

The Essentials for Attaining Buddhahood



THE “Expedient Means” chapter in volume one of the Lotus Sutra states, “The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable.” A commentary says that the riverbed of reality is described as “infinitely profound” because it is boundless, and that the water of wisdom is described as “immeasurable” because it is hard to fathom.¹

Is not the meaning of the sutra and the commentary that the way to Buddhahood lies within the two elements of reality and wisdom? Reality means the true nature of all phenomena, and wisdom means the illuminating and manifesting of this true nature. Thus when the riverbed of reality is infinitely broad and deep, the water of wisdom will flow ceaselessly. When this reality and wisdom are fused, one attains Buddhahood in one’s present form.

The sutras expounded prior to the Lotus Sutra cannot lead to Buddhahood because they are provisional and expedient teachings that separate reality and wisdom. The Lotus Sutra, however, unites the two as a single entity. The sutra says that the Buddhas open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, show it, cause them to awaken to it, and induce them to enter its path. By realizing this Buddha wisdom, one attains Buddhahood.²

This inner enlightenment of the Buddha is far beyond the understanding of voice-hearers and pratyekabuddhas. This is why the “Expedient Means” chapter goes on to say, “Not one of the voice-hearers or pratyekabuddhas is able to comprehend it.” What then are these two elements of reality and wisdom? They are simply the five characters of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Shakyamuni Buddha called forth the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and entrusted to them these five characters that constitute the essence of the sutra. This is the teaching that was transferred to the bodhisattvas who had been the disciples of the Buddha since the remote past.

The Lotus Sutra states that Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the others will appear in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law to propagate the five characters, the embodiment of the two elements of reality and wisdom. The sutra makes this perfectly clear. Who could possibly dispute it? I, Nichiren, am neither Bodhisattva Superior Practices nor his envoy, but I precede them, spreading the five characters to prepare the way. Bodhisattva Superior Practices received the water of the wisdom of the Mystic Law from the Thus Come One Shakyamuni and causes it to flow into the wasteland of the people’s lives in the evil world

of the latter age. This is the function of wisdom. Shakyamuni Buddha transferred this teaching to Bodhisattva Superior Practices, and now Nichiren propagates it in Japan. With regard to the transfer of teachings, it is divided into two categories: general and specific. If you confuse the general with the specific even in the slightest,³ you will never be able to attain Buddhahood and will wander in suffering through endless transmigrations of births and deaths.

For example, the voice-hearers in Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime received the seeds of Buddhahood from Shakyamuni in the distant past when he was the sixteenth son of the Buddha Great Universal Wisdom Excellence. Therefore, they could not attain enlightenment by following Amida, Medicine Master, or any other Buddha. To illustrate, if a family member brings home water from the ocean, the entire family can use it. But were they to refuse even a single drop of that water and instead go looking for water from some other ocean, it would be terribly misguided and foolish. In the same way, to forget the original teacher who had brought one the water of wisdom from the great ocean of the Lotus Sutra and instead follow another would surely cause one to sink into the endless sufferings of birth and death.

One should abandon even one's teacher if he or she is misguided, though there will be cases where this is not necessary. One should decide according to the principles both of the world and of Buddhism. Priests in the Latter Day of the Law are ignorant of the principles of Buddhism and are conceited, so they despise the correct teacher and fawn on patrons. True priests are those who are honest and who desire little and yet know satisfaction. Volume one of *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra* states: "Those who have yet to attain the truth should

humble themselves before the highest principle, which is comparable to heaven, and feel abashed before all the sages. Then they will be monks with a sense of shame. When they manifest insight and wisdom, then they will be true monks."

