

## The *Lotus Sutra* in Japanese literature: A spring rain

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Carlos Rubio

**W**ILL I be able, in little over an hour, to enumerate the properties of water to you? And its benefits for the soil and the land? It would be better to sum it all up in one sentence which we have probably heard more than once: “Water is the key to life on earth”.

To me, in this day of spring here in Madrid, lavish in fresh and unexpected downpours, beautifully referred to as “*harusame*” by Japanese people, the water is a metaphor for the *Lotus Sutra*. I am not going to explain this metaphor in terms of what this text stands for to the Buddhist believer. I do not have the authority to it simply because, unlike most, if not all of you, I am not gifted with faith. However, I would venture to talk about the *Lotus Sutra*—and I ask you to pardon me for being daring—due to its intrinsic values, as I perceive them, through what I learnt during the two years of supervision of the text, when I had the honour of collaborating in the Spanish edition of the work which Soka Gakkai is preparing, as well as its connection with some aspects of the Japanese culture, especially poetry.

### **Message of Hope: “You will be Buddhas”**

In the first scene of the *Lotus Sutra* (abbreviated from now on as LS)<sup>1</sup>, great sages, deities and kings gather in large numbers to hear the Buddha speaking. After they have presented an endless number of offerings, the Buddha greets them and enters a state of profound concentration. Flowers rain from the sky and the Earth shakes as the multitude awaits the Buddha’s sermon. But then a glow comes from a lock of white hair between his eyebrows and illuminates the thousands of worlds in every direction of the universe. The bodhisattva Maitreya, eager to know the meaning of this wonder, asks Manjushri, who starts recalling and says that he had witnessed something similar in the distant past. What is happening now, he remembers, happened long time ago,

when the Buddha preached the *Sutra of Innumerable Meanings* and entered *samadhi* while the universe was shaking and flowers were raining from the sky. These wonders were followed by the preaching of the LS. Therefore, now the Buddha must be ready to preach this sutra again. So, before the expectation of the multitude, the first chapter of the LS comes to an end.

In chapter 2, the Buddha rises from his chair and explains how difficult it is to make his wisdom understandable to those who are not Buddhas. Neither bodhisattvas will be able to understand it. Nevertheless, the multitude, with Shariputra as its leader, begs the Buddha to reveal it. The Buddha finally agrees and explains it by using a variety of “expedient means”. Some monks, having heard about the difficulty of this supreme wisdom, stand up and leave the place. The Buddha praises those who stay, by saying: “You, who stay, will be Buddhas”. That is why at the beginning of chapter 3 of the LS, we see Shariputra dancing with joy. Then the story enters the first of the many parables for which this writing is known. Later, it concentrates on its marvellous merits and the responsibility of those who embrace it: how it should be copied, recited, spread and explained. The status of the LS is upgraded to the one of an object of worship. As the praises of this sutra increase with ever more details, it is easy to line up with the main characters of the sutra and not realise, like them, that the sermon of the LS never happens. The text, brimming with merits, dazzling images and a sublime poetic language refers to a speech that is never given: as George Tanabe says, it is like an extensive preface without a book<sup>2</sup>. The intense exaltation of the sutra is the *Lotus Sutra* itself. Nevertheless, there is actually a fundamental idea in this writing, a message of hope and joy: all living beings have got the Buddha’s nature and therefore the potential to attain Buddhahood.

### **Life-giving Water of the Lotus Sutra into Japanese Culture**

Its most extraordinary quality, from the point of view of a non-believer scholar, lies within the text itself, whose main characters are constantly praising a sermon that never takes place. As such, it can be read, listened to, processed and applied in many different ways. Nevertheless, while this empty text can be deprived of ideas, painted for devotional or ritual reasons, recited as poetry, engraved in stone, or used to obtain political power, to heal sick people, to win the honours or to inspire an artist, it is also a book, a joyful hymn that has had a tremendous influence over the cultural life of Japan over the centuries.

This Buddhist scripture can be compared with water, amorphous by nature as liquids are, with the mysterious quality of adapting to and be moulded by its container. When it does not have a container and it falls, for example, to the earth, water loses its substance but transfers its qualities: it gives life and meaning to the earth that it pervades. This is what the LS has done with Japanese culture.

Therefore, the LS is exceptional because not only is it subject to many different interpretations, as it happens with many texts, but it is also empty at its very heart. It is a circumambulatory text, pure context, which invites not only to interpret what is said in it, but to fill it with things that are not said. This invitation implies the liberty to transform the text into multiple aspects of Japanese culture, to impregnate, as incense does in a room, every corner and furniture in it, giving them a distinctive character. The object of this speech is to let you take part of this aroma or, to stick to the metaphor, to identify the earth impregnated by the life-giving liquid of the LS. But Japanese culture is an extensive territory, as the Earth is, and so are its multiples areas—painting, history, philosophy, politics, religion, sculpture, calligraphy, gastronomy, architecture—so numerous that we could not discuss them in one hour, nor am I prepared for it. However, I could speak about a little part of this territory, of this soil into which the life-giving water of the LS has wonderfully soaked and, as we will see, has grown plants of exceptional interest and beauty. This part of the territory is Japanese literature and a smaller one inside of it is Japanese poetry.

