

The Lotus Sutra and SGI President Daisaku Ikeda

He Jingsong

IN more than 2,000 years of Buddhist development, the Lotus Sutra due to its unique thought system and religious practice has obtained a historical significance, unmatched by others canons. Not only does it mark the sermon of Buddha in full maturity, but also it has determined the fundamental direction of the great vehicle. Today, we even more realize that it can be called a true classic of supreme Buddhism. Through Mr. Ikeda's explanation and unique sagacity, and the great cultural movement developed by Soka Gakkai under his leadership, the Lotus Sutra takes on a strong, contemporary meaning and shines again with bright splendor.

Defense of the Religious Importance of the Lotus Sutra

According to the theory of Tiantai sect distinguishing “five periods and eight doctrines,”¹ as we already know, the Lotus Sutra is the last sermon of the Buddha in his earthly life, containing the highest Buddhist truth. However, the claim of Tiantai sect regarding the Lotus Sutra has met the serious challenge of exegesis. The exegesis ascertain that the writing of the Lotus Sutra is roughly around the year zero A.D.. This easily leads us to think that this sutra was written by some believers few centuries after the entry of the Buddha to nirvana. The expression of “great vehicle as not spoken by the Buddha” comes from there. On this matter, Mr. Ikeda has consciously examined the historical development of Buddhism, pointing out that not long after the entry of the Buddha in nirvana, the disciples have organized a meeting to arrange the teachings of the Buddha. In the following two or three centuries, the Buddhist canon has been transmitted orally, until the first century B.C. when the writings of today appeared. “It means that the small vehicle canon was practically not formed earlier than the earliest works of the great vehicle.”² If we advocate late formation to deny the Lotus Sutra as a sermon of the Buddha, it clearly denies the authenticity of some small vehicle canons such as the Āgama Sutra.

It is not difficult to observe that the denial of the Lotus Sutra and

other great vehicle sutras arises mostly from a disagreement between sects, resulting from the opposition between great and small vehicles. Mr. Ikeda had conducted a study proving that between great and small vehicles sutras exist mutual contradictions on fundamental teachings. At the same time, he has observed an essential connection between the two. The existing contradictions between great and small vehicles lay in the development and the changes in the 50 years of the Buddha's teaching. "Even though the fundamental principles he proclaimed were identical, he repeatedly reflected on how to better explain his feelings and its meanings to simple people. Without doubt, in different surroundings, he may have wisely used different methods to teach."⁷³ So, he needed to think in a concrete context about the capacity of the people to listen, and accordingly to adjust the content of his teaching. We can imagine that the content of his message was adjust to the spiritual progress of the disciples. Moreover, we still need to consider that the progressive growth and development of the religious community would influence the content and the style of the teaching. Mr. Ikeda thinks that "the differences in the content and style of the teaching mainly originate from community members or secular believer groups."⁷⁴ At that time, the monks remained separated from the world. Their interest in the Buddha's teaching mainly lay in the area of internal norms for the preservation of the community, or in some meticulous analysis and explanations of the doctrine, put into practice inside a quite and peaceful monastery. The first meeting in the history of Buddhism appears to be chiefly concerned about community rules. Also, the focus of interest by an early group into abhidharma trend has inevitably brought a clear limitation. But, in contrast, other disciples worried about transmitting the faith to the whole society, and so they took the oral teaching as a basis to determine which of them are attractive to secular believers and to ordinary people. It is the reason why many great vehicle sutras ingenuously use the parables and other literary forms, choosing clear stories to make people understand. Clearly, those who have determined the great vehicle canon firmly believes that the Buddha teaching was not reserved to monks and intellectuals, but was primarily for the masses.

Most of the people having in mind the difference between great and small vehicles consider that the monastic institution was an early form of Buddhism. Later on, the rising of the great vehicle movement and the idea of Bodhisattva are a reaction to early Buddhism. Mr. Ikeda in clarifying the differences between great and small vehicles and the reason for their distinction, has put his attention on the internal relation between the two, the Lotus Sutra playing the evident function of a

