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FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

DHARMA WORLD

SPRING 2023 Vol. 50

Religion's Role in Peacebuilding

First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970

Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974

Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979

Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984

Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989

Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace Japan

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

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

Purpose

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

Activity

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

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

Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999

Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006

Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013

Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

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FEATURES: Religion's Role in Peacebuilding

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

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The Conciliatory Power of Religion

by Kyoichi Sugino

Kyoichi Sugino is the president of Gakurin Seminary of Rissho Kosei-kai, Tokyo. He served as deputy secretary general of Religions for Peace International.

As conflict continues to rage on in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, and elsewhere across the globe, the prospect of world peace seems ever out of reach. The buildup for military solutions to political problems, including nuclear brinkmanship, is becoming normalized and accelerating. How should the world's religions respond to this reality? As people of faith, we must begin with ourselves. In his recent Dharma guidance, Rev. Nichiko Niwano, president of Rissho Kosei-kai, stressed the need for introspection and inner peace. The seeds of war—greed, suspicion, arrogance, impatience, hatred, and anger—are not a function of some external condition, but of our own mind. This understanding is the foundation of religious peacebuilding.

In Ukraine and across neighboring countries, faith-based humanitarian NGOs were among the first to provide emergency relief and care for displaced families, sustaining their operations to the present. Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury met online with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church to call for an immediate end to the war. While the world's religions and their associated organizations are indispensable agents of care and support for the people affected by war, religions can also play an important role in ratcheting down hostilities and negotiating pathways to peace. But in order for such religious diplomacy to be initiated, faith leaders and their communities must be mobilized and engaged in a skillful and coordinated way.

I have had the privilege of taking part in multi-religious track II diplomacy in conflict situations and directly working with some of the contributors to this edition of *Dharma World*. These examples offer insights and hints for possible multi-religious diplomacy to address current hostilities around the world. In Southern Thailand, the Interreligious Council of Thailand offers a powerful case study. Responding to communal distrust caused by protracted insurgencies and historical wounds, Dr. Parichart Suwanbubbha, a laywoman Buddhist leader, the first secretary general of the Interreligious Council of Thailand, who passed away in 2016 and was succeeded by Dr. Suphatmet Yunyasit, served as a bridge between affected communities.

Mr. Harsha Navaratne, chair of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), and I worked together to form the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF), crafting *the Yogyakarta Statement on Shared Values and Commitments*, on themes ranging from peacebuilding and religious freedom to environmental protection, citing both Buddhist and Islamic sacred scriptures. Meanwhile, the Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace brought together Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders to reverse the forced cremation of Muslim victims of COVID-19 and build a multi-ethnic school in Vavuniya, a war-affected region of Sri Lanka. While disagreements and tensions may surface, existing relationships, friendships, and the habit of collaboration can create constructive solutions to common challenges.

Rev. Elga Sarapung, director of the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia (Interfidei), and I partnered with the world's largest and second-largest Muslim organizations—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, respectively—as well as minority communities such as Buddhist, Confucian, Ahmadiyya, and indigenous communities for interfaith action. I recall our working together in Ambon—a place where Muslim and Christian communities have long suffered from conflicts—and Papua, where Christian-Muslim tensions continue to simmer. But global and regional multi-religious solidarity has produced a positive impact on local interreligious relations.

Multi-religious engagement for peacebuilding requires multi-layered, multi-dimensional approaches, skillfully mobilizing religious leaders and communities at different levels, putting shared concerns at the center of the table, and creating multi-stakeholder mechanisms for sustainable engagement. The experiences and insights presented by my colleagues in this edition of *Dharma World* remind us of the conciliatory power of religion. As multi-religious leaders, we must leverage the spiritual, moral, and social assets of religion to carve out pathways to peace, even where peace may seem impossible. ❑

Peace and Reconciliation: Value, Practice, and Finding Meaning in Life

by A. Elga Joan Sarapung

A. Elga Joan Sarapung is director of the Institut Dialog Antar-Iman di Indonesia (Interfidei), coordinator of the Indonesian Interfaith Network (JAII), a member of Religions for Peace (RfP) Indonesia, and chairperson for the Asia Pacific Women of Faith Network (APWoFN).

My optimistic hope is that all of God's creation throughout the world can live in safety, prosperity, and peace.

Peace and reconciliation: two words that are beautiful to hear but difficult to practice. Starting from the smallest life circle, family, to the largest life circles, between groups, religions, ethnicities, races, and nations, where are the people who profess themselves to be religious actively undergoing religious rituals and traditions?

Everywhere these same people are full of ego, arrogance, and greed, allowing those darker impulses to control their minds and life practices without wanting to learn to improve and become a benefit to humankind.

What have we done in the past, what are we doing now, and what can we do in the future, to bring peace? Peace and reconciliation are core values and practices—the very meaning of life. They also encompass the environment in which all people live their lives.

Why do people want to destroy nature and life just because of differences, with various forms of violence—wanting to kill many people through conflict and war? Why?

Between Optimism and Reality

I am grateful that there are still many people in this world who are never tired, bored, or hopeless, but rather occupy themselves with thinking, prayer, remembrance, education, work, practice, and fighting for how to create a peaceful life. This is in their family environment, in their religious community, and even more broadly, in their society and nation at large, without regard to ethnicity, race, or gender.

My optimistic hope is that all humanity and all of God's creation throughout the world can live in safety, prosperity, and peace. That is the relationship between self and other, between man and nature, between man and the Creator, reflecting and radiating peace and peacefulness.

One's life can easily be affected by things that trap, weaken one's commitment and integrity, and plunge one into thoughts and life practices that are not for peace. A life that does not assign importance to togetherness and brotherhood soon languishes. Peace and reconciliation do not merely represent an actual situation that comes into being *just like that*, but rather an authentic experience that must be thought about, grappled with, and put into practice in order to instantiate itself.

Peace needs to not only be prayed for, preached in religious spaces, discussed in classrooms, and debated in the political sphere, it needs to be fought for and practiced in the form of positive, strategic action together, in a collaborative environment—not alone.

It is an effort to send love to those who hate, harass, and consider others as inferior—who mistreat others and practice things that are inhumane, who violate others' dignity and right to a decent life—those who commit crimes for and against others: children and youth, women, the elderly, as well as different tribes and ethnicities, races and religions, and those of other social and economic classes.

Even in an increasingly modern world, with the evolution of media technology and science, there are issues related to the majority who are more powerful than the minority—the smaller and weaker ones. Everyone watches openly how egoism, arrogance, and greed easily control people and quickly weaken their ability to think healthily with positive logic, human conscience, and good thoughts.

There are many similar cases where, if not careful, with and through social media, humans become easily provoked by unhealthy and discriminatory news. Generally, social media does not allow humans to choose and make ethical

Photo courtesy of the author

Participants in the Global Exchange on Religion in Society (GERIS) visit the Interfidei Center in July 2022.

decisions that are just, civilized, and in favor of a peaceful life.

They are also surrounded by greedy people who don't care about a healthy universe, protecting clean water and forests that provide oxygen to humans—forests that are also home to those who are faithfully able to care for and appreciate it, especially communities that adhere to local religions or beliefs, as is the case in Indonesia.[1]

People around them choose unfair and untrue ways within issues related to politics, law, human rights, and economics, wherein religions are utilized by religious institutions (leaders, organizations, and people). Religious doctrines, texts, and symbols are politicized for the benefit and political gain of their power and economy (personal and group).

The current reality can be seen everywhere in the world—for example, with Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Palestine, Nigeria, Somalia, the Middle East, India, Myanmar, and Indonesia.

They are religious people (at least they *claim* to be religious). The question is, how could this happen? How does the meaning of their religious life form the basis of reality in society? How is their reflection and sense of religious life related to their social status?

How do they interpret their religious values and beliefs to build relationships with one another, both between political interests and between interests of different religions, ethnicities, races, and genders? What kind of politics needs to be thought about and developed for the welfare of a peaceful life?

Why are justice, truth, and positive civilization apparently moving away from us? How can the concrete thoughts, attitudes, and actions of leaders and religious figures in Indonesia, Asia-Pacific, and the rest of the world address this challenge? The effect is not only conflict and war but also various socio-cultural and environmental issues, such as human trafficking, climate change, and a history of violence.

What Are Peace and Reconciliation, and How Do We Get There?

Peace and reconciliation are tricky, especially when humans do not have the commitment and integrity to work on them by practicing them in their own lives. That leads to reinterpreting the religion they profess and reinterpreting the system of values in their everyday life, namely: shared ethics, justice, truth, humanity, brotherhood, compassion, mutual respect, and solidarity, rather than greed, arrogance, and selfishness.

In Indonesia, there have been two major horizontal conflicts involving two groups of people: in Poso, Central Sulawesi (1998–2000), and Ambon, Maluku (1999–2001). Both involved two religious communities—namely Muslims and Christians.

According to the analysis of several studies, there is conflict in these two areas due to economic and political jealousy among local communities and immigrants from outside the area—those who come from Java and Bugis Makassar (South Sulawesi), who are Muslim. This aspect of social jealousy has been politicized and become a conflict involving both religious communities.

From the observations and experiences of Interfidei during conflict resolution and peacebuilding in both areas, there are two interesting things related to the meaning of the words peace and reconciliation, according to the participants of the activity: youth, leaders of community-based religions, and local community leaders.

First, both in Ambon and Poso, it is automatic to say that peace and reconciliation suggest a state in which there is no conflict. Without conflict, their lives would be peaceful. However, one must enquire: Why do conflicts occur? That means, if you don't want an environment of conflict, then the root or fundamental cause of the conflict must be sought so that a way out—a solution—can be found and the situation gets better. So, one cannot just stop the conflict. One must fix the root cause of the conflict.

Second, from the analysis of several similar studies, in both conflicts, questions related to the meaning of religious life in each community were not a causal factor. Why? Because they could not have conflict and kill each other due to religious factors, even though it was clear that they consciously did it in the name of their two religions: Islam and Christianity.

Therefore, Interfidei believes that in both conflicts, the economic and political

aspects were the trigger, though indeed religion played a role—in this case, the understanding of religious life in the praxis of everyday life amid the plural society—that is, misunderstanding the meaning of religion and religious life in a pluralistic society experiencing a crisis of common life, between natives and immigrants. The misunderstanding appears in the form of "religious identity" as a force that encourages and legitimizes the conflict, with no hesitation to use that identity to justify killing one another and destroying life in each region where the enemy group is located.

Photo courtesy of the author

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) and Interreligious Council Kenya—friends from Kenya, The Netherlands, and India—visit the Interfidei Center in November 2022.

Another indicator is that each group, "Religion A" and "Religion B," consciously took to the streets to kill one another, burning houses of worship and people's homes. Before doing so, they prayed and used their religious symbols and texts—meaning there was something that was not correct or true in their understanding and interpretation of religious life, so religion was used as an identity of power for conflict, and religious symbols became shields. Thus, peace and reconciliation are not limited to stopping conflicts. What is needed is non-discriminatory circumstances and social, political, and economic justice in the community.

Papua, which is the easternmost region in Indonesia, even now experiences severe vertical conflict between the people of Papua and the Central Government, as well as horizontal conflict, especially with newcomers from several regions in Indonesia, namely, Java, Bugis, and Makassar (who are generally Muslims) and from areas such as Minahasa, Toraja, NTT, and North Sumatra (who are generally Christians).[2]

The vertical conflict between the people of Papua and the Government in Jakarta (Central), TNI (Indonesian National Armed Force), and the police of the Republic of Indonesia is still very complex. When Interfidei conducted various activities in several areas in the Papua region with teachers, leaders, and religious figures—specifically churches and students from eight local faith-based universities—participants were asked: "What do you understand about peace and reconciliation?" Their answers were interesting and varied. They answered that peace and reconciliation are when:

(a) our children and families receive a proper education like others outside Papua.
(b) our children and families receive proper health care.
(c) our fellow Indonesians do not stigmatize us.
(d) we are treated humanely and fairly.
(e) the Indonesian government values our human rights.
(f) our women can give birth and breastfeed, and play a role in society.

When examining these answers, again, peace and reconciliation are not merely the state of being free from conflict, but also of being free from the fundamental things that cause conflict to occur: injustice, untruth, greed, cruel practices, the absence of love and mutual respect, and disrespect for the human dignity of the Papuan people.

In fact, in the context of Papua, issues related to the central government's policies toward Papua and its implementation are questioned. Is the purpose of such policies to find a fair solution for the people there, or what? This includes questions related to Papua's extraordinary natural wealth, such as its minerals, gold, uranium, unique marine life, and forests with highly-quality trees. To what extent do these natural resources contribute to the lives of Papuan children, and Papuans in general, in a fair, humane, and civilized society?

Concerning these issues, Interfidei activities emphasize the following: (a) What should be done by religions and churches in the Land of Papua? and (b) How can Papua be a land of peace? After all, Papua is an indicator of whether Indonesia is peaceful based on Pancasila[3]—five foundational philosophies in the life of the people and their nation.

The Need to Collaborate and Network

Two things have been the focus of Interfidei's activities so far: (a) Those related to questions of differences, and how to build bridges of peace for the common good. For example, issues related to Freedom of Religions and Beliefs (FoRB), problems related to intolerance and radicalism, and (b) Those related to questions on how to make differences become a common force to prevent, face, and overcome the social problems of humanity and the environment—for example, with climate change and human trafficking, and Papua as a land of peace.

In essence, differences can be a force with a shared spirit that values and respects life humanely for the common good of all. Strategically, meeting and dialogue become the principles necessary for practices ensuring cooperation between all stakeholders, including governments, education, civil society, the media, et al.

From thirty-two years of experience in Interfidei under six presidencies (1991–present), it is clear that people cannot work alone in the face of various challenges within their reality. Everyone must work together. Therefore, for Interfidei, the network is essential. Thus, since 2002, it has established an Interfaith Network in Indonesia. In addition to all religions and beliefs present, there are also the government, religious institutions, educational environment, the media, and civil-society organizations.

On the global scale, we see that between government institutions (executive, legislative, and judicial, as well as security), civil society, and organizations, conflicts—even all-out wars—continue to occur everywhere. You can imagine the technological sophistication of today's war equipment that not only destroys physical structures on a vast scale but also sacrifices humanity (and ultimately the rest of the world) with deadly chemicals.

On a smaller scale, there continues to be hostility and hatred between religious and ethnic groups in some countries, including Indonesia. For example, the power of social media is used unethically, rather than positively as a medium that educates people to live peacefully in a pluralistic society. Also, with the emergence and development of intolerant groups in the name of religion, understanding the religious texts in a narrow and discriminatory way, which build and reinforce the jargon of hatred and hostility, especially the narratives that are constructed by both the majority and the minority, and used as an excuse to develop attitudes and practices of intolerance.

For those of us who are active in religious organizations, it's necessary to strive for collaboration and networking—intra-religious, inter-religious, and extra-religious—with other stakeholders, namely the government, educational institutions, the media, cultural institutions, and civil society. Religious institutions (religious leaders, figures, people, and organizations) need to take concrete actions that are positive and collaborative. In addition, it's necessary to strive for meeting and dialogue, in which the process of learning together, building a collaborative spirit, and joint movement can occur.

It is conceivable that the concrete actions in question can be carried out starting with facing problems and looking for a way out together. Therefore, for all religions and beliefs, religious leaders should not only focus on questions related to routine religious activities but also talk about things that happen in a society that people in real life experience. Peace and reconciliation exist where everyday life happens, not only in the scriptures, prayers, and sermons of the religious in worship spaces but in the actual arenas where life takes place.

Leaders and religious people, who may also be leaders in the community, such as investors, entrepreneurs, and educators, are expected to have integrity—to not easily be swayed by the interests of political power and the economy, and anything that harms others—that sacrifices nature and life. Peace and reconciliation without the intention of creating a mutually beneficial life together is pseudo-peace and pseudo-reconciliation. Therefore, true peace and reconciliation must always breathe possibility into others and the world around us.

In Closing

I would like to end my writing by quoting some passages from Dr. Yoshiaki Iisaka, professor of Political Science at Gakushuin University, Tokyo, and the general secretary of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP), whom I have known since the Fourth General Assembly of the ACRP, in Yogyakarta, in 2002.

"Peace is not only an objective condition but also an existential posture on the part of peacemakers . . . Peace in each individual has to be related to peace in society . . . Peace is an unending process . . . Peace, in some religious traditions, is a promise, an eschatological hope, to be realized as an ultimate telos (end) through divine providence. Thus, peace is the origin, process, and telos—all of them together." [4] ❑

Notes

1. In many areas of Indonesia, there are still religious communities that live very close to nature, in forests. They are the ones who respect, maintain, and care for nature, cultivating clean water and lush forests.

2. In Papua there are many immigrant communities from several regions in Indonesia: Batak (North Sumatra), Minahasa (North Sulawesi), Maluku, Toraja, Bugis (South Sulawesi), Java, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), and others. But it is interesting that those who have been in Papua for twenty to fifty years already feel like Papuans and live side by side with them. The problem is the migrants who have been in Papua for less than ten or fifteen years, related not only to the socio-economic and cultural differences but also political and religious ones, while the people of Papua feel a lot of injustice and inhumane actions fall upon themselves.

3. Pancasila: (1) Oneness of God; (2) Just and civilized humanity; (3) The unity of Indonesia; (4) Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations among representatives; (5) Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia.

4. "A Holistic Approach to Peace and Disarmament," in *Religions for Human Dignity and World Peace: Unabridged Proceedings of the Fourth World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP IV), Nairobi, Kenya, August 23–31, 1984; in honor of Dana McLean Greeley*, Geneva: World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1986, p. 178.

Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections of an Amateur Peacebuilder

by Suphatmet Yunyasit

Dr. Suphatmet Yunyasit is a lecturer at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand. She also serves as Secretary-General of Religions for Peace Thailand (RfP Thailand) and as Co-Chair of the Asia-Pacific Women of Faith Network (APWoFN), Religions for Peace Asia. Her work focuses on religion and human rights in the context of Southeast Asia and religion's role in conflict transformation, as well as intra- and interreligious dialogue as tools for conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Religion can become a key driver for constructive change in the twenty-first century.

July 2, 2012, was the first day I started working at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP) at Mahidol University. It was also the first day this greenhorn social anthropologist, whose knowledge was based mostly on books and a mere fourteen-month course of fieldwork for her Ph.D. studies, ventured somewhat accidentally onto the peacebuilder's path. At that time I was interested in *conflict* more than I was in *peace*, a concept that I negatively perceived as too idealistic to be attained in our messy world. But two reputable peacebuilder academicians at IHRP took this stubborn realist under their wing. They offered me the opportunity to join their team, whose major task was (and still is) to transform The Unrest—a nickname for the protected conflict between the Thai Buddhist state and Malay-Muslim insurgent groups in the three southernmost provinces. The issue I was assigned to assist the team with was to promote religion's role in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the restive southern region.

It is commonly understood that the Unrest is not a religious conflict but an ethnic one. It has its roots in the Malay nationalist resistance to Thai state rule. The Malay Muslim population—an ethnic minority group of about three million people—has long struggled to assert its distinctive ethnocultural identity and to withstand a series of assimilation policies launched by the Thai Buddhist state since the reign of King Rama VI. They demand equal rights and independence to run their internal affairs. The Malays of the deep south have great pride in their origins and the history of *Patani Darussalam*,[1] the name of a Malay Sultanate that was subsequently split into three southernmost provinces and four districts of Songkhla under the Siamese administration. They are also strongly attached to Islam, in a similar way that the Thais there are toward Buddhism. The people's strong adherence to their religion contributes to the charm and uniqueness of the deep south, which has never failed to mesmerize me. It's hard to find anywhere else in Thailand where religion could paint the local people's lives so beautifully with its strong hue.

Despite adhering to different religions, Thai Buddhist and Malay-Muslim horizontal relations, prior to the eruption of violence in 2004, had been quite cordial. Throughout the past five or six years when I traveled to remote areas of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, I was told time and again by both Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim villagers that there was no such divide between them . . . Thai and Melayu—they are brothers and sisters. Their ancestors lived together peacefully with no problems. That was the story of the past, of course. In the present-day southernmost region, inter-group tensions are clear and present; even a first-time traveler to the region can easily sense that. I've seen the people there increasingly prefer engaging and interacting only with those of their own group. Young people in particular have very limited space to interact across ethnoreligious boundaries, as the Malays prefer to enroll their children at private Islamic schools rather than public, state-run schools that serve, according to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, as a "bureaucratic field" for the Thai state to transmit its ideology and assimilate children of minority groups into mainstream Thai-Buddhist society.