I am going to focus on the latter. Japanese literature, which has developed in written form for 1500 years, covers an extremely long period. Thus, I am going to focus only on the centuries from the 7th through the 13th. It was the time when, on the one end, the aesthetic and literary canon of the Japanese was developing and, on the other end, when the influence of Buddhism had started to permeate the courtly classes and the high clergy, the only ones who picked up the brush to write. The samples I have chosen will be different—both in genre and the time when they appeared—because I want this diversity to be the symbol of the many different influences of the LS over the Japanese culture. These samples are:

- 1) The mythological prose or pseudo-history of the *Kojiki*
- 2) The narrative work *The Tale of Genji*, for many one of the finest work of classical Japanese literature.

I will borrow the ideas about those two works outlined by the SGI President Daisaku Ikeda in *Koten o Kataru*, a book of the 1970's which has not been translated into Spanish yet, but it has in English, written in

the form of conversations with the historian Makoto Nemoto<sup>3</sup>.

3) Poetry: the poems scattered both throughout imperial anthologies and the individual anthologies of some poets, especially three of them: princess Senshi, Saigyō and Jien.

I have gleaned some of them from the anthology *El pájaro y la flor* (“*The Bird and the Flower*”) and some others from the article by Yamada Shōzen, «Poetry and Meaning: Medieval Poets and the *Lotus Sutra*», which belongs to the work *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*.

### 1) *Kojiki*, a seedbed of Japanese Literary

*Kojiki*, meaning “Record of Ancient Matters in Japan”, is a work firmly placed in the misty bridge that separates history from myth. It is the oldest extant literary work of Japan. It is full of gods and heroes who live up through their acts the immense, dynamic and multicolour tableau that announces the beginning of the Japanese civilization.

This book, a mixture of half-legendary stories, myths about the creation, songs, poems and genealogies, recognised nowadays more for its literary and anthropological value than for its historical one, was presented at the Japanese court in March 712; however, it had probably been written long before, in the 7th century, and many of the songs and legends might have been created at a much earlier stage, when the Japanese society was illiterate. The compilation of the *Kojiki* in the reign of emperor Temmu in the last quarter of the 7th century coincides with a period of intense absorption of Buddhism in the courtly circles of Japan. Let us remember that Buddhism officially gets to the Japanese court in the middle of the 6th century from the west—Korea and China—even though it is thought to be known a few decades before, maybe not only from China but from India or the southern routes. It seems likely that the sources of the *Kojiki* existed in the Japanese court of the 7th century, when Buddhist texts started to be known and appreciated. It is known, for example, that prince Shōtoku (574–622), revered in the next generations as the incarnation of Bodhisattva Kannon, was a Buddhist devotee of the *Lotus Sutra*. This famous statesperson—even though today there are doubts that he actually wrote it—made public its “Commentaries on the Three Sutras” in which he chose the LS together with two others. It seems that prince Shōtoku appreciated that scripture because it was very popular in the China of his time and in particular because it was easy to understand for many people as it used parables and simple literary expressions.

However, who did more to elevate Buddhism to the category of “State

religion” was emperor Shōmu (724–749), who founded Buddhist temples in every province of Japan. He issued an edict that the LS would be read and recited in every women’s monastery. These monasteries would be called “Temples for the removal of the sins by the grace of the LS”, even though the removal of the sins is not mentioned in any of the chapters of the LS. The LS, together with the *Sovereign Kings of the Golden Light Sutra* and the *Benevolent Kings Wisdom Sutra* were considered as “the three sutras that protected the country”.

I am referring to these historical facts in order to show that the LS was well known in the Japanese court of the end of the 7th century when the *Kojiki* was compiled and in the 8th century when it was published. The Japanese scholar Hideo Kanda has proved that Buddhist texts, especially the LS and the *Sutra Vimalakīrti*, had a deep impact on the compiler Ō no Yasumaro from a literary perspective<sup>4</sup>. I will mention three or four of his findings:

- a) One of the most distinctive features of the *Kojiki* is how cleverly old songs blend into the narrative of the prose text. This is an imitation of the *ge* (*gāthā*)—part in verse—poems used in Buddhist texts to praise the Buddha, to summarize the main points of the doctrine or as a mnemonic device that made memorization easy.
- b) In the myths and legends of the *Kojiki*, when someone addresses a deity or sovereign, he/she uses the honorary verb *po* or *haku*. This use was probably taken from Chinese translations of Buddhist texts. For example, in chapter 16 of the LS we find these lines: « The bodhisattva Maitreya and others said to the Buddha ». In the original Chinese text, the word « said » is given with the term *po* or *haku*. The use of this word as an honorary verb and with this meaning is rarely found in the Confucian classics that were known in Japan since the 5th century.
- c) In the *Kojiki*, the songs and the names of places and of people or gods are written in sinograms used for their phonetic value and not for their semantic value. This system had already been used by the Chinese people or Chinese translators to transcribe names that were not Chinese in sinograms. It was used by Kumarajiva (344–413) in his translations of the LS and other scriptures. For example, chapter 26 of the LS includes transcriptions of the dharani or Hindu mantras according to this system.

They also used the practice of the sinograms to express words from Sanskrit or Pali, the languages of India, such as *arhat*, *ashura*, *pāramitā*, *upāsaka* or *sahā*, unknown in non-Buddhist Chinese texts, like

Confucian ones. In order to recreate the sounds of the Japanese language of the 7th century, the *Kojiki* uses the same group of sinograms than the ones used in the LS.

