

My potential

Here we are, living in the twenty first century. At times, it may have seemed unlikely that mankind would make it to this time. Wars and conflicts, droughts and famines, problems economic and environmental, psychological and physical; nothing in the advances of the past century has been able to resolve these issues. Our planet, seemingly robust, remains remarkably fragile. The causes we are making now will affect the environment of our planet for generations to come.

As individuals, we have been born into this world, and into these circumstances. We grow, mature and one day we will start to decline and inevitably we will die, passing from this world into some other, as yet unknown, state.

How do we cope with life in this troubled world? If we are fortunate, we are fit and healthy, as are our children and relatives. If we are fortunate, we have adequate, or surplus, financial means, we are occupied in interesting ways, and surrounded with loving and supportive family and friends. We have nothing to fear about the future of our jobs, our homes, our health. But who is that fortunate? Or, if someone is that fortunate, how can they be sure that their good fortune will not one day run out?

The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin teaches that the way life is, is not the responsibility of an external, all-powerful being. Rather, this philosophy starts with the individual. Each person has – in broad terms – similar attributes. We are awake and asleep. We eat, drink and have bodily functions. We talk and we listen. We have the potential to

fight and to love, to create and to destroy. Buddhism teaches that in the heart of every person there is incredible potential, which for the most part remains hidden. As we will see later, this potential is likened to a lotus flower.

Revealing it

Imagine a reservoir of the best qualities that life has to offer. And imagine this reservoir deep in your own life, and of an enormous, unimaginable volume. What will you find there? You will find the necessary ingredients to experience joy, happiness and good fortune here and now.

First, you will find wisdom – the wisdom to deal with every situation you could ever possibly have to confront. This is more than knowledge, or learning; it is the creative wisdom to resolve fundamental issues that affect your life.

Then you will find the courage that you need to take the action to make your life move forward. No matter what obstacles may appear to be holding you back, the courage in your life will enable you to surpass them. No matter how fearful, insignificant or cowardly you may feel now, there is more than enough courage in this reservoir to make you wonder why you waited so long before moving forward.

Also you will find an enormous supply of compassion which will ensure that every action you take will be for the good not only of yourself, but also for the good of the world at large.

There is also a store of

energy, or life-force; as much as you need to achieve whatever you wish for your life. This creative, dynamic energy combined with the courage, compassion and wisdom outlined above means that you can really take control of your life and fulfil your greatest dreams.

Is all this a fantasy? Buddhism teaches that we all have this reservoir. Perhaps we are aware that those qualities trickle out to some extent, but how often have we found that the trickle dries up when we really need it?

Right now!

This reservoir is known as the Buddha state, or Buddha wisdom, and the teachings of Buddhism exist so that we can reveal it in daily life. From this we can understand that the Buddha is not a special person. Buddhahood is not an unattainable life condition, but a potential that is within all life and within each of us, right here, right now.

The person who established the way for anyone to become a Buddha in this day and age was Nichiren Daishonin, who lived in the thirteenth century in Japan. This is what he says:

"If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death you have endured since time without beginning and to attain unsurpassed enlightenment in this lifetime, you must perceive the mystic truth that is originally inherent in all living beings. This truth is Myoho-enge-kyo. Chanting Myoho-enge-kyo will therefore enable you to grasp the mystic truth innate in all life". [On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime, WND p3]

So what has been called a 'reservoir', Nichiren Daishonin refers to as the 'mystic truth'. It is 'mystic' because it is not apparent to our ordinary conscious minds. It is the 'truth' that is at the heart of all Buddhist teachings. All life, all phenomena are endowed with Buddhahood; the greatest potential of life.

A Buddha is an ordinary human being alive in this world who realizes that the reservoir is there, draws on it at will, and also works to encourage others to do the same. Nichiren Daishonin said that all the teachings of Buddhism pointed to this fact: we all have this potential and the way to experience it is to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

What is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo?

It is not easy to give a short answer that answers all the aspects of what Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is. Here are two answers. It is the title and the heart of the Lotus Sutra, and it is the Law that explains the workings of life.

