

PREFACE

In November of 1998, an exhibition was held in Tokyo of manuscripts and block prints of the Lotus Sutra and other Buddhist texts from the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. The exhibition was entitled “The Lotus Sutra and Its World: Buddhist Manuscripts of the Great Silk Road,” and was sponsored jointly by the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy of Tokyo, which I founded some years ago.

These precious texts and materials, which included Sanskrit manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra discovered in Central Asia such as the Petrovsky manuscript, were avidly viewed not only by Japanese scholars of Buddhism and East Asian studies but by visitors from abroad who attended the exhibition, and no doubt contributed significantly to their researches and provided them with much food for thought.

The sacred texts of Buddhism, expounded in India by Shakyamuni Buddha, were over the centuries transmitted to many different parts of the Asian continent, where they were translated into the languages of the various regions and disseminated among the population. Thus began the flowering of the so-called “Buddhist Culture,” a culture symbolic of peace and prosperity.

But the Buddhism of Central Asia, that for a time had flourished so proudly, later fell into sad decline as a result of the invasion of foreign peoples and climatic changes in the area, and in the end the sacred texts of Buddhism were buried beneath the shifting sands of the desert.

In the nineteenth century and the century that followed, however, explorers from various European countries and other parts of the world set about surveying the region and excavating the archaeological sites, and thus the Buddhist texts were once more brought to life. Scholars and research organizations, applying the techniques of modern philology, then began the task of putting the texts in order and deciphering their contents.

The Seminar für Indologie und Buddhismuskunde of the University of Göttingen is world renowned as a leader in traditional Buddhist studies. Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920), who in 1881 published a work entitled *Buddha: sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, provided the impetus for such studies. One of the first to apply comparative techniques to the study of the Buddhist scriptures, he left behind a brilliant name in the history of Buddhology.

Over the long years of the Seminar’s endeavours, its achievements have been truly

remarkable. Among these may be cited its researches in Indian fairy-tale literature, as well as the project, begun in 1957 in cooperation with the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, to compile a catalogue of handwritten Asian texts in Germany, the “Katalogisierung der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland.” One of the products of this joint research project is the “Sanskrihandschriften aus den Turfanfunden” (Sanskrit Manuscript Remains from the Turfan Discoveries), the compilation of which was begun by Professor Ernst Waldschmidt (1897-1985) and which is being carried on by his successors.

It may be noted that Professor Ji Xianlin of Peking University in his younger years studied at the University of Göttingen, devoting himself under the direction of Professor Waldschmidt to the study of the Buddhist Sanskrit of the Lotus Sutra and similar texts. And when Professor Ji Xianlin’s disciple, Mr. Jiang Zhongxin, Professorial Research Fellow of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, edited the first work in the Soka Gakkai’s Lotus Sutra Manuscript Series, that entitled *Sanskrit Lotus Sutra Fragments from the Lüshun Museum Collection*, Professor Ji kindly inscribed the title in Chinese and wrote a foreword for the work.

The German Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), studying such figures as Confucius, Shakyamuni and Socrates from whom so much of our present day thought and philosophy derive, dubbed the period in which they lived, roughly around 500 BCE, a “pivotal age.”

Jaspers had from his youth been deeply interested in Buddhism, and in his work *Die großen Philosophen*, published in 1957, which deals with the great thinkers of the past and present, he included sections on the Buddha Shakyamuni and the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna. In his appraisal of Buddhism, he states: “For the first time in history a philosophy of all humankind appeared, a true world religion took shape.”

In similar fashion, Professor Heinz Bechert of the University of Göttingen, in a lecture entitled “The Foundation of Mahayana Buddhism—From Early Buddhism to the Lotus Sutra,” has pointed out that, in the Lotus Sutra, the teaching of the Buddha represents a single substance and content. It sets forth a path toward the highest type of enlightenment, one that leads not simply to the emancipation of the individual, but to the happiness of all humankind.

The people of the world today face numerous common problems related to nuclear energy, environmental concerns, human rights, and similar matters. To borrow Jaspers’ phrase, we are living in what might be described as a second “pivotal age.” As we enter a new century, we must learn to transcend the egoism of race and nationality and to achieve a perspective that is global in scope. In this age that is of pivotal importance in

human history, we must find a way that, as Professor Bechert has said of that set forth in the Lotus Sutra, leads to the happiness of all humankind, a philosophy, a source of light, that will insure salvation to all the peoples of the world.

The book for which these brief remarks will serve as a preface brings together the text of fragments of a Lotus Sutra manuscript, discovered in Central Asia, that are preserved in four different collections in the three cities of Berlin (the former East Berlin), Munich, and London, making these valuable materials available within a single volume. As such, its publication thus serves as a symbol of our present age, one that is moving “from division to unity.”

It is my sincere hope that this publication, the third in the Lotus Sutra Manuscript Series, will open up new horizons in Lotus Sutra studies and help to further cultural and academic exchange between Germany and Japan and deepen the friendship between our two countries.

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