We are very happy to reproduce the interview that an esteemed friend Dr. Naresh Mantri had given in Tokyo to a magazine, “Dharma World” dedicated to the ideals of Buddhism. This interview deserves an elaborate introduction for more reasons than one.

I have been associated with Dr. Naresh Mantri as a friend for more than fifty years. Both of us are fellow students of late Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Shri Mantri being senior to me in age and in his association with Kakasaheb. We were thus groomed in the same Gurukul by the same mentor. Dr. Mantri went to Japan in 1963 and has made that country his home for more than 40 years by now. This interview also describes the motivation behind his staying and working in Japan. Besides studying Japanese Buddhism and writing books on that subject, he has also conducted classes in Tokyo to teach Sanskrit and Marathi. He had also acted as the functionary of an organization wedded to promote the ideals of Sarvodaya and to cultivate friendship between India and Japan. He is held in high esteem in Buddhist Circles of Japan. As his interview reveals, he is now engaged in translating the Chinese version of the Lotus Sutra into Hindi. We record our good wishes for the success of this noble venture.

Dr. Mantri’s interpretation and insight into Gandhian as well as Buddhist teachings is very important. He had sat at the feet of a Gandhian stalwart like Kakasaheb Kalelkar and thus imbibed the Gandhian spirit. He later had the good fortune of undertaking serious study of Japanese Buddhism, which enabled him to earn the highly coveted degree of the doctor of literature. To quote the words of Dr. Mantri himself, “...I entered the doctorate course and started studying the Lotus Sutra under the guidance of Professor Yensho Kanakura. In any case I wanted to write my dissertation about the Lotus Sutra because that was the instruction of Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar. It was very difficult to get the degree of Doctor of Literature on that Sutra, because research on the Lotus Sutra was already quite advanced in Japan. I had to read all the papers and books already published in Japanese. I read them and compared them with the Suddharma Pundarika Sutra. Then I could find some new points on the interpretation of this Sutra. My ideas were recognized and I received my doctorate from the university in 1973.”

Besides Dr. Mantri’s views on Mahatma Gandhi and Buddhism, there is another important aspect of this document to which I would like to draw the attention of the readers.

In answer to the question of the interviewer, Dr. Mantri has narrated how the spirit of patriotism was a major motivation in taking to the life of service and scholarly pursuits. He talks to us how he and his friends gave up studies and how they wanted to serve the country. The search finally led Dr. Mantri to Kakasaheb Kalelkar. He thus gives us a glimpse of the spirit of patriotism that pervaded the air through the unique struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi for freedom from colonial rule. Dr. Mantri’s life and work is a bright example of voluntary service of the Gandhian stream. In this stream of service, acquiring political power or amassing wealth are not the objectives. The objective is to serve selflessly and the attempt to promote higher values of life.

When India became independent from British rule, you were eighteen years old. Could you tell us your impression of the British government’s policies and your boyhood under colonial rule?

I was born into a Hindu family in Bombay, which is now called Mumbai. The city had been developed as a trade center for the British East India Company to carry on trade in India and China. It later came under British rule and was used as the base for conquering India. The British entered India through Bombay. The people of Bombay had been in contact with Western civilization for generations, so they were fortunate to get a Western-style education in English. Bombay developed under British rule, but it also became the centre of the independence movement – the Indian National Congress was also established there in 1885.

Gandhi launched his “Quit India” movement in an effort to bring the British to the negotiating table for India’s independence, and on August 9, 1942, he declared from Bombay his famous call to the British to “Quit India” and to Indians: “Do or die” – either free India or die in the attempt. A great number of the
Congress leaders – Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and all the others – were immediately put into confinement.

That happened when I was in school, and there was a feeling that we should do something for our country. But at that time we were young students and had the feeling that we were not able to do much, that we were unable to take part in the independence movement. But we read the writings of Gandhi, Tilak, Nehru and other great leaders. Sometimes we used to go to hear the speeches of the independence movement leaders. Therefore, we were very happy when the Indians were liberated from British colonial rule under the superb leadership of Gandhi and Nehru. So when I graduated from school, I realized that my generation was full of patriotism – that we were all imbued with the feeling that we should do something for our newborn country.

After you heard the news of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, what was the situation in Mumbai?

