

CHAPTER I

Mystic Opportunity

A cool spring has kept Tokyo's cherry trees in bloom for almost three weeks. One morning, I awake to see snow outside the windows of the Hotel New Otani. Later, walking in the hotel garden, I feel sure there must be a sequence of Japanese characters—gray sky, flecks of flying snow, pink blossoms—to capture the essence of the phenomenon, something literary thought to be “Zenlike” in the United States, where everyone knows cherry trees bloom in spring in Japan. But how wonderful to see them, especially amid billowy clouds of snow. *Such quiet beauty*, I think, *and such a sublime stereotype of “Japaneseness.”*

But this is a workday, not a time for musing, so I use these moments to brace myself for another round of interviews and note taking. I flew into Narita a few days ago to learn about the history of Soka Gakkai, one of Japan's largest, most dynamic, and highly controversial Buddhist movements, and about Daisaku Ikeda, its president and the spiritual leader of some twelve million Buddhists in Japan and around the globe.

A historian of American religion, I'm a specialist in Buddhists in the U.S.—Tibetans, south Asians, Chinese, and Koreans; Zen, Pure Land, and Shingon Buddhists from Japan; and a wide range of different groups of Americans who are “meditating Buddhists,” whose main practice is to sit in quiet contemplation. I also know many “chanting Buddhists” in the Soka Gakkai—artists, actors, lawyers, teachers, people in all walks of life; Caucasians, Latinos, Japanese Americans, and African Americans. I understand that their ideals fit comfortably into America's religious landscape, that Ikeda's Buddhist Humanism, which teaches

individual initiative and social responsibility, is said to reflect values considered typically American.

“I still don’t get a few things,” I say to myself under my breath (a habit I’ve picked up from many months of living alone), as I sit with my notebook on a small bench nestled against a gnarled old tree, watching snowflakes melt on paving. In what way can values said to be typically American also be both Buddhist and Japanese?

The Soka Gakkai is a classic case of modern Buddhism on the move in the age of globalization, having found its way to more than a hundred nations, so I also need to know what propelled it out of Japan and how it is received in the West and on the Asian mainland. What’s the appeal of chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra, an ancient Indian Buddhist scripture, in archaic Japanese for Brits, Brazilians, or Koreans?

“Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; Nam-myoho-renge-kyo; Nam-myoho-renge-kyo,” I intone, tentatively and softly, just to hear what the chant sounds like in the cold Japanese air.

A clutch of Japanese guests enters the garden, which once was that of an old aristocratic family of Edo, Tokyo’s name before Japan modernized in the nineteenth century. Like me, they are cherry-tree viewing and enjoying the snow, laughing among themselves as they negotiate the slick walkways, their exuberant intimacy reminding me of my more personal motives for coming to Japan.

At roughly age fifty, at the dawn of a new millennium, in the midst of a wildly euphoric bull market, I’m faltering. Just over a year ago, Ann, my wife, died unexpectedly. With intensely blazing grief now largely in the past, I find myself drifting, listless and unfocused, on a plateau of vague anxiety, not acute but threatening to become chronic. So I made this academic journey in the hope that Japan would distract and amuse me, give me some sort of an agenda, a jump start or some intellectual solace to help ease me into a new phase of my life.

I’m glad that Rob Eppsteiner—a charming American Soka Gakkai member with a warm heart and a good sense of humor, also about fifty—is traveling with me. Rob and I have now spent many hours together, day after day, without a tense word between us. I am easygoing, but Rob is a saint. He listens patiently to my endless fretting over the Soka Gakkai and its controversies. He takes charge of recording equipment. He hails cabs, hunts up subway entrances, and guides me through Tokyo’s streets while I stand by often dazed and confused. He has become, in effect, my handler, enabling me to pour my energy into conducting interviews and indulging in speculation.

Rob and I are colleagues only now becoming friends, having met in 1993 in Chicago at the Parliament of the World's Religions, a rousing weeklong event where Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and New Agers from around the world engaged in what amounted to a mass demonstration of religious globalization. In our chats at the time, we discovered much in common. We both came of age in the '60s and both turned to the East, our lives transformed by the widespread vogue for Asian religions. We both have mellowed considerably, but still share many '60s-era sensibilities. Both of us continue to move in Asia-oriented circles, but he is a husband and father in a Soka Gakkai family. I'm an academic who studies the West's long fascination with Eastern spirituality, a history so creative, impulsive, and often neurotic that I've come to think of it as a passionate love affair. No small part of what I hope to accomplish is to see the history of the Soka Gakkai very clearly, which means piercing through American stereotypes about Buddhism and Japan.

Rob first pitched this trip to me as a quick one, just a few days to meet a few people, but somehow it has burgeoned into a major undertaking—multiple interviews each day; a crash course on the Lotus Sutra with scholars at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy; a visit to Kamakura, where Nichiren, the thirteenth-century reformer and inspiration behind the movement, narrowly escaped execution on the beach. The learning curve I'm treading is steep—Meiji-era modernization; Japanese militarism in the 1930s; the impact of the American occupation of Japan on the movement's history and identity.