- d) In chapter 24 of the First Part, the Age of the Gods, of the *Kojiki*, when the god Okuninushi is forced to surrender his land, the deities sent by Amaterasu descend to Izasa beach, in Izumo, where they « drew his ten-fists-length-sword, and stood it sticking upside-down on a wave, and sat cross-legged on the tip of the sword »<sup>5</sup>. The sinogram used to express the position of “seated cross-legged” is *fuz*a. In the LS, the exact same word with the same sinogram is used to express the position used by Buddha when he is meditating, precisely *kekka fuz*a.
- e) In the *Kojiki* the word *jōshin* (to become a Shinto deity) seems to have been patterned after the word *jōbutsu* (to become a Buddha) of the LS. This is also true of others like: *kangi* (grace, blessing), *hinkyū* (poverty), *shitto* (jealousy), *yōgyō* (to wander).

Now, if we consider the *Kojiki* a seedbed of literary and aesthetic values of Japanese culture, would the influence of the LS in its pages have spread also to the next cultural expressions, with the overwhelming porosity of water pervading the Earth?

## 2) *Genji monogatari*, a classic Novel of Shining Prince

I would like to focus on the influence of the LS on the work that is considered by many to be the key work of the classic literature of Japan. *The Tale of Genji* by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu. It is believed that this 1200-pages masterpiece, divided into 54 chapters, was written between 1001 and 1006; it is one of the most important works of the universal fiction. The main character is Prince Genji, a model of virtue and artistic skills. In the novel he is presented under three different aspects: as a lover or the Japanese version of a Don Juan; as a politician (he ends up being the emperor’s father-in-law, an enviable position at that time, despite the low social status of his mother); and as a religious man. The two main subjects of the novel are the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death.

To which extent can we discern the influence of the LS on this masterpiece? Well, at the time it was written, Heian Buddhism was dominated by two main schools: Tendai and Shingon or “True Word”. The *Genji* mentions evil spirits and descriptions of prayers and exorcisms used to save people about to die, a practice strongly associated to the Shingon school; moreover, there are many evidences of the belief in Amida Buddha’s Paradise. In the book already mentioned,

written in the forms of dialogues with Japanese historian Makoto Nemoto, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda quotes the scholar Kikan Ikeda, in particular his work *Genji monogatari jiten* (“Encyclopedia of the Tale of Genji”) to comment on revealing aspects of the influence of the LS on this work.

Let us see some of them:

- a) In this work, Prince Genji is normally referred to as Hikaru Genji or Shining Prince. The idea of the light that sparkles and emanates from the body of someone of great beauty or holiness seems to have entered Japan through Buddhist scriptures in which it is associated to the Buddha. Something similar happens with one of the other heroes of the work, prince Kaoru, whose name means « perfume ». In this case, it is not light but fragrance that emanates from his body and it is compared to the « perfume of the sandalwood of the Ox Head Mountain »<sup>6</sup>, a perfume given off by the real believer, according to chapter 23 of the LS.
- b) In chapter 19 of the *Genji*, called « A Wreath of Cloud », Fujitsubo’s death is described with these words: « While she was speaking, she expired like a candle burning out ». It is a description based on the following lines of the first chapter of the LS: « That night the Buddha entered extinction, as a fire dies out when the firewood is exhausted ».
- c) In chapter 47, called « Trefoil Knots », there is a reference to the bodhisattva Never Disparaging described in chapter 20 of the LS.
- d) In chapter 53 of the *Genji*, « Writing Practice », a monk called Yokawa no Sōzu speaks about Lady Ukifune whose origin is still unknown to him: « if this lady is what she seems to be, a young woman of a well-to-do family, then the secret will not be kept forever. By this I do not mean that there are not beautiful young women in the lower classes. Our world is such that even a dragon’s daughter can be saved... » This might refer to the famous history of the Dragon King’s daughter in chapter 12 of the LS, who attains Buddhahood even though she is low-born.
- e) The commentaries on the *Genji* of the 14th century such as *Kachō yojō* by Ichijō Kanera and in *Kogetsushō* by Kitamura Kigin of the 17th century, offered detailed considerations about the influence of Buddhist scriptures over *Genji monogatari*. The similarity, which had already been detected at that time, between the famous scene called “Critical evaluation of a rainy night” in the second chapter, in which prince Genji and his friends value the qualities of women, and the “three stages of preaching”

explained in the LS, is well known.

Which are these stages? In the second chapter of the LS called « Expedient Means », Shakyamuni preaches the doctrine of the *shohō-jisso* according to which the variety of the phenomena of the world shows the real aspect of the eternal truth. But none of his disciples, with the exception of Shāriputra, was able to understand it and attain enlightenment. This way of explaining the doctrine is known as the *hossetsu-shū* or preaching by theory. After realising this, Shākyamuni used parables like the one of the three carts and the burning house—they can be read in the third chapter. The result was that a few disciples (Subhūti, Kātāyana, Kāshyapa and Maudgalyāyana) understood and attained enlightenment. This method is called *yusetsu-shū* or preaching through examples. Thirdly, thinking about the disciples with less capacity like Purna, who still failed to understand, he preached the doctrine of the causes of previous lives, telling stories of past Buddhas' lives. This method is called *innen-shū* or preaching through causes, as it is shown in the chapter of the LS.

Now, in the mentioned chapter of the *Genji* the discussion starts with the observation of women in general. Later it goes on with the description of hypothetical types of women, which corresponds to the parables of the sutra. Finally, every friend tells his personal experiences with women, which corresponds to the stories of previous lives of the sutra.

