

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

AUTUMN 2021 Vol. 48

**Religion's Potential
for Advancing**

**Sustainable
Development**





First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970



Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974



Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979



Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984



Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989



Religions for Peace 
Japan

Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace was established in 1970 as an international nongovernmental organization. It obtained general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1999. As an international network of religious communities encompassing over ninety countries, the Religions for Peace family engages in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and other peace-building activities through dialogue and cooperation across religions.

Religions for Peace Japan was established in 1972 as a committee for the international issues supported by Japanese Association of Religious Organizations. Since then it has served as the national chapter of Religions for Peace.

Purpose

1. Calling on religious communities to deeply reflect on their practices, address any that are exclusionary in nature, and engage in dialogue with one another in the spirit of tolerance and understanding.
2. Facilitating multireligious collaboration in making peace initiatives.
3. Working with peace organizations in all sectors and countries to address global issues.
4. Implementing religiously based peace education and awareness-raising activities.

Activity

Religions for Peace Japan promotes activities under the slogan: "Caring for Our Common Future: Advancing Shared Well-Being," which include cooperating and collaborating with Religions for Peace and Religions for Peace Asia; participating in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference; cooperating and collaborating with both international and local faith-based organizations; and building networks with various sectors (politics, economics, academics, culture, media, and so forth). Religions for Peace Japan also promotes various programs related to peace education that include hosting peace research seminars and peace university symposiums.



Sixth World Assembly in Rome and Riva del Garda, Italy, 1994



Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999



Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006



Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013



Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

Religions for Peace Japan Different Faith, Common Action

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DHARMA WORLD

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FEATURES: Religion's Potential for Advancing Sustainable Development

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

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Chapter 28: Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (3)



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The SDGs and the One Vehicle of the Lotus Sutra

by Yoshie Nishi



Since every being in this world is an emanation of the great life force of the universe and is of equal value and dignity, we should respect the unique individuality of each and cherish the potential of every person.

Yoshie Nishi is a deputy director (Youth Network Group) of the Dharma Education and Human Resources Development Department of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

Having been involved in peace work for the past five decades, Rissho Kosei-kai's Youth Group embarked on a new venture in 2020: advancing the SDGs. It is no longer possible for any of us to stand by while global warming accelerates and disasters worsen, and so we are doing what we can as independent people of faith to tackle the global challenges that we face.

Our aim in engaging with the SDGs is to create a world infused by the spirit of the One Vehicle propounded in the Lotus Sutra. This spirit exactly matches the pledge to leave no one behind that underpins the SDGs. A world infused by the spirit of the One Vehicle is one in which we can all join hands in worship, acceptance, and support of one another—a world where no one is excluded for any particular reasons; where all, not the few, are saved; and where all beings are recognized as precious and irreplaceable.

In today's world, however, there exist wide economic, educational, health, and other disparities. With discrimination and prejudice rampant and wealth and benefits concentrated in the hands of the few, we are far from a world where no one is left behind. Steeped in capitalism and globalization, we have become economic supremacists who think only

of efficiency, rationality, and satisfying our boundless greed.

For people like us who live their faith in this world, working to achieve the SDGs offers a way of demonstrating, through our deeds, that it is possible to live by a different, truly enriching set of values. It is not a give-and-take or a win-win approach to life but, rather, a give-and-give way of living in which we take pleasure in serving others without expecting anything in return.

Everything interrelates and cannot exist in isolation. We are all connected to each other in a mesh of ties, and our way of life always impacts others. That is why we should never blame others or society for everything but instead take a closer look at ourselves and do what we can do serve others.

We are blessed by the light of the sun, water and air, plants and animals, and everything else in the cosmos. That is why it is so important that we accept ourselves as we are, thankful for what we have rather than covetous of what we lack. I am reminded of one of our women's group members who, after eating clam miso soup, prayerfully puts her hands together with the children to thank the clams before throwing the shells away. I believe that the accumulation of such momentary acts of recognition

of our interconnectedness with all life enrich the world.

Since every being in this world is an emanation of the great life force of the universe and is of equal value and dignity, we should respect the unique individuality of each and cherish the potential of every person as we change in myriad ways through our encounters with others. Consider the example of one of our youth group members, who had become socially withdrawn for several years. One day, at the invitation of her friends who had continued to visit her again and again, she ventured out for a fundraising event on the street. Starting by quietly asking passersby for donations, she gradually became able to go out, and the following year she brought a friend along to collect donations again. This demonstrates the importance of accepting ourselves, and others, for what we are, including our complexes and weaknesses as well as our strengths and virtues, and recognizing that it is these very weaknesses that enable us to understand and appreciate people better.

By working to advance the SDGs, I want us to demonstrate to the world through our actions the existence of Buddhist values and conscientious ways of living that put encounters with people and nature before money and economics. □

Religions, Gender, and SDG 5: Barriers and Drivers for Change

by Emma Tomalin



Religion plays a role in shaping attitudes and behaviors with respect to gender roles, identities, and relationships in ways that have an impact on women's ability to participate in the activities of their religious traditions fully and equally.

Setting the Context: Religion, Development, and the SDGs

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) came into effect at the start of 2016 and comprise 17 global goals and 169 targets that will shape international approaches to sustainable development until 2030. Distinct from previous frameworks, such as the UN Millennium Development Goals, which ran from 2000 to 2015, the SDGs apply as much to the Global North as to the Global South. They also have as

their underlying impetus the maxim “leave no one behind,” aiming to reach and transform the lives of the most marginalized people wherever they might be. Although the final set of goals and targets was debated and agreed upon at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, to arrive at that stage, the UN undertook a wide-ranging public consultation that endeavored to get the input of local civil-society actors globally. It is questionable whether this public consultation achieved its aims, with some holding the view that the SDG framework remains disconnected

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from the lives of marginalized groups and reflects only the political and economic interests of UN member states.

Despite this disconnect, NGOs and other civil-society actors across the globe are now beginning to interpret and apply the SDG framework in their local settings. This includes faith actors, whether they be religious leaders or faith-based organizations in their role as civil-society actors, particularly in highly religious settings in the Global South. In addition to their religious functions, these faith actors play a key role in shaping and achieving social-justice agendas in ways that reflect local contexts and needs. Despite this, research indicates that faith actors were not widely consulted about the SDGs and that when they were, they were treated in the same way as other civil-society actors, with their religious identity not making an obvious difference (Tomalin et al 2018). Moreover, those faith actors who were consulted tended to be those who were already at the table and had



Photo: NEWS.COM / AFLO

On September 25, 2015, the 193 UN states approved the development agenda, or SDGs, that will guide the efforts of the international community toward the year 2030, following a three-day summit at the United Nations headquarters.

been afforded that position because they had accepted the informal regulation that they should downplay their religious identity and behave like other secular NGOs (Tomalin 2018). This meant that local faith actors were effectively left behind and were not able to play a role even though they are closest to many of the poorest communities globally—with an understanding of their social and spiritual needs and often at the forefront of providing material support in times of crisis.

Religion has not been something that global-development actors have taken very seriously, and when they have engaged, it has tended to be on the terms of the secular Northern-led development industry. This has led to criticisms that religion is being instrumentalized to serve neoliberal development goals (Jones and Peterson 2016). Global-development policy and practice is seen as a secular endeavor influenced by the secularization thesis, which predicts that as people and communities develop, their reliance on religion will diminish and eventually disappear altogether. However, this is a problematic

view for several reasons. First, religion plays a role in perpetuating inequality and discrimination and therefore development actors should be taking it very seriously, trying to better understand where religion gets in the way of the pursuit of equality, including gender equality. Second, religion does not seem to be disappearing even in places that are developed, such as the United States. The link between modernization and secularization is more complex than this. Third, opportunities to learn from and connect with the more-radical potential of faith actors and traditions to imagine and effect alternatives and solutions to development problems are pushed out of the frame.

In the following text I consider how religion acts as a barrier to realizing SDG 5 and its nine targets and suggest that understanding religious dynamics is key to addressing the question of how to reduce gender discrimination and empower women. However, to form productive, effective, and non-instrumentalizing partnerships with faith actors, including local faith actors, and to address gender inequality and

discrimination, it is necessary to form these partnerships on an equal basis, reflecting where various actors are positioned, rather than assuming that there is a uniform way to approach women's empowerment.

Religion Can Be a Barrier to Achieving SDG 5

Gender inequality is a major factor in poor health and economic outcomes for many women and girls globally, who are also more likely to experience domestic and sexual violence and to become victims of human trafficking (Cerise and Francavilla 2012; Voronova and Radjenovic 2016). The Sustainable Development Goals framework directly addresses these issues in SDG 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," with its nine targets (see the box below).

Across the globe, religion plays a role in shaping attitudes and behaviors with respect to gender roles, identities, and relationships in ways that have an impact on women's ability to participate

SDG 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation. 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences. 5.A Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws. 5.B Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. 5.C Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels. |
|--|--|

in the activities of their religious traditions fully and equally as well as limiting their opportunities and establishing their status within their local communities and wider societies. Taking the first target, religious traditions can be a barrier to achieving SDG 5, since they often discriminate against women. For example, it is not uncommon for women to be viewed as subordinate to men, with their roles defined in terms of their biological capacity to reproduce, which is backed up with references to religious texts and traditions. This can have an impact on women's access to education, employment, and political representation. Afaf Jabiri (2013) discusses this with respect to the concept of *wilālay* (guardianship over women) in the Arab region, which is an Islamic concept that “forms the very basis of women's legal and social subordination” and “constructs and produces certain types of femininity and masculinity that define women's positions.”

It is well documented that women's secondary and dependent position to men within many religious settings renders them more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, both in the home and in the wider community, which stands in the way of the second target. As Susan Rakoczy writes with respect to the “insidious links between patriarchy, violence, and Christianity” (Rakoczy 2004, 29) in South Africa, “patriarchal structures in society and Christianity are not only violent in their effects on women's dignity as persons, but they undergird the epidemic of violence against women” (2004, 34). Violence is also seen in the “harmful traditional practices” (HTPs) that affect millions of women and girls globally, including, for example, child, early, and forced marriage. Although these are not religious practices per se, the assumption that it is woman's religious duty and destiny to marry, alongside the existence of gender disparities that privilege the male perspective, can mean that young women

are coerced into marriages they would not have chosen and with much older men. As Carol Kuruvilla (2017) writes concerning child marriage in American evangelical circles, “a significant age difference among couples was seen as ideal for allowing men and women to carry out their God-given duties: the husband to provide and lead, and the wife to run the household and give birth to many children.”

Finally, as Nora Khalaf-Elledge (2021) points out, the ability of women to challenge gender inequality and discrimination in their religious traditions is limited by the lack of access to leadership roles within their traditions (see the fifth target). This includes positions in which they can engage in textual reinterpretation to undermine patriarchal understandings of religions and develop styles of what have been called “religious feminism” (Tomalin 2011, 4). Moreover, male faith actors often put forward religious arguments against women's participation and leadership in politics and other activities in the public sphere, where religious traditions underpin a strong belief that the biological differences between men and women mean that women are not suited to leadership roles.

Religion is not the direct cause of gender inequality, but in intersection

with other patriarchal systems and institutions, religious traditions support processes and customs that disadvantage women and that collectively work together to make inequality more difficult to remedy. Despite this fact, the SDGs barely mention religion or identify it as a key barrier to achieving SDG 5. As Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler note, “Religion is mentioned only in passing in the ‘leave no one behind’ clause, as well as in SDG 10.2 on reducing inequalities, which recognises religion as a possible ground for discrimination” (2020, 47). Why the silence on religion in the SDGs? Is this a reflection of the strong influence of the secularization thesis on development discourse as well as the view that religion is a potentially risky factor that could jeopardize the perceived neutrality of the UN? Is it because religion is a sensitive topic, particularly in combination with gender issues that concern the most intimate personal and family matters around sexuality and procreation, leading to uneasy conversations between some faith actors and promoters of gender equality? It has been reported by Gillian Paterson (2015) that SDG 5, and its sixth target specifically, was one of the most difficult to negotiate, and aspects of it were opposed by some faith actors. For instance, with respect to Catholic concerns over the language of



Angelique Kidjo (left), UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and famous Benin singer, explains to a young girl why she should not accept forced marriage, near Awassa, Ethiopia, February 8, 2005.

Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

gender, sexual and reproductive health, and reproductive rights in the SDGs, she explains that there was “fear that espousing these ill-defined concepts will open doors, by default, to practices the Church could not endorse.”

All of these factors are likely to play a role in the avoidance of direct reference to religion in the SDGs and, coupled with the rather narrow set of actors involved in setting the global goals, would seem to lend support to the view that global-development actors would rather keep religion at arm's length and engage only when it is on their terms and meets their goals. This is damaging to the pursuit of women's rights and development globally, where sidelining religion as a relevant factor and avoiding engagement with faith actors on equal terms is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities and miss opportunities for partnership and transformation.

Moving Forward: Engaging with Faith Actors to Achieve SDG 5

Gillian Paterson (2015) recommends that overcoming this impasse between the “God-centered master-narrative/paradigm of religious discourse and the Humanity-centered master-narrative/paradigm of human rights discourse” can be achieved only through “developing spaces” to “dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect, and come together with the humility to recognize the limitations of human understanding.” Indeed, there are many impressive and hopeful examples of the coming together of faith actors and development actors to collectively challenge the patriarchy within religions that is a barrier to SDG 5 and that aim to start from the current positions of various actors rather than assuming that there is going to be an easy agreement on sensitive topics. However, this kind of engagement is something that



Photo: AFP / AFLO

A girl of the Pokot tribe looks at a broken food basket in front of the abandoned cave where girls rested to heal after their circumcision. The cave is located at their spiritual site near Katabok village, northeast Uganda. Female genital mutilation (FGM) was banned in 2010. Photo taken January 30, 2018.

many secular NGOs do not feel comfortable with or have limited expertise in but that international faith-based organizations such as Tearfund, Islamic Relief, World Vision International, and Christian Aid are taking a leading role in. For instance, Elisabet le Roux and Selina Palm (2018) highlight a number of such partnerships, including one between Norwegian Church Aid Ethiopia and Ethiopian faith-based organizations and the Inter-Religious Council on child, early, and forced marriage, involving dialogues and theological engagement. In another study, Elisabet le Roux and Brenda Bartelink (2017) examine the issue of how to engage with faith actors to address harmful traditional practices that affect women and girls while emphasizing that this has to be done in ways that take not only a public-health approach but also a “scriptural/theological approach to addressing harmful practices” because this is “a way of engaging faith leaders in terms that they are comfortable with, that they trust, and on which they see themselves as expert. Sacred scriptures are used to rethink and re-envision certain practices in terms of the equality of God’s creation. In this way, sacred scripture can be a powerful weapon in challenging

and transforming unequal and unjust structures and practices.”

Final Considerations

Engagements in collaboration and dialogue, however, do not necessarily result in perfect agreement about the exact nature of women's empowerment or how to achieve it. For instance, while some have responded to patriarchy in their religious traditions by looking for resources within their religions that support gender equality, others have instead emphasized gender equity, which relates to the idea that men and women should not be treated the same, as they have different but complementary roles; however, this difference should not be used as a basis for discrimination or unjust treatment (Tomalin 2019). In many contexts there is a genuine commitment to exploring women's empowerment within a religious framework even if, by Western feminist standards that focus on gender equality as the starting point, the goals might sometimes seem quite modest or not far-reaching enough. Serious engagement with religion in pursuit of gender equality needs to recognize that it cannot be assumed that there is a unified feminist vision.

There is a need for development actors to acquire a fuller understanding of what constitutes women's empowerment and status raising in different contexts, and an openness to include a diversity of views and strategies even when they might initially seem to be in tension with secular feminisms premised on female and male equality in all spheres of life. Research that addresses these issues could assist development actors in modifying their language and expectations in different contexts so as to be supportive of modes of female empowerment that are culturally embedded, thereby achieving the best outcomes for women at any particular time. □

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Reasons That Religions Matter in/to Peace and Security, and the Considerations of the “How To”

by Azza Karam

To assume a clear divide between secular politicians and religious leaders is to ignore the interlinked realities that have existed for centuries.

Peace and security should be understood as inclusive of the manner in which people think (what motivates them), and how they behave toward one another. A Pew Research Poll in 2012 indicated that more than 80 percent of people around the world claim a certain religious affiliation. This means that religions are part the influence on people's behaviors, thoughts, and actions—the good influences and the not so good ones. Yet, the secular lenses through which many Western governments have perceived the world—through the prism of their own sidelining of the realms of religion—mislead at best, or are blinding at worst.

Religious institutions, religious leaders, and faith communities are social and cultural gatekeepers in all societies. Any transformation in behaviors and attitudes—in social and cultural norms—involves religious leaders and operators of institutions advocating specific behaviors. Only then is it possible to disseminate widely and systematically the changes required—regarding, for instance, staying safe and healthy during this pandemic.

Even within the UN development system—which, arguably, operates within a Western European mindset—the ignorance around religion is now

being reversed. Today there is a UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development with membership from more than twenty UN system entities members, with a forty-plus member Advisory Council of religious NGOs.

I know because I was one of those who founded and served both the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, as well as the Multi-Faith Advisory Council. The UNHCR

(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) have an Islamic Finance unit, and UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) is considering launching a “multireligious giving circle” because today the UN receives money from religious actors—a far cry from the times when religion was simply a private or spiritual affair.

