

The True Aspect of All Phenomena

Written by Nichiren



QUESTION: The “Expedient Means” chapter in the first volume of the Lotus Sutra states, “The true aspect of all phenomena [can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature . . . and] their consistency from beginning to end.” What does this passage mean?

Answer: 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-*renge-kyo*. If there is an environment, living beings are bound to dwell there. A commentary states, “Living beings and their environments always manifest Myoho-*renge-kyo*.”¹ Another says: “The true aspect invariably manifests in all phenomena, and all phenomena invariably manifest in the ten factors. The ten factors invariably manifest in the Ten Worlds, and the Ten Worlds invariably manifest in life and its environment.”² And “Both the beings and the environment of the Avichi hell exist entirely within the life of the highest sage [Buddha], and what is more, the life and the environment of Vairochana [Buddha] never transcend the lives of common mortals.”³ These explanations are precise and clear. Who could have doubts? Thus, the entire realm of phenomena is no different than the five characters of Myoho-*renge-kyo*.

Even the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, in performing the function of the benefit of the five characters of Myoho-*renge-kyo*, manifested themselves as the two Buddhas, and seated together in the treasure tower, nodded in mutual agreement.

No one but Nichiren has ever revealed teachings like these. Though T’ien-t’ai, Miao-lo, and Dengyo knew about them in their hearts, they never put them into words. They went about their lives keeping this knowledge to themselves. And there was good reason for this. The Buddha had not entrusted them with the task, the time had not yet come, and they had not been the Buddha’s disciples from the distant past. Only Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, and the other foremost leaders and guiding teachers among the Bodhisattvas of the Earth can not only appear during the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law and spread the five characters of Myoho-*renge-kyo*, the essence of all phenomena, but also give concrete form to the ceremony of the two Buddhas seated side by side in the treasure tower. The reason is that what they are to spread and give concrete form to is none other than the teaching of the actual three thousand realms in a single moment of life in the “Life Span” chapter of the essential teaching.

Therefore, the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, are Buddhas who are functions [of Myohorenge-kyo]. It is Myohorenge-kyo that is the true Buddha.⁴ This is what is described in the sutra as “the Thus Come One’s secret and his transcendental powers.”⁵ The “Thus Come One’s secret” refers to the entity of the Buddha’s three bodies, and it refers to the true Buddha. “His transcendental powers” refers to the functions of the three bodies, and it refers to provisional Buddhas. A common mortal is an entity of the three bodies, and a true Buddha. A Buddha is a function of the three bodies, and a provisional Buddha. In that case, 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.

The “Thus Come One” is explained clearly in T’ien-t’ai’s commentary as follows: “The Thus Come One is a general designation for the Buddhas of the ten directions and the three existences, for the two Buddhas, the three Buddhas,⁶ the true Buddha, and provisional Buddhas.”⁷ The “true Buddha” here means common mortals, whereas “provisional Buddhas” means Buddhas. However, because of the difference between ordinary people and Buddhas that stems from the disparity between delusion and enlightenment, ordinary people are unaware that they are endowed with both the entity and the functions of the three bodies.

“All phenomena” in the sutra refers to the Ten Worlds, and the “true aspect,” to what they actually are. The “true aspect” is another name for Myohorenge-kyo; hence all phenomena are Myohorenge-kyo. Hell’s displaying the form of hell is its true aspect. When hell changes into the realm of hungry spirits, that is no

longer the true form of hell. A Buddha displays the form of a Buddha, and a common mortal, that of a common mortal. The entities of all phenomena are entities of Myohorenge-kyo. That is the meaning of “the true aspect of all phenomena.” T’ien-t’ai states that the profound principle of the true aspect is the originally inherent Myohorenge-kyo.⁸ This interpretation identifies the phrase “true aspect” with the theoretical teaching and “the originally inherent Myohorenge-kyo” with the essential teaching. You should ponder this interpretation deep in your heart.

Although not worthy of the honor, I, Nichiren, was nevertheless the first to spread the Mystic Law entrusted to Bodhisattva Superior Practices for propagation in the Latter Day of the Law. I was also the first, though only Bodhisattva Superior Practices is so empowered, to inscribe [the object of devotion as] the embodiment of Shakyamuni Buddha from the remote past as revealed in the “Life Span” chapter of the essential teaching, of Many Treasures Buddha who appeared when the “Treasure Tower” chapter of the theoretical teaching was preached, and of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who arrived with the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter. Though people may hate me, they cannot possibly alter the fact of my enlightenment.

