

**The Voice-hearers Awaken to a Life Based on the Great Wish
for the Happiness of All Beings
Dialogue on the Lotus Sutra 15**

This is the fifteenth installment in a series of discussions on the Lotus Sutra between SGI President Ikeda and Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It first appeared in the April 1996 issue of the Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

In this installment, they discuss the vital importance of the teaching of the Lotus Sutra for the twenty-first century, touching on the principle of the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle; the predictions of enlightenment for Purna, Ananda, Rahula and other voice-hearer disciples; the "unification of the practitioners" and "unification of the teachings," the parable of the gem in the robe; and other matters explained in "Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples" and "Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts," the eighth and ninth chapters of the Lotus Sutra.

Saito: I had the opportunity to sit in on your meeting [February 16, 1996], President Ikeda, with Dr. Margarita I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, who has done a great deal of research on the Lotus Sutra. I found the discussion profoundly moving.

Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya lost her husband at a young age and had to raise her son alone. Undeterred by the difficulties of her situation, for four decades she has tirelessly pursued her research on the Lotus Sutra. Adding to the challenge, for most of that time her country was governed by a totalitarian regime. Her study of Buddhism cannot by any stretch of the imagination have been easy.

Your discussion with the Russian scholar seemed to confirm the universality of the Lotus Sutra, which has transcended national boundaries to capture the hearts of truly enormous numbers of people living under widely varying circumstances.

Ikeda: Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya is a person of tremendous character. She possesses genuine humility and profound humanity. Perhaps it is for this reason that she has grasped the outstanding merits of the Lotus Sutra. From speaking with her, I could see that she has a deep understanding of the sutra.

How can one grasp the essence of the paean to humankind that pulses in the Lotus Sutra? The truth of the Lotus Sutra can be found only within the human heart; it definitely cannot be comprehended with the intellect alone. Therein lies the fascination of studying the Lotus Sutra; and also the difficulty. Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya has done research on the Lotus Sutra that indeed touches on this essence, on the human heart.

Suda: Her answer to why the Lotus Sutra has been embraced by so many people and spread so widely was very clear. The Lotus Sutra, she explained, engendered a completely new way of thinking. She characterized this as the understanding that people are fundamentally free, and can themselves change the course of their own destiny. This perspective of the Lotus Sutra inwardly liberates people; and it is this, she said, that has held such a powerful attraction.

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Saito: In the course of our dialogue, we have discussed this aspect of the Lotus Sutra from a variety of angles.

Endo: Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya's remarks on the important role that the Lotus Sutra may play in the twenty-first century were also impressive.

The Lotus Sutra, she said, prompts each person to reflect on the purpose for their actions, their ultimate goals in life, and the direction in which the human race is heading. She suggested that the Lotus Sutra's function lies in getting people to think along these lines.

This is in fact the view of the Lotus Sutra that you, President Ikeda, mentioned in our first discussion, which was on the theme, "Surmounting the absence of philosophy in our age."

Saito: Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya at one point credited you and the SGI with breathing new life into her research. She also said that she hoped her work would be of service to humankind. Hearing these words, pervaded with her sense of mission to dedicate herself to the good of others, was most refreshing.

Ikeda: To work for the sake of others — that is the spirit of a true scholar. Whatever the field, without this spirit one cannot accomplish anything great. In the present age, this spirit seems to have been all but forgotten.

Suda: There are some who even go so far as to proclaim that other people's happiness is their misfortune, and that other people's misfortunes are a cause for their happiness.

Saito: Such people are the sad victims of the competitive society we live in, their lives rendered dark and perverse.

Ikeda: The truth is that devoting ourselves to others' happiness is a necessary condition for becoming genuinely happy ourselves.

Endo: From studies in the area of depth psychology, Carl Jung (1875– 1961) and other psychologists have described the "ideal life" as something like this: In infancy, to have a sense of security in being embraced in the love of parents and others; during youth, to make tenacious efforts to seek something higher, something sacred or divine; in middle age, to serve others; and in old age, to live with hope, wisdom and a sense of absolute confidence in the value of the life that one has led.

Ikeda: Working tenaciously to seek something lofty, serving others, and leading a long and fulfilled existence — this is very similar to the way of life of a bodhisattva. Restoring such a way of life will be a fundamental concern of the twenty-first century.

The Struggles of the Citizens of Leningrad

Suda: The siege of Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg), which came up in your discussion with Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, produced many instances of human drama, of people acting with the spirit of bodhisattvas.

Ikeda: As many as a million citizens are said to have perished while the Nazis blockaded the city for almost nine hundred days. The majority of these died of starvation.

A poet put the body of her deceased husband on a child's sled and pulled it to Piskarevsky Cemetery on the city's outskirts. It was painful for her to have to place her husband's body along with the many other corpses piled there. Whenever she walked along the road, exhausted and hungry, having to frequently stop to rest, she would pass women similarly pulling sleds bearing corpses similarly wrapped in sheets or blankets. She wrote, "Really will there be a victory for me? What comfort will I find in it? Let me be. Let me be forgotten. I will live alone. . . ."1

Endo: I understand that you once visited Piskarevsky Cemetery.

Ikeda: I laid a wreath of flowers and offered heartfelt prayers for the eternal happiness of those buried there. One headstone in the cemetery bears the inscription, "Let no one forget; let nothing be forgotten!"2

The history of Leningrad calls out to us with the weight of a million lives, each of them unique and irreplaceable: "Peace! Realize peace, no matter what it takes!" "Such a tragedy must never again be repeated!" To bring this unvoiced cry to all people, I will continue to travel the world, meet with people and conduct dialogue.

Saito: What sustained the citizens of Leningrad amid such hardship?

Ikeda: Various explanations have been given, but radio broadcasts seem to have been an important factor.

Endo: All transmissions were by wired radio. Possession of ordinary radio receivers was reportedly made a capital offense [at the outset of the war, the aim being to prevent citizens from listening to foreign broadcasts].

