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“Our World, our Jewel: Engaged Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra”

At the 2003 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a seminar was advertised that caught my eye. “Embracing Life with the Heart of a Buddha” was sponsored by the UUA’s Advocacy and Witness Staff Group and promised to explore “Buddhist teachings and meditation practices that are the ground of a spiritually infused social activism.” Joanna Macy, a well-known Buddhist environmental activist, was the featured speaker. “A wise and compassionate response to the suffering of the world begins with our capacity to be mindful and accepting of our own most difficult emotions,” she said at the forum. Okay, I thought, that’s nice—but how does it help to push people out into the world? How does it motivate them to respond in *active* ways to the suffering of others?

Traditional Buddhism has helped to center me during times when my personal activism has been stressful and overwhelming. Macy teaches, for example, how to use intentionality to counter the anger and despair felt when countering the injustices of the world. “The great challenge is to negotiate the dynamic interplay of action and nonaction, engaging completely while avoiding attachment to visible results.” One way that some Buddhists have started to engage in the world, says Donald Rothberg, is to use Buddhism to enhance their ability to feel the pain of the world, which suggests a caring and wider perspective beyond that of the separate and isolated self. “Cultivating this wider perspective they find resources to help themselves not to be so easily overwhelmed or paralyzed” by powerful events, and this allows them to act, however they choose, out of wisdom and compassion rather than reactivity. Again, however, teaching someone to be caring and to feel another’s pain is not the same as encouraging them to take action to prevent that other person’s pain.

Throughout traditional Buddhism there is this mixed message about the type of conflict that is appropriate for engagement. Rothberg reminds us that although the historical Buddha was concerned about the conditions leading to social peace, justice, and harmony—and apparently even advised kings in this regard by intervening several times to prevent war—he also prohibited his monks and nuns from any contact with “political affairs having to do with kings and power.” It is instructive to remember that Sakyamuni Buddha left his family and community

in order to obtain enlightenment—as most Buddhist monks do today. On the other hand, as the Buddha learned under the Bodhi tree, we are all subject to *pratitya samut pada*, or co-dependent arising. The Lotus Sutra teaches that this world is all there is for us now and the world we see is at least a part of our own creation—a product of all things coming to exist interdependently.

Using Buddhism to center oneself during periods of stress (always a useful activity) may work wonders when functioning, as activists do, in a political and often bureaucratic world where burnout is endemic. For me, though, meditation practices have not had the ability to *fuel* my activism or to help me engage injustice at an institutional level. Buddhism has been a great help, but it hasn't been the thing that triggers or motivates my social conscience. Rothberg explains that, in general, the focus even among many socially engaged Buddhists, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Joanna Macy, has been on the “inner responses” to social injustice and the environment, “on developing a wider understanding of Buddhist ethical precepts, and on forming a host of contemporarily applicable individual and group transformative practices.” What has been missing are efforts toward collectively transforming institutions.

Until recently, I, too, found myself separating Buddhist practice from social activism. At work, where I edit a magazine devoted to peace and the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, I work for social change through educational efforts aimed at the outward transformation of corrupt and secretive institutions. In my personal life, I use Buddhist practice to work for inner change and transformation. Encountering the Lotus Sutra has begun to break down this dichotomy for me. Perhaps Buddhist practice doesn't need to be one that ultimately removes the devout practitioner from the world. Perhaps if we redefine what it means to embed oneself in the sangha (or Buddhist community, where enlightenment is attainable) it will open up new ways to practice compassion. Donald Lopez says that a Buddhist “is generally defined as someone who seeks refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.” The sangha, he notes, is interpreted in different ways. Sometimes it means specifically those who have followed the Buddha and have obtained nirvana; sometimes it means the community of nuns and monks; other times it means more generally those who follow the Buddha. I now see that some Buddhists define sangha a fourth way—as the world community of which we are all a part. The Lotus Sutra says “A

child of the Buddha teaching the Dharma / Will always be gentle, patient, / And compassionate toward all.”

With the number of movements inspired by the Lotus Sutra that actively engage this larger sangha—of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike—it follows that something in the sutra must be leading followers to define the term sangha more broadly than has traditional Buddhism. After all, if, as the Lotus Sutra teaches, everyone is a bodhisattva and therefore a potential/future Buddha, then excluding any being from the sangha, even through neglect, is to look only at what is happening in the present, not at what will be. The many stories about Bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra, says Gene Reeves, are there to provide us role models. “They play a role in the ever-present tension between what already is and what is yet to be.” In Chapter 15 of the Lotus Sutra we learn that there are as many bodhisattvas as there are grains of sand in 60,000 Ganges Rivers. In other words, *everyone* is a bodhisattva. The sutra goes to tell us that the Buddha nature is alive as long as people are Buddhas for one another; serving and purifying this Buddha land and helping others is practicing the Dharma. And one must not forget that of all the Buddha lands, it was from a mountain in Japan that Sakyamuni Buddha chose to preach the Lotus Sutra—so this Buddha land must, indeed, be a special one.

Although the Lotus Sutra does not contain specific instructions for changing the world through outreach and activism (just as it never actually preaches the Dharma it promises to preach), its liberation theology has spawned many movements, especially in Japan, that have helped to change the world for the better. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, bases his book, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace*, on the Lotus Sutra premise that the problems of people anywhere are the problems of all. Happiness cannot be realized by one person, Niwano stresses, until it is realized by all. To this end, and among its many other outreach programs, Rissho Kosei-kai founded its “Brighter Society Movement,” which today has more than 24 million members worldwide—more than three times the membership of Rissho Kosei-kai itself!

As I read the Lotus Sutra for the first time I wondered *how* it has inspired and motivated people to get out and change not just themselves, or their local Buddhist communities, but everything with which they come in contact. While altruism and service to others is found in traditional Buddhist doctrine, says Kenneth Tanaka, “for example, in the Bodhisattva ideal where spiritual adepts postpone their own liberation in order to remain in the world to help liberate

others,” there is something in the Lotus Sutra that is especially motivating. Peggy Morgan calls this the “wow” factor of the sutra. It says to East Asian Buddhists, in particular, as one Tibetan woman told Morgan during an interview, “just imagine that people could be that skillful, that compassionate.” Paul Williams explains that for many East Asian Buddhists, the Lotus Sutra has been the nearest equivalent to a Buddhist Bible, “one revealed work containing the final truth, itself sufficient for salvation.”

The origin of the term *engaged Buddhism* is usually attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh and his struggle against the Vietnam war. That war has been over for some time, of course, and other Buddhist groups, such as the Japanese Lotus Sutra sects Rissho Kosei-kai and Sokka Gakkai, have taken the concept of engaged Buddhism further (or perhaps, one might say, deeper) into social reform. The term engaged Buddhism itself, explains Rothberg, “implies a critique of some Buddhists as ‘disengaged’” from concerns like war, poverty, and other social problems. If the Buddha is alive with us today as the Lotus Sutra insists, we must ask how skillful means are being used to purify this Buddha land and expand the Dharma.

Kenneth Kraft explains that although socially engaged Buddhists in Japan remain marginal in Buddhist circles, they are actively campaigning for peace in many quiet ways both in Japan and internationally. For example, the Niwano Peace foundation, chartered in 1978, works toward the realization of world peace by promoting research, education, and political reform. According to the foundation’s Web site:

Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, during his many years of guiding the organization and disseminating its teachings has consistently urged the necessity of peace activities based on a religious spirit but transcending denominational bounds. The world today is threatened by many difficult problems—nuclear war, hunger, environmental pollution.

At such a time, the group explains, the involvement of “people of religion” is more important than ever.

The work done to promote peace, education, and a clean environment by the other main Japanese Lotus Sutra sect, Soka Gakkai, is at least as expansive as the work done by Rissho Kosei-kai. In 1992, there were 8 million Japanese

households involved in Soka Gakkai, which had an additional 1.26 million members worldwide in nearly 120 countries. The organization sponsors the Komeito, an educational system that includes a large university, museums, and several media companies. Both Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai are founded on the principles laid down by Nichiren, who devoted his life to searching for solutions to the problems associated with living in an age of *mappo*, or a decline of the Dharma. Although evil prevails in the world today, these groups believe that they can help lead and guide humankind to a better existence here on Earth. Nichiren concluded that the ultimate religious truth lay only in the Lotus Sutra, which he believed to be the last and greatest teaching of the Buddha. As Rothberg describes this trend, Buddhists such as those in Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai have extended the meaning of Buddhist precepts beyond personal relationships. For example, the first Buddhist precept forbidding the taking of life can “be extended to include the collective killing done by governments and the damage done to the earth by society.” As the definition of community expands, so can the number of beings who are saved.

Masahiro Shimoda says that social movements grounded on the discourse of the Lotus Sutra are rooted in the sutra’s fundamental idea that the Buddha’s truth should be continually brought into the present by a teacher utilizing “skillful means.” “As has been reiterated so often,” he says, “the truth handed down to us by the Lotus Sutra must be substantiated by evidence in present history.” To do this, followers of the sutra start by reciting the sutra, even if that recitation is only the title. But they must return what they learn and gain from their practice

to the present reality by involving themselves in some kind of social activity. . . . For Japanese Buddhists, the origin of the truth is incarnated in the words of the Lotus Sutra, and they should be verified in the present historical world.

Unlike their counterparts in India, many Japanese Buddhists have not seen the world as merely an obstacle, but as “an important screen on which sacred words must be projected.”

Central to the Lotus Sutra is also the idea that being a bodhisattva is transactional—that is, one cannot be a bodhisattva without someone to be a bodhisattva for. The sutra also proclaims that everyone is a bodhisattva,

affirming that interconnection is an inherent part of being human. All that we do is from bodhisattva to bodhisattva. “What, then, does it mean to be a bodhisattva?” asks Reeves. “Basically in the Lotus Sutra it means using appropriate means to help others. And that finally, for the Lotus Sutra, is what Buddhism itself is.” There are two principle bodhisattva practices outlined in the Lotus Sutra: transforming people and purifying Buddha lands. Through social action, both of these are obtainable on Earth. As people are transformed they gain a better understanding of compassion for all living things (and I include the Earth as a living thing)—and as they are transformed they, in turn, act to purify the Earth. Throughout the Lotus Sutra we see people helping others to obtain something of value. In Chapter 8 there is a man who sews a jewel, representing the Dharma, into the robe of his friend. In a later parable, a treasure is hidden in a man’s topknot.

Christopher Queen notes that while Buddhists have in the past been known to respond to local challenges, they just as often have “declined or failed to lead in shaping the flow of social change.” However, the times, to quote Bob Dylan, do seem to be changing. None of today’s Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama, Ambedkar Bhimrao Ramji, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Buddhadasa have chosen the most traditional role for a Buddhist leader, that of the forest or temple monk, which would remove them from “outside” social, cultural, and familial connections.”

“The liberation theology espoused by today’s Buddhist leaders is based on their own distinctive readings of traditional Buddhist doctrines,” Queen says, “particularly those of selflessness, interdependence, the five precepts, the four noble truths, nondualism, and emptiness.” Clifford Geertz has given three reasons for this reliance on ancient texts in rapidly changing times. First, there’s the popular reverence for scripture and scriptural literacy. Second, the belief in the inerrancy of the canonical tradition. Third, and this is most relevant to examining how and why the Lotus Sutra is able to inspire its followers to work for social and ecological justice, is a contemporary desire to translate and reinterpret ancient teachings in the light of modern problems. Queen illustrates this last point with two modern examples: Thich Quang Duc’s 1963 self immolation protesting the Vietnam war, a burning inspired by the Lotus Sutra parable where a bodhisattva burns his body, piece by piece, as a living sacrifice to the Buddha); and in the way followers of the Lotus Sutra will chant its title.

According to Shimoda, there have been more manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra discovered to date than any other Buddhist manuscript in India. Shimoda is also struck by the fact that the sutra “has initiated an equally surprising number of social movements throughout the history of Japan.” This hints, he says, at the way it has been accepted by different societies, illustrating how the sutra comes “alive again to people in a new situation in a renewed appearance with its substance unchanged.” While traditional Buddhist liberation has been obtained through detachment, for engaged Buddhists liberation is obtained through engagement.

