enter the Avīci Hell, / where they shall fulfill one kalpa. / When the kalpa is ended, they shall be reborn there, / in this way, spinning around, / for kalpas without number” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, *Taishō Tripiṭaka* [hereafter *T*] no. 262, 9:15b22–c1; Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, rev. ed. (Columbia University Press, 2009), 71–72 (the quoted text is slightly modified). The passage continues for numerous verses, detailing how such wretched offenders, at last emerging from the Avīci Hell, will be born as wild dogs, scabrous and emaciated, or as monstrous snakes, “deaf, stupid, and legless.” At last ascending to the human realm, they will repeatedly be born poor, deformed, and afflicted with disease, never to hear the Dharma for *kalpas* (aeons) numberless as the sands of the Ganges River. Even this, the Buddha declares, is a mere summary, for the evil recompense incurred

by those who malign the Lotus could never be explained in full, not even over the course of a *kalpa* (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:15c1–16a9; Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus*, 72–75). Nichiren, however, did not use the term *Dharma slander* simply to mean criticizing or maligning the Lotus Sutra but expanded the definition of this offense to include setting aside the Lotus, for whatever reason or motive, to embrace some lesser, provisional teaching. “To be born in a country where the Lotus Sutra has spread and neither to have faith in it nor practice it, is Dharma slander,” he wrote (*Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 1:12).

Nichiren redefined Dharma slander in this way very early in his career, in debate with followers of the “exclusive *nenbutsu*” (*senju nenbutsu*) movement initiated by Hōnen (1133–1212), founder of Japan’s independent Pure Land school. Hōnen and his disciples, like other people at the time, believed themselves to be living in the Final Dharma age (*mappō*), a degenerate era following the passing of Śākyamuni Buddha, when his teachings are filtered through an ever-more flawed understanding, and liberation becomes increasingly difficult to achieve. Hōnen had taught that now in the Final Dharma age, human religious capacity had declined to a point where most people were no longer capable of achieving liberation through the traditional disciplines of precept observance, meditation, and doctrinal study. Only by chanting the *nenbutsu*, the name of Amida Buddha, and relying upon that Buddha’s aid could people in this evil age escape the miserable round of deluded rebirth and be born in Amida’s Pure Land, where their enlightenment would then be assured. In promulgating Hōnen’s “*nenbutsu* only” teaching, his followers were especially critical of Lotus Sutra devotion—probably because the Lotus was commonly read, recited, and copied with the aim of birth in Amida’s Pure Land and was widely revered as the Buddha’s highest teaching. By Nichiren’s account, Hōnen’s

disciples argued that the Lotus Sutra was too profound for people of this deluded age. Attempting to practice it was like a small boy trying to wear his grandfather’s shoes or a physically weak person trying to use a stout bow and heavy armor. They further insisted that such statements did not amount to maligning the Lotus Sutra but simply reflected a realistic assessment of human shortcomings: Those who attempted to practice the Lotus were bound to fail in their efforts and fall after death into the evil realms of rebirth. One would do better to set aside the Lotus in this lifetime, chant the *nenbutsu* instead, and achieve birth in Amida’s Pure Land. Then one could attain the awakening of the Lotus Sutra there. It was in opposition to such arguments that Nichiren redefined “slander of the true Dharma” to mean, not merely speaking ill of the Lotus Sutra, but setting it aside in favor of lesser teachings (for a more detailed treatment, see Jacqueline I. Stone, “The Sin of Slandering the True Dharma in Nichiren’s Thought,” in *Sins and Sinners: Perspectives from Asian Religions*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara [Brill, 2012], 113–52).

For Nichiren, Hōnen’s focus on human limitations ignored what Nichiren understood to be the Buddha’s own distinction between true and provisional teachings. The Lotus was the sutra of which Śākyamuni himself had said, “In these forty years and more [before preaching this sutra], I have not yet revealed the truth” and “Frankly discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, T 9:386b1–2; *Wuliangyi jing*, T no. 276, 9:10a19). These passages formed the basis of the traditional Tendai *kyōhan*, or comparative classification of the Buddhist teachings, according to which the Buddha had first expounded a range of preparatory, incomplete teachings, accommodated to his hearers’ capacity, and only then revealed the full truth in the

Lotus Sutra. The *nenbutsu*, Nichiren argued, belonged to a lesser category of provisional Mahayana and did not represent the Buddha’s final intent. He likened it to the scaffolding erected in building a large stupa: once the stupa (the Lotus Sutra) has been completed, the scaffolding (the *nenbutsu*) should be dismantled (“*Nenbutsu mugen jigoku shō*,” *Teihon* 1:35). Precisely because the Lotus Sutra is profound, he said, it could save even the ignorant and evil persons of the last age. This same argument underlies Nichiren’s later criticisms, not only of the exclusive *nenbutsu*, but also of Zen, Ritsu, and the esoteric teachings (*shingon*).

We can identify at least three reasons why Nichiren held the Lotus Sutra to be superior to all others. First, only the Lotus Sutra, in his reading, enables all people to become buddhas. Other Mahayana sutras teach the emptiness and interpenetration of the dharmas, the ontological basis upon which all can in principle realize buddhahood. But according to the Tendai classification schema, this basis remains theoretical or incomplete in the provisional Mahayana, which denies the possibility of buddhahood to followers of the so-called Hinayana vehicles—*śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, who seek to escape the wheel of samsaric suffering in personal nirvana—as well as to women and evil men. Only the Lotus Sutra fully sets forth the nondual ground upon which the realization of buddhahood takes place and extends this possibility to all. Nichiren developed this claim using the Tendai concepts of the mutual possession of the ten realms (*jikkai gogu*) and the three thousand realms in a single thought-moment (*ichinen sanzen*). The perfect interfusion and mutual encompassing of the Buddha and ordinary beings that these doctrines elucidate was for him what made the Lotus Sutra “true” and qualified it as the “wonderful Dharma” (*myōhō*) (*Kaitai sokushin jōbutsu gi*, *Teihon* 1:10).

Second, for Nichiren, the Lotus Sutra—specifically its “origin teaching” (*honmon*), the latter fourteen chapters—opened a perspective from which buddhahood is not something to be achieved as a distant goal exterior to oneself but is accessed in the very act of practice:

The merit of all other sūtras is uncertain, because they teach that one must first plant good roots and only afterward become a buddha. But in the case of the Lotus Sutra, when one takes it in one’s hand, that hand at once becomes Buddha, and when one chants it with one’s mouth, that mouth is precisely Buddha. It is like the moon being reflected in the water the moment it appears above the eastern mountains, or like a sound and its echo occurring simultaneously. (“Ueno-ama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 2:1890)

And third, the Lotus Sutra functions as the “seed” or source of buddhahood. Here Nichiren drew on the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi’s (538–97) description of the process by which the Buddha instructed his disciples by first sowing the seed of buddhahood through an initial teaching, nurturing its growth through subsequent teachings, and finally enabling them to reap the harvest of enlightenment. Nichiren maintained that only the Lotus Sutra plants the seed of buddhahood. People in prior ages might have achieved liberation through provisional teachings such as the *nenbutsu* or Zen because they had already received the seed of buddhahood by forming a connection to the Lotus Sutra in previous lifetimes (*hon’i uzen*). But people born in the Final Dharma age have not yet formed such a connection (*honmi uzen*) and thus cannot benefit from the *nenbutsu* or other provisional teachings, no matter how earnestly they might practice them. In the Final Dharma age, Nichiren taught, it is specifically

the *daimoku*, the essence of the Lotus Sutra, that acts as the seed of buddhahood. “At this time,” he wrote, “Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō of the ‘Fathoming the Lifespan’ chapter, the heart of the origin teaching, should be planted for the first time as the seed of buddhahood” in the hearts of the benighted persons of the *mappō* era (*Kyōgoshō goshō*, *Teihon* 2:1480). This conviction informed the assertive proselytizing for which Nichiren is so well known. By declaring to others the unique truth of the Lotus, he believed, even if they should malign or reject it, one enabled them to form a relationship to the true Dharma that would eventually allow them to realize buddhahood, whether in this life or a future one.

