FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

The Impact of Cyberspace on a Variety of Religious Traditions and Practices

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

WCRP JAPAN

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

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Different Faith, Common Action

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DHARMA WORLD

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

FEATURES: The Impact of Cyberspace on a Variety of Religious Traditions and Practices

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.

Photo: AP / AFLO

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The Digital Transition to New Forms of Dharma Sharing

by Yasuhiro Agatsuma

Yasuhiro Agatsuma is deputy director of the Dharma Dissemination Media Group of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sent a digital wave through Rissho Kosei-kai's Dharma dissemination and other activities in Japan since 2020.

COVID-19 has upended Dharma dissemination at Rissho Kosei-kai, which has basically conveyed its teachings through direct person-to-person encounters in the past, just as when Shakyamuni's community began missionizing. But with people unable to congregate in the real world, necessity has driven a shift to remote dissemination outreach and Dharma-center activity utilizing digital technologies.

Development of these new tools is steadily progressing. The Dharma Dissemination Media Group, which supports Dharma-sharing outreach via diverse channels, has played an expanding role since the emergence of COVID-19, and its wide-ranging activities now include finding new ways of broadcasting ceremonies held at our headquarters, setting up and maintaining a video-conferencing system, preparing the hardware and software needed by staff to work from home, providing mobile Wi-Fi, and helping with remote conferences. Following are three examples of the forms of remote Dharma-sharing outreach and Dharma-center activity currently being pursued in Japan.

First is the "webification" of meetings. Web conferencing, formerly used only for international conferences and a handful of domestic conferences on a trial basis, is now commonplace both at our headquarters and at Dharma centers. Some Dharma centers are conducting conferences and training sessions online—and even *hoza* (Dharma circles) and social gatherings that used to be held only face-to-face.

Second is the use of YouTube to stream ceremonies. With ceremonies held at our headquarters being streamed exclusively for members, they can participate in them at home or wherever they are as long as they have a computer or a smartphone. Dharma centers, too, are streaming their services, enabling members who cannot attend in person to participate online.

And third, smartphone use is growing. In Japan, where many of our members are over sixty years old, the majority have used old-fashioned cell phones, and few had smartphones. Now that we have begun streaming ceremonies on YouTube and online conferencing has taken root, more and more members are getting smartphones. I have heard of one ninety-year-old member who visited a smartphone store every day to learn how to use his new phone from the sales staff, and he is now delighted to be able to watch services on YouTube.

In this way, digitalization has created all kinds of connections that transcend time and distance. At one Dharma center, a remote devotional service was held to pray for the recovery of a believer with terminal cancer. The believer was in a hospital some 250 kilometers away from the Dharma center. However, web conferencing made it possible for the patient and his family to join members at the Dharma center remotely in the devotional service. This was something that was rarely possible in pre-COVID times. The individual concerned had intended to live out the remainder of his life without receiving any new treatment. However, he was so moved by everyone's prayers for his recovery that he decided to undergo further treatment to try to live a little longer.

These are just a few of the benefits of digitizing Dharma-sharing work and Dharma-center events. However, digital technologies are not without their drawbacks. The information gap between those who have access to IT (information technology) and those who do not is widening. Many people cannot afford a smartphone or do not have Wi-Fi at home. We will be taking the needs of such members fully into account as we continue to create appealing, accessible digital content.

We have a lot to learn from Rissho Kosei-kai International and overseas Dharma centers regarding the state of their remote activities and cooperation with Rissho Kosei-kai's headquarters, and we will be working closely with them as we develop our digital outreach work to contribute ever more to members' daily practice and Dharma-center events in Japan. ❑

Rhinoceros Dharma
by David R. Loy

"Although Gautama Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed all realized something profound when they dared to go alone into the wilderness, they did not just disappear into the natural world. Instead, they returned to human society, bringing a new vision that eventually flowered into a new way of life."

David R. Loy is a professor, a writer, and a Zen teacher in the Sanbo Zen tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism. He is a prolific author whose essays and books have been translated into many languages. He teaches nationally and internationally on various topics, focusing primarily on the encounter between Buddhism and modernity and what each can learn from the other. See www.davidloy.org.

In March 2020 the world shut down. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all international travel suddenly stopped, and many people found themselves confined to their homes. Ways of living that most of us took for granted disintegrated in the face of an invisible threat that haunted all personal contact, including religious gatherings. Monasteries had to choose either to close their gates and try to isolate themselves from the rest of society or to disperse monastics for the time being. In those countries where Buddhism is now practiced predominantly by nonmonastics, congregations of laypeople could no longer gather safely. It became a unique challenge: what does spiritual practice mean in a world where we cannot move about?

Fortunately, some new technologies have kept us connected, especially the internet, with video-conferencing apps such as Zoom. As difficult as the shutdown has been both physically and psychologically, it would have been much worse without such digital links. My own teaching ended up being affected less than expected: yes, almost no traveling, yet Dharma centers quickly adapted to online talks and retreats, and I probably gave more presentations in 2020 than in previous years. I was already Zooming with most of my students, and during the lockdown I gained a few more. But the most interesting development was the evolution of a new cyberspace sangha.

A Dharma teacher in Colorado, where I live, organized seven local Buddhist teachers to offer free morning meditations on Zoom every day of the week. Each of us does it in our own way: on Fridays I lead a thirty-five-minute silent sitting, followed by a short dharma talk ("dharmette") of ten minutes or so, and ending with a few minutes when everyone can unmute and socialize (sometimes commenting on the talk or asking a question). These online sessions together quickly became quite popular. Most of those who attend also live in Colorado, but the format enables people to join from anywhere as long as they have a reliable internet connection. Although the number attending varies, of course, most people are regular, and to my surprise a genuine sense of sangha has developed. I am using the present tense because, as of February 2022 (when I am writing this), it looks as though these online meditations will continue indefinitely, even when in-person meditation gatherings resume, because people are still appreciating them and don't want them to end.

It's too early to say how this new type of communal practice will develop, but it seems to be accelerating a shift that started before the pandemic. Some Buddhist teachers had already been reducing their traveling in response to the climate crisis and increasing concern about fossil fuels and one's carbon footprint. A few Buddhist groups had started to experiment with hybrid events, combining in-person attendance with a live video feed. My sense is that something like this may become the new normal: teachers and students will still gather to practice together; some students will travel to gather in person, and others will join them via their home computers.

When considering the constraints that the ecological crisis is beginning to impose, I think such a shift might be a positive development—or at least a necessary one in the long run. But it nonetheless raises serious issues that we are just beginning to grapple with.

Humans are social animals, and over the course of our long species history we have evolved to thrive in the physical presence of others. For those fortunate enough to have digital access during these difficult times, the pandemic lockdown has been a vast social experiment in relating to other people mostly in a mediated fashion, through images on a screen and words heard through tiny speakers. Widespread news reports about increasing incidences of anxiety, depression, and other forms of mental stress indicate that for many of us the experiment is not working well. In some places fear has turned into anger against public mask and vaccine mandates, creating group divisions that are fraying the social and political fabric. We do not know yet what this might lead to, but it looks like the consequences of the pandemic will continue to resonate for a long time to come. Like prison inmates in solitary confinement, people who become isolated usually suffer from the loss of human contact.

But not always.

The solution to loneliness is solitude.
—Anonymous

Without minimizing the social crisis that increasing loneliness presents, Buddhism offers an alternative approach for those on the path.

The oldest extant Buddhist texts are collected in the Pali Canon, and one of the earliest teachings in that collection is the *Khaggavisana Sutta* (Rhinoceros Sutra), included in the *Khuddaka Nikaya*. Its critique of communal life suggests that it may even predate institutional monasticism. Its verses repeatedly praise the joys and benefits of solitude in place of group practice. For example:

> One whose mind
> is enmeshed in sympathy
> for friends and companions
> neglects the true goal.
> Seeing this danger in intimacy,

> wander alone,
> like a rhinoceros.
> Abandoning offspring, spouse,
> father, mother,
> riches, grain, relatives,
> and sensual pleasures
> altogether,
> wander alone,
> like a rhinoceros.
>   (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans.)

Most of its forty-one stanzas end with the same refrain: "Wander alone, like a rhinoceros."

This recommendation of solitude as an important aspect of the spiritual life evokes the story of Gautama Buddha himself. According to the traditional accounts, when he left home on his quest, he went into the forest, where he initially studied with two teachers and then undertook ascetic practices with a few companions. But when the future Buddha renounced asceticism, he apparently went off to meditate by himself and experienced his great awakening alone. After his *parinibbana*, the sangha he established eventually settled into monasteries and group life, yet there have been many exceptions, such as the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa, who secluded himself in a cave, where he is believed to have eventually attained full enlightenment.

These Buddhist examples conform to a larger nonsectarian pattern that extends to many spiritual traditions: important religious figures often experience spiritual transformation by leaving society and going into the wilderness, where they practice in solitude. According to the Torah, Moses spoke with God several times, but always when he was alone in the desert or on a mountain. Following his own baptism, Jesus went into the desert where he fasted for forty days and nights in solitude. Mohammed's revelations occurred when he retreated into a cave, where he was visited by the archangel Gabriel. Anthony the Great sought solitude deep in the Egyptian desert and

became the father of the Desert Fathers, early Christian hermit monks who also lived in the desert.

Of course, there is a big difference between the solitude that nurtured these religious figures and the loneliness of someone in Covid quarantine. Voluntary seclusion and involuntary isolation cannot be equated. Being able to seclude yourself in the natural world is not the same as enduring pandemic lockdown in your home. And that points to another important difference:

> The child of a certain rabbi used to wander in the woods. At first his father let him wander, but over time he became concerned. One day he said to his son, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder why you go there?" The boy answered, "I go there to find God." "That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. "I am glad you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?" "Yes," the boy answered, "but I'm not."

All the religious founders mentioned above apparently found what they sought in the natural world. Today most of us meditate inside buildings with screened windows, which insulate us from insects, the hot sun, and chilling winds. There are many advantages to this, of course, but is something significant also lost?

The historical Buddha seems to have had a special relationship with trees. He was born in Lumbini Grove when his mother went into premature labor. As a child, while sitting under a tree and watching his father plow a field as part of a religious ceremony, he spontaneously fell into a meditative trance. His spiritual quest sent him into the forest, and after his enlightenment he continued to spend most of his time outdoors, often teaching under trees and eventually passing away between two trees.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Buddha expressed appreciation for trees and other plants. According to one story in the *Vinaya* monastic code, a tree spirit appeared to him and complained that a monk had chopped down its tree. In response, the Buddha prohibited sangha members from damaging trees or bushes, including cutting off limbs, picking flowers, or even plucking green leaves. One wonders what he would say about our casual destruction of whole ecosystems.

Why can the natural world be so helpful to one's spiritual development? Is it because nature offers us a temporary refuge from our instrumentalized lives in urban settings? Although we often relate to the rest of nature in a utilitarian way, the natural world is an interdependent community of living beings that invites us into a different kind of relationship. Buddhist emphasis on the impermanence of everything implies that the world is a confluence of *interacting processes*, but learning to talk conditions us to perceive the world as a collection of *separate things*, each with its own name.

Language is necessary for interaction with and functioning within society, of course, yet it can also be problematic. Insofar as meaning for us has become a function of words, we tend to miss the meaning of everything else. "For most cultures throughout history—including our own in preliterate times—the entire world used to speak. Anthropologists call this animism, the most pervasive worldview in human history. Animistic cultures listen to the natural world. For them, birds have something to say. So do worms, wolves, and waterfalls" (Christopher Manes, *A Language Older Than Words*). They have not ceased to speak but most of us are no longer able to hear what they are saying.

Going off into the natural world by oneself is an opportunity to open up to something older than words. Of course, one can still relate to nature in a utilitarian way—for example, trees are profitable as lumber—but withdrawing into nature, especially by oneself, can disrupt our usual ways of understanding the world and open us up to an alternative way of perceiving in which we no longer treat everything as only a means to achieve some goal and satisfy our desires.

When we experience life only as an incessant succession of intentions and cravings, which keeps us grasping the world as a collection of utensils, then we are constantly overlooking something important that the poet William Blake famously realized:

> If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern. (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Is this why we delight in the innocence of children and pets, why we appreciate music and dance so much? In an over-instrumentalized world, they bring us back to the here and now. Young children haven't learned yet that life is a serious business and that they need to start always preparing for the future. Perhaps Jesus was alluding to that when he declared: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Maybe the kingdom of heaven— the Pure Land?—is closer than we realize:

> The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging. A member of this cosmos was not an alienated observer of it but a direct participant in its drama. His personal destiny was bound up with its destiny, and this relationship gave meaning to his life. (Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, Cornell University Press, 1981)

Entering the marketplace with empty hands.

> —Tenth (and Last)
> Oxherding Picture

Solitude can be transformative, whether in nature or in quarantine, but it is not the final stage of the path. Although Gautama Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed all realized something profound when they dared to go off by themselves, they did not just disappear into the natural world. Instead, they returned to human society, bringing a new vision that eventually flowered into a new way of life.

We should not romanticize this process of withdrawal-and-return. The myths associated with each of them usually assume that their own personal transformation was already complete when they reentered society. Whether or not that was true for these special figures (and I have my doubts), the rest of us always have more to learn—from others. As Joanna Macy often says, the world has a role to play in our awakening and that includes the social world. The ongoing task is integrating whatever we have realized into how we actually relate to other people, whether in person or on Zoom. One's self-centered habits are deeply rooted and do not automatically evaporate. As Ram Dass liked to say, if you think you're enlightened, go spend the holidays with your family and see what happens. Engagement with the world and its problems is not a distraction from our individual spiritual practice but an essential part of it. With or without a pandemic, in quarantine or wandering freely, the bodhisattva path remains the same: recognizing that we are not separate from others (that they are not really "other") and doing what we can to make this a better world for all of us. ❏

Logging On While Locking Down: Reflections on Religious Life during the Pandemic
by Daniel Veidlinger

Has the move to online worship caused by the pandemic been beneficial or detrimental to the spiritual life of humanity?

The past two years have been very trying for the whole world, with much of normal life having come to a halt during the COVID lockdown as stores, schools, theaters, and restaurants closed their doors. A crucial difference between this pandemic and previous ones, however, is that this has been the first pandemic to occur during the age of the Internet. I am sure I am not alone in wondering what these past two years would have been like had there been no ability to engage with the world through the Internet. Children have been able to attend school from home by using learning management systems; meetings have been able to continue by the use of Zoom; and even art galleries have been able to mount online exhibits. Of course, religious services have moved online as well, with organizations broadcasting worship, meditation, or study sessions through live streaming on Facebook, Instagram, or their own branded websites, and also posting recorded sessions on YouTube. There is little doubt that the impact on the spiritual life of humanity caused by the move to online worship necessitated by the pandemic has been profound, but has it been beneficial or detrimental? As with so many things, the answer is that it has been both.

In some ways, virtual services during the pandemic have afforded the opportunity for people to engage in ways they have not done before: Even during normal times some people have not been well enough to attend live religious services, and now they are able to participate once again as full members from their home. Others have felt too shy to enter a sacred space in person, perhaps feeling that their own inner doubts about religion render them unfit to enter the sanctuary, but they are willing to dip their feet into a religious service virtually. The numbers are often staggering: in 2020 almost eighteen million people live-streamed the Vatican's Holy Week proceedings, a number that greatly outstrips anything seen in person in previous years (Parish 2020). Many churches in the UK have seen three, ten, and even twenty times more people attending mass online than used to come to the church in person (ibid.). Already in August of 2020, to say nothing of August 2021, a third of Americans in the United States had attended religious services online, and most of them found it to be very satisfying (Cooperman 2020).

Online services have also allowed people to broaden their perspectives and learn about new organizations within their own religion. I have spoken to people who felt that, compared with sitting at the back of larger churches and feeling alienated from the service, the online experience affords a much better view of the proceedings; rather than creating a sense of distance or alienation, it draws the attendee in further than being in a

A priest preaching before the camera during the Mass of the Resurrection in April 2020. Easter in Spain at the time was affected by the state of emergency decreed by the government for the COVID-19 crisis. Many priests joined in the confinement and broadcast masses via the Internet as public gatherings, including those of religious purposes, were banned.

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physical church does. Most people, for obvious practical reasons, attend religious services at a site near where they live. However, with the broadcasting of services online, someone living in, say, San Francisco is not limited to attending religious services in the Bay Area but can tune in online to a service in Detroit, Toronto, or even Mexico City. All possibilities are open, and this has allowed many people to gain experiences they otherwise would not have had and has enabled them to broaden their understanding of their own religion—and possibly other religions as well. Organizations such as Sharing Sacred Spaces (sharingsacredspaces.org) have taken advantage of this situation to run interfaith-experience programs where people from a diverse pool of religious backgrounds can virtually attend each others' religious services and pose live questions to the faithful afterward.

Turning specifically to Buddhism, Charles Prebish has pointed out that virtual communities, often known as cyber-sanghas, have existed on the Internet since the 1990s (Prebish 2004, 135–47). People have joined these cybersanghas for various reasons. For example "they may seek [online] community because they are geographically isolated; they may desire a convenient way to practice because they are overscheduled; they may be disabled and housebound and quest for relationships; they may be engaged in some sort of identity play" (Grieve 2017, 196). As Heidi Campbell explains, "for most people, community is

something that is dynamic and changeable, holds multiple connections, and is determined by personal needs and choices" (Campbell 2020, 12). The San Francisco Dharma Collective (https://sfdharmacollective.org/about-us) is just one of scores of communities that have been very busy during the pandemic as people have looked for a community to join online. Here people often gather in online meeting rooms hosted by Zoom or other similar companies and practice together to attain some measure of communal experience and spiritual support. There is every reason to believe that the changes forced upon us by the pandemic can still yield positive results in community building.

From a contemplative perspective, the COVID lockdown has provided an ideal environment for those Buddhists who are serious meditators, affording them the time, silence, and privacy to sit and develop their meditative practice. However, many meditators prefer to sit in community with others. We must remember that although the earliest texts do seem to lionize the ideal of the solitary mendicant who "wanders alone like the rhinoceros horn," the Buddha still established the Sangha, meaning community of believers, as one of the three jewels. He also, in discourses such as the *Upaddha Sutta* (SN 45.2), put a lot of emphasis on the importance of having good friends (*kalyāna mitra*) and a supportive and peaceful community at the forefront of his teachings. During the pandemic, many sites, such as the San Francisco Zen Center (https://www.sfzc.org/online-programs/online-zendo), have offered online meditation

A Catholic woman watches a virtual streaming of a prayer meeting inside the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Saint Teresa, to mark the anniversary of her death in Kolkata, India.

Photo: AP / AFLO

sessions, and we have seen people meditating online in community. As with in-person meditation, there is something about the commitment to support each other through the difficult experience of meditation that helps the aspirant to remain steadfast in their attempts when meditating in an online community. Knowing that others are going through the same trials and are there to support you if you falter can greatly help in the success of one's practice. In that sense, supportive online communities are very helpful—and can even be more helpful than in-person experiences. Online, especially because of the anonymity that is conferred in this environment, people can feel freer to discuss personal issues about which they might be inhibited when talking in person. People have shared remarkably intimate stories in online forums and have generally received thoughtful responses.

As for ritual practice, while Buddhists have often discussed whether rites carried out virtually are authentic and efficacious, recent studies have suggested that most Buddhists are willing to accept that if one's avatar meditates, this does count as meditation, and if one worships an online object, it has the karmic consequences that worship of a real-world sacred object would have (Falcone 2015, 173–90). Virtual objects point toward a worshipper's intentionality, and as such there are core similarities with real-world objects, because both direct the mind toward the Buddha and his Dharma, thereby attracting one's thoughts toward good deeds and the generation of good karma. As such, a virtual object can generate merit in one's life as well, and the more strongly one associates it with the Buddha, the more powerful its effects.

