

Buddhist Thoughts on Symbiosis—And its Contemporary Implications

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I. Removing “the arrow of earthly desires”

SHAKYAMUNI Buddha’s words are recorded in the With Stick In Hand chapter of the *Sutta Nipāta*,

“Fear comes from the (one who has) embraced violence. Look at people quarrelling. I shall describe my agitation, how it was experienced by me.”¹

“Seeing people floundering, like fish (floundering) in little water, seeing them opposed to one another, fear came upon me.”²

The India of Shakyamuni’s time was filled with endless strife as smaller countries were annexed by larger ones, and conflicts between people abound. It was a time of great upheaval. In fact, in the latter part of Shakyamuni’s life, his own Shakya tribe was annexed by the larger kingdom of Kosala.

In a world so full of conflict, how should peace and co-existence be brought about? The impetus of Shakyamuni’s denouncing of his royal heritage and searching for the truth within his deeper consciousness came from the shock and fear he felt at the sight of violence.

Shakyamuni’s lament and impressions of violence are not restricted to the India of his time, but are also pertinently relevant now in the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the survival of humanity hangs in the balance.

The “little water” from the passage above can easily be reinterpreted for the present to mean “our limited planet”. The earth’s natural resources, energy, and ecosystems, have been abused and defiled due to humanity’s bottomless greed and egoism to the point that the foundation for our very existence is threatened. Global warming, expanding deserts, dwindling forests, pollution of the seas, deficient food supplies and the extinction of species, are all serious global issues that we currently face.

Despite these desperate circumstances, as was in Shakyamuni’s time, or perhaps even more so now, contemporary society is experiencing a growing disparity between the rich and the poor, animosity between nations, ethnic and tribal groups, and discrimination based on religion or

culture. These are all fissures in society along which wars, conflicts and terrorist acts escalate on a global scale, enveloping all of humanity in confrontation. “Weapons”, today include a wide range of devices for mass destruction from nuclear and biochemical weapons, to conventional weapons such as cluster bombs, totaling an arsenal of “fear” capable of wiping out our entire species many times over.

In this paper, starting from Shakyamuni’s quest for enlightenment, I would like to explore philosophical avenues for the co-existence of humankind—to seek ways to overcome the threat of extinction which we and all other living things on this earth currently face, and find clues to how we can create a world of peace and sustainable development.

Shakyamuni demonstrated that enlightenment can be reached by practicing penetrating meditation. Meditation allows submersion from the superficial layers of consciousness to the deeper layers beneath. In other words, it is a search for the “cosmos within” using the shallow consciousness of the self as a starting point.

By submerging oneself into the deeper consciousnesses, one undergoes a process of self-reflection, first reflecting on one’s own past experiences. On deeper levels, the self is transcended in an area of the transpersonal. This means a level of consciousness that connects the self with members of one’s family and friends, and then even deeper, to the level connecting oneself with one’s tribe, ethnic group and nationality. This level is where the consciousness of a group of people of the same tribe or ethnicity, or in today’s terminology, nationality, merge together as one. At deeper levels, there is a consciousness connecting all humanity, and all this functions upon the foundation of the natural environment.

Shakyamuni’s meditation took him into the deepest sections of humanity’s consciousness, and in the *Sutta Nipāta*, describes this experience as follows,

“The world was without substance all around; all the quarters were tossed about. Wanting a dwelling-place for myself, I did not see (anywhere) unoccupied.”³

“But seeing (people) opposed (to one another) at the end, I was dissatisfied.”⁴

Shakyamuni first sought a peaceful world without the sufferings of conflict, sickness, birth and death, but in his broad quest found that such a blissful world does not exist anywhere. He then sought to find the answer to what makes people antagonistic and belligerent towards one another.

At that moment, he perceived that “the arrow of earthly desires” was embedded in the depths of humanity’s consciousness,

“Then I saw a barb here, hard to see, nestling in the heart.”⁵

“Affected by this barb, one runs in all directions. Having pulled that barb out, one does not run, nor sink.”⁶

In a 1993 speech at Harvard University, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Daisaku Ikeda proposed that this “(single) arrow of earthly desires” stuck deep in the consciousness of all human beings can be viewed as “an attachment to distinctions”. He states,

“The following quote is illustrative: ‘I perceived a single, invisible arrow piercing the hearts of the people.’ The ‘arrow’ symbolizes a prejudicial mindset, an unreasoning emphasis on individual differences. India at that time was going through transition and upheaval. To Shakyamuni’s penetrating gaze, it was clear that the underlying cause of the conflict was attachment to distinctions, to ethnic, national, and other differences.”⁷

An “attachment to distinctions” is a contemporary interpretation for the concept of “fundamental darkness” that lies at the base of all earthly desires. People have a tendency to desperately cling to their “lesser self” of a shallow consciousness, discriminating others as the poisons of greed, anger, stupidity and distrust rule their behavior. Buddhism explains the reason why people cling to this “lesser self” is because of their fundamental darkness. Fundamental darkness refers to ignorance of the existence of a fundamental law (Dharma) of the universe that underlies all things.