If peace is to be understood as not only the absence of war, but also as the access to a sense of security and certainty of dignity by all—or at least as a minimum, the assurance of meeting basic needs such that no one is left behind—then some hard economic and service realities need to



Photo: AFP / AFLO

Nuns look on as a woman is tested for the novel coronavirus by a nurse with the mobile crew of the Lebanese American University Medical Center, at the Order of Malta dispensary, in the southern Lebanese local authority of Roum in the town of Jezzine on May 21, 2020.



Azza Karam serves as secretary-general of Religions for Peace. She obtained her PhD cum laude from the University of Amsterdam in 1996 and has since published, in several languages, articles and books on international political dynamics, including democratization, human rights, peace and security, gender, religious engagement, and sustainable development. She holds a professorship of religion and development at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

be faced. Religious institutions are the largest, oldest, and most far reaching social-service providers—the original development actors. Since time immemorial, religious institutions have served people’s needs in health, education, nutrition, sanitation, environmental conservation, psychosocial and palliative care, among many other basic matters. While data vary, Christian health organizations alone are estimated to provide at least a quarter of the world’s primary health care. This applies in the United States, as it applies in the continent of Africa, as it does in the Middle East. The figure is known to rise dramatically in conflict-ridden contexts.

Moreover, religious NGOs are often the first responders in humanitarian crises: at least four out of the top ten global humanitarian NGOs are religiously inspired, if not religiously based. Religious sites (churches, mosques, temples and the like, together with their affiliated structures like schools and clinics) are often the first go-to spaces in natural or man-made humanitarian crises—especially, albeit not only, in armed conflicts.

If peace and security are the business of politics and politicians, then it behooves us to be aware that religious leaders—and some movements and entire religious infrastructures—are partners in policy and actions, and

are spiritual advisors to many politicians. Religious inspiration runs deep in the fabric of the social consciousness of most political actors in societies that are themselves still rooted in cultures defined and informed by religion. To assume a clear divide between secular politicians and religious leaders is to ignore the interlinked realities that have existed for centuries. To make such an assumption in the context of the Middle East is to be blind to the basics of the Middle East. Religious narratives, and religious leaders, are political actors—as centuries of history vividly illustrate.

If security is to be realized through the participation of human beings, then we must understand that religious communities are the most creatively self-resourced institutions in the world. Their networks of volunteers (human resources) and their respective fund-raising capacities (financial resources) far outweigh any other secular NGO counterpart. Indeed, some religious institutions may well be wealthier than some political parties. We need only think about charitable donations, or tithes in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Baha’i, or Jewish contexts. Or consider Islamic Zakat and Islamic financing institutions as well as the Institute for the Works of Religion (commonly known as the Vatican Bank) as examples. No one is arguing that all religious institutions are wealthier than nation states, but it is important to consider that many religious institutions and large religious NGOs receive funding from governments in diverse guises, including in the



Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

The author wrote, “Religious narratives, and religious leaders, are political actors—as centuries of history vividly illustrate.” The head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Bethlehem bishop Theofilactos attends the Holy Fire ceremony in Bethlehem’s Church of Nativity, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, on May 1, 2021.



Some nine hundred delegates and guests of the Tenth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, which was held on August 19–23, 2019, in Lindau, Germany, took part in an interreligious and spiritual ceremony at the island town's Luitpold Park on August 20. Dr. Karam was elected the new secretary-general of Religions for Peace during the assembly's plenary session.

supposedly secular Western Hemisphere. And it is equally valuable to recognize how it is that the Covid pandemic itself has resulted in multitudinous instances of volunteer labor and efforts mobilized by religious communities around the world. In short, as long as humans matter to peace building and peace making, that which moves them, nourishes them, and serves them also matters.

If some religions are identified as sources of insecurity and violations of rights and dignity—indeed, also as sources of terrorism, violence, or extremism—then all policy makers must ask themselves how it is even possible not to engage with the religious sectors: how can one treat symptoms if the policy makers are not engaged with spreaders of the disease?

But what does it take to engage religious actors?

It requires first and foremost a political will to engage in a manner that is open-minded—that is, not replete with stereotypes and ignorance about the diversities of religions and religious

groups—as well as a recognition of the existing realities of the pervasiveness of religion in public life, as described above.

Engaging with religious realms also requires humility regarding how little traditional Western and Westernized diplomatic forums know (not specifically about the basics of Christianity or Islam or Judaism or Hinduism and so on; that is the business of theologians) and a humble willingness to learn about the multiple, complex, and complicated ways in which the religious informs the daily lives of millions of people around the world, forms part of the lexicon of political and cultural realities, and is already embedded in both local and national institutions of governance.

Engaging with religious actors is not an added burden of learning and public policy; rather, it is about rectifying the lack of learning. Engaging is not about using or instrumentalizing certain religious leaders and institutions for specific political or economic purposes; it is about appreciating the prevalence and diversity of their agency

and actions as human rights champions; development and humanitarian providers; shapers of political, cultural, and even financial discourse—and social consciousness; warmongers as well as peacemakers, soldiers as well as reconcilers. Use religious actors for your own ends at your peril, as the history of countless instances from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe—everywhere—testifies.

Partnering with the diverse and full range of multireligious actors needs to be done in a manner that integrates the religious within the larger sphere of civic work—rather than isolating the religious as unique, because they claim a direct affiliation with God or the godly. Religions are part of our civil societies, and there should be a process of accountability to one another as civic actors.

Engaging with the diversity of religious actors is not up to governments. It is ultimately about upholding the conscience and accountability of all forms of governance. □

The SDGs, Food, and Faith

by Makio Takemura



Highlighting what meals should really be like from a religious perspective can potentially make a major contribution to reducing food loss and waste, and this is one important way in which religion can contribute to the attainment of the SDGs.

Makio Takemura, DLitt, was president of Toyo University, Tokyo, from 2009 to 2020, where he is now an emeritus professor. He specializes in Buddhist thought and the philosophy of religion and is the author of numerous books on Buddhism. He has also led the Transdisciplinary Initiative for Eco-Philosophy and served as the director of the Research Center for Kyosei [harmonious coexistence] Philosophy, both at Toyo University.

Introduction

In Japan, many companies have begun to actively engage with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and thanks in part to a promotional campaign on TV, public awareness of the goals is quite high. According to the old Japanese mercantile philosophy of *sampō yoshi*, business should be good for the seller, the buyer, and society. It is gratifying to see that business is now expected to be good for the future as well.

SDG 12 and Religion

As most people are now familiar with the 17 SDGs, I will not go into them here. Instead, I would like to focus on one of the goals in particular, SDG 12, in order to explore its relationship with religion.

So what exactly is SDG 12? This goal is concerned with responsible consumption and production, and its aim is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. Hiroshi Minami and Masaki Inaba explain the significance of SDG 12 as follows:

Human society today depends on consuming 1.69 times more resources than the earth can replenish, a

situation that, in the medium to long term at least, is unsustainable. Shifting from this dependence to the production and consumption of only one planet's worth of resources is the ultimate aim behind the transition from an unsustainable world to a sustainable world that is a mainstay of the SDGs. SDG 12 addresses a range of specific challenges, including food loss and waste, [*] hazardous waste, recycling, and environmental education. If we are really going to create a sustainable world and a society that can live within the earth's means so as not to deprive future

generations of their potential and having their needs met, it is crucial that we take stronger, concrete steps to achieve this goal (SDGs—*Kiki no jidai no rashinban* [SDGs: The compass in the age of crises], [Iwanami Shoten, 2020]).

SDG 12 consists of eight targets. While religion has much to offer in



A landfill, a site for the disposal of waste materials. Unless they are stabilized, landfills may undergo severe shaking or soil liquefaction of the ground during an earthquake.

Photo: Shutterstock



A May 2017 photo at Sydney's OzHarvest Market, Australia's first recycled food supermarket. The market takes surplus products from major supermarkets, airlines, and other suppliers that would normally be destined for landfill, and gives them away for free. Such initiatives help support a major government push to cut down on waste, which costs the Australian economy the equivalent of 15 billion USD a year.

regard to the eighth of these targets, which addresses lifestyle issues, my focus in this article is on the third target, which concerns food loss and waste and its relationship to religion.

Interest in Food Loss and Waste

The aim of Target 3 of SDG 12 is to “halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses, by 2030.” Significantly, a very specific numerical target and deadline for attainment has been set. The problem of food loss and waste is also closely related to SDG 2: Zero Hunger.

According to the website of Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF):

The world currently has a population of about 7.7 billion people, of whom more than 800 million (approximately one in nine) living mainly in developing countries lack sufficient food and are undernourished.

In developed countries, on the other hand, surplus food is thrown away even though it is still edible. Japan's food self-sufficiency rate is one of the lowest in the developed world, and the country is dependent on imports for much of its food. The conditions that give rise to such extensive food loss are something that society as a whole must work to resolve.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reports that about 1.3 billion tons of food, or one-third of the world's total food output, goes to waste every year. Of the food wasted in Japan, 6.12 million tons per year consist of food that is thrown away even though it could still be eaten (based on MAFF estimates for fiscal year 2017). Per capita, this food waste comes to about 47 kg (ca. 103 pounds) per year, which is the equivalent of everyone in Japan throwing away a bowl of rice every day. Statistics on the Japan Mottainai Food Center's website indicate that food waste on this scale is

equivalent to around twice the amount of food aid provided by the world as a whole, and the cost of disposal amounts to 2 trillion yen (about 18.2 billion US dollars) per year.

According to MAFF data on food waste in Japan, business food waste (such as unsold supermarket food and restaurant leftovers) comes to 3.28 million tons, while households generate 2.84 million tons of food waste (owing to throwing away leftovers and other surplus food). Moves are afoot throughout society to tackle the problem, such as by rethinking best-before dates, utilizing preservation techniques and preserved food know-how, opening “lost food” restaurants that use surplus food ingredients, promoting food banks and free or low-cost “kids' cafes” that distribute surplus food to those who need it, and developing systems to facilitate local production for local consumption, and it is hoped that moves of this kind will continue to spread. People can take concrete action in the home as well, such as by avoiding buying and preparing too much food. Other effective measures include making wider use of doggy bags to take home leftover food from restaurants and requiring restaurants to provide doggy bags.

Another initiative to reduce food loss is described by Norichika Kanie:

The Dutch government and the World Resources Institute launched an initiative called Champions 12.3 soon after the SDGs were adopted. This is an initiative in which the leaders of diverse stakeholders, including governments, businesses, international organizations, research institutions, and non-governmental organizations, work together to achieve 12.3. Among its members are well-known companies such as Nestlé and Kellogg's (SDGs: *Jizoku kanōna kaihatsu mokuhyō* [SDGs: The Sustainable Development Goals], [Chuo Koron Shinsha, 2020]).

In Japan, meanwhile, the Act on Promotion of Food Loss and Waste Reduction went into effect in October 2019. While it may currently be more economical to throw food away than recycle or redistribute it, it should still be reprocessed into animal feed or used for volunteer activities or in business instead.

Food loss and waste means that the labor and energy expended to make food are wasted. Since the food that is thrown away is mainly disposed of by incineration, there are cost and environmental impacts to consider as well. For a variety of reasons, therefore, the problem of food loss and waste needs to be taken seriously.

A Faith-Informed Reflection on Food Loss and Contribution to the SDGs

Tackling food loss and waste requires not only concrete action of the kind outlined above but also a more fundamental understanding and appreciation of food and meals. From a religious standpoint, partaking of food relates directly to one's own life, blessed as it is by God and the Buddha, and it is at the very root of the religious life. Food is considered from a variety of perspectives in religion, whether it be

from the angle of food equality, discouragement of gluttony, gratitude for the blessings of food, or the rights and wrongs of eating meat. This importance is evident from the fact that in almost all religions, prayers are said before eating. I would argue that we should revisit these ideas about food, universalize them, and persuade the general public of their benefits.

Reflecting on the words chanted before meals in religions from this angle, I am struck by the profundity of the *gokan-no-ge* (five contemplations recited before meals) introduced by the Buddhist priest Dogen (1200–53) in *Fushuku hanpō* (The Dharma of taking food). Although intended for Zen practitioners (*unsui*), I believe that people today can learn much from them as well. The contemplations are as follows:

First, let us consider the effort it took to prepare the meal in front of us and reflect on the paths that each ingredient took to get here. Second, let us reflect on whether our actions make us worthy to receive the offerings made by the many who made this meal possible. Third, we should always try to maintain a

well-balanced mind, avoid wrongdoing, and, in so doing, beware of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. The same applies to meals. Fourth, when we partake in this way, we are in effect taking good medicine that prevents the body from wasting away. Fifth, I am eating like this because I have the great goal of following the path of Buddhism (*Tenzo kyōkun, Fushuku hanpō* [Instructions for the Zen cook and the Dharma of taking food], translated and annotated by Shohachi Nakamura, Rikizan Ishikawa, and Toshiyuki Nakamura [Kodansha, 1991]).

Herein can be found not only gratitude for the labor of others and the blessings of food but also a questioning of one's worthiness to partake of food and a profound affirmation of what one is striving for in life. When we ponder these words, we realize the importance and sacredness of food and turn away from gluttony and toward eating only what we require to nourish our physical and spiritual needs rather than simply satisfy our sense of taste.

Thus, highlighting what meals should really be like from a religious perspective can potentially make a major contribution to reducing food loss and waste, and this is one important way in which religion can contribute to the attainment of the SDGs. I sincerely hope that religious groups and people of faith will work to remind others of the religious significance of food for us as human beings and contribute to the achievement of one of the targets of the SDGs. □

*Food loss is the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions by food suppliers in the chain, excluding retailers, food service providers, and consumers. Food waste refers to the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions by retailers, food service providers, and consumers. (Downloaded on July 27 from the website for the FAO: <http://www.fao.org/food-loss-and-food-waste/flw-data>.)



Photo: Andia / UIG / PPS

Collective prayer during the meal at Ryumonji, a Buddhist monastery of the Japanese Soto Zen tradition, in Strasbourg, France.

Reconsidering the SDGs in Light of Grassroots Socially Engaged Buddhism

by Jonathan S. Watts

The first step religious groups need to take is to clarify the conceptual problems and structural limitations of SDGs. . . . Without doing so, they cannot promote an authentic civil-society movement that truly serves the people rather than state and corporate agendas.

The Brave New World of Social Development Goals

Living here in Japan, I wonder if other nations in Asia and elsewhere have noticed a new flood of promotions around the United Nations' seventeen Social Development Goals officially adopted by UN member states in late 2015. These seventeen goals encompass a wide range of socioeconomic policy

agendas that any reasonable and caring person would resonate with, such as eradicating poverty and hunger, achieving gender equality, developing affordable and clean energy, promoting responsible consumption and production, and supporting climate action, peace, and social justice. What person in good conscience would oppose these?

Japan, always sensitive to world trends and the perception of their society by the outside world, has wholeheartedly

embraced these goals, with the Japanese government handing out awards to "companies, local governments, and NGOs/NPOs that are making outstanding efforts on sustainable development (www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/sdgs/award/index.html). Their campaign has even extended to painting and decorating entire commuter trains promoting the SDG movement in cities such as Yokohama.

The Japanese Buddhist world, as equally concerned about its public image, has also jumped on the bandwagon, with one Buddhist priest designing *kesas* (a scarf worn around the neck for ritual duties) creating a distinctively patterned SDG *kesa* for sale. The Japan Buddhist Federation, which acts as a formal representative body for the traditional Buddhist denominations of Japan on public matters, has also begun to search for ways to promote these goals within the Buddhist world. This time of climate crisis is a fitting moment to put the well-being of the common person center stage in our new millennium and for Buddhism to become more deeply socially engaged for the well-being of all sentient beings.

For some Buddhists, however, something seems a little off in this promise of the brave new world of the SDGs. Since the modern era began in Asia with the full onslaught of Western colonialism in the mid-1800s, Buddhists, specifically socially engaged Buddhists, have been attempting to articulate and chart an alternative course of modernity for their once-traditional societies. Their



Photo: Shutterstock

On September 8, 2020, the Tokyu Railways Corporation, a private sector running a railway service linking the Tokyo area with Yokohama City, started to run the "SDGs Trains" to promote its corporate campaign of the Sustainable Development Goals.



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visions have sought a more holistic and middle-way course between what they view as the destructive materialism of Western capitalism and socialism. This struggle became increasingly sophisticated and practical with the achievement of national independence by most Asian nations after World War II.

Perhaps the most highly systematized attempt at Buddhist development that continues today is the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, founded by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne in the 1950s and rising to national prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the pioneers in the microcredit and community-banking movement, Sarvodaya articulated a people's participatory development. This movement has stood in contrast to state and market-driven development lorded over by a class of national and international elites often more interested in their own financial gain than the well-being of the people. At the beginning, Sarvodaya articulated a set of Ten Basic Needs for the community that are very similar to the Seventeen SDGs: (1) a clean and beautiful environment, (2) an adequate supply of safe water, (3) the minimum requirements of clothing, (4) a balanced diet, (5) simple housing, (6) basic health care, (7) communication facilities, (8) energy, (9) total education related to life and living, (10) cultural and spiritual needs.