Having discussed many of the benefits of religion and Buddhism online, I should point out that there are also detrimental features to this environment. For example, media scholar Srividya

Ramasubramanian launched an online meditation program during the pandemic that attracted people from all over the world and was a big success at first, but within weeks she felt the tone had deteriorated into a space that felt tense and rife with misunderstandings. Eventually, she had to pull away from it in order to regain her balance (Campbell 2020, 31).

There are also challenges associated with the limited sensual palette available online because the tactile, olfactory, and gustatory elements of being at a religious service are a large part of the experience itself. The physical surroundings, the lofty ceilings that lure one's attention upward to the heavens, the smell of incense that fills the air with the spiritual fragrance of another world, the taste of tea: all of these contribute mightily to the overall experience of the sacred and are difficult to replicate online. Ultimately, while many Buddhists have enthusiastically embraced digital technology, some have rejected this technology as a danger to the religion, seeing it as inauthentic, materialistic, and a driver of desire rather than a means to overcome it (Hershock 1999, 137–57; Loy 2002; Loy 2007). The era of selfies and self-aggrandizing blogs may encourage selfishness rather than compassion, shorten the attention span, and overstimulate us such that the ability to concentrate and live mindfully is severely curtailed.

I think it is sometimes important to take a step back from the endless swirl of debates about the positive and negative aspects of living digitally and realize that in some ways there is not as much difference between offline and online experience as one might think. All experience runs through the senses, and as Marshall McLuhan famously averred, communications media are extensions of our senses (McLuhan 1964, 91). Buddhists, more than anyone, ought to appreciate that there is no impermeable border between the self

and the world around us. Buddhism is at pains to point out that the human being is not an immutable entity but a complex open system of continually changing elements that is in constant dialogue with its environment (Macy 1991, 107–14). Although we tend to think of ourselves as ending with the skin, really there are many things outside the body proper that affect who we are, how we engage with the world, and how the world influences us. If we are observing a Buddhist ceremony at a temple through glasses, are we less present than if we did not wear glasses? If we are observing it through the glass of our computer screen, does that make us even less present? We all know that a good movie can draw us in so fully that it feels as if the events were actually happening. In a similar way, a well-designed online religious service can supply the same kind of rich experience as a physical-world experience might. It can draw us in, move us to feel strong emotions, and make us feel things that we would feel if we were physically there. In fact, if done well it can be even more real than the physically present experience. We all know people who seldom cry during the course of the sometimes difficult events that happen in life but who might let a few sniffles escape during a poignant scene in a movie. Likewise, in the virtual reality of Second Life (Grieve 2017, 106), there are many people who claim that not just religious experiences but even that most physical of all experiences, sex, can be as rich and fulfilling when performed virtually online as when in the actual physical world. We might also note that religious services and teachings have been broadcast through television—and before that, on the radio—since the very beginnings of these technologies, and each time some purists have lamented that this was the end of authentic religion. But religion has always been mediated. We must remember that we don't hear the sacred texts themselves directly from

the mouths of the visionary founders such as the Buddha or Jesus but rather by means of various media, such as written manuscripts that were circulated, often globally, well before the Internet era. As Courtney Price points out, this is not the first time that religious communities have been separated by great distances, and two thousand years ago the early Christians scattered across the Mediterranean region maintained a strong sense of community through the circulation of letters (Campbell 2020, 46). Likewise, the Buddhist Sangha for centuries created a sense of community through busy communication networks that carried ideas back and forth (Veidlinger 2018, 102–20). One can think of the Internet as the culmination of these efforts, different in speed and scope but perhaps not in kind.

My own research has suggested that core Buddhist concepts, such as universal compassion and the idea of the interconnection of all things, fare better in environments such as the Internet, where communication is robust and there are deep and complex networks established between a variety of heterogeneous agents. Obviously, for example, if people live in an isolated village with no communication with the outside world, and the vast majority of residents have met only the eighty people in that village, they are not likely to be terribly motivated by a Buddhist idea such as compassion for all people, because they have no concept of what other people who are not their own kind are like. And we have indeed seen an incredible surge in compassion for people whose lifestyle is different from the norm. When I was growing up, no one could have imagined, for example, that alternative sexualities would increasingly become accepted in America, or that a Black woman could be a vice-president. There is no doubt that the Internet has played a major role in these advances, as it allows people to learn about new, different, or marginalized ideas and

practices. On the other hand, there has also been increased polarization and bigotry that can be blamed on the Internet. One of the reasons for this is the opinion bubbles that many of the algorithms used by social media platforms employ. These algorithms learn about our interests by tracking our social media behavior—what have we read? What have we posted? What have we liked? And then they construct a profile of us and send us other articles, posts, and feeds that they determine we will like based on our prior behavior. This makes perfect sense from the social media platform's standpoint because it will increase our engagement, but what it also does is reinforce our current beliefs and short circuit our exposure to alternative viewpoints. Like almost everything in our life, the Internet has its benefits and pitfalls, and the jury is still out about which of these will win out as we move more and more of our social engagements online. Like water, it gives us life, but too much of it may drown us. We need to find a balanced middle way between a life lived entirely in cyberspace and one where we refuse to take advantage of the wonders of modern technology. ❏

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The Spiritual Pings of Digital Religion
by Christopher Helland and Gregory Price Grieve

Digital religion has caused a massive readjustment in the practice of spirituality. This has been both a blessing and a curse.

Is the current use of digital media a skillful and innovative means to promote spirituality, or is it a dangerous practice that intensifies suffering and craving? Our phones are pinging us every day and all day! Email notifications, social media mentions, news alerts, and texts constantly catch our attention with the sound of a ping, bringing our focus back to phone and away from the world we are in. When your device has apps that "ping" you for spiritual reasons, does it momentarily wake you up, or is it a distraction or worse? The seed of our argument is simple—media practices shape how each of us perceives the world, and religious practices on digital media are reconfiguring our spirituality.

Media practices consist of such activities as reading a book, watching television and film, and listening to the radio, as well as engaging a computer, smartphone, or another digital device. Media practices do not merely provide us with information. These practices are also embodied social activities that users execute with varying degrees of regularity, dexterity, and flair. "Media" here does not mean "the media," as in the diversified communication corporations that influence and even control the dissemination of information.

Instead, media practice indicates "mediation," a term that indicates how different media, such as print, broadcast, and digital, are not neutral conveyors of information but rather play a fundamental role in producing the message. Media practices emerge from a relationship between possible human action, on one hand, and systems of communication, on the other, and describe how social beings, with diverse motives and intentions, use the technologies of communication at hand to make and transform the realities in which they live (Lundby and Evolvi 2022). Over the past thirty years we have entered a new media environment dominated by digital media, the Internet, and now the smartphone. People within religious traditions, especially Buddhism, have always been aware of how to use new media skillfully and mindfully. However, is our current situation different from the past (Grieve and Veidlinger 2015)?

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Our media environment is changing so quickly that it often feels like we need to run just to stay in place. New phones, new types of networks, more speed, more information, and more ways of being connected seem like the new normal. What happens then during this hectic race when we are pinged by religion? When the World Wide Web was born in the early 1990s, how did religion find a new way of being, and a new way of entangling practitioners with what they perceive as ultimate reality in the Buddhist sense? Much to the surprise of early internet researchers—and to the academic field that would come to be known as digital religion—within a very short period there were three times as many websites dedicated to religion and spirituality as there were for sex. There was a seemingly untapped desire for the divine online. Religious sites flooded the World Wide Web and seemed to adapt quickly to this new form of media. Of course, there was much trial and error, with failed websites and empty virtual pews and meditation cushions, but that did not deter many from spreading their faith online (for snapshots of early scholarship, see Grieve 1995 and Helland 2000; for a current overview see Grieve 2021).

For some religious groups, taking their religion online was a blessing. For others it was a dark quagmire. In the early years, being online was something other and different, a charismatic and exotic space—sometimes dangerous and often creating a giddy vertigo of seemingly endless possibility. Many of you reading this article will have a vague recollection of the sound of a modem screeching out its bits and bytes as it slowly communicated with computers through the phone lines. In what now seems ancient history, long before the smartphone and high speed Wi-Fi interwove the actual with the virtual, there was a strong dichotomy between being online and being offline. Being

online wasn't easily done, and it certainly wasn't everywhere. This digital divide between life online and life offline perplexed members of religious traditions and challenged them to recognize that the digital world was a new type of space with incredible potential for religious expressions and experiences but also with numerous limitations and pitfalls.

Adapting to the new online environment required religious organizations to socially shape internet technology so that it could be used to meet the religious and spiritual needs of their practitioners, what early researchers began calling "spiritualizing the Internet" (Campbell 2005). This was not an easy process, and it led to significant debates and divides within groups over the role of this new technology within their faith. Through years of trial and error, arguments about efficacy and effectiveness, and experimentation, religious groups imagined their way online and began using this new form of media in ways they felt best assisted with their religious functions. For some groups this meant communicating information to their practitioners in a one-to-many fashion, much like they used radio or television. Other groups created virtual spaces online to host rituals, undertake pilgrimages, and engage their practitioners in a myriad of new and creative ways (Helland 2004).

On the other side of the screen, practitioners also had to adopt this new way of doing religion so that their religious needs could be met online. Interaction with religion in this new environment shaped religious adherents as they negotiated and engaged with their faith on the internet. It certainly wasn't for everyone, and there were mixed reviews about how well the online practices could replace offline ones. For many people, the internet was used as a tool for seeking religious information. As early as 2001, the Pew Research Center found that 25 percent

of Americans had searched online for religious information in the previous year (Larsen 2020). The internet opened a world of resources and incredible possibilities for getting religious information. For others—and what we two authors found so fascinating—digital religious practice was also a way of connecting with like-minded practitioners and created a new way for maintaining community and friendships. And many users saw it as a new space where they could undertake rituals and engage with their religion in creative and innovative ways.

Going online required an adjustment at the very least, and often even major transformation. This challenged religious organizations to innovate, not only in the way they communicated their religion to others but also how they engaged with the religion itself. Transferring rituals and religious practice online required all sorts of adjustments: practices and even beliefs needed to be tweaked, changed, altered, and adapted, if not scrapped, and completely overhauled. In the end, certain things just couldn't be included. For example, how do you capture the smell of incense or the taste of the sacrament in the online space? How do you communicate, touch, or have other haptic sensations? With our present technology, it cannot be done. In other words, the bodily practice of doing ritual had to be transformed or even excluded in the traditional way of undertaking a ritual (Radde-Antweiler 2022).

There were a lot of mixed results, with many interesting but ultimately failed experiments. Some practitioners felt that the new online environment could not meet their religious needs. To many, a virtual pilgrimage was an interesting and fascinating online event but it wasn't the same as the real thing. To others, online religious practices opened a world of spiritual possibilities. Virtual pilgrimage was just the start: online churches and temples sprang

up in 3D virtual reality environments such as the Second Life platform, and people adjusted, then embraced, these new types of practices (Grieve 2017).

For many, this new type of activity, these spiritual pings, were an option they now had at their desktop. It was a supplement to their religious practice that created new possibilities, while at the same time the old ways of doing their religion were still available. To others, online religion became an amazing new way of connecting to their faith and changed not only their way of doing religion but also their way of being religious. For example, Hindus working abroad could go online to participate in their important pujas, pilgrimages, and homas even though they were not at home. By clicking their mouse they interacted with the gods, "ping, ping, ping" (Scheifinger 2008). Tibetan Buddhists anywhere in the world could connect through www.dalailama.com and feel as if they were sitting at the feet of the Dalai Lama as he gave live teachings and empowerments from Dharamsala, India. They felt the ping (Helland 2015). Neo-pagans practicing alone in their communities were now connecting with others around the globe in virtual groves (Grieve 1995). The pings were getting stronger.

Once a fascinating, and often fun, supplement to the actual world of face-to-face interaction, digital media is now becoming the main method many people in developed nations use for engaging with each other and the world. As internet technology continued to develop, computers became less expensive, more powerful, and even portable; our lives offline started to blend and become more and more entangled with our online activities. The pings were becoming part of our everyday reality. The separation between life offline and life online simply disappeared. We all text, talk, tweet, and post our way through our daily lives at a frantic

pace, often unable to see past our own screens. Over the last two years, numerous surveys have found that, on average, people in North America spent five hours each day glued to the screens of their mobile device. Most people check their smartphones within fifteen minutes after waking up and in the United States, people checked their phones as often as every four minutes (344 times a day). The pinging doesn't stop.

Many people reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed by this activity—this is what it means to be hypermediated, a term that encompasses both the processes of technological acceleration and the massive flow of information and ideas that we must now absorb. These increasingly pinging devices boost the tempo of everyday life to a frantic pace. This seemed fine when we felt we could still escape back into the real world. Up to 2019, much of our online religious activity seemed optional, something that might or might not have become embedded into our daily routines. But then the Covid crisis hit, and lockdowns transformed how we could live and interact. People wanted to continue to practice their religion and had no other option than to go online. Churches and temples were closed, sacred sites were emptied, pilgrimages were canceled. Suddenly, and without choice, if you wanted to practice your religion, you had to turn on your screen.

What happens when digital media is no longer supplemental to physical practice but becomes the main way that most people involve themselves with a religion? For instance, one of the fascinating locations where religion, spirituality, and social media are deeply entangled is the Buddhist meditation apps such as Buddhify, Imagine Clarity, and Headspace. These apps, which have become more and more important for people during the stress of lockdowns, center on the practice of mindfulness. The current

popular understanding of mindfulness is derived from the Buddhist concept of *sati*, which describes being aware of one's body, feelings, and other mental states. As it is practiced in America today, mindfulness meditation focuses on being intensely aware, without any sort of judgment, of what one is sensing and feeling at this very moment. Mindfulness practice has been shown to counter the current tendency among many people to spend too much time planning and problem solving, a tendency that can lead to stress, anxiety, and even symptoms of depression. Mindfulness practices, as pursued by way of the Buddhist apps, involve breathing, guided meditation, and other forms of relaxation, and clinical tests show that mindfulness relieves stress, anxiety, pain, depression, insomnia, and hypertension.

Yet are Buddhist apps really Buddhist? (Grieve and McGuire 2019). Do they relieve suffering, or do they just further entangle users in the digital world? In our hypermediated, hectic environment, can mindfulness apps change our perspective? Mindfulness, like other forms of popular spirituality, promises to soothe away the anxiety and stress of modern life but not remove you from it. Thirty years ago, mindfulness was just an obscure Buddhist principle; today it is sold as a popular cure-all for many aspects of life. Many apps focus on the practical benefits of mindfulness—its ability to reduce stress, improve sleep, and increase productivity—but leave out its ethical and religious dimensions.

To return to our original question, are the digital religious practices pinging us different from earlier forms of religion? In early Buddhist texts mindfulness meant not only paying attention but also remembering what the Buddha taught so that one could discern between skillful and unskillful thoughts, feelings, and actions and ultimately attain liberation from the

cycle of birth and death. Within early Buddhism, mindfulness practitioners were those who criticized mainstream societal values and cultural norms, whereas mindfulness apps today often encourage people to cope with and accommodate themselves to our frantic society. By promoting mindfulness as a means of relaxation and temporary escape, many of these apps overlook the surrounding causes and conditions of our suffering and stress, which are in large part due to the constant pinging in our lives from the overuse of digital technologies. The pings are just demanding and capturing our attention; more of our focus and energy is now locked within a society that is inherently exploiting these digital activities for materialist gains. Not all mindfulness apps guide us down this path, but many do.

Conclusion

As seen with Buddhist apps, because of the quickly changing media environment of contemporary society, media practices are much more conspicuous now than they were in the recent past. We've all been pinged relentlessly. The fact that Buddhist apps exist is not surprising. Digital religion has caused a massive readjustment in the practice of spirituality. This has been both a blessing and a curse. In the early years of the internet, for those who engaged in religion online, it helped form friendships, community, faith, and even a closeness with the sacred. As digital religion matured, with this massive shift to maintaining our societies, communities, and cultures through digitized practices, digital religious activity became a strategic way of engaging with ultimate reality in our hypermediated world (Grieve 2022).

But now, when digital media seems to be the main way to communicate rather than just a supplement to face-to-face religious practices, can being pinged by our device save us? What happens now, in our hypermediated world, when we get a spiritual ping: what echoes are we really hearing, what is the intent of digital religion in our everyday lives? Do we wake up? Or are we distracted and pulled further down into the addictive practices of craving on which social media feed? Is current digital religion a way of bringing the sacred into people's overmediated lives or is it just another part of an online system being put in place to capture our personal information and exploit our activities for corporate gains? As our online activities have replaced much of our offline functions out of necessity, the authors wonder if spiritual pings on our smartphones could be used to lessen our anxiety? Or is social media inherently harmful to Buddhist practice, inauthentic, and addictive? Can digital media lead to anything else but *tṛṣṇā*, the craving that causes *duḥkha*, suffering? ❏

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Adapting Interfaith Collaboration to an Internet Reality

by Renáta Katalin Nelson

After two years it is clear that there are many opportunities for developing constructive interfaith collaboration in the online space and the experience, meaning, and depth of an encounter are not always lost online.

Introduction

Even prior to the pandemic, religious actors and institutions began embracing more and more aspects of the online universe—from websites to online services to social media. Being present in cyberspace has become especially important to advancing visibility, religious work, and collaboration in an increasingly globalized world. Interreligious engagement, an important part of the work of many interreligious practitioners and institutions, has been slower to follow. Like the development sector, interreligious engagement initiatives continued to rely heavily on face-to-face interaction, with those involved often being concerned about losing the meaning and depth of the personal experience. In 2020, when COVID-19 shut down world travel and interrupted the ability for even neighboring communities to meet, interreligious practitioners were forced to draw on creative means online to conduct a greater portion of both religious and interreligious work virtually, resulting in a rapid shift to collaboration in cyberspace. This process faced several initial challenges, and although this shift has allowed for much positive development in interreligious collaboration, it is important to examine the challenges that remain.[1]

Interfaith Collaboration: Common across Religions

Helping others and improving the human condition is common to all major world religions. For this reason, interreligious[2] collaboration and exchange has played an important role and takes many forms, from interfaith dialogue and projects on strengthening community cohesion to peacebuilding work or banding together on a common objective, such as access to clean water and humanitarian relief. Interfaith collaboration results when religious actors or institutions reach out to other faiths or when secular actors connect with religious actors on a common issue. In both instances, those involved point to passages within scripture that call for people to work together or help others from different religions and cultures. One's own religion plays a key role in an interreligious encounter and its result. Examples of interreligious collaboration and exchange (interreligious exchange can take place in different forms, such as interreligious dialogue or cross community learning) across religions can be found throughout history. Since the end of World War II, numerous intrareligious and interfaith platforms

have been established or reestablished by religious actors. Notable examples include the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD, established in 2016); the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI, launched in 2012); the Parliament of the World's Religions (first founded in 1893 as World's Parliament of Religions but relaunched with a centennial conference in 1993 in its current form); Religions for Peace (founded in 1970); United Religions Initiative (URI, founded 2000); and the World Council of Churches as an ecumenical example (established in 1948). Even secular actors such as governments and intergovernmental organizations recognize the importance of fostering interreligious cooperation to strengthen peacebuilding and development work. Examples include the UN Environmental Programme's Faith for Earth Initiative, the World Bank's Moral Imperative for Faith Actors, and the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) establishment of the Central African Republic Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership. As another example, Austria, Spain, Saudi Arabia, and the Holy See launched a small intergovernmental organization that resembles a hybrid of an interreligious and multilateral organization with its multireligious board of directors and a Council of Parties comprised of member states as part of its governance structure: the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID[3], founded in 2012). KAICIID, whose purpose is to foster dialogue among religions and between religious actors and

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policy makers, has since established and supported interreligious platforms in four world regions and develops ongoing interreligious projects and initiatives.

