

## The Modern Significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Hiroshi Kanno

### THE PROBLEM STATED

IF we ask the modern significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*—or any other religious classics—we should remember that the meaning of a scripture cannot be limited to a specific age, but should possess a vitality that transcends historical time. For example, both the Bible and the *Lotus Sūtra* have histories of about 2000 years. Obviously, both texts have played major historical roles in their respective regions over the ages.

The question is, why were these religious scriptures able to have such lasting vitality? In the life of any human being, there is both a part that differs according to the age, such as material living standards and culturally shared knowledge, and a part that does not differ, such as the problems of suffering (birth, aging, sickness, and death), sin, and evil. In our quest for the best way to live as human beings, it is important to know how we consider this unchanging aspect of our identities. I think the primary contribution of religious scriptures is that they illuminate this unchanging part of human beings. However, at the same time it is clear that religious scriptures do not automatically give answers to all the problems and demands of any particular age. Without human beings to explore and draw meaning from the Bible or the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, neither could not play a role in any specific age, let alone any continuous role throughout history.

Our present age is one in which there are serious problems, such as bioethical controversies, food supply issues, and global environmental destruction. These problems have been brought about by the development of science and technology, plus the attendant rapid increase in world population and the globalization of economic activity. The human race is experiencing problems such as have never occurred before in human society. Moreover, after the end of the cold war, the peace we all expected has not been achieved. Local military conflicts are smoldering everywhere, so that slaughter and retaliation are occurring all over the world.

We must recognize that the *Lotus Sūtra* will not provide direct answers to these modern problems, even when we seek its religious significance. Religious scriptures do not offer concrete recipes to solve specific problems, for the simple reason that the problems were unknown when the scriptures were written. However, we can expect religious scriptures to provide fundamental messages that will lead to the discovery of solutions to our problems. However, in any age there must be human beings to struggle to solve those problems—by themselves, religious scriptures are silent. Effectively, what is important is whether people who seriously work on the *Lotus Sūtra* can capture its spirit and apply it to the situations they confront. In the following pages, I want to consider what messages we can draw from the *Lotus Sūtra* to address the present world situation.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE  
BY IMAGINING THE SCALE OF THE UNIVERSE

When we first read the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is common to be surprised at how many magnificent stories it develops on such a grand spatial scale. Let me introduce some of them here.

(1) In the Introduction Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, there appears a scene where Śākyamuni Buddha expounds the Mahāyāna sūtra entitled *Immeasurable Meanings*, immediately after which he enters into the “*samādhi* of the place of immeasurable meanings.” In quick succession, by the power of that *samādhi* the Buddha then rains down flowers from the heaven, causes the earth to quake and tremble, and emits a ray of light from the tuft of white hair between his eyebrows that lights up eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern direction. This light makes it possible for the audience hearing the Buddha preach the *Lotus Sūtra* to see the various religious practices of Buddhism being implemented in those eighteen thousand worlds.

(2) In the Emergence of the Treasure Tower Chapter, an enormous treasure tower rises up out of the earth and stands suspended in the air. A loud voice declaring the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra* issues from the treasure tower, and the members of the audience declare to Śākyamuni Buddha that they want to see the body of Many Treasure Buddha.

(3) In the Emerging from the Earth Chapter, a host of bodhisattvas equal in number to the grains of sand of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers emerges from beneath the earth.

(4) In the Life Span of the Thus Come One Chapter, Śākyamuni Buddha explains the incredibly long time that has passed since he originally

