

What does the *Lotus Sutra* Say?

This book is dedicated to Kakutaro Kubo and Kimi Kotani

Introduction: Beyond the Common Understanding of Buddhism

I am now 71 years old, and I have been reading the *Lotus Sutra* and living my life in relation to it from my childhood until today. The *Lotus Sutra* advocates “the liberation of all human beings.” That liberation, however, is not advocated through any divinity. What, then, does “the liberation of all human beings” actually mean? How is it experienced? If the liberation in the *Lotus Sutra* is not promoted through a divinity, what is the essence of such liberation and how does the *Lotus Sutra* inspire it? In this writing, I would like to explore in detail the kind of liberation that the *Lotus Sutra* offers.

The Concept of “Enlightenment” in the *Lotus Sutra*

The expression in English of what Buddhism promotes is “enlightenment.” According to the common understanding of Buddhism, “enlightenment” is understood as something like an “ultimate wisdom” that only pertains to those called “Buddha.” However, according to the *Lotus Sutra*, “enlightenment” is actually the capacity of awareness that is innate to everyone. It is the reflection of the condition that any human being can gain insight from all things, and it is the indication of the strength of spirit of all who achieve it. Thus, “enlightenment” is not something specific to those called “Buddha.” When people come to fully grasp this point, they will feel a stirring of the potential for an inner fulfillment that they can achieve by themselves in their daily lives, and it is the essence of the *Lotus Sutra*’s discussion of the relevant relationship between one’s “enlightenment” and one’s actions.

People living life with an aspiration for such inner fulfillment will naturally become more aware of life’s many details. They will become, for example, more aware and discerning of things that have been taken for granted. Each such awareness gained is an “enlightenment,” and each such “enlightenment” attained becomes a joy and a factor of growth leading to the next moment. This is the process of empowered living that I constantly aspire to.

The concept that “enlightenment” is found everywhere in our daily lives and is not

something specific to those called “Buddha” is beyond the common understanding of Buddhism. Nevertheless, from a variety of perspectives, the Lotus Sutra is promoting that very idea—that “enlightenment” is an experience that can be captured even if one is not a buddha.

Kumārajīva was a famous translator from Central Asia who translated many Buddhist texts in Ch'ang-an (長安), an ancient capital of China. His most well known work was the *Miàofǎ Liánhuā Jīng* (妙法蓮華經), his translation of the *Lotus Sutra* into Chinese in the beginning of the 5th century, which has since been the basis of practice for Buddhist monks and followers in China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan. It is worthy of note that in the *Miàofǎ Liánhuā Jīng* (妙法蓮華經), he occasionally translated the concept of “enlightenment” as *tao* (道) meaning “path” or “way.” This, in my opinion, indicates that even the renowned Kumārajīva grasped the concept of “enlightenment” as a realm of participation that human beings could enter, and I will discuss this in further detail later in this book.

On the other hand the concept has been expressed in several ways in modern day translations, which reflects various understandings among translators. I believe this is because, given the traditional understanding of “enlightenment” as a goal and as the exclusive domain of buddhas, they have found it difficult to distance themselves from that preconception and connect with the idea that someone who is not a buddha can similarly advance within practice based on the accumulation of his or her awakenings.

Nevertheless, the *Lotus Sutra*, in various expressions, speaks of “the enlightenments of those who do bodhisattva practices.” It teaches that “enlightenments” are something a person—i.e., a bodhisattva—gains through living his or her everyday realities. From its Buddhist perspective, “enlightenments” arise one by one within the bodhisattva lifestyle; that is, we are each able to awaken to our own “buddha-perspective” within our own daily lives. We are the ones who are actually creating this perspective as our “enlightenments”—the “joys” gained through our own experiences of awakening—accumulate. These, in turn, fuel a spirit to continue our advancement day by day toward our own liberation. This is what the *Lotus Sutra* describes.

