

## **BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (1)**

### **THE FOUR VIRTUES OF THE BUDDHA: BREAKING OUT OF THE LESSER SELF**

HOW WE VIEW OURSELVES is reflected in how we see the world and how we treat others. The less sure we are of ourselves, the more we become fixed on ourselves while disregarding others and the world around us. Selfishness is often the flip side of a lack of self-identity. Even when those who are not really sure of themselves try to do something for others, they are often motivated by selfishness. They may be attempting either to make themselves feel needed by others, or seeking some sort of praise, recognition or even the salvation of their souls for their "altruism." Buddhism views altruism as an expression of one's awakening to one's true self and explains that it stems from compassion, appreciation and a sense of interconnection rather than insecurity. The notion of the "four virtues of the Buddha" describes and encourages a holistic view of self, a view that transcends selfishness.

The Buddha, or enlightened one, is said to possess four virtues: true self, eternity, happiness and purity. The original concept of these four virtues, however, predates Buddhism. Brahmanism, the prevailing religion in Shakyamuni's India, taught that the human being has an enduring soul or essence called *atman*—"the breath of life." *Atman*, often translated as "self," was viewed as eternal, happy and pure. Espoused by the Brahmins, then India's highest, priestly caste, Brahmanism explained that the supreme purpose of *atman* was to acquire wealth and honor. So, by making offerings to the deities, people sought worldly gains. *Atman*, in this sense, may be viewed as self in pursuit of selfish desire.

In his early teachings, Shakyamuni refuted the Brahmanic view of self and in his later teachings revealed his enlightened perspective on the matter. When people are consumed with egotism, no matter how much they seek wealth and honor, the pain of their hunger will not be eased. So from this standpoint, Shakyamuni taught that the self is impure and transient and causes suffering. In the earlier sutras, he explains that nothing remains constant, there is no such thing as eternal self. Because the self was transient and not enduring, the Buddha taught, attachment to it or anything in this impure and fleeting world was the cause of suffering. In his later teachings, which came to be classified as Mahayana, or "Greater Vehicle" teachings, especially in the Lotus and Nirvana sutras, Shakyamuni expounds an entirely new view of self. He explains that one's true self, that is, one's Buddha nature, is eternal, transcending the cycle of birth and death; it is essentially pure and endowed with happiness. From the viewpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, therefore, true self, eternity, happiness and purity are called the four virtues of the Buddha. In this regard, one Mahayana scripture explains: "The deluded beings are attached to their lesser self and thus suffer. Buddhas and bodhisattvas discard the lesser self. As a result, their self is pure and thus called the greater self. Because they think of all living beings as 'self,' theirs is called the greater self."

While Brahmanism justifies attachment to self, Mahayana Buddhism advocates the inner reform to discard one's lesser self and develop the greater self rooted in compassion. The Nirvana Sutra clarifies this point, saying: "The deluded beings view that in this world, self is eternal, happy and pure, but this is topsy-turvy. The Buddha also views that in this world, self is eternal, happy and pure, and this is the truth." Buddhas are those who are awakened to the greater self of compassion. In this expanded vision of self, they see that

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their lives are connected to others and the world around them. So Buddhas have genuine appreciation for others and are driven by their desire to contribute to the world around them.

Nichiren Daishonin attributes the four virtues of the Buddha to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Bodhisattva Superior Practices (*Jogyo*) represents true self. Revealing true self means for us to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, thus manifesting our innate Buddhahood and shedding the lesser self of egotism. Bodhisattva Boundless Practices (*Muhengyo*) signifies eternity. Through establishing our true self of Buