

DIALOGUE ON THE LOTUS SUTRA (47) CULTURAL ACTIVITIES BASED ON THE MYSTIC LAW ARE “WONDERFUL SOUNDS”

This is the forty-seventh installment of an ongoing discussion on the Lotus Sutra among SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai Study Department Chief Katsuji Saito and Vice Chiefs Takanori Endo and Haruo Suda. It appeared in the December 1998 issue of the Daibyakurengo, the Soka Gakkai study journal.

This installment examines the function of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, a being of magnificent light and sound who appears in the “Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound” (twenty-fourth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. Participants this time discuss the significance of cultural activities based on Buddhism, introducing the brilliant musical culture that has historically developed around Buddhism and the inspiring dramas of the Soka Gakkai’s fife-and-drum corps.

DAISAKU IKEDA: I recently [November 8, 1998] saw the exhibition “The Lotus Sutra and Its World: Buddhist Manuscripts of the Great Silk Road.” The texts themselves seemed to radiate joy and light. They seemed to smile as though they were truly happy. There were Sanskrit texts [of the Lotus Sutra] dating back twelve or thirteen hundred years.

KATSUJI SAITO: The highlight of the exhibition was a text known as the Petrovsky manuscript. Dating from the 7th or 8th century, it was excavated at Khotan in western China and named after the Russian consul general of Kashgal, a major link along the ancient trade route known as the Silk Road.

TAKANORI ENDO: I, too, was impressed by the exhibition.

IKEDA: Dr. Margarita Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Oriental Studies related that the Petrovsky manuscript had been copied in Khotan in memory of the deceased relative of a person whose name appears at the end of the text. The manuscript is overflowing with prayers for “good circumstances in future existences” (LS5, 99).

Words are words, but they are also something more. They are imbued with spirit, with feeling.

Nichiren Daishonin says, “Words are forms that manifest the minds of all living beings” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 380).

HARUO SUDA: Words are “physical phenomena” that express “spiritual phenomena” invisible to the eye. Whether or not we can perceive this depends on the depth of our awareness.

IKEDA: That’s all the more true in the case of the Lotus Sutra. The words of the Lotus Sutra are expressions that capture the rhythm of the great life force that is swirling and pulsing at the very marrow of the universe. When I commented on this, Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya replied that coming into contact with the sutra manuscripts energized her.

GRASPING THE HEART OF THE PEOPLE

IKEDA: Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya is an outstanding scholar who has spent more than forty years painstakingly studying ancient texts, with a particular focus on the Lotus Sutra. Her husband, a scholar of linguistics who had had a promising future, died at the young age of twenty-eight. After his death, Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya single-mindedly pursued her research while raising their son, who grew up splendidly and has himself earned a doctorate in chemistry. Her victory in life calls to mind the Daishonin's words, "Winter always turns to spring" (WND, 536).

When we met this time, I was glad to find her in excellent spirits. I remarked to her: "The Lotus Sutra talks about a state of life in which one never ages and never dies. A life where one becomes increasingly youthful while growing older is a life that accords with the Lotus Sutra."

Smiling brightly, she responded, "It would be nice if we could all come to understand this state free of aging and death through the power of the Buddha."

I replied: "That is true world peace. The Lotus Sutra itself is a great wave of peace for humankind."

The cellist Pablo Casals (1876–1973) said: "Work and interest in worthwhile things are the best medicine for age. Each day I am reborn. Each day I begin again."¹

Dr. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, Dr. Yuri Petrosyan (vice chairperson of the St. Petersburg Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences) and Dr. Evgenij Kychanov (director of the Institute of East Asian Studies of the same academy), who came to Japan to attend the exhibition's opening, have dedicated themselves in earnest to the study of culture for forty years — no, for nearly fifty years — without any concern for fame or wealth. And in the process they have overcome indescribable hardships. What noble lives!

It was thanks to their efforts that this remarkable exhibition could be realized.

ENDO: This was the first public showing of many of these items abroad. Even in Russia, it would be very rare to have the opportunity to view so many cultural treasures all together in one exhibition.

The exhibition, which was cosponsored by the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, was the first public showing anywhere in the world of forty-seven extremely valuable hand-written copies and wood-block prints from the collection of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Study in St. Petersburg. President Ikeda founded the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in 1962 as a center for academic philosophical research.

SAITO: Specialists in the field were excited. The exhibition afforded them the opportunity to view in person items that previously they could only see in photographs.

Dr. Charles Le Blanc, former director of the Center of East Asian Studies at the University of Montreal, said that the opportunity to view for the first time so many translations of the Lotus Sutra was memorable. And he remarked that the fact that a Buddhist scripture had been translated into so many languages attests to the power of Buddhism to appeal to many different peoples.

IKEDA: The ancient Lotus Sutra is known to have versions in seven different languages. The exhibition included texts in five of them.

SUDA: These were Sanskrit, Old Uighur, Xixia (Tangut), Khotan Saka and Chinese.

ENDO: Dr. Kychanov, who is a specialist in Saka literature, explained that the Lotus Sutra

was the first Buddhist text to be translated into Saka, a language that was formulated in the 11th century.

IKEDA: This shows how the Lotus Sutra has captured people's hearts. While there are of course a number of reasons for this, put simply, it is because the Lotus Sutra is so alive. It gives hope to all people without discrimination. It exudes the warmth and brightness of the sun.