The Lotus Sutra liberates its followers by affirming the transactional nature of being a bodhisattva through its parables and stories. If engaged Buddhism is a liberation theology, then the Lotus Sutra is a collection of marching songs. Even if it does not say, ‘go out and change the world by purifying the environment, getting rid of nuclear weapons, and making peace with your neighbors,’ (these are some of the activities in which Lotus Sutra followers are engaged) its stories, and more importantly, its tone, make this mission clear.

When the Buddha first explains to Shariputra how there are not three Buddha vehicles, but one, he does it by explaining that Buddhas have, in the past, distinguished three ways within the One Buddha-vehicle to use skillful means to address the problems of this world: “Shariputra, the Buddhas appear in an evil world of five pollutions. . . . When the age is in chaos, the stains run deep, and greedy and jealous living beings acquire unhealthy roots.” The Buddha names these five pollutions as the pollution of the age, pollution from mental agony, the pollution of living beings, the pollution of views, and the pollution of life. Using nuclear weapons as an example, one can see that weapons of mass destruction fall into at least four of these five categories: They are a pollution of our age; they were developed in response to the mental agony (fear) that another power might have the means and will to destroy “us”; they are created by living beings; and they are the result of a political viewpoint that distrusts “otherness.” That’s four of the five pollutions right there.

Michio Shinozaki says that modernity has created many dead materials “which resist the natural cycle-recycle process,” violating nature’s characteristic process of eternal return. The Energy Department, for example, is attempting to bury excess nuclear weapons plutonium under Yucca Mountain in Nevada, promising to isolate it from the environment for at least 25,000 years. (It will take 250,000

years for it to be safe, but who's counting?) But as the Buddha says in the Lotus Sutra, all Buddhas recognize that "nothing exists independently, and that Buddha-seeds grow interdependently." This "co-dependent arising" runs counter to the idea that anything can be created or disposed of outside the Earth's natural cycles—or at least anything that isn't a pollution.

A fundamental Buddhist view of the world, says Shinozaki, is that everything in this universe is interrelated and changing. . . . all existence, including human and nonhuman, is inevitably and mutually related or dependent. . . . [All] beings, sentient and nonsentient have the Buddha nature. Among them there is no division. They are authentically the same.

He stresses that the Lotus Sutra can be interpreted in this naturalistic way, purifying human desires and the environment as it is better understood. Chapter 28 of the sutra says that a pure person "will be content with few desires and able to do the works of the [Bodhisattva] Universal Virtue." Humans are not merely a product of biological processes, Shinozaki continues, but are products of history and culture, able to transcend and change, to grow beyond what they are as a product of evolution.

Applying this argument to the ecological crisis of today, Shinozaki presents a rationale for incorporating science (and I would add political science and peace studies) into the practice of being a bodhisattva. He says that saving living beings from suffering, an essential part of being a bodhisattva, is a concern of all Buddhists. And because there are ecological, political, economic, and social principles at the root of much of human suffering, it is essential for us to concern ourselves with this world. In chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, the eternal Sakyamuni Buddha, as opposed to the actual man who gained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, has constantly been preaching and teaching in this world. "This means that within this present time, the everlasting Buddha is helping and saving in the historical reality of this world by appearing in it, and preaching the Dharma. The Lotus Sutra affirms this world when it says:

Now this triple world

All is my domain;

The living beings in it

All are my children.

But now this place

Abounds with distresses;

And I alone

Am able to save and protect them.

By engaging all that modern learning has to offer, from environmental studies to political science, in the struggle to purify the Earth, Buddhists can incorporate their desires to help all living beings (their Buddhist practice) into their daily practices and intellectual lives.

I'd like to pause to note how my attitude changed about writing on the Lotus Sutra as I went through this project. The way I went about writing this paper illustrates something about how to best interact with this remarkable text. My first impulse, and the task about which I went for several months, was to read everything that scholars were writing about engaged Buddhism and the Lotus Sutra. In August I realized I had not cracked open my manuscript of the sutra since June. This is exactly the wrong way to interact with the teachings of the Lotus Sutra; instead, one should *start* by looking at how they are reacting to these teachings of the Buddha, at what inside is being sparked and inspired. It is always instructive to take a look at how others are reacting to a text, and this one is no exception. But for this paper I realized that I also needed to look at *what* in me was being inspired by the Lotus Sutra. Like the Dharma rain in Chapter 5, where the rain that falls on everything equally is only absorbed and used by each plant according to its need, so does the Lotus Sutra appeal to a listener's heart in individual and powerful ways. For Reeves, the text is primarily soteriological. "I think its main purpose is not to teach Buddhist doctrines or refute other interpretations or forms of Buddhism, but to incline the reader's heart, and especially behavior, in a certain way," he says. As I understand it, this also means in a way that reflects the reader.

