

## The Lotus Sutra and Western Culture and Spirituality

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**T**HE Lotus Sutra is a Buddhist scripture, but what relationship does Buddhism have with culture? In order to understand this, we need to make a detour.

### **Religion is the Common Heritage of Humanity**

General Comment 22 of the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations describes Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the United Nations. It says: “Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee, therefore, views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community”.

Article 18 defends freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Most countries of the world have signed this article, however, most of them do not comply with it. For that reason, the Human Rights Committee had to publish the General Comment which has to be followed by all the states that have signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that establishes freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the field of international law. In this comment, the UN describes the way a religion should be interpreted. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. Some might think that Buddhism is atheistic, while others might not. Even if it is, or

if it is not, it belongs to the semantic field of “beliefs”. So, the terms “belief” and “religion” are to be broadly construed and not narrowly. All this is also in line with what the UNESCO states in the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. In this universal declaration, the UNESCO, mother of all the UN organisations related to culture, defines culture in quite an interesting way in order to prove that “beliefs”, namely religions, are part of culture. This definition says that culture “should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”.

Religion is part of culture, religion is spirituality, religion works with the emotional nature, religion belongs to the semantic field of traditions and beliefs. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity states that cultural diversity is as necessary to humankind as biodiversity is to nature. It is the *common heritage of humanity*, and not only of people belonging to a particular religion, or people who follow it. Therefore, Buddhism is a heritage of all humanity and not only of Buddhists. In this sense, we can also state that Judaism is heritage of Buddhists. Human beings are able to appreciate different beliefs and convictions even if they don’t agree with them. These are appreciated as culture or as a human quality device.

In the international debate, interfaith and intercultural are sometimes seen as two separate but interrelated issues; whereas other times, like in the case of the Council of Europe, it is stressed that religious beliefs and traditions—like agnostic, atheist or secularist convictions—are one dimension of culture.<sup>1</sup>

This said, can the Lotus Sutra have an influence on Western culture? The answer is yes. The theory that allows us to see the way a Buddhist text can bring human quality devices to culture is found, as we have just seen, in the definitions the UN and UNESCO give.

### **Institutional and Spiritual Aspect of Religion**

At the same time, when we examine what a religion is, the first thing that stands out, from a sociological approach, is that it is very institutional. People can tell a religion exists because of the way people are dressed and because of the temples. If we take a stroll along Madrid, and considering we are not religious, the first thing we would notice are the temples, the places of worship or the clothes some religious people wear, in other words, we would see the institutional aspect.

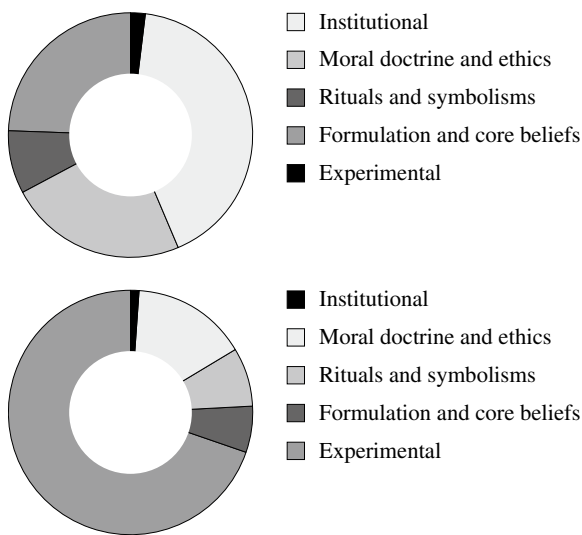
The next thing that becomes apparent is the moral doctrine and ethics, like for instance, the way the religious followers behave, what they say is right and what is wrong. Catholics would say that divorced Catholics cannot receive communion. But this is not spirituality, it is just morality.

Following that, if we keep examining a religion, we will then perceive the symbolic aspect of the religious fact, in other words, the rituals and symbols, because rituals and symbolisms are part of every religion.

Furthermore, we can also appreciate the formulation of faith or beliefs. These are official formulations which are more or less dogmatic and are based on the history and structure of each particular tradition.