The *Lotus Sutra* Has Been Valued Throughout History

The *Lotus Sutra* is considered to have been completed in the mid-2nd century. Like other ancient Mahayana sutras that are available to us today, the *Lotus Sutra* was based on the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha passed down orally in the pre-literacy era. Creatively styled in dramatic fashion, it was compiled by Mahayana followers in northwest India in the hope of spreading Śākyamuni Buddha's true message.

The original Sanskrit title of this sutra, "*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*," is a compound of three ideas: Being of Truth (Saddharma), White Lotus Flower (puṇḍarīka), and the Thread (Sūtra) tying them together. There are several understandings of the three ideas and their interrelationships, but I think any understanding will depend on how a reader receives them.

The *Lotus Sutra* has captured people's attention ever since its creation. Many handwritten transcriptions of the sutra on palm leaves and papers were discovered—and continue to be found—in Nepal and at oases on the Silk Road. It must have taken tremendous effort and motivation to make copies of the sutra in those early days. As evidence of this, there are several copies that show signs of different transcribers. This fact alone can imply how great the passion of the people was for the transcription work. In Tibet, there are not only translations from Sanskrit but also from ancient Chinese. In Nepal, the *Lotus Sutra* is still treasured today as one of the most important sutras.

The Chinese translation of the *Lotus Sutra* by the aforementioned Kumārajīva in the beginning of the 5th century has long been held in high esteem from China to the Korean Peninsula to Japan. Chih-I (智顛), now known as Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai (天台), was a charismatic and active leader in China during the 6th century. He constructed a major Buddhist philosophical system centered on the *Lotus Sutra*, which developed into the T'ien-t'ai tradition of Buddhism.

Great interest in the *Lotus Sutra* was also seen in early Japanese history. In the beginning of the 7th century, Prince Shōtoku (聖德), the creator of the historically important *Seventeen-article Constitution*, published the *Hokke Gisho* (法華義疏) (*Annotations on the Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*), which was one of the commentaries from his *Sangyōgisho* (三經義疏) (*Annotated Commentaries on the Three Sutras*). A significant characteristic of this commentary is that, despite the enormous influence of the Buddhist tradition established by Chih-i during the previous century in China, the *Hokke Gisho* is not at all influenced by it. The Heian (平安) period (794-1185) in Japan, however, was strongly influenced by the Chinese T'ien-t'ai school. The Tendai (天台) (the

Japanese pronunciation of T'ien-t'ai) school was founded at Mt. Hiei (比叡) by Saichō, (最澄) who is respectfully known as Dengyō Daishi (伝教大師). During the Kamakura (鎌倉) period (1185-1333), such magnetic and dynamic Buddhist leaders as Nichiren Shōnin (日蓮上人), who had studied various sutras from the Tendai and other denominations, and Dōgen Zenji (道元禪師), the founder of the Sōtō (曹洞) school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, cultivated their own Buddhistic views based on the *Lotus Sutra*. In Japanese society today, activities organized by newly founded Buddhist groups centered on the *Lotus Sutra* are many and various.

The sutra's influence extends beyond religious activities. It is also well known that Kenji Miyazawa, a renowned Japanese poet and author of children's literature in the early 20th century, was an earnest reader of the *Lotus Sutra* and weaved messages he grasped from it into his stories. Moreover, Edogawa Ranpo, another renowned Japanese science-fiction writer, recommended the sutra as a textbook for writers of the genre.

The *Lotus Sutra's* Yet Untold Stories

So, what are items of interest in the *Lotus Sutra*, what kind of characteristics distinguish it from other Buddhist sutras, and what are the actual teachings it expounds? The *Lotus Sutra* has greatly impacted and influenced the history and present situation of East Asia, including Japan. There are, however, more concepts that remain unnoticed in the sutra, like yet undiscovered veins of valuable minerals and gems, which need to be extracted. Focusing on revealing them, I think we will be able to grasp ideas that are beyond general and traditional understandings of Buddhism, and many guiding principles based upon them will be made available for the betterment of modern human living.