Online Presence Prior to COVID-19

Religious and interreligious actors and institutions have long adopted the use of email for communication, coordination, and event organization and have also used the internet for research. Some religious institutions even broadcast their services through internet streaming, a logical modernization of the televised services already offered by various churches, mosques, and temples. Religious and interreligious institutions frequently have well-developed websites and regular e-newsletters and have even adopted a regular presence on various social media channels. Coordination meetings were taking place via Webex, Skype, and Zoom years before the widespread outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Nevertheless, most took for granted the capacity of people to move and gather to conduct tangible work. Even if planning meetings were held online, consultations, conferences, meetings, and projects were organized in person. The onset of COVID-19 resulted in the imposition of new rules and restrictions that have in many ways prohibited the core element of joint interreligious work: meeting face-to-face. As a result, interreligious work was significantly reduced or ceased entirely.[4]

Initial Challenges

The significant reduction in interreligious activities can be explained by many factors. Initially many organizations thought that the COVID scenario would pass by the end of 2020, and therefore they simply postponed physical projects while continuing to plan meetings virtually. Virtual platforms such as Skype, Zoom, and Webex faced security breaches, were difficult for the less tech savvy to navigate, or were inadequate for the size or kinds of meetings and conferences that organizers wished to hold. There was also a degree of resistance from interreligious practitioners, who expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of interreligious work online and whether such virtual work would be accepted by participating communities. Another area of concern was the lack of access to the internet in many parts of the developing world. The interfaith work that was initially moved online reflected a shift in priorities toward joint COVID-19 responses and away from other development, humanitarian, and social concerns, such as climate, community-based, or peacebuilding related issues. However, there was also a fear of alienation or losing the depth of the interfaith experience by moving interreligious encounters online. As it became more evident that COVID-19 would continue to present challenges for international travel and face-to-face meetings, these actors and institutions felt it significantly more important to continue working together

toward the common good than to wait for the possibility of gathering in person. They began to adjust their way of working to a dominant virtual reality when possible and to learn to balance the work on COVID-19 with overall development, humanitarian, and social initiatives.

Adjusting to the Increased Virtual Reality

One way interreligious practitioners have handled the COVID scenario is simply by shifting what they were doing face-to-face into an online format. Arguments for making this move fall deeply within each individual's own religious beliefs. As the pandemic progressed, it was clear that challenges to communities had increased, and interreligious action was needed more than ever. Thus, they were able to leap the hurdle and move as much work as possible online. Although shifting online does not work for all interfaith activities, it has worked well for many types of interfaith engagement. Examples include shifting interreligious meetings and project consultations to online formats. Webinars replaced traditional panel discussions, and live streaming supported interfaith prayers. Religious leaders joined together to publish joint statements and to record podcasts or film conversations that often advocated compliance to government measures, and they also called on governments for action, particularly in regard to

being sensitive to religious traditions and practices.

Other, more-creative ways for religious actors to engage in interfaith activities began to pop up, particularly among youth and faith-based NGOs, who were quick to react to the webinar fatigue that was beginning to set in by mid-2020. The rapid troubleshooting of existing platforms and the development of new online meeting platforms further helped this creativity thrive. Social-media campaigns like those of KAICIID or Religions for Peace and JLI were launched; URI in North India developed a daily dose of optimism, which shared acts of kindness among people of different faiths; large interreligious conferences reconvened on online conferencing platforms, such as the Parliament of the World's Religions' 2021 virtual conference. Other interreligious conferences were held in a hybrid format (a mix of face-to-face and virtual), such as the G20 Interfaith Forum 2020 in Saudi Arabia and the PaRD General Assembly in 2021. With expanded technological abilities, online conferencing can include workshops with breakout sessions and Jamboard meetings for brainstorming and for the easy sharing of tools and resources. For smaller events, webinars have been rethought into more creative formats such as fireside chats, master classes, case studies, and expert debates. Interfaith programs and videos have been produced by partners in different hemispheres.

The Pros and Cons

Despite being a bit slower to embrace cyberspace as a place to engage with one another, share information, and collaborate across different religions, interfaith actors have not only shifted to virtual formats but also invoked a large degree of creativity in the creation of online collaborative projects and activities. The initial fears of alienation have been largely stemmed in part by better platforms, more creative ways of engaging, and the partial resumption of the ability to hold physical gatherings again. The virtual space creates opportunities and has positive effects yet poses challenges and presents potential negative side effects.

Positive Effects

1. You can reach more people: When activities are moved online, it is possible to engage more people than might have been possible physically. This applies to the number of participants, the geographical spread, and the types of participants.

2. Better outreach to and involvement of youth and women, both groups that are traditionally underrepresented in religious and interreligious engagement: Youth, as we all know, tend to be faster and better with technology than most others. Women are also increasingly online. When activities are moved online, there is increased potential for engagement beyond the typical religious patriarchy. This has two benefits: First, outreach to youth and women is easier. Second, women and youth can be approached to develop online activities to increase interfaith cooperation among other women and youth, and also among other underrepresented groups. This has opened doors to helping these groups during the pandemic and giving them a voice.

3. Creativity: Digital space allows for the creation of very different event and activity formats from face-to-face encounters, and it also provides numerous ways that interfaith practitioners can promote interfaith collaboration, ranging from videos to cartoons to talk shows and social media campaigns. It also allows for better and more frequent information sharing.

4. More environmentally friendly: By offering events in an online or hybrid format, organizations cut down on travel costs and individuals are less physically stressed from frequent travel. Additionally, travelling less or forgoing travel for short stays, especially when the travel is over long distances, is better for the environment. Physical encounters can then be focused on the most meaningful and sensitive exchanges.

5. Greater flexibility: Although large gatherings are just as labor intensive to plan online as on the ground, for smaller activities it is easier to gather online with less planning. Interreligious meetings can be called with less effort and could foster more-frequent interaction, which can improve community cohesion.

6. Ability to react quickly: Interfaith action can be mobilized more rapidly online. This can be highly beneficial for countering hate speech toward a specific religious group, for preventing further violence when an isolated incident has occurred between individuals of different religious groups, and for showing solidarity and empathy when tragedies occur.

Negative Effects

1. Internet fatigue: Engaging too many people in online activities risks the loss of focus and losing motivated interfaith actors. Additionally, when the same key interfaith actors are invited to many online events, this can cause webinar fatigue. Too many online activities can lower the religious motivation behind interfaith collaboration. Additionally, when attendees see the same people frequently featured in different events and activities, there is a sense of an elite that is out of touch with the population.

2. Lack of internet access in areas: This lack remains a critical issue in the developing countries and regions where many people do not have

access to electricity or internet. By moving too many activities online, there is a risk of leaving these areas of the world behind. Often, these are vulnerable populations that suffer the effects of climate changes, health crises, and war the most deeply, and that is where interfaith work has a big role to play.

3. Feelings of alienation or disconnectedness: Being online does not create the same type of group dynamic as in face-to-face gatherings. Participants may feel alienated or disconnected from other participants. This is even more true for participants who have not previously met face-to-face, whereas might not be as bad for participants who already know one another.

4. Trust building is difficult: First-time encounters across religions can be a bit more difficult online since trust has not yet been established. This is particularly challenging when gathering religious actors from conflict areas that are opposed to one another. Here it is incredibly important to build trust, which is difficult regardless of the format but more difficult when not meeting face-to-face.

5. Lack of internet literacy: Many religious leaders are less internet literate than the younger generation. Although this has been somewhat ameliorated by the advent of easier-to-use platforms and by two years of regular practice online, there are still many who struggle to manage online. And a dangerous side effect of internet illiteracy is that religious leaders may take as truth rumors and fake news promulgated online and share this information within their community. Because religious leaders are often trusted and respected members of their communities, this misinformation can exacerbate divides, spread hate speech, and fuel conflicts.

6. Some things simply need to be done

in person: Even though interfaith action can be more rapidly mobilized online; it cannot replace the weight of a personal visit when a tragedy has occurred. Additionally, religious actors often work together as first responders in times of crises. An online presence can never replace the need for physical action when it comes to humanitarian relief and interreligious peacebuilding in conflict-afflicted areas.

Conclusion

Cyberspace is indeed an important place where religious actors and institutions can be present and interact across religions. After two years it is clear that there are many opportunities for developing constructive interfaith collaboration in the online space and the experience, meaning, and depth of an encounter are not always lost online. Nevertheless, it is important to evaluate how and when online interactions are most effective. And when they are not, interfaith actors need to ensure that face-to-face interactions still take place. The following are a few recommendations to keep in mind when developing interfaith work online.

1. Engage less-represented groups as participants or even helpers in developing and promoting activities; minorities, youth, women, and others can bring alternative perspectives to the table.

2. Make sure to keep the online activity relevant to the participants and to your work, and that the participants are relevant to the activity.

3. Think critically about whether it makes more sense to be online or physical—can it be done effectively online, if at all? Humanitarian relief, trust building, and even networking activities are better in person.

4. Think creatively: change, alter, or rotate formats to prevent fatigue and lack of interest, but also think

in terms of interfaith online products, such as interviews, podcasts, creative videos, or online courses.

5. Develop internet literacy training for those who struggle online; this is mutually beneficial.

6. Engage local religious actors who can facilitate physical meetings on the ground; the coordination can be done online. This is beneficial whether you attend physically or not. Local religious actors can help in trust building.

7. Evaluate: whether physical or online, it is important to have a plan for measuring your success.

8. Share with other interfaith actors what you have developed and learned in the process.

In closing, it is important to revisit the progress, successes, and failures of interfaith work online, especially as technology continues to develop and the world continues to change during and after COVID. ❑

Notes

1. For this paper, the author draws on eight years of experience working in interfaith collaboration and dialogue in the areas of development, human rights, and peacebuilding. The author also draws on and builds upon research she conducted for "Interfaith Dialogue in Action: A Guide for Dealing with COVID-19" (Abu-Nimer, Alabbadi, Djuric, Nelson, 2020, available for download at: https://www.kaiciid.org/publications-resources/covid-19-interfaith-guide or https://jliflc.com/resources/interfaith-dialogue-in-action-a-guide-for-dealing-with-covid-19/) to support this article.

2. The author uses the terms "interfaith" and "interreligious" interchangeably.

3. The author has been working for KAICIID since 2013.

4. Interreligious actors include religious leaders and actors, religious institutions, and faith-based organizations involved in interreligious engagement and collaboration, as well as interreligious organizations and interfaith dialogue practitioners.

The Creative Challenges of Religious Practice Today: Remoteness Generates Collective Effervescence
by Masaki Matsubara

Learners from all over the globe have found online classes helpful, convenient, easier, and more comfortable as online classes have become the dominant way of carrying on educational, religious, and spiritual activities.

In light of the unprecedented disruptions from the Covid-19 pandemic that have characterized educational, religious, and spiritual institutions since March 2020 in New York State and all over the world, the need for widespread shifts to remote teaching and learning has become evident and urgent. The pandemic situation has shown us the necessity of online classes when traditional ways of teaching, where teachers and students sit and learn through in-person interactions, shut down. Since January 2022, when I finished writing this article, partly in Japan and partly in New York City, the Omicron variant has been rapidly spreading worldwide. To some degree teaching and learning through an online course can be different from a traditional face-to-face course. Yet learners from all over the globe have found online classes helpful, convenient, easier, and more comfortable as online classes have become the dominant way of carrying on educational, religious, and spiritual activities. There are many reasons for and benefits of choosing online teaching and learning.

When the pandemic began in March 2020, I was in the middle of the spring semester teaching a course on Rinzai Zen Buddhism at Brown University, and my class was immediately changed to a remote class. Since then I have had many online classes. For example, since fall 2020 I have been teaching Zen meditation (hereafter, zazen) at Brown's Contemplative Studies Program as a Virtual Contemplative Mentor in Residence. This Mentor's class is open to both the Brown and the Rhode Island School of Design communities and to others by invitation. Furthermore, at Rissho Kosei-kai International of North America (RKINA), I have been teaching zazen in its new weekly program called Morning Chant, and I am also offering weekly lectures on Buddhism in a new program called Dharma Dōjō. Moreover, as a member of RKINA, I have joined the Transatlantic Sangha to give periodic lectures on Buddhist teachings and practice. This online learning program, initiated by RKINA as well as the offices of Rissho Kosei-kai in Rome, the UK, and Brazil, bridges the continents of Europe, Africa, South America, Asia, and North America. More recently I have started my own independent one-to-one zazen sessions online for new meditators as well as for those with more experience who wish to renew the strength of their practice. Overall, while conducting these online classes, I have appreciated the technologies that allow me to meet people whom I have not yet met, those I have not seen for a while, and those who are my friends and fellow practitioners in the world.

From March 2020 to the present, I have found my online teaching and learning experiences to be less problematic than I had expected, even though my courses on zazen practices, including a chanting practice and a mindful eating practice, would traditionally require the learning circumstances to be in person because of the nature of religiosity and spirituality. I have found that I take greater care to create learning settings that facilitate collectiveness, which is one advantage that online teaching and learning brings in this time of loss of in-person attendance. The collectiveness I assume people are looking for is particularly important when one of the challenges is that people have lost many of their physical connections with others.

First, probably the biggest advantage of the online program is that it can provide great flexibility with time and location. A teacher can be in a different state or country and still perfectly deliver classes and even manage events such as zazen meetings (*zazenkai*). There is no need for the teacher and the participant to be in the same place, classroom, or event site, as they do not need to meet physically. On this point, taking the example of the Transatlantic Sangha, in which participants gather from many parts of the globe, I realize that the Transatlantic Sangha becomes diverse and inclusive in its functionality as an online program, going beyond

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physical boundaries. People who live in London, Paris, Rome, Reykjavík, Tokyo, Cape Town, Honolulu, San Francisco, New York City, San Paulo and elsewhere can meet, study, and practice together. The same can be said of my course Dharma Dōjō, hosted by RKINA, whose main office is located in Los Angeles. If Dharma Dōjō had only a physical class in LA, where we would sit and learn through in-person interactions, people who live in New York City, for example—much less in Japan—could not participate in the class. This primary characteristic function of inclusion and diversity brings about a limitless potential for collectiveness and solidarity.

Second, in relation to the first point above, I will add the characteristics of comfort, accessibility, feasibility, and practicality of online practice. All the participants, including teachers, can join together in the comfort of their own homes or any other preferred location. For instance, we can meditate zazen, recite the Lotus Sutra, chant the *odaimoku* or *Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō*; copy sutras, participate in dharma talks, and meet the sangha members without stepping out of our houses. This is simply the best option for gatherings during the pandemic, where we can meet without fear for our safety. To attend such an online course, people just need to have a proper internet connection. Here is what a friend and fellow teacher living in Upstate New York related to me in an email: She was going to lead a *sesshin*, or a concentrated period of Zen practice, but she had slipped and fallen on an icy road while out walking with her dog and hit her knee very hard. She had stayed in bed and worked on her laptop preparing for the *sesshin*, and she mentioned how fortunate it was that we have Zoom so she would still be able to start the *sesshin* the next evening, with whatever seemed to work—while sitting with ice on her knee. This story reminds me of a famous Japanese anime called "Doraemon"; one of its main subjects is Doraemon's wondrous tool, the anywhere door, by which one can go anywhere in the world. An online course can be regarded as a product of internet technologies similar to the anywhere door.

Third, whether it is in a private or a group setting, I find that online meetings can offer a more personalized experience for learners. Through online teaching and learning, the participants can get to know one another better. It is obvious that this is particularly true if an online course takes place in a private setting. But even in group settings, the learners may find it more comfortable to open themselves up when they are online. In the context of in-person class settings, some people might find it challenging to ask questions or to be asked questions, as they may feel shy and uncomfortable in the presence of others. I myself have had this experience many times, and I think that many people would feel the same, at least to some degree. As I have thought about why I sometimes feel more comfortable in online settings than in-person settings, I've concluded that it is probably because I can, to some degree, keep my personal distance in online settings. I would add, from my own experience of teaching private zazen lessons, that a teacher can invest more time with one student when meeting alone, as the lesson can be personalized based on the requests and convenience of the student.

With a particular focus on inclusion and diversity, which are the important functional elements of online activities, I contend that religious and spiritual institutions will need to continue using online tools of teaching and learning because they are practical and effective, and thus, essentially necessary, for a broad range of purposes. I have often

An Osaka-based canned coffee company's advertisement at a subway station in Tokyo depicts an image of Doraemon's "anywhere door" with the phrase "wherever you are is your workplace."

heard of a tension regarding traditional face-to-face interactions versus online interactions in terms of what religious leaders and religious practices are supposed to be, and I would like to stress that online activities can fulfill a purpose; delivering rituals, training, and dharma talks creates and re-creates a community around a shared experience of a particular belief and practice. In fact, a ritual can be a tool to give rise to a shared experience, such as a religious practice. I think that religion is a coherent system of beliefs and practices in which practitioners and their significant groups posit ultimate realities, or what they deeply consider to be the sacred, as a means of describing, organizing, and manifesting their world. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), in his 1915 work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (https://www.gutenberg .org/files/41360/41360-h/41360-h.htm). By "sacred things" he meant beliefs and practices that evoke the transcendental feeling of the collectivity of human beings, or what he calls "collective effervescence," that finally creates one single moral community. In other words, while Durkheim described religion as "the projection of the collectivity of human beings transcendent," this collective effervescence, which is the underlying element of the projection, is the foundational experience unifying a community around that experience. I have little need to go over Durkheimian definitions of religion here, as there is now a robust study on this subject. For the purpose of this article, I would simply like to limit myself to making clear my position that online activities, in addition to in-person class settings, can bring about the experience of the collective effervescence.

In my zazen practice at the weekly online class Morning Chant, I teach the spiritual technique of concentration on counting one's breath, paying full attention to each inhalation and exhalation, and cultivating the awareness of being in the moment. I have emphasized that, by cultivating the awareness of being here and now, sharpening attention and connectivity, and nurturing empathy and compassion, this spiritual technique brings about calm union with fellow human beings. In fact, as we continue to practice cultivating the awareness of being in the moment, we are also cultivating the awareness that we are always living in *en* (causality), *ichigo ichie* (one moment, one meeting), or *mujō* (impermanence). For Buddhists, this keen awareness is grounded in the Buddha's Law or the ultimate reality. For practitioners, I argue that when this idea and their experiences are closely united, the collective sentiments—simultaneously generating what Durkheim labels the experience of emotional "electricity"—help enhance the mutual understanding of different people from different backgrounds and help in making efforts for the advancement of a better society, world, and humanity. Today religious and spiritual institutions should continue to pursue the creative means that bring about this collective sentiment as a goal of their practices.

This collective sentiment that simultaneously generates a sense of togetherness or oneness can also be seen in the practice of reciting the *odaimoku*. The common point of both zazen and the *odaimoku* is a meditative practice that brings practitioners into high concentration or meditative absorption, that is to say, *samadhi*. The very nature of such a meditative practice acts to build a sense of community around a shared experience of emotionally charged togetherness, or the oneness that meditative practice generates. A good example of this is the *hōza* practice, a form of group counseling offered by Rissho Kosei-kai as one of their unique core practices. The *hōza* practice is not simply a counseling

Foreign residents in the Tokyo area and Japanese members share everyday experiences and awareness in a hōza *(Dharma circle) meeting, held on Sundays by Rissho Kosei-kai's International Buddhist Congregation.*

opportunity. It also functions as an opportunity to build a sense of a community, conveying the messages that "you are not alone" and "we are a team." This is a practice of creating a calm union among practitioners.

