

## Message for the 21st Century as Depicted in the Lotus Sutra

Yoichi Kawada

### *Introduction*

THE Lotus Sutra is a Buddhist scripture that seeks to expose both the self-awakening of Shakyamuni and the missionary spirit upon which it is based. Consequently, this scripture expresses the opening of the “inner cosmology” of Shakyamuni under the Bodhi tree; the fundamental transformation of life made possible by the “Law” to which he became awakened; and finally, the spirit of compassion of one who devoted his entire life to saving people.

The Lotus Sutra, whose essence we delineated above, exerted great influence on the history of central Asia and of the Asian people. Especially in Japan, the Lotus Sutra provided the inspirational source for the flourishing of culture and played a role as a spiritual pillar driving changes in History.

As we enter the 21st Century, our human race as a community has now embarked on a new episode in history with the events of “September 11th” as the pivotal watershed. Weapons of mass destruction, war, and the “vicious cycle of hatred” brought about by terrorism, extreme poverty, oppression of human rights, and the negative attributes of economic globalism, which is rampant pursuit of materialism, and finally, the destruction of Earth’s ecosystem are only some of the afflictions that increase in seriousness.

Furthermore, what is even more important is the weakening of the “Human Spirit” itself, not to mention the risks of destruction of the individual from within. The contemporary human being is tormented by his own identity crisis. This implies that he is even on the verge of renouncing both the courage and the will to withstand the fundamental issue of “life and death as a human being,” faced as he is with having lost an understanding of the “cosmology” that underlies all sense of identity.

Given this predicament faced by our human society, what kind of “messages” can the “Lotus Sutra” offer today? The answer to this question is equally of the utmost essence, touching as it does on the issue of the “*raison d’être*” of both the Lotus Sutra and Buddhism as a living

religion. For this reason, I should like to attempt to discern three aspects to the significance of the Lotus Sutra for our contemporary world.

I would like to explore the subject at hand through the following three lines of inquiry. The first relates to the following question: what should be the religious foundation that can shatter violent tendencies, while developing the kind of spiritual energy of non-violence and compassion? The second point leads us to examine whether we can indeed create a “Culture of Peace” that allows diverse religions, cultures, and ethnic groups to coexist, while all live in harmony with the Earth’s ecosystem. Finally, we shall explore the issue of “the mission as a human being,” as portrayed by the enlightenment of Shakyamuni—and how the Lotus Sutra can lead people towards a way of life and death that is worthy of human beings, from the viewpoint of “Buddhist cosmology.”

#### *Development of “Inner Goodness”*

In his essay contributed to the book *From the Ashes—A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America*, published immediately following the tragedy of September 11th, Daisaku Ikeda, president of Soka Gakkai International, shares his outlook on the history of human civilisation as follows.

For much of our history, humanity has been trapped in vicious cycles of hatred and reprisal. We must redouble our efforts to break this cycle and transform distrust into trust [...] it is the function of evil to divide; to alienate people from each other and divide one country from another. The universe, this world and our own lives are the stage for a ceaseless struggle between hatred and compassion, the destructive and constructive aspects of life. We must never let up, confronting evil at every turn.

Buddhism calls the detrimental forms of energy, such as an aggressive or a destructive nature, “Earthly Desires,” defined as the Three Poisons (of greed, anger and ignorance). It considers the root of such destructive energy to be found in the “fundamental darkness,” which is none other than fundamental egoism, inherent in human lives. Simultaneously, however, Buddhism also perceives the positive forms of energy in human life, such as compassion, wisdom, or creativity, which it calls “Bodhi” (goodness), and designates the root of such “inner goodness” by the term “Buddhahood,” or Buddha nature.

The specificity of the Lotus Sutra, it is said, lies in its assertion that all people have the potential to attain enlightenment. This is because it elucidates that however an entity—whether it be a human being, a tribe, an ethnic group or a Nation-State-may, on the surface, be held prisoner

by its Three Poisons or the energy of fundamental darkness, all beings have the potential to open and manifest their Buddha nature, thus tapping the source of constructive energy, allowing it to flow abundantly.

In the second chapter of the Lotus Sutra entitled “Expedient Means,” Shakyamuni divulges that the goal for his appearance in this world (“The one great cause”) was to allow all people to “open,” to “reveal” and to “become awakened” to their “ability to see and know the Buddha.” Here, the “ability to see and know the Buddha” is synonymous of “Buddha nature.”