Another reason is that it is written in such beautiful language. It is a work of art filled with the exquisiteness of a blossoming lotus flower emitting a lovely fragrance. It radiates joy that wins people's hearts. That is why people are naturally drawn to it.

BODHISATTVA WONDERFUL SOUND IS LARGER THAN THE EARTH

If the form of a voice-hearer is what is needed to bring salvation, he [Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound] manifests himself in the form of a voice-hearer and proceeds to preach the Law. If the form of a *pratyekabuddha* will bring salvation, he manifests himself in the form of a *pratyekabuddha* and preaches the Law. If the form of a bodhisattva will bring salvation, he manifests a bodhisattva form and preaches the Law. If the form of a Buddha will bring salvation, he immediately manifests a Buddha form and preaches the Law. Thus he manifests himself in various different forms, depending upon what is appropriate for salvation. And if it is appropriate to enter extinction in order to bring salvation, he manifests himself as entering extinction. (LS24, 295–96)

SAITO: The Lotus Sutra indeed has an artistry capable of inspiring images and music in one's heart.

IKEDA: The “Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound” (twenty-fourth) chapter, which is the topic of our discussion this time, illustrates this nicely. A “wonderful sound” reverberates throughout the entire Lotus Sutra. It rings with music that stirs the spirit. In Japanese, the term “music” is written with characters that mean to “enjoy sound”; a joyous heavenly song imbues the sutra.

Not only is it full of music, but also images of light, colors and fragrance. The earth shakes; flowers rain from the sky. It is a spectacular drama of life. It is like an opera performed on the stage of the cosmos.

It has philosophy and testimonials of personal experience. There are stories of struggles against villains, and the advance of the people. There is dance. It would inspire prodigious creativity even in someone who is not an artist.

The Lotus Sutra itself is an expression of the value of beauty. What is the foundation of this beauty? What is the basis of all great cultures? The answer is none other than the dynamism of human life, the struggle to draw upon and manifest the innate rhythm of the universe expressed by the line “winter always turns to spring” (WND, 536). It is the vitality to endure all, no matter how difficult or painful, and realize victory in the end.

Doesn't this zest for life pulse at the core of all high art, even if it seems to depict suffering? I would suggest that the “Wonderful Sound” chapter has as its core this great life force of hope.

SAITO: Come to think of it, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound is described as being inordinately large in size. This had seemed peculiar to me before, but now it occurs to me

that this may be intended to express the idea that he is overflowing with abundant life force, the wellspring of the universe.

ENDO: He is said to stand 42,000 *yojanas* tall. [A Sanskrit text gives his height as 4.2 million *yojanas*.] Since the Treasure Tower in the Ceremony in the Air has a height of five hundred *yojanas*, this makes Wonderful Sound eighty-four times the size of the Treasure Tower.

SUDA: One *yojana*, a unit of measurement used in ancient India, is defined as the distance that the royal army could march in a day. While there are other explanations, a *yojana* can be conservatively calculated as 7.3 kilometers (4.6 miles). This would give the Treasure Tower the enormous size of one-fourth the diameter of the earth.

SAITO: And this bodhisattva is eighty-four times as tall!

ENDO: Let's see. That would be about twenty-four times the diameter of the earth!

SUDA: The arrival of such a gigantic bodhisattva would certainly cause quite a stir!

IKEDA: Indeed. This chapter, which is also called "The Coming and Going of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound," describes Wonderful Sound making an appearance in the *saha* world and then taking his leave.

Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound is not only enormous in size, but as the sutra explains, "a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand moons put together could not surpass the perfection of his face" (LS24, 293). His body shines with a golden hue and is "adorned with immeasurable hundreds and thousands of blessings" (LS24, 291).

And the sutra says that the lands he passes on his way to the *saha* world quake and tremble, and that in all of them "seven-jeweled lotus flowers" rain down and "instruments of hundreds and thousands of heavenly musicians" resound (LS24, 293).

ENDO: It sounds like a spectacular parade.

IKEDA: He is a magnificent bodhisattva of light and sound. Just showing his splendid form to the people of the *saha* world is part of the purpose of his visit.

SAITO: A little earlier it was said that the words of the Lotus Sutra are expressions of the rhythm of the great life force that pulses at the very core of the universe. It seems to me that Wonderful Sound symbolizes the rhythm of this great life force.

IKEDA: The entire universe is playing a "wonderful sound." The universe itself is a symphony of life, a chorale sung by all beings and phenomena—a serenade, a nocturnal, a ballad, an opera, a suite. The universe performs all "wonderful sounds."

The foundation of this is the Mystic Law. It is Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. Therefore, reciting the sutra is essentially a "wake-up song" that causes the sun to rise in our hearts, as well as a nocturnal, a "Moonlight Sonata," that illuminates our hearts with the light of the moon.

Reciting the sutra is like reading a poem. And chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is like singing a musical masterpiece. Our daily practice is the most cultural of activities.

CULTURE IS AN EXPRESSION OF PEOPLE'S STATE OF LIFE

SUDA: Why does Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound come to the *saha* world? Let's consider

the outline of the chapter.

