

The *Lotus Sutra*: Ideas and Values

This is the translation of Opening Lecture for the Exhibition “Lotus Sutra—A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence” in Madrid, Spain on February 17, 2012

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THE lotus flower, paradigm of the strange beauty that grows, immaculate, deep in the mud, gives its name to the king of the sacred texts of Buddhism. The *Lotus Sutra* is the popular name for the religious text which in Sanskrit is entitled *Saddharma-pundarika sutra* and whose literal translation would be “Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law.” It is the most commented writing on Buddhism, its influence having proven to be long-lasting in the cultures of the Far East, and over the centuries it has been the subject of profound veneration for Buddhists in China, Korea, Japan and other parts of East Asia, as it still is today.

Like a Movie on the Screen of Universe

The *Lotus Sutra* is a film of colossal proportions and multiple dimensions. To see it you don’t need those special glasses they give you at the cinema door, only a sincere heart.

The events described in the *Lotus Sutra* take place in a universe of cosmic proportions with incalculable time frames; a universe that in many ways is a reflection of ancient cosmogonic ideas from India.

The ten levels or paths of existence described correspond to the Buddhist concept of the ten states or categories of beings, also called “ten worlds” or “ten realms”. It is important to distinguish each separately as there are constant references to the inhabitants of all of them, continually marching in jubilant corteges across the different levels of existence on the giant screen on which our eyes follow the development of the sutra.

Our world may be three dimensional, in terms of space—or perhaps even four-dimensional—but the spiritual apotheosis of the *Lotus Sutra* is a film of multiple dimensions, all colossal, which is projected on the screen of the entire universe.

This evening I invite you all to open your eyes wide before the giant screen on which this huge film will unfold: a film, however, in which you who have the gift of faith, are actors, active characters. What insolent audacity on my part! I who am not a believer, dare to speak to you of this film. I have to watch it dubbed—or at least with subtitles. But you are the actors in it. I apologise for being so daring.

What are its contents? To explain them in my poor language will be the aim of my talk.

History and Structure of the Sutra

Characterized by its universal message and the beauty of its images, the *Lotus Sutra* comes at the end of a complex story of Buddhism, so therefore several different past trends come together in it. Although primitively written in a language of northern India, this Sutra was actually put to paper around the first or second century BC in Sanskrit, a language that enhanced its prestige and the dissemination of the work. We have proof that the work existed in written form in the year 255 AD, the date of the Chinese version. It seems there was a total of six translations into that language, of which three have been lost. Of the three preserved, the version produced in 406 AD by the monk Kumarajiva was the one which enjoyed greatest popularity in China and which spread successfully through the countries under Chinese cultural influence. This version, unanimously acclaimed as the most successful in terms of both style and content, serves as a base for the text that will soon be available to the Spanish-speaking public.

Kumarajiva worked on his Chinese translation with the help of several disciples with whom he exchanged ideas. This teamwork produced comments on the sutra which were classified and characterized. The *Miao fa lien huan ching su* (“Commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*”), written by one of those disciples, Tao Sheng, is the oldest compilation of those commentaries. In it, there is a division made between Chapter 14 (“Peaceful Practices”) and 15 (“Emerging from the Earth”), separating the sutra into two halves: the half on the cause and the half on the effect. This division has been the traditional one. The patriarch of the Tendai, T’ien T’ai or Zhiyi school respected this and defined the first half as “the realm of the remains” or theoretical teaching, and the second as “the realm of the source” or the essential teaching.

Apart from this fundamental subject division and bearing in mind the process of adaptation which the sutras underwent over time, the studies on the specific teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* reveal that the text’s poetic

material—what is called “hymns and praise”—was put down in writing around the year 100 BC, while the parts in prose are of a later date, perhaps around 40–50 AD. Almost all the chapters consist of a combination of parts in prose and verse. The latter were used as a way of passing it on which was easier to memorise. It is believed that the passages in verse or *gathas* must have been composed earlier.

