

THE ESSENTIALS OF NICHIREN BUDDHISM
THE IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF THE LOTUS SUTRA
PART 9

The Lotus Sutra was Shakyamuni Buddha's highest teaching and the purpose of his life. In it, Nichiren Daishonin found a theoretical and doctrinal basis for establishing his Buddhism — **a teaching to lead all humankind to happiness. This installment continues the examination of the sutra with a look at the meaning of the true aspect of all phenomena and the universality of Buddhahood.**

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The True Aspect of All Phenomena and the Attainment of Buddhahood by Persons of the Two Vehicles

Two principles form the core of the theoretical teaching in the first half of the Lotus Sutra: the principle of the true aspect of all phenomena and that of the attainment of Buddhahood by persons of the two vehicles. People of the two vehicles, those in the worlds of the voice-hearers (learning) and cause-awakened ones (realization), were incapable of attaining Buddhahood through teachings preceding the Lotus Sutra.

The “Expedient Means” (second) chapter teaches the principle of the true aspect of all phenomena (also called the true entity of all phenomena or the true entity of life). It thereby endeavors to express in words something that eludes description — the nature of the Buddha's enlightenment. “All phenomena” refers to all things and activities — all of the various forms and functions that appear in the world of reality, or in the universe. So, included in all phenomena are all expressions of life, which manifest the Ten Worlds from Hell to Buddhahood, and the various places or environments where such life dwells, that is, everything in the entire universe.

True aspect refers to the supreme truth or ultimate reality. We must not think of this as something special that exists in a separate or distant realm, in a world apart from the concrete reality of all phenomena. In answer to a question about the meaning of the true aspect of all phenomena, Nichiren Daishonin says, “It means that all beings and environments in the Ten Worlds, from hell, the lowest, to Buddhahood, the highest, are without exception manifestations of Myoho-enge-kyo” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 383).

To perceive all life in any of the Ten Worlds and all realms in which such life dwells as being, in their true nature, manifestations of Myoho-enge-kyo is to perceive the true aspect of all phenomena. Through this teaching, the fact that all living beings are equally capable of attaining Buddhahood is made clear in theoretical terms in the Lotus Sutra. To make plain the fact that all people equally possess the potential for enlightenment, the theoretical teaching strongly emphasizes that even persons of the two vehicles are able to attain Buddhahood.

The idea that all living beings are equally capable of attaining Buddhahood presents a revolutionary view when compared with the sutras taught before the Lotus Sutra. The earlier sutras regard the nine worlds from Hell through Bodhisattvas as states of delusion. They teach that only by removing ourselves from these states of life can we become Buddhas; in order to achieve this, it is necessary to carry out Buddhist practice over a period of eons and countless lifetimes while ascending gradually through various levels of practice.

This view that one should pursue a world of Buddhahood that is separate and distinct from

the other nine worlds contradicts the principle of the true aspect of all phenomena. According to that principle, all living beings of the Ten Worlds are equally entities of the Mystic Law (true aspect) innately endowed with the Buddha nature; if one opens this internal world of Buddhahood, one becomes a Buddha.

The Buddha's Actual Attainment of Enlightenment in the Remote Past

A core principle of the essential teaching of the Lotus Sutra is that the Buddha actually attained enlightenment in the remote past. This is revealed in the “Life Span of the Thus Come One” (sixteenth) chapter, in which Shakyamuni Buddha states, “But good men, it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.” Thus, Shakyamuni expresses that an incalculably vast period has passed since he first became a Buddha. This immense span of time is often called “numberless major world system dust particle kalpas,”¹ which may be viewed as virtually limitless.

Shakyamuni's true identity is that of the Buddha who actually attained enlightenment in the remote past. This idea refutes as transient or provisional the view that Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood for the first time in this life as a result of lengthy Buddhist practice carried out over many previous lifetimes. That understanding preached in earlier sutras and in the theoretical teachings in the first half of the Lotus Sutra, assumes that with his attainment of Buddhahood in the present life, Shakyamuni had brought to fruition the effects of practice carried out over many lifetimes in the past. Furthermore, with his death he would pass into a completely separate realm, never to be born again in this physical world. From this perspective, Nirvana, or emancipation, is something not of this world but the next. The doctrine of the Buddha's actual attainment of enlightenment in the remote past in the “Lifespan” chapter completely overturns this way of thinking.

The Buddha's Bodhisattva Practice

The “Life Span” chapter also explains that since the time in the remote past when the Buddha attained enlightenment, he has resided in various lands amid this saha² world. He has taken the forms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas and thus has been teaching the law and converting living beings.

“Ever since then I have been constantly in this saha world, preaching the Law, teaching and converting.”

The sutra says that this Buddha has never ceased these activities, even for a short while. This is not a Buddha in the traditional view — one who attains enlightenment and then passes into a separate or transcendent realm. The Buddha of the “Life Span” chapter is one who, since attaining enlightenment long ago, has continued his activities in the real world to save all people from suffering.

The “Life Span” chapter teaches that the Buddha's death or entry into Nirvana — a state in which his form is no longer manifest — is but an expedient means by which he converts and teaches living beings. In the sutra the Buddha says, “In order to save living beings / as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana / but in truth I do not pass into extinction.”

Moreover, it is the nature of this Buddha who attained enlightenment in the remote past to continue his activities to enlighten living beings by appearing in various places and in various forms. Viewed from this perspective, the many Buddhas described in other sutras and in the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra, including Shakyamuni who first attained enlightenment in the present life, are merely expedients. They reveal but one aspect of the Buddha of the remote

past and are therefore transient, or provisional. Thus, the “Life Span” chapter clarifies that the Shakyamuni who first attained Buddhahood in this lifetime is but a transient or provisional identity, and the Buddha who actually attained enlightenment in the remote past is Shakyamuni’s true identity.

The great teacher T’ien-t’ai refers to this clarification as “casting off the transient and revealing the true.” A key point underlying the principal of the Buddha attaining enlightenment in the remote past is that a true or genuine Buddha is one who is continuously and eternally active in the real world, taking on differing forms and roles in order to save living beings from suffering. The real life state of Buddhahood functions within any circumstance found in the real world. The idea that the Buddha only existed in this world while Shakyamuni was alive and then passed into extinction with his death is a misconception. This was not the view of Buddhahood that Shakyamuni himself sought to teach.

As we have already seen, the principal of the true aspect of all phenomena makes clear that the life-state of Buddhahood is innate within all living beings. This forms a basis for the idea that all people possess the potential to become Buddhas. The principal of the Buddha’s attainment in the remote past takes this idea — that Buddhahood is innate in all living beings — one step further and clarifies that Shakyamuni himself actually manifested the eternal life of Buddhahood.

The “Life Span” chapter expresses three aspects of Shakyamuni’s Buddhahood, that is, true cause, true effect, and true land. The statement, “Originally I practiced the Bodhisattva way,” refers to the “true cause” by which Shakyamuni attained enlightenment through his bodhisattva practice. Shakyamuni’s having attained enlightenment in the distant past as revealed in the “Life Span” chapter sets forth the “true effect” of Shakyamuni’s Buddhahood. Shakyamuni’s description of his having been continuously active as a Buddha in various lands throughout the saha world is a clarification of the Buddha’s “true land.” T’ien-t’ai referred to these three aspects as the three mystic principles, that is, the mystic principle of the true cause, the mystic principle of the true effect, and the mystic principle of the true land. He also spoke of them in terms of one principle as the “fusion of the three mystic principles.”

Bodhisattvas of the Earth

The term Bodhisattvas of the Earth refers to countless Bodhisattvas who emerge from the space beneath the earth in response to Shakyamuni’s call to propagate the Lotus Sutra after his death. They are described in the “Emerging from the Earth” (fifteenth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. These bodhisattvas are said to be “as numerous as the sands of 60,000 Ganges Rivers,” and each of them is accompanied by countless followers and supporters.

According to the description in the sutra, their appearance and spirit are more brilliant and magnificent than that of Shakyamuni Buddha himself. In addition, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are identified as disciples of Shakyamuni, who he had been converting and teaching since the time of his actual attainment of enlightenment in the far distant past. This means that they are disciples who share a relationship of oneness of mentor and disciple with the eternal Shakyamuni Buddha. As the Buddha had been continuously struggling in this world to save human beings since his enlightenment numberless eons ago, they too had been learning from and deeply grasping the same way of life as their teacher. Therefore, they are not bodhisattvas who simply aspire to their own attainment of Buddhahood as their ultimate goal; rather, their supreme objective is to continue to fight for people’s happiness amid the harsh realities of this world, just as their mentor did.

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are headed by four great leaders: Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Peaceful Practices. Each of their names suggest an

aspect or quality of the way a Buddha carries out practice in the real world to save living beings from suffering.

In the “Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One” (twenty-first) chapter, Shakyamuni transfers all of his teachings, his supernatural powers, and his practices as a Thus Come One (*Tathagata*, one of the titles of a Buddha) to Bodhisattva Superior Practices, who represents all the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, and entrusts to him the propagation of the Lotus Sutra after his death. Shakyamuni’s transfer of his teachings to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the “Supernatural Powers” chapter is referred to as the “specific transmission.” Then in the “Entrustment” (twenty-second) chapter, Shakyamuni entrusts his teachings to all of the bodhisattvas and heavenly beings present in the assembly. This transfer of his teachings to all of the bodhisattvas is called the “general transmission.”