And following that and only at the end of the analysis we find the experience.

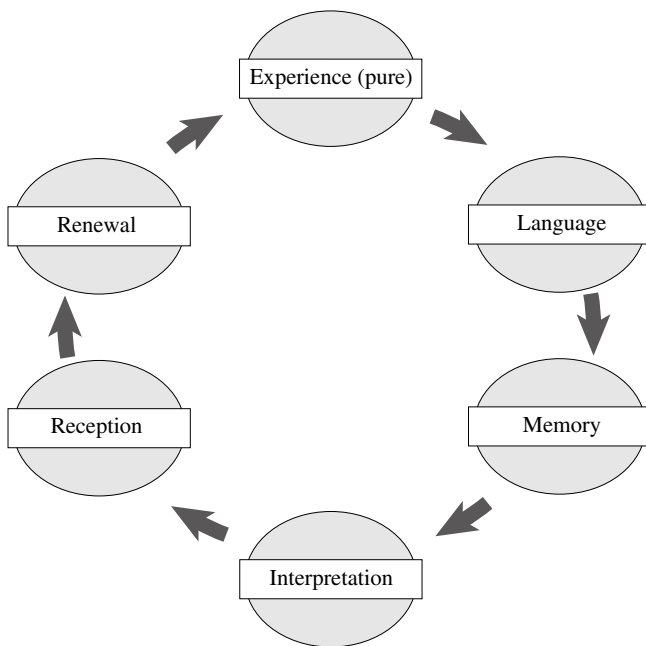
Aspects of the religious or spiritual fact



In the first diagram, what we first see is the institutional aspect of religion; whereas the spiritual aspect almost doesn't exist. How can I tell the experience a Buddhist has when he meditates? All I can say is that he is conducting a ritual. However, seen from the perspective of the experience, i.e. the second diagram, the opposite happens. For someone who has an experience or possesses a practice, the institution is not as important. But, if this institution didn't exist, the experience wouldn't take place either. Nevertheless, the institution plays a secondary role and it is important to be aware of this. This idea is precisely what the Soka Gakkai and the Lotus Sutra can bring to Western culture. The notion that

the role of institutions can be played down, especially the role of the most embedded or clerical institutions. Diminishing the importance of them does not mean not accepting the role they play, it means putting them into perspective. Sometimes, in religious traditions, institutions have not helped spirituality as they have not been transparent and have not allowed any light in. On the contrary, they have been an obstacle in the spiritual path and have cast a shadow over the religious experience. Unfortunately, this is what has happened. If we are aware of this, we can prevent similar situations in the present and the future.

The importance and pivotal role the experience plays in a religion, inevitably leads us to talk about the religious experience. Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010), an internationally renowned theologian and philosopher, gives an explanation of the experience. At the end, the most important thing for Panikkar is the “pure experience”, which is the experience one has when one is meditating alone even though surrounded by a community. The bottom line is that this experience is not transferable. The experience one has while meditating cannot be shared. It can be shared through words, but it basically cannot be expressed. But, at the end, language always wins and we have to end up sharing what we have experienced. We feel we want to transmit this experience we have in silence, even if it is ineffable and so we convert it into words.



This language is transmitted and slowly becomes a memory, so we remember the experience. Every time we memorize or remember the experience, somehow we relive it again. Even though it is an experience we only had once, it had an impact on us and is now a reference. The experience does not have an axiological or motivational value alone, it has a value of making me feel alive. I interpret the experience, I explain it and give it a meaning. After that, the experience is shared within a community. I socialize it and share it with my friends, family, community or neighbours. Finally, the experience will be refreshed. So, we refresh the experience and renew it at each moment.

### **Displacement of Religious Facts in Various Ways**

In any case, the way the religious experiences are manifested changes. We are witnesses of important displacements of religious facts. It is not easy to accept a definition for religion. We can find more than a hundred definitions and people don't agree on one. One of the latest definitions we find is given by an international law lawyer who defines religion according to what one chases after: your religion will be judged by what you pursue.

