

World Peace and the Lotus Sutra

Daisaku Ikeda

SHORTLY after the opening of the 21st century, major cities in the United States suffered simultaneous terrorist attacks. Since then, conflicts and wars have forged a chain of hate and retaliation that now extends to many parts of the globalizing world. In our modern civilization, the divisive energies of violence and malice sunder human beings from human beings, ethnic groups from ethnic groups, and humanity from Nature.

What role can philosophy play in converting what has started as a century of violence and war into a century of nonviolence and peace? Toward answering this question, I should like to shed some light from the Lotus Sutra, one of the most outstanding works of oriental philosophy, and the wisdom contained in it.

A secular expert on the Lotus Sutra, Professor M.I. Vorob'yova-Desyatovskaya has written, "Thus the (Lotus) Sutra gives hope of (eliminating all discrimination and offers the possibility of) general prosperity. It is precisely for this reason that it is so popular; it is precisely for this reason that it is called the pinnacle of the Buddhist teachings."¹

The content of the Lotus Sutra is rich and varied. It speaks of respect for life as a basic principle, and it describes the four kinds of actions that arise from Buddha's wisdom. There is a marvelous tower of treasures that appears as if by magic and floats above the Earth, and amazing characters known as Bodhisattvas arise from the Earth as manifestations of life's eternity and power. I refer you to chapter 2 ("Expedient Means"), chapter 11 ("The Emergence of the Treasure Tower.") and chapter 15 ("Emerging from the Earth"). The wisdom of this Sutra and its compelling illustrations are, indeed, a rich source of hope.

Humanity today faces a global *problématique* involving war, terrorism, famine, and environmental pollution. What suggestions do the Lotus Sutra teachings and their practice offer us? What kind of practice do they encourage? It is in the light of these issues that I should like to consider the role of the Lotus Sutra in creating a Century of Peace.

I. Critical Dimensions

Humanity faces crises on three dimensions.

The first dimension is the global ecosystem. The concept of dominating Nature is at the bottom of modern scientific-technological civilization. The idea is not harmonious coexistence with—but exploitation of—Nature. This approach has led us to put holes in the ozone layer, pollute the seas, aggravate desertification, drastically curtail species numbers by ravaging rain forests, and create radiation pollution over vast expanses. We have destroyed our natural environment to a critical degree. Other factors like the exploding population in developing nations, food shortages, and a widening gap between the poor and rich have further worsened the situation.

Human society is the second critical dimension. Technological innovations mean that today international society is increasingly interdependent in news, transportation, economics, and military affairs. In spite of our interdependence, however, conflict and indiscriminate terrorist attacks resulting from cultural, ethnic, and religious differences still occur frequently. In other areas, the spread of viral disease like AIDS causes grave concern; and immigrants flooding into the industrialized nations provoke discrimination.

The third dimension is a state of decline in the human spiritual condition. Growing numbers of people are losing all sense of purpose and suffer what is called identity crises. As people become devitalized, such innate human attributes as compassion, wisdom, justice, and courage diminish while violence increases and ethical standards drop. Having lost the affection, trust, and human bonds cultivated in the family and the community, people suffer from a sense of isolation and nihilism.

The third chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “Simile and Parable,” contains a passage that accurately describes the world we live in today. “There is no safety in the threefold world; it is like a burning house, replete with a multitude of sufferings, truly to be feared.”²

The fire destroying the house is delusion, the metaphor of earthly desires, which, as the passage warns, affects the individual, the family, the district, the ethnic group, the nation, humanity, and the whole world. The “multitude of sufferings” is the ecological, social and spiritual crisis confronting humanity today.

The Sutra describes our world in terms of the Five Impurities. “Shariputra, the Buddhas appear in the evil worlds of five impurities...impurity of the age, impurity of desire, impurity of living beings, impurity of view, and impurity of life span.”³

In *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, Tiantai (active in China during the sixth century) first comments on the five impurities and then clarifies the relations among them.⁴

The impurity of desire is the impurity of the three poisons called greed, anger, and foolishness. The impurity of thought or way of viewing the world pertains to philosophy and ideology and attachment to imperfect ideologies. These two—the impurity of desire and the impurity of view—debilitate human beings mentally and physically, resulting in the impurity of living beings. This persists for age after age, sapping human vital powers, draining the will to live, and shrinking life spans. This is the impurity of life span. When society is permeated with the impurities of living beings and life span, all social levels—family, tribe, race, and nation—become impure, thus obstructing the whole era, resulting in the impurity of the age.

Ignorance (*moha*), the source of the delusions and wrong views fundamental to the Five Impurities, manifests itself in greed, anger, and foolishness and in many other offshoots.