Ikeda: That's right. Without any food and holed up in cold rooms with nothing to do, people looked forward to the poetry readings and musical performances that came to them over the radio.

But if just staying alive was an ordeal for those listening, those making the transmissions were also hanging on for dear life. There was a poet who, after finishing a reading for a broadcast, collapsed in the studio from hunger and died several days later. In another instance, a singer who performed was so frail he had to support himself with a cane. He died that very night.

In the studio, there was a rake-like wooden device in the shape of the letter "T." This was to support performers if they were too weak to stand. The director of the studio encouraged the performers with all his being: "In thousands of apartments they are awaiting your voice."3

When the radio transmissions were discontinued because of the power shortage, citizens eagerly offered to have their rations cut in order for the transmissions to be resumed.4

The desperate spirit of those involved in the broadcasts to somehow give hope and

inspiration ignited the flame of courage in the people's frozen hearts. There were interruptions in the supply of food, heat and light. And when hope itself had been lost, it was the voices and words calling out to their spirits that sustained people's lives. Not only the stomach grows hungry; the spirit, too, requires nourishment.

Saito: This really makes one contemplate just how important culture is.

Ikeda: It is said that thousands of sailors in the Russian navy whiled away their time at sea by reading Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.⁵

There was an episode of particular note. Some writers in Leningrad had the idea of preserving the experience of life under the state of siege in a book. But the authorities would not give them permission. A good deal later the approval did come through, but by that time many of the writers had died, and those who survived were too weak and emaciated to work. Ultimately, the project came to nought. Journalist Harrison Salisbury describes the situation in these terms: ". . . people held themselves together by the consciousness of being needed. They began to die when they had nothing to do. Nothing-to-do was more terrible than a bombing raid."⁶

The reason for the delay in permission being granted was that no one among the authorities wanted to take responsibility for approving the project. Bureaucratism robbed the writers of their hope, and with it their lives. It's a fearful thing when those in positions of authority do not understand the people's hearts. This is a point that leaders in the SGI need to grasp from the depth of their own being.

At any rate, it was the spirit and determination "to hang on for others," "to sing to the best of my ability for the sake of all," and "to write for the sake of posterity" that sustained these individuals and enabled them to support one another. Our true selves shine and the underlying strength of our lives wells forth when we exert ourselves for others. This is human nature. And this is the way of life the Lotus Sutra teaches.

This time, let's discuss "Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples" and "Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts,"⁷ the eighth and ninth chapters of the Lotus Sutra. These chapters conclude the teaching of the replacement of the three vehicles of the voice-hearers, *pratyekabuddhas* and bodhisattvas (Learning, Realization and Bodhisattva) with the one vehicle of Buddhahood, which is the main theme of the Lotus Sutra's first half (or theoretical teaching).

From "People Who Are Saved" to "People Who Save Others"

The way followed by the sons of the Buddha,
because they are well learned in expedient means,
is wonderful beyond conception.
They know how most beings delight in a little Law
and are fearful of great wisdom.
Therefore the bodhisattvas
pose as voice-hearers or *pratyekabuddhas*,
employing countless expedient means
to convert the different kinds of living beings.
They proclaim themselves to be voice-hearers
and say they are far removed from the Buddha way,

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and so bring emancipation to immeasurable multitudes,
allowing them all to achieve success.
Limited in aspiration, lazy and indolent though the multitudes are,
bit by bit they are led to the attainment of Buddhahood.
Inwardly, in secret, the sons act as bodhisattvas,
but outwardly they show themselves as voice-hearers.
They seem to be lessening desires out of hatred for birth and death,
but in truth they are purifying the Buddha lands.
Before the multitude they seem possessed of the three poisons
or manifest the signs of heretical views.
My disciples in this manner
use expedient means to save living beings.
(*The Lotus Sutra*, ch. 8, pp. 146–47)

Saito: As is clear from the titles, the main theme of these two chapters is the bestowal of prophecy. They contain the culmination of the Buddha's predictions of enlightenment for the voice-hearers.

The Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai of China designates the eight chapters from the "Expedient Means," the second chapter, through the "Learners and Adepts," the ninth chapter, as the "revelation"⁸ section of the theoretical teaching. From a doctrinal standpoint, these eight chapters explain the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle. In terms of narrative drama, however, the central element is probably the bestowal of prophecies of enlightenment upon the voice-hearers.

Ikeda: It is the drama of the voice-hearers opening their eyes. Without understanding the significance of this drama, one cannot grasp the true meaning of the doctrine of the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle.

What is the awakening of the voice-hearers? In conclusion, it has to do with their changing from "people who are saved" to "people who save others." They awaken, in other words, to the "great vow" to unfailingly lead others to happiness.

The voice-hearers had sought the Buddha's teaching out of the desire to escape — to be "saved" from — the sufferings of this impure world. The Buddha, understanding their minds, first expounded the Hinayana teachings to them as a path to gain release from suffering.

Endo: Their mistake lay in their becoming attached to these teachings.

Suda: In the fourth chapter, "Belief and Understanding," the voice-hearers confess, "in the midst of birth and death we undergo burning anxieties, delusions, and ignorance, delighting in and clinging to lesser doctrines" (LS4, 86).

Ikeda: "Lesser doctrines" means the Hinayana teachings. But the Buddha's true intention was not contained in the Hinayana. The Buddha did not want his disciples to wind up being merely people who seek to be led to salvation, and so he expounded the Lotus Sutra, which clarifies his true intention.

What you should seek, he tells the voice-hearers, is not the enlightenment of the Hinayana but the wisdom of the Buddha. He is saying in effect: "I want to enable all

people to gain the Buddha's wisdom and raise their state of life so that they can freely lead others to happiness just as the Buddha does." This is the Buddha's true intention.

Saito: The expression, "just as the Buddha does," points to the oneness of mentor and disciple.