For Nichiren, identifying the Lotus as “superior” or “true” and all other teachings as “inferior” or “provisional” did not represent a historically contingent human evaluation but was grounded in a metaphysical principle that informed the sequence of the Buddha’s preaching as set forth in the traditional Tendai *kyōhan*. Because the Lotus is the true and perfect teaching, encompassing all the Buddha’s virtues within itself, the merit of embracing it overrides all lesser, worldly offenses and blocks the path to rebirth in the lower realms. “Whether or not evil persons of the last age can attain buddhahood does not depend upon whether their sins are light or heavy but rests solely upon whether or not they have faith in this sūtra,” he said (“Hakii Saburō-dono gohenji,” *Teihon* 1:749). But for that very same reason, Nichiren asserted, to set aside the Lotus in favor of some lesser teaching amounts to “slander of the Dharma.” For him this was no ordinary sin such as taking another’s life or property, whose retribution might cause one to suffer for only one or a few lifetimes, but an infinitely more terrible act that cut off the possibility of buddhahood both for oneself and for others and led to countless rebirths in the Avīci Hell. It was worse,

even, than the five heinous offenses, an act so appalling that he could convey its magnitude only by analogy to exaggerations of the most reprehensible worldly crimes: slandering the Lotus Sutra was worse than killing everyone in all the provinces of China and Japan or murdering one’s parents a hundred million times (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:604; “Kyōdai shō,” *Teihon* 1:920).

Rebuking Dharma Slander

Such arguments were no mere scholastic exercise on Nichiren’s part but stemmed from his understanding of the collective suffering he saw around him. Nichiren first began to connect the problem of Dharma slander to actual human misery in the wake of the massive Shōka-era earthquake of 1257, which devastated much of Kamakura, where he was living. The earthquake was the latest in a series of recent calamities, including drought, famine, and epidemics. “Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets,” he wrote, “and the bones of the stricken crowd the highways . . . ; beggars are everywhere in sight, and scenes of death fill our eyes” (*Rishō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:209; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1990], 13–14). Observing that prayer rites and government relief measures had proved equally ineffectual, Nichiren argued that the country’s suffering stemmed from rejection of the Lotus Sutra in favor of inferior teachings. Combing the Buddhist canon, he found a number of sutra passages predicting various disasters that will occur in a realm whose ruler fails to protect the true Dharma and instead allows it to be maligned or neglected. These scriptural prophecies, Nichiren observed, exactly mirrored the state of Japan at present. “When prayers are offered for the peace of the realm and still the three disasters occur within the country, then one

should know that it is because an evil teaching has spread,” he wrote (*Shugo kokka ron*, *Teihon* 1:116). In a group of essays written between 1258 and 1260, Nichiren attributed these disasters and the grief they caused to the spread of Hōnen’s exclusive *nenbutsu* teaching. The most famous of these is his *Risshō ankoku ron* (On bringing peace to the land by establishing the true Dharma), submitted as a memorial to the Bakufu, or shogunate, in 1260. Here Nichiren argued that the offense of slandering the Dharma not only carries frightful consequences for the perpetrator but also has repercussions for society at large. Because the Lotus Sutra and the esoteric teachings had been set aside in favor of the *nenbutsu*, he said, the protective deities, no longer able to hear the true Dharma on which they subsisted, had abandoned the country, enabling demons to enter and wreak havoc. In effect, the spread of Hōnen’s teaching was turning all of Japan into a nation of Dharma slanderers. “With the power of faith that is in their hearts,” Nichiren asked, “why must they recklessly give credence to distorted doctrines? If they do not shake off these delusions that they cling to but continue to harbor erroneous views, then they will quickly leave this world of the living and surely fall into the Avīci Hell!” (*Risshō ankoku ron*, *Teihon* 1:225; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 39 [slightly modified]). Conversely, he argued that the spread of faith in the Lotus Sutra would transform this world into a Buddha land.

Nichiren pointed out that violent storms, crop failure, starvation, disease, and ominous celestial portents had already occurred, just as the sutras foretell. If the situation was not promptly rectified, then, judging by these scriptural predictions, two further disasters might be expected: “revolt within one’s own domain” and “invasion from foreign lands.” Both would surely occur, he warned, if the exclusive *nenbutsu* continued to spread unchecked. In time, a

rebellion led by the shogunal regent’s half brother in 1271 and the emergence of the Mongol threat, culminating in two invasion attempts in 1274 and 1281, gave seeming credence to his words. The *Risshō ankoku ron* directs its polemics only at Hōnen’s exclusive *nenbutsu* teaching, but Nichiren’s later works expand the same argument to include the Zen school, newly imported from China; the Risshū precept-revival movement; and the esoteric teachings.

Nichiren’s redefining of *slander of the Dharma* as meaning not necessarily verbal abuse but rejection of the Lotus Sutra in favor of some lesser teaching meant that one could commit this offense without malicious intent, indeed, even without knowledge, simply by falling under the influence of a misguided teacher. He alone, he believed, had come to see clearly how present calamities had come about because the people at large had been deceived into abandoning the Lotus Sutra for provisional teachings and were therefore destined to “fall like rain into the Avīci Hell” (“Niiama gozen gohenji,” *Teihon* 1:867). This insight, he believed, conferred upon him a moral obligation to speak out. To see slander of the Dharma being committed and fail to speak out against it was to share in the same offense and to receive the same karmic retribution. “Because I wish to avoid the offense of complicity [in slander of the Dharma], because I fear the Buddha’s rebuke, and because I understand my obligations and wish to repay the debt I owe my country, I have made all this known to the ruler and to the people,” he wrote (“Akimoto gosho,” *Teihon* 2:1735; *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, trans. Gosho Translation Committee [Sōka Gakkai, 1999], 1:1019 [modified]). At the same time, to speak out was an act of compassion toward all those suffering in consequence of an error they did not recognize as such. To rebuke another’s slander of the Dharma was, potentially, to save that person from

rebirth in the Avīci Hell. As Nichiren phrased it: “If a bad son who is insane with drink is threatening to kill his father and mother, shouldn’t you try to stop him? . . . If your only child is gravely ill, shouldn’t you try to cure him with moxibustion treatment? To fail to do so is to act like those people who see but do not try to put a stop to the Zen and Nenbutsu followers in Japan. As [Zhiyi’s disciple] Guanding writes, ‘If one befriends another but lacks the compassion to correct him, one is in fact that person’s enemy’” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:608; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 146 [slightly modified]).