attained enlightenment by the parable of “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas.” Also, in the Parable of the Phantom City Chapter, an immensely remote past when the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence lived is described by the parable of “major world-system dust-particle kalpas.” The parable is as follows. If a person should take all the earth in the thousand-millionfold world and grind it to dust, there would be innumerable particles of dust. Then, moving eastward, each time he passes a thousand worlds he drops a particle of dust. He continues eastward in this way until he has finished dropping all the particles. And if he then takes all the worlds he passed through, both those into which he dropped a particle and those he did not, and once more grinds them all to dust, there will be such an innumerable quantity of dust that it would be far beyond comparison to the first set of particles. Then, let each particle represent one kalpa (approximately sixteen million years). The time that has passed since the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence entered nirvāṇa surpasses this number of kalpas by a truly inconceivable amount of time—said to be immeasurable, boundless, hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of *asamkhyeya* (“incalculable”) kalpas. Though it might seem to modern people that such an explanation is tedious, the length of time involved is described in such a way that it stimulates our imagination to the limit, exceeds that limit and stimulates our imaginations once again to the upper limit again. It is this process of challenging and then repeatedly exploding beyond the limits of our ordinary understanding that makes the strongest impression, far more than the length of time indicated by the stupendous number of years involved alone. Also, the “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas” in the Life Span Chapter is a far more stupendous figure than the “major world-system dust-particle kalpas” in the Parable of the Phantom City Chapter. For it is not the thousand-millionfold world but five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a *million nayuta asamkhyeya* thousand-millionfold worlds that the “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas” takes as of its basis of calculation. Therefore, the concept of “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas” indicates a length of time that is incomparably longer than the “major world-system dust-particle kalpas.”

(5) Finally, in the Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound Chapter, the Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound comes to this *sahā* world all the way from another world called Adorned with Pure Light and participates in the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra* hosted by Śākyamuni Buddha.

Thus the *Lotus Sūtra* presents grand stories referring to a vast scale of space and time using stupendous figures that stretch our powers of

imagination to the limit. Although some of us might regard these stories as absurd and tending only to generate illusions about the world, I think they provide insight into how the vastness of our cosmos so far exceeds that of this small earth on which we live so fearfully, and where we so disastrously devote our time and energy to fights between individuals, wars between races, and confrontations between nations. One phenomenon of the modern age is of course that some people become crazy about space aliens and flying saucers, but in the background of this fascination is the hope we would recognize our own shared identity as residents of one and the same cosmos. Is there not the same expectation among the many people who generate romantic feelings while watching a swarm of shooting stars? We know that some astronauts, who have the opportunity to look at the earth from space, experience such dramatic changes in their personal philosophies that they may be said to have experienced religious conversion. I think such experiences are possible because something like the consciousness of space beings arose in them. Hence, the grandiose scale of the world of the *Lotus Sūtra* raises our consciousnesses so that we become residents, not just of the earth but of the entire cosmos, thus transforming the very meanings of self and world, and enabling us to acquire an entirely new perspective on ourselves and on our existence as humans. If we comprehend the fundamental intention of the *Lotus Sūtra*, we thus become living beings born with both a deep religious attachment to this earth (known as the *sahā* world in Buddhist terminology) and consequently a mission to accomplish that which is important during our times here.

#### THE CONCEPT OF HELL AND THE MEANING OF SELECTIVE SALVATION IN BUDDHISM

Not only Japan, which presently suffers from economic depression, but also many other countries in the world seem to be bothered with a dark cooped-up feeling that is characteristic of our age. In such an age we naturally want to apply light from the optimistic soteriology of the Buddhism and the *Lotus Sūtra*, and to find the courage and hope that will enable us live strongly in this world. First, we must explain that there is no concept of everlasting hell in Buddhism, as there is in many monotheistic religions. This trait of Buddhism is an important component of the profoundly optimistic soteriology of Buddhism that will be considered in the next section. Moreover, in relation to the concept of hell we must consider that one of the purposes of explanations of the existence of hell in various religions is the function of motivating their

followers to be strong believers in those religions. Since Buddhism has teachings not only of the existence of hell but also of selective salvation, we need to explore the meaning of these closely related concepts.

### *The Hell of Buddhism*

There is no concept of everlasting hell in Buddhism. Buddhism holds that all deluded living beings are reborn repeatedly in one after another of six different realms: hell; the realms of hungry spirits, animals, asuras, and men; and heaven. The existence of hell is implied in the idea of rebirth itself. Various kinds of hell are posited, even the hell of incessant suffering (*avīci* hell) that is the lowest and most tortuous hell among them. However, according to Buddhism people do not stay in hell through all eternity. Because undergoing the suffering of hell is comparable to the repayment of a loan, when the repayment is completed the individual will be reborn in one of the upper worlds, such as that of hungry spirits, animals, asuras, men, and even heaven. One good indication of how this is thought to work is that, in the Devadatta Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, even Devadatta, who attempted to murder the Buddha, is prophesied to become a Buddha named Heavenly King. This absence of the concept of eternal hell is one of the ways in which Buddhism differs so greatly from monotheisms such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

