

Nichiren Buddhism: A World Religion

After battling advanced lung cancer, Shin Yatomi died on May 31 in Santa Monica, Calif. After his diagnosis last fall, he continued to submit articles to the World Tribune, including the following.

By SHIN YATOMI
Contributing Editor

A world religion — if it is simply regarded as a teaching for all people — welcomes diversity as an opportunity to demonstrate its universal value. Beneath people's myriad differences — race and nationality, status and wealth, lifestyle and politics — a world religion sees the original human condition that gives rise to shared sufferings and offers a means to improve that negative state.

Shakyamuni Buddha intended his

teaching to be a world religion in this simple sense — a teaching for absolutely everyone. Shakyamuni taught that the source of humanity's universal sufferings of old age, sickness and death is our fundamental ignorance of the Dharma, life's inner causality from which arise both suffering and happiness.

Our ignorance is so deep-seated that we are unaware of it. As an addict burns with desire for drugs, we continue turning on the switch of suffering by trying to fulfill our deluded desires. People, according to Buddhism, don't know the causes and conditions that lead to authentic happiness. Shakyamuni taught that to conquer this fundamental ignorance is to conquer unhappiness for everyone.



Because Shakyamuni's teaching addressed people's universal problems, it was quickly accepted by many from all walks of life — from powerful kings and wealthy merchants to the ordinary members of society. Shakyamuni's India was diverse. The abundant agriculture of the central Ganges river basin led to the development of manufacturing and commerce. Cities were growing and attracting people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. One early Buddhist text, for example, describes the various skin tones of the residents of Vesali as "blue" (dark complexion), "yellow," "red" and "white" (see *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p. 243).

Courageously and tenaciously,
PLEASE SEE YATOMI, 6

Making the Universal Message of Buddhism Accessible to All

FROM YATOMI, I

Shakyamuni and his disciples spoke about the Dharma with all kinds of people, regardless of their appearance, wealth or status. The enthusiasm of early Buddhists engaging people of diverse backgrounds in dialogue demonstrates their conviction in the universality of their teaching.

The early Buddhists' confidence that everyone has the potential for Buddhahood eventually found clearer expression in Mahayana Buddhism, especially in the Lotus Sutra's teaching of Buddhahood existing eternally within every person's life. Although we don't know exactly when and where the Lotus Sutra was compiled, through recent textual scholarship and archeological discoveries, many now believe it was likely compiled in several stages during the first century through the beginning of the third century in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent — the Kushana Empire. (Other dates and places are also suggested.)

Stretching from northern India to what is now Pakistan,

Afghanistan and Central Asia, the Kushana Empire was a melting pot of diverse ethnicities and cultures — Indian, Chinese, Central Asian, Persian and Greco-Roman. Centered on Peshawar, today a northern Pakistani city near the Afghan border, Kushana was a cosmopolitan empire thriving on commerce along the Silk Road between Rome and China.

Near the northern border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the area that is ironically known today as a hideout for international terrorists, the Lotus Sutra teaching of universal Buddhahood likely flourished and spread further, mainly to the east, as it addressed the universal human sufferings of old age, sickness and death by encouraging people to develop confidence in their eternal Buddhahood.

In medieval Japan, Nichiren Daishonin gave the Lotus Sutra teaching a concrete form of practice, accessible to all — chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with confidence in one's eternal potential for Buddhahood. Nichiren's teaching spread beyond the rigid class barriers separating



SGI youth from various countries gather in Tokyo, Sept. 14, 2004.

samurai and farmer; it also attracted many women. Nichiren himself was the son of a fisherman, unlike many prominent priests of the day who came from the aristocracy. Nichiren's community of faith was uncharacteristically diverse for his era.

Until the last century, however, when the SGI began bringing

Nichiren Buddhism to the world, the teachings had yet to be given an opportunity to demonstrate their validity beyond a single ethnic group.

People of diverse backgrounds are at last coming to know the universal message of Buddhism on a global scale. But unless the practitioners of a world religion are

confident of its validity despite people's differences, its universal teaching will likely remain obscured.

I'm not sure if Buddhism will work for this person.... I don't think that person is exactly a Buddhist type.... We may have entertained such thoughts from time to time. Perhaps the first thing we must do to bring the universal teaching of Buddhism to our friends and family is break down the stereotypes we ourselves have created about who is likely to practice Buddhism.

Virtually everyone undergoes the sufferings of growing old, becoming ill and, ultimately, facing death, and Nichiren Buddhism holds the key to resolving all these essential sufferings — no matter how uniquely those unavoidable sufferings become manifest in people's lives.

Nichiren Buddhism is about to embrace humanity's grand diversity on an unprecedented scale. The teaching is ready, and so are its practitioners, to be catalysts for transforming universal sufferings into universal happiness. **WT**