Ikeda suggests that the “arrow” is the most fundamental evil of humankind, and that only by overcoming this evil, can we establish a peaceful world of co-existence. He states,

“The ‘invisible arrow’ of evil is not to be found in the existence of races and classes external to ourselves, but is embedded in our own hearts. The conquest of our own prejudicial thinking, our own attachment to difference, is the necessary pre-condition for open dialogue.”⁸

So how was Shakyamuni able to overcome his fundamental darkness, his “attachment to distinctions”? How was he able to pull out the “arrow of earthly desires”?

Shakyamuni’s meditation took him further, deeper, beyond the realm of humanity’s consciousness to the level of the life and death of planets, and then even further to the cosmos itself—and he became one with the life of the universe at the deepest extremity of consciousness. By doing so, he was able to realize the eternal fundamental law of all things (Dharma) within the depths of his own being, and was able to overcome his fundamental darkness. He reached nirvana. He found “a dwelling-place for [him]self”.

Noritoshi Aramaki comments on Shakyamuni's enlightenment in the following way,

"During meditation, Gautama Buddha shed layer upon layer of his 'smaller self' going deeper and deeper, until there were no more layers to be shed. This is when he discovered that the truth of eternal life lay in each moment of the present...It was when he completely discarded his 'small self' and became 'selfless', that he became free of his past, present and future self, and discovered the path to becoming a new entity that could experience 'eternal life' in every passing moment."⁹

Aramaki also calls "eternal life" by another name, "the eternal collective truth".¹⁰

The fundamental law of the universe (Dharma)—the eternal collective truth to which Shakyamuni awakened was what he manifested in his own life, and walked to spread its message throughout Eastern India until the end of his 80-year life. From this viewpoint, it can be said that Buddhism is a "religion of wisdom" based on a "law", but at the same time, that "wisdom" is manifested as "compassion".

When Shakyamuni was near death, Ananda, as a representative of the Buddha's saddened disciples, asked what should they use as their spiritual guidepost once the Buddha was gone? To this, Shakyamuni gave the following guidance, according to the *Mahā Parinibbāna Suttanta*,

"O Ānanda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be ye a refuge to yourselves. Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast to the Truth as a lamp. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Look not for refuge to any one besides yourselves."¹¹

Among Buddhists, this guidance is sometimes referred to as "own light, law light". The "self" referred to here means a "self" at one with the "law", and not a reference to the "lesser self". In other words, a self that governs, meaning a self at one with the law—the fundamental eternal life of the cosmos. This is the ideal self that can control one's earthly desires, overcome the lesser self, open the way to nirvana and lead people to happiness. This true self, to heighten its contrast to the "lesser self", can be called the "greater self". Shakyamuni taught how to establish this true self from various angles.

For example, in the *Dhammapada*, he stated,

"Your own self is your own mainstay, for who else could your mainstay be? With you yourself well-trained you obtain the mainstay hard to obtain."¹²

And in the *Udānavarga*, he stated,

"He who conquers a thousand times a thousand men in battle, a greater conqueror than he is he who conquers himself."¹³ And in yet

another passage, he states,

“Self is the lord of self; what other lord could there be? He who has become master of himself finds a patron in himself.”¹⁴

By overcoming earthly desires on various levels, and seeking to realize oneness with the life of the universe itself by systematically discarding the lesser self, one can realize the “greater self”. The greater self has a fundamentally different outlook of the world, because it is fused with the eternal law within the depths of one’s being, and is based in a “wisdom of light”. This wisdom to lead humankind to happiness expounded in Buddhism is the “wisdom of dependent origination”. The wisdom contained within the concept of dependent origination is that all people and all living things are interconnected, and it is within this concept that we can begin to see how the Buddhist ideal of a symbiotic society can be made a reality.

II. Symbiosis Through Dependent Origination

“Symbiosis” is a key concept of the twenty-first century. In the latter half of the twentieth century despite the globalization of economics, finance, and information technologies, or perhaps, as a result of globalization, “the energy of division” originating from the “arrow of earthly desires”, is ever growing. This division occurs between humankind and nature, between people on various levels, such as family, tribe, ethnicity, nation, culture and religion, and even between the body and mind of single individuals, because of animosity and prejudice. Isolated and cut-off from others, each sector loses sight of the balance of the whole, and faces the lonely threat of extinction.

Within this backdrop, the concept of symbiosis was a new paradigm that promised hope for society.

Although this concept originated in the field of ecology, it is currently used in many sociological contexts as well.

Tatsuo Inoue says this about the word, “symbiosis”,

“Symbiosis was a word coined to mean the opposite of parasitism. However, in current Japanese philosophic circles, the word is used in a wide variety of literature in phrases such as, ‘the symbiosis of human beings and nature’, ‘a symbiosis of diverse ethnicities and cultures’, ‘a symbiosis with physically challenged individuals’, and ‘a symbiosis of men and women’...The contemporary meaning of symbiosis does not include the desire for individuals to merge together around a single mindset, but rather, to aim for a mutually creative co-existence wherein individuals respect, but also maintain a certain distance from each

other...a symbiosis is the co-existence of unlike components, and the right to be different is accepted by the members of its community, which is fundamentally different from assimilation into one like-minded entity.”¹⁵

As mentioned above, at the core of the current definition of symbiosis is an understanding that it is not a merging of self and others into one homogeneous entity, but a relationship wherein all members of a community are independent from each other, in character and ability, but are equally respected, and because of these differences, are able to create a richer quality of life for its members overall.

How does the modern concept of symbiosis fit into the framework of Buddhist thought?