But despite what amounts to very hard work, I am taking delight in my first trip East, my own little piece of the globalizing '90s and a dream long deferred, even though the East-West encounter has for decades been my academic meal ticket.

Much of this delight comes from the wonderful people I meet, who combine dedication, humor, and frank intelligence with startling amounts of energy, all of this tempered by a courteous formality I find appealing. But I also find communicating with them through interpreters exhausting. I must work to maintain my critical, scholarly poise while giving each interviewee 100 percent of my attention and energy. At the same time, I must keep in mind the charges of Ikeda's critics and enemies, must keep my radar up for signs of deceit or manipulation as I puzzle out what it all amounts to. This means I have to think on my feet during each interview, watch faces of interviewees and interpreters intently, and listen closely to their tone and inflection, all to gauge the import and accuracy of what they are telling me.

Fortunately, Japanese coffee is strong and I drink lots of it throughout the day. Weak coffee, I learn, is called “American.” On postcards home I write: “Research goes well; Tokyo fabulous; am having a ball.” But by seven each night I’m usually done in and long to cocoon in my room, to be offstage, to catch my breath and sharpen my wits, to rest up for the next day’s exhilarating go-round with the Soka Gakkai and Japan.

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By the time Rob and I leave the hotel for the train, the heat is up, the sun is bright, and the snow has melted, so we stroll slowly along a broad embankment past Sophia, a Catholic university, overlooking railroad tracks that run in a trough that was once the outer moat of the emperor’s palace. Students spread blankets along the walk under arcing boughs of ancient trees, setting up daylong cherry-tree-viewing/drinking parties, with complete picnics from the look of their baskets. Shoes set neatly at the edges of blankets remind me I forgot to wear the loafers I bought at Takashimaya, an upscale department store near Shinjuku station, a busy commercial district. I like the stepping in and out of shoes one does in Japan and how it reflects a respect for public-private boundaries. But in the laced shoes I wore on the plane, I find it awkward and vaguely embarrassing.

Within an hour, Rob and I arrive by train in Hachioji, a Tokyo suburb, where we meet Rie Tsumura, a Japanese Korean woman who will be our guide and interpreter. A beautiful woman of about thirty-five, casually dressed, with long, straight black hair, Rie knows a great deal about the Soka Gakkai and speaks both formal and colloquial English. After many interviews, I’ve learned to depend on her skills and read her reactions. We have even brainstormed together how to handle interviews with elderly practitioners, so I can draw out from them what I need to make sense of the movement’s early, controversial history.

The three of us cab up to Soka University, a flagship institution of the Soka Gakkai, where I am to attend the entrance ceremony for the class of 2005 and see Daisaku Ikeda in action. I am keen to watch him in public so I can begin to hone my judgments as to his character and charisma, to begin to assess just why it is that he makes social and political waves. Ikeda is loved by millions and held in regard by political and intellectual figures around the world. But that Ikeda is totally at odds with another, whose image and reputation as a cult leader have been

shaped by Japan's tabloid press over the course of several decades. Some critics have raised legitimate concerns about Soka Gakkai and church-state issues as they are cut in Japan, but others seem to trade in rumors of thuggery, cronyism, and scandal and to damn him by innuendo.

Ikeda founded Soka University in 1971, and he and Soka Gakkai members devote immense amounts of money, time, and energy to its young women and men. Students have held a special place in the movement since its founding in 1930 by educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the movement's first president, who laid the foundations for its unique form of Buddhism. Josei Toda, its second president, built the Soka Gakkai into a powerful mass movement during Japan's postwar decades. Ikeda became president in 1960 and has been the guiding force behind its globalization, a process he fosters by teaching Buddhist Humanism, a spirituality that rests on the pillars of peace, culture, and education—a noble-sounding, maybe somewhat vague philosophy that I must also puzzle out.

Makiguchi, Toda, and Ikeda have been deeply political, each in different circumstances and distinct ways, which has no doubt contributed to the many controversies in the Soka Gakkai's history. All three have also been lay leaders rather than ordained clergy. They are now seen as a lineage of Buddhist teachers, independent and authoritative in its own right—especially since 1991, when the Soka Gakkai was excommunicated from Nichiren Shoshu, a priestly sect with which it had been affiliated for more than six decades. This too is a controversy I need to figure out.

Cherry trees bloom later in Hachioji than in Tokyo, with about a week yet to peak, but pinkish-green buds frame the walks and plazas of Soka University, which, like most places I visit in Japan, is uniformly modernistic. There are no hoary temples or shrines, no burnished images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, no old mossy stone walls, nothing to suggest the romance of the samurai.

Like most things I've seen, the university is also comfortably familiar but oddly different in ways I find difficult to grasp and articulate. Wherever I travel in Japan, I attend to this uncanny sense of simultaneous sameness and difference. Japanese cities are much like those in the United States, but they are easier and safer to be in. I neither speak nor read Japanese, which contributes to this sense of being someplace I know well but do not understand. No stray conversations overheard on the street are ever understood; all signs are as delightfully opaque as Egyptian hieroglyphics. In Hachioji, a city with a bustling downtown of

food courts and department stores, there's a view of Mount Fuji to be had, which signifies foreignness to me even as it is wholly familiar, the quintessential stereotype of Japaneseness.