In a recent interview with Harsha Navaratne—who spent years in the field building Sarvodaya under his uncle Dr. Ariyaratne and presently serves as the chairperson of the International Network



Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, the president of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of Sri Lanka, gives a special lecture on the principle of the movement at Rissho Kosei-kai's Gakurin Seminary, Tokyo, on May 8, 1992.

of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)—he notes that these Ten Basic Needs were actually taken from the traditional development concepts of every Sri Lankan village that ensured the wide-ranging sustainability of the people and their environment. Navaratne further notes that Sarvodaya had to revive them in their work, because they had been destroyed by the invasive and exploitative nature of British colonial capitalism, which views everything as means for economic productivity. After Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the new government embarked on a period of more measured, socialistic development in which organizations like Sarvodaya could emerge and thrive. However, under the strain of increasing ethnic conflict, whose root causes had been sown by the

British, Sri Lanka embraced a policy of free-market, liberal capitalism in 1978. In this period, the United Nations and its new development policies became much more active in the country, first with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), established in 1965 to “end poverty, build democratic governance, rule of law, and inclusive institutions.” (<https://www.undp.org/about-us>) But Navaratne comments that for Sri Lanka these UN programs simply reintroduced the English model of liberal capitalism under the banner of development and poverty reduction. While taking into account that sociopolitical conditions in Sri Lanka are incredibly complex and nuanced, these programs still never reached any of their aims. The nation subsequently descended into a



The Treaty of Münster depicted here and the Treaty of Westphalia, both signed in October 1648, brought an end to the Wars of Religion and marked the start of today's nation-states.

forty-year ethnic war. Much of its economy became propped up by the migration of young women to the Middle East to work in the servant class. This all led to the deterioration of community life, so that Sri Lanka had the leading rate of suicide in Asia for decades.

The Historical Roots of Neurotic State and Corporate-Led Development

Navaratne's response to the SDG movement is thus less than enthusiastic, not because of its ideals, but because of its methods. He sees it as a movement being initiated by the United Nations, a broken institution built around the deeply flawed paradigm of the modern nation-state system. As numerous authors have noted, such as David R. Loy in his *Buddhist History of the West*, the European nation-state system is a child of the traumatic failures of the Protestant Reformation to liberate Christianity from the Catholic Church and establish a unified and enlightened form of Christianity for the people. Within a

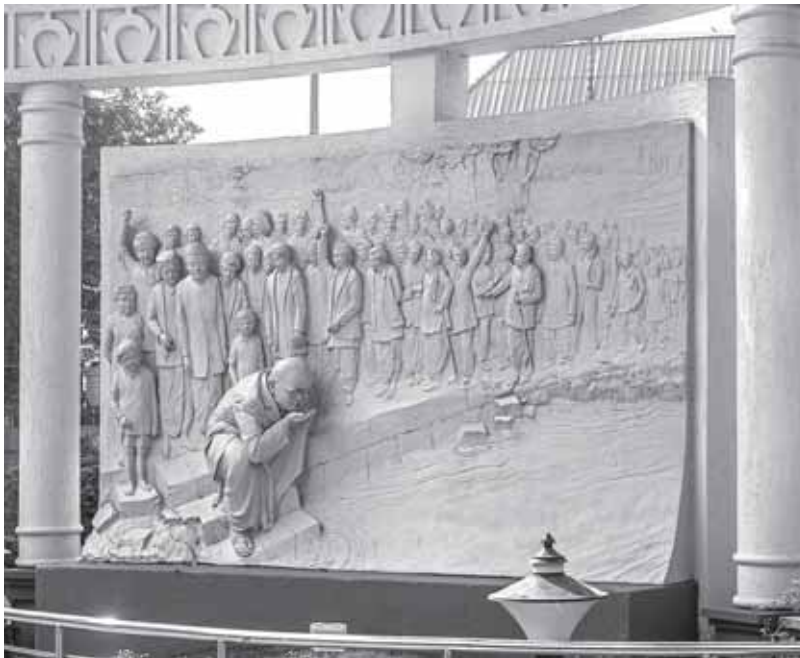
short time, Europe began to tear itself apart in the Wars of Religion, which concluded with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and also the establishment of the modern nation-state as the norm for political systems. These events led Europeans to give up on religion as a bonding agent for society, eventually replacing religious faith and morality with utilitarian logic and scientific reason. The naturally autonomous, property-owning individual living within a system of tribalized nation-states became the new basis for society as epitomized in the American idealism of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. While the West has heralded this as a transformative moment in human liberty, the legacy of this period must be questioned, with three hundred years of racist colonialism, two world wars, and the new economic colonialism of globalization all fueled by a neurotic overemphasis on material development.

Navaratne notes that under this ongoing paradigm of the nation-state systematized through the United Nations, real grassroots organizations that sit outside liberal and communist systems

cannot access funds. Large amounts of government aid money are funneled through the UN, which in turn takes a huge percentage of it simply to maintain the institution. While much lip service is being paid to the SDGs, the reality is that the funding goals of the biggest donors, such as those on the UN Security Council, are pouring money into security issues that serve the nation-state: for example, USAID's focus on democracy and peace in Asia as a means to compete with China over regional influence. Navaratne notes that there is no actual balance in providing funds equally for the other SDGs. Further, funding for progressive goals, such as clean energy, is funneled through large corporate projects, and not through citizens organizations that help local people build up sustainable local economies. Indeed, these deeper liberal-capitalist agendas are found embedded in the language of the SDGs, which "recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth" (<https://www.sdgaactioncampaign.org/17goals/>).

Buddhist Visions and Practices for Sustainable Development

According to Somboon Chungprampree, the executive director of INEB in Bangkok, the first step religious groups need to take is to clarify the conceptual problems and structural limitations of SDGs as outlined above. Without doing so, they cannot promote an authentic civil-society movement that truly serves the people rather than state and corporate agendas. From a Buddhist standpoint, this involves the practice of the Buddha's First Noble Truth, which, in this context, is getting in touch with the real suffering of the people, and the Second Noble Truth, which is clarifying



The sculpture depicts the Mahad water movement, or referred to as the Mahad Satyagraha, led by B. R. Ambedkar on March 20, 1927 to allow Dalits to use water in a public tank in Mahad (currently in Raigad district), Maharashtra, India.

the root structural and cultural causes of this suffering that are neglected, unseen, and glossed over, for example by sparkly SDG campaigns and advertisements. The Third Noble Truth is developing a new vision for the ending of suffering, a vision of nirvana.

The Sarvodaya movement under Dr. Ariyaratne offers one such vision, which embraces cultural diversity and articulates itself for non-Buddhists and nonreligionists. There are also important Buddhist forerunners in the pre-war era that present-day Buddhists should become aware of. For example, the Japanese Nichiren-sect priest Rev. Giro Seno-o (妹尾義郎, 1889–1961) was one of the few Buddhists in Japan in the pre-war era to reject not only Western materialism but also the archaic idealism and imperialism of the Meiji Restoration. While maintaining that Buddhism “is nothing other than the truth of development and change,” he urged Japanese Buddhists to recapture the revolutionary spirit of “Buddhism for society” found in the formative period of the

Kamakura era (James Mark Shields, *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2017], 220).

Chinese Master Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947) was another pre-war pioneer of modern Buddhist praxis, mapping out a process that would transcend both the nation-state and religion itself. “Progress in the realm of government is from the authority of tribal chieftains to a monarchy, and from a monarchy to a republic, and from a republic to [the ideal of] no government at all. In religion, progress is from [the belief in] many gods to one god, from one god to sages and worthies, and from sages and worthies to no religion at all” (Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* [University of Hawai’i Press, 2001], 251–52).

In India, B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) articulated a Buddhist path of modernity that would heal the schism of religious morality and secular reason in Western modernity with an engaged, nontheistic morality to guide

the nation-state and its development path. While India continues to struggle with religious fundamentalism and the social injustices it gives birth to, Ambedkar’s legacy in drafting the independence constitution of modern India continues to serve progressive Indians with a vision of a multicultural dharma society.

In the postwar era, even more highly developed social critiques and visions have been articulated. The Vietnamese Buddhist movement developed a distinctly nonaligned ideology of neutralism during the war in Vietnam and a nuanced understanding of nonviolent action. In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, “The violence of the system is much more destructive, much more harmful, although it is well hidden and not so visible. We call it institutional violence. By calling ourselves non-violent, we are against all violence, but we are first against the institutional violence” (Sallie B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church: Nondualism in Action,” in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King [State University of New York Press, 1996], 345).

Finally, in Thailand we can see the reclamation of true socialism in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s Dhammic Socialism, which seeks a middle way between Western individualism and Asian collectivism through an ethical social system grounded in harmony with a duty toward the natural environment.

From these forerunners, Buddhists not only in Asia but all over the world have been developing a wide variety of social activities and movements to realize the ideals of the SDGs, but within the more authentic framework of grassroots communities. For Chungprampree, this is the important second agenda, that of showing actual alternative forms of development based on the people’s standpoint—an expression of the Buddha’s Fourth Noble Truth of the path toward realizing the vision of nirvana.



Muslim and Buddhist people clean the compound of a mosque as they prepare for it to be reopened, after it was temporarily shut as a preventive measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Thailand's southern province of Narathiwat on June 13, 2021.

In June 2020, as the COVID pandemic first overtook the world, INEB presented a response called “Enlightening Crisis: A Vision for a Post-COVID-19 World.” This document and accompanying video detailed a wide variety of grassroots initiatives by socially engaged Buddhists. Though such activities began well before the pandemic, they also offer a path to a world order that can be more resilient in the face of future such crises that will no doubt emerge from our growing environmental one. These initiatives have been organized under the following four wider themes: (1) Dharmic Economics, Right Livelihood, and Holistic Development; (2) Environmental and Sustainable Interbeing; (3) Cultural Diversity and Co-Existence; and (4) Good Governance, Human Rights, and Peace.

Under the theme Dharmic Economics, Right Livelihood, and Holistic Development, we are seeing a whole new host of socially engaged Buddhist development activities flowing out of the historical precedents of Sarvodaya and the Thai development monk movements. These activities include the Sufficiency Economy and New Theory Agriculture (Kok Nong Na) movements led by Buddhists to rehabilitate the rural economy and community

in Thailand; temple-based community banks and microcredit in Myanmar; Buddhist-run clean-energy systems for community development in Japan; and an international network of peoples-based social enterprises evolving out of Sri Lanka called the Good Market.

Under the Environmental and Sustainable Interbeing theme, the Eco-Temple Community Development Project has, in the past decade, evolved out of the Inter-Religious Climate and Ecology Network (ICE) to become a forum for activating Buddhist temples as leaders in responding to much more than the surface-level issues of the environmental crisis. Their six-point seed-planting scheme takes the work to a deeper level in developing a variety of models for building local sustainable economies based on clean energy, environment-friendly architecture, rehabilitation of the local and regional environment, and community education in development and spirituality.

Under Cultural Diversity and Co-Existence, the aforementioned ICE network based in South Korea has been creating a wide range of interfaith initiatives to bring faith communities together to work on climate change. Such interfaith work is also extending

to the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim relations founded in 2013 to address the specific issues and conflicts going on in southern Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Under Good Governance, Human Rights, and Peace, socially engaged Buddhists continue to navigate the political landmines that their forerunners did in the colonial era. This includes Buddhists in the United States becoming active in the social-justice and electoral campaigns of 2020 and participants in the Interfaith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy in Japan speaking out against nuclear energy and its inevitable connections to militarism and war.

Conclusion

There are numerous activities taking place at the grassroots level by socially engaged Buddhists and other like-minded religious groups. These are, in fact, the kind of peoples-based SDGs of which we should become more aware and which we should support with helping hands rather than trendy marketing campaigns. It was Einstein who once said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” We should take this as a mantra when being unmindfully and uncritically swayed by governmental and corporate campaigns to alleviate poverty and save the environment. The modern nation-state and its twin siblings of corporate capitalism and command-economy socialism are the very systems that created poverty, environmental destruction, and many of the other problems the SDGs seek to remedy. How then, can we assume they will provide the leadership to solve them? In a world flowering with new visions of social inclusivity and diversity, we must continue to build the twenty-first century based on a people’s articulation of and participation in authentic sustainable development. □

Fostering a World Free of Inequalities, Injustice, Poverty, and Violence The Role of Religion

by Indunil Janakaratne Kodithuwakku Kankanamalage



A reform is necessary because the axial revolution is under constant threat by those who want to use the religious classics of their traditions to supplant universalism and fraternity with particularism and tribalism.

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The Axial Age was a period of transition in human cultural history in significant parts of Europe and Asia in the six hundred years between 800 and 200 BCE. Certain texts in literature, philosophy, and theology that have become classics paved the way for this cultural transformation of four or five major civilizations. Among them are the canonical scriptures of Hebrew prophets (Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah among others), the central texts of Greek philosophy (those of Plato and Aristotle in particular), the *Analects* of Confucius and the *Daodejing*, early Indian texts such as the *Bhagavadgita*, and the teachings of the Buddha in the Pali Canon. All of them contributed to the emergence of higher religions and ethical ways.¹ Naturally, we can also add to this list Islam, Christianity, and other religious traditions, including the indigenous religions. It needs to be noted, however, that the religious heritage of humankind is a double-edged sword. In the course of human history, religion has contributed to fostering a world free of inequalities, injustice, poverty, and violence. However, religious classics have also been falsely interpreted to justify destructive and discriminative acts individually and structurally. This phenomenon is widely present today as well.

Can the heritage of the classics of the Axial Age advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with its central promise to leave no one behind? As a matter of fact, “Axial societies provided their citizens with a means of connecting with a shared conceptual framework to cope with the intellectual and spiritual challenges of living in a new kind of social context.”² One of the most dramatic expressions of Axial religions is found in the monastic brotherhood and sisterhood, an association that is not based on consanguinity or forced relationships. Men and women monastics divorce themselves from the natural demands of the territorial group and set up a protected community of peaceful and celibate men and women in a deserted place.³

Robert N. Bellah notes:

There is today a feeling of crisis that is first of all ecological, but also social and cultural, having to do with global inequality and stability that is deeper and more widespread than has been the case for a long time. It is in this context, then, that I want to inquire whether the Axial heritage can help us or hinder us in our current crisis.⁴

This essay is a sort of prophetic plea to the followers of different religious traditions to return to the original claims of their religious heritage in order to transform a world that is ravaged by disease and environmental catastrophes. Such a reform is necessary because the axial revolution is under constant threat by those who want to use the religious classics of their traditions to supplant universalism and fraternity with particularism and tribalism. We see this happening in the rise of ethnoreligious nationalism, right-wing political parties, and religious radicalism and extremism, although there are also signs of interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Using the see-judge-act method of analysis—seeing social situations, judging them in light of religious classics, and acting together with all to foster justice and nonviolence and to transform the afflicted peoples and places to a culture of respect and fraternity—this article pays attention to the following three areas:

- See: the context of inequalities, injustice, poverty, and violence
- Judge: the responses from the religious classics



Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

An Occupy Wall Street demonstrator holds a sign during what protest organizers call a “Day of Action” in New York on November 17, 2011. Hundreds of Occupy Wall Street protesters marched through New York’s financial district toward the stock exchange to protest the economic inequality at the heart of the American capitalism.

Act: interreligious and intrareligious dialogue and cooperation

See: The Context of Inequalities, Injustice, Poverty, and Violence

The document of the 2030 Agenda for SDGs launched in 2015 notes: “This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom.” It further points out that “as we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.”⁵ The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals deal with world issues. We will limit ourselves to a brief examination of the social problems of inequality, injustice, poverty, and violence.

Inequality

Inequality is a social problem caused by the unequal and/or unjust distribution of resources and opportunities. It can be found in the areas of income, gender, age, origin, ethnicity, disability, class, religion, and so on. Inequality can also

be seen in newer areas, such as access to online and mobile technologies.⁶ The following information reveals the gravity of the problem.

- Seventy-one percent of the world’s population live in countries where inequality has grown.
- In 2018 the twenty-six richest people in the world held as much wealth as half the global population (the 3.8 billion poorest people).⁷
- Groups such as indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, and ethnic and other minorities continue to suffer from discrimination, marginalization, and lack of legal rights. Such discrimination is pervasive across developing and developed countries alike and is not tied to income.
- Unequal opportunity affects life expectancy and access to basic services such as healthcare, education, water, and sanitation.
- There is growing evidence that the high level of income and wealth inequality is propelling the rise of nativism and extreme forms of nationalism.
- Urgent policy challenges are raised by the evolution of issues such as climate change, technology, and urbanization. If climate change continues to be unaddressed, it will increase inequality within countries and may even reverse current progress in reducing inequality between countries.⁸
- Two hundred fifty-eight million children—one out of every five—are not able to go to school. Ten thousand people die each day because they lack access to affordable healthcare. The world’s twenty-two richest men have more wealth than all the women in Africa.⁹

Such forms of inequality are neither inevitable nor irreversible. They can be remedied.

Injustice

Injustice—the social problem of people being treated unfairly—can be caused by ageism (prejudice against the aged), racism (denial of the right to equality because of race), modern-day slavery (sex trafficking and compelled labor), unjust laws (legislative injustice), segregation (establishing laws or customs of separate facilities for social, ethnic, or religious groups by providing separate educational, recreational, and other services, for example, the caste system in India), statelessness (the condition of being without a nationality or without a legal right to domicile, religious intimidation), economic discrimination (denial of the right to material well-being, exploitation in employment, violation of human rights at work, international economic injustice, unequal global economic relations, lack of environmental justice), discrimination against minorities (on racial, religious, linguistic, ideological, political, or economic grounds), regional underdevelopment, and so forth.¹⁰

Injustice, whether it flows from individuals or structures, violates human dignity and deprives the human person of his or her fundamental rights.

