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DHARMA WORLD

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DHARMA WORLD

For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue

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Mere Ordinary People

by Nichiko Niwano

Article Ten of Prince Shotoku's historic sixth-century Seventeen-Article Constitution states, "We are not undoubtedly wise, nor are others undoubtedly foolish. Together, we are all just ordinary people."

The meaning, of course, is that we do not always display wisdom and other people are not always foolish. The implication is that all of us, ourselves and others, are no more than ordinary people. No one can claim to be special in this world, we are all just regular people.

It is quite easy to recognize the shortcomings and mistakes of others, but our doing so only means that we ourselves share them. We do not recognize something that we do not share in ourselves.

When we realize this, then when someone becomes angry with us, instead of attacking the person or returning the anger in kind, we can calmly reflect and detect that the cause of the person's anger may lie within ourselves. Then the anger will fade naturally and we will be less likely to have conflicts with others.

The renowned Japanese educator Nobuzo Mori (1917–91) wrote about the importance of "having an amicable heart rounded like a circle." We can say that an amicable, rounded heart is one that is neither arrogant nor servile. In other words, it has no harsh irregularities, it is a heart that is gentle, calm, and at ease.

There is something similar to this in these verses of the writer Kenji Miyazawa's much-loved poem, "Unyielding in the Rain":

Devoid of greed,
Never angry,
Always quietly smiling.
.....
Everyone calls him a fool,
He is praised by no one,
And nobody cares about him.

Nichiko Niwano is president of Rissho Kosei-kai and the Niwano Peace Foundation, a president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), and chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan).

When we realize that we are all ordinary people, that none of us is perfect, and that all of us are foolish, then petty rivalries among us vanish and we become aware that we are caused to live by the one great life-force.

Playing Our Roles

We have all been given life equally as ordinary people, and at the same time, each of us has a uniquely independent personality that is demonstrated as we seek to lead the life of the Peerless Honored One. Therefore, each of us plays a variety of roles in the surroundings in which we find ourselves at home, in our workplace, and in our community.

For example, at our branch of Rissho Kosei-kai we may be given such assignments as chapter head, area leader, and group leader. Assigning members to these roles is similar to casting actors in a movie or a play. For a certain period these members play the assigned parts at their branch, but this in no way makes them special people. What is important is that they develop a good grasp of their roles and diligently fulfill their duties.

Photo: Kyodo

Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933)

Having a role to play presents us with an opportunity to do our best for others, to exercise our abilities, and to grow. We may not always feel excited about the role we have been assigned, but from a broad point of view, it is a positive thing for us. When we become aware of this, we can then complete our assigned role with pleasure, and will be grateful for it. □

The Global Crisis and Human Hubris

by Tsuneya Wakimoto

Last year, the summer was hotter than usual. It seems to me that I have thought this for the last three or four years. In other words, I feel as if summer is growing hotter by the year. Nor am I alone. Most of my acquaintances seem to share this feeling, and we complain to one another of the increasing summer heat. Such comments have become part of everyday conversation. But when I think about it more deeply, I realize that in this chitchat we are touching on the fact of the truly major environmental change known as global warming.

If global warming advances, the polar ice will melt, coastal waters will rise, land areas will shrink, and crop and livestock farming will decline. If that happens, people's livelihoods will be imperiled on a global scale. Because of the synergistic effect of this and population increase, hunger will spread, and a hell of poverty, disease, and conflict will unfold. Followed to its logical conclusion, and with only a little exaggeration, this train of thought leads us to contemplation of a crisis that could end in human extinction.

The chief culprit behind this crisis is humanity itself. Although I do not understand the mechanism behind phenomena like the rise in carbon-dioxide emissions and the destruction of the ozone layer very well, scientific investigation indicates that human beings are at the starting point of the chain of cause and effect leading to global warming. International conferences and the like are being convened to come up with measures to combat global warming, but so far, it seems, to little avail. While I myself have not engaged in any careful studies, television and press reports impel me to reflect in my own way on human folly and hubris.

It is true that we human beings have done mighty things. In a mere instant, in the context of the earth's 4.6 billion

years of history, we have created civilization. We have cleverly manipulated nature's land and waters, flora and fauna, altering the natural state of the earth to create a comfortable living environment. But in our relentless pursuit of comfort, have we not done violence to the earth and little by little succumbed to greed and fallen into hubris? This is the blind pride of assuming that human power can and will do whatever it likes. As a result, we have pushed transformation of the earth to the brink of irreparable harm. I fear that modern civilization has reached a critical point.

By and large, the world's major religions and ethical systems speak with one voice in advocating the virtues of moderation and humility. They teach that human beings must not arrogantly assume the right to do whatever they please, that they should learn moderation and restrain greed, living humbly and knowing their place in the overall scheme of things. Knowing one's place reminds me of the concept of *Kreatur-gefühl*, "creature-feeling," in Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige* (The Idea of the Holy): the sense of being as dust before Almighty God. No matter how much we may talk about the greatness of human beings, in the presence of the transcendently great being, we are so insignificant that we can be blown away by a puff of wind. Creature-feeling means realizing one's limits and feeling awe of unseen power. Surely what is required of us modern people, who have lapsed into blind hubris, is this kind of creature-feeling, the realization that we owe our existence to the earth, the cosmos, and the great entity that lies behind them.

On an individual level, there are a good number of principled people who are faithful to the teachings of moderation and humility and know their place in the overall scheme of things. I know many such people. But when it comes to behavior in the context of the unit known as the nation, there are many cases in which arrogantly egotistic claims clash and pride battles pride, creating carnage—in other words, war. To overcome the hubris of national ego that gives rise to war, surely what we might call national creature-feeling, realization of the petty relativity of the nation, is essential. □

Tsuneya Wakimoto, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, acts as chairman of the board of directors of the International Institute for the Study of Religions. He is the author of Shukyogaku nyumon (An Introduction to Religious Studies), Shi no hikaku shukyogaku (A Comparative Religious Study of Death), Hyoden Kiyozawa Manshi (Manshi Kiyozawa: A Critical Biography), and other works.

Toward a “Civilization of Life”

by Minoru Sonoda

The root cause of all the serious problems facing our age resides in the loss of the essential view of life derived from the religiosity that is unique to human beings.

In his 1963 work *The Dogma of Christ*, the American thinker Erich Fromm (1900–1980) declared that in the nineteenth century we killed God and in the twentieth century we killed people. In short, in the modern period religion has lost people’s confidence and proved helpless in the face of humanity’s problems.

In the twenty-first century, however, it is crucial to “revive people” and, in order to do so, we need to “revive God.” This is because the root cause of all the serious problems facing the present age lies in human existence, and thus resides in the loss of the essential view of life derived from the religiosity that is unique to human beings.

Modern secularized anthropocentrism is a current of thought that sees humankind as possessing a right to life

that deserves unconditional respect, and therefore holds that individuals should not hesitate to employ any and all means to ensure their survival. People behave as if their lives were theirs alone, as if they had a natural right to live totally independent of parents and others. That is why today they have come to believe that to prolong their own lives they can make free use not only of other beings’ lives but also of the bodies and organs of embryos and brain-dead people. Cutting-edge medicine and life sciences have, in fact, advanced under the protection of this narrow reading of respect for human life.

We might say that people killed God in the nineteenth century and went on to kill people as well in a bid to become gods—in other words, that people are losing sight of their essential humanity. Moreover, the material civilization of mass consumption of energy made possible by the rapid development of science and technology in the twentieth century has now brought about severe degradation of the global environment. What is more, this degradation of the global environment equates to a degradation of the entire global ecosystem that jeopardizes the very survival of humankind.

Whose Right to Life?

Today’s cutting-edge science has made it clear that primitive life arose on earth about 3.5 billion years ago and that after eons of evolution human beings emerged some 2 million years ago. It has also made it clear that we have inherited our genes from those far-distant primitive organisms and, moreover, that we share a chain of life with all the microorganisms and flora and fauna now on earth. It has been confirmed that the earth as a whole is one great world in which countless living things coexist, maintaining a delicate balance with sun, water, and air. The earth is

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indeed Gaia; it is a living planet. What is more, this living earth, this irreplaceable Gaia, damaged by our self-serving material civilization, is on the verge of crisis, with human existence itself in peril. Therefore, surely the greatest challenge facing humanity in the early twenty-first century is to correct the course of this destructive material civilization and move toward a rich “civilization of life” in which all living things on earth can once again live together properly and humankind can also live in a healthy fashion.

The first important thing to realize is the clear fact that although humanity is but a small part of the earth’s great chain of life, it is human religious culture that identified that phenomenon as mysterious and sublime. The British ethnologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), argued that humanity’s first religion, which he called animism, emerged from primitive people’s belief, based on their experience of the death of their fellows and

their own dreams, that spirit was inherent in all things. Whether or not this account of the origin of religion is correct, I believe that a spiritual view of life is the basis of all religions in history. It seems to me that from primitive times down to the present people have striven for self-transcendence in order to understand themselves, and that as soon as people recognized that they were alive, religion was informed by universal issues. In other words, the life that people discovered meant that they themselves were imbued with life. Thus they confronted the subjective, existential questions of life, and probed the mystery and contradiction of why they were born, why they lived, and why they died.

That life was not the objective phenomenon that is spoken of today. It was not a third-person, objectified “his/her/their life” but a first-person, subjective “my/our life.” The life addressed by modern medicine and life sciences is nothing but an abstract phenomenon stripped of the living subject’s spiritual and emotional workings. Since human beings, unlike other living things, have always possessed an awareness of life and culture, the issues of life will continue to go beyond the life sciences and be existential issues of human subjects. In other words, all living things on earth possess the “species will” to accomplish their lives as discrete entities and to leave descendants, but human beings are destined to be aware of the lives and deaths of discrete entities and to continually question the meaning and value of life and death so as to better accomplish their lives.

Now that cutting-edge science has elucidated the way in which humankind coexists with the global ecosystem, it is impossible to believe that humanity alone has some God-given right to life. If we contemplate the undeniable fact that all living things have been endowed with precious life and that all beings both vivify and are vivified by one another as they accomplish their own lives and deaths, surely we should realize the value of our own life and those of others, the preciousness of having been given life, and the mysterious action of life, surpassing human understanding.

The Place of Religion

As Glenn M. Vernon wrote in *The Sociology of Death* (1970), “Man can conceive of his own death.” In this sense, humanity has gone beyond the stage of other living things. It is also likely that human beings alone have become aware of the basic contradiction regarding their own existence—that living means dying, and that living means taking the life of many other beings for food.

The intellectual history of human culture testifies that precisely because human beings are human beings, they

Photo : Kyodo

An operating room at Osaka University Hospital, where the heart from a patient who had been declared brain-dead was first transplanted in Japan (1999). Do human beings have the right to prolong their lives at all costs?

are compelled to appeal to some means of religious transcendence. In *Love's Body* (1966), the American classicist and idiosyncratic thinker Norman O. Brown, in the context of the Jainist strict prohibition against taking life, declared, "There is no way to avoid murder, except by ritual murder." I too believe that all religions, in one way or another, are based on the earnest search for a way to free the human heart from that fundamental guilt and anxiety of living, and that for this very reason religions possess varied forms of prayer for symbolic atonement in the form of myths and symbolic rites, especially those of sacrifice.

Japan's Shinto prays for the coexistence and coprosperity of gods and human beings as an integrated whole by seeing ancestors and the forces of nature that imbue us with life as *kami* (divine entities), the invisible spiritual forces of life, and by worshipping those *kami*. We receive life from the gods and ancestors through our parents and transmit it to our descendants and to nature through our death. And through accomplishing our life and death, eventually we become ancestral *kami* that our descendants will worship. Here we find the prayer to the mysterious world in which everything shares life, both people and all things that give them life.

The tradition of Japanese Buddhism, too, regards all things—not only people and other sentient beings but also non-sentient beings, including plants and minerals—as possessing the "life spirituality" known as the buddha-nature. The Nirvana Sutra's declaration that all sentient beings have the buddha-nature was celebrated, especially by the Kegon and Tendai sects, in sutra commentaries and literary art. And scriptural statements that all things, even plants and the earth, will attain buddhahood were frequently quoted not only in sermons but also in songs and tales.

In the light of modern science's elucidation of the symbiotic nature of the ecosystem, it seems to me that a more rigorous adherence to the fundamental view of spiritual life nurtured by Japan's spiritual traditions, including Shinto and Buddhism, can serve as a guiding principle for correcting the course of the material civilization that dominated the twentieth century and for moving toward realization of a "civilization of life" that will enrich people in the twenty-first century both materially and spiritually. □

At a national forest in Kiso, Nagano Prefecture, Shinto priests perform a ritual to report to the kami who dwells in the tree the official start of the cutting of the tree to be used as the main pillar of a new sanctuary at the Grand Shrine of Ise, Mie Prefecture. The ritual, which takes place with the rebuilding of the sanctuary every twenty years, has been performed since the late seventh century and was conducted most recently in June 2005.

From Private Profit to Public Good

by Hiromasa Mase

Companies and religious organizations are both members of society. Both must place greater emphasis on activities that contribute to society as a whole.

The twentieth century saw mass production and mass consumption as virtues, and created a “civilization of possession” focused on goods and money. But mass consumption generated mass waste and gave rise to waste-disposal and environmental problems. We understood that the civilization of possession does not bring people happiness. We understood that it was a mistake to consider that more abundant production and consumption automatically raised the standard of living, enhanced humanity, and made people happy. Instead, we came to think that we needed to shift to an age focused on “the person and the heart,” one that saw affluence as a matter of quality rather than quantity, of satisfying people’s inner wants and needs. This is our human condition in the twenty-first century. Rethinking the period of overemphasizing the private good and profit must begin with turning our concern to the public good. “Public good” is the key phrase paving the way to the new age.

From a Value of Having to a Value of Being

One book that is helpful in understanding the modern human condition is E. F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful*. Schumacher, an economist, sounded a warning to European society’s mass production and mass consumption and criticized the civilization of possession, advocating instead “Buddhist economics,” based on Buddhist thought. As is well known, Buddhism does not reject possession out of hand. It teaches us to seek the greatest happiness possible, possessing what we need but no more than we need and living in moderation. It counsels a way of life based on this teaching of the Middle Way. Buddhism calls this “right living.” I was enlightened by the unexpectedness of Bud-

dhism’s advocacy of a different yardstick in an age that measured affluence in terms of the volume of production and consumption.

Erich Fromm’s *To Have or to Be?* is another useful book. The social psychologist Fromm diagnosed modern people as addicted to possession, not satisfied unless they amass things. He asked how people could be released from this addiction and prescribed a viewpoint emphasizing a value of being—a value prized by Japan and the Japanese since ancient times. “Having” is not an absolute value. Fromm said that the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Basho expressed a different way of living in a famous haiku that can be roughly translated as follows: “Looking closely, I see a shepherd’s purse blooming on the hedge.” Basho did not

Hiromasa Mase is head of the graduate program at Tohoku University of Community Service and Science in Sakata, Yamagata Prefecture. Until 2001 he was a professor in the Faculty of Letters at Keio University in Tokyo, where he is now professor emeritus. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the philosophy of religion.

Elementary-school students participating in a discussion on energy and the environment with the chairman of one of Japan's major gas companies. Some 350 children from Aichi Prefecture took part in this event, which took place on July 5 at the Aichi Exposition 2005.

want to pluck the flower, to have it; he was content simply to gaze at it. He savored the sheer being of the little flower. In this way, Fromm extolled the importance of appreciating being and advocated a value shift from having to being.

It seems to me that in this twenty-first century we need to turn toward a value of being together and living together, a "culture of coexistence and symbiosis." To do so, we need to radically rethink capitalism and the market principle and implant a new "principle of the public good" in society. If we overlook this, there will be no global future.

Coexistence and Symbiosis as the Model of Maturity

In essence, religion is highly oriented toward the public good. In reality, however, religion is seldom associated with the public good. Why is this? In Japanese society, at least, it is because religion is always associated with money. In community life, for example, its public-good component includes rites of passage. Weddings and funerals are the oldest public-good activities in the community. But as a matter of fact they have been leached of the crucial component of spirituality, and for the most part interest is focused purely on how much they cost.

Japanese religious organizations are good at collecting money, but they spend all the money they receive on their own operation and programs. Their use of money is not

open to the scrutiny of society. Therefore, citizens are deeply wary of religion, fearing that if they approach religion it will suck up their money. If even a proportion of the money received were used to contribute to society, the relationship between religion and offerings would change for the better.

This is not limited to religious organizations. Profit-making businesses, too, can no longer afford to be indifferent to the public good. There are moves to give preference to firms that are environmentally friendly and address social problems, and new investment funds that incorporate social indicators in their corporate evaluation criteria have emerged. No longer are companies evaluated solely by how much money they make. Now that corporate activities for the public good are thriving, it would behoove religious organizations, too, to place greater emphasis on such activities.

Since both companies and religious organizations are members of society, they exist together and live together with citizens. This posture of coexistence and symbiosis is the true form of a mature society. Corporate activities that contribute to society are called philanthropy, from the Greek *philanthropia*, "love of humanity." Is this not originally a term pointing to religion? If we overlook this, there will be no global future. □

Ancient Promises Cannot Be Ignored

by C. W. Nicol

*The essence of truly religious people lies in how they react
and respond to other lives, both human and other.*

When I was the game warden of the Simien Mountain National Park in Ethiopia I had a German shepherd dog. His name was Mogus. I raised him from puppyhood, and he became my companion and my guard dog. When possible, I took him on patrol. He was very good at his job. When we patrolled into predominantly Muslim areas, however, I could not take Mogus along because the Muslims seemed to despise dogs and to be offended at his presence. Therefore I would leave him at our base, in care of the men there.

I do not know who it was—I know it certainly was not

one of the rangers—but Mogus was badly beaten, while restrained on a chain, with the chain and leash that I used when we went into villages or into town. After that he became violent at the sight of any Ethiopian male who was not wearing a ranger uniform. While he was with me I could keep him under control. His ferocity toward locals was hard to control without my presence, however, and fearful lest he should bite somebody who did not deserve to be bitten, I shot him.

Thirty-five years have passed since that killing, and the memory still torments me. I still think it was the right decision, but at the same time I feel that I betrayed him.

There was a pension owner here in Kurohime who always had a puppy to amuse his guests. He never kept an adult dog. This was because he would get a puppy from the pound, keep it and name it and pet it until it grew close to adulthood, then take it back to be disposed of. When I angrily challenged him about this, he just shrugged and said, “Guests like puppies, not big dogs.”