But in most respects, Soka University is just another university. Students in T-shirts and windbreakers, packs on their backs, march from class to class or mill around making casual conversation. There is the familiar assortment of classroom, administration, laboratory, athletic, and dorm buildings, plotted out on the Musashino hills that surround Hachioji.

Still, I see clues embedded in campus architecture and design that suggest things familiar are here out of place and that this out-of-placeness is a key to understanding the Soka Gakkai and Ikeda. The facade of Ikeda auditorium where the entrance ceremony is to be held, for instance, has stylized Greek pillars and fronts on a fountain dedicated to Poseidon. A bronze Walt Whitman wearing a porkpie hat, a butterfly on his finger, lounges off to one side. Two grand statues, one of Victor Hugo, the other of Leo Tolstoy, flank the open staircase in the white marble lobby. Nearby, in the court of the Central Tower, stands a spectral Leonardo da Vinci. In the adjacent Women's College, there's a more modestly scaled statue of Marie Curie.

My sense of sameness and difference persists inside the vast auditorium. Seated on the ground floor, students in the entering class are fresh-faced but nervous. Neater and better groomed than most Americans their age, they are nonetheless familiar as young and idealistic. Parents, aunts, and uncles up in the mezzanine are proud and beaming. It could be matriculation at Harvard or the University of Wisconsin or Hamilton College, the old-line liberal arts school in New York State where I teach religious studies.

Except, of course, that everyone around me is Japanese. The fact that Japan is filled with Japanese people startled me when I first arrived in Tokyo, but I became accustomed to it quickly. Here in the audience I recall that critics would have me see all these people as cult members, either dupes of Ikeda or themselves treacherous schemers. So I play a game I will repeat frequently in the course of my journey. I first take in everything I see at face value—well-dressed middle-class people sharing a ceremonial occasion. Then I cast over the auditorium a net of suspicion: each woman then becomes a Tokyo Rose, each man a fifth columnist, the entrance ceremony itself a conference of conspirators.

It is an amusing, if ridiculous game, but with a serious intent. It's my job to sort through history, fantasy, mythology, and fact—no small

matter for a historian of religion whose subject tends toward the imaginary, often extraordinary, and completely unseen. It demands a willingness to empathize with convictions that believers consider lofty and profound but others dismiss as outlandish, a capacity to entertain faith while remaining the skeptic.

But I'm surprised by the emotional flip-flop that accompanies my shift from taking things as they appear to viewing them with suspicion, a change in me from light to shadow, from trust to misgiving, from hope and goodness to distrust and bitterness. Since Ann died I simply don't know whom or what to trust, and my sense is that this emotional confusion has become more acute since my arrival in Japan.

The people next to me acknowledge my presence with courteous smiles, perhaps because I am obviously a *gaijin*, a foreigner. At five feet eleven inches, I'm not a tall man. When my weight is up, my Irish comes out, reflecting my mother's side of the family. When I am a little gaunt, I take on the Anglo-American look of my Protestant father. But here I feel large and clumsy, too conspicuously an American although I might be taken for German, English, or Australian. Many members have seen my photograph in the *Seikyo Shimbun*, the movement's daily newspaper, founded by Toda in 1951, which now has a circulation of five and a half million and is a major paper in Japan. They recognize me, I think, the American scholar who will meet with Ikeda-sensei. It is a fact that I am now known in Soka Gakkai circles and am treated a bit like a celebrity. But then again, maybe these people have no idea who I am and are simply casually polite to a foreign stranger.

I never quite know what is going on around me in Japan. Sometimes this is discomfoting and feeds into my emotional flip-flopping. At other times, I enjoy it as an obliviousness to meaning and a refreshing new freedom, an escape from old habits of thought and personal identity, an unexpected opening for a process of reinvention.

I settle into my seat, positioning my notebooks and pens, fussing with earphones that will provide a simultaneous translation. But I'm soon preoccupied again by questions of sameness and difference, occasioned this time by the immense curtain that hangs at the proscenium. From where I sit, it has the soft sheen of frosted glass, but I learn later it is a woven silk tapestry donated by alumnae of the university. It recreates in fabric the famous painting by Raphael of Socrates and Plato, striding boldly together through the loggia of the Academy in ancient Athens, wrapped in flowing togas and engaged in philosophic conversation. I scribble notes: "Greek columns, Poseidon, Whitman, Hugo,

Tolstoy, Academy in Athens, etc. Book must be about why these at Japanese Buddhist-based university!”

Then suddenly, my curiosity about Japan and Ikeda is swept away. My cult-detection radar crashes. Disbelief fills an inner vacuum. My roof falls in again.