After a decade of working on the ground trying to transform conflict and build peace with my limited knowledge,

Photo courtesy of the author

Luang Phor Muk with Bae Seng, my most trusted Muslim driver for the past ten years. I make frequent visits to Piyaram temple to see Luang Phor Muk, and Bae Seng is usually the one driving me there.

skills, and power, it has become even more clear to me that religion is absolutely not the primary basis of this violent conflict that has taken more than 7,200 lives since 2004. But a religious divide, once created, can exacerbate conflict. The conflicting parties are able to muster more support from their targeted population by utilizing the narrative that their religion is under threat, while action by opposing groups is orchestrated. People of the south—Buddhist and Muslim alike—are quite sensitive to this narrative, as a religious way of life forms the cornerstone of their identity, and religious community is their key agent of socialization. The disappearance of their religion from their homeland would represent an existential threat. Insurgent and Malay radical groups know about this sentiment, and that is why they increasingly campaign for the liberation of Islam from Buddhist domination, along with the liberation of the Patani Sultanate from one-time Siamese (later Thai) rule.

On the Thai Buddhist side, after more than a decade of being the target of violent attacks by insurgent groups, the majority of Buddhists there have increasingly lost trust in their Malay friends, noting the bystander's role the latter adopt when attacks on Buddhists take place. They want the Malays to step up and do more to prevent violence against Buddhist civilians and religious leaders. Some have expressed to me that it has become difficult to make the Malays understand their pain and suffering. With those violent attacks, the Thai Buddhists also feel that they are being chased out of their homeland. "Although Thailand is a Buddhist majority country, here in the deep south we (Buddhists) are the minority. Our numbers are attenuating each year, as many of us feel unsafe and move away," said Phi Danai,[2] a fifty-six-year-old Buddhist villager of Pattani, whom I interviewed in August 2022 for my research project on the socio-cultural decline of the Buddhist community of the deep south as a result of seventeen-year violence. Although most of my 73 Buddhist informants have nothing against Islam in principle, they express sincerely that deteriorating Buddhist-Muslim relations need to be fixed, and promptly.

How can we bridge the gaps between these two communities? Clearly we must use the social capital and resources found in the area, even amid the rise of ethno-religious nationalist movements that have exacerbated the tension and hostility between the two groups. Local government agencies have put a lot of effort into relationship-building in the deep south. The Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and Internal Security Operation Commands, Fourth Region (ISOC4) have implemented myriad projects for this purpose. However, in the eyes of academics, they may not be right for this task, as they themselves still need to do much more to gain the trust of the people. Religious leaders and communities seem to be a better choice for the task in this complicated and sensitive scenario. They can definitely play a leading role while state and non-state actors and agencies—including non-religious civil society organizations and academicians like me—can provide assistance and collaborate with them for a better outcome. There are at least three areas that religion, especially its leaders, can do to improve the situation: promoting a better understanding within and between groups, encouraging intergroup social interaction, and mending broken relationships for long-lasting, peaceful coexistence. These are the mandates of a peacebuilder, and similar to most peacebuilding activities, they take time to bear fruit and do not always proceed in a linear fashion.

During the past decade of my amateur peacebuilder's life, I have known a number of religious leaders in the south and beyond who dedicate their lives to executing the three aforementioned tasks.[3] To me, they are the "critical yeast" in John Paul Lederach's peacebuilding theory: like yeast that we add to the dough to make the bread rise, these leaders are crucial catalysts for social change and peaceful coexistence. In the southern Thailand context, it is neither easy nor safe to pursue these goals. From 2004 until the present, some

Photos courtesy of the author

Luang Phor Muk performing a merit-making ritual at a local community in Yaring and visiting the Kuan Ran Tai community in Songkhla.

monks and imams who have acted as a bridge between the two communities have been attacked by insurgents. The unlucky ones got killed in those incidents. I lost some peacebuilder monks and imams in my network before. Those who still live and work hard to promote Buddhist-Muslim relations serve as the source of my inspiration to do more for peace in the south. Ven. Prakru Udomdhammathorn (Pramuk Panatho) or Phor Than Muk, the abbot of Piyaram temple, Piyamumang, Yaring, Pattani, is one of them. His life illustrates brilliantly the role of religion in peacebuilding.

I first met Phor Than Muk, whom I later would affectionately call Luang Phor (my monk father) in March of 2015, when we both traveled from Thailand to attend the Buddhist-Muslim Summit organized by the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. As Buddhist representatives from Religions for Peace Thailand, we both shared our southern experiences. I got to know about his works in the sharing circles. Little did I know, what he chose to share at the event was just a small part of his peacebuilding life. This kind and humble seventy-five-year-old monk who had lived in Yaring, Pattani his whole life was one of the most respected monks of the province, and the pillar of Pattani's Buddhist community, precisely because of his dedication to the role of peacebuilder.

Promoting Better Understanding within and between Groups

Piyaram temple, where Luang Phor Muk has served as abbot since 1989, is located in the Piyamumang area. Since violence erupted in the deep south in 2004, there have been relatively few violent incidents in Piyamumang compared to other sub-districts of Yaring, Pattani. Hence, it is considered one of the most peaceful communities there. Most people are curious to know: Why is there still peace in Piyamumang? And what kind of strategy do the people there use in curbing the level of violence? The first peacebuilding task of Luang Phor Muk back in 2004 was his attempt to promote better understanding among Buddhists, and between Buddhists and Muslims, in Piyamumang—an effort that still continues today. Whenever violence took place near Piyamumang, he would reach out to two Muslim figures in the area: Mr. Samae Dorloh, Piyamumang's sub-district chief, and Imam Yusof Wae Due Rae, the latter's childhood friend. The three would sit down together to discuss the situation. After the discussion, each of them would go to their respective communities to make sure the villagers understood the situation. "It is important to remind them (villagers) that those incidents are created by bad actors to serve a particular agenda, and they should not undermine the good relations our Piyamumang ancestors have forged for decades," said Luang Phor Muk when we were on a car trip, with Bae Seng as our driver, to visit a Buddhist community in Songkhla. He also established Piyamumang's Peace Council in 2004 to be a local platform where religious leaders and key actors of the community can come to interact and proactively reduce violence and keep the community safe.

Building Peace through Joint Living

Before COVID-19 hit the world, I was working on a project with the goal to restore the socioeconomic and cultural life of some Buddhist communities badly affected by violence. With the humble budget I received from the Swiss government and later from Mahidol University, I managed to locate some Buddhist communities that were laboring under challenging conditions and connect them with some better-off Buddhist communities. The idea was to have the latter serve as mentors for the former. Piyamumang

Photos courtesy of the author

Phor Than Muk in some of our intrareligious and interreligious dialogues organized in Pattani to promote peace and social cohesion in the past five years.

community was identified as one of the mentor communities, due to its vibrant socioeconomic scene. In 2009 Luang Phor Muk, knowing that poverty is one of the most common problems shared by Buddhists and Muslims in Piyamumang, initiated an agricultural project on the land belonging to Piyaram temple. This project was designed to be a joint working and living space for people of both groups. The people of Piyamumang, irrespective of their religious affiliation, came to raise cattle, grow vegetables, and make a living together. The project started as a modest one, and with support from local government agencies, it gradually became one of the most successful agricultural projects in Pattani. The people there are economically better off without having to desert their villages to seek jobs elsewhere. This joint live/work space is also very much needed in violence-affected areas like the deep south. It makes the people feel closer to one another and increases opportunities for regular and meaningful group interactions. Once the relationship is built and strengthened, people are likely to become comfortable enough to discuss other more serious, sensitive, and complicated issues like insurgency and social injustice. Today more than 70 Buddhists and Muslims of the Piyamumang community are working on the project, and it has expanded to cover the adjacent area of Nong Rat, Yaring, as well.

As I reflect on my brief amateur peacebuilder's journey, I am increasingly convinced that religious leaders such as Luang Phor Muk serve as living proof that religion can be a great asset, rather than a liability, when it comes to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Religion and its exponents can play a positive role in making a more just and peaceful world. This essay of mine may draw your attention to just one potential of religion in peacebuilding, among endless possibilities. I do hope that if we can identify more such opportunities and work together to promote them, religion can become a key driver for constructive change in the twenty-first century. ❑

Notes

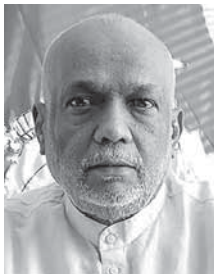
1. This sultanate was known in the Arab world as Fatoni. In the fifteenth century it was one of the most prosperous ports located in the Malay Peninsular and Sumatran region. The wealth of this independent state drew traders and settlers from all over Asia and beyond, creating a tapestry of multicultural and religious interaction and coexistence that has been mentioned in various accounts by western merchants and missionaries.

2. This is not his real name, but rather a pseudonym I created for this key informant.

3. One of the most inspiring Japanese figures I have met is Rev. Norio Sakai, the former chairman of Rissho Kosei-kai and International Trustee of Religions for Peace International. Rev. Sakai, who passed away on Christmas of 2022, came to Thailand on various occasions to promote cross-cultural understanding. I was fortunate that in those trips he would ask me to organize activities for Japanese youth to exchange and interact with Thai youth. He had such a strong passion for peacebuilding that I regard him one of my mentors. I still remember his golden line: "If people around the world become friends, there will be more peace, as friends treat one another with love, respect, and understanding." Rev. Sakai's words continue to guide us in our peace works and mission.

The Role of Spirituality and Faith in a Divided World

by Harsha Navaratne



As engaged Buddhists, we have a greater responsibility to actively reach out, network, and mobilize people in every community.

Harsha Navaratne is a former member of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee and currently serves as the High Commissioner-designate of Sri Lanka to Canada, and the chairperson of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) Executive Committee. His lifelong commitment to building peaceful societies initially began in Sri Lanka and expanded through the years with regional and international efforts through the arts, development, inter- and intrafaith dialogue, and more.

"Today, we need to address the future not with prayers prompted by fear, but by taking realistic action founded on scientific understanding. The inhabitants of our planet are interdependent as never before. Everything we do affects our human companions, as well as innumerable animal and plant species."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's
Message to COP26,
October 31, 2021.

During my childhood, our whole village community used to live as one big family. The village temple was the central place—the heart of community. The village was full of life and thrived on the values of coexistence, shared resources, and solidarity. Our homes surrounded the temple where we learned to live this way, and the monks were our gurus. When the temple bell rang, we would all come together at the preaching hall.

I never saw a police officer in the village. The first time I saw one was when I left my village and went to a boarding school in the city. Unfortunately, as time passed, politics entered the temples and the community started to be more dependent on politicians. Some of the Buddhist monks who were spiritual masters also started to follow political trends, rather than their faith and value system.

This kind of challenge, however, is only one of the many that we are facing now. When we look at the world today, we see crises on a scale that we never could have imagined. The genesis of most challenges that confront us, however, can be found in community life. Poverty, armed conflict, oppression, and so many other human-engineered threats are challenging human dignity. Internal conflicts among ethnic groups and communities, wars fought between nations, hunger, drought, climate change, ocean pollution, degrading natural resources, exploitation by multilateral companies, media domination and manipulation, citizens' distrust of democracy, tyrannical regimes taking dominion over nations, etc., are all contributing to the current situation.

These conditions were more recently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that generated new public health concerns and greater inequality through accelerating poverty in many parts of the world. Add to that the divisive misinformation, smear campaigns, trolling, and hate speech, as a result of which it is almost impossible to tell the difference between truth and falsehood. Whom to trust and not to trust is a question that haunts our minds all the time.

Meanwhile, the constant and unending interplay between geopolitical forces is adversely affecting our day-to-day lives as the power dynamic continually shifts at the global level between superpowers such as the United States and China, and also at the regional level—for instance, between China and regional superpowers like India. The greatest contemporary example of this is the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The year-long war between the two nations, besides resulting in a humanitarian crisis, has created international economic challenges that have deeply affected both the developed and the developing world.

In order to limit the consequences and damage wreaked by human failing, we all need to work together in greater cooperation and solidarity. We need to find a path toward personal awakening so that we can come out of our present suffering—to build a culture and society that leads to a safer, more harmonious, happier, and greener world. We need to act and recognize the importance of

Photo: AFP / AFLO

Ukrainian servicemen fire with a 105mm howitzer toward Russian positions near the city of Bakhmut, on March 8, 2023, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

humanity's sense of oneness, our interconnectedness that links everyone—indeed, every sentient being—as a part of the whole. But if we want to make all this a reality and take ownership of our common future, we will need to follow the path of spirituality.

Undoubtedly, we as human beings are responsible for creating these issues. It is therefore also our responsibility to confront and address them. It is time we come together at the global level to commit ourselves to understanding and addressing them, and then finding solutions that will bring future benefits. This journey must begin at the micro level, where we can individually find answers to these problems and then relay these answers to the greater society, thus creating hope for the future.

Many people ask me, "How is it possible for Sri Lanka, a predominantly Buddhist country, to go through such violent upheavals, again and again?" I have often asked myself that same difficult question.

I'm sure that if values had been retained at the local level and continually applied to changing contexts, then these problems would not have arisen, or at least would not have become so entrenched. This is where the role of the Dharma comes in. Unfortunately, Lord Buddha's teachings, which promoted unity and oneness within one's village, society, and country, have started to be ignored. When society began to divide itself by ethnicity, religion, and political beliefs, disaster after disaster followed. The more humankind has moved away from the Dharma, the more these problems have increased.

I have spent the last forty-five years of my life as a development practitioner. My journey began as a volunteer in a village in Sri Lanka, bordering a jungle, far from the city. During my time as a development worker in my country, I have witnessed tragedy after tragedy, whether caused by humans or by natural forces. I have experienced the loss of friends and colleagues, who while seeking to make social change lost their lives in the process. Some of them were even labeled as terrorists by the ruling regimes, though considered heroes by the common people. Ironically, heroism and politics in my country, as in any other country, are such that a person can be called either a hero or a terrorist depending on where your social and political sympathies lie. This may not necessarily be based on facts or justifiable reasoning. Under the guise of democracy, political parties create divisions and destroy the very fabric of moral values and ethics. They are responsible for pushing a country into desperate conditions resulting in economic crisis and continuous suffering.

Villages and local communities represent the microcosm of what is taking place in Sri Lanka and around the world. Today, we live in a society in which many of us are contradicting and violating its spiritual teachings and moral foundation. The crisis has expanded from the community to the national and regional levels. This has created a huge challenge for civil society activists and truly committed social movements in countries like ours. People are moving away from moral and ethical values in their search for quick fixes and easy answers. If we had remained true to our values at the micro level and continued living that way, things would not have devolved to this degree.

It is important to seek the best methods to practice what we preach and live our values, which will stimulate social awakening. Do our politicians, spiritual leaders, and do-gooders always practice what they preach? It's hard to answer "Yes" to that question. Sometimes those who are regarded as gurus, preaching to a large group, are also responsible for breaking up society and contributing to ongoing negative trends through their teachings. It is, in fact, a real challenge these days to identify authentic, sincere, and truthful leaders. So, what should be the role of a true leader of the people?

A true leader needs to be one hundred percent committed to the common good and must advance slowly but surely toward social and national goals, based on his or her values. They need to move forward with like-minded people, with a shared understanding, with a clear worldview, and with the right attitude. Great importance must be given to setting long-term goals and having the readiness to face challenges, all the while remembering that it will be a long haul. In order to be an example and role model to others, leaders must also be prepared to practice what they preach.

As activists too, we need to understand the challenges we face, discuss them, and continuously share our findings with our peers. I come from a country where bad planning, mismanagement, corruption, and huge debt brought the economy to its knees. This, along with complicated social issues, has driven the country almost to bankruptcy, which has resulted in increased human suffering. Today people are on the streets asking for systemic change—calling upon policymakers to plan and implement comprehensive reform programs, including the democratization of unjust social structures.

Many do not understand that the last seventy-four years of party-based politics are responsible for the present situation in Sri Lanka. Doing away with the Democratic parliamentary system and adopting a centralized executive presidency in which the majority leaned toward nationalism—while ignoring the needs and voices of minorities—has seriously damaged the country's vibrant social fabric. As social activists, therefore, we demand the decentralization of executive presidential powers, as well as essential constitutional changes based on legitimate governance for the common good.

Now is the time for inter-religious and intra-religious groups to collaborate on preventing conflict and violence through joint peacebuilding initiatives.

Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

Demonstrators representing four religions of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism take part in a protest against Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, outside the Presidential Secretariat, amid the country's economic crisis, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on April 18, 2022.

These collaborations across religious groups are also critical to the viability and sustainability of social movements. The unique contribution made to society by religious and faith-based groups, besides being a cultural resource, is a source of moral and ethical legitimacy and clarity. Intra- and inter-religious dialogue helps us find common ground and lends credibility while addressing larger issues faced by communities, which can then gain momentum and inspire similar dialogue beyond the local context.

So let us face these challenges together by building communities that are resilient in all ways by developing inclusive, participatory models for economic growth, and by embracing equality for all. This will require bold political leadership committed to real change, which can only be attained through inclusive development and peace.

A community such as ours—that is, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)—needs to look at our respective countries' past, present, and future. This includes mainstreaming INEB's values and putting those values into practice to benefit society as a whole. The vibrancy and strength of engaged Buddhists are based in essential relationships between *kalayanamitta*, or spiritual friends. Such relationships have the ability to transcend many obstacles and accomplish great things together.

As engaged Buddhists, we have a greater responsibility to actively reach out, network, and mobilize people in every community. Let us join hands in friendship. As *kalayanamitta*, we can confront these divisive social issues together.

As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Even the most painful and violent experiences of life demand our full attention. When we are attentive to our own suffering, we will know that of others. That knowledge can help break cycles of suffering and violence in the world around us." In essence, he teaches us to live in peace and mindfulness. ❑

The Concept of Religion and the Challenges of World Peace

by Michael Berman

"Religion" and "world peace" [are often] put in the same sentence, despite religions frequently contributing to warfare.

It is easy to find praise and encouragement for the active role of religion in the pursuit of world peace, as there is much evidence that religion can have a positive effect on people's lives. The pages of this magazine provide countless examples of the ways in which religious cooperation and dialogue have the potential to improve the world. In the previous Autumn 2022 issue alone, there are multiple passionate, learned articles stating what religious leaders should do to contribute to peace.

However, it is questionable whether improvement is spurred by direct praise; nor does it always come through calls to action. Sometimes, movements toward some telos, such as peace or justice, come through critiques of that very telos. In this essay, I offer a critical account of the relationship between religion and world peace. I do so not to criticize in a way aimed at stopping the pursuit of peace. Rather, I do so in hopes of bolstering those efforts by highlighting ways that ideas about "religion" and "peace" might ironically get in the way of accomplishing world peace.

But first, perhaps it is necessary to ask, What is religion? The answer to this question is not as simple as it may seem, and many conversations about religion never actually define their basic terms. In practice, "religion" can mean different things to different people. The definitions that people give or live by rely partially on their own experience, their intended audience, and what it is they hope to achieve. For example, a religious professional such as a priest, monk, or rabbi might define religion differently from a politician, a professor, or an activist (even though sometimes these roles overlap).

Moreover, what religion is has changed over time. The category of religion—as opposed to the traditions that we now think of as religions—is quite new in many parts of the world. Only since World War II has it been possible to talk about something called Buddhism and something called Shinto as examples of the same thing called religion. Notably, even now, some nationalists in Japan do not recognize Shinto as a religion. Regardless, we could choose other traditions—even ones that are historically derived from each other—and say the same thing: Surely, Judaism or Islam have a different set of beliefs and practices from Christianity, for example, sometimes to the point of making them hardly recognizable as belonging to the same category (Abrahamic religions). After all, is prohibiting certain foods, an important part of Jewish and Muslim life, really similar to believing that Christ died for one's sins?

My point here is not to draw lines of division between religions. Rather, it is to demonstrate that the fact that people work to find similarities or traits that unify religions suggests that religion is not a simple category. The difference here is not between Eastern and Western religions, but rather between very different traditions that get grouped together under different-sized umbrellas. Of course, what falls under an umbrella is not the same as the umbrella itself. In other words, "religion" is something different from the traditions that we now treat as religions. Additionally, more than in the case of an umbrella, the category of religion changes that which falls under it. When someone acts as a "religious professional" in a public space instead of as a "Buddhist priest," for example, they tend to be doing different work that benefits people but might not help maintain their temples (Berman 2018).

So why does this matter? It matters because categories and concepts are not simply definitions written in books. As scholars such as Bertell Ollman (1976) and Derek Sayer (1987), following Marx, have argued, categories arise from and affect what people do. Categories are thus practical. For example, whether a given tradition is categorized as a religion can determine its legal freedoms, prohibitions, and general constraints. The definition of religion affects public ceremonies, tax codes, speech, and which organization can participate in state functions.

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It affects individuals, too. The difference between how people feel when they are being religious, working, or following the law might seem obvious. Likewise, depending on where we live, it may be easy to take distinctions between religion, the economy, and politics as a simple matter of fact. However, throughout history, certain religious activities have been (and continue to be) identical to those of daily life, the economy, and the law. In a way, where there is no legal and/or conceptual separation between those facets of life, the secular concept of religion does not exist. That is because, to some degree, in liberal democracies, religion is popularly and legally defined in contrast to the economic and the political.

Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

City officials and Buddhist monks pray together for the victims of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami at a temporary mass grave site in Higashi Matsushima City, northeastern Japan on March 22, 2011. The author writes, "The definition of religion affects public ceremonies, tax codes, speech, and which organization can participate in state functions."

This is important for several reasons. For one, when religion is defined this way, it tends not to be an integral part of governance or a truth backed by the violence of the state. It becomes instead a matter of individual belief. As mentioned above, that in part is why nationalists in Japan do not consider Shinto to be a religion. Historically, the general category of religion has also been based on Christian conceptualizations of what that means, so creating laws related to the "freedom of religion" in places like Japan, for example, has been a part of efforts by some nations to spread Christianity (Thomas 2019).

The effects of defining religion as separate from the state and the economy go beyond legal frameworks. With the creation of something called religion—as distinct from specific traditions that we now call religions—people's orientation toward things like suffering, discipline, history, and truth has changed (Asad 2009). People's ways of living and justifying what they do have changed. Importantly, these kinds of changes have been an important part of the global distribution of suffering, care, and neglect. For example, global capitalism does not include considerations for people's souls, redemption, or enlightenment when calculating costs and profits. The considerations for who is fully human, and the justifications for exploitation and mistreatment are thus partially different from what they were under imperialism and colonialism—systems on which capitalism has capitalized.

With the loss of certain types of governmental power, and with the rise in prominence of the category of religion, religious traditions in some parts of the world have also changed their focus. As Marx wrote in his "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," religion became the "heart of a heartless world." There are several ways to interpret this, particularly when considering that Marx also wrote that religion deals with suffering in a way that obscures the social and historical causes of that suffering. What I would suggest here, however, is that the category of religion had come to be associated with

all that "capitalism" and "the government" were not associated with, including care. To be clear, I am not saying that this is necessarily what religion is, let alone what any specific tradition is. In actuality, religions are still involved in governance, economics, etc. However, a socially determined understanding of religion as something like the "heart of a heartless world" is a part of the reason that "religion" and "world peace" could be put in the same sentence, despite religions frequently contributing to warfare now and in the past.

Being conceptually associated with things like the heart, compassion, and peace in some ways makes members of the category of religion ideal participants in the pursuit of world peace. However, might the ways in which religion and world peace are thought about and pursued ironically impede religious traditions from thriving and world peace from being achieved?

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to propose three specific topics affected by the concept of religion in ways that might obscure contradictions in pursuits of world peace: organizational stability and "soft power"; the relationship between peace and violence; and gender inequality within corporate structure. Again, my goal is not to discourage such work, but rather to encourage consideration of the ways in which people do such work, the types of issues they identify as problems, and the location of those problems. Moreover, what I point out will not be equally applicable to all religious groups working toward peace. After all, as discussed above, the actuality of religion is that it is incredibly diverse, including groups with very different histories and relationships with power. Moreover, peace, too, is a messy process, and people living in war zones might have a very different orientation toward peace than people looking on from afar, even if they share the same religious proclivities.

Organizational Sustainability and Soft Power

Culture is an important aspect of international politics. As the political scientist Joseph Nye (2004) has written, "Parents of teenagers know that if they have structured their children's beliefs and preferences, their power will be greater . . . than if they had relied only on active control. Similarly, political leaders and philosophers have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate" (56). He calls this type of power "soft power." Unlike "hard power," which is based on military strength and is funded by nation-states, the sources of soft power are very diverse. Religions, as well as NGOs affiliated with or funded by them, have been a significant component of soft power. This presents religious organizations with two challenges. The first is organizational stability and sustainability. In my research, I have seen that religious organizations are often deeply invested in compassionate projects and work toward world peace. Sometimes this leads them to be less concerned about the financial costs or ROI of such efforts. This is admirable. It is also related to the conceptualization of religion as the heart of a heartless world. However, when governments rely on religious organizations and NGOs to provide social services and to spread soft power, the financial burdens of such work can take a toll on smaller religious organizations—including individual churches, temples, etc.—and religions without long histories of association with state power.

The other challenge is dealing with the potential implications of exercising soft power. Peace is not always accomplished in ways that are just. Some interests are served more than others. That goes for religious organizations as much as for anything else. Even when religious organizations are not acting at the behest of a national government and are not limited geographically to a single nation-state, the ways that the representatives of any religious organization conceptualize and strive for peace are necessarily partial, in the sense that they are incomplete and politically situated. Moreover, just as religion has been used to propagate the power of the U.S. and of Christianity, the concepts that religious people use in the pursuit of peace can partially enact and spread governmental frameworks, even unintentionally.

The Relationship between Peace and Violence

The close relationship between soft and hard power is related to a blurry line, with long philosophical and religious roots, about whether violence can ever be justified. Different religious traditions have different stances on violence. For example, the principle of *ahimsa*, or doing no harm to living beings, is common among Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. In comparison, G-d's violence is foundational to the Bible, shared by the Abrahamic traditions, which have also contributed much to "just war theory." Moreover, while the secular concept of religion removes it from the state, historically, different relations between governments and religions have had a significant effect on religious stances on violence. Thus, despite the principle of *ahimsa*, it is well-known that Zen Buddhism in Japan was closely related to warfare, both in the times of the samurai and in modern Japan.

In any case, the pursuit of peace is not simply devoid of violence. In the most egregious cases, the maintenance, creation, or spread of peace is used as a justification for real violence. In many other cases, as we can

Photo: AAP / AFLO

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese participates in the forty-fifth annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade on Oxford Street in Sydney, Saturday, February 25, 2023.

see with increasing military budgets in countries that are already heavily armed, the potential for violence is presented as a necessary condition for peace. When concerns shift from war to broader definitions of violence, which might include social-structural injustices that slowly kill portions of a population based on race, class, or caste, then considerations about the means of achieving peace also change. Is maintaining the status quo, which in some parts of the world is taken as a state of peacefulness, itself necessarily a violent endeavor? Conversely, do redistributions of power, which are necessary to maintain the dignity of all lives as equally important, entail some sort of violence? Finally, from which vantage points do complex relationships between violence, peace, and religion become visible? For example, if religious activities sometimes serve as soft power, do they indirectly justify the historical violence that gives different populations varying levels of social mobility? Such questions exceed the conceptualization of either peace or religion, and push toward messier understandings of the world that do not distinguish between things that might at first appear to be opposites.

Gender Inequality and Corporate Structure

An example of a messier understanding could start with the conceptual division between religion, the state, and the economy. In some places and in some situations, it might even be possible to think about these things as antithetical to one another. However, as Levi McLaughlin, Aike Rots, Jolyon Thomas, and Chika Watanabe (2020) have recently argued, the corporate form—that is, the ways in which a collective is organized—can unify what are frequently thought of as different aspects of life or society. It is not uncommon for businesses to be structured in the same way as religions, or vice versa. The organization of those, in turn, can resemble the state or the ideals of the state. Simple resemblance is not necessarily a problem, but there are ways that resemblance in form can create and exacerbate inequalities and injustices. One example of this that seems quite prevalent among religious traditions is gender inequality. Sometimes, gender inequality is partially written into scripture, but even when it is not, it can appear in the structure of religious organizations.

The problem here is not simply that there is a hierarchy, but that the hierarchy carries with it prejudices that lead to injustices. Those injustices are not limited to the fact of inequality but can also include violence. The prevalence of sexual violence not only as a reprehensible aspect of warfare but also of daily life suggests that peace cannot be achieved without transforming the organizational structures that maintain gendered hierarchies. Though this is just one example among many, it is nonetheless important and, I hope, demonstrates the usefulness of thinking about religion and world peace in ways that are not bound by facile conceptual frameworks. ❑

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The Fortieth Niwano Peace Prize Awarded to Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India

The Niwano Peace Foundation announced the selection of Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India as the 2023 recipient of the Niwano Peace Prize, in recognition of his lifelong work in the service of justice and peace through nonviolent methods, and his commitment to care for the environment. The reason for selection issued by Dr. Flaminia Giovanelli, chair of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, follows.

On behalf of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee I am honored to announce that the fortieth Niwano Peace Prize will be awarded to Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India in recognition of his extraordinary work in the service of Justice and Peace. His actions in favor of the poorest and most marginalized of his country, carried out through peaceful and nonviolent methods, and his struggle for the recognition of the equal human dignity and equal rights of every man and woman, irrespective of caste or gender, inspires great admiration. His particular accomplishments that garner the highest esteem include negotiating the surrender and facilitating the rehabilitation of gangs, the education of young people in the service of the poor, and, well aware that the primary needs of the poor are water, land, and forests, his commitment to care for the environment. Mr. Rajagopal's work for justice is also carried forward through dialogue with institutions with a view to counteracting the phenomenon of land grabbing, and obtaining, through appropriate land reform, the redistribution of land and the assignment of land ownership.

The means and meaning of spirituality are deeply rooted in all of Mr. Rajagopal's activities. Being a Gandhian in thinking and action, he strongly believes in a journey of social action that starts from an "inner transformation" and expands to the outer world. This spirituality is matched by Mr. Rajagopal's very remarkable organizational skills as evidenced by the transition from action carried out in small groups and self-help organizations to the creation of large movements such as Ekta Parishad, which has an active membership of 250,000 landless poor and is capable of mobilizing thousands of participants in national and international marches to call attention to the important problems of our time. Mr. Rajagopal's biography and curriculum vitae is so rich that one can go over it only in outlines. The child of a Gandhian family, he was born on June 6, 1948 in Kerala State, South India. He uses only his first name in public to avoid being associated with the phenomenon of caste, which is a clear sign of his vision of human equality. He first obtained diploma in traditional art and music from a reputed organization in Kerala, and afterwards a diploma in Agricultural Engineering in a Nai Talim system of education, the Gandhian method of "education for life." As Mr. Rajagopal himself stated, "it was a long journey, in terms of trying to find what I really wanted to do."

What he wanted to do became clear at the beginning of the 1970s when he moved to the Chambal district of Madhya Pradesh. There he found endemic violence, the consequence of injustices and wrongs suffered by the population which had resulted in the growth of gangs ("dacoits"). Mr. Rajagopal along with other senior Gandhian leaders, became a peacemaker, obtaining the surrender and even the rehabilitation of the dacoits. This courageous initiative paved the way for another of great significance that developed during the 1980s: the organization of regional and national youth training programs to promote the concept of non-violent action for social change.

Mr. Rajagopal's commitment to justice and peace in this twenty-year period culminated in the establishment of Ekta Parishad (Unity Forum) as an umbrella mass-organization with the mission of non-violent activism for securing land and livelihood rights for marginalized communities. Thanks to Ekta Parishad, Mr. Rajagopal's social activism has taken on a greater national and international visibility through successful land rights

Photo: © Ekta Parishad

Mr. Rajagopal P. V., founder of Ekta Parishad.

marches with the participation of thousands of people. Overall, the movement with the collaboration of other groups, secured land rights for nearly 500,000 families, negotiated a "Forest Rights Act" in 2006–2007, organized highly attended marches in 2007 and 2012, and a new land reform policy was agreed to by the central government and the state governments of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The last and more visionary march through ten countries, from Delhi to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva (Switzerland), planned to last a whole year (October 2019 to October 2020), couldn't be completed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ekta Parishad activists and volunteers, more than 2,000 in number, reacted to the challenge of COVID-19 by delivering home care and health interventions in many Indian rural regions to fight the pandemic.

Mr. Rajagopal's roots in Gandhian spirituality and philosophy made it natural for him to serve within institutions that maintain the Mahatma's memory by applying his principles. In 1972 he was Secretary of the Mahatma Gandhi Seva Ashram, in 2005 he was elected Vice-Chairman of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, and today he continues to be the Managing Trustee of the International Gandhian Initiative for Nonviolence and Peace (IGINP). Mr. Rajagopal's nonviolent social action has also led him to be a man of dialogue with institutions, holding official positions such as Enquiry Commissioner of the Supreme Court on Bonded Labour, and a member of the National Council for Land Reform. His goal is the creation of a ministry and budget for peace and nonviolence. "If you are spending so much money on war, the military, and police, why can't you spend some money on peace and nonviolence?" he asks.

The inter-religious essence of Mr. Rajagopal's activism is in bringing together the poor, united in nonviolent protest for their rights, without distinction of religion. The movement's protest demonstrations take place with the side-by-side participation of peasants of all religious beliefs.

The great movement originated by Mr. Rajagopal's efforts has for years transcended the borders of his great country, India, as evidenced, for example, by the influence of Ekta Parishad on other continents such as Europe, and the international resonance of the Jai Jagat campaign. The United Nations is also on Mr. Rajagopal's horizon. He would like to have this leading international body as an ally in his quest for what he calls "a nonviolent economy."

Finally, we think it is highly significant to award Mr. Rajagopal the fortieth Niwano Peace Prize in 2023 in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted a downside of our interconnected world and forced us to rethink globalization. His social activism, while addressing the most salient issues of the globalized world, utilizes a closeness to the land and the people, and recovers a place for ethics and justice in development. Mr. Rajagopal ultimately reclaims for the people a way of development that is sustainable and humane ❑

Photo: © Ekta Parishad

Throughout the year of 2011, many members of Ekta Parishad continued to tour across India on foot or by car to invite people to join their "March for Justice," which was scheduled to be held in October 2012.

The Body and the Mind Are Deeply Connected

by Nichiko Niwano

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

In recent years, I think that many people are staying home more often and not getting enough exercise. If you do not walk regularly, the muscles in your legs weaken so that even a short walk might make you tired, and then you become even less willing to go out.

Regarding muscles, it is reported that people with greater muscle mass live longer. We could say this is due to the relationship between muscles, immunity, blood sugar level, and so forth. However, I am also experiencing the decline of muscle strength that comes with aging, so in order to stay healthy, I continue to take an hour-long daily walk, unless it is a scorching summer's day. Considering what else is indispensable for maintaining good health though, I think there is more to it than just training the body's muscles.

The body and the mind are mutually inseparable. Indeed, the functioning of the mind affects the body, so it is important that we give our "mental muscles" a daily workout with inspiration and stimulation, always keeping them active in order to build up a constitution that is resistant to both mental and physical decline and illness. That way, we can always enjoy good health. Masahiro Yasuoka (1898–1983), whose writings have influenced me for a long time, also says that the cause of poor health and senility is more in the mind than in the body.

In particular, if you lose interest in things other than your private affairs and mundane daily routine, or become obsessed with trivial things, you will no longer experience the joy and stimulation of self-improvement but lose your mental vitality, which will, in turn, affect you physically.

What is important then for maintaining a stimulated, active mind that enjoys self-improvement, even when we are preoccupied with trivial, mundane matters? Yasuoka offers the following three principles.

"The Three Principles of Good Health"

The first of these principles is to "always keep the god of happiness in your mind." The god of happiness is the most authentic mind. In other words, this means always keeping happiness present in your mind. And doesn't that mean always accepting each and every event that unfolds before you with joy and the feeling of receiving the teachings of the Buddha? Even when we are suffering, by positively accepting the reality before us and asking ourselves "What is the Buddha teaching me now?" we realize that beyond suffering there is the light of liberation, and our minds continue to evolve and refine themselves.

The second principle for preventing the decline of your mental muscles is to "constantly keep thoughts of gratitude in your mind." It is certainly true that every time we think of gratitude and say the words "thank you" they bring us fresh inspiration.

The third is to "always aspire to be quietly virtuous." In reality, this is not limited to doing good deeds unknown to other people; it also includes being considerate of the people you come in contact with in your daily life, as well as practicing putting other people first while aiming to benefit them and bring them happiness. However, from our point of view, those who have cultivated these three things in their minds are called bodhisattvas, aren't they?

Incidentally, I first became interested in health in 1960, when I found, in a used bookstore in Kanda, a book titled *Nishi shiki kenko ho* (The Nishi Method of Health) by Katsuzo Nishi (1884–1959). That was the year that Founder Niwano made me president-designate. Thinking back on it now, at age twenty-two I was filled with anxiety, so perhaps it was my instinctual reaction to try to keep my body and mind in harmony and maintain my physical health in order to suppress that mental anxiety.

Thanks to all of you, this month that anxious young man will turn eighty-five years old, and Rissho Kosei-kai will also mark its eighty-fifth anniversary. Although we have not yet exited the long tunnel of the COVID-19 pandemic, let's definitely share with the people close to us the blessings of the wondrous Dharma—which itself can be called a method of maintaining mental health—and together build healthy and dynamic families and societies. ❑

ESSAY

What Is Esoteric Buddhism?

by Michihiko Komine

Michihiko Komine is elder of Kanzō'in in Tokyo, a temple belonging to the Chisan branch of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism. His special fields are early Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Shingon Buddhist doctrine. He is the author of numerous books on esoteric Buddhist paintings.

Esoteric Buddhism undertakes religious practice to attain enlightenment, aiming at achieving buddhahood in this very lifetime.

Esoteric Buddhism has sometimes been regarded with suspicion as an unscientific religion because of its strong magical and mystical aspects, such as the *goma* fire ritual, and because its doctrine is presented through mandalas, preferring the use of mantras and dharani over everyday language. These are just two of the many lines of distinction between esoteric Buddhism and Buddhism at large. Therefore, although it belongs to Buddhism as a whole, it is necessary to look at esoteric Buddhism from a perspective different from the conventional understanding of Buddhism.

This does not mean that esoteric Buddhism is in any way heretical. It is rather a continuation of the orthodox line of Buddhism—a development of new doctrines and practices that go beyond Mahāyāna Buddhism. To explain this point, in this essay I will re-examine the significance of esoteric Buddhism and describe it as clearly as possible.

Photo: A. Abbs / Magnum Photos / AFLO

At dawn on January 1, 2010, a Buddhist monk performs a goma *ceremony before the main altar of Sanbōin, a temple of the Kōyasan Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism on Mount Kōya, Wakayama Prefecture.*

The Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel

To this end, I believe it's important to look at the long historical development of Buddhism in terms of the three turnings of the Dharma wheel. Needless to say, the first turning was when Śākyamuni Buddha first taught Buddhism in Deer Park near Varanasi, India, and those teachings were succeeded by and developed as Abhidharma Buddhism. The second turning, which marked a major shift in Buddhism, was the rise of Mahāyāna around the beginning of the Common Era, its doctrinal base being the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) sutras. There is an awareness in them that they represent this second turning: Chapter 43 of the Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom in 18,000 Lines states, "We in Jambudvīpa have seen the second turning of the Dharma wheel." Mahāyāna Buddhism subsequently took center stage and Buddhism developed widely, but in the seventh century, esoteric Buddhism emerged with the Mahāvairocana and Diamond Sutras. Although some see this esoteric Buddhism as late Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is in fact qualitatively

different from Mahāyāna, considering its content and distinctiveness. Therefore, I position esoteric Buddhism as the third turning of the Dharma wheel.

Of course, there is another view of the third turning. This is based on the statement in the fifth chapter of the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra: "Now, in the course of the three periods, the World-Honored One has, for the sake of all those rightly moving toward the One Vehicle, turned the wheel of the true Dharma, speaking of the emptiness of the dharmas, their non-arising and non-extinction, inherent tranquility, innate nirvana, and non-substantiality." This description of the wheel of the true Dharma is called the "ranking of the teachings according to the three periods," and some commentators have postulated that the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra was its third turning. For example, Paramārtha (499–569) and Xuanzang (602–64) proposed based on that sutra that the first period, taught by Śākyamuni, be called the "turning of the Dharma wheel," that the second period of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras be called "illuminating the Dharma wheel," and that the third period of the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra be called "maintaining the Dharma wheel." However, this third turning should be seen as an extension of Mahāyāna, and not as a new development like esoteric Buddhism.

There are several major reasons for positioning esoteric Buddhism as the third turning—one of which can be seen in the difference in how the Buddha is viewed. The Perfection of Wisdom sutras present the profound perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) as the new Buddha—the fundamental buddha who also created Śākyamuni Buddha. Esoteric Buddhism, on the other hand, while following this view of the Buddha in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, created a buddha with a new personality—the Dharmakāya Mahāvairocana.

In other words, esoteric Buddhism developed a Buddhist movement based on Mahāvairocana, in contrast to the profound perfection of wisdom set out in the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Just as those sutras led to the Mahāyāna movement, the Mahāvairocana Sutra developed its own esoteric movement.

Photo: Nicolas Datiche / AFLO

A wooden box in which the food for Kūkai is put is carried by three Buddhist monks. At 6:00 and 10:30 AM every day, a team of three monks brings the meals to Kūkai, who is believed to be still deep in meditation at the Okunoin, which means "temple at the end" and refers to his mausoleum, on Mount Kōya.