These displacements of religious facts appear in a variety of ways. Many people do not want to follow any type of faith as the prevailing climate nowadays is one where there is a certain indifference and even allergy towards institutions. There is a certain aversion towards institutions. Currently, institutions are not likeable and people do not want to identify themselves with one.

What we also find is a proliferation of free spiritual search or investigation. People like to buy books, attend courses, go to therapies and everyone seems to be seeking. Many seek their well-being, others seek spending time with other people in a free and creative atmosphere. In any case, generally speaking, there is a free spiritual search and people buy Buddhists books without being Buddhists and they read Buddhist scriptures without being Buddhists.

There is another relatively new phenomenon which is the adhesion to different religions. We now come across people who say that they follow various religions at the same time.

Another phenomenon we must be aware of is organized belligerent secularism which is a pseudoreligion in every sense. Even in sociology of religion books, people study anticlerical or antireligious belligerent secularism as if it were a parareligious phenomenon. Even though the number of people choosing this aggressive secularism is decreasing,

these bodies are better organized.

Another displacement is the religion without beliefs, where there is no end point to religion but a reinterpretation. Luc Ferry, a French thinker, talks about this and in his opinion, religion is a type of new humanism, but without beliefs. Other authors like Don Cupitt and Marià Corbí follow the same thinking.

Another new phenomenon related to religion is spiritual coaching and therapeutic spirituality which is becoming more and more popular. On the other hand, psychoanalytic psychology is decreasing in popularity and there are less psychoanalysts as people don't believe in them anymore. Transpersonal psychology is also becoming more popular as it contains other types of humanistic psychology which includes the spiritual realm.

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher and expert in religion, talks about a new phenomenon in his book entitled "A Secular Age". This phenomenon is about the free release of the religious fact and basically means the end of orthodoxies and the opening of a gradual space for spiritual creativity.

### **Harmony of Wisdom, Love and Altruistic Action**

After this detour, we arrive to the Lotus Sutra. In my opinion, it is a spiritual example of harmony between knowledge and wisdom; love and devotion; and altruistic action. The Lotus Sutra is one of the most commented Buddhist sutras. Its spiritual uniqueness is portrayed in the following text by Nichiren:

"Nevertheless, the Buddha managed to survive these various ordeals, and, at the age of seventy-two, forty-two years after he first began preaching the Buddhist teachings, at a mountain called Gridhrakuta northeast of the city of Rajagriha in central India, he began to preach the Lotus Sutra. He preached it for a period of eight years. Then, on the bank of the Ajitavati River at the city of Kushinagara in eastern India, in the middle of the night of the fifteenth day of the second month, when he was eighty years of age, he entered nirvana.

But before that, he had revealed his enlightenment in the form of the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, the words of this sutra are indeed the very soul of Shakyamuni Thus Come One."<sup>2</sup>

The notions of "eight years" and the "heart" show that it is in no way a secondary revelation. In this sense, it brings together the principal

Mahayana teachings.

At this point, I would like to outline these main Mahayana teachings. The first one is the transcendental nature of the Buddha. The Buddha is not only Shakyamuni, the historical character. It is one of the most beautiful insights that I believe Buddhism can bring to non-Buddhists and to Western culture, which is that all living beings alike possess the Buddha nature.

The second one is that everyone possess Buddhahood, wisdom and compassion, including women and disciples like the dubious Devadatta who is a funny and slightly crazy character. Sometimes it seems that spirituality is made solely for “good” people, for people who have evolved and who have matured. But it’s not. Spirituality is also made for people who have not evolved as much, who are not “good” and mature. Devadatta is a clear example of this.

Going back to the transcendental nature of the Buddha, I would like to highlight the concept of the symbol of the Lotus because the Buddha nature is brought forth from Samsara, pain, suffering and everything that connects us to the phenomenal world, and stops us from having the conscience of knowledge and wisdom. The purity of the Buddha who once it attains enlightenment still lives in this world and does not leave is brought forth. The Bodhisattva is one who does not leave this world and who is not ashamed.