Therefore, to have exiled me, Nichiren, to this remote island is, I believe, an offense that can never be expiated, even with the passing of countless kalpas. A passage from the “Simile and Parable” chapter reads, “If I were to describe the punishments [that fall on persons who slander this sutra], I could exhaust a kalpa and never come to the end.” On the other hand, not even the wisdom of the Buddha can fathom the blessings that one will obtain by giving alms to Nichiren and by becoming his disciple and lay supporter. The sutra reads, “[The benefits he gains thereby

will be such that] even the Buddha wisdom could never finish calculating their extent.”⁹

Nichiren alone took the lead in carrying out the task of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. He may even be one of them. If Nichiren is to be counted among the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, then so must his disciples and lay supporters. The sutra states: “If one [of these good men or good women in the time after I have passed into extinction] is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One’s work.”¹⁰ Who else but us can this possibly refer to?

When praised highly by others, one feels that there is no hardship one cannot bear. Such is the courage that springs from words of praise. The votaries born in the Latter Day of the Law who propagate the Lotus Sutra will encounter the three types of enemies, who will cause them to be exiled and even condemn them to death. Yet Shakyamuni Buddha will enfold in his robe those who nonetheless persevere in propagating. Heavenly gods will make them offerings, support them with their shoulders, and carry them on their backs. They possess great roots of goodness and deserve to be great leaders for all living beings. Thus extolled by Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ten directions, the seven reigns of the heavenly deities and the five reigns of the earthly deities, the Mother of Demon Children and the ten demon daughters, the four heavenly kings, Brahma, Shakra, King Yama, the gods of the waters and winds, the gods of the seas and mountains, the Thus Come One Mahavairochana, the bodhisattvas Universal Worthy and Manjushri, and the gods of the sun and

moon—thus praised by all these honored ones, I, Nichiren, have been able to endure countless harsh trials. When praised, one does not consider one’s personal risk, and when criticized, one can recklessly cause one’s own ruin. Such is the way of common mortals.

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.”¹¹ There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-enge-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women. Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the daimoku. At first only Nichiren chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, but then two, three, and a hundred followed, chanting and teaching others. Propagation will unfold this way in the future as well. Does this not signify “emerging from the earth”? At the time when the Law has spread far and wide, the entire Japanese nation will chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, as surely as an arrow aimed at the earth cannot miss the target.

But now you must build your reputation on the Lotus Sutra and give yourself up to it. At the Ceremony in the Air, when the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions gathered together, the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Many Treasures, nodded in agreement. What they decided on was nothing other than the perpetuation of the Law throughout the Latter Day. Many Treasures Buddha had offered Shakyamuni Buddha a place beside him, and when they unfurled the ban-

ner of Myoho-enge-kyo, the two leaders of the entire multitude made their decision together. Could there have been anything false in their decision? Their ultimate purpose in meeting was to provide a way for all of us living beings to attain Buddhahood.

Although I was not at that ceremony, on looking at the sutra, this is crystal-clear. On the other hand, I may have been at the ceremony, but since I am a common mortal, it is beyond my power to know the past. There is no doubt, however, that in my present life I am the votary of the Lotus Sutra, and that in the future I will therefore reach the seat of enlightenment without fail. Judging the past from this point of view, I must have been at the Ceremony in the Air. There can be no discontinuity between the three existences of past, present, and future.

Because I view things this way, I feel immeasurable delight even though I am now an exile. Joy as well as sorrow moves us to tears. Tears express our feelings for both blessings and misfortune. The one thousand arhats shed tears in memory of the Buddha, and in tears Bodhisattva Manjushri chanted Myoho-enge-kyo. From among those one thousand arhats, the Venerable Ananda replied in tears, "This is what I heard."¹² The tears of all the others fell, wetting their inkstones, and they wrote Myoho-enge-kyo, followed by "This is what I heard." I, Nichiren, now feel exactly as they did. I am now in exile because I spread the five and seven characters of Myoho-enge-kyo. I spread this teaching because "This is what I heard": Shakyamuni Buddha and Many Treasures Buddha left Myoho-enge-kyo for the future and for all living beings in the country of Japan.

I cannot hold back my tears when I think of the great persecution confronting me now, or when I think of the joy of attaining Buddhahood in the

future. Birds and crickets cry, but never shed tears. I, Nichiren, do not cry, but my tears flow ceaselessly. I shed my tears not for worldly affairs but solely for the sake of the Lotus Sutra. So, indeed, they must be tears of amrita. The Nirvana Sutra states that, while the tears one has shed in past existences at the death of one's parents, brothers, sisters, wives, children, and other relatives surpass the quantity of water in the four great seas, one weeps not a drop for the Buddha's teachings. One becomes a votary of the Lotus Sutra by virtue of one's practice in past existences. It is karmic relationships that determine which among the many trees are made into images of the Buddha. It is also because of karma that some become statues of Buddhas of the provisional teachings.