Characteristics of Esoteric Buddhism

While the Mahāyāna doctrines of Tiantai (Jpn., Tendai), Pure Land (Jpn., Jōdo), Faxian (Jpn., Hossō), Huayan (Jpn., Kegon), and San-lun (Jpn., Sanron) were established by the eminent Chinese priests Zhiyi, Shandao, Kuiji, Fazang, and Jizang, esoteric Buddhist doctrine in Japan, was systematized by the Japanese priest Kūkai (774–835). He regarded the distinctive feature of esoteric Buddhism as "buddhahood in this very body" (*sokushin jōbutsu*), and described the doctrinal differences between Mahāyāna and esoteric Buddhism based on the theory of the mandala. Mahāyāna Buddhism is based on the practice of the Way of the Bodhisattva, whose primary purpose is specifically to save living beings in the actual world. In other words, the significance of bodhisattvas lies in their activities for the benefit of others; they do not aim to attain buddhahood, but take it upon themselves to remain unenlightened.

Esoteric Buddhism, on the other hand, undertakes religious practice to attain enlightenment, aiming at achieving buddhahood in this very lifetime. Mahāyāna Buddhism holds that enlightenment is beyond language and intellection—that it's beyond the reach of the mind and cannot be described in words. Esoteric Buddhism, however, suggests that enlightenment can be attained through the practice of the "three mysteries"—three practices to unify the body, speech, and mind. Specifically, the practitioner forms mudras with the hands, recites mantras with the mouth, and contemplates the deity with the mind. Esoteric Buddhism differs from Mahāyāna Buddhism in this way, by emphasizing practices that lead to attaining enlightenment.

Revealed and Secret Teachings

Another thing to note is that while Mahāyāna Buddhism emphasizes sectarian differences, esoteric Buddhism has a comprehensive perspective that encompasses all of Buddhism. This is demonstrated in the fact that its doctrine

is expressed in mandalas that incorporate what amounts to "everything." For example, in the Womb World Mandala, the Buddha Mahāvairocana is placed in the center, surrounded by four buddhas and four bodhisattvas. The mandala also depicts Śākyamuni and his disciples, the bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna, and even includes the gods of India. All are regarded as the manifestations of Mahāvairocana.

Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Mandala 1 detail.jpg

The center image of the Womb World Mandala, featuring the central figure of Mahāvairocana surrounded by four buddhas and four attendant bodhisattvas.

Kūkai wrote the "Secret Mandala of the Ten Mind Abodes" (*Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*) based on the Womb World Mandala. In it, he divided esoteric Buddhism and general Buddhism into two categories—the revealed and the secret—and discussed their differences by classifying the human mind into ten categories, beginning with the deluded mind and ending with the world of enlightenment, describing them in terms of the Buddhism that existed in Japan at the time. The ten types of mind are as follows:

1. "The mind of the unenlightened person like the mind of a sheep": that is, the deluded mind of a person seeking only to satisfy desires.
2. "The mind of the foolish child trying to keep the precepts": the mind awakened to morality and ethics.
3. "The bold mind of a child": the mind in which faith in the deities has sprouted.
4. "The mind that believes in the aggregates and that there is no permanent ego": the mind that has faith in the teachings of the *śrāvaka-yāna* (a follower of Hīnayāna).
5. "The mind that seeks to pull out the seeds of karma": the mind that has faith in the teachings of the *pratyekabuddha-yāna* (the way of the self-enlightened buddha).
6. "The mind that abides in the Mahāyāna, contemplating causes": the mind of the Hossō school that teaches the idea of consciousness-only.
7. "The mind that contemplates non-substantiality": the mind of the Sanron school that teaches the Middle Way of the eightfold negation.
8. "The mind of one who walks the single path": the mind in accord with the Tendai school that teaches the One Vehicle.
9. "The mind of mutual identity without hindrance": the mind of the Kegon school that teaches that all things are without own-nature.
10. "The mind of mystic adornment": the mind of esoteric Buddhist enlightenment that has perfected the practice of the three mysteries.

The first three of these are associated with this world. The mind has awakened from just satisfying desires to ethics and morality, and has sprouted a belief in the deities, but is concerned only with oneself, with no connection to Buddhism. The remaining seven minds relate to the mind that has established a relationship with the teachings of Buddhism: the fourth and fifth refer to the mind that has awakened to Buddhism, but that lacks the compassion to benefit others. The four minds from the sixth to the ninth belong to Mahāyāna; though they strive to benefit living beings, they do not lead to the attainment of enlightenment. It is the tenth and final stage that represents the very realm of esoteric Buddhist enlightenment.

Kūkai regards the first nine minds as the revealed teachings and the tenth as the secret, or esoteric, teaching. There is no suggestion that the latter is superior or inferior to the others; Kūkai simply points out the difference between the realm of enlightenment and the world of phenomena. This makes sense when we consider the thought behind the mandala. The secret teaching is of the realm of enlightenment, while the revealed teachings are of the phenomenal world. In the Womb World Mandala, Mahāvairocana sits in the center of the hall known as the Central Dais Eight Petals (*chūdai hachiyōin*), surrounded by four buddhas representing the inner reality of enlightenment and four bodhisattvas representing the idea of practice toward enlightenment. The various bodhisattvas and deities appearing in the three zones surrounding the Central Dais depict the workings of Mahāvairocana in the real world.

Kūkai's distinction between manifest and esoteric Buddhism is based on the representation of two realms: that of the inner reality of enlightenment and that of its workings. Esoteric Buddhism is characterized by its attempt to view human existence from a comprehensive perspective, with an eye toward encompassing all that exists. ❑

Is the Universe Compassionate?

by Dominick Scarangello

I am sometimes asked how exactly a universal law can be compassionate. Doesn't Buddhism hold that, as we can see in the world around us, good causes lead to good results, and bad causes lead to bad results? The assertion that universal law is somehow compassionate would seem to be illogical and erroneous. This is the question we'll explore this time.

The Law of Causation and Compassion

In this series, I've examined what the Buddhist traditions of the Lotus Sutra call the "original Buddha" (Chn., *benfa*; Jpn., *honbutsu* 本仏), first from the standpoint of the history of religions (Scarangello 2019) and again from the premise that engaging with myth, metaphor, and symbolism can help people intuitively grasp profound religious assertions about truth and reality (Scarangello 2022). Readers who want to learn more about the original Buddha are urged to look at those pieces, but to summarize, the "original Buddha" is a religious metaphor and symbol of the ultimate truth that permeates the universe. In a nutshell, the most basic understanding of this truth is causation.

For Buddhism, causation is a universal law that governs how everything arises, stabilizes, changes, and extinguishes, finally becoming something else. The most basic account of causation in Buddhism is that a primary cause (Skt., *hetu*, Chn., *yin*; Jpn., *in* 因) encounters a condition, or facilitating secondary cause (Skt., *pratyaya*; Chn., *yuan*; Jpn., *en* 縁), producing a third phenomenon as a result. The Buddhist principle of "dependent origination" theorizes a chain of causation by which living beings are born and die, and describes their moment-to-moment experience. In most standard explanations, the chain contains twelve links (twelve causes and conditions) that, when conditioned by ignorance, lead to suffering, or, when conditioned by wisdom, lead to liberation and awakening. For Buddhism, "suffering," or *duḥkha*, is not necessarily physical pain but is better understood as the mental quality of unsatisfactoriness or "dis-ease" that we experience when life doesn't meet our expectations or desires—when things don't go our way. Thus, it is often said that although pain and sickness are unavoidable, we don't have to suffer—that is to say, there is no need to undergo the disappointment with life or anger at existence that wells up within us when our expectations and desires are out of touch with reality. The Lotus Sutra also introduces a unique principle of causation called the "ten suchnesses," which it says comprise the "ultimate reality of all things" (see Scarangello 2021).

Usually, we think of universal principles or laws as functioning mechanically in a disinterested, unbiased way. Gravity, for instance, works the same way on matter, according to the matter's mass. Whether it is a ball thrown by an athlete or a jogger who has stumbled, gravity will pull both toward the ground, irrespective of the serious consequences for the unfortunate jogger. Gravity doesn't give the jogger a pass because he or she is a living being who can suffer. Even socially, in democratic countries, we insist that, in principle, all people are equal before the law. That's why it's said colloquially, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime." In Buddhism too, basic principles of causation hold that "good causes," that is, actions and attitudes that are in accord with reality, lead to the good result of the absence of suffering, and bad causes, which is to say actions and attitudes that are not in accord with reality, lead to suffering.

But in some kinds of Buddhism, including the Lotus Sutra tradition, universal truth—reality itself—is said to be compassionate. The original Buddha is omnipresent, always working to lead us to liberation and awakening, and the encounters we have in our lives with things and people are all taken as messages from the Buddha, teaching and transforming us. But, in discursive terms, this is essentially saying that the universal law of causation, whether we conceive of it as cause, condition, and result, the twelve causes and conditions, or even

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the ten suchnesses, are not impartial, disinterested laws, but compassionate. Putting aside the issue of the personifying religious symbolism and metaphor of the original Buddha, I am sometimes asked how exactly a universal law can be compassionate. Doesn't Buddhism hold that, as we can see in the world around us, good causes lead to good results, and bad causes lead to bad results? The assertion that universal law is somehow compassionate would seem to be illogical and erroneous.

This is the question we'll explore this time.

Four Different Ways of Understanding Causation in Buddhism

Not unlike the world's other major religions, Buddhism is extremely diverse and has a long history. Its teachings and practices have developed over time and through interaction with the many cultures to which it has spread. One aspect of Buddhism that has undergone tremendous development is its conception of causation. And because over time Buddhists conceived of causation differently, their understanding of suffering and how to practice one's response to it also differed. As Rev. Dr. Kenneth Tanaka writes in a recent article for *Tricycle*, for the first time in history, all of the many types of Buddhism are found in one place at one time—North America (Tanaka 2021), and I think this also goes for other areas of the world such as Europe and even some parts of Asia. This means that those of us who begin studying Buddhism today confront the entirety of Buddhism's 2,500-year legacy of teachings and practices, including theories of causation, and unless we have some way of sorting out Buddhism's various understandings of causation, we are likely to become very confused.

Making sense of the diversity of Buddhism is in fact one of the main points at issue in the Lotus Sutra, and historically, many Buddhists have used the Lotus Sutra as a framework to bring coherence to the "84,000 teachings" of Buddhism. One of these was Zhiyi (智顗, 538–97 CE), also known as Master Tiantai, after the mountain where he practiced and taught many of his disciples. Zhiyi created a fourfold typology to make sense of the many Buddhist teachings and practices that had been transmitted to China. One of Zhiyi's criteria for sorting teachings into these four categories was their theories of causation, which were also closely connected to the understanding of suffering and how people should practice to transcend it. Depending on the text, the details of Zhiyi's schema can become quite complicated, and my presentation of it will necessarily be rudimentary, at best. I believe a basic account of his four categories of Buddhist teachings is still useful today for making sense of different conceptions of causation in Buddhism, learning how these conceptions relate to one another, and understanding how each of them can be skillful according to the circumstances. It will also help us comprehend how Lotus Sutra Buddhism arrived at the conclusion that the universe is a compassionate place, and that the functioning of causation is the compassionate activity of the Buddha.

Photo: Alamy / PPS

The Buddha as a young prince at the gate of his father's palace. *Hanging scroll painting, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang in Gansu province, China. Eighth century. The painting depicts the young prince seeing a sick man, one of the four encounters that led him to a path of enlightenment.*

The Four Categories of Buddhist Teachings

The teachings in Zhiyi's first category look at suffering much like ordinary people do—as problems that arise and exist. Spiritual practice is the work of extinguishing suffering by removing its causes and conditions, or extinguishing

suffering analytically through mental exercises of logical reduction, breaking down suffering and its causes into the things that make them up, such that they no longer logically exist to us as substantial entities. Liberation is attaining the state of the nonexistence of suffering.

The teachings in the second category go a step further by holding that suffering, like anything in the world, is the encounter of causes and conditions, and thus suffering and its causes are never anything substantial, but ephemeral and fleeting in their essence. Suffering, and its causes and conditions, never truly arise as substantial existences in the first place. The things in life that vex us only have the power we ourselves give them by not seeing them as they really are in their essence. When we look through their forms or appearances to their very essence, we see only chimeras and mirages. They are, just as they are, "empty" of substantial existence, and when we perceive them directly as such illusions or daydreams, they lose their power over us. And in terms of causation, because suffering and its causes never truly arise as substantial things in the first place, we don't have to extinguish them, and this is how the causal chain of suffering evaporates of its own accord.

The teachings in the first and second categories work primarily through subtraction, reduction, and negation—they remove things, or intellectually break them down into their components, or they teach people to see things, just as they are, as insubstantial. These are teachings of deconstruction. Liberation is a zero point, an absence—the nonexistence of suffering. To use an analogy, the teachings of the first category are like peeling back the layers of an onion to finally arrive at the center, where there is no core, but only emptiness—an absence. In contrast, in the teachings of the second category, the insight of wisdom is like X-ray vision that can instantly look past all the onion's layers at once to see its empty core as the immanent reality of what it is.

The third and fourth teachings take a different starting point: they are not world-negating in character, but world-affirming. To continue the analogy of an onion, in these teachings the "emptiness" at the core of the onion is also understood in a positive way: it is the very thing that makes the onion possible. Or, compare it to an empty glass. The absence or vacuum inside it is the very utility of the glass; it is what gives the glass its positive, affirmative qualities to do something in the world: to accept, hold, and store liquids. What was formerly seen as emptiness is now also seen as an affordance; the space within the glass is not just something negative, but instead the very source of all it can do. What was the emptiness of phenomena is, in these teachings, also a storehouse of merits and infinite possibility.

In the various explanations of the teachings in the third category, ignorance encounters "dharma nature" (Skt. *dharmatā*; Chn., *faxing* 法性;) or "suchness" (Skt., *tathatā*; Chn., *zhenru* 真如), giving rise to everything that exists. Readers may be unfamiliar with terms like dharma nature or suchness, which are said to be the ineffable true nature of phenomena, but for our purposes, we can think of it as the propensity of things to follow the law of causation, and we can also consider it synonymous with "buddha nature." To draw a parallel to modern philosophy, dharma nature could be imagined as something along the lines of Alfred Whitehead's proposal that creativity is the "universal of universals," the nature of everything, and because of this, "the universe is thus a creative advance into novelty" (Mesle 2008, 79).

Dharma nature or suchness is even sometimes said to be the direct cause (Skt., *hetu*) of everything that exists, while our ignorance is a condition (Skt., *pratyaya*), or facilitating cause for suffering, delusion, and defiled phenomena. For this reason, it is also said that "Dharma nature gives rise to all things." In one metaphor used to conceptualize this teaching, dharma nature or suchness is like the placid and tranquil water of a lake—the original state of phenomena—and our ignorance is a strong wind that churns the water, causing it to lose its clarity and become muddied. But, despite the admixture of the mud, the water remains and is never lost. For this reason, it is in this category of teachings that we first encounter the belief that all beings have buddha nature.

For readers familiar with the Threefold Lotus Sutra, this understanding of "emptiness" as also being a wellspring for existence should ring a bell. In the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings, the "opening" sutra of the Threefold Lotus Sutra and a kind of preface to the Lotus Sutra proper, Shakyamuni Buddha tells the assembly that the "innumerable meanings arise from the One Dharma, and this One Dharma is, namely, the state of having no attributes" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 14). The state of having no attributes—what we could call emptiness or dharma nature—is the "One Dharma" that gives birth to everything.

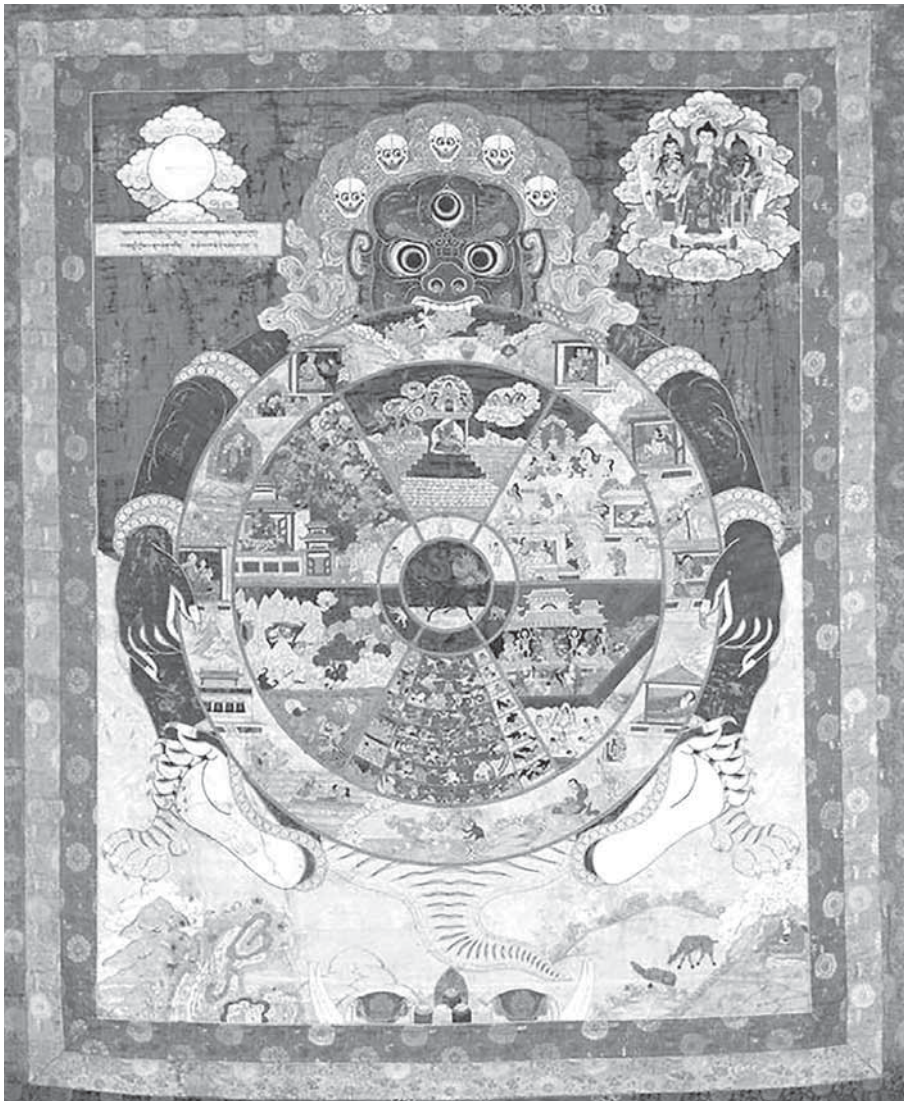
The teachings in the third category consist of practices to extinguish these adventitious forms of suffering and defilement that arise from the encounter of dharma nature and ignorance. This is reminiscent of the first category of teachings, but according to the perspective of the third category, once delusions and defilements are eliminated, in addition to emptiness, the dharma nature or suchness as a storehouse of merits is also attained. Thus, liberation and awakening are not simply absences, but also the recovery of something wondrous—buddha nature. Because these teachings posit the presence of both the defiled and the pure in things, and the way they bring together existence and nonexistence (emptiness), is why

they are considered teachings of the middle way.

The teachings in the fourth category take a further step that for most of us is a grand leap, which is why, to borrow the words of the Lotus Sutra, the teachings in this category are "difficult to enter and difficult to understand" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 57).

According to the teachings in the fourth category, the Buddha's wisdom reveals that even the adventitious phenomena of suffering and defilement are of the very same dharma nature as pure and undefiled phenomena. Both types of phenomena arise through the very same workings of dharma nature, thus in their essence, they are not different. In terms of causation, they have the same nature to interact with other things they encounter, become causes and conditions, and produce effects. Even though they are experienced by the ordinary human being as suffering, these things and experiences are, just as they are, dharma nature. This means that we cannot reject these phenomena in an absolute sense. An example used to explain these teachings is the metaphor of utensils made of gold. If the approach of the third category of teachings were taken, practitioners would melt down these utensils to obtain their gold, but here, in the fourth category of teachings, practitioners awaken to the fact that the utensils, be they cups or whatever, are nevertheless gold, just as they are, and there is no need to melt them down to obtain their gold.

From this standpoint, the teachings of the fourth category embrace phenomena characterized by suffering and delusion, but in a very nuanced way that, if misunderstood, could lead to even more suffering. The teachings in this fourth category hold that from the standpoint of causation there can be no liberation without the existence of bondage, and there can be no awakening without delusion. Samsara, the cycle of suffering, and nirvana, the peace and tranquility of liberation, are inseparable. Wisdom and delusion are entangled. For these reasons, we cannot experience any bliss or happiness separate from the aspects of our lives normally characterized by suffering—namely, birth, aging, and death. This ultimate reality of the world is described by Mahayana Buddhism's famous maxim "Delusion is inseparable from awakening, and samsara is inseparable from nirvana."



Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Wheel of Existence.jpg

A traditional Tibetan thangka showing the Wheel of Life, or chain of causation. This thangka was made in eastern Tibet and is currently housed in the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama.