Everyone was very sad, and full of tears. There was an unbearable feeling – no one could comprehend why such a great leader, who had dedicated all of his life to the unity of Muslims and Hindus and had conducted his movement through non-violence, should have been assassinated. Our grief was even deeper.

I was very much impressed by the speech by Nehru (Prime Minister at that time), which I heard on the radio in the evening on the day that Gandhi was assassinated. I still remember that Nehru was saying, “The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere…. The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light…. For that light represented the eternal truth, and the eternal man was with us with his eternal truth, reminding us of the right path, drawing us from error, taking this ancient country to freedom.” The light that was guiding us to the future had gone – I understood it in that way. On that day I decided to quit eating meat and became a vegetarian, like Gandhi. At that time, however, I had no idea that in the future I would go to Wardha, where Gandhi’s last ashram was operated by his disciples.

What lured you to Wardha?

I had two close friends. After graduating together we all entered Wilson College of the University of Bombay, which is located near Chowpatty, where Tilak was cremated and his statue is still standing. We
were always a group of three friends. We decided to stay together in a hostel. I was going to major in Sanskrit studies. One of my friends was Mangesh Padgaonkar, a talented poet. He published his first book in 1950, a couple of years after entering college. His books are all in Marathi. Now he is one of the most renowned poets of Marathi literature. We always discussed literature and spiritual things. We used to go to listen to J. Krishnamurti when he came to Bombay. We felt that he had already attained enlightenment. While listening to such a great religious man, at that time, I came to read books on Lord Buddha. I was also attracted to the Buddha’s teachings. So I used to keep an ivory Buddha statue in my room. Although I was a Hindu, I didn’t keep any statues of Hindu deities. But I kept the Buddha statue.

We were very much influenced by Krishnamurti’s spirituality and aspired to enlightenment; therefore, the three of us decided to leave college. Leaving college education means for young persons to give up the chance for a professional career. Unless they graduate from university, they cannot get good jobs. At that time there was no such thing as a hippie, but we were almost like that. We had long hair and grew beards.

Taking only a small bag, we started on a tour of South India. When leaving home I gave the Buddha statue to my sister and bought another one in Travancore. It is still with me. We visited first Sri Aurobindo’s ashram in Pondicherry. He was a very creative yogi and a very renowned person. Then we went to some Christian ashrams, and then to Ramana Maharshi’s ashram. He was a great sage. In this way we travelled to Sri Lanka.

After a six-month journey, we returned to Bombay again. For nearly one year we were thinking what to do. I didn’t want to go to college again. So, one day, one of our friends took the three of us to Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar - a close disciple of Gandhi. Gandhi trusted him very much. Staying in Gujarat, he helped Gandhi’s work. He started travelling all over the world after independence, and at that time he stayed in Bombay in order to go by ship to East Africa (Kenya) for a tour. Acharya Kalelkar talked with us, all three of us, separately. He asked me what the aim of my life was. I was full of spiritual aspirations, so I replied, “What aim can one have except self-realization?” He said, “Now you come and stay with me.” So of the three, he selected only me. After returning from the tour, he took me to Wardha, where he ran an institution called the Hindustani Prachar Sabha. I worked in that institution. I stayed there. Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar became my lifelong teacher.

Please tell us about your life in Wardha.

Originally, the Hindustani Prachar Sabha had been established by Gandhi. It was to propagate Hindustani throughout India as our national language. Gandhi’s idea of a national language was a little bit different from that of others. What he was concerned with was the question of unity between the Hindus and Muslims of India. He had realized the importance of Hindustani as the means to unite the two communities - because Hindi and Urdu are thought of as two facets of the same language, Hindustani. Both languages share a common lexicon that includes native (Indic), Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and English loanwords. When expressing the elevated thoughts of science, philosophy, art, and politics, the Muslims of India naturally drew from the wealth of Arabic and Persian, whereas the Hindus turned toward Sanskrit. Therefore, Gandhi encouraged the unified view of Hindustani written in Nagari and Urdu scripts, which is commonly understood and easily spoken and learned. For this purpose, Gandhi assigned Acharya Kalelkar the task of creating a simple Hindi with a beautiful style. But those who opposed his idea wanted to promote Modern Hindi as the national language, but it was too much a kind of “Sanskritized Hindi.” Soon after India was partitioned, the question of this unity of Hindi and Urdu, the main object of his concern, disappeared. So the importance of Hindustani also died, and gradually Modern Hindi was accepted as the national language by the Constitution.