Ann is gone. In one rich flood, our entire life together comes alive in me—eighteen years of romance; ten solid ones of marriage; her oval intelligent face and wild blue eyes framed by brown-red hair. But then, as quickly and unexpectedly, she’s gone. And I’m slumped in my chair, nauseous and teary, alone again, surrounded by Japanese, on the verge of becoming a sobbing gaijin in a sea of happy families. So by dint of will, I refocus on sameness and difference. Zenlike cherry blossoms in the snow. Fuji views. Socrates, Plato, Whitman, Leonardo, Curie: all of them unexpectedly, but apparently not inexplicably, Buddhist and Japanese.

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To my relief, the great curtain soon opens, revealing a scene familiar at any college or university: some eighty educators in academic robes walking onto the stage amid strains of lofty music and applause from the assembly. Some are Soka faculty and officers, others are professors, deans, and vice presidents from Universiti Putra Malaysia and China’s Northwest University. References to the fragrance and fragility of cherry blossoms figure in their cordial, formal words of greeting. As the first order of business, delegates from Northwest University confer on Ikeda an honorary degree in recognition of his decades-long effort to foster amicable relations between China and Japan.

A short man with a round face and a spirit more gregarious than sage, Ikeda begins his address with banter and teasing. “So, how many of you think you will actually graduate?” he asks the incoming students. “Is this class any good? Did you get some live ones for us this year?” he asks, peering at the dean of admissions. He pretends to glower at the faculty—“Don’t be arrogant. Don’t be too stern. Serve students well; don’t forget your income depends on their tuition.”

Ikeda displays an almost maternal regard for the kids—behave but have fun, he tells them, get good sleep, eat properly. If you have no money for food, get treats from your teachers. Or write to me. But he also insists that they demand a good education. Learning is your “mystic opportunity,” he counsels them, underscoring the central role

played by education in the Soka Gakkai's spirituality. He then recites a poem of his own that I recognize as classic Ikeda, an expansive and romantic exhortation to victory.

My friends,
 Absolutely never give up!
 While sharing
 profound exchange
 With new acquaintances,
 While surmounting
 the wild flames
 Of chaos and disarray.
 Decisively seize victory
 With voices raised in song
 infused with hope—
 As heroes of learning,
 As champions of philosophy!

Ikeda operates in a forthright style and strikes no overtly spiritual poses. He makes no cryptic allusions with koans, those cagey parables Americans associate with Buddhism. He makes no attempt to be “Zenlike” or to style himself a finger pointing at the moon. On the contrary: once he gets into the meat of his address, he lays out a stinging critique of Japanese nationalism that I find unusually hard-hitting for such a ceremonial occasion. Much to my interest, his remarks elicit rounds of applause from the apparently respectable audience of Japanese families. My radar goes back into operation.

One theme Ikeda develops throughout the address is that the spirit of the Soka Gakkai was forged in resistance. Today is the anniversary of the death of Josei Toda, his mentor, he reminds us, and also the anniversary of the founding of Soka University. Both events call to mind the heroic life of Makiguchi, the philosopher and educator who was branded a traitor by his country and died in 1944 after languishing in prison. That Makiguchi was imprisoned for noble ideas reflects the insularity of Japan, he tells us, “an island country whose people are plagued by jealousy and scheming.” Makiguchi’s “spirit of martyrdom” is the foundation for Soka education, whose mission is “to spread peace, culture, and education throughout the world, while forever battling narrow-minded nationalism.”

Ikeda also develops a second theme, this one the violation of the long, deep relationship between China and Japan by Japanese militarists. China was the teacher of Japan for many centuries, he tells us,

but then Japan turned on its mentor to inflict on it and other Asian nations unspeakable atrocities that “reveal the true nature of our country.” Ikeda likens Makiguchi’s work as an educator and his heroic resistance to that of Lu Xun, a Chinese scholar schooled in Japan in the early twentieth century who later fought the Japanese in China.

Going off text, Ikeda steps from behind the podium, looking down to speak intimately with the new students who sit directly before him. “Do not trust Japan. Watch out for any drift to the right. In the past that had dire consequences and fatal results,” he tells them, referring to the rise of State Shinto and militarism in the decades before the Second World War. “Do you know what I am talking about?” he asks them, students born in 1983 or ’84. “Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?” A few respond with a tentative “Hai, hai” (“Yes, yes”), but he remains standing before them, silent for a few long moments, allowing his remarks to sink in.

He then shifts gears, making a bold and expansive gesture as he exhorts the students to achieve excellence and transform the world—familiar, idealistic fare, even if expressed in metaphors almost unimaginable at an American university. Alluding to Xi’an, home of Northwest University and the eastern terminus of the ancient Silk Road that once linked China and Rome, he urges students to master foreign languages and to carry out exchanges for peace with other nations, each becoming a crossroads of East and West. “I want you to become people who can later look back and say, ‘During my youth I gave it absolutely everything I had, and I succeeded in creating my own Silk Road!’” Emulate Zhou Enlai, first prime minister of the People’s Republic of China, he tells them. Follow the three-point motto Zhou set down in his youth: be ahead of your times in your thinking; conduct yourself in the most up-to-date manner; keep abreast of the most current scholarship.