At a later date passages in prose or poetry which paraphrased or commented on the poetry sections were added. In the current text, the sections in verse usually repeat preceding passages in prose. It is also thought that the original body of this text was added to on several occasions which, all together, are referred to as “the sutra of the added parts.” Some scholars share the view that even after these additions the Sanskrit text underwent seven adaptations, however the basis of the free text of these additions became permanent around the year 200 AD. The result is a product which, despite everything, produces a harmonious impression.

Incalculable Bodhisattvas in the Life of Shakyamuni

The events described in the *Lotus Sutra* take place in a universe of cosmic proportions. For a start, it was believed that the world we live in was made up of four continents around a great mountain, Mount Sumeru. South of this elevation, located in the centre, like a heavenly Jerusalem, was Jambudvipa, that is, the mainland (*dvipa*) where trees (*jambu*) abounded, whose form was that of an inverted equilateral triangle and its surface washed by four large rivers, one of which was the Ganges, so, the north of this world was wide and it narrowed down in the centre to end in a point at the south end, a shape that resembles the current geographical outline of India.

On this continent there were sixteen large kingdoms, five hundred average-sized ones and a hundred thousand small ones. Happiness in these lands was not common as the people who lived there had bad karma, the reason for which—it was thought—Buddha appeared on this continent solely to enlighten his people. Beyond this world of ours of four continents, there were others in infinite number, scattered in all directions, each one of which consisted of four different continents presided over by different buddhas. Like ours, all these worlds were trapped in a never-ending cycle of formation, development, decline and disintegration, a four-phase process that stretched over astronomically long eras.

Like almost all the sutras, this one begins with the words “This is

what I heard,” words traditionally attributed to Ananda, present in many of Buddha’s sermons. Ananda then describes the moment when, on the mountains or peak of the Eagle, Shakyamuni preached the *Lotus Sutra*. In these opening lines, we are still in the world of historical reality, on the outskirts of that Indian city in the state of Magadha, where Gautama or Shakyamuni probably expounded their teachings in the fifth century BC. But immediately afterwards, Ananda mentions the incalculable variety of celestial beings, human and nonhuman, who gather to hear the words of Buddha. Then we realise we have left behind the world of everyday reality and have entered another world just as real, but extraordinary.

This may be the first point that the modern reader, imbued with the modern myths of reason, logic and history as “faithful” representations of reality, should keep in mind when opening this book. The scene of Buddha preaching and the bodhisattvas belongs to a universe that totally transcends our ordinary concepts of time, space, logic and reason, and of course history. Again and again we read of beings or worlds as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges, of events which took place countless *kalpas* ago. A short *kalpa*, often described simply as “kalpa”, lasted sixteen million years.

These astronomical amounts or “numbers” are really only pseudo numbers stated with the intention of imprinting on the reader—the listener, when Buddha preached—the awareness of the impossibility of calculating the incalculable. Taking these numbers at face value would be as childish as considering them to be pure metaphor. They are simply real—but in the context of the sublime reality-unreality of this writing. The *Lotus Sutra* is neither a fairy tale nor a novel of science fiction. The second president of the lay Buddhist organisation Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, talked with clever irony on the subject of the mismatch between “our numbers” and the sutra numbers as follows:

There were eighty thousand bodhisattvas and twelve thousand disciples listening to the voice! How is it possible that, in an era when there were no microphones, Shakyamuni had assembled together a number of such proportions and had talked to everyone? The *Lotus Sutra* tells us that, really, everyone was there and they all heard him preach. That is, there was a huge number of spectators, hundreds of thousands of people assembled there, listening to Shakyamuni explaining the Law. Was it really a lie? No, not at all. Did so many people really get together? How could a buddha lecture to such a massive group of people without a microphone? No matter how loudly he could have spoken ... The *Lotus*

Sutra says that the conclave lasted eight years. Providing food for so many people for eight years must have been a daunting task. How on earth could they have organised toilets for so many people? But, then, is the sutra lying? No, it's not lying. They were gathered together and not gathered together...