Shakyamuni produces a light from between his eyebrows, which illuminates the worlds in the eastern direction. There, among the infinite number of Buddha lands, is a world called “Adorned with Pure Light” where dwells a Buddha named Pure Flower Constellation King Wisdom. It is in this land that Wonderful Sound lives.

SAITO: The sutra says that he has “waited upon” and made offerings to infinite numbers of Buddhas, and attained all manner of *samadhis*, including the “Dharma flower *samadhi*” (LS24, 291).

IKEDA: The statement that he has waited upon the Buddha is very important. From our standpoint, this means steadfastly praying to the Gohonzon. On another level, it means serving and supporting the members of the SGI who are taking action for kosen-rufu, or simply meeting with other members. Through such actions we can increase our life force and expand our state of life.

ENDO: A *samadhi* is a state of intense concentration. There are such *samadhis* as the “*samadhi* that allows one to understand the words of all living beings” and the “wisdom-torch *samadhi*” (LS24, 291).

IKEDA: A *samadhi* is a state of life that is abundant in wisdom, a state of inner peace. It indicates a rock-solid condition that nothing can perturb. From this inner peace, the “great song of the spirit” capable of moving people’s hearts surges forth.

Inner peace is not born of indolence. It is exactly the opposite. Just as a top appears unmoving when it is rotating at full speed, an immense life-state of composure is sustained by the earnestness of practicing at one’s full capacity.

SUDA: When the light from Shakyamuni’s forehead illuminates Wonderful Sound, Wonderful Sound says to the Buddha Pure Flower Constellation King Wisdom, “World-Honored One, I must journey to the *saha* world to do obeisance, wait on, and offer alms to Shakyamuni Buddha, and to see . . . [various bodhisattvas].” The Thus Come One replies:

You must not look with contempt on that land or come to think of it as mean and inferior. Good man, that *saha* world is uneven, high in places, low in others, and full of dirt, stones, mountains, foulness, and impurity. The Buddha is puny in stature and the numerous bodhisattvas are likewise small in form, whereas your body is forty-two thousand *yojanas* in height and mine is six million eight hundred thousand *yojanas*. . . . Therefore when you journey there, you must not look with contempt on that land or come to think of the Buddha and bodhisattvas or the land itself as mean or inferior! (LS24, 291–92)

ENDO: Certainly, nothing can compare with his enormous size!

SAITO: And the Buddha of this other world is even larger than Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound!

IKEDA: Still, he tells Wonderful Sound that he must respect the Buddha and the bodhisattvas of the *saha* world, saying in effect: “You must not look down on those who

expound the Law and spread the teaching under the most difficult of circumstances! You mustn't judge them by their appearance! You should treat them with utmost respect!" This is an important teaching.

Those who are fighting with all their might amid the harshest of conditions are most noble. Those, however, who receive benefit and earn the respect of others due to the power of Buddhism, but who then look down on and seek to distance themselves from such a place of struggle are guilty of the worst kind of arrogance.

SUDA: Through the inherent power of the Thus Come One, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, without moving an inch, causes 84,000 beautiful lotus flowers to appear on distant Eagle Peak.

ENDO: He does this through his supernatural powers. In modern terms, this would be comparable to a satellite transmission!

SUDA: The lotus flowers he causes to appear have golden stems, silver leaves, diamond stamens, and calyxes of ruby-like gems.

ENDO: And they appear next to where Shakyamuni is preaching at Eagle Peak.

IKEDA: They are "jewels of the spirit," "jewels of good fortune and virtue" and "jewels of wisdom." These are the jewels that exist eternally over the three existences of past, present and future.

SAITO: Yes, for no matter how many actual diamonds you accumulate in this lifetime, you cannot take them with you when you die.

SUDA: The people on Eagle Peak are stunned. Representing the assembly, Bodhisattva Manjushri asks Shakyamuni to explain the appearance of the lotus flowers.

When Shakyamuni replies that this is a sign that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound is going to pay them a visit, Manjushri expresses the wish to meet Wonderful Sound.

SAITO: In other words, he arouses a seeking spirit, longing to meet and learn from him.

SUDA: Then, with the assent of Many Treasures Thus Come One, who says, "Come, good man," Wonderful Sound appears aboard a "dais made of seven treasures" (LS24, 293) accompanied by 84,000 bodhisattvas.

ENDO: This image reminds me of a brilliantly shining space ship.

SUDA: The scene of his arrival is just as we discussed earlier.

IKEDA: The sight would have caused everyone to gasp in amazement.

Through his august form and with his music, Wonderful Sound lets all present know of the incredible benefit of the Lotus Sutra. He expresses the invisible state of life he has attained in such a way that anyone can understand, in both a visible and an audible form.

It comes down to expression; unless we express ourselves clearly, others will not understand. Take love as but one example. If you keep your feelings to yourself, the other person will never know! It is only by conveying to others in some way the state of life we acquire through faith that they will receive our light.

Culture is a good example of this. Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound represents cultural activity. I think we can say that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound's actions symbolize the SGI's movement for peace, culture and education. We are moving forward, giving rise to a brilliant heavenly song.

SAITO: I associate “Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound” with those engaged in our broad-ranging SGI cultural activities, especially those of the youth division fife-and-drum corps and music corps, as well as those of the Min-On Concert Association.