However, it might not be necessary to regard the everlasting hell of the monotheism as something that exists in such a literal fashion. Perhaps it is only a type of discourse intended to motivate evil people to generate strong belief in God. Many people, including me, have indulged themselves in the pleasures of daily life and turned their eyes away from the truly important problems of life and death. Many religions and philosophies point this out. The *Lotus Sūtra*, for its part, uses simple parables to turn our attentions to the crises of the human condition. The most characteristic of these parables is that of the three carts and the burning house.

### *The Three Carts and the Burning House*

Suppose that in a certain place there was an old millionaire. His house was very big, but it had only one small, narrow gate. The house was also very old and dilapidated, so that it could easily fall victim to fire. Indeed, on one particular occasion a fire suddenly broke out in this house. The old millionaire knew that he could escape to safety by himself, but he knew that a lot of his sons were absorbed in playing, and they were not thinking of trying to escape from the blazing house at all. At first, he thought to himself that he would carry them out of the house,

using his great physical strength, but he found it impossible to do so because it had only one small, narrow gate. He was distraught, realizing that they would be burnt to death if the situation continued. So he called to his sons, saying that they should all leave the house at once. However, the sons could understand neither the meaning of death nor the imminent danger of the fire—they were too absorbed in their games and did not accept his words. Finally, he invented an appropriate means to save them. He said, “Your favorite goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts are outside the gate. Come out of this burning house at once and play with them.” Hearing this, they vied with each other to run the fastest and get the toys, thus escaping from the burning house. The old millionaire was very pleased to see them escape safely. When they asked him to give them the promised carts, he gave all of them, without discrimination, richly decorated carts drawn by big white oxen.

The *Lotus Sūtra* goes on to provide an explanation of the meaning of this parable. According to it, the “millionaire” indicates the Buddha, who is rich with wisdom. The antiquated house represents the threefold world through which beings are reborn, which consists of the realms of desire, form, and formlessness. The fire in this house stands for the suffering and earthly desires of living beings. Needless to say, the “millionaire’s sons” represent all living beings. And, even though living beings suffer from the various problems of birth, old age, sickness, and death, they avoid thinking about them, indulge themselves in the ephemeral things of this world, and fail to escape from rebirth throughout the threefold world. This fact is represented by the sons being thoroughly engrossed in their playing in the burning house and failing to escape from it. The Buddha sees the pitiful situation of living beings and wants to save them from it, because he is their father. Finding it impossible to save them with only his supernormal powers and the power of his wisdom, using appropriate means he expounds three different teachings for three different types of practitioners. His teachings for voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones (pratyekabuddha), and bodhisattvas are respectively compared to goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts, which allow the practitioners to escape from the threefold world. However, instead of these three types of carts, the Buddha actually gives all of his sons who escaped from the burning house carts drawn by large white oxen. These carts represent the one vehicle teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is superior to all other teachings.

The world where we humans live is the burning house. This is the most important point of the parable of the three carts and the burning house. Because religions force us to be aware of our situation of crisis

and promise salvation from that crisis, their first task is to describe the situation in which we exist. The description of the world where we live as a flaming inferno makes a huge impression on us because of our innate fear of fire.

Next, the fact which makes our crisis more dangerous is that we are completely unaware of it. The manner in which the millionaire's sons are immersed in their play perfectly describes how we forget our own crisis situation and become attached to the amusements of our surroundings, property, position, and status, etc.

*The Meaning of the Withdrawal  
of the Five Thousand Arrogant Persons*

The warning of monotheistic religions that people lacking in faith will fall into everlasting hell has the function of motivating ignorant people, who avert their eyes from the truth, to develop strong belief. Is it not possible to argue that religions posit the existence of hell, not because God wants to cast human beings into hell, but precisely because he wants not to send them there? Such a religious discourse is clearly expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*, in the famous episode of the withdrawal of the five thousand persons.