In this letter, I have written my most important teachings. Grasp their meaning firmly, and make them a part of your life. Believe in the Gohonzon, the supreme object of devotion in all of Jambudvīpa. Be sure to strengthen your faith, and receive the protection of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions. Exert yourself in the two ways of practice and study. Without practice and study, there can be no Buddhism. You must not only persevere yourself; you must also teach others. Both practice and study arise from faith. Teach others to the best of your ability, even if it is only a single sentence or phrase. Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The seventeenth day of the fifth
month

POSTSCRIPT:

I wrote before about the doctrines that have been handed down to me. Those I have revealed to you in this particular

letter are very important. Is there not a mystic bond between us? Are you not the embodiment of one of the four bodhisattvas, including Superior Practices, who led the Bodhisattvas of the Earth equal in number to the sands of the sixty thousand Ganges Rivers? There must be some profound reason for our relationship. I have given you the teachings that concern myself. Nichiren may be one of the followers of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth who are equal in number to the sands of the sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, for I have been chanting Nam-myoho-

renge-kyo out of my desire to guide all the men and women in Japan. The sutra says, “[Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders.] The first was called Superior Practices . . . These four bodhisattvas were the foremost leaders and guiding teachers.”¹³ A bond of karma from the past has led you to become my disciple. By all means keep this letter to yourself. I have herein committed to writing the doctrines of my own enlightenment. I will end here.

Reply to Sairen-bo



Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to Sairen-bo Nichijo while at Ichinosawa on Sado Island in the fifth month of the tenth year of Bun'ei (1273). For some reason Sairen-bo was also in exile on Sado, where he had been converted by the Daishonin in the second month of 1272. A former Tendai priest, he already knew something about “the true aspect of all phenomena”; it was a fundamental concept in the Tendai school of Buddhism. He could not, however, satisfactorily come to grips with this concept through T'ien-t'ai's theory alone, so he asked the Daishonin for an explanation. *The True Aspect of All Phenomena* is the Daishonin's reply.

Though comparatively short, this document elucidates two important elements of the Daishonin's Buddhism. It was completed a month after Nichiren Daishonin wrote *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, in which he explained the Gohonzon, the object of devotion that can lead all people in the Latter Day of the Law to enlightenment. *True Aspect of All Phenomena* begins with a passage from the “Expedient Means” chapter—the heart of

the theoretical teaching of the Lotus Sutra—that implies that no phenomenon is in any way different from the true aspect, or Myoho-renge-kyo. It also implies that all the innumerable forms and realities that exist, both concrete and abstract, are manifestations of Myoho-renge-kyo. The Daishonin then explains the essence of the Lotus Sutra, Myoho-renge-kyo, and its embodiment, the Gohonzon. This is the first element—the object of devotion in terms of the Law.

After clarifying the ultimate teaching of the Lotus Sutra, the Daishonin states that Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, will propagate that teaching, and that he himself is carrying out the mission entrusted to that bodhisattva. In light of his own behavior and his fulfillment of the predictions in the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren Daishonin suggests that he himself is Bodhisattva Superior Practices. A more profound interpretation, however, identifies him as the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, whose purpose was to establish the Gohonzon for the enlightenment of all people in the

Latter Day. Thus *True Aspect of All Phenomena* also explains the object of devotion in terms of the Person. This is the second element. Referring to both the Person and the Law, the Daishonin clarifies the fundamental object of devotion for the people of the Latter Day. He brings together the points he expounded in *The Opening of the Eyes* completed in 1272, which focuses on the second element, and in *The Object of Devotion for Observing the Mind*, which focuses on the first element.

The latter half of this letter explains to Sairen-bo that those who devote themselves to propagating the correct teaching in the same spirit as the Daishonin are themselves Bodhisattvas of the Earth. The Daishonin predicts that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo will spread widely in the future, and concludes by setting forth the key elements of Buddhist practice in the Latter Day of the Law—namely, faith, practice, and study.

Notes

1. *The Annotations on "The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra."*

2. *The Diamond Scalpel.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Here the entity of Myoho-renge-kyo is identified as the "true Buddha" and its function as a "provisional Buddha."

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 16.

6. The two Buddhas refer to a Buddha in his true, original status (the Dharma body) and a Buddha in the form in which he appears in response to the people's desires in order to save them (the manifested body). The three Buddhas indicate the three bodies of a Buddha—the Dharma

body, the reward body, and the manifested body.

7. *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra.*

8. This statement is attributed to T'ien-t'ai, but its source has not yet been satisfactorily identified.

9. Lotus Sutra, chap. 23.

10. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

11. *Ibid.*, chap. 15.

12. A phrase that opens many sutras. The "I" indicates the person who recites what the Buddha taught, so that it may be set down in the form of a sutra.

13. Lotus Sutra, chap. 15.