Poverty

Because of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme poverty rose across the globe in 2020 for the first time in more than twenty years. About 120 million additional people are living in poverty as a result of the pandemic, with the total expected to rise to about 150 million by the end of 2021.¹¹

Following are some current facts about worldwide poverty:

- In 2018 four out of five people below the international poverty line lived in rural areas.
- Half of the poor are children. Women represent a majority of the poor in most regions and among some age groups. About 70 percent

of the global poor aged fifteen and over have no schooling or have only some basic education.

- Almost half of the poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa live in just five countries: Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Madagascar.
- More than 40 percent of the global poor live in economies affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, and that number is expected to rise to 67 percent in the next decade. Those economies have 10 percent of the world's population.
- About 132 million of the global poor live in areas with high flood risk.
- Many people who have barely escaped extreme poverty could be forced back into it by the convergence of COVID-19, conflict, and climate change.
- The “new poor” will be more engaged in informal services and manufacturing and less in agriculture. They will live in congested urban settings and work in the sectors most affected by lockdowns and mobility restrictions.¹²
- New research estimates that climate change will drive 68 million to 132 million into poverty by 2030.

Violence

The World Health Organization defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.”¹³ Target 16.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.”¹⁴

The “World Report on Violence and Health” (WRVH)¹⁵ presents a typology of violence that is useful for understanding

the contexts in which violence occurs and the way different types of violence interact. Violent acts can be physical, sexual, or psychological and can involve deprivation or neglect. It further divides the general definition of violence into three subtypes according to the victim-perpetrator relationship.

- Self-directed violence: violence in which the perpetrator and the victim are the same individual.¹⁶
- Interpersonal violence: violence between individuals, which includes family violence and community violence.
- Collective violence: violence committed by larger groups of individuals. It can be subdivided into social, political, and economic violence.¹⁷ Larger groups such as nation states, militia groups, and terrorist organizations resort to collective violence in order to achieve political, economic, or social objectives.¹⁸

The following statistics reveal the prevalence of human suffering, especially that of women and children who are the victims of violence:

- One out of two children, or one billion children, suffer some form of violence each year.
- Nearly three in four children, or three hundred million children, between the ages of two and four regularly suffer physical and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers.
- One in four children under the age of five lives with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence.
- One hundred twenty million girls and young women under the age of twenty have suffered some form of forced sexual contact.¹⁹ Gender-based violence, or violence against women and girls,



Photo: AFP / AFLO

An internally displaced mother, who fled violence in Ethiopia's Tigray region, carries her sleeping child as she waits for donated items from local individuals organized by self-directed volunteer Mahlet Tadesse, in the Tigray capital of Mekelle, on June 22, 2021.

is a global pandemic that affects one in three women in their lifetime. Two hundred million women have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting.”²⁰

Judge: The Responses from the Religious Classics

As we saw above, the context of inequalities, injustice, poverty, and violence in the world is alarming and heart-rending. SDGs aim at improving this situation by 2030. In what way can the followers of different religions contribute to achieving the aims of the SDGs? Can the religions establish a global ethic for the universal family? There are rays of hope. “The present reality of global interdependence makes it easier to appreciate the common destiny of the entire human family and makes all thoughtful people increasingly appreciate the virtue of solidarity.”²¹

Pope Francis notes that a new and fraternal world can emerge if—and only if—we open ourselves to transcendent reality. “We are certain that ‘only with this awareness . . . can we live in peace with one another’” (272; this and the following numbers represent paragraphs in

the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*).²² He further writes that “others drink from other sources. For us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (277). In this context, interreligious dialogue becomes a dialogue of the heart leading to “encounter with the sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family, as a vocation of all” (ibid.). *Fratelli Tutti* affirms that “religious classics can prove meaningful in every age” (275); therefore there is a need to “reawaken . . . spiritual energy” (276) through dialogue to restore human fraternity. Moreover, “This has nothing to do with watering down or concealing our deepest convictions” (282). On the contrary, dialogue flows from our respective religious identities.

This vertical dialogue opens the believer to the transcendental truth that in turn shapes their horizontal vision to “recognize one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters” (274). Our deep and sincere friendship with God/Ultimate Truth shapes our social relationships. He further notes: We need to move beyond ourselves, because we need one another. The pandemic has made us realize that “no one is saved alone” (54). For this we need dialogue, that is, approaching, speaking to, listening to, looking at, and coming to know and understand one another, and thus find common ground in order to build a culture of care and encounter (198).

The religious classics of other religions also have narratives of salvation and the liberation of humanity. Realizing the following worldwide similarities among various religions and beliefs can help us grasp our common human destiny.

- God/Ultimate reality/Dharma/Tian
- Universal human family
- Satan and sin/*avijja* (ignorance)/*maya* (illusion)/*zui* (sin, fault)

- Human quest for salvation/universal moral law/global ethic
- Savior: for Christians, Jesus is the Universal Savior; most other religions have their own savior figures and/or a path of liberation.
- Mission of religions: building a fraternal and harmonious society based on ethical values.
- Last things (*nirvana/moksa*/heaven/harmony)

The list above shows that we can roughly infer that if humanity has a common origin (God or another source), a common search (spiritual/philosophical), a common pilgrimage (transcendental goal), a common end (integral liberation/salvation/harmony here and hereafter), a common problem (sin and evil manifested in diverse ways), then this commonality ought to lead humanity in a universal search for a common ethical code. Moreover, religious classics could foster an altruistic sense of humanity by means of an authentic global ethic founded on liberty, justice, fraternity, and love. This can be called growth of the larger mind. Men and women today need this transformation to foster SDGs.

Act: Interreligious and Intrareligious Dialogue and Cooperation

We need to rise again against the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as other social problems and move from fragility to resilience. No one is saved alone, therefore, SDGs require dialogue and collaboration. Governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society, followers of different religions, and so on need to work together.

Some recent initiatives and collaborations have sought to foster a culture of encounter, a culture of inclusion, and a culture of respect and care. Here are a few of them.

- The Vatican’s Joint Declaration of Religious Leaders against Modern Slavery, December 2, 2014.
- The April 2019 retreat at the Vatican hosted by Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury brought together South Sudan’s rival political leaders to start to rebuild mutual trust at the end of the bitter civil war.
- The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, April 4, 2019.
- The Position Paper of the Abrahamic Monotheistic Religions on Matters Concerning the End of Life, Vatican, October 28, 2019.
- The Joint Declaration on Global Health by His Holiness Pope Francis and His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, November 18, 2019.
- The Global Compact of Education: Educating young people about worldwide fraternity and teaching them how to overcome divisions and conflicts and promote hospitality, justice, and peace.²³
- World Meetings of Popular Movements for the purpose of bringing dignity back to the center and building alternative social structures.
- The Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which invites everyone “to be an artisan of peace, by uniting and not dividing, by extinguishing hatred and not holding on to it, by opening paths of dialogue and not by constructing walls” (284; see note 19).
- The seven-year *Laudato Si’* Action Platform announced by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to pursue integral ecology through the Seven *Laudato Si’* goals: response to the cry of the earth, response to the cry of the poor, ecological economy, adoption of a simple lifestyle, ecological education,



Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio speaks as Pope Francis and Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I look on during the meeting "Faith and Science: Towards COP26" at the Vatican on October 4, 2021.

ecological spirituality, and community commitment and participatory action.

- The "Faith and Science: Towards COP26" meeting, which took place on October 4, 2021. The event brought together numerous faith leaders and scientists to address the theme of climate change and the need for a coordinated effort to protect all Creation.

Conclusion

We are in need of a humanism capable of fostering a new social, economic, and political order founded on the dignity and freedom of every human being. As in the past, religious classics indicate a road map to liberative solidarity with all to heal a wounded humanity and our common home.

Both the SDGs and the religious classics are setting out an ambitious and transformational vision: a world free of inequalities, injustice, poverty, and violence. The hoped-for new humanism is not a mere utopia but is, rather, a realistic approach to building a better world. Its dawn depends on the contribution of

all to the efforts of changing the existing social and political conditions. □

Notes

1. Robert. N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., introduction to *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.
2. Merlin Donald, "An Evolutionary Approach to Culture: Implications for the Study of the Axial Age," in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 73.
3. Cf. David Martin, "Axial Religions and the Problem of Violence," in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 303.
4. Robert. N. Bellah, "The Heritage of the Axial Age: Resource or Burden?" in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 450.
5. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, preamble to "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>, accessed July 7, 2021.
6. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/01/World-Social-Report-2020-FullReport.pdf>.

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8. Ibid.

9. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/5-shocking-facts-about-extreme-global-inequality-and-how-even-it>.

10. The Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential: World Problems & Global Issues. <http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problems>.

11. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>.

12. Ibid.

13. <http://www.emro.who.int/violence-injuries-disabilities/violence/>.

14. <https://www.informea.org/en/goal/target-161>.

15. "World Report on Violence and Health," World Health Organization, 2002, http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf;jsessionid=79D1852DF40067640F3B42AC7942E4A7?sequence=1.

16. More than seven hundred thousand people die by suicide every year—one person every forty seconds. Many more attempt suicide. http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevent/en/.

17. <http://www.who.int/violenceprevention/approach/definition/en/>.

18. In 2011 the WHO Global Burden of Disease project estimated that 6.3 percent—or 86,307—of all deaths resulting from violence were directly caused by war and civil conflict.

19. World Health Organization, Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children 2020, <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/violence-prevention/global-status-report-on-violence-against-children-2020>.

20. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/violence-against-women-and-girls>.

21. John Paul II, "Message for the World Day of Peace 2001," Rome, December 8, 2000, in *Interreligious Dialogue, the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–2005)*, 805.

22. Fratelli Tutti, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

23. <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/en/global-compact-on-education/>.

The Covid-19 Pandemic—A Rude Awakening to Sustainable Development: Toward Interreligious Engagement for Inclusive Citizenship

by Fadi Daou

[The] unintentional absence of governmental policies and communication of the specific needs of certain communities—usually minorities—because of their sociocultural specificities and religious backgrounds is called invisible diversity.

Introduction

“Leave no one behind” is one of the three universal values adopted by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It represents “the unequivocal commitment of all UN Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole.”¹

Yet the Covid-19 pandemic with its related circumstances has demonstrated how wide the gap remains between the reality and this global, ambitious, and transformative promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, the Covid-19 crisis has shown the predominance of nationalistic interest and policies over global collaboration and solidarity. It has also revealed structural dysfunctions and challenges within societies.

In this essay, I will discuss how liberal democracy systems, often coupled with a nation-state framework, have structural limitations that produce disparities and discrimination among citizens in accessing their rights. Within these frameworks, marginalizing or

simply ignoring such social factors as religion can become a self-destructive dynamic. This pandemic has helped in identifying such gaps and their related cost in human rights and lives. Here, I will first deconstruct the liberal narrative of equality by revealing the high cost in illnesses and death among some minorities because of the failure of the government to provide adapted pandemic advice. Then I will continue this analysis by criticizing the politics

of uniformity—being the main obstacle to a cultural governance strategy—and advocating an inclusive citizenship approach. Finally, I conclude by advocating for interreligious engagement as a creative dynamic for sustainable development and human fraternity.

The Risks of Invisible Diversity

Striking data related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden has attracted the attention of many observers and experts. During the first months of the pandemic, the Swedish government adopted a unique approach: it relied mainly on the citizens’ responsible behavior and their voluntary social distancing. The most vulnerable were encouraged to



A billboard informing citizens of the importance of social distancing in preventing the spread of the coronavirus disease is seen on a facade in Stockholm, Sweden, April 29, 2020.

Photo: REUTERS / AFLO



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stay at home, while the businesses and some of the schools remained open.

By April 2020 the data for Sweden showed an astonishingly high rate of Covid-19–related deaths among two minority groups: the Somali and the Syriac Iraqi communities. While the Somalis represent 0.69 percent of the total population,² statistics showed that 40 percent of the reported Covid-19 deaths occurring in Stockholm involved the Somali diaspora communities, while the rate was 18 percent on the country level. Many experts have tried to explain this disturbing fact. Akbar Shahid Ahmed reported to *HuffPost* that although known for its openness to refugees and its social safety net, the Swedish government initially failed to release much advice on the pandemic in the non-Swedish languages spoken by thousands of citizens, including Somalis. “The government’s actions,” he concluded, “failed to account for cultural differences within a nation whose migrant and asylum-seeker populations have grown.”³

David Keyton, from *CTV News*, highlighted the socioeconomic factors behind this data, providing the example of bus drivers and taxi drivers, for whom it is impossible to work from home. It is also true that staying home to avoid the virus doesn’t have the same benefit, since the Somalis typically live in large family units, compared with more than half of Swedes living in one-person households. Keyton also added that the linguistic barrier should not be underestimated and noted that in May 2020



Photo: AP / AFLO

A hairdresser from Syria cuts the hair of a customer, who was originally from Kurdistan, in his hair salon in Akalla, Rinkeby-Kista borough, Stockholm, Sweden, on April 28, 2020. The coronavirus has taken a disproportionate toll among Sweden’s immigrants. Many in these communities are more likely to live in crowded households and are unable to work remotely. There also are concerns the message has not reached everyone in immigrant neighborhoods.

some cities started distributing awareness leaflets in Somali, Persian, French, and other languages.⁴

In addition to the socioeconomic and linguistic aggravating factors of contamination and deaths from Covid-19, another study established that religion, too, contributed to this tragic situation. In their article, provocatively entitled “When Religion and Culture Kill” Speckhard, Mahamud, and Ellenberg reported, according to a Somali community member, that the reason Somalis did not take the government’s advice was that they automatically listen to Somali clerics regarding this intensely widespread illness, and the clerics say that whatever is meant to happen to one’s

health has already been ordained by Allah.⁵ Moreover, according to the same study, extremist Muslim religious leaders around the world have also advised their followers to continue going to religious gatherings and to ignore health warnings from the authorities, stating that Covid-19 is a punishment for the unbelievers and will not touch Muslims. These ideas motivated people to doubt all the government advisory measures about hand washing and other methods of prevention.

A similar culture- and religion-based impact was noticed among the Christian Syriac Iraqi community in Sweden. At least five Covid-19–related deaths among Syriacs have been tied to two

large religious memorials, attended by hundreds, that were held in early March for locals who had died, according to Sweden's Syriac Orthodox Youth Federation president Gunay Raheb, as she reported to *HuffPost*. "We know that . . . we socialize differently [from] ethnic Swedes. We love to be social, we love to be near the family, we have a different point of view concerning the elderly: we meet them every week." Raheb added, "The Swedish government should look differently at the different groups in Sweden."⁶

In fact, from both cultural and religious perspectives—which are strongly related—the community plays a predominant role in the life, well-being, and salvation of individuals in the Eastern Syriac Christian tradition, which is almost the opposite of the Protestant understanding of Christianity among the Swedish Lutherans (who form the predominant culture in Sweden), which is based on individual responsibility and salvation.

Therefore, in both instances we see that religion highly influences the behavior and hence the fate of individuals, while it went unnoticed by the authorities. This unintentional absence of governmental policies and communication of the specific needs of certain communities—usually minorities—because of their sociocultural specificities and religious backgrounds is called invisible diversity. In actual fact, the Swedish government did not favor any category of citizens in its Covid-19–related policies. Nevertheless, some communities paid a much higher price because of inadequate public communication or recommendations resulting from the linguistic barrier, the household situation, or the cultural-religious mindset. Therefore, even though acting on the basis of the equality of citizens, the government failed to ensure equitable results. The problem is deeper than simple miscommunication. Not recognizing and embracing the needs and contributions of a growing diversity within formerly almost monolithic

societies is a failure of the nation-state mode of governance.

Inclusive Citizenship for Comprehensive Participation and Solidarity

In his famous lecture "What is a Nation?" delivered at a conference at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882, Ernest Renan affirmed that ethnographic considerations have counted for nothing in the constitution of modern nations. He even considers ethnographic politics to be a danger: "You use it today against others but tomorrow will see it used against you." Hence, he states that neither race nor religion nor language nor common interest nor geography can offer a sufficient basis for the establishment of a modern nationality.⁷

However, the growing ethnic, cultural, and social diversity in present societies requires a redefinition of the nation-state paradigm, shifting to a national state whose members possess a measure of national unity and integration but not cultural homogeneity. It is obvious that the nation-state paradigm, based on a social uniformity, is increasingly and widely being challenged. In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Jonathan Sacks affirms that every system now has to face a crucial test: Does it secure a space for alterity? Does it recognize the dignity of the difference? For him, difference is nowadays an integral part of the texture of daily life. He advises that we should understand that, as natural environment depends on biodiversity, human environment depends on cultural diversity.⁸ This statement echoes the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), which adds that diversity is "a source of exchange, innovation and creativity"⁹ within societies. Thus, an integrated diversity itself becomes the social capital of a society and can facilitate a higher degree of innovation and group adaptation



Photo: AFP / AFLO

People play chess at a park in Stockholm on May 29, 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

based on the cooperation of citizens in a mutual trust framework.¹⁰

While liberal citizenship intends, based on the rule of law, to treat all citizens equally, the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of some peoples may lead to unfair results, as was seen in the Swedish case related to Covid-19 response. Inclusive citizenship fosters the integration of all in national public life through the recognition of their specificities, needs, and capacities as well as through the facilitation of their participation in and contribution to public life, both individually and collectively. It ensures that no one is left behind because of their economic condition or cultural and religious identity.

