

11

Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images



THE Buddha possesses thirty-two features. All of them represent the physical aspect. Thirty-one of them, from the lowest, the markings of the thousand-spoked wheel on the sole of each foot, up to the unseen crown of his head,¹ belong to the category of visible and non-coextensive physical attributes.² They can therefore be depicted in tangible form, such as pictures or statues. The remaining feature, the pure and far-reaching voice, belongs to the category of invisible and coextensive physical attributes.³ It therefore cannot be captured either in a painting or in a wooden image.

Since the Buddha's passing, two kinds of images, wooden and painted, have been made of him. They possess thirty-one features but lack the pure and far-reaching voice. Therefore, they are not equal to the Buddha. They are also devoid of the spiritual aspect. The Buddha in the flesh is as different from a wooden or painted image as the heavens are from the earth, or clouds from mud. Why, then, does *The Epilogue to the Mahaparinirvana Sutra* state that both the living Buddha and a wooden or painted image made of him after his passing bestow equal benefit? Indeed, the Jeweled Necklace Sutra absolutely declares that a wooden or painted image is inferior to the living Buddha.

When one places a sutra in front of a wooden or painted image of the Buddha, the image becomes endowed with all thirty-two features. Yet even though it has the thirty-two features, without the spiritual aspect it is in no way equal to a Buddha, for even some human and heavenly beings possess the thirty-two features. When the Five Precepts Sutra is placed before a wooden or painted image having thirty-one features, the image becomes equal to a wheel-turning king. When the discourse on the ten good precepts is placed before it, the image becomes equal to the lord Shakra. When the discourse on emancipation from the world of desire is placed before it, the image becomes equal to the king Brahma. But in none of these cases does it in any way become equal to a Buddha.

When an Agama sutra is placed in front of a wooden or painted image, the image becomes equal to a voice-hearer. When one of the common teachings on wisdom,⁴ which were preached at the various assemblies held during the Correct and Equal and the Wisdom periods, is placed before it, the image becomes equal to a cause-awakened one. When one of the specific or perfect teachings preached during the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, or Wisdom period is placed before it, the image becomes equal to a

bodhisattva. Yet in none of these cases, either, does it in any way become equal to a Buddha. Buddha Eye's⁵ mudra and Mahavairochana's mantra described in the Mahavairochana, Diamond Crown, and Susiddhikara sutras are useless, for although their names represent the Buddha eye and the great sun, in reality they do not possess these qualities. Similarly, even the Buddha who appears in the Flower Garland Sutra is not the Buddha of the perfect teaching, though his name [Vairochana] suggests that he is.⁶

When the Lotus Sutra is placed before an image possessing thirty-one features, the image never fails to become the Buddha of the pure and perfect teaching. It is for this reason that the Universal Worthy Sutra, referring to the Buddha of the Lotus Sutra, explains, "A Buddha's three types of bodies are born from this correct and equal sutra." The correct and equal sutra in this phrase does not mean the sutras of the Correct and Equal period; it indicates the Lotus Sutra. The Universal Worthy Sutra also states, "This great vehicle sutra is the eye of the Buddhas. It is through this sutra that the Buddhas are able to acquire the five types of vision."⁷

The written words of the Lotus Sutra express in visible and non-coextensive form the Buddha's pure and far-reaching voice, which is itself invisible and coextensive, and so possess the two physical aspects of color and form. The Buddha's pure and far-reaching voice, which once vanished, has reappeared in the visible form of written words to benefit the people.

A person gives utterance to speech on two occasions: On one occasion, it is to tell other people what one does not oneself believe in an effort to deceive them. That person's voice in this case "accords with others' minds." On the other, it is to voice what one truly has in mind. Thus one's thoughts

are expressed in one's voice. The mind represents the spiritual aspect, and the voice, the physical aspect. The spiritual aspect manifests itself in the physical. A person can know another's mind by listening to the voice. This is because the physical aspect reveals the spiritual aspect. The physical and spiritual, which are one in essence, manifest themselves as two distinct aspects; thus the Buddha's mind found expression as the written words of the Lotus Sutra. These written words are the Buddha's mind in a different form. Therefore, those who read the Lotus Sutra must not regard it as consisting of mere written words, for those words are in themselves the Buddha's mind.