So how does the Lotus Sutra suggest that all people can reveal their Buddha nature and bring forth the positive forms of energy inherent in their lives? The answer lies in practising the “Bodhisattva Way.”

Numerous bodhisattvas appear in the chapters of the Lotus Sutra, one of whom is Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. It is said that this particular Bodhisattva would bow in obeisance and speak words of praise to all the four kinds of believers—monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen—he would meet, saying “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practising the Bodhisattva Way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.”

Even towards those who displayed ill feelings and threw stones or struck him with sticks, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging continued to believe in their Buddha nature and inner goodness inherent in their lives, and revered them as “future Buddhas.” In addition, as records indicate, he resorted to dialogue with all people, no matter what the situation, and encouraged them to manifest their inner goodness.

As Buddhists, we believe that contemporaries who put the action and attitude of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging into practice include Mahatma Gandhi and the Reverend Martin Luther King, both proponents of non-violence movements. At the same time, they both believed, as do we, in the moral “goodness” that exists in all human beings, and sought to multiply and boost positive forces through various non-violent means, channelling them into mass movements.

The first significance of the Lotus Sutra is to propound a religious basis that allows and encourages the development of inherent goodness in the hearts and minds of human beings through non-violent means.

### *Philosophy of Coexistence and Symbiosis*

Through his awakening to the “Law,” or Dharma, Shakyamuni manifests his life condition as a “Buddha.” The title of the Lotus Sutra in Sanskrit, “Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra,” consciously includes the term Law (Dharma).

As this indicates, the Lotus Sutra seeks to bring together the various Buddhist teachings expounded previously under this “Law.” In so doing, the Lotus Sutra goes on to explain, the various other sutras and teachings, by reflecting this “Law,” will take on the full brilliance and meaning for which they were originally destined. In modern terms, one could say this is an issue of harmonising “synthesis” and “diversity.”

The “Law,” which is the axis for the synthetic vector combining and integrating the diverse teachings, is expounded in various ways in Buddhism. However, using contemporary language, one could say that this Law in question is one of the “Dignity of human beings and of life.” As previously discussed, the very first ethical rule by which all Buddhists lead their lives, without exception, “non-violence.” This corresponds to the “precept forbidding the destruction of life,” [*prāṇanipata*], the Sanskrit equivalent of the expression used by Mahatma Gandhi, “*ahimsā*.”

Moreover, non-violence according to Buddhism applies not only to human beings, but to all forms of living beings, be they sentient or non-sentient. This is because the philosophy of “Respect and dignity of human beings” is predicated on the principle of “Reverence for life” in general. Without first firmly establishing a philosophy of the “Reverence for all forms of life,” the “Respect and dignity of human beings” would be impossible.

From this ethical standpoint, of respecting human beings and all forms of life, evolves the second ethical standard applied to our actions, that commanding people “not to steal.” In other words, this precept admonished individuals not to steal from others, out of our own desires. To inflict harm on others, or to steal things belonging to others, are nothing other than acts that violate the “Respect and dignity of human beings.” The main reason behind extreme poverty boils down to people or countries that plunder what belongs to others.

The third precept, “not to commit adultery,” as well as the fourth, “not to lie,” also derive from this fundamental philosophy of the “Dignity of life.” The third precept sheds light on gender problems, and basically affirms the principle of the “Equality of all human beings.” Unfortunately, the reality of Buddhist history is that it has experienced episodes of oppression of human rights. Originally, however, the “Law” expounded in Buddhism perceived the Buddha nature in all human beings, and thus asserted the equality between the gender, ethnic or racial backgrounds, cultures, religions, and social status (or ‘castes’ in the case of India).

The fourth precept, “not to lie,” exhorts us to speak the truth, and expresses trust in the humanity within others. Just as the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging respected all other people, so should all Buddhists

show the greatest respect to the “Buddha nature” existent in others, and speak words of truth. In so doing, we can establish a trust that is indestructible.

The above four ethical standards of action, based on the principle of the “Dignity of human beings,” contain an universal quality common not only to Buddhism, but equally to all religions and cultures, thus making them apt to be considered as “global ethics” or “ethics of humankind.” Such “universal ethics” constitute the crux of the principle of “Human dignity” from the moral dimension, and they also symbolise the capacity for integration and synthesis fulfilled by the Lotus Sutra.