Ignorance is blindness to what the Sutra is teaching. As is set forth in the Lotus Sutra, this truth is the supreme, eternal dignity inherent in all life. In modern terms, ignorance means to be ignorant of the dignity of all living things. It leads inevitably to an all-pervasive egoism that ignores and infringes on that dignity. It reduces life to a state of indifference to the pain of others who are neglected, injured, or even done to death for the sake of satisfying exclusive, selfish desires.

An ignorant philosophy of disregard for life is at the bottom of modern terrorism and wars of retaliation. This way of thinking ignores the dignity of other people and regards them as no more than things or convenient means to ends. This, in turn, is the source of the inhumanity of contemporary material civilization.

Taking the form of greed, ignorance surpasses the limits of the single individual. In the world today, it widens economic gaps between poor and rich everywhere. For instance, the greed of the industrial nations deprives developing nations of the minimal necessities of life. By denying other living creatures the right to exist, it has disastrous effects on species diversity.

When expressed in anger, ignorance erupts as violence in the home, the school, and the local community. It causes historical grudges to generate tribal, ethnic, and racial wars or cowardly and violent terrorist attacks. Foolishness, another form of ignorance, ramifies into various forms, including lack of self-awareness. Basic, ignorant egoism rends the web of dependent origination and mutual interdependence connect-

ing all living creatures and destroys the foundation of existence for all things. The present era appears to take disregard for life to an extreme. In contemporary civilization, ignorance at all levels seems to be destroying the natural ecological system, and humanity along with it.

Viewed in the light of Buddhist wisdom, our current era exemplifies what is called the Latter Day of the Law, a time when Gaia, that has become “an evil world” dyed dark with the Five Impurities, and the human race as well face the threat of extinction.

II. Overcoming Ignorance

Ignorance has created a subcurrent of dehumanization and disregard for life. This is not, however, the true current that we ought to follow. Knowledge of the true nature of all things generates respect for the dignity of life and harmonious coexistence. This is the true current of life. Our task is to convert the subcurrent into the main current. Achieving the goal is the task of philosophy and religion.

Like many other philosophies and religions, the Lotus Sutra is permeated with the spirit of the dignity of life. In chapter 11 (“The Emergence of the Treasure Tower”), breaking through the surface of the Earth, a great jeweled tower appears. Inside sit two Buddhas: Shakyamuni and Many Treasures. After the tower’s appearance, Shakyamuni uses his powers to purify lands three times and raise the entire assembly of believers and emanations from far away into the air, where the proceedings continued. The description of the scene found in the text is as follows: “At that time in the Buddha’s presence there was a tower adorned with the seven treasures, five hundred yojanas in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in width and depth, that rose up out of the earth and stood suspended in the air.”⁵

According to the 13th century Japanese religious leader and philosopher Nichiren, the Treasure Tower symbolizes the identity between the dignity inherent in all life and the dignity of the eternal cosmos (universal life or the Buddha nature). He further wrote that, in this passage, Shakyamuni symbolizes the operation of wisdom, Many Treasures stands for the essential nature of phenomena as truth, and the assembled emanations in Buddha form represent the operations of compassion. Inherent in all humanity is the Treasure Tower as the dignity of life.

Indeed, the second chapter of the Sutra (“Expedient Means”) clearly states that Buddhas appear in this world for the purpose of revealing to sentient beings the universal life (Buddha nature) in each of them. This task is one of the four actions for Buddha wisdom: “The Buddhas, the

World-Honored Ones, wish to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world. They wish to show the Buddha wisdom to living beings, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to cause living beings to awaken to the Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. They wish to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom, and therefore they appear in the world. Shariputra, this is the one great reason for which the Buddhas appear in the world”⁶ In short, their purpose in appearing is to open and show living beings wisdom, awaken them to it, and cause them to become one with it. This glorifies the dignity of life and helps sentient beings be as good as they are capable of being.

Elsewhere in the same chapter, Shakyamuni says, “Shariputra, you should know that at the start I took a vow, hoping to make all persons equal to me, without any distinction between us.”⁷

The Buddha wisdom equates to the radiant Buddha’s Great Realm of Life, or the Buddha Nature in Tiantai’s interpretation.⁸ Ignorance is destroyed when we reveal the same Buddha Nature that is within Shakyamuni and the infinite number of other Buddhas. Since ignorance is their source, all delusions—including the Three Poisons of greed, anger, and foolishness—are converted into *bodhi*, the supreme, ultimate Buddha enlightenment.

Mahayana Buddhism teaches that enlightenment and delusion (or earthly desires) is the same thing. By realizing enlightenment, which is wisdom, in our lives we counter delusion, which is evil.