“Please strive each day to open up a new age of your own victory as a human being and of the victory of humankind,” he concludes. “Cheerfully and tenaciously advance along the brilliant path of your mission—together with your professors, together with me, together with your irreplaceable friends.”¹

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Back in bright spring sunlight, Rie, Rob, and I mingle among parents and students on the plaza fronting the auditorium, within spitting distance of Whitman and Poseidon. Having translated for many scholars

and journalists, Rie finds Ikeda's rhetoric familiar. Rob has been a member of Soka Gakkai for thirty-some years and has met Ikeda on numerous occasions but enjoyed the speech immensely, finding a great deal of inspiration in the words of a man he considers his mentor and teacher.

I'm preoccupied by how his remarks about Japan's insularity, his criticism of its past and its spirit, and his warning to students have put new, confusing blips on my radar. On one hand, much of what Ikeda said was surprisingly conventional and idealistic for a figure who seems always to be embroiled in controversy. On the other, I'm intrigued by his good humor, directness, and sharp geopolitical edges, none of which I had expected.

Ikeda's address also sheds light on the design of Soka University, helping me to make sense of things I'd only wondered about earlier, such as the Bridge of Literature spanning a campus pond. Rie had pointed out how the bridge is decorated with Chinese characters inscribed by Chang Shuhong, director of the Dunhuang Relics Research Institute. Dunhuang was a caravan stop on the ancient Silk Road, where a trove of Buddhist art and scripture was discovered early in the twentieth century. I now understand that the Silk Road is a metaphor to conjure with in the Soka Gakkai. *Great East-West stuff*, I think, jotting notes: "Silk Road = ancient East/West contact = Ikeda's aspiration for students = contemporary globalization."

Ikeda's remarks also provide a glimpse into the intricacies of the Soka Gakkai's relations with the Asian mainland. Earlier Rie had drawn my attention to a prominently placed cherry tree dedicated to Zhou Enlai, which had been planted in 1977 by the first class of students from the People's Republic of China. The university takes pride in having pioneered Japan-China student exchanges, so Ikeda's reference to Zhou suggests the tree's significance. Ikeda also met Zhou in 1974, their meeting leading to the forging of links between Soka University and educational institutions in China, ties that are now central to its special educational mission to northeastern Asia. These contacts and networks reflect Ikeda's concern both to overcome Japan's insularity and to rectify the damage Japan inflicted during its decades of military expansion.

Ikeda's speech also suggests why Raphael, Whitman, and others have so prominent a place at a university founded by Japanese Buddhists. His concerns about Japan's insularity help me to see the campus as a landscape that signifies a kind of cosmopolitan internationalism. Seen historically,

it is an architectural embodiment of the selective process of westernization and modernization that began to preoccupy Japan deeply in the middle of the nineteenth century. The familiar but out-of-place quality I sense here and in Japan as a whole is an expression of the immense success of that extraordinary undertaking.

More specifically, I begin to see Raphael, Whitman, Leonardo, Hugo, Zhou Enlai, and Madame Curie as people who are regarded as among the best in the world by Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai. They are paragons of a Soka University education, their presence on campus functioning like the names of luminaries engraved on the friezes of old neoclassical buildings, recalling to mind the work of great laborers who built Western civilization. Here, however, they represent the ideals of a liberal-arts education that is also both Buddhist and Japanese, their out-of-placeness refreshing, even while perplexing to me.

Rob and I are soon on our way back to Tokyo, settled into a train humming with speed, streaking through a broad rail corridor, dense midrise exurbs extending on either side. It's years since I've ridden a train, my image of them formed by traveling to Chicago from my hometown in industrial Wisconsin on aging, swaying cars past abandoned factories and the backs of tenement buildings, their fire escapes hung with wash. This is an altogether different experience—rails as space-age transport. In Japan, it's said that if a train is to leave at 10:01, don't bother to show at 10:02 because it's already far out of the station.

As Rob catnaps, I rework my thoughts about the Soka Gakkai and Ikeda, casting about for an organizing principle that will help me to sweep bits and pieces of information into a single idea or thesis.

My instincts tell me that Ikeda's Buddhist Humanism is kin to modern liberal religions in the West. In particular, it resembles nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, a broad reform movement in the United States and Europe that sought—and still seeks today—to adapt received traditions to the modern world. Like liberal Protestantism, Buddhist Humanism is essentially a hybrid forged out of traditional religious material and modern, secular ideas such as human rights, individualism, and democracy, and the scientific worldview.² It is a self-conscious attempt to make ancient concepts and rituals potent and relevant in a world dominated by self-interest and a capitalist economy, by instantaneous communications, rapid social change, and teeming megalopolises. In this light, Ikeda and the Soka Gakkai fit nicely on the familiar side of the sameness/difference equation I sense everywhere I turn in Japan.

This analogy may also shed light on some of the controversy. Protestant liberals were and still are a fairly benign crew, idealistic to a fault perhaps and too optimistic about the prospects for America and the world, at least for my taste. But their congenial reformism evoked and still evokes today snide assaults from secularists on the left who have no use whatsoever for religion. More vituperative attacks come from the Christian right, who consider liberals the real enemy, charging them with everything from plotting against American values to Bible-hating blasphemy.