Those who congregated there were the ones listening to the voice, and the bodhisattvas who lived in the life of Shakyamuni himself. So there could be nothing that got in the way of even tens of millions of bodhisattvas and disciples who were listening to the voice all getting together.¹

Neither is this sutra a fantastic story, nor in its pages do we intend to provide statistical data; we simply seek to overwhelm the mind, break the bonds of reason, and free the intellect from conventional concepts of time and space. Indeed, in the realm of the vacuum, time and space—as we conceive them and regulate our daily lives—are devoid of any relevance. The reader, without the heavy baggage of conceptual servitude, in joyous freedom, will thus receive a doctrine which can then reach out to the depths of his being.

However the cosmos of the *Lotus Sutra* is not uninhabited. According to the cosmogonic conception that illuminates its pages, the living beings of this world, Jambudvīpa, is inhabited by living things. It is all of us and in it we occupy six categories or realm. Rather, we go along six paths of existence, ranked in hierarchical order as the path or kingdom of hell; that of the starving bodies; the animals; the demons; the human beings; and the heavenly beings.

Only Vehicle of True Enlightenment

After several breathtaking events that remind us of the truly cosmic scale of the film we're watching, Buddha began his preaching. The first point that stands out in this is that there is only one vehicle of salvation: the path to buddhahood. At an earlier stage Buddha had taught three ways or vehicles: the one for those who hear the voice (*shravada*); the one for those who attain enlightenment for themselves alone (*pratyeka-buddha*); and that of the bodhisattvas. But now, the believer must leave these minor roads aside and aspire, simply and solely, to buddhahood, the only vehicle of true enlightenment or, expressed in terms of the *Lotus Sutra*, the **supreme, perfect enlightenment**. When asked the reason for the old teaching of the three vehicles, the Buddha replied that

believers were not ready to understand this sublime truth. It was therefore necessary to resort to so-called *expedient means* to lead them gradually to the path of greater understanding.

In certain Mahayana texts, some direct disciples of Buddha, such as Shariputra, who represented the “lesser vehicle” appeared ridiculed. In the *Lotus Sutra*, however, a text steeped in compassionate love for them all, these same disciples respond with understanding and gratitude to the Buddha’s words. This, in return, grants them the prophecy of attainment of buddhahood in future existences, even to reveal the type of Buddhist country they were to preside over. The doctrine is sublime and only the bodhisattvas fully capture it; but this is not an elitist education: it is for everyone.

Therefore, the Buddha avails himself of a variety of resources for salvation (“expedient” or “skilful means”), as illustrated by the series of parables, such as the famous one of the burning house (Chap. 3); the father of the prodigal son (Chap. 4)—which recalls the Christian parable of the Prodigal Son; the one about the rain that falls on all kinds of plants (Chap. 5)—the same rain bathes all plants equally but each one receives it according to its capacity; and the one about the spell of an enchanted city (Chap. 7)—that encourages walkers to continue on their way. Chap. 8 narrates one of the richest parables in content, about the hidden gem: a beggar, despite living on alms, for years has carried a gem of great value, sewn into the lining of his clothes. This simple parable illustrates more truths than many treatises on happiness. Where do we find the rule for being happy? Is it not inside us, within each person?

The idea of the whole universe unified by a Wonderful Law as the sole vehicle of salvation, as set forth in the *Lotus Sutra*, deserved subsequent developments. Kumarajiva translated this concept as “the real state of all things.” This can also be expressed as “the real state of the universe.” Basing himself on this concept, T’ien T’ai systematized the teaching of the “three thousand realms contained in a single moment of life. The “three thousand realms” indicate the aspects and variable phases that life takes on at every moment and its teaching relates that the state of the microcosm (mind) and the state of the macrocosm (three thousand realms) are interdependent; they are united in their true nature and form a harmonious whole under the Wonderful Law as the only vehicle. On the other hand, the mandala of the Ten States illustrates in diagrammatic form the existences of the different beings which inhabit a universe divided into ten states or worlds, from the world of hell to the world of the buddhas, albeit unified under the Wonderful Law as unique

vehicle.