I think the very essence of a truly religious person lies not in the rituals of their religion but in how they react and respond to other lives, both human and other. Callousness and cruelty to other creatures underlie a basic evil that, in a society, will inevitably turn toward callousness and cruelty to other humans.

Western nations continue to berate Japan for whaling, but look at a country like Britain (where I was born), for instance. When a nationwide outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease occurred, millions of cattle, sheep, pigs, and horses were killed and burned, even healthy ones. Foot-and-mouth disease is curable, but to treat and cure animals was deemed by society to be uneconomical. Cattle and other creatures, it seems, were not seen as living, suffering creatures.

Long ago in human history our ancestors tamed wild

From 1965 to 1967 C. W. Nicol, born in Wales, was marine mammal technician at the Arctic Biological Station of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada. After that he was game warden of the Simien Mountain National Park, Ethiopia, for two years. In 1972 he was appointed senior field technician in environmental impact studies for Environment Canada at the Freshwater Institute, Winnipeg. Since 1980 he has lived in Kurohime, Nagano Prefecture, as a writer. He received Japanese citizenship in 1995 and founded the C. W. Nicol Afan Woodland Trust in 2002.

A baby brown bear playing on a broken plastic container that had been washed ashore in Shiretoko, Hokkaido.

creatures for their own use and comfort. It probably started with wolves, which through centuries of breeding became guard dogs and hunting dogs, and after thousands of years were turned into all shapes and sizes, all for the sake of humans. The same happened with horses, sheep, pigs, and cattle.

All these creatures, with the exception perhaps of domestic cats, are by original instinct herd or pack animals. By taking their ancestors into the human herd, we made an ancient promise to treat them fairly. But are we keeping this promise? Animals, birds, and fish kept for food in modern, so-called advanced societies are kept in terrible, cruel conditions. Most of them are transported over long distances in crowded conditions, then killed in huge slaughter factories. We have a similar disregard for the sanctity of life in the way we destroy wetland, forests, rivers, and other natural habitats that are home to billions of other life forms.

There is a strong trend in Europe toward a more natural or organic approach to farming and animal husbandry. The use of poisons is diminished, and domestic animals and birds are allowed to roam and feed outside, with more comfortable places to nest, shelter, give birth to their young, and so on. The people who use the foods thus produced are generally healthier, because the plants and creatures they feed on are healthier. Another result in areas where there is more organic farming is that the beauty and diversity of the scenery are improved. There are more birds singing, dragonflies and butterflies dancing, wildflowers blooming, and bees buzzing, with lambs, foals, and calves frolicking in fields and pastures. All in all, such scenery gladdens the human heart, too.

In Japan, every year bears are trapped in cages and shot.

Their crime is that they come into what humans consider to be their territory. They come in search of food and raid fields, orchards, beehives, and garbage dumps. Only rarely are humans injured or killed in these encounters. Bears come down from the mountains because Japan has impoverished the biodiversity of the forests and deprived the bears of their natural food. Not only that, but due to insane policies, the monoculture tree plantations are left untended, and the mixed woodlands that until recently gave country folk in Japan so many natural riches have grown into tangled, crowded scrub.

For more than twenty years now we have been raising a small woodland, which has become rich in insects, birds, and other wildlife, including bears. The woods have become a place of beauty and bounty, and also give great joy and peace of mind.

Without concern, kindness, and appreciation (and dare I say love?) for all life, no matter how much religious leaders preach, sermonize, pontificate, raise their voices in prayer, or rant and rave against nonbelievers, their religion is hollow and meaningless, and often will lead to cruelty and violence against other humans.

We are a part of the whole circle of life, and if we are to survive, or to have made our passing in the universe of any value at all, then we must feel humility, concern, gratitude, and respect for all other living creatures, even if the decision is made to take life in order to protect or sustain ourselves. It is not hard to live in harmony with other creatures, as long as we try to understand their needs and to compromise with our own selfishness. To live off other life, which indeed we must to survive, entails many ancient promises. We ignore these promises at our peril. □

Shugendo and Women

by Gaynor Sekimori

The prohibition of women from sacred sites, the norm until 1872, remains in place in a small number of locations. There are still strong reminders that the relationship of women with Shugendo remains contested.

It is difficult to talk about Shugendo, a Japanese Buddhist sect centered on the veneration of mountains, without mentioning the prohibition of women from sacred sites, particularly mountains, which was the norm in Japan until 1872. This ban remains in place in a small number of locations, and provides fodder for media attention at regular intervals. Visitors to temples can often find stone plinths with the words “No women allowed beyond this point,” recalling a time when pathways were so indicated to warn women that they should not go any farther

into temple precincts or along mountain trails. Place names, too, such as *miko ishi* (shaman’s rock) or *bijo sugi* (beauty’s cryptomeria), that are connected with legends about women who transgressed the sacred boundaries can still be found at many sites. And even today, barriers forbidding female access along four paths leading to the mountain Sanjogatake in the Omine range near Yoshino, Nara Prefecture, and along the path leading to the inner precinct at the mountain Ushiroyama, Okayama Prefecture, are strong reminders that the relationship of women with Shugendo remains contested.

Development of Female Exclusion

Though the rationale for the exclusion of women from sacred sites had become related to blood pollution by the Middle Ages, it probably developed in relation to the building of separate training facilities for men and women after Buddhism arrived in Japan in the sixth century. The eighth-century *Soniryō* (Rules for Monks and Nuns) makes clear that this was to prevent sexual misconduct: “A monk may not enter a nunnery and a nun may not enter a monastery except to be received by a superior or for a visit on account of death or sickness, or for the purpose of religious ceremonies or observances or instruction.”

Restricted areas expanded with the development of the mountain temples of the Tendai and Shingon sects in the ninth century. Saicho (767–822), the founder of Japanese Tendai, wrote in his *Regulations* that lay officials would be provided to “keep out robbers, liquor, and women” from Enryakuji temple, on Mount Hiei, near Kyoto, whose sacred boundaries were indicated by valleys and mountains in the four directions. This is clearly in accordance with the

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Buddhist precepts that forbid stealing, the abuse of liquor, and illicit sexual relations. Later centuries, however, saw an expansion of Saicho's intent from the simple preservation of the precepts to a wider fear of female trespass. A diary entry from 1020 exemplifies the attitude of priests to women: a "madwoman" who had climbed Mount Hiei was forcibly evicted, but despite the fact that when this had happened previously the Sanno deity had caused it to thunder and rain, this time there was no divine intervention, much to the consternation of the priests. Women, who had been excluded from temple precincts because they were a distraction, now were excluded because they were in some way impure.

Female exclusion was reinforced with the growth of Shugendo. Mountains were probably once forbidden to all, as the abode of the *kami* and the dead; the border between the realms would be marked off at the foot of the mountain by some special natural feature, and here the *kami* would be called down. With the growing influence of continental religious practices, mountain ascetics began entering mountains to gain the power of the *kami*, and gradually their practices developed into what we now call Shugendo. There is considerable influence in Shugendo of the culture of mountain dwellers who lived by hunting. They regarded the mountain *kami* as the female deity of the hunt, and even today the exclusion of women from mountains is often explained as a result of the jealousy of a mountain deity who is quick to vent her anger if females enter her abode.

One of the earliest references to female exclusion regarding a Shugendo mountain is contained in the *Yichu liutie*, a tenth-century Chinese work, which states that females were not allowed to climb Mount Kinbu, Nara Prefecture, at all and that males wishing to do so had to abstain from meat and sexual relations beforehand. Mountains were thus associated with a range of taboos, and special rituals and behavior were required to enter them. Another factor in female exclusion was that specifically Shugendo practices revolved around the idea of the mountain as a womb and a place of rebirth. Sexual imagery was explicit and male oriented. Thus the presence of women practitioners would have been an embarrassment.

But not all places, even mountains, excluded women: the Kumano Shrines, Wakayama Prefecture, always welcomed female pilgrims, as did the Shugendo shrine-temple complex on Mount Haguro, Yamagata Prefecture, which allowed access as far as Noguchi on the trail to the mountain Gassan. Then again, sometimes everyone was excluded, as in the case of Mount Miwa, Nara Prefecture.

Even where women were forbidden entry to mountain temples, alternative modes of practice for the excluded women developed. One practice, which can however only

be surmised from legend, was for women to demonstrate their spiritual power by trying to break the taboo. A tradition shared among many sacred mountains concerns a "nun" called Toran. The eleventh-century *Accounts of Japanese Immortals* says she lived at the foot of Mount Kinbu and had attained long life by practicing the Dharma. She wanted to climb to the mountain's summit, but though she was so holy that springs bubbled forth wherever her stick touched the ground, she was prevented from doing so by thunder and lightning. An account in the *Genko shakusho* 200 years later says explicitly that she argued with the *kami* of the mountain that her spiritual attainment should make up for her female gender, and that she used her powers to try to climb the mountain. Even then she was defeated. Legends from other mountains are less benign. For example, Toran tried to climb Tateyama, Toyama Prefecture, accompanied by a woman and a young girl. When they passed the barrier, the woman and the girl were turned into cryptomeria, and Toran was eventually turned into a stone. This is probably related to the fact that in ancient times trees and stones were used to mark out sacred areas.

A second practice that is well documented centered on *nyonindo* (halls for females) built at the exclusion points on trails into the mountains. They were places where women could stay on retreat and venerate the *kami* and buddhas of the mountain from afar. Some, such as the *nyonindo* at the seven (later six) entrances to Mount Koya, Nara Prefecture, were joined together to make a pilgrimage circuit especially for women. *Nyonindo* were often connected with a cult of the founder's mother. The Mirokudo (Maitreya Hall) at Jison'in temple, below Mount Koya, gained popularity among women in the fifteenth century as the mausoleum of the mother of Kukai (774–835), the founder of the Japanese Shingon sect. Legend says that when she went to meet her son there was thunder, an earthquake, and a rain of fire. Kukai discouraged her from going farther, saying women and criminals could not enter the sacred precincts. Because female pollution was related to menstruation, Kukai's mother thought her age would exempt her, and she placed her robe on a rock and tried to continue. At that moment, menstruation came, though she was 83, and her robe burst into flames. After she died, however, Kukai's powers turned her into a form of the buddha Maitreya connected with cremated remains, and the Maitreya Hall became the center of a salvation cult promising women entry into the Tushita heaven. Similarly, there is a hall called Hahakodo (Hall of the Mother) at Dorogawa, below Mount Kinbu, where En no Gyoja, the seventh-century founder of Shugendo, is supposed to have parted from his mother, and a number of halls on the border of exclusion zones on Mount Hiei are dedicated to

the mothers of the priests Saicho and Ryogen (912–985). *Nyonindo* were built below almost every sacred mountain to provide women with an alternative opportunity to worship.

During the Edo period (1603–1868) a cult centered on the so-called Menstruation Sutra (*Ketsubonkyo*) was widespread, and mountain-temple complexes like Mount Haguro, Nikko (Tochigi Prefecture), Risshakuji (Yamagata Prefecture), Tateyama, and Hakusan (Ishikawa Prefecture), among others, promoted it among female pilgrims. Integral to the sutra was the existence of a Blood Pool Hell to which women are condemned in retribution for their sins, manifested as menstrual blood. Copies of the sutra were thrown into pools called *chi no ike* (blood pools) within temple grounds in a service for the salvation of the dead, and they also acted as a protective charm for women during pregnancy. That temples actively associated themselves with this cult is illustrated by the fact that a pond on the site of the former Ryusuiji temple at Mount Haguro was actually renamed Chi no Ike on a 1791 map.

Sometimes special rituals were devised for women who were not allowed access to the sacred reaches of the mountain. A good example is the Nunohashi Kanjo-e, held at Ashikuraji temple at the base of Tateyama. Women made confession and were given the lay precepts in the Enmado,

and were then led by priests in a funeral procession, walking on white cloth, over a curved bridge. There they were met by priests representing the buddha Amida (Amitabha) descending to welcome believers to his Pure Land, and were taken to the Ubado (Old Women's Hall), where they experienced the joy of rebirth. This ritual reproduced the death-and-rebirth motif that is central to all Shugendo mountain-entry practices. Having fallen victim to the *kami-buddha* separation laws of 1868 and 1869, it was revived eight years ago as a cultural performance and was held for the second time in modern times on September 18, 2005. It is of interest, though, that religious motives and interpretations were common among participants.

Modern Challenges to the Taboo

In 1872 the government enacted legislation to permit women access to sacred mountains and other religious sites, and emphasized that “climbing mountains and visiting temples and shrines is to be freely permitted.” This was one of a number of laws concerned with the banning of superstitious, unenlightened practices, and was in part related to the opening of an exposition in Kyoto at which foreign visitors, including women, were expected. There was much opposition from temples and shrines, and very few complied

The Nunohashi Kanjo-e, held on September 18, 2005, at Ashikuraji temple at the foot of Tateyama, Toyama Prefecture.

immediately. Even Togakushi Shrine, Nagano Prefecture, which had decided to admit women two years earlier, still requested that visitors under abstinence, including menstruating women, refrain from entering its grounds. Clearly female blood pollution was the rationale for female exclusion.

Today a number of places remain closed to women, the most notorious of which is Sanjogatake in Yoshino. The restricted area averages 10 kilometers east to west and 24 kilometers north to south, and was originally much larger. The exclusion zone in the village of Dorogawa, below Sanjogatake, originally included the temple of Ryusenji and the road beyond. Women, though parishioners, were unable to participate even in funerary services. After the temple burned down in 1946 and was rebuilt with a great deal of female sponsorship, there was increased insistence that the restrictions be lifted. As well, more women were working on the mountainside itself, including inside the exclusion zone, and this brought criticism from *yamabushi* (male Shugendo practitioners). More women, too, were involved in service occupations; if the tofu dealer or the person delivering the mail was female, the priest had to come out to the gate in all weathers.

As a result, in 1960 the zone was moved back 2 kilometers, but with the caveat that this did not mean that the same reasoning would apply to Sanjogatake. Thus local economic conditions, rather than religious motivation,

determined the decision. The zone was moved 12 kilometers farther in from the Yoshino side and 2 kilometers in from the Dorogawa side in May 1970, partly in relation to the fact that Osaka was holding an international exposition that year. Domestic tourism was also a factor. A local railway company was interested in creating a new hiking course in part of the restricted area near Dorogawa, stimulated by the large increase in woman hikers, and tourist buses going to a sightseeing spot some 2 kilometers into the exclusion zone wanted to avoid having to drop off their (female) guides beforehand.

There was hope that the restrictions might finally be lifted in time for the 1,300th-anniversary celebrations scheduled to be held in honor of En no Gyoja in 2000, and an announcement in the newspapers was made to this effect in 1997. Although the supporting temples were generally in agreement, there was opposition from local supporters' groups, which maintained that it was a question not of discrimination but of traditional faith and practice. At a delicate point in the negotiations, a group of female schoolteachers forced its way to the summit; this was regarded as "unfair pressure from outside," and opposition hardened and ultimately prevailed. Female Shugendo practitioners who wanted to take part in the celebrations at Omimesanji temple on Sanjogatake planned to hire a helicopter to fly over the area, but even this was not allowed.

The whole question of female access has opened up

Local supporters of Omimesanji temple posting a notice (April 1998) on a path to Sanjogatake in Yoshino, Nara Prefecture, declaring that the traditional restriction of women's entry into the mountain would be maintained, despite the media reports in the previous year that the ban would be lifted.

again as a result of the area's being designated part of a World Heritage site in 2004. UNESCO was willing to grant the status despite the fact that some of the area would be not open to women, on the basis that this was part of the Shugendo heritage. Kosho Okada, a priest at Omimesanji, defended the position in an interview. "The mountain is only for men," he said. "It is a tradition that we will defend." The tradition has taken on a life of its own; though female practitioners are not allowed access, there is no problem with Muslims or Jews or homosexuals climbing the mountain, according to Genchi Masutani of Dorogawa. The incongruities of the situation have been highlighted by a man who has made a number of ascents dressed in female clothing as a form of protest.

Female practitioners, though, are not on the whole as concerned with gaining access as are women motivated by the human rights issue. Those affiliated with the various temples connected with the Omime mountains tend to practice in parallel with the men. Women taking part in the Okugake, the annual mountain-entry ritual of the Omime mountains, climb up from Dorogawa and join the men outside the restricted area and continue on with them. They have even developed their own practice area (*gyoba*) behind Dorogawa to compensate for the fact that they cannot go to Sanjogatake. Because women and men have different organizations within the temples sponsoring practices in the Omime mountains, their institutional separation is reinforced. When the Yoshino temple Kinpusenji hosted a series of *saito goma* (outdoor fire) rituals from Shugendo organizations around the country in the first part of 2005, men and women from that temple performed on separate days.

Haguro Shugendo, centered on Mount Haguro, is the other main stream of Shugendo that continues to maintain its traditional practices. As a result of the government's legislation to clarify the differences between Shinto and Buddhism in the late nineteenth century, the week-long annual Autumn Peak mountain-entry practice (*Aki no Mine*) is conducted both through the temple Kotakuji and through Dewa Sanzan Shrine. The shrine does not allow women to participate, though a separate practice called *miko shugyo* was created for them in 1993 as an event to mark the 1,400th anniversary of the founder. It is a combination of the tradition of the *Aki no Mine* preserved by the shrine and of Shinto purification exercises. There are many contradictions in this rather contrived practice, not the least of which is the requirement for water purification (*omisogi*) in a specially constructed pool adjacent to the retreat hall (*Buchudo*), where the shrine holds its male-only *Aki no Mine* each August (during which the use of water is forbidden). There was considerable opposition to allowing

A group of female practitioners of miko shugyo on Mount Gassan, Yamagata Prefecture, in September 1998.

women to use the *Buchudo*, and it is telling that women did not go to the most sacred site of all, Sangozawa. Here male sensibilities seem to have prevailed, though the difficulty of the climb was the ostensible reason for women's not going there. Unlike the men, women are not entered into a ranking system, and this strengthens the impression that *miko shugyo* is considered inferior to the male practice. Female exclusion continues at the shrine in a different guise.