IKEDA: We are advancing in perfect accord with the basic principles of the Lotus Sutra. Religion is like the earth. But without flowers or trees, the earth would be barren. Conversely, culture that is not grounded in the “earth” of religion is rootless.

Using the analogy of the body, if religion is the skeleton, then culture would correspond to the muscles, skin and clothing. The value of beauty is born when the two complement and support each other.

THE BEST FIFE-AND-DRUM CORPS IN THE WORLD

ENDO: In looking at the history of the fife-and-drum corps, it is clear that it was created by your own hands President Ikeda.

The corps was inaugurated on July 22, 1956, with a membership of just thirty-three young women. You used money out of your own pocket to present them with instruments. Shigetake Arishima, the leader of the brass band, which at that time was like an elder sibling to the corps, made every effort to round up instruments: he came up with forty fifes and ten drums. The drums were U.S. Army surplus, and were decorated with flashy red and blue lines.

Although they began practicing right away, the corps members did not even know the proper way to hold the drumsticks, nor had any of them ever before laid hands on a fife. After blowing on them for five minutes straight, they all became dizzy. But you took every opportunity to encourage them, urging them to become the foremost fife-and-drum corps in the world.

They performed for the first time at a young women’s division leaders meeting on September 3, 1956 [held at the Nakano Public Hall in Tokyo]. Although they had practiced daily, on the day of their debut nearly half the members could not produce any sound on their instruments. So they lined up with those who could play in front and those who could not in back. The program for the performance consisted of three popular songs. Because it was their first performance, their legs were quivering, their fingers would not move properly, and they could only produce the faintest of notes. The drums were placed flat on the stage floor, and they struck them from a kneeling posture.

At this peculiar scene, hushed giggles could be heard in the hall. But the earnestness of the corps members finally brought tears to people’s eyes. As one participant described it, by the time the performance was drawing to a close, the performers and the audience had become one.

Twenty days later, the corps performed at the third youth festival. Standing to the left side of the main reviewing stand, they performed on a make-shift stage of thin straw mats. Second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda went to them and asked gently, “Are we going to hear some music today?” At these words, everyone gathered around him joyfully.

They were wearing cream-colored shirts with black ribbons and black skirts. On their feet they wore gym shoes they had coated with white chalk or toothpowder. This was their most festive attire. Someone told me that it had never even occurred to them to wear white socks, so meager were their means.

Afterwards, you gave each of the members a pair of white socks as a present. I understand that all were moved to tears by this gesture.

IKEDA: This brings back many fond memories. The fife-and-drum corps has now truly become the foremost body of its kind in the world. These “emissaries of peace” are today active across the globe.

Those who hear them perform are invariably moved, exclaiming “How bright!” and “How wonderful!” Since they are bringing people joy, they are bodhisattvas. They are expanding a spirit of friendship. They are creating waves of peace.

Music knows no boundaries. It directly bridges the gap between people’s hearts. By causing the innate rhythm of the universe to reverberate through a single fife or a single drum, the corps is causing a prayer for peace to ring out in the depths of the hearts of humankind.

SAITO: The heart is key. It’s about heart-to-heart communication.

IKEDA: Beethoven was fond of the expression “from heart to heart.” If I remember correctly, in the margin of the score for his resplendent “Mass in C Major,” he jotted down the words, “It [music] comes out of my heart. My wish is that it reaches the hearts of others.” It is culture and fundamentally religion that nourish the heart.

SUDA: One person who was moved by the spirit of the fife-and-drum corps was the late jazz great Art Blakey. On January 18, 1965, he performed in Tokyo. Even after the curtain came down following an intense two-hour concert, the audience remained electrified and showed no sign of leaving.

At that moment, several members of the fife-and-drum corps who were in the audience darted backstage with their drums in hand. In halting English, they explained that they were members of a fife-and-drum corps and entreated him to give them a lesson. So impressed was he by their spirit, that he began instructing them right then and there.

IKEDA: It’s hard to imagine that they did such a thing!

SUDA: While Mr. Blakey must have been quite surprised, he promised to give them a lesson on another day as well, perhaps because he was struck by their sincerity.

On January 26, a number of members of the brass band and fife-and-drum corps met with Mr. Blakey, who gave them a basic lesson in drumming rhythm. The youth played in earnest, prompting the jazz artist to take off his jacket, pick up some sticks and start drumming away ferociously. He told them, “Your playing shouldn’t be stiff and formal. You must play from your heart!”

So saying, without even wiping the sweat from his brow, he continued to move to the rhythm and beat the cymbals. He seemed the embodiment of a tremendous force.

This practice session, in which teacher and students became one, went on for about an hour. Even after they had gone beyond the time that he had promised for the lesson, he would not stop. Finally, dripping with sweat and tears, he told them, “I feel like I have glimpsed the true image of Japan. Japan is my home.” Then, going over to the edge of the stage, he tearfully embraced the manager.

Many capable people emerged from the corps through contact with such leading figures in the world of music and other fields.

“WONDERFUL SOUND”—THE VOICE OF COURAGE

IKEDA: We cannot become first-rate individuals without coming into contact with exemplary people ourselves. The point is not to start off familiarizing oneself with the

amateurs of any given field, whether it be art, philosophy, religion or even life in general, but to aim straight for the top. By so doing, we begin to see clearly what is second and third-rate. If we only acquaint ourselves with mediocrity, we will not know what is truly great.