Online activities have become useful, practical, and effective ways of connecting people by building inclusive and diverse circumstances in religious and spiritual institutions. But also, and perhaps more important, these activities have simultaneously served as a means of generating and enhancing a mind of oneness. We should continue to look for creative means to pursue this mind of oneness. As I have continued my online teaching and learning of Buddhism, I have always kept the two pillars of my practice in my mind: One pillar is to create a circumstance of inclusion, diversity, and connection. This pillar reminds me at all times to be moving toward gentleness in my practice as a teacher. The other pillar is a teaching that we are all connected and that we are living in the web of the interconnectedness of everything. This second pillar keeps me listening for even the tiny voices of insects and sensing a gentle breeze. These two pillars stand as a gate in my practice that looks for a mind of oneness as its goal. I am forever grateful to my teachers for leaving me such a well-lit path.   ❑

The Thirty-Ninth Niwano Peace Prize Awarded to Father Michael Lapsley, SSM

The Niwano Peace Foundation has announced that it has chosen Anglican Father Michael Lapsley, SSM, of South Africa to be the 2022 recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize for his relentless struggle against apartheid and social discrimination, his support for the liberation movement in South Africa, and his peace-building activities. The reason for selection issued by Dr. Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, chair of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, and the recipient's acceptance letter follow.

The Reason for Selection of Father Michael Lapsley

On behalf of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, it is my pleasure to announce that the thirty-ninth Niwano Peace Prize will be awarded to Father Michael Lapsley, SSM, of South Africa in recognition of his relentless struggle against apartheid and social discrimination, his support for the liberation movement in South Africa, and his various peace-building activities in other parts of the world. Father Lapsley, as a religious leader and a global social activist, has called upon faith communities to reflect on and acknowledge social discrimination within their societies and has mobilized their support against racism, apartheid, and all forms of social discrimination that prevail in different parts of the world. The exceptional aspect of his social activism is that he has not restricted himself to addressing the socioeconomic and political basis of racism but has also emphasized the process of healing to deal with the bitterness, racial hatred, and other socio-psychological impacts of injustices that emerge out of social discrimination.

Father Michael Lapsley was born on June 2, 1949, in New Zealand. He began his education at the Anglican Society of the Sacred Mission in New Zealand. As a white man, he could have enjoyed the ease and trappings of his privilege, but his religious conviction led him to join the priesthood. In 1971 he joined the religious order of the Society of the Sacred Mission (SSM) in Australia. He was ordained to priesthood in 1973.

He went to South Africa at the height of apartheid in that country and began his work as chaplain on both black and white campuses, which exposed him to student activism and the injustices experienced by black students under apartheid. He raised his voice for black students

Father Michael Lapsley, SSM, president of the Healing of Memories Global Network.

Photo: © 2021 Father Michael Lapsley, SSM

who were being shot, detained, and tortured. Because of his involvement in antiapartheid activities, he was expelled from South Africa, but he took this opportunity to travel the world to raise awareness against racism and mobilize support for the antiapartheid movement in South Africa. In 1990 he sustained severe injuries, including losing both hands, the sight

A May 1986 demonstration in Johannesburg by Witwatersrand University students for the release of an imprisoned fellow student. Police officers advance with batons against the demonstrators.

inequalities that he has witnessed around him, and this has led him to seek justice for all based on his understanding of the Bible. Therefore, while being rooted in Christianity, his appeal has been universal and interfaith. Father Lapsley's nonviolent, multifaith peace-building efforts and activities of healing based on a restorative justice approach, dialogue, and reconciliation are continuing to contribute to the healing of South Africans as well as many others all over the world.

In this way, Father Michael Lapsley has contributed immensely to the cause of peace and interreligious cooperation, which is in congruence with the mission of the Niwano Peace Prize.

The Recipient's Acceptance Letter for the 2022 Niwano Peace Prize

The news that I was to be awarded the Niwano Peace Prize took me totally by surprise.

I am humbled and honored to accept the prize.

Whilst you are awarding this prize to me, in so doing you honor not just me but the many collectives of which I am a part.

in his right eye, and extensive burns from a letter-bomb explosion. This incident, rather than leaving him bitter, angry, or dejected, reshaped his life's work and led to his transition from being a freedom fighter/social activist to a healer. He realized the need to combine healing and reconciliation in his nonviolent peace-building efforts.

Father Michael Lapsley was the chaplain of the Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Torture in 1993. He founded and became the director of the Institute for Healing of Memories (IHOM) in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1998. Since then he has continued the institute's work in South Africa and internationally, organizing community forums to combat xenophobia and violence against refugees, developing workshops for prisoners, providing human rights education for youth, and participating in dialogue sessions and other peace-building activities. His Healing of Memories workshop provides a platform for those who want to share their experiences of injustice and discrimination and want to be heard compassionately. Father Lapsley, in his approach, is very inclusive, as he embraces people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, faiths, and marginalized groups.

As a global activist, Father Lapsley, after recognizing that racism was not confined to South Africa alone, has not restricted himself within his country but has moved globally, such as launching the association called Friends of Cuba and creating the International Network for Peace along with the families of those killed in the September 11 attacks in the USA, to promote effective and nonviolent solutions to terrorism.

Father Lapsley draws his spirituality from his reflections on injustices, pain, and suffering caused by social

A workshop of the Healing of Memories Global Network held in 2019 at Cape Town, South Africa.

I was the fifth of seven children. At the age of seventeen, I went to a monastery to join a community. In South Africa I became part of a liberation movement. Members of the movement to end apartheid came from many different faith communities and ideologies. We learned interfaith dialogue not in the academy but as we participated together in a life-and-death struggle. We knew, as Pope Paul VI said, that if we wanted peace, we needed to work for justice.

When I received a letter bomb, I became a target of evil and hatred. In response, people of faith, people of good will from across the world, sent me messages of love, prayer, and support. I was the recipient of interfaith solidarity. I was accompanied on my journey of healing by the peoples of the world.

Thereafter, I discovered a vocation to accompany others on their journey of healing. Humanity and Mother Earth are in great need of healing. With companions, I created the Institute for Healing of Memories in Cape Town to help heal the wounds of history with people of different faiths, cultures, and ideologies. The "people's archbishop," the late Desmond Tutu, became our patron. The institute now has a training room as a gift from the government and people

Father Lapsley standing together with the South African anti-apartheid revolutionary political leader Nelson Mandela in front of a prison cell, where the latter was imprisoned for eighteen years, on Robben Island, South Africa. The photo was taken in 1995.

of Japan. And thanks to Bishop Renta Nishihara, there is a Japanese edition of my memoir, *Redeeming the Past*.

My father and his generation were at war with Japan. For his son to receive this peace prize has a special significance for me.

I am humbled to be included among the previous illustrious recipients, especially Dom Helder Camara, whom I admired greatly.

Today this prize acknowledges that healing the wounds of the past is essential for the world to live in peace. The work of the Niwano Peace Foundation is a sign of hope. It bears witness to the truth that a peaceful future for humanity is an interfaith future where all faiths and cultures are reverenced and respected.

I thank you.

Fr Michael Lapsley, SSM
President of the Healing of Memories
Global Network ❏

Father Lapsley attending a ceremony together with the South African bishop Desmond Tutu, in Cape Town, in 2012.

The Bodhisattva and the Christ
by Peter Feldmeier

I am not saying that the bodhisattva path and the path of Christ are exactly the same. There are disanalogies along with . . . analogies.

The Way of the Bodhisattva

Most of the students in my classes are Christians who see in Christ a unique expression of sacrificial redemption for the salvation of the world. There is much in the Bible to support this. Just consider: "For the Son of Man [Jesus] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43–45); "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18); and "For our sake God made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21)*.

In my world-religion courses, as well as my course in Buddhism, these students become acquainted with Mahayana and the bodhisattva path. To their surprise, they encounter a hero's journey that sounds very much like Christ's ministry.

In Shantideva's *Bodhicharyavatara* (trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton [Oxford University Press, 1995]), we find that the emerging bodhisattva vows to "allay all the suffering of every living being. . . . May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine. May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings. . . . See, I give up without regret my bodies, my pleasures, and my good acquired in all three times, to accomplish good for every being" (3.6–10). "For all sentient beings, poor and destitute, may I become a treasure ever plentiful. . . . And all my merits gained and to be gained, I give them all away withholding nothing. . . . Nirvana is attained by giving all, Nirvana, the objective of my striving. Everything therefore must be abandoned, and it is best to give it to all others" (3.8–12). Here we see that Shantideva seeks nirvana and is thereby willing to abandon all things for it, while at the same time willing to give everything away in virtual eternal service: "May I be a light for those in need of light. May I be a bed for those in need of rest. May I be a servant for those in need of service, for all embodied beings" (3.18).

Many Western depictions of the bodhisattva vow imagine that a bodhisattva renounces nirvana until all sentient beings attain it, thus remaining ever a servant. As we can see above, this is not correct. Rather, Shantideva wants to attain nirvana for the express purpose of serving all beings from the greatest position.

The point here in Mahayana is that the very nature of nirvana is the supreme attainment of Wisdom and Compassion, and its expression is to live in service of all beings. The Dalai Lama writes, "The final stage of the bodhisattva is combining insight into emptiness [*shunyata*]—the ultimate nature of reality—with universal compassion" (Tenzin Gyatso, *Practicing Wisdom: The Perfection of Shantideva's Bodhisattva Way*, trans. and ed. Geshe Thupten Jinpa [Wisdom Publications, 2005], 15).

Becoming a bodhisattva is an eons-long commitment to spiritual perfection, and there is no shortage of programs in the Mahayana tradition that map out the journey. Perhaps the most important is the *Dashabhumika Sutra* (Ten Stages). The stages are technically called *bhumis*, which literally translates as "place" or "region," implying a firm place to stand or a condition of life. The stages focus on various parts of interior purification, wisdom into the nature of reality, and the traditional six perfections (*paramitas*) of Mahayana. It is not my intention to detail these stages, and their progress is not exactly linear. But we should note that each stage is arduous and unremitting, and that each stage would require innumerable lifetimes of diligent practice.

The most important of all the stages is the first, the development of *bodhicitta*, or awakened mind. Kamalashila, an eighth-century contemporary of Shantideva, describes how *bodhicitta* can emerge for an aspirant in a series of meditations whose end is to become utterly determined to serve others. It is

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called the Six Causes and One Effect. Infinite lifetimes assure us that all beings were at one time our mother. The six causes are then: (1) realizing that every sentient being was once my mother; (2) realizing that as mothers, they suffered for my sake and were immensely kind to me; (3) realizing that right now my past mothers are undergoing great suffering themselves, and I have an obligation to them; (4) realizing that if I do not attend to my mothers' suffering, I myself am guilty of conscience; (5) generating great love and compassion for my mothers, I desire to free them from suffering and its causes; and (6) I decide to take upon myself the responsibility for alleviating their suffering, and to do this I must become a fully enlightened Buddha.

These are the six causes. The one effect is *bodhicitta*, the aspiration for full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings (Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. [Routledge, 2009], 197).

In the *Bodhicaryavatara*, Shantideva distinguishes *bodhicitta* in intention and "active" or "perfect" *bodhicitta*, the latter being a "ceaseless stream of merit" (1.17). "Except for perfect *bodhicitta*, there is nothing able to withstand the great and overwhelming strength of evil . . . only this will save" (1.6–7). D. T. Suzuki notes that when *bodhicitta* becomes an intense, spontaneous commitment, one's whole consciousness changes. The fabricated desire now becomes utterly spontaneous, which "brings about a cataclysm in one's mental organization"

(D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* [Rider, 1950], 173).

It is this new consciousness that makes one a bona fide bodhisattva. "From that moment that he takes on that Mind to release the limitless realm of beings, with a resolve that cannot be turned back. From that moment on . . . uninterrupted streams of merit like the bursting sky continuously pour forth" (*Bodhicaryavatara*, trans. Crosby and Skilton, 1.18–19).

The Way of Christ

Saint Paul, in exhorting the Christians in Philippi, writes:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11)

In this extraordinary passage, Paul tells us that only by emptying himself

is Christ highly exalted, and that we, too, should take on this very mind of Christ ourselves. That is, the way of glory is the way of emptiness. Jesus often spoke of this as a paradox to his followers. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24–25).

We find this same claim repeated in each gospel, often several times in each. What is confounding is that if I want to ultimately save myself, then I'll decide to lose myself for Christ's sake. But if that is my intention—a skillful way to save my life—then I will not actually lose my life. Rather, I'm just using Christ as a vehicle for saving my life in the end. It won't work. I have to lose my life for no other reason than for Christ. Only in doing this will I paradoxically save it.

In Saint John of the Cross's famous sketch of ascending Mount Carmel, that is, union with God, he writes, "The path of Mount Carmel the perfect spirit: nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mount nothing" (Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, rev. ed. [ICS Publications, 1991], 111).

Yet, in describing this "nothing," John also uses the most exalted terms: "God makes the soul die to all that he is not[;] . . . This renovation illumines the human intellect with supernatural

light so that it becomes divine, united with the divine; informs the will with love of God so it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely" (ibid., 428). Thus, we are both nothing *and* divine, empty *and* filled.

The Gospel of John is filled with this same paradox of emptiness and fullness. We find many passages where Jesus is identified with or self-identifies with the Divine. "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). Jesus declares that "before Abraham was, I Am" (8:58). Here he identifies with the divine name God gave to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). There are more seemingly nondual statements in John: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6); "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

If Jesus is the icon of God, a manifestation of God, even the very presence of God in his person, how would this be recognized? By the paradox of self-emptiness. In the synoptic gospels, the cross represents both a redeeming sacrifice for sin and an image of humanity ravaged by sin.

In contrast, in John's gospel, the cross represents Jesus's glory. It is here that he most reveals the Father. Jesus references Moses's lifting up of a bronze seraph on a pole to heal the people: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). Jesus heals by being "lifted up," that is, crucified on the cross. This is his greatest expression of glory: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12:23–24).

The cross has a kind of paradoxical magnetism to it. No one can see God (Exodus 33:20), and what they do see here is the self-emptying Christ. Self-offering, self-emptiness, reveals God, and they cannot look away: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32).

The sacrificial, self-emptying ministry of Christ continues in two ways. First, while Christ died "once for all" (Hebrews 10:10), it is also the case that Christ continues his ministry for all. In Hebrews we also find "He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (7:24–25). Second, and just as crucially, Christ's disciples are called to the same reconciling ministry, that is, the same kind of bodhisattva ministry. It begins with a Christian form of *bodhicitta* (awakened mind). Like the bodhisattva-to-be, simply having a determination to enter the path is not enough. Jesus's disciples were utterly earnest in following Christ. Peter will even remind Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you" (Matthew 19:27). But this looks more like *bodhicitta* of intention. It is worthwhile on a conventional level but could never be anything but preliminary. A full-fledged engagement in the reconciling ministry of Christ comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptized by the Spirit, the disciples are transformed, and they mediate Christ's love, taking on his ministry of healing, prophecy, and eventually offering the gift of their very lives. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," Jesus promises (Acts 1:8). So it happened: "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house . . . and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:2–4).

It is through the Spirit that the disciples are now empowered. Paul sums it up: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. . . . All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. . . . So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:17–20).

Uniting Visions

I am not saying that the bodhisattva path and the path of Christ are exactly the same. There are disanalogies along with the analogies we've just seen. The biblical eschaton or final end for example, also includes damning judgment on recalcitrant sinners. The Christian tradition has generally taken this judgment as an eternal judgment. But the analogies are striking. Joseph O'Leary suggests, "For the Christian, this bodhisattva posture will resonate with the kenotic attitude of Christ, bending compassionately over sinful humanity, even identifying with it, becoming sin for our sake" (*Buddhist Nonduality, Paschal Paradox: A Christian Commentary on the Teaching of Vimalakirti.* [Peeters, 2018], 97). He further argues insightfully,

> Sin and evil, as absence of being, are overcome through the emptiness of the Cross, in which the divine Word becomes sin for our sake and takes the form of what is not. It may be objected that the resurrection or exaltation of Christ fills up this emptiness. . . . Yet the emptiness of the Cross cannot be something merely provisional. It is inherent in the very texture of reality. Thus emptiness is the door into the reality of resurrection, just as in Buddhism emptiness opens the bliss of nirvana. (Ibid., 168)   ❑

*All Bible references come from the New Revised Standard Version.

Living Together, Here and Now
by Nichiko Niwano

According to one Buddhist legend, upon his birth, Shakyamuni proclaimed, "I alone am honored in heaven and on earth." This legend praises Shakyamuni, and I accept it as the foremost expression of the essence of Buddhism.

Some people have described Shakyamuni's proclamation upon being born as expressing that he is one of a kind in this world. But every person, not only Shakyamuni, has an irreplaceable, precious existence from the moment he or she is born. Therefore, Shakyamuni's proclamation conveys the core Buddhist teaching: to be aware of the preciousness of our own lives.

Buddhism also teaches people how to liberate others from suffering—from that point of view as well, this proclamation is imbued with profound meaning. Shakyamuni realized the true Dharma and, based on those teachings, we are liberated from suffering. In turn, we liberate those around us.

In light of the long history of Buddhism, I can't help but think about how many people have liberated themselves by liberating others since Shakyamuni's era. Human beings are really wonderful.

However, just as Shakyamuni also told us, "We are not born as saints—we become saints by our deeds." Our human dignity is refined by our daily deeds. Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) used the phrase *shusho itto* ("practice is awakening") to say that training is not a method of awakening—instead, diligent practice proves that we have attained awakening. In other words, diligently applying the Buddha's teachings to how we lead our daily lives serves as proof that we are buddhas. Deepening our compassion through this practice is the Buddha Way.

Like a Spring Breeze

Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Former Deeds of the Bodhisattva Medicine King," shows the importance of using one's own body to practice the teachings of the Buddha and thereby cause many people's minds to aspire to Supreme Perfect Awakening.

Plainly speaking, by putting others first, you transcend thoughts of self-interest. Then, when you use your entire mind and your words to show consideration for others, your practice of the faith becomes your own joy and happiness and you also become a bright light leading to the liberation of all living beings.

More specifically, some people have professed that serving people is their training in the Buddha Way. An eighth-century Indian monk named Shantideva said that diligence means manifesting, through action, the mind of compassion—and that doing so is none other than Buddhism. Buddhist scholar Hajime Nakamura (1912–99) said that "merely knowing religious teachings means nothing. They must be embodied somewhere in the actions taken by our physical bodies."

Of course, knowing the teachings is not without meaning, but the concrete action of reaching out to someone in need is surely the best way to liberate them from suffering.

Furthermore, the joy of receiving this kind of warm thoughtfulness may be the catalyst that awakens someone to the preciousness of both their own life and others' lives. Even a single compassionate act can become the means of turning someone's mind toward the truth. Such compassionate skillful means may be the starting point of sharing the faith, which fulfills Shakyamuni's wishes. In this terrible time of the coronavirus pandemic, above all else, this kind of compassion is especially needed.

However, in order to practice these compassionate skillful means, it's important to "live our own lives as humbly as possible," as Shantideva also said. In this sense, we must not forget to lead lives of simplicity by being satisfied with as few things as possible and being grateful for whatever comes.

To quote a poem, "Would that my body / Could become / A spring breeze / Blowing gently / At the gates of the sad" (Nobutsuna Sasaki, 1872–1963). Thinking about the suffering of all people who are living here and now, I am waiting for the day when, like a spring breeze, we can bring them refreshing compassion. ❏

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Engaging with the Religious Myth and Metaphor of the Lotus Sutra

by Dominick Scarangello

If dismissive interpretation can break religious myth and metaphor, rendering it incapable of carrying us over to transcendence in daily life, and if we people of the postmythological vision cannot or will not read the text literally, what are we to do? Is the power of religious myth and metaphor to create meaning and put us in touch with transcendence utterly lost?

In the last few years, I've been involved in the translation of one of the commentaries written on the Lotus Sutra by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai. In his commentaries, Rev. Niwano takes two different approaches to the religious myth and metaphor of the Lotus Sutra. The first is symbolic interpretation. Rev. Niwano explains that the compilers of the Lotus Sutra used symbolic expression "to make abstract, intangible ideas accessible by expressing them in tangible forms," but that we should not become overly concerned with the literal veracity of the sutra's stories because "what is important is not the actual, literal 'fact' but the truths that these kinds of metaphors and symbolism express." "Therefore," he concluded, "no matter how improbable the literal content of the sutra, what matters most is gaining a firm grasp of the deeper truth that lies beneath the surface of its words and sentences" (Niwano 1989, 24).