In the Expedient Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Śāriputra asks the Buddha three times to preach the teaching. Recognizing Śāriputra's serious desire for the truth, the Buddha begins to preach in response. However, five thousand arrogant monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen leave the assembly, refusing to listen any longer because they think they understand the Buddha's teaching. In fact, they have roots of guilt that are deep and manifold deriving from their past lives, and overbearing arrogance even though they are not actually enlightened. At the time the Buddha does not stop them from withdrawing, and he states that it was well that these persons of overbearing arrogance had withdrawn, so that his assembly was now made up solely of the steadfast and truthful.

What does this withdrawal of the five thousand arrogant persons mean? It seems to suggest that, in order to listen to the *Lotus Sūtra*, we should remove all traces of our own overbearing arrogance. Arhats like Śāriputra are the highest practitioners of Nikāya Buddhism, who have already obtained emancipation or nirvāṇa. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* explains that their enlightenment and their nirvāṇa are only temporary and provisional, and this realization threatens to damage their pride severely. Therefore, this incident shows that, in order to endure damage to one's pride, it is necessary to listen to the Buddha's preaching with modesty and faith.

When people hear the *Lotus Sūtra* for the first time and learn of this episode, they cannot help reflecting on their own attitudes of belief. Searching solemnly within themselves, they ask themselves whether after all they belong to the group of the five thousand arrogant persons or the group that remains in the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Buddhism has an optimistic soteriology in which, ultimately, anyone can achieve salvation. Thus eventually even these five thousand arrogant persons will be saved, and there is no idea of excluding them from salvation. However, if in the present context salvation is available initially to those within the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is very important whether we are among those who leave or those who stay.

A similar idea to the withdrawal of the five thousand arrogant persons also occurs in the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Even the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which generally teaches that all living beings possess the Buddha nature, in some sections holds that there are people of incorrigible disbelief (*icchantika*) who do not possess the Buddha nature and cannot become enlightened. This means that the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* excludes *icchantika* from salvation. Even though the latter part of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, a later accretion, admits the possibility of *icchantika* achieving enlightenment, when we read the teaching that *icchantika* cannot become enlightened we are forced to ask ourselves to which group we belong.

This exclusive or selective soteriology has the function of motivating people to develop faith. The benefits from faith and the retribution for bad behavior emphasized in the *Lotus Sūtra* are based on the karma theory of Buddhism. However, the *Sūtra*'s strong emphasis on benefits and retribution can be explained as a device to motivate its readers to faith.

#### OPTIMISTIC SOTERIOLOGY IN BUDDHISM AND THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

Above, I mentioned that the everlasting hell of monotheistic religions has the function of motivating their followers to have faith. Buddhism lacks this particular device, and it is certainly more thorough than the monotheistic religions in the optimism of its soteriology. Of course, even Buddhism is not uniformly optimistic. For example, according to the theory of five different natures which the Consciousness Only school established around the fourth century in India, all living beings do not necessarily get enlightened. This particular school of Buddhism is not particularly optimistic, it must be recognized. However, some of the people who cannot achieve complete enlightenment as Buddhas can still become arhats and cause-awakened ones (*pratyekabuddha*), the highest achievements in Nikāya Buddhism. In addition, people possessing the



very lowest nature, who cannot become such saints, can remain ordinary people who are reborn throughout the six realms without ever falling into an everlasting hell. Hence, even the theory of five different natures can be said to be considerably optimistic compared with monotheistic beliefs.

There are aspects of the optimistic soteriology of Buddhism other than the nonexistence of everlasting hell, which we have just been discussing. Let us consider some of them now.

### *The Eternal Buddha as the Savior*

The first aspect of Buddhism's optimistic soteriology that I would like to consider is that the Buddha never enters nirvāṇa until he finishes saving all the living beings with whom he has religious connections. The historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, entered nirvāṇa at the age of eighty, but Mahāyāna Buddhism, which developed afterwards, generated many other Buddhas to assist living beings after his death. Also, the *Lotus Sūtra* devised its own concept of the eternal Śākyamuni Buddha, a new figure of the Buddha that developed out of the historical figure.