Interreligious Engagement for Sustainable Development

The consequences of the Swedish policies in responding to the Covid-19 crisis provide a warning to the rest of the world of the public-health costs of one-size-fits-all messaging. It is highly risky to marginalize social institutions such as religions and their capacities to contribute to facing common challenges in a pandemic. Such marginalization can open the door to extremist voices, who manipulate the religious narrative and related identities, either to spread extremist ideologies or to feed racist arguments and behavior based on conspiracy theories.¹¹

Fortunately, the global community is now recognizing the positive role that religions can play in facing the pandemic and in sustainable development in general. On May 8, 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the Global Appeal to Address and Counter COVID-19 Hate Speech. He has stressed the influence faith actors have on people's values, attitudes, behaviors, and actions and has called on religious leaders to play a key role in addressing the

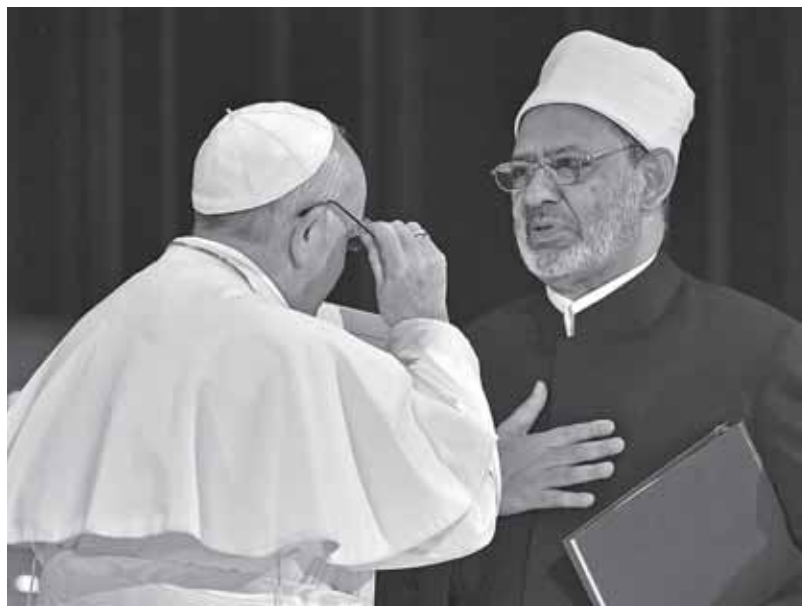


Photo: AFP / AFLO

Pope Francis and Egypt's Azhar Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed Al Tayeb greet each other as they exchange documents during the Human Fraternity Meeting at the Founders Memorial in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019. Pope Francis rejected "hatred and violence" in the name of God, on the first visit by the head of the Catholic Church to the Muslim-majority Arabian Peninsula.

pandemic by working together and translating common values into action. In response to this call, the UN Alliance of Civilization and the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and Responsibility to Protect, together with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, organized a virtual consultation on May 28, 2020, which brought together religious leaders and actors as well as faith-based organizations to discuss possible areas of action and collaboration with the United Nations in the common fight against Covid-19 and its socioeconomic consequences. The meeting resulted in a Global Pledge for Action, where religious actors from twenty faith-based and interfaith organizations made a commitment to "ensure that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will guide our responses to the pandemic to build a healthier, safer, fairer and more inclusive world where no one is left behind."¹²

The Human Fraternity Document, cosigned in 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al

Tayeb, starts by affirming that "through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need."¹³

The Adyan Foundation considered that this interreligious Fraternity message invites believers and faith leaders, from different religious backgrounds, to assume their religious social responsibility, by working together for the sustainable and inclusive development, beyond the borders of their own communities. This is a transformational path, moving faith-based attitudes from identity-based-religion to value-based-religion. The result of this shift will place the value of a religion not on the number of its followers but on the good that is spreading among all humanity.

A recent report that highlighted the relation between human fraternity and interreligious engagement indicated that



Some nine hundred participants of the Tenth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, entitled “Caring Our Common Future,” held on August 19–23, 2019, in Lindau, Germany, took part in a multireligious procession. The Adyan Foundation has been a member organization of Religions for Peace since 2019.

a nuanced approach to religion “has opened the possibility in the global policy community to the idea that religion can be actually part of the solution, that is, a strategic resource for diplomacy, peace-building, the strengthening of human rights, and the advancement of citizenship and sustainable development.”¹⁴ For the authors of the report, this new policy-oriented discussion is emerging as one of the most promising fields of strategic and creative thinking on which governments and international organizations are working collaboratively with religious organizations to achieve common goals and global sustainable development. □

Notes

1. The United Nations Sustainable Development Group, <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>.

2. Cf. Anne Speckhard, Othman Mahamud, and Molly Ellenberg, “When Religion and Culture Kill: COVID-19 in the Somali Diaspora Communities in Sweden,” in: International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, April 5, 2020, <https://www.icsve.org/when-religion-and-culture-kill-covid-19-in>

-the-somali-diaspora-communities-in-sweden/.

3. Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Sweden’s Unique Response to Coronavirus Is Hurting Its Minority Communities,” *Huffpost*, April 9, 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/sweden-coronavirus-minorities_n_5e8dfba3c5b670b4330a3977.

4. David Keyton, “Coronavirus takes a toll in Sweden’s immigrant community,” in *CTV News*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-takes-a-toll-in-sweden-s-immigrant-community-1.4932203>.

5. Cf. Speckhard, Mahamud and Ellenberg, op. cit.

6. Ahmed, “Sweden’s Unique Response to Coronavirus,” op. cit.

7. Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” trans. Ethan Rundell (Presses Pocket, 1992), http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf.

8. Cf. Jonathan Sacks, *La dignité de la différence: Pour éviter le choc des civilisations* [*The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*] (Bayard, 2004), 96–97.

9. UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, Article 1, 2001, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

10. Cf. Francis Fukuyama, “Social Capital,” in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, ed. Lawrence

E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (Basic Books, 2000), 98–99.

11. A Norwegian blogger named Fjordman, who was heavily cited by Islamophobic mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik, tweeted: “At least 6 out of the first 9 who have died from the coronavirus in Stockholm are Somalis. A Chinese virus killing African Muslims in Sweden. The gift of open borders.” <https://twitter.com/Fjordman1/status/1242168977541009414>.

12. Global Pledge for Action by Religious Actors and Faith-Based Organizations to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in Collaboration with the United Nations, May 28, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/GlobalPledgeAction.pdf>.

13. Pope Francis and Ahmed Al Tayeb, *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, February 4, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

14. Fabio Petito, Fadi Daou, and Michael D. Driessen, eds., *Human Fraternity and Inclusive Citizenship: Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean* (ISPI-Adyan, 2021), <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/human-fraternity-and-inclusive-citizenship-interreligious-engagement-mediterranean-30794>.

Living Thoughtfully

by Nichiko Niwano



Nichiko Niwano is president of Risho Kosei-kai and an honorary president of Religions for Peace. He also serves as an advisor to Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan).

From the time we wake up in the morning until the time we go to bed, we unknowingly divide our many actions into important and not-so-important ones, don't we? We can't neglect sutra recitation, but family greetings tend to become halfhearted . . . and so on.

"The single most important thing is your mind today, in this moment." So declared Zen master Dokyo Etan, a.k.a. Shoju Rojin (1642–1721). But getting up in the morning, getting dressed, washing our face, greeting our family members, and, after that, performing sutra recitation, going to work, and discussing business—each and every one of these actions is "the single most important thing." In other words, we should thoroughly devote ourselves to each of these actions and approach them all with the same thoughtfulness.

However, doing so is difficult, not only because we're busy, but because we make distinctions about things. In truth, everything we do has significance and value, but we think some things deserve more effort, so we pay more attention to them. Or we decide that we can let some, conveniently for us, "slide by"—but they then become expressions of insincere words and actions, don't they?

I was taught the phrase "there is no ranking the beauty of flowers." If we look at things without any superficial judgments such as likes and dislikes, we can accept them all as important and meaningful.

The "shoju" in Shoju Rojin is a translation of *samadhi*, which means leaving

behind your own thoughts and concentrating your mind on one thing. In order to concentrate on the actions of "today, in this moment," we need to forget about what is convenient.

Thinking of Other People

Now let's consider living thoughtfully from another angle. To take an example from my home, in winter it takes some time for the hot water to start flowing, meaning that cold water comes out of the faucet for a while. So, instead of letting it go to waste, we collect it in a container and use it for the humidifier. This kind of resourcefulness—not letting even a small amount of water go to waste—is an example of one small action that can lead to living thoughtfully. And this is true not only of water: paying a little attention to things we usually don't notice can lead to making better use of them.

Even activities like reading poetry that uses forms such as tanka and haiku can train us to pay attention to the moment in our everyday lives and focus our mind on our surroundings.

Here is a poem by Tachibana Akemi (1812–68): "When new leaves come out, / No matter what mountain you look at / Or what kind of tree you see, / What a beautiful sight to behold." This cheerful poem reflects the current season. Observing the colors and changes of the four seasons, as this poet does, can lead to feeling happy in our ordinary lives and nurturing

the mind of cherishing and valuing this time right now.

However, if we only have a vague notion of what living thoughtfully means, we're apt to be swept away by our habitual lifestyles. How can we make our behavior and actions, at all times and in all places, become naturally thoughtful?

Chapter 24 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Bodhisattva Wondrous Sound," describes the many *samadhis* attained by the Bodhisattva Wondrous Sound. The basis of every one of these *samadhis* is a bodhisattva vow, such as, "I will liberate not only those people with whom I have a connection, but also those with whom I do not yet have a connection," or "just like a torch lighting up its surroundings, I will shine forth upon people the bright light of wisdom."

In other words, whether we make a vow to help someone nearby or to bring happiness to someone in a distant land, we can't help but live our lives thoughtfully when we devote ourselves to performing even a single action like washing our face.

This is a state of mind in which we can accept everything we see as "a beautiful sight to behold," and as long as we do so, our days will always be full of feelings of happiness. □

The Lotus Sutra's Prescription for Sustainability: The Ten Suchnesses as the Ultimate Reality of All Things

by Dominick Scarangelo

When we understand them as a system of causation, the ten suchnesses are quite useful for making sense of the events and experiences of our lives by identifying the causes of problems in our lives and helping us design a plan of practice to attain liberation from suffering. Examining things from the standpoint of the ten suchnesses reveals how events and experiences arise, how they produce results and lasting effects that impact our lives, and, most importantly, how we can change ourselves and our environment for the better and become happier and healthier people.

Sustainability and Systems

The theme of this issue of *Dharma World* is sustainable economic development and the role that people of faith and religious movements can play in making our world a better place by contributing to the establishment and realization of sustainable development goals. In the twenty-first century, humanity faces many difficult challenges that are all connected in one way or another to the problem of attaining sustainable ways of living that are compatible with our environment and the planet's limited resources. Perhaps the most pressing of these challenges is climate change caused by human industrial activity. At one time this problem was called global warming because the disruption of the world's climate is associated with increases in the average global temperature. However, many people around the world didn't recognize the seriousness of the problem or denied it altogether

because they didn't feel that the weather where they lived had gotten any hotter. In fact, many people point to severe winters in the Northern Hemisphere in recent years as evidence to the contrary. People who make these counterarguments fail to understand that because of the complex interrelatedness of many factors regulating the earth's climate, increases in the earth's average temperature do not translate into a uniform temperature rise everywhere but, rather, disrupt climate equilibrium and the natural environment in vastly different ways according to the location.

A primary reason for this kind of climate-change denial is that many of us do not understand the forms of causality that occur within a complex system such as the earth's environment. Most of us think of causation in simple linear terms, as isolated chains of events: phenomenon A acts on phenomenon B and leads to result C, something like how a pool player shoots the cue ball, sending it crashing into one billiard that

in turn strikes another. Causation can indeed work in this mechanistic, unidirectional way, but in reality, it is often far more dynamic. During the twentieth century, scientists began to realize that systems must be understood in holistic terms because their constituents are not isolated from one another but exist interdependently, change synchronously, mutually affect one another, form feedback loops, and give rise to systemic properties that are not possessed by any one single part (Skyttner 2005, 38). To use a cliché, a system is indeed more than the sum of its parts. The study of causality in systems is called general systems theory and is particularly important to climate science, biology, and the burgeoning field of artificial intelligence.

The complex causal patterns impacted by the rise in average global temperature change wind and air currents, which makes some places hotter and others cooler or makes seasons more extreme. The transfer of energy toward the North Pole creates the polar vortex weather phenomenon that propels arctic air southward, causing frigid temperatures in temperate regions, even as the warm air moving toward the poles is rapidly melting the polar ice cap. In the United States, the eastern half of the country is beset by high rainfall and tropical storms, while the western half of the country has suffered drought for much of the last few decades and faces water shortages and more ferocious wildfires every year. These previously unseen trends suggest that the earth is edging



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closer to a tipping point, where negative feedback loops that mitigate rising average temperature will be overridden, resulting in a new, drastically different climate system that could endanger or at the very least drastically transform life on earth as we know it. To prevent this dire fate, we must achieve a sustainable way of life in harmony with the global environmental equilibrium.

The Reality of All Things: The Ten Suchnesses

Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy has examined the teachings of dependent origination in early Buddhism from the standpoint of general systems theory, arguing that Shakyamuni Buddha held a theory of mutual cocausality that was remarkably similar to contemporary general systems theory. According to Macy, the Buddha's teaching *pratītya samutpāda*, or twelve causes and conditions, holds that "everything arises through mutual conditioning in reciprocal interaction. Indeed, the very word Dharma conveys not a substance or essence, but orderly process itself—the way things work" (Macy 1991, xi). Similar to the twelve causes and conditions, "systems theory sees causality as reciprocal, arising from interweaving circuits of contingency" (xi–xii). For Macy the Buddha's understanding of self resonates with the notion of a system, an organization of interrelated processes.

In the world seen in terms of relations, rather than substance, personal identity appears emergent and contingent, defining and defined by interactions with the surrounding medium. Where all is process, so is the self, which by that token is neither categorically distinct from others nor endowed with any changeless essence. (Macy 1991, 108)

Macy concentrates on the Buddhist teaching of the twelve causes and conditions, but there is also a theory of causation in the Lotus Sutra tradition that describes phenomena, including the person, as a system of contingent processes, or ways of working, that mutually condition one another in a synchronous fashion. This principle, called the ultimate reality of all things, is a system of ten ways or "suchnesses" in which phenomena exist in our world. These ten suchnesses are so called because they all begin with the words "such a . . ." "Suchness" also means that which is real, or the reality of things. In the monk Kumarajiva's (344–413) Chinese translation of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha reveals the ultimate reality of all things to be these ten ways in which everything exists. No matter what a phenomenon may be, it exists in these ten ways.

In the beginning of the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha abruptly rises from meditation and begins explaining the knowledge and insight of buddhas for his wisest disciple, Shariputra, culminating with

the delineation of the ten suchnesses as the ultimate reality of all things.

That is to say, among all things, each has such an appearance, such a nature, such an embodiment, such a potential, such a function, such a cause, such a condition, such an effect, such a reward, and from the first to the last, such an ultimate identity." (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 58)

As is often the case in the Lotus Sutra, the text presents a doctrine but does not explain it in depth. However, early Chinese Buddhists discovered various explanations that illuminated this passage, including in the *Da zhidu lun* (大智度論) (Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom), translated by Kumarajiva, and in a commentary on the Lotus Sutra by Kumarajiva's disciple Daosheng (ca. 360–434), who had also assisted Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra.

What are these ten suchnesses? They are the characteristics of the ultimate reality, or suchness, of all things. As the *Da zhidu lun* appears to indicate, on the most basic superficial understanding of suchness, the suchnesses are the laws or rules according to which things exist in the world. But a deeper understanding also reveals the characteristics these laws govern to be impermanent and changeable, returning to extinguishment (that is, they are empty, or *śūnya*, because they exist interdependently). Finally, as the universal state of being, suchness is the oneness of all things. These three apprehensions of suchnesses are

not different levels or layers of reality but three progressively profound perceptions of reality that are all true and do not contradict one another (Ramanan 2016, 257; *Da zhidu lun* 1926, 298c). In other words, the unique characteristics of all phenomena and the oneness of all phenomena are always in perfect harmony.

Let's go through each of these ways that things exist in greater detail, drawing on the clear and readily understood explanation of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, founder of Rissho Kosei-kai.

1. Such an appearance: All things that exist invariably manifest an image or features (such as smells or physical sensations) detectable by our senses. This is called such an appearance.

2. Such a nature: Each existence that appears invariably has its own dispositions and inclinations. These tendencies are called such a nature.

3. Such an embodiment: Everything that possesses a nature invariably has its own unique embodiment. This is called such an embodiment.

4. Such a potential: Everything that is embodied also has abilities and potencies. These capabilities are referred to as such a potential.