Spreading faith in the Lotus Sutra was thus for Nichiren inseparable from denouncing slander of the Dharma. This conviction underlay his choice of *shakubuku*, a method of Dharma teaching that directly rebukes another’s attachment to provisional teachings, over the more accommodating *shōju* approach of leading others gradually without criticizing their present views. Nichiren saw himself as engaged in a great Dharma battle:

When one must face enemies, one needs a sword, a staff, or a bow and arrows. . . . When the time is right to propagate the teaching of the one vehicle, the provisional teachings become enemies. When they are a source of confusion, one must refute them from the standpoint of the true teaching. Of the two types of practice, this is *shakubuku*, the practice of the Lotus Sutra. (*Nyosetsu shugyō shō*, *Teihon* 1:735–36; *Letters of Nichiren*, ed. Philip B. Yampolsky, trans. Burton Watson and others [Columbia University Press, 1996], 68 [slightly modified])

Nichiren also represented this course as something he had chosen in full advance recognition of the consequences: “In Japan I alone have understood this [that is, how people are deceived into abandoning the Lotus Sutra for lesser

teachings]. But if I utter so much as a word concerning it, then parents, brothers, and teachers will surely criticize me, and the government authorities will take steps against me. On the other hand, I am fully aware that if I do not speak out, I will be lacking in compassion. . . . If I remain silent, I may escape harm in this lifetime, but in my next life I will most certainly fall into the Avici Hell. If I speak out, I am fully aware that I will have to contend with the three obstacles and the four devils. But of these two courses, surely the latter is the one to choose” (*Kaimoku shō*, *Teihon* 1:556–57; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 79 [slightly modified]).

The Sufferings of the Lotus Devotee

Nichiren’s outspoken criticism of the *nenbutsu* and other Buddhist forms provoked the anger of influential clerics and their followers, who eventually prompted Bakufu officials to take action against him. He was twice arrested and exiled, first to the Izu peninsula (1261–63) and again to Sado Island (1271–74). He was physically attacked and once nearly executed, and some of his followers were imprisoned, had their

lands confiscated, or in a few cases were put to death. Most painful of all to him was that the authorities paid no heed to his message. These experiences led him to ponder a different kind of suffering: that which one encounters in upholding the Lotus Sutra and declaring its unique efficacy for the present age. In the course of his efforts, Nichiren found deep soteriological meaning in the hardships that his confrontational stance elicited. The remainder of this essay will consider his thinking in this regard (see also Jacqueline I. Stone, “Giving One’s Life for the *Lotus Sūtra* in Nichiren’s Thought,” *Hokke bunka kenkyū* 33 [2007]: 51–70).

The Lotus Sutra itself speaks of the great trials that those who uphold it must undergo in an evil age after the Buddha’s passing. The “Dharma Preacher” chapter reads: “Hatred and jealousy toward this sutra abound even during the Buddha’s lifetime. How much more so after his nirvāṇa!” (*Miaofa lianhua jing*, *T* 9:31b20–21). And in the “Fortitude” chapter, numbers of bodhisattvas describe the hardships they are resolved to meet in order to spread the Lotus Sutra at that future time: ignorant people will attack them with swords and staves, while eminent monks, revered

by the world at large, will revile, persecute, and oust Lotus devotees and induce the authorities to take action against them. “We will endure all these ordeals,” they vow. “We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the unsurpassed way” (ibid., *T* 9:36c17–18). It is difficult to know whether these passages represent the actual experience of the sutra’s redactors as followers of the minority Mahayana movement in being ostracized by the Buddhist mainstream or are simply the hyperbole of a small and marginal community. Whatever the case, the sutra casts these passages in the form of predictions, and Nichiren read them as foretelling both the slander of the Lotus Sutra that had spread in Japan in his own time and the hostility that he himself encountered in rebuking it.

About a year after he had submitted the *Risshō ankoku ron*, a mob attacked Nichiren’s dwelling, and shortly thereafter, he was arrested and exiled to the Izu peninsula, where he remained for almost two years. It was around this time that he began to read the Lotus Sutra as speaking directly to his own experience. In a letter to a lay follower, he wrote, “When I think that a base and ignorant person like myself, a monk

without precepts, should be mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, taught more than two thousand years ago, and that my trials were foretold by the Buddha himself, I cannot contain my joy” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon* 1:236). The coincidence of the sutra’s prediction of grave trials and his own experience of persecution solidified for Nichiren the sense that he was karmically destined to proclaim the truth of the Lotus Sutra in this age. Another of his letters from the same period reads:

In the Final Dharma age, a votary of the Lotus Sutra will surely appear. The greater the hardships confronting him, the more he rejoices, because his faith is strong. Doesn’t a fire burn more briskly when firewood is added? All rivers flow into the ocean, but does the ocean reject the rivers? The many rivers of adversity pour into the great sea of the Lotus Sutra and dash against its votary, but he neither rejects nor finds fault with them. Without the rivers, there would be no sea, and without grave trials, there would be no votary of the Lotus Sutra. (“Shiiji Shirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:227; *Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, 1:33 [modified])

This represents an early occurrence of the term *votary of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokekyō no gyōja*), by which term Nichiren designated himself and his disciples. (*Gyōja* is translated variously as “practicer,” “practitioner,” “votary,” “devotee.” I have varied the translation in this essay.) To my knowledge, it is Nichiren’s coinage and has no precedent in the history of Lotus Sutra devotion. People in Japan’s Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods who devoted themselves largely or exclusively to reciting the Lotus Sutra as their personal practice were known as *jikyōsha*, literally, “one who holds the sutra.” Nichiren, however, saw his experience of persecution as distinguishing him from this category of practitioner. “The *jikyōsha*

in Japan have not yet experienced these scriptural passages [foretelling great trials]. I alone have read them. This is the meaning [of the statement]: “We do not cherish bodily life. We value only the unsurpassed way” (“Nanjō Hyōe Shichirō-dono gosho,” *Teihon* 1:327).

A votary of the Lotus Sutra, then, is one who practices the Lotus not only by having faith in and reciting it but by living out its predictions. Having been exiled, as he saw it, for the sutra’s sake, Nichiren wrote that even when not engaged in actual recitation, he was in effect practicing the Lotus Sutra at every moment of the day and night, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. “For one born human, what greater happiness could there be?” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon*, 1:236). Nichiren also described practice in this sense as “bodily reading” (*shikidoku*) of the Lotus. On the eve of his second exile, while under arrest, he wrote to his disciple Nichirō, who had also been arrested and imprisoned, praising him for reading the sutra not only by verbally reciting its words or mentally grasping and internalizing their meaning but by personally undergoing this ordeal for the sutra’s sake:

Tomorrow I leave for Sado Province. In the cold tonight, it grieves me to think of your sufferings in prison and my thoughts go out to you. How admirable it is, that because you have now read the entire Lotus Sutra with both body and mind, you will be able to save your parents and relatives and all living beings! (“Tsuchirō gosho,” *Teihon* 1:509–10)