A modern believer in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Japanese writer, Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1930), beautifully presented the same idea in his *Nomin geijutsu gairon koyo* (“Introduction to the Art of Agriculture”):

First of all,
we are dust, bright and tiny,
and let us spread across the sky ... in all directions.

Universal Accessibility to Buddhahood

The second central idea is the universality of the Buddhist message: buddhahood is within everyone’s reach. In Chapter 12, the Buddha reveals that Davadatta, perpetrator of the most serious crimes, such as endangering the life of Shakyamuni and sowing discord within the Buddhist community, in a previous life had done good deeds, so he would not only be saved but would also become a buddha. This example shows the infinite range of the compassion of Buddhist teaching: in the realm of non-dualism which the sutra preaches, evil and good are not always mutually exclusive opposites. In the same chapter there is further proof of the universal and salvific power of this teaching. The Bodhisattva Manjushri talks of when he preached the *Lotus Sutra* in the palace of the dragon king, at the bottom of the sea. The *Nagas* or dragons, adaptations of Hindu mythology, were a species of nonhuman beings responsible for protecting Buddhism. When Manjushri was asked if there was anyone among his listeners who had attained enlightenment, he said there was. There was indeed someone: a girl of scarcely eight years old. The response amazed the assembly, as everyone knew that it took Shakyamuni himself kalpas of religious practice to attain enlightenment. But then the little girl appeared and, before a stunned assembly, performed acts that proved this to be true.

Early Buddhism claimed that women could never aspire to Buddhahood, simply due to the fact of being women and therefore subject to the Five Hindrances. But the *Lotus Sutra* decisively demolishes this claim. The little girl was not even a human being: she was a dragon of the female sex and barely eight years old. And yet, just listening for a moment to the bodhisattva speaking, she had reached the highest level in the scale of spiritual progression. Once again this sutra reveals that its revolutionary doctrine operates in a realm that transcends all contemptible distinctions of gender (male or female); age (child or adult); species (human or nonhuman); time (a moment or kalpa). These

startling revelations concerning the universal accessibility to buddhahood, which takes up the middle chapters of the Sutra, are the second most important idea in the work.

Eternal Life of Buddha

The second half of the *Lotus Sutra* covers the third, equally fundamental idea: the eternal life of Buddha. As stated in Chapter 16, entitled “The lifespan/The Longevity of the Thus Come One,” Shakyamuni has been a Buddha since an eternal past when he reached buddhahood. It also states that Shakyamuni, the historical buddha who lived in India and died at eighty years old, was the physical manifestation of the eternal Shakyamuni living in our world. Three explanations can be offered to explain the eternity of Buddha. According to the first of these, it was necessary to unify these different buddhas.

The history of the veneration of Buddha indicates that the followers of Shakyamuni not only worshipped his relics but also longed for his presence after he left this world. They wasted no time in seeking other buddhas as substitutes of Shakyamuni. The *Lotus Sutra* attempted to unify the different buddhas that appeared and presenting them as emanations of an eternal Shakyamuni succeeded in unifying all of them. Secondly, the eternal existence is seen as the inherent quality of a unifying truth. Therefore, the Wonderful Law as a unique vehicle—the unifying truth of the universe—is not only a natural law but also an eternal reality, personal and vital, that permeates all living things, all life.

Third, the pace of eternal existence is perceived through the activity of practice in the real world. The historical Shakyamuni takes time to explain this. Thus, chapter 16 states that the eternal Buddha endlessly performs the practices of the bodhisattvas.