The Lotus Sutra

The Buddhist teaching, which explains that everyone has the same potential as the Buddha is the Lotus Sutra ('sutra' means 'teaching'). The Sutras were originally taught in Sanskrit, and the Lotus Sutra was known as Sad-Dharma-Pundarika-Sutra. As the teachings of Buddhism spread they were translated into the languages of the cultures they travelled to. The Lotus Sutra was translated into Chinese, and when it reached Japan it was known as Myoho-Renge-Kyo. The title of a sutra was considered to encapsulate the teaching it contained. It was also the practice to place the word Nam (or, Devotion) before the names of Buddhist teachings or characters in order to praise them. Nichiren Daishonin

taught that the act of praising the Lotus Sutra would enable the qualities of the Buddha, the reservoir, inherent in our lives to emerge. Therefore he placed the word 'Nam' in front of the title of the Lotus Sutra, 'Myoho-renge-kyo'. This appears very simple; but the practice itself is very profound.

The Law of Life

As we consider each of the constituent parts of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we start to sense its profundity. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is referred to as the 'Law of Life'. Although it is just six syllables, each signifies profound truths that go to the heart of the universe, life and death, as well as the law of cause and effect.

Nam

Nam is an action word. The act of praising our potential will make it emerge. Nam is the word that turns this principle from a theory into a reality. The Lotus Sutra, although profound, is merely a teaching. But Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is a practice that will have actual results. Nam's literal meaning is 'Respect' or 'Dedication' – so the whole phrase has the simple meaning of 'Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra'.

Myoho

Myoho explains at least 2 major principles of life: the relationship between life and death, as well as the relationship between our highest, or Buddha, state and all our other 9 conditions or states of life (See topic on the ten states of life).

How do the teachings of Buddhism view the relationship between life and death? We all have a birthday. That is, quite simply, the day when we emerged into the world as a baby. We also have some idea of what was happening to us in the nine or so months before we

emerged from the womb. Before that, however, other than the knowledge that a sperm and an egg came together at a particular moment, things are not so clear. Biologists cannot give definitive answers as to where or what our consciousness was before conception and philosophers have also struggled to explain this. Buddhism teaches that all our constituent parts, not just physical ones, but mental and spiritual as well, existed in a state of latency, waiting for the right conditions to emerge before we could start the process of being born after conception.

Before conception, we are latent, or 'myo'. This means that our life energy is waiting for the necessary circumstances before it can take on a physical form. 'Ho', law, or phenomena, describes the manifest state and particularly the emergence of the new born baby into the world. We remain alive – manifest – until the point when, for whatever reason, our bodies can no longer support our lives, the body dies, and the constituent parts separate. The body decays, and at this point we cease to be 'ho' and return once more to the latent state of 'myo'.

Buddhism teaches that life is a cycle. We emerge from myo, become ho and return to myo again. This rhythm continues forever. Similarly the cycle of the seasons echoes this process. We see new growth in Spring, maturity in Summer, harvest and decline in Autumn before a period of apparently bleak withdrawal in Winter. But Winter never fails to turn into Spring once more, and the cycle starts again.

This cycle of myo and ho is a bit like sleeping and recharging before the next day starts. But chanting Nam myoho rengo kyo is drawing from and infusing our lives with life force. Chanting itself works according to the fundamental principles of myo and ho.

We feel our Buddhahood at work because our chanting has caused it to appear according to another

fundamental life principle: renga
which is about how the effect exists
simultaneously with the cause. (See
topic on cause and effect and the nine
consciousnesses)

Renga

This literally means
lotus flower. The lotus flower
rests on the surface of the pond,
its roots going deep into the
water and drawing on the
nutrients it finds in the mud at
the bottom.

This image of the lotus
flower also means that the
Buddha is not a perfect being,
detached from the realities of
life, either in a monastery or in
some other, unearthly realm.
Rather, the Buddha is an aspect
of our own lives which we can
draw on. It is because of the
trials and tribulations of real,
everyday life in this world that
the Buddha's qualities can be
revealed.

Renga signifies the
process of cause and effect at
work deep within the life of
each person and which we are
ordinarily caught up in and
unable to change
fundamentally.

Kyo

The word Kyo literally
means 'sutra', or teaching. It is
the vibration of our voice which
is so important in our Buddhist
practice. It is said the voice
does the Buddha's work. This is
why we chant Nam-myoho-
renga-kyo aloud, rather than
performing a silent meditation.
Kyo is the interconnectedness of
all phenomena; and how our
prayer/sound of chanting can
affect people and situations out
of our immediate sphere.

Introductory study programme materials

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