Chinese Buddhism points out that the characteristic of the teaching elucidated in the Lotus Sutra lies in its revelation of the provisional nature of the three vehicles, disclosing that such lesser paths should be cast aside in favour of the one and only vehicle, that leading to enlightenment. In other words, the Lotus Sutra views all the various Buddhist teachings in light of the “mirror” of the reality of the “Law” (Dharma)—a Law which can be expressed in modern terms as the combination of the two principles of the “Dignity of life” and the “Dignity of human beings.” As long as a teaching does not transgress or violate these fundamental principles of the Dignity of human life, the Law respects all teachings as diverse expressions of the Law, encouraging their mutual development in a spirit of co-operation. Herein lies the philosophy of “coexistence” and “symbiosis” among all cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, as elucidated by the Lotus Sutra.

It is hoped that the human race will create a “Culture of Peace” by using as the common philosophical underpinning the principle of the “Dignity of human beings”—which consists of the all-important “universal ethics.” Such a “Culture of Peace” would allow the various ethnic traditions to flourish in their own distinctive way all the while remaining open to exchanges with modern civilisation, thus suggesting an image of a field of countless species of flowers in full bloom.

The path towards “Coexistence” of the entire human race and “Symbiosis” with the ecological system, depicted by such an image, is precisely the second “message” offered by the Lotus Sutra.

### *The Awakening to an Universal Mission*

The Lotus Sutra, which sought to express the “inner cosmology” to which Shakyamuni became awakened under the Bodhi tree, overflows with powerful imagery as vast as the universe itself.

For example, the chapter entitled “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” describes how a colossal tower rose from the earth and soars,

suspended, in the sky. According to scriptural records, this Tower is said to have been higher than half the circumference of the earth. This tower is adorned with seven kinds of precious jewels. From within, one hears the voice of one of the “Buddhas from the past,” Taho. Shakyamuni then calls upon all his emanations from the entire universe to convene, at which point he enters the treasure tower, sharing the single seat with Taho. The whole assembly also rises into the sky, and thus begins a ceremony known as the “Ceremony in the Air.”

In the chapter, “Emerging from the Earth,” “Bodhisattvas of the Earth” as innumerable as the sands of 60,000 Ganges River emerge from the Earth. In later chapters, entitled “The Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” and “Entrustment,” Shakyamuni entrusts the propagation of the Law after his demise to these Bodhisattvas.

In the chapter “The Life Span of the Tathagata,” Shakyamuni announces through the parable of *Gohyaku Jintengo*, or “The 500 dust-atom kalpas” that he actually attained enlightenment in an inconceivably remote past. [*As you all know, the image of reducing innumerable major world systems to dust particles, each one of which represented an aeon, was his way of explaining the concept of infinity in both space and time, as well as the innate nature of Buddhahood.*] He then reveals that his life span is twice as long as “the 500 dust-atom kalpas.”

This parable is on a scale that far surpasses the scale of any theory of the universe developed by contemporary astronomers. Shakyamuni, who thus attained enlightenment in the infinite past, discloses that he had continually appeared on various planets within the vast universe, whether in the form of a Buddha, in the form of a bodhisattva, or at times taking on the form of various human beings, devoting himself ceaselessly to saving the people. He further asserts that he will continue in the future and for all eternity to work in order to save people.

Here, before us, is revealed the truth about Shakyamuni: someone who has “attained enlightenment since time without beginning,” a “Buddha whose eternal purpose is to save people.” This dramatic and grandiose episode, taking place on the expansive stage of space cosmology, identifies Shakyamuni as an “eternal Buddha” who is one with the Dharma, and also affirms Buddhism as a “religion of salvation.”

The second President of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, underwent a profound “religious experience” while in prison toward the end of World War II. President Toda was imprisoned by the militaristic government in power at the time, when absolute obeisance to the militaristic ideology and to the Emperor, considered to be a “living god,” was imposed on all the “subjects.” He was accused of *lèse-majesté*, and of violating

the “Law on Preservation of Security,” which was used to incriminate all so-called “thought criminals” deemed subversive to the militaristic régime.

I should like to share with you, if I may, the following passages from the novel *Human Revolution* authored by Daisaku Ikeda, President of SGI, which mainly touches upon the above-mentioned chapter from the Lotus Sutra, “Emerging from the Earth.”

By mid-November, the number of daimoku [chanting of the mantra Nam Myoho Renge Kyo] he had chanted with determination since New Year’s Day was reaching the two million mark. [...]

