

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTEMPORARY LOTUS SUTRA MANUSCRIPT STUDIES BY SGI PRESIDENT DAISAKU IKEDA

In early 1997, the *Sanskrit Lotus Sutra Fragments From the Lushun Museum Collection* was published jointly by the Lushun Museum in China and the Soka Gakkai of Japan. The book was in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries. There are seventy pages of color photographs of the sutra fragments dating from around the fifth or sixth century, making them among the oldest in existence. The fragments were first discovered at the beginning of this century in China's Xinjiang Province. They are important in that they are closest to the time of the Chinese translator of the Lotus Sutra, Kumarajiva (344–413) and correlate with his work. They suggest that differences between Kumarajiva's Chinese translation and that of more recent Sanskrit versions are attributable to changes that arose as the Sanskrit sutra was copied and recopied and even edited. It was Kumarajiva's translation that provided the foundation for the studies of the Chinese sage, T'ien-t'ai (538–597) and was so important to Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) in thirteenth-century Japan.

Over the years, SGI President Ikeda has received copies of several versions of the Lotus Sutra from sources in Russia, China, India and Nepal. In January 1994, in an effort to promote research on these various versions of the Lotus Sutra, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, founded by Mr. Ikeda, sent Professor Katsuhisa Yamada to Dalian, China and the Lushun Museum to assist with compilation of the book. The following is the preface to the book by President Ikeda.

Since ancient times in East Asia, the Lotus Sutra has been called the king of sutras. Why, among all the many sutras, was the Lotus called “king”? No doubt it was mainly because the Lotus Sutra teaches the path to Buddhahood that is open to all people. Rather than being a cold logic that denies and expels others, it is a kingly philosophy that through compassion brings out the best in all things in the universe.

This doctrine is also referred to as the concept of the single vehicle, meaning the single Buddha vehicle or the one great vehicle that is all-encompassing and that embraces all beings equally with wisdom and compassion. Thus, the unifying spirit of the Lotus Sutra can become a wellspring that soothes the miseries of divisiveness and conflict, allays suffering, and ushers in dynamic harmony and peace. One can also understand this from the fact that music and dancing, not blood and sacrifice, are offered to the Lotus. (*Taisho shinshu daizokuyo*, Vol. 9, p. 43). Music and dancing are symbols of vibrant life, of joy and gratitude, and of culture and peace.

Today impenetrably dark clouds of confusion blanket the world. The era of confrontation between two camps polarized by different principles has ended, but this has led to the release of energies of divisiveness and disunion stemming from hatred and violence that has long been dormant deep beneath the surface of human history. Divisive fissures created by ethnic, cultural, religious and racial prejudice have split apart, again and again, people's awareness of themselves as belonging to humanity. We are in a situation now where these fissures reach even to the ecosystem, giving rise to catastrophes in the natural world.

From this set of circumstances have emerged the various difficulties facing the world today — regional strife, economic disparity, exploding populations and starvation, as well as hard dilemmas concerning life ethics and environmental ethics. The burden of these

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problems now presses in upon all the people of the world, regardless of region or nation.

What is urgently needed now is a conceptual, philosophical basis that will help transcend the forces of division and hatred underlying these global problems and make possible unity through compassion.

I believe the single-vehicle teaching expounded in the Lotus Sutra is a concept that will become a ray of light piercing the spiritual darkness so that we may open the way into the new century.

Ours is an age in which people have forgotten the question. “For what purpose was I born into this world?” When they forget to ask this fundamental question concerning the things that support their own lives, human beings often fall into the trap of narrow ideologies such as nationalism.

In the fifteenth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “Emerging from the Earth,” a question is asked about where a great host of bodhisattvas has come from and what causes and conditions have brought them together; *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson. Fundamentally, of course, this is a question about the meaning of the emergence of the bodhisattvas from the earth, and, though out of sequence, an answer to this can be found in the second chapter, “Expedient Means.”