bridge between the two. This sutra⁵ includes 28 chapters, whose content can be separated in two parts, each one of 14 chapters. The first part centered on the “Expedient Means” (*Fangbian*) chapter which discussed the question whether the adepts of the two vehicles can become Buddha. The latter part centered on “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” (*Rulaishouliang*) chapter which argued whether the Buddhahood’s potentiality is already present at the beginning or formed progressively. Most of the sutras consider that in distinguishing between two vehicles (one for the hearer, or disciple, and one for the solitary Buddha) lays the weakness of a restrictive search for individual liberation, not wanting to be a compassionate Buddha, advocating “the suppression of body and mind,” working only to one’s own perfection. Also, this distinction had met with fierce criticism from all the great vehicle sutras and has been judged as never leading to Buddhahood. For example, the *Sūraṅgama Sutra* views it as a “wrong device.” Also, “The broad and equal prayer” sutra called this distinction a dead wood unable to give a flower, a burnt seed not to germinate again. But the Lotus Sutra is looking also from a higher perspective. With its original creation of the principle that “the three together returned into one,” it has conveniently unified the oppositions and mended the contradictions between great and small vehicles. It has departed from the view of other great vehicle sutras, has properly classified the former Buddhist theories, and has given to those theories adequate value and status.⁶ As Mr. Ikeda said, “the Lotus Sutra by exposing the vitality principle includes those two (vehicles) in the whole universe.”⁷ Anyway, it “clearly demonstrates that Buddha world and the nine other worlds are completely identical,”⁸ attesting that everyone can become a Buddha.

Concerning the life of the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra offered different explanations from earlier canons. The small vehicle usually regards him as a historical personage, its own religions founder and guide. However, the great vehicle makes him the highest personal and powerful god. Also it considers that it is through religious practice that he start to reach the perfect Enlightenment. On this regard, the Lotus Sutra in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” states that those above expressions are only but parables, a device used by the Buddha to instruct people. The Buddha himself told his disciples: “I have already became a Buddha myriads of years ago.” As a historical figure, Shakyamuni is only “to cross over, to reach conveniently the nirvana, to destroy the illusion.” The affirmation of the Buddha’s life span as “inconceivably long” has a very important meaning. So, the idea that “the two vehicles can both lead to buddhahood” as well as the idea of

future manifestations of Buddhas in the future had an emotional and convincing impact on the people. On this basis, this sutra has firmly established that the Buddhahood is the clear goal of those who practice. The teaching that “the three vehicles return to one” implies that believers should reject the view of three vehicles. They should through the Buddha’s wisdom unify the three vehicles into one, and should walk on the same road leading to Buddhahood.⁹

From the perspective of the inclusiveness of the principle “the three together returned into one” and of the impermanence of Buddha’s life “eternally completed,” this sutra is clearly different from all others. It is not exaggerated to say that it is in the entire life of Shakyamuni the most perfect logical induction. Mr. Ikeda has abundantly proved the historical and religious significance of the Lotus Sutra by an analysis of the texts mentioned above and by the study of the Buddhist canon’s content.¹⁰

Mr. Ikeda and the Practice of Lotus Sutra

Mr. Ikeda’s affirmation of the historical significance of the Lotus Sutra amounts to a defense of the Buddhist wise life (*huiming*). We should notice that, according to Mr. Ikeda, the defense of wise life does not stop at the historical meaning of the doctrine. But the religious principle of the Lotus Sutra is transposed into the area of practical life, giving again a practical meaning to the teaching. At the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s, Mr. Ikeda has proposed the famous notion of “the third civilization” and proclaimed the slogan of “new socialism.” Later on, those theories were elaborated, enriched, until the final development in the new concept of “Middle Way politic” (direction of the middle path), as a spiritual basis for the social activities of Soka Gakkai.

The Middle Way politic proposed by Mr. Ikeda is rooted in the theory of “the unification of the three truths”: Lotus Sutra advocates for itself the philosophy of the unification of the three truths of emptiness (*kong*), temporary reality (*jia*) and mean (*zhong*). More explicitly, the late Lotus Sutra has revealed its meaning, hidden within the text, with the Holy Nichiren: the truth of emptiness, temporary reality and mean have the middle path as regulating principle.¹¹ Tiantai sect by promoting the theory of “the unification of the three truths” understands that the truth of emptiness refers to the fact that things of the world arise due to certain conditions; they don’t have their own essence, and so are empty. The truth of temporal reality considers that even through the things are empty and without their own essence, still it is not a pure vacuity, and things possess a temporary existence. The truth of mean is that taking

into account that the things in the world are from one aspect empty, and from another real, it is neither empty nor real, but it is a Middle Way. Zhiyi (or Chih-i) considers that the three truths, “though three, are one; through one, are three, without mutually conflicting,” “one idea arises, at the same time empty, real and middle.”¹² That means that the emptiness and the reality of phenomena are a Middle Way, and that the Middle Way is shown in the middle of all the phenomena.

The word Middle Way in Sanskrit means originally to leave away two sides (two extremes) and to choose the way of not having any inclination. In the chapter of The Four Truths, in the *Treaty of the Middle*, it is said: “The Law arises from many conditions; I say it is empty; it is named real; it means Middle Way.” Mr. Ikeda has firmly grasped the specificity of the Middle Way: “To stand on ‘the indistinctiveness between the material things and the spirit’ and to talk about the Middle Way, it means not to lean on material things nor on the spirit, but that the material things and the spirit together possess this indistinction.” Mr. Ikeda, while transposing the soul of Middle Way theory of the traditional Buddhist thinking into the field of contemporary social activities, said: “The three truths of emptiness, reality and mean can conceptually be applied to the main contemporary thoughts of idealism, materialism and existentialism. What idealism advocates is only the part corresponding to the truth of emptiness; materialism talks only about the part corresponding to the truth of reality; but existentialism is the philosophical principle corresponding to the truth of mean.”