Rev. Niwano's second approach is to use second-order religious metaphor, that is, to formulate his own metaphors to help people ponder and intuitively grasp the sutra's myths and metaphors,

and those expressions remain prominent in the discourse of Rissho Kosei-kai practice today. During the translation and editing of Rev. Niwano's commentary, I discovered that some readers who greatly appreciated Rev. Niwano's symbolic interpretative approach were less than enthusiastic about his use of religious metaphor, especially those that were personifying and anthropomorphic. This difference in attitudes toward symbolic interpretation and religious myth and metaphor, or "mytho-metaphor," as I will call it, puzzled me and led me to ponder how myth and metaphor could still play a role in spirituality today, particularly from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra.

There are, of course, many people of faith who insist on reading sacred texts literally, but the general trend in modernity has been to increasingly rely on interpretation to recover meaning from our scriptures. Yet, while symbolic interpretation can preserve the relevance of religious mytho-metaphor today, I have come to the conclusion that doing so comes at a cost. Instead of preserving the symbol, a solely interpretative strategy that translates it into

concepts or doctrines can function to abstract the symbol and dispense with it such that religious practitioners do not ponder the symbol itself. As I will discuss below, exclusively interpretative approaches to mytho-ritual can break the symbol and prevent it from functioning as it was intended: to carry us over to the realization of transcendent truths that are difficult, if not impossible, to express in language or envision in rational, linear thought.

Do we have to accept this loss? Is there a way that we today can approach mytho-metaphor directly and incorporate it into our practice, allowing it to carry us over to the other shore of realizing transcendent truth? Some theologians and philosophers have indeed tackled this difficult problem, including Bernardo Kastrup, who has made an innovative proposal for how to once again face religious mytho-metaphor directly, taking it as true and reinvesting it with the power to connect us with transcendent truth (Kastrup 2016).

In the pages that follow I will explore how mytho-metaphor works to help us realize truths that are difficult to express in words, taking the Lotus Sutra's expression of its truth—the ultimate reality of all things—in myth and metaphor as a specific example. Next, I will consider the reasons we struggle with religious mytho-metaphor today, and why a wholly interpretative strategy isn't a panacea for the problem. At the conclusion of the essay, I will introduce Kastrup's ideas and share how I find his approach useful for embracing one

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of the most prominent religious metaphors in Rissho Kosei-kai discourse that is used to express the ultimate reality of all things, the primary truth of the Lotus Sutra.

Religious Myth and Metaphor in a Nutshell

A Brief Definition of Myth

Our word "myth" originates in the Greek *muthos*, meaning a speech or story, but it later came to denote the ancient tales of the gods and goddesses or other traditional stories that explain natural or social phenomena. For most of humankind's history, religious myth was central to grounding us in a world of meaning, helping us locate our place in that world, and providing exemplars for how to act within it. Myth is also thought of as a kind of ancient psychology. Anthony Stevens, drawing on Carl Jung's understanding of myth, provides a particularly comprehensive definition:

> Myths provide an entire cosmology compatible with a culture's capacity for understanding, they establish a transcendent context for our brief existence here on earth, they validate the values which rule our lives, they ensure that cohesion of cultures and the worth of individuals by releasing an archetypal response at the deepest levels of our being, and they awaken in us a sense of participation in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* [awe-inspiring and fascinating mystery] which pervades

the relationship between the cosmos and the Self. (Stevens 2015, 41)

The last sentence of Stevens' definition is particularly applicable to religious myths. Religious myth, as philosopher Bernardo Kastrup explains, brings transcendence to everyday life (Kastrup 2016, 23). It sacralizes the world, or we might say that it opens our eyes to the sacredness that was already there. In this sense, another function of myth is to cause a shift in our consciousness, to see and experience a deeper, more profound reality in the world. Religious myth is not merely a literary form, it is a type of practice, a tool for illuminating the world and attaining gnosis. Kastrup submits that religious myth recalls the experience of transcendence by shocking, tripping, or flipping the practitioner into a similar awakening through an "involuntary shift in cognitive perspective" (ibid., 8). But it does this through symbolism, pointing to things rather than describing them in literal, direct language, because the subject of religious myths is said to be ineffable.

How Religious Metaphor Works

As myth is a form of symbolic thought, metaphor is one of its key ingredients. And a common dictionary definition of metaphor describes it as "a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract." According to the *Metaphors Dictionary*, "a metaphor compares two unlike objects or ideas and illuminates the similarities between them"

(Sommer and Weiss 2001, vii) and works by transferring the main subject's "original semantic charge" to the subsidiary subject (quoted in Martin and Ringham 2000, 84). Transference can also occur in both directions between the two subjects of the metaphor (McGilchrist 2019, 117).

Religious texts aim to express the fundamentally ineffable, and for this reason metaphor is ubiquitous in scripture and spiritual language precisely for its ability to express meaning with an economy of words and transfer semantic charge. Buddhist texts, for example, frequently claim that the Dharma, the ultimate truth, "exhausts words." Metaphor, which literally means "carrying over," aims to get us to cross the threshold between statements of truth and realization. As Tom Cheetham puts it: "The metaphoric vision of reality sees through the literal appearance of things to the ever-shifting and mysterious Presence that lies behind the daylight Face of things" (Cheetham 2012, 92).

Iain McGilchrist, who understands metaphor from the standpoint of cognitive science, suggests that the reason this transference, or carrying over, seems to work is that metaphorical insight is primarily cognized by the right hemisphere, the more holistic and imaginative sphere, which has the capacity to understand metaphor and narrative (McGilchrist 2019, 115). The right hemisphere's attention is global, and it is central to discovering what we do not know, what is new, and what is emotionally engaging, while the left is more focused on analyzing what we do know.

The right hemisphere is responsible for "frame shift" in problem solving and is freer and more creative (ibid., 40–41). It is the right hemisphere that sees wholes, before analysis occurs (ibid., 46). McGilchrist describes the carrying over of metaphor in the following way: "It activates a broad net of connotations, which though present to us, remains implicit, so that the meanings are appreciated as a whole, at once, to the whole of our being, conscious and unconscious" (ibid., 116).

Because it deals with the implicit and not the explicit, metaphor carries us over to the ineffable that can only be pointed to, and for this reason it is a mode of language that facilitates our escape from language. There is an embodied sense to metaphors, and it is this that helps us exit language and arrive at experience. Metaphors are actually deeper, more fundamental than literal, rational language. "The very words which form the building blocks of explicit thought," McGilchrist explains, "are themselves all originally metaphors, grounded in the human body and its experience" (ibid., 118).

Instead of the structures of the brain, Cheetham, drawing on the religious studies scholar Henry Corbin (1903–78), a contemporary and influencer of Carl Jung, sees metaphors as natural, arising out of and communicating with the deep structures of consciousness. Cheetham quotes Corbin on symbol and metaphor: "The symbol is not an artificially constructed sign: it flowers in the soul spontaneously to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise" (Cheetham 2012, 79).

In other words, metaphors work because people formulate them intuitively based on the complexes of symbolic ideas, or what Jung called archetypes, in a deep level of the mind. This level of mind works wholistically and symbolically, below our ordinary rational and linear linguistic thought. If religious truth is ineffable, as our scriptures

maintain, then this level of mind, which experiences reality through image and symbolism, is where transcendent truth must be grasped—not in the sense of the rational mind's propositional knowledge (knowing a linguistic statement that is true) but through an intuitive form of experiential knowledge that is deeply participatory. I should point out that Cheetham's view, and the similar thinking of Bernardo Kastrup that we will explore later, do not necessarily contradict the more physicalist explanation of McGilchrist, since many philosophers and scientists have proposed various relationships between mind and the physical biology of the brain.

The Religious Truth of the Lotus Sutra and its Expression in Religious Metaphor

The Religious Truth of the Lotus Sutra—the Discursive Expression

The Lotus Sutra first elaborates its main truth, the ultimate reality of all things (Chn., *zhufa shixiang*,　　) in two main ways. The Buddha's first attempt to teach his disciples the ultimate reality of all things, in chapter 2, using the kind of rational, analytical language that we prioritize today is largely unsuccessful. Later, in chapter 16, the text introduces an entirely new narrative of the Buddha and religious metaphor to express what he tried to say in chapter 2. This mytho-metaphor is an original or fundamental buddha that transcends time and space, a cosmic-level personification of the ultimate reality of all things, the omnipresent truth that permeates the totality of existence.

In his attempt in chapter 2 to reveal the ultimate reality of all things, Shakyamuni Buddha teaches the principle of the ten suchnesses, ten ways in which phenomena, whether tangible or intangible, manifest in the world. As we saw in a previous *Dharma World* essay

(Scarangello 2021), these ten factors can be understood as a system of causal relations, showing how a phenomenon arises, influences other things in the world, changes, and transforms. In the case of the events of our lives and how we experience the world, the ten suchnesses can be grasped as a system of linear causation that places particular importance on the ability of the states of our minds to influence the reality of our experience.

But according to the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom (Chn., *Da zhidu lun*,　　), these factors are only the shallowest understanding of the ultimate reality of all things, which it calls the "lower suchness" (*Da zhidu lun* 1926, 298c). Beyond this, the suchnesses become increasingly difficult to understand. When we ponder them more deeply, the ten factors also relate to one another as a system of synchronous causality. That is, as in general or dynamic systems theory and cybernetics, the factors mutually influence each other simultaneously such that changing one suchness changes all the others. Because all the factors are mutually interconnected and interdependent in complex ways, it is possible to say that the suchnesses all interpenetrate. Or we could say that each single suchness contains within itself all the others.

Additionally, none of the suchnesses comprise any kind of permanently existent substrate or ground of phenomenal existence. Each factor is dependent on the others, and we cannot even perceive or talk about any one of them without referring to the others, so that when we explore the factors, we end up pursuing an infinite regression of causal relations. We never arrive at a first cause. I compare this to peeling away layers of an onion in an attempt to reach what is a nonexistent core. This is the emptiness or relativity of the suchnesses. This would be what the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom calls the middling suchness.

Let us proceed a step further. If we take this complex web of synchronous, mutual cocreation among the factors of a single phenomenon and expand it to cover interactions with things in the environment, we eventually arrive at a level of complexity that is beyond the ken of the ordinary person's mind. As the Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom holds, at the greatest depth of understanding, extending the factors in this way leads us to the realization of a universal sea of suchness. This is essentially a vision of the totality of the universe as a great system of becoming, functioning, actualization in which all things bring each other to life, interpenetrate one another, with the microcosm and macrocosm inhabiting each other, and in which the innumerable phenomena of the universe are all differentiated and unique but at the same time inseparable from each other. In East Asian Buddhism, this universal totality was often understood as the very One Vehicle of universal liberation of which the Lotus Sutra speaks.

Is your head spinning yet? We can appreciate why, in a passage of verses near the end of chapter 2, Shakyamuni Buddha tells Shariputra, the wisest among his disciples, that the truth the Buddha has realized is ineffable: "This Dharma is inexpressible; / It exhausts the capacity of words" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 59). It is no wonder, then, that after this the Lotus Sutra shifts strategies and adopts myth and metaphor to carry Buddhists over to a realization of the ultimate reality of all things.

Religious Truth of the Lotus Sutra—The Mytho-Metaphorical Expression
The Lotus Sutra introduces this new narrative of the Buddha and the metaphor of the cosmic One Vehicle in chapter 16. As I have considered this chapter's personifying, anthropomorphic metaphor for the truth-as-Buddha in a previous *Dharma World* essay (Scarangello 2019), here I will
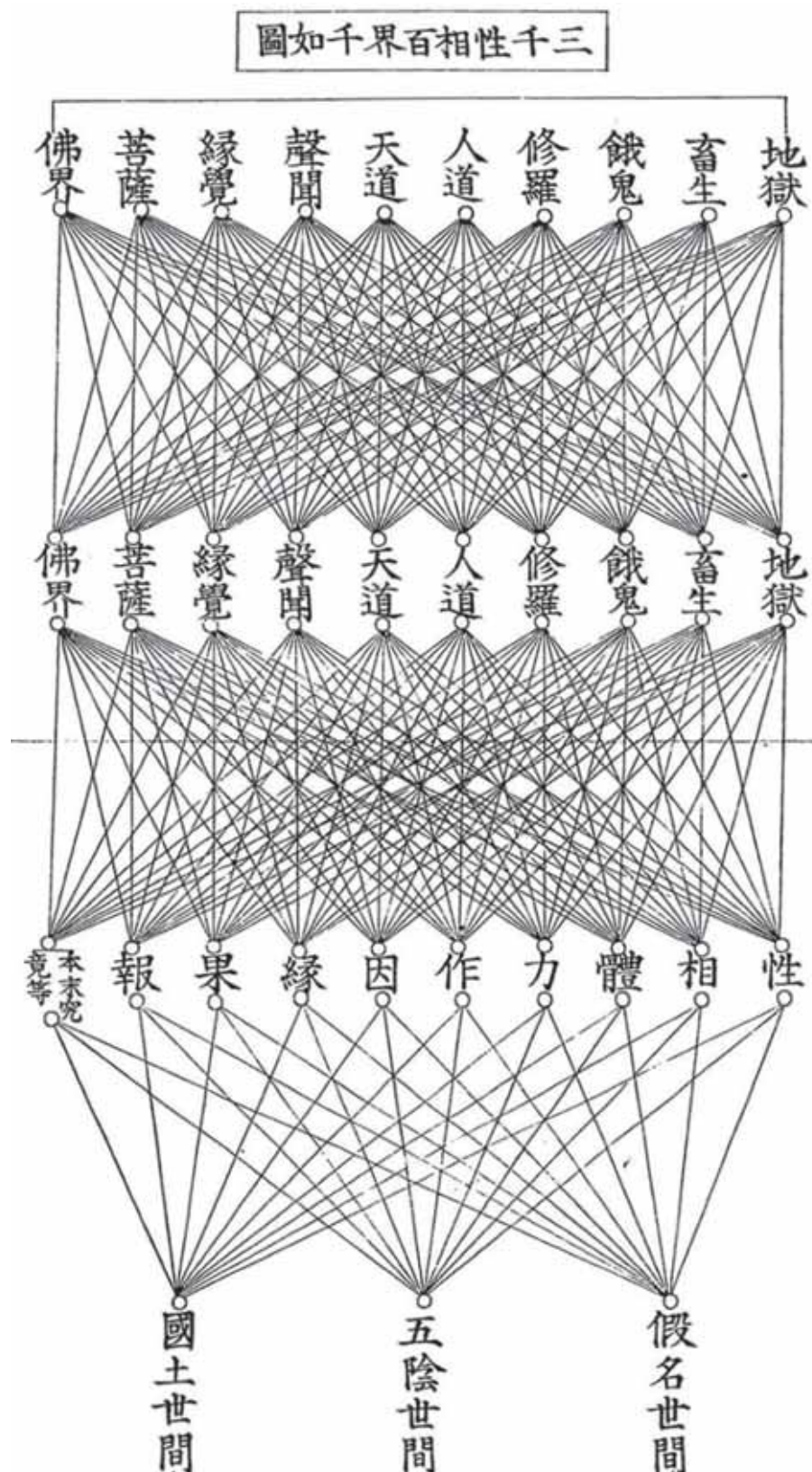

Diagram of a view of the world through the prism of the ten suchnesses.

provide only a brief outline. Shakyamuni explains that while all his disciples assume that he had become a buddha only a few decades previously and that they will witness his apparent death

shortly after he finishes expounding the Lotus Sutra, in fact the Buddha's life span is unfathomable and for all intents and purposes extends from time immemorial into the infinite future.

Furthermore, Shakyamuni reveals that other buddhas who have appeared were actually Shakyamuni himself, responding to the unique needs of sentient beings in innumerable appropriate ways. Shakyamuni also explains six different ways in which he manifests in the world, including appearing as other sentient beings and their actions, which has also been understood to mean the environment and events. In the verses that conclude the chapter, the Buddha tells the assembly that he is ever present on Divine Eagle Peak and in all other places, describing the universe as his pure land, which is never destroyed, even though in the eyes of living beings the world systems throughout the cosmos appear to go through cycles of arising and destruction.

In the Lotus Sutra tradition, the aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha revealed in this chapter, his entity, described as actually having been enlightened since time immemorial and possessing an essentially infinite life span, is called the Eternal Original Buddha. Human, mortal buddhas come and go, but the omnipresent truth to which they awaken, the ultimate reality of all things, is the fundamental Buddha, the Eternal Original Buddha. The Original Buddha is a religious metaphor for the universe as the One Vehicle that, in chapter 2, everyone at the assembly except Shariputra struggled to realize. The personifying metaphor of the Eternal Original Buddha is the construction that the Lotus Sutra provides to enable practitioners to shift their frame of consciousness and be carried to realization of the ultimate reality of all things. It is the universe as the Buddha, as the One Vehicle; and from the standpoint of the totality—ultimate reality—everything within is pure. Nothing is separate from truth, and thus nothing is separate from Buddha. This is a cosmos that is constantly embracing us with compassion, sustaining us and leading us to awaken and obtain liberation from suffering.

Whither Religious Myth and Metaphor?

Modern Logos and Left-Hemisphere Civilization

The next step—embracing the Lotus Sutra's mytho-metaphor as something real—is a huge problem for people today. If religious myth and metaphor are such powerful tools for religious insight, why do many people view them as dubious linguistic constructs? Today we often use the word "myth" to say that a certain story or belief is false, naive, or, worse, deceptive. For many people, religious myths are, at best, unbelievable but quaint tales such as the legend of Santa Claus and, at worst, irrational stories that only religious fundamentalists take seriously. We no longer have the mythic consciousness of our ancestors, for whom religious myths gave deep, ineffable meaning to the world and provided lessons for how to live a good human life.

We have lost our mythical vision of the world because several hundred years ago there began a transformation of our way of knowing, beginning with the scientific revolution. As Gary Lachman summarizes:

> In the early seventeenth century, a new way of knowing and understanding ourselves and the world we live in appeared in the West and quickly rose to prominence. So effective and powerful was this new approach to knowledge that within a relatively short time—merely a few centuries— it achieved ascendancy in practically all fields of human endeavor, and subsequently became, as it is today, the gauge by which we measure such difficult and fundamental notions as "truth" and "reality." (Lachman 2017, 5)

To be sure, this revolution had earlier roots in our historical past. But as Lachman continues to explain, it was a complete break with what had come before. In the words of Karen Armstrong, "Our modern society . . . is rooted in 'logos' or 'reason,' which must relate precisely to factual, objective and empirical reality if it is to function efficiently in the world: logos is the mode of thought characteristic of the brain's left hemisphere" (Armstrong 2019, 7). Similarly, McGilchrist describes our civilization as a "left-hemisphere-dominated culture," in which "metaphors and narratives are disregarded as myths and fables or, at worst, downright lies," and "articulating and making explicit are of increasing importance and are treated as a mark of truth, and their inverse treated with increasing suspicion" (McGilchrist 2019, 97).

The Problem with Dismissive Demythologizing

The dominance of logos problematized scripture because people started to read sacred texts as literal, factual accounts, and if this reading could not conform to modern science and history, people began to either double down and read scripture in a "doggedly literal manner" or dismiss scripture as untrue altogether (Armstrong 2019, 338). A third approach to religious texts is to adopt a strategy of primarily reading them symbolically and allegorically. This strategy is not entirely new. Armstrong observes that in Christianity, to give one example, scripture was often interpreted in several senses, with a literal reading being the initial, but not the only, way of making sense of scripture (ibid., 206).