Egaku Mayeda points out that Buddhism’s theory of co-existence is based in the concept of dependent origination. Mayeda credits Benkyo Shiio as the postulator of the modern Buddhist view of symbiosis,¹⁶ and then explains how dependent origination relates to this modern terminology,

“Shiio saw the theoretical premise for symbiosis in the Buddhist idea of ‘dependent origination’. Dependent origination means to arise due to a cause, and pertains to all phenomena in this world, including the notion that all phenomena are interrelated...In this way, the concept of dependent origination is directly linked with the basic Buddhist concepts of ‘non-substantiality’ and ‘the Middle Way’. This is an example of human wisdom equaling Buddhist wisdom, and having Buddhist wisdom means being awakened to the truth. By having this framework of truth, new insights into the relationships between people and nature become evident as we re-examine the contemporary world.”¹⁷

Narumi Asai also viewed dependent origination as the underlying Buddhist concept as the basis of symbiosis, stating,

“The basis for a Buddhist discussion on symbiosis is the law of dependent origination. If talking about the relation of all things with each other, this law is at the core of discussions about symbiosis in any field. Whether the discussion is about the ecological system of plants, the relationship of nature to human beings, or the relations between nations or ethnic groups, the Buddhist law of dependent origination plays a central role.”¹⁸

Dependent origination, or dependent arising, is a key concept in all Buddhist doctrines from early Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. This concept is developed in various ways within the various denominations of Buddhism, such as the Arising from Karmic Influence, Arising from Alaya-consciousness, and Arising from *Tathatā* (True Suchness). In

China, the dependent origination of all phenomena interpenetrating without obstruction of the Flower Garland School, and the dependent origination of the six great elements of the True Word School are some examples. The concept of the true aspect of all phenomena (three thousand realms contained in a single life-moment) of the T'ien-t'ai School can also be considered a development of the theory of dependent origination.

As Mayeda points out, dependent origination means to arise due to a cause, and is the interrelatedness of all things that exist.

If the above is true, how does the basic concept of dependent origination add to the wisdom of contemporary symbiosis theory? Or rather, how do we construct a theory of symbiosis as a function of dependent origination?

I propose five qualities that would emerge as a result of combining the theory of symbiosis with dependent origination.

First is the premise that all things depend on and are related to all others in its existence. The self is connected to others in terms of time and space, and is a part of the balance of the whole. No one person exists disconnected to others. This may especially hold true in today's world in which we are complexly linked on a global scale. Humanity as a whole can be viewed as one entity composed of a life of humanity, and together with nature and her ecosystems, lives within a large rhythm of the whole. No one has the right to disturb this harmony of the whole, to disconnect or destroy it. In fact, because of this structure, humanity should play a role in aiding the whole, to help each other, from one individual to another, and to expand the bonds of harmony.

In addition, the Flower Garland philosophy contains a concept called "Indra's net"¹⁹ which illustrates the theory of dependent origination of all phenomena interpenetrating without obstruction.

Indra's net is a large metaphoric net mentioned in the sutras which contains a jewel at each knot. Each jewel reflects the light of all the other jewels in the net, interpenetrating each other ad infinitum. This symbolizes the relationship that all phenomena exist supported by the existence of all other phenomena. Each phenomenon is the cause for all other phenomena to exist and to prosper.

The jewel in each knot of the net can easily represent one individual, or one ethnic group, one nation, one culture, one religion or our natural surroundings. This also represents how one person can affect a change on a variety of levels in society, humanity and nature. It illustrates how we shine a light on each other, help each other, and create a harmony of the whole in a rhythm of expanding development.

Secondly, the individuals in symbiosis are closely interconnected. Although each member has their own unique character, they are each an invaluable part of the whole, and as such there is complete equality between all individuals.

In the *Sutta Nipāta*, equality between people is described as follows,

“This (difference) is not found individually among men in respect of their own bodies, but among men difference is spoken of as a matter of designation.”²⁰ Also,

“Not by birth does one become a Brahman; not by birth does one become a non-brahman. By action one becomes a Brahman; by action one becomes a non-brahman.”²¹ In addition,

“Thus the wise, seeing conditional origination, knowing the fruit of action, see this action as it really is.”²²

Shakyamuni rejected the Indian caste system in place during his lifetime, and taught equality of all people, no matter their status at birth. He completely disregarded differences in birth, tribal connectedness, occupation, gender, culture or religion and the “attachment to [these] distinctions”. Instead, he focused on all people’s actions (karma), and asked people to reflect on how they lived their lives.

The Bodhisattva Never Disparaging chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* introduces a Bodhisattva named Never Disparaging. He is said to be an earlier incarnation of the Buddha before he reached enlightenment. His bodhisattva practice included saying a mantra of respect and bowing to all those he encountered, saying, “I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance.”²³ Of the myriad of people of different backgrounds he encountered, he continued his practice of showing respect for them, even if his greeting was returned by insults or violence. The reason for this was because he truly respected the sublime “Buddha nature” within each individual, and had the conviction that one day they will fully manifest their Buddhahood.

Buddha nature refers to the wellspring of innate goodness within each of us—our non-violent, compassionate, courageous, hopeful and wise character—the basis for universal life itself. No matter what biological or sociological difference one has compared to others, all people are equally endowed with this spirit of goodness. Although there may be differences in the manner in which individuals manifest this nature, the realization of this state of life will bring out the best parts of each person’s character and talents, and will enrich one’s character in all respects.