In the Life Span of the Thus Come One Chapter, in response to a question by Maitreya Bodhisattva about the Bodhisattvas emerging from the earth, Śākyamuni Buddha explains that an incredibly long period of time (shown by the parable of numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas, already discussed above) had passed since he originally attained enlightenment, and also that his future lifespan would be virtually unending. In other words, he clarifies his own identity as the eternal Buddha Śākyamuni, which is one of the core ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The main points of the Life-span of the Thus Come One Chapter are that (1) Śākyamuni Buddha possesses an eternal lifespan; (2) his entry into nirvāṇa is merely intended as an "expedient display"; and (3) the eternal Buddha will appear to persons of deep faith.

It is common knowledge that the monotheistic religions posit an eternal God. And it can be said that Buddhism acquired its deepest religious meaning only after the *Lotus Sūtra* established the idea of the eternal Buddha Śākyamuni.

### *The Attainment of Buddhahood by All People*

The Buddha saves all living beings. If we consider this from the perspective of living beings themselves, we may paraphrase this to say that everyone has equal access to Buddhahood. This idea is expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra* in the concept of the "one Buddha vehicle." The attainment of Buddhahood by all people is the most important message of the *Lotus*

*Sūtra*, and it is still a valuable idea in the present world. This idea was also manifested in the concept of the universal Buddha nature inherent in living beings, a teaching which is found in the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.

The idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra* holds that the three vehicles expounded for voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones, and bodhisattvas are only expedient and provisional teachings, intended to suit the respective capacities of these different categories of sages. The real truth, the *Sūtra* declares, is that everyone is equally able to attain Buddhahood. To explain this a bit more, following the story of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the concept of the “one Buddha vehicle” occurs in the context of the explanation that the Buddha appeared in the *sahā* world for one great purpose. Śākyamuni Buddha clarified his one great purpose immediately after the episode of the five thousand arrogant persons. What was it? It was to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to show Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to cause living beings to awaken to Buddha wisdom, and to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom. Namely, the Buddha appeared in this world to make it so that living beings would attain Buddhahood. According to this doctrine, even the voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones—who gave up seeking the extraordinarily lofty goal of Buddhahood and settled on becoming arhats and pratyekabuddhas—can attain Buddhahood.

The passage explaining the Buddha’s one great purpose is a direct expression of the “one Buddha vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and as such is the most important religious message of the entire scripture. In the Simile and Parable Chapter, gods in the assembly said about this message, “In the past at Vārāṇasī the Buddha first turned the wheel of the Law. Now he turns the wheel again, the wheel of the unsurpassed, the greatest Law of all.” (T9.12a; translation by Burton Watson, the *Lotus Sūtra* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1993], p. 54) This statement equates the *Lotus Sūtra* with the first turning of the wheel of the Law at Mṛga-dāva of Vārāṇasī. On that earlier occasion, the Buddha accepted Brahmā’s request and went to Mṛga-dāva to teach the five practitioners who had been his friends in religious training. The Buddha expounded the middle way transcending self-indulgence and self-mortification, the four noble truths, and the eightfold right path. This occasion is widely known as the first turning of the wheel of the Law; in contrast the “one Buddha vehicle” of the Expedient Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* is regarded as the second turning of the wheel of the unsurpassed Law.

The greatest religious message in the *Lotus Sūtra*, I think, is the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” as expressed in such vividly dramatic form in the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging Chapter includes the following narrative. During the period of the Counterfeit Dharma of the very first Buddha in the series of twenty thousand million Buddhas, who bore the name King of Awesome Sound, monks of overbearing arrogance exercised great authority and power. At that time there was a bodhisattva monk by the name of Never Disparaging. Whatever people he happened to encounter, whether monks, nuns, laymen or laywomen, he would bow in obeisance to all of them and speak words of praise, saying a certain set of words. According to the Kumārajīva translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he would say, “I have profound reverence for you. I would never dare treat you with disparaging and arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.” (T 9.50c; Watson, p. 266)

There is no phrase in the Sanskrit text corresponding to the “bow in obeisance” in the Kumārajīva translation. In the Sanskrit, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging merely utters the preceding words, with no mention of bowing to beings in obeisance. Despite this difference between the Kumārajīva translation and the Sanskrit text, the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging express an attitude that attributes the utmost dignity to all humankind, bespeaking the possibility that all human beings will, without fail, become Buddhas if they practice the bodhisattva way. In other words, the scripture counsels us to respect all human beings equally as future Buddhas.