Materialism and idealism are two main philosophical branches. For Mr. Ikeda, the opposition between materialism and idealism is quite similar to the opposition in the Buddhist doctrine between material things and spirit, between the truth of emptiness and the truth of reality, reflecting only one side of the knowledge. The spirit of the unification of the three truths principle in the Tiantai Lotus Sutra can really unify different philosophical trends such as materialism and idealism. Mr. Ikeda said: “Only the Middle Way of the Mystic Law can break the partiality of the two great ideologies of idealism and materialism, permanently opposing and confronting. From there, we can create a philosophy of life with a strong direction. So, the Mystic Law of the Middle Way corrects the partiality of all the ideologies, puts them in an appropriate place, and establishes a systematic thinking; this is an absolute truth without any mistake.” Why? “First, the sublime teaching of the Middle Way and the Middle Way politic not only lay between the two big forces opposing each other, but also shouldn’t advocate its own way by choosing the positive elements from the two... The correct Middle

Way should possess its own independently strong opinion and direction, with the great and powerful principles of contesting, suiding, unifying... Secondly, the Middle Way's direction shouldn't be submitted to political party's control and absolutely shouldn't allow itself to be centered on party's policies. In all circumstances, it should put the public interest in the forefront; its practical policy should be the search for people's prosperity and happiness." Concretely, Mr. Ikeda hopes that Soka Gakkai will become a powerful third force for the whole of Japan.

Mr. Ikeda has said that the essence of the Middle Way doctrine can practically be identified as a doctrine of man with man as an "harmonious and complete vital essence, so it can be said that the essence of human life is the Middle Way. To take an example, in hot weather we can remove clothes; in cold weather, we put on clothes. What changes is the clothes. Man's essence didn't change, because the essence of human life is the Middle Way." Mr. Ikeda extends this example to capitalism and communism, drawing a parallel conclusion: one puts on clothes, one doesn't put clothes on. Mr. Ikeda says by the way of comparison. On a cold winter, it is needed to wear clothes; it is like communism. During a hot summer with the intensity of the heat, removing the clothes make one adapt quickly; it is capitalism. That means that, in any cases, one can never be attached to either capitalism or communism. If not, it means one doesn't pay attention to the weather, to the environment and to other conditions, and fundamentally one doesn't look at the human essence. So, "whether capitalism or communism, they both aim to realize people's happiness and bring social prosperity. The social system in final analysis is only a device to accomplish this aim."¹³

We have to realize, after World War II, East and West remain in a situation of complete opposition. Mr. Ikeda firmly transposes the spirit of the Buddhist teaching of the unification of the three truths into international politics, intending to finish the Cold War between the two socialist and capitalist camps, bringing about peace and security. This undoubtedly bears great historical meaning and pragmatism. After that the world situation may warm up, especially after the deep changes in Eastern Europe, Mr. Ikeda's penetrating ideas may have even more value.

The Meaning of the Lotus Sutra in the Future of Society

For a long time, the doctrine of Middle Way has constituted the foundation of Soka Gakkai's cultural activities for peace in the world. Until the late 1970s, Mr. Ikeda had persistently emphasized rationale of the *santi yuanrong* (interpenetration of the three truths) that means the eventual

reciprocal compensation between the void, the false and centrality. According to Mr. Ikeda, the three truths exist in the following way: the truth of void is the immanent nature of all dharmas (beings/phenomena). The nature will show itself necessarily just like a human being speaks and a tree flowers, as any wisdom will exhibit somehow in the universe. The truth of the false is merely a temporary amalgamation of the five *skandhas* (elements) which are some forms human beings of flowers appear in the reality. As for the truth of centrality, it not only comprises

Both the void and false, but represents the unchangeable life as origin of all phenomenal beings. The truth of void, as some appearance of universal wisdom, symbolizes progress and vitality; the truth of false, in form of temporary amalgamation, stands for compromise that means all dharmas (beings) ever-changing at every moment but maintaining its temporal and special location as a particular existence. Yet, as the unchangeable life, the truth of centrality provides the fountainhead and starting-point for both void and false. Of the three truths, none is absent for the establishment of a perfect society. Any cultural institution for mankind should stand upon the three principles of vitality, compromise and starting-point. And any compromise without a starting-point is only surrender lack of principled standards; and if it is lack of progress and vitality, the compromise runs into a stagnation; but without compromise, any progress and development in society tends to degenerate into abnormality and imbalance.

