

Section D - On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime

Section D: “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime”

SGI President Ikeda’s Study Lecture Series

LECTURES ON “ON ATTAINING BUDDHAHOOD IN THIS LIFETIME”

[1] Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime – The Fundamental Purpose of Life And a Source of Hope for Humankind

Lecture

If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death you have endured since time without beginning and to attain without fail 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. (WND-1, p. 3)

Just what constitutes a deeply meaningful life? What is true happiness? Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism is a teaching of hope that enables us to forge a state of unsurpassed and indestructible happiness and to lead a life of supreme value, while also helping others do the same.

Everyone has the potential to attain Buddhahood; moreover, they can gain that lofty state just as they are, and in fact are assured of being able to do so in this lifetime. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin clearly elucidates this wonderful path to enlightenment.

The Daishonin’s profound teaching of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime was a revolutionary concept that turned prevailing Buddhist thought on its head. Indeed, it continues to shine today as a principle that can powerfully transform the age and open a bright future for our modern world in the 21st century.

Therefore, I look forward to studying the Daishonin’s writing “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime” together with you, as we embark in high spirits on a new journey of growth and development toward the Soka Gakkai’s 80th anniversary (in 2010).

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The Profound Meaning of Chanting Daimoku

“On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime” is an important writing that clarifies the basic theory and practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism. SGI members throughout the globe have deepened their understanding of the essence of the Daishonin’s teachings by earnestly studying this writing as a guideline for practice and study.

Although the original is no longer extant and the precise date and name of the recipient are unknown, this letter is traditionally held to have been written around 1255 and addressed to Toki Jonin.¹ The assertion that it was composed in 1255, shortly after the Daishonin publicly declared his teaching of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo in 1253, is credible in view of the letter’s content, explaining as it does the significance of chanting daimoku in terms of both theory and practice.

The practice of chanting daimoku is the foundation of the Daishonin’s lifetime teachings. The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, unlike the established Buddhist schools of his day, was not dedicated to the worship of a specific god or Buddha. The Daishonin established the means for all people to achieve enlightenment, the ideal of the Lotus Sutra, by formulating the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, which enables us to activate our inherent Buddha nature and manifest it as the life-state of Buddhahood.

There are two aspects of the daimoku in Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism: the daimoku of faith and the daimoku of practice. The daimoku of faith refers to the spiritual aspect of our practice. This essentially consists of the struggle we wage in our hearts against our inner delusion or darkness; a battle against the negative and destructive forces within us. It means breaking through the darkness clouding our Buddha nature and bringing forth the life-state of Buddhahood through the power of faith. The daimoku of practice, meanwhile, refers to chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo ourselves and also teaching it to others. It means making efforts in word and deed for the happiness of ourselves

¹ Toki Jonin: A lay follower of the Daishonin. He lived in Wakamiya, Katsushika District of Shimosa Province (part of present-day Chiba Prefecture) and served as a retainer to Lord Chiba. He was the recipient of many of the Daishonin’s writings, including “The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind,” and carefully preserved them.

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and others as evidence of our spiritual struggle against inner negativity and illusion.

When we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, we are both chanting the name of, and calling forth, the Buddha nature in our own lives and the lives of others. When our faith wins out over inner doubt and delusion, the power of our inherent Buddha nature is called forth by the sound of our daimoku and spontaneously manifests in our lives.²

The key point that set the Daishonin's Buddhism apart from the other Buddhist schools of his day was the establishment of this concrete means for attaining Buddhahood. And from the time he first declared Nam-myoho-renge-kyo until the moment of his death, the Daishonin ardently strove to teach this supreme path of enlightenment to people throughout the land.

In the opening passage of "On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime," the Daishonin clearly and fully articulates the basic philosophy of salvation that lies at the heart of his teaching, which exists for the happiness of all humanity:

If you wish to free yourself from the sufferings of birth and death you have endured since time without beginning and to attain without fail unsurpassed enlightenment in this lifetime, you must perceive the mystic truth that is originally inherent in all living beings. This truth is Myoho-renge-kyo. Chanting Myoho-renge-kyo will therefore enable you to grasp the mystic truth innate in all life. (WND-1, p. 3)

I would like to discuss the profound meaning of this passage in detail next time. But briefly, it says that by manifesting within us the mystic truth inherent in all living beings, we can free ourselves of the endless sufferings of birth and death. The name of that mystic truth is Myoho-renge-kyo, and the way to manifest it is through chanting Myoho-renge-kyo.