“Bodily reading,” the willingness to give one’s life if needed to propagate the sutra and to endure the hardships it predicts, defines the practice of the *Hokekyō no gyōja*. The somatic overtones of *bodily reading* also resonate with widespread use of the term *gyōja* to denote especially ascetic practitioners. In his Izu writings, Nichiren

began to refer to the hero bodhisattvas of the Buddhist scriptures, like the boy of the Snow Mountains (Sessen Dōji), Bodhisattva Medicine King (Yakuō Bosatsu), Bodhisattva Ever Weeping (Jōtai Bosatsu), and others who burned their bodies in offering, sacrificed their flesh to learn the Dharma, or tore off their skin to use as paper on which to record Buddhist teachings. On the one hand, Nichiren saw the acts of these ascetic virtuosi as beyond the reach of ordinary persons. But his willingness to meet hardship for the Lotus Sutra’s sake had catapulted him into their exalted company. “I am a foolish ordinary worldling with a body of flesh and blood, who has not uprooted even the slightest part of the three kinds of delusion,” he said. “But for the Lotus Sutra’s sake I have been reviled and slandered, struck with swords and staves, and sent into exile. In this light, I believe I may be comparable to those great saints who burned their arms, broke their bones [to extract marrow], or offered their heads [as sacrifice]” (“Shion shō,” *Teihon* 1:239–40). Nichiren’s later followers have included some serious ascetic practitioners, notably those who train as healers and exorcists (*kitōshi*). But Nichiren devotees have rarely if ever engaged in the practices of self-mutilation or self-immolation found in the ascetic strands of other Buddhist traditions. Rather, it is those willing to give their lives for the Lotus Sutra’s sake, especially those who met persecution at the hands of worldly authorities, who have been celebrated as the Nichiren sect’s great heroes (Stone, “Giving One’s Life”).

The Work of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct

After his pardon from exile in 1264, Nichiren traveled in the Kantō provinces to preach and encourage followers. By 1268 he had returned to Kamakura. That same year messengers had arrived from

Kublai Khan demanding that Japan submit to Mongol overlordship; subsequent envoys repeated these demands in 1269. A sense of crisis mounted as the Bakufu mobilized its defenses and the major temples and shrines conducted prayer rites for the country's safety. Nichiren and his followers were emboldened by the seemingly imminent fulfillment of the prophecy of "invasion from foreign lands" made in his *Risshō ankoku ron*. Nichiren repeated his admonitions to top officials, and Zen and the Shingon-Ritsu precept-revival movement now joined the nenbutsu among his polemical targets. His specific criticisms of *shingon*—by which term he designated both Shingon and Tendai esoteric traditions—also began around this time or perhaps shortly thereafter, in connection with government sponsorship of esoteric ritual for protection from the Mongols. Again, Nichiren's attacks on other Buddhist traditions made enemies. He and his followers may also have been targeted by official measures aimed at readying the country against foreign attack by suppressing potentially disruptive elements on the domestic front (Yutaka Takagi, *Nichiren to sono montei* [Kōbundō, 1965], 189–90). In the autumn of 1271, Nichiren was arrested and again sent into exile, this time a "remote exile" to Sado Island in the North Japan Sea.

On Sado, Nichiren deepened his conviction that his sufferings incurred on the Lotus Sutra's account were a proof of his karmically destined mission. Just as his meeting with "hatred and jealousy" established him in his own eyes as the sutra's votary, his encounters with persecution in turn confirmed the truth of the Lotus, a point he now began to stress. "The sutra says, 'There will be many ignorant people who will curse and speak ill of us and attack us with swords and staves, with tiles and rocks,'" he noted. "Look around you in the world today—are there any monks other than myself who are cursed and vilified on

account of the Lotus Sutra or who are attacked with swords and staves? Were it not for me, the prophecy made in this verse of the sutra would have been sheer falsehood!" (*Kaimoku shō*, 1:559; *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, 83). At this point, Nichiren's "bodily reading of the Lotus Sutra" became what Ruben Habito has termed a "circular hermeneutic" in which sutra and practitioner reflect, validate, and bear witness to each other. The sutra's predictions that its devotees would meet with hardships legitimated Nichiren's experience, and Nichiren's experience of persecution, in that it fulfilled these predictions, legitimated the Lotus Sutra (Ruben L. F. Habito, "Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*," in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone [Columbia University Press, 2009], 198–99). Not only was his suffering valorized by the Lotus Sutra; that suffering was necessary for the Lotus Sutra to be true.

During his exile to Sado, Nichiren turned his attention increasingly to the "origin teaching" (*honmon*), the latter fourteen chapters of the Lotus Sutra, which reveal that Śākyamuni Buddha has been awakened since the inconceivably remote past and ever since has remained present and active in the world. Like other Tendai thinkers of his day, Nichiren associated the "origin teaching" portion of the Lotus Sutra and its revelation of the Buddha's constant presence with the view that buddhahood is not an external goal to be achieved in the distant future but can be accessed now, in the very act of faith and practice. His writings from this period assert that all the practices that the primordial Śākyamuni Buddha carried out over countless *kalpas*, and the virtues and wisdom he consequently achieved, are perfectly contained within the *daimoku*, the sutra's title, and are immediately accessible to those who chant it. In this connection, Nichiren also began to identify his heightened sense of personal mission as the votary of the

Lotus Sutra with the task of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct (Skt., *Viśiṣṭacāritra*; Jpn., *Jōgyō*), leader of a vast throng of bodhisattvas—Śākyamuni's disciples from the inconceivably distant past—who emerge from beneath the earth in chapter 15 of the Lotus. In the sutra's narrative, their appearance provides the occasion for Śākyamuni Buddha to reveal his original awakening in the far distant past, and it is to them that he entrusts the task of propagation in an evil age following his nirvana. At this point, Nichiren began to speak of the *daimoku* as the very teaching transmitted from Śākyamuni Buddha to Bodhisattva Superior Conduct at the Lotus Sutra assembly in open space above Vulture Peak, and of himself as a forerunner or an envoy of this bodhisattva ("Shōji ichidaiji," *Teihon* 1:524; "Shijō Kingo-dono gohenji," *Teihon* 1:637; "Shohō jissō shō," *Teihon* 1:725). Nichiren's identification with the work of Bodhisattva Superior Conduct developed in tandem with a growing conviction that he and his followers had been the Buddha's disciples since the remotest past and must have been present at the Lotus assembly. "When I think of things in this way," he wrote, "I feel boundless joy, even though I am in exile" ("Shohō jissō shō," *Teihon* 1:727).

Because Nichiren's sufferings bore out the predictions of the Lotus Sutra, they legitimated his course of action; identified him as a person whose advent was foretold by the Buddha, endowed with a unique destiny to spread the Lotus Sutra in the evil latter age; and even served to establish the truth of the Lotus Sutra itself. From this perspective, suffering became the vehicle that confirmed to Nichiren the transcendent purpose of his life and thus became precious and meaningful. At the same time, intertwined with this particular strand of interpretation in his thought was another, no less significant: that of redemptive suffering.

To be continued

An Approach to Interreligious Cooperation

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.

I have always sought to live by freely accepting the suggestions made by others and by acting on them sincerely, with all my strength. This has been to my benefit, because it has broadened my views, deepened my understanding, and opened new worlds to me.

Whatever happens to us, the most valuable thing we can do is make a serious effort to learn from it. Sincerity has to be present when learning anything, for without it, we lose sight of what is important.

For example, when you are traveling to a Dharma center by bus or train, there are always lots of people coming and going around you or who happen to sit down beside you. But you would probably find it hard to answer if someone asked you what kind of people you met on the way. However many people you came across, not a single one would remain in your memory if you didn't pay attention to anyone.

You may stop and look intently at something displayed in a shop window

that you want to buy, but a person whose mind is preoccupied by other things won't even see the display. Unless you have an interest in something, you won't notice it. People may see the same mountain but in different ways: a hunter will wonder if there are any wild boar or bears around, a logger will look only for good stands of trees, while those who like fishing will remember only a swiftly flowing stream. People see mountains differently according to their interests. People who are worried might not even remember seeing a mountain, as if nothing existed outside their own concerns.

Thus, though people see the same thing, they see it in an infinite variety of ways. When we realize this, we are able to reflect that our own way of looking at things and thinking about them may on occasion be unbalanced. This will make us all the more aware of the importance of listening carefully to what people say and learning from it.

We must not be too particular about our own likes and dislikes or base

everything we think on our own narrow experience. When we can take in all types of people or whatever anyone says, we will be able to grow, help free others from suffering, and turn everything around toward a better direction.

If we have a nutritional imbalance, our bodies develop odd symptoms. Eating just meat every day will result in a taste disorder, caused by a lack of zinc, and we will be unable to taste what we eat. An unbalanced diet may also damage our eyesight. In the same way, an unbalanced spiritual and mental diet will leave us unable to distinguish between right and wrong, with the result that people will give us a wide berth, fed up with our unbalanced views, opinions, and ways of dealing with things. This is something that particularly those in a leadership position should keep in mind.

In September 1963 I received the chance of a lifetime when I was invited to join the Peace Delegation of Religious Leaders for Banning Nuclear Weapons touring ten countries, including the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States, to speak with their leaders. I happily accepted the invitation. I was buoyant in anticipation of all the things I would learn as a member of a delegation of religious leaders meeting leading figures in the various countries we visited and presenting them with our request for peace.

The delegation of eighteen was led jointly by Rosen Takashina, primate of the Soto Zen sect and president of the Japan Buddhist Federation, and Masatoshi Matsushita, president of

Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of the World Conference 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.

Rikkyo University in Tokyo, and consisted of representatives from various Christian, Buddhist, and Shinto groups. I was made a deputy leader.

According to the initial schedule, we were to visit ten countries in the short period of forty days and meet religious leaders such as Pope Paul VI and the archbishop of Canterbury, and political leaders such as Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union. Our purpose was to visit leaders responsible for the direction in which the world was headed and speak to them directly and unservedly, appealing to them as Japanese religious leaders to promote a ban on nuclear weapons and listening to their opinions.

Fear of nuclear weapons was spreading around the world at that time, following the sinking in the previous April of the American nuclear submarine *Thresher* in the Atlantic Ocean 220 miles off the coast of Boston. Antinuclear protestors in Britain were organizing the Aldermaston marches, and citizen protest movements were also taking off in the United States. It was in this heightened atmosphere that the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow on August 5, 1963, by the governments of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It seemed that there was now a good chance to turn public opinion toward banning nuclear weapons altogether.

But in Japan, even though it was the only country to have experienced the terror of nuclear attack, the antinuclear movement was floundering, owing to antagonism between political interests and ideology.

The delegates agreed that the movement must not flounder, that people of religion must stand at the head of the movement, since they stand above political and ideological concerns. The delegation resolved to assume this role. What drew me above all was its call to religious leaders from both East and West to join hands and stand together in an appeal for peace.

Anyone can mouth the words *world peace*. However, it needs far more courage to preserve peace than to wage war. To maintain peace, we have to persevere with our call, humbly but always confident in our resolve. It is up to people of religion to overcome their sectarian differences and take the first steps.

I believed, on the basis of my experience up to that time, that if we kept our eyes firmly fixed on the ultimate goal of religion, surely we should be able to act together, transcending our sectarian differences.

Between East and West

We left Japan on September 14, 1963, and went first to Rome, where we had an audience with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican. We presented him with our peace proposal, which advocated a total and unconditional ban on nuclear tests

and a total ban on the manufacture, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons. Our proposal said, "We feel strongly that it is necessary for people of religion throughout the world to cooperate fully to bring this about."

The pope expressed complete agreement with our peace proposal, brought all the way from Japan. He said, with a warmth of expression and a voice filled with conviction, "Though I do not exert any political or economic power, I can call upon the hearts of people." His words stayed with me.

On September 19 we went to Geneva for an informal meeting with Dr. Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches. We next went to Moscow, arriving there on September 25, for an audience with Emilian Elinov, patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union. Then on October 4 we met Dr. Michael Ramsey, the archbishop of Canterbury, in London, and after that flew to the United States, where we had talks with the UN secretary-general, U Thant, and a senior officer of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs.

As we kept to our busy schedule, a certain awareness began to grow within me. Though we had formed a delegation that was traveling around the world

and exchanging views with many leading figures, when we returned to Japan we would all split up and go our separate ways. Was that enough?

At the time of our visit, distrust between the East and West had still not been eliminated, and the situation in various countries was tense. I also felt irritation that wherever we went, the work of the delegation had not gone as well as we had hoped. This was because religious leaders in Europe and the United States did not have a sufficient understanding of the religious situation in Japan. I was keenly aware that religious organizations could play no role in ensuring human happiness if they clung to their narrow denominational perspectives and if people took the attitude that only their own faith was true and all other religions and denominations were false.

The Catholic theologian Hans Küng said, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions." The British historian Thomas Carlyle wrote that religion is "an everlasting lodestar, that beams the brighter in the heavens the darker here on earth grows the night around him."

It is especially at times when the

world is in greatest distress that religion must spread its light and become a lamp illuminating the hearts of people everywhere. I felt impatient that the religions of the world had not yet shown any such tendency. In the Sutta Nipata, Shakyamuni laments, "Some say this is the truth and the reality, while others say this is false and unreal, and based on different attached views, they dispute. Why do not the followers of the various ways say one and the same thing?" It is important to seek points of agreement rather than those of dispute with people. Herein lies the path to peace. I think that these words must be the foundation for any initiative toward interreligious dialogue.

These words of Shakyamuni did not apply just to India as it was twenty-five hundred years ago. As I was traveling around meeting religious leaders in Europe, there was indisputably an atmosphere in which, while people did not insist that only their own faith was true, they distrusted people of other faiths and avoided interfaith exchanges.

At the same time as feeling that we should do more to promote interreligious dialogue, I kept coming around to the question of how we were to accomplish it.

To be continued

The Prism of the Lotus Sutra (3)

by Atsushi Kanazawa

Atsushi Kanazawa is a professor in the Faculty of Buddhism at Komazawa University, Tokyo. He specializes in the Indian philosophy of language and the history of Indian philosophy and culture.

The Precious Seven

The Japanese are fond of a type of beautiful cloisonné ware known as *shippō-yaki*, or “seven-treasures ware,” so called because it looks as if it has been inlaid with the seven precious substances (*shippō*, also *shichihō*). These “precious seven” are seven kinds of precious metals and gems, both valuable and beautiful, that, according to Indian Buddhist scriptures, are used to adorn the Pure Land and other Buddha realms. But the identity of these seven precious substances is not necessarily clear and requires caution, for there are some discrepancies between different texts in their listings of the precious seven.

In the Lotus Sutra, the following passage in the “Prediction” chapter, in which Shakyamuni predicts the attainment of buddhahood by one of his disciples, is well known: “This Kātyāyana [as the disciple was called] / Will, with various kinds / Of excellent offerings, / Pay homage to buddhas. / After the buddhas are extinct / He will erect stupas of the precious seven / And also, with flowers and perfumes, / Pay homage to their relics; / In his final bodily state / He will obtain the Buddha-wisdom / And accomplish Perfect Enlightenment.” In several places elsewhere in the Lotus Sutra the seven precious substances are listed as gold, silver, lapis lazuli, giant clamshell, agate, pearl, and carnelian. While this gives one an idea of what they actually are, the true identity of what has

been rendered here as “giant clamshell” and “carnelian” is uncertain.