Chapter 1: Living “One’s Own Life”

An Environment for Living Happily

There is no doubt that we all want to live happily, but the question is, “where should we direct our hearts and minds in order to do so?”

Recent studies of quantum physics prove things that are mostly beyond the grasp of ordinary non-scientific people like me. The Copenhagen school of thought suggests that the external environment we live in is not as fixed as we believe; rather it is being made real to each of us by our individual observations at each moment. According to its studies, any environment, from our daily realities to the ultimate limit of space, is chosen from infinite possibilities and is created when we become conscious of it. Even with little knowledge about physics, a person like me can relate to such a concept in daily life—when something wonderful happens, the world turns into a paradise for me. I believe all of us have similar experiences.

For example, when I, at my current age, see a flower in full bloom, I become impressed by its beauty and find tranquility in myself. At the same time, I regret not appreciating such natural beauty during other stages of my life. Reality changes its hue in our eyes depending on our own perspectives.

Anyone who is familiar with Japanese Buddhism would recognize what is meant by such well-known Japanese phrases as “*Shōja Hitsumetsu* (生者必滅) (what is born or produced cannot avoid death or destruction)” and “*Esha Jōri* (会者定離) (those who meet must part).” Anyone who comes into this world will leave it at some point, departing from his or her loved ones. There are also similar adages: “*Jōsha Hissui* (盛者必衰) (the prosperous inevitably decline),” “*Ogorerumono wa Hisashikarazu* (the proud do not endure).” Thus does the world always change. These notions and sayings certainly stem from Buddhist ideas and teachings. Relative to Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings in the *Lotus Sutra* however, their message is far from being one of mourning over this ever-changing nature—their focus is not at all a negative one.

Everything that comes into existence in this world changes. Because of that, in the *Lotus Sutra* Śākyamuni Buddha says that, at each moment in any given circumstance, it is necessary to be as aware as possible of one’s actual situation and condition so as to be on the right course for one’s fulfillment and “happiness.” This is not directly written in a sentence as such in the sutra; however, starting with the first page, the sutra leads its reader on a journey to such an idea. It is as if his or her mental focus is automatically drawn to it. The sutra speaks of the importance of understanding the “you and yourself”

of the particular moment one is now living. Indeed, it indicates that directing one's heart and mind to each successive self in each moment over one's whole life is the foundation of all other things.

This idea may seem to be nothing new, or even may seem to be a matter of course; but when given only momentary consideration it becomes taken for granted and ceases to be important. However, it takes on a completely different dynamic and can be very challenging when we try to apply it to our own realities—nothing is more formidable than one's own self when one attempts to live and think in concert with other people's lives and thoughts. I believe, therefore, that facing the entirety of one's own self is the foundation of everything.

Having said that, I would like to momentarily change the focus from the sutra to our contemporary reality. When you look at the world today, what do you see?

For example, with regard to Japanese society, I feel that the Japanese people must shift their perspective toward their societal dynamic, in the realization that the country is now facing a historical “turning point.” There should be a change from the traditional point of view of respecting objective perspectives to respecting subjective ones. It is the kind of change in which we would leave behind measurements of social status and “winners and losers,” and prioritize the contentment we can achieve in everyday life. It might take the form of a nursing care system that goes beyond one-way giving and encourages the active participation of those who are in need of care; or producing materials to cultivate a mind rather than producing a mind to cultivate materialism. There are other situations that require such a change in the traditional point of view of respecting objective perspectives to respecting subjective ones.

Nowadays, from TV to the Internet, a virtual environment that requires minimal coordination of the five senses has been expanding as a part of our daily lives. Within such expansion, where cell phones and PCs offer chat mates to be considered as your acquaintances, how do you mindfully construct and maintain yourself and your own life zone? This requires a high capacity of discernment that needs to be cultivated, especially by young people.

Change is not only required from the aspect of the speedy progress of the recent information technology and materialism in our civilization, but also from the aspect that Japanese people are living through an upheaval after Japan's closed capitalism—in which old Japanese family cartels formed industrial conglomerates and protected each other—collapsed due to economic globalization. Within such drastic changes in the social environment, we are definitely compelled to shift our perspectives on the philosophy of living from respecting objective perspectives to respecting subjective ones.