Ikeda: Exactly. Those who hear the Lotus Sutra and stand up with the "wish shared by the mentor and disciple as one" — that is, with the desire to lead people to enlightenment as the Buddha does — are the bodhisattvas of the Lotus Sutra. This wish or vow is at the same time the "awareness of the Buddha's children" — the realization: "I am a child of the Buddha, and therefore I can inherit in its entirety the wisdom that is the Buddha's legacy."

A little earlier, we talked about the bodhisattva-like activities of the people responsible for radio transmissions during the siege of Leningrad. It can also be said that Shakyamuni's voice-hearer disciples change from being merely voice-hearers who "hear the Buddha's voice" into voice-hearers who, as bodhisattvas, "enable others to hear the Buddha's voice."

The eight chapters comprising the revelation section of the theoretical teaching depict the drama of the voice-hearers carrying out their human revolution along precisely these lines. The chapters we have discussed up to this point show Shariputra and the four great voice-hearer disciples⁹ enacting this drama of awakening. But in "Five Hundred Disciples" and "Learners and Adepts," we finally see all of the voice-hearers becoming involved.

The Prediction of Enlightenment for All Voice-hearers

Suda: I'd like to start by discussing the general flow of these two chapters. At the outset of "Five Hundred Disciples," Shakyamuni bestows a prophecy of enlightenment on Purna, who had delighted upon hearing the Buddha's preaching in the "Parable of the Phantom City," the seventh chapter. Among Shakyamuni's disciples, Purna was known as foremost in preaching the Law and also as foremost in eloquence.

Endo: At one time, Purna undertook a journey to spread Shakyamuni's teaching among the people in another land. A Buddhist text records an episode that occurred prior to his departure. Some have argued that this episode is actually about a different person with the same name. Still, I would like to share it because, scholarly disagreements notwithstanding, it seems to shed light on the character of Purna as the disciple foremost in preaching the Law.

When Purna tells the Buddha he is going to embark on a journey of propagation, Shakyamuni says to him: "Purna, the people of that land are known to be rough-tempered. Without understanding the reason of things, they constantly speak ill of others. They will very likely deride and abuse you. When that happens, what will you do?"

Purna replies, "If that is the case, I will say to myself, 'Because they do not strike me with their fists, the inhabitants of this land are good people.'"

"Then what will you do," the Buddha continued, "if they strike you?"

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“I will say to myself,” said Purna, “‘Because they do not beat me with staves, the inhabitants of this country are good people.’”

“If they beat you with staves, what will you do?”

“I will say to myself, ‘Because they do not lash me with whips, they are good people.’”

“What if they lash you with whips?”

“I will say to myself, ‘Because they do not injure me with swords, they are good people.’”

“What if they injure you with swords?”

“I will say to myself, ‘Because they do not kill me, they are good people.’”

“What, then, will you do, Purna, if you are killed by the people of that country?”

The disciple answered without hesitation: “There are some who seek death. Because in being killed I would, without seeking death, be able to discard this poor, impure body for the sake of the Buddhist Law, it would bring me the greatest joy.”

Shakyamuni’s mind was put at ease. “Very well, then, Purna,” he said. “If you have such determination, you will be all right. Go then.”¹⁰

Purna, it is related, then went to that land and converted many people to the Buddha’s teaching.

Ikeda: He realized his wish. Purna’s name is variously translated into Chinese as “Wishes Fulfilled” and “Fulfillment.” True to his name, I’m sure his life was indeed one of great fulfillment.

Suda: From the fact that he was known as foremost in preaching the Law and foremost in eloquence, we can see him as someone who was skilled at discourse and who possessed a refreshing eloquence. The Sanskrit text of the “Five Hundred Disciples” chapter says, “Purna reveals the Law to the four kinds of believers, teaches them, praises and encourages them, and causes them to feel delight, and he never tires of expounding the Law.” As this suggests, it was not that he possessed superficial technique, that he was a skillful conversationalist. For that matter, when it comes to speaking skill alone, probably no one can match the glibness of a con artist.

Ikeda: Kumarajiva’s translation of the sutra speaks of Purna’s “ability in teaching, benefiting and delighting the four kinds of believers” (LS8, 144). He caused people to feel joy by preaching the Law to them. That is where Purna placed his emphasis. When someone truly feels delight from the bottom of his or her heart, those around the person change.

What was the source of Purna’s powers of eloquence? One factor was probably his passion for spreading and sharing with others the teaching of his mentor. No matter how skilled at speaking people may be, if they lack burning passion, they will not be able to move the hearts of others. And the source of passion is conviction. Also, I think it was Purna’s honesty and integrity. He was a “person of sincerity,” as it were. No doubt many were touched by his warmheartedness and thoughtfulness.

Saito: In “Five Hundred Disciples,” Purna receives a specific prophecy that in the future he will become a Buddha called Law Bright Thus Come One. I think the meaning is that he will illuminate people’s lives with the brilliant light of the Law.

Ikeda: SGI members who exert themselves for kosen-rufu similarly illuminate the lives of many others.

Endo: When they hear the specific prophecy for Purna, the twelve hundred arhats rejoice. Shakyamuni says that he will bestow prophecies on them, too, and predicts enlightenment for five hundred. This is where “five hundred disciples” in the chapter’s title comes from. These five hundred are represented by Kaundinya (Ajanta Kaundinya), who was Shakyamuni’s very first disciple.

Arhats are voice-hearers of the highest rank who have attained the enlightenment of the Hinayana teachings. It may be that the five hundred *arhats* were disciples who played a central role in the Buddhist order from its early days. In other texts, there are accounts of Shakyamuni taking five hundred disciples with him on journeys to preach the Law. This may also be why, in his prophecy of enlightenment for them, Shakyamuni gives all five hundred the same name — Universal Brightness Thus Come One.