In any case, the fife-and-drum corps, brass band and chorus groups of the SGI have all developed splendidly. I am particularly proud to witness the growth of all those capable people who accomplished their human revolution through such musical training.

There are many artists about whom people say, “Their art is incredible, but their life is a failure.” Some even romanticize such tragedy. But I think that if an artist — as the “entity” of the art that he or she creates — becomes spoiled and decadent, then that person’s art will also lack true brilliance.

While there are various explanations of the meaning of “wonderful sound,” I recall that one of these is to “stutter.”

SAITO: Yes. Wonderful sound is a translation of the Sanskrit *gadgada-svara*, which means to stammer, indicating a person whose voice is “hard on the ear.”

IKEDA: How did this come to mean a person of “wonderful sound”? Since there is no indication of this in the sutra, we can only use our imaginations. But I think it may have to do with the drama of one person’s human revolution.

When Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound appears in the saha world, the scene is so fantastic that a bodhisattva named Flower Virtue asks, “what good roots has he planted, what benefits has he cultivated, that he possesses these supernatural powers?” (LS24, 294).

ENDO: That’s right. Shakyamuni then reveals details of Wonderful Sound’s previous existences. In the past, the Buddha explains, he made an offering to a Buddha called Cloud Thunder Sound King of a hundred thousand types of musical instruments and of 84,000 alms bowls made of the seven treasures. As a result, he was born as Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound and endowed with various supernatural powers and all manner of good fortune and benefit.

IKEDA: Nichiren Daishonin says that the number 84,000 stands for the “84,000 dust-like cares” (GZ, 775), meaning all manner of hardships and delusions. Life is an endless succession of struggles, struggles as innumerable as particles of dust. But when we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, he teaches, these toils all become the “84,000 teachings.”

Every difficulty we encounter becomes a lesson for our life, wisdom and the ability to help and guide others. Interpreted from the standpoint of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound toiled repeatedly to overcome many sufferings, chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and carried out his human revolution. This is comparable to making an offering to the Buddha of “eighty-four thousand alms bowls made of the seven treasures.” We are no different. No matter how tough things may get, we chant and continue moving forward without giving up.

Though invisible to the eye, there are paths in the universe and currents in life. If we dedicate our lives to kosen-rufu, we will absolutely enter the current of a supreme life. We will enter the path of the “river of true happiness,” the “river of treasures.” Those who exert themselves for kosen-rufu enter the golden current of the Mystic Law. By working wholeheartedly on the supreme path of kosen-rufu, we ourselves, along with our family and relatives, will all become happy without fail.

Isn’t it the case that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, while battling a painful destiny, in

the end sings a song of victory? As he struggles and suffers, he warmly encourages those around him, singing a courageous tune. This is the image that comes to mind. A sincere voice encouraging a friend, words of conviction that move a person's heart, cries of justice to refute evil—these are truly “wonderful sounds.”

KING ASHOKA'S “CULTURE FESTIVALS”

“The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings” states: Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound represents the living beings of the Ten Worlds. “Wonderful” means inscrutable and “Sound” (*on*) means the words and sounds uttered by all living beings. These are the voices of the Mystic Law, the wonderful sounds that exist eternally over the three existences of past, present and future. To take action for a person's happiness depending on the person's need is compassion; this is the work of a bodhisattva. It also says that “wonderful sound” means the wondrous voices of Nichiren and his followers chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo now in the Latter Day of the Law. (GZ, 774)

SUDA: The sutra says that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound makes musical offerings” (LS24, 294). This is a characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism.

It seems that music and dancing were prohibited by Hinayana clerical orders as obstacles to one's practice. Practitioners were not only forbidden from engaging in such activities themselves, but they were also not supposed to enjoy them.

ENDO: But when we come to Mahayana Buddhism, it's exactly the opposite.

IKEDA: The “Teacher of the Law” (tenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra includes a directive to make offerings of music to the Lotus Sutra (cf. LS10, 161). And King Ashoka of ancient India is said to have made “musical offerings.”

The third ruler of the Maurya dynasty in the third century B.C.E., Ashoka was a strong believer in Buddhism who implemented policies of welfare and peace. He banished corrupt monks, and prohibited the sacrificial offering of living things.

SAITO: This took the form of festivals that took place around stupas.

IKEDA: It's known that people would gather around stupas singing songs and playing various musical instruments. They acted out dramas, performed dances and read poetry. Merchants stood by, hawking their wares.

ENDO: Sounds like quite a party!

IKEDA: Children would sit watching acrobatics. Performances of juggling and magic brought enthusiastic applause. There were boxing, wrestling matches, and other competitions. Young women danced in brightly colored costumes, and young men sat enrapt, unable to take their eyes off them. Processions of torches filled the streets.

SAITO: What a brilliant display of culture and music!

IKEDA: It was an offering of music in praise of the Dharma. It was an offering of joy. When the people expressed their pure joy to live based on the Law with their entire being, song poured forth and their bodies sprang into action.

Those “waves of peace” spread out far and wide. Ashoka's offerings of music and dance

could be thought of as the precursor to our great cultural movement.

ENDO: It's a brilliant image.

IKEDA: It's brightness and beauty. It is peace.

