

The Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form



QUESTION: In Japan, there are the six schools, the seven schools, and the eight schools. Among these, which school teaches the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form?

Answer: According to the Great Teacher Dengyo, this doctrine is found only in the Lotus Sutra, while according to the Great Teacher Kobo, it is found only in the True Word teachings.

Question: What proof can you show to support this?

Answer: The Great Teacher Dengyo states in his *Outstanding Principles of the Lotus Sutra*: "You should understand that, among the sutras that the other schools rely upon, there are none that teach the doctrine of entering [Buddhahood] in one's present form. Although a few of them appear to teach this doctrine, they limit such attainment to those who have reached the eighth of the ten stages of development or higher. They do not acknowledge [the attainment of Buddhahood in] the form of an ordinary person. Only the Tendai Lotus school clearly teaches this doctrine of entering [Buddhahood] in one's present form."

Outstanding Principles also declares, "Neither teacher nor disciples need undergo countless kalpas of austere practice in order to attain Buddhahood.

Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can do so in their present form."

It also says, "You should understand that this passage¹ is inquiring whether there are any persons who have attained Buddhahood, and so intends to manifest the great power and authority of this sutra."

The purpose of these passages of commentary is to clarify that the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form is limited to the Lotus Sutra alone.

Question: What evidence can you show that would indicate the opinion of the Great Teacher Kobo?

Answer: In his *Comparison of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism*, the Great Teacher Kobo states, "*The Treatise on the Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* says: 'Only in the True Word teachings can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form, because these teachings expound the practice of samadhi meditation. No such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings.' I would like to point out that this treatise represents the secret storehouse, the heart and core, of all the thousand treatises written by the great sage Nagarjuna. In the passage just quoted, the phrase 'other types of teachings' refers to the various doctrines expounded by the body of beneficence and by the

various transformation bodies.² These are all doctrines of the exoteric teachings. But the words 'these teachings expounded the practice of samadhi meditation' refer to the teaching expounded by the body whose nature is the Dharma and to the samadhi practice carried out in the esoteric teachings of the True Word school. These are set forth in the hundred thousand verses of praise in the Diamond Crown Sutra and in other texts."

Question: The opinions put forward by these two great teachers are as incompatible as water and fire. Which one are we to believe?

Answer: These two great teachers were both outstanding sages. They went to China in the same year, and there both alike received instruction in the True Word esoteric teachings. The Great Teacher Dengyo had as his teacher of the two mandalas³ the Reverend Shun-hsiao. The Great Teacher Kobo had as his teacher of the two mandalas the Reverend Hui-kuo.

Both Shun-hsiao and Hui-kuo were disciples of Pu-k'ung. And the Tripitaka Master Pu-k'ung was sixth in a direct line of succession from the Thus Come One Mahavairochana.⁴ From the standpoint of both the transmission they had inherited and their own accomplishments, the great teachers Dengyo and Kobo were valued by the people of the time as though they were the sun and moon. They were looked up to as if they were the minister of the left and the minister of the right. For a person of shallow learning to try to decide what is right and what is wrong is difficult indeed. [Were I to do so,] I would surely get a bad reputation throughout the land and call down great difficulties upon myself. Nevertheless, I will attempt to examine their doctrines with a critical eye and clarify their truth or falsehood. [To that end, allow me to ask you something.]

Question: When the Great Teacher Kobo says that the doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form is found only in the True Word teachings, on what sutras or treatises is he relying?

Answer: The Great Teacher Kobo is relying on *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna.

Question: What proof do you have of this?

Answer: In his *Exoteric and Esoteric*, the Great Teacher Kobo cites the passage from *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* that reads, "Only in the True Word teachings [can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form] . . . No such exposition is to be found in the other types of teachings."

Question: Is there any sutra text to support this view?

Answer: In his *Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form*, the Great Teacher Kobo states: "The six great elements⁵ interpenetrate without obstruction and are always united. The four types of mandalas⁶ are not dissociated from one another. When the Buddha bestows the three mysteries and one responds with one's own three mysteries, Buddhahood will become manifest immediately. The aspect that is infinitely and mutually reflecting, like the jewels of Indra's net, is what is referred to as 'present form.' The Buddha is naturally endowed with all-embracing wisdom. More numerous than dust particles are those possessing the fundamental entity of the mind and its attendant mental functions. Each is endowed with the five kinds of wisdom, that is, boundless wisdom. When the power of the round-mirror wisdom⁷ functions perfectly, this is the true wisdom of awakening."

Question: I am somewhat in doubt as to what sutra passages this commentary is based on.

Answer: It is based on the Diamond Crown and Mahavairochana sutras.

Question: May I ask what sutra passages these are?

Answer: The Great Teacher Kobo cites as his proof this passage: "The person who practices this samadhi can actually attain the Buddha's enlightenment."⁸ He also cites this passage: "Without casting off this body, one can attain the supernatural power of being anywhere at will. Strolling in the realm of the Great Void, one masters the mystery of the body."⁹ And this passage: "I [Mahavairochana] realized that I am originally unborn."¹⁰ And this: "All phenomena are from the beginning unborn."¹¹

Question: I would like to make an objection. These passages are indeed from the Mahavairochana and Diamond Crown sutras. But one refers to the Thus Come One Mahavairochana's attainment of enlightenment; another asserts that the True Word practitioner can acquire the five transcendental powers¹² in his present body; and another describes how a bodhisattva in the ten stages of devotion may in his present body move on to the next stage, the stage of joy.¹³ But these still do not explain how in one's present life one can gain awareness of the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena, much less how one can attain Buddhahood in one's present form.

Moreover, *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment* [on which Kobo bases his argument] is not even a sutra. To base one's arguments on a treatise is to commit the error of turning one's back on what is superior and following what is inferior. It also violates the Buddha's teaching that one should "rely on the Law and not upon persons."¹⁴

[The hypothetical questioner retorts:] But the True Word priests of To-ji temple speak ill of Nichiren, saying, "You are only an ordinary man, whereas the Great Teacher Kobo was a bodhisattva who had reached the third

stage of development."¹⁵ You have not yet reached the state of realizing the non-birth and non-extinction of all phenomena in your present form, while the Great Teacher Kobo attained Buddhahood in his present form before the emperor's very eyes.¹⁶ And moreover, because you have not yet received any imperial edict [bestowing such a title upon you], you are not a Great Teacher.¹⁷ Therefore, you do not qualify as a teacher of the country of Japan. (This is their first point.)

"The Great Teacher Jikaku was a disciple of Dengyo and Gishin; the Great Teacher Chisho was a disciple of Gishin and Jikaku; and the Reverend Annen was a disciple of the Reverend An'ne. These three men have declared that the Lotus Tendai school represents the esoteric doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form, while the True Word school represents the esoteric doctrine of and practice for attaining Buddhahood in one's present form."¹⁸ The great teachers Dengyo and Kobo were neither of them foolish men. In addition, sages show no partiality, and thus the three teachers Jikaku, Chisho, and Annen, though they lived in the mountain temple founded by Dengyo, concurred in their teachings with the intent of Kobo of To-ji temple. Accordingly, in Japan for the past four hundred years or more, no one has disputed their doctrines. Now, what do you, an unworthy person, mean by coming forward with these evil doctrines of yours?" (This is their second point.)

Answer: If you simply speak rudely and adopt an abusive attitude, I will not discuss the matter with you. I will discuss it only if you sincerely desire to hear the truth. But with people like you, if one makes no reply, then you suppose one to be incapable of responding. Therefore, I will answer you. But rather than adopting an abusive attitude or using rude language, you had better

produce some clear passage from the sutras to support the assertions of the Great Teacher Kobo in whom you put such trust. In view of your abusive language and attitude, it would seem that in fact there is no sutra passage [substantiating the True Word doctrine] of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form.

As for the matter of Jikaku, Chisho, and Annen, the great teachers Jikaku and Chisho embraced the doctrines of the Great Teacher Dengyo while they were still in Japan. But after they journeyed to China, they adopted the doctrines of such teachers as Yüancheng and Fa-ch'üan, and in their hearts discarded the doctrines of the Great Teacher Dengyo. Thus, although they lived in the mountain temple founded by Dengyo, they proved unfaithful to his teaching.

Question: What led you to this conclusion?

Answer: The commentary by the Great Teacher Dengyo states, "You should understand that this passage is inquiring whether there are any persons who have attained Buddhahood, and so intends to manifest the great power and authority of this sutra." This section is related to a passage he quoted earlier in this commentary from the "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra [in which Manjushri says], "When I was in the ocean [I constantly expounded the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law alone]."¹⁹ The point of Dengyo's comment is that, no matter how much people may talk about attaining Buddhahood in one's present form, unless there are actual examples of persons who have done so, one should not heed their doctrine. It stands to reason that there can be no attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form unless it is based on the sutra of the single truth that is pure and perfect. And in the True Word scriptures such as the Mahavairochana and Diamond Crown sutras,

no examples of such persons are to be found.