Countering these reasons, it could be argued that the Buddha sometimes seems to extinguish himself in Nirvana, sometimes reappearing in the world. But all this he does in order that human beings do not give up seeking enlightenment due to the fact of always being accustomed to his presence. His physical passing away is nothing more than another “expedient means” at human endeavour, one of so many beneficial resources with which he aims for his teaching to adapt to the many different abilities and natures of individuals. We know that, in the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha, who had previously been considered a historical character, is now conceived as a being that transcends the threshold of time and space, an eternal principle of truth and compassion existing

everywhere and in all beings.

Truth, Life and Practice

Based on traditional analysis and an understanding of the historical evolution of the text, the main content of the *Lotus Sutra* can be condensed into three elements: the law or doctrine (dharma), the perfect being (buddha), and men (bodhisattvas) or, even more succinctly, truth, life, and practice. In other words, the unifying truth of the universe (the Wonderful Law as the only path), eternal life (eternal Sakyamuni), and the human activities of the real world (the practices of Bodhisattvas) are the three major themes of the sutra. They correspond, respectively, to the first realm or world (the remains); the second realm (of origin) and the third realm (of practice).

This last emphasizes the need to exercise the true doctrine and endure the hardships of life. For example, in a time of remarkable political and ideological turbulence, such as the thirteenth century in Japan, a monk of humble origin named Nichiren was the first to recognise the importance of this third kingdom and raise the *Lotus Sutra* as the banner of struggle for justice; the flag of good versus evil. The tribulations suffered by this man—incessant persecution and exiles in Izu at aged forty, and the island of Sado at fifty, were the spark that made him comprehend the third realm, which led him to compare himself with the bodhisattva martyrs mentioned in the sutra and, ultimately, to recognise the value of this writing.

The trio of ideas discussed above is the heart of the sutra and also of Mahayana Buddhism. It is no exaggeration to add that all three; the doctrinal treasures of Buddhism, were set down in the *Lotus Sutra*, and this is the reason why it has been a text revered and exalted by believers of all schools for the last two thousand years. Its pages present these ideas through an elegant and compelling language, particularly through similes and parables by which the sutra has gained so much presence in literature and the visual arts in Asian cultures.

It would be a mistake to approach the *Lotus Sutra* seeking a methodical and logical exposé of a Western philosophical system. Some of the religious principles considered most important in traditional Buddhism are only touched on in passing, while other ideas, far from being presented in an orderly way in a sequenced argument, appear in a scattered manner and all of a sudden, like flashes of divine revelation.

This is a text which, with its astronomical figures, hyperbolic language full of formulae and its spell-binding effects, aims to appeal

not so much to the intellect as to the emotions. We have already indicated that in the early centuries of Buddhism, the custom was not to write the teachings but rather, once committed to memory, transmit them orally in order that they would be received only by those worthy of them. The formulaic style, the summaries in verse, and the constant repetitions were intended to facilitate memorisation and transmission to others.

The most important idea of the sutra—perhaps the one responsible for its secular veneration—is the repeated assertion that it embodies the truth that underlies the entire universe. It is rare to find a script that lavishes so much praise on itself and with such tireless enthusiasm. This is another surprising aspect of the *Lotus Sutra* and one of its secret values. As its chapters move forward, the self-praise of its merits increase, it being easy to become wrapped up in the magic of the protagonists' discourse and, like them, not realize a surprising fact: the preaching of the sermon promised in the first chapter never takes place. In some passages we are told that the *Lotus Sutra* will be preached; in others that it has already been preached with wonderful results; in others, how it should be preached or the veneration it should be paid. George Tanabe, a scholar of Buddhism, has even said that this is a sutra whose “discourse is never presented: an extensive preface with no book.”²

In summary, the splendid sequence of praise of the *Lotus Sutra* becomes the *Lotus Sutra* itself. This elusive nature is perhaps due to the fact that Mahayana Buddhism has always insisted on the fact that the supreme truth can never be expressed in words, as they create a kind of distinction that violates the unity of the vacuum. All the sutra can do, therefore, is to circumnavigate around the truth, like a butterfly around the lamp, pointing with its turns to the empty centre where the source of blinding light resides. It is a river that flows expansively and leads to an endless sea of meanings; it is a painting with magnificent frames but with the canvas bare, stretched out horizontally before our astonished eyes. Not only is a text subject to different interpretations, as can be most texts, but its core may also be empty or open.