However, today's symbolic interpretation of religious texts is not without problems. While interpretation may appear to preserve the value of sacred texts, it can do so at the expense of the mytho-metaphors by translating them into concepts in order to dispense with them. Susan Sontag suggested that to the postmythical consciousness there is something unseemly about religious myth (Sontag 1966, 6). This can be discerned by carefully listening to how

people talk about religious mytho-metaphor using negative modifiers, describing them as *just* symbols or *merely* metaphors or *only* allegory. As theologian James Fowler observed, it is felt that the content of scripture is truly meaningful only if it can translate into prepositions, definitions, or conceptual foundations, and so we regard the meanings of scripture as separable from the symbolic media that express them (Fowler 1981, 180). We don't take the myths and metaphors themselves seriously. After having deciphered the symbolism, we no longer need the symbols, the stories, the metaphors, and we hardly interact with them, we rarely ever ponder them. This is how Bernardo Kastrup sums up this approach toward religious myth: "Immediately, we start investing the whole of our intellectual and emotional energy in searching for this direct representation of the truth, dismissing the allegory as a superfluous intermediary step. We say to ourselves: 'Nice allegory, but what is it that is really going on?'" (Kastrup 2016, 35–36).

Lachman lays the blame for this dismissive approach at the feet of the scientific view we have adopted, which "reduces reality to what it can abstract from it and apply to useful ends." Influenced by the scientific worldview, we today often see that the useful concepts, laws, theories, and so forth that science abstracts out of the world is "the really real" (Lachman 2017, 17). Susan Sontag characterized this style of interpretation as an "excavation" (Sontag 1966, 6).

So, why is this way of reading mytho-metaphor a bad thing? Because it renders them broken. As Paul Tillich observed of symbols, they not only point to something beyond them but also participate in what they point to (Tillich 2011, 48). Thus, if we approach religious myth and metaphor primarily as containers of meaning, extracting the meaning leaves them empty and breaks their connection to the transcendent truths to which they used to join us. Dismissive

interpretation also disempowers the symbol because it gives us control over it; we no longer receptively allow it to act upon us (Fowler 1981, 187). The person of faith who uses symbolic interpretation as a strategy to dispense with mytho-metaphor can no longer relate to the transcendent through the symbol. Kastrup, again: "Religious myths seen as mere allegories cannot provide us with the context, perspective and meaning we crave in modern life. They cannot restore the transcendence and mystery of the world (Kastrup 2016, 11).

Let's think of this problem in light of the ways that the Lotus Sutra expresses its religious truth. If the mytho-metaphorical expression of the Lotus Sutra's truth in chapter 16 becomes broken because of a dismissive and extractive interpretive strategy, then we are left with only the logoed expression of the truth in chapter 2. As I explored in a previous *Dharma World* piece (Scarangello 2021), the ten suchnesses are an effective method of practicing the Noble Truth of the Cause (determining the cause of our suffering in everyday life) and the Noble Truth of the Path (developing a plan to eliminate that suffering). However, while it is not impossible, I think that readers can appreciate how difficult it would be to expand the application of the suchnesses so as to see our entire world through their prism. Although the ten suchnesses can function as an explanation of the world, it is extremely hard to transform that propositional knowledge—a statement about reality—into a way of seeing the world (perspectival knowledge) or a form of directly experiencing the world as the extended ten suchnesses. However, it is not difficult to imagine that the person capable of mythological vision could view the world through the mytho-metaphor of the Eternal Original Buddha to see universal truth all around them, constantly embracing them with the workings of its compassionate and wise skillful means.

If dismissive interpretation can break religious myth and metaphor, rendering it incapable of carrying us over to transcendence in daily life, and if we people of the postmythological vision cannot or will not read the text literally, what are we to do? Is the power of religious myth and metaphor to create meaning and put us in touch with transcendence utterly lost?

Reclaiming Religious Mytho-Metaphor

We can hardly return to the ancient vision of our ancestors in antiquity, for whom the bifurcation of the literal and the figurative probably did not exist. The philosophers and scholars I've drawn on for this piece also reject literalism, holding that literal readings damage the symbol and render it incapable of connecting to anything beyond itself. However, we don't want to give up on interpretation—first, because rational logos is inseparable from who we are and we cannot abandon it, and second, because despite its drawbacks, interpretation does allow us to make sense of religious myths and metaphors in new ways that are appropriate to our lives in the contemporary world. Reclaiming mythos should not demand abandoning logos.

What is needed, according to Paul Ricoeur, is a "second naivete" or "willed naivete" (quoted in Fowler 1981, 187–88,) or what Fowler speculated would be a "resubmit[ting] to the initiative of the symbolic," but, he lamented, we have to "relearn how to do this" (Fowler 1981, 187–88). For the symbolic to carry us over, it has to be reinvested with the power to do so.

Two more recent thinkers that have pondered this problem are Patrick Harpur and Bernardo Kastrup. Harpur suggests that "we have to cultivate a new perspective, or seeing through; and a sense of metaphor, a seeing double (Harpur 2003, 285). This "seeing

double" would be "the practice of looking poetically at the world," of "seeing the metaphorical in the literal, the story behind the 'facts'" as well as "amplifying and developing images" and by "becoming aware of what associations and feelings the images evoke" (Harpur 2010, 211–12).

Kastrup thinks along the lines of Harpur but goes further by giving us a practical strategy for reengaging religious mytho-metaphor. First, Kastrup believes we can break out of the conundrum of choosing between literal and allegorical truth by recognizing a third category: transcendental truth. This is a level of truth that our language and intellect cannot adequately capture, but as Kastrup reminds us, the intellect of the conscious mind is not all that there is to the human psyche. In the vein of Carl Jung and the archetypal psychologist James Hillman, Kastrup holds that the "obfuscated mind" (what Jung called two things: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious) does not primarily function linguistically but operates symbolically, through images that "refuse to be bound by the constraints of logic, time and space normally enforced by grammatical rules" (Kastrup 2016, 42). This is evidenced by our dreams, which are one of the primary ways the obfuscated mind breaks into ordinary rational and linguistic consciousness. And along with Jung and Hillman, Kastrup holds that this obfuscated mind has experience and intuits. It knows. Thus, it is very conscious indeed, just not always readily accessible to the linguistic, rational portion of our consciousness. It is this mind that mytho-metaphor speaks to, and this mind intuitively apprehends it as truth because, Kastrup proposes, the truths of religious myths are those that were originally sensed by and emerged from the obfuscated mind. This is why religious myths resemble dreams and are populated by the archetypes of the deep mind. And precisely because the

transcendent truth of religious myth speaks directly to this mind that can work with images instead of linguistic concepts, in contrast to prevailing notions about myth, Kastrup holds that "they [religious myths] aren't merely roundabout ways to refer to something literal, but the most direct and accurate utterance of transcendent truths" (ibid., 46).

So, how can we reclaim mytho-metaphor? Kastrup clarifies Harpur's abstract notion of "seeing double" by giving us a concrete proposal for how to recover the mythical vision:

> I thus propose that, if a religious myth resonates deeply with your inner intuitions and survives a reasonably critical assessment of its depth, then you should emotionally—though not intellectually—take it onboard as if it were literally true. The religious myth that resonates the strongest with your obfuscated mind should inform your emotional life—again, not your intellectual life—as if it were the literal truth, even though you'll know rationally that it isn't. I am thus advocating a deliberate, lucid split or dissociation between your emotional and intellectual attitudes. (ibid., 46–47)

In other words, allow the religious myth that resonates within us, deep down, to guide us emotionally in life, putting aside the questions of the myth's literal truth. To do this, Kastrup says, "You will need your intellect to grant itself rational permission to step out of the way and make space for your wiser obfuscated mind to co-direct your relationship with reality" (ibid., 49). He calls this "emotional belief" and cautions us that it will require faith—the "sincere emotional openness to the transcendent truths connoted by a story, beyond the superficial, literal appearances of the story's denotations" (ibid).

What would emotionally accepting religious mytho-metaphor and allowing it to guide our relationship with reality look like? I will consider this by reflecting on one emotion-laden religious metaphor that Rev. Nikkyo Niwano used to imagine the Eternal Original Buddha and which continues to be important to Rissho Kosei-kai teachings today.

Intuiting Transcendental Truth through Religious Metaphor

The metaphor I will ponder is "being together with the Buddha," one of several that Rev. Niwano used in his commentaries to invoke a sense of the presence of the Eternal Original Buddha, chapter 16's mytho-metaphorical expression of the ultimate reality of all things. Consider the following example:

> To wish with all one's heart to see the Buddha means…becoming conscious of always being together with the Buddha. The unmistakable awareness of the Buddha's embrace and the realization that he sustains us is itself the experience of seeing the Buddha. This awareness constitutes our absolute peace of mind. (Niwano 1989, 433)

Rationally speaking, "always being together with the Buddha" is a metaphor for the omnipresence of universal truth and the interconnectedness of all things, but even though our modern mindset demands explanatory justification, when I explain it, which is interpretation, I think it loses emotional force. Taking on this metaphor in the way Kastrup proposes requires that, instead of concentrating on interpretation, we give our intellects permission to get out of the way and let the emotional charge of this metaphor speak to us—to assure us that we are

never alone and that the universe, as Buddha, is always embracing us. This is not a rational deduction or a type of reasoning but an emotional intuiting that recalls the feelings of togetherness with a parent or a friend, the reassuring human connectedness that we experienced the moment after birth when we were held in the arms of our mother or father or family members. As a metaphor, it seeks to carry us over to realizing the presence of the Eternal Original Buddha—omnipresent truth—by transferring a primary human experience to our relationship with the wider world. The passage above also speaks of the Buddha's embrace, which alludes to other metaphors that Rev. Niwano frequently used, such as to be "embraced in the arms of the Buddha," and "fly into the arms of the Buddha." These metaphors draw upon the parent-child relationship and parental affection, which frequently appears in parables and metaphors of the Lotus Sutra.

For me, these metaphors evoke an early childhood memory of being chased by a vicious dog and running back to my father and jumping into the safety of his arms. I am not saying that I envision the Buddha like a spirit or ghost standing near me at all times. I think that would be a far too literal grasp of the metaphor that would short-circuit its inherent capacity to shift my frame of reference and transfer the emotional content of that experience. Kastrup is talking about emotional belief. What I should be doing is reaching back to and imaginably summoning the emotional content of that experience. I think I should first recall my desire to reach safety in the face of danger, which could be envisioned as the realization of suffering in the life we lead in this world. Second, I would call to mind racing toward my father—the act of going to the Buddha to take refuge. Finally, I could recollect jumping into my father's embrace, which could be thought of as the spiritual assurance that there is no Dharma—no thing or

experience in the world—that is separate from Buddha Dharma.

What I have done is translate Rissho Kosei-kai's religious metaphor into an emotionally laden memory, and for clarity's sake I've added a bit of interpretation, but since this story is in the past, its translation requires the work of imagination to recall and reexperience it in the present moment. But the point of engaging with mytho-metaphor in the way that Kastrup proposes is not to explain but to invoke, intuit, and feel—to emotionally believe. We could also call this emotional faith. Some people think that emotion does not play an important role in the practice of Buddhism, but the Lotus Sutra, at least, is filled with emotionally charged language and parables. The sutra frequently uses the word "joy" to relate the experience of awakening and holds that one's yearning, one's "thirst" for the Buddha leads to encountering the Buddha. In the Lotus Sutra this thirst to see the Buddha is a way of characterizing faith, and on this point, I think Kastrup's notion of emotional belief or faith is quite appropriate to the sutra.

Next Time . . .

In addition to emotion, imagination has emerged as an important aspect of practicing religious myth and metaphor. In the fall issue I will continue this issue's meditation on religious myth and metaphor and the Lotus Sutra by considering the role of imagination in the practice of the sutra, and then turn to another seminal example of the Lotus Sutra's myth and metaphor: the highly figurative bodhisattvas that populate the applicational portion of the text. ❑

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The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue

(1)

This is the 137th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

INTRODUCTION   The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, also known as the Sutra of Repentance, was taught in the Great Forest Monastery in Vaishali after the Buddha's discourse of the Lotus Sutra. Following on from the final chapter of the Lotus Sutra, "Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue," it features Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, as the central figure.

What is meditation?
The word "meditation" is one we often see and hear in Buddhism; it translates the Sanskrit term *vipashyana* and means "to concentrate the mind and bring wisdom fully into play, observing the Buddha, the Dharma, and all the various phenomena of human existence and the universe, contemplating them, and striving to attain realization." Put this way, meditation sounds very difficult, the preserve of eminent religious figures and philosophers. While truly contemplating the most profound principle of the ultimate

reality of all things (this principle is discussed more fully below) is the final goal to strive for, Buddhism teaches various methods of meditation for practitioners who have not yet attained such a difficult practice. Meditating on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue is one such contemplation method. The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue represents the virtues of truth, concentration (*samadhi*), and religious practice but, on the surface at least, appears to symbolize the virtue of religious practice in particular. We may regard him as the bodhisattva who represents practice and training in the Buddha Way, and as our guiding bodhisattva. As we concentrate our mind upon the single practice of contemplating the excellent quality of Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, our thoughts gradually become one with the virtues the bodhisattva embodies. Then our mind will be fixed on the Buddha Way of its own accord.

For the sake of attaining concentration
It can be said that practicing meditation is for the purpose

An image of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. Hanging scroll. Color on silk. Owned by Bujoji, Chizu, in Tottori Prefecture, Japan. The scroll has been designated as National Treasure of Japan. Twelfth century.

Naturally, it is difficult for ordinary beings such as we are to avoid such states of mental agitation and delusion, yet if we leave them as they are, we are wasting our efforts to walk the Buddha Way. It is only by persevering in our efforts to dispel the dark cloud of delusion, by quieting our agitation and by revealing and polishing our buddha nature, that we can bring our minds to a state of clarity and correctness. In other words, we must lead ourselves to the condition of *samadhi*. One way of doing this is to practice the contemplation method called meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

Repentance

All the same, if we wish to banish delusions and correct our faults, it is vital that we be able to reflect upon them, recognizing without doubt that something is wrong and vowing to amend it. We cannot solve our problems without striving to do this. A good illustration of such an attitude of mind can be taken from the world of sports. In tennis or golf, for example, if players swing at the ball without following the form proper to the game, they will never hit effectively. They must be able to reflect upon their past performances and note what has prevented them from hitting successfully before they can turn around and correct their swing and work to assimilate the right form. There is not the slightest difference when we come to discuss human life itself: first, we must recognize our faults; second, we must vow in our heart to correct them; and third, we must strive in our efforts to gain the true path. By following these three steps, and by fulfilling these three conditions, we will be able to reach the supreme and boundless Way.

This process is none other than repentance. Repentance is often thought of as something weak, dreary, or introverted, but it is no such thing. True repentance is action that is wonderfully heroic, replete with courage, and supremely positive. Religions attach great importance to the purification of the mind, and repentance takes on an increasingly central role. In fact, without repentance, there could be no such thing as Buddhism, for there can be no purification of the mind without a great cleansing of the spirit through a confession of the consciousness of the sin that lies within the heart. Further, one's buddha nature cannot come shining through except by exposing what one wants to hide; the small self can be denied to the extent that the mind is in a state of selflessness.

Near the end of this sutra, we learn that the supreme state of repentance is to contemplate the ultimate reality of all things. Here, however, I wish to stress the usual, rather than the more profound, interpretation. There are generally two ways religious repentance can be carried out.

of attaining concentration, which is the state of the mind fixed on the Buddha Way. As we study the Lotus Sutra, the very crystallization, essence, and peak of all of Shakyamuni's discourses, we gain a realization of the true meaning of the teachings and are therefore able to delight in life and face our existence with boundless hope and courage. The actualities of everyday living, though, often do not meet the ideal. All too often we are unable to stand aloof from the numerous sufferings and worries that beset us, as we cannot control the base desires and evil thoughts that seem to arise at every opportunity within our hearts. We lose the joy, hope, and courage we have attained; our minds become unsettled and are enveloped in a black cloud of delusion.

The first way is to make a verbal confession of one's faults of mind and behavior to someone of one's own faith or to a religious leader. The *poshadha* ceremony, held by members of the early Buddhist community, is of this type. Twice a month the *bhikshus* would gather together and repent their faults before the Buddha or the elders. One bhikshu would read out the regulations of the Vinaya one by one, and if a bhikshu realized that he had transgressed one of them, he would immediately acknowledge that transgression before the company. Having disclosed all the faults that lay hidden in their hearts, the bhikshus would await the instruction of their leaders according to the Dharma.

(Incidentally, although I say "leaders," Shakyamuni's community [sangha] was completely democratic, and in organizational terms there was no division between "leader" and "follower." Of course, the community placed importance on the authority invested in certain officials in order to maintain its cohesion, yet that authority was not recognized as belonging intrinsically to the individual. Before the Dharma, all were equal, and therefore the relationships of members of the community were also equal. The only distinction lay between those who had attained enlightenment and those who were still seeking it, in other words, a difference of where individuals were on the road to realization. Those who were more advanced acted as guides and leaders of those who were behind them. This is a way of looking at human relationships that should be the model for the workings of human society as a whole.)

The second way is to repent of one's faults to the unseen gods and buddhas and to declare one's vow and intention of rectifying them.

"Repentance" is expressed in Sanskrit as *deshana* or *kshama*. *Deshana* means "that which is shown," "exposition of the truth," "confession," which implies that a person reveals himself or herself completely to the sight of others. Without doing so, there can be no repentance. Unless we confess everything before the gods and the buddhas, or a leader or a member of the same faith, we will not be in a position to receive guidance about our hidden weaknesses and faults. Repentance means, above all, "showing ourselves"; this fact should be engraved indelibly in our minds. *Kshama* means to confess one's wrongdoings and to seek forgiveness for one's faults.

As I have mentioned already, "repentance" has a further dimension, that is, to confess one's faults to unseen gods and buddhas, to repent them, and to vow to correct them. Mahayana Buddhism considers this aspect to be particularly important, and it teaches that such repentance will certainly be accepted by the Buddha through his power, and that the person will be able to be delivered from all sense of sin and evil. Since the recipient of this repentance is the unseen Buddha, repentance must be performed with sincerity, undefiled by even a single cloud. Furthermore, that person must live a spiritual life of self-control and self-encouragement, reflecting upon his or her deficiencies and faults in the light of the Buddha's teachings all the time, studying those teachings more deeply and contemplating them, and thereby progressing ever upward. For this reason, this represents an even higher level of repentance than that made toward someone of the same faith or a religious leader.

Effects of repentance on others

I would like to describe briefly the effects of repentance made toward someone of the same faith (including a religious leader), as mentioned above. We find it difficult in the ordinary world to bare ourselves to the gaze of others because we fear that if we unthinkingly reveal to others our spiritual and physical offenses—the unpleasant side of our nature, our weaknesses, and our distress—such an act may bring nothing but distrust and contempt of others upon us. Further, it is highly probable that if those things were made known to many people, disadvantages could negatively affect our everyday lives, so we enclose ourselves in a kind of shell to some extent in our relations with others out of a kind of self-preservation instinct. This kind of reaction is more or less inevitable for people living everyday lives, but I wonder how a person can ever find true happiness when closed up in a shell for twenty-four hours a day all the seventy or eighty years of their life. How can such people ever develop their true personality and character? The reason it is impossible to experience true, humane happiness is that if continually shrouded by a self-protective shell, the mind will remain closed, preventing it from acting in a free and unrestricted manner. All living things, human beings in particular, have the fundamental desire to seek more essential freedom. So if a person lives in a way that opposes this and shuts the mind away in a restrictive shell, that person can hardly be expected to experience feelings of happiness from the bottom of the heart. Similarly, it is impossible to develop one's true personality, because shutting oneself away becomes a habit, and one falls into a continuous chain of self-deception. The mind becomes ceaselessly filled with attachment to the self and does not permit buddha nature to shine forth.

For this reason, only through confessing their spiritual anguish and their physical offenses are human beings able to attain spiritual freedom, taste a sense of release, and bathe in truly human happiness. At the same time, they are enabled to cultivate their true personality. As a byproduct, physical sickness often finds a cure, as modern psychosomatic medicine has proved. There are also innumerable instances of improvement in the hardships of life and other adverse conditions.