All people are unique individuals, different from everyone else, and invaluable. It is because we are all different that we can learn from each

other, that we can enrich each other. The key is to discover the spirit of goodness within each individual no matter how different they may seem on the surface, and then to learn from each other about those points that make us unique and to respect those differences.

Whenever Bodhisattva Never Disparaging encountered someone who was ruled by animosity or prejudice, and their violent nature appeared at the forefront of their character, he still respected them as they were, since he perceived their innate Buddha nature and believed that their spirit of goodness will someday reveal itself. The wisdom of dependent origination in Buddhism allows for accepting and respecting the unique character of others just as they are, even if they are antagonistic, so that the causes for their inner spirit of goodness to reveal itself can be created.

Furthermore, not only on an individual level, but for all tribes, ethnic groups, nationalities, cultures and religions, the unique qualities that make up each group can be recognized and respected by the same principle. For example, let us say there was a group of people acting with animosity and violence, but underneath the negative expressions that have surfaced, lie a vast potential for goodness which is highly and beautifully unique. A mutual spirit of respect inspires the manifestation of a higher potential in each of us.

The third point is that humankind and all living things exist as a result of the vast network of dependent origination throughout the universe.

In terms of time, our existence here and now is a result of some 15 billion years of physical, chemical and biological evolution, as well as 5 million years of evolution of our species. In terms of space, we exist on the Earth which spins around a massive universe, and on this Earth, we live inside the delicate region that supports life, and our lives are also supported by the billions of other human beings on this planet. The workings of the greater cosmos are conveyed in the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, using plants and trees as a metaphor.

“Kashyapa, it is like the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and the medicinal herbs, widely ranging in variety, each with its own name and hue, that grow in the hills and streams, the valleys and different soils of the thousand-millionfold world. Dense clouds spread over them, covering the entire thousand-millionfold world and in one moment saturating it all ... The rain falling from one blanket of cloud, accords with each particular species and nature, 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.”²⁴

There are countless types of plants on this planet, each with unique characteristics. The rain falls, and plants obtain nutrients from the earth, and grow. They receive the blessings of the sky and earth, and prosper.

Nichiren Daishonin calls this principle within the *Lotus Sutra*, the principle of “cherry, plum, peach and damson blossoms”.²⁵ Receiving the compassionate blessings of the greater cosmos, cherry blossoms express their unique “cherry-blossomness”, whereas the plum blossoms and other plants express their own unique characteristics, each with its own beauty.

Nichiren also calls this metaphor of the plants, “manifesting its true nature”.²⁶ The metaphor of plants can be applied to individuals as well as any social group of varied and unique natures. All phenomena exist supported by the compassion of the universe, and is an integral node on the network of dependent origination, playing its part in a grand harmonic symphony.

By viewing our existence from the perspective of the long evolutionary process of the cosmos and the incredible history behind this particular moment in time, and coming to the realization that everything around us supports our existence, it is difficult not to feel appreciation for our precious existence. From this starting point, we can begin to take action to show our appreciation toward others, and their support for us. In Buddhism, one of the most representative concepts of appreciation is the “four debts of gratitude”²⁷ found in the *Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra*, and among the four is the debt of gratitude owed to all living things. It is appreciation toward all those that support our existence. Specifically, the way that we show our appreciation toward the blessings of the greater universe is to work for the sake of others as a natural response for acknowledging our debt of gratitude in the framework of dependent origination.

Fourth, the mutual respect, appreciation, and gratitude inherent within us, nurtured by the wisdom of dependent origination also find expression as non-violence and compassion toward others. Compassion is the sharing of suffering of others, and working toward happiness together, and that working of compassion is linked to a non-violent lifestyle.

Passages in the Looking-kindness chapter of the *Sutta Nipāta* read,

“Whichever are seen or unseen, whichever live far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded.”²⁸

“And loving-kindness towards all the world. One should cultivate an unbounded mind, above and below and across, without obstruction, without enmity, without rivalry.”²⁹

Here, compassion can be seen from the viewpoint of time and space of dependent origination. In terms of space, the mind of limitless mercy allows one to extend a helpful hand to those that are beyond one's immediate surroundings, and to encompass the entire world. In terms of time, having a grasp of dependent origination allows one to perceive chain-linked causes from the infinite past, while simultaneously envisioning the happiness of future generations. In this way, the mind of compassion creates a platform for the creation of an intra-generational as well as an inter-generational ethics.

The central axis of Buddhist ethics is the prohibition of killing, that is, the practicing of non-violence.

Passages from The Self chapter of the *Dhammapada*, read,

“All tremble at the rod, all are fearful of death. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill.”³⁰

“All tremble at the rod, all hold their life dear. Drawing the parallel to yourself, neither kill nor get others to kill.”³¹

All people fear death, and regard their lives as precious. If one can put oneself in another's place, and know that they too feel the same fear and preciousness of life, it becomes impossible to cause them suffering or inflict violence upon them. Instead, a compassionate heart is nurtured, suffering is shared and a cooperative spirit to seek happiness together blossoms. Not only this, but an expectation for others to become non-violent and to not kill develops as well, and we insist they do the same.

