

Theoretical vs. Actual: Buddhism Can't Exist Without You
What a Concept: On the basic ideas of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism
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The Daishonin's Buddhism teaches not that we should merely observe the true entity of all phenomena within our lives but that we should strive to make the reality of our lives and our environment shine as the true entity of all phenomena. It is a philosophy of change and improvement for causing all phenomena — our lives and society — to shine as the entity of the Mystic Law.

— SGI President Ikeda, Lectures on the 'Expedient Means' and 'Life Span' Chapters of the Lotus Sutra, vol.1, p. 149.

The Chinese scholar T'ien-t'ai (538– 97) was a historian of Buddhism and an enlightened observer of life. He compiled Buddhist teachings, arranged them and commented on them in a systematized, analytical way. To T'ien-t'ai, the chief purpose of studying Buddhism was to achieve a perfect understanding of reality — to have the correct perspective of life.

Nichiren Daishonin studied T'ien-t'ai's work and elaborated on its implications. The Daishonin taught that while it's crucial to understand reality — the ultimate reality, the universal truth — what is most significant is the extent to which we embody this reality in daily life, or attain Buddhahood in this lifetime.

T'ien-t'ai's teachings are known as theoretical teachings, while the Daishonin's are actual teachings. All Buddhist concepts can be interpreted from both a theoretical point of view and, more important, an actual one.

If you want only to contemplate and debate Buddhism, these differing points of view make for highbrow entertainment, maybe. But if you want, as the Daishonin did, to change obstacles into a source of happiness and transform society for the sake of people's welfare, then there's only one way to look at Buddhism: from the standpoint of actualizing it.

As practitioners of the Daishonin's Buddhism, we study the theoretical teachings so we can gain a correct perception of reality, which is: Everything is an expression of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Everything essentially has the Buddha nature. You, other people, trees, buildings, all life, all phenomena. To perceive this — genuinely, serenely — is to perceive the ultimate reality.

But all is not bliss. We have to take into account the three poisons of greed, anger and foolishness. Fundamental darkness. Bad karma. The Daishonin teaches that these, too, are part of reality, part of living in the real world.

Although Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism enables us to perceive things correctly, fundamentally it's a philosophy of change, not a philosophy of mere observation. The Daishonin teaches that we can literally change the world by changing ourselves — and not only can we change, we must.

While our Buddha nature itself is unchanging and incorruptible, it is easily obscured by doubts, poisons and the innate darkness of life. In Buddhism, to change ourselves means to resolve our doubts, transform poison into medicine and illuminate the darkness. On a practical level, this means taking action: the actions of practice and study, of making efforts to relieve our suffering and the suffering of others, of speaking out against injustice, of appreciating our lives.

In Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism there are two levels to every concept: understanding it and living it. Buddhist concepts can't exist only as theory — without people who are striving to actualize the teachings, Buddhism is a mere (albeit interesting) abstraction.

In other words, Buddhism can't exist without you.

Three in a series

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