

The *Lotus Sūtra* and the Dialogue of Religions

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The Problem

IN the contemporary world, the significance of the dialogue of civilizations and the dialogue of religions, which are the very foundation of human civilization, is becoming ever greater. John Hick has advocated a pluralistic approach, approving the equal value of religions in contemporary society, where it is unavoidable that many religions coexist. Hick's pluralism is a hypothesis designed to be a foundation for the dialogue of religions, an attempt to prevent harmful, useless fighting among religions.

On the other hand, John Hick criticizes inclusivism for not renouncing the old exclusivist dogma.¹ His pluralism can be called a certain kind of inclusivism, however, one that assumes "ultimate reality" as a central concept. To speak metaphorically, there are a plurality of ways which lead to the summit of a mountain. If that plurality of ways is compared to the plurality of human religions and the summit of a mountain is compared to the "ultimate reality" at which those religions aim, the metaphor is quickly applicable as an explanation of Hick's concept of pluralism.

However, what if the situation were that there is not only a single mountain, but many peaks of various heights? We might imagine each mountain having a unique command of its own beautiful scenery, each with its independent and original value. If our goal is to explain a pluralism which affirms the diversity of religions, I think that this image is more appropriate than that of a multiple paths to the summit of a single ultimate reality. It is in this understanding that true affirmation of the differences between religions originates. I personally take my own stance in just a such pluralism.

On the other hand, many actual followers of specific religions seem to be without any feelings of harmony with any sort of religious pluralism, whether it is Hick's variety or mine. I think that it is quite difficult for ardent and faithful devotees of any one religion to take a pluralistic stance. I do not at all think that such devotees are unenlightened people

who cannot understand pluralism, and whom we should criticize for being ignorant. Rather, such devotees are likely to pour out their energies into a wide variety of real achievements, in global ethics, world peace, social justice, etc. They make very substantial contributions to the world and their fellow humans without the least regret, and we need appreciate their efforts even though they are based on non-pluralistic viewpoints. Therefore, I cannot avoid discounting the meaningfulness of Hick's pluralism for some kinds of followers. If they can share with other certain secular values, such as respect for human rights and protection of global environment, even though they fall into groups whose inclusivism is criticized by Hick, I think they can justifiably sit at a table of dialogue of religions along with the rest of humanity.

Keiji Hoshikawa has stated that "awareness of the limits of the human ability to recognize truth" should be the basis of religious tolerance,² and this position is entirely appropriate. However, the history of religions indicates that some kinds of faith were established on entirely transcendental bases such as revelations deriving from God or the enlightenment experiences of the founders of religions, which were entirely beyond the access of ordinary humans. How shall we overcome this unbridgeable gulf? Even though to take a stance in such extreme exclusivism makes it difficult to join the dialogue of religions, each individual may choose to accept the transcendental component of his or her religion's doctrines. However, if in the dialogue of religions some people directly express to followers of other religions their beliefs, which accept the transcendental component of their religions, it might be difficult to expect their understanding from those dialogue partners. I think rather that we should try to communicate with others by means of ordinary spoken languages and terminology that lies within the range of our own recognition, as well as our own experiences. Anyone being able to do so, even those whose standpoint is exclusivist, can participate in at least certain themes within the dialogues of religions.

As for the many of serious problems now facing the human race such as global environmental destruction, the rapid increase in world population, and issue of food supply, etc., I think that scientific and social-political methods are the most important for their solution. However, even though solutions are shown to people, national and racial chauvinism, not to mention simple human greed, sometimes renders such solutions less than easily accepted. As long as followers of religions occupy a considerable proportion of the world population and religions provide guidance for their followers, religions are expected to share their knowledge of the serious problems facing the human race and their solutions,

to undertake the role of teachers of such knowledge to their followers, and in general to wield their influence broadly to solve those problems.

The dialogue of religions is in fashion at present. However, instead of only swimming with the current of the times it is necessary for us to excavate the meaning and the spirit of the dialogue of religions on the basis of each of our various religious traditions. Otherwise, the dialogue of religions is likely to become a superficial performance, and there is even the danger of declining into an unprincipled adaptability. This paper aims to enable followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* to deepen their understanding of the problem of dialogue of religions as well as to make it possible for other people to understand the *Lotus Sūtra*.³