Drawing this overview more closely to our own subjective worlds of experiences, feelings, judgments, etc., means that first and foremost we all need to start from “this particular me,” and at the same time strive to discover the depth and grasp the essence of what this “this particular me” is. This should be the “matter of course” and “the natural foundation” that needs to be fixed in the center of our hearts and minds as we live everyday. No one, without exception, can escape from existing within the dynamics of direct or indirect relationships between one’s own self and other existences. Looking into the depth of “this particular me” is, in a way, reexamining the quality of all of the communities that one cultivates in close and extended relationships, and understanding that these communities are reflections of “this particular me”—in actuality one’s own self. Contentment in life arises there, and this, above all, is the point that I would like to offer to readers.

Awakening to Our Inherent Dignity

Śākyamuni Buddha talks in the *Lotus Sutra* about the very reality of our world, in which each person is living as a “human.” Therefore, when it comes to maintaining a humane world it is really a matter of creating a society where one “human” can interact with other “humans” sincerely and honestly. This can only be initiated by our own attitudes toward whatever human interactions we have, which in turn requires an awareness of our attitudes as a first step.

As “humans,” we all want our world to be a decent place to live. However, there are challenges in various aspects of our lives—our social systems fail to function properly, processes of government and administration are obscure, we question the effectiveness of our schools, we wonder if the media are biased, and we may even feel hopelessness with regard to our jobs.

There are strong, formidable walls in society that one individual cannot directly break through or overcome. Within the reality of every individual such walls exist in many forms and in many layers. If we take a closer look, however, those who take part in creating the walls that are beyond our individual power to scale are also “humans” like each one of us. Therefore, the reason why those walls exist is, fundamentally, a question of our own human qualities. If we “humans” don’t make the world a better place, who will?

Then, what is the power to make the world a “better place” for the generations to come? I think it is, without any doubt, the humanity—the dignity and majesty that

corresponds to being human—that is inherent within each of us and which manifests itself in sympathetic joy and compassion for others. I think it is most important that all of us recognize and exercise that humanity.

We see conflicts arise because of the polar aspects of human nature—good and bad, virtue and vice, cooperation and self-centeredness, etc. Everyone has these opposing qualities, more or less. We often conflict with one another in society because of our own attachments to prioritizing selfish impulses and/or protecting personal interests. The fundamental cause for many problems we encounter in life, both big and small, is that such conflicts exist between “humans”—I am a “human” and so is my opponent. Nevertheless, we often believe that the way to survive in this world today is to not fully express ourselves—to put on a face and hide what we truly feel—and live in as small a circle as possible. This is often more prevalent among those who are supposedly leading a society.

How can we shake up such a stagnant condition? I think it can be done by demonstrating to those around us the joy of interacting with a vivid sense of humanity in our own daily lives.

In order to grasp the responsibility of living as “humans,” we have to awaken to the dignity of humanity. This means knowing the importance of how we live in each moment, and manifesting the sympathetic joy and compassion that transcends distinctions between self and others. This is what Śākyamuni Buddha says in the *Lotus Sutra* says, and, in order to make our own “human” world a “better place,” I sincerely wish that this message from the distant past will reach as many people as possible.

The Path of “Happiness” depicted by the *Lotus Sutra*

Are communications with others a big part of your daily life? Do you often have satisfying conversations with people close to you—your partner, your parents, your children—in which you feel gratified that you are able to express your true feelings and can hear the real feelings of those loved ones?

“I really enjoyed talking with you!” When we are able to share our feelings openly and frankly with those around us, our daily lives will be filled with senses of well-being and happiness. And these sentiments can become driving forces to make our daily lives - and our entire life experience - richer and less stressful.