### **Methods to Teach One Single Way to Different Types of Beings**

I would also like to highlight the concept of universal teaching, which I believe is portrayed in the inclusive humanism of the Lotus Sutra. What I find interesting about the Lotus Sutra is that it constitutes a series of lectures directed towards a diverse audience. Unlike many religious texts, maybe only like a gospel, the Gospel of Matthew, in the Lotus Sutra we see a method of communication with different levels and different types of beings. In my opinion, this single message directed towards different audiences comes under a pedagogy framework, more specifically in the teaching of a mentor who sends a message to his different types of disciples, who receive it each on their own way based upon their own ability and possibilities. This curricular adaptation of the message is done so using methods and expedient means. For instance, in the parable of the burning house, the “lie” is actually good. Obviously, when we understand the deeper meaning, which is the happiness of all living beings, we discover that it is not a lie but a dosage of wisdom and knowledge. In this sense, in the Lotus Sutra we also find the notion of

the 35 different forms he assumes according to who he is called by. This is an example of symbolism. In order for this single way to be shared and attained by different living beings, it might be necessary that the Buddhas preach an infinite number of doctrines. The Lotus Sutra reads:

“The original vow of the Buddhas  
was that the Buddha way, which they themselves practice,  
should be shared universally among living beings  
so that they too may attain this same way.  
The Buddhas of future ages,  
although they preach hundreds, thousands, millions,  
a countless number of doctrines,  
in truth do so for the sake of the single vehicle.”<sup>3</sup>

I was also taken in by this when I read the Lotus Sutra and studied it calmly. The Buddhas preach a countless number of doctrines, so this means that there isn't only one doctrine. Neither this fix and static dogmatism that certain spiritual mentors, who really are not mentors at all, try to make us believe.

Another interesting aspect of the Lotus Sutra which I would like to share with you is that it allows us to substitute faith and religious practice for wisdom, which in turn makes Buddhism accessible for all people and democratizes it. Before, it was excessively monastic. The Lotus Sutra clearly states the concept of the one vehicle in Buddhism.

“The Lotus Sutra, wherein the Buddha honestly discarded expedient means, says that one can “gain entrance through faith alone.” And the Nirvana Sutra, which the Buddha preached in the grove of sal trees on the last day of his life, states, “Although there are innumerable practices that lead to enlightenment, if one teaches faith, then that includes all those practices.”

Thus faith is the basic requirement for entering the way of the Buddha. In the fifty-two stages of bodhisattva practice, the first ten stages, dealing with faith, are basic, and the first of these ten stages is that of arousing pure faith. Though lacking in knowledge of Buddhism, a person of faith, even if dullwitted, is to be reckoned as a person of correct views. But even though one has some knowledge of Buddhism, if one is without faith, then one is to be considered a slanderer and an icchantika, or person of incorrigible disbelief.”<sup>4</sup>



And also:

“Shariputra, the Thus Come Ones have only a single Buddha vehicle which they employ in order to preach the Law to living beings. They do not have any other vehicle, a second one or a third one. (...)

Shariputra, the Buddhas of the past used countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of living beings. These doctrines are all for the sake of the one Buddha vehicle.”<sup>5</sup>

Like with any other tradition, Buddhist sometimes talk about interpretation and there are many currents, schools and tendencies, which at times can confuse practitioners: if there are so many schools, which one should we follow? Is there one way, the Buddha way? Are the paths of Shakyamuni and the Buddhas one way or several? The Lotus Sutra provides the explanation that it is one path but that there is diversity. Moreover, as we have already seen, this path is not a theoretical or conceptual one, nor it is a philosophical or wisdom path alone, it is also a praxis path in terms of faith and compromise.

Another key insight of the Lotus Sutra is the presence of love in this scripture. There are some Buddhist scriptures where it is difficult to perceive and discover this love and it is hard to find the emotional component of the spiritual path. In the Lotus Sutra, it is not difficult to perceive this love. If we take a Zen text, for example, we will not be able to find this love anywhere. I am sorry, but this is the reality. To illustrate this, I have selected a number of parables, like the burning house parable, where the Buddha is like a father:

“a father to all the world. His fears, cares and anxieties, ignorance and misunderstanding, have long come to an end, leaving no residue. He has fully succeeded in acquiring measureless insight, power and freedom from fear and gaining great supernatural powers and the power of wisdom. He is endowed with expedient means and the paramita of wisdom, his great pity and great compassion are constant and unflagging; at all time he seeks what is good and will bring benefit to all.”<sup>6</sup>

A father to all the world. This is affection, kind heart and love. If it is not love, I don't know what else it could be. It is warm and affectionate, not cold and curt. And it is neither austere like the path of knowledge. It is the path of love. Another parable which depicts tenderness and

humanity is the parable of the wealthy man and his poor son. It truly talks about the “Buddha’s sons”.

I would also like to mention the parable of the Sagara dragon king’s daughter who is able to attain enlightenment:

“Her [the daughter of the dragon king] eloquence knows no hindrance, and she thinks of living beings with compassion as though they were her own children. She is fully endowed with blessings, and when it comes to conceiving in mind and expounding by mouth, she is subtle, wonderful, comprehensive and great. Kind, compassionate, benevolent, yielding, she is gentle and refined in will, capable of attaining bodhi.”<sup>7</sup>

Women and femininity are symbolically the perfect example of the aspect of love and affection. We can substitute the word “women” by anima vs. animus, as Jung would say, but femininity is the presence of the emotional characteristics.

### **“Buddha Nature” is in harmony with “Human Rights” or “Children of God”**

This said, what can the Lotus Sutra bring to Western culture and spirituality? The first thing to point out is the symbol of the Lotus, as the symbolism of the Lotus is a mixture of the sacred and profane, of purity and impurity. The Lotus Sutra can provide a perspective of the Absolute being present in the phenomenal world. The Absolute goes beyond this world, i.e. transcendence, but is still present in this world, immanence.

The symbolism of the Lotus also brings up insights present in Western culture, especially in Christianity. Western culture, which typically comes from Judaism, Christianity and secularization, develops the idea of embodiment which in turn is very present in certain contemporary ideologies such as Marxism.

Another notion to be aware of is the idea of Dharmakaya or the cosmic body of the Buddha that is made history through the words of the Lotus Sutra but especially through the bodhisattvas, who help living beings manifest their inherent divine nature. This is similar to the way in which in Western culture, the Absolute is made history (Judaism) and human being (Christianity).

I think it is important to see how in this sense the Lotus Sutra fits in perfectly well with Western culture but also with other categories of Buddhist tradition. It can also help to strengthen, add and be an ally to Western culture. In essence, the problem would arise if Buddhism were

an alienated and alienating religion, and was not committed to social change. It was actually one of the criticisms made to Buddhism at the beginning. For years, Western Christian theology, especially Catholicism, used apologetic language to discredit Buddhism by stating the idea that “Buddhist meditate a lot, but do nothing to change the world for the better”.

The Lotus Sutra perfectly matches this Western Jewish and Christian model. Therefore, from the philosophical and conceptual viewpoint, the West can open up to it with no problem.

We also find functional equivalents, which is a term acquired by Panikkar that means that in different cultural or ideological contexts there can be terms that have a similar function. For instance, a functional equivalent of the word “religion” in Buddhism would be the word “dharma”. The term “religion” does not exist as such in Buddhism, however in Hinduism and Buddhism a functional equivalent for the term religion would be Dharma or cosmic order. Dharma cannot be translated as religion and even though sometimes it is, it is not correct. We could use it in a specific curricular adaptation but not in another context.

All living beings can manifest their Buddha nature. There are two concepts that stem from the West, that are in harmony with the notion of the Buddha nature of all living beings. One of them is the universal and inalienable human dignity which is found in the Human Rights Declaration of the UN. According to the human rights declaration, all human beings possess the same dignity, which is in perfect harmony with the Buddha nature. Furthermore, Christianity expounds that all beings are children of God. These are different words, terminologies and meanings, but they are, as Panikkar would say, functional or homeomorphic equivalents. Another concept in Christianity that is in harmony with the Buddha nature, is divinization, which is also formulated by saying that all human beings are children of God. In Christianity, all beings are christics as they have both love and Logos. In Buddhism, all beings have compassion and knowledge, wisdom.