1. The Idea of the “One Vehicle” in the Skillful Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*

The sūtras of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism were generated one after another over a period of about a thousand years, beginning around the first century before the common era (hereafter BCE). Although the passage of hundreds of years from the death of Śākyamuni Buddha was necessary before the specific content of early (i.e., pre-Mahāyāna) Buddhist sūtras was finally fixed, the general dimensions of that content had been virtually fixed since shortly after the Buddha’s lifetime.⁴ In contrast, Mahāyāna sūtras continued to develop new Buddhist ideas, under the assumption that they should aim at creative religious development based on interpreting the fundamental intention of the Buddha according to the needs of the given age and region. Generally speaking, some criticisms of established ideas must be included in the background of any articulation of new ideas. How did the *Lotus Sūtra* comprehend the past history of Buddhism and thereby generate its own distinctive standpoint? This problem is related to the position of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the history of Indian Buddhism. There will presumably be no objection to the suggestion that the doctrine of the *Lotus Sūtra* most directly related to this problem is the idea of the “one vehicle” expounded in the Skillful Means Chapter. The concept of the “one vehicle” is also the most famous doctrine of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Allow me to explain its meaning by introducing the story of the Skillful Means Chapter.

In the Introduction Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* Śākyamuni Buddha enters into the samādhi of the place of immeasurable meanings and then in the sequential Skillful Means Chapter he arises from that samādhi and addresses Śāriputra. After praising the greatness of the wisdoms of the Buddhas, he states, “The true characteristics of all the *dharmas* (i.e.,

supreme merits which are perfected by the Buddhas and compose the Buddhas' spiritual stage) can only be understood and shared between Buddhas."⁵ Then, Śāriputra asks the Buddha three times to preach the teaching. When the Buddha begins to preach in response, five thousand arrogant monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen leave the assembly, refusing to listen any longer.⁶ At the time the Buddha does not stop them from withdrawing, and he states that it was well that these persons of overbearing arrogance had withdrawn, so that his assembly was now made up solely of the steadfast and truthful. He then elucidates the reason why he emerged in this world.

Śākyamuni Buddha states that the Buddhas of three times, including himself, emerge in the world for the purpose of accomplishing one single important task. This task is to open the door of Buddha wisdom⁷ to all living beings, to show the Buddha wisdom to them, to cause them to awaken to the Buddha wisdom, and to induce them to enter the path of Buddha wisdom. In other words, the scripture clearly states that the Buddhas emerge in the world to make all living beings become Buddhas.

To make all living beings become enlightened shows that even voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas can become Buddhas, even those who gave up the supreme aim of becoming Buddhas and instead directed their efforts at the lesser goals of becoming either an arhat or a pratyekabuddha.

This statement concerning the "one single great reason" is a direct expression of the idea of the "one vehicle," and it is one of the most important religious messages of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In the following Simile and Parable Chapter, gods in the assembly say about this message, "In the past at Vārāṇasī the Buddha first turned the wheel of the Law. Now he turns the wheel again, the wheel of the unsurpassed, the greatest Law of all" (T no. 262, 9.12a15–17; Watson, p. 54). This statement compares the teaching of the 'one vehicle' of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the first turning of the wheel of the Law at Deer Park (Mṛga-dāva) in Vārāṇasī (modern Benares). On that earlier occasion, the Buddha accepted Brahmā's request and went to Deer Park to teach the five practitioners who had been his friends in religious training, expounding the middle way transcending self-indulgence and self-mortification, the four noble truths, and the eightfold right path. This occasion is widely known as the first turning of the wheel of the Law; and in contrast the preaching of the "one vehicle" in the Skillful Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* is described as the second turning of the wheel of the unsurpassed Law.

If the aim of the emergence of Śākyamuni Buddha is to enable all liv-

ing beings to become enlightened, the problem develops of why the Buddha preached the vehicles of voice-hearer and pratyekabuddha, who aim at the goal of arhatship and pratyekabuddhahood, respectively. The *Lotus Sūtra* explains that before the Buddha expounded the *Lotus Sūtra*, he taught three different types of teaching for three different types of practitioners, the voice-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas, respectively. That is, the four noble truths, the twelve-fold chain of causes and conditions, and the six pāramitās constituted three different sets of doctrines and practices leading to the states of arhat, pratyekabuddha, and Buddha. Furthermore, the *Lotus Sūtra* reveals that the Buddha's previous assertions of the existence of three different teachings were only expedient and not of absolute truth value. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* explains that the Buddha could not preach the teaching that anyone can become enlightened immediately after his own achievement of Buddhahood, because the spiritual capacities of the voice-hearers and pratyekabuddha practitioners in his congregation at the time were dull. He caused them to mature spiritually and educated them through use of the lesser teachings of the vehicles of voice-hearer and pratyekabuddha, in accord with their religious abilities.