What subjects generate good feelings within you when you are able to openly have

conversations about them? Love and relationships? Worries and fears? Personal experiences? You may have many such topics, but a common factor among them will be that you are able to earnestly listen to others and to sincerely express what you truly feel.

Having people in our lives who can sincerely disclose their feelings to us and to whom we can frankly share our real feelings is a basis for happiness, and an essential aspect of human living is to create and nurture such intimate relationships around us. This aspect is the basis and framework of the “Buddhistic” practices depicted in the *Lotus Sutra*.

For human beings, a key to attaining and maintaining happiness is to become a person who is always ready to listen to what others have to say and who can sincerely express his or her true feelings to others. To live life in such a way is the path to happiness that the *Lotus Sutra* talks about.

Among the numerous Mahayana texts (for example, the Heart Sutra, The Infinite Life Sutra, and many others), the *Lotus Sutra* is particularly unique in its narrative style. In addition to Śākyamuni Buddha’s discourses, listeners ask questions or express their own opinions. In the beginning portion of the sutra, while Śākyamuni is immersed in meditation, the bodhisattva Maitreya asks the bodhisattva Monjushiri about what Śākyamuni is about to do. Monjushiri answers, saying to everyone present:

“The Buddha, the Tathagata, intends to create a place in which the great Dharma can be heard and discussed.”¹

Traditionally, however, this portion of Monjushiri’s reply has been translated as:

“The Buddha, the World-honored One, is now going to expound the great Dharma.”²

Most contemporary translations are similar to this, and such wording indicates that Śākyamuni Buddha is going to do all of the talking.

Yet, returning to the first quote above, in the original Sanskrit (an ancient language of India that was used by Mahayana Buddhists when the sutras were written down) the word *sāṃkathya* (“conversation”) is prominent, so I believe that, more than just

¹ From: *The Lotus Sutra: Chapter 1, Origins*. Ichiyosha Publishing, Tokyo, Japan, 1999. Translation from Sanskrit to Japanese by Dr. Tsugunari Kubo and Mrs. Katsuko Kubo. Chapters 1 through 6 of a translation series of the entire *Lotus Sutra* have been published, and quotations in this text from those chapters will be taken from those completed works. Quotations from chapter 7 onward that appear in the text will be current translations of the author.

²From: *Myo-ho-rengé-kyo*, with Opening and Closing Sutras. Published by Heirakuji-Shoten, in which the Japanese translation of Kumarajiva’s Chinese translation of the *Lotus Sutra* appears.

expounding the Dharma, Śākyamuni is also providing the opportunity for us to talk about it among ourselves. Additionally, in Chapter 10 (Dharma Expounder), the *Lotus Sutra* describes a bodhisattva practice of conveying to others whatever we have grasped concerning the Dharma, a process by which we ourselves become expounders of the Dharma. I think the idea of Śākyamuni creating a forum for our own discussion of the sutra is entirely consistent with the Sutra's contents.

An important focus point in the sutra is that people who hear the Buddha's teaching should convey it to others in their own words as they themselves grasp it. Kumārajiva translated this concept as "interpret and explain." Thus, from the sutra's standpoint, creating opportunities for communication based on the Buddha's teaching is an important role for human beings. It is worth noting that this focus and the concept of "interpret and explain" have both been misinterpreted as merely being recommendations for religious propagation by most of those who hear or promote the *Lotus Sutra*. I believe that such an interpretation is a fundamental mistake that does the sutra a great disservice.

What the *Lotus Sutra* is saying is that for one to merely hear the sutra is not enough. It is saying that communication in the real sense—hearing and then engaging in dialogue with others—is a vital part of the human condition, that it is a path to mutual understanding among people, and that such communication is a keystone of human relationships and society.

We can easily understand the significance of this if we look at it in the context of our actual daily lives. Nowadays many children do not listen to their parents even if parents try to talk to them with kindness and consideration. Many partners do not show any gratitude to their significant others although they know that they should. So it is that actual communication is not well established even among these most basic human relationships. Expanding this view it can be said that human relationships can flourish in social systems in which participants are given opportunities to freely express themselves and actually do so when given the opportunity.