Women have been able to take out Shugendo qualifications at Kotakuji (Hagurosan Shugen Honshu) since around 1945. It is said that women asked the temple to allow them to participate on behalf of their menfolk who had been sent away to war, but the actual lifting of the ban was due to the urgings of a particularly serious female practitioner. It was not easy in the beginning for women; they stayed in a separate hall in the grounds of Kotakuji

and often were not informed when rituals were taking place. Today men and women practice in complete equality, sleeping and living in the same rooms and doing exactly the same practices. "There is no barrier to female participation in Haguro Shugen Honshu," comments a senior woman practitioner. "Unlike Omine, there are no restrictions on where women can go, or on the type of practice they can do." There is no separate organization for women, and ordained women are not given a separate designation denoting their female status, as happens in other Buddhist sects. In 1999 a woman was named a *sendatsu*, one of the four ritual positions of the Aki no Mine, for the first time. Though she was one of the most accomplished practitioners, this came as a complete surprise. Apparently some doubt was expressed when the idea was mooted, but once the woman showed her complete competence in the role, she was accepted very quickly.

There is still an "invisible wall" for female participants, however. This does not stem from conscious discrimination but is a result of female participation in what is still

predominantly a male society. In other words, women are conscious of not being full members of the club (which is usually between 75 percent and 90 percent male). Nothing is stated, but sometimes barriers are imposed. For example, women tend not to help build the wooden altar for the *saito goma* ritual, and female first-timers are usually not included in general requests to help. There is no reason they do not; it is the result of the invisible wall that some women (not all) perceive but is hidden from the male gaze. In 2004, when my son participated for the first time, I was constantly amazed at how easy it seemed for him to be part of the group.

But I must stress that this invisible wall is not a gateway erected by an external religious taboo, like the barriers at Omine, but is based on the gender consciousness of society as a whole, within which women continue to tread new ground. Ideally, participation in the Aki no Mine, where men and women live in very close proximity, teaches both to transcend their gender differences and deal with each other on an equal basis as human beings. □

Photo : Courtesy of the Nikko Shugendo Sannoin

As part of the 2005 Autumn Peak mountain-entry practice (Aki no Mine) in the Nikko mountains, a woman practitioner walks barefoot over burning logs at the end of the outdoor fire ritual (Chuzenji temple, Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture).

Live Each Day as if It Were Your Whole Life

by Yusai Sakai

*What you do with all your might today will influence tomorrow.
Tomorrow there will be an entirely new self. What happens
from now on is immaterial—just live today to the fullest.*

From the time I was very small, everybody called me useless and good for nothing. “It’s no good even trying; you’re hopeless,” was all I heard. It was no wonder that everyone seemed to me to be somehow above me.

Since I was overcome with shame in whatever I did, I thought that being humiliated was the natural order of things. I didn’t even feel embarrassed any more. “What does that fellow think he’s doing,” people around me would say, but it just did not sink in.

I worked in a Chinese noodle shop, I traded in stocks and shares, I ran a furniture store, and did many other things for a living. When engaged in business, all I could think about was making a profit. I did not see people’s faces—just figures and money.

Ultimately, I lost the battle. After hanging around for a while, I finally found myself on Mount Hiei. I was forty years old when I took ordination as a priest. The age of forty for ordinary office workers means they are already ripe in experience and business. But I started all over again as I reached middle age.

It was as if my feet had been swept from under me, and only then realizing that I was in complete confusion, I found myself placed at the entrance to the realm of the Buddha. And I managed to step in place several times, but finally had to accept the fact that nothing else was left for me if I would fail there and I would not be able to live by any other way than pursuing the Way of the Buddha. The Buddha must have thought, “If this fellow keeps on going as he is, he’ll become completely worthless. He’ll have to be completely deflated and put into a world of religious training as a novice.”

Ascetic training was the only course left open to me. I was forty-nine when I decided that this was how I was going to live my life from now on, when I at last discovered this one important way.

If I had been brought up in a temple from a young age

Yusai Sakai, born in 1926, is a priest of the Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism and head of Iimuro Fudo-do at Enryakuji on Mount Hiei. He completed the thousand-day mountain-circuit practice in 1980, and later completed a second round of this practice in 1987. He was given the title Dai-Ajari (supreme teacher). In 1991, in cooperation with the Buddhist Association of China, he organized a joint pilgrimage of Japanese and Chinese monks to Mount Wutai, the first such event since Buddhism took root in East Asia.

Dai-Ajari Sakai passing through the precincts of Kyoto's Kiyomizu Temple in the final stages of his thousand-day mountain circuit in July 1980. Many people gathered there to praise his great efforts.

and become a priest as a matter of course, I would never have become involved in ascetic training. I think that the Buddha must have made some kind of promise to me when I was first born.

I Had Found My Way

If you are determined to find a way, you will, without any doubt. Being unable to find it simply means you have not tried hard enough to do so. It does not matter what way you will take. There is nothing forcing you to follow any particular path.

Do one practice-session each day. Decide to do something each day, and persevere with it. You may renew yourself by breathing deeply once a day on the roof of your company. Try keeping at it every day, without stopping. If you are able to do so, eventually you will see a way open up before you. Once you have reached the core, you will not be wavering any longer.

If you are not successful in your practice, it means you are thinking too much about other things. When your head is filled to bursting with such things, the inner strength that you have always had will be blocked.

What is important is not to be fixated on any particular preconceptions. If you are, you will be trapped and controlled by them.

Some days are sunny, others are cloudy. If rain falls, it falls; it cannot be helped. When there is a storm, let the wind blow you about. Try to accept everything as it is, without resistance and straightforwardly.

It is no good making a fuss. What happens, happens; give your utmost to each thing as it happens. Trust nature; you can only go so far in making a decision and taking a particular stance.

Learn from Unvarnished Nature

It is all about accepting nature as it is and living according to it.

When we look at nature, we see mountains. Mountains have many trails—trails that take us up, trails that take us down, and level trails that lead us through them. Remember that all exist within nature.

Human beings are influenced by their environment. Coming into contact with nature eases the mind. We can get many hints about life from it.

At dawn, I stand under the waterfall. The temperature of the water is different every day. It is because it is different that I am aware of myself as alive that day. At dusk, the water of Lake Biwa glows. The moss shines in the morning sun. I lead a life that I am indeed lucky to have.

People who are moody should try to climb a mountain once a month. Their moods will be lightened by the view from the summit, and they will feel their energy renewed.

The sun shines upon all people equally to make them happy. In the same way, the Parable of the Herbs in the Lotus Sutra tells us that plants, both large or small, all receive their equal share of compassionate rain, according to their capacity.

We could describe Buddhism very simply as the religion that breeds a compassionate mind.

If human beings lose compassion, that is the end. A compassionate mind is nurtured by reverencing all things. We should simply bow our heads before the emanations of nature—trees, rocks, and grasses. What we must do as human beings is in this. Nature is the buddhas and the gods. If nature is destroyed, human hearts will also be destroyed. It is therefore very important that we should venerate nature and show our gratitude to it.

We Have Only Today

Live each day as if it were your whole life. Today's self finishes with the day. Tomorrow there will be an entirely new self.

Live today to the utmost. What you do with all your might today will influence tomorrow. What happens from now on is quite immaterial. Just live today to the fullest.

When I was doing the thousand-day mountain-circuit practice at Mount Hiei, I would never have been able to continue if I had always thought about how many more days I had left to go.

After having returned from the circuit of a day I was thankful for having been able to finish the day's practice safely, and I renewed my resolve to do my best again the next day.

The realm of movement came to an end when I took off my straw sandals after having walked around the mountain. Performing the morning service in the main hall and meeting those visiting me at the temple were the realm of calm. During this time, I ordered my mind by reflecting on the realm of movement. In this way, I taught myself not to make the same mistakes again. At night, when everything was finished, I slept. In the morning, I awoke as a new person. And in this way movement and calm alternated and repeated themselves.

Movement is life and calm is death. The world of death is preparation for rebirth and a new life.

So that today's mistakes are not repeated tomorrow, dispose of them today. Deal with today's problems today; tomorrow is a new day and a new life. We face the new day refreshed and with a new attitude.

There is a difference between yesterday's self and today's self. When all is forgotten, we can relax and smile again. Even though we have exchanged words with someone today, tomorrow we can exchange greetings with them as if there had been no bad feeling between us.

The greatest ease we can feel comes from not being caught up with our own petty interests. □

Editor's note

The thousand-day mountain circuit is a seven-year practice that has been performed under Tendai tradition for more than a thousand years at Mount Hiei. It was introduced by the priest So-o (831–918), a disciple of Ennin, the third patriarch of the Tendai sect, soon after Ennin had returned from China. At 2 A.M., a practitioner runs alone along a trail in the mountains while offering prayers to more than 260 stupas, pagodas, and even appointed stones and trees on the way. The goal of this practice is to embody the spirit of Bodhisattva Never Despair in chapter 20 of the Lotus Sutra, who revered the buddha-nature in all living beings.

The practice starts in March every year and the practitioner tours a 30-km mountain trail for one hundred days. He repeats this for two more years as the first stage, then in the fourth and fifth years, as the second stage, he does the same for two hundred days. After he completes those seven hundred days, he is given a permission to enter the third stage, called *do-iri*: a nine-day meditation while reading sutras with no food, water, or sleep. In the sixth year he tours a 60-km portion of the same mountain trail for one hundred days. In the seventh, the last year, he first tours an 84-km additional circuit course in Kyoto City for one hundred days and then returns to tour a 30-km mountain trail for another one hundred days.

Some of the straw sandals that Dai-Ajari Sakai wore during his circuits.

Finding Meaning in Life

by Manuel Amoros

*Our lives are an irreplaceable blessing granted to us by the grace of God.
Thus we must always maintain an affirmative attitude toward life.*

Suicide is a serious social issue in Japan today. During the last few years, the number of people taking their own lives has exceeded 30,000 annually, and half of these are men in their forties and fifties. People commit suicide for various reasons—unemployment and other financial problems, health problems, stress from interpersonal relationships, and so on. However, the fact that many people have difficulty finding meaning in their lives can also be seen as a background factor influencing this increase in suicide.

After the war, Japan rose from the chaos of defeat and achieved astonishing economic growth. In pursuit of a better material life, the Japanese threw themselves into their jobs, and they made many sacrifices for their success. At the same time, and this might have had some connection with the U.S. policies during the occupation, the Japanese people lost their souls in the Western-style competitive society that was created. The dominant value system came to regard only the strong as useful, and those who did not go along with this notion were considered outcasts. Economic

success was mistakenly set up as the standard for judging a person's worth.

However, even though everyday life may be materially affluent, without growth in one's inner life, the soul will not be satisfied. Japan is now in an economic slump. People are facing extreme difficulties in the society around them, and as their spiritual power has been severely weakened more people are being crushed. Depression afflicts many as they experience continual anxiety from being unable to find any way out of their difficulties. People are suffering from living in a reality in which no meaning can be discovered in life. If any road out of this dilemma exists, I think it can be found in religion. This is because the purpose of religion is to nurture the soul.

Using Oneself for the Benefit of Others

The author Hiroyuki Itsuki, who has written many books from a Buddhist point of view, describes life in *Ikiru Hinto* (Hints for Living) by saying that our lives were given to us by the gods and buddhas through our parents, and every one of us exists because we are being supported and kept alive by a countless number of people around us. This means no more or less than "our lives belong not just to ourselves alone." Itsuki firmly declares his rejection of suicide for this reason.

In the Catholic Church, life is considered a blessing. Our lives are an irreplaceable blessing granted to us by the grace of God. Thus, we must always maintain an affirmative attitude toward life. We must not treat our own lives or the lives of others foolishly. Before Japanese people start a meal, they say *itadakimasu*, which means "I receive." I think this is a wonderful expression, because it incorporates feelings of appreciation and respect for nature and the countless people and other living things that were involved in the growth and production of the food about to be consumed.

And, precisely because life is a blessing and something that has been given to us, it is a good thing to actively put ourselves to work for the benefit of others. When we realize this, we make a profound discovery about the meaning

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of human life. This is religion's fundamental view of life, and what we should be seeking in our everyday lives in faith.

Human beings all basically desire a happy family and a life fulfilled with a certain level of economic and cultural wealth, but it is important not to stop there, but also to try to make a contribution that benefits others as well. However, in the course of everyday life, we tend to forget about the merits of putting ourselves to work for the benefit of others. And when we lose the feeling that our lives are something we have received as a blessing from the gods and buddhas, we start to feel only intensifying discontent and dissatisfaction.

Volunteer activities allow us to experience a great sense of fulfillment as we devote our time and labor for the benefit of others, and we start to feel that we would like to make this kind of experience a greater part of our lives. We want to become more deeply involved. Or we come to feel that we could make a certain amount of sacrifice to do this. At the moment we discover that this is our real mission in life, what we are doing transcends simple volunteer activity. There are many people quietly working for others and for society even though they are anonymous to those around them and may even lack a clear consciousness of themselves as people of faith in the world. Sometimes these nameless people perform extremely vital work. I believe that religion plays an important role in leading people to this kind of self-enlightenment, and that this is religion's great mission.

Walking Together toward God

The Spirituality Center Saseragi helps mostly Catholics with their lives in faith. The initial idea for establishing the center was to change the image of the church. Even now, the image of the Catholic Church is that it is centered on the pope, bishops, and priests, and that the faithful need only follow these leaders. However, the church was originally a collective body, and the faithful were like a family. Thus, the system at the center involves building teams around ordinary church members, and they take on various issues and problems as a team, assisted by the Fathers and Sisters.

The Society of Jesus has long used the term "guidance" with respect to helping the faithful with meditation and other spiritual exercises, but about twenty years ago, this expression started to change. We now use the word

Middle-aged Japanese men seeking jobs at a public job-placement office in Tokyo.

Photo: Kyoto

"accompany." It is not just a change in terminology; the contents of the meditation and spiritual exercises, and the approach taken, have also completely changed. The word "guidance" implies direction or instruction from above, whereas the word "accompany" expresses an approach in which "you and I are together in this." When we meditate, one person does not act as a teacher who guides the other; rather, we walk together toward God by helping one another to pray.

I think that the most important thing that goes on at the center is the way members help and learn from one another. When we listen to what others say, we can realize that other

people have experiences similar to our own. When we learn things together with others, we can also discover things that we would not have noticed by ourselves. This kind of learning takes place mostly one on one, but sometimes I feel that there are not only two people there, but that God is there also, guiding the process.

Every Life Is Precious

In order to be able to think of others, learn things together with them, and be of use to other people, the first prerequisite is to take good care of yourself. I have been teaching at a university in Japan for a long time, and every year I talk with the students about "love." When we talk about love, we also need to talk about self-love. However, in many cases, Japanese people misunderstand, confusing self-love with selfishness. In fact, self-love is completely different from selfishness.

To love yourself means to cherish and protect the life that every one of us has been granted. Those who do not love themselves are not capable of loving others. There may be some minor doctrinal differences in how love is defined in Buddhism and Christianity, but both religions teach that life is a divine gift, and that every single person's life is precious and something to be grateful for. In this, the two are fundamentally pointing us in the same direction.

Today, somewhere, precious lives will be lost as a result of suicide. And, somewhere in the world today, people will all too lightly be robbed of their lives through war and conflict. Such things should never be allowed to happen. As followers of a religious faith, I believe that one of our important jobs is to raise our voices together and join forces to protect the lives of every single person. □

Seen with Joy by All the Living

by Gene Reeves

The author believes that the Lotus Sutra does not actually teach that we should burn ourselves or our body parts. Suicide would go against the teachings of the sutra as a whole as well as the Buddha's precept against killing.

Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sutra tells a story about previous lives of Medicine King Bodhisattva, when he was a bodhisattva called Seen with Joy by All the Living, a bodhisattva who burned his whole body, and later a bodhisattva who burned just his arms as a sacrifice to a buddha. It then praises the Lotus Sutra and those who follow the sutra. Like the Lotus Sutra as a whole, this chapter has had enormous impact on East Asian Buddhism. Many will remember the sight of Vietnamese monks burning themselves to death during the Vietnam War in the 1960s, beginning with the monk Thich Quang Duc in 1963. It has been said that these monks and nuns used their bodies as torches to illuminate the suffering of the Vietnamese people so that the world might see what was happening in Vietnam. Theirs was an extremely powerful message. And it is a fact that the story and pictures of Thich Quang Duc burning were soon seen all over the world, and within a few months the regime of President

Diem was overthrown and his anti-Buddhist policies ended.

Also, a great many Chinese monks right down to the middle of the twentieth century followed the practice of burning off one or more of their fingers as a sign of dedication and devotion. And, until very recently, virtually all Chinese monks and nuns, and I believe those in Vietnam as well, when receiving final ordination, used moxa, a kind of herb used in traditional Chinese medicine, to burn small places on their scalps, where the scars usually remained for life. This ritual burning was taken to be a sign of complete devotion to the three jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns).

While deeply sympathetic with those who show such great devotion by sacrificing their bodies by fire, it is not a practice I want to recommend to anyone. It is much better, I believe, to sacrifice our bodies through dedicated work, in a sense burning our bodies much more slowly. Since chapter 23 is naturally read as advocating self-immolation, it has been my least favorite chapter in the Lotus Sutra, one that I sometimes wish had not been included. And yet the last part of the chapter contains some of the most beautiful aphoristic poetry in the Lotus Sutra.

Seen with Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva

In response to a question by Constellation Flower King Bodhisattva as to why Medicine King Bodhisattva is traveling around in this world of suffering, doing many difficult and painful things, the Buddha explains that many ages ago there was a buddha named Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon whose world was a special kind of paradise, a world without difficulties of any kind. This buddha preached the Lotus Sutra to one and all, including a bodhisattva named Seen with Joy by All the Living.

After doing various austerities and strenuously seeking to become a buddha for thousands of years, this bodhisattva gained the ability to transform himself by taking on any form. But instead of doing so, he made many offerings

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of flowers and incense to the buddha. Then, thinking his own body would be an even better offering to the buddha, he drank fragrant oil, put perfume and oil on his body, dressed himself in perfumed robes, and set fire to himself. The light from that fire lasted for twelve thousand years, illuminating countless worlds, where the buddhas praised him for making such an offering out of pure devotion.

After being consumed by the fire, Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva was born once again in the same world under the same buddha, this time as the son of a king. There, after explaining the need to do so to his father, he rode a platform of seven treasures into the sky to pay tribute to the buddha of that land. The buddha, announcing to Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva that he would soon enter final nirvana, entrusted all of his teachings to him, including the Dharma of supreme awakening, and all of his disciples, lands, and physical remains, instructing him to distribute the remains widely and to build stupas for them.

