

Session 3 – June

Chapter 1: The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin (1)

—Nichiren Daishonin’s Life and Teachings—

3. Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime

1) Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime

The fundamental purpose of our Buddhist faith and practice is to attain the life state of Buddhahood.

By embracing faith in the Gohonzon and striving sincerely in Buddhist practice for oneself and others, anyone can realize the state of Buddhahood in this existence. This is the principle of “attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime.”

“Practice for oneself” means to carry out Buddhist practice for one’s own benefit. “Practice for others” means to teach and guide others to Buddhist practice so that they, too, can attain benefit. Specifically, “practice for oneself and others” indicates doing gongyo and chanting daimoku, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, while also reaching out to talk with others about Buddhism, teaching and guiding them, and thereby propagating the Mystic Law. (A more detailed explanation appears in chapter 3.)

Nichiren Daishonin wrote: “If votaries of the Lotus Sutra carry out religious practice as the sutra directs, then every one of them without exception will surely attain Buddhahood within his or her present lifetime. To cite an analogy, if one plants the fields in spring and summer, then, whether it be early or late, one is certain to reap a harvest within the year” (“The Doctrines of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life,” WND-2, 88).

Attaining Buddhahood, or becoming a Buddha, does not mean becoming some kind of special human being, completely different from who we are now, nor does it mean being reborn in a pure land far removed from this world in our next lifetime.

The Daishonin explains the “attain” of attaining Buddhahood as follows: “‘Attain’ means to open or reveal” (OTT, 126). Attaining Buddhahood, therefore, simply means revealing our innate Buddhahood.

As ordinary people, we can reveal this enlightened state of life, just as we are. This is expressed in the Buddhist concepts of “the attainment of

Buddhahood by ordinary people” and “attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form.”

Attaining Buddhahood does not mean going to some other world. Rather, it means establishing a state of absolute and indestructible happiness here in the real world.

The Daishonin says that “one comes to realize and see that each thing—the cherry, the plum, the peach, the damson—in its own entity, without undergoing any change, possesses the eternally endowed three bodies [of the Buddha]”¹ (OTT, 200). As this passage suggests, attaining Buddhahood means living in a way in which we make the most of our unique inherent qualities and develop our potential to the fullest.

In other words, in attaining Buddhahood, our lives are purified, allowing us to give full expression to their inherent workings; we gain a strong inner state that is not swayed by any hardship.

Attaining Buddhahood is not the achievement of a final goal. The state of Buddhahood is characterized by an unremitting struggle based on faith in the Mystic Law to eliminate evil and generate good. Those who strive tirelessly for kosen-rufu are Buddhas.

“The Attainment of Buddhahood by Ordinary People” and “Attaining Buddhahood in One’s Present Form”

The terms “ordinary person” or “common mortal” appear frequently in Buddhist sutras and texts, indicating an unenlightened person. The Lotus Sutra teaches that ordinary people inherently possess the life state of Buddhahood and that they can reveal that state of life. That is, it is possible for us to manifest within us that noble life state as ordinary people. This is expressed in such Buddhist terms as “ordinary people are identical with the highest level of being” (OTT, 22) and “an ordinary person is a Buddha” (“The Izu Exile,” WND-1, 36).

Attaining Buddhahood is a process of manifesting the life state of a Buddha, which is originally present within all people (the inherent world of Buddhahood). A Buddha, therefore, is not a special being separate from or superior to human beings. The Daishonin taught that attaining Buddhahood is

¹ The three bodies of the Buddha refer to the Dharma body, the reward body, and the manifested body. The Dharma body is the fundamental truth, or Law, to which a Buddha is enlightened. The reward body is the wisdom to perceive the Law. And the manifested body is the compassionate actions the Buddha carries out to lead people to happiness.

revealing the highest humanity—that is, Buddhahood—in our lives as ordinary people.

This is called “attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form.” This means that people can realize the life state of a Buddha just as they are, without having to be reborn and changing their present form as an ordinary person.

Though Mahayana sutras other than the Lotus Sutra teach the attainment of Buddhahood, they all require at least two conditions.

The first is that one not belong to any of the following groups, which were deemed incapable of attaining Buddhahood: practitioners of the two vehicles (voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones), evil people, and women.

Practitioners of the two vehicles believed that it was impossible for them to attain the elevated life state of the Buddha, and so contented themselves with seeking to gain the stage of arhat—the highest stage of awakening in the teachings for the voice-hearers. These practitioners aimed for the annihilation of body and mind in arriving at this stage, in which all earthly desires were completely extinguished, ending the cycle of rebirth into this world. Many Mahayana sutras harshly condemned such practitioners as being unable to attain Buddhahood.

These sutras also taught that evil people had to first be reborn as good people, and women be reborn as men, before they could attain Buddhahood. Neither evil people nor women were considered able to attain Buddhahood as they were. Though these sutras taught the possibility of attaining Buddhahood, only a limited number of people could meet the requirements to actually do so.

The second condition for attaining Buddhahood in Mahayana sutras other than the Lotus Sutra was that one had to engage in Buddhist practice over repeated cycles of birth and death (known as “countless kalpas of practice”) in order to free oneself from the life state of an unenlightened, ordinary person and achieve the life state of a Buddha.

Attaining Buddhahood as an Ordinary Person in This Lifetime

In contrast, the Lotus Sutra teaches that attaining Buddhahood is not a matter of becoming some sort of exceptional or extraordinary being, but that each person can reveal the life state of Buddhahood within them, just as they are.

Nichiren Daishonin further clarified that the fundamental Law by which all Buddhas attain enlightenment is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. He also manifested his enlightened state of life that is one with that Law in the form of the Gohonzon—the object of devotion of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

By embracing faith in the Gohonzon of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, anyone can reveal the Buddhahood inherent in his or her life.