As for the remaining seven hundred disciples, no specific prophecy of enlightenment is made for them in the sutra. However, at the outset of the “Teacher of the Law,” the tenth chapter, Shakyamuni predicts enlightenment for all those gathered in the assembly where the Lotus Sutra is being expounded. We may surmise that these seven hundred disciples are among the recipients of that prophecy.

Suda: At the beginning of “Learners and Adepts,” prophecies of enlightenment are bestowed first on Ananda and Rahula. Among Shakyamuni’s disciples, Ananda was said to be foremost in hearing the Buddha’s teachings — that is, he listened to Shakyamuni expound the Law more than any other disciple — and after Shakyamuni’s death he played a key role in efforts to compile his teachings as sutras. Rahula was Shakyamuni’s son from before he renounced the world. Among the Buddha’s disciples, he was known as foremost in inconspicuous practice.

Shakyamuni also makes predictions of enlightenment for two thousand learners and adepts. These are voice-hearers who have not yet reached the stage of arhat. A “learner” means someone still engaged in the process of learning; an “adept” is someone whose studies are complete.

Ikeda: It is interesting to note that the original term for “adept” is composed of two characters meaning “no learning” (Jp. *mugaku*), the implication in a Buddhist context being that the person has completed their learning and has no further need of study. In modern Japanese usage, this term has exactly the opposite meaning — that of “lack of learning,” “uneducated,” or “ignorant.” At first glance, therefore, when one is unaware of this distinction, it would seem to suggest that those with “no learning” are above those with learning!

Suda: Yet, despite the distinction between learners and adepts, they are all voice-hearers who have not yet attained the enlightenment of arhats.

Saito: In short, in these two chapters, prophecies of enlightenment are bestowed on all voice-hearers irrespective of their degree of attainment in practice. The specific

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predictions concerning the titles of the Buddhas they will become, and the names of the *kalpas* when, and the lands where, they will be active, are as follows.

Shakyamuni predicts that Purna, in an age called Treasure Bright and a land called Good and Pure, will become a Buddha named Law Bright Thus Come One. He predicts that the five hundred arhats will become Buddhas called Universal Brightness Thus Come One. He predicts that Ananda, in an age called Wonderful Sound Filling Everywhere and a land called Ever-Standing Victory Banner, will become a Buddha called Mountain Sea Wisdom Unrestricted Power King Thus Come One. Rahula, he predicts, will become a Buddha called Stepping on Seven Treasure Flowers Thus Come One. And he predicts that the two thousand learners and adepts will become Buddhas called Jewel Sign Thus Come One.

Later, in the “Encouraging Devotion,” the thirteenth chapter, Shakyamuni says, “I earlier made a general statement saying that all the voice-hearers had received such a prophecy” (LS13, 191).

Ikeda: As I have mentioned before, the spirit of the bestowal of prophecy upon the voice-hearers is that of a bestowal of prophecy upon all people. The promise of enlightenment does not apply only to the voice-hearers; all people can attain Buddhahood. All people can inherit the Buddha’s wisdom and become capable of leading others to happiness. This idea is indicated in the prophecy of enlightenment upon all voice-hearers, in which no distinction is made between arhats, learners and adepts.

Nichiren Daishonin says, “T’ien-t’ai establishes that the attainment of Buddhahood by those in the two realms of Learning [voice-hearers] and Realization [*pratyekabuddhas*] is proof that all persons without exception can become Buddhas” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Dai-shonin*, vol. 5, p. 25). In the provisional teachings that preceded the Lotus Sutra, all voice-hearers were deemed to be incapable of ever attaining Buddhahood. But in the Lotus Sutra, they are revealed to be capable of attaining Buddhahood. This clarifies that, not only the people of the two vehicles, but all beings in the ten worlds can attain Buddhahood.

That is because the life of one voice-hearer is endowed with all ten worlds. So the bestowal of a prophecy of enlightenment upon one voice-hearer indicates that all ten worlds of life can manifest the world of Buddhahood. The fact that the ten worlds can manifest the world of Buddhahood means that living beings in any world can attain Buddhahood.

On the other hand, if the voice-hearers (i.e., those in the world of Learning) could not become Buddhas, it would mean that the world of Learning in the lives of bodhisattvas, as well as the world of Learning in the life of the Buddha, could not manifest the world of Buddhahood.

Endo: If neither bodhisattvas nor Buddhas could attain Buddhahood, Buddhism would not exist.

Ikeda: The enlightenment of the voice-hearers and *pratyekabuddhas* (the people of the two vehicles), therefore, is the very cornerstone of Buddhism.

Now, the voice-hearers comprised people who were closest to Shakyamuni, people constantly at the Buddha’s side. If Shakyamuni could not enable them to attain

Buddhahood, then we would have to wonder about the purpose of Buddhism.

The voice-hearers and *pratyekabuddhas* were held to have “scorched the seeds” of Buddhahood in their lives. Shakyamuni’s enabling them to become Buddhas reveals the power of the Lotus Sutra to enable all people to attain Buddhahood. The sutra in effect proclaims to all people: “You, too, can develop the same state of life as the Buddha.” This is the spirit of the bestowal of prophecy.

Suda: Nichiren Daishonin expresses the same spirit with his own words. In the “Ongi Kuden” (Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings), it says:

Now, when Nichiren and his followers chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, they are bestowing on both learners and adepts a prophecy that, as Shakyamuni Buddha said, “all persons [will be] equal to me, without any distinction between us,” are they not? . . . On all of them, wise and ignorant alike, we bestow the prophecy of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, “forcing them to listen, though it angers them.” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 735)

Ikeda: That is the spirit of kosen-rufu—to expound the Mystic Law to people whether they are wise or ignorant, whether they believe or disbelieve. Those who reject the teaching will be led to enlightenment through a “poison-drum” relationship,¹¹ that is, through the benefit of a reverse relationship. This is the true bestowal of prophecy. The members of the SGI have put this teaching into practice. The spirit of the Lotus Sutra is alive and well within the SGI.