Moreover, when we examine these True Word sutras, we see that they clearly belong to the categories of "combining, excluding, corresponding, and including." They do not teach that persons of the two vehicles can attain Buddhahood, nor do they even suggest anywhere that Shakyamuni actually attained Buddhahood in the inconceivably remote past.

Were Jikaku and Chisho perhaps deceived by the commentaries of the Tripitaka masters Shan-wu-wei, Chinkang-chih, and Pu-k'ung? Jikaku and Chisho appear to have been worthy men and sages, and yet they tended to honor what was distant and to despise what was close at hand.²⁰ They were bewitched by the fact that the three True Word sutras contained mudras and mantras, and completely forgot about the all-important path of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form.

Thus, although the persons on Mount Hiei today seem to be propounding the Lotus Sutra's doctrine of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form, they are in fact propounding the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form as put forward by the Great Teacher Jikaku, Annen, and the others. The attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form put forward by these persons is an attainment of Buddhahood in name but not in reality. The doctrines of such people are utterly at variance with those of the Great Teacher Dengyo.

According to the Great Teacher Dengyo, regardless of whether or not one has cast aside the body subject to transmigration through delusion with differences and limitations,²¹ the intent of the Lotus Sutra is that one attains Buddhahood in one's present form. But according to the doctrines of the Great Teacher Jikaku, if one casts aside the body subject to transmigration

through delusion with differences and limitations, it is thought that one has failed to attain Buddhahood in one's present form. People who propound such a view, however, have no understanding of what attaining Buddhahood in one's present form really means.

Question: The Great Teacher Jikaku knew the Great Teacher Dengyo personally, studied directly under him, and inherited his teachings. You, on the other hand, are separated [from Dengyo] by more than four hundred years. Is this not so?

Answer: Are those who have received the teachings directly from their teacher invariably free from error, while those who appear in later ages and examine and clarify these teachings are to be regarded as worthless? If so, then should we throw away the sutras and instead rely upon the four ranks of bodhisattvas? Should a person throw away the deed of transfer received from his father and mother and instead depend upon oral transmissions? Are the written commentaries of the Great Teacher Dengyo so much trash, and the oral traditions handed down from the Great Teacher Jikaku the only guide to truth?

In *Outstanding Principles*, the Great Teacher Dengyo lists ten points that are not found in any sutra [other than the Lotus]. As the eighth of these, it names the sutra's "superiority in leading people to attain Buddhahood in their present form." Later on, the commentary states: "You should understand that this passage is inquiring whether there are any persons who have attained Buddhahood, and so intends to manifest the great power and authority of this sutra. . . . You should understand that, among the sutras that the other schools rely upon, there are none that teach the doctrine of entering [Buddhahood] in one's present form."

Are we to turn our backs upon this passage of commentary and accept the attainment of Buddhahood in one's

present form that the Great Teacher Jikaku says derives from the esoteric doctrines and practices of the Mahavairochana Sutra?

Question: Among the commentaries of the Great Teacher Dengyo, are there any that do not accept the word "only" in *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment's* statement [that "only in the True Word teachings can one attain Buddhahood in one's present form"]?

Answer: *Outstanding Principles* states, "Neither teacher nor disciples need undergo countless kalpas of austere practice in order to attain Buddhahood. Through the power of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law they can do so in their present form." Thus, as you can see, this commentary does not accept the word "only" in *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment's* statement.

Question: If one rejects *Mind Aspiring for Enlightenment*, is not one then rejecting Nagarjuna?

Answer: It is more likely that the translator distorted the meaning according to his personal views.

Question: If you reject any translator, then should you not also reject Kumarajiva, the translator of the Lotus Sutra?

Answer: In the case of Kumarajiva, there is actual proof [attesting to the validity of his translations]. But no such proof exists in the case of Pu-k'ung.

Question: May I ask what proof you refer to?

Answer: I refer to the fact that Kumarajiva's tongue remained unburned.²² You should inquire about the details.

Question: Were Jikaku and Chisho ignorant of this matter?

Answer: These two men put their trust in the doctrines of the Tripitaka masters such as Shan-wu-wei. That is probably the reason they rejected the correct teachings of the Great Teacher Dengyo. They are examples of men who relied upon persons and turned their backs upon the Law.

Question: Up until now, there has never been anyone in Japan who disputed the teachings of Jikaku, Chisho, and Annen. How do you explain that?

Answer: Do the followers of the Great Teacher Kobo accept the teachings of Jikaku and Chisho? Do the followers of Jikaku and Chisho accept the teachings of the Great Teacher Kobo?

Question: Although the two teaching lines may differ somewhat, they are not, as your teachings would be, as incompatible as water and fire. And neither do they criticize others as slanderers of the correct teaching, do they?

Answer: But how exactly should we describe slander of the correct teaching? When the followers of non-Buddhist religions attack the Buddhist teachings, when followers of Hinayana attack Mahayana, when followers of provisional Mahayana look down on the teachings of true Mahayana, or when true Mahayana attempts to join forces with provisional Mahayana—when, in the final analysis, what is superior is designated inferior—such acts go against the Law and are therefore termed slander of the Law.

Where is there any scriptural evidence to support the Great Teacher Kobo's contention that the Mahavairochana Sutra is superior to the Lotus and Flower Garland sutras? The Lotus Sutra, on the other hand, contains passages clearly stating that it surpasses the Flower Garland and Mahavairochana sutras. This is the meaning, for example, of the statement that, among all the sutras the Buddha has preached, now preaches, and will preach, [the Lotus Sutra stands supreme].²³ Though Kobo is highly honored, he can hardly escape the grave charge of contradicting Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the emanation Buddhas of the ten directions.

Now, rather than appealing to the authorities in an attempt to brow-

beat me, why do you not simply produce some reliable passage of scriptural proof? You people look to human beings to be your allies. But I, Nichiren, make the gods of the sun and moon, Shakra and Brahma, my allies.

Gods of the sun and moon, open your heavenly eyes and look at what is happening! In the palaces of the sun and moon surely there are copies of the Lotus, Mahavairochana, and Flower Garland sutras. Compare them and see! Whose teachings deserve the higher place, those of Kobo, Jikaku, Chisho, and Annen, or those of Nichiren?

If in the doctrines I put forth there is even one part in a hundred or a thousand that accords with the truth, then how can you withhold your aid from me? And if the teachings of Kobo and the others are in fact false, then all the people in Japan will suffer the retribution of being born without eyes.²⁴ Will you not then regard them with great pity?

I, Nichiren, have twice been banished, and at one point was almost beheaded.²⁵ Those responsible were in effect attempting to cut off the heads of Shakyamuni, Many Treasures, and the Buddhas of the ten directions.

There is only one god of the sun and one god of the moon, but you are the eyes and the life of all the living beings of the four continents. It is written in the sutras that you gods of the sun and moon feed upon the Law of the Buddha and thereby increase your brilliance and power. Persons who destroy the flavor of the Buddhist Law are in effect depriving you gods of your strength. They are enemies of all living beings. How can you gods of the sun and moon go on shining upon the heads of such persons, giving them long life, and sustaining them with clothing and food?

When the disciples of those three great teachers [Kobo, Jikaku, and Chisho] slander the Lotus Sutra, is it sim-

ply because the minds of you gods of the sun and moon have entered into them and are causing them to commit slander? Or if that is not the case and I myself am at fault, then you, the god of the sun, must show me so! Let those disciples be summoned to debate with me, and if I am bested in the argument and yet refuse to change my views, then you gods may take away my life!

But that is not what happens. Instead, you unreasonably hand me over to my enemies, like a baby monkey entrusted to a dog, or a baby mouse presented to a cat, to be attacked and tortured without mercy, and yet mete out no punishment to my tormentors. That is what I cannot countenance! As far as you gods of the sun and moon are concerned, I suppose I am a deadly foe. When I find myself in the presence of

Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, I will surely press charges against you. At that time, you gods must bear me no resentment!

You gods of the sun and moon, as well as you gods of the earth and sea, hear my words! And you gods who protect and guard Japan, hear me! I have not the slightest ill intention. Therefore, you must hasten to respond in an appropriate manner. And if you delay until it is too late, you must bear me no grudge! Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The fourteenth day of the seventh month

Reply to Myoichi-nyo



Background

This letter was written at Minobu in the seventh month of the third year of Koan (1280) to a woman called Myoichi-nyo, about whom very little is known. One theory identifies her with the lay nun Myoichi, a relative of Nissho, one of the Daishonin's senior disciples. Employing a question-and-answer format, the Daishonin addresses the issue of whether it is the Lotus Sutra or the esoteric True Word teachings that represents the doctrine that enables one to attain Buddhahood in one's present form; hence the writing's title.

This letter reflects the Daishonin's conviction that explanations of doctrine should rest firmly on the authority of the Buddha's own words as recorded in the sutras and not on the arbitrary opinions of later teachers.