But my instincts aren't yet honed enough to make sense of the cast of characters in Japan—militarists, Socialists, Communists, high priests, and divine emperors—which is why my learning curve is so steep. I can't seem to wrap my brain around the Japan-Buddhism-difference-unfamiliar side of the equation.

Arriving at a conceptual impasse, I decide to play tourist and enjoy scenes slipping past as the sun dips behind the towers of central Tokyo, now coming into view. The hum and shush of the train lull me into a haze in which I fantasize Ann in Japan, how I would depend on her to make sense of the people we'd be meeting together, her taste for power and politics so much more acute than my own. I always sought out radical alternatives, an idealistic streak leading me into "the '60s," Eastern spirituality, and the study of religion, all of which appealed to Ann despite her pragmatism. She jumped on board the entrepreneurial bandwagon of the '80s and began a business while I slipped into good-natured academic cynicism, the two of us quite happy with how we had differentiated.

"That balancing act is all in the past," I say aloud, rousing Rob as the train pulls into the station right at 4:47. He suggests we cab to the hotel, shed suits, slip into jeans, and head out for drinks and dinner in Shinjuku or Akasaka-Mitsuke.

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A too-cheerful Japanese woman talks about light rain in Kuala Lumpur, overcast skies in Ho Chi Minh City, and full sun from Hong Kong to Hokkaido, a weather report I find fascinating, even though I make sense of it only by watching radar and graphics, another small, familiar-unfamiliar jolt to my consciousness. Notes and books are scattered about the room, some from New York, more collected here, my library on the road. Despite a good meal and an hour walking the streets with

Rob, I'm still restless. I need to bone up on Nichiren and the history of Buddhism in Japan, but fixate instead on the incomprehensibility of Japanese TV, zany talk and game shows all the wackier because I can't understand a thing.

Eventually, I turn off the TV and all the lights and sit in the dark, the twinkling, blinking lights of Shinjuku's towers inducing a calm in me I've not experienced all day.

"To study religion is your fate, not your passion," I mutter aloud, working my way into a plush armchair by an expansive window. To think critically about what most people take for granted, to focus on faith while not having one of my own . . . "I hate it."

I once relished cynical detachment from the spectacle of American "spirituality"—its born-again politicians, its New Age shamans, its cults of celebrity and civil religions, its self-serving worlds of profundity and weirdness. But my disdainful love for the over-the-top lost its savor when Ann died. Ironic hipness suddenly seemed a weak existential option, not a set of convictions but an attitude about those of others with no substance of its own.

It is, thus, a new thing for me to approach academic work in the hope of finding direction or solace, so I'm surprised to find myself warming to Nichiren, the Kamakura prophet, whose ideas form the basis of the Soka Gakkai and some forty other sects in Japan. A mover and shaker, a reformer both brilliant and irascible, Nichiren has been called the Martin Luther of Japan, even though he took on the Japanese establishment more than two centuries before Luther was born. So anti-authoritarian as to be foolhardy, so convinced of his unique grasp on truth as to be irritating, he also strikes me as a genuinely spiritual man. Given that confrontation, not decorous harmony, was one of his strong suits, Nichiren is often said to be not typically Japanese. His followers often embraced this quality by styling themselves "Nichiren's lions," their seeing in his passionate nature not hardheadedness but courage, fortitude, compassion, majesty, and courage.

Nichiren's Buddhism, like all forms of Buddhism, is based on the teaching of Shakyamuni, the *muni* or sage of the Sakya clan who lived in the sixth century BCE, north of what is now India. Shakyamuni identified life's central problem as *dukkha*—suffering, stress, frustration, that sense of things always being out of joint. He also taught that one can put an end to suffering by following what he called the *dharmā*, the teaching or law that is the path to genuine happiness, wisdom, and freedom. As a result of this discovery, Shakyamuni was called *buddha*,

“awakened,” this state or quality becoming one of his many names—the Awakened One, “the Buddha.”

The Buddha taught that suffering is rooted in false ideas about the permanence of the soul or self and of all phenomena. To cling to such ideas is to cling to an illusion, the futile defense of which is the ultimate source of dukkha. Another of his teachings is a sophisticated version of the biblical notion that one reaps what one sows, that “what goes around, comes around,” which is described by Buddhists as the law of cause and effect or the law of karma. According to the Buddha, actions or karma born in false egotism, such as anger, craving, lust, greed, and the like, bind people to illusion, which leads to suffering as certainly as a cause leads to an effect. He further taught that people can free themselves from illusion created by bad karma in the past by taking positive action in the present, a process Buddhists often refer to as transforming one’s poison into medicine.

Nichiren Buddhism is in the Mahayana tradition, a broad current of teaching that predominates in East Asia. As Buddhism moved from India to China, it absorbed aspects of Confucianism and Taoism, which gradually recast Shakyamuni’s teachings. Scriptures that re-expressed his ideas, such as the Diamond, Pure Land, and Lotus sutras, became authoritative as new philosophical schools proliferated before taking root in Korea and then in Japan, where Buddhism also absorbed elements from their indigenous traditions.