This is the mechanism for which mutual goodwill naturally develops into a network and expands its circle of influence, and the creation of such network is the highest practical application of the law of dependent origination.

Fifth, the wisdom of dependent origination and the acts of compassion become the Bodhisattva Way, not only bringing a dramatic transformation in oneself, becoming self-actualized and capable, but also become an impetus for others to transform as well. The self-actualized self and other mutually inter-relate in symbiosis and work together to create a new history of “cooperative creation”.

Through the Bodhisattva Way, the self transforms into a “greater self” by becoming at one with the law of the universe, and seeks to find enlightenment within this lifetime. Additionally, when others also challenge to change themselves, the network of good expands, eventually creating a new society which creatively transforms the human world and natural world. The mutual influencing of improvement of oneself and others provides the energy for the creation of a new era for humanity.

In Nichiren's thoughts on the interaction of the self and others, he

states,

“The ten directions are the ‘environment’ and living beings are ‘life.’ To illustrate, environment is like the shadow, and life, the body. Without the body, no shadow can exist, and without life, no environment. In the same way, life is shaped by its environment.”³²

This passage refers to Miao-lo’s theory of “the oneness of life and its environment”.³³ “Life” is the living being, and “environment” is the realm of the environment. In contemporary terms, life is humanity and environment is all that surrounds us. The realm of the environment is comprised of three components: the realm of society, the realm of culture, and the realm of the natural environment, which includes natural ecosystems. Also, life and the environment mutually influence each other, support each other, and operate within the framework of dependent origination. Furthermore, the foundation for both lies in the universal life itself, thereby making this relationship between the two, non-dualistic in nature.

Let me further clarify the relationship of life and its environment. In the statement above, “without life, no environment” means that observing from the viewpoint of life, there is no environment without life. Just as a shadow will disappear when the body disappears, life is a necessary given in order for the environment to take shape. Each unique life is endowed with a unique environment, and this environment, as a reflection of life offers a feedback response. This is what is meant by the phrase, “In the same way, life is shaped by its environment.” Alternately exerting and receiving influence, life and environment continually undergo change, and this is the process by which a new history of human and natural society can be established.

The significance of viewing life as the body and the environment as shadow in this case is to focus the need for change first on the human side, and by doing so, the environment will reflect a change. In Buddhism, through the Bodhisattva Way, that is, through the wisdom of dependent origination and acts of compassion, it is our hope to change each individual for the better, so that we may affect a positive change in the environment.

Again, replacing the individual with family, tribe, ethnic group, nationality and humanity, we hope to see an expansion of the circle of good influence at each and every level. Then it will be possible for life and the environment to receive the blessings of the universe within the rhythm of a grand symbiotic harmony.

Our current society is facing the question of whether we will be able to open a new era in our history where we, the entirety of humanity, can

create a harmonic symbiosis with Earth's nature. When we are able to realize such a state, we can call this "cooperative creation".

Being able to propose this model of symbiosis as "cooperative creation" based in dependent origination and acts of compassion is Buddhism's contribution to the current debate. The "fully symbiotic society" which will appear through the new process of creating history, will be welcomed by Buddhists as the ideal "Buddha land".

III. Toward the Realization of a Symbiotic Society— The Message within "*On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*"

In the Expedient Means chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, there is a passage that states the Buddha will appear in an age when the five impurities abound,

"Shariputra, the Buddhas appear in evil worlds of five impurities. These are the so-called impurity of the age, impurity of desire, impurity of living beings, impurity of view, and impurity of life span."³⁴

T'ien-t'ai, in the fourth volume of his work, *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, explains the mechanism by which the five impurities appear,

"Impurity of desire and thought are at the base. These two impurities lead to the impurity of living beings, which then leads to the impurity of life span. With the passing of time, these four impurities give rise to the impurity of the age."³⁵

At the center of the five impurities, are the impurities of desire and thought, which lie in the hearts of people. The impurity of desire and thought make the hearts and minds of people impure. Due to impure thoughts such as Shakyamuni's "arrow of earthly desires" in the *Sutta Nipāta*, fundamental darkness, and "attachment to distinctions" mentioned earlier, the life of human beings becomes defiled and this leads to the impurity of living beings. When the body and mind of people become impure due to earthly desires, balance is lost, and the mind and body lose synchronicity. As a result, the life energy of the individual decreases, making the continuity of life shorter, thereby leading to an impurity of life span.

If "living things" is expanded to mean not only an individual life, but family, tribe, ethnic group, nation, or humanity as a whole, each level and when the culture supported by each level succumb to earthly desires or incorrect thoughts, fragmentation and confusion will abound, sap its life force and lead its members down the path of destruction. Further, if

the desires and incorrect thoughts from one individual influences the consciousness of the group or natural environment, the entire age created by that collective will be full of chaos and fragmentation. This is what is called the impurity of the age.

In Buddhism, it is said that the Buddha will appear to save living beings when the age becomes impure, full of chaos, fragmentation, and earthly desires. The Life Span of the Thus Come One chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* introduces a Buddha of time without beginning, i.e. the Buddha which appeared from the fundamental law (Dharma) of the universe, who appears in the *saha* world defiled by the five impurities to preach the way to living beings and save them from suffering,

“Ever since then I have been constantly in this *saha* world, preaching the Law, teaching and converting.”³⁶

By doing so, the *saha* world filled with earthly desires and suffering itself is transformed into the undefiled Buddha land, or Land of Tranquil Light.