5. Such a function: Whatever has potential invariably manifests that potential as actions that work on the outside world. This is called such a function.

6. Such a cause: The universe is filled with innumerable embodied existences, and their outwardly directed functions are interrelated with all things. Nothing in the universe has an isolated existence. All things invariably have complex interconnections with one another. This mutual interaction produces various phenomena. Something that is primarily responsible for the production of a phenomenon is such a cause.

7. Such a condition: Even when a potential cause is present, it will not produce its effect unless it comes in contact with certain conditions. For

example, water vapor, the primary cause of frost or dew, is always present in the air. But without the condition of contact with the ground or the leaves of plants, water vapor will not produce frost or dew. These circumstances or requirements (sometimes referred to as secondary causes) are called such a condition.

8. Such an effect: When a cause (such a cause) meets the proper condition (such a condition) it produces a phenomenon, which we call such an effect.

9. Such a reward: However, an effect is not realized as just an immediate phenomenon; it invariably has an influence that lingers like a trace or residue. For instance, the effect of frost forming will give a pleasant feeling to someone who finds the patterns it leaves on windowpanes pleasant, while the same effect will give an unpleasant feeling to someone whose crops have been damaged by it. The function of an effect leaving a lasting influence is called such a reward (Niwano 1989, 203–5).

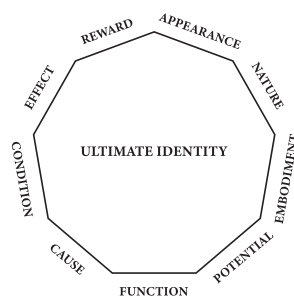
The last of the ten suchnesses shows us that all the nine suchnesses discussed thus far are simultaneously present in any phenomenon, equally and integrated, and that together these ten suchnesses are the ultimate reality of all things.

10. From the first to the last, such an ultimate identity: The nine suchnesses described above occur endlessly in society and our universe as a whole. However, they are interconnected in extremely complex ways such that in many cases ordinary human understanding does not allow us to discern which is a cause and which is an effect. The Buddha teaches that all things manifest by behaving according to this universal principle, so that no thing, no circumstance, and no action violates this truth. Every single thing that exists manifests by presenting all of these nine suchnesses, from appearance through reward. That is to say, from the first (such an appearance) to the last

(such a reward), these nine suchnesses are inseparable, and despite their differences, from the ultimate standpoint all of the nine are identical in essence, all behaving according to this universal truth. The ultimate integration of the nine suchnesses is understood as the tenth and final suchness: from the first to the last, such an ultimate identity (ibid.).

Let me add a few points for further clarification. “Appearance” indicates not simply visual form but all the outer attributes of a phenomenon by which we become aware of its existence. We could think of a phenomenon's nature as the encoding of the phenomenon's structural-functional organization, which is not immediately detectable by our senses. Both appearance and nature form the entity of the phenomenon, its embodiment, but in the case of intangible phenomena (such as events), we can think of embodiment as the predominant quality that a phenomenon manifests in the world.

When trying to comprehend phenomena as comprising these suchnesses, I like to imagine the suchnesses by picturing a nine-sided figure called a nonagon. Each side of the nonagon is one of the nine suchnesses, and the phenomenon as a total entity, represented by the nonagon as a whole, is the ultimate identity of the first nine suchnesses. Since the suchnesses form an integrated whole, correlated with one another, all the angles within the nonagon are equal, as is the length of each side. Keep this in mind, since we will come back to it later in the discussion.



The Ten Suchnesses: The Power of Understanding Phenomena and Events as Systems of Causation

The ten suchnesses might seem esoteric, but now that we have a handle on their basic meanings, we can explore their practical applications. It is important to remember that from the standpoint of the ten suchnesses, phenomena—whether tangible or intangible—are fluid moving processes rather than stable, substantial things. Essentially, any phenomenon is a system of internal relations, and as such, its varying attributes all work together to remain coherent. Astute readers may have discerned from the explanation of the ten suchnesses above that the nine factors are essentially a system of causal relations, and this is how they have been understood since at least the time of the monk Zhiyi (538–97), the founder of Tiantai Buddhism, who correlated the suchnesses with the twelve causations and conditions. When we understand them as a system of causation, the ten suchnesses are quite useful for making sense of the events and experiences of our lives by identifying the causes of problems in our lives and helping us design a plan of practice to attain liberation from suffering. Examining things from the standpoint of the ten suchnesses reveals how events and experiences arise, how they produce results and lasting effects that impact our lives, and, most importantly, how we can change ourselves and our environment for the better and become happier and healthier people.

The first step: using the ten suchnesses as a system of linear causation to analyze our experience in the world—the Noble Truth of the Cause

The easiest way to understand the ten suchnesses as a system of causation and

learn how to use them as an analytical tool is to work through an easy example.

Our bodies and minds, or “such an embodiment” in the language of the ten suchnesses, is the combination of our appearance and nature. These two mutually influence one another, determining how we present ourselves to the world and act upon it. Let’s say we wake up on the wrong side of the bed a certain day, in an angry mood, filled with angst and dissatisfaction (for now we will put aside the causes for this state of things, as we need to begin our analysis at a definitive point). Our appearance will tend to reflect our mood, which creates the potential for certain experiences. The latent potential of such a mindset and the appearance that is its outer expression will tend to be negative and unskillful, leading to the experience of what Buddhism calls *duhkha*, a sense of unsatisfactoriness or dis-ease commonly translated into English as “suffering.”

Next, when we act in the world through our speech or bodily actions that are conditioned by such a mindset, we may manifest anger, behaving aggressively or raising our voice at others. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to see how, when we meet certain conditions (such as the necessity of interacting with others), our actions can become the cause for the unskillful result of a quarrel or fight. Now imagine that such a conflict occurs at our office or place of employment. Not only can a quarrel or fight produce the immediate unsatisfactory results of hurt feelings or even a black eye if things get physical, the long-term effects (such as a reward) could include poisoning our work environment or even losing our job. Unemployment often upends people’s lives and also portends horrible consequences for the health and well-being of the individual as well as their families. Analyzing such a painful experience by using the ten suchnesses reveals how the influence of our states of mind

can ripple throughout our lives and environments in ways that we usually do not anticipate. Using the ten suchnesses as a diagnostic tool in this way uncovers the causes of suffering, putting into practice Shakyamuni Buddha’s Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, one of the most fundamental principles of Buddhism.

Discovering the cause of suffering by tracing things back to the mind

When using the ten suchnesses as an analytical tool, we usually prioritize “such a nature,” which in the case of living beings means the state of our minds. Generally speaking, Buddhism sees our mindsets as the most fundamental determinate of how we experience and act in the world. A metaphor found within Buddhist texts likens the mind to a painter crafting the canvas of their experience. Another way of putting it is that our mindsets are like a pair of colored glasses, which put a certain shade on reality. This isn’t to say that reality is wholly within our minds, but we assign significance to events and experiences through the biases and preconceptions that undergird our perceptions. Our mindsets—such a nature—condition the way we present ourselves to the world, prefiguring our potential for action, and thus are powerful determinants of how we act in the world.

This is why, when we look for the causes of our suffering, we need to ascertain the state of our mind that conditioned our experience of suffering. Let’s return to the example of the office conflict above. What was the state of mind that conditioned our fight with our coworker and led to such unsatisfactory results? Our state of mind (by prefiguring our potential and manifesting in action) is understood as the extended cause, and our coworker’s behavior toward us is identified as the circumstances (such a condition) that provided the opportunity for the manifestation of our potential for unskillful action. This distinction is

crucially important. When we have disputes with others, we often say “So and so made me angry.” However, no one really makes us angry. The facts of experience are what they are, but it is we who assign significance and judge them. This is why people’s response to the same exact situation may differ widely, because our own habit energy, prejudices, and even conscious choices determine how we react. As a system, the inputs do not directly correspond to outputs but are processed through the internal settings of the system before outputs occur. To think that someone else makes us angry is to confuse the cause and the condition. Confusing the cause and the condition is a serious problem because it prevents us from discovering the causes of our suffering. This is why Risho Kosei-kai teaches us to look for the cause for our dis-ease in ourselves, not in others.

If we don’t remember our state of mind at that time, we can infer it by looking at the other suchnesses, because all the suchnesses are integrated and mutually condition one another. Obviously, our actions (such an action) indicate that our mindset at that time was unskillful, one that primed us for suffering. How did we present ourselves to the outer world at that time? Since we cannot see ourselves directly, we can try to remember how others were reacting to us because, as the very apt proverb goes, others are our mirrors. We can even ask our family, friends, and members of the sangha to help us out with this. “Recently you always have a frown on your face” or “Something seems to have been bugging you” are the kinds of responses we might hear. We can gain these clues to our mindset at the time because all the aspects of our experience are integrated and correspond appropriately to one another, which is “such an ultimate identity.”

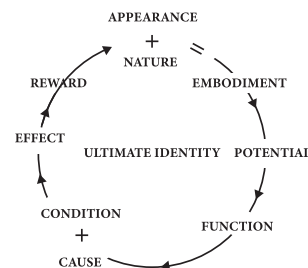
Using the ten suchnesses to discover a path to end our suffering—the Noble Truth of the Path

The ten suchnesses are also used to determine how to change ourselves to mitigate or eliminate the dis-ease in our lives. The event described above didn’t have to turn out the way it did, and after we ascertain the state of mind that conditioned the experience, we can work to change our hearts and minds to mitigate or even eliminate that suffering. Changing our minds alters our potential, and when that transformed potential manifests, it doesn’t have to lead to suffering. For example, if we become aware of frustration and dissatisfaction in our hearts, we can respond to those feelings by applying antidotes. In the case above, we could have stopped and taken store of the things we should be thankful for, kindling feelings of gratitude in our hearts that would have acted as an antidote to anger and its related emotions. When our hearts and minds change, so does the way we appear to others, and our actions will be more likely to lead to beneficial results. When we run up against that coworker in the office, if we look at them differently, we don’t have to snap at them aggressively.

Following the example of Shakyamuni Buddha in the Lotus Sutra, who praised his archenemy Devadatta as his good spiritual friend, Rev. Niwano taught people to view those whom they clashed with as their teachers, because it is through those most difficult relationships that we grow and develop wisdom. As Japanese practitioners often put it, it is through those kinds of encounters that we receive our message from the Buddha. In the example above, changing our hearts and minds could have helped us avoid unproductive arguments or even physical clashes. Responding to the people around us in ways that demonstrate an appreciation for their feelings can totally transform a potential conflict into mutual understanding and cooperation. Just think of how different the future could be. Perhaps we could become friends with that person. Open communication and friendly

cooperation might allow both of us to be more productive, contributing to a better bottom line. At the very least, avoiding a quarrel or fight certainly lessens the suffering of an unpleasant interaction and prevents a series of regrettable events before they even occur. This is using the ten suchnesses to practice Shakyamuni Buddha’s teaching of the Noble Truth of the Path to Liberation from Suffering.

When we use the ten suchnesses as an analytical tool in this way, we are primarily understanding them as a path of linear causation, but this view also assumes a feedback loop. Long-term effects (such a reward) feed back on our appearance and nature, causing further unskillful negative feelings and reactions. But applying antidotes to our state of mind can condition wholesome feelings and lead to a beneficial experience, ultimately nurturing the Buddha’s wisdom within us. The reinforcement of bad habits or the establishment of new, virtuous proclivities (which we can think of as karma) can further change our potential, and so on. The figure below shows this understanding of the ten suchnesses.



The Ten Suchnesses as a Synchronous System of Mutual Causation

When the ten suchnesses are used as a diagnostic tool to discover the cause of suffering and ways of changing ourselves in order to reduce suffering, we usually view them as a system of linear

causation as explained above. Linear causality is easy to grasp and to apply, making the suchnesses an effective way for anyone to practice the Noble Truths of the Cause of Suffering and the Path to the Extinguishment of Suffering. But even as we used the ten suchnesses in the examples above to discover both the cause of suffering and the antidotes leading to the extinguishment of suffering, there were hints of a more complex relationship between the suchnesses. In order to remember our state of mind at the time of the conflict at work, I mentioned that the way we appear to others provides an indication of our state of mind. Similarly, we know the potential of something or someone by observing how it functions. As the famous monk Manshi Kiyozawa (1863–1903) observed, when we speak about any of the suchnesses, we do so by reference to all the others (Kiyozawa 1935, 94–96).

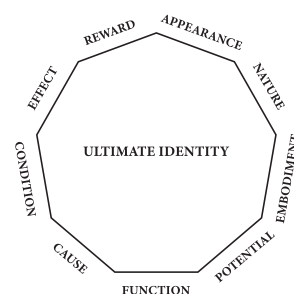
Let's examine this more closely. The nature of a phenomenon is not immediately accessible to our senses, but we can know it through appearance. A person might say, "He was angry." If you ask the speaker why they made that determination, they will usually reply with an answer such as "Well, his face was bright red, and he had a frightening look in his eyes." In other words, he appeared angry. If we think a certain criminal is capable of killing (such a potential), we say so because of the actions we or others have seen them perform. The person in question might have beaten someone and hurt them very badly. When we speak about how something functions, we are often indicating the effects and results of its actions. "The such-and-such party is bad for the country because it increases unemployment through its policies." But how do we know that there is an increase in unemployment? We may know this because we see more people waiting at the unemployment office in the mornings or long lines of applicants for job openings, or we may have

seen reports about unemployment on the evening news. That is to say, the effects and rewards of such-and-such a political party's policies are reflected in the changing appearance of society. Furthermore, the appearance of society in the form of increased substance abuse or domestic violence manifests the changing nature of society—increased mental anguish and suffering—conditioned by the policies of such-and-such a political party. Now we have arrived at the beginning of another round of causation, and the process continues.

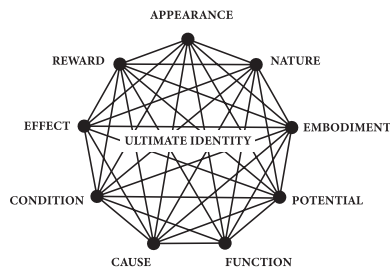
We always reflect on one suchness through the other suchnesses because none of these characteristics of a phenomenon, or ways of existing, as Rev. Niwano describes them, exists independently under its own power. Each is dependent on the others in complex ways. When we try to grasp any one of these characteristics on its own, we see it is conditioned by the other characteristics. Somewhat like peeling an onion, we pull away one layer and discover that it is undergirded (dependent upon) by all the other layers. And like peeling an onion, we never really arrive at a ground, core, or final substrate among the suchnesses but always uncover more relationships of mutual conditioning. This is the emptiness (Skt., *śūnyatā*; Chn., *kong* [空]; Jpn., *kū*), or the ultimate identity, of the suchnesses. No matter how hard or long we search, we will always find more relationships of dependent origination. In the linear causal understanding of the suchnesses we applied in the examples above, when we privileged nature (in the case of sentient beings and their states of mind), we were using a form of skillful means because any analysis must have a starting point and because of the importance Buddhism places on mind as filtering how we perceive reality. Privileging mind and taking the view of linear causation is not incorrect or untruthful but a truth from a specific perspective taken for a particular

purpose. But because the nine characteristics are part of an integrated whole, they mutually condition one another; at the same time, they also interact with the totality by changing it, even as that change in the whole reverberates back on the parts.

I think we can better understand the synchronous mutual conditioning of the suchnesses by returning to the model of the nonagon I used at the beginning of the article. To review: each of the sides of the figure is of equal length, and their internal angles are also all the same. The equality of the lengths and



angles represents the "such an identity" or the equality of the nine suchnesses. Now, imagine that a person uses their index finger and thumb to pinch one of the sides of the nonagon. Because each side is connected to the others and the internal angle remains the same (the identity of each of the suchnesses), changing the length of any of the sides by pinching it causes all the other sides to change in tandem. The same thing remains true if we lengthen any one of the sides of the nonagon: all the other sides grow longer in tandem. Like the nonagon, changing any one of the suchnesses changes all the others, because all are integrated and mutually conditioning. There is no way to change one without changes occurring in all the others. Because the change of any suchness affects all the others, we can also think of the relationship among the suchnesses as a nine-point perfect graph in which each side is connected to all the others, as in the next diagram.



Zhiyi described this relationship (such an identity) among the suchnesses as “existing interdependently” (Chn., *xiangzai* [相在]) (Swanson 1989, 184). He explains that the effects and rewards of a phenomenon that come later are already present within the earlier appearances and natures, and the appearances and natures that come earlier are still present in the later effects and rewards (*Fahua xuanyi* 1926, 694b). Because the suchnesses are interfused in this way, when we look at any one of them, we are looking at all the others. We can even say that each suchness includes all the others. Identity means that fundamentally each of the suchnesses is itself an ultimacy: the manifestation of the ultimate reality of the entire phenomenon.