Of what was he thinking? Nothing in particular. Perhaps of his business, which was on the verge of bankruptcy, or of his chafing to be free of prison as soon as possible, or of his greatly distressed family, or of his venerable old master, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who was in the same prison. But no, all these thoughts had disappeared from his mind.

If there was anything at all, it was the 15th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “Emerging from the Earth,” which he had been reading over and over again for several days. It was lodged in a corner of his mind.

The sun provided warmth, and a gentle breeze reminded him of the peace of spring as it caressed his cheeks. He felt as though an indescribable delight in living were flowing from his body. He felt enveloped in a peaceful, quiet, and endless shroud of emotion, which seemed to be washing away all his worries and sufferings.

“Countless Bodhisattvas emerged from the Earth at the sonorous sound of Shakyamuni’s preaching. Each of these Bodhisattvas was a leader of the people. Each of them led followers as numerous as the sands of 60,000 Ganges Rivers. Naturally as well, there were those Bodhisattvas who led as many others as the sands of 50,000, 40,000, 30,000, 20,000, and 10,000 Ganges.”

Suddenly, before he knew it, Toda found himself in the midst of the air, in a huge crowd of people numbering as many as the sands of 60,000 Ganges Rivers, all worshipping the Dai-Gohonzon.

Josei Toda reads on from the 15th chapter, “Emerging from the Earth,” to the 16th, “Life Span” chapter, and onto the chapters “Supernatural Powers” and “Entrustment.” Referring to a Confucian idiom dividing a person’s age into decades with a corresponding credo, drawn from the *Analects*, which reads, “*At 40, freed from vacillation, and at 50, knew heaven’s decree,*” the scene where Josei Toda becomes aware of his own “religious mission” is described in the novel in the following way.

Toda, at 45, belonged to neither of these, but he had acquired them both at once. Pacing about in his cell, he declared: “Freed from vacillation five years late and knew heaven’s decree five years early!”

This experience in prison—in other words, the “awakening” of Josei Toda after many hours of chanting the mantra *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* and his recitation of the *Lotus Sutra*—allowed him to realise that the Dharma was not separate from his life, and, precisely for this reason, he stood up with the pledge worthy of a “Bodhisattva of the Earth,” in other words, of a bodhisattva who shares the identical life condition as the “Buddha who is an eternal being” and as a “Buddha ever concerned for the salvation of all beings.”

In his “Theory on Buddhist Compassion,” President Toda writes, “In this universe, all are entities of the Buddha, and all phenomena of the universe without exception are acts of compassion. Therefore, ‘compassion’ should be considered the essential and original nature of the universe.” He continues to expand on the concept of a “mission as a human being” that can be inferred from the viewpoint of this Buddhist cosmology.

As long as the cosmos itself is compassion, it goes without saying that our acts in everyday life are naturally acts of compassion. Furthermore, in so much as a human being manifests a unique form of life, he or she must not consider itself to be in the same situation as other living beings or plants. One who truly seeks to serve the Buddha must act accordingly for a higher and more noble cause.

To dedicate oneself to others with compassion and wisdom, in other words, to follow what Buddhism calls the “Bodhisattva Way,” is the path for each individual to participate in actions harmonious with the fundamental and original nature of the universe. Herein lies a way of life that heightens and strengthens our capacity to respect and revere human beings.

It seems to me that each person must have his or her own cosmology in order to alleviate the “identity crisis” suffered by individuals today, so that they can awaken to their mission and purpose in this lifetime. Those spiritual legacies that have survived over the centuries have all fostered their own abundant cosmology, depending on its religious tradition, ethnic group or culture.

Each one of these cosmologies, in turn, issues an invitation to individuals to awaken to their “mission as a human being” in this vast universe. By lending an ear to that call, people should become conscious of this

“appeal from the universe” expressed by the “heart and soul” of each religion, culture, or ethnic group in which they were brought up.

The Buddhist cosmology, which began from the penetrating insight into Shakyamuni’s universe within, coupled with the “mission as a human being”—as expressed by the “Bodhisattva Way”—from which it evolves, are messages from the “soul” of Asian peoples to humanity in this modern age.

It is my fervent wish that the human race in the 21st Century, especially peoples and societies in the West, shall lend an earnest ear to this third message of the Lotus Sutra, a call from the Buddhist cosmology to the peoples on this planet.

29 March, 2003