However, for the voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas themselves the expedient nature of the teachings they received was a secret to the end, and they remained convinced that teachings which had been given them were true. At this stage the teachings presented by the Buddha are regarded as true by the disciples, for whom the comparison between true and expedient does not exist at all. Next, the *Lotus Sūtra* reveals for the first time that the statement that there are three different teachings is itself only an expedient. Therefore, the vehicles of voice-hearer and pratyekabuddha are only expedient and provisional teachings, and the categories of voice-hearer and pratyekabuddha do not represent permanently fixed types of practitioner. When such beings become mature and are sufficiently educated, they are said to become bodhisattvas and finally to attain Buddhahood. This teaching, which enables all living beings to attain Buddhahood, is called the "Buddha vehicle" (*Buddha-yāna*) and indicates the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. Therefore, since there is ultimately only the Buddha vehicle, it is called "one vehicle" (*eka-yāna*), or also, combining the two terms, the "one Buddha vehicle" (*eka-Buddha-yāna*). This is the idea of 'the three vehicles as expedient and the one vehicle as real', which in the specialized terminology of Chinese exegetical discourse becomes "elaborating the three to reveal the one" (*kaisan xianyi* 開三顯一).

That is how the *Lotus Sūtra* arranges and evaluates the previous histo-

ry of Buddhism, and how from this standpoint it explains its own novel doctrine of the “one vehicle.”

2. The Interpretation of the “One Vehicle,” and Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

From the explanation just given of the idea of the “one vehicle” in the Skillful Means Chapter, we can see that the one vehicle is related to the three vehicles of voice-hearer, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva. Before considering the relationship between the one vehicle and the three vehicles, let me explain the relationship between the bodhisattva vehicle as it occurs in the three vehicles and the Buddha vehicle. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the bodhisattva vehicle indicates the Mahāyāna sūtras before the *Lotus Sūtra*, while the Buddha vehicle indicates the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. Historically, there appeared two different interpretations, that the bodhisattva teaching is equivalent to the Buddha vehicle and that the Buddha vehicle is superior.⁸ In my understanding, the bodhisattva vehicle (great vehicle) in the three vehicles is related to the two vehicles of voice-hearer and pratyekabuddha (the lesser vehicles), while that of Buddha transcends the polarity of the two vehicles and the bodhisattva vehicle. On this basis, the bodhisattva vehicle should not be merely equated with the Buddha vehicle. From the standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas should awake to being bodhisattvas themselves, while bodhisattvas, for whom the bodhisattva vehicle is preached, should not contest with voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas, but rather maintain a profound discernment that voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas are actually practicing the way of the bodhisattva. Therefore, voice-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas, for whom the three vehicles are preached, are states of existence which all demand personal transformation.

By the way, even though the concepts of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, which John Hick set forth with regard to how relations between religions are understood, are flawed to the extent that they are only very rough frameworks, it cannot be denied that they have a certain conceptual effectiveness.⁹ At this point, I will suggest the possibility of certain different interpretations of the one vehicle based on the expedient use of this framework. The first and second of the following interpretations appeared in the history of Buddhism, but the third is only a theoretical possibility implied by pluralism and has not appeared in history.

- (1) The first interpretation of the one vehicle: The three vehicles are preached for the sake of the one vehicle as preparatory teachings to that one vehicle; it is only at the stage where the one vehicle is explicitly preached that the three vehicles should be abandoned as obsolete.

In this case, only the one vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra* stands transcendent above all other teachings, and all those other teachings are denied as useless. Hence this first interpretation can be described as exclusivist.

Concretely, the Skillful Means Chapter states, “Now I, joyful and fearless, in the midst of the bodhisattvas, honestly discarding skillful means, will preach only the unsurpassed way” (T no. 262, 9.10a18–19; Watson, pp. 44–45). This statement emphasizes the discarding of all skillful means.¹⁰ Also, concerning the problem of for whom the *Lotus Sūtra* should be preached, the exclusivist attitude toward people who prefer sūtras other than the *Lotus Sūtra*, as well as non-Buddhist texts, is shown in the Simile and Parable Chapter.¹¹

- (2) The second interpretation: If three vehicles insist on the ultimate truthfulness of their own doctrines, they should be strictly criticized. However, at the stage where the one vehicle is clearly preached, if three vehicles recognize their own expediency their doctrines can be appreciated as teachings preparatory to the one vehicle, so that those expedient teachings may ultimately be included in the one vehicle. In other words, the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” implies not only that we should abandon all the teachings which the Buddha expounded before the *Lotus Sūtra*—since they are merely provisional expedients—(corresponding to the first interpretation), but also that those very same teachings become revitalized once again if we recognize both their limitations and their advantages as skillful teachings (corresponding to the second interpretation). Here “skillful means” has two aspects. One is to severely reject teachings other than those of the *Lotus Sūtra*, while the other is to revitalize those non-*Lotus* teachings once again. The second interpretation can be described as inclusivist because the one vehicle includes all other teachings.¹²