The Daishonin states that the True

Word priests heap abuse upon him for his criticism of their founder's doctrines, a reaction that, in itself, he says, betrays the weakness of their doctrinal position. The Daishonin also refers to the True Word priests' objection that Dengyo's own successors in the Tendai school, men such as Jikaku, Chisho, and Annen, held the True Word teachings to be superior to the Lotus Sutra. In response to this point the Daishonin asserts that the True Word sutras do not begin to approach the profundity of the Lotus Sutra, with its unique doctrines of the attainment of Buddhahood by people of the two vehicles and the revelation of the Buddha's original enlightenment in the distant past. Citing scriptural evidence, the Daishonin reiterates that only the Lotus Sutra enables all people to attain Buddhahood in their present form. To

claim otherwise, he asserts, is to hold a superior doctrine to be inferior, which amounts to slander of the Law. He

concludes by calling on all the deities to bear him witness and lend him their aid.

Notes

1. This refers to a passage of the "Devadatta" chapter, in which Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated asks Manjushri if, among those to whom he has taught the Lotus Sutra, there is anyone who has put the sutra into practice and gained Buddhahood. Manjushri replies that the dragon king's daughter has attained the stage of non-regression and is capable of achieving the supreme Buddha wisdom. Then she appears and, in the presence of the assembly, attains Buddhahood in her dragon form.

2. "The body of beneficence" refers to the Buddha who appears in accordance with the wish of human beings, and who enables them to enjoy the benefits of the Law accordingly. "The transformation bodies" refers to the various bodies that Buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest in order to instruct and save people.

3. The two mandalas refer to the mandalas depicting the Diamond and Womb realms, described in the Diamond Crown Sutra and the Mahavairochana Sutra, respectively.

4. According to True Word tradition, the transmission of the esoteric teachings passed in succession from Mahavairochana Buddha to Vajrasattva, Nagarjuna, Nagabodhi, Vajrabodhi (Chin Chin-kang-chih), and Pu-k'ung.

5. According to ancient Indian belief, the basic constituents of all things—earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness.

6. Four kinds of objects of devotion described by Kobo in his *Doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form*. They are: (1) the great mandala, (2) the samaya mandala, (3) the Dharma mandala, and (4) the karma mandala.

7. The round-mirror wisdom indicates the great round mirror wisdom, one of the five kinds of wisdom, which perceives the world without distortion, just as a clear mirror accurately reflects all images.

8. Diamond Crown Sutra.

9. Mahavairochana Sutra.

10. Ibid.

11. Diamond Crown Sutra.

12. The five transcendental powers refer to the first five of the six transcendental powers; the powers of being anywhere at will, of seeing anything anywhere, of hearing any sound anywhere, of knowing the thoughts of all other minds, and of knowing past lives.

13. The stage of joy refers to the stage in which one rejoices at realizing a partial aspect of the truth. This represents the first of the ten stages of development.

14. Nirvana Sutra.

15. The third of the ten stages of development. It is called the stage of the emission of light, in which one radiates the light of wisdom.

16. Kobo is said to have transformed himself into Mahavairochana Buddha by invoking a spell at a religious ceremony presided over by Emperor Saga in 813.

17. The honorific title "Great Teacher Kobo" was posthumously granted Kobo in 921 by Emperor Daigo.

18. Tendai esotericism defines the Lotus and Flower Garland sutras as esoteric, but because they explain nothing about mantras and mudras, which can be described as esoteric practice in its concrete form, they are considered to be merely teachings of esoteric doctrine. In contrast, the Mahavairochana, Diamond Crown, and Susidhikara sutras, which describe the mudras and mantras, are considered to be teachings not only of esoteric doctrine but also of practice.

19. In response to this statement of Manjushri's, Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated poses his question (see n. 1). Dengyo's commentary regards the dragon girl as an actual example of the attainment of Buddhahood in one's present form through the power of the Lotus Sutra.

20. That is, Jikaku and Chisho honored the three True Word teachers but slighted their own teacher Dengyo, who was closer to them in both place and time.

21. This refers to the transmigration of unenlightened beings through the six paths. In this repeating cycle of rebirth through the six lower deluded worlds, living beings

are reborn with limited spans of life and in different forms in accordance with their karma.

22. According to tradition, when Kumara-rajiva's body was cremated, his tongue remained unburned as a sign of the accuracy with which he had explained the meaning of the Buddhist teachings.

23. This refers to a passage in the

"Teacher of the Law" chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

24. That is, for their lack of discrimination in embracing erroneous teachings.

25. References are to the Izu Exile from 1261 to 1263, and the Sado Exile from 1271 through 1274, and to the unsuccessful attempt to execute the Daishonin at Tatsunokuchi near Kamakura in 1271.