Although we are concerned here with inquiring into the precious seven, I believe that now is the time for us to turn our attention away from the precious substances themselves and read with an open mind from the grand and infinitely mysterious “Precious Stupa” chapter. As Shakyamuni the World-honored One is preaching the Lotus Sutra, there suddenly appears an enormous radiant stupa adorned with the precious seven, and from inside the stupa there comes the voice of a past buddha called the Buddha of Abundant

Treasures, praising the Lotus Sutra and its expositor Shakyamuni. It is a difficult passage, but if we savor it slowly and carefully, then, with the Lotus Sutra left by Shakyamuni—who has for us become a buddha of the past—to guide us, the path along which we ought to proceed and its outcome will undoubtedly become clear of their own accord. □

Sandalwood and Aloeswood

Neither sandalwood nor aloeswood is a flowering tree known for its blossoms of beautiful form or color; rather, they are aromatic woods, famed as sources of sandalwood incense and aloeswood incense, both of which are processed products.

There is a saying in Japan that “sandalwood is fragrant from its seed leaves,” meaning that genius will display itself at an early age. Sandalwood (*candana* in Sanskrit) is known to have been used as building material for mausoleums and stupas, but in the Lotus Sutra it

is more important as the source of a fine powdered incense. The chapter “Discrimination of Merits” in the Lotus Sutra says, “It also rained incense of fine sandalwood, aloes, and so forth.” Images of happiness are associated with beauty rather than ugliness, with fragrance rather than foul odors. The incense of sandalwood and aloeswood became minor props for glorifying the Buddha, the truth he discovered, its embodiment in the form of the most wondrous Lotus Sutra, and the world of its practitioners, the preachers of the Law.

While flowers that rain down from heaven have both visual and olfactory appeal on account of both their color and form and their scent, the seven kinds of precious metals and gems known as the

Nectar

The Japanese word for nectar (*kanro*), which means literally “sweet dew,” is used in the name of a sweet syrup in which fish or chestnuts are stewed (*kanro-ni*) and also in the name of a type of candy (*kanro-ame*). But originally it referred to a delicious sweet liquid that, according to an ancient Chinese legend, pours down from the heavens in response to a sovereign’s benevolent rule. In Chinese translations of Buddhist texts it is used to translate the Sanskrit *amṛta*, meaning “immortal” or “immortality.” But we do not know to what *amṛta* actually refers, for it is by no means clear whether it is simply an adjective meaning “immortal” or whether it is a noun signifying something precious, such as an elixir of immortality—and in the latter case it is not clear what sort of thing we should envisage.

In the Lotus Sutra, however, we find in chapter 25, “The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World,” the following passage: “Law of pity, thunder quivering, / Compassion wondrous as a great cloud, / Pouring spiritual rain like nectar, / Quenching the flames of distress!” Although the exact

precious seven and used to adorn stupas and so on have only visual appeal. Does this mean that, just as the precious seven have only visual appeal, sandalwood and aloeswood appeal only to our sense of smell? Perhaps we should reread from such a perspective the chapter “The Merits of the Preacher,” which begins with the following description of the merits of a preacher of the Lotus Sutra: “If any good son or good daughter receives and keeps this Law-Flower

meaning may not be clear, one gets the feeling that the Lotus Sutra itself could be described as “spiritual rain like nectar.”

A number of other passages in the Lotus Sutra suggest that *amṛta* implies its teachings to be a wondrous sound emanating from the Buddha that is to be heeded. Or they suggest that the teachings are comparable to a beverage originating from the Buddha that is to be imbibed and its delicious flavor savored. One such passage is from chapter 7, “The Parable of the Magic City”: “World-honored One, roll the Law-wheel, / Beat the drum of the Law, sweet as dew, / Save the suffering living, / Reveal the nirvana-way!”

Two other such passages are in chapter 19, “The Merits of the Preacher”:

“He will obtain twelve hundred merits of the tongue. Whatever pleasant or unpleasant, sweet or not sweet, bitter or astringent things meet his tongue will become of the finest flavor, like celestial nectar; nothing will be unpleasant.”

Sutra, or reads, or recites, or expounds, or copies it, that person will obtain eight hundred merits of the eye, twelve hundred merits of the ear, eight hundred merits of the nose, twelve hundred merits of the tongue, eight hundred merits of the body, and twelve hundred merits of the mind; with these merits he will dignify his six organs, making them all serene.”

This means that by practicing the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, the five sense organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body—and the mind, the sixth, internal, organ that controls the other five sense organs, will be finely honed and the way to rigorously differentiating between true and false fragrance will be opened up. □

“Pure is this man’s organ of tongue, / Never receiving ill flavors: / Whatsoever he eats, / All becomes as nectar.”

Bearing these passages in mind, may we endeavor to savor to the full with our own tongues the nectar of the Lotus Sutra’s blessed teachings. □

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 21

The Divine Power of the Tathagata (3)

This is the 115th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

TEXT In whatever land, whether it be received and kept, read and recited, explained and copied, cultivated and practiced as the teaching; whether in a place where a volume of the sutra is kept, or in a garden, or in a grove, or under a tree, or in a monastery, or in a lay devotee's house, in a palace or on a mountain, in a valley or in the wilderness, in all these places you must erect a caitya and make offerings.

COMMENTARY As has been often pointed out, the Buddha emphasizes here repeatedly the holiness of his teachings themselves, and he clearly teaches that the best way to keep one's faith is to receive and keep, cultivate and practice the teachings in everyday life.

Accordingly, the phrase "a place where a volume of the sutra is kept" should be understood not as a physical but a spiritual place, the basis for right living and correct practice.

In the original Sanskrit text, the passage does refer to

the physical sutra, and considering the sutra only as a material object is a mistake, as we can see from the thought or spirit permeating the passage quoted above.

We must be exacting about the interpretation of a single word, because some people are apt to regard an object that symbolizes the teaching as more valuable rather than the teaching itself. They err in devoting themselves to that object as symbol.

As we noted earlier, in chapter 20, in the section on "The Three Treasures in Concrete Forms," that which symbolizes the teaching is indeed holy. We should respect, revere, and worship it deeply. But if we take refuge in it alone, regarding it as supreme, and if we preach or believe that worshipping it brings good fortune, we trivialize the holy teaching of the Buddha to the level of a mere folk belief, and greatly slander the Buddha's Dharma.

We can understand this more clearly as we read Shakyamuni's own explanation, as follows.

TEXT Wherefore? You should know that [all] these spots are the thrones of enlightenment. On these [spots] the buddhas attain Perfect Enlightenment; on these [spots] the buddhas roll the wheel of the Dharma; on these [spots] the buddhas [enter] parinirvana.”

COMMENTARY *The thrones of enlightenment.* As noted earlier (see the July/August 1993 issue and the May/June 2001 issue of *Dharma World*), wherever one practices the Buddha Way is the “throne of enlightenment,” or the place of enlightenment.

When Shakyamuni himself refers to the place of enlightenment, he very often is referring to the foot of the *bodhi* tree at Buddhagaya where he attained enlightenment. Therefore we should take “the thrones of enlightenment” as referring to any place that the Buddha Way is practiced, represented by the ultimate, most exalted place at Buddhagaya.