Nichiren, aiming to establish what is mentioned in the *Lotus Sutra* as the “*saha* world equals the Land of Tranquil Light” and “This Land equals the Buddha Land”, sought to eliminate earthly desires and suffering, save living beings, and change the world for the better. This attempt was the first time since Shakyamuni to practice wisdom and compassion in contemporary society for the purpose of creating a Buddha land.

The Japan in which Nichiren was born was full of the five impurities, just as the sutras stated. Nichiren’s treatise, “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” is written from the perspective of the common people who were suffering from severe fluctuations in climate, rampant epidemics, and starvation.

“Once there was a traveler who spoke these words in sorrow to his host: In recent years, there have been unusual disturbances in the heavens, strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence, all affecting every corner of the empire and spreading throughout the land. Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets, and the bones of the stricken crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and there is hardly a single person who does not grieve... The host then spoke: I have been brooding alone upon this matter, indignant in my heart.”³⁷

This period of time in Japan was wrought with devastating earthquakes, strong winds, floods, large scale famine and pestilence one after another. The lament of the host in the treatise, when he says these events lay “indignant in my heart”, is an expression of Nichiren’s empathy for the people of Japan.

Nichiren's compassion moved him to search the sutras for the root cause of the people's unhappiness. After contemplating various Buddhist doctrines, he arrived at the answer, which was the misalignment of people's minds as it was ruled by fundamental darkness and earthly desires. He warned that unless this basic thinking was quickly corrected, the calamity of war which had not yet occurred, would soon take place, saying,

"When a nation becomes disordered, it is the spirits that first show signs of rampancy. Because the spirits become rampant, all the people of the nation become disordered. Now if we examine the present situation carefully in the light of this passage, we will see that the various spirits have for some time been rampant, and many of the people have perished. If the first predicted misfortune in the sutra has already occurred, as is obvious, then how can we doubt that the later disasters will follow?"³⁸

The "rampant spirits" he mentions here represent distorted ideologies, and to again borrow from the concept of the five impurities, indicate impurity of desires and fundamental darkness, the most basic of the impurities that lie in the life of living beings. These impurities function to obscure the highly respectable Buddha nature contained within all people, and prevents the spirit of goodness such as compassion and wisdom from manifesting. The impurities of desires and thoughts lead to the impurity of living beings and life span, and then the age itself becomes impure.

When the five impurities take stronger hold, the "three calamities and seven disasters"³⁹ listed in sutras such as the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, *Medicine Master Sutra*, and *Great Collection Sutra* appear. Natural disasters and epidemics which were listed had already taken place, but the two disasters of "internal strife" and "foreign invasion", which are caused by unrest of the people, had not yet occurred. Nichiren pointed out the root cause for these calamities and disasters was unchecked earthly desires that suppressed the spirit of goodness and obscured people's Buddha nature.

Nichiren also points to the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness as the source of the three calamities.

"In a country where the three poisons [of greed, anger, and foolishness] prevail to such a degree, how can there be peace and stability? ...Famine occurs as a result of greed, pestilence as a result of foolishness, and warfare as a result anger."⁴⁰

Greed is an ever expanding desire for more. Famine occurs as a result of the inability to control the base impulse of fulfilling one's selfish

desires, even to the extent of forcibly taking from others. Foolishness is another name for fundamental darkness. Fundamental darkness is an earthly desire that is in opposition to the fundamental rhythm of the universe, obstructs revelation of the Buddha nature that exists within people, and steers people away from the law of dependent origination. It is fundamental darkness that usurps one's life-force, creates an imbalance of body and mind, and weakens the body's natural defenses against diseases. This is the source of widespread pestilence and the onset of other diseases. Finally, anger is the base impulse of aggression that lies within our lives. Animosity toward others triggers this aggression which quickly escalates into conflict and war. The impurities of desires and thoughts are at the root of the three calamities.

In his treatise, Nichiren calls out for immediate attention to be turned to the philosophy of Buddhism to transform the times, which were ridden with the five impurities, and the three calamities and seven disasters ran rampant. He urged that fundamental darkness and earthly desires need to be overcome, and what needed to be manifest was people's most respectable Buddha nature, which is the great life of the cosmos at one with the fundamental law of the universe contained deep within each individual life. Nichiren chose the *Lotus Sutra* as the teaching which contained the law of the universe—the cure for the ills of society. The treatise reads,

“You must quickly reform the tenets that you hold in your heart and embrace the one true vehicle, the single good doctrine [of the *Lotus Sutra*]. If you do so, then the threefold world will become the Buddha land, and how could a Buddha land ever decline? The regions in the ten directions will all become treasure realms, and how could a treasure realm ever suffer harm? If you live in a country that knows no decline or diminution, in a land that suffers no harm or disruption, then your body will find peace and security, and your mind will be calm and untroubled. You must believe my word; heed what I say!”⁴¹

He says here that the law that should be held in high regard is “the one true vehicle, the single good doctrine”. The “true vehicle” means the teaching that carries the message of the fundamental law of the universe, and Nichiren regarded the *Lotus Sutra* as this teaching. The “single good doctrine” refers to the fundamental good within the fundamental law of the universe. The *Lotus Sutra* teaches that it is possible for all people to become Buddhas, and have the life condition of being at one with the fundamental law of the universe.