Peace and culture are like two sides of a coin. Without peace, there can be no culture. When culture flourishes, peace unfolds. I'm not talking about fleeting or hedonistic culture, but culture that brings out the most noble qualities in human beings; lofty culture created by people who believe in the innate goodness of humankind and strive together to approach something eternal.

Dr. Jutta Seifert (president of the European Youth Cultural Initiative for the Young Generation and former undersecretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Art and Sports) remarked to me that "Art is the expression of something sacred existing within us."

SAITO: According to one source, when the Lotus Sutra was being compiled in its present form, the musical offerings of King Ashoka were common knowledge; and this is reflected in the make-up of the "Wonderful Sound" chapter and the other chapters in the transmission section. Whether this explanation is true or not, it is clear that music is inseparable from the Lotus Sutra.

IKEDA: Come to think of it, the birthplace of the Buddhist scholar Kumarajiva (344–413) was famous for its music.

ENDO: He was born in what is known today as Kucha.

This is part of what is today China's Sinkiang Uighur autonomous region. He was from a town in the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains.

IKEDA: During the Han period, this was the largest kingdom in western China, with a population of more than eighty thousand.

It seems that Kucha music, which was noted for outstanding singing and the use of wind and string instruments, was very popular. In Chang-an, the capital of Tang China, people vied with one another to be able to hear such exotic melodies. The famous five-stringed *biwa* (Japanese balloon guitar) preserved at Shosoin³ is thought to originally derive from the Kucha lute. The music of Kucha also had a great influence on the music of Japan's imperial court.

At the same time as it was a kingdom of music, Kucha was also a kingdom of Buddhism. When the Learned Teacher Hsuan-tsang (602–64) visited the area, he was surprised by the flourishing of Buddhism he found there.

SUDA: He was a great traveler who became the model for the "Learned Teacher" in *Journey to the West*, a sixteenth century Chinese epic by Wu Ch'eng-en.

SAITO: It is probably no coincidence that the Lotus Sutra's great translator was from this area.

IKEDA: Kumarajiva must have had quite an ear for music. Otherwise the text of the sutra surely would not have such exquisite rhythm.

Many different musical instruments are also mentioned in the Lotus Sutra.

ENDO: Yes. Starting with the wind instruments, there are the "horns," "conch shells," "pipes" and "flutes."

IKEDA: What about stringed instruments? The balloon guitar is one that the Sutra mentions.

ENDO: Yes. In addition, there is the zither that is played with either a pick or the fingers, and the lute with many strings (cf. LS2, 40).

SAITO: There is the expression, “Like the harmony of zither and lute” (indicating conjugal harmony).

ENDO: The harp is also mentioned.

SUDA: As for percussion instruments, there are cymbals and gongs.

IKEDA: Music fills the Lotus Sutra.

Sheet music of Tang China, an age when the Lotus Sutra flourished in the country, has been excavated at Dunhuang. It is more than a thousand years old, and experts are still trying to determine just what kind of music it is. Not only does it indicate the pitch of each note, but it even indicates the rhythm. Some have even tried performing it.

At any rate, the Lotus Sutra encompasses the great sound of the universe. It contains the fundamental rhythm, the melody and the chords of the universe.

According to another explanation, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound’s name comes from a word meaning “thunder.” This is interesting.

SAITO: Yes. We earlier interpreted the Sanskrit term *gadgada-svara* as meaning a stuttering voice. But there is an explanation which suggests that *gadgada* is a variant of *gargara*, which is the sound of the drum that precedes Shakra Devanam Indra (Jpn *Taishaku*) into battle.

SUDA: Since Shakra is originally the god of thunder, the sound of this drum could be thought of as the sound of thunder.

IKEDA: The term for thunder in Japanese, too, is said originally to indicate the “roar” or appearance of a god. It is the rumble of the heavens, the roar of the universe.

ENDO: I am reminded of an incident that took place in Cuba [on June 25, 1996] when you were awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Havana. I heard about this from a correspondent of the *Seikyo Shimbun* who accompanied you. On the day of the event, a rain fell, driving off the intense heat and soon turning into a heavy downpour. During the ceremony, just when you began to deliver your address, it became a thunderstorm. The sound of thunder rang through the auditorium. This made some of the Japanese present a little worried, concerned that it might interfere with your talk.

But you began your speech, remarking: “What marvelous thunder! It is the music of the heavens, the resounding drum, the resplendent symphony of the skies, congratulating the progress of humanity toward the victory of peace. And what wonderful rain! The skies are telling us that we must not allow ourselves to be defeated by trouble! We must advance courageously through the storm of adversity!”

I was told that with these words you captured the hearts of all those in attendance.

SAITO: I think that I, for one, would be hard-pressed to come up with such reassuring words on the spot!

IKEDA: The Buddha whom Wonderful Sound served in the past was called Cloud Thunder Sound King. In other words, he represents the sound of the universe, the voices

of all beings.

All activities, from the movement of the planets to the motion of atoms and molecules, are governed by some kind of rhythm or “musical principles.” This is an important point. Why don’t we take it up when we discuss the “Dharani” (twenty-sixth) chapter?

It is up to us how much we can internalize this “universal music.” The sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) said that art is the reflection of nature in human beings. It is vital that we polish our inner mirror that reflects the natural world.

