

THE GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LOTUS SUTRA
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THE arrival of the year 2000 will mark a new century and a new millennium. Within Mahayana Buddhism, each age has brought new questions and concerns to the Lotus Sutra, and often found fresh meaning not seen in previous periods. Today, however, the Lotus Sutra belongs not just to Nichiren Buddhism, nor even to Mahayana Buddhism, but to the world. In 1852 the Sanskrit Lotus Sutra was introduced to the West in a French translation¹ and since 1884 it has been advertised as one of the Sacred Books of the East and published in English from Oxford.² Not only has it had Buddhist devotees, but for almost a century it has also attracted attention from Christian scholars.³ Moreover, in the last twenty-five years, the Chinese version of the Lotus Sutra has received at least five new English translations.⁴

So today we can ask about its role not just for Buddhism, but for humanity. Accordingly, I shall consider the significance of the Lotus Sutra among other religious scriptures, and then its possible role in the midst of some of the more pressing challenges of the twenty-first century.

1. Challenge of Religious Pluralism

AS a global scripture, the claims of ultimacy made for the Lotus Sutra must be placed side-by-side with similar claims made by other Buddhist scriptures, as well as by non-Buddhist scriptures, such as the claims that Muslims make for the Holy Qur'an. To Muslims and to Lotus devotees, both scriptures are seen to be taught eternally, and to reveal the saving truth for all humanity. In the past, such a situation would constitute a challenge and competition over which was right. But after centuries of futile and wasteful religious war, humanity is learning that the most important question is not which religion is superior to others, but which one has the means to illuminate and help us to understand this religious diversity, and to bring peace and reconciliation in the midst of the world's religions. Rather than become embroiled in interreligious competition over which scripture is best or truest, we first need to consider how the Lotus Sutra can be related to other scriptures, and how it can illuminate our diverse human religious life.

Fortunately, the Lotus Sutra gives a great deal of attention to the fact of other religious teachings, and affirms their importance. However, this affirmation is partial since they are all branded as skillful means (*upaya*, Jpn *hoben*), In contrast, the Lotus teaching is seen as the complete and ultimate teaching (*saddharma*, Jpn *myoho*). Other teachings may be useful for the specific needs and capacities of individuals at certain times and places, but all are incomplete and will be swallowed up in the true and final teaching of the Lotus teaching.

This position means that the Lotus Sutra is not exclusivistic, but affirms that other reli-

gious teachings have positive value. However, it is not blindly tolerant of them either, but evaluates both their positive contributions in helping people at lower levels of growth, while judging them to be limited and unable to reach the highest levels. Accordingly, the Lotus Sutra denies that all teachings are complementary: they are not different but equal paths to the same goal. Rather, the Lotus expresses a developmental approach to other religions which accepts other religions as useful at a lower level, but finally rejects the “three vehicles” as inadequate for attaining the highest truth which can only be attained through the “one vehicle” of the Lotus teaching.

The Lotus position on pluralism seems to echo the Roman Catholic approach based on Thomas Aquinas. When confronted with the obvious value of Greek philosophy, Aquinas developed the distinction between reason and revelation. Greek philosophy made great contributions at the universal level of human reason, but these rational truths needed to be completed and fulfilled by divine revelation that was only available through Christianity. Just as the Catholic Church has taught that there is no final salvation outside the Church, so the Lotus Sutra seems to be teaching that there is no final salvation outside the Lotus teaching.

A central issue to be decided is whether the ultimate Lotus teaching (*saddharma*) is to be totally identified with the Lotus Sutra preserved in Sanskrit and Chinese, or whether it is transcendent. Similarly, Roman Catholics have to decide whether or not salvation by God is limited to the Catholic Church, and Muslims have to decide whether salvation is limited to those devoted to the Arabic Qur’an. This is a major question for the twenty-first century, and how followers of the Lotus Sutra deal with this issue of pluralism will greatly determine its future role.

In the past, *saddharma* (true teaching, Jpn *myoho*) in the Lotus Sutra has often been used as a polemical term to argue for the superiority of the Lotus above other, rival and lesser, teachings. Similarly, in the Lotus Sutra the word *upaya* (Skillful Means, Jpn *hoben*) refers to all other teachings, but not the Lotus teaching. From this point of view, the only viable religious peace in the future would be for all other religions to abandon their teachings and join the Lotus community. This attitude can be called “tolerant triumphalism” since it is tolerant of other religions in limited roles, but affirms that the Lotus is ultimate. For example, all references in the Lotus Sutra to the coming “age of decay” when other forms of truth will be in decline also affirms the continued strength, saving power, and triumph of the Lotus teaching.⁵