Ikeda interprets the above passage based on the principle of “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land” in the fol-

lowing way,

“The essence of ‘establishing the correct teaching’ lies in believing in the fundamental good that is the *Lotus Sutra* and in each individual establishing peace in their hearts. Only when a society that functions in accord with the fundamental good is firmly secured will a truly peaceful society be actualised. This does not mean, however, that every person in a given society must be united by faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. What matters is that the spirit of the great philosophy of peace expounded in the *Lotus Sutra*, with its teaching that all people are Buddhas, be given full play in society as a whole. On a societal level, ‘establishing the correct teaching’ means establishing the concepts of human dignity and the sanctity of life as principles that support and move society.”⁷⁴²

As stated above, on an individual level, “establishing the correct teaching” means establishing a state of life that can overcome fundamental darkness and earthly desires, and indicates creating peace in one’s heart. Furthermore, when the spirit of protecting human dignity and the sanctity of life found in the *Lotus Sutra* spreads in society, and becomes a living principle in people’s actions, the “peace of the land” becomes a reality.

More specifically, in regards to the concept of “land”, the goal is to create a society in which the “common people”⁷⁴³ are the first priority, and are able to enjoy a life of happiness. Therefore, the word “land” is not limited to a single society or nation, but can mean any ethnic group, any nation, or even the whole of humanity, inclusive of many levels of interpretation. Not only that, since society is strongly linked with the environment it is in, when this ideal society is established, both components will work to create a peaceful land, which could also be considered both a Buddha land and treasure realm.

Then, in specific terms, what is meant by a society that highly values human dignity and the sanctity of life? One form of this could be the symbiotic society that was discussed earlier. In other words, a society in which the aforementioned five characteristics of a symbiotic society are working on all levels of community.

Respect for human dignity means mutual and equal respect for all members of society, just as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging practiced. Respecting the sanctity of life means recognizing that all people are innately endowed with a Buddha nature, which is at one with the fundamental law of the universe, and that Buddha nature not only exists within human beings, but all living things. Because all living things possess a Buddha nature that is at one with the fundamental law of the universe, all living things are worthy of respect.

When the principles of the wisdom of dependent origination and acts of compassion take physical form, the five characteristics of a symbiotic society will come alive at various levels of society. To summarize, 1) to be self-aware of the principle of equality for all life, 2) to have respect for diversity and individuality, 3) to have appreciation towards universal life, and 4) to practice non-violence and compassion. In regards to 5) to self-actualize one's full potential so that one may live as a "greater self", it should be noted that the road to self-actualization is not realized alone, but continually in an environment of oneself (life) and others (environment), mutually influencing each other in a positive manner to transform society overall to become creative. To achieve this end, Nichiren states,

"If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?"⁴⁴

When this kind of society is realized, an individual's self-actualization becomes one with the creative transformation of society. That is to say, "the individual" and "the entirety" are in a relationship of "cooperative creation". The creative transformation of society requires the individual and the whole to mutually influence each other. From another perspective, it can be said that it is one's mission to take part in transforming society in order to achieve one's own personal transformation.

The Buddha land and the Land of Tranquil Light proposed in Nichiren's treatise, "Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land" is a model for a symbiotic society where creative cooperation and symbiosis dynamically pulsate as living principles. The Buddha land is a society in which an individual fully manifests the fundamental life of the universe while in symbiosis with various levels of community, and dynamic history is created based on wisdom and compassion.

The Soka Gakkai and SGI have been aiming from the last century to the present, to actualize on a global scale, the ideal Buddha land that Shakyamuni and Nichiren envisioned for humanity.

Notes

¹ *Sutta Nipāta*, 935, *THE GROUP OF DISCOURSES (SUTTA-NIPĀTA)*, vol.2, trans. by K.R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p.107.

² *Sutta Nipāta*, 936, *Ibid.*, p.107.

³ *Sutta Nipāta*, 937, *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁴ *Sutta Nipāta*, The first half of 938, *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁵ *Sutta Nipāta*, The latter half of 938, *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁶ *Sutta Nipāta*, 939, *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁷ Daisaku Ikeda, "Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first-Century Civilization" (Address at Harvard University, Cambridge, Sept. 24, 1993), *A New Humanism: The*

University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1996), pp.154–55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.155.

⁹ Noritoshi Aramaki, *Budda No Kotoba Kara Joudo Shinshu E* [From the Words of the Buddha to the True Pure Land School (Shin Buddhism)] (Tokyo: Jishousha), p.64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.29. Aramaki defines this term by saying, “I created the phrase eternal collective truth to mean the eternal truth that lies at the base of every culture—for example, that truth may be called ‘God’ or ‘Buddha’ or ‘The Way’—and the members of the collective use this truth as a basis when communicating with each other.”

¹¹ *Mahā Parinibbāna Suttanta*, Chapter 2, 26, *DIALOGUES OF THE BUDDHA*, Part 2 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p.108.

¹² *Dhammapada*, 160, *Tipitaka, The Pali Canon*, trans. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.12.than.html>

¹³ *Udānavarga*, Self, 3, William Woodville Rockhill, *A Collection of Verses from the Buddhist Canon* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.98.