In a previous paper,¹³ I considered some of the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra* relating to its inclusivism, and I claimed that the *Lotus Sūtra* is basically inclusive, even though it can also be said to be exclusive or pluralistic according to different interpretations. Here I

will not repeat that detailed explanation, but restrict myself to merely listing the issues involved: (a) the idea that even “trivial good actions lead to the attainment of Buddhahood;”¹⁴ (b) the Arhat Pūrṇa is regarded as a bodhisattva inwardly while appearing outwardly as a voice-hearer; (c) the *Lotus Sūtra* is said to teach only bodhisattvas and regard all living beings as bodhisattvas; (d) Bodhisattva Never Disparaging carried out the practice of paying respect to all living beings as future Buddhas¹⁵; and (e) on the basis of the story of the Emergence of the Treasure Tower Chapter, the *Lotus Sūtra* integrates various Buddhas into the one Buddha Śākyamuni in terms of space, and on the basis of the story of the Life Span of the Thus Come One Chapter, it integrates various Buddhas into the one Buddha Śākyamuni in terms of time.¹⁶

- (3) The third interpretation: When the one vehicle is considered as universal truth that transcends even Buddhism itself, this interpretation may come close to pluralism. In this case the relationship between the one vehicle and pluralism becomes the main topic, and accordingly the relationship between the one vehicle and other religions becomes problematic, while the conflict of the one vehicle and the three vehicles is not a problem any more. It is certainly possible to make the interpretation that the one vehicle aims at universality, in the sense of having transcended all the distinctions of country, race, gender, and culture, etc. However, even though the one vehicle aims at all living beings’ attainment of Buddhahood, it will be regarded as a kind of the inclusivism from the standpoint of Buddhism because its ultimate aim is expressed in the terminology of the “attainment of Buddhahood.”

Now if we describe “Buddha,” the goal at which Buddhism aims, as an ideal state possessing human values that are more universal than Buddhism, what does this imply? This conception may come close to being pluralistic.¹⁷ However, this is merely my attempt to approximate John Hick’s standpoint, which espoused pluralism by rephrasing various expressions of salvation in different religious traditions as “the actual transformation of human life from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.”¹⁸

I think that although different interpretations remain possible, the fundamental standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra* is close to inclusivism. In the history of Indian Buddhism, the *Lotus Sūtra* tried to establish a new Buddhist doctrine that all living beings can attain Buddhahood. It did so by generating a novel doctrine of the one vehicle, even

while recognizing the role played by previous Buddhist doctrines. If we participate the dialogue of religions from this standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which attitude shall we take? Does the *Lotus Sūtra* give us some indicators?

3. The *Lotus Sūtra* and the Dialogue of Religions—The Four Easeful Practices and “Room, Robe, and Seat of the Thus Come One”

In Buddhist sūtras such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, the contents are composed of dialogues between the Buddha and his disciples. We cannot say that there is equality in the level of enlightenment and practices given the natural differences between a teacher and his or her students. In other words, the dialogue that takes place between the Buddha and his disciples is not one between individuals standing on equal footings, which is the most important foundation of true dialogue. Therefore, in some wider sense it may be possible to learn the spirit of dialogue from the *Lotus Sūtra*, but it would be quite difficult to seek in the text for guidelines that would be applicable to the modern dialogue of religions. Nevertheless, we need to consider this problem a little further, taking up the four easeful practices of the Easeful Practices Chapter and the “room, robe, and seat of the Thus Come One” of the Dharma Preacher Chapter.

Even though the four easeful practices are emphases for spreading the *Lotus Sūtra* in the evil age after Śākyamuni Buddha has entered nirvāṇa, they are worth referring to for those of us engaged in the dialogue of religions.¹⁹ Actually, the names of the four easeful practices do not appear in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, and the exegetes’ usages for them differ. According to the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 of Zhiyi and Guanding 灌頂, for example, they refer to body, mouth, mind, and vows, respectively.²⁰

At the beginning of the Easeful Practices Chapter, Mañjuśrī asks Śākyamuni Buddha, “In the latter evil age, [after the Buddha has entered nirvāṇa], how should bodhisattva mahāsattvas go about preaching this sūtra?” (T262, 9.37a10; cf. Watson, p. 196). The Buddha replies, “If bodhisattva mahāsattvas in the latter evil age wish to preach this sūtra, they should abide by four practices” (T262, 9.37a12–13; cf. Watson, p. 196). He then proceeds to explain the meaning of these four practices, which came to be known as the four easeful practices.