- *The buddhas [enter] parinirvana.* This means leaving this world and becoming extinct. Earlier we learned briefly why the places where the various buddhas become extinct are significant for believers (See the October–December 2012 issue of *Dharma World*). The reward-body and the manifest-body buddhas each have a special affinity for the lands where they are charged with disseminating the Dharma. The believers in each of those lands feel a special longing for their buddha, so they build a stupa or something similar where that buddha died, and forever remember his virtues. Accordingly, the Buddha mentions specifically “on these [spots] the buddhas [enter] parinirvana.”

As the Buddha has revealed here, holiness consists in the teachings themselves and the actual practice of those teachings. True faith is receiving and keeping, cultivating, and practicing the holy teachings in daily life. We must inscribe this deeply in our minds strongly because it is so important that it forms the foundation of our religious life.

TEXT At that time the World-honored One, desiring to proclaim this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse: “All the buddhas, saviors of the world, / Dwelling in great divine penetration, / In order to gladden all living beings / And reveal their infinite powers divine.

COMMENTARY *In order to gladden all living beings.* This is not the kind of gladness that satisfies the desires of the five senses, but the true gladness deep in the mind that comes with religious exultation.

It should be quite clear that the merit which the Buddha bestows upon us is this religious exultation and not merely some kind of physical or material pleasure.

Our exultation has physical or material effects without

fail, but a utilitarian faith is erroneous and evil, and never brings ultimate happiness.

TEXT Their tongues extend to the Brahma heavens, / Their bodies emit countless rays of light; / For those who seek the Way of the Buddha / They show this rare phenomenon.

COMMENTARY Those who seek the Buddha Way are those who wish to attain buddhahood. The buddhas reveal their divine powers to them, to inspire them and move them to action.

The buddhas’ broad and far-stretched tongues reaching for the Brahma heavens means that the Buddha’s teachings are absolute truth.

The buddhas’ shining a light of infinite and numberless colors from their entire bodies means that the Buddha’s teachings originate from one truth, which dispels the darkness of delusion.

When this is clearly and vividly demonstrated, those who seek to follow the Buddha Way increasingly strengthen their determination and summon up new courage. The same can be said of the other subsequent manifestations as a variety of auspicious signs.

TEXT The sound when the buddhas cough / And that of the snap of their fingers / Are heard throughout the whole universe, / And the earth in six ways shakes.

COMMENTARY Coughing and the snapping of fingers have already been explained in detail.

TEXT Because, after the Buddha’s extinction, / It is possible to keep this sutra, / The buddhas all rejoice / And show infinite powers divine.

COMMENTARY Earlier we noted that the Buddha demonstrated his divine powers to inspire living beings and move them to action. Moreover, he felt secure that even in the Latter Days of the Dharma, humanity would preserve his teachings, and he manifested as follows divine powers in order to show humanity the splendor of the Dharma.

TEXT In order to entrust this sutra / To him who receives and keeps it, let praise, / Through kalpas infinite, / Be inexhaustible. / The merits of this man / Shall be boundless and without end / As space in every direction, / Which cannot find a limit. / He who can keep this sutra / Is one who already beholds me / And also the Buddha Abundant Treasures, / And all buddhas as the separate embodiments [of me], / And sees besides the bodhisattvas / Whom I have instructed until now.

COMMENTARY *Beholds.* This word has the same sense as “see” in the earlier phrase “seeing a buddha,” which means sensing a buddha’s presence rather than seeing him with the naked eye, allowing tacit communication.

Those who truly believe in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra naturally practice them and spare no effort in expounding them widely. They are therefore precious people who feel the Buddha’s presence, communicating tacitly with the Buddha Abundant Treasures and the buddhas of the ten directions, who are separate embodiments of Shakyamuni Buddha. They are also the companions of the bodhisattvas whom Shakyamuni has instructed.

How wonderful it is to be aware of that. Those without money or status or fame but who are aware of being in the company of the great bodhisattvas, by communicating tacitly with Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha Abundant Treasures, and the buddhas of the ten directions, must be among the most exalted and worthy people in the world. By all means, they are the kind of people we want to become.

TEXT He who can keep this sutra / Will cause me and the [buddhas] who are my separate embodiments, / And the Buddha Abundant Treasures in nirvana, / All of us entirely to rejoice; / And the buddhas now in the universe, / And those of the past and the future, / He shall also see and serve / And cause to rejoice.

COMMENTARY *Serve.* This means wanting to enter into direct service of those buddhas, attending to their personal needs.

TEXT The mysterious, essential Dharma that has been attained / By the buddhas each on his throne of enlightenment, / He who can keep this sutra / Must surely gain before long.

COMMENTARY This is certainly not exaggerating. The Lotus Sutra reveals the supreme enlightenment and the highest wisdom of all buddhas, so someone who studies, comprehends, and firmly believes in the Lotus Sutra and in the Dharma, even if unable to undertake as many practices as the many bodhisattvas of the past, will surely attain buddhahood more rapidly. We must gratefully accept these very persuasive, reasonable words.

TEXT He who can keep this sutra / Shall expound joyfully and without end / The meaning of the teachings, / With their terms and expressions, / Like the wind in the sky, / Which never has impediment.

COMMENTARY *Expound joyfully and without end.* In this

original text, “expound joyfully” means preaching happily, pleasantly, and fluently. “Without end” means not coming to a dead end, such as by running out of topics, but preaching as fluently as water bubbling up from an unlimited spring.

Eloquence is a talent for persuasive speaking, but some people who are learned and wise are poor speakers. But poor speakers, if they have deep faith and excellent virtues, can acquire their own special eloquence and reach a stage where their words captivate others and never run out.

One of the Buddha’s disciples, Cudapanthaka, was at first so dull he could not remember his own name, but in the end he preached the Dharma eloquently to lay practitioners as well as those who had renounced the world. This shows the power of faith.

- *Terms and expressions.* In contrast with the previous phrase, “meaning of the teachings,” which refers to all the teachings, this phrase refers to the meaning of specific phrases and sentences.

TEXT After the Tathagata is extinct [such a one], / Knowing the sutras that the Buddha has taught, / [Together with] their causes and conditions, and process, / Shall expound them according to [their] true meaning.

COMMENTARY This is another very important passage.

- *Causes and conditions.* These refer to the kind of country in which, and the capabilities of the people to whom, the Dharma is preached. When the Buddha preaches the Dharma, there are always a number of premises, including the country and character of his listeners, and their customs and way of thought.

A major condition among these is a person’s capacity for understanding the Dharma.

By imparting teachings that perfectly suit conditions, the Buddha guides people to a perfect understanding of his teachings, filling his listeners with a sincere desire to follow them. This, as you are already aware, is the Buddha’s skillful means (adopting the right method for each person).

- *Process.* “Process” means the order of the imparting the teachings. If one suddenly imparts a very profound teaching to beginners, they might not understand it and be confused. It might even discourage some of them. They would think the Buddha Dharma is over their heads and give up trying to understand it.

Besides, imparting a major teaching before a lesser one might give the false impression that the first one is less important, and the listener would pay less attention to it. However subordinate one teaching may be, it is still precious and must not be neglected. But if teachings are imparted in the right order, none will be neglected.

All things considered, one ought to start with teachings

that are easier to understand, and gradually progress to deeper, more exalted ones. This is also an important point in preaching the Dharma.