What was sparked in me was inspired by my involvement in peace activities, and I discovered that while there has been more than a few articles written on the Lotus Sutra and health care ethics, and more than a few books written on engaged Buddhism and the environment, I could find little written about the peace activities of Lotus Sutra followers. In my mind, the most egregious pollution that humans have dumped on this earthly Buddha land are the nuclear weapons and waste generated by the nuclear military industrial complex. In the 1950s there were atmospheric tests that created most of the “normal background” radiation of today. Through testing, the United States contaminated islands in the Pacific to the extent that they will be uninhabitable for thousands of years. In Georgia, residents are digging up dangerous portable nuclear power sources placed in that country by the Soviets during years of training exercises. Cancer rates continue to increase as, in my opinion, more and more people are exposed to the radiation of modern society. If nuclear weapons aren't a pollution, I can't imagine what would be. Kraft says that Einstein himself may have inadvertently enunciated a first law of eco-karma: “Humanity will get the fate it deserves.”

The fact that the topic of engaged Buddhism emerged from the text for me, because of who I am, is an example of how the Lotus Sutra itself uses skillful means. By appealing to this interest of mine, it motivates my activist work. And then, through my organization, I am able to do the bodhisattva work of purifying Buddha lands. “I see the Lotus Sutra this way because of who I am,” a fellow classmate of mine said. Like a series of nested Russian dolls, on the surface of the text is a story, beneath that are interpretations of the story, and at the core is a way of viewing the world and a philosophy that emerges and engages our higher Buddha selves. For some, like my friend, the Lotus Sutra may reveal superheroes who motivate their ministries. For me I see an intersection between cleaning up the nuclear weapons mess and purifying the world.

Paul Swanson says that for those seeking meaning in the Lotus Sutra they must seek the meaning that is alive and meaningful now. “Precisely because the Lotus Sutra is of immeasurable meanings, it has the potential for providing meaning in our day.” In large part finding such connections hinges on being aware of the potential goodness that surrounds us, which allows a Buddhist (or anyone) to grow beyond his or her local community. It allows us to foster concern for the ecology of places far away from our own. It leads us to lifestyles that minimize our impact on the planet. It can lead to action. “Who would have thought that the Lotus Sutra has anything to do with modern environmental issues”? Swanson

asks. “Yet this is but one example of the immeasurable meanings latent in the Lotus Sutra.”

The solution to modern crises, if we look, can be found in the Buddhist understanding of the relationship between nature and humanity. “Nature is the ideal,” says Shinozaki, it is in the process of eternal rhythm of which humans are a part. When we realize this, ignoring our part in nature by abusing others or supporting unjust systems, puts us at odds with our own nature. The “no thinking” or “no action” of Eastern naturalistic philosophy (all trees are enlightened) is remedied in the Lotus Sutra by skillful means. The Lotus Sutra teaches that sometimes it is best to wait and be mindful, such as we find in the story of the father who does not reveal himself to his prodigal son until the father is about to die. But other situations require immediate reason, thought, and direct action. For example, if the father in the parable of the burning house had waited for any length of time before acting, his children would not have survived!

Jamie Hubbard affirms this shift in outlook from inner to outer change by saying that individual action as affirmed in the Lotus Sutra is no longer dwarfed by the great “ultimacy of the cosmic cycle,” but plays a part in the propagation of the Dharma and the betterment of the human condition.” Thus, the Lotus Sutra strikes a balance between the Western view of time and history, where everything is evolutionary—a one-chance only event—and the Eastern view that all is “eternal return” and cyclical. If I take the Lotus Sutra to heart, there is no way I can just sit around and accept that the injustices created by humans are inevitable and irreversible. Through skillful means, there is always something that can be done. Perhaps I can’t solve every crisis, but I can respond to the cries of the world—whether those cries are from those close to me or on the other side of the planet.