We were all living the ashram-like life in the institution. And we used to have the ashram prayer also. In the beginning of the prayer, we used to chant the O-daimoku, “Namu Myoho Renge-kyo.” Since that time I have been familiar with this Buddhist mantra. In the morning and evening prayer, we used to start with “Namu Myoho Renge-kyo.” At that time, most of Gandhi’s great disciples were in Wardha. They were Vinoba Bhave and others; whereas Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar used to travel all over India.
He was invited by the different institutions - Mahatma Gandhi’s institutions all over India - to come and give lectures and guidance. He took me with him many times. There my education began again. I started studying different languages. My mother tongue is Marathi, but I studied Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and some Bengali. Then Sanskrit was my favorite subject, and English, also. We used to clean latrines, work in the fields, and study. So I had a very spiritual life and had many opportunities to receive direct guidance from Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar. And I found that he was also very much attracted to Buddhism.

What was your motive in coming to Japan and studying the Japanese Buddhist tradition?

I didn’t have any idea that I might be going to Japan for study. At that time, even a university graduate seldom had the opportunity of going out of India for study.

Now I have to tell about my new teacher in Japan -- the Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fujii, founder of the Nipponzan Myohoji Sangha. We used to call him Fujii Guruji out of respect, because Gandhi gave him the title of Guruji, which means a respected teacher. He met Gandhi and his disciples in Wardha. So my teacher, Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar, also became one of his friends. After the Second World War, Fujii Guruji launched a peace movement in Japan. He started to build pagodas -- peace pagodas. So whenever a new pagoda was completed, he used to invite guests from India, especially from Gandhi’s
disciples, for the opening ceremony of the pagoda. In this way Acharya Kakaasaheb Kalelkar also came to Japan at the invitation of Fujii Guruji. On his second visit to Japan, he said to Fuji Guruji, “We shouldn’t communicate in English. It is not good. We should communicate in our own languages. So you send me two of your disciples to study Hindi - our language, so that we can communicate in Hindi.” So Fujii Guruji sent one man and one woman - both young - to our institution in Delhi, which had also been founded by Acharya Kakaasaheb Kalelkar near the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Museum. He brought me from Wardha to Delhi to help establish that institution. In the beginning, I taught them some Hindi. Then Acharya Kakaasaheb Kalelkar sent them to another school for further study. They stayed in India for five or six years, I think, and attained mastery in Hindi. After their return, Fujii Guruji said to Acharya Kakaasaheb Kalelkar: “Now you send one of your disciples to study Japanese Buddhism.” That meant, for him, the Lotus Sutra. So Acharya Kakaasaheb Kalelkar told me, “The Lotus Sutra was written originally in Sanskrit. We have an English translation, a Hindi translation too. We read it, but we don’t find it very interesting. So I don’t know why Japanese Buddhists respect it so much. So you go to Japan and study this, and find out why it is respected so much.” It was in early April of 1963, and I was 34 years old. I left Bombay by steamer on August 26 and reached Tokyo on September 15.

In Tokyo I went to a Japanese-language school for six months. Then I joined Rissho University where Dr. Shobun Kubota, a great scholar in sociology and Buddhism, helped and guided me in many ways.
First, I studied sociology in the Faculty of Arts, then I entered the M.A. course of the Faculty of Buddhist Studies. After that, I entered the doctorate course and started studying the Lotus Sutra under the guidance of Professor Yensho Kanakura. In any case, I wanted to write my dissertation about the Lotus Sutra, because that was the instruction of Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar. It was very difficult to get the degree of Doctor of Literature on that sutra, because research on the Lotus Sutra was highly advanced in Japan. I had to read all of the papers and books already published in Japanese. I also read as many of the Sanskrit scriptures as were available. I read them and compared them with the *Saddharma-pundarika-sutra*. Then I could find some new points on the interpretation of this sutra. My ideas were recognized, and I received my doctorate from the university in 1973.

The Most Ven. Nichidatsu Fujii, founder of the Nipponzan Myohoji Sangha. After the World War II he and his Sangha started building peace pagodas throughout the world.