Ignorance evokes evil energy creating schisms within a single individual, between one person and another, between humanity and Nature, and between human beings and society. If it prevails, this evil energy breaks the law of dependent origination at all levels from the human psychosomatic compound to the whole cosmos. Everything loses its vital luster. When people and society are split and isolated, general disregard runs rampant.

But good energy manifest by the true nature of all phenomena and the Buddha nature becomes compassion, trust, wisdom, courage, and justice, which work to restore the bonds sundered by evil energy.

When all things—including humanity—reveal the good nature and are united in solidarity, the essential dignity of life based on the law of dependent origination is made manifest. Under such circumstances it is possible to create a culture of peace characterized by nonviolence, compassion, trust, and hope.

III. Dialogue

Bringing to full flower a culture founded on respect for the dignity of human life is the broad highway to lasting peace. Dialogue guides us along the road to a culture of peace that rests on the solidarity of the good.

I personally have repeatedly engaged in dialogues with thinkers and leaders from many cultural and philosophical backgrounds and from many religious groups: Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Daoist, and Confucian. From discussions in the quest for ways to achieve world peace, I have learned that the way will open up before us as long as all participants keep our common humanity and share in life in mind. No matter what their birthplace or cultural background, all human beings share abundant goodness. Engaging in dialogues to call forth and manifest that goodness facilitates mutual understanding and leads to problem solutions. Dialogue is the way to open human minds and to destroy the ignorance of misunderstanding and prejudice. It is one of the worthiest of human undertakings because it manifests the goodness inherent in us.

The Buddhist ideal culture of peace is described in chapter 5 of the Lotus Sutra; “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs.” In nature grows a great diversity of plants and trees. Rain falling from the sky waters them all impartially, and they receive the water according to their different characteristics. “The rain falling from one blanket of cloud accords with each particular species and nature, causing it to sprout and mature, to blossom and bear fruit. Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and are moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars.”⁹ Thus receiving the equal blessings of earth and rain, the plants grow and blossom, each manifesting its own characteristics.

This text, in which earth and the rain are metaphors for Shakyamuni’s impartial teachings and plants represent living beings, skillfully describes the nature of the culture of peace. In other words, all material, biological, and human evolution depends on cosmic compassion and creative force. All receive life and manifest their individual characteristics within a state of universal interconnectedness.

The parable accords completely with the main theme of this ICANAS conference: Unity in Diversity. Nichiren expressed universal phenomena in terms of plants nurtured by the essential good of the universe, through the metaphor of four trees: “Cherry, plum, peach and apricot blossoms...all just as they are, are entities possessing their own unique qualities.”¹⁰ Each beautiful in itself, the cherry and the plum bloom at different seasons. Though their relationships to human beings and other

entities differ, all enjoy the blessings of Nature. Each demonstrates the essential nature of life by fully manifesting its inherent potentialities. Human beings, too, demonstrate the meaning and mission of life through self-realization and manifestation of their potentialities with the support of the cosmos. Nichiren refers to this fundamental way of existence as self-manifestation.¹¹

In social terms, the parable indicates how diverse cultures can preserve their distinctive natures while coexisting peacefully. It is precisely because of their diversity based on their own history and tradition that individual cultures can relate distinctively to the cosmic universal from which they draw wisdom and vitality.

IV. Modern-day Bodhisattvas

The Lotus Sutra describes the actions of people working for the peace of humanity in terms of bodhisattvas of various kinds. Among them, the bodhisattva named Never Disparaging (chapter 20 “The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging”) provides a model of nonviolent dialogue.

In a time when arrogant priests exerted their power to disturb society as much as possible, this bodhisattva said to everyone he met, “I have profound reverence for you. I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.”¹² The people he addressed cursed him, sometimes throwing stones at him or beating him with sticks. But he went on in his nonviolent and worshipful way. Nichiren described the attitude and deeds of the bodhisattva Never Disparaging as the heart of the practice of the Lotus Sutra: “What does Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s profound respect for people signify? The purpose of the appearance in this world of Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of the teachings, lies in his behavior as a human being.”¹³

In short, Never Disparaging behaves in the noblest way possible for a human being. He believes in and respects human dignity to the maximum extent. The search for the optimum way of life for both the self and the other was Shakyamuni’s purpose in appearing in this world.

Nonviolent dialogue of the kind represented by this bodhisattva can convert a century of war into a century of peace by halting serial retaliations spawned by hatred and violence. The bodhisattva Never Disparaging is presented as an as-yet-to-be-realized Shakyamuni during a past life. The Bodhisattvas from the Earth (chapter 15), however, appear as those who will disseminate the spirit of the Lotus Sutra in the future. They are described as infinite in number and rising from the eternal

force of life that is the origin of the cosmos. It is predicted that they will appear together with the philosophy of respect for the dignity of life in the evil age of five impurities, the Latter Day of the Law.