If we further examine our modern society, it is not difficult to realize that our modern culture has already fallen into a profound crisis. This crisis is shown in the unilateral and accelerated development of science, technology and material civilization. But the spiritual civilization receives relatively less attention and stays in the background. Not only developing countries but also developed countries are facing a mountain of problems. For example, because science, technology and material wealth are concentrated in few people's hands, a quite important part of the population is still suffering from natural calamities and man made disasters, famine and diseases, ignorance and backwardness; the rapid economic development brings about global environment damage; the stimulation of material thirst make people fall into an extreme egocentric and profit-orientated mentality, burying humanity and morality, lacking higher ideals, becoming short-sighted, looking for short term results. Money and enjoyment become the only happiness. As we can see, the problem facing humanity in the 21st century is how to solve this spiritual crisis.

In fact, the fundamental origin of this crisis is that our humanity totally turns the back to the teachings of “the indistinctiveness of the material things and the spirit” and to “the unification of the three principles.” So the serious crisis of modern culture, as Mr. Ikeda said, is not going to be solved by the development of science, technology, material civilization, improves legal institution, neither by the support of different social institutions. Even though science and technology are the moving force behind progress in modern society, science and technology have to be handled by men. So the fundamental element of productivity lies in man and not in things. The different institutions, including social ones, are to serve man. The material civilization can only solve the material basis for man’s survival and existence. Man has still a higher spiritual quest. If a society has only a developed material civilization without higher spiritual civilization, the development of this society is not healthy, but abnormal and sick. The serious problems of the modern society are manifested at the spiritual level. Mr. Ikeda intends to solve the different problems from the perspective of man. On this regard, he has also proposed an authentic practical route, that is “to make a revolution inside the individual,” so as “to change the fate of one country, up to the point of changing the fate of the whole humanity.”

On multiple aspects of practical problem, we understand more the important meaning of the fundamental spirit of Buddhism that Mr. Ikeda has drawn from Lotus Sutra. At the same time, the Soka Gakkai under the leadership of Mr. Ikeda, based on the spirit of Lotus Sutra, has provided a field where this great cultural movement can be developed.

Finally, I would like to express my best wish for Soka Gakkai: May it always maintain its sublime character that any good-lotus possesses as not taking root without mud and keeping uncontaminated in spite of growing in mud.

Notes

¹ Tiantai sect distinguishes in the life on Buddha five periods of preaching: the “Flower Garland” period when, after reaching Enlightenment under the pipal tree, he spoke about the great vehicle as the superior door in the “Flower Garland Sutra”; the period of the Āgama Sutra when during 12 years he taught to simple people the Āgama Sutras; the period of the introductory Mahāyāna when during eight years he taught at the request of advanced people the Vimalakīrti Sutra, the Golden Light Sutra, the Lānkāvātara Sutra and other great vehicle truths; the period of the Prajñā (or Wisdom) while during 22 years he transmitted the principle that all the dharmas are empty; the “Nirvana and Lotus” period when during eight years he proclaimed the fundamental feeling of leaving the world, in the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra.

² Daisaku Ikeda, *One thousand Years of Buddhism* (Chinese edition), TianJin University Press, p. 84

³ idem, p. 85

⁴ idem, p. 87

⁵ as translated by Kumārajīva in the *Miaofa lienhua* Sutra

⁶ He Jingsong, *The Correct Sermon Looking as a White Lotus*, Taiwan: Ruwen Press, p. 72–73

⁷ *One thousand Years of Buddhism*, p. 90

⁸ idem, p. 90

⁹ *The Correct Sermon Looking as a White Lotus*, p. 75–76

¹⁰ Mr. Ikeda has remarked: “As we can see, the small vehicle’s Āgama Sutra and other great vehicle canons are the assembly of the different theories before Shakyamuni revealed his true spirit at last in the Lotus Sutra... They represent some aspects of his illumination, and so enclose some truths. But each one separately is limited to one part of the ‘perfect teaching’ achieved in the Lotus Sutra.” Mr. Ikeda also noticed: “If Shakyamuni had not taught the Lotus Sutra, he would not have spoken the most complete form of the Law, nor would have completed the mission for which he has come to this world.” *One thousand Years of Buddhism*, p. 95

¹¹ *Seikyo Sinbun*, Tokyo: Seikyo shinbunsha, November 14, 1966

¹² Zhiyi, *Mohe zhiguan*, volume 2

¹³ Mr. Ikeda’s speech at the 31st general meeting, 1959. Quoted from Yang Zhong-bang, *On Ikeda Daisaku*, 14th edition, Tokyo: Taikosha, 1969, p. 228–229.