For this reason, T'ien-t'ai in his commentary states: "When the Buddha begins preaching after repeated entreaties from his listeners, he expounds the heart of his teaching. The heart of his teaching is the Buddha's mind, and the Buddha's mind is itself the Buddha's wisdom. The Buddha's wisdom is extremely profound. Therefore, the Buddha refuses three times to proceed with his preaching, and his listeners entreat him four times to continue to preach. The preaching of the Lotus Sutra was accompanied by such difficulties. Compared to the Lotus Sutra, the preaching of the other sutras was an easy matter."⁸ In this commentary, T'ien-t'ai uses the term "Buddha's mind" to indicate that the sutra, itself a physical entity, actually embodies the Buddha's spiritual aspect.

Because the Lotus Sutra manifests the Buddha's spiritual aspect, when one embodies that spiritual aspect in a wooden or painted image possessing thirty-one features, the image in its entirety becomes the living Buddha. This is what is meant by the enlightenment of plants.

It is for this reason that T'ien-t'ai states, "All things having color or fragrance are manifestations of the Middle

Way.”⁹ Commenting on this, Miao-lo adds: “However, although people may admit that all things having color or fragrance are manifestations of the Middle Way, they are nevertheless shocked and harbor doubts when they hear for the first time the doctrine that insentient beings possess the Buddha nature.”¹⁰ Ch’eng-kuan of the Flower Garland school stole T’ien-t’ai’s doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, using it to interpret the Flower Garland Sutra. Then he wrote: “Both the Lotus and Flower Garland sutras reveal the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. The Flower Garland Sutra, however, is the teaching of enlightenment for people of the sudden teaching, because it was preached earlier, while the Lotus Sutra is the teaching of enlightenment for people of the gradual teaching, because it was preached later. The Flower Garland Sutra is the root, because it preceded all the other sutras. The Lotus Sutra consists of nothing but branches and leaves.”¹¹ He puffed himself up like a mountain, thinking that he alone had mastered the true teaching. In reality, however, he did not know about the enlightenment of plants, the heart of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. Miao-lo ridiculed the ignorance Ch’eng-kuan showed in the above-quoted statement.

Our contemporary scholars of the Tendai school think that they alone have mastered the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. Yet they equate the Lotus Sutra with the Flower Garland Sutra or with the Mahavairocana Sutra. Their arguments do not go beyond even Ch’eng-kuan’s views but remain on the same level as those of Shan-wu-wei and Pu-k’ung. In the final analysis, when the eye-opening ceremony¹² for a newly made wooden or painted image is conducted by True Word priests, the image becomes not a true Buddha but

a Buddha of the provisional teachings. It does not even become a Buddha of the provisional teachings. Even though it may resemble the Buddha in appearance, in reality it remains the same insentient plant from which it originated. Moreover, it does not even remain an insentient plant; it becomes a devil or a demon. This is because the erroneous doctrine of the True Word priests, expressed in mudras and mantras, becomes the mind of the wooden or painted image. This is like those instances in which the mind causes a person to alter and turn into a rock, as happened with Uluka or Kapila.

Unless one who has grasped the essence of the Lotus Sutra conducts the eye-opening ceremony for a wooden or painted image, it will be as if a masterless house were to be occupied by a thief, or as if, upon death, a demon were to enter one’s body. When, in present-day Japan, eye-opening ceremonies for the Buddha images are conducted according to the True Word rite, demons occupy them and deprive people of their lives, for a demon is also known as a robber of life. Moreover, devils enter those images and deprive people of benefits; another name for a devil is a robber of benefit. Because the people worship demons, they will bring the country to ruin in their present lifetime, and because they revere devils, they will fall into the hell of incessant suffering in the next.