However, certain persons became exceedingly exercised over Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s bestowals of prophecy of future Buddhahood, since he was not yet a Buddha himself and thus had no recognizable power or authority to make such momentous statements. However, even though he was severely persecuted, he kept up this practice for his entire life. His dedication also represents a great revelation for us in the present age. His behavior indicates that we should believe firmly in our own abilities to attain Buddhahood, and it conveys the idea that all other people are none other than potential Buddhas, all of whom have the ability to attain Buddhahood. What is important here is not a practice of offering something concrete to the other people, but rather the undertaking to teach us all to awaken to our own fundamental dignity. When I bow in obeisance to another person as Buddha, in response his Buddha nature bows in obeisance to me as Buddha—even though it has not yet manifested sufficiently in either of us. In other words, here the

scripture establishes the idea that respecting other people is directly connected with the manifestation of own Buddha natures. The concept of peaceful coexistence is required by the age in which we live. In the *Lotus Sūtra* the idea of coexistence is based on the interdependent relationship between people, in which we mutually respect each other as beings of integrity, all of us with the prospect of attaining Buddhahood.

The author of *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude* (*Kankyo no tomo*), Keisei (1189–1268), was a monk in the Jimon line of the Japanese Tendai school and the elder brother of the powerful aristocrat Kujō Michi'ie (1193–1252). The ninth tale in the first fascicle of *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude* bears the title, “The Story of an Old Monk from the East who emulated the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.” Keisei says of the meaning of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice, “Generally speaking, the heart that embraces this behavior of refusing to belittle others perhaps bows to the fact that the Buddha nature exists deep within the chest of every living being. Deluded beings such as ourselves may not be directly aware of this principle, but even before we become enlightened we are fully endowed with Buddha nature, and there is no creature, even as seemingly lowly as an ant or a cricket, that deserves to be looked down upon. Even among the hells and the realms of hungry ghosts there is not a single being that does not possess the Buddha nature. Hence, if you are truly cognizant of this principle, you will not fail to respect even the lowly birds and beasts.” So saying, Keisei infers that a slightly earlier historical example of a Japanese priest named Genjō shōnin, who bowed to birds and beasts, might have its foundation in the notion that even animals have the Buddha nature.

Moreover, having put his finger on the fact that spite and ridicule towards others will naturally disappear if we know that all beings have Buddha nature, Keisei cites the words of Fu Xi 傅翁 (also known as the great being Shanhui 善慧, 497–569), “Night after night, I sleep in the embrace of the Buddha; morning after morning, I arise with the Buddha.” Keisei found great inspiration in these words. The statement by Fu Xi shows that we who possess the Buddha nature are engaged with the Buddha in all our actions. If each and every person had the awareness of acting as a Buddha, how would the world change? I think cruel bullying at schools and office, as well as sexual and other types of harassment, cannot be fundamentally solved unless we awaken to the fundamental dignity of self and others.

In addition, the *Lotus Sūtra* says that everybody attains Buddhahood. What kind of existence is Buddhahood? The creator god of monotheistic

religions tends to be described as some kind of superman. But here I would like to consider the “eighteen unshared properties,” that is, qualities that only Buddhas possess. These eighteen include ten powers, four fearlessnesses, three kinds of tranquility, and great pity. The ten powers are the powers of wisdom that Buddhas possess: (1) the power of distinguishing between what is true and what is not; (2) the power of knowing karmic cause and result; (3) the power of knowing all the stages of the various kinds of meditation practice; (4) the power of discerning the superiority or inferiority of all people’s religious capacities; (5) the power of knowing people’s various wishes; (6) the power of knowing the various realms in which beings exist; (7) the power of knowing in what realm people will be reborn; (8) the power of remembering the past lifetimes of himself and other people; (9) the power of knowing the death and birth of all people in the future; and (10) the power of knowing that all his earthly desires have been eradicated. The four fearlessnesses are four types of confidence: (1) fearlessness in declaring oneself to have obtained the highest and correct enlightenment; (2) fearlessness in declaring oneself to have extinguished all desires; (3) fearlessness in explaining about earthly desires to disciples; and (4) fearlessness in explaining about the way of extinguishing earthly desires to disciples. The three kinds of tranquility are three aspects of a Buddha’s quality of serenity, that a Buddha’s mind remains tranquil and undisturbed regardless of the approval, disapproval, or mixed reactions of his disciples listening to his preaching. Great pity is the unlimited compassion for people that a Buddha possesses.