The greatness of this sutra is that it was formed and taught in order to bring all Buddhist sects together into one form of Buddhism - to make a synthesis of all the teachings of both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. In order to synthesize all that, the Lotus Sutra was formed and there the teaching of Ekayana - One Vehicle - became essential. And in order to achieve it, the eternal life of the Buddha was preached. Shakyamuni was also a form of this eternal Buddha. In this way Buddhism was synthesized.

So that is the greatness of this sutra, which I discussed as the main theme of my dissertation.

*Why did Gandhi adopt the chanting of the O-daimoku at his ashram as a key part in the practice of prayer?*
Fujii Guruji believed in the prophecy of Nichiren that Japanese Buddhism would be returned to India. But another attraction was the movement of Gandhi based on non-violence. In Gandhi’s movement he found a kindred spirit of Nichiren’s Rissho Ankoku-ron. So Fujii Guruji reached India in January 1931. He had to wait for two years in India until he was able to meet Gandhi in 1933, because Gandhi was very busy doing so many things at that time. In March 1930 Gandhi launched the Satyagraha against the taxation on salt, which was called the Salt March. He was arrested and put in prison for a while. During that time, Fujii Guruji was staying in Calcutta, where the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore operated Shantiniketan, a school for the study of Indian philosophy and fine arts. It later developed into a university. However, Fujii Guruji did not have the desire to meet him; rather, he was only waiting to have a chance to meet Gandhi. And it came in October 1933, in the place of Wardha. Beating a drum and chanting the O-daimoku - Namu Myoho Renge-kyo - Fujii Guruji appeared in Wardha. When both of them met for the first time, both souls were melded together. Fujii Guruji didn’t understand Hindi or any Indian languages, nor did Gandhi understand Japanese. But Gandhi was very impressed and fascinated by the drum sound and the chanting of the O-daimoku. And he liked chanting it very much until he was assassinated.

Gandhi maintained that all religions are equal. Therefore, in his ashram prayer, he included all the prayers of different religions. He also included a prayer from the Qur’an. He could even recite some verses from the Qur’an. He read it, and so did we. But until the meeting with Fujii Guruji, he had not included any Buddhist prayers in his ashram prayer.

A handwritten letter by Gandhi to Nichidatsu Fujii. Gandhi celebrated in writing this letter the end of Most Ven. Fujii’s fasting at Calcutta in December 1933.
What do the teachings of the Lotus Sutra mean in your life personally?

I also believe in synthesis, and that true religious persons should not raise any conflict. They should try to understand the philosophy and the faith of other people and try to respect them. That is also the message of the Lotus sutra. It is taught that all of the teachings are true in this Lotus Sutra. So what is different is hoben - skilful means. Thus it teaches that all people have the freedom to believe according to their beliefs. There are so many different countries and different languages. Gandhi used to say that there can be as many religions as there are men in the world. Everyone has a different personality from everyone else. So all people can have their own unique religions. We should not try to impose anything on others. We should understand this. And religion should not be the cause of conflicts or strife in the world. It should work for peace - for the harmony and uplift of all people. So that is the message of the Lotus Sutra, I think.

Can the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence or the Gandhian perspective on peace respond to contemporary conflict situations? Could you elaborate your ideas on this point?

I think that after the creation of deadly nuclear weapons, Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence has become more relevant and necessary, because there can be no real solution through violent means. In Japan, Gandhi is introduced as a political leader. But he was a pure religious person and his philosophy, teachings, and movement all had but a single purpose - to save all humanity in the twentieth century. He was born in India not only for the cause of independence, but to save humanity from nuclear holocaust.

Buddhism teaches us the doctrine of cause and effect. Gandhi also believed in this causality. In order to achieve a good cause, we should use good means. Through bad means we can never achieve good results. Getting rid of Saddam Hussein by violence will not make Iraq peaceful. So in order to achieve good results, we should sow a good seed. From a bad seed, we cannot have a good tree. This is the principle - the interdependent relationships among phenomena. Gandhi saw this. Only through non-violence were the people of India able to achieve a real independence. So in the face of nuclear weapons, what we should develop is spiritual force, not brute force, in order to save humanity. Gandhi believed, and we must also believe as religious people, that real spiritual force is superior to brute force - material force. So wherever there is any conflict, we must resolve it, but we must try to solve it through spiritual force. If you try to resolve it through brute force, what awaits you is hatred and the destruction of all humanity.

What is the significance of your translating the Lotus Sutra into Hindi, which you are now working on?

The Lotus Sutra was originally written in Sanskrit. But we do not find the Sanskrit version very interesting, as I told you. But the Chinese translation made by Kumarajiva in the fifth century is very inspiring. So through Kumarajiva, the Lotus Sutra has received a new life. I think it is very important. As you know, there are many English translations, but still, there is no single Hindi translation made directly from Kumarajiva’s Chinese translation. This is the reason that I am now translating it into Hindi. But only translating does not satisfy me. I would also like to make detailed notes on the important words. The Sanskrit version is also helpful. But sometimes in Kumarajiva’s version there are some parts that are not in the original Sanskrit. Therefore, it is a very important work. Besides, there are so many meanings in the Chinese terms. It takes more time for translation. You have to study many books. You have to see many translations. So it becomes very hard work, but I would like to accomplish it anyway.

This is the only thing I can do because I have devoted my life to the study of this sutra. So this has become my lifework.

India was the cradle of Buddhism, which, however, disappeared in the land of its origin in the thirteenth century. Actually, what is your basic idea for bringing the spirit of the Lotus Sutra back into India?
For those who follow the teachings in the Lotus Sutra, there is no division, such as Mahayana and Hinayana. It’s only Ekayana - One Vehicle. As I told you, in Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy, teachings, and movement, this Buddhism-Ekayana Buddhism, or the teaching for bodhisattvas - was revived.

There is another person who needs to be mentioned when I discuss Gandhian philosophy and Buddhism - Acharya Dharmananda Kosambi. He is not very well known in Japan, but his son, Professor Damodar Kosambi, is more popular as a renowned mathematician, historian, and Sanskrit scholar whose books have been translated into Japanese.

Acharya Dharmananda Kosambi was originally from a Brahmin family in Goa. But he began reading about Buddhism. He was very much attracted to Buddhist philosophy and the Buddha’s life, so he became a Buddhist. But he realized that he didn’t know anything about Buddhism. So he decided to start again, by learning Pali. He travelled from Ceylon to Nepal and Burma for the study of Pali scriptures. Thus, he became a great Buddhist scholar who wrote many books. He was also fascinated with Gandhi’s movement. Dharmananda Kosambi went to see Gandhi in Pune, a city near Bombay, in 1924 when Gandhi was hospitalized because of appendicitis. Gandhi also had great respect for him as a Buddhist scholar. In the hospital, Gandhi told Dharmananda Kosambi that he had already known many things about him through Shankarlal Banker, one of Gandhi’s disciples. Both had once been confined in prison, so Shankarlal used to speak to Gandhi about him. So Gandhi said, “You are a great Buddhist scholar.” Dharmananda replied, “It is true that I have studied Buddhist literature very well, but it is you who really savours the Buddhist teachings, who knows, while practicing Buddhism, the real taste of Buddhism.” What he was pointing out was that Gandhi was truly practicing Buddhism as a living faith. The true spirit of Buddhism was revived in India through Gandhi and the “Satyagraha” movement, through which he showed humanity how to put into practice the Buddha’s teachings to solve different problems by peaceful means.

So I don’t think that any new attempt has to be made to take Buddhism from Japan to India. Gandhi was the greatest bodhisattva who appeared in the twentieth century. He was not merely a political leader - he was purely a religious man.

Until now, people may have had some illusions about the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, and also his followers’ feelings and faith. So what is necessary for all those who follow the Buddhist faith in Japan is to know and study Gandhi’s philosophy. But I think that you should not be very sensitive about the names - the spirit is there. Honestly speaking, Indian people themselves are already forgetting the Gandhian philosophy. So we have to inherit what Gandhi did and give a new form to philosophy. So we have to inherit what Gandhi did and give a new form to Buddhist faith. That is important. And I want to devote my life to doing this. I believe that the Gandhian philosophy should be the guiding principle for the twenty-first century.

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*Courtesy: The Bi-Monthly Dharma World published by Kosei Publishing Company, Tokyo. E-mail: dharmaworld@kosei-shuppan.co.jp*