After the buddha died, Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva, saddened and in grief, burned the buddha's body on a sandalwood pyre. He collected the remains, made eighty-four thousand urns for them, and erected a stupa for each of the urns. But, still not satisfied with himself, he announced that he would make an offering to the remains of the buddha. Then he burned his arms before the stupas and offered the light from the fire to the remains of the buddha for seventy-two thousand years, causing many to aspire to supreme awakening. Seeing their teacher without arms, many bodhisattvas, gods, and others became troubled and sad. But Seen with Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva explained that having sacrificed his arms he surely would eventually obtain the golden body of a buddha and that his arms would soon be restored. And they were, to the great joy of all.

Then the Buddha explained to Constellation Flower King Bodhisattva that Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva was actually Medicine King Bodhisattva in previous lives. He does not mind doing austerities in this life, the Buddha explained, because he has offered his body to buddhas countless times in previous lives. Everyone who aspires to supreme awakening, the Buddha says, should offer a light to a stupa by burning a finger or toe, as the reward for this will be much greater than the reward for giving even the greatest of material offerings. Yet greater still will be the reward of one who keeps even a single verse of the Lotus Sutra, the king of all sutras, because it saves all living beings. Those who hear this chapter of the sutra especially will be highly rewarded. For example, a woman who hears and keeps this chapter will be reborn in the paradise of Amitabha Buddha as a man, as a great bodhisattva, who

sees and is praised by billions and billions of buddhas and is surpassed only by buddhas.

Literalism and Devotion

Despite the fact that this chapter was taken as praising the actual sacrifice of one's body or body parts by burning, I believe that the Lotus Sutra does not teach that we should burn ourselves or our body parts. The idea that keeping even a single verse of the Lotus Sutra is more rewarding than burning one's finger or toe suggests this. Suicide would go against the teachings of the sutra as a whole as well as the Buddha's precept against killing. The language here, as in so much of the Lotus Sutra, is symbolic, carrying a deeper meaning than what appears on the surface.

There is no evidence to suggest that such practices as burning body parts or one's whole body was taken literally in India. It was in China and Vietnam especially, with finger burnings and self-immolations occurring even as late as 1948, that such language was taken literally. This is one danger of literalism. It can lead to extreme acts that benefit no one. Devotion is good; devotion to the Buddha is good; devotion to the Lotus Sutra is good. But acts of devotion have to be examined with additional criteria to determine whether they are in accord with the Dharma as a whole, whether they promote or retard one's progress along the way, and whether they are likely to lead to a reduction in suffering. There could be very exceptional circumstances, perhaps once in ten million eons, when such a sacrifice is called for. It may be that Vietnam in the 1960s was one such time. But the monk Thich Quang Duc, who burned himself in 1963, did not do so merely to express his devotion. His act of devotion was also a political act aimed at improving the lives of millions of people.

Religious devotion that is not tempered by intelligence and wisdom can be dangerous, both to others and to oneself. Sound practice, skillful practice of the Buddha Way, requires that we develop to the fullest all of our capacities for doing good.

Certainly we should devote our whole selves to the Dharma, to the Truth. This is the most important meaning of "burning our bodies." Does it mean abandoning the bodhisattva practice of service to others in order to serve the Dharma? Of course not. It is by serving the Dharma that we serve both others and ourselves. Serving the Dharma and serving others cannot be separated, just as serving others cannot be completely separated from serving ourselves. This integration of interests—in contrast with Western individualism and with certain Christian ideas of completely selfless devotion and sacrifice—is one of the great insights of Buddhism.

Let your practice be a light for others, helping them to

dispel the darkness. This is a second meaning of “burning” our bodies or arms. It is similar to a very famous passage in the Christian New Testament:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before people, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16)

It is not enough to receive, preserve, or believe Buddhist teachings in one’s head. One must put them into practice in daily life. This cannot be done in isolation, for the very meaning of bodhisattva practice is serving others. This is the most important meaning of offering a light to the Buddha.

Purification by Aroma

Before Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva sacrificed his body in the fire, he drank perfumed oil, and put various perfumes on both his body and his clothes. I think we should understand this to be a kind of purification in preparation for what he was about to do, offering himself to the Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon.

While we normally think of purification as a cleansing or washing, usually with water, in human history many different things have been taken to be agents of purification—especially fire, smoke, salt, and blood. This is one reason that even today a typical Chinese temple is usually full of smoke and incense. But long before the invention of the bathroom shower, the washing machine, and the dry cleaner, many people used perfume and incense as a way of “removing” unwanted aromas and, in a sense, purifying themselves, their clothing, and their special spaces. Though we do not think of it as purification, perfume and perfumed things of various kinds are still used to mask many odors felt to be undesirable.

Purification of ourselves in preparation for sacrificing ourselves to the Buddha can still be an important part of Buddhist practice. For followers of the Lotus Sutra, the highest act of devotion to the Buddha is not meditation or chanting or burning incense, though they may be helpful. The most important display of devotion is bodhisattva practice, the practice of helping others. And for this, preparation is often needed. One kind of preparation is the development of appropriate skills, perhaps especially skill in listening. But more foundational than the development of skills is the matter of purifying ourselves of things that get in the way of our being actually helpful.

As part of the Threefold Lotus Sutra, the Lotus Sutra

itself is often followed by a “closing sutra,” the Sutra of Meditation on the Dharma Practice of Universal Sage Bodhisattva. This sutra is often called the Repentance Sutra (*Sange-kyo* in Japanese) because it is about purifying ourselves, especially our senses, and has been used by monks in purification rituals.

Another way to approach purification is through the idea of the three poisons. The three poisons are mentioned several times in the Lotus Sutra, but are never discussed. They are named only in a couple of places in addition to this chapter. In this chapter, in accord with tradition, they are said to be greed, anger, and folly. Actually, while “greed” and “anger” are very common designations of the first two poisons, the third has sometimes been taken to be delusion, foolishness, or stupidity. Here we might best think of it as confusion. If we are going to be helpful to others, we need to purify ourselves of these three poisons. Our actions should not arise from greedy, selfish motives. Our actions should not be based on anger. And we should not be confused about what we are doing.

With the sense of purification we find in chapter 23, however, purifying ourselves would not necessarily mean getting rid of our greed, anger, and confusion. Human beings are selfish. To think that one is completely free of selfishness and self-centeredness is probably always a kind of self-deception. It’s unlikely that human beings are ever completely free of greed, of wanting more than they need. Human beings get angry. It is a natural, though not inevitable, response to the anger of others, for example. As I suspect we all know, simply saying we are not angry does not make it so. It’s unlikely that human beings are ever completely free of anger. And, while we want to be as free from confusion as possible, it probably is good that some confusion, some lack of clarity, some caution remains, at least usually.

What we see in the case of Medicine King Bodhisattva is a kind of purification that is a masking. This might mean, for example, that rather than trying to pretend to ourselves that we are purely selfless, we need to recognize that we are actually interested in what we are doing and even expect to gain from it in some way. If we can recognize our own interest in everything we do, we might be able to avoid the kind of purely self-serving activity, selfishness, and self-centeredness that gets in the way of actually being helpful to others. Similarly, if we can recognize our own anger and the reasons for it, we need not express it in ways that lead others to become angry. We can wear the perfume of a smile!

Such purification is, of course, itself both for our benefit and for the benefit of the Buddha. By being aware of our desires and anger and confusions, and, at the same time,

Openwork above the entrance of Rissho Kosei-kai's Great Sacred Hall in Tokyo depicts the Jataka tale about the rabbit's sacrifice: Once upon a time, Indra came into the woods disguised as an old man who was starving. The monkey and the fox gave the old man food that they obtained using their own skills, but the rabbit was not gifted enough to obtain anything for the man to eat. Instead, he asked the old man to make a fire, and when it was burning he jumped into it to offer the man his own body to eat. Indra saved the rabbit from the flames, praised his great sacrifice, and made him the rabbit in the moon.

purifying ourselves of them with perfume, we can improve both our own lives and the lives of others. In this chapter we can find the curious idea that from the mouth of those who joyfully receive this chapter will come the fragrance of blue lotus flowers and from their pores will come the fragrance of sandalwood. In other words, if we purify ourselves, both our words and actions will smell good! This means that those who truly hear the sutra will not only be changed themselves, but will also influence others in beneficial ways.

The Pure Land of the Buddha

Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva lived for many lifetimes in the land of the Buddha Pure and Bright Excellence of Sun and Moon:

In his land there were no women, no one living in hells, no hungry spirits, no animals, no asuras, and no difficulties of any kind. The land was as level as the palm of one's hand and made of lapis lazuli. It was adorned with jeweled trees, covered with jeweled curtains, and hung with banners of treasured flowers. Jeweled vases and incense burners were everywhere. There were platforms made of the seven precious materials, with trees for each platform. . . . Under all these jeweled trees, bodhisattvas and shravakas were seated. And above each of the platforms tens of billions of gods were making heavenly music and singing praises to the buddha as an offering.

Like Purna's buddha land, the land of this buddha is very unlike this world in which we live, the world of Shakyamuni Buddha. I suppose it should not be surprising that celibate monks sometimes thought that a paradise would

be without women. No doubt sexual desire was a major problem for men who wanted to be rid of all desire. This is why, a bit later in the story, Seen With Joy by All the Living Bodhisattva was reborn in that same land without a mother, through a metamorphosis like that of an insect.

Perhaps such monks actually yearned for the kind of paradise described here and elsewhere in the Lotus Sutra, but I wonder if even they would really want to live in such a place, a place with no difficulties of any kind. I wonder also, at least for more contemporary readers of the Lotus Sutra, whether such a paradise might not be seen as extremely boring and uninteresting. I know I would not welcome going there, at least not for more than a few days!

Is it possible that such a description of a supposedly ideal state in some way enhances our appreciation of the fact that this world is not flat, is not without difficulties, is not without sexuality and sexual desire, is not without its purgatories and hells, and so on? Is it possible that the difficulties and challenges we face in life contribute not only to our sorrows but also to our joys? Perhaps the greatest joy comes not from life in a pure land with no difficulties of any kind, but from the very struggle with, and occasional overcoming of, difficulties that life in this world presents to us. In other words, Medicine King Bodhisattva comes to this world and travels around in it just because it is a land in which suffering has to be endured, which is the only kind of land in which a bodhisattva can really be a bodhisattva.

Toward the end of this chapter we read that if there is a woman who hears this sutra and acts in accord with its teachings, she will become a bodhisattva, one who is becoming a fully awakened buddha, in the pure land of Amitabha Buddha. Because she has been able to "embrace, read, recite,

and ponder over this sutra and teach it to others,” she will obtain boundless merit, be praised by countless buddhas throughout the universe, be protected by hundreds of thousands of buddhas, and become equal to the Buddha; in other words, she will become a buddha. Here, in a sense, we have an alternative vision to that of a paradise in which there were no women—one in which a woman becomes a buddha through embracing the sutra, by living the sutra in this world.

A great Taiwanese monk, Master Yin Shun, passed away at the age of 100 in June 2005. Normally, in Taiwan, the name of Amitabha, the buddha who presides over the Western Paradise, the land of happiness and bliss, is chanted for the benefit of someone who has died. But shortly before he died, Master Yin Shun requested that instead the name of Shakyamuni Buddha be chanted after his death because Shakyamuni Buddha is the buddha of the world in which we live now. Master Yin Shun wanted to be reborn into this world of suffering and hardship rather than in a world of eternal happiness and bliss, so that he could continue promoting the Buddha Dharma where it is most needed.

Twelve Similes

Toward the end of the chapter we find what I believe to be one of the more beautiful passages in the Lotus Sutra. It is a set of twelve similes that can be understood to be prayers not unlike these famous “beatitudes” of the New Testament:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:3–11)

These beatitudes can be a kind of prayer because they express, not a prediction of what is to happen in some future, but a hope about what will be. They have served down through the ages to give encouragement to people in conditions of need.

In chapter 23 we find these twelve similes:

This sutra can greatly enrich all the living and fulfill their hopes. Just like a clear, cool pool, it can satisfy all who are thirsty. Like fire to someone who is cold, like clothing to someone naked, like a leader found by a group of merchants, like a mother found by her children, like a ferry found by passengers, like a doctor found by the sick, like a lamp found by people in the dark, like riches found by the poor, like a ruler found by the people, like a seaport found by merchants, and like a torch dispelling the darkness.

This can easily be understood to be not only as describing the wonderful powers of the Lotus Sutra but also as expressing hope for all those in need:

May all those who are thirsty find cool, clear water.

May those who are cold find a warm fire.

May those who are naked find clothing.

May those who are without leadership find a leader.

May children who are lost find their mothers.

May those who need to get across water find a ferry.

May those who are sick find a doctor.

May those who are in the dark find a lamp.

May those who are poor find riches.

May people in need of one find a ruler.

May merchants who want to trade find a seaport.

May those in the dark find a light.

In other words, the twelve similes are not merely claims about what the Lotus Sutra can do, though they are that; they are also a poetic expression of the many kinds of human needs and of the hope that they be met.

How, for example, can the Lotus Sutra help children who are lost find their mothers? If the Lotus Sutra is only a text in the narrow sense, if it is only ink on parchment or paper, if it is some rolls in a box or a book on a shelf, or even if it is a text memorized in our heads, the Lotus Sutra will not help anyone find anything. The whole point of the Lotus Sutra is to have the Buddha Dharma become alive in this contemporary world. Of course, to be read or recited or copied, it has to be embodied in texts, but to be fully alive in the world it also has to be embodied in the lives, in the conduct and actions, of human beings.

Thus the meaning of “this sutra can save all living beings” is that if it is heard and applied—by us—people will be saved. Those who are thirsty will find cool water and those in the dark will find light.

The text says:

Even if someone were to give a three-thousand-great-thousandfold world full of the seven precious materials as an offering to the Buddha, great bodhisattvas, pratyeka-

buddhas, and arhats, the blessings such a person would gain would not equal those of someone who receives and embraces even a single four-line verse of this Dharma Flower Sutra. Happiness greater than this will not be found.

We should, I believe, understand this to mean that the greatest happiness comes from putting the Lotus Sutra into practice by following the bodhisattva way of traveling

around in this world helping others, thus enabling it to live in the world.

Why does Medicine King Bodhisattva travel around in this world of suffering? This is the question with which the chapter begins. He does so because he wants to help all those in need, and over many lifetimes has prepared himself to do so. We too, the story of Seen with Joy by All the Living suggests, can bring comfort and satisfaction to those in need by embodying the Lotus Sutra in our own lives. □

Japanese Buddhist Folktales

Kishimojin

Once upon a time, in the country of Musashi, there was an old temple called Shinryuji. A terrifying female demon named Kishimojin lived there, and she was always taking away human children and devouring them.

The villagers who lived nearby hid their children in the back of their houses, but Kishimojin would appear like the wind—whoosh—and seize the children, which was unbearable. A number of people had had their children taken, and the parents were very sad.

The Buddha saw this, and one day he seized Kishimojin's youngest child, a boy, and hid him. Kishimojin had 500 children, and when she realized that one was gone, she nearly went crazy, looking everywhere for him. Then, the Buddha appeared before her and said:

"Kishimojin, I have your youngest child. When your own child is taken, you feel sad, don't you? Well, when you take their children, human beings feel just sad as you do now. So will you stop taking human children?"

Crying, Kishimojin pleaded with the Buddha:

"I promise that I will never take another human child again. Now will you please return my son to me?"

Then from behind the Buddha her youngest child came running, crying, "Mama!" Kishimojin held her child close to her, and thereafter had a complete change of heart; she was transformed into the kindly patron deity of childbearing who also protects children. □

(A story from Saitama Prefecture)

Comparing Heights

Long, long ago, the mountain Yatsugatake was higher than Mount Fuji. At some point in time, the goddess of Mount Fuji and the god of Yatsugatake began quarreling over whose mountain was higher. The goddess said, "My mountain is higher," and the god, not to be beaten, said, "No, my mountain is higher." So they asked Amida to serve as a mediator in their dispute.

"I have a good idea. We'll let water decide who is telling the truth. I will stretch a trough from one of your heads to the other, then pour water in the very center of it. Since water runs from the higher place to the lower place, it will determine which of you is the taller." Then, Amida poured the water in the trough between them, and it ran quickly to Mount Fuji's peak.

"Well, there is no need for you to argue any more. The taller mountain is that of the god," Amida announced. But the goddess had a much stronger temperament than the god and cried, "Oh, this is unbearable, unbearable," and struck her bitter rival, Yatsugatake, over the head. Yatsugatake then blew up, his head splitting into eight pieces and flying apart. And that is why

today, Yatsugatake has eight peaks, and Mount Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan. □

(A story from Nagano Prefecture)

A polychrome wooden image of Kishimojin in the form of the patron deity of childbearing, enshrined at Homyoji temple in Tokyo. 16th century.

Agape and the Bodhisattva Ideal in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*

by Elizabeth Cameron Galbraith

The famous novelist, a practicing Roman Catholic, portrayed his own interior conflict between his Christian self and his Japanese self, pondering the rejection of his foreign faith.

Shusaku Endo, who died as recently as 1996, was one of Japan's most renowned novelists. He was also a practicing Roman Catholic. In 1926, when he was three years old, Endo was taken to Manchuria by his parents. When they later divorced, his mother moved back to Japan with her two sons, to live with a sister in Kobe. Following her sister's example, Endo's mother became a fervent and strict Roman Catholic and had Endo baptized at the age of eleven. Speaking as an adult of his baptism, Endo claimed, "I became a Christian against my will"¹ and spoke of his baptism as an "arranged marriage," or forced union chosen for him by his mother.² As he grew older, Endo considered alternatives to the enforced Catholicism, including Marxism and even suicide, but could not quite take off the Catholic suit he had been dressed in at such an early age:

"And anyway, if I were to strip off these ill-fitting clothes, I had nothing to change into. Yes, I had had a go at Marxism and the like, but somehow it didn't appeal. And there was this business of having been handed the faith by my mother, and my attachment to her; it was hardly a noble or ideal business but something that accrued slowly in the heart."³

He did, however, feel like an alien in Japan during the Second World War. As a Christian, he felt that he was taught to look to the West as his spiritual homeland, to Europe in particular, the center of Christian history, tradition, and culture, and yet his country was under siege from the West. He suffered feelings of being a traitor and was taunted for his allegiance to a Western faith.