² In "How Those Initially Aspiring to the Way Can Attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra," the Daishonin says: "When we revere Myoho-renge-kyo inherent in our own life as the object of devotion, the Buddha nature within us is summoned forth and manifested by our chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. This is what is meant by 'Buddha.' To illustrate, when a caged bird sings, birds who are flying in the sky are thereby summoned and gather around, and when the birds flying in the sky gather around, the bird in the cage strives to get out. When with our mouths we chant the Mystic Law, our Buddha nature, being summoned, will invariably emerge" (WND-1, p. 887).

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The Significance of Our Existence as Human Beings

Nevertheless, even though you chant and believe in Myoho-enge-kyo, if you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching. (WND-1, p. 3)

The concept of “attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime” refers to an ordinary person becoming enlightened during the course of their present existence. What this also means, by extension, is that they can achieve this just as they are. As such, “attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime” means the same thing as “attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form,” which is the approach to Buddhahood found in the Lotus Sutra and illustrated by the example of the dragon king’s daughter³ in the sutra’s “Devadatta” (twelfth) chapter.

This view contrasts sharply with the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, which expound that one can become enlightened only after practicing austerities over countless lifetimes. Because the life-state of Buddhahood is at one with the eternal Mystic Law and abounds with infinite wisdom and compassion, it tended to be seen as something completely separate and removed from the lives of ordinary people steeped in illusion. Attaining enlightenment was thought to require overcoming the unfathomably deep chasm between the spiritual states of a Buddha and ordinary people, and this gave rise to the idea that it was necessary to carry out austere practices for innumerable kalpas.

Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism clarifies that it is specifically in this present existence, in which we have been born as human beings, that we can actualise the principle of attaining Buddhahood in one’s present form that is revealed in the Lotus Sutra. This is what led him to elucidate his profound teaching of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime.

³ In the “Devadatta” (twelfth) chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the eight-year-old daughter of the dragon king Sagara conceives the desire for enlightenment when she hears Bodhisattva Manjushri preach the Lotus Sutra. She comes to offer a jewel to Shakyamuni and instantaneously perfects the bodhisattva practice. She then appears in a land to the south called Spotless World and manifests the state of Buddhahood without changing her dragon form and preaches the Lotus Sutra to all living beings there (cf. LS12, pp. 187–89).

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Drawing an analogy with rice crops, the Daishonin notes that while some ripen early and some ripen late, they will all mature and be ready for harvest within the year. He explains that practitioners of the Lotus Sutra will likewise attain Buddhahood in this existence without fail.⁴

The Daishonin places importance on the present lifetime of human beings. Of course, not only humans but all living beings possess the Buddha nature and have the potential to attain Buddhahood in their present form. But the reason the Daishonin stresses attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime is that his focus is always first and foremost on the happiness of human beings.

The human heart is sensitive, multifaceted, and rich, and has the capacity to achieve incredible feats. But for that very reason, it often also undergoes great suffering and torment. Likewise, the human heart can become trapped in an endless, negative downward spiral. Will our lives transmigrate forever in the paths of evil, or can we succeed in moving them into an orbit of good?

As evidenced in many of his writings, the Daishonin repeatedly stresses the crucial importance of the heart or mind. It is in this inner realm of life that the potential resides for dramatic shifts from evil to good or from good to evil. That is why the Daishonin's teaching of enlightenment can be viewed as a process that begins with inner change. In other words, through the power of faith, we can defeat the negative functions inside us – workings that are governed by the fundamental darkness that resides in all human hearts – and manifest the positive functions of life that are one with the Dharma nature – that is, our Buddhahood.

This present lifetime, in which we have been born as human beings, represents a golden opportunity to ensure that our lives no longer transmigrate in the evil paths but instead traverse through the paths of good.

⁴ In his writing "Ichinen Sanzen Homon" (The Doctrine of Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life), the Daishonin states: "If practitioners of the Lotus Sutra practice according to the Buddha's teaching, they will surely without a single exception attain Buddhahood in the course of this lifetime. To cite an analogy, if one plants the fields in spring and summer, then, irrespective of whether the time of planting is early or late, one is still certain to reap a harvest within the year. The practitioners of the Lotus Sutra fall into three categories – those of superior, intermediate, and lesser capacities – and yet all will invariably attain enlightenment within a single lifetime" (GZ, p. 416).