In spite of the many verses of praise in the Lotus Sutra for those who recite, chant, uphold, and teach it, in the context of global pluralism some new interpretations of the Lotus Sutra may be necessary if it is to fulfill its own promise in the next millennium. Even though the Lotus Sutra may be saving and bring many benefits and become ultimate for many people, do these positive cases make it universally ultimate for all times, places, and people? I would argue that we can and should distinguish between the written text of the Lotus Sutra and the Lotus sermon [teaching] that is celebrated in the sutra. The Lotus Sutra says that the Lotus sermon contains the ultimate saving truth, but that sermon is not recorded in the Lotus Sutra. The sutra is a text that tells us about the contents of the Lotus sermon but is not identified with the Lotus sermon. I would propose that the saving truth that is celebrated in the written text is in fact beyond the written text, is beyond the chanted words, and is beyond our ability to own, read, write, or fully express it, even though we may have access to this saving truth through the written words.

The distinction between the written Lotus and the eternal Lotus sermon is not different from the distinction between the finger that points and the moon that is pointed at. Although the finger may be important and necessary for the salvation of some, it is the moon that is the reality to be experienced and the source of saving truth. Based on this distinction, the effectiveness (*upaya*) of the written Lotus Sutra can be celebrated by those whose lives have been saved through it and by those who have experienced ultimacy by means of it. However, there is the possibility that other people may find other means to discover and be saved by the reality proclaimed in the transcendent Lotus sermon (*saddharma*).

To support this distinction, I would propose that we apply the teaching of the Lotus Sutra about *upaya* to the written text of the Lotus Sutra itself. Accordingly, the Lotus Sutra in its present form is to be cherished because it is skillful in pointing toward the *saddharma* and is helpful to the spiritual growth of people. But while revering and honoring it as a text and for the truth it imparts, we should also see that the text, unlike the truth to which it points, is constructed and partial, conditioned and impermanent, like all things that are made.

The primary role of a scripture is to bring ultimate salvation to beings by being a vehicle for saving truth. Even though some may worship the written text of the Lotus Sutra because of its unique role in bringing saving truth to them, cannot this be seen as an *upaya* that might be swept away and disappear like the three vehicles by the one great vehicle of *saddharma*?

Etienne Lamotte has pointed out that, even though the Buddha's teaching about conditioned [dependent] origination is considered to be unchanging (*paramartha*), how it is taught, learned, and followed by people is part of the conditioned world of change (*samvrti*). Accordingly, it is not surprising that early in Buddhist thought, there developed the idea of *mappo*, [the Latter Day of the Law] a future period when Buddhism itself would one day decline and disappear.⁶ Even though one may believe that the truth preached in the Lotus sermon is eternal truth and will reappear in age after age, the Sanskrit, Chinese, English and French forms of the written and chanted text are finite, changing, and one day will disappear.

When the Lotus Sutra is seen within human religious history as an expression of the human tendency to revere certain texts as sacred, we discover that the role of Lotus practitioners and devotees becomes very important. Scriptures are not born as scriptures, but become that way because of their role in human lives and because of human responses. In a historical context, the truth of scriptures has no external validity. Instead, their truth necessarily arises interactively with believers. Their significance is not found in isolation and abstractly, but only in the lives of people who respond to them, are changed through them, and value them. It is people who discover the Lotus Sutra to be supreme, not just because the text says so.⁷ Accordingly, it is people who have to decide how and in what way the text is ultimate.

The Lotus Sutra is filled with many sectarian messages that praise the preachers of the Lotus, and promise great rewards to them for suffering through persecution, while heaping vile threats against those who reject the Lotus teachings. However, by distinguishing between the saving truth (the *saddharma*) and its vehicle (the written Lotus Sutra), Lotus devotees and preachers may find some common ground with other religious followers who may not know the written Lotus Sutra, but who may be devoted to the eternal truth (*saddharma*) conveyed through it.

In order for the Lotus Sutra to offer a saving and harmonious message for the twenty-first century, I am proposing that it be seen as affirming innumerable different forms of

religion as *upaya* (including the written Lotus Sutra), while also affirming the universal truth that is beyond all forms (*saddharma*) that is saving and eternal. For devotees, the written and chanted Lotus Sutra still would be saving and ultimate and a unique expression of the one vehicle, but the *saddharma* which is made accessible through the written Lotus Sutra would not be confined to it, and could be available to others through other *upaya*. This interpretation provides a positive base to affirm the highest values of religion while respecting global religious differences, and is based on the key ideas of skillful means and eternity in the Lotus.