- f) Regarding the contents, we must draw attention to another interesting and maybe deeper similarity. Buddhism starts with facing the most fundamental facts of life: birth, aging, illness and death. It deals with them from different points of view, it tries to explain them and it offers some ways to overcome them and rescue the individual from his/her inevitable reality. In short, it offers an understanding of the true aspect of life itself. The doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* or “three thousand realms contained in a single moment of life” of Tendai school represents the crystallisation of Buddhist thought as it is shown in the LS.

For its part, literature, as we can define it, is an attempt to discover the reality of life facing the phenomena and daily life situations of people. In terms of the Ten Worlds of the existence, it is an attempt to improve from the ninth world of the existence to the comprehension of the highest world—the world of Buddhahood. In terms of the nine layers of consciousness, it is an attempt to move from the sixth or the seventh layer of consciousness to the ninth. The philosophy of *Genji* and of the author's idea of literature is shown in « Drake Fly » chapter. The author

writes: « if the author wishes to write well, then he/she chooses good things; if the author wishes to grab the readers' attention he/she chooses bad or really bad things. But the good and bad things are all things and situations of this world we live in and not of any other. Condemning them as lies because they are fictitious would mean to go away from the truth of life. Even in the writings that Buddha drew from his noble heart there were parables and means to point out the truth indirectly. To the ignorant, they don't seem to have a clear goal. The Great Vehicle is full of them, but the general load is always the same. The difference between enlightenment and confusion is of the same order as the difference between the good and the bad in the novel. If one adopts a generous point of view, there is nothing empty or useless ».

There is another work written, of course, by a woman around the same time as the *Tale of Genji*, in which there is a clear reference to the LS. It is the *The Pillow Book*, by Sei Shōnagon. There is a passage that stands out in the book: the author—the book, a collection of sparkling episodes, is written in the first person—must leave the room where she is listening to a sermon and asks for a cart pulled by oxen to pick her up. At that moment one courtier who is sitting next to her tells her not to do the same as the “five thousand who walked out”. This line shows that the content of the LS—in this case the incident of the five thousand arrogant monks who stood up and walked out because they did not want to listen to the Buddha's preach previously mentioned—must have been known in the Japanese imperial court in the 9th and 10th century. This is also confirmed by illustrations in folding screens of that time. We know that “Devadatta” chapter was a favourite subject during the talk of the “Eight conferences about the LS”, when the courtiers take part in processions and play kings carrying wood and water as servants of the sage Asita.

### **3) Garden of Poetry, imbued with Sacred Powers**

Our third journey about the influence of the LS on the vast territory of Japanese literature will be through a garden, a garden of lights and shadows, made out either of stones or sand, moss or flowers, but always exquisite. This garden is Japanese poetry.

What is poetry within the Japanese cultural tradition, so different from the Western one? Few cultures have cherished poetry with so much care as the Japanese one. The reasons might be different: the sacred value (*kotodama*) given to the poetic word since the dawn of Japanese civilization, the close association of the imperial court with the poetic exercise, the important social function of poetry among the courtly

classes during the centuries of the so-called Heian period (794–1185). The ability to compose and appreciate poems in those centuries was an essential requirement in order to progress in the world. Such omnipresence of poetry as a prestigious social gesture can hardly be found in a Western society. Emulating the social function of Chinese poetry in the Tang dynasty, Japanese poetry of that time and of the previous centuries occupies a similar place, differences aside and with a different content, to the one of the press and television in our time. It created public opinion and was its strongest expression together with imperial edicts. Its advantages were multiple. Because it had dignity, it was a vehicle for communications within the court and for official appointments. Because it was a work of art, it gave the right to express ideas that were considered outrageous if expressed through any other means. Because it was allusive, it could escape the rigours of censorship. Because it could express the deepest emotions of a human being, it could be an instrument of the expression of affections and religious feelings. And this is where the poetry imbued with the spirit, ideas and images of the queen of Buddhist scriptures—the LS—comes into play.

In one temple of the present Japanese province of Shimane, the former region of Izumo, there is a monument which proclaims to be the place where Japanese poetry made its first whimpers heard. According to tradition, its author was a god, Susanoo no Mikoto. The divine poem might have been adapted from materials of the 5th or the 6th century in order to adjust it to the form that was put in writing in the 7th century and compiled in the *Kojiki*, a work that we have already considered. The belief in divine authorship of the first poem would have important cultural consequences in Japan. For example, it would legitimize the tireless sponsorship of the poetic exercise provided by emperors, who were thought to have divine lineage in traditional Japan. It was a common idea before, during and after the compiling of that first poem that Japanese poetry was imbued with supernatural powers for representing a deity. From the 6th century, when Buddhist ideas began to slowly enter Japan, it was natural that the prayer to the god adopted the form of a poem according to the old belief of the centuries before the 6th century, or that, as we will see, the Buddhist devotee to the LS honoured this scripture with a poem or used it to increase his/her religious faith. In many texts, the devotee writes the poem and offers it at the pillar of the Shinto sanctuary or includes it in an anthology of Buddhist poetry. In his famous preface to the *Kokinshū* of the early 10th century, Ki no Tsurayuki, the first Japanese author of poetic precepts, reminds us that Japanese poetry « moves without effort heaven and

earth, stirs the feelings of the spirits and of unseen gods »<sup>8</sup>. Many works of the liturgical theatre named Noh which flourishes in the 15th century and keeps being performed in modern Japan are imbued with the same idea. Also, in the long list of imperial poetic anthologies—a table is given below—there is no shortage of Buddhist religious poems, with the ones related to the LS standing out.