This manner of entrustment indicates that, after Shakyamuni’s death, particularly in the evil age called the Latter Day of the Law, it is the Bodhisattvas of the Earth led by Bodhisattva Superior Practices who will play the leading role in spreading the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, it was Nichiren Daishonin who, in accord with this entrustment, took the lead in propagating the Lotus Sutra in the Latter Day. In “The True Aspect of all Phenomena” Nichiren writes, “Now, no matter what, strive in faith and be known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and remain my disciple for the rest of your life. If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth. And if you are a Bodhisattva of the Earth, there is not the slightest doubt that you have been a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha from the remote past. The sutra states, ‘Ever since the long distant past I have been teaching and converting this multitude’” (WND, 385).

Thus, from the perspective of Nichiren Buddhism, each person who has faith in that teaching and strives in practice with the same spirit as the Daishonin to spread the Mystic Law for the peace and happiness of humanity is a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

The story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging appears in the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging” (twentieth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra. He is described as a previous incarnation of Shakyamuni Buddha, and is cited as an example of the Buddha’s bodhisattva practice in the distant past. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging appeared during the end of the Middle Day of the Law of a Buddha called Awesome Sound King. He bowed in respect and reverence to all people he encountered while uttering the words: “I have profound reverence for you; I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.”

These words epitomize the intent of the Lotus Sutra, which is to affirm that all living beings possess the Buddha nature. In the sutra’s Chinese text this statement consists of twenty-four characters and therefore is sometimes referred to as the twenty-four character Lotus Sutra.

Bodhisattva Never Disparaging derives his name from the fact that his words express a vow never to disparage or disrespect others. As he carried out this practice of respecting others, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was slandered and vilified by people whose minds were tainted by the poison of anger.³ He met with persecution, including being attacked with sticks of wood, tiles and stones. Undaunted by this, however, he continued to repeat his words of respect and praise for people’s innate Buddhahood. As a result, the chapter states, he was able to “put his offenses to an end,” meaning that through this practice, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging expiated all of his past offenses and negative karma.

Later, as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s life neared its end, he heard coming from the sky, in its entirety, the Lotus Sutra that had been preached by the Buddha Awesome Sound King.

Thus he obtained the purification of his six sense organs, and his life span increased by “two hundred, ten thousand, million nayutas of years.” He continued to preach the Lotus Sutra himself. Then, after he died, he encountered an incalculable number of Buddhas, and went on to teach the Lotus Sutra to the four kinds of believers (monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen) and through the resulting benefit, he attained Buddhahood.

The people who had persecuted Bodhisattva Never Disparaging until that time came to believe in and follow him, but the offense of having persecuted a bodhisattva caused them nevertheless to fall into the hell of incessant suffering for thousands of kalpas. When they had paid for their offenses, however, through the benefit of having formed a relationship with the Lotus Sutra, they could be present among the assembly of those listening to Shakyamuni preach the Lotus Sutra.

The sutra’s description of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice clarifies the cause for Shakyamuni’s attainment of Buddhahood. It also stands as an example of how bodhisattvas should put the Lotus Sutra into practice in the time after Shakyamuni’s death. That way of practice can be summarized as follows: first, always maintain firm conviction that all people can attain Buddhahood and have profound respect for all people; second, spread the core teaching of the sutra in the same spirit as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging; third, be prepared to encounter and endure persecutions that arise as a result of persevering in our beliefs; and fourth, as we struggle to realize our convictions in an age that is defiled by evil, never become tainted by that evil but instead continue to work to transform our karma. Nichiren Daishonin pointed out that his personal struggle to establish and spread the Mystic Law constituted his carrying on the legacy of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.

1. “numberless major world system dust particle kalpas”—Described in the Lotus Sutra as: “Suppose a person were to take five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkha thousand-million fold worlds and grind them to dust. Then, moving eastward, each time he passes five hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkha worlds he drops a particle of dust. He continues eastward in this way until he has finished dropping all the particles. Good men, what is your opinion? Can the total number of all these worlds be imagined or calculated?”

“Suppose all these worlds, whether they received a particle of dust or not, are once more reduced to dust. Let one particle represent one kalpa. The time that has passed since I attained Buddhahood surpasses this by a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkha kalpas.

2. Saha world—This world, which is full of suffering. Often translated as the world of endurance. Saha means the earth; it derives from a root meaning “to bear” or “to endure.” For this reason, in the Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures, saha is rendered as endurance. In this context, the saha world indicates a world in which people must endure suffering. It is also defined as an impure land, a land defiled by earthly desires and illusion, in contrast with a pure land. The saha world describes the land where Shakyamuni Buddha makes his appearance and instructs living beings.

3. The poison of anger — one of the ‘three poisons,’ three fundamental evils inherent in life that give rise to suffering. The other two are greed and foolishness. The poison of anger refers particularly to deep-seated hatred and malice, and is regarded as a great obstacle to Buddhist practice.

POP QUIZ

- 1.** What is the meaning of “true aspect” and “all phenomena” in the concept of the true aspect of all phenomena?
- 2.** What is the significance of the time when Shakyamuni attained enlightenment?
- 3.** What are the characteristics of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth?
- 4.** What is the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging?