

**From the symposium in Spain to commemorate the exhibition
“The Lotus Sutra—A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence”**

Message on the Exhibition

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ON this occasion, the exhibition entitled “The Lotus Sutra—A Message of Peace and Harmonious Coexistence”, I wish to offer my heartiest congratulations to the Lleida Public Library and the UNESCO Association of Lleida for their joint sponsorship that has made it possible. To all those whose efforts have brought this about, I extend my warmest greetings and thanks.

The introduction of this exhibition on the Lotus Sutra, which represents the spiritual heritage of Eastern Asia, to this ancient city of Lleida in Catalonia, an area which has received many cultural influences and possesses a rich spiritual soil, marks an occasion that is filled with meaning for me.

In the speech given in 2004 at the General Assembly of UN, Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero proposed “the Alliance of Civilization”, and it is a cause of great joy to us to have an opportunity to engage in East-West spiritual dialogue with the distinguished scholars of Catalonia who have been playing a pioneering role in interfaith and intercultural dialogue not only in Spain but in Europe as a whole, because we also are searching so eagerly for a society of mutual coexistence.

The Lotus Sutra and the other sacred scriptures of the Buddhist religion have for well over two thousand years constituted the spiritual mainstay of the peoples of East Asia, a rich cultural heritage that has flourished greatly. Now, through the medium of these Lotus Sutra manuscripts, we have the opportunity to introduce to you some of the representative works of the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhism, originating in India, spread to southern Asia, the Middle East, and eastward over the Silk Road, the main trade route connecting China to the countries of Central Asia, until it reached China, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and the countries of Southeast Asia. It served as the underlying force in culture and civilization, and its spiritual power was

crystallized in its many Buddhist scriptures.

For the people of the East, these revealed the story, from the time of Shakyamuni, the founder of the religion, onward, of its dialogue with “the spirit of the universe,” an ongoing discovery and exposition of the rhythm of the universe, which manifests itself in the form of Dharma, the Law or reality of life.

A special characteristic of Eastern thought is the concept of a dialogue between the self, which represents the inner universe, and the universe itself, the greater universe, and the fusion of the two, which results in the greater being manifested in each of the individuals. In other words, this is the identification of the transcendent with the indwelling, the eternal with the individual.

In Buddhism, Shakyamuni sought out a vast “internal universe” within his own self, and in doing so, surmounted his inner self and expanded it until it became one with the great outer universe, the life force of the universe, which he understood as Dharma or the Law of life.

When Shakyamuni’s enlightenment, his wisdom and compassion, was directed toward the salvation of the people, it became embodied in the many Buddhist scriptures that adorn the history of the religion. Among these, the Lotus Sutra in particular represents an attempt to express and embody the Dharma which Shakyamuni himself awakened to. It has been most conspicuously embraced by the peoples of the East, has been most widely disseminated, and has captured the soul of the populace, proof of the scripture’s deep and encompassing religious significance, its message of the fusion of the life force of the universe with the individual, and the force and simplicity with which this idea is set forth. It is my hope that, through this exhibition of the heart of Buddhism, the spirit of the people of the East, those of you who are expert in the spiritual ways of the West will, through the examples of the texts of the Lotus Sutra, come to have a greater appreciation of that tradition.

To help foster that kind of understanding, we have arranged the characteristics of the Lotus Sutra under three headings that point up the contrasts between Western civilization and the civilization of the East. These are presented under three headings, namely, “The Concept of the Coexistence of All Forms of Life”, “The Search for the Eternal”, and “The Movement to Create Peace”.

The Concept of the Coexistence of All Forms of Life

This concept is first alluded to in the “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, which occurs in the first part of the sutra. In this chapter,

the Buddha, alluding to the purpose for which he has appeared in the world, speaks of the “one great reason”, namely, to “open the door” to the Buddha wisdom, to “show it”, “to awaken” people to it, and to cause them “to enter” it. What is referred to here as the Buddha wisdom is the wisdom that is embodied in and shines its light on the life force of the universe, or what in the Chinese Tiantai school of Buddhism came to be called or to be synonymous with the term Buddha nature

In the Lotus Sutra, it is clearly stated that persons traditionally regarded as inferior in capacity, of whom the most common representatives are persons of the two categories of voice-hearers and *pratyekabuddhas* or privately enlightened individuals, and women, all are endowed with such Buddha wisdom as part of their inner nature. Thus, all categories of race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, or culture are ignored; all people have the Buddha nature inherent in them, and through its active realization are capable of setting out on the path toward happiness. All, in other words, are endowed equally with basically sound and equal human nature. The Buddha wisdom or nature latent within them is what gives them, in Buddhist terms, the dignity of life.