For readers familiar with the Buddhist account of causation known as the twelve causes and conditions (also translated as "twelvefold causation" or "the twelve links of dependent origination"), Zhiyi describes this transformation of delusion into awakening and samsara into nirvana using the twelve links as follows. When the practitioner truly grasps that all phenomena are immanent expressions of the ultimate truth, and if they contemplate the ignorance that conditions the entire chain of causation as inseparable or not-different from wisdom, the entire chain of causation is transformed. First, the links characterized as delusion (ignorance, desire, and grasping) turn into wisdom—the mind of awakening, and are experienced as the realization of the world as buddha nature. Second, the links of the chain characterized as action (action and existence) turn into

wholesome deeds that are the workings of buddha nature and experienced as the freedom of liberation. Third, the links of the chain characterized as the suffering subject and its suffering (name and form, or the body-mind, and birth, aging, and death) become the body of a buddha, as birth, aging, and death are experienced as ease (see *Fahua xuanyi* [The profound meaning of the Lotus Sutra], in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [The Buddhist canon, Taishō period new edition], vol. 33, 705c).

If this transposition of experience seems counterintuitive to you, it may help to reflect on the relativity and interdependence of things according to Mahayana notions of causation. Can there be "up" without "down?" Can there be "heads" without "tails?" This is why ignorance cannot be separated from wisdom, and the suffering of samsara cannot be unrelated to liberation. Here, we can see that the perspective of the fourth category of teachings does not fly in the face of the principle of causation, but reflects a deep understanding of causation as mutual co-creation that is heavily indebted to the Buddhist philosophy of Nāgārjuna (second century CE). However, relativity does not lead to nihilism, but to the embrace of the world, and of all experience. This is not an encouragement to wallow in negative thoughts and actions that lead to more suffering, but to appreciate that working through and responding to the difficulties and challenges in life is the very source of our growth and development. Metaphorically, they are like the burden of heavy weights, without which we cannot tone our bodies and build our muscles. A famous example of this can be found in the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, where Shakyamuni Buddha expresses his appreciation for his archnemesis Devadatta, who tried to supplant him as the leader of the Buddhist community and, having failed at that, attempted to kill him on various occasions. "Because Devadatta was my good friend, I was able to perfect the Six Paramitas," Shakyamuni tells the assembly, even giving some credit to the adversarial role Devadatta played in his attainment of supreme perfect awakening: "All of this is due to the good friendship of Devadatta" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 232).

In the third, and especially the fourth, category of Buddhist teachings—the latter of which includes sutras such as the Lotus Sutra and the Mahayana version of the Nirvana Sutra—the workings of causation, even when they bring us suffering and delusion, are paradoxically appreciated as facilitating our liberation from suffering and the attainment of the wisdom of awakening. If good and evil were simply dualisms and forever separate, how could anyone ever attain awakening? In this teaching, good and evil are not separated by an eternal, uncrossable gulf, but are instead polarities, like ice and water or positive and negative electric charges. They are different functionings of the very same dharma nature.

As a result, awakening and liberation are the nature of everything, everywhere, all at once. This is a radical affirmation of the world as compassionate and merciful and a considerable development beyond the worldview of the first category of teachings. But when we look at the various teachings using Zhiyi's schema, we find a logical progression in their conceptualizations of causation, and we can see that causation is the fundamental principle that unites them, even though they differ in their understanding of it.

The Four Teachings All Have a Place in Our Practice

These four teachings are often understood as a hierarchy. The first two are considered true perspectives on reality, but one-sided or partial, in which things either exist or don't substantially exist. The third teaching tries to synthesize these partial truths by affirming both of them, while the fourth teaching negates both, to be the highest reality: the middle way that transcends both existence and nonexistence. However, the first, second, and third teachings included in the "One Vehicle" of Buddhism are useful and have an appropriate place in our practice, according to our capacities and circumstances. In the words of the Lotus Sutra, the many and diverse teachings of Buddhism "are solely for the sake of liberating living beings, [and] are all valid and not in vain" (ibid., 279).

A Lighthearted (but Hopefully Useful) Exercise

Let's try a thought experiment to see how all four teachings could be beneficial to us.

Sometimes we need to extinguish the existence of a certain kind of suffering in our lives by eradicating its causes. For example, let's say my health is in decline because of a poor lifestyle, and this brings me various types of suffering. One of the causes is perhaps that my diet consists of fast food, which is high in salt, fat, and calories. I can remove one cause of my suffering by eliminating fast food from my diet. Let's think of this as a metaphor for some of the teachings in the first category.

I still have a problem, however. The downtown of the city where I live is full of fast-food restaurants that offer all the sandwiches that I love and desperately crave. Maybe in the beginning of my effort to improve my health, I can avoid those restaurants by walking a different way home from the train station. But can I circumvent downtown forever? No, I can't. Yet, whenever I walk past those restaurants, I'm assaulted by the aroma of all the fast food I love, and sometimes I cannot resist it. I end up giving in to my cravings and walk into

one of those restaurants, and, having denied my cravings for so long, gorge myself on all the fast food I desire.

What could I do? I could reason with myself, going over in my head how the ingredients hurt my health, and that, after I eat that food, the next day I don't really feel well, and experience indigestion and bloating because of all the fat, salt, and preservatives used to make that food. Every time I pass through downtown, I can recall the bad ingredients and remember the suffering they have brought me.

Both avoiding these restaurants and the analytical exercises of reducing my favorite fast foods are like the approaches of the first category of teachings.

But I will never really succeed in freeing myself from the allure of fast food until the way I see it is utterly transformed. Eventually, if I change how I look at fast food so that, instead of perceiving the desirable surface characteristics I always see through to its essence as something unhealthy and intrinsically undesirable, then it will lose its power over me. If I were to see the fast food without the eyes of desire—that is, if desire originally never arose in the first place, then I would have the perspective of the second category of teachings.

If we stay with the metaphor of trying to achieve health, the teachings of the third and fourth categories would be more akin to proactive methods. What if I were to realize that not all fast food causes suffering, but that some foods on offer, like the salads (minus the high-calorie dressing, of course), can be healthy? Or what if I patronize newer fast-food chains that serve healthier food? We can think of this approach as a metaphor for the third category of teachings. It both affirms and negates at the same time.

An approach akin to the fourth category of teachings is admittedly hard to imagine using a fast-food habit as an example. But even fast food, despite its excessive salt and fat, is not completely devoid of nutritional value, and the reason why fast food leads to suffering is not anything intrinsic to the food, but within me, my mindset, and the actions it spurs. From this perspective, fast food is really no different from any other food. What I need to learn is moderation and knowing when enough is enough. Another possible way to embrace a middle way rather than one-sidedly negating fast food could be to get a job in one of those restaurants. I expect that at times I'll go into a fast-food restaurant and end up pigging out, but the very struggle itself holds the promise of helping me develop a sense of moderation, which, when extended to everything in my life, could completely transform the way I live. I could also use the teachings of the fourth category after the previous approaches have already suppressed my desire to a significant degree. In a way, this is a return to my world before I began practicing but informed by the wisdom of the middle way. Eventually, fast food could become my "good friend" like Devadatta, which, by the challenge it presents, facilitates the development of good qualities in me.

The Compassionate Universe of the Fourth Category of Teachings

The Threefold Lotus and Nirvana Sutras contain descriptions of the kind of compassionate universe that the fourth category of Buddhist teachings declares. In the Threefold Lotus Sutra's closing sutra's account, the Buddha is omnipresent, and the universe, his abode, is described as follows:

> It is a place composed of the paramita of permanence. It is a place securely established by the paramita of self. It is a place where the attributes of existence are extinguished by the paramita of purity. It is a place of no abiding in the attributes of body and mind, owing to the paramita of bliss. And it is a place where the attributes of all things are not seen as existence or nonexistence. (Ibid., 404)

Notice that the world is described in ways that are the direct opposite of how the Buddhist teachings of the first category would describe it. Those teachings contradict our ordinary view of the world by showing phenomena to be impermanent, and nonself; phenomena are defiled, and the attributes of body and mind are suffering. But in the Lotus Sutra and Nirvana Sutra, the first category of teachings' negation of the ordinary worldview is itself negated, becoming a higher-order affirmation of the world. Also, notice the statement that things are "not seen as existence or nonexistence." The transcendence of both partial views of existence and nonexistence tells us that this is the worldview of the fourth teaching.

In his commentary on this passage, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano explains that it is the description of how the world is experienced by an awakened person:

> It is a world composed of the paramita of permanence—a state of mind attained through one's practice in which one eliminates attachment to transient things and obtains a solid grasp of what always abides. It is also a world securely established by the paramita of self—the peace of mind attained by eliminating the egotistical small self and awakening to the great self. This great self is the free and unimpeded state of having perfectly realized universal buddha nature. It is also a place characterized by the paramita of purity, the equanimity of mind that is attained by abandoning the deluded discrimination of self and other (extinguishing attributes of existence). It is a place where, through the paramita of bliss—through the attainment of true quiescence of the heart and

peace of mind—suffering and distress come to an end. (Niwano 1989, 726)

The awakened person is not transported to another universe or some kind of heavenly paradise, but undergoes a radical change in their perspective to, as these sutras hold, see the holistic state of things as they really are. As Rev. Niwano makes clear, this is not a separate place in spatial terms but a different state of mind. For example, whereas the first category of Buddhist teachings provided nonself as an antidote to the selfish, petty sense of self that is the cause of so much suffering, here, a new self is realized: a grand self that is the interconnectedness with other people and the environment. In some Mahayana sutras like the Nirvana Sutra, this is called the "true self" or the "great self": the oneness of oneself with the totality of phenomena and events in our universe. Thus, instead of undergoing practices to negate or analytically reduce the ordinary, selfish sense of self, we transcend the petty notion of self by focusing on the interconnectedness of ourselves and all causal events in the universe. In the lexicon of Rissho Kosei-kai, this is pondering the events and people in our lives as causing us to live and sustaining us.

Practical Steps to Awaken to a Compassionate World

The teachings in the third, and especially the fourth category, which include the Lotus Sutra and the Mahayana version of the Nirvana Sutra, challenge us to see all things in the world as having arisen from dharma nature, suchness, or buddha nature, and more radically, to recognize the immanence of dharma nature in all things, perceiving all phenomena as nothing but Buddha Dharma. Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, taught a practical way in which ordinary people could work to attain this view of the world in the context of their everyday lives. This is to take the stance that all encounters in our lives are part of the path to awakening, and nothing is in vain. I think of this as Rissho Kosei-kai's lay-focused adaptation of Zhiyi's various instructions to his monastic disciples to contemplate things as dharma nature. Rev. Niwano taught people to do this using the basic language of causation, urging them to accept all that happens as "good causes."

As Rev. Kosho Niwano, president-designate of Rissho Kosei-kai, describes it:

> The founder [Rev. Nikkyo Niwano] always focused on the way that good causes lead to good effects. Having encountered the Lotus Sutra, he advanced the basic Buddhist teachings [on causation] an extra step . . . always seeing the people around oneself as good causes and good conditions. (Kosho Niwano 2008, 34)

If we only know the view of causation that is central to the first category of teachings—good causes lead to good results and bad causes lead to bad results—Rev. Niwano's words might strike us as unusual, but it should be clear to readers that this is a readily understandable practice thoroughly based on the fourth category's understanding of causality, and the oneness of everyday life and the realm of awakening heralded by the notion that "Delusion is inseparable from awakening, and samsara is inseparable from nirvana." As Rev. Kosho Niwano puts it:

> Actually, we are all liberated, although many people are not yet aware of this. The process of liberation is certain. Thus the important thing is to accustom yourself to always seeing that all things you encounter can be causes of happiness. (Kosho Niwano 2013, 34)

Rev. Kosho also says that we must confirm "all causes as good causes" through the events of our daily lives (ibid.). In other words, we must discover what we can learn from encounters, how we should change ourselves in light of them, and what they can teach us about life in general. In a previous feature, I reflected that this is like working on a Zen koan, or paradoxical riddle. You may not find meaning at first and struggle with doubt in hopes that you will understand it. The wish to solve the riddle is your faith. Then one day it is revealed to you. To see all causes as good causes is essentially an awakening to buddha nature in yourself and in others, and realize the events of daily life as the workings of the Buddha's liberation. But it takes work to open one's eyes. This is how each encounter can be transformative, because in our encounters we find wisdom.

Isn't This Just a Game of Semantics?

I understand why a compassionate universe, in which causation works mercifully, may be hard for many people to accept. It goes against our commonsense assumptions about the way things are. Over the last several centuries of western civilization, the scientific revolution's perspective of an impersonal, mechanistic universe has become the normative outlook, supplanting beliefs in any deity or principle of the good as ruling the cosmos. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" has coincided with the rise of nihilism in western secularized society. This revolution in consciousness has inevitably led to the existentialist notion that life lacks inherent meaning or preordained purpose.

The realist would respond that seeing all causes as good causes, and the compassionate universe that it implies, is merely a game of semantics, and that when we look squarely at the material

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The main gate of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau German Nazi concentration and extermination camp in Oswiecim, Poland.

realities of existence, death always wins out in the end. And so, the reality of the human predicament is that we live in a universe without any intrinsic meaning. The philosopher and novelist Albert Camus (1913–60), who went as far as to call the universe absurd, assailed philosophies or religions that refuse to recognize this absurdity as a checking out of reality that he called "philosophical suicide" (Camus 1991, 11).

While I do not accept that this is just an issue of semantics, and in the Lotus Sutra tradition the fourth teaching's vision of the world is believed to be the ultimate reality, transcending the partial truths of existence and nonexistence, awakening to the real is indeed fundamentally an issue of perspective. Buddhist practice includes changing our lives by avoiding behaviors and circumstances that will lead to suffering, and incorporates affirmative practice by helping others as a bodhisattva, but the heart of Buddhist practice is changing one's perspective. From its very beginnings, Buddhism has taught people to make their peace with the material realities that cannot be changed, such as birth, aging, sickness, and death; the inevitability of having to part with those we love and situations we prefer; the inability to get away from people we dislike or situations that are uncomfortable; and our powerlessness to make things turn out the way we want them to. Although these experiences cannot be totally avoided, we have the freedom to transcend those sufferings by changing our stance toward them, thus altering our subjective experience of them. But changes in our perspective manifest in our behavior, and this does eventually change the material realities of our lives. This is what Buddhism means when it claims that all realities arise from the mind.

An Existentialist Response: Every Experience in Life Is Meaningful

In western culture, the freedom to take a stance toward reality was discovered by the Stoics of the ancient Greco-Roman world, and in modern times, proclaimed by the existentialist philosophers. One modern existentialist thinker who may help us understand Lotus Sutra Buddhism's worldview for the twenty-first century is the psychologist and Auschwitz death camp survivor Viktor Frankl (1905–97). Frankl's "logotherapy" is counted with Freud and Jung's approaches as one of the three schools of Viennese psychotherapy. Despite enduring one of history's most tragic events of human suffering, Frankl rejected modern nihilism—the position that existence is senseless—and he also repudiated scientific reductionism, which asserts that human experience is nothing but lower-order drives (Marshall 2011, 10). For Frankl, meaning was to be found in every experience in life, no matter one's circumstances. What interests me about Frankl's thought is how it resonates with the world-affirming tenor of the fourth category of Buddhist teachings, including the postulate that "all causes are good causes."

In contrast to Freud, who taught that humankind seeks pleasure, and Nietzsche, who saw the will to power as primary, Frankl was convinced that the quest for meaning is central to what it is to be human. Frankl acknowledged that Being is ambiguous and that it is possible to see it as either nonsense or meaningful. Both interpretations are "logically of equal status," but because the individual making their decision about the nature of Being faces an existential choice, they "place the weight of their own existence onto one side of the scale" in favor of meaningfulness (ibid., 9). Frankl says that it is not knowledge that makes the decision,

but faith. For Frankl, this faith is not a distortion or minimizing of reality, but an "enriching of reality by the existentiality of the decision maker" (ibid.). This decision is summed up by the literal meaning of the German title of his famous work *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Despite everything say 'yes' to life" (Frankl 2014, 40).

Frankl acknowledged that this existential decision is subjective, but it "does not in the least detract from the objectiveness of reality itself." He illustrated this by asking his seminar students at Harvard to look out the classroom window at the cathedral across the street. Since each student was seated in a different location in the classroom, their perspectives on the cathedral differed. Yet, these differences in perspective did not change the objective reality of the cathedral in any way. However subjective a perspective may be, Frankl explains, things are seen *through* a perspective, thus our subjective perspectives are not ipso-facto projections forced upon reality (ibid., 40-1).

The affordance for the existential decision to see the world as one of meaning is the freedom that human beings always possess to make this choice, no matter the circumstances. As Frankl explains:

> To be sure, a human being is a finite thing, and his [sic] freedom is restricted. It is not freedom from conditions, but it is freedom to take a stand toward the conditions. (Frankl 1992, 132)

Frankl's recognition that we are finite beings with limited freedom, but never totally without freedom, is shared by Buddhism—there is no escape from aging, sickness, and death, and other types of suffering, but we can eliminate "dis-ease" by changing our attitude toward these experiences. In fact, Frankl goes as far to say that if the universe is indeed meaningful, there would have to be meaning in suffering in particular:

> If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete. (Ibid., 41)

This is the freedom to, by the stand we take toward our situation, transform situations of suffering into something positive.

> Life is potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable. And this in turn presupposes the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive. (Ibid., 89)

During his time in the death camp, Frankl found meaning in the experience in various ways, including using his medical and psychotherapeutic training to respond to the suffering of his fellow inmates, and at times his life became meaningful by focusing on the beauty of trees and sunsets (ibid., 9). The idea that the stand we take toward things can transform them from negative to positive, or something constructive, evokes how changing our way of seeing the world in the fourth category of Buddhist teachings can transpose ignorance into wisdom, and "dis-ease" into ease.

Frankl cautioned that the meaning of any given moment is not always clear, and we must be patient if we want to discover it (Guttman 2008, 61). Meanings need to be discovered and decoded, not arbitrarily, but conscientiously, and they should be integrated with higher orders of meaning. The meanings of a particular moment or instance that hold the potential to be true for us are those that fit with the meanings of our lives, and the ultimate meaning that we subscribe to (Marshall 2011, 30). "Ultimate meaning," or what Frankl called "supra meaning" is something like a general organizing principle of the universe (ibid., 29). It can also be faith and trust that there is an ultimate meaning (Frankl 2011, 17). Even though it may not be possible to fully grasp it intellectually, and thus it must be approached through faith, Frankl thought that having a sense of ultimate meaning is "of foremost psychotherapeutic and psychohygienic importance," and "adds immeasurably to human vitality" (Guttman 2008, 37).

The world as dharma nature, or in the language of Rissho Kosei-kai, a world where the Buddha is omnipresent, always together with us, and reaching out to us through all our encounters is Frankl's "supra meaning" for Lotus Sutra Buddhism. The Lotus Sutra also speaks of the need for faith to accept this account of reality because it cannot be entirely grasped intellectually or expressed in language. Zhiyi called it "inconceivable." On the granular level of meaning in everyday life, this becomes the stance that moment-to-moment experiences are all good causes, prompting the interrogation of experience to discover and decode its meanings.

Having Attained the Rare Birth of a Human Being

When president-designate of Rissho Kosei-kai Rev. Kosho Niwano urges people to try out this belief that "all causes are good causes" and says that "When we embrace this approach, we become aware of happiness and can acquire true joy" (Niwano 2013, 34), it may strike some as mere magical thinking. This time I've sought to show how profound this deceptively simple teaching is by exploring its roots in the development of Buddhism's thinking about causation and causal logic of the fourth category of Buddhist teachings that profess the universe to be filled with the Buddha's compassion and see

causation as the working of that compassion in the world.

Some readers may be thinking that I have not spoken to the problem of inevitable, inescapable death—the great equalizer. Doesn't this negate all meaning, and certainly prove that the workings of causation are not compassionate? Many Buddhists would answer by pointing to reincarnation and saying that death is only a transformation into another form. The river of existence, a great chain of dependent origination, marches on. But I will cede ground to the realist by refraining from making any claims that I can't prove through science. Instead, I will share a metaphor that Buddhism uses to convey the rarity and preciousness of a human life.

It is commonly said in Buddhism that being born as a human being is as rare as the chance occurrence of a sea turtle swimming under the sea to poke its head through the hole in a piece of driftwood when it surfaces. This metaphor was originally tied to the belief in reincarnation, but I prefer to interpret it this way: when we look around our world, we see that most things are inanimate matter—rocks, soil, air, gas, and so forth. Even many of the living things on earth, such as plants, are insentient (as far as we know). This means that most of the matter in our world has come together to form inanimate things, and only the tiniest fraction has assembled in just the right way to become sentient living beings. Being born as humans, we have attained an exceedingly rare and precious marker of existence—sentience. Even if you think this is sheer luck, if you try meditating on life in this way, I don't think you'll be able to feel anything but gratitude. Yes, we must die; it is inevitable. But most of the universe doesn't even get the chance to live a sentient life in the first place.

And our actions in this world are not necessarily in vain. However infinitesimal we are in the face of the cosmos, what we have done in this life is part of the grand totality of causation. Frankl says that the fact that something has happened never changes. The event, or the living being, has existed, and nothing can change that fact. He maintains that meaning is never lost.

In a fascinating discussion in her most recent book, Sabine Hossenfelder, physicist and host of the podcast "Science Without the Gobbledygook" writes that when a person dies, the information of their body and the life they lived disperses quickly into forms we can no longer communicate with, "and becomes, in practice, irretrievable." But advanced mathematics shows that information is, in principle, eternal:

> If you trust our mathematics, the information is still there, spread out over the universe, to be preserved forever. (Hossenfelder 2022, 19) [...] While the situation is not entirely settled, it seems that the laws of nature preserve information entirely, so all the details that make up you and the story of your grandmother's life are immortal. (Ibid., 21–22)

Hossenfelder's scientifically informed speculations bring to mind the following passage from "The Life Span of the Eternal Tathagata," ch.16 of the Lotus Sutra:

> The Tathagata perceives the character of the threefold world as it really is. Birth and death do not leave it or appear in it. There is no staying in the world or departing from it for extinguishment. It is neither substantial nor insubstantial. And it is neither thus nor otherwise. (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 278). ❑

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The Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue

(3)

This is the 139th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

TEXT One bodhisattva's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on the Buddha'; another's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on the Dharma'; yet another's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on the Sangha'; still another's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on the precepts'; still another's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on donation'; yet another's preaching will say: 'Do you reflect on the heavens.' And the preaching will further say: 'Such six laws are the aspiration to buddhahood and are the ones that beget the bodhisattvas. Before the buddhas, do you now confess your previous sins and repent them sincerely.'

COMMENTARY The bodhisattvas preach and instruct the follower to do a variety of things in order to purify the six organs. This implies that there is a considerable gap between our own actions and those of the bodhisattvas who appear in the Mahayana sutras. We must therefore reflect upon our deficiencies. The bodhisattvas' preachings are heard as voices from the sky that reverberate in the mind. A voice first says to reflect on the Buddha: "You may think that you have taken refuge in the Buddha, but your awareness of this remains insufficient. Unless you strive with your whole body and mind to become close to

the Buddha, that awareness doesn't express your earnest desire." Another voice then demands that we reflect on the Dharma. "Do you think you have completely understood the Buddha's teachings? Are you not guilty of great arrogance? The Buddha's teachings are very profound and deep. Unless you study them and think about them more deeply, you will not understand their truth." A further voice orders us to reflect on the Sangha. "A community of believers is essential if the Buddha's teachings are to spread in the world. Are you exerting yourself for the community? Aren't your efforts perhaps still lacking? Forget yourself and work for the community of believers." Another voice sternly adjures us: "Are you keeping the precepts you received from the Buddha? Are your donations (particularly that of the Dharma) for the sake of society and other people sufficient? Have you attained the realm of heavens, or the state where you are entirely separated from the defilements?" It is when these six are in place that we can truly be said to have raised the aspiration toward enlightenment. Practicing them is in itself the way to be a bodhisattva. Thus the follower must reflect on whether he or she lacks any of them; if faults or deficiencies are perceived, they must be confessed before the buddhas and repented sincerely. With repentance, another voice arises in the mind.

TEXT In your innumerable former lives, by reason of your organ of the eye, you have been attached to all forms. Because of your attachment to forms, you hanker after all dust. Because of your hankering after dust, you receive a woman's body and you are pleasurably absorbed in all forms everywhere you are born age after age.

COMMENTARY This passage is important for its remarkably concise exposition of the fundamental causes of human unhappiness. We should recall here the Law of the Twelve Causes and Conditions.

• *In your innumerable former lives*. This refers to an extremely long period of time lasting from the far distant past to the present, repeating the cycles of rebirth.

• *By reason of your organ of the eye, you have been attached to all forms*. In the course of countless cycles of rebirth, we have continued to hold on to our fundamental ignorance (lack of wisdom). Because of errors in how we perceive things (organ of the eye), we are always attached to the phenomena (all forms) that surround us, or we have the tendency to covet them.

• *Because of your attachment to forms, you hanker after all dust*. "Dust" refers to all the trivial things that act as a base for the defilements. If we become attached to phenomena (forms), we inevitably lust after those things that bring pleasure to our senses.

• *You receive a woman's body*. In ancient India, women were lowly regarded, being considered a hindrance to religious training. Such a statement would not be apt in modern times.

The mind's voice continues:

TEXT Forms harm your eyes and you become a slave of human affections. Therefore, forms cause you to wander in the triple world. Such fatigue of your wandering there makes you so blind that you can see nothing at all.

COMMENTARY *A slave of human affections*. This refers to the mind that feels gratitude to things that bring pleasure to the senses and that is attached to the result. In other words, we feel grateful for those things that are favorable to us and become attached to having them always remain unchanged. Even if circumstances do change, we still try to grasp hold of those things that bring us pleasure. Thus, we are captive of phenomenal change and become its slave.

• *Fatigue*. We become exhausted with chasing after phenomenal things. Those who are attached to "human affections" are pursued by the defilements that arise when phenomenal changes occur, and suffer mental fatigue. To perceive the truth, the mind must be relaxed and clear; in a state of fatigue it is in no state to do so.

The mind's voice continues:

TEXT You have now recited the sutras of Great Extent, the Great-vehicle. In these sutras the buddhas of all directions preach that their forms and bodies are not extinct. You have now been able to see them—is this not true? The evil of your eye-organ often does much harm to you.

COMMENTARY This too is an important passage. Having learned that the Buddha attained buddhahood in the infinite past, we believe that we will also be able to attain buddhahood someday, but it is not easy to remain true to that consciousness. If we cannot, though, we will be unable to grasp the essence of the Mahayana teachings. The ultimate teaching of the Mahayana sutras, the Lotus Sutra in particular, is the truth about the existence of the Eternal Original Buddha; that is, all beings and all things are caused to live by that Buddha. When we are able to realize this in the furthest depths of our mind, we will for the first time experience the true joy of living. We will be unaffected by the temporary joys and sadnesses associated with phenomenal things, for we will be constantly composed in mind in daily living. Further, when we realize that all existence is equal, being caused to live by the Eternal Original Buddha, we are naturally impelled to value all others. There will spontaneously well up within us all a true love for all beings and things, a spirit of harmony

and conciliation. Thus, to be completely assured of the existence of the Eternal Original Buddha is the supreme way to become truly human beings and create a brighter human society. If we lack some of this confidence, if we feel unsure, we must reflect upon ourselves and repent, and then continue our training until we mentally conform to that truth.

TEXT Obediently following my words, you must take refuge in the buddhas and Shakyamuni Buddha and confess the sins caused by your organ of the eye, saying: 'Dharma-water of wisdom-eye possessed by the buddhas and the bodhisattvas! Be pleased, by means of it, to wash me and to let me become pure!'

Having finished speaking thus, the follower should universally salute the buddhas in all directions, and turning to Shakyamuni Buddha and the Great-vehicle sutras, he should again speak thus:

COMMENTARY *Wisdom-eye*. This is the eye of wisdom that penetrates the true aspect of all things. More precisely, wisdom comprises both the power to discern the aspect of distinction of all phenomena and the power to penetrate the aspect of equality of all phenomena. This quality is brought out in the expression universal and great wisdom.

TEXT 'The heavy sins of my eye-organ of which I now repent are such an impediment and are so tainted that I am blind and can see nothing at all. May the Buddha be pleased to pity and protect me by his great mercy! The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue onboard the ship of the great Dharma ferries the company of the countless bodhisattvas everywhere in all directions. Out of compassion for me, be pleased to permit me to hear the law of repenting the evil of my eye-organ and the impediment of my bad karma!'

COMMENTARY *The company of the countless bodhisattvas*. Here "company" has the sense of a "band of companions." The companions of the countless bodhisattvas are the people who are led, guided, and taught by those bodhisattvas.

TEXT Speaking thus three times, the follower must prostrate himself down to the ground and rightly reflect on the Great-vehicle without forgetting it. This is called the law repenting the sin of the organ of the eye.

COMMENTARY The section above has dealt with the method of repentance for sins caused by the eye. The main point is to be aware of the fundamental error of perceiving only those phenomena that appear before the eye and to strive to see the true aspect of all things.

TEXT If there be anyone who calls upon the names of the buddhas; burns incense; strews flowers; aspires to the Great-vehicle; hangs silks, flags, and canopies; speaks of the errors of his eyes; and repents his sins, such a one in the present world will see Shakyamuni Buddha, the buddhas who emanated from him, and countless other buddhas and will not fall into the evil paths for asamkhyeya kalpas. Thanks to the power and vow of the Great-vehicle, such a one will become an attendant [of the buddhas], together with all the bodhisattvas of dharani. Anyone who reflects thus is one who thinks rightly. If anyone reflects otherwise, such is called one who thinks falsely. This is called the sign of the first stage of the purification of the eye-organ.

COMMENTARY *Thanks to the power and vow of the Great-vehicle, such a one will become an attendant [of the buddhas], together with all the bodhisattvas of dharani*. If we have acquired the strong power that is the Mahayana teachings and hold continually to our vow to bring about the deliverance of all beings, we too will become one of the company of dharani bodhisattvas, who possess the power to instruct others not to do any evil and possess the power to encourage others to do good.

TEXT Having finished purifying the organ of the eye, the follower should again further read and recite the Great-vehicle sutras, kneel and repent six times day and night, and should speak thus: 'Why can I see only Shakyamuni Buddha and the buddhas who emanated from him but cannot see the Buddha's relics of his whole body in the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures? The stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures exists forever and is not extinct. I have defiled and evil eyes. For this reason, I cannot see the stupa.' After speaking thus, the follower should again practice further repentance.

COMMENTARY The Buddha Abundant Treasures is, as is true in the Lotus Sutra , buddha nature itself. There is therefore no other way to see the Buddha than to realize one's buddha nature. We have only to consider the actuality of our lives to know how difficult such a realization is. When we are told the truth that the essence of human beings is buddha nature, all of us will be able to have some degree of understanding of what it is, but it is far more difficult to reach the point of being able to affirm it from the depths of our being. If we are satisfied with only half measures and tell ourselves we have come far enough, our religious training won't get any further, and we will never attain true enlightenment. Thus the sutra teaches us here that we must undertake stricter self-reflection.

Photo: Bridgeman Images / PPS

The Buddhas Prabhutaratna and Sakyamuni seated sided by side in the jeweled stupa. *Shakyamuni Buddha and the Buddha Abundant Treasures sit together. Gilt bronze. Northern Wei dynasty, China (386–535). Guimet Museum.*

TEXT After seven days have passed, the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures will spring out of the earth. Shakyamuni Buddha with his right hand opens the door of the stupa, where the Buddha Abundant Treasures is seen deep in contemplation of the universal revelation of forms. From each pore of his body he emits rays of light as numerous as the atoms of the sands of the Ganges. In each ray there dwells one of the hundred thousand myriad kotis of transformed buddhas.

COMMENTARY The follower who is thoroughly strict with himself and does not deceive himself will reproach himself and repent if he senses that there is even a minute gap in his understanding or the slightest obstruction to true enlightenment. If he continues to do so with all his mind, he will eventually perceive buddha nature welling forth as if before his eyes. When Shakyamuni opens the door of the precious stupa with his right hand (the power of wisdom), the follower clearly perceives the truth of the Mahayana teachings that the Buddha has preached for the sake of all. With this enlightenment comes the confirmation of the truth that buddha nature is possessed by all beings and that buddha nature reveals itself to anyone, taking a variety of forms ("universal revelation"). Then we will be able to see buddha nature clearly, shining and radiant, even in those people whom we have considered ignorant or evil. The "hundred thousand myriad kotis of transformed buddhas" refers to those people.

TEXT When such a sign appears, the follower will rejoice and make procession around the stupa with praising verses. When he has finished making procession around it seven times, the Tathagata Abundant Treasures praises him with a great voice, saying: 'Heir of the Dharma! You have truly practiced the Great-vehicle and have obediently followed Universal Virtue, repenting [the sins of] your eye-organ. For this reason, I will go to you and bear testimony to you.' Having spoken thus, the Tathagata extols the Buddha, saying: 'Excellent! Excellent! Shakyamuni Buddha! Thou art able to preach the Great Dharma, to pour the rain of the Great Dharma, and to cause all the defiled living to accomplish their buddhahood.'

COMMENTARY Making procession around the stupa of the Tathagata Abundant Treasures seven times while reciting the verses of praise describes the follower's admiration for the wonder of buddha nature and his praise with joy.

TEXT Thereupon the follower, having beheld the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures, again goes to the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, and folding his hands and saluting him, speaks to him, saying: 'Great Teacher! Please teach me the repentance of my errors.'

Universal Virtue again speaks to the follower, saying: 'Through many kalpas, because of your ear-organ, you dangle after external sounds; your hearing of mystic sounds begets attachment to them; your hearing of evil sounds causes the harm of one hundred and eight illusions. Such retribution of your hearing evils brings about evil things and your incessant hearing of evil sounds produces various entanglements. Because of your perverted hearing, you will fall into evil paths, faraway places of false views, where the Dharma cannot be heard.

COMMENTARY Here again the mind's voice speaks: For long ages you have piled error upon error in the way you listen to things. Because of your mind's illusion, you seek and follow ("dangle after") what you hear from without ("external sounds"). When you hear what is pleasant ("mystic sounds"), you are deluded by those sounds and cling to them ("begets attachment"), and when you hear what is unpleasant ("evil sounds"), various defilements

arise and lead to thoughts of enmity and revenge, which injure your own mind and cause harm to others ("causes the harm"). Because you hear things with a deluded mind ("hearing evil"), as its retribution, you will act wrongly ("evil things"); moreover, because you have been prone to always interpret what people say in a negative manner ("your incessant hearing of evil sounds"), one delusion will become the contributing cause for the increasing growth of that delusion ("produces various entanglements"), as one grasps rocks and trees one after the other to clamber up the mountainside. Because you listen to things with a distorted mind, your thoughts fall into such evil ways as anger (the realm of hell) and greed (the realm of hungry spirits) or faraway places of mistaken ideas ("false views"), so that you become incapable of hearing the teachings of the Buddha ("where the Dharma cannot be heard"). The passage "faraway places of false views" can also be interpreted as "extreme views unrelated to the Buddha's teachings ('faraway places'), or mistaken ideas ('false views')."

There are many points here that are called to mind. It is one of the unhappy propensities of ordinary people to think too negatively about what others say, and in particular, matters become even worse when something is heard secondhand. Once people interpret in a negative way, their interpretations can turn into preconceptions, which causes them to harbor hatred and grudges one after another. We must beware of such things occurring in the course of our daily lives.

TEXT At present you have recited and kept the Great-vehicle, the ocean-store of merits. For this reason, you have come to see the buddhas in all directions, and the stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures has appeared to bear testimony to you. You must yourself confess your own errors and evils and must repent all your sins.'

COMMENTARY Again we hear the inner voice. You have at last acquired the Mahayana teachings, and through the merit thus acquired, you have been able to come into contact with the minds of the buddhas in every direction. You have also understood, as clearly as if you could see it with your own eyes, the actuality of buddha nature. However, something is still lacking in your training. You must examine the illusions of your mind much more closely and dispel them.

TEXT Then the follower, having heard thus, must again further fold his hands, and prostrating himself down to the ground, he must speak thus, saying: 'All wise, World-honored One! Be pleased to reveal yourself and bear testimony to me! The sutras of Great Extent are the masters of compassion. Be pleased to look upon me and hear my words! Until my present life, for many kalpas, because of my ear-organ, I have been attached to hearing [evil] sounds, like grass clings to glue; my hearing evil sounds causes the poison of defilements that are attached to every condition, and I am not able to rest even for a little while; my raising evil sounds fatigues my nerves and makes me fall into the three evil ways. Now having for the first time understood this, I confess and repent it, turning to the world-honored ones.'

COMMENTARY *The sutras of Great Extent are the masters of compassion*. This is a very important passage. The Mahayana teachings are the source of compassion, for at their core is the truth that all beings equally possess buddha nature. More precisely, all human beings, all animal and plant life, as well as all nonliving beings, are caused to live by the Eternal Original Buddha and, possessing buddha nature, are of exactly the same existence as each of us. When we understand this in the depths of our mind, we cannot help but feel affection for all beings, both sentient and nonsentient, which is a deep affection based on the oneness of the self with others. Such affection is called compassion. Love of others stimulated by a necessity to love is an excellent thing, as is love born of pity. The compassion that Buddhism refers to transcends those kinds of love and is the state where one comes to love spontaneously, which is considered the highest of all forms of love. Such compassion develops through the deepest realization of the essence of Mahayana, which teaches that all beings and things are caused to live by the Eternal Original Buddha. It is in this sense that the sutras of Great Extent are the masters of compassion.

• *Be pleased to look upon me and hear my words!* This passage means to say, "Since the Buddha sees through everything, please look into the deepest parts of my heart. There is nothing I will try to hide from you, for I intend to reveal all to you."

• *I have been attached to hearing [evil] sounds, like grass clings to glue*. "Like grass clings to glue" is a skillful metaphor. When we hear things that appeal to us, we rejoice in them without consideration, adhering to them tightly. Such psychology of ordinary people is described clearly.

• *My hearing evil sounds causes the poison of defilements that are attached to every condition, and I am not able to rest even for a little while*. Here, too, is a fine description of the mindset of one who has no firm faith. It is when we have no firm faith that we are at the mercy of external stimuli ("sounds"), buffeted from side to side ("every condition"), swayed by appearances, and misled on every front ("not able to rest even for a little while"). When we hear evil sounds (those disadvantageous or unpleasant to us) in particular, they give rise to wrong emotions ("the poison of

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An image of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

defilements") one after another, such as anger, hatred, and jealousy. Then we, too, unintentionally voice "evil sounds," raging, backbiting, and making slanderous remarks. However much we give vent to such feelings, however, we will never gain any relief; rather, we will become more and more irritated ourselves, and as a consequence we will be mentally tired ("fatigues my nerves"). This will cause us to become depressed and fall into the mire of the three evil ways, or states of mind: hells (the realm of anger), the realm of hungry spirits (where inhabitants continually chase after their desires), and the realm of the beasts (where inhabitants live by instinct alone, with no wisdom). Reflect on whether we, too, may be guilty of such pitiful behavior or inclination is the repentance of the ear-organ.

TEXT Having finished repenting thus, the follower will see the Buddha Abundant Treasures emitting a great ray of light that is gold-colored and universally illuminates the eastern quarter as well as the worlds in all directions, where the countless buddhas appear with their bodies of pure gold color. In the sky of the eastern quarter there comes a voice uttering thus: 'Here is a buddha, the world-honored one named Excellent Virtue, who also possesses innumerable emanated buddhas sitting cross-legged on lion thrones under jewel trees.' All these world-honored ones who enter into the contemplation of the universal revelation of forms speak to the follower, praising him and saying: 'Good! Good! Good son! You have now read and recited the Great-vehicle sutras. That which you have recited is the mental stage of the Buddha.'

COMMENTARY Seeing the Buddha Abundant Treasures emitting a great ray of light indicates that as we purify the ear-organ through repentance, our buddha nature comes to grow still clearer within the mind. Consequently we come also to see countless emanated buddhas, which means we can discern the buddha nature in all living beings as well. To perfectly reach such a state is to enter the mental stage of the Buddha. Guiding all beings to that mental stage is nothing other than the ultimate purpose of the Mahayana teachings.

TEXT After these words have been spoken, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue will again further preach to the follower the law of repentance, saying: 'In the innumerable kalpas of your former lives, because of your attachment to odors, your discrimination and your perception are attached to every condition and you fall into birth and death. Do you now meditate on the cause of the Great-vehicle! The cause of the Great-vehicle is the ultimate reality of all things.'

COMMENTARY *Because of your attachment to odors*. This means to be greedy for the pleasures of the five sense-organs and to forget mental joy. Here, "odors" represents all the senses. When we lust too much after the pleasures of the senses alone, our powers of understanding and discriminating ("perception" and "discrimination") sensibly become dull. As a result, we will end up living at the mercy of external stimuli. When things that appeal to us appear before our gaze, we thoughtlessly give ourselves up to them ("attached to every condition"), and at the mercy of phenomenal changes ("birth and death"), we will oscillate between joy and sadness. Thus spiritually we find ourselves in a lamentable condition.

People who find themselves in such a position gain great benefit from removing themselves from everyday life for a time and undergoing religious training to perceive clearly for themselves the ultimate reality of all things that is the basis ("cause") of the Mahayana teachings. By doing so, they come to realize how empty it is to pursue the pleasures of the senses alone, so that when they return to their normal life, they are easily able to escape the oscillations of joy and sorrow that result from phenomenal changes.

Thus the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (the mind's voice) strongly recommends this repentance.