The two main qualities of a Buddha are basically wisdom and compassion, as described in these eighteen unshared properties. Unshakable confidence and imperturbability may be added to the basic qualities of wisdom and compassion. Since the importance of compassion might give an impression of gentleness, perhaps we should add courage to this list of basic qualities. “Exerting oneself bravely and vigorously,” as given in the Expedient Means Chapter, represents in effect the practice of showing courage. Needless to say, many of the properties that a Buddha possesses are based on his realization of the truth. Here the word “truth” corresponds to “dharma” in Sanskrit. In short, understanding the truth, and the possession of wisdom, compassion, courage, confidence, imperturbability and so on, have been regarded as Buddha’s properties throughout the history of Buddhism.

*The New Interpretation of Rebirth:  
Valuing of the Real World*

Next I would like to take up the new interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhism concerning rebirth and emancipation. In the Nikāya Buddhism, practitioners aim to emancipate themselves from the world of rebirth and to enter nirvāṇa by severing all earthly desires. In other words Nikāya Buddhism, according to this interpretation, regards rebirth and nirvāṇa as two entirely different principles, with the former to be abandoned in favor of the latter. Buddhism is often criticized as a pessimistic religion, and this negative appraisal might capture this aspect of the Nikāya Buddhist worldview.

However, Mahāyāna Buddhism developed an affirmative evaluation of this world of rebirth as a place where people practice the way of the bodhisattva. According to the Teacher of the Law Chapter, those who embrace faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* after the passing of the Buddha are believed to have already attained true enlightenment in their past lives, and yet out of deep compassion they relinquish the fruits of their good karma and voluntarily choose to be born in this evil world to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* for the sake of all sentient beings. This is the concept underlying the characteristics of the Bodhisattvas who emerge from the earth.

Moreover, this idea is clearly manifested in the core idea of the *Lotus Sūtra* that the eternal Buddha Śākyamuni does not enter nirvāṇa, but remains in the *sahā* world, preaching on Eagle Peak so as to save living beings. According to the Life-span of the Thus Come One Chapter, the eternal Buddha Śākyamuni's location on Eagle Peak is a place where living beings are happy and at ease. This description led to the concept of the "pure land of Eagle Peak." At the same time there arose the idea that the *sahā* world is in itself the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, that is, that this seemingly impure land is in itself a pure land. It would be pointless were this idea to only philosophical speculation by aristocrats isolated from the hardships of real life. On the contrary, the teaching that the real world is a place where human beings can be happy and at ease should encourage us to reconstruct our own society as such a world.

THE FUNDAMENTAL IMAGE OF THE ONE BUDDHA VEHICLE:  
INTEGRATION AND DIVERSITY

As soon as we think of the *Lotus Sūtra*, its "one Buddha vehicle" doctrine comes immediately to mind. In my understanding, the fundamental

image of the “one Buddha vehicle” is a simultaneous combination of integration and diversity. At the most basic level, the concept of the “one Buddha vehicle” implies not only that we should abandon all the teachings which the Buddha expounded before the *Lotus Sūtra*—since they are only provisional expedients—but also that those very same teachings become revitalized once again if we recognize their validity as expedient teachings. As proof of how this works, the *Lotus Sūtra* also explains the achievement of perfect enlightenment by voice-hearers. Destined to remain arhats in Nikāya Buddhism, when they understand the ultimate import of the *Lotus Sūtra* they become reborn as “true voice-hearers” destined for Buddhahood. Also, all religious merit, even the most trivial of good actions, does not lead to worldly benefits but contributes directly to the attainment of Buddhahood. This feature of the *Lotus Sūtra* is referred to in Chinese Buddhism by the technical term “elaborating the expedient teachings and revealing the ultimate truth,” which highlights the fact that the *Lotus Sūtra* revives all teachings, even those superseded in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself.