The first is the easeful practice of body. We find in it the terms “locus of practice or action” (行處) and “locus of associations” (親近處). “Locus of practice” refers to the repertoire of activities or practices appropriate to the bodhisattva, while “locus of associations” refers to the sphere and

forms of social interaction appropriate to the bodhisattva. As for the “locus of practice or action,” the sūtra states:

If a bodhisattva abides firmly on the ground of forbearance when faced with humiliation (住忍辱地), if he or she is gentle and congenial (柔和), skilled at accommodating and bringing others into compliance (善順), not given to impulsiveness (不卒暴), and never alarmed in mind (心不驚); if, furthermore, he or she performs no [discriminatory] act with respect to phenomena (於法無所行), but contemplates the true character of all phenomena (觀諸法如實相); if he or she also does not act with or engage in non-discrimination (亦不行不分別), then this is called the locus of practice or action appropriate to the bodhisattva mahāsattva (T no. 262, 9.37a14–17; Watson, p. 197).

Next, there are two categorical distinctions with respect to the “locus of associations or interactions appropriate to the bodhisattva.” The first seeks to delimit the sphere of social interactions, with particular attention given to behavior in unavoidable situations of social intercourse.²¹ The second involves thoroughgoing realization of the emptiness of existence.

The second is the easeful practice of the mouth. It shows a central preoccupation with words and speech. As described in the sūtra,

When he opens his mouth to expound or when he reads the sūtra, he should not delight in speaking of the faults of other people or scriptures. He should not display contempt for other teachers of the law or speak of other people’s tastes or shortcomings. With regard to the Voice-hearers, he should not refer to them by name and describe their faults, or name them and praise their good points. Also he should not allow his mind to become filled with resentment and hatred. Because he is good at cultivating this kind of peaceful mind, his listeners will not oppose his ideas. If he is asked difficult questions, he should not reply in terms of the law of the Lesser Vehicle. He should explain things solely in terms of the Great Vehicle so that people will be able to acquire wisdom of all modes [of existence] (T no. 262, 9.38a1–7; Watson, pp. 201–202).

The third is the easeful practice of mind. It concerns mental dispositions. As described in the sūtra, the bodhisattva

must not harbor a mind marked by jealousy, fawning or deceit. And he must not be contemptuous of or revile those who study the Buddha-way or seek out their shortcomings. “If there are monks, nuns, laymen, or laywomen who seek to become voice-hearers, seek to become pratyek-

abuddhas, or seek the bodhisattva way, one must not trouble them by causing them to have doubts or regrets, by saying to them, ‘You are far removed from the way and in the end will never be able to attain wisdom of all modes [of existence]. Why? Because you are self-indulgent and willful people who are negligent of the way!’ Also one should never engage in frivolous debate over the various doctrines or dispute or wrangle over them. With regard to all living beings one should think of them with great compassion. With regard to the Thus Come Ones, think of them as kindly fathers; with regard to the bodhisattvas, think of them as great teachers. Toward the great bodhisattvas of the ten directions at all times maintain a serious mind, paying them due reverence and obeisance. To all living beings preach the Law in an equitable manner. Because a person is heedful of the Law, that does not mean one should vary the amount of preaching. Even to those who show a profound love for the Law one should not on that account preach at greater length” (T no. 262, 9.38b3–14; Watson, pp. 203–204).

The fourth is the easeful practice of vows. The sūtra states,

Toward the believers who are still in the household or those who have left the household they [who accept and embrace the *Lotus Sūtra*] should cultivate a mind of great compassion, and toward those who are not bodhisattvas they should also cultivate a mind of great compassion, and should think to themselves: These persons have made a great error. Though the Thus Come One as a skillful means preaches the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, they do not listen, do not know, do not realize, do not inquire, do not believe, do not understand. But although these persons do not inquire about, do not believe and do not understand this sūtra, when I have attained anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi, wherever I happen to be, I will employ my transcendental powers and the power of wisdom to draw them to me to cause them to abide in this Law (T no. 262, 9.38c5–11; Watson, p. 205).

The sūtra emphasizes that we should cultivate a mind of great compassion toward all living beings and that we should vow to save them by the *Lotus Sūtra*.

I think the following three lessons can be gained from the four easeful practices as a mental attitude that advances the dialogue of religions, if participating in the dialogue of religions from the standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The first is to be based on the realization of emptiness, which is a basic ontology of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This shows that we regard our own religion and other religions not as unchangeable and

fixed but as changeable and fluctuating. I think it is important for us to take an open attitude to our own transformation which might appear through the dialogue. In Buddhism, a gentle and calm attitude to others should be based on the realization of emptiness.

The second is to pay respect to other religions, not to excessively criticize others, and not to prefer doctrinal controversy in the dialogue of religions. Otherwise, it will become impossible for various religions to sit at the same table of dialogue.

The third is that the dialogue of religions exists for the sake of approaching solutions for the serious problems of our global society, even if that progress only consists of small steps based on the cooperation of various religions, and that in the foundation of the dialogue therefore must be our vows and dedication to compassion, which will bring peace and happiness to all of humanity.

When interpreted in this way, we find that the emphases of the *Easeful Practices Chapter* are shared in the “room, robe, and seat of the Thus Come One” expounded in the *Dharma Preacher Chapter*.²² The *Dharma Preacher Chapter* states that after the Thus Come One has entered nirvāṇa, those who wish to expound the *Lotus Sūtra* for the four kinds of followers should enter the Thus Come One’s room, put on the Thus Come One’s robe, sit in the Thus Come One’s seat, and then expound the *Lotus Sūtra*. The “Thus Come One’s room” is nothing less than the state of mind that shows great pity and compassion toward all of humanity. The “Thus Come One’s robe” is the very mind that is gentle and forbearing. The “Thus Come One’s seat” is the ultimate emptiness of all phenomena.²³

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the realization of emptiness is based on right wisdom. As wisdom and compassion are the two main qualities of a Buddha, we can say that bodhisattvas aiming at the attainment of Buddhahood are beings who seek to achieve wisdom and compassion. Moreover, because various difficulties are prefigured when bodhisattvas play active roles in the real society, forbearance becomes very necessary. Needless to say, the foundation of this forbearance is none other than wisdom and compassion. It is presumably common knowledge that the perfection of forbearance is included in the six *pāramitās* (the six perfected practices of almsgiving, keeping the precepts, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation, and wisdom).

4. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, my own personal stance is

to affirm the independent value of each religion. However, considering the importance of the dialogue of religions, we should exclude neither inclusivists nor exclusivists, so as best to remove the obstacles to the understanding of one another's religions and to promote mutual understanding. Through such dialogue it will become possible for members of the various religions to associate with each other for the purpose of solving the very serious problems of the modern world, and even at times to reveal hitherto unrecognized potentialities within each religion to its adherents, thus facilitating a deepening of our own religions; on the contrary, we can rather expect that such transformations will lead to the enrichment of our own religious lives.

From the standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the vitalization of the dialogue of religions as a method to solve the serious problems of our globe, a task that is vitally important to contemporary society, is intimately connected to the vows and compassion of bodhisattvas. Furthermore, in our actual exchanges, we will all benefit from the realization of emptiness and the spirit of forbearance. Even though the suggestion that forbearance will contribute to the dialogue of religions may seem a little strange, forbearance is very important in the removal of obstacles to misunderstanding and the patient promotion of mutual understanding. This is especially the case when people of various religions, who have either had no mutual historical relationship or who have experienced long histories of marked confrontation, are sitting at the same table to engage in dialogue. It would be possible to cite many examples from international conferences that would eloquently describe such situations. In addition, it should bear noting that forbearance cannot become real and true if it is not based on wisdom and compassion.

Finally, in the parable of the three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees of the Parable of Medicinal Herbs Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, we also find the message that we should respect and praise differences and diversities of human beings.²⁴ The content of this parable is very simple. Dense clouds spreading throughout the sky send down rain equally and saturate the ground everywhere, so that each of the various plants (the three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees) grow up according to its particular species and nature. The "three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees" are little, middle-sized, and big medicinal herbs, and big and small trees. The little herbs are compared to ordinary people and heavenly beings, and middle-sized herbs are compared to persons of the two vehicles. Big herbs, small trees and big trees are compared to three ranks of bodhisattvas.²⁵

The thrust of this parable is that (1) the Buddha's preaching is equally

available to all; (2) there is great diversity in living beings; (3) the Buddha does not immediately preach comprehensive wisdom at the beginning of his teaching career; and (4) it is ultimately in the *Lotus Sūtra* that the Buddha enables living beings to reach comprehensive wisdom. The central intention of the parable is to explain the reason why the Buddha preaches the *Lotus Sūtra* only through the medium of many skillful teachings, i.e., why he does not immediately preach comprehensive wisdom. That is, because the *Lotus Sūtra* ultimately aims at enabling living beings to reach comprehensive wisdom, the goal of the scripture is not to affirm any absolute distinctions between the natures of voice-hearers, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas. If we understand correctly the original meaning of this parable, can we not imagine that this stupendous image—that all the many plants grow up energetically on the earth each receiving sufficient rain for its own needs—symbolizes that all mankind should coexist on this earth mutually respecting our many differences?

Notes

¹ See John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 33.

² See Tamaru Noriyoshi, Hoshikawa Keiji, and Yamanashi Yukiko, *Kamigami no wakai—Nijūsseiki no shūkyō kan taiwa* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2000), p. 86.

³ See my previous paper on this topic, “Inclusivism and Religious Tolerance in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 15 (2005): 94–108.