The “Unification of the Practitioners” and “Unification of the Teachings”

Saito: As we have discussed previously, starting in the “Simile and Parable,” the third chapter, one after another the voice-hearers, beginning with Shariputra, receive predictions of future enlightenment. This signifies their transformation from “people who are saved” into “people who save others.” The voice-hearers, in other words, become bodhisattvas.

Endo: In “Expedient Means,” Shakyamuni says, “I employ only the single vehicle way / to teach and convert the bodhisattvas, / I have no voice-hearer disciples” (LS2, 45). This is the “unification of the practitioners” (i.e., the unification of the persons practicing the three vehicles within the one vehicle); and we should note that it is confirmed already in “Expedient Means.” This means that all who are instructed through the path of the one vehicle (i.e., the Lotus Sutra) are bodhisattvas.

Saito: Unification, here, means amalgamating things usually thought of as distinct or separate, by viewing them from a higher perspective. In terms of the teaching, unification means that the Buddha expounds only the one Buddha vehicle, and that there are no separate teachings of the three vehicles (of voice-hearers, *pratyekabuddhas* and bodhisattvas). When we view the three vehicles as distinct teachings, we view them from the standpoint of the people who receive these teachings. From the Buddha’s perspective, they are unified; he is expounding only one path to attaining Buddhahood, and that is the one Buddha vehicle.

In terms of the practitioners, the Buddha teaches only bodhisattvas who cherish the aspiration to attain Buddhahood; there are no distinctions of voice-hearer,

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pratyekabuddha and bodhisattva among the disciples whom he instructs. From the standpoint of the “unification of the practitioners,” the Buddha discerns that all people in the depths of their lives aspire to become Buddhas and have a seeking spirit for the Buddha’s wisdom. From that perspective, all people alike are unified as bodhisattvas.

At the outset of “Five Hundred Disciples,” Purna, having in the preceding chapter, “Phantom City,” heard Shakyamuni expound the causes and conditions uniting the disciples with the mentor since the remote past of *sanzen-jintengo*, realizes “the wish that we have had deep in our hearts from the start” (LS8, 144). In other words, he indicates that, since the distant past, he has yearned to attain Buddhahood, and has carried out bodhisattva practice together with his mentor, Shakyamuni. Before becoming a voice-hearer, he was a bodhisattva; and this, he realizes, is his true identity.

The “unification of the practitioners” of the Lotus Sutra clarifies that “deep in their hearts” all people are originally bodhisattvas. From this perspective, all people are equal, not in terms of appearance or abilities, but on the level of life itself; they are a single unified entity.

Ikeda: This most egalitarian understanding of life is substantiated by the principles of the mutual possession of the ten worlds and three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

Suda: In “Learners and Adepts,” it is clarified that Ananda is “foremost in hearing the Buddha’s teachings,” not in his practice as a voice-hearer, but based on his “original wish” as a bodhisattva. This is because, through hearing the Law continuously as the Buddha’s attendant and relaying it to others, he can guide others to attain Buddhahood.

Endo: The same is true of Rahula’s virtue of being foremost in inconspicuous practice. Rahula was born as the son of Shakyamuni. In becoming Shakyamuni’s disciple after the latter attained enlightenment, it is explained, Rahula did not become a voice-hearer but carried out inconspicuous practice with the single-minded hope of attaining Buddhahood. His practice, of which others were unaware (hence, called “inconspicuous”), was bodhisattva practice. The same is true of the voice-hearers at the levels of learner and adept.

Ikeda: The “Five Hundred Disciples” and “Learners and Adepts” chapters reveal that all voice-hearers are originally bodhisattvas. We can view the revelation of the true identity of the voice-hearers as the theme of these two chapters.

Of course, from a more profound perspective, even the view that they are “originally bodhisattvas” or that they have “secured their attainment of Buddhahood” is from the standpoint of the theoretical teaching, or the Lotus Sutra’s first half. From the standpoint of the essential teaching, or the latter half of the sutra (i.e., in terms of the implicit meaning), it is the revelation that “our life has from the beginning been a Buddha” (GZ, 788).

The standpoint of the theoretical teaching is that a person carries out bodhisattva practice and then becomes a Buddha; in other words, that one proceeds from the cause to the effect, from the nine worlds to the world of Buddhahood. By contrast, the

essential teaching takes the position that a Buddha enlightened from the remote past carries out bodhisattva practice; in other words, that one proceeds from the effect to the cause, from the world of Buddhahood to the nine worlds. From this standpoint, the life of a bodhisattva is in fact none other than the life of the Buddha.

Also, their recollecting “the wish that we have had deep in our hearts from the start” means that they base themselves on their awareness of the Buddha’s having sown the seed of enlightenment in their lives in the remote past.

To put it another way, in supposing that they were earnestly making efforts to become Buddhas, the voice-hearers were proceeding from cause to effect (i.e., practicing from the standpoint of theoretical teaching). But once they ascend the mountain of the Lotus Sutra and look around, the world at once opens up and they behold the vast panorama of the universe. At that point, they understand that the Buddha enlightened since the remote past has been ceaselessly carrying out bodhisattva practice to guide the beings of the ten worlds. (This is the standpoint of the essential teaching, of proceeding from the effect to the cause.) This Buddha carries out this activity, without interruption or change, eternally — over past, present and future.

When the voice-hearers look at themselves, they realize that, as common mortals of *kuon ganjo*, they have all along been in a relation of oneness with the Buddha. At one with the mentor, they are carrying out bodhisattva practice toward the goal of *kosen-rufu*. The essential teaching reveals to the beings in the assembly this profound aspect of their lives.

I hope we can discuss this matter in more detail on some occasion.

Return to the Prime Point of the Human Being

Ikeda: Broadly speaking, the unification of the practitioners means transcending all differences among people by viewing things from a deeper level, and perceiving that all are equally worthy of respect.