¹⁴ *Udānavarga*, Self, 20, *Ibid.*, p.101.

¹⁵ Tatsuo Inoue, *Iwanami Tetsugaku Shisou Jiten* [Iwanami Dictionary of Philosophy and Thought] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006), pp.343–44.

¹⁶ Egaku Mayeda, *Mayeda Egaku Shu* [Collected Works of Professor Dr. Egaku Mayeda], vol. 6 (Tokyo: Sankibou Butsushorin), p.28. In *Bukkyo Ni Okeru Kyousei No Shuchou* [A Buddhist Case for Symbiosis (Special Lecture)], he states, “The word symbiosis actually appears in ancient Indian texts, but Shiiio uses a quote from a Chinese source of the Tang Dynasty which reads, ‘all people wish to live together with many other living beings in a peaceful land,’ so it may be considered a modern word.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.28–9.

¹⁸ Narumi Asai, *Shinran Ni Okeru Kyousei No Shisou—Tokumi Issai Ujō No Sukui ni Tsuite* [Shinran’s Thoughts on Symbiosis—Especially in the Context of Saving All Living Beings]—from *Bukkyo Ni Okeru Kyousei No Shisou* [Buddhist Thoughts on Symbiosis] (ed. Nihon Bukkyo Gakkai, Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 2000), p.130.

¹⁹ Delving into the Essentials of the Flower Garland Sutra, vol.1, in Taisho Tripitaka vol. 35, p.116.

²⁰ *Sutta Nipāta*, 611, *op. cit.*, p.71.

²¹ *Sutta Nipāta*, 650, *op. cit.*, p.73.

²² *Sutta Nipāta*, 653, *op. cit.*, p.73.

²³ *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.266–67. The entire mantra of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was, “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.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.98

²⁵ Nichiren, *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, trans. by Burton Watson (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2004), p.200.

²⁶ 自体顕照 (*jitai kensho*), <http://www.sgi.org/treasuringdiversity.html>

²⁷ Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra, vol.2, in Taisho Tripitaka vol.3, p.297. It states, “One, debts owed to one’s parents. Two, debts owed to all living beings. Three, debts owed to one’s sovereign. Four, debts owed to the three treasures of Buddhism.”

²⁸ *Sutta Nipāta*, 147, *op. cit.*, p.17.

²⁹ *Sutta Nipāta*, 150, *op. cit.*, p.17.

³⁰ *Dhammapada*, 129, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Dhammapada*, 130, *op. cit.*

³² Nichiren, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), p.644.

³³ The Annotations on “The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra”, in Taisho Tripitaka vol. 33, p.919. In talking about the “ten onenesses”, the sixth is “oneness of life and its environment.” The passage reads, “Six, the oneness of life and its environment is exemplified by the oneness of Vairocana-Buddha and the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light, and this oneness arises from the beginningless principle of three thousands realms in a single life-moment. Two of these three realms—the realm of the five components and the realm of living beings—represent ‘life,’ and, naturally, the realm of the environment represents ‘environment’ in terms of the principle of oneness of life and its environment. These three realms exist in a single moment of life and are inseparable from one another. Therefore, a living being and its environment are non-dual in their ultimate reality.”

³⁴ *The Lotus Sutra*, *op. cit.*, p.32.

³⁵ The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra, vol.4., in Taisho Tripitaka vol.34, p.53.

³⁶ *The Lotus Sutra*, *op. cit.*, p.225.

³⁷ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, *op. cit.*, pp.6–7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.24.

³⁹ Three calamities and seven disasters. According to the *Abhidharma-kośa* vol.12, in Taisho Tripitaka vol.29, p.65. The three lesser calamities are listed as warfare, pestilence, and famine. The seven disasters differ according to the sutra. In the *Benevolent Kings Sutra*, in Taisho Tripitaka vol.8, p.832, they are 1) extraordinary changes of the sun and moon, 2) extraordinary changes of the stars and planets, 3) fires, 4) unseasonable floods, 5) storms, 6) drought, and 7) war. In the *Medicine Master Sutra*, in Taisho Tripitaka vol.14, p.407, they are 1) pestilence, 2) foreign invasion, 3) internal strife, 4) extraordinary changes in the heavens, 5) solar and lunar eclipses, 6) unseasonable storms, and 7) drought. In volume 3 of the *Golden Light Sutra*, in Taisho Tripitaka vol. 16, p.347, they are 1) extraordinary changes in the stars and planets, 2) pestilence, 3) violent wind and rain, 4) disbandment of groups, 5) invasion by evil doers, 6) famine, and 7) internal strife.

⁴⁰ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, *op. cit.*, p.989.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁴² Daisaku Ikeda, et. al, *The World of Nichiren Daishonin's Writings* (Kuala Lumpur: SGI-Malaysia, 2003), p.75

⁴³ The Chinese character Nichiren uses to mean “nation” is highly significant in the treatise, “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land.” Within the text, there are three versions of this character. The first is the traditional character 國, in which the radical in the center of the character indicates 王, or king, therefore implying nation means the area governed by a king. The second is 國, in which the radical in the center is 戈, or dagger-axe, therefore implying nation means an area protected by this weapon. The third is 國, in which the radical in the center is 民, or the people, therefore implying nation means the area where the common people live. In the treatise, the third character is used roughly eighty percent of the time.

⁴⁴ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.