In 1949 Endo graduated in French literature from Keio University in Tokyo and in 1950 he went to the University of Lyon to study French Catholic literature. He spent three years in France, where he was eventually hospitalized for pleurisy. It seems quite plausible that Endo hoped that in France, a country he associated first and foremost with

Christianity, he might feel at home in his faith. On the contrary, however, his experience with racism from fellow Christians made him feel rejected in what he expected to be his spiritual home, and the more he came into contact with European art and culture, the more aware he became that they derived from emotions and a sensibility that remained alien to him. Endo eventually suffered a crisis of faith due to what he felt was a very European Christianity that was alien to him as a Japanese, and this great cultural, religious, and psychological letdown undoubtedly contributed to his severe sickness. Even in his sickbed at the hospital, Endo did not feel consoled by Christianity; on the contrary, he longed to escape the oppressive force of European Christianity and return home to Japan.⁴

Soon after returning to Japan in 1953, Endo published

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his first novellas, and in 1955 he assumed the post of instructor at Sophia University. After publishing two more novels, Endo made a second trip to France in 1960, only to suffer a relapse of pleurisy, and he was forced return to Japan, with an ensuing three years in hospital.

During this ten-year period between his first visit to France and the recovery from his second illness, and after a visit to Palestine to research the life of Jesus, Endo became preoccupied with the misfit of his European Christian clothing for his Japanese body: "For me Christianity was like a suit of Western clothes that just doesn't fit. I had a hunger for *miso* soup and Japanese pickles, but they proffered me the butter-rich concoctions of the West; I had an urge to dump it all on the floor."⁵ However, rather than throwing off the faith that he had inherited from his mother, he became determined to fashion or mold his European suit into something more comfortable for the Japanese in him. "I came to think that I should alter the European suit of clothes my mother had bestowed on me into something Japanese, something that fit me, . . . and somehow I was sure that if the time came when I saw the task was impossible and felt that there was nothing for it but to drop this faith, my mother would forgive me."⁶

Endo's novels from then on became preoccupied with precisely the task of retailoring with his own hands the Western suit his mother had put on him into a Japanese garment that would fit his Japanese body; and, using characters, plots, and themes to his full advantage, Endo made it very clear how impossible a task that at times appeared to be. Is the culture of Japan inhospitable soil for the seed of Christianity? Is Christianity so uncompromisingly Occidental in nature that it cannot adapt to the Oriental mindset? These questions, among others, are raised subtly and often subversively throughout Endo's fiction.

In some form or another, Christianity is still the center of Western culture, whereas in Japan there is no Christian history, tradition, sensibility, or cultural heritage. There is also, Endo suggests, something in the Japanese sensibility that forms a barrier to crucial aspects of Christianity: an insensitivity to God (so that the very question of the existence or nonexistence of God does not even present itself to the Japanese), an insensitivity to sin, and an insensitivity to death. In the novella "Yellow Man," Endo points to the difficulty of making Christians of a people like the Japanese, who hate extreme ways of thinking about evil and good, have no concept of sin or of a monotheistic God, and are unmoved by the thought of death.⁷

These three Japanese characteristics, which, according to Endo, are the root causes for the failure of Christianity in Japan, are typically understood to be what Endo is alluding to with his now renowned "mudswamp" metaphor in

Silence, his most celebrated novel. Set during the seventeenth-century persecution of Christians in Japan, *Silence* relates the experiences of Portuguese missionaries, in particular, the priest Rodrigues, who enters Japan illegally to minister to Japanese Christians and to locate his former teacher, Ferreira, who supposedly had apostatized. Eventually captured by the Japanese authorities, Rodrigues is informed by Ferreira, that:

"This country is a swamp. In time you will come to see that for yourself. This country is a more terrible swamp than you can imagine. Whenever you plant a sapling in this swamp, the roots begin to rot, the leaves grow yellow and wither. And we have planted the sapling of Christianity in this swamp."⁸

According to Endo, "This is a reflection of my own doubts formed during my stay in France as to whether Western culture (not civilization) can ever truly take root when planted in Japan."⁹ Thus, Endo was projecting his own problem into this novel, with its seventeenth-century background. Later, after Rodrigues himself has apostatized, he is told by Inoue, the Japanese interrogator:

"This country of Japan is not suited to the teaching of Christianity. Christianity simply cannot put down roots here. . . . Father, you were not defeated by me; . . . you were defeated by the swamp of Japan."¹⁰

Silence portrays Endo's own interior conflict between his Christian self and his Japanese self, a novelist pondering the rejection of his own foreign faith. The distance between Eastern and Western cultures that Endo himself had felt so personally in Paris, "the same sense of distance is evidenced in my novel *Silence*."¹¹ In the suggestion that Christianity, a religion that developed largely out of European ways of thinking, can never take root in Japan is to be found Endo's own concern over whether he can ever reconcile Christianity with his Japanese self. And yet, as impossible as the challenge at times appeared to be, Endo never quite gave up on the hope of reconciling the two. And for the source of such an attempt at reconciliation, one need look no further than the very same novel in which the conflict is presented:

"At the time of my second illness I slowly realized that Christianity was not simply a European thing. In that suit of Western clothes I began to discern the outline of a kimono. With this realization I began to internalize the faith. I think that fact is visible in *Silence*, the novel I wrote upon being discharged."¹²

While acknowledging deeply challenging differences between Western Christianity and the Japanese mentality, Endo provides in *Silence* a vision of Christianity, and in particular of Christ, that is amenable to the Japanese mindframe. We see this vision best through the progres-

sion that takes place in the faith of Rodrigues throughout the novel.

At the outset, Rodrigues believes in the omnipotent and omniscient God of Western Christianity. His, as so many other European Christians', is a resplendent Christ, the beautiful, glorious victor. He notes, however, most significantly, that the physical appearance of Christ was left out of the Bible: "What did the face of Christ look like? This point the Bible passes over in silence."¹³ Rodrigues hopes to be victorious in his mission to Japan.

What he experiences in Japan, however, is somewhat at odds with his glorious expectations. He is constantly faced with the immense suffering of Japanese Christians and the silence in the midst of their suffering of the Almighty God in whom he has such faith. He finds God's silence haunting and begins to question his own faith. His doubts are exacerbated by his former teacher, Ferreira, who he discovers had in fact apostatized, and who, once Rodrigues is captured by the Japanese authorities, aids them in their efforts to induce the apostatizing of Rodrigues himself.

Crucial to Rodrigues's own precipitous fall from his earlier strong faith in an omnipotent God is Ferreira's confession that he had apostatized because God did nothing for the suffering Japanese: those Japanese who, when arrested by the Japanese authorities for practicing Christianity, were tortured if they would not renounce their faith. Moreover, Ferreira tortures Rodrigues spiritually with his protestation that if Christ were here he too would have apostatized. Christ would have apostatized in order to prevent the suffering of Japanese Christians, for he was much more concerned with saving the lives of his flock (literally) than of making martyrs of them. This protestation from Ferreira creates an apparent polarization in Rodrigues's mind between God and Christ. Ferreira even hints that stubborn martyrdom rather than trampling on a *fumi-e* (an image of Christ or the Virgin Mary) might be tantamount to treating the *fumi-e* as an idol. Thus Ferreira exclaims: "Christ would certainly have apostatized to help men. . . . For love, Christ would have apostatized, . . . even if it meant giving up everything he had";¹⁴ and in motioning Rodrigues toward his own apostasy, Ferreira exclaims: "You are now going to perform the most painful act of love that has ever been performed."¹⁵

In this polarizing of Christ and God, in this questioning of obstinate martyrdom in the face of the suffering of others (Japanese Christians will have their lives spared and be released if only Rodrigues will apostatize), and more than anything in this appeal to love, lies the root from which Rodrigues's own apostasy takes hold.

In it, however, also lies the crucial transformation from Western Christianity to a Japanese Christ. It was the cloth-

Shusaku Endo (1923–96)

Photo: Kyodo

ing representing the perfect Christ that Endo needed to discard in order to find the Christ who could speak to the Japanese. This transformation he presents notably through a European, rather than a Japanese, faith transition.

Rodrigues begins to envision not the powerful and dignified beauty of European tradition, but the man who desired to share our pain. The powerful and glorious Christ image instilled in Europe "resplendent with the authority of a King" that "bears the expression of encouragement . . . filled with vigor and strength" begins to be replaced with the ugly face of Christ, crowned with thorns, and the thin, outstretched arms. It was a sunken and exhausted face. And yet, behind the outward frailty there was a strength that enables Christ to accept human frailty and come alongside the individual in moments of need. This frail Christ, not the Almighty God, in a moment of extreme catharsis pierces the silence that has haunted Rodrigues ever since the commencement of his mission to Japan. And it is of crucial significance that the consoling voice comes in the midst of Rodrigues's apostasy. It is as he is on the verge of apostatizing that Rodrigues, for the first time in the novel, hears the voice of Christ: "You should trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world!"¹⁶

The ugly, frail, rejected, sad face of Christ in the *fumi-e* is not the face of splendor that Rodrigues is accustomed to; it is not the beautiful, majestic European Christ. Yet, this is the Christ who speaks to him: "It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross!"¹⁷

Has Rodrigues fallen, or lost his faith, or simply succumbed to his own weakness? There may be senses in which he has done all of the above, and for Endo this is part of what it means to be human. But in losing his faith, and even his self, Rodrigues has found a more substantial faith

in Christ. Thus, Rodrigues exclaims: "Our lord was not silent,"¹⁸ and Endo invites the reader to consider the possibility that the aim of *Silence* is not to portray a silent God who seems indifferent to human suffering, but rather a God who speaks through humanity itself.

There is an important contrast here for Endo, between the God of Western Christianity, who for Endo has always been presented as the Unmoved Mover of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the eternal unchanging being of European scholasticism, incapable of being moved by human emotions, and essentially emotionless in and of itself; and a God who is so completely moved by human suffering as to choose to enter into it with us, as Rodrigues hears Christ claim: "I was not silent; I suffered beside you."¹⁹

It is only upon this realization that Rodrigues is able to love Christ in a different way from before, and he feels that all that has taken place until now has been necessary to bring him to this love. "Lord, you alone know that I did not renounce my faith."²⁰ Inwardly Rodrigues is now possessed of a faith more real and more profound than that which had inspired him to risk all in embarking on his mission to Japan.

Together with this epiphany of faith, Rodrigues's initial perception of an unfathomable gap between East and West has been eroded. Christianity as a Western religion to be imposed upon godless Japan evaporates, through a Christ who may indeed succeed in penetrating the mudswamp of Japan in a manner not available to the figure of awe and majesty best known in the West. Rodrigues knows now "that my Lord is different from the God that is preached in the churches."²¹

And once more the face of Christ rises up behind his eyelids. It is not a face filled with majesty and glory; neither is it a face made beautiful by enduring pain; nor is it a face filled with the strength that conquers temptation. It is the face of the *fumi-e*, sunken and exhausted. Looking up at him in sorrow, those eyes had said: "Trample! Trample! . . . it is to be trampled on by you that I am here."²² Nor has Rodrigues been defeated by the swamp of Japan as his interrogator assumes, for "Christianity is not what [Inoue takes] it to be."²³ In Rodrigues's silent protestation that Christianity is not what Inoue thinks it is²⁴ is also to be heard Endo's proclamation that Christ and Christianity are not limited to the Western interpretation of them. Here it is helpful to quote Endo himself at length:

"*Silence* contains various themes, and it received various interpretations and analyses from the critics. But to me the most meaningful thing in the novel is the change in the hero's image of Christ. The hero, a foreigner, believed in a Jesus of majesty and power, an orderly Jesus who was even governed by order. This was the image conceived by

Western artists. The novel's hero brought this image with him to Japan, and from that strong face of Christ he gained courage to evangelize.

"After suffering many trials and frustrations, however, he was caught at last and brought before the *fumi-e* (picture of Christ that Christians were ordered to step on). Standing there, he saw an image of Christ he had never seen before, an image shaped by Japanese hands. It was not the orderly, European one, but the worn-out face of a Christ suffering as we suffer."²⁵

But it is not only the suffering, worn-out image of Christ that makes it distinctly Japanese:

"More significantly, the image of Christ carved on the *fumi-e* was a maternal image, a woman seeking to suffer with her child and to share the child's pain. It is not the paternal image to be found in so much Western art, the face of Christ resplendent with majesty and wearing an expression that represents the epitome of order and discipline. . . . I intended this transformation to be the theme of *Silence*."²⁶

This maternal image, according to Endo, underlies a crucial distinction between European Christianity and the fashioning of a Japanese Christ:

"To me there are two kinds of religion. Erich Fromm has called them father religion and mother religion. In father religion, God is to be feared; he judges and punishes man's sins; he gets angry. Mother religion is different. God is to man what a mother is to a bad child. God forgives; he suffers with man. . . . If the righteous are saved, how much more the wicked. I began to feel that the gulf I had long felt between Christianity and me was due to the European overemphasis on the paternal aspect of religion. Christianity seemed distant to us Japanese because the other aspect, maternal religion, had been grossly neglected from the time of the early Christian missionaries down to the present."²⁷

In the preface to the American edition of his nonfiction treatise, *A Life of Jesus*, published seven years after *Silence*, Endo informs the reader:

"My way of depicting Jesus is rooted in my being a Japanese novelist. . . . The religious mentality of the Japanese is—just as it was at the time when the people accepted Buddhism—responsive to one who suffers with us and who allows for our weakness, but their mentality has little tolerance for one who judges humans harshly, then punishes them. In brief, the Japanese tend to seek in their gods and buddhas a warm-hearted mother rather than a stern father. With this fact always in mind I tried not so much to depict God in the father image that tends to characterize Christianity, but rather to depict the kind-hearted maternal aspect of God revealed to us in the personality of Jesus."²⁸

That a Japanese Catholic novelist would identify in European Christianity what essentially amounts to an overly patriarchal emphasis, an emphasis highlighted in the feminist critiques of Western theological scholarship also, is of great interest. Worthy of note is the appreciation Endo might have had for the writings of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century anchoress who in her *Revelations of Divine Love* repeatedly refers to Jesus as mother,²⁹ envisions that mother as constantly suffering with her children, and finds it near nigh impossible to find any kind of eternal punishment for sins. Instead Julian is overcome with the universalist impression that, despite the magnitude of human sin “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”³⁰

Just as an early editor of Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love* tried to suggest that Julian’s insight into Jesus as mother was likely the result of her own experience with a loving mother, so it can be argued that Endo’s proclivity for the suffering, maternal, and nonjudgmental Christ has much to do with his relationship to his own mother. That proclivity might equally, however, have something to do with the indigenous Shinto traditions of Japan, in which Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, has always played a central role. I would also suggest that Endo’s fascination with the Kakure Christians, those Japanese “hidden” Christians who had disguised their Christian faith throughout the hundreds of years of the repression of Christianity in Japan, only to surface again with the opening of Japan to the West, is a most likely candidate for influences that bore fruit in the maternal Christ of *Silence*. It is in the Kakure Christians that we find the seeds for a most fascinating comparison between Buddhist and Christian religious practice.

For the Kakure Christians, Endo tells us in his short story, “Mothers”: “God was a stern paternal figure, and as a child asks its mother to intercede with its father, the Kakure prayed for the Virgin Mary to intervene on their behalf. Faith in Mary was particularly strong among the Kakure, and I concluded that their weakness had also prompted them to worship a figure that was a composite of the Holy Mother and Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy.”³¹

It is the composite of the Virgin Mary and Kannon in the above that is particularly worthy of note. Kuan-yin, more completely Kuan-shih-yin, is a Chinese translation from the Sanskrit name of Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisattva who perceives or hears the cries of people who suffer from a variety of difficulties in the world. In Japanese, Kuan-yin and Kuan-shih-yin are pronounced Kannon and Kanzeon. Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra is known as “Kuan-yin’s Universal Gate” or even as the “Kannon Sutra.” A gate in Buddhism is an entrance to the Dharma and a beginning

This brass fumi-e, formerly the property of the Nagasaki Magistrate’s Office, portrays an image of Christ on the cross. Important Cultural Property.

toward awakening. Kuan-yin is understood as making it possible for all people to take the path, which is the Buddha Way. In chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, the Bodhisattva Inexhaustible Mind asks, “For what reason does the Bodhisattva Kuan-shih-yin have the name Kuan-shih-yin?” Then Shakyamuni Buddha explains that if anyone who is suffering calls Avalokiteshvara’s name with all their heart, they will immediately be heard and will be able to free themselves from suffering.³²

Of perhaps more than passing significance, as Chun-fang Yu documents well in *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*,³³ is that Avalokiteshvara, originally male, underwent the most interesting metamorphosis into a female identity in China, where she became a powerful symbol of compassion as “the Goddess of Mercy” or bodhisattva of compassion. Some have even argued that one of the reasons that the Lotus Sutra became so popular is because of a close association with Kuan-yin (although Kuan-yin appears in many sutras, the Lotus Sutra is the only sutra that includes a significant story about Kuan-yin). In China, in particular, many folk stories took shape around Kuan-yin. In one such story, Kuan-yin is a Buddhist who through great love and sacrifice during life had

A late Edo-period image of the Virgin Mary in the guise of Kannon (Maria Kannon) that Christians in Nagasaki area worshiped in secret. White porcelain. Height: 22.4 cm. Important Cultural Property.

earned the right to enter nirvana after death. However, while standing before the great gates of paradise she heard a cry of anguish from the earth below. Turning back to earth, she renounced her reward of bliss eternal but in its place found immortality in the hearts of the suffering. Some would argue that Kuan-yin has become the most popular Buddhist figure in East Asia.

An acquaintance with Kuan-yin can greatly inform one's reading of *Silence*; it can also affect one's study of Christology. Western scholarship has duly recognized in Endo's portrayal of the Christ who suffers with and for us in *Silence* the suffering servant image of the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 53),³⁴ as well as the Christ of the gospel of John: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16).³⁵ Endo himself has made it very clear that *agape*, God's love for humankind reflected in human charity, lies at the very heart of his Christology. When I have taught *Silence* to students in classes on Christian theology, these are themes that students tend to identify almost immediately. However, in fall 2004 when I used *Silence* in a class on the religions of China and Japan, the responses from students were somewhat different. Upon reading the crucial apostasy scene in *Silence* in light of

their study of Buddhism, students still find Endo's suffering Christ, but they also find a Christ who has much in common with their understanding of the *bodhisattva* ideal; namely, the practice of those who put off their own salvation in order to return to earth and aid in the cessation of the suffering of others.