In terms of time and space, the *Lotus Sūtra* integrates various Buddhas into the one Buddha Śākyamuni, and it also consolidates the various teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha into the “one Buddha vehicle.” These considerations might seem to imply that only the aspect of integration is emphasized, but diversity actually receives similar attention as well. This is shown in the technical term “elaborating the expedient teachings and revealing the ultimate truth.” The problem is how to capture the true sense of the concept of integration. If we locate it in strong sectarian dogmatism, then the esteem of diversity will be like pie in the sky. If we regard the idea of the one Buddha vehicle as the teaching of the complete manifestation of the dignity of human beings, then diversity should be esteemed as long as we do not deviate from the dignity of human beings.

This idea is closely related to the recognition that human beings do not exist for the sake of religions, whereas religions do exist for the sake of human beings. This recognition might imply a danger of falling prey to the arrogance of human beings and losing contact with religion entirely, but I think it is important to emphasize the dignity of human beings. If human beings are sacrificed and become enmeshed in conflict between religions, this would be to mistake the means for the end. The *Lotus Sūtra*, which advocates a balance of “integration” and “diversity,” seems to propose the possibility of a dialogue between religions, which is one of the desiderata of the present age. This is an important question that I would like to consider on another occasion.

## LIVING IN THE ETERNAL LAW AS FOUNDATION

The historical Buddha Śākyamuni said at the very end of his life, “all conditioned things are decaying. Strive with diligence.” (This citation is from the *Mahāparinibbāna suttanta*). To tell the truth, Buddhism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. As the present age continues to be violated by pessimism, sometimes to the point of losing all hope, it is necessary for humans living in the modern world to emphasize optimism.

“All conditioned things are decaying” can be interpreted as the famous Buddhist teaching that all things are impermanent. This idea is real and true in the phenomenal world. However, we have to keep in mind that it is different from sentimental feelings of transience, like the “emptiness” as has been traditionally understood by many Japanese people. The real meaning of the impermanence of all things is its implication of the inevitability of change in the phenomenal world. The problem is that good things change for the bad, and bad things change for the good. In short, there are always two possibilities—things will always improve or worsen. The Buddha said to the disciples, “Strive with diligence” after saying “all things are decaying.” Because we are thus always open to infinite possibilities, the Buddha gave us this last message so that we would aim at attaining Buddhahood and make effort as ordinary human beings. This standpoint is based on the principles of devotion and effort of Buddhism.

As mentioned above, the Buddha attained Buddhahood by awakening to the truth (dharma). The *Lotus Sūtra* adopted the dharma which the Buddha awakened to as a part of its title, *Saddarmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*. In Buddhism the dharma is said to exist eternally, regardless of whether Buddhas appear in the world or not. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the ultimate teaching of Buddhism is that not only Śākyamuni Buddha and but also the past Buddhas, such as Sun Moon Bright Buddha and Great Universal Wisdom Excellence Buddha, preach continuously. The *Lotus Sūtra* is understood as an eternal, universal teaching, as the sūtra which expounds the dharma that all Buddhas should realize. The spirit of Buddhism means to aim to achieve and realize this dharma in one’s own body through the application of Buddhist practices, and to realize wisdom and compassion. People are uncertain on what they should base their lives, in an age when greed prevails and people’s morals are in decline. Does this way of living based on the eternal law not give immovable confidence to all of us living in such a stormy age?



## CONCLUSION

In this brief paper I have been unable to give a sufficient explanation of “the modern significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*”; instead, I have only been able to explain some of the scripture’s most basic tenets. I myself want to learn from the *Lotus Sūtra* a way of abiding in the eternal law and making it one’s foundation of living, as well as a way of living which achieves the symbiosis of mutual respect by awakening to the dignity of self and others. Such an ideal way of living changes the world from a place where much suffering exists to one where living beings are happy and at ease.

As mentioned at the beginning, even though there exist wonderful religious scriptures, it is only when there are human beings who struggle to solve the various problems of the particular time that we can discuss the relationship between a historical age and religious scriptures. I would like people who seriously work on the *Lotus Sūtra* to explore the modern meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra* themselves, each from his or her own standpoint.