When we commit ourselves to the attempt to sincerely communicate with those around us, we may find that it requires a bit of courage and effort to "break the ice" and initiate a dialogue. We may feel hesitant. And, having forced a conversation, we may get only blunt responses. But if we take such responses as motivation to try other approaches, we may well receive different replies. If we are successful and receive sincere responses, what we learn may surprise us, and may even reveal our own misunderstandings. It will become clear that shaping and nurturing our human relationships to the point at which fully open and mutually sincere communication is

the norm will be a long and ongoing process.

Although it may not seem that way to some, it seems to me that it is becoming more and more difficult to nurture human relationships in such a manner—and to find opportunities to do so—within daily life in this day and age. That is why, as I reflect on things that are happening in current societies, I believe that the *Lotus Sutra's* initial emphasis on establishing a foundation for sincere, in-depth communication is especially applicable to our modern-day human daily life dynamic.

Hear and Discuss

As I mentioned at the outset, the *Lotus Sutra* is structured like a drama. It is composed multi-dimensionally, setting up ideas by means of various perspectives and themes. I would now like to begin discussing these ideas, themes, and perspectives one by one. The nature of the sutra, however, makes this a challenging task, as its various points are artfully woven into its structure and are often obscure and escape immediate recognition. In truth, I have only recently felt a full grasp of some of them, and I cannot say with complete assurance that my discussion will include them all.

Typical of the sutra's construction, the first chapter, "Origin," puts forth many important themes—including, near its end, the previously mentioned aspect of establishing opportunities for open and frank dialogue and communication. It serves as a prologue. Just as artfully constituted appetizers or hors d'oeuvres prepare the palate to discover and enjoy various tastes of the meal that is to follow, chapter one serves up the background and circumstances around which Śākyamuni, in the next chapter, begins to expound the *Lotus Sutra*.

Just as in other sutras, the introductory line of the *Lotus Sutra* is, "Thus have I heard." Then the narration begins, paraphrased as follows:

"On one occasion Śākyamuni Buddha was at Mount Vulture Peak, accompanied by his many followers and all manner of spiritual beings not visible to the eye."

After a description of the entire assembly, the narrative continues and says that, after expounding a teaching, Śākyamuni sat down and entered into a specialized state of meditation. At that time, flowers began raining down from the sky, the ground began to tremble, and all of those present—both human and spiritual beings—were overwhelmed with feelings of unprecedented great joy. A beam of light issued forth from the Buddha's forehead (from "the ringlet of white hair" between his eyebrows that is often depicted on

statues of Buddha as “the third eye”), and by means of that light, all of those in the assembly could equally see an immeasurable number of Buddha-lands in the eastern direction. The narration goes on to describe the various conditions in those lands that everyone in the audience is able to see.

Even in the midst of such imagination-stretching circumstances, Śākyamuni Buddha remained immersed in his specialized state of meditation. Maitreya Bodhisattva then asks Monjushiri Bodhisattva, “What, indeed, is going on here?” In reply, Monjushiri says, “I remember the same thing happened when I lived in the land of a buddha named Luminance of the Sun and the Moon,” and he goes on to say:

“The Buddha, the Tathagata, intends to create a place in which the great Dharma can be heard and discussed.”

This dialogue is the *Lotus Sutra’s* opening teaching. (As for the contents of “the great Dharma,” the sutra gives explanations from various perspectives as it unfolds, but briefly stated, it refers to the contents of Buddha’s enlightenment—primarily to the concept of “dependent origination.” This is to recognize and fully grasp that the nature of every ‘thing’ is to arise, or come into being, in context with other ‘things.’ In Japan this contextual relationship is called “cause and condition,” or “cause and effect.”) The hearers and discussers are to be those who “read” the sutra—people who come to it under various conditions. Revealing this teaching at the beginning of the sutra, Śākyamuni is encouraging such people to, in turn, provide their own contexts and forums for hearing and discussion.