Such an Ultimate Identity: Even a Single Spiritual Practice Can Lead to Awakening

Once again we seem to have wandered into the weeds by diving into an obscure investigation of the ten suchnesses. But please stay with me, because the identity of the suchnesses explains important approaches to spiritual practice in Lotus Sutra–based forms of Buddhism, including Rissho Kosei-kai. The identity or mutual presence of each suchness within all others means that just by changing one characteristic, all the others change. We don’t have to attend to all nine; we can concentrate on a single aspect of any phenomenon. We have already discussed how changing our appearance can have a dramatic effect on our

experience, but now that we understand the identity of the suchnesses and how, when one changes they all change, we are able to fully grasp why something as simple as changing our appearance can alter our entire being. Rev. Nikkyo Niwano was well-known for his endearing smile, and there is hardly a photo of him where his smile is not visible. It is said that he actually practiced smiling, which at first may sound strange to us. Smiling is most often thought of as the manifestation of an inner state of mind or emotion, but now that we are familiar with the workings of the suchnesses as a synchronous system of mutual conditioning, his smiling practice should make sense. By making the simple expression of smiling into a form of spiritual discipline, he was transforming his mind, his potentialities, and the way he affected the people around him just by smiling. Of smiling, the reverend wrote the following:

While some people believe that in order to perform good actions we must first have a good state of mind, the reverse is also true. We can attain a good state of mind by first performing good actions. If you want to see evidence of this, try looking at a mirror and forcing a smile. As we do this over and over again, the smile eventually becomes amusing and lightens our mood. On the other hand, while looking into the mirror try mimicking a sad face, as if you were about to cry. If you hold this face for a while, you will naturally begin to feel a little sad and depressed. This is how the human psyche works. Our minds can transform our actions, and our actions can also transform our minds. (Niwano 1989, 671)

It is common in Japanese Buddhism to counsel people to practice transforming themselves by entering through form (Jpn., *katachi kara hairu*), and the reasons for this thinking should be clear now to

readers. The emphasis Buddhism places on ritual and the proper practice of ritual forms and postures should also make more sense to readers now. Meditation as an internal form of concentration is not the only way to transform our hearts and minds. This should be good news for anyone who finds it hard to meditate and tends to fall asleep whenever they try sitting in meditation. As Rev. Niwano relates, our minds (such a nature) can transform our actions (such a function), but the reverse is also true: our actions and appearance (such an appearance and such a function) can also transform our minds.

“Such an identity,” as the mutual presence of all the suchnesses within one another, also elucidates the practice of the Lotus Sutra’s Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect (also known as Never Disrespectful Bodhisattva), who appears in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra. As Shakyamuni Buddha recounts:

That monk did not apply himself to reading and reciting the sutras. Instead, he merely practiced bowing respectfully to people. Even when he saw one of the four groups in the distance, he would make a point of going up to them in order to bow respectfully and praise them, saying, “I could never find you unworthy of respect. All of you will become buddhas.” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 322–23)

“Merely [practicing] bowing respectfully to people” as future buddhas is understood in the tradition of the Lotus Sutra as devoting oneself to the reverence of people’s buddha nature, often described as a *samadhi* of one practice (Jpn., *ichigyō zanmai* [一行三昧]). The bodhisattva’s one practice of reverence was so powerful that by the end of his life he purified his mind and his other five sense spheres, attaining an extremely high level on the path to buddhahood. Not unlike smiling practice, but certainly

far more ascetically demanding, the action of pressing the palms of the hands together in reverence to all people utterly transformed the bodhisattva's mind to the point that he never responded with even the slightest anger to the many people who jeered at him or threw things at him, even those who tried to strike him. He always remained reverent even when it was necessary to flee for his safety. This level of devotion to nonviolent respect for human life indicates that the bodhisattva was not suppressing anger at all, because it is not really possible to continually quell one's anger in such situations. The bodhisattva didn't control his anger—he didn't have any anger. His appearance was the epitome of reverence, and so was his potential, his function, and so forth.

All of this was achieved by assiduously pursuing a single, simple practice. When we thoroughly devote ourselves to a single spiritual discipline, it can transform all aspects of our being, because just as each suchness is mutually present within the others, innumerable spiritual practices can be found within our single thoroughgoing practice. This is one reason Rev. Niwano taught Rissho Kosei-kai members to take Bodhisattva Never Unworthy as their role model and emulate his behavior.

We should follow Never Unworthy of Respect's path, retracing his footprints step by step. It is perfectly acceptable to begin the journey by performing a single bodhisattva practice. Since all the Buddha's teachings share one basis, if we proceed to carry out that one practice with sincerity, we will definitely be able to realize all the truths that originate from the single basis of all teachings. (Niwano 1989, 541)

In the Lotus Sutra the single basis of the teachings has two faces: in the first half of the Lotus Sutra Shakyamuni logically explicates it as the ultimate reality

of all things, the truth that permeates all phenomena, and in the second half of the Lotus Sutra he personifies it as the Eternal Original Buddha. One practice, if done persistently and with all one's strength, will also accomplish what other teachings do. And since the way any teaching, as a phenomenon, exists in the world is the ten suchnesses, all teachings interfuse one another, just as every buddha, despite their unique circumstances, is one with every other buddha. The assertion that a single practice can lead us to awakening is indeed a grand claim. But I think it's safe to say that only occasional or halfhearted practice will not bring about permanent change in our lives. The Bodhisattva Never Unworthy of Respect is said to have practiced begrudging neither body nor life. This is what I think Rev. Niwano meant by "practice with sincerity."

Attaining Sustainability Begins with Seeing the Ultimate Reality of Our World

The ultimate reality of all things is admittedly difficult to grasp and requires a good deal of study and practice before we become able to see the world from the standpoint of the ten suchnesses. But I think it is well worth putting in the effort to understand them because the ten suchnesses are useful tools for people who are looking to improve their lives through the cultivation of spiritual practices, and they also provide a skillful perspective for those in search of solutions to the challenges that humanity faces in the twenty-first century. If we are to attain a sustainable way of life and live in harmony with other people and nature, every one of us will have to take responsibility, finding the cause within ourselves. It is up to us, not anyone else. Moreover, we can take the first step toward a sustainable human

civilization by realizing that our hearts and minds have an incredible impact on how we act on the world, because we inevitably manifest the potential of our thoughts through our actions. And, perhaps most important, we will have to learn that living in peace and cooperation with others is not obstructed by our individuality, cultural diversity, or dissimilar beliefs, because although our characteristics are variously different, the ways we all manifest our uniqueness are ultimately one and the same. □

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Guided by All

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 a global Buddhist movement and a pioneer of interreligious cooperation who dedicated himself to liberating all people from suffering with firm faith in the Lotus Sutra. Dharma World has continued to publish excerpts from the book in installments. The following is the concluding section of the book.

I have met many people in the course of my dissemination work in Japan and at international conferences abroad. There is also much that I have been taught by those who hold opinions different from mine. I have already mentioned the attack by *Yomiuri Shimbun* [newspaper] and the abuse from some in the media, who thought I was pandering to Communism when I went to the Soviet Union. There were also incidents such as when someone threatened to blow me up with dynamite.

I can't help thinking, though, that all these things were the arrangements of the deities and the buddhas, showing me that I was walking the way without error.

I think it was in 1979 that Professor David Martin of the London School of Economics and the then president of the International Conference of Sociology of Religion visited Rissho Kosei-kai. As we were talking, he asked me, "Mr. Niwano, I think you will have met many different people as you traveled the world. Who has left the greatest impression?" I answered honestly: "All the people I met were my teachers."

A large number of words exchanged during those countless meetings remain in my heart.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the senior bishop and leader of the Anglican Church, is the person who places the crown on the British monarch's head during a coronation. Dr. Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury between 1961 and 1974, made a sudden visit to Rissho Kosei-kai with the British ambassador in 1973. Four years previously I had visited Dr. Ramsey in Canterbury to ask for his cooperation in the first World Assembly of Religions for Peace. We had talked at his home over a glass of sherry. I have not met him again since our 1973 meeting.

As we met in the Great Sacred Hall, Dr. Ramsey said immediately, "I have come to hear the continuation of what you were saying when we met several years ago. Speak to me about Buddhism." I thanked him for the important work the Anglican Church was doing in Japan, building hospitals and universities, and then I said, "I believe that Buddhism must learn from Christianity and concentrate more effort on community service."



Founder Nikkyo Niwano visited the Soviet Union from September 22 through 27, 1982, at the invitation of the Russian Orthodox Church. His schedule included a tour of the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius, the most important Russian monastery, in Sergiyev Posad in Moscow Oblast, Russia.



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

Dr. Ramsey replied, “The Christian church in Western Europe is concentrating too much on community activities and has neglected the spiritual side. In the long run, community service is only supplementary to religion. I have come to learn from the Buddhism of the East, and your organization in particular, how to cultivate the spirit, which is the true task of religion.” He then proceeded to ask me one question after another about religious practice in Rissho Kosei-kai.

If a religion is detached from reality, it cannot bring liberation to those living in the present. Dr. Ramsey taught me anew that religious people must bring people to liberation, transforming their reality by cultivating their spiritual capacities.

We cannot pour more water into a glass already full. If we clutch our own tiny strength and our own diminutive knowledge—thinking that is the whole, we cannot grow. I have often been asked, “What is the secret of Rissho Kosei-kai’s growth?” But there is no secret. If there were one, it would be that I myself have never concealed those things lacking in my character and have relied on the strength and encouragement of others to support me and push me forward.

Buddhism says, “All who see, hear, recognize, and know shall approach enlightenment.” As long as we have humility, all that we see, hear, and touch will be an aid to draw near enlightenment. I believe what is most important is that we realize we do not know anything. Once we realize we are still

immature, we will perceive every person and every happening to be teaching us something. If we listen carefully, truly “all sounds are the voice of the Buddha.”

I hardly need to say that when I look back over my long life, it is not a matter of going along simply according to how I think. What is important is how I receive what has happened.

We call the softness of something, such as clay, plasticity. A person having a similar quality can respond flexibly to a problem without holding any fixed idea about it. Receptive to advice, he or she can withstand the criticism of those about them. This plasticity is what the Lotus Sutra calls having “a gentle and upright nature, a flexible and forbearing mind.”

When I think about the crises I have had to overcome in my life, I think the most important thing was that I never lost a flexible mind.

There is an interesting story about the Chinese philosopher Laozi. At one time he opened his mouth wide in front of the disciples and said to them, “Have a good look. How are my teeth?” They peered into his mouth and answered, “You don’t have any teeth left.” Then Laozi asked, “What about my tongue?” “It is still there,” they replied. And Laozi said to them, “Do you understand now?”

I have read that what Laozi wanted to teach his disciples was that what is hard breaks in the end but what is soft endures. This story teaches us the importance of plasticity and the “gentle and



Founder Nikkyo Niwano had a talk with Dr. Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, at a meeting room in the Great Sacred Hall, Rissho Kosei-kai’s Tokyo headquarters, in 1973.

upright nature, the flexible and forbearing mind” of the Lotus Sutra.

When we come to write about ourselves, we tend to relate just the good things, what we can be proud of and want others to know about. When I think back over my own life, I remember that I made many mistakes and had many bitter experiences. However, I don’t think it admirable to have never made mistakes. Rather, what is important is in what frame of mind a person recovers when a mistake has been made. It’s a bit like a professional athlete who says, “I don’t learn anything from tournaments I win. It’s from tournaments I lose that I learn a lot.”

All Things Are Transitory

I’d like to speak again, without fear of repeating myself, of something I have spoken of over and over again in this book: It is an undeniable truth that in this world everything changes and nothing remains the same, and that everything that exists depends on everything else in an interdependent relationship. In other words, everything comes about through causes and conditions, and everything changes according to causes and conditions.

When we forget this truth, we experience suffering. On the other hand, if we can live holding tightly to it, the tranquil realm of nirvana will emerge. This is why we have to value every meeting and continue to propound this teaching.

To amplify further, Buddhism teaches us that in this world there is nothing fixed or substantial that never changes. In Buddhist terms, everything is empty. However, to cling to this alone risks falling into nihilism. To embrace emptiness too tightly exposes us to emptiness sickness, where we see even what exists in front of us as empty. This may prevent us from being able to live with our feet on the ground.



Rissho Kosei-kai celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on March 5, 1998. President Nichiko Niwano gave an address from the platform specially set up at the Great Sacred Hall.

Let us imagine that there is a tea bowl of the finest quality in front of us. It is an indisputable fact that the tea bowl really exists in the here and now. There is no reason to see it as not existing, as empty. However, the tea bowl itself has come about through various causes and conditions, and so it exists now as long as those specific conditions remain in place. However, if they are broken—if there were an earthquake or if I were careless—then the tea bowl would at that moment not be a tea bowl any longer but just a pile of pottery shards.

The tea bowl before my eyes has only a temporary existence, depending on the particular causes and conditions that brought it into existence in the first place. This exemplifies the view that all existence is temporal. It allows us to realize our own ignorance when we are attached to what is only temporary, and to escape from excessive attachment. To discern the empty and the temporal and live in a balance between them is to understand the importance of the Middle Way. Aiming at such self-control, we can live moderately in a meaningful way, being contented with little.

The reality of all things is not in seeing them as empty or temporal. The core

of the teaching of Zhiyi (538–97), the fourth patriarch of the Tiantai (Jpn., Tendai) School of Chinese Buddhism, was that the three truths of emptiness, temporality, and the middle were one. I want everyone to realize this and live accordingly.

It is said that Buddhism has eighty-four thousand gates to the teachings, but its doctrine can be summarized as the three seals of the Dharma (that all things are impermanent, nothing has an ego, and nirvana is quiescence); and its faith is the taking of refuge in the three treasures (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha). The importance to Buddhists of the Buddha and the Dharma are obvious, but I would like to speak a little about the Sangha.

Shakyamuni said to his disciples, “In the morning at sunrise, the sky first brightens in the east. This light gradually expands as the sun rises. The brightening of the eastern sky is a sign that the sun will rise. In the same way, if you all want to walk the Noble Eightfold Path, there must be a sign beforehand. This sign is having good friends (that is, the Sangha)” (Samyutta-Nikaya).

What is called the Noble Eightfold Path can be understood broadly as the

Buddha Way. When we want to walk the Buddha Way, more important than anything else is the precondition that we have good friends who can support and encourage us.

Good friends are those who bring determination to those who are flagging, who extend a helping hand to those drowning in a sea of despair, and who support the discouraged. They are, in other words, the Sangha. Shakyamuni taught that it was not possible to walk the Eightfold Path without the Sangha.

There were some thirty of us, including me, on the narrow path that I first walked. This path has grown, and it is recognized that all who walk it can find happiness. I urge you therefore to walk this path that we walked and go beyond us. This great path is not somewhere distant. Do not forget that it is there, just as it is, under your feet.

A Japanese Zen master of the fourteenth century, Jakushitsu Genko (1290–1367), said, “At nightfall, the traveler loses his way at the crossroads.” We can interpret this as a warning to practitioners who stand in the dark at the crossroads on life’s journey, lost and without a map or the staff of faith, wondering which way to go.

Rissho Kosei-kai celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on March 5, 1998. I am now frail, and though I stand on the altar dais, I cannot speak as I once did. That I have been able to carry out my duties throughout my long life is all due to the teachings of Shakyamuni and the gift that is the great protection of the Eternal Original Buddha. It is the great effort of all its members over sixty years that makes Rissho Kosei-kai what it is today.

With this sense of gratitude, the last words Shakyamuni spoke to his disciples spring to mind out of the welter of my thoughts: “Bhikkhus, all things in the world are changeable. Strive untiringly.”

Now the book is finished, I put down my pen. I pray with all my heart that your lives will be good. □



Founder Nikkyo Niwano at Suganuma, his birthplace, in 1995.

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 28

Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (3)

This is the 136th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

TEXT [where] Maitreya Bodhisattva, possessed of the thirty-two signs, is surrounded by a host of great bodhisattvas and has hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nymph-followers, amongst whom they will be born. Such are their merits and benefits.

COMMENTARY *The thirty-two signs.* These are the thirty-two signs, or primary marks (*dvatrimshati-lakshana* in Sanskrit), that the Buddha possesses on his face and body (see the Sept./Oct. 1992 issue of *Dharma World*). As the bodhisattva who will succeed to the Buddha's position (the next buddha), Maitreya Bodhisattva possesses the thirty-two signs similar to those of the Buddha.

When Maitreya was a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha in this world, a robe that Bhikshuni Mahaprajapati had offered to Shakyamuni Buddha was bestowed upon Maitreya by the Buddha. When Maitreya Bodhisattva went out on his begging rounds wearing this robe, the thirty-two signs of a buddha immediately appeared on his person, and his body shone with a golden radiance (see the Jan./Feb. 1996 issue of *Dharma World*).

TEXT Therefore the wise should with all their mind themselves copy it, or cause others to copy it, receive and keep, read and recite, rightly remember it, and practice it as preached.

COMMENTARY *The wise.* “The wise” here refers to people who are sagacious in the true sense of the word, who understand the true meaning of life and live in accordance with the Truth. They are not what the secular world refers to as people of wisdom.

The requisites for “the wise” may be summed up as follows:

1. The wise are those who are easily able to discriminate between right and wrong and between good and evil.
2. The wise are those who are able to discern beforehand what results their acts will bring and what effects those actions will have on others.
3. The wise are those who know clearly what place they occupy in this world and what their role in it is.
4. The wise are those who know the noble joy of loving others and harmonizing with others.
5. The wise are those who know clearly what kind of life is humane and significant, and they also know or can devise ways to make the entire world better.

As long as one is wise in this sense, and once he or she knows the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, then it’s only natural that the person receives, keeps, and practices them. We should understand that the words of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue in the passage above imply that so doing is entirely natural and a matter of course.