It is like a hollow tree but with splendid leafy branches and fruits whose seeds are put there to germinate in the hearts of men. This sutra honours the nature of the flower of its name: the lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), in fact—as Haruo Suda reminds us—³ it is a plant whose stem and rhizome, unlike the lily, are hollow. Our writing is thus an empty, circular text, pure context, which irresistibly invites us not only to interpret it but also to fill in what is unsaid in its expansive horizontal

development. It is, in short, a writing open to people. More easily than other sacred texts it therefore lends itself to being discussed and interpreted, as indeed it has been, and also to being transformed and impregnated subtly in the hearts and lives of people, like a perfume in the silk of a dress.

“Cosmic Humanism”

On the religious level, that horizontal quality of the *Lotus Sutra*, elusive and, at the same time open, that we have just commented on, teaches us that there are other paths to truth other than words and intellectual discourse. Its pages exhort us to approach the wisdom of the buddhas through faith and religious practice, we are invited to experience these pages with our minds and bodies to become imbued with their meaning. Its profound influence on religious and cultural life in East Asia is due less to its importance as a prayer book than to its function of unifying fragmentary teachings and spiritual beacon of human beings. Perhaps this humanistic value is the most significant for modern society. Therein lies the wisdom of the *Lotus Sutra*; a wisdom one hundred percent focused on man and fully valid today. Daisaku Ikeda, the president of Soka Gakkai International and certainly the most lucid modern champion of the values of the sutra in the international arena, has coined the term of “cosmic humanism” for the *Lotus Sutra*. He argues as follows:

Its pages echo the voices of a chorus of joy at achieving absolute freedom through the Three Existences—past, present and future—a freedom that rises like a flight towards the heavens. In it, the shining light is combined with flowers, greenery, music, pictorial images and vivid accounts. It offers unsurpassed lessons on the psychology and functions of the human heart, life, happiness and peace. It traces, like a map, the basic rules for good health. It makes us aware of the universal truth that a change in our heart and attitude can transform everything. The *Lotus Sutra* is not a scorching desert of individualism or a totalitarian prison. It has the power to manifest a realm of pure mercy, where people complement and encourage each other. Both communism and capitalism today have used people as a means for their own ends. But in the *Lotus Sutra*, king of the sutras, we find a fundamental humanism where people are the purpose and objective; they are the protagonists and sovereigns. Could we not perhaps refer to the teaching of the *Lotus Sutra* as “cosmic humanism”?⁴

Perhaps the chapters that have most influenced the devotional practice of Buddhist believers are the last ones. They describe several bodhisattvas who excel in their zeal to assist the believer. Prominent among them is chapter 20, where the bodhisattva, Never Disparaging appears essential for understanding the teaching on the meaning of forgiveness. And chapter 25, whose protagonist is the bodhisattva, Avalokitasvara or Perceiver of the World's Sounds, known in China as Guanyin and in Japan as Kannon or Kanzeon. "Kanzeon" is a compound of three ideograms: *kan* (looking), *ze* (the world) and *on* (sound). True to his name, he is able to take on any form necessary—the chapter describes thirty-three of these—just to alleviate the suffering of any human being, from kings and potentates to salesmen and criminals. The forms he adopts are appropriate to the person asking for his help. The iconic representation of this religious figure has used images with a huge number of eyes and ears to see and hear the cries of any person afflicted, as well as countless hands to meet the needs of as many as seek him out. Japanese Christians, in the time when Christianity was banned in that country, used statuettes of Kannon as a substitute for images of the Virgin Mary, with the invocation of "Maria Kannon, mother of mercy." And over the centuries, through chapters like this one, recited with great enthusiasm by untold legions of devotees, this sutra has spread comfort and hope to all levels of society.