Generally speaking, Buddhist poetry written in Japan consisted of three different classes:

- a) poems based on sutras (*shakkyōka*)
- b) poems about rituals and religious services
- c) miscellaneous poems which are not included in the above classes

The three classes were also present in China, with which Japan had shared devotion to poetry as a vehicle for religious expression since the first centuries when Buddhism was known there.

In the first group, poems based on sutras, the poet extracts a line from a sutra and uses it as the main theme or title. The second ones were used in ceremonies like the Eight Lectures on the LS (*Hokke hakkō*), about nirvana (*nehan kō*), the consecration of temples, funeral services, etc. The third ones were related to Buddhist beliefs or activities, like the poems in glorification of Bodhisattva Kannon, pilgrimages to Mount Kōya, etc.

In numerical terms, the first group—the sutra poetry—is the core of Buddhist poetry; and the heart of this core is made up by the poems about LS. After all, the heart of Buddhism is the sutra and Buddhist poetry evolves from this heart.

Our journey through the presence of the LS in Japanese poetry is going to be divided into three stages:

- A) 8th century, in Nara period
- B) Late 8th–late 12th century, in Heian period
- C) Late 12th–14th century, in Kamakura period

In general terms, the three stages correspond to the so-called Nara, Heian and Kamakura periods in Japanese cultural history.

#### **A) Nara period (710–794)**

The collection of the *Man'yōshū* anthology, one of the most interesting collections of Japanese literature as it includes poems still relatively free from the influence of Chinese thinking and Buddhist ideas, dates from the 8th century. However, the 3rd volume of this anthology includes the first poem about the LS. It was written by prince Ishihara:

*Inadaki ni*

Peerless is the gem

<i>kisumeru tama wa</i>	That I wear on my locks;
<i>futatsu nashi</i>	Such are you to me
<i>ka ni mo kaku ni mo</i>	That my hearts moves at your will. <sup>9</sup>
<i>kimi ga ma ni ma ni</i>	

This undoubtedly love poem is based on chapter “Peaceful Practices” which speaks about the wheel-turning King who gives his best soldiers different rewards except the most valuable one: a jewel hidden in its bun.

From a religious point of view, it is impossible to say that there are poems based on the LS in the *Man'yōshū*.

However, there are two poems of volume 16 which seem to be based on the LS that were inscribed on the surface of a musical instrument, a sort of harp or *koto*, found in the Salon of Buddha of the Kawahara monastery. Yet they are not based on the LS but on other sutras. One poem of Gyōgi monk (668–749) collected much later in a poetic anthology called *Shuishū* (1005–1011) is actually based on the LS. It clearly refers to “Devadatta” chapter. It reads:

<i>Hoke kyō o</i>	For collecting firewood,
<i>waga eshi koto wa</i>	Gathering herbs,
<i>takigi kori</i>	And carrying water,
<i>na tsumi mizu kumi</i>	My reward is
<i>tsukaete zo eshi</i>	The <i>Lotus Sutra</i> .

The poem is based on a legend about the Buddha who, in a previous life as a king, renounced his kingdom and became the servant of a sage, performing humble occupations like the ones described in the first three verses in order to receive the teaching of the LS from the sage.

## B) Heian period (794–1185)

During these three centuries, the figure of a woman shines as the moon on a clear night: a poet, princess Senshi (964–1035), who compiles a collection of poems called *Hosshin wakashū* (“A Collection of Poems on the Aspiration for Enlightenment”, compiled in 1012) which can be accurately considered the first poetic anthology about sutras. Although she was a shrine maiden at Kamo Shrine, the princess was also a pious Buddhist—no contradiction! According to what she writes in the preface of her work, she knew that poetry was effective in the praise of Buddhist scriptures. Nevertheless, because she herself was a woman who having been born in Japan, did not know Chinese or Sanskrit, she decided to

praise the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas through the 31-syllable *waka*.

Were women illiterate at that time, including members of the imperial family? Allow me to speak about the literary Japanese society of that period. It will help us to appreciate more this woman's extraordinary contribution to Japanese Buddhist poetry.