During the Cold War, for example, the doors of the communist world were closed tight, as though frozen over with ice or barred by iron. But there was no reason why, differences between capitalism and socialism notwithstanding, exchange could not take place based on the recognition of a common humanity. That was my conviction.

Saito: When you went to the former Soviet Union, many people criticized you, asking, for example, why a religious leader was traveling to an atheist nation. But your reply to these attacks was perfectly clear: “Because there are people there.” I recall being moved by your actions, thinking that this was truly an example of the “unification of the practitioners” in the present age.

Endo: In concrete terms, exchange on a human level means exchange in the realms of culture and education. To cultivate such exchange is truly to carry out the practice of the Lotus Sutra.

Ikeda: Russia has produced many great writers, including Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, who urged people to transcend differences among themselves and “return to the human being.”

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Suda: Dostoevsky, like Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, was born in what is today St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad).

Ikeda: That's right. In the late nineteenth century, Russian intellectuals were divided into two camps: "Westernists," who were enamored with the thought and tradition of Western Europe, and nationalistic "Slavophiles." Dostoevsky characterized the members of both of these groups as "unhappy wanderers" who had become alienated from the people. He cried:

Oh, all this Slavophilism and this Westernism is a great, although historically inevitable, misunderstanding. . . . Yes, the Russian's destiny is incontestably all-European and universal. To become a genuine and all-round Russian means, perhaps (and this you should remember), to become brother of all men.¹²

"Become a human being!" he cried, in other words. "By doing so, you will become the friend of all people."

Endo: I am reminded of your account of your impressions on visiting the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad.

You wrote:

In the distant future, after countless generations of our grandchildren's grandchildren, when people sift through the past, they will be struck only by the brilliance of human life itself, which far transcends the realm of social systems such as socialism and capitalism. That brilliance is the source of all humanistic and creative culture.¹³

That was more than twenty years ago. Humanity, it seems, is increasingly approaching this realization.

Saito: I cannot help but feel that there are strong similarities between Dostoevsky's thought and the current of humanism and global citizenship that you have been working to develop, President Ikeda.

Ikeda: Russia is a great country. It has produced some of the world's finest literature and music. And, having concluded its grandiose experiment with socialism, it is now struggling to open a new phase in human history.

The people of Russia are pioneers of humankind. It seems to me they are taking the lead in dealing with problems that the rest of humanity will have to face in the future. Therefore, their worries are great, and their mission is likewise immense.

Dostoevsky writes of "becoming brother of all men." What a wonderful sense of mission this is! We have a great deal still to learn from the lofty spirit of Russia.

Incidentally, in connection with the "Five Hundred Disciples" chapter, we cannot omit discussion of the parable of the gem in the robe.

The Parable of the Gem in the Robe

Endo: Yes. After receiving a prophecy of enlightenment from Shakyamuni, the five hundred disciples relate the parable of the gem in the robe as “evidence” of their joy.

Forgetting themselves in their elation, the five hundred arhats kneel down in veneration at Shakyamuni’s feet. They regret their mistake in having been satisfied with the small wisdom of arhats and not seeking the wisdom of the Thus Come One, and reproach themselves. Describing themselves in their earlier foolishness as having been like a “poor wanderer,” they relate the parable of the gem in the robe. It goes as follows.¹⁴

A poor man visits the house of a dear friend. There he feasts and drinks heartily, and falls asleep in a drunken stupor. At that time, the friend suddenly has to go off on urgent official business. Before leaving, the friend sews a “priceless jewel” into the lining of the man’s robe. Because the poor man is asleep drunk, he is completely unaware of this. And he remains ignorant of the jewel later as he goes wandering from one country to another. Over the years, he becomes completely destitute and his life is filled with suffering. He works to clothe and feed himself, but his suffering continues. And whenever he gets a little money, he feels fully content.

Saito: He was living a hand-to-mouth existence.

Ikeda: There are many people today who, spiritually, are in similarly precarious positions.

Suda: At length, the friend encounters the man again. Seeing his ragged appearance, he tells him:

How absurd, old fellow! Why should you have to do all this for the sake of food and clothing? In the past I wanted to make certain you would be able to live in ease . . . and so . . . I took a priceless jewel and sewed it in the lining of your robe. It must still be there now. But you did not know about it, and fretted and wore yourself out trying to provide a living for yourself. What nonsense! (LS8, 151)

The poor man then sees the gem of which his friend has told him and greatly rejoices.

Saito: What is the “priceless jewel”? The sutra describes it as the “determination to seek comprehensive wisdom” and the “desire for comprehensive wisdom” (LS8, 151). “Comprehensive wisdom” is the wisdom of the Buddha. In other words, the priceless jewel is the spirit to seek the Buddha’s wisdom, the spirit of yearning to attain Buddhahood.

As explained in the “Phantom City” chapter, this determination was formed in their lives in the remote past of *sanzen-jintengo* when they heard the Lotus Sutra from Shakyamuni, who was then a bodhisattva. In the parable, this is represented by the gem that had been sewn into the lining of the man’s robe by his good friend. The “good friend,” needless to say, is Shakyamuni.

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Endo: The man's wandering in poverty and his contentment with his precarious existence represents the state of life of the voice-hearers, who had studied the Hinayana teachings, felt satisfied with the enlightenment of arhats, and did not seek the wisdom of the Buddha.

The man's re-encounter with the good friend and finding out about the priceless jewel corresponds to the voice-hearers now hearing the Lotus Sutra. That is, through hearing the Lotus Sutra in the present, they recall the "original wish" to attain Buddhahood they had conceived in the remote past of *sanzen-jintengo*.

Ikeda: They return to their "true selves." This is the "awakening of the voice-hearers." They wake up from the "drunken stupor of darkness" (that is, ignorance about the true nature of their lives).