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Emphasis on Inner Change

Therefore, when you chant *myoho* and recite *renge*, you must summon up deep faith that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself. (WND-1, p. 3)

*

Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (WND-1, p. 4)

In “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” the Daishonin thoroughly explains that we cannot achieve enlightenment without a profound change in our lives themselves – that is, a change in our hearts and minds.

First of all, he says that the mystic truth with which all living beings are endowed reveals “the principle of the mutually inclusive relationship of a single moment of life and all phenomena” (WND-1, p. 3). What this means is that our lives or our minds at each moment both embody all phenomena and pervade all phenomena. This could be described as a state of life of oneness with the universe.

Also, the Daishonin warns that if we seek the Mystic Law outside ourselves, then no matter how much daimoku we chant, we will not be able to attain enlightenment; on the contrary, our Buddhist practice will only “become an endless, painful austerity”. (WND-1, p. 4) He clearly states: “Even though you chant and believe in Myoho-renge-kyo, if you think the Law is outside yourself, you are embracing not the Mystic Law but an inferior teaching.” (WND-1, p. 3)

The Daishonin explains that summoning up deep faith is the key to chanting daimoku, and declares that when we do so, we can polish our lives and attain enlightenment. He writes: “Therefore, when you chant *myoho* and recite *renge* [i.e., chant daimoku], you must summon up deep faith that Myoho-renge-kyo is your life itself [lit. your mind at each moment]”; (WND-1, p. 3) and “Arouse deep faith, and diligently polish your mirror day and night. How should you polish it? Only by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.” (WND-1, p. 4)

In addition, the Daishonin speaks of “the mystic entity of the Middle Way that is the ultimate reality” (WND-1, p. 4) – in other words,

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the mystic, inscrutable nature of life, of our hearts and minds, that manifests as Buddhahood. In this way, he indicates that Myoho-enge-kyo is the mystic law of life, of the inner realm of our beings. On that basis, he asserts that when we chant daimoku with deep faith in the Mystic Law, we can attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.

The Lotus Sutra is the king of sutras, the direct path to enlightenment, for it explains that the entity of our life [lit. our mind or inner reality], which manifests either good or evil at each moment, is in fact the entity of the Mystic Law. If you chant Myoho-enge-kyo with deep faith in this principle, you are certain to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. (WND-1, p. 4)

A Teaching of Genuine Humanism

Next, I wish to touch on three aspects in which the Daishonin's teaching of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime is significant.

First, I would like to point out that by opening the way for all people to attain enlightenment in this lifetime through chanting daimoku, the Daishonin established for the first time a teaching of genuine humanism. Opening the way to enlightenment for all people could be called the prerequisite for a genuinely humanistic religion. This, I believe, is the religious or philosophical significance of the principle of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime.

Nichiren Daishonin had deep insight into the potential of human beings, discerning that they could free themselves from a cycle of negative transmigration and realize a positive one through profound inner change. And he set forth a practical way to enable them to achieve this. Consequently, there is no other teaching that can more deservedly be called humanistic than the Daishonin's Buddhism.

In "The True Aspect of All Phenomena," the Daishonin writes: "Though it is thought that Shakyamuni Buddha possesses the three virtues of sovereign, teacher and parent for the sake of all of us living beings, that is not so. On the contrary, it is common mortals who endow him with the three virtues." (WND-1, p. 384) This passage describes a shift from an "authoritarian religion" to a "humanistic, people-centered religion".⁵ The Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin, who established the

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this passage, see "Lectures on 'The Opening of the Eyes,'" Instalment No. 2, *SGI Newsletter* No. 6122.

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concrete means for achieving enlightenment in this lifetime, makes this shift possible.

When the Soka Gakkai's first president Tsunesaburo Makiguchi formulated his theory of value, he did not include "holiness" or "sacredness," which a number of other thinkers before him had considered to constitute a religious value. For Mr Makiguchi, "great good" was deemed the highest value that a religion should strive to realize. "Great good" here refers to the highest value that can be actualised by human beings and society. In Mr Makiguchi's theory of value, we find the view that a true religion is one that serves the welfare of human beings. The opening of the path to attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime by the Daishonin signifies the establishment of a religion that contributes to the happiness of human beings in the greatest possible way.

The Significance of Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime from the Individual Perspective

Second, by opening the path to attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime, the Daishonin made it possible for us to lead lives based on the infinite power of the Mystic Law – that is, to lead solid and secure lives that give us the courage and confidence to be self-reliant. This is the significance of the principle of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime in terms of our individual lives.