TEXT Having heard these words, the follower should again further repent, prostrating himself down to the ground. When he has repented, he should exclaim thus: 'Namah Shakyamuni Buddha! Namah stupa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures! Namah all the buddhas emanated from Shakyamuni Buddha!'

COMMENTARY The teachings of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue continue.

TEXT Having spoken thus, he should universally salute the buddhas in all directions, exclaiming: 'Namah the Buddha Excellent Virtue in the eastern quarter and the buddhas who emanate from him!' The follower should also make obeisance to each of these buddhas as wholeheartedly as if he saw them with his naked eyes and should pay homage to them with incense and flowers. After paying homage to the buddhas, he should kneel with folded hands and extol them with various verses. After extolling them, he should speak of the ten evil karmas and repent all his sins.

COMMENTARY *The ten evil karmas*. These are the ten types of evil action of body and mind: killing, stealing, committing adultery, lying, improper language, a double tongue, ill speaking, covetousness, anger, and ignorance ("ten evils"; see the discussion in "Ten Merits," chapter 3 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings).

The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (the mind's voice) continues:

TEXT Having repented, he should speak thus, saying: 'During the innumerable kalpas of my former lives, I yearned after odors, flavors, and contacts and produced all [manner of] evils. For this reason, for innumerable lives I have continuously received states of evil existence, including hells, hungry spirits, animals, and faraway places of false views. Now I confess such evil karmas, and taking refuge in the buddhas, the kings of the Righteous Dharma, I confess and repent my sins.'

COMMENTARY We should consider this to be a deeper form of repentance regarding the attachment to odors discussed earlier. Adding "flavors" and "contacts" to "odors" strengthens the meaning of the sensual pleasures and refers to physical pleasure.

- *Faraway places of false views*. This passage can be interpreted as "extreme views and false views."
- *The buddhas, the kings of the Righteous Dharma*. The "Righteous Dharma" refers to the true teachings. The kings of the true teachings are the buddhas who are one with the true teachings themselves.

Again, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue continues:

TEXT Having repented thus, the follower must again read and recite the Great-vehicle sutras without negligence of body and mind. By the power of the Great-vehicle, from the sky there comes a voice saying: 'Heir of the Dharma! Do you now praise and explain the Dharma of the Great-vehicle, turning to the buddhas in all directions, and before them do you yourself speak of your errors! The buddhas, the tathagatas, are your merciful fathers.' Do you yourself speak of the evils and bad karmas produced by your organ of the tongue, saying: 'This organ of the tongue, moved by the thought of evil karmas, leads me to false speaking, improper language, ill speaking, a double tongue, slandering, lying, and praising the words of false views, and also causes me to utter useless words. Because of such many and various evil karmas, I provoke fights and dissensions and speak of the Dharma as if it were not the Dharma. I now confess all such sins of mine.'

COMMENTARY *The buddhas, the tathagatas, are your merciful fathers*. These are truly important words. The follower has continued to practice repentance on the physical aspects very severely, and if people do not understand the meaning of this sufficiently, some of them may feel a lump in their throat. Or others may think it implies that one prostrates oneself before a master who observes one's evil deeds, confessing one's sins and begging forgiveness. This, however, is completely wrong. The Buddha is our compassionate and gentle father, who thinks continually of ways to bring all to deliverance, not of inflicting punishment. Every time we strip away one defilement of our mind through repentance, he rejoices and always praises us for our efforts. The reason we will repent is not because we fear him. Rather, because we cherish a longing and a thirst for him and wish him to rejoice, we will repent, feeling like we depend on a fond father. Thus the words "the buddhas, the tathagatas, are your merciful fathers" have such deep significance.

The evil karmas of the tongue have their basis in delusion of mind. Because of evil karmas, the tongue is moved by thoughts of evil; thus it is the mind that must in the final analysis be corrected. It is also the case that often the words uttered make a bad mind still worse. For example, if we say that we don't like a particular person, we might very well end up detesting him or her. Both the mind and the words provide causes and outcomes, so that we need to pay attention to both.

Among the sins of the tongue are false speaking, speaking irresponsibly (improper language), ill speaking, causing dissension (a double tongue), abusing people or the Buddhist teachings by marshaling false facts (slandering), lying, misleading people by teaching or praising false ideas (words of false views), and indulging in worthless gossip (useless words). You may think that gossip is not harmful, merely a form of social recreation, but if we chatter meaninglessly on and on, our thought processes will become blunted and we will find it increasingly difficult to think about things that matter or to discuss what is truly important. We must, therefore, attempt to keep such talk within measure.

Because of the evil karma our words cause, people reject one another ("fights"), the peace of their lives is disturbed ("dissensions"), what is correct (especially "the Righteous Dharma") is spread as if it were something incorrect, people's improvement is impeded, and social progress is inhibited. Thus we must constantly reflect upon and repent the words that leave our mouth.

The teachings of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue still continue.

TEXT Having spoken thus before the world's heroes, the follower must universally revere the buddhas in all directions, prostrating himself down to the ground and folding his hands and kneeling to salute them, and he must speak thus, saying: 'The errors of this tongue are numberless and boundless. All the thorns of evil karmas come from the organ of the tongue. This tongue causes the cutting off of the wheel of the Righteous Dharma. Such an evil tongue cuts off the seeds of merits. Preaching of meaningless things is variously forced upon [others]. Praising false views is like adding wood to a fire and further wounding living beings [who already suffer] in raging flames. It is like one who dies drinking poison without [showing] sores or pustules. Such reward of sins is evil, false, and bad and causes me to fall into the evil ways during a hundred or a thousand kalpas. Lying causes me to fall into a great hell. I now take refuge in the buddhas of the southern quarter and confess my errors and sins.'

COMMENTARY Here, too, we have extremely important teachings and many severe but apt metaphors.

• *All the thorns of evil karmas come from the organ of the tongue*. This sentence means wounding another through the barbs of the mouth. Causing such wounds, born of negative intent and difficult of cure, is behavior resulting in grave karmic retribution.

• *The cutting off of the wheel of the Righteous Dharma*. The true teachings extend infinitely, like an ever-rolling wheel, bringing large numbers of people to deliverance. The rolling wheel can, however, be brought to a standstill by malicious slander against the teachings, the worst of all sins.

• *Preaching of meaningless things is variously forced upon [others]*. "Meaningless things" refers to what is not the Truth. We often see examples in the course of our life where, when issues cannot be explained directly, they are promoted indirectly in a high-handed fashion ("forced upon") and in a variety of ways ("variously") or distorted in order for them to be accepted. There are certainly individuals and groups who publicize themselves in this way ("false views"). This is like throwing more wood on an already raging fire and thus causing great harm to people. Since the people will tend to think that such ideas are splendid and correct, they will, all unknowingly, find at some point that they have become undermined spiritually. This is like a person who has been poisoned. Though the person does not develop boils ("sores") or a rash ("pustules"), he or she dies of the burning down of the internal organs. People who have been poisoned by evil ideas may show no visible sign of their affliction on the surface, but they have been tainted within. We have here an excellent description of the evil workings of false views.

TEXT When the follower reflects thus, there will come a voice from the sky saying: 'In the southern quarter there is a buddha named Sandalwood Virtue who also possesses countless emanated buddhas. All these buddhas preach the Great-vehicle and extinguish sins and evils. Turning to the innumerable buddhas and the great merciful world-honored ones in all directions, you must confess such sins and false evils and repent them with a sincere heart.' When these words have been spoken, the follower should again salute the buddhas, prostrating himself down to the ground.

Thereupon the buddhas will send forth rays of light that illuminate the follower's body and naturally cause him to feel joy of body and mind, to raise a great mercy, and to reflect on all things extensively. At that time the buddhas will widely preach to the follower the law of great kindness, compassion, joy, and indifference, and also teach him kind words to make him practice the six ways of harmony and reverence. Then the follower, having heard this teaching, will greatly rejoice in his heart and will again further recite and study it without laziness.

From the sky there again comes a mystic voice, speaking thus: 'Do you now practice the repentance of the body and mind!

COMMENTARY *Joy, and indifference.* "Joy" is to rejoice in the happiness of others; "indifference" is to disregard both the favors we do others and the injuries inflicted on us by others. It is to go beyond love and hate in order to think continually about the good of others.

• *Kind words*. This refers to gentle words full of affection. The Buddhist expression "a gentle face and kind words" tells us what our demeanor toward others must be.
• *The six ways of harmony and reverence*. Those sharing the same faith must act in harmony with, and show respect to, one another in their spiritual and everyday lives. The six ways of doing so are in body, word, and mind through the precepts, through correct views, and through practice. This teaching, of course, is not limited to people of religion but can be applied to everybody everywhere.

TEXT '[The sins of] the body are killing, stealing, and committing adultery, while [the sins of] the mind are entertaining thoughts of various evils. Producing the ten evil karmas and the five deadly sins is just like [living as] a monkey, like birdlime and glue, and the attachment to all sorts of conditions leads universally to the [passions of the] six sense organs of all living beings. The karmas of these six organs with their boughs, twigs, flowers, and leaves entirely fill the triple world, or the twenty-five abodes of living beings, where all beings are born. Such karmas also increase the twelve sufferings, including ignorance, old age, and death, and infallibly reach through to the eight falsenesses and the eight circumstances. Do you now repent such evil and bad karmas!'

COMMENTARY *Producing the ten evil karmas and the five deadly sins is just like [living as] a monkey, like birdlime and glue*. Being inseparable from each other, the mind and body produce the ten evil karmas and the five deadly sins endlessly, just like a monkey moving from branch to branch and like sticky birdlime. "The five deadly sins" are killing a father, killing a mother, killing an arhat, wounding the Buddha, and destroying the harmony of the Sangha. Committing these sins leads inevitably to rebirth in the Avichi hell, the worst of all the hells.
• *Boughs, twigs, flowers, and leaves*. The boughs, twigs, flowers, and leaves all grow from a root. Similarly, the workings of the mind have their origins in the nature of the spirit. Thus the boughs, twigs, flowers, and leaves refer to minor mental actions.
• *The twenty-five abodes of living beings*. This refers to the realm of defiled living beings undergoing the ceaseless round of birth and death (transmigration) that is divided into the triple world: the fourteen abodes in the realm of desire (*kama-dhatu*), the seven abodes in the realm of form (*rupa-dhatu)*, and the four abodes in the realm of formlessness (*arupya-dhatu*).
• *Fill the triple world where all beings are born*. This means to fill the world where all sentient beings exit. This implies that all beings will be dogged by karmas no matter how many times they transmigrate after death, until they attain emancipation.
• *The twelve sufferings, including ignorance, old age, and death*. This refers to the teaching of the Twelve Causes and Conditions: ignorance, action, consciousness, name and form, the six sense organs, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, and old age and death.
• *The eight falsenesses*. This refers to practices contrary to the Noble Eightfold Path: false views, wrong thought, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, and wrong meditation.
• *The eight circumstances*. These are the circumstances in which it is impossible to see a buddha or listen to his teachings, also called the "eight conditions of no leisure," where there is no time to practice the Buddha Way. These conditions are hells, the realm of hungry spirits, the realm of animals, remote places, the heaven of long life, being blind or deaf, secular prejudice, and a time when a buddha is absent in this world.

"Remote places" refers to areas of natural bounty where living is always pleasant. In ancient India it was believed that such an area, called Uttara-kuru, existed. However, when human beings suffer but little from life, they have no incentive to improve their condition, and without this incentive, progress will cease. Human beings are said to be at the apex of all creatures and are the lords of creation, yet they must still continue to advance. Much progress has been made in terms of living conditions, but the human race is still immature in mind; the task of the human race in the future is to advance more and more spiritually.

We must, therefore, pursue that which is true and correct in our lives; if our lives are too comfortable, we will neglect that pursuit and become absentminded in living. This is the reason that the Buddha taught that such places are not good for people.

The "heaven of long life" is one of the heavenly realms, whose inhabitants have long life spans. That makes them convinced that their life span will continue endlessly. Translated to everyday terms, it refers to those who think vaguely that they will live forever in this world—a common condition of us all. Those who give little thought to the finitude of life are not compelled to seek the Buddha's teachings, or even if they do, they think they will practice them someday. This attitude does not aid our spiritual progress, and so the realm of such thoughts is considered an adverse circumstance.

"Secular prejudice" means to be overly intelligent in a worldly sense and concerned only with getting on in the world. Such people are absorbed only in that which is before their gaze; they tend to forget the more important question concerning how human beings should live, and they rarely

give a thought to pursuing the question. The Buddha teaches us that such a way of living is not the true human way.

A "time when a buddha is absent in this world" refers to the period after one buddha has died and before the next has appeared. It is, therefore, a time when it is impossible to meet a buddha. Considered in real terms, it may indicate a period when the Buddhist teachings are not actively practiced or a human condition in which people cannot have any interest in them, even if they are being taught.

Ordinary people with their sins of body and mind are infallibly enmeshed in the eight circumstances and, unable to escape them, wander around lost and deluded. If we do not practice repentance, we will likewise find ourselves always within their bounds and unable to walk out toward our progress. Thus repentance is essential.

TEXT Then the follower, having heard thus, asks the voice in the sky, saying: 'At what place may I practice the law of repentance?'

Thereupon the voice in the sky will speak thus, saying: 'Shakyamuni Buddha is called Vairochana Who Pervades All Places, and his dwelling place is called Eternally Tranquil Light, the place that is composed of permanency-paramita and stabilized by self-paramita, the place where purity-paramita extinguishes the aspect of existence, where bliss-paramita does not abide in the aspect of one's body and mind, and where the aspects of all the laws cannot be seen as either existing or nonexisting, the place of tranquil emancipation, or prajnaparamita. Because these forms are based on permanent law, you must now meditate on the buddhas in all directions.'

COMMENTARY Here the buddha-realm of the Eternal Original Buddha is mentioned, which indicates how this realm can be attained (awakened to). It is a difficult passage and repays constant rereading, so that we gradually come to understand its meaning correctly.

• *Vairochana Who Pervades All Places*. Vairochana is the buddha whose radiance illumines all places and who is present everywhere. Vairochana refers to the true body, the Dharma-body (*dharma-kaya*), of the Buddha, and only the Dharma-body is nonborn and nondying. In other words, he is the Eternal Original Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past. Therefore, saying that "Shakyamuni Buddha is called Vairochana Who Pervades All Places" means that though Shakyamuni appeared as a human being, his original form, or Dharma-body, is the Eternal Original Buddha. The passage then goes on to describe what kind of place his buddha-realm is.

• *Eternally Tranquil Light*. "Tranquil" means immovable and unchanging. The buddha-realm never changes and is always filled with a radiant light.

Photo: Shutterstock.com

An image of Vairochana (right) in the main Longmen Grotto, located twelve kilometers south of present-day Luoyang in Henan Province, China.

• *The place that is composed of permanency-paramita*. The buddha-realm is the perfected (paramita) condition of eternally unchanging characteristic (permanency), a world made up of and ruled by ("composed of") the characteristic of perfect permanence. This realm is realized only after people cease to be attached to that which is impermanent and they perfect their practice of perceiving what is permanent (the Original Buddha).

• *Stabilized by self-paramita*. Here, "self" refers to the "true self." The Buddha denied the existence of the physical and mental "small self." Here, "self" is that which cannot be moved by anything, having been confirmed through the attainment of perfect enlightenment. We can also call it buddha nature. The place referred to is that realm made up of and stabilized by this "true self." The realm of the Buddha is, therefore, the place where we are able to attain only after we are removed from our attachment to ourselves that undergo birth and death; we achieve this realm through exertion in bodhisattva training.

• *The place where purity-paramita extinguishes the aspect of existence*. The world of the Buddha transcends all phenomena ("existence"), being a realm of true equality that stands above all discrimination. We are unable to perceive that realm unless we become utterly pure in mind and abandon all phenomenal distinctions between the self and others.

• *Where bliss-paramita does not abide in the aspect of one's body and mind*. "Bliss-paramita" refers to perfect peace. The world of the Buddha is imbued with such perfect peace. We will be able to attain that realm only when we have

transcended "the aspect of one's body and mind" (the actually existing mind and body) and formed no attachment to them. If we remain attached to the actually existing body and mind, we will inevitably come into confrontation with others, and because of greed and other delusions, will dispute with those around us. The suffering and anguish of human existence will then never end.

The four paramitas above signify the Buddha's virtues of permanence, bliss, self, and purity. But as to all things in this world, because of illusions, ordinary people regard what is impermanent as permanent; they mistake what is essentially suffering for pleasure; they regard only the surface of things and mistake the impure for the pure; and they mistakenly think that although all things are devoid of self, there is a lasting entity or substance (self) that exists independent of all other things. These, of course, are completely opposite from actuality. Only when we reach the Buddha's realm are we able to see that this world is the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light all the time.

• *Where the aspects of all the laws cannot be seen as either existing or nonexisting*. This refers to the realm that transcends relativity, such as arguments or decisions about whether "all laws" (everything that exists) actually exist or not.

• *Tranquil emanciption*. This refers to the realm of immutability and great harmony, freed from all delusions and suffering.

• *Prajnaparamita*. "Prajna" in Sanskrit is wisdom, the Buddha wisdom that penetrates the true aspect of all things. "Prajnaparamita" (the paramita of wisdom) is the state where this wisdom is perfected.

• *Because these forms are based on permanent law*. Because these appearances ("these forms") of the Buddha's realm are not susceptible to change ("permanent law").

However we interpret these words, we can never completely understand them through the intellect, since they refer to the world of the Buddha. If we read the sutras as if we were in a state of samadhi and strive always to perform bodhisattva practice, we will, I am sure, eventually come to realize the full import of the description above.

TEXT Then the buddhas in all directions will stretch out their right hands, laying them on the head of the follower, and will speak thus: 'Good! Good! Good son! Because you have now read and recited the Great-vehicle sutras, the buddhas in all directions will preach the law of repentance. The bodhisattva practice is not to cut off binding and driving nor to abide in the ocean of driving. In meditating on one's mind, there is no mind one can seize, except the mind that comes from one's perverted thought. The mind presenting such a form rises from one's false imagination like the wind in the sky, which has no foothold.

COMMENTARY *Not to cut off binding and driving nor to abide in the ocean of driving*. Even though the defilements ("binding and driving") are not entirely cut away, we should strive not to become immersed ("abide") in the sea of the defilements ("ocean of driving"). This is an important teaching for us, performing as we are the bodhisattva practice in the everyday world. If we could sever the defilements utterly, it would be best. This, however, in a normal context, is no more than an ideal. Even if we still possess the defilements, we must control ourselves so that we are not drowned by them, not falling into error. In addition, it is because we, too, possess the defilements that we are well able to understand the defilements of others and employ the power of tactfulness suited to them. Thus the defilements become a valuable and effective aid in the bodhisattva practice of teaching and transforming others. Here we find a large difference between the shravaka and pratyekabuddha, who withdraw from the floating world, and the bodhisattva, whose mission it is to liberate all living beings.

• *In meditating on one's mind, there is no mind one can seize*. Ordinarily the minds of people are not firm but constantly flit from one thing to another. It is impossible to grasp clearly what the mind really is.

• *Perverted thought*. This means the confused ideas, the opposite of the truth, that see things that do not exist as existing. This is the state of mind of the ordinary person.

• *False imagination*. This means thinking false things to be the truth, considering everything in a self-centered way, and discriminating among things that are originally equal.

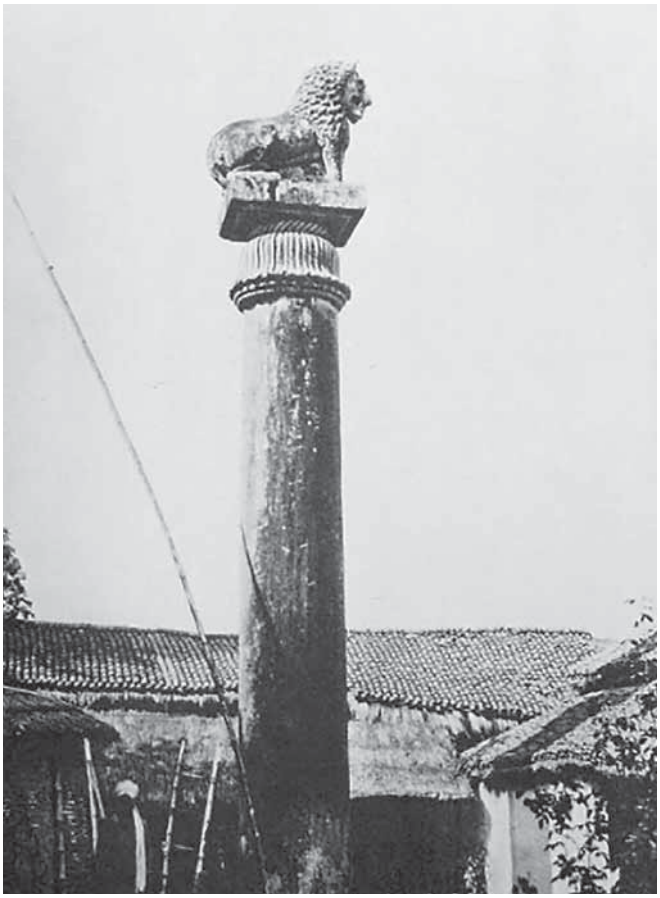
The method of repentance taught by the buddhas of every direction continues.