TEXT World-honored One! I now by my supernatural power will guard and protect this sutra so that, after the extinction of the Tathagata, it may spread abroad without cease in Jambudvipa.”

COMMENTARY *Spread abroad.* The original Chinese characters mean to spread throughout the world as well as widely disseminating.

TEXT Then Shakyamuni Buddha extolled him, saying: “It is well, it is well, Universal Virtue, that you are able to protect and assist this sutra, and bring happiness and weal to the living in many places. You have already attained inconceivable merits and profound benevolence and compassion. From a long distant past have you aspired to Perfect Enlightenment and have been able to make this supernatural vow to guard and protect this sutra. [And] I, by my supernatural power, will guard and protect those who are able to receive and keep the name of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

COMMENTARY *Those who are able to receive and keep the name of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.* In chapter 25, “The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World,” we also find the phrase “any who keep



Photo: Thor Bognar / PPS

Statues of Shakyamuni and Maitreya Buddhas in Dharmayangyi Temple in Bagan, Myanmar. The temple was built during the reign of King Narathu (1118–71)

the name of that Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World.” A name manifests the entity, and therefore one who earnestly receives and keeps the name is able to become one with that entity. In other words, that person is one who possesses the same spirit as the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue and will do the same practices.

TEXT Universal Virtue! If there be any who receive and keep, read and recite, rightly remember, practice, and copy this Dharma Flower Sutra, know that such are attending on Shakyamuni Buddha as if they were hearing this sutra from the Buddha’s mouth;

COMMENTARY *Attending on Shakyamuni Buddha.* All having to do with Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment is

poured into this sutra, so whoever believes this sutra and studies it wholeheartedly, even after the Buddha's extinction, will feel the same as if they were meeting him face to face. They will be able to achieve the self-awareness that they are together with Shakyamuni Buddha. This is a truly important phrase.

• *As if they were hearing this sutra from the Buddha's mouth.* It will seem to them as if they were actually hearing the teachings directly from the mouth of Shakyamuni Buddha himself, and they would really feel as if they were. These are also important words.

TEXT know that such are paying homage to Shakyamuni Buddha;

COMMENTARY Shakyamuni Buddha himself is saying that to receive and keep, learn, and practice the teachings are nothing less than paying homage to him. We can see that the Buddha's profound spirit of high esteem for the Wonderful Dharma is vividly expressed in this phrase.

TEXT know that the Buddha is praising them—"Well done";

COMMENTARY We ought not vaguely to ignore these words as being proclaimed to the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue and the others in the assembly at that time, but rather we ought to receive the words as spoken directly to ourselves. If we ourselves receive and keep the Lotus Sutra wholeheartedly, we will ourselves be praised by the Buddha—"Well done." When we consider this, we surely experience an inexpressible delight and feel courage for life spring up within us.

TEXT know that the heads of such are being caressed by the hands of Shakyamuni Buddha;

COMMENTARY As noted earlier, "one's head is caressed" means being trusted. In this case, however, it is not restricted to such a meaning, but it has an important meaning in that people will really feel their heads caressed by the hands of the living Shakyamuni Buddha.

When people feel that their heads are caressed by the warm hands of Shakyamuni Buddha, to whom they devote themselves, take refuge in and for whom they long and thirst, this must surely make them willing to offer their life for the Buddha and for the Dharma. This state of religious exaltation is truly priceless. Herein lies the difference between religion and morality or philosophy.

TEXT know that such are covered by the robe of Shakyamuni Buddha.

COMMENTARY To be covered by the robe means to be firmly embraced by Shakyamuni Buddha. This in turn means already having gone beyond the mutual relation of protecting and being protected and having achieved the absolute state of uniting with the Buddha. This is the pinnacle of religious faith. The person can act entirely at will and feel as if he or she was at one with heaven and earth.

TEXT Such as these not again be eager for worldly pleasure, nor be fond of heretical scriptures and writings, nor ever again be on intimate terms with such men or other evil persons, whether butchers, or herders of pigs, sheep, fowl, and dogs, or hunters, or panders.

COMMENTARY *Not again be eager for worldly pleasure.* This does not mean at all that it is bad for people to lead happy, pleasant lives. Rather it is bad for them to forget spiritual joy by being attached to worldly pleasure, and craving it so that they corrupt both body and mind. We should pay attention to the expression "be eager for."

• *Nor be fond of heretical scriptures and writings.* "Heretical scriptures and writings" means written works of religions other than Buddhism, and here they refer not only to the written works but also to the teachings themselves. It is not bad to study non-Buddhist teachings and it may indeed be useful in widening one's perspective. But the phrase means that one must not become attached to those scriptures and writings. Becoming "fond" of such things means becoming emotionally involved, and that leads one to lose sight of the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma).

In the English translation of the Sanskrit text, we find "poetry" for "writings," but here the word can be taken to mean literature in general. It never says that literature is bad for people. In short, it means that it is not good for them to be so engrossed in literature or anything else that it clouds their eyes from seeing the Truth.

• *Nor . . . be on intimate terms with such men or other evil persons, whether butchers, or herders of pigs, sheep, fowl, and dogs, or hunters, or panders.* We must be especially careful not to misunderstand these words, for they reflect Indian manners, customs, and relationships based on the caste system and occupations in those days. In the present day, with the exception of panders, all of these occupations are entirely respectable.

The true meaning preached here is not that we must keep away from such people, but rather that we should not be affected by the atmosphere of taking life. If we, who desire to spread the Buddha's teachings abroad in this world, should stay away from those engaged in such occupations, hating or excluding them, we would grossly act against the



Photo: De Agostini / PPS

Triad of Shakyamuni Buddha. Light grey limestone stele with votive relief decoration. Northern Qi Dynasty. Sixth century.

Buddha's mind of liberating all living beings. Therefore we must be careful not to misconstrue these words.

TEXT But such as these will be right-minded, have correct aims, and be auspicious.

COMMENTARY

The pinnacle of Mahayana liberation

This section is very important.

- *Right-minded.* The literal meaning of the Chinese characters for this expression is mentally “natural” and “upright,” whose underlying meaning is that the mind is “obedient to the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma).”

Delving a step further, even if we possess an obedient mind to the Truth, it is practically impossible to be completely conscious of the mind every moment and be obedient to the Truth. When a neighbor says “good morning,” it is impossible to reply “good morning” if we stop to consider how our reply complies with the Truth. When someone says “good morning,” you reply “good morning” unconsciously.

As long as it is impossible to consider the Truth every moment and then act in accord with it, being “right-minded” must be the stage at which “thinking naturally accords with the Truth.”

The Sanskrit text seems to convey this true meaning. In the English translation of the Sanskrit text, we find “They must be held to be possessed of natural righteousness.” This means to naturally have a way of living and thinking in accord with the Truth.

In other words, those who have fully understood the teachings of the Lotus Sutra will of their own accord act and conduct themselves in accordance with the Truth (the wonderful Dharma), and there could be nothing as welcome as this. This is surely the apex of Mahayana liberation.

- *Have correct aims.* In this case, the phrase means that people’s way of thinking is right and always conforms with the Truth. While those who are “right-minded” conform unconsciously with the Truth of their own accord, the conscious thoughts of those who have correct aims will also be completely in accordance with the Truth.

Because it says that our spiritual life is consistent with the Truth, this can only be seen as the utmost gratitude for Mahayana liberation.

- *Be auspicious.* This implies that not only will such people be liberated, but also will come to possess the power to liberate others. They will come to possess the power of virtue to bring happiness to many. In other words, they will become actual practitioners of Mahayana liberation.

These three phrases—“will be right-minded,” “have correct aims,” and “be auspicious”—can be said to be truly the three factors that lead to Mahayana “liberation.”

TEXT Such will not be harassed by the three poisons,

COMMENTARY We have already examined the three poisons in detail: greed (desire that knows no limits), anger (anger that springs from the ego, or “small self”), and foolishness (the inability to see beyond one’s nose). These are the three most potent poisons that do harm to human beings.

TEXT nor be harassed by envy, pride, haughtiness, and arrogance.

COMMENTARY

- *Pride.* This refers to “self-conceit.” It is the mind that always wants to be above others.

- *Haughtiness.* This is the conceitedness that while acting dishonestly, one thinks one is doing no wrong. It is the mind that does not reflect on itself.

- *Arrogance.* This is the haughtiness and conceit due to one’s illusions of having completely awakened and fully

understood, despite having hardly awakened and comprehended only a little.

Envy is generated by one's feeling of inferiority, while pride, haughtiness, and arrogance are born of a false sense of superiority. All of these feelings are caused by forgetting the correct point of view of things. Those who have truly understood the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and have been able to obtain a right view of things will never generate such an unseemly mind.

TEXT Such will be content with few desires, and able to do the works of Universal Virtue.

COMMENTARY The words "few desires" mean having little desire for worldly things. Here "desires" not only include those for money and material things, but also status, fame, and power. It also includes seeking the love and service of others. Those who have attained the mental stage of deep faith have very few such desires and are indifferent to those things.

We must note carefully that although those people are indifferent to worldly desires, they should be very eager for the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma), that is, they should have a great desire for the Truth. To be indifferent itself is good, but to be indifferent to the Truth is to be slothful in life, and it can be said that those people are of extremely low worth. To be content with few desires means to be satisfied with little material gain, that is, to be content with one's lot and free from worldly cares and circumstances. They are satisfied with their present conditions, being free from worldly cares. Even so, this does not mean that they have no aspirations. They may have them, but they do not complain and are not dissatisfied. They do their best in their work and are serious about developing it.

Such people will never be ignored by those around them. Their worldly circumstances will invariably and naturally improve. But even if they were ignored by those around them, they would not mind in the least. They would feel quite happy because spiritually they are living like a king.

TEXT Universal Virtue! After the extinction of the Tathagata, in the latter five hundred years, if anyone sees one who receives and keeps, reads and recites the Dharma Flower Sutra, he must reflect thus: "This man will ere long go to the wisdom-floor, destroy the host of Mara, attain Perfect Enlightenment, and rolling onward the Dharma-wheel, beating the Dharma-drum, blowing the Dharma-conch, and pouring the rain of the Dharma, shall sit on the lion throne of the Dharma amidst a great assembly of gods and men."

COMMENTARY This describes Shakyamuni Buddha's

attainment of Buddhahood and his dissemination of the Dharma, and it is nothing other than the assurance that anyone who receives and keeps, reads and recites the Lotus Sutra will have the qualification for attaining buddhahood.

TEXT Universal Virtue! Whoever in future ages shall receive and keep, read and recite this sutra, such persons will no longer be greedily attached to clothes, bed things, drink, food, and things for the support of life; whatever they wish will never be in vain, and in the present life they will obtain their blessed reward.

COMMENTARY

Natural supplies

- *Things for the support of life.* These refer to the necessities of everyday life. Those who have truly devoted themselves to the teachings of the Buddha have no greed for or attachment to such things. This is because they will always and naturally be supplied with what is necessary. From somewhere it will always come around. This seems to be truly mysterious, but it is an actual fact.

- *Whatever they wish will never be in vain.* Since this seems so abrupt, it may be hard to comprehend, but this "wish" is for emancipation, and hence it comes to be firmly connected in meaning with the words that follow, "in the present life they will obtain their blessed reward."

TEXT Suppose anyone slights and slanders them, saying, 'You are only madmen, pursuing this course in vain with never a thing to be gained.' The doom for such a sin as this is blindness generation after generation.

COMMENTARY

The sin of cutting off the Dharma-seed

Why is it such a great sin to slight and slander the believers in the Lotus Sutra? This is because the speech and conduct of such a person hinders spreading the teachings (rolling the Dharma-wheel) and brings it to a complete halt.

Suppose a wicked person steals and swindles. It is beyond doubt that such deeds violate the five precepts of Buddhism and that such evil-doing brings trouble to others. However, the influence of such evil is comparatively limited. It generally causes misfortune to only one individual or one household. Moreover, as evil deeds bring inevitable retribution, such a person is eventually imprisoned and pays the penalty for his or her evil deeds.

On the other hand, although speech and conduct obstructing the spread of the true Dharma are not punishable by law, they exert a great influence. If the Dharma is spread in every direction, it is beyond our conception how many people will obtain their happiness or will abandon the life



Photo: Erich Lessing / PPS

Shakyamuni Preaching the Lotus Sutra on Vulture Peak. Silk embroidery on hemp cloth from Cave 17 of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China. The British Museum.

of evil through it. When a person stops others from spreading the Dharma, he or she commits a grave sin. Blocking the course of the teachings, which ought to spread gradually and endlessly in such a way, is called “cutting off the Dharma-seed.” The influence of this sin is quite inestimable.

Slandering the Dharma is not restricted to merely criticizing the Dharma nor merely to the evil effects within that particular situation, but creates in this way sin without limit.

We must be very careful in reading the scripture which follows so as to receive it in the proper meaning. It says that the recompense for slandering the Dharma is to grow blind or suffer from various maladies. This is a figurative way of admonishing against slighting and slandering the true Dharma. It is the self remonstrating against the self. Accordingly, as mentioned in chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra, “A Parable” (see the July/Aug. 2001 of *Dharma World*), to

pass judgment on or discriminate against people in such circumstances is to run counter to the mind of the Buddha. It may even be said that beyond going against the mind of the Buddha, it goes against all that is human. We must be fully aware of that.

TEXT If anyone takes offerings to and praises them, he will obtain visible reward in the present world.

COMMENTARY In contrast with one who would slander the believers of the Dharma, one who would make offerings to and praise those who believe and practice the teachings of the Lotus Sutra would be excellent in one’s own acts, and moreover, the future influence of one’s acts is inestimable in fostering the spreading of the Dharma.

TEXT Again, if anyone sees those who receive and keep this sutra, and proclaims their errors and sins, whether true or false, such a one in the present life will be smitten with leprosy.

COMMENTARY One who has not deeply studied the doctrines, to the degree that he or she defames the teachings themselves by picking at the minor mistakes of those who believe and practice the teachings, will try to slander the teachings or religious organizations. This is a truly base mind. In other words, such a person will make himself or herself into a contemptible human being.

TEXT If he ridicules them, generation after generation his teeth will be sparse and missing, his lips vile, his nose flat, his hands and feet contorted, his eyes asquint, his body stinking and filthy with evil scabs and bloody pus, dropsical and short of breath, and [with] every evil disease.

COMMENTARY Those who deride the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma) make themselves into beings of low character. Such things are figuratively expressed here. For this reason, it goes without saying that the Buddha is not commenting upon those who suffer such ailments.

TEXT Therefore, Universal Virtue, if one sees those who receive and keep this sutra, he should stand up and greet them from afar just as if he were paying reverence to the Buddha.’

COMMENTARY *Greet them from afar.* This does not mean to go afar in order to greet them. When one sees such people no matter how far away they are, one should stand and greet them respectfully just as one ought to greet the Buddha.

With these words, the Buddha concluded his preaching of the Lotus Sutra, extending over the two places and the three assemblies. He says that because the whole body of the Tathagata is included in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, those who believe and practice the teachings should be revered just like the Buddha. We should accept these words of the Buddha with gratitude.

TEXT While this chapter of the encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue was being preached, innumerable incalculable bodhisattvas equal to the sands of the Ganges attained the *dharani* of the hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of revolutions, and bodhisattvas equal to the atoms of a three-thousand-great-thousandfold world became perfect in the Way of Universal Virtue.

When the Buddha preached this sutra, Universal Virtue and the other bodhisattvas, Shariputra and the other shravakas,

and the gods, dragons, human and nonhuman beings, and all others in the great assembly greatly rejoiced together and, taking possession of the Buddha's words, made salutation to him and withdrew.

COMMENTARY This is indeed the end of a very inspirational scene.

Dusk has already settled, and above the mountains that range beyond the City of Royal Palace the twinkling of stars must have begun to be visible. The broad sky turns darker and darker and the distant Indian plain also gradually becomes wrapped in darkness. The assembly which looked out at this scene as they returned, descending from the mountain peak, must with each step surely have appreciated the feeling that they were firmly embraced in the bosom of the Original Buddha.

To be continued



Photo: Alamy / PPS

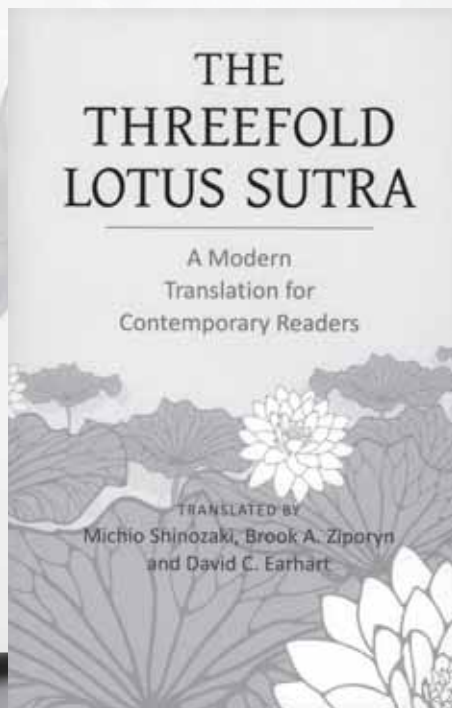
On the summit of Vulture Peak are the ruins of a monastery surrounded by brick walls. This is the spot at which the Buddha is said to have spoken.

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