In the Daishonin's Buddhism, attaining enlightenment is not about embarking on some inconceivably long journey to become a resplendent godlike Buddha; it is about accomplishing a transformation in the depths of one's being. This revolutionary view of realizing enlightenment fundamentally changed the whole meaning of Buddhist practice as it was traditionally viewed.

In other words, it is not a matter of practising in order to scale the highest summit of enlightenment at some point in the distant future. Rather, it is a constant, moment-to-moment, inner struggle between the opposing courses of revealing our innate Dharma nature or allowing ourselves to be ruled by our fundamental darkness and delusion. This unceasing effort to polish our lives is the heart and essence of Buddhist practice.

Only by winning over our inner darkness and negativity can we be victorious in life and reveal our full potential. The same is true if we

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wish to savour true fulfilment in our lives. In that sense, I want to emphasise that the practice set forth in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in order to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime is the only means to conquer the darkness and delusion that are the fundamental source of human evil, and cultivate true independence, construct a solid self, and achieve a state of life of boundless happiness and peace of mind. Attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime thus becomes the fundamental purpose of an individual's life.

The Significance of Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime from the Collective Perspective

The Lotus Sutra is the king of sutras, the direct path to enlightenment, for it explains that the entity of our life, which manifests either good or evil at each moment, is in fact the entity of the Mystic Law.

If you chant Myoho-enge-kyo with deep faith in this principle, you are certain to attain Buddhahood in this lifetime. That is why the sutra states, "After I have passed into extinction, [one] should accept and uphold this sutra. Such a person assuredly and without doubt will attain the Buddha way." Never doubt in the slightest. (WND-1, p. 4)

Third, I assert that the principle of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime is significant in that it offers a source of hope to humanity and opens the way to transforming the destiny of all humankind. This is its collective or universal significance.

Many leading thinkers and intellectuals share a recognition that modern civilisation has lost sight of the human being and become deadlocked on many fronts. There is no denying that the inner spiritual realm has been neglected and all too many people are obsessed with seeking comfort, ease and pleasure in external things – things outside of themselves.

Without surmounting the fundamental human delusions of greed, anger and foolishness, we will not be able to solve the many problems that the world faces today, including the preoccupation with economic growth, politics that are devoid of humanism, international conflicts,

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warfare, growing disparity between rich and poor, and rampant discrimination. One conclusion from my dialogues with leading thinkers is that the only real solution is for human beings themselves to change, that the sole key lies in “human revolution”.

It could further be said that without establishing a correct view of life and death, it is impossible to conquer inner darkness and delusion at the most fundamental level. Without the view of life and death of the Middle Way – a view that rejects the extremes of the doctrine of annihilation and the doctrine of eternity⁶ – true and lasting happiness cannot be achieved.

The only way for human beings to change is for them to conquer their inner darkness and rediscover the eternal sanctity and dignity within their own lives. Cultivating the noble spirit with which all people are originally endowed will directly lead to a change in the destiny of humankind. With that conviction, we of the SGI have been working to build a network of good all around the globe.

In the course of these lectures, I would like to comment further on the growing expectations and praise for this unprecedented endeavour we are undertaking.

At the end of this writing, the Daishonin says: “Never doubt in the slightest.” (WND-1, p. 4) He is telling us that we should have complete confidence in our attainment of Buddhahood in this lifetime. His words also contain the warning that unless we maintain strong faith, we can easily lose sight of the fundamental goal of enlightenment and fall into the depths of darkness and delusion.

All people at the core of their lives yearn to attain enlightenment. But there is no teaching more difficult to believe or understand than the teaching that we can definitely attain Buddhahood in our present existence. We of the SGI have taken on the challenge of practising this profound teaching and sharing it widely with others in Japan and throughout the globe.

In today’s world, we, the courageous Bodhisattvas of the Earth, are showing great actual proof of humankind’s potential to transform its

⁶ The doctrine of annihilation is the mistaken attachment to the notion that life begins with birth and ends with death. According to this view, there is only the present life, and death represents a complete cessation of existence both physical and spiritual. The doctrine of eternity is also the mistaken notion that what exists here in the present is permanent and unchanging. This view rejects causality, so that neither practising good nor practising evil produces any change in one’s condition.

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destiny. Proud of our noble mission, let us continue to joyously spread the Daishonin's Buddhism – with its teaching of attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime that enables all people to achieve unsurpassed happiness – and lead the most valuable and fulfilling lives possible.