TEXT 'Such a form of the law neither appears nor disappears. What is sin? What is blessedness? As one's own mind is void of itself, sin and blessedness have no existence. In like manner all the laws are neither fixed nor going toward destruction. If one repents like this, meditating on one's mind, there is no mind to be seized. The law also does not dwell in the law.

COMMENTARY This passage, like the previous one, is extremely difficult.

• *Form of the law*. This refers to the essential nature of all things, or their significance. The basic characteristics of all things are nonarising and nonperishing ("neither appears nor disappears").

• *As one's own mind is void of itself, sin and blessedness have no existence*. If all things are empty, one's mind must itself be empty. Therefore, both sin and blessedness are only temporary appearances, and they have no real, unchanging substance ("have no existence").



Source: Wikimedia Commons File: Basarh lion, DGASI, before 1929.jpg

Ashoka Pillar, standing at Vaishali (present-day Basarh) in Bihar State, India. The Buddha is said to have preached the Sutra of Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue at a monastery in Vaishali.

• *The law also does not dwell in the law*. Here "law" signifies "all things." Nothing in this world has fixed existence, and all things are always subject to change and transformation. Therefore, we must not become attached to what is presently appearing and be swayed by it. We must, however, not be satisfied with the present conditions and never cease making efforts to improve ourselves. "Enlightenment" is to be accomplished through bodhisattva practice within our actual lives.

TEXT 'All the laws are emancipation, the truth of extinction, and quiescence. Such an aspect is called the great repentance, the greatly adorned repentance, repentance of the non-sin aspect, and the destruction of discrimination.

COMMENTARY All things are themselves in a state of emancipation, nonsuffering, and the tranquillity of nirvana. To realize this is the greatest and most beautiful repentance, the repentance that truly does away with all sin. That repentance will break down the mind that tends to be attached to phenomena and satisfied with the present conditions, and it makes us turn instead toward true enlightenment.

A number of methods of repentance have already been set before us. Here we are told definitely that the highest form of repentance is to contemplate the real aspect of all things. Repentance, in other words, is to accumulate our bodhisattva practice, which begins with our reflecting upon our sins and faults regarding phenomenal things, so that we eventually reach the realization of the real aspect of all things, the apex of the Mahayana teachings. We keenly realize that repentance is a positive and extremely profound practice toward that end.

TEXT 'He who practices this repentance has the purity of body and mind not fixed in the law [but free] as flowing water. In every thought and in every moment, he will be able to see the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue and the buddhas in all directions.'

COMMENTARY *Not fixed in the law [but free] as flowing water*. This means that we become no longer captured by the things of the world, and our spirit flows free and unrestricted. As we continue to practice repentance, we become purified in mind and body, and no longer captured by the things of the world, our spirit flows free and unrestricted. Eventually we will be able to experience the presence of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue and the buddhas of the ten directions as if they were truly before us.

Here the buddhas of the ten directions conclude their teaching of repentance.

TEXT Thereupon all the world-honored ones, sending forth the ray of light of great mercy, preach the law of nonaspect to the follower. He hears the world-honored ones preaching the emptiness of the first principle. When he has heard it, his mind becomes imperturbable. In due time, he will enter into the real bodhisattva standing."

COMMENTARY *The law of nonaspect*. This is the teaching that all things have no firm and specific forms, which indicates that we must remove ourselves from all attachments and be true to the view of equality.

• *The emptiness of the first principle*. This means the emptiness as the supreme meaning. While "emptiness" has a number of different meanings, the ultimate meaning of "emptiness" refers to the real aspect of all things, which is the true aspect of this world. "The emptiness of the first principle" means the emptiness that is in great harmony.

• *His mind becomes imperturbable*. The things we see before our eyes do not actually exist as we see them, but they are in the state of emptiness. When we have prepared ourselves to understand such truths, we will be neither surprised nor upset when we hear what seems to be beyond common understanding.

• *The real bodhisattva standing*. This refers to the true stage of a bodhisattva, not a substitute or an assistant, but the actual performer, whose task it is to bring deliverance to the world and humankind.

TEXT The Buddha addressed Ananda: "To practice in this manner is called repentance. This is the law of repentance, which the buddhas and great bodhisattvas in all directions practice."

COMMENTARY To confess one's sins is the repentance of a novice; however, the greatest form of repentance, that practiced by the buddhas and bodhisattvas, is to contemplate the most profound principle of the real aspect of all things. Thus the Buddha confirms as correct the teachings of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue.

TEXT The Buddha addressed Ananda: "After the extinction of the Buddha, if all his disciples should repent their evil and bad karmas, they must only read and recite the Great-vehicle sutras. These sutras of Great Extent are the eyes of the buddhas. By means of the sutras the buddhas have perfected the five kinds of eyes. The three kinds of the Buddha's bodies grow out [of the sutras] of Great Extent. This is the seal of the Great Dharma with which the ocean of nirvana is sealed. From such an ocean are born the three kinds of pure bodies of the Buddha. These three kinds of the Buddha's bodies are the blessing-field for the gods and men and are supreme object of worship. If there be any who recite and read the sutras of Great Extent, the Great-vehicle, know that such are endowed with the Buddha's merits and, having extinguished their longstanding evils, are born of the Buddha's wisdom."

COMMENTARY *These sutras of Great Extent*. The Mahayana sutras, of which the central is the Lotus Sutra (see the Spring 2022 issue of *Dharma World*).

• *The five kinds of eyes* (see the discussion in "The Parable of the Herbs," chapter 5 of the Lotus Sutra).

• *The three kinds of the Buddha's bodies* (see the discussion in "Virtues," chapter 1 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings).

• *The seal of the Great Dharma*. The seal of the Dharma is the hallmark of the Buddha's teachings, the slogan that indicates to the world the purpose of Buddhism. The seal of the Dharma in Mahayana Buddhism is the teaching of the ultimate reality of all things, while in basic Buddhism it refers to the Three Seals of the Dharma: "all things are impermanent," "all things are devoid of self," and "nirvana is tranquil." Since these Three Seals of the Dharma are the basis for the Dharma seal of the ultimate reality of all things, I will discuss them in detail at the end of this section of commentary.

• *With which the ocean of nirvana is sealed*. This means that it is impressed upon people in the world that the realm of the Buddha is as broad as the ocean and truly at peace.

• *From such an ocean are born the three kinds of pure bodies of the Buddha*. The three kinds of the Buddha's bodies are born from the Mahayana teachings, which expound the true nirvana.

• *Blessing-field*. The three kinds of the Buddha's bodies are compared to a cultivated field, for they are the sources of all blessings without end.

• *The supreme object of worship*. "Object of worship" means one who is worthy of offerings from the people of the world. This is one of the ten epithets of the Buddha.

• *Born of the Buddha's wisdom*. This is a valuable phrase. A person who has gained knowledge of the truth through the Buddha's teachings and who leads a new life on the basis of that truth is as one who has been reborn. He or she has received new birth as a bodhisattva, by means of the Buddha's wisdom.

The Three Seals of the Dharma

I would like to spend some time at this point explaining the most important "seals" of the Dharma in basic Buddhism, the Three Seals of the Dharma: "All things are impermanent," "All things are devoid of self," and "Nirvana is tranquil." Since I have already discussed the first two in my commentary on "Preaching," chapter 2 of the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings, I would ask you to reread the section.

All things are impermanent. The way that all things, all phenomena, appear has a certain cause; when that cause meets with an exactly suitable condition, it takes form as a phenomenon, and when that cause or condition disappears, the phenomenon also disappears, all things of this world are neither unchanging nor permanent but change continually and eventually disappear. This is the seal of the Dharma that all things are impermanent. It is a precise, scientific statement. On the basis of that teaching, Buddhism preaches how people should live and what kind of mental attitudes they should have in leading their lives. The most important feature of the teaching, though, is that when we discern that all phenomena undergo constant change, we will spontaneously no longer be attached to, or be pulled about by various phenomena that happen to us or around us, or undergo suffering and pain, or cause suffering or pain to others. Therefore, it is essential that we realize that all things are impermanent.

People (and particularly the Japanese in the past) tend to interpret impermanence pessimistically, in the sense that all things in the world are fleeting and untrustworthy. This, however, is a distorted understanding of the concept. Perhaps the distortion occurred because the ordained monks of the

past who pursued this teaching as a guidepost to emancipation were those who renounced the world. A negative interpretation regarding the nature of things caused no hindrances to them and, in fact, may have supported them in their decision to do so. Such an attitude, however, seems backward looking and pessimistic to modern people, who have to work hard for their living, who marry and raise children, and who participate in the running and progress of their respective societies. If they indulged in views that rejected the world, all progress and development would be brought to a halt. We must therefore completely reverse our attitude to impermanence, understanding it in the light of Shakyamuni's teachings as something dynamic and forward looking.

Impermanence does not mean inevitable decline and decay. The dewdrop poised on a leaf's tip seems to disappear once the sun shines on it, but in fact it turns into vapor and, joining together with other components in the atmosphere, rises high into the sky and falls again as rain to moisten the fields or provide the energy to produce hydroelectricity. The dewdrop does not die; rather, it is born anew. Similarly, the cells in our body die and are reborn every moment, and each second about a hundred million red blood corpuscles perish and the same number come newly into existence. We should not therefore understand impermanence emotionally as the people of old did; rather than accepting it as "disappearance," we should understand it more dynamically as "constantly changing."

If things ceased to change, there would be nothing other than eternal death. Because there is change there is mobility, and because of mobility there is life. Once we understand this to the very core of our being, change and movement will no longer frighten us or cause anxiety but, rather, be a reason for joy, since they are signs of living. The more change there is in our life and work, the more we should feel encouraged, for the changes are proof that we are alive. This is the way modern people should understand impermanence.

All things are devoid of self. This is the truth that there is no such self (real, unchanging substance) in this world that is permanent (that is, never dies or changes), existing without connection to others or not separating from others, possessing unrestricted power, and governing our fate. Accordingly, there is not one thing that exists alone, independent of all else; everything is linked, all relying on and supporting one another. Our body provides an excellent example of this principle. It is made up of dozens of elements, including oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulphur, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, and iron, but all these same elements are in some way supplied by and returned to sentient and nonsentient beings on earth. Human beings live because they inhale the oxygen that plants exhale, while plants are able to grow by turning into a carbohydrate the carbon dioxide that human beings and other animals exhale. In this sense, human beings do not live independently of everything else but come into being through the coming together of various forms of energy. We may think that we live of ourselves, but in fact we are caused to live through a variety of unseen factors.

The interconnectedness of life is even closer between people. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the houses we live in, and all the other necessities of life have been produced by somebody somewhere; when we think of the process by which they actually come into our hands, we will be astounded by the almost limitless breadth of the connections involved. We are surrounded by things we use and consume to support our lives that are produced, manufactured, shipped, and sold by untold numbers of people whom we will never meet. Conversely, our labor also supports the existence of countless people about whom we know nothing. Likewise, our taxes and the money we pay for insurance are of use to somebody somewhere. We all live, regardless of country, in a condition of live and let live. This does not apply only to other human beings, for we have similar connections with all life, sentient and nonsentient, in the universe, supporting and being supported by one another's existence. Realizing that there is no self that exists completely independently of everything else is expressed in Buddhism in the words "all things are devoid of self."

How this realization is to be put into practice in everyday life will soon become apparent. All the various actions of one's own life must be seen to be linked in an intricate way—like the crisscross pattern of a net—with those of other people. We must always be aware that should one person selfishly exert too much pressure on one line of that net, the mesh will become distended or break completely, so that the overall balance holding society together will be lost, hitches will occur in its smooth flow, and all will fall into confusion. However, it is not enough that we just control ourselves and act correctly, for there are many in the world who entangle or rip the meshes of the net. Therefore, we should strive to enlighten as many people as possible about the teaching of "all things are devoid of self" and instill in them a spirit of shared responsibility. This is a major reason that we have to be desperately concerned to spread the Buddhist Dharma throughout the world. The seal of the Dharma, "all things are devoid of self," is a fundamental truth of human social life. Precepts against selfishness and greed are also based on this doctrine, as are the teachings that we should be grateful to all the beings of heaven and earth and feel obligation to all people.

Nirvana is tranquil. This third seal of the Dharma signifies the state of perfect tranquillity of body and mind. There are a number of stages in such tranquillity. Generally, it refers to the perfect peace and calm that comes from liberation, the equilibrium of a mind released from the anxieties of the world through enlightenment to the teaching "all things are devoid of self." Just as we as modern people must comprehend the meaning of "impermanence" in a dynamic way, so must we not limit ourselves to understanding the teaching "nirvana is tranquil" as merely calm and peace. For instance, the peace of a body and mind in which all motion has stopped can still be called peace. After intense activity, such peace is very necessary, for a healthy life is one that alternates between activity and rest. Nevertheless, it would be a clear mistake to pursue such calm and peace as the source of human happiness. As I mentioned above, it is circulation that determines life, and eternal stillness is nothing other than death.

Such things as minerals that have no movement are in fact dead. Of course, from the standpoint that even plants and earth can become buddhas (because all beings, sentient and nonsentient, have buddha nature), minerals, too, are considered to possess life; however, since they cannot move without the aid of some external force, they will remain still and unmoving forever, and so in the ordinary sense of the word we are justified in considering them to be without life. The pursuit of peace of body and mind as the first principle of human life is nothing less than seeking to be like an inanimate rock and so represents an abandonment of the significance of having been born as a human.

True tranquillity is harmony within movement, the harmony that is the merger of the creative talents of many people. It is similar to chords in music. It is an inexpressible joy to hear the harmony produced by different instruments, despite the differences in the tone and pitch of individual notes. The true peace that people seek is like such a chord. An orchestra that does not perform has no life, however many fine musicians it might possess. In the same way, people who do not let their creative talents arise are not truly alive. As each and every person works diligently at his or her own occupation, their unknowable quantity of work combines and flows forward in a great harmony. As long as this ever-flowing harmony continues, people will work happily and live contentedly, stimulated by a will to work that arises from within. This is true peace.

When we look around society today, we may see this ideal of harmony achieved by some people in some places at some times, but it seems almost impossible to comprehend that this ideal state of harmony is continually possible for all the people of the world. Wherever we look, all we see seems to be disharmony. All the same this very disharmony might well be the path to progress. If a few people in the excellence of their activities conspicuously stand out from the mass who are crawling along or even retrogressing, they will upset the harmony of the whole but bringing that disharmony to a newer, more advanced harmony is progress. For example, when the majority of people in a group are lazy, the intense activity of one person can overturn the balance and bring about a higher form of harmony. When someone of great wisdom like Shakyamuni appears among people who are ignorant of the true nature of things and teaches a better way of living, the balance is broken for a time and friction occurs. However, when large numbers of people begin to follow those teachings and their attitude toward living rises to a higher plane, society as a whole will advance as a newer and more advanced harmony comes about. Human progress is the repetition of such a process of a low-level harmony being broken and then reformulated into a higher state.

Perhaps the highest ideal is an unbreakable harmony, within which, nevertheless, humankind progresses ever higher. This is certainly possible in theory. Consider, for example, the well-balanced performance of a symphony orchestra. As long as everyone works together and no one neglects his or her study and practice, the orchestra itself can continue to improve little by little, in quality and content, without losing its overall balance. The same should be possible in society if each and every person works hard according to his or her own talents and appointed task. United by the common spirit of "all things are devoid of self," all strive to maintain the bonds joining them. They hold one another in affection and compassion, extending a hand to those who fall behind and lending their strength to those who are weak, so that all walk together in harmony. If all humankind could live in this way, people would experience great tranquillity within a life of true creativity and progress. This, I believe, is the highest form of tranquillity, the true state of "nirvana is tranquil."

Through careful practice of these three principles, we will achieve, as individuals and in society as a whole, true deliverance and bring into being the Land of Tranquil Light. This, then, is why Buddhism proclaims these three "seals of the Dharma." The three seals were later developed into the principle of the real aspect of all things. This is the reason that Mahayana Buddhism considers as its seal of the Dharma that principle based on the Three Seals of the Dharma.

I will here bring my remarks on the seals of the Dharma to a close and return to the main text.

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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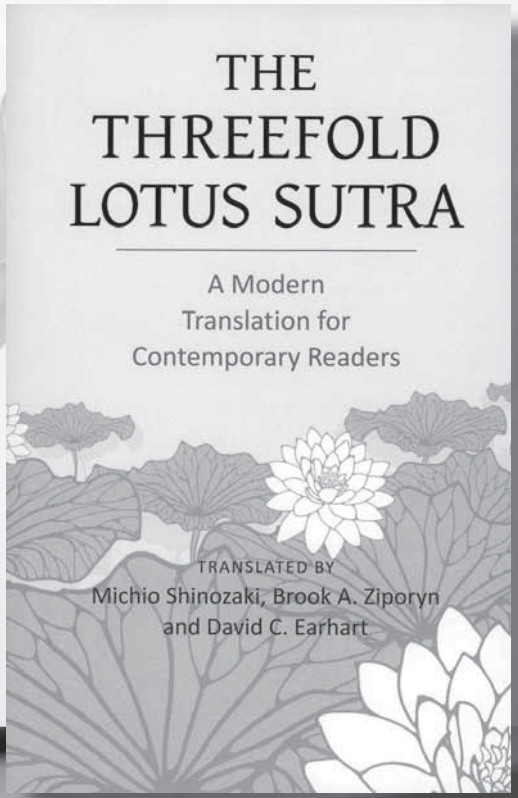

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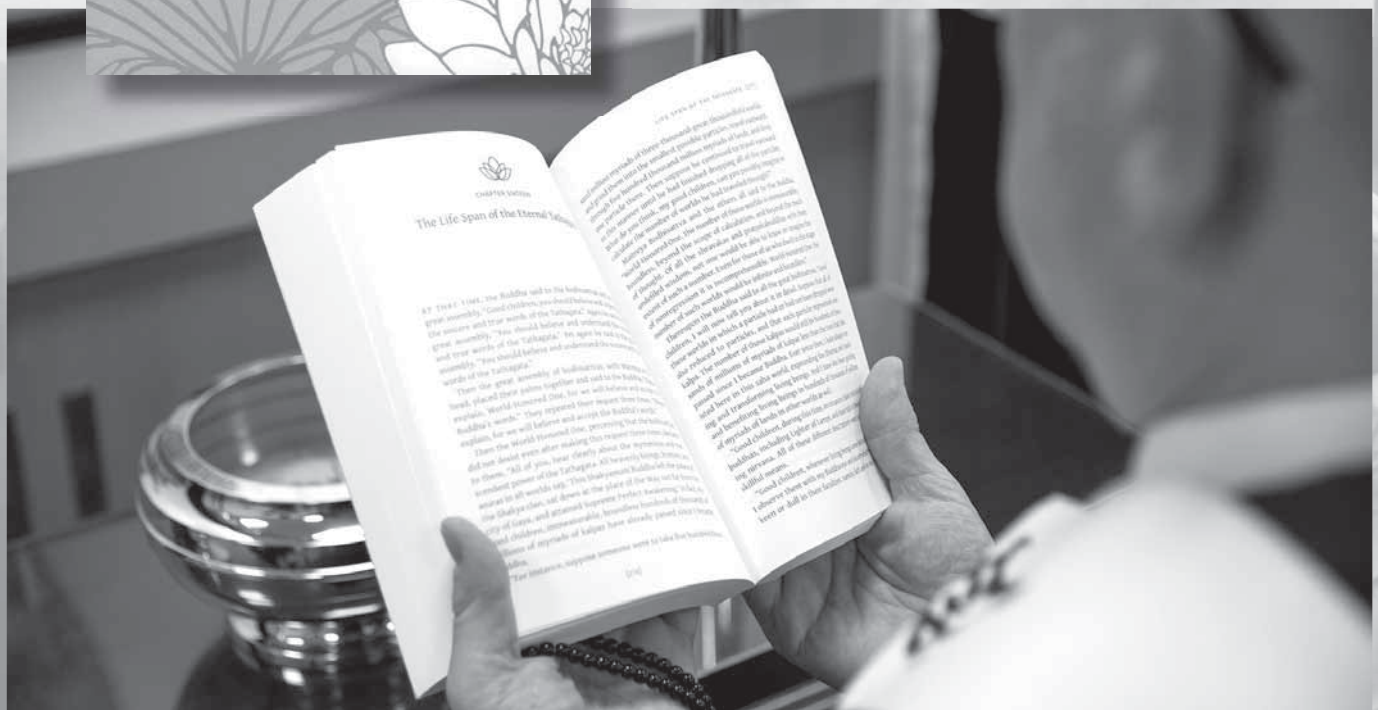

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