Can the various bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra be seen as practical examples to be followed in the next century? Whereas T'ien-t'ai Chihi (538–597) found many important philosophical and meditative truths in the Lotus Sutra, it was the founder of the Three Stages Movement, Hsin-hsing (540–594), who implemented its teaching in social welfare programs. Like Sadaparibhuta Bodhisattva (Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, Jpn Fukyo), he never disparaged others but praised them as future Buddhas. Can Lotus devotees treat members of other religions like that? Also, the new problems of the next century will require many innovative solutions. Can Lotus devotees be like Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds (Jpn Kannon) and adopt many new and different forms in order to be helpful to others, even if these forms are in the garb of other religions and other scriptures?

It may be true that only those who have faith can understand the Lotus Sutra, but all people can understand and appreciate the importance of the Lotus Sutra if Lotus devotees are able to positively impact the world in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, let me outline three more urgent challenges that face the twenty-first century and invite Lotus devotees to demonstrate the truth of the Lotus by bodhisattva actions in these areas.

2. Challenge of the Earth

In preparation for the centennial celebration of the 1893 Parliament of World's Religions, Gerald O. Barney published a book entitled *Global 2000 Revisited: What Shall We Do?* in which he carefully outlined how over-population, dwindling natural resources, and new forms of poverty, violence, hatred, and despair are threatening the life of the planet. To begin the recovery process, "requires as its first condition a sustainable, just, and healthy human relationship with Earth."⁸ How does the Lotus Sutra nurture this primary connection with the earth?

The Lotus Sutra is a product of what Karl Jaspers has called the axial age of religions, the period when most of the major world religions were formed. Basically, this axial period saw not only the emergence of great thinkers such as Plato and Confucius, but the founding of many new religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and Talmudic Judaism. These axial religions are distinctive since they arose as historical movements that broke from the rural cultures that focused on close relationships with the earth and sky. By contrast, these new revelations focused on social relations or inner thoughts and attitudes not connected with the land or sky or animals. This separation from kinship with the local environment also made these new religions more portable, and enabled them to spread.

Today various world religions that follow this axial model are beginning to see how their separation from nature has meant the loss of a natural wholeness fostered by indigenous cultures. When North American Indians visited the United Nations to see how each nation had a representative, they reportedly asked: But who will represent the animals and the birds? Modern society has devalued nature, whereas native peoples have commonly revered

nature. As the American Indian Chief Seattle reportedly said to President Pierce in 1885 when the president asked to buy the chief's land:

How can you buy or sell the sky—the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people, every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

In a recent study in modern Japan, the importance of nature for elderly people was a remarkable discovery. When the elderly were asked what sights, sounds, and smells they wished to have when they are dying, invariably the sight of trees and nature, the smell of fresh air, and the sounds of birds and the wind were most valued.⁹ Similarly, most readers of this journal and most followers of the Lotus Sutra are probably preoccupied with social issues and neglect nature. However the approach of death sets in sharp relief those things that are most important in life, and the primacy of the earth and sky emerges. Accordingly, the need to protect and cultivate nature not only is important for the health of our planet, but for our own spiritual growth as well.

Of all the major scriptures of the world, the Lotus Sutra stands out for being named after a flower and for its numerous references to nature. I would think that the Lotus Sutra has the potential to be of great significance in the twenty-first century in helping us to recover our kinship with nature. There is certainly enough imagery in the Lotus Sutra to inspire a recovery of our relations with nature, but whether or not this happens will depend on how the Lotus Sutra is interpreted by its devotees.

3. Challenge of the Economy

The major enemy of our kinship with nature is the greed of consumerism. As a consequence, the North consumes too much to satisfy its ego, while the burgeoning population of the South needs to consume more just to survive. “For the people of the South to live as the people in the North now live would require an increase by a factor of five to ten in the total economic activity on the planet.”¹⁰ How ironic that just as capitalism has won world dominance with its free market-system economic model, increased production and consumption is proving to be a disaster to the earth. The earth is now ruled not by the United Nations, nor by national governments, nor by military agreements, but by international business and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT). People's worth is measured more in economic terms than national, cultural or religious values. The shopping malls of America are not just market places, but are the new temples of refuge, renewal, and recreation. Whereas fifty years ago malls were often closed on the holidays as representing work, now they are most active on holidays as the growing center of American community life.

What does the Lotus Sutra have to say about economic life? Perhaps this is the weakest area for Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra, but it is the area that will dominate war in the twenty-first century. In the past in Europe, religious wars dominated life up until 1648 when the Holy Roman Empire collapsed, the Peace Treaty of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War between the Catholic and Protestants, and the nation-state system was born. After 1648 conflicts between nations dominated war and peace, and loyalty to one's nation

could inspire people to die or to kill others. However, since 1945 and the founding of the United Nations, the major factor inspiring war has been economic conflict, as most vividly expressed in the Cold War struggle between Communism and Capitalism. Even though capitalism is now the world economic system, local wars are dominated by economics.