A key word, here, is "recollect." They return to their own prime point. They perceive the Law that is the well-spring of their own lives. It is a matter of "returning to the self." It was the stupor of "darkness" that had caused them to forget this. T'ien-t'ai says that this stupor may be either heavy or light.¹⁵

Saito: There is "heavy drunkenness" and "light drunkenness." "Heavy drunkenness" is the state where one completely has no recollection. This is comparable to being dead drunk. "Light drunkenness" is like the state of someone who is only slightly inebriated at the time but who afterwards forgets everything.

Ikeda: While there are differences in degree of "drunkenness," in either case the person fails to remember. That is what "darkness" means. Because their hearts are shrouded in darkness, they cannot understand the wonder of their own lives.

Suda: People who are drunk have a hard time accepting that they are drunk.

Saito: And, for that matter, trying to wake someone who has passed out from drink is next to impossible.

Ikeda: It seems that for most of us it's only after receiving a lot of strict encouragement from our seniors in Buddhist practice that we finally wake up in faith.

Suda: In the "Ongi Kuden," the Daishonin says, "Now, when Nichiren and his followers chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, they are in effect sobering up from the wine of ignorance" (GZ, 735). The sense of exhilaration we feel when chanting daimoku is the joy of awakening from the stupor of darkness.

Endo: The sutra says, "When the poor man saw the jewel / his heart was filled with great joy" (LS8, 152). The "Ongi Kuden" states regarding this passage:

This passage refers to the great joy we experience when we understand for the first time that our life has from the beginning been a Buddha. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the greatest of all joys. (GZ, 788)

Ikeda: We each have “from the beginning been a Buddha.” The “Five Hundred Disciples” chapter speaks of the “wish that we [the Buddha’s disciples] have had deep in our hearts from the start.” In a nutshell, this is the great wish to lead all people to enlightenment. It is this great wish that the voice-hearers have recollected.

Nichiren Daishonin says, “‘Great wish’ refers to the propagation of the Lotus Sutra” (GZ, 736). When we base ourselves on this great wish, we discover the “priceless jewel hidden in the robe.”

Endo: I have an image of the “priceless jewel” as something like an inexhaustible wellspring of benefit that enables us to get whatever we desire.

Ikeda: When we base ourselves on the great wish for kosen-rufu, all our desires will be realized.

Once at a meeting, after listening with delight to members relate experiences of benefit in faith, second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda remarked: “Benefit of the kind mentioned in the experiences given earlier hardly counts as benefit. Supposing the benefit I have received is comparable in size to this auditorium, then their benefit is only the size of a finger.”¹⁶ I remember the scene clearly because I attended the meeting and had spoken as a youth division representative.

President Toda had experienced the great and profound benefit of the Mystic Law with his entire being. And he sincerely wanted every Soka Gakkai member without exception to equally gain this great benefit. In these words I could keenly sense his immense mercy.

So he called out, urging us to base our lives on the great wish for kosen-rufu. He told us he wanted to enable us to receive great benefit through working for kosen-rufu. Ultimately, it is we ourselves, not others, who benefit the most from our efforts for kosen-rufu.

Endo: Profound significance then attaches to SGI members’ activities.

Changing Destiny Into Mission

Ikeda: When we base ourselves on the great wish for kosen-rufu, then everything, every situation, takes on value for our lives. Nothing around us is without meaning; no effort is wasted.

The Daishonin cries, “All my disciples must cherish the great desire. . . . Since death is the same in either case, you should be willing to offer your life for the Lotus Sutra. Think of this offering as a drop of dew rejoining the ocean or a speck of dust returning to the earth” (MW-1, 250-51).

There are also the golden words, “Like dew entering the ocean, or dirt being added to the earth, your good fortune will neither be lost in lifetime after lifetime, nor decay in world after world” (GZ, 968).

Life, he says, is as evanescent as “dew.” In the greater scheme of things, our bodies in and of themselves may seem as insignificant as “dust.” But through manifesting and acting upon the “great wish” of faith, our lives become eternal. Our lives, together with the ocean of the Lotus Sutra and the great earth of the Mystic Law, will never for all eternity disappear or decay. We will be forever connected with the great state of life

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of the Buddha. This is the Daishonin's promise. This is the dynamic drama we are enacting.

Suda: Speaking of enacting a drama, in "Five Hundred Disciples" there is a passage:

Inwardly, in secret, the sons act as bodhisattvas,
but outwardly they show themselves as voice-hearers.
They seem to be lessening desires out of hatred for birth and death,
but in truth they are purifying the Buddha lands. (LS8, 146)

In other words, outwardly they display the appearance of voice-hearers trying to escape the cycle of birth and death but, in truth, they carry out the practice of bodhisattvas who work to purify the Buddha lands.

Saito: Next, Shakyamuni says:

Before the multitude they seem possessed of the three poisons
or manifest the signs of heretical views.
My disciples in this manner
use expedient means to save living beings. (LS8, 146–47)

In other words, the voice-hearers' seeming defilement by the three poisons — greed, anger and stupidity — and attachment to erroneous views are just expedient means they employ to lead all people to enlightenment.

Ikeda: From our standpoint, we have been born in this world to fulfill the "great wish" we have cherished since the remote past. When we have this conviction, we realize that all our sufferings and illusions in this life are expedient means for us to help others become happy.

Were we to appear before others blessed with every good fortune and completely free of suffering, then no one could understand the greatness of the Mystic Law. Furthermore, it is unlikely that we could understand people's hearts. All our karmic sufferings we ourselves "dared to choose" so that we might overcome them and show proof of victory. We need to be confident of this. Since these are sufferings that we ourselves created in order to triumph over, our victory is certain. We cannot possibly be defeated.

When we awaken to the "great wish" for kosen-rufu, that is, when we realize "from the beginning I have been a Buddha," then even harsh destiny changes into mission. We are born with sufferings just like everyone else. By always practicing together with the people, we construct lives of ultimate happiness. This is the drama of mission that we enact.

The SGI Is a Body of People Who Base Themselves on the "Great Wish"

Saito: Speaking of turning everything into a source of benefit and value, there is truly a great diversity of people in the SGI. This is because the SGI bases itself not on a

narrow, biased “small wish,” but on the “great wish” for the happiness of all humankind.