Nichikan wrote: “If we accept and believe in this object of devotion and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to it, then our lives are themselves the object of devotion of three thousand realms in a single moment of life; we are the founder, Nichiren Daishonin” (“The Commentaries of Nichikan”).

By believing in the Gohonzon and continuing to exert ourselves in faith and practice for the sake of kosen-rufu, we can manifest in our lives as ordinary people the same life state of Buddhahood as Nichiren Daishonin.

This is also expressed as the principles of “attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form” and “attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime.”

[Note: Nichikan (1665–1726) was a scholar priest who lived during the Edo period (1603–1868) of Japan. He systematized and placed fresh emphasis on the Buddhist principles of Nichiren Daishonin as inherited and transmitted by his direct disciple and successor, Nikko Shonin.]

“Earthly Desires Are Enlightenment” and “The Sufferings of Birth and Death Are Nirvana”

The idea of “attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form” can be expressed from another distinct perspective as the principles that “earthly desires are enlightenment” and “the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana.”

The various sutras and scriptures traditionally categorized as Hinayana teachings in the Daishonin’s day taught that the cause of suffering lies in one’s earthly desires or deluded impulses, and that there is no way to eliminate suffering other than to extinguish such desires or impulses. The aim of these teachings was emancipation (awakening that brings about release from suffering) through upholding numerous precepts (rules of discipline) and accumulating the results of prolonged and intensive practice and training.

However, trying to achieve a state utterly devoid of earthly desires led people to seek to annihilate both the physical and spiritual self and thereby escape the cycle of birth and death, never to be reborn in this world again. This ultimately amounts to a complete denial or rejection of life.

In the Mahayana sutras other than the Lotus Sutra, persons of the two vehicles who practice the Hinayana teachings, evil people, and women are denied the possibility of attaining Buddhahood.

This represents a way of thinking that is essentially quite similar to the Hinayana doctrines, creating a gap or divide between ordinary people and the Buddha that is difficult to bridge.

These sutras also present fictitious Buddhas—as in the case of Amida Buddha or Mahavairochana Buddha—who far transcend human beings in their attributes and dwell in separate realms far removed from the real world.

These sutras teach that for ordinary people to become Buddhas, they must learn, practice, and acquire aspects of the Buddha's enlightenment a little at a time over the course of many successive lifetimes.

Also, the belief that one could not through one's own efforts or power alone become a Buddha gave rise to an emphasis on seeking salvation through the absolute power of a Buddha.

In contrast, the Lotus Sutra reveals that all human beings inherently possess the world of Buddhahood, a life state of compassion and wisdom, and that it is possible to tap and bring forth this inner Buddhahood.

Even ordinary people whose lives are dominated by earthly desires, burdened by negative karma, and afflicted by suffering, can, by awakening to the reality that Buddhahood exists within their own lives, manifest the wisdom of the Buddha's enlightenment, liberate themselves from suffering, and realize a state of complete freedom.

A life tormented by earthly desires and suffering can become a life of limitless freedom that shines with enlightened wisdom, just as it is. This is the meaning of the principle that “earthly desires are enlightenment.”

Nichiren Daishonin teaches that the world of Buddhahood within us is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

When we believe in the Gohonzon of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, chant daimoku, and awaken to our true, noble selves, the wisdom to live out our lives, the courage and confidence to face the challenges of adversity and overcome them, and the compassion to care for the welfare of others will well forth in our lives.

“The sufferings of birth and death are nirvana” means that, though we may be in a state of suffering caused by the painful realities of birth and death, when we believe in the Gohonzon and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we can manifest in our lives the tranquil life state of the Buddha's enlightenment (nirvana).

The principles of “earthly desires are enlightenment” and “the sufferings of birth and death are nirvana” teach us that when we base ourselves on faith in the Mystic Law, we can lead positive, proactive lives, transforming every problem and suffering we have into a cause for growth and happiness.

Relative Happiness and Absolute Happiness

Second Soka Gakkai President Josei Toda (1900–58) taught that there are two kinds of happiness: relative happiness and absolute happiness. Relative happiness describes a condition in which our material needs are fulfilled and our personal desires satisfied. But desires know no limits; even if we may enjoy a sense of those desires being fulfilled for a time, it is not lasting. Since this kind of happiness is dependent on external circumstances, if those circumstances should change or disappear, then so will our happiness. Such happiness is called relative because it exists only in relation to external factors.

In contrast, absolute happiness is a state of life in which being alive itself is a source of happiness and joy, no matter where we are or what our circumstances. It describes a life condition in which happiness wells forth from within us. Because it is not influenced by external conditions, it is called absolute happiness. Attaining Buddhahood means establishing this state of absolute happiness.

Living amid the realities of this world, it is inevitable that we will meet with various problems and difficulties. But in the same way that someone who is strong and physically fit can easily climb a mountain, even when carrying a heavy load, those who have established an inner state of absolute happiness can use any challenge they encounter as an impetus for bringing forth powerful life force and calmly overcome adversity. For strong mountain climbers, the steeper and more demanding the ascent, the greater enjoyment they feel in overcoming each challenge on the path to the summit. Similarly, for those who, through Buddhist practice, have acquired the life force and wisdom to overcome hardships, the real world with all its troubles and challenges is a place for creating value, rich in satisfaction and fulfillment.

In addition, while relative happiness, which depends on external factors, disappears with death, the absolute happiness of the life state of Buddhahood persists eternally. As the Daishonin writes: “Passing through the round of births and deaths, one makes one’s way on the land of the Dharma nature, or enlightenment, that is inherent within oneself” (OTT, 52).