If it is in fact the case that the Jesus whom Endo reveals in *Silence* has more in common with the *bodhisattva* of compassion than with Saint Thomas Aquinas's Unmoved Mover, then it is also likely that in writing *Silence* Endo had not only buried the distance he had formerly sensed between Christianity and himself, but had also in the process discovered a more composite self, one with latent Buddhist, as well as Shinto and Kakure Christian, Japanese sensibilities. I would also like to consider the provisional and diverging perspectives on whether it is even appropriate to compare, let alone conflate, the Christ figure of the New Testament with the Lotus Sutra's *bodhisattva* of compassion, as Endo seems to have done in *Silence*.

Marcus Borg is one Christian theologian who might be willing to answer in the affirmative. In *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Borg uses precisely the New Testament passage that has lain at the heart of so much Christian exclusivism: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) to suggest points of comparison between Christianity and other religions. Of particular interest to Borg is the idea that Jesus is the "Way." Anyone familiar with Taoism will already be struck by the notion of the Tao, the Way, so central to this Chinese tradition. Is it possible, Borg asks, that the Way referred to in the Gospel of John is a path or a road or a journey, and not a set of beliefs?³⁶ And if this is possible, then might conforming one's life to that of Jesus, the suffering servant, be the way for Christians, just as imitating Kuan-yin or the *bodhisattva* ideal is the way for countless numbers of Buddhists? Furthermore, is it not possible that both "Ways" have a great deal in common, as is shown precisely by the similarity between Jesus and a Buddhist *bodhisattva*?

Paul Griffiths thinks not. Adamant that it is not possible to translate Buddhist concepts into Christian ideals, Griffiths maintains, "Bilingualism is possible, but bireligionism is not."³⁷ According to Griffiths, it is not only that each "Way" is different, but also that each maintains radically different outcomes. Salvation in Buddhism means something markedly different from salvation in Christianity. To speak of the different religions as simply different "Ways" to salvation is to wash them all down to a common denominator that makes everything bland and does not take adequate account of the very real differences between these different traditions. James Fredericks also warns against attempts to

reconcile Christianity with other religions in ways that end up with a religion that not only Christians but also Buddhists might not be able to recognize as Christian.³⁸ In his efforts to give Christianity a Japanese visage and an Asian home, Endo may have committed one of the worst crimes possible in the comparative study of religion—oversimplifying similarities and ignoring crucial differences between the religions.

In *Endo Shusaku: A Literature of Reconciliation*, Mark Williams constantly warns that one must beware the trap “of reading Endo’s texts as theological tracts,”³⁹ a cautionary note with which, I suspect, scholars like Griffiths and Fredericks would concur. And yet, the possibility that through novels like *Silence* Christians might learn new, even Buddhist approaches to their own faith may be sufficient warrant for their use in the comparative study of religions. That exposure to a religious tradition as rich as Buddhism can bring new perspectives to one’s reading of Christian testimony is borne out by the following example from Dostoevsky’s reflections on the death of his wife:

“To love someone as oneself, in accordance with Christ’s commandment, is impossible. The law of personality is binding on earth. The self stands in the way. Christ alone

could do it, but Christ was an eternal ideal, toward which man strives and must strive, by the law of nature. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ, as the ideal of man in the flesh, it becomes as clear as day that the highest, the final development of personality must come to this (at the very end of development, at the very point of attaining that goal): that the person should find, should recognize, should with the full force of his nature be convinced, that the highest use someone can make of his personality, of the development of his self, is to annihilate this self, as it were—to give it totally to each and every one, undividedly and unselfishly. And this is the greatest happiness. In this way the law of the self merges with the law of humanism, and, in the merging, the two—both the self and the all (seemingly two extreme opposites)—are mutually annihilated for each other, while at the very same time each separate person attains the highest goal of his individual development.”⁴⁰

As far as I know, Dostoevsky knew nothing of Buddhism, but fresh from a study of Endo it is difficult not to find in the reflection above a meeting ground for Christianity and Buddhism not unlike that between agape and the bodhisattva ideal offered to us so eloquently in *Silence*. □

Notes

1. Quoted in “Japan’s Faithful Judas, Part I,” Philip Yancey, *Christianity Today*, 1995.

2. Ibid.

3. Shusaku Endo, *Watakushi ni totte Kami to wa*, 1988, Tokyo: Kobunsha, pp. 11–12. *What God Means to Me*, unpublished translation courtesy of Professor Paul McGrath, Nagoya Gakuin University.

4. Ibid., p. 12.

5. Ibid., p. 11.

6. Ibid.

7. Shusaku Endo, *White Man/Yellow Man, Two Novellas*, trans. Teruyo Shimizu, EastBridge, 2003.

8. Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980, p. 147.

9. Shusaku Endo, *Foreign Studies*, Peter Owen, 1989, introduction, p. 9.

10. *Silence*, p. 187.

11. *Foreign Studies*, p. 9.

12. *Watakushi ni totte Kami to wa*, p. 15

13. *Silence*, p. 22.

14. Ibid., p. 170.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 171.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 191.

19. Ibid., p. 190.

20. Ibid., p. 175.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 176.

23. Ibid., p. 187.

24. Ibid.

25. *Japan Christian Quarterly* 40: 4, p. 181.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Shusaku Endo, *A Life of Jesus*, Paulist Press, 1973, p. 1.

29. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 125 & 130 (Revelations 52, 54).

30. Ibid., pp. 88 & 97 (Revelations 34, 40).

31. Shusaku Endo, “Mothers,” in *Stained Glass Elegies*, Peter Owen Press, 1984, p. 129.

32. See *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 2003, Chapter 25. I am indebted to Gene Reeves for a commentary on the Lotus Sutra he provided me with, as well as for a Dharma Talk he gave on chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra, “Kuan-yin’s Universal Gate,” on June 10, 2001.

33. Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, Columbia University Press, 2000.

34. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1989, Hebrew Bible, pp. 1052–53.

35. Ibid., New Testament, p. 152.

36. Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, Harper San Francisco, 2001, p. 216.

37. Paul Griffiths, “The Properly Christian Response to Religious Plurality,” *Anglican Theological Review* 79, 1997, p. 11.

38. James Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions*, Paulist Press, 1999, pp. 120–27.

39. Mark Williams, *Endo Shusaku: A Literature of Reconciliation*, Routledge, 1999, p. 195.

40. Quoted in James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky: The Thinker*, Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 82.

Using Our Talents and Abilities for Others

by Hachiro Kitagawa

Our skills truly shine when we utilize them to bring peace of mind, joy, and salvation to other people.

Twice in my life, I have fasted for more than forty days, and each time my belief in transmigration has been confirmed. Human beings are born into this world having already experienced numerous previous lives, and will pass through even more lives after death on a journey of refinement of the soul. The long periods of fasting have also honed all of my senses.

I realize the meaning of transmigration: it is to work off the karma accumulated in one's previous lives. In other words, it is the evolution of our souls as being human. Each of us is born into this world for a brief period with "homework" that was assigned to us in a previous existence.

Saving Others

Viewed from this perspective, it is clear that people are so distracted by their material desires that they remain indifferent to the evolution and maturation of their souls. The structure of this world is complicated and subtle. The interconnectedness of our minds and bodies and contemporary society is sustained narrowly, but at the same time it is infinitely profound.

Each person has unique talents and abilities. The contemporary person tends to use these talents and abilities only for personal gain. We work to have our own house; to increase our assets; to acquire various possessions. We work to achieve promotions and to secure the accolades of society. And in the process we stir the jealousy of others and must overcome all kinds of trouble and obstacles.

In contrast to this, our talents and abilities really shine when we use them to bring peace of mind, joy, and salvation to others. And we save ourselves when we find our own joy in the joy of others.

The other day I lectured in a seminar of "cram" school teachers where I heard the following complaint.

Every year the teachers worked hard to get their students into the top-ranking schools, but once the students passed the entrance exams they set off on a fast-paced life in pursuit of their own advancement and success and no one came back to thank their teachers. All that effort to get the students to study; all that competition with other schools to see who could get the most students into the best schools—it all seemed so futile. How, I was asked, should the teachers reconcile themselves to this situation?

My reply was, "Talents shine when they are used for others. Talents that are used only for the self become tarnished and buried in the trouble that inevitably ensues. The talents and abilities of a person who is able to get into a top-ranking school like the University of Tokyo only become meaningful when they are applied in service to others. We should be applying our talents to bringing serenity to others and peace to society. Getting into the University of Tokyo is only the means to this end. If students are aiming only for the rewards that will come after, it will not be long before they realize how futile that is. Maybe you teachers are not getting this message across."

When you limit the use of your talents and abilities for your own personal gain, you acquire a need for the praise and respect of others, and start to say and do things that will attract attention. You try to fulfill yourself with material things until you finally reach the point where you realize in frustration that you will never be satisfied. You bow

Hachiro Kitagawa, born in 1944, is a ceramic artist. Having set up a kiln at the foot of Mount Aso, Kumamoto Prefecture, where he also pursues organic farming, he has developed a unique style of glazing techniques.

your head to those who are stronger than you and look down on those who are weaker. You feel no shame in this and live a warped life.

As you lose confidence in your work and abilities, your final recourse becomes money. You take pride in having a large house, a big car, and in hobnobbing with the elite. But just because you stay in a top-class hotel, go see a top-class show, and have a few upper-class friends does not make you a top-class person.

With the elevation of the soul comes the realization that the values of this world, status and fame, are flimsy things that do not last. Only when you contribute to the peace and happiness of others will you be able to find your own peace and happiness. It is here that our hearts and minds will really shine.

Sometimes It's Better to Lose

One reason we are given life in this world is to give us the opportunity to raise the level of our character. And the only way to do this is to pray always for the happiness of others and give thanks to others. You can save yourself with a smile and a word of kindness just as much as you will be saving others. The sooner you realize that social status and riches are not the objectives of your existence, the happier you will be.

In this world, in which economics seems to mean everything, it's not surprising that a lot of people equate success with economic success. But the really successful person is one of superior character, a person who has learned to live without anger, fear, or sin. There can be no fulfillment in a life that is measured by the number of one's possessions. Uncertainty and a sense of insufficiency are the only rewards of such an existence.

We talk of "winners" and "losers." My advice is to sometimes become a "loser." By doing so, you will know the pain of losing and will learn to take care not to inflict the same pain upon others but instead to give comfort. Every time you "lose," you will gain fresh insights.

The person who is always winning, on the other hand, will someday lose and lose big. How many corporations have we seen that have grown into giants by constantly winning, only to descend into managerial crises? How many high-ranking corporate CEOs and presidents have we seen tarnish their final years with scandal? These are people who have lost control of their greed and find themselves riding at the head of a locomotive without brakes.

Vigilance is required when you have been a winner for too long. Have you become arrogant? Are you vain? Are you proud? Are you haughty? Do you like to show off the fact that you count important and famous people among

Mr. Kitagawa standing in front of his workshop in the town of Oguni, Kumamoto Prefecture.

your friends? Do you make fun of the weak? Watch out for your own arrogance and do not boast. There is neither a lesser seat, nor a seat of honor. Live with the willingness to sit in whatever seat happens to be open.

Life is impermanent. Life is like a torn piece of paper blown here and there by strong winds over a span of seventy or eighty years that come to an end in no time. If we are to shine even for a moment, we must give of ourselves to others and fill our hearts with thanksgiving. Do this and you are certain to find peace.

And be prepared to miss out once in a while; be prepared to lose. The sensitivity and caring that you will glean from the experience of losing will add polish to your character and ensure that your next life is rich and fruitful. We cannot take money or riches to that other world to which we will all go one day. The only things you can take with you are the sorrow and the joy you have brought to others. □

The Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: Reanimating Buddhist-Christian Relations

October 28, 2005, marked the fortieth anniversary of the Roman Catholic Church's document *Nostra Aetate*, issued during the Second Vatican Council, which served to open a new wave of interreligious dialogue. In particular, this document clarified the attitude of the church toward other major religions.

On the anniversary, events took place throughout the world, one of which was at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, where a three-day international conference titled "*Nostra Aetate* Today: Reflections 40 Years After Its Call for a New Era of Interreligious Relationships" was held.

All of the plenary sessions on the second day were devoted to the theme of dialogue between Christians and members of Asian religions. James L. Fredericks, professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, spoke about the church's dialogue with Buddhism. Based on his many years of experience in dialogue with Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhists in the United States, China, and Japan, Rev. Fredericks claimed that the church's theology of religions does not "succeed in supporting our dialogue in Buddhism," since it is not adequate as a basis for dialogue. The church today needs to shift its energies "to the praxis of interreligious dialogue," he said, adding that Pope John Paul II's theology of religions is a comprehensive Christian theological interpretation of the meaning of other religious communities adequate to the demands of Christian orthodoxy. The church's fulfillment theology reflects Christian theological

principles and responds to problems relating to Christian belief. However, problems arise when the church's theology of religions is employed as a basis for dialogue with the Buddhist community, as Roman Catholics engaged in dialogue tend to apply their own fulfillment theology of religions to Buddhism.

Another problem in the dialogue with Buddhism concerns the recognition of the theological value of religious differences. Although similar and different in significant ways, Buddhist and Christian virtues have different doctrinal backgrounds, Rev. Fredericks said. While Christians practice their virtues "for the sake of [attaining] the Kingdom [of Heaven]," Buddhist virtues must be understood "in relation to the doctrines of karma and rebirth." Differently from Christianity, in Buddhism "time is not ordered to an eschatological fulfillment." Thus, reflection on the non-eschatological virtues of Buddhism is important because "it enables Christians to think more deeply about the role of the virtues in their own religious life." When Catholic fulfillment theology is imposed as a framework upon Buddhist-Christian dialogue, however, this opportunity for theological reflection is obscured, Rev. Fredericks said. He added that his Buddhist partners in dialogue never suggested that Christians amend their basic beliefs regarding the uniqueness of Christ. On the contrary, he said, Christian teachings should be proclaimed "in the light of the religious truths" of the partners in dialogue. *Nostra Aetate* announced the challenge to interreligious dialogue and in this

respect, argued Rev. Fredericks, "the church's attention needs to shift from the problems of a comprehensive theology of religions to the actual praxis of interreligious dialogue." Of all dialogues, "the dialogue with Buddhism is perhaps the most mature and energetic," he affirmed. Finally, Rev. Fredericks stated that it must be clearly understood that the purpose of dialogue is not evangelization but "to establish bonds of solidarity between the church and other religious communities." He took as a symbolic example his friendship with the head of a prominent Buddhist monastery in Taiwan. This friendship, he said, "is not based on our religious differences." These friendships should be an example of unity and of interreligious dialogue to the whole world. It is "a sign of the solidarity that is possible between Buddhists and Christians." The church's dialogue with Buddhism "carries with it immense implications not only for recognizing the limited meaning of our theology of religions, but also for appreciating that the Spirit is once again calling the church to be a sign for the world, this time by means of interreligious dialogue."

In his opening speech, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, highlighted the importance of understanding the role played by the Roman Catholic Church in a world marked by religious pluralism. He pointed to the progress made by the church in this field by noting that when the document was first issued, it was presented as a declaration on the church's relations with non-Christian

religions. The definition of “interreligious dialogue” today symbolizes the church’s increased awareness of the “identity” of the other religious traditions, since interreligious relations are based on respect for the identity of all the partners engaged in dialogue. In stressing the importance of good interreligious relations, Archbishop Fitzgerald pointed out that in order to overcome prejudice in pluralistic societies, it is important that accurate information on the different religious traditions present is provided, since knowledge of one another is the basis for mutual understanding and for the maintenance of peace.

Asanga Tilakaratne, head of the Department of Buddhist Philosophy at the Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka, spoke about a Buddhist perspective on the conciliary document. He drew a comparison between the changes in interreligious dialogue brought about by the Second Vatican Council and the Buddhist Councils. Despite apparent similarities, he said, the Second Vatican Council brought about decisions with far-reaching effects for the Roman Catholic Church. He added that there is also “no official position representing the Buddhist view toward other religions universally adopted by Buddhism.” He then recounted his experience as a speaker in an interreligious panel in Bangalore, India, in 1995. On that occasion he lectured on Buddhist enlightenment and ineffability, pointing out that enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition is fundamentally different from that in Christianity. Dr. Tilakaratne said how he appreciated that at the end of the meeting, Francis Cardinal Arinze, who at the time was the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, came up to him and praised his efforts to represent his tradition as it is.

Noel Sheth, S.J., president of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India’s na-

tional institution for the training of Catholic priests and other religious leaders, made a comparative theological study of the Theravada Buddhist and the Christian understanding of altruistic love. Both religions go to the extent of advocating loving one’s enemy and even sacrificing one’s life for another.

Anantanand Rambachan, professor of Sanskrit at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, spoke of how interreligious dialogue with Christians influenced his understanding of Hinduism. He pointed out that more than at the formal level, interreligious dialogue was undertaken at the personal level of friendships with the Christians he met during the course of his entire life: “One encounters another tradition most meaningfully through its embodiment in persons who express their faith in their way of life.” The impact of such encounters, he said, “is inevitably profound.” He added that although dialogue between Hindus and Christians in recent years has been dominated by controversies concerning proselytizing and conversion, more emphasis should be placed “on enriching the possibilities for dialogue centered on those matters that define the heart of our traditions.” Here “we will discover shared convictions, challenging questions for each other, and opportunities for new understanding of our tradition that only interreligious dialogue can offer,” he concluded.

The other two days of the conference were devoted to dialogue with Judaism and Islam. Most speakers agreed that interfaith dialogue has much to do with everyday life. This is where it must be put into practice. Some speakers said that members of non-Christian religions often suspect that the Christian desire to engage in dialogue is motivated by a conscious or unconscious desire to convert the other. One of the speakers spoke of *Nostra Aetate* in international and interreligious relations.

John D’Arcy May, associate professor of interfaith dialogue at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin, said that more than being only a theological problem, the Jewish-Christian dialogue gradually came to be understood also as having to confront European Christianity’s history with the Jews, while the dialogue with Muslims led the Vatican into “uncharted diplomatic territory.” He pointed out that dialogue entails an intrinsic element of politics. Thus, “religious stances are now seen to be political factors, even where the conflict is not ‘about’ religion.” Dr. May suggested the adoption of an “ethics of dialogue,” to test the validity of religious claims in the process of dialogue itself, and an ethical “politics of dialogue” to transpose the nonviolent quality of interreligious communication to the conduct of interethnic and international relations.