In this chapter the “one great reason” for the appearance of Buddhas in the world is explained. Using the same words as in Shakyamuni’s declaration of his mission (*Mahavagga*, “Great Group-ing” in the *Vinaya-pitaka*), the sutra says Buddhas appear for people’s happiness, for benefit, and for peace (Kern-Nanjio edition, p. 42, 11. 12-15).

The Buddhas make their advent in this world as cosmopolitans transcending racial, ethnic and national differences in order to realize happiness for people—this is the noble declaration of human beings’ essential mission that has borne fruit as the bodhisattva way in Mahayana Buddhism.

Nichiren, the great thirteenth-century Buddhist sage whose teachings we follow, called himself “*Hokekyo no gyoja*,” a votary, or practitioner, of the Lotus Sutra. This golden phrase arose from the fierce struggles in which, with his entire life, he put into practice the single-vehicle doctrine. Because of his faithful adherence to this doctrine, he was twice exiled by the military regime of his time.

The Soka Gakkai has succeeded to the spirit of Nichiren. Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, founder and first president of the Soka Gakkai, embracing the one-vehicle concept of the Lotus Sutra and in exact accord with the spirit of Nichiren, stood up against the fanatic militarist regime and died a martyr in prison during the Second World War. Josei Toda, who would later succeed Mr. Makiguchi as president of the Soka Gakkai, was also imprisoned.

Mr. Toda stood up alone on the ruined earth of a defeated Japan and vowed to rid society of misery and unhappiness. The Soka Gakkai, faithful to the legacy of its first and second presidents, is carrying out peace, cultural, and educational activities worldwide based on the spirit of the Lotus Sutra.

Today, in bringing to people around the world the Lotus Sutra doctrine of happiness equally available to all beings, historical study of the Lotus Sutra is absolutely essential. The foundation of this research should be interpretive reading and comparative studies of various versions of the sutra. The study of the actual process of unfolding the single-vehicle teachings to the various peoples of Asia will enable us to acquire valuable lessons for serving humankind and to extract wisdom that may be employed in the future.

To be more specific, first, through comparative studies of the various versions of the

Lotus Sutra, we can retrace the process by which it came into being and was transmitted. I would like to express my deep respect to Beijing University Professor Ji Xianlin, who has played a pioneering role in this area from the philological viewpoint, and to the other researchers in the field.

Second, analysis of differences in the versions of the sutra excavated or preserved in various areas can provide clues to perceiving how the Lotus Sutra changed and was altered in response to the diversity of the peoples and cultures of Asia.

Third, on the basis of the results of this study, we can analyze the relations between the histories of peoples, each with their own unique culture, and the Lotus Sutra, thus allowing us to also examine how the all-embracing doctrine of the sutra contributed to the formation of these peoples' cultures.

Fourth, extracting lessons from the history of the transmission of the Lotus Sutra can also make possible the discovery of how to nurture, in an all-inclusive way, a common consciousness of belonging to humankind, while making the best of the distinctive features of the earth's varied and diverse cultural areas.

I hope the study of the Lotus Sutra, as it heads into the twenty-first century, will develop into a comprehensive study that is the crystallization of the wisdom of humankind. The basic significance of research on different versions of the Lotus Sutra can be found in the laying of the scholarly foundation for this.

The current project originates partly in the presentation to the Soka Gakkai in 1984 of a precise photo reproduction of a Sanskrit version of the Lotus Sutra in the collection of the Library of the Cultural Palace of the Nationalities in Beijing by Wang Zhen, then honorary president of the China-Japan Friendship Association. I am deeply grateful to Professor Ji and to Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Professorial Research Fellow Jiang Zhongxin for their wide-ranging advice and cooperation regarding the study of ancient texts, and to Lushun Museum Director Liu Guangtang for his great efforts in realizing the publication of the Lushun versions of the Lotus Sutra.

Deeper friendship is desirable between Japan and China for the peace and stability not only of East Asia but also of the whole world, and, in this regard, the publication of these manuscript fragments is one splendid outcome of friendly exchange between Japan and China. And it is my sincere hope that this project will become a step in the direction of still more profound exchange and mutual understanding. □