Huge Cultural Influences on China, Korea, Japan

In terms of culture, its value has been incalculable. In sculpture, painting, calligraphy, architecture, theatre, and plastic arts, the direct or indirect presence of the thematic and iconographic motifs of the *Lotus Sutra* has been formidable over the last one thousand five hundred years of cultural history, often through educational and enriching motifs in countries such as China, Korea and Japan. Regarding literature, there are countless examples that illustrate the impossibility of understanding many poetic compositions of these three countries without having a thorough understanding of this sutra. For example, in Japan the so-called Heian period (8th–12th century), the classical period in the arts, the upper classes were inspired with a remarkable knowledge and appreciation of the *Lotus Sutra*. Indeed, there is a work that contains more than 1,360 poems on this sutra selected from over 120 anthologies of poetry of that period and the following one (12th–14th).⁵ The first of these, attributed to the priest Gyogi (or Gyoki, 668–749), is represented by the following verses:

For collecting firewood
 Gathering herbs,
 And carrying water,
 My reward is
 The *Lotus Sutra*.

The poem is inspired in the episode described in chapter 12 (“Davadata”) where Buddha remembers one of his past lives when a fortune-teller explained the Sutra to him in exchange for offerings of firewood, water, and edible herbs.

Another example, now of profane literature, is provided by *The Pillow Book*, a classic of the Heian period.⁶ In this work, the authoress, Sei Shonagon, wants to stop listening to a sermon and go home, so she orders her carriage. Beside her, a courtier tells her she should not behave like one of “the five thousand who left.” This is a clear allusion to the incident of the five thousand disciples who, disdainful of the preaching of Buddha, rose and left the assembly. The episodes of the sutra had in fact permeated the everyday life and speech of at least the upper classes of that time.

The two major narrative works of literature in China and Japan, respectively, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Tale of Genji*, are profoundly inspired by the ideas and images of the *Lotus Sutra*, and their scenes are the most represented in the religious art of both countries.

In terms of survival over the centuries, the *Lotus Sutra* can be defined as a collection of religious texts, an anthology of sermons and parables, a gallery of images. Texts, sermons, parables and images that have spoken with particular eloquence to people of flesh and blood from different countries at certain times and under different circumstances of their lives. And the work continues talking to modern man. For all these reasons, it is one of the grandest and loftiest human and universal values.

The extraordinary quality of the *Lotus Sutra* lies in the same story in which the main characters are constantly praising a sermon that never takes place. As such, due to this carefully considered elusiveness and openness, it can be read, listened to, discussed, processed and applied to a variety of different purposes. It is an empty book and, at the same time, full of functions and values. Like water, it adapts to all forms; like water, it permeates everything; and, like water, it enlivens the things it touches. Among these, the heart of man.

Words are so worthless when one gets a glimpse of the grandeur of

the *Lotus Sutra*! Might not silence be better?

The problem is that if I remain silent for more than five seconds, you would be too surprised. But I will try ... SILENCE.

Teaching and worship, meaning and ritual, history and mystery, ideology and power, didactics and aesthetics have become intertwined in the long and fascinating history of the *Lotus Sutra*. Now its 69,384 sinograms or *kanji*, which appeared in the Chinese version by Kumarajiva in the year 406, are offered to all of us in this room today in Madrid on a cold February afternoon (when the plum trees—the *ume*—are blooming in Japan, filling the human heart with hope in an ever restless world) in the form of a spiritual message; a modern message directed at the heart of men and women of our time, of all of us.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

NOTES

¹ Quoted by D. Ikeda in *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra. Dialogue on the religion of the 21st century* (Soka Gakkai, Tokyo, 2003, vol. 1, pg. 94–95).

² George J. Tanabe (“Introduction” to *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, op. cit., pg. 2).

³ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, op. cit., vol. IV, pg. 80.

⁴ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, op. cit., pg. 28–29.

⁵ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, op. cit., pg. 28–29.

⁶ Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book*