I have mentioned already, however, how hard it is to cast off, in the context of everyday life, the shell that surrounds the heart. Here is the importance of a group of people sharing the same faith and one of the reasons for the existence of religious organizations as well. In a place far from the demands of daily life, where only those of the same faith are gathered, there is no need to be careful. They can have a heart-to-heart talk with one another without reservations, which creates an atmosphere where one can repent naturally, without particular effort, like a spring welling forth. After thus having completely purified their minds and reentering their everyday lives, some may return to their former state somewhat, but they find such bad habits gradually falling away as the mind is repeatedly purified. And then a serene and affable personality is gradually cultivated.

It is strange that when the personality is being cultivated, even when people expose their weaknesses and faults to others openly, they gain in attractiveness to their listeners; everyone deeply respects and trusts those who hide nothing. It can be said that it is the truly humane, unrestricted, and free state of mind. We must never forget that repentance is crucial spiritual behavior for a person seeking a higher state and a greater dimension of freedom.

Guidelines for those who listen to someone's repentance
Not only will we be in a position to express repentance ourselves but we will often find ourselves in the position to hear the repentance of others. As to how we respond in that case, the following guidelines were established by the early Buddhist community:

1. Speaking according to the situation. Those who hear the repentance of others should guide them appropriately according to their own ability and circumstances. (It seems that this warned against dogmatism.)

2. Speaking according to the truth. Hearers should make judgments according to the true Dharma and guide with proper words.

3. Speaking softly. Hearers should not reproach in an angry voice but speak in a gentle tone so that the repenters may understand fully.

4. Speaking to benefit the repenters. This is a warning that the hearers should speak only with the aim of helping the repenters improve in every respect and attain true enlightenment.

5. Speaking compassionately. This is a teaching that hearers should treat repenters with deep affection to bring them happiness. This seems to be a matter of course, but impure feelings may be mixed with one's response. We must constantly be on guard to prevent such feelings from arising.

The type of repentance taught in the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue is mainly repentance made toward the Buddha (the second type described earlier). It is the practice of the teaching to cleanse and polish our buddha nature, which is our essence, by confessing our faults to the unseen Buddha, repenting them, and vowing to correct our ways. We clearly understand through the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma that all human beings equally have buddha nature. We realize that each of us is sure to have the priceless jewel called buddha nature. The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma is, so to speak, the teaching that manifests buddha nature.

This newly discovered jewel is, however, still covered with mud and cannot shine forth as it should. Unless we wash away the dirt, its true worth will not be apparent. The act of washing away the dirt is repentance at its first step. Just washing away, however, is not enough to let the jewel shine forth as it should. In this stage its surface is usually cloudy and cracked. This cloudy and cracked part must be removed by polishing the jewel little by little. Only after doing so will it shine forth brilliantly. This act of repeated polishing is repentance at its second step.

As in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Bodhisattva Never Despise," it is necessary to revere others deeply in order to bring them to a realization of their buddha nature. When hearing the repentance of others, we must follow the five guidelines outlined above and act with tolerance and flexibility based on compassion. It is, however, necessary to take an extremely severe attitude toward ourselves. In other words, our own buddha nature must be cleansed and polished. We must constantly pour cold water over it and burnish it till it shines. Such religious training inevitably involves pain, but it is only by bearing up under it and continuing to cleanse and polish our buddha nature that it can shine forth with perfect radiance.

Being devoted to enlightenment to the ultimate reality of all things
Eventually, as we go on reading the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, we learn that the zenith of repentance is contemplation on the ultimate reality of all things. And we find the following passage in the sutra: "Let him sit upright and meditate on the ultimate reality [of all things]." In other words, being devoted to enlightenment to the ultimate reality of all things is the highest form of repentance. To sum up, repentance is first to practice meditation and then to attain concentration that can be devoted to enlightenment to the ultimate reality of all things. This is nothing other than the meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. Since this sutra teaches repentance specifically and thoroughly, it is also called the Sutra of Repentance.

Let us proceed to the main text.

TEXT　Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying at the two-storied assembly hall in the Great Forest Monastery, in Vaishali; there he addressed all the bhikshus, [saying]: "After three months, I shall surely enter parinirvana." Thereupon the honored Ananda rose from his seat, straightened his garment, and with joined palms and folded hands made procession around the Buddha three times and saluted him, kneeling with folded hands, and attentively gazed at the Tathagata without turning his eyes away for a moment. The elder Maha-Kashyapa and the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva Maitreya also rose from their seats and with folded hands saluted and gazed up at his honored face.

COMMENTARY　*Vaishali.* A country in central India that gained prosperity through trade and commerce and was a thriving center of Buddhism. The layman Vimalakirti, the central figure of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesha-sutra*, is supposed to have been a rich merchant of this country. The Great Forest Monastery in Vaishali was, like the Bamboo Grove Monastery and Vulture Peak outside Rajagriha (both in the kingdom of Magadha) and the Jetavana Monastery in Shravasti (in the country of Kosala), a place where Shakyamuni often stayed.

TEXT　Then the three great leaders with one voice spoke to the Buddha, saying: "World-honored One! After the extinction of the Tathagata, how can living beings raise the mind of a bodhisattva; practice the sutras of Great Extent, the Great-vehicle; and ponder the world of one reality with right thought? How can they keep from losing the mind of supreme buddhahood? How, without cutting off their earthly cares and renouncing their five desires, can they also purify their organs and destroy their sins? How, with the natural pure eyes received at birth from their parents and without forsaking their five desires, can they see things without impediments?"

COMMENTARY　*The mind of a bodhisattva.* This can be expressed as follows: While bodhisattvas elevate themselves by seeking buddhahood, they strive to guide and liberate ordinary people from suffering by descending to their level. Bodhisattvas undertake religious training in seeking the supreme enlightenment of a buddha and at the same time ceaselessly strive to bring all living beings to deliverance.

• *The sutras of Great Extent.* The original two Chinese words for "Great Extent" mean "correct" and "equal," so "Great Extent" is an epithet for the Mahayana sutras. This is so because Mahayana teaches that the truth of the Middle Way is correct and that the Buddha and all living beings are equal in their essence.

• *The world of one reality.* This is the realm of becoming one with the Buddha, where all actions are identical with the

This image depicts Vimalakirti in debate with Manjusri. Detail from a wall painting in Mogao Cave 103 in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China. Eighth century.

Buddha's. In other words, it is the realm of perfect enlightenment to the ultimate reality of all things.

• *How, without cutting off their earthly cares and renouncing their five desires, can they also purify their organs and destroy their sins?* Here an extremely important question is being asked. How can we purify our senses and destroy our sins if we do not eliminate the defilements and remain aloof from the five desires? It is only natural that an ordained monk should aim at eliminating the defilements and putting away all desire, but this is just not possible for lay believers who practice the Buddha Way while living an ordinary life. Nonetheless, though it may be impossible, the Buddhist ideal of emancipation from the defilements and desires should not be abandoned. Yet lay believers are presented with a difficult problem: how can they span the wide gap that lies between the ideal and reality? It was the Lotus Sutra that skillfully solved this problem. The teachings of the Lotus Sutra showed a way of living like the white lotus that blooms unstained—beautiful flowers in the mud. Furthermore, the teachings of the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue show in very specific

fashion how this realm can be attained, through the daily accumulation of particular spiritual practices. It can be seen that this sutra has the intention of helping lay followers (and ordained monks as well, of course) in cleansing their minds and seeking buddhahood while living secular lives, and we can regard such spirit as being consistent throughout the sutra.

I think this preliminary description of the sutra's intention will help you understand this more clearly as you read the sutra.

"Organs" refers to the six organs of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body (the tactile sense), and mind (thought).

• *See things without impediments*. This expression means seeing the Truth of all things (the ultimate reality of all things), not being seduced by the defilements that cause our sight to be clouded.

TEXT   The Buddha said to Ananda: "Do you listen to me attentively! Do you listen to me attentively, ponder, and remember it! Of yore on Mount Gridhrakuta and in other places, the Tathagata extensively explained the way of one reality. But now in this place, to all living beings and others in the world to come who desire to practice the supreme Dharma of the Great-vehicle, and to those who desire to learn the works of Universal Virtue and to follow the works of Universal Virtue, I will now preach the Dharma that I have entertained. I will now widely make clear to you the matter of eliminating numerous sins from anyone who may happen to see or not see Universal Virtue.

COMMENTARY   *Do you listen to me attentively! Do you listen to me attentively, ponder, and remember it!* These are extremely important words. When we listen to the teachings of the Buddha, the words of a teacher, or any important communication, we must listen with an open and unobstructed mind so that what is said enters our head exhaustively and without distortion. This is the meaning of "listen attentively." Listening also means digesting what we have heard, thinking it over in our heart, and pondering it deeply. Thus the sutra says "ponder, and remember it!"

• *The way of one reality*. This refers to the only one way of Truth: the way to become a buddha and the way of a bodhisattva. All living beings are originally one with the Buddha, and are caused to live by him. Therefore, as long as they follow the religious training, they will without fail attain buddhahood. This is the teaching of the way to enlighten to the ultimate reality of all things completely and reach the state of the Buddha. The "supreme Dharma of the Great-vehicle" is this same way, this Dharma.

• *Anyone who may happen to see or not see Universal Virtue.* "Anyone who may happen to see . . . Universal Virtue"

means those who may happen to hear about and know that bodhisattva's virtues and deeds. "Anyone who may . . . not see" refers to those who have neither heard about nor known him, but if they follow the practice outlined later, even those people are sure to attain the same result as that of those who happen to hear about and know him.

TEXT   "Ananda! The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue was born in the eastern Pure Wonder Land, whose form I have already clearly and extensively explained in the Sutra of Miscellaneous Flowers. Now I, in this sutra, will briefly explain it [again].

COMMENTARY   *The Sutra of Miscellaneous Flowers*. This is another name for the Flower Garland Sutra (*Avatamsaka-sutra*). Comparing various practices to flowers, and ornamenting the buddha-fruit (buddhahood as the result of Buddhist training) with those practices, is called flower garland. "Miscellaneous flowers" refers to the weaving of various practices into one.

TEXT   "Ananda! If there be bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas, upasikas, the eight groups of gods and dragons, and any living beings who recite the Great-vehicle, practice it, aspire to it, delight to see the form and body of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, have pleasure in seeing the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures, take joy in seeing Shakyamuni Buddha and the buddhas who emanated from him, and rejoice to obtain the purity of the six organs, they must learn this meditation.

COMMENTARY   *Who recite the Great-vehicle*. Here, "recite" refers to learning the teachings.

• *Aspire to [the Great-vehicle]*. This refers to the conviction

Seven leaves from a manuscript of the Gandavyuha Sutra that comprises the thirty-ninth chapter of the Flower Garland Sutra. Gum tempera and ink on palm leaves. Eleventh century. Nepal.

that one will be liberated oneself through the teaching of one reality (the One Buddha-vehicle), and that one wishes to liberate all living beings likewise.

• *[Those who] delight to see the form and body of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue*. This refers to those who desire not only to hear about and know the virtues and deeds of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue but also to come into contact with his actual form ("form and body"). If one concentrates with all of one's heart, one will be able to see the form of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, like a dream or vision. This is a mystical, religious experience that has occurred often, in both the past and the present. Here, we could take the expression as meaning that we should make the bodhisattva's deeds our exemplar, as if we were coming into contact with the form and body of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

• *[Those who] have pleasure in seeing the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures*. The Buddha Abundant Treasures is the buddha symbolizing buddha nature. Therefore, to behold his stupa is to realize clearly that all living beings are endowed with buddha nature, as if they were actually seeing these things.

• *[Those who] take joy in seeing Shakyamuni Buddha and the buddhas who emanated from him*. Here "Shakyamuni Buddha" refers not to the Shakyamuni who took on human form but to the Tathagata Shakyamuni as the Eternal Original Buddha. Seeing the Original Buddha refers to clearly realizing the Truth that we are caused to live by the Original Buddha. "Seeing . . . the buddhas who emanated from him" means sensing vividly that the Original Buddha takes various forms, appearing temporarily in different times and places to lead us toward liberation.

TEXT The merits of this meditation will make them free from all hindrances and make them see the excellent forms. Even though they have not yet entered into contemplation, simply because they recite and keep the Great-vehicle, they will devote themselves to practicing it, and after having kept their minds continuously on the Great-vehicle for a day or three times seven days, they will be able to see Universal Virtue;

COMMENTARY *The excellent forms*. "Excellent" translates a Chinese compound made up of two characters, the first of which means "the highest" and the second of which means "indescribably beautiful and precious." "Forms" refers to that which manifests itself as phenomena. In others words, it means that "virtues," which are intangible, manifest themselves as tangible forms.

• *Even though they have not yet entered into contemplation, simply because they recite and keep the Great-vehicle*. This

phrase expresses the original intention persistent throughout this sutra. It means that the merits of this meditation will bring the practitioners steadily closer to the deeds of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue as long as they recite and keep the Great-vehicle teachings wholeheartedly, even though they might not enter into contemplation. While some can attain this contemplation after three times seven days, others might take three lifetimes (as is said later). We are assured, however, that as long as we persevere, we will without doubt be able to get closer to that stage. We must say that it is a powerful encouragement.

• *And after having kept their minds continuously on the Great-vehicle*. The mind constantly changes, rolling over from one thing to another. Whatever it changes into, though, it never becomes detached from the Great-vehicle teachings.

TEXT those who have a heavy impediment will see him after seven times seven days; again, those who have a heavier one will see him after one birth; again, those who have a much heavier one will see him after two births; again, those who have a still heavier one will see him after three births. Thus the retribution of their karma is various and not equal. For this reason, I preach the teaching variously.

COMMENTARY *The retribution of their karma*. "Retribution" means what inevitably results from one's mental and physical acts. "Karma" means "action." It includes both mental and physical acts. As I have mentioned many times (for example, see the discussion in "Ten Merits," chapter 3 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings), Buddhism teaches that our present physical and mental form (retribution) is manifested through the accumulation of various acts, both good and bad, that we have performed not only in this world but also in our lifetimes from the distant past up to the present.

TEXT The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue is boundless in the size of his body, boundless in the sound of his voice, and boundless in the form of his image. Desiring to come to this world, he makes use of his unrestricted transcendent powers and shrinks his stature to the small size [of a human being].

COMMENTARY It is unsurprising that the virtues and workings of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue should be immeasurably great, for his was originally a symbolic existence. As such, however, he is so vastly distant from human beings that in reality he cannot easily become an exemplar for them. Because of his being of a different dimension, ordinary people have no idea how and what they could learn from him or cannot feel any sense of closeness to him. They will give up from the start, feeling that they

cannot possibly become like him. It is for this reason that the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue appears in human form in such a way that it is possible for us to compare our own actions and thoughts with his. If we can compare, we are filled with the urge to emulate him and are able to have the hope of success.

TEXT Because the people in Jambudvipa have the three heavy hindrances, by his wisdom-power he appears transformed as mounted on a white elephant. The elephant has six tusks and, with its seven legs, supports its body on the ground. Under its seven legs seven lotus flowers grow.

COMMENTARY *Three heavy hindrances*. These are the three delusions (defilements) that block a person from attaining enlightenment: greed (inordinate desire), anger (selfish rage), and folly (the foolishness of not being able to look beyond the immediate present).
• *Transformed*. That which is formless appears as a form.
• *Mounted on a white elephant*. White is a symbol of purity, while the elephant is the embodiment of practical strength. The vow and workings of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue to guide people along the Way by first setting right their behavior is symbolized by his form, which appears mounted on a white elephant.
• *Six tusks*. The six tusks represent the Six Paramitas, or Six Perfections.
• *Seven legs*. The Chinese character used here for "leg" has the connotation of "division." As branches divide from the trunk of a tree, the arms and legs divide from the main trunk of the human body. These limbs function to support the trunk. Here, the seven legs have the powers to support the mind, that is, the seven precepts: not to commit the evil acts of killing, stealing, committing adultery, lying, speaking ill, using improper language, and having a forked tongue. The seven legs suggest these seven precepts.
• *Under its seven legs seven lotus flowers grow*. If people keep the seven precepts, their actions will be pure and noble. Further, those around them will also be beautifully influenced, which is expressed by the phrase "seven lotus flowers grow."

TEXT The elephant is white as snow, the most brilliant of all shades of white, so pure that even crystal and the Himalaya Mountains cannot be compared to it. The body of the elephant is four hundred fifty yojanas in length and four hundred yojanas in height. At the end of the six tusks there are six bathing pools. In each bathing pool, fourteen lotus flowers are growing, exactly matching the size of the pool.

COMMENTARY The pure white of the elephant's skin,

the bathing pools, and the lotus flowers filling the ponds all signify the functions of cleansing the mind and body, and also the results of those functions.
• *Fourteen lotus flowers*. This metaphor seems to be symbolizing the purified state of the fourteen physical forms: the five sense-organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body), the five objects perceived through the sense-organs (color and shape, sound, smell, taste, and touch), and the four elements (earth, air, water, and fire) that ancient Indians believed to be the elements of the physical forms (those appearing as phenomena). The growth of the fourteen lotus flowers signifies that all objects of perception, and perception itself, are purified and made beautiful.

TEXT The flowers are in full bloom as the king of celestial trees. On each of these flowers is a precious daughter whose countenance is red as crimson and whose radiance surpasses that of nymphs. In the hands of each daughter there appear, transformed of themselves, five harps, and each of these has five hundred musical instruments as accompaniment. There are five hundred birds, including ducks, wild geese, and mandarin ducks, all having the color of precious things, arising among the flowers and leaves. On the trunk of the elephant there is a flower, and its stalk is the color of a red pearl. That golden flower is still a bud and has not yet blossomed.

COMMENTARY These scenes mean that when we do the works of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, our surroundings will be naturally beautified.
• *Each of these has five hundred musical instruments as accompaniment*. The appearance of five harps, which produce their sweet tones, and their accompaniment of five hundred musical instruments means that as one of the immediate surroundings is beautified by the practice of the Buddha's teachings, then many other things are similarly beautified one after another.
• *That golden flower is still a bud and has not yet blossomed*. The bud of faith is swelling but it has not yet opened. Its opening will be effected by the practice of repentance and meditation, as the following next section states.

TEXT Having finished beholding this matter, if one again further repents one's sins, meditates on the Great-vehicle attentively with entire devotion, and ponders it in one's mind incessantly, one will be able to see the flower instantly blossom and light up with a golden color.

COMMENTARY Here one repents that one's faith is still lacking, because the bud is swelling but has not yet opened. In addition, one does not merely repent this lack

but also sees things clearly and attentively ("meditates . . . attentively with entire devotion") and deeply considers the teachings of the Great-vehicle ("ponders it"); then the flower of enlightenment will eventually unfold and send forth a golden brilliance. Thus, after repenting, one must be sure to meditate attentively, with entire devotion, on the teachings of the Great-vehicle and ponder them. We usually think of the meaning of "repentance" as the acts of becoming aware of our own faults, expunging the ego (small self), and purifying the mind. If we do not couple these acts with the practice of bodhisattva deeds through meditating attentively and with entire devotion and pondering, our repentance will be half finished. Since this is an extremely important point, it must be engraved on our hearts. We must not stop and relax our efforts at only the preparatory stage of repentance, as we usually think is sufficient.

TEXT   The pedestal of the lotus flower is a cup of kimshuka gems with wonderful Brahma jewels, and the stamens are of diamond. A transformed buddha is seen sitting on the pedestal of the lotus flower, with a host of bodhisattvas sitting on the stamens of the lotus flower.