Drawing on both Indian and East Asian sources, Mahayana philosophers developed an understanding of the universe and society quite different from that of theologians in the West. Both the universe and society are seen to have come into being not through the work of a creator but through the law of cause and effect, a premise that many argue makes Buddhism more compatible with modern science than is Western theism. For centuries, Buddhists have pictured the universe as infinitely vast and eternal, likening it to an interconnected net or web in which negative and positive karma work within and among the myriad beings inhabiting it. Society itself is essentially a network of spiritual and ethical relationships in which people’s actions matter immensely. Both universe and society are driven not by fate, destiny, blind energy, or the will of God but by an endless, collective chain of causes and effects set in motion by the actions of individual people.

Within this framework, Mahayana Buddhists place a particular emphasis on the bodhisattva, an awakened being who makes a commitment to awaken others to the nature of suffering and freedom, thus

exemplifying the essence of Shakyamuni's teachings. On the most exalted level, a bodhisattva is a mythological being and an object of veneration, an exemplary model of the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha who reincarnates through endless lifetimes, always aiding others to alleviate their suffering. On the human level, a bodhisattva is a person committed to becoming awakened in order to awaken others and teach them how to walk the path. Bodhisattvas demand of themselves a spiritual and ethical orientation to life that amounts to a vow to create good causes that make for good effects, thus doing their part to set in motion a positive chain reaction in the web of relationships that comprise our world.

Nichiren, the son of a fisherman, who pursued the truth through the dominant Buddhist institutions of Kamakura Japan, was one among many Mahayana teachers and reformers over the centuries to give substance to these ideas. "If Japan ever produced a prophet or a religious man of prophetic zeal, Nichiren was the man," writes Masaharu Anesaki, an early-twentieth-century historian of religion at University of Tokyo, in his classic study *Nichiren: The Buddhist Prophet*. "One of the most learned men of his time," he was "a strong man of combative temperament, an eloquent speaker, a powerful writer, and a man of tender heart."³

Anesaki's account makes clear how, seven centuries after he took up his mission, Nichiren could fire the imaginations of Ikeda, Toda, and Makiguchi and inspire a dynamic lay Buddhist movement dedicated to social transformation. Like many of his contemporaries, Nichiren understood himself to live in the age of *mappo*, the latter day of the dharma, a long era of turmoil during which Shakyamuni's original teachings had become corrupt and needed a vigorous restatement. Convinced he grasped the true essence of those teachings, he vigorously propagated his views, lovingly taught his disciples, and struggled against rival Buddhist schools for the soul of Japan. The record of his efforts is contained in his writings, or *Gosho*, the authoritative religious texts for all Nichiren Buddhists.

Nichiren was influenced by Shinto, Japan's indigenous tradition; Confucian social ethics imported from China; and a range of Japanese schools of Buddhist philosophy and practice then current. From these, he fashioned a unique understanding of the "mystic law," a phrase used within the Soka Gakkai today to refer to dharma. For Nichiren, freedom and happiness were not to be gained by rebirth into an otherworldly Pure Land, as claimed by the priestly Jodo sect that dominated

the Kamakura government. Nor was it to be achieved through the contemplative detachment taught by Zen masters, or through the complex rituals of esoteric schools, or by adhering to the numerous rules of monasticism.

According to Jacqueline Stone, a Princeton University authority on Buddhism in medieval Japan, Nichiren developed his teachings in two interrelated ways. First, he preached a passionate fealty to Buddhist principles as expressed in the Lotus Sutra, a foundational scripture of Mahayana Buddhism. Second, he taught that not just monks, nuns, priests, and other clerics had the capacity to awaken themselves but also laypeople, who could do so in the midst of struggles they encountered in ordinary life. They could, in Anesaki's words, restore a "primeval connection with the eternal Buddha" as laborers, warriors, merchants, and farmers, as wives and husbands.⁴ Nichiren understood the essence of this inner awakened nature to be expressed in the chant "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo," a phrase thought to embody the essence of the teaching of the Lotus Sutra.

Responding to the widespread turmoil in medieval Japan, Nichiren publicly criticized dominant Buddhist schools in his preaching and teaching and in his *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, a treatise whose title is often translated "On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land." In it he charged that the government, by supporting corrupt forms of Buddhism, led Japan astray and drew down upon it many calamities. He prophesied that continued unrighteousness would draw down further disasters—more famine, war, rebellion, and even invasion by the Mongols, who dominated the Asian mainland—as surely as bad causes lead to bad effects. Nichiren's charges angered authorities, so he endured persecution and was exiled twice; but he remained certain to the end that he and his disciples were bodhisattvas with a mission to propagate true Buddhism and thus to renovate Japan.

. . .

Tokyo in the dark is much like Houston or Chicago or almost any large city—a vast plain of lights punctuated by clustered, half-dark towers whose mirrored skins reflect the city back on itself. From high in the New Otani, where I am nestled down with a drink from a basket of treats sent by Ikeda, the hieroglyphics I find so marvelous in their indecipherability lose distinctiveness; they become neon blur, just as our unique individualities dissolve into the mass when viewed from a distance.