When we tune and practice the “instrument” of the self, we cause the wonderful sound of the universe to pulse in our life; we cause it to reverberate and ring out. Buddhist practice teaches us how to do this.

Historically, people have believed that musical training cultivates character. The ancient Greeks subscribed to this notion, as did the people of ancient China. Plato placed great importance on musical education. He believed that rhythm and harmony foster outstanding people. And Confucius’ emphasis on “manners and music” is also well known. He seems to have thought that balanced character could be cultivated through the study of music.

In early Buddhism, too, while there were prohibitions against singing and dancing, music was not completely out of the picture. Originally, the sutras themselves were recited in a musical fashion. And it was in this way that they first touched people’s hearts. According to an early sutra, Shakyamuni described the benefits of using one’s voice, saying that it prevented fatigue, improved the memory, rejuvenated one’s spirits, and aided cognition.

A MOVEMENT OF WONDERFUL SOUND, BRINGING HOPE TO SOCIETY

SAITO: I think that music has the power to infuse our lives with the harmony of the universe. It brings our lives into perfect balance.

IKEDA: Music liberates the heart. It eases the heart’s stiffness.

The English word “play,” in the sense of perform, also means to frolic or have fun. It implies a relaxing and liberating experience.

In Japanese, we also speak of “playing” wind and string instruments. Performing is play in the best sense of the term. Music makes our heart free.

SUDA: One of the *samadhis* that Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound attained is the “*samadhi* of the sport of transcendental powers” (LS24, 291).

ENDO: It must be the aim of “music therapy” to clear the heart of obstruction.

IKEDA: Since music is soothing as well as liberating, wherever there is song, there is growth. President Toda used to say, “Wherever people have prospered throughout history, song could always be heard.”

In the SGI, too, as long as we keep vigorously singing songs, our organization will continue to develop. The same is true of society. It could be said that a society in which the people hum beautiful songs has a rhythm of advance. On the other hand, the future of a society plagued by moans and cries must be bleak.

ENDO: Come to think of it—I believe this was shortly after the Great Kanto Earthquake (of 1923)—there was an author who argued that such an unprecedented natural disaster on the capital must have been somehow related to the desolation and arrogance of people’s hearts.

IKEDA: That was in an essay by the Japanese writer and poet Rohan Koda (1867–1947).

ENDO: A song that was popular before the quake hit went, “I am the withered eulalia grass of the dried riverbed, and you, too, are the withered eulalia grass.” In that essay, I recall Koda revealing that he had felt something ominous in the lines of that song.

SUDA: He must have heard it as a “melancholy sound.”

IKEDA: Of course this cannot be proven empirically, nor can we apply this to every circumstance, but I think it can probably be said that culture and music and the tendency of the times mutually influence one another. As the saying goes, “Songs follow the times, and the times follow the songs.”

SUDA: Are you referring to the difference between “melancholy sounds” and “wonderful sounds”?

IKEDA: “Melancholy sounds” does not refer strictly to sad tunes. I think they include any kind of melody, music or culture that causes people to have feelings of resignation. No matter how lively and spirited something may seem, music and culture that guide people toward nihilism, toward thinking, “There’s nothing I can do to affect the outcome,” are “melancholy sounds.”

On the other hand, culture that, while perhaps unostentatious, appeals to beautiful human emotion and elevates the mind, qualifies as “wonderful sound.” For it inspires trust and hope within people.

The SGI movement is a movement to bring hope to all, not only through music, but through all endeavors. In that sense, it can be described as a “wonderful sound movement.” It is a movement to pluck the strings of goodness in people’s hearts. Isn’t this perhaps what is signified by the “thirty-four forms” of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound?

SAITO: Yes. Wonderful Sound, like Bodhisattva Medicine King and Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, has acquired the *samadhi* to manifest all physical forms. In this state of life one is able to assume any form in order to lead people to happiness.

ENDO: The sutra describes him appearing alternately as King Brahma (Bonten), Lord Shakra (Taishaku), the heavenly being Freedom, and so on. It reads:

This bodhisattva manifests himself in various different bodies and preaches this sutra for the sake of living beings in various different places. At times he appears as King Brahma, at times as the Lord Shakra, at times as the heavenly being Freedom, at times as the heavenly being Great Freedom, at times as a great general of heaven, at times as the heavenly king Vaishravana, at times as a wheel-turning sage king, at times as one of the petty kings, at times as a rich man, at times as a householder, at times as a chief minister, at times as a Brahman, at times as a monk, a nun, a layman believer, or a laywoman believer, at times as the wife of a rich man or a householder, at times as the wife of a chief minister, at times as the wife of a Brahman, at times as a young boy or a young girl, at times as a heavenly being, a dragon, a *yaksha*, *gandharva*, an *asura*, a *garuda*, a *kimnara*, a *mahoraga*, a human or a nonhuman being, and so preaches this sutra. The hell dwellers, hungry spirits, beasts, and the numerous others who are in difficult circumstances are thus all able to be saved. And for the sake of those who are in the women’s quarters of the royal palace, he changes himself into a woman’s form and preaches this sutra. (LS24, 295)

SAITO: Nichiren Daishonin says, “To take action for a person’s happiness in accord with the person’s situation is compassion; this is the work of a bodhisattva” (GZ, 774).