The Nirvana Sutra states: "If even a good monk sees someone destroying the teaching and disregards him, failing to reproach him, to oust him, or to punish him for his offense, then you should realize that that monk is betraying the Buddha's teaching. But if he ousts the destroyer of the Law, reproaches him, or punishes him, then he is my disciple and a true voice-hearer." You should etch deeply in your mind the two words "see" and "disregard" in the phrase "sees someone destroying the teaching and disregards him, failing to reproach him." Both teacher and followers will surely fall into the hell of incessant suffering if they see enemies of the Lotus Sutra but disregard them and fail to reproach them. The Great Teacher Nan-yüeh says that they "will fall into hell along with those evil persons."⁴ To hope to attain Buddhahood without speaking out against slander is as futile as trying to find water in the midst of fire or fire in the midst of water. No matter how sincerely one believes in the Lotus Sutra, if one is guilty of failing to rebuke slander of the Law, one will surely fall into hell, just as a single crab leg will ruin a thousand pots of lacquer. This is the meaning of the passage in the sutra, "Because the poison has penetrated deeply and their minds no longer function as before."⁵

The sutra states, "Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers,"⁶ and "If one stays close to the teachers of the Law, one will speedily gain the bodhisattva way. By following and learning from these

teachers one will see Buddhas as numerous as Ganges sands.”⁷⁷ A commentary says, “Originally one followed this Buddha and for the first time conceived the desire to seek the way. And by following this Buddha again, one will reach the stage where there is no retrogression.”⁷⁸ Another commentary says, “In the beginning one followed this Buddha or bodhisattva and formed a bond with him, and so it will be through this Buddha or bodhisattva that one will attain one’s goal.”⁷⁹ Above all, be sure to follow your original teacher so that you are able to attain Buddhahood. Shakyamuni Buddha is the original teacher for all people, and moreover, he is endowed with the virtues of sovereign and par-

ent. Because I have expounded this teaching, I have been exiled and almost killed. As the saying goes, “Good advice grates on the ear.” But still I am not discouraged. The Lotus Sutra is like the seed, the Buddha like the sower, and the people like the field. If you deviate from these principles, not even I can save you in your next life.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The third day of the eighth month
in the second year of Kenji (1276),
cyclical sign *hinoe-ne*

To Soya



Background

This letter is addressed to Soya, a lay follower who lived in Soya Village in Shimosa Province. His full name and title were Soya Jiro Hyoe-no-jo Kyoshin, and he is thought to have been an officer of the high court of the Kamakura shogunate. He had converted to Nichiren Daishonin’s teachings around 1260 and became one of the leading believers in the area, together with Toki Jonin and Ota Jomyo.

In 1271, Soya became a lay priest and was given the Buddhist name Horen Nichirai by the Daishonin. Horen built two temples and lived at one of them until he died in 1291 at the age of sixty-eight.

In this letter, the Daishonin first quotes the “Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra and states, “The way to Buddhahood lies within the two elements of reality and wisdom.” Reality indicates the ultimate truth that the Law permeates all phenomena in the universe. Wisdom, on the other hand, means the ability to perceive and un-

derstand this truth. When this wisdom exists—when the “water of wisdom” fills the “riverbed of reality”—it is known as the fusion of reality and wisdom. This is enlightenment. In other words, one illuminates and manifests the Law in one’s own life.

The Daishonin stresses that Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is the Law that unites both reality and wisdom; it is the seed of Buddhahood for all people in the Latter Day. This Law is to be propagated by Bodhisattva Superior Practices at the beginning of the Latter Day. The Daishonin states that he is the first one to embark on this great mission, by which he is really indicating that he is the original teacher who will lead all people to enlightenment.

Next, he points out that any teacher or disciple who ignores those who commit slander of the Law will fall into hell. This amounts to a compassionate warning about the responsibility believers have to protect the Buddha’s teaching.

Notes

1. This commentary is based on passages from *The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra* and *The Annotations on "The Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra."*

2. The wording of the Japanese text has been expanded for clarity. In the "Expedient Means" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni reveals the "one great reason" why the Buddhas make their advent in the world. He says it is to enable all people to realize their inherent Buddha wisdom.

3. The general refers to an overall or surface view, and the specific, to a deeper, more sharply delineated view. In the "Entrustment" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni makes a general transfer of the sutra to all the bodhisattvas present, but in the "Supernatural Powers" chapter, he spe-

cifically transfers the essence of the sutra, or the Mystic Law, to Bodhisattva Superior Practices and the other Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

4. This phrase is found in a passage from *On the Peaceful Practices of the Lotus Sutra*, which reads: "If there should be a bodhisattva who protects evil persons and fails to chastise them . . . then, when his life comes to an end, he will fall into hell along with those evil persons."

5. Lotus Sutra, chap. 16.

6. *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

7. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.

8. *Profound Meaning.*

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