The words *waka* and *kanshi* open the doors to the social reality of the time in which this remarkable woman, princess Senshi, lived. *Waka* means poetry written in hiragana letters, which are letters with phonetic value—that is each letter represents a sound. *Kanshi* refers to the poetry written exclusively in Chinese—that is in sinograms. Both are Japanese poetry. They only differ in their writing—that is their graphic support. There are also some other differences. For example, *waka* poetry can be about feelings and emotions, while in general terms *kanshi* poetry celebrates landscapes, historical facts or matters of China. Well, *kanshi* and *waka* were socially antagonistic realities. The first one was an all-male preserve, as only men were allowed to study Chinese and its writing. The second one, with a predominantly lyric and emotional content, rather belonged to women: heirs of an ancient tradition of oral literature, they were those who took it over. But in which writing could they give expression to such an emotional poetry if they were excluded, because of their sex, from studying sinograms? In a writing system that they developed themselves, probably a thousand years before princess Senshi was born, which was so typical of them that it was known as “woman's hand” (*onna de*): a limited number of simple phonograms (*kana*) derived from the complex sinograms or *kanji*. It is the syllabary that today we call *hiragana*, used by Japanese children to learn to read and write. The graceful curves of its strokes compose an elegant and free writing, maybe more personal and appropriate to suggest court ladies' emotions both in prose and in verse. Separation between both preserves was strict. In fact, well into the 10th century, when our distinguished Buddhist princess Senshi was born, a Japanese literate person or poet could not lose his dignity by writing neither in feminine *kana* nor in the emotional *waka*. So when the courtier and poet Ki no Tsurayuki, who flourishes at the beginning of that century inserts poems *waka* in a prose work also written in *waka* called the «Tosa Diary» (*Tosa nikki*) of year 935, he pretends to be a woman in order not to lose his social status. The vehicle of Japanese poetry (*waka*), of the poems written by princess Senshi in praise of the LS was therefore discovered thanks to the illiteracy of Japanese court women who could not read the difficult Chinese sinograms. It will also be the vehicle for the splendid literature in prose of the two next centuries, like *The Tale of Genji*, in

which we already find the influence of the LS, a literature of women (*nyobo bungaku*). Some modern Japanese critics have found in this literature a formidable feminine mockery of the withered and boring erudition of the men of that period. At the time of princess Senshi, in their poetry they described subjects, landscapes and people of the distant China that almost nobody had seen or known. Those Japanese of the 10th century studied the poetry of Li Bo and the volumes of Chinese poetic anthologies. They boasted of their literary diction and their loyalty to distant models. The greatest compliment for them would be being compared with a Chinese master. They adopted Chinese names and felt happy when in dreams they entered into communion with their admired masters of the distant China. Furthermore, there was interest: through their erudition about Chinese matters they could aim at holding a high position in government, as in the fateful case of Sugawara no Michizane, or being honoured with the imperial commission of a poetic anthology, like the abovementioned Tsurayuki. Nothing can be more contrary to the poetic motivation of women than this. To begin with, promotion or social climbing by means of erudition was impossible to women simply because of their sex; for the same reason they did not have access to official education. In addition, they had the advantage of writing in their mothertongue, the language of emotions through which they felt and spoke.

Princess Senshi composed the first complete corpus of sutra poetry in Japan in this language. Within her collection there are no less than 55 poems, the titles of which are lines from different sutras. 31 of them are about LS. These 31 poems include one poem on each of the 28 chapters of the LS, one poem each on the opening and closing sutras and one additional poem based on the lines “we beg to take this merit” from the “Parable of the Phantom City” chapter. That the poems related to the LS amount to over half of the total of the collection reveals the deep influence of the Tendai sect, which regarded the LS as its fundamental scripture above the rest of Buddhist scriptures.

Despite the importance of the collection of princess Senshi for the development of sutra poetry, there is an interesting precedent of the influence of the LS on courtly circles. A passage in volume 11 of the work *Honchō monzui* (“Elegant literature of Japan”) refers to the “preface to poems composed in praise of the 28 chapters of the LS”. According to this passage, when the empress Fujiwara Senshi died in 1001, the all-powerful minister Michinaga—who was her brother—invited poets such as Fujiwara Yukinari, Minamoto Toshikata and Fujiwara Kintō to compose poems using the chapters of the LS as titles.

Although other poets such as the mentioned Gyōgi or monk Henshō had composed poems on the LS, as far as we know they had never used before the names or lines of the chapters of the LS as titles. The poets under Michinaga must have been conscious that they were doing it for the first time.

Moreover, in light of princess Senshi's assertion—ten years after this assignment—saying that because she was a woman she resolved to praise the LS by composing *waka*, it can be inferred that Michinaga and his poets decided to use *waka* and not *kanshi*, which would have been natural given that they were men and knew *kanji*, because the deceased to whom the poems were dedicated was a woman: the empress Higashi Sanjō-in or Fujiwara Senshi (wife of emperor Enyō). This fact demonstrates two things:

The popularity of the *waka* poetic form in the Japanese court of the late 10th century even among men, and secondly the knowledge and diffusion of the LS among the courtly circles of that period.

Other factors that allow us to measure the popularity of sutra poetry in the Japanese court of those centuries are poetic anthologies, that almost always enjoyed prestige due to the sponsorship of the emperor. They are the famous imperial anthologies which regularly mark the poetic history of Japan between the 10th and the 16th century. *Goshuishū*, compiled in 1088, was the first imperial anthology to contain poems under the heading “Buddhist poetry” (*shakkyōka*). However, in that anthology they still did not merit a separate chapter of their own. This happened in 1183 with the anthology *Senzaishū*, with 44 poems in chapter 19, also called *shakkyōka*, more than the 33 of chapter 20 called “Shinto poetry” (*jingika*), suggesting Buddhist poetry was already highly esteemed at that time. All the anthologies compiled after this one would contain one chapter dedicated exclusively to Buddhist poetry. Therefore, the connections between literature and Buddhism were developed specially through the 31-syllable poetic form called *waka*.

The conclusion that can be drawn is that over the centuries sutra poetry became a tradition in imperial anthologies. What about private anthologies?

Furthermore, the most famous poets of the centuries of Heian and Kamakura period used to include poems about sutras. For instance, Fujiwara Tadamichi (1097–1164), regent and prime minister before Genpei wars, included poems on each of the 28 chapters of the LS in its *Tadamichishū* for instruction at the Japanese court, or better, at the very centre of the Japanese court given that his daughter Teishi (Kujō-in) was married to emperor Konoe.