IKEDA: Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound is completely free to adjust to the capacity of another person. This is total liberation. Buddhism is not a religion that tries to force people into a mold or to create a bunch of automatons. It emancipates the lives of those who have been living robotically.

The thirty-four forms of Wonderful Sound are proof of the correctness of the multifaceted activities SGI members carry out in all sectors of society. While each of us may be exerting ourselves in a different area, we are all motivated by compassion and humanity. We should burn with a spirit and determination to become the foremost ally of those who are suffering! If we lack this spirit, we are not behaving like Bodhisattva Wondrous Sound.

SAITO: Dr. Alexander Yakovlev (a leading architect of *perestroika*), once remarked with respect to your activities, President Ikeda: “When Dostoevsky says ‘beauty will save the world,’ by beauty he must mean humanity.”

He was referring to the importance of continuously working for society within society, always upholding a spirit of compassion toward humankind.

IKEDA: This is what is meant by beauty, by “wonderful sound.” This is the spirit of the Lotus Sutra. The approach of the SGI is correct.

SUDA: The other day, the documentary “Knight of the Rising Sun,” introducing your activities for peace, won the “Special Prize” at the Religion Today Film Festival in Bologna, Italy. Judges said they were impressed by its portrayal of religion contributing to society.

ENDO: For us as SGI members, this seems perfectly natural. But I guess that outside the SGI it strikes people as a novel concept.

SAITO: That’s because while there are many people who spout theories, there are very few who in fact take action while standing up to the pressures of life. With regard to the problem of degradation of the environment, I have heard someone lament, “Compared to the number of people who speak out, how few are those who take any action!”

IKEDA: Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the first Soka Gakkai president, asserted that “religion must not exist for the sake of religion.” He argued that the existence of a religion had no significance if it did not create the values of beauty, gain and good. Herein lies the decisive difference between the SGI and the Nichiren Shoshu priesthood.

President Makiguchi strongly asserted that religion must not remain confined within the world of religion, but must work to transform the present world into something of value. And he died a martyr to his beliefs. We need to change this world into a “land of beauty,” a “land of gain,” a “land of good.” And we need to create lives of beauty, gain and good. This is what it means to lead a life of value creation.

THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE

SUDA: When Shakyamuni explains the thirty-four forms of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, the people listening all attain the *samadhi* enabling them to manifest all kinds of bodies.

Wonderful Sound then greets Shakyamuni and returns to his land. On the way back, the lands that he passes through quake and tremble, jeweled lotus flowers rain down, and

hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of different kinds of music are played.

IKEDA: This scene concludes the “Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound” chapter. It describes his coming and going, which fills the universe with music. It is a “bridge of music” spanning the universe. Through this process, the lives of the beings at Eagle Peak open up to the vast universe. The 84,000 bodhisattvas who accompany Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound also attain the same great state of life (the *samadhi* to be able to manifest all kinds of forms).

Opening the finite self to the infinite—this is the purpose of faith. Through faith, the self embraced in the universe comes to encompass the universe. This is what happens when we perform the gongyo and daimoku of “wonderful sound.” Between the self and the universe we extend an invisible bridge. This is the function of wonderful sound. Broadly speaking, this is the power of art. This bridge of life also bridges the gaps between people.

ENDO: Dr. Petrosyan of Russia remarked that cultural exchange means building an invisible bridge between nations and people. Although other bridges (political or economic) are destroyed in a instant by war, he continued, the invisible bridge of culture will never crumble. And he said that you, President Ikeda, are the architect of such cultural bridges.

SAITO: I was very moved to hear these words. The unifying power of culture, transcending the divisive power of evil, is necessary.

Dr. Kychanov said that the world requires the “power of good.” And he expressed hope that SGI members will bring about the “victory of good.”

IKEDA: The United Nations has designated the year 2001 the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” The SGI, which has consistently sought to promote inter-civilizational dialogue, is truly leading the way into the 21st century.

The Great Teacher T’ien-t’ai of China says of Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound: “With wonderful sounds, he roars in the ten directions, spreading this teaching. Therefore, he is called Wonderful Sound.”³

In Dharmaraksha’s Lotus Sutra of the Correct Law (Jpn *Sho-hokke-kyo*, a Chinese-language translation of the Lotus Sutra), the bodhisattva’s name is rendered “Wonderful Roar,” referring to the roar of the lion.

Right up to his death, President Toda maintained the spirit to fight on no matter what. His determination to expend every last ounce of energy was expressed in each word he spoke and in his appearance. Now, summoning all my thoughts into a single phrase, I would like to cry out just as he did: “Let’s fight with all our might!”

The Daishonin states:

“Even if you are not the Venerable Mahakashyapa, you should all perform a dance! Even if you are not Shariputra, you should leap up and dance! When Bodhisattva Superior Practices emerged from the earth, did he not emerge dancing?” (WND, 1119).

This is the vibrant spirit of the Lotus Sutra.

Let’s enjoy. Let’s advance cheerfully and with composure.

Let’s struggle with all our might, holding our heads high!

Footnotes:

1. *Song of the Birds: Sayings, stories and impressions of Pablo Casals*, ed. Julian Lloyd Webber (London: Robson Books, 1985), p. 117.
2. *Hokke Mongu (Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra)*, vol. 10.
3. A storehouse at Todai-ji Temple in Nara, built in the 8th century to preserve national treasures.