The sutra introduces various other bodhisattvas who have characteristics of their own and work for the salvation of the ordinary people: Manjushri (wisdom), Samantabhadra or Universal Worthy (learning), Maitreya (compassion), Medicine King (healing), Wonderful Sound (art), Avalokiteshvara (Perceiver of the World's Sounds), and so on. We might ask ourselves how we today can emulate these bodhisattvas.

In our terms, the bodhisattvas appearing in the Lotus Sutra can be seen as representing ordinary people striving to create a culture of peace. The heart of their endeavors is respect for the dignity of life. Their principle tool is nonviolent, compassionate dialogue. And each manifests his or her distinctive traits and characteristics while working for the achievement of the goal. Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is a popular movement inspired by the Lotus Sutra spirit shown by these bodhisattvas.

In the Lotus Sutra spirit of respect for life, in 1957, in the midst of the Cold War, Josei Toda, second president of Soka Gakkai, demonstrated nonviolence and compassion by issuing his "Declaration for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapons."¹⁴ It was addressed to the whole world and especially to young people, who bear the responsibility for the future.

In response to the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra doctrine of respect for life, I spoke out against indiscriminant terrorist acts and called for intercultural and ecumenical dialogues for cultivating the good innate in all people.¹⁵

Dialogue has the power to break down walls of mistrust and hatred. Many things must be done to create a society of lasting peace: the creation of a system to prevent international terror, working out of means centered on the United Nations to narrow the gap of economic inequity, perfecting a system of international law. But I firmly believe that, if they are to be effective, all efforts in these directions must be founded on a dialogue-induced reformation of the human spirit. This may take time. Nonetheless, it is vitally important to conduct sound and steady dialogue over and over on all levels to inspire confidence in the goodness of human nature, to summon it forth, and to spur it on.

Firmly believing in the dignity of life, SGI is vigorously working as a United Nations nongovernmental organization (NGO). We promote mutual understanding by encouraging artistic and intercultural exchanges. In the field of learning, too, we promote mutual understanding

and respect among cultures and religions through dialogue as part of our pacifist efforts.

The people, the citizens of the world, are the primary movers in work to build an enduring culture of peace. They are the diverse bodhisattvas that appear in the Lotus Sutra to promote universal happiness by awakening human awareness, persevering in nonviolence and dialogue, and stimulating general human good simultaneous with the manifestation of individual characteristics.

In *A Geography of Human Life* (1903), Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, first president of Soka Gakkai, expressed the desire for a new era of enlightened world citizens and humanitarian competition oriented toward the happiness of the self and the other.¹⁶ He advocated replacing law-of-the-jungle competition with cooperative competition for the creation of a universally prosperous global society.

As heir to Mr. Makiguchi's philosophy, I do my utmost to cultivate citizens of the world by founding universities in Japan and the United States and other educational institutions in many parts of the world. Global citizens require education in peace, the environment, human rights, and languages. I am convinced that citizens of the world trained in these ways will be the modern-day Lotus Sutra Bodhisattvas. They will be Never Disparaging, the Bodhisattvas from the Earth, and all the others who build a new world and make this a triumphant century of peace. In the confident belief that this will come to pass, I conclude these remarks.

Notes

¹ Vorob'yova-Desyatovskaya, M. I.: from her foreword to the Russian edition of *Lectures on the Chapters "Expedient Means" and "The Life Span of the Thus Come One"* by Daisaku Ikeda.

² *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, New York; 1993), P. 69.

³ *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. P. 32.

⁴ *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, T34. 53a.

⁵ *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. P. 170.

⁶ *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. P. 31.

⁷ *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. P. 36.

⁸ *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*

⁹ *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. P. 98.

¹⁰ Nichiren Daishonin, *Gosho Zenshu*, published by Soka Gakkai, P. 784.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *The Lotus Sutra*, op. cit. PP. 266–267.

¹³ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, P. 852.

¹⁴ In September, 1957, Josei Toda issued his "Declaration for the Abolition of Nuclear

Weapons.” In it he described weapons that threaten the very right to existence of the ordinary people as monstrous products of evil. He announced that their abolition was the first article in his legacy to youth.

¹⁵ Mr. Ikeda contributed the article “The Evil over which We Must Triumph” to a collection of essays by Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders entitled *From the Ashes—A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America* (Rodale Press, 2001).

¹⁶ In an age of imperialism and fierce struggles for hegemony, Mr. Makiguchi divided competition into four categories: 1. military, 2. political, 3. economic, and 4. humanitarian. He proclaimed that the time had come to abandon the first three for the sake of the fourth.