COMMENTARY   *The pedestal of the lotus flower*. Thus a transformed buddha is sitting in the middle of the flower.
 • *Kimshuka gems*. The *kimshuka* is a beautiful red jewel, probably a ruby.
 • *Wonderful Brahma jewels*. This refers to a beautiful transparent jewel, perhaps something like the famous Indian star sapphire.
 • *A transformed buddha*. This can refer either to the form that buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest temporarily in order to liberate living beings from suffering or to what they manifest by changing themselves.

TEXT   From the eyebrows of the transformed buddha, a ray of golden light is sent forth and enters the elephant's trunk. This ray, having become the color of a red lotus flower, then emanates from the elephant's trunk and enters its eyes; the ray then emanates from the elephant's eyes and enters its ears; it then emanates from the elephant's ears, illuminates its head, and changes into a golden pedestal.

COMMENTARY   Here a fantastic scene is depicted. It signifies that as a religious believer practices the teachings of the Buddha faithfully, the believer's mind will gradually communicate with the Buddha's, and everything—what is perceived by the eyes, the ears, the nose, and the other senses, and what one thinks will become pure and beautiful. Such a state is depicted in the passage above.

TEXT   On the head of the elephant there are three transformed men: one holds a golden wheel, another a jewel, and yet another a diamond pounder. When the latter raises the pounder and points it at the elephant, it immediately walks a few steps. The elephant does not tread on the ground but hovers in the air seven feet above the earth, yet the elephant leaves its footprints on the ground, which are altogether perfect, marking the wheel's hub with a thousand spokes. From each [mark of the] wheel's hub there grows a great lotus flower on which a transformed elephant appears. This elephant also has seven legs, and walks after the great elephant. Every time the transformed elephant raises and brings down its legs, seven thousand elephants appear, all following the great elephant as its retinue.

COMMENTARY   *Transformed men*. This phrase refers to those whom the buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest through their supernatural powers. And sometimes it means the temporary manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves.
 • *Golden wheel*. In ancient India, there was a legend that the gods gave the most virtuous ruler the golden wheel. The wheel is a symbol of that guiding power able to govern people freely and without hindrance (see the commentary on the wheel-rolling kings in "Virtues," chapter 1 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings).
 • *A jewel*. The Sanskrit word for "jewel" is *mani*, a collective name for all jewels. It is believed that such a jewel is capable of averting ill luck and calamity, and that it has the capacity to make muddy water pure. According to a certain botanist, the *mani* was originally a citrus fruit resembling the mandarin orange; when eaten, it greatly promoted health, and its acidity was capable of sterilizing water. This is why it was highly prized by the ancient Indians. The botanist says that this is the origin of frequently depicting bodhisattvas with the jewel in their hands. It is certainly an interesting theory, relating the jewel to actual life as well as to the essence of a bodhisattva.
 • *A diamond pounder*. Statues of Kobo Daishi, or Kukai, who founded the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism, and other high priests of esoteric Buddhism hold in one hand a short metal object, tapered at both ends. This is the diamond pounder (*vajra* in Sanskrit), a ritual object that symbolizes the power to destroy evil and sin. When the diamond pounder is pointed at the elephant, it immediately begins to walk. This signifies that the practice of the teachings begins with repentance, which smashes evil and sin.
 • *The elephant does not tread on the ground but hovers in the air seven feet above the earth, yet the elephant leaves its footprints on the ground*. This is a skillful metaphor. Hovering in the air means to proceed toward the ideal, but the elephant

Photo: Alamy / PPS

An image of the Buddha's footprint carved on a rock in Wat Phu temple in Champasak Province, Laos.

leaves footprints on the ground, which signifies that the actual results clearly appear in that progress.

• *Its footprints . . . , which are altogether perfect, marking the wheel's hub with a thousand spokes.* The mark of the Dharma-wheel, which is on the soles of the Buddha's feet, is left on the ground. This means that one can exactly follow in the Buddha's footsteps. The number of spokes radiating from the hub is beyond count in the Buddha's Dharma-wheel and so is symbolized by the number "thousand."

The growing of a flower out of each wheel, the appearance of an elephant on each of those flowers, the appearance of seven thousand elephants whenever those elephants step, and the fact that they all follow the great elephant mean that whenever people practice the Buddha's teachings, their acts will inspire countless others to follow the teachings, so that all follow in the Buddha's footsteps.

TEXT On the elephant's trunk, having the color of a red lotus flower, there is a transformed buddha who emits a ray from his eyebrows. This ray of golden light enters the elephant's trunk; the ray emanates from the elephant's trunk and enters its eyes; the ray then emanates from the elephant's eyes and, again, enters its ears; it then emanates from the elephant's ears and reaches its head. Gradually rising to the elephant's back, the ray is transformed into a golden saddle that is adorned with the precious seven. On the four sides of the saddle are the pillars of the precious seven, which are decorated with precious things, forming a jewel pedestal. In the center of the pedestal there is a lotus-flower stigma bearing the precious seven, and that stigma is also composed of a hundred jewels. The pedestal of that lotus flower is made of a great jewel.

COMMENTARY You will understand the meaning of

the first half of this section because it has the same symbolism we have already discussed. The second half shows how virtue is transformed to become the permanent seat of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

TEXT On the pedestal there is a bodhisattva called Universal Virtue who sits cross-legged. His body, pure as a white jewel, radiates fifty rays of fifty different colors, forming a brightness around his head. From the pores of his body he emits rays of light, and innumerable transformed buddhas are at the ends of the rays, accompanied by the transformed bodhisattvas as their retinue.

The elephant walks quietly and slowly and goes before followers [of the Great-vehicle], raining large jeweled lotus flowers. When this elephant opens its mouth, the precious daughters, dwelling in the bathing pools on the elephant's tusks, play music whose sound is mystic and extols the way of one reality in the Great-vehicle. Having seen [this wonder], a follower rejoices and reveres, again further reads and recites the profound sutras, salutes universally the innumerable buddhas in all directions, makes obeisance to the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures and Shakyamuni Buddha, and salutes Universal Virtue and all the other great bodhisattvas. Then the follower makes this request: "If I have [received] some blessings through my former lives, I should be able to see Universal Virtue. Be pleased, honored Universal Fortune, to show me your form and body!"

COMMENTARY Even though we have attained a form of enlightenment, we must never be self-satisfied and neglect our training. We must continue progress further and further and strive to deepen that enlightenment. The second half of this section teaches this.

• *Honored Universal Fortune.* This refers to the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (see the Autumn 2020 issue of *Dharma World*).

TEXT Having thus made his request, the follower must salute the buddhas in all directions six times, day and night, and must practice the law of repentance; he must read the Great-vehicle sutras and recite them, think of the meaning of the Great-vehicle and reflect on its practice, revere and serve those who keep it, see all people as if he were thinking of the Buddha, and treat living beings as if he were thinking of his father and mother.

COMMENTARY This is a very important section, since it summarizes in full the elements of Buddhist discipline. It is well worth learning by heart. "Repentance" mentioned here is the higher-level one that serves to polish further and further the buddha nature manifested (see p. 38 of this issue).

• *Six times, day and night*. This expression refers to daybreak, midday, evening, early night, midnight, and late night. In India there's a custom of performing religious observances at these times. Even in modern Japan, certain Buddhist sects maintain this custom. Of course, this is a duty for ordained clergy, but there is no need for lay believers to follow this pattern; a constant and conscientious attitude to religious duties is sufficient.

TEXT   When he finishes reflecting thus, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue will at once send forth a ray of light from the circle of white hair—the sign of a great man—between his eyebrows. When this ray is displayed, the body of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue will be dignified as a mountain of deep gold, so well ordered and refined that it possesses all the thirty-two signs.

COMMENTARY   If we continue to cultivate the discipline of polishing our buddha nature, we come to see the Buddha in all people and to display a parental compassion in our dealings with all living beings. Then we understand that the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, whom we have looked upon until this time as an ordinary bodhisattva, is indeed a separated embodiment of the Buddha and is endowed with the same virtue as the Buddha. This understanding is proof of our deepening enlightenment.

TEXT   From the pores of his body he will emit great rays of light that will illuminate the great elephant and turn it to the color of gold. All transformed elephants will also be colored gold, and all transformed bodhisattvas will be colored gold. When these rays of light shine on the innumerable worlds in the eastern quarter, they will turn them all to the color of gold. So, too, will it be in the southern, western, and northern quarters, in the four intermediate directions, in the zenith and the nadir.

COMMENTARY   When our outlook on the world changes, we will likewise see all people and the whole world change, for we come to recognize the preciousness and beauty of their essential nature. That is depicted in this passage. The turning of all beings and all the worlds to the color of gold means that the truth is one, to anyone and in any world.

TEXT   Then in each quarter of all directions there is a bodhisattva who, mounting the six-tusked white elephant-king, is exactly equal to Universal Virtue. Like this, by his transcendent powers, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue will enable all the keepers of the Great-vehicle sutras to see transformed elephants filling the infinite and boundless [worlds] in all directions.

COMMENTARY   Until our minds are purified, we will never know the true value of really great leaders to our lives, even if they are in the world. It is as if we had practically no such people. But as our buddha nature emerges ever clearer, we will see with spiritual eyes that there is always an outstanding leader in any world, no different from the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. If we visit the leader for guidance, we will be able to refine ourselves even more. Similarly, we are unable to see the numerous transformed elephants attendant on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (that is, accomplished practitioners of the Buddha Way) as long as our hearts are clouded with delusion. Once that cloud has been swept away, however, their presence will become overwhelmingly apparent, and we will be able to understand one another's feelings perfectly. Hand in hand with those many people, we will walk the way of improving our human nature.

TEXT   At this time the follower will rejoice in body and mind, seeing all the bodhisattvas, and will salute them and speak to them, saying: 'Great merciful and great compassionate ones! Out of compassion for me, be pleased to explain the Dharma to me!' When he speaks thus, all the bodhisattvas and others with one voice will each explain the pure Dharma of the Great-vehicle sutras and will praise him in various verses. This is called the first stage of mind, in which the follower first meditates on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

COMMENTARY   Here there are two important points to be noted. First, "all the bodhisattvas and others with one voice will each explain the pure Dharma of the Great-vehicle sutras." The expression "with one voice" signifies that the teachings of a true leader to our lives] are essentially of the one Truth (the Wonderful Dharma). There is but one Buddha-vehicle, not two, not three. True Mahayana is the essence of Shakyamuni's teaching; it is the One Buddha-vehicle as revealed in the Lotus Sutra.

Second, the bodhisattvas "will praise him in various verses." This passage implies that if the believer venerates the bodhisattvas and rouses his mind fervently to seek the Dharma, this feeling will unfailingly be transmitted to the minds of the bodhisattvas. A sincere heart will always elicit the response of the buddhas and bodhisattvas and be praised by them.

TEXT   Thereupon, when the follower, having beheld this matter, keeps the Great-vehicle in mind without forsaking it day and night, even while sleeping, he will be able to see Universal Virtue preach the Dharma to him in a dream. Exactly as if [the follower] were awake, [the Bodhisattva]

will console and pacify the follower's mind, speaking thus: 'In the sutras you have recited and kept, you have forgotten this word or have lost this verse.'

COMMENTARY   There are several references to dreams in the ensuing text. *Dreaming* can be considered to have two meanings. First, our faith deepens even to the level of the subconscious self. When we are awake, we are conscious and can keep in mind the teachings of the Great-vehicle. During sleep, however, the mind (the subconscious self) cannot exert any influence. However much we wish to have dreams we like or prevent ourselves talking in our sleep, it is impossible to have any such control. When our faith is sufficiently deep, though, the teachings we have realized with our surface mind are gradually permeating its deepest strata, with the result that we will be able to see the buddhas and bodhisattvas and hear their teachings in our dreams. The fact that we see the buddhas and bodhisattvas in our dreams is in itself not important; what is significant is that the teachings have permeated even the depth of our minds and that our subconscious selves have communicated with the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Faith alone can do this; here is revealed its true worth. Without this, the teachings would be no more than ethical or moral ones.

Second, *dreaming* may not refer just to what happens during sleep. It often occurs that those who have deep faith awaken to the true meaning of the teachings in a sudden flash of understanding. Such a kind of awakening to the truth or revelation is referred to as seeing in a dream. But something that flashes into the mind has not been firmly grasped, and it is still in a dreamlike state. When we seriously consider what flashes into the mind and have become convinced that it is the truth in every respect, it at last belongs to us and can in turn become a valuable teaching that can be communicated to others. This should not be forgotten. This is exactly what Shakyamuni did, meditating beneath a bodhi tree at Buddha-gaya (now Bodhgaya), and as a result, he attained the supreme enlightenment that made him the Buddha, or Enlightened One.

TEXT   Then the follower, hearing Universal Virtue preach the profound Dharma, will comprehend its meaning and keep it in his memory without forgetting it. As he does like this day by day, his mind will gradually acquire spiritual profit. The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue will cause the follower to remember the buddhas in all directions. According to the teaching of Universal Virtue, the follower will rightly think and remember everything, and with his spiritual eyes he will gradually see the eastward buddhas, whose bodies are gold colored and very wonderful in their majesty.

COMMENTARY   Though the follower has until now aimed at approaching the stage of a bodhisattva, advancing one step further, he comes to consider the buddha stage, which is represented by the words "remember the buddhas in all directions." The actual practice that the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue preaches raises people to this stage. Seeing "the eastward buddhas" with "spiritual eyes" refers to the mental state where people come to roughly know the splendor of the stage of a buddha even though it remains far distant. The "east" is significant, (and appears often in the Lotus Sutra), for this is the direction in which the sun rises and symbolizes the beginning of things. The west, by contrast, is where the sun sets, so it is associated with endings. From this derives the Buddhist idea that the dead will go to the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss in the west. Here, the follower sees the "eastward buddhas" because he is still at the beginning of his true faith.

Incidentally, the south represents activity, while the north is associated with quietness. Thus the east is spring, the south summer, the west autumn, and the north winter. If we relate this to agricultural work, the symbolism becomes much more apparent. I think that this kind of knowledge prepares us for understanding the sutras at a deeper level.

TEXT   Having seen one buddha, he will again see another buddha. In this manner, he will gradually see all the buddhas everywhere in the eastern quarter, and because of his profitable reflection, he will universally see all the buddhas in all directions.

COMMENTARY   Seeing one buddha, then another, and finally all the buddhas in all directions means that all the buddhas are the same everywhere. The truth is one, the One Buddha-vehicle. If objects were originally one, having the same essence, then knowing one of them will lead us to know all of them. It is the same with religion—when people understand their own faith deeply, they should be able to understand others' as well. As long as the religion is a true one, then it will share the same essence as others.

With the world becoming smaller day by day and nations and peoples drawing closer both in culture and thought, we are moving toward one world, united without barrier as one buddha-land. This is the natural path that humankind must pursue. It is irrational, therefore, for some religions to turn their backs on one another, going against this historical necessity.

Should religions not take the lead in uniting their minds and hearts into one, in constructing the one world? What prevents them from doing so are trivial emotions and old prejudices. People of the twentieth or twenty-first century will be able to sweep away such things because their mental

faculties have become sharper, and "having seen one buddha," they "will again see another buddha" until eventually they will be able to universally "see all the buddhas" in all directions. This is where I believe all true believers must be moving.

TEXT   Having seen the buddhas, he conceives joy in his heart and utters these words: 'By means of the Great-vehicle, I have been able to see the great leaders. By means of their powers, I have also been able to see the buddhas. Though I have seen these buddhas, I have yet failed to make them plain. Closing my eyes I see the buddhas, but when I open my eyes I lose [sight of] them.'

COMMENTARY   How keenly apt is the phrase "Closing my eyes I see the buddhas, but when I open my eyes I lose [sight of] them" in describing the situation of ordinary people. It may apply to all of us. Because we are this way, it is all the more vital for us to acknowledge our faults and to reflect upon them. A specific form of action is outlined in the next section.

TEXT   After speaking thus, the follower should universally make obeisance, prostrating himself down to the ground toward the buddhas in all directions. Having made obeisance to them, he should kneel with folded hands and should speak thus: 'The buddhas, the world-honored ones, possess the ten powers, the fearlessness, the eighteen unique characteristics, the great mercy, the great compassion, and the three kinds of stability in contemplation. These buddhas, forever remaining in this world, have the finest appearance of all forms. By what sin do I fail to see these buddhas?'

COMMENTARY   *Prostrating himself down to the ground.* Literally, this phrase means to touch the ground with five parts of the body (arms, knees, and forehead). Persons who prostrate themselves first kneel, then bend their body to place their forehead on the ground, between their two outstretched arms. This type of prostration is the most reverent that can be performed. Tibetans take it to an extreme form, kneeling and then stretching the whole body flat on the ground. They may repeat such prostrations throughout the day before an image of the Buddha. In Japan, too, prostration by touching the forehead to the ground has long been considered the highest form of reverence.
• *The ten powers*. This refers to the ten wonderful functions possessed by the manifest-body (*nirmana-kaya*) of the Buddha (see the discussion in "Virtues," chapter 1 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings).
• *The fearlessness*. This refers to the stage of the Buddha, who preaches the Dharma without any fear or trepidation.

Photo: UIG / PPS

Prostration in Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) temple in Geneva, Switzerland.

This fearlessness is based on four conditions, which the Buddha has met perfectly. We have already discussed the four kinds of fearlessness (see the discussion in "Virtues," chapter 1 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings).
• *The eighteen unique characteristics*. This means eighteen special attributes possessed by the Buddha and no one else (see the discussion in "A Parable," chapter 3 of the Lotus Sutra).
• *The three kinds of stability in contemplation*. This shows the three ways the Buddha regards living beings. The first kind of stability is that the Buddha gives joy to the hearts of those who praise him rather than taking delight in the fact of the praise itself. The second kind is that the Buddha is neither saddened nor angered for himself when there are those who would slight him or curse him; rather, he has deep pity and compassion for such people. The third is that the Buddha looks on all equally, making no distinction between those who have taken refuge in him and those who have not, and displaying the same compassion toward all. He does this because he is able to discern that they all possess buddha nature equally.

These three kinds of attitudes refer to the Buddha's mind, but we must take them as the ideal for ourselves in our relations with others in our everyday lives. When our spirit is concentrated on faith alone, we are approaching the stage described as "closing my eyes I see the buddhas," but when we return to the realities of life, we soon lose it. Thus the sutra says "but when I open my eyes I lose [sight of]" the buddhas. This is because we are not yet perfected in ourselves and need to accumulate more and more religious practice.

To be continued

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

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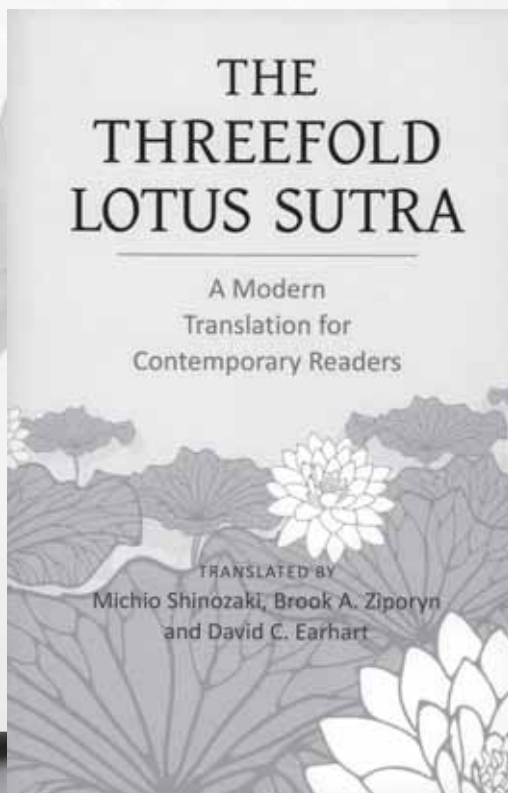
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526 pp., 5.5 x 8.5 in., Glossary
ISBN: 978-4-333-00692-2
25.00 USD for paperback
17.39 USD for eBook

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