

WHAT A CONCEPT: Bodhisattva
Being Your Selfless Self
By LISA JONES, Staff Writer

Altruism (as opposed to egoism) is a noble idea, most people agree — the idea that the proper goal of an individual's actions is to ensure the general welfare of society. Often, though, this is interpreted as sacrificing one's individuality to a collective ideal or enduring personal suffering and dissatisfaction for the sake of a larger good. But the Buddhist concept of bodhisattva encompasses both individual freedom and social responsibility, both personal satisfaction and humanitarian service.

In Sanskrit, *bodhi* can mean enlightenment, to be alert, or to recognize; *sattva* means being or existence. So, in a sense, a bodhisattva is a being whose essence is enlightened. According to the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, our enlightened life-essence is Buddha, and the real-world expression of this essence is bodhisattva action.

In one sense, bodhisattva action could be summed up as seeking to live your life to the fullest. More specifically, it is motivated by four universal vows, the first of which is to lead as many people as possible to become Buddhas. This vow is fulfilled by living the other three, which are explained in light of the Daishonin's Buddhism: to continuously "burn the firewood of earthly desires," fueling your life force; to infinitely deepen your faith in and understanding of the Mystic Law; and to constantly manifest wisdom, courage, endurance, forbearance and compassion, the characteristics of an enlightened person.

It could be said that a bodhisattva is one who is devoted to overcoming his or her egoistic shallowness, but that doesn't mean that we have to annihilate our sense of self in order to be bodhisattvas. Rather, it implies that our concept of the self extends beyond our physical body and immediate surroundings.

Bodhisattva action is rooted in the understanding that the self is eternal, abundant and interwoven with the lives of all other beings. In other words, the self is selfless. It's inextricable from the lives of others. Ultimately, there's no separation between self and other (a point that is explained by the Buddhist concepts of two but not two and the oneness of life and its environment).

Accordingly, there's no clear separation between practice for oneself and practice for others. Buddhist practice — which could be summed up as faithful chanting and dedication to fulfilling our bodhisattva vows — is by its very nature both for self and others.

Whether you're determinedly struggling to get out of debt, inspiring others with the story of how you overcame a serious problem, or praying and working to realize your dreams, you're taking bodhisattva action. By demonstrating the efficacy of Buddhist practice, you're leading others to their Buddhahood, their absolute freedom and joy. What's more, our life-condition is expanded by bodhisattva action; SGI President Ikeda, for example, has attributed his high life-condition to his consistent prayers for the happiness, prosperity and good health of SGI members.

Ultimately, a person's Buddhahood is expressed in his or her actions. Regarding this, President Ikeda said recently: "The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are in fact Buddhas. But the term *Buddha* is inevitably taken to mean a being who is somehow transcendental or superior to ordinary human beings. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth thoroughly devote themselves to the way of human beings. This is a point of tremendous significance."

All in all, being a bodhisattva means being yourself in the truest sense.

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