In such moments of quiet, I can admit to myself that modern religion exhausts me—the daily assertion of our unique spiritual worth, our endlessly putting meaningful constructions on our being—Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, Marxist, patriot, rationalist, feminist, cynic.

Raised Roman Catholic, I'm mystically inclined and still appreciate a well-executed mass, but I don't believe in the Bible, even though the biblical worldview structures much of my thinking. I don't believe in the Lotus Sutra either, but I respect the fact that, over the centuries, it has played a major role in lives of millions, probably billions, of people in an East Asian, Lotus Buddhist tradition of great power and sophistication.

A compound of philosophy, parable, and poetry, the Lotus Sutra is a dazzling, sometimes maddening exploration of both the illusions that cause suffering and the Buddha's methods of healing. Its tales of children who escape from a burning building, its appearing treasure towers and disappearing cities, its poisons that turn out to be medicines are as central to East Asian Mahayana Buddhism as are the parables of Jesus to Christianity. Composed around the second century of the Common Era in India, this sutra is considered by devout Buddhists to be the last and most complete of Shakyamuni's teachings. Given a systematic, doctrinal interpretation in China, it was introduced into Japan in the ninth century by Saicho, who also founded a great monastic compound on Mount Hiei, where four centuries later Nichiren took up his studies.

Wherever I dip into the sprawling text—Shinjuku's cold lights becoming distant, a single reading lamp now lit, my hotel room becoming my cocoon—I see, once again, the alternative spirituality I searched for in my adolescent quests. The marvelous intelligence of Hinduism and Buddhism! The extravagant, yet persuasive and plausible, worldviews! All that led me to this problematic profession in which I make my money—the study of religion!

I am soon drawn into the universe of the Lotus Sutra, which is cyclical and eternal, the classic Asian Hindu-Buddhist perspective. In contrast, Christians tend to conceive of the world in a linear framework—an assumption inherited from the Bible, which begins with the creation of the world by God and ends with its fiery conflagration. The sutra, however, opens with an aged Shakyamuni gathering his disciples before him on a hilltop in India, Eagle or Vulture Peak, to give them a final teaching, a scene as well known to Nichiren Buddhists as the crucifixion of Christ is to Christians. But this scene soon explodes when a brilliant light bursts from Shakyamuni's brow to illuminate the universe in all

directions. He then reveals to his disciples that he has been teaching them through many lifetimes in a universe that is uncreated and unending, in which past, present, and future are linked in what one academic called “the coincidence of the historical and transcendent.”⁵

Like the Bible, the Lotus Sutra claims to reveal a universal truth, but it does so in its own unique terms. Christians find truth revealed in the Sermon on the Mount and the life and death of Jesus, which are the foundations of a universal ethic of love of God, self, and other. In the sutra, Buddhists find truth in the universality of the dharma. On one hand, this universality is expressed in the concept of nondualism—all distinctions such as body and mind, self and other, life and death are understood to be relative concepts. To cling to these as ultimate is to cling to illusions that cause suffering. On the other, universality is also expressed in Shakyamuni’s teachings about the true nature of the Buddha. Buddha, he tells his disciples, is not the man who once taught in India nor a cosmic being, but an eternal essence or principle that pervades the entire universe. Thus, to live in oneness beyond dualism is to become awakened to the universal Buddha nature within all beings.

The Lotus Sutra also teaches that Buddhism, like Christianity, is a missionary religion. Jesus’s injunction—“Go therefore and teach all nations”—has long inspired Christians to spread the Gospel and to build up the church progressively as a kingdom of God on earth, a process understood to come to its eventual climactic end in a final renovation of heaven and earth. The Buddhist mission in the Lotus Sutra, however, operates within Asia’s traditional cyclical framework and is inspired by the Buddha’s revelation on Eagle Peak. In the course of his preaching, Shakyamuni reveals to his disciples a great assembly of bodhisattvas arising from the earth. These are disciples he taught in the distant past, he tells them, but they are seen as they rise up to teach and preach true Buddhism in the future. These bodhisattvas of the earth have risen and will rise again and again, striving in each lifetime to fulfill their vow to aid suffering people.

Later that night, too tired to do more reading, lying in bed, still edgy with jet lag, I begin to flip-flop again, as I struggle with all that I’m experiencing and learning. When a sinister mood grips me, I look back on an unreal, surreal week, always at the mercy of the Japanese, lost in a forest of their hieroglyphics, with no reality check other than my gauging of facial expressions and my trusting to what seem to be their good hearts. I cringe, muscles cramping beneath the sheets—“You’re a pigeon, a sitting duck, a way-overeducated gaijin ripe for the plucking.”

But then I flip-flop and am buoyantly manic, chuckling with delight as I picture Socrates, Leonardo, Curie, Whitman—maybe even Zhou Enlai, who knows?—among the bodhisattvas of the earth revealed on Eagle Peak, all of them returning again and again from their journeys into death to teach and preach humanistic Buddhism.

Eventually, desperately in need of sleep and too tired to drive myself crazy any longer, I turn to Ann and try to imagine where she is and what she is doing, missing her, needing her on a journey I would never have taken had she lived.