Nichiren, the thirteenth-century founder of the Japanese Buddhist sect that bears his name, took a hint from this passage of the text and formed his own particular idea, expounding it as “the five critical classifications of teachings” (*goko-kyohan* in Japanese). It evolved from a consideration of the five following points in the Lotus Sutra: (1) teaching, (2) capacity, (3) time, (4) country, and (5) order.

(1) *Teaching*: “Teaching” here refers to doctrine. Shakyamuni imparted innumerable teachings in his lifetime, and the first point means we must ascertain which of them he emphasized and employed the most. This is what the sutra means where it says, “Knowing the sutras that the Buddha has taught, / [Together with] their causes and conditions, and process.” That means we must discern clearly which scripture most completely embodies the Buddha’s true spirit.

After thorough research along this line, Nichiren concluded that the Lotus Sutra embodies Shakyamuni’s core teachings of the wonderful Dharma, which is true and perfect.

(2) *Capacity*: “Capacity” means the measure of the ability, after receiving and keeping the Lotus Sutra, to live by its teachings. Nichiren concluded that dissemination of the Lotus Sutra required suitable, capable people, and without them worldwide dissemination would be impossible.

(3) *Time*: “Time” refers to the time in which people of such capacity appear in the world; in other words, when the time is ripe for the Lotus Sutra to spread worldwide. Until the time is ripe, the teachings are unlikely to see the light of day, however excellent they are. This is the significant factor to which “time” refers.

(4) *Country*: “Country” means the base or stronghold which the Buddha chooses for propagating the true Dharma. It is of course important for those who learn the “sutras that the Buddha has taught” to know “their causes and conditions, and process,” while the Buddha himself considers and selects one particular scripture to be disseminated in one particular country.

Nichiren concluded that Japan was the base for worldwide dissemination of the Lotus Sutra. We of today are deeply impressed by the accuracy of his judgment.

(5) *Order*: “Order” refers to the order, or sequence, in which the Dharma is preached and disseminated. The importance of order and process was emphasized earlier.

In summary, although the Lotus Sutra is the supreme embodiment of the Buddha’s teachings, unless it is embraced by capable people in a country where they have arisen, when the time is ripe and a sequence of dissemination is followed, it will neither blossom nor bear fruit. Although

some may chant *Myoho Renge-kyo* (The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma), those who practice the teachings will not arise easily. Only one or two people can do little to disseminate Buddhism. Nichiren explains that the Buddha sends someone into the world to become a great religious leader when the Buddha perceives in his wisdom that in a certain place and time, multitudes will accept and follow his teachings.

I have referred to Nichiren’s explanation because it is so well known and so deeply related to this passage in this chapter, “The Divine Power of the Tathagata.”

TEXT Just as the light of the sun and moon / Can dispel all the darkness, / So this man, working in the world, / Can disperse the gloom of the living / And cause numberless bodhisattvas / Finally to abide in the One Vehicle.

COMMENTARY This very beautiful and sacred verse is so infinitely significant that it is worth learning by heart.

As we noted before, darkness is not real, but is only the absence of light. Therefore, when a light shines, darkness disappears of itself.

In the same way, delusion does not exist by itself but is simply ignorance of the truth. Accordingly, when one shines upon it the light of truth called the true Dharma, delusion vanishes.

Shakyamuni here offers us firm assurance that if a follower of the Lotus Sutra performs bodhisattva practice in society, the darkness in which so many living beings suffer will vanish and be replaced by a cheerful, pleasant world of radiant light.

He says that at the same time, the efforts of a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra can cause all believers to abide in the One Vehicle.

The One Vehicle, or One Buddha Vehicle, is the final path leading oneself and all others to buddhahood.

It may seem that the Buddha’s teachings distinguish among the vehicle of the shravakas (*shravakayana*), the vehicle of the pratyekabuddhas (*pratyekabuddhayana*), and the vehicle of the bodhisattvas (*bodhisattvayana*). But these are merely the skillful means of so-called causes and conditions, and are a process. In reality, all these vehicles lead to buddhahood in the end. The three vehicles did not originally exist, and all the Buddhist teachings can be summed up as a single teaching, called the One Buddha Vehicle. This is the vehicle that carries us to supreme enlightenment. Transcending the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana, it is the doctrine taught and practiced as the one and only Buddha Way, the final truth.

As a result, from a broad perspective, shravakas and pratyekabuddhas are all bodhisattvas. We read in chapter 2 of

the Lotus Sutra that the Buddha said there are “no shravaka disciples.” It is entirely true that all of the Buddha’s disciples are bodhisattvas.

We must note that the passage says “And cause numberless bodhisattvas / Finally to abide in the One Vehicle,” not the four groups of countless Buddhist followers.

TEXT Therefore he who has wisdom, / Hearing the benefits of this merit, / After I am extinct, / Should receive and keep this sutra. / This man shall in the Way of the Buddha / Be determined and have no doubts.”

COMMENTARY *He who has wisdom.* What an excellent expression! This of course does not mean common sense or cleverness. Rather, it means the wisdom of knowing the fundamental truths of how people should live. “He who has wisdom” does not mean those who have attained that wisdom, but those who seek it.

• *Should receive and keep.* Although “should” suggests people are obligated to do this, believers do this voluntarily, not from obligation.

The chapter “The Divine Power of the Tathagata” concludes with this. From ancient times, the commission described in this chapter has been called “the limited commission,” because the Buddha limits this commission to the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha, beginning with the Bodhisattva Eminent Conduct, to disseminate the Lotus Sutra in the world to come. This is to clearly differentiate it from chapter 22, “The Final Commission,” in that the commission in chapter 22 is called “the general commission”

because this was the Buddha’s commission to all bodhisattvas.

Some people believe there is an unbridgeable gap between the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha in the remote past and the bodhisattvas instructed by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. However, the Lotus Sutra basically teaches that all people are equal, so there are no unbridgeable gaps among them.

Setting aside for a moment the surface meaning, I think “the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha” fundamentally means “those who see the Eternal Original Buddha.” They are those who have fully realized that the Original Buddha is the ultimate Being, or the absolute Truth, that is neither arising nor perishing, and sustains all beings. Therefore, they are those who are aware that the Original Buddha sustains them and they are his children. They fully believe they are at one with the Eternal Original Buddha.

In contrast, the bodhisattvas taught by the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, take refuge in him alone. These bodhisattvas are excellent people who take Shakyamuni the World-honored One as the only Buddha, diligently study his teachings, live by them, strive to perfect themselves, and disseminate the teachings for the liberation of humanity. All that separates them from the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha is whether they see the Original Buddha.

However, this one factor is of great magnitude. True liberation means seeing the Original Buddha, that is, being aware that the Original Buddha sustains us, and awakening to the truth of being at one with the Eternal Original Buddha. That is why Shakyamuni clearly distinguishes between the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha and those taught by the historical Buddha.

However, this is strictly a matter of inner awareness, and anyone who attains enlightenment can become a bodhisattva taught by the Original Buddha.

Therefore, we ought not to feel that because this chapter, “The Divine Power of the Tathagata,” is a commission limited to the bodhisattvas taught by the Original Buddha, it is not a commission that we too can carry out. We should accept it as a teaching for us, accept the Buddha’s gracious commission, and think earnestly about spreading the Lotus Sutra worldwide.

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.