**Poems about Buddhist sutras in Japanese classical poetry**  
(period 1086–1439)

Imperial anthology	Compilation Date	Number of Buddhist poems	Number of sutra poems	Ratio of sutra poems
<i>Goshuishū</i>	1086	19	8	42,1%
<i>Senzaishū</i>	1188	54	35	64,8%
<i>Shinkokinshū</i>	1206	63	38	60,3%
<i>Shinchokusenshū</i>	Around 1234	56	33	58,9%
<i>Shokugosenshū</i>	1251	52	28	53,8%
<i>Shokukokinshū</i>	1265	73	38	52,1%
<i>Shokushuishū</i>	Around 1278	66	43	65,2%
<i>Shingosenshū</i>	1303	106	56	52,8%
<i>Gyokuyoshū</i>	1313–1314	110	51	46,4%
<i>Shokusezaishū</i>	Around 1320	106	46	43,4%
<i>Shokugoshuishū</i>	1325–1325	42	21	50,0%
<i>Fugashū</i>	1344–1346	63	34	54,0%
<i>Shinsenzaishū</i>	1359	118	41	34,7%
<i>Shinshuishū</i>	1364	78	33	42,3%
<i>Shingoshuishū</i>	1383	35	19	54,3%
<i>Shinshokukokinshū</i>	1439	66	29	43,9%
TOTAL		1107	553	50,0%

**C) Kamakura period (1185–1333)  
or the *Shinkokinshū* period**

We know that emperor Go-Shirakawa at the end of the 12th century composed a poetic anthology called *Ryōjin hishō* containing 22 Buddhist poems of which 114 are about the LS. The emperor, who loved popular poetry, learned *imayo* songs from a *shirabyoshi* dancer and courtesan called Otsumae. When she became ill, it is said that the emperor recited the LS and prayed for her recovery; he also copied a thousand LS for the first anniversary of the dancer's death.

The three poets who best represent the poetry of that time were Saigyō, Jien and Fujiwara Shunzei.

a) Saigyō (1118–1190)

In his work *Kikigakishū*, there are poems arranged in order on the 28 chapters of the LS and also one poem on “The Parable of the Phantom City” chapter and one on “The Universal Gate of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara” chapter. It makes a total of 30 poems. One of the characteristics of his sutra poetry is the apparent darkness of the allusion

to the sutra, which can only be understood if we consider previous Buddhist works.

Examples:

*About “Preachers of the Dharma” chapter of the LS*

*If a man devotes to the Lotus Sutra a single moment of rejoicing, on him, too, I confer the prophecy of the supreme and perfect enlightenment”.*

<i>Natsu kusa no</i>	Even the white dew
<i>hitoba ni sugaru</i>	Clinging to every blade
<i>shiratsuyu mo</i>	Of summer grass
<i>hana no ue ni wa</i>	Does not accumulate
<i>tamarazarikeri</i>	On this flower.

But how are the title of the poem and the title of the sutra related to each other? Why does not the dew accumulate on the flower? The author wrote this poem from the point of view of the work *Dainichi kyō sho*, a commentary on the work *Dainichi kyō*, written by the Chinese monk I Hsing and commented by Kukai, the founder of the True Word School, about the concepts of conditional prophecies and unconditional prophecies.

The word “flower” in the poem clearly refers to the LS and the dew is the standard metaphor for conditioned things, that is, the transient nature of life. That the dew does not accumulate on the flower means that the prophecies of the LS are unconditional prophecies of perfect enlightenment. Unlike the summer leaves, the smooth perfection of the lotus flower does not allow the transient dew to cling with the vagaries of conditional prophecies.

*About “The Universal Gate of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara” chapter:*

*(The sun of wisdom) that can subdue winds the flames of misfortune / And everywhere give bright light to the World...*

<i>Fukaki ne no</i>	Had I not been told
<i>soko ni komoreru</i>	Never would I have known
<i>hana ari to</i>	That hidden deep
<i>ii hirakazuba</i>	Within the root
<i>shirade yamamashi</i>	Lies a flower.

This poem is based on the work of Kukai *Hoke kyō kaidai*, in which he says that the exquisite lotus flower (Myōhōrenge) is the secret name

of the bodhisattva Kanjizai or Avalokiteśvara, popularly referred to as Kannon.

b) Jien (1155–1225)

Buddhist monk, historian and maybe one of the most representative poets of his age, as is attested by the fact that he had 92 poems included in the anthology that takes the pulse of the poetic climate of his century *Shinkokinshū*, second only to Saigyō.

Of course, he also wrote poems about the LS, maybe because his school, the Tendai sect, reveres this scripture as their fundamental one. His collection named *Shūgyokushū* (A gleaning of treasures) includes poems on the 28 chapters of the LS. There is a section in it based on one hundred lines of different chapters of the sutra. The first observation that can be made of his sutra poetry is that he viewed this sutra as the unsurpassed vehicle of enlightenment and salvation.

« *Preachers of the Dharma* » Chapter  
*The Dharma Blossom is foremost...*

<i>Haru no yama</i>	Abandoning distant views
<i>aki no nohara o</i>	Of spring mountains
<i>nagame sutete</i>	And autumn fields,
<i>niwa ni hachisu no</i>	I see only the lotus blossom
<i>hana o miru kana</i>	In my own garden.