There are some alternatives posited in the Lotus Sutra. The desolate son is secretly hired by his father not to increase consumption or production, but to enable him to achieve various personal, social, and spiritual virtues. The jewel hidden in the garment of the poor man by his wealthy friend is a symbol of his Buddha Nature, his potential for enlightenment. Wealth is not denied, but placed in context under higher values. The magical city becomes a symbol for a lower level of nirvana, not the highest attainment. The Bodhisattva Gladly Seen by All Living Beings finally burns his own body as an offering to the Buddha and becomes the Medicine King. What finally is to be valued is not wealth or one's body, but the Eternal Buddha and one's Bodhisattva service to others.

4. Global Ethics

During the closing plenary meeting of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions held on September 4 in Chicago, a solemn declaration was read outlining global problems and inviting those present to commit themselves to working toward a global ethic. Delegates then signed a document of intent, that included the passage:

By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. By a global ethic we mean a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes. Without such a fundamental consensus on an ethic, sooner or later every community will be threatened by chaos or dictatorship, and individuals will despair.¹¹

The quest for a global ethics arose from an initiative by the European theologian, Hans Kung, who has said:

No peace in the world until there is peace among the religions; no peace among the religions until there is dialogue among the religions.

Certainly the Lotus Sutra is committed to actively engaging others and to a final unity in the one vehicle. However, can Lotus devotees affirm the present value of other religious people as following helpful paths (*upāyo*) in the short run, such as over the next century or next millennium, even though these paths may not have saving truth for Lotus devotees? Second, will Lotus practitioners also accept the idea that it is important to find ways to avoid human and ecological misery by forming a shared human community based on a commitment to minimal ethical standards for all humans?

Concluding Reflections

The significance of the Lotus Sutra for the coming century is not an abstract question, but involves the visions, decisions, and work of those who are devotees of the Lotus Sutra. For it to be a guiding light for the dawn of a new age, it must become "the light that shines

in the darkness” of our world. Certainly there are perennial forms of darkness that are shared in all ages by humanity, such as sickness, old age, and death, that the Lotus Sutra will continue to alleviate. However, there are also specific challenges that dominate each historical period, and already it is clear what some of these major problems will be for the twenty-first century: namely, religious pluralism, the environment, economics, and the need for global ethics. How devotees of the Lotus Sutra are responding to these problems in the present can serve as a barometer to measure the significance of the Lotus Sutra for the future. □

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1. Burnouf, Eugene, tr., *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1852), 897 pp.
2. Kern, Hendrik, tr., *Saddharma-Pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884), 454 pp.
3. See Elizabeth A. Gordon, *The Lotus-Gospel, or Mahayana Buddhism and Its Symbolic Teachings Compared Historically and Geographically with those of Catholic Christianity* (Tokyo: Waseda University Library, 1911), 392 pp., and more recently Michael Fuss, *Buddhavacana & Dei Verbum: A Phenomenological & Theological Comparison of Scriptural Inspiration in the Saddharmapundarika Sutra & in the Christian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 479 pp.
4. These translations are by Kato, Bunno and others, tr., *Myoho-Renge-Kyo: The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1971), Murano, Senchu, tr., *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* (Tokyo: Nichiren Shu Headquarters, 1974), Hurvitz, Leon, tr., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) and most recently Kubo, Tsugunari and Yuyama, Akira, tr., *The Lotus Sutra* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, BDK English Tripitika 13-1,1993) and Watson, Burton, tr., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
5. See T.9.10b, T.9.31a, T.9.38c, etc. I am indebted to Jamie Hubbard for the ideas in this paragraph. See his “Buddhist-Buddhist Dialogue? The Lotus Sutra and the Polemic of Accommodation” in *Buddhist Christian Studies* 15 (1995): 119-136.
6. See David Chappell, “Early Forebodings of the Death of Buddhism,” *Numen* 27.1 (Summer,1980): 122-154, and Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).
7. For an insightful study of the meaning of scripture, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
8. Gerald O. Barney, *Global 2000 Revisited: What Shall We Do?* (Arlington, VA: Millennium Institute, 1993): 52.
9. Public lecture on June 23, 1995 at the University of Hawaii by Carl Becker, Professor Human Sciences at Kyoto University reporting on unpublished field research among the elderly.
10. Gerald O. Barney, *Global 2000 Revisited*: 62.
11. Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kusche, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1993): 21.