In his October 26 letter to Cardinal Kasper, president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Pope Benedict XVI recalled that *Nostra Aetate* “offered the basis for sincere theological dialogue.” In the letter he defines the declaration as an “occasion of greater mutual understanding and respect, cooperation, and, often, friendship between Catholics and Jews.” Looking back at four decades of fruitful Jewish-Christian dialogue, the pope said that “we need to renew our commitment to the work that yet remains to be done,” in view of the need to “build a world of justice, reconciliation, and peace for future generations.”

The conference was attended by over 350 people from more than 20 countries and was co-sponsored by Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., the Cardinal Bernardin Center at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, and Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. □

Eva Ruth Palmieri

To Walk Beside Those Who Need Me

The faith of this member of Rissho Kosei-kai had helped her in the midst of personal trials, but she has now learned how to be of service to others simply by being there when they need her.

I never felt burdened by Takashi's handicap. He was my first child and I just thought that was the way things were. Takashi was so cute; I was happy to be his mother."

Mayumi Umeda speaks with remarkable ease about her thirty-year-old son, Takashi, who has cerebral palsy. Takashi's birth was difficult. At ten months, he suffered severe seizures, and he has shown little mental or physical development since then.

Mayumi loved Takashi dearly, but as the bride of the eldest son of the Umeda family, it was a terrible misfortune to have presented her husband, Mitsuo, with a disabled first child. Both husband and mother-in-law were gentle with Takashi and actively helped with his care and the many necessary trips to the hospital, but it only took a word here and a frown there to let Mayumi know that they were both very disappointed. Mayumi was ashamed that she had not fulfilled her job as a bride and this made her feel bad.

It was around this time that Mayumi joined Rissho Kosei-kai at the invitation of a friend from her high-school days. Every time she felt herself slipping into depression, Mayumi would strap Takashi onto her back and go to see Yurie Ishizeki, her neighborhood group leader at the time. She would pour out her pain to Ms. Ishizeki: "It's my fault my son is like this. It's my fault that I have brought sorrow to my family." Every time, Ms. Ishizeki would console Mayumi with gentle words, "I see. It has been hard for you, hasn't it."

Mayumi's friends at the Rissho Kosei-kai branch would also console her: "Takashi knows that you love him and that's the best thing a parent can do for a child."

"I don't remember much about my sad feelings of the past," Mayumi says now. As she says, "Everyone in the Sangha shared my feelings and I was healed by their sincere

good wishes—that's why I've been able to get this far"; a smile plays on her lips.

Even as Mayumi's pain has been healed little by little, she has been blessed with two more sons, Yuji (now twenty-four) and Shinya (now twenty-one), and her family has become closer than ever. These are happy years.

Two years ago, however, something happened that compelled Mayumi to re-examine her faith. It all began with a telephone call.

Transmitting the Law

"Mayumi, what should I do?"

The voice on the other end was that of Hiroko Onishi, Mayumi's friend of fifteen years. Mayumi and Hiroko had come to know each other at the day care center in which Mayumi had enrolled her third son. Shinya and Hiroko's son were in the same class. The two mothers remained friends even after Hiroko moved to Hiroshima and the two often called and visited each other. This time, Hiroko related an unbelievable story.

Hiroko's only son, Kotaro, twenty-one years old, had moved to an apartment in Kanagawa Prefecture where he was to attend university. The day after the university's entrance ceremony, Kotaro was attacked by two thugs. They hit him repeatedly on the head and stole his wallet and student ID card. Kotaro telephoned his father to tell him to cancel his bank card, but after he hung up they heard nothing more from him. His parents telephoned the apartment landlord and the police in a panic but it was not until two hours later that Kotaro was found bloody and unconscious in his apartment. Kotaro narrowly escaped death but the doctors gave a bleak prognosis: "His nerves have been badly damaged," they said. "He is paralyzed from the neck down and probably will never be able to show any kind of emotion."

Mayumi put down the telephone receiver in shock. She immediately went to the family Buddhist altar and began to chant the sutras. All she could see were the clear, bright

Mayumi Umeda is a member of the Hachioji Branch of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.

eyes of the happy and lively Kotaro she had known as a child. She had last seen Kotaro a few years ago. He had been a typical gruff teenager then, but his eyes had held the same intelligent gleam of his childhood. To think such a terrible thing had happened to this child. Mayumi's heart filled with pain.

Mayumi prayed for Kotaro. Hiroko moved into Kotaro's apartment and went to visit him at the hospital every day. Seeing this, Mayumi decided one day to invite Hiroko to join Rissho Kosei-kai. Mayumi wanted Hiroko to have the same refuge she herself had found in Rissho Kosei-kai.

Both Hiroko and her husband were quick to join. They were haggard and worn by their son's plight and were eager to grasp at any help that might be offered. From that day on Hiroko chanted the sutras with unmatched fervor.

For all the world as if Hiroko's prayers had reached heaven, Kotaro's condition gradually began to improve. One day he was able to follow his mother's moving fingers with his eyes, and at another time his shoulders shook with silent laughter. A few days later he was able to wiggle his fingers and soon after that he was able to lift his arm. At long last, Kotaro was able to communicate with his fingers. He still looked nothing like the animated Kotaro that he had once been, but his recovery was miraculous considering the initial bleak diagnosis.

Hiroko wanted more, however. She could not yet accept the reality that was before her. She still hoped that her prayers would be answered and Kotaro would one day stand up and say, "Mother." Each day she went to the hospital full of this hope and each day she had to face the sight of her son, immobile in the hospital bed. The thugs who had attacked Kotaro had long since been arrested, but Hiroko could not forgive them for what they had done to her son. Her mind reeled from the hatred she felt for these two, who were about the same age as Kotaro.

It was time to take Kotaro back to Hiroshima. Mayumi spent the night before with Hiroko in Kotaro's apartment. "You've got to stop denying what Kotaro has become. You've got to accept him just as he is. Only then can you move forward," Mayumi urged Hiroko. She tried hard to get Hiroko to see that making judgments about what was good and bad would only deepen her pain. She poured out her early feelings about Takashi and how she had been saved by her faith.

"Kotaro and Takashi are not the same!" Hiroko glared at Mayumi.

"How can you know how I feel? My only son has been suddenly robbed of his future. How can you possibly understand my despair?" Hiroko's lips quivered with her pain. Mayumi was at a loss for words.

Mayumi buried her face in her hands and wept. Seeing this, Hiroko broke down and cried too, in a loud voice.

The bitterness of knowing that your son has been robbed of his future; the regrets and self-accusations, . . . Mayumi knew that she could never fully comprehend Hiroko's feelings, even though she was also a mother. Why, no two people could ever feel exactly the same way about anything, even if they had the exact same experience. Here she was so close to her friend, but there was a huge gap in their feelings. Mayumi wept with the frustration of knowing that there was nothing she could do. She could not stop her tears. All she could do was pray that some day her friend would find peace.

To Walk with My Friend

Mayumi spoke of Hiroko to the friend who had first guided Mayumi to her faith. "Wouldn't it be nice if you were able to think of others in the same way that you think of Takashi," her friend said. It suddenly hit Mayumi. She was never bothered no matter what Takashi did. Why couldn't she respond in the same way to others? After all, that is what the Sangha had done for her.

Mayumi realized that she wanted to become a friend to others, a person who could walk quietly by their side. She wanted to be able to wish others happiness.

After her experience with Hiroko, Mayumi decided she wanted to learn how to pass on the Buddha's teachings to others and she faithfully attended seminars and workshops. That winter, Mayumi was assigned the position of district group leader, and she is busy these days being of service to others whenever she can.

Today, Kotaro lives at home, using an electric wheelchair that he can control to get about. He is also working hard at rehabilitation in the hope that he may someday walk again. Every so often, Mayumi telephones Hiroko in Hiroshima to hear the latest on Kotaro's progress. She shares in Hiroko's joy and in her frustration, and talks to her about the Buddha's teachings.

Up to now, Mayumi says, she has been blessed in the knowledge that her faith has helped to keep her at peace no matter what trials she has had to undergo, both large and small. At the same time, she was so taken up with Takashi's care, that she used to be reluctant to make herself of service to others.

"I thought it was sufficient that I look into my own heart. I didn't try to go beyond that. But now I want to accept people and their feelings just as they are. I may not be able to understand their feelings completely, but if I can be at their side that is enough. My experience with Hiroko taught me that there is great joy to be had in simply being there for someone."

And it is this joy that gives meaning and energy to Mayumi's life. □

The Lotus Sutra and World Peace

by Nikkyo Niwano

This essay is part of a continuing series of translations from a volume of inspirational writings by the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai. DHARMA WORLD will continue to publish these essays because of their lasting value as guidance for the daily practice of one's faith.

What determined the entire course of my life was my having the opportunity to encounter the Lotus Sutra while I was still a youth. In the first half of my life, I devoted myself day in, day out to making the Lotus Sutra teachings as widely known as possible. By contrast, during the latter part of my life, my work became increasingly involved with social issues, and these gradually grew to include issues with a global scope. Some Rissho Kosei-kai members were perhaps puzzled that I became so deeply concerned with matters relating to world peace, and it is for those people in particular that I would like to take the opportunity here to explain briefly how the Lotus Sutra is actually the essential teaching for achieving world peace and human salvation. In this sense there is no contradiction between my early life and my later life. Whether propagating the teachings or working for world peace, I have been following the natural course of a believer in, and a practitioner of, the teachings of the Lotus Sutra.

The Threefold Lotus Sutra, as most of us know, teaches us very firmly that human beings are intrinsically endowed with the buddha-nature. An example of just how much confidence and joy this realization brings is shown in the Parable of the Poor Son in chapter 4 of the Lotus Sutra, "Faith Discernment." When considering the matter of individual personal dignity, we should strive to learn what is the true dignity that is essential to us.

Nikkyo Niwano, the late founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace and was honorary chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) at the time of his death in October 1999.

However, I must point out here that the emphasis on personal rights that is derived from the philosophy of individualism is no more than an emphasis on what are basic "human" rights. The Kanji character used to express the concept of "rights" also can convey the meaning of "temporal" or "provisional." It is also used in the Japanese phrase meaning "the end justifies the means" to describe expedients that differ from occasion to occasion. In Japan, many native divinities have the designation of "gongen" (using the same character), which literally means "temporary manifestation." Here the divinity is considered to be the provisional human form taken by the Buddha to bring living beings to salvation; thus both instances of "right" in Japanese do not indicate the actual thing. Seen in this light, "rights" are something given to human beings for the period of their existence in this world. When we confuse what is temporary with what is the truth, we are treating something that is temporary as something that is inherent. In consequence, we take a cautious attitude toward others, behave in a manner unlikely to concede to them, and take a stance to expose their evil and combat them. Thus have the cold and unfriendly personal relations that mar today's society come into being.

On the other hand, when we are aware of our buddha-nature, as the Lotus Sutra teaches us, we are able to see that our essential self is one with the eternal life of the universe. Realizing this, we cannot help but perceive the truth; we are inevitably obliged to face the fact that essentially we are one with everyone else. When we do so, a feeling of intimacy and unity with others wells up within us and suffuses us with an indescribable sense of warmth. It is a spirit of

At the ruins of Breendonk Concentration Camp near Antwerp, Belgium, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano prays for the repose of the souls of the victims of Nazi atrocities during World War II. Rev. Niwano took a tour to the site with other participants during the second assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, which was held in Leuven in 1974.

friendship that Buddhism calls “compassion.” We tend to think of compassion as mere benevolence, as in the case of a superior taking care of an inferior, or the strong sympathizing with the weak. However, it is not a sense of superiority. Compassion should be considered the sense of a great type of friendship where there is no distinction between the self and others.

The Buddhist term “compassion” is expressed in Chinese through the translation of two Sanskrit words, *maitri* and *karuna*. *Maitri* is an abstract noun derived from the root *mitra*, which means “friend,” so we could say it conveys the idea of the highest type of friendship. It is said that the basic meaning of *karuna* is “groaning with pain,” and so expresses the idea of the sympathy felt when seeing someone suffering and instinctively experiencing that suffering as one’s own. In friendship and sympathy there are no barriers between the self and others. Compassion thus is that pure friendship that wells up of itself from the sense of oneness. If everyone felt such compassion, there would be no hatred or ill-will. How could people fight and engage in war? Compassion is the very starting point of

peace; peace lacking it is transient and no more than a sham.

The reason I must emphasize is that the Lotus Sutra’s teachings of peace derive from the philosophical base of “the real aspect of all things,” that is, all phenomenal things are in themselves ultimate reality. And behind the notion of this resides the spirit of infinite compassion.

If we think about this from the viewpoint that all things are one in their true form, although to outward appearances diversity marks human beings, in essence they are all completely equal.

This is the equality that the Lotus Sutra teaches. The Lotus Sutra’s view of human equality derives from the very truth of existence itself. It is of a quite different quality from some kind of forced ethical system that tells us we should regard all people as equal. Its roots run deep and strong and are unaffected by phenomenal change. The spirit of human equality which should be such an important pillar of world peace must, I believe, therefore be underpinned by the idea of equality that the Lotus Sutra exemplifies. □

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 11

Beholding the Precious Stupa

(1)

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

In chapter 10, “A Teacher of the Law,” Shakyamuni elaborated on the mental attitude of those who would expound the teaching of the Lotus Sutra in the later age of decay, and the merits that would accrue to those who expounded the teaching correctly. The moment he finished preaching, a huge radiant stupa made of the seven precious jewels sprang up from the earth and rose into the sky. Within the stupa was seated a buddha called Tathagata Abundant Treasures, who praised Shakyamuni’s preaching and invited him into the stupa to share half of his throne. Shakyamuni immediately took his seat beside the Tathagata Abundant Treasures.

Thus begins a series of events so strange and wonderful that they seem to belong to the realm of fantasy. Yet this chapter is by no means an account of the fantastic. The Lotus Sutra abounds in a rich variety of methods to bring people to an understanding of its formless truth and ideas by giving them metaphorical form, developed dramatically. This chapter should be understood in that way.

Let us briefly examine the symbolism involved in the chapter before studying it, bearing in mind that it would be a shame to think of it merely in theoretical terms. I hope that you will be able to deepen your faith and devotion and perceive the indescribable value of the teaching through the mystical spectacle developed here, while at the same time understanding the content. We should never read the sutras with logic alone.

The Precious Stupa that springs up from the earth symbolizes the buddha-nature inherent in all human beings. The buddha-nature, that is, the essential nature of human beings, is perfectly endowed with the true, the good, and the beautiful. Thus the Precious Stupa, made from seven

radiant jewels, rises high into the sky and shines with indescribable beauty.

It is also significant that the stupa springs up from the earth rather than descends from above. The buddha-nature is unmistakably within us, though we think of ourselves as filled with defilements and uncleanness. There is no need to seek it elsewhere. All we need to do is realize it.

How do we come to this realization? What teaches it to us is the Lotus Sutra. When the assembly finished hearing the discourse of chapter 10, “A Teacher of the Law,” all realized instantaneously what had been taught. The moment they arrived at this realization, the beautiful Precious Stupa appeared. Thus the chapter under discussion here is titled “Beholding the Precious Stupa” (in other words, seeing the buddha-nature).

Within the stupa is the Tathagata Abundant Treasures, who symbolizes the perfect aspect of the truth (Thusness). The truth is that which never changes. It has continued without change since the very beginning of the universe. The truth manifests itself in various ways; the unified form that brings all these manifestations together (Thusness) is symbolized by the Tathagata Abundant Treasures, hence the buddha title (the tathagata in whom numerous treasures are gathered).

The Tathagata Abundant Treasures shares his throne with Shakyamuni, saying, “Shakyamuni Buddha! Take this seat!” This invitation symbolizes the authentication of the truth of Shakyamuni’s teaching. Such authentication has no meaning if given by a worthless person. In chapter 2, “Tactfulness,” we find the words “Only a buddha together with a buddha can fathom the real aspect of all things.” The ultimate truth of this universe can be understood and

authenticated only by enlightened buddhas. Now the truth of the teaching of the Lotus Sutra taught by Shakyamuni has been authenticated by the Tathagata Abundant Treasures, the perfect aspect and the unified body of the truth (Thusness); nothing could be more certain and definitive. Since a buddha together with a buddha have authenticated the teaching, there is no reason for us to doubt its truth.

Those who doubt are those absorbed in materialistic ideas, who consider that religion has no meaning for them. Though Buddhism is the teaching of wisdom that all can understand, it eventually comes down to belief. In fact, everything that makes up the world is, in the end, built on belief. Even unconditional supporters of science are no exception; for instance, most people who believe that all that exists is made up of a hundred-plus kinds of atoms never actually see those atoms for themselves. They merely believe in what other people have seen or said. Furthermore, though only a hundred-plus kinds of atoms have been discovered, there is said to be a strong possibility that different experimental methods will uncover numerous other kinds of elementary particles. This suggests that even the belief of the most inflexible scientific supporter and materialist is grounded in hypothesis. All we need to do is recognize the importance of believing in and following the teaching of the Buddha, who taught us the essential nature of human beings and the correct way to live. For everything that exists, even science, which studies that existence, is enveloped within the Buddha Dharma.

The sutra then shows us Shakyamuni and the Tathagata Abundant Treasures sitting side by side within the Precious Stupa. This indicates that both the truth (Thusness) and the preacher of the truth are equally to be exalted. If there were no one to preach the truth, ordinary people would never be able to realize it. Though the truth exists, ignorance is rampant, plunging the world into disorder and confusion within which no progress can be made. Therefore one who preaches the truth is of inestimable value.

Let us now, furnished with this basic knowledge, go on to study the text.

TEXT At that time in front of the Buddha a stupa of the seven precious things, five hundred *yojanas* in height and two hundred and fifty *yojanas* in length and breadth, sprang up from the earth and abode in the sky. It was decorated with all kinds of precious things, [splendidly adorned with] five thousand parapets, [and] thousands of myriads of recesses,

COMMENTARY *Yojanas*. This Sanskrit term signifies a large distance. One *yojana* is considered to be four to eight times the distance the bellow of a bullock can be heard, probably

around one kilometer. A height of five hundred *yojanas* would therefore be five hundred kilometers. The phrase describes something taller than the eye can reach.

• *Recesses*. As we can see when looking at photographs of Indian stupas, recesses like small rooms are set into the walls in order to enshrine Buddha images and other sculptural or pictorial elements.