### **Web of Compassionate Interdependent Relationships**

The Lotus Sutra Buddhism expounds the concept of subjectivity where the individual embodies the fundamental power of the Law, the Dharma. “Law” in this context is not equivalent to the jurisprudence or legislation law, but to the Cosmic Law. Buddhism can contribute to the Western world by offering a web of compassionate interdependent relationships, which are more suitable for knowledge societies than other Christian

and Jewish social patterns. In other words, Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra can offer Western culture a more harmonious vision with the current knowledge societies, because it talks about interdependence and symbiosis. Knowledge societies, which are based on science, technology and innovation can only be symbiotic. They are different from information societies. For example, in information societies knowledge does not necessarily need to be shared. On the other hand, in knowledge societies it has to be shared, everyone has to share everything. Information societies brings about inequality and hierarchy is still present, while knowledge societies rather than creating unevenness create interdependence. Buddhism offers a model of adaptation to knowledge societies, which in turn can be an example for other religions and even non-religious beliefs.

Moreover, Buddhism has much in common with the current pattern of globalized, technical-scientific societies based on innovation and continuous growth. The contribution of Buddhism is necessary to some religious traditions that are being left behind and are going to miss the boat and are having difficulties in being part of knowledge societies.

Buddhism affirms that this symbiosis and interdependence is also with nature and beings. This is another key contribution because in knowledge societies it will be essential to respect the environment, because otherwise science and technology will destroy us all. If we cannot manage to respect the environment, science and technology will destroy us all in no time at all.

Buddhism provides an axiological framework which will allow us to avoid this destruction by recognizing and legitimizing this symbiotic interdependence. This is quite an original contribution to Western culture; it is an innovation to Western culture. The contribution of this Buddhist dimension is an innovation in the Western culture.

Even though the environment and nature play an important role, Buddhism expounds the priority of human beings over nature as we are the only beings who are able to manifest cosmic subjectivity. This said, Buddhism does not say that human beings are equal to other non-human beings, but that the first ones have a priority over the latter ones, but it does not involve either one being dominant or submissive.

### **Personal Revolution as the Basis for a Social Revolution**

Another concept expounded by Buddhism is the human-centred social reform focused on the idea of one's own personal revolution as the basis for a social revolution. In the book "A New Humanism" by Daisaku

Ikeda, we can read about the importance of the Dharma in the relationship between the mentor (mirror of the Dharma through his teachings and behaviour) and the disciple, given the lack of role models in the West. It is possible to be a mentor and a disciple without losing one's freedom which is one of the things Buddhism makes possible.

On the contrary, in the West, the mentor and disciple relationship is always seen as a dependent relationship involving a submission. This is an Abrahamic concept deriving from Abrahamic religions, but in Buddhism, this relationship is not viewed in this way. The way Buddhism perceives this relationship is the key to the West. There is also the concept that the same doesn't mean one identity and that unity of diversity is possible. Civilizations and cultures are irrepressible, but this does not mean that we are heading toward conflict. Through the power of dialogue, difficult relationships can be transformed into a creative inter-fertilization.

Buddhism can provide a non-dual view of anthropology to the West. It is possible to go from this schizophrenic, extremist, dual anthropology, where good and evil are in opposite poles to a harmonious and interdependent interaction which in turn provides a new way of perceiving human beings full of possibilities.

The spiritual way is a long path and even though it is one path, everyone walks along it in their own way.

This is an outline of my humble vision of what Buddhism can bring to Western culture and Western spirituality.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Preparing the "White Paper on intercultural dialogue" of the Council of Europe. <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1081461>

<sup>2</sup> *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*. Soka Gakkai (1999) pp. 338–339

<sup>3</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson. Columbia University Press, New York (1993), p. 41

<sup>4</sup> *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*. pp. 141–142

<sup>5</sup> *The Lotus Sutra*, p. 31

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187