Suda: There are leaders who are highly intelligent or enjoy very favorable circumstances, or who have prestigious academic degrees. Again, there are leaders who, while not having degrees or titles, have had to struggle hard in life and who understand people’s hearts more than anybody else. I think that each has their mission and role to play.

Ikeda: That’s exactly right. But we mustn’t forget that it definitely wasn’t intellectuals who worked desperately to rebuild the Soka Gakkai when Japan stood in ruins at the end of the war. The Gakkai was built by down-to-earth, ordinary people. Though widely derided as a “gathering of sick and poor,” it was they who constructed the great movement of people united for peace, culture and education that today spans the world.

Intellectuals have certain strengths and they also have weaknesses. Japanese intellectuals, in particular, rather than trying to protect the people, exhibit a strong inclination to try to protect themselves and their own interests. In a life dedicated to the great wish for kosen-rufu, there is no need for such small-mindedness. It’s a matter of discarding the narrow concerns of the lesser self, allowing them to fall away like “a speck of dust returning to the earth” (MW-1, 251).

Young people in particular should struggle hard to overcome difficulties with the determination that the greater their struggles, the better they will be able to understand people’s hearts, and the greater will be their mission.

At any rate, the Lotus Sutra calls out to the voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas: “Return to the wellspring of life!” “Recollect your great wish!” In terms of concrete action, this means living and working among the people. Above all, the Lotus Sutra urges them: “Learn from the people!”

Dostoevsky advises intellectuals, “Let us stand there and let us learn the people’s humility, their business-like reasoning, the concreteness of their minds.”¹⁷ And he warns them, “Society cannot be animated because you do not rely upon the people; spiritually, the people are not with you, and they are alien to you.”¹⁸

Endo: This was his conviction as someone who lived together with the people during his long exile.

Ikeda: Of particular note, Dostoevsky, who had once discarded his religious beliefs in favor of “European liberalism,” recouped his spirituality thanks to his experience of living among the people.¹⁹ For Dostoevsky, the people were the “great earth” that taught him faith in his roots as a human being. It is interesting that, on the day Dostoevsky died, he had his wife read their children the parable of the prodigal son from the Bible.²⁰

Endo: The parable of the prodigal son essentially tells the story of a young man, who leaves home and squanders his fortune in dissolute living in a distant land, and who, upon realizing the error of his ways, repents and returns to his father’s fold, where all is forgiven.

Suda: Because of the similarities with the Lotus Sutra's parable of the wealthy man and his poor son (in the "Belief and Understanding" chapter), there are scholars who view this as evidence of the Lotus Sutra's influence.

Ikeda: Through religious faith, Dostoevsky hoped to bring an end to his spiritual wandering. At the same time, he wanted to bring other wanderers along back with him. He wanted to help them return to the "great earth" of the people, where faith pulses so vibrantly. "Wanderers" correspond to the poor son in the parable of the wealthy man and his poor son, as well as also to the poor man in the parable of the gem in the robe.

In a sense, it could be said that humankind is today in the position of the prodigal son or the poor man. We in the SGI are calling out to humankind, which wanders lost through life: "Here is the great earth of life to which you may return!" "In your heart, you hold the key to bring your wandering to an end!" Such are the lives we are leading. Such actions constitute the true path whereby we may free ourselves from a life of "poverty."

Amid the storm of persecution, Nichiren Daishonin declared: "I, Nichiren, am the richest man in all of present-day Japan. I have dedicated my life to the Lotus Sutra, and my name will be handed down in ages to come" (MW-2 [2nd ed.], 151). Let us follow the original Buddha in maintaining this confidence and pride.

(To be continued)

Illustrations by Larry Ashton

Footnotes

1. Harrison E. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 468.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 518.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 461.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 462.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 463.

7. Hereinafter "Five Hundred Disciples" and "Learners and Adepts," respectively.

8. Revelation: The second of the three divisions of a sutra (preparation, revelation and transmission), a format often used in interpreting sutras thought to have been formulated by T'ien-t'ai. Preparation indicates the introductory section, revelation the part containing the main teaching, and transmission the concluding part. In the case of the Lotus Sutra, in addition to the entire sutra having these divisions, each half may be further analyzed into three sections.

9. Four great voice-hearer disciples: Maudgalyayana, Mahakashyapa, Katyayana and Subhuti.

10. Translated from Japanese. *Nanden Daizokyo*, ed. Junjiro Takakusu (Tokyo: Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo Kanko-kai, 1971), vol. 15, pp. 99-102. cf. *The Book of*

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Kindred Sayings (Sanyutta-Nikaya), Part IV, The Salayatana Book, trans. Mrs. Rhys Davids (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1993), pp. 35–36.

11. Poison-drum relationship: Another term for reverse relationship, i.e., a bond formed with the Lotus Sutra by opposing or slandering it. The expression “poison drum” comes from the Nirvana Sutra, vol. 9, which states, “Once the poison drum is beaten, all the people who hear it will die, regardless of whether or not they have a mind to listen to it.” Similarly, when one preaches the Lotus Sutra, both those who embrace it and those who oppose it will equally receive the seed of Buddhahood.

12. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. Boris Brasol (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p. 979.

13. Translated from Japanese. Daisaku Ikeda, *Watashino Sobieto Kiko* (My Soviet Travels) (Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 1975), p. 133.

14. Cf. LS8, 150–51.

15. *Hokke Mongu* (Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra), vol. 8.

16. At a general meeting of Kamata Chapter at the auditorium of Hoshi University, in Tokyo, June 1953.

17. *The Diary of a Writer*, p. 1034.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 1028.

19. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 984.

20. Aimée Dostoiewsky, *Dosutoefushuki-den* (Life of Dostoevsky, Japanese edition) (Tokyo: Akagi Shobo, 1946), p. 244.

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