⁴ It is said that the Pāli canons was written down around the first century BCE in Sri Lanka.

⁵ T no. 262, 9.5c10–11; Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 24. For the reader’s convenience, throughout this paper I have cited the translation by Burton Watson, albeit with minor changes. As for my interpretation of this famous sentence, see Kanno Hiroshi, “Hokeyō hōbenbon no shohō jissō no gengi [The Original Meaning of the true characteristics of *dharma*s in the Skillful Means Chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*],” in *Ichinen sanzen towa nani ka* [What is the doctrine of “the macrocosm in a moment of thought”?] (Tokyo: Daisan bunmeisha, 1992), pp. 46–60.

⁶ This withdrawal of the five thousand arrogant persons suggests that, in order to listen to the *Lotus Sūtra*, we should remove all traces of our own overbearing arrogance. See Hiroshi Kanno, “The Modern Significance of the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 14 (2004): 95–111.

⁷ “Buddha wisdom” (*fozhijian* 佛知見) corresponds to the Sanskrit term “*tathāgata-jñāna-darśana*.” We may understand it as Buddha’s wisdom.

⁸ Concerning the parable of three carts and the burning house of the Simile and Parable Chapter, two interpretations appeared among exegetes on the *Lotus Sūtra* in China. In other words, there were two interpretations concerning whether or not the ox-carts the father promised to give the children in the burning house, are identical with the great white ox-carts he finally gave them. If the promised ox-carts are identical with the actu-

ally proffered great white ox-carts, there would then be three kinds of carts in all, and if the two types of cart are different from each other, then there are four kinds. The representative exegete of the former “three kinds of carts” school was Ji 基 (632–682) from Ci'en 慈恩 Monastery, while the representative exegetes of the “four kinds of carts” school were Fayun 法雲 (467–529) and Zhiyi 智○ (538–598). Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) had been identified with the “three kinds of carts” school, but according to recent research he seemed to take a free stance in which he advocated neither understanding. Instead, given that living beings become enlightened on the basis of theories, he thought it very important that each theory should be evaluated on the basis of its relation to living beings' enlightenment.

⁹ See Nishitani Kōsuke, *Shūkyō kan taiwa to genri shugi no kokufuku—shūkyō rinri teki tōron no tameni* (Tokyo: Shinkyō shuppansha, 2004), pp. 40–55. Nishitani insists that the typology of religions proposed by George A. Lindbeck, which includes cognitive-propositional, experiential-expressive, and cultural-linguistic models, is more effective than that of John Hick. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine—Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984). Also see Hoshikawa Keiji, “Shūkyō kan taiwa ni okeru ‘kyōri’ no mondai,” in *Gurōbaru jidai no shūkyō kan taiwa*, edited by Hoshikawa Keiji and Yamanashi Yukiko (Tokyo: Taishō daigaku shuppankai, 2004), pp. 1–48.

¹⁰ On the contrary, “discarding skillful means” is not clearly expressed in the Sanskrit text.

¹¹ “If a person, earnest in mind, seeks this sūtra as though he were seeking the Buddha's relics, and having gained and gratefully accepted it, that person shows no intention of seeking other sūtras and has never once given thought to the writings of the non-Buddhist doctrines, to a person such as this” (T no. 262, 9.16b1–4; Watson, p. 79). Also, the *Easeful Practices* Chapter admonishes not to approach to other followers except Buddhists such as heretics and Brahmins. See “They should not associate closely with non-Buddhists, Brahmins or Jains, or with those who compose works of secular literature or books extolling the heretics, nor should they be closely associated with Lokayatas or anti-Lokayatas” (T no. 262, 9.37a19–21; Watson, p. 197). In my opinion, Nichiren (1222–1282) adopts basically the first interpretation and partially includes the second one. As for the theoretical standpoint of Nichiren's exclusivism, see Kanno Hiroshi, “Nyorai no tsukai—Nichiren,” in: *Hokekyō shisō shi kara manabu bukkyō* (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan, 2003). pp. 190–206.

¹² Even though Zhiyi of the Tiantai school in China adopts basically the second interpretation, he also includes a partial form of the first. The previous citation “honestly discarding skillful means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way” was quoted in Zhiyi's *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 (T no. 1716, 33.681b3–5) as evidence from the sūtra evidence to the effect that lotus blossoms falling and fruit ripening should be compared to discarding skillful teachings and establishing the truth. I have discussed Zhiyi's views of the *Lotus Sūtra* and clarified that it is more fitting to call him a “perfect teaching absolutist” than it is to refer to him as a “*Lotus Sūtra* absolutist.” See Hiroshi Kanno, “A Comparison of Zhiyi's and Jizang's Views of the *Lotus Sūtra*: Did Zhiyi, after all, Advocate a ‘Lotus Absolutism’?,” in *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 1999*, (March, 2000): pp. 125–147.

