

Greetings

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Gandhi and the Lotus Sutra

THE Lotus Sutra came into the limelight in our family due to the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. While Mahatma Gandhi was fighting for the freedom of India, he linked our freedom to the freedom of humanity as a whole. We were not fighting for the freedom of the people of India alone but for the freedom of all people who were oppressed by colonization. In this quest, a number of people of Asian and European origin came to his ashram. There were some Japanese monks who recited the Lotus Sutra living in the ashram at Wardha, as well as a Cambodian monk. Buddhism became a presence at the ashram. Gandhiji wanted to know about the Lotus Sutra, as it was unknown on Indian soil. A Sanskrit edition had been published in Russia, but it was difficult to find a copy of it in India. My father, Prof. Raghu Vira, obtained a copy for Gandhiji. He also found him a copy of an English translation of the Sutra made by Heinrich Kern that was included in *The Sacred Books of the East* published by Oxford University Press. Gandhiji read it and was moved to ask; “Why have we lost a Sutra of such importance, where existence and transcendence come together?” The lotus grows out of a village pond and shines brilliantly. Likewise, the human mind in the Lotus Sutra shines anew in the efflorescence of our inherent Buddha nature. This ascendance of the mind is crucial to the thought of the Lotus Sutra.

In 1955, Premier Nikolai Bulganin and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union came to India on a state visit and presented a microfilm of the Petrovsky manuscript of the Lotus Sutra to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. My father was at that time a Member of Parliament. Panditji called him and said that he had received a microfilm of a Sanskrit manuscript for his work. It was well nigh impossible in those days to acquire a microfilm from the Soviet Union. My father was overwhelmed with this opportunity coming from the Prime Minister himself. My father passed away before he could complete the manuscript for a facsimile edition. I continued his work and furthermore collected stray

leaves and fragments from the British Museum in London and the Museum at Mannheim, Germany. The publication of the manuscript has since attracted the constant attention of Japanese scholars.

The History of the Spread of the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra was an important Sutra in the Central Asian states, almost a palladium. It was translated into several Central Asian languages, such as, Hsi-hsia, Tibetan, and Mongolian. You can see examples of these different versions in the exhibition.

In China, the Lotus Sutra played a special role. The Sutra was translated by one of the greatest translators to ever like, Kumarajiva. The Kumarajiva Institute at Kucha has honored President Daisaku Ikeda. It is an honor richly deserved by President Ikeda, the great successor of Kumarajiva and Nichiren. When I was at Dunhuang in 2000, I visited a stupa nearby where the horse of Kumarajiva collapsed out of thirst and hunger and then died. Kumarajiva was barely two kilometers away from the Crescent Lake. The grief he felt on the death of his horse is immortalized by this beautiful stupa. It reminds us of the fragility of life. I have paid homage to this stupa connected with the Sutra. At the exhibition, you can see photographs of the paintings of the Sutra that adorn the walls of the Dunhuang caves. Mogaoku caves in Dunhuang has about 496 caves and is one of the largest cave complexes containing Buddhist relics. In Cave No. 17, about 50,000 manuscripts were discovered. The earliest Turkish and Chinese manuscripts were found in this cave. It is a treasure house of the world. All of the Dunhuang caves are covered with Buddhist wall paintings. There are three cave complexes: Mogaoku, Yumen, and the Western caves. These three complexes comprise about a thousand caves, where as in Ajanta there are only 29 caves. You can imagine the immensity of the vision of the Buddhist monks and patrons who built these caves. The work began in the fourth century when an Indian master dug out the first cave. Dunhuang was an important center of Chinese military power in the second century BC, and gradually it became a place of meditation as well. An inscription made during the Gupta period can also be seen in the Dunhuang caves. It shows the vibrant relationship that existed between India and East Asia. One day the people of Asia will look more towards the East than towards the West.

On display in the exhibit is a photograph of the Rawak monastery in the kingdom of Khotan. Khotan was a source of manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra in China. The Petrovsky manuscript, whose main portion is now at St. Petersburg and some leaves in two other museums, comes

from Khotan.

This exhibition shows some Japanese paintings that display various motifs of the Lotus Sutra. The representation of sutras in pictures was an established tradition in Japan. This tradition goes back to the time of Lord Buddha. The great monastery of Jetavana, nine stories high, was dedicated to Lord Buddha by Anathapindada. At that time, few people came to take part in Dharma activities. Lord Buddha asked the donor to have the walls of the monastery decorated with images painted in brilliant colors. When the paintings were completed, people came to admire them. The images captured their minds and their hearts, and the message of Dharma was thus conveyed in a unique aesthesis of grace and beauty. The Buddha was not only a hermit but also a prince, a Prince of Dharma. This exhibition is the first in the world to show the great expanse of the Lotus Sutra. Beautiful colors enshrine the message. Aesthesis becomes the dynamics of the mind.

The Lotus Sutra is displayed in several manuscripts in different languages, from various lands and several centuries. The Petrovsky manuscript is the most ancient on display. It goes back to about the seventh century, close to the time of the Chinese translation by Kumarajiva. The Petrovsky manuscript represents an earlier tradition than that of the translation of Kumarajiva. Kumarajiva was born of a Kashmiri trader and a Princess of Kucha. The people of Kucha spoke a Celtic language. It was the coming together of Sanskrit, Celtic, and Chinese, as Kucha had close contact with China. The Lotus Sutra was a global phenomenon in the person of Kumarajiva. Kumarajiva thus represents the convergence of humankind on the levels of spirituality and physicality because of his noble birth and education.

Closing Remarks

We are happy that you have come to enjoy the exhibition. You will carry away with you the message of the Lotus Sutra, which says that the mind is like a lotus. No one opens the lotus, but the lotus blooms by itself. Likewise, the human mind opens on its own to the inherently divine, to its intrinsic Buddha nature. Our Buddha nature has to evolve on its own, from within, and we have to be lamps unto ourselves. This innate efflorescence, the enlightened core is not enshrined anywhere better and in a more refined manner than in Japan. The Japanese have created everything with their own hands, with their own eyes, with their own language, with their own vision, and in keeping therewith, they have propounded a new hermeneutics of the Lotus Sutra. President Daisaku Ikeda renews this message to India.

Gandhiji would have been thrilled to see the exhibition and to appreciate the visual appeal of the Lotus Sutra. At the time of Gandhiji, India was thrilled to see Japan as representing the evolution of Asia into the modern world of science and technology, power and progress, while retaining her spirit and spirituality. Such a modern country so deeply steeped in the Lotus Sutra was the realization of the harmonization of culture and civilization. The Western conceptualization of a Judaic paradigm with its categorical monocentrism can only lead to the “Clash of Civilizations” of Huntington. Humanity has to move away from clashing to the sharing of civilization and cultures. Theodiversity and humane values are the future. The Lotus Sutra with its open text and context is the paradigm of a just future, wherein will be a harmonization of several languages, multiple ideas, and different ethnicities; and above all that the Divine is inherent or innate to all sentient beings. The wisdom of a Buddha is present in every being to enrich him, to ennoble him.