The fact that, transcending all categories of gender, culture, race, ethnicity—all categories whatsoever—they are all endowed as human beings with the possibility of living life to the fullest—this is what produces the possibility for a world culture of coexistence and harmony.

In “The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs” chapter of the sutra, this idea of coexistence and harmony is given expression through the idea of the harmonious coexistence of three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees. These all differ in height and structure, but when the rain falls, they will take what they need to grow, depending upon their own particular requirements. The sky, and the rain which falls from it, represent the nourishment of the life force of the universe, which is the Buddha’s preaching, and which nourishes the million creatures of the universe. The Japanese Buddhist leader Nichiren uses the metaphor “cherry, plum, apricot, and damson,” for the herbs and trees, and he points out how the power of the Buddhist teachings act to create an atmosphere of cultivation for all of them, and of all forms of life, allowing them each to develop to their fullest.

The Search for the Eternal

The section of the Lotus Sutra I would call “The Search for the Eternal” begins with the emergence of the treasure tower that is the subject of chapter 11, which bears that name. In this chapter, a great treasure tower

emerges from the earth, and Many Treasures, a Buddha from the past who is seated in the tower along with Shakyamuni Buddha carry on a dialogue. Then, in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter, the earth opens again and a huge host of bodhisattvas appear and salute the assembly. Bodhisattva Maitreya, voicing the concern of the assembly, asks who all these people are. In “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” chapter that follows, Shakyamuni replies to Maitreya’s question, speaking as the original Shakyamuni, or the eternal Buddha, making clear his true identity as the Buddha enlightened from time immemorial.

Nichiren, in answer to a question regarding the meaning of this section of the sutra posed by a follower of his named Abtsu-bō, replies that it refers to his, Abutsu-bō’s, own identity. That is, the treasure tower represents the universal life force that is present within each individual. And Tiantai, the Chinese patriarch who commented at length on the meaning of the Lotus Sutra, defines it as “the utmost depth of the essential nature of phenomena”. Deep inside the phenomenal world with its knitting of the life and death of all beings lies the life force of the universe, which Shakyamuni awakened to. The eternal Buddha is one with the eternal Dharma, the Buddha who embodies the underlying rhythm of the universe.

The “Life Span” chapter, while it transcends the world of phenomena, of the constant cycle of life and death, at the same time reveals the ever-present nature of the eternal Buddha, which is necessary for the salvation of all beings of the phenomenal world. As the Buddha states, “I have been constantly in this saha world, preaching the Law, teaching, and converting.” The eternal Dharma, which is personified in the eternal Buddha, is revealed as an eternal savior, for his wisdom and compassion, as he himself states, has “never for a moment neglected” to care for humankind.

The Movement to Create Peace

The Movement to Create Peace, the third of the three topics, is revealed in the Lotus Sutra in the figures of the bodhisattvas who spring up from the earth, representations of the eternal life force of the universe, and the other bodhisattvas depicted in the final chapters of the sutra. These chapters describe Bodhisattva Medicine King, who specializes in medication and life preserving concerns, Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, who symbolizes musical and artistic matters, Bodhisattva Universal Worthy, who represents the qualities of learning and thought, and the bodhisattva known as Perceiver of the World’s Sounds, who is described as giving

ear to all the troubles and distresses of the world's population, hurry to their aid to make them brave and fearless.

With these various kinds of bodhisattva-like characteristics, these figures proceed to exercise their compassionate nature, helping to develop a culture of peace for the multitude to whom they are dedicated. Of particular note because of his peaceful activities is the bodhisattva known as Never Disparaging. This name derives from his customary saying, "I have reverence for you, I would never treat you with disparagement or arrogance," which he pronounces to all those whom he meets. It is representative of his attitude toward them, his respect for the Buddha nature inherent within them. He goes about "simply bowing to people," as the sutra states, in this way paying honor to their inherent worth and integrity. He typifies the spirit of peaceful dialogue and renunciation of all violence and offense with which the bodhisattva ideology sets about seeking to create a peaceful world, and one which is a model for those of us today who cherish the same ambition.

In this way the Lotus Sutra, through its grasp of the fundamental ideas of the Buddha nature inherent in all, seeks to develop the thought of peaceful coexistence, deepening it through an understanding of the eternal, the life force of the universe and the search for the eternal Buddha and the eternal Dharma. From such a search, the sutra implies, will inevitably emerge a world community symbolized by the activities of the bodhisattvas pictured in it.

This type of thought—that the Buddha nature is possessed by all peoples and developed through the kind of boundless trust and reverence, which is expressed in the Lotus Sutra—we hope will resonate with the people of Spain, who are endowed with rich understanding and are deeply sympathetic to any call for the development of human nature, and will help to lead them to new creativeness in the field of human culture. Such is my prayer.