In the context of this chapter, it is clear that Jien speaks of giving up views of the mountains even if covered with flowers in spring or by tinted leaves in autumn, that is to say, abandoning the various Earlier Buddhism teachings, for there is nothing better than to look at the beauty of the lotus flower which he grows in his own garden of the Tendai School.

His view of the supremacy of the LS is reflected in these other poems:

« *Expedient Means* » Chapter  
*The suchness of their nature...*

<i>Tsu no kuni no</i>	Even the truth of Naniwa
<i>Naniwa no koto mo</i>	In the province of Tsu
<i>Makoto to wa</i>	Can be apprehended
<i>Tayori no kado no</i>	From the path leading
<i>Michi yori zo shiru</i>	To the steadfast gate.

The landscape at Naniwa changes with the four seasons, but we can know its true nature, just as we can know the true form of all things, through the teachings of the « expedient means », which is, to him, the gate of entry into the LS. Jien is confident that this sutra provides the key that will unlock the truth in all things.

The second characteristic of Jien as a sutra poet is his capability to use images and words used by other poets who were famous in his time or in the past. In this regard, it should be recalled that at that time the imitation of formal elements was not considered plagiarism or a demonstration of lack of originality, but rather a matter of respect and sensitivity towards tradition, qualities that are not much appreciated in traditionally individualistic cultures like ours, the Western ones.

The next two poems written by two poets of his time provide the imagery used in the above poem. Here is one by Saigyō:

<i>Tsu no kuni no</i>	Spring at Naniwa
<i>Naniwa no haru</i>	In the province of Tsu
<i>Yume nareya</i>	Is now but a dream:
<i>Ashi no kareha ni</i>	The wind sweeps over
<i>Kaze wataru nari.</i>	The withered reeds.

Saigyō's poem is itself patterned after the one below, which was written by the monk Nōin in the anthology *Goshuishū* one hundred years before (mentioned in the list of anthologies displayed):

<i>Kokoro aramu</i>	How I wish to show
<i>Hito ni miseba ya</i>	Someone of feeling
<i>Tsu no kuni no</i>	The sight of spring
<i>Naniwa watari no</i>	Sweeping through Naniwa
<i>Haru no keshiki o</i>	In the province of Tsu.

By alluding to these two poems—in particular, the motifs of spring, Naniwa and Tsu—he places his sutra poem within the prestigious current of *waka*, but he dedicated it to praise the LS. While Saigyō and Nōin dwell on the changing feelings that spring brings, Jien, the high priest of Tendai, stresses that underlying those transformations is the constant truth of the LS.

- c) There is another poet, Fujiwara Shunzei or Toshinari (1114–1204), the compiler of the anthology *Senzaishū* and father of the renowned

poet Fujiwara Teika. His personal collection named *Chōshū eisō* contains a set of 28 poems on the LS arranged in order.

Here is a sample:

« *Medicinal Herbs* » chapter

*Since I have neither “that” nor “this”; Nor any thought of love or hatred...*

<i>Harusame wa</i>	The spring rain,
<i>Ki no mo ka no mo no</i>	Soaks this and that,
<i>Kusa mo ki mo</i>	The grasses and trees.
<i>Wakazu midori ni</i>	Dyeing them all green,
<i>Somuru narikeri</i>	Without distinction.

The spring rain falls indiscriminately here and there, on green grasses and on trees, causing flowers and leaves to flourish. Similarly, the Buddha’s compassion falls generously and widely over all people and causes them to flourish. The parable of the three kinds of herbs and two kinds of trees, one of the seven great parables in the LS, appears in this chapter. It likens the Buddha’s compassion to the spring rain which falls equally over all plants causing them to grow and flourish according to their different nature; so too, the Buddha’s teaching spills equally over everyone and can benefit everyone, but depending upon the differences in the individual recipients, there will be distinctions in how they receive it.

In this rainy spring in Madrid, with so much *harusame*, it was a joyful and refreshing coincidence that we finished this lecture speaking about water. Is there a better metaphor for the wonderful goodness of the *Lotus Sutra* than water?

Here today, the water that has given life to many species chosen among the splendid richness of the garden of Japanese literature, helped us, I hope, at least to glimpse the wonderful effects of its qualities. As water, it has adapted to each shape, has impregnated all and has given life to whatever it touched. This crystalline current formed by 69,380 magic water drops—the number of the sinograms (*kanji*) of the LS—keeps refreshing and purifying the men and women of our time, as yesterday did.

Water and earth: the *Lotus Sutra* and Japanese culture.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Lotus Sutra and its Opening and Closing Sutras*, translated by B. Watson (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, George J. Tanabe Jr. and Willa Jane Tanabe edition (Honolulu: Hawaii U.P., 1989), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Japanese Classics* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> *On the Japanese Classics*, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Kojiki*, translated from the Spanish edition by C. Rubio and R. Tani (Madrid: Trotta, 2008), p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> *The Tale of Genji*, translated from the Spanish edition by J. Fibla (Girona: Atalanta, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> *The Pillow Book*, translated from the Spanish edition by I.A. Pinto, O. Gavidia and H. Izumi (Lima: Universidad Pontificia de Peru, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> *Kokinshū*, translated from the Spanish edition by C. Rubio (Madrid: Hiperión, 2005), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> The translations of the poems are all from *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, op. cit.