It seems that Zhanran 湛然 (711–782) played a big role to form the *Lotus Sūtra* absolutism of Tiantai school. I infer that as the Huayan 華嚴 school which claims the

supremacy of a single sūtra such as the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, Dharma Characteristics school which advocates the idea of the “expediency of the one vehicle and the reality of the three vehicles,” and the Zen school which advocates “separate transmission outside the sūtras” were established during the period between Zhiyi and Zhanran, Zhanran came to emphasize on the *Lotus Sūtra* absolutism to oppose those schools. Nichiren seemed to accept the direct influence of Zhanran.

¹³ See Hiroshi Kanno, “Inclusivism and Religious Tolerance in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ This concept appears in the *Fahua wenju*. Cf. T no. 1718, 34.79a24–25.

¹⁵ The practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging becomes something that gave living expression to the concept of the one vehicle, namely, the idea that all sentient beings can equally attain to Buddhahood. See Hiroshi Kanno, “The Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the *Lotus Sūtra* and its Reception in China and Japan,” in: *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 12, 2002, pp. 104–122.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

¹⁷ The “one vehicle” has never in the history of Buddhism been interpreted from the standpoint of pluralism. The current global age, when religions cannot avoid coexisting, is a novel experience for the human race. However, the idea that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism all aim at the same ultimate truth had been popular since the end of Tang Dynasty in China, and in addition the idea that Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism all aim at the same ultimate truth was advocated by some thinkers during the Edo period (1603–1868) in Japan.

¹⁸ See John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, *loc. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Nichiren thought that the teaching of the Easeful Practices Chapter and that of the Encouraging Devotion Chapter are alternative and under a special limitation concerning the age and the region such as Japan and Kamakura era (the Latter Day of the Law), selected the teaching of the Encouraging Devotion Chapter. However, I think that it is worth reviewing once again the value of the teaching of the Easeful Practices Chapter under the new conditions of our modern world.

²⁰ See the second part of the eighth fascicle of the *Fahua wenju*, where it states, “Master Tiantai says, ‘The compassion of calming and contemplation directs or informs the three deeds [of body, speech, and mind] and vows’. . . . We refer to this as the easeful practice that pertains to the deeds or actions of body. For the other [aspects of] speech, mind, and vows it is the same” (T no. 1718, 34.119a19–27). As for interpretation of the four easeful practices by Huisi 慧思 and other exgetes, see Hiroshi Kanno, “Huisi’s Perspective on the *Lotus Sūtra* as Seen through the *Meaning of the Course of Ease and Bliss* in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in Daniel B. Stevenson and Hiroshi Kanno, *The Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra’s Course of Ease and Bliss: An Annotated Translation and Study of Nanyue Huisi’s (515–577) Fahua jing anlexing yi*, 2006, Bibliotheca Philologia et Philosophica Buddhica, vol. IX, The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism, pp. 208–212.

²¹ In this limitation of the sphere of social interactions we find the exclusivist attitude that followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* should not approach to persons seeking to become voice-hearers (cf. T no. 262, 9.37a25–26). Also, the sūtra considers certain occupations whose representatives we should not approach, revealing discrimination against certain kinds of occupation. I feel this represents a contradiction of the universalistic standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which should aim for the attainment of salvation by all living beings, and I think we should admit that the *Lotus Sūtra*, like other ancient religious texts, is not

completely free from the restrictions of thought of its own times.

²² The four easeful practices and the “room, robe, and seat of the Thus Come One” both originally expound mental attitudes to be adopted when propagating the *Lotus Sūtra*. However, I referred to them as providing suggestive insights pertaining to the dialogue of religions. The dialogue of religions differs from the realm of propagation at all, but the locus of association between various religions aimed at the solution of serious global problems. On the other hand, it is sometimes necessary to compete against each other in a fashion of good will and to try to improve by learning from others so as to reveal the wisdom and energy necessary for the resolution of problems. Clearly, it requires a serious attitude to learn from others and deepen one’s own religious views.

²³ Cf. T no. 262, 9.31c21–27; Watson, p. 166.

²⁴ The parable of the three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees is one of the representative seven parables of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Of the seven, this parable is unique in being based on the natural phenomenon of the heavy rain in India; the other six parables illustrate the doctrines of the *Lotus Sūtra* without reference to regional conditions. Therefore, since this parable might include aspects that are inconsistent with the overall thought of the *Lotus Sūtra*, we need to interpret it carefully.

²⁵ Cf. T no. 262, 9.19a25–20b19; Watson, pp. 98–105.

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