TEXT and countless banners and flags; hung with jewel garlands, with myriads of kotis of gem bells suspended on it; on every side exhaling the fragrance of tamalapattra [and] sandalwood, filling the whole world. All its streamers and canopies were composed of the precious seven, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, moonstone, agate, pearl, and carnelian, reaching up to the palaces of the four heavenly kings.

COMMENTARY *With myriads of kotis of gem bells suspended on it*. It is the custom in China and Japan, as well as India, to suspend bells from the eaves of stupas and pagodas. The sound of these bells spreading in the four directions symbolizes the spread of the virtues and merits bequeathed by the Buddha.

• *On every side exhaling the fragrance of tamalapattra [and] sandalwood*. The leaves (*pattra*) of the *tamala* tree, like sandalwood (*candana*), have a very fine scent. As the strong fragrance of the wood permeates the surroundings, so the virtues of the Buddha influence people in every direction.

• *Reaching up to the palaces of the four heavenly kings*. The four heavenly kings are the four great guardian deities who serve Indra (see the January/February 1996 issue of DHARMA WORLD). The stupa reaches as high as the palaces of the four heavenly kings.

TEXT The thirty-three gods, raining celestial mandarava flowers, paid homage to the Precious Stupa. Other gods, dragons, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, mohoragas, human and nonhuman beings, all these thousand myriad kotis of beings, paid homage to the stupa with all kinds of flowers, perfumes, garlands, streamers, canopies, and music, revered, honored, and extolled it.

COMMENTARY *The thirty-three gods*. Indra was the central deity in ancient Indian religion. He was surrounded by eight deities in each of the four directions. These made up the thirty-three gods. Originally they were Brahmanic deities. Buddhism did not reject popular beliefs or seek to do away with them, but rather enveloped them. This was not only due to Buddhism's temperate and tolerant character but was also a natural result of the fact that the Buddha Dharma enfolds everything in the universe, without exception.

Lotus Sutra is the pivot of the teachings that the buddhas have watched over and kept in their minds. It is the teaching of the bodhisattva way to save all the world by enabling people to realize and cultivate the buddha-nature. Shakyamuni was the first buddha to unveil the Lotus Sutra for the sake of the multitude. This is a holy task, beyond the highest praise. For humanity it is the greatest matter, bridging the ages. That is why such a loud voice reverberates from within the great stupa of the buddha-nature.

TEXT Then the four groups, beholding the great Precious Stupa abiding in the sky and hearing the sound which proceeded from the stupa, were all [filled with] delight in the Law and with wonder at these unheard-of happenings; they rose up from their seats and, reverently folding their hands, withdrew to one side.

COMMENTARY *Delight in the Law.* This is the innermost, supreme joy, religious exaltation beyond description.

TEXT Meanwhile, a bodhisattva-mahasattva named Great Eloquence, perceiving uncertainty in the minds of all the worlds of gods, men, asuras, and others, spoke to the Buddha, saying: "World-honored One! For what reason has this stupa sprung out of the earth and from its midst this voice proceeded?"

Then the Buddha told the Bodhisattva Great Eloquence: "In this stupa there is the whole body of the Tathagata.

COMMENTARY The Buddha's words here are the core of this chapter. "Tathagata" means "one who has come from Thusness." "There is the whole body of the Tathagata" means that there is the perfect aspect of Thusness. Thusness, fundamental truth, is one, though its manifestations are infinite. The teachings arising from Thusness, too, are infinite. The reverse is also true; these infinite teachings all come down to the one Thusness (fundamental truth). Though the Buddha taught many doctrines, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Twelve-linked Chain of Dependent Origination, they were all developed from his realization of the real aspect of all things. Thus the so-called eighty-four thousand teachings can be subsumed under the truth of the real aspect of all things.

When the essential nature of human beings is considered from the standpoint of one who has realized the real aspect of all things, it is the buddha-nature. Therefore all teachings come down to the one teaching—that which causes us to become aware of the buddha-nature within ourselves, to discover and realize the buddha-nature in all others, and to develop it. This is the meaning of the words

The Precious Stupa affixed to the mandorla of the image of the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni enshrined in Rissho Kosei-kai's Great Sacred Hall. Seated in the stupa is Tathagata Abundant Treasures.

TEXT Then from the midst of the Precious Stupa there came a loud voice, praising and saying: "Excellent! Excellent! World-honored Shakyamuni! Thou art able to preach to the great assembly the Wonderful Law Flower Sutra of universal and great wisdom, by which bodhisattvas are instructed and which the buddhas guard and keep in mind. So is it, so is it, World-honored Shakyamuni! All that thou sayest is true."

COMMENTARY From within the huge stupa, which is the buddha-nature replete with all that is true, good, and beautiful in the universe, resounds a loud voice praising as the unmistakable truth the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, which Shakyamuni is now expounding. "Universal and great wisdom" is the wisdom to realize the real aspect of all things and to discern that all living beings are equally able to become buddhas. The Lotus Sutra is based on and teaches this "universal and great wisdom." The phrase "by which bodhisattvas are instructed and which the buddhas guard and keep in mind" has repeatedly been explained (see the March/April 2004 issue of DHARMA WORLD). The

“In this stupa there is the whole body of the Tathagata.” Thus, whenever and wherever the Lotus Sutra, with its teaching of the realization and development of the buddha-nature, is expounded, this great stupa is sure to appear.

TEXT Of yore in the past, innumerable thousand myriad kotis of asamkhyeya worlds away in the east, there was a domain named Jewel Clear. In that [domain] there was a buddha entitled Abundant Treasures. When that buddha was treading the bodhisattva way, he made a great vow, [saying]: ‘After I become a buddha and am extinct, if in any country in the universe there be a place where the Law Flower Sutra is preached, my stupa shall arise and appear there, in order that I may hearken to that sutra, bear testimony to it, and extol it, saying: “Excellent!”’

COMMENTARY The *Mahaprajna-paramita-shastra*, the Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra, attributed to Nagarjuna (ca. 150–ca. 250 C.E.), explains that the Tathagata Abundant Treasures did not expound the teaching of the truth of the One Vehicle, because the people of his time lacked the capacity to understand it. Thus he vowed to appear and authenticate the truth of that teaching, that is, the Lotus Sutra, when in later ages it was finally preached. In other words, he made a solemn vow to appear whenever the highest teaching was expounded in order to testify to its truth and cause the people of the world to establish firm faith in and devotion to it.

TEXT When that buddha had finished his course, he, his extinction approaching, in the midst of gods, men, and a great host, instructed [his] bhikshus: ‘Those who, after my extinction, desire to worship my whole body should erect a great stupa.’

COMMENTARY “Should erect a great stupa” means “should reveal the buddha-nature of all beings.” This is the greatest homage that can be paid to the Buddha, because doing so manifests to the world the complete aspect of Thusness, the fundamental truth symbolized by the whole body of the Tathagata. Shakyamuni has already used the expression “the whole body of the Tathagata,” and here the Tathagata Abundant Treasures speaks of “my whole body.” I discussed the meaning of this expression earlier, and since it is an extremely important phrase from which the idea of “emanated bodies,” discussed later, is derived, I hope you will bear it in mind.

TEXT Wherever in the worlds of the universe the Law Flower Sutra is preached, that buddha by the supernatural

powers of his vow causes his stupa, containing his whole body, there to spring forth, and praises [the sutra], saying: ‘Excellent! Excellent!’ Great Eloquence! It is because just now the Tathagata Abundant Treasures heard the Law Flower Sutra preached that his stupa sprang up from the earth and he extolled [the sutra], saying: ‘Excellent! Excellent!’”

COMMENTARY *The supernatural powers of his vow.* A strongly heartfelt vow manifests great powers. If we aspire to attain buddhahood and to bring the world to peace, our aspiration is sure to be realized at some future time. As our spirit, holding this desire, is more and more enhanced and ennobled, and as our spiritual power strengthens, the strength to achieve the desire also increases, so that when we attain buddhahood it becomes utterly free and unrestricted. This is the meaning of “the supernatural power of his vow.”

TEXT Thereupon the Bodhisattva Great Eloquence, because of the divine power of the Tathagata, said to the Buddha: “World-honored One! We earnestly desire to see this buddha body.” The Buddha addressed the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva Great Eloquence [thus]: “This Buddha Abundant Treasures has a profound and grave vow: ‘When my stupa appears in the presence of [any of the] buddhas for the sake of hearing the Law Flower Sutra, if [he] desires to show my body to the four groups, let the buddhas who have emanated from that buddha and who are preaching the Law in the worlds in all directions return all together and assemble in one place, and then shall my body appear.’

COMMENTARY *Because of the divine power of the Tathagata.* This is a little difficult to understand. The Sanskrit text reveals the meaning more precisely: “I beg that the World-honored One will use his divine power to show forth the body of this Tathagata.”

• *The buddhas who have emanated from that buddha.* The Chinese compound *fen-shen* means literally “divide into parts” and “body,” thus “separated bodies.” Using his supernatural power, the Buddha divides himself into innumerable bodies and sends them as messengers in all directions. This means that the manifestations of the truth are free and unrestricted.

What is the meaning of the vow of the Tathagata Abundant Treasures? Why should he cause this great stupa to spring up in the later age of decay wherever the Lotus Sutra is preached, and his body within the stupa to appear only after Shakyamuni has called together his emanated bodies scattered throughout the universe? The reason lies

in the fact that the teaching of the Lotus Sutra is the entirety of Thusness, that is, fundamental truth, and the complete aspect of the truth. In other words, the title “Lotus Sutra” has been given to the teaching that expresses the perfect aspect of the truth. Precious and exalted teachings have been taught by various wise people in different places: They have been taught by Jesus Christ, Confucius, Socrates, and innumerable other philosophers and people of religion. Their teachings are the truth, though only one part of it. The Lotus Sutra, which teaches us the real aspect of all things and the buddha-nature as the essential nature of human beings, unites all aspects of the truth; it is the perfect aspect of the truth, that is, the whole body of the Tathagata. Therefore, to expound the Lotus Sutra correctly means to teach it as the teaching of Thusness, which integrates all aspects of the truth. To preach only a part of the truth is not to preach the Lotus Sutra. This is a crucial point.

Consequently, in order to verify that the Lotus Sutra is true, it is necessary to gather all the scattered pieces of the truth, showing their integrated form to be the Lotus Sutra. Unless this is done, there can be no proof. That is why the Tathagata Abundant Treasures vows that he must appear after having caused Shakyamuni’s emanated bodies to “return all together and assemble in one place.” It is a logically consistent vow.

TEXT [So,] Great Eloquence, I must now assemble the buddhas who have emanated from me and who are preaching the Law in the worlds in all directions.”

Great Eloquence replied to the Buddha: “World-honored One! We would also see the buddhas emanated from the World-honored One and worship and pay homage to them.”

Then the Buddha sent forth a ray from the [circle of] white hair between his eyebrows, whereupon eastward there became visible all the buddhas in five hundred myriad kotis of nayutas of domains [numerous] as the sands of the Ganges. All those domains had crystal for earth and jewel trees and precious cloth for adornment, were filled with countless thousand myriad kotis of bodhisattvas, had jeweled curtains stretched [above them], and were covered with networks of jewels.

COMMENTARY *A ray from the [circle of] white hair between his eyebrows.* The ray of light emitted from the whorl of white hair in the middle of the Buddha’s forehead symbolizes the Buddha’s enlightenment. When those domains are seen by the Buddha’s enlightened eyes, every domain is a beautiful buddha land. Just as described immediately

below, all the lands in every direction are pure lands of the Buddha. This is because the Buddha is not attached to phenomena but sees things as they really are.

TEXT All the buddhas in those domains were preaching the laws with ravishing voices. And innumerable thousand myriad kotis of bodhisattvas were also seen, filling those domains and preaching to the multitude. So, too, was it in the southern, western, and northern quarters, in the four intermediate directions, in the zenith and the nadir, wherever shone the ray-signal from the [circle of] white hair.

COMMENTARY *The four intermediate directions.* These are the four quarters of northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. The eight directions are the four cardinal points and the four intermediate directions. Adding zenith and nadir, we have the ten directions. In the Buddha’s eyes, there is no world in the ten directions that is not the Land of Tranquil Light. But because we see these worlds through the eyes of ignorance, they appear to be filled with delusion and uncleanness. Changing this world into the Land of Tranquil Light necessitates changing the way we see and think about things. As already explained in the context of the teaching of the Twelve-linked Chain of Dependent Origination (see the January/February 2004 issue), if human beings regard and consider things with right wisdom, this world will gradually be transformed into a peaceful world. If all human beings are able to see things as they really are, with the perfect wisdom of the Buddha, this world becomes the Land of Tranquil Light here and now. Therefore it can be said that the buddhas and bodhisattvas are present in all domains, exerting every effort to cause human beings to change their way of looking at things. The dreamlike scenes depicted in this chapter are not a hallucination but the present world itself. It is merely being presented symbolically.

TEXT Then the buddhas in all directions each addressed the host of [his] bodhisattvas, saying: “Good sons! I must now go to Shakyamuni Buddha in the saha world and pay homage to the Precious Stupa of the Tathagata Abundant Treasures.”

Thereupon the saha world instantly became pure,

COMMENTARY To pay homage to the Precious Stupa of the Tathagata Abundant Treasures is to revere the buddha-nature. To venerate Shakyamuni is to respect the person who develops the buddha-nature. Since all the buddhas in every part of the universe gather in the *saha* world to revere the buddha-nature and the person who teaches it,

the *saha* world at once becomes a realm of the buddha-nature alone; it is instantly transformed into a pure and immaculate world.

TEXT with lapis lazuli for earth, adorned with jewel trees, cords made of gold marking the boundaries of its eight divisions, having no hamlets, villages, towns, cities, great seas, great rivers, mountains, streams, forests, and thickets, smoking with most precious incense, its ground strewn with mandarava flowers, spread with precious nets and curtains, and hung with all kinds of precious bells.

COMMENTARY The expression “having no hamlets, villages, towns, cities, great seas, great rivers, mountains, streams, forests, and thickets” symbolizes the fact that people’s minds are not attached to phenomena. The reference to no mountains, rivers, forests, and towns implies that there are no workings upon which human defilements can be based. There is nothing but the radiant light emitted by the Buddha, and people accept this radiance with selfless minds.

Unless we have the mind of emptiness, the selfless mind, we will not be able to grasp the real aspect of all things. In regard to scientific truth, there is the famous story of Newton realizing the nature of gravity upon seeing an apple fall from a tree. We are told that at that time he was thinking without any focus, that is, his mental state was close to one of nonself, a state of “no thinking” far removed from the world and its works. His subconscious mind, however, was still very active. This is a state of mind very similar to that achieved during Zen meditation. It was then that the apple dropped to the ground. Suddenly he understood. If Newton had been absorbed in random thoughts, that is, selfish thoughts, about the apple, such as whether he would eat it, or whether it would taste good, or whether it was rotten, he would probably have reacted to the apple’s fall in a completely pedestrian way, focusing on the apple itself. He would never have been able to realize in an instant a profound thing like the nature of gravity.

Here is the importance of meditation, or contemplation. This was an indispensable practice for shravakas and pratyekabuddhas far removed from the secular world, but it is equally necessary for people leading an ordinary life. If we are swayed by human workings twenty-four hours a day, our minds inevitably become narrow and our thoughts and acts self-centered. In addition, as one self grates against others, the world becomes enmeshed in conflicts great and small. To resolve this situation, or at least alleviate it, it is imperative that we devote at least a little time each day to entering a mental state of nonself, removed from human workings. We may sit quietly and read the

sutras, or chant the title of the Lotus Sutra, or meditate upon the boundless universe and the eternal life and compassion of the Original Buddha. Those who find this type of meditation difficult may try visualizing the realm of the Buddha.

It is when we are in a mental state devoid of self that our inherent buddha-nature can well up to the surface mind and we can receive the Buddha’s radiance directly. Through the realization of the Buddha’s wisdom, we become able to see things as they really are. It is for this reason that Buddhism prizes meditation, or contemplation, as do Christianity and other religions. I therefore urge you to attempt to make it part of your everyday life.

This is why the expression “having no hamlets, villages, towns, cities, great seas, great rivers, mountains, streams, forests, and thickets” indicates a mental state of nonself, in which self-centered human workings no longer prevail. The expression “smoking with most precious incense, its ground strewn with mandarava flowers, spread with precious nets and curtains, and hung with all kinds of precious bells” symbolizes the beauty of the Buddha’s workings. In other words, when human beings gain the mental state of nonself, the Buddha’s wisdom begins to work and manifest itself directly. The text here symbolizes the purity and adornment of the working of that wisdom. The sutra describes the scene in this way to create a deep impression of contrast.

TEXT There only remained the assembled congregation, all [other] gods and men having been removed to other lands.

COMMENTARY Those who remain to listen to the discourse are those who have resolved to hear the teaching of truth. Such people are able to see the Buddha. Others, those who have no wish to hear the Buddha’s teaching, cannot see him, even though his presence fills their surroundings. None of them are literally “removed to other lands” if they do not listen to the teaching of the Lotus Sutra. But though they are present physically, if they do not wish to see the truth it is as if they were not there. In this sense they are “removed to other lands.” Since this is a sentence open to misconstruing, I hope you will be able to understand its true significance.

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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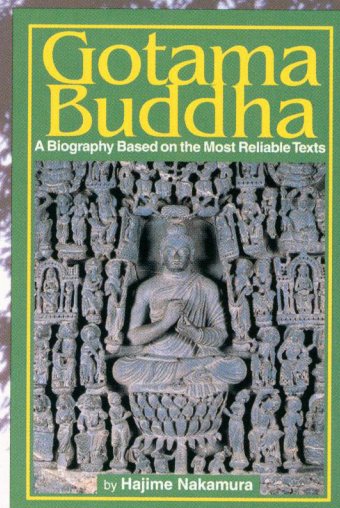
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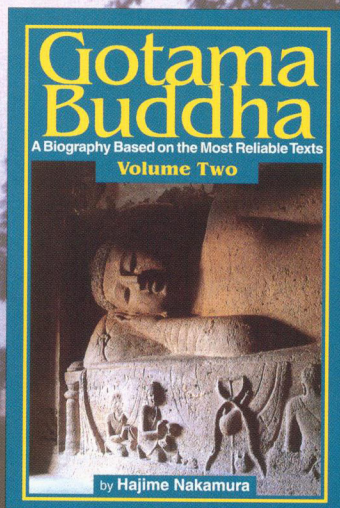
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