When the spirit departs from the body after death, a demon may enter in its place and destroy one’s descendants. This is what is meant by a hungry demon that devours even itself. However, if a wise person extols the Lotus Sutra and inspirits the dead person’s remains, then, although the deceased’s body remains human, that person’s mind will become the Dharma body. This accords with the doctrine that one can in one’s present form attain the stage where one perceives the non-

birth and non-extinction of the phenomenal world. A wise person who has mastered the perfect teaching of the sutras of the Flower Garland, Correct and Equal, or Wisdom period can bring a dead person's remains into the stage of realizing the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena. This is what the Nirvana Sutra means when it states, "Although his body remains human, his mind will become equal to that of the Buddha." Chunda set an example of attaining in his present body the realization of the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena.

If a wise person enlightened to the Lotus Sutra conducts a service for a deceased person, the deceased's body, just as it is, will become the Dharma body. This is what the phrase "in one's present form" means. Then the wise person will retrieve the departed spirit, bring it back into the remains of the deceased, and transform it into the Buddha's mind. This is what the phrase "attaining Buddhahood" indicates. The words "in one's present form" repre-

sent the physical aspect, and "attaining Buddhahood," the spiritual. The deceased person's physical and spiritual aspects will be transformed into the mystic reality and mystic wisdom of beginningless time. This is attaining Buddhahood in one's present form.

Thus the Lotus Sutra states, "This reality [of all phenomena] consists of the appearance (the body of the dead person), nature (the mind), entity (the true entity of body and mind) . . ." ¹³ It also reads, "He profoundly understands the signs of guilt and good fortune / and illuminates the ten directions everywhere. / His subtle, wonderful pure Dharma body / is endowed with the thirty-two features." ¹⁴ In this last quotation, the first two lines indicate the realization of the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena, and the latter two, the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form. The model of the latter is the dragon king's daughter, while that of the former is Chunda.



Background

This letter is thought to have been written in the first year of Bun'ei (1264), while Nichiren Daishonin was living in Kamakura. But the recipient of the letter is not named. In this letter, the Daishonin deals with the concept of the enlightenment of insentient beings, first in terms of Buddha images and then in terms of the deceased.

The letter begins with reference to the thirty-two features that the Buddha is said to possess. They represent the Buddha's capacity, virtues, abilities, and so forth. Of the thirty-two features, thirty-one can be depicted in pictures or statues; only the Buddha's pure and far-reaching voice cannot.

Next, Nichiren Daishonin compares a wooden or painted image to the living Buddha. Wooden and painted images of the Buddha are inferior to the living Buddha because they lack not only the feature of the pure and far-reaching voice but also the Buddha's mind, that is, his spiritual aspect. The pure and far-reaching voice is the manifestation of the Buddha's mind. The Buddha's compassion to save the people manifests itself in his voice, that is, in his teachings. Thus, when a sutra is placed before a Buddha image (that is, used to "open the eyes" of the image or consecrate it), it is the same as if it possessed the pure and far-reaching

voice. This is because a sutra embodies the Buddha's teachings conveyed by his voice.

However, the Daishonin goes on to explain that the kind of sutra used to consecrate an image will determine the nature of the spiritual aspect that the image manifests. He concludes that, since the Lotus Sutra embodies the Buddha's true spiritual aspect, when the Lotus Sutra is used to "open the eyes" of a Buddha image, that image will become equal to the living Buddha. This accords with the principle of the attainment of Buddhahood by plants, "plants" here representing all insentient life.

This concept of the enlightenment of plants in turn derives from the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which teaches that all life—insentient and sentient—possesses the Buddha nature.

Subsequently the Daishonin sharply attacks the use of True Word rituals to open the eyes of Buddha images. He points out that using distorted teachings such as those of the True Word to consecrate images will cause demons or devils to occupy them—that is, it will bring forth not the Buddhahood but the diabolical nature inherent in the insentient life of the image, causing

suffering for individual believers and disaster for the land in which they live.

In the final section, the Daishonin touches on the subject of prayers for the deceased. The idea of the spirit departing from the dead person's body and a demon taking its place actually stems from popular folk belief. The Daishonin employs it to make readily understandable to his contemporaries the concept that the religious conduct of the living has an influence on the lives of those who have passed away. In this context, he explains two levels of enlightenment: the realization of the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena and the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form. Both can of course be achieved while one is alive, but since the subject of this letter is the enlightenment of insentient beings, the Daishonin explains both in terms of the deceased—death being life's insentient phase—as represented by the dead person's remains. In the text, "a wise person [who simply] extols the Lotus Sutra" is anyone but "a wise person enlightened to the Lotus Sutra" that specifically indicates Nichiren Daishonin. The Daishonin embodied his perfect enlightenment to the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in the form of the Gohonzon.

Notes

1. A Buddha is said to possess the markings of a wheel of the Law on the sole of each foot. The "unseen crown of his head" is also often cited as a protuberant knot of flesh resembling a topknot on the crown of the Buddha's head. The top of the Buddha's head is said to be invisible, indicating his inconceivably great wisdom, the boundlessness of his enlightened life, and so forth.

2. The category of visible and non-coextensive physical attributes is the first of the three categories of physical attributes enumerated in *The Heart of the Abhidharma*. "Non-coextensive" here means that the physical attributes in this category cannot simultaneously occupy the same space. The

second category is that of invisible and non-coextensive physical attributes, and the third, invisible and coextensive physical attributes. Mention of this third category immediately follows in the text.

3. According to *The Dharma Analysis Treasury*, all sounds and voices including the Buddha's pure and far-reaching voice fall under the category of invisible and non-coextensive physical attributes. However, the Daishonin assigns the Buddha's pure and far-reaching voice to the category of invisible and coextensive physical attributes, probably to emphasize that it embodies the Buddha's teaching.

4. "The common teachings on wisdom"

refers to the teachings on wisdom which were expounded in common for both voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones of the two vehicles and for novice bodhisattvas. Wisdom here means the wisdom that illuminates all phenomena and their essential truth. In terms of the four teachings of doctrine set forth by T'ien-t'ai, the common teachings on wisdom correspond to the connecting teaching.

5. Buddha Eye is one of the Buddhas who appear in the esoteric teachings. Also called Buddha Mother, this Buddha is said to give birth to all other Buddhas.

6. The Buddha of the perfect teaching refers to the Buddha expounded in the Lotus Sutra. Vairochana, the Buddha of the Flower Garland Sutra, means "coming from or belonging to the sun."

7. The Universal Worthy Sutra actually reads, "This correct and equal sutra is the eye of the Buddhas." "This great vehicle sutra" also means the Lotus Sutra.

8. *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.*

9. *Great Concentration and Insight.*

10. *The Annotations on "Great Concentration and Insight."*

11. This assertion appears in Ch'eng-kuan's *Meaning of the Flower Garland Sutra Based on An Earlier Commentary*, though the wording differs slightly. Ch'eng-kuan asserted that, although both the Lotus Sutra and the Flower Garland Sutra lead to enlightenment, the Buddha taught the former as the conclusion of a gradual process of instruction, but expounded the latter to people of superior capacity directly from his own enlightenment without giving any prior instruction. For this reason, he declared the Flower Garland Sutra superior to the Lotus Sutra.

12. Ceremony for consecrating a newly made Buddha image. By means of this ceremony, it is said, the image is endowed with the Buddha's spiritual property, thus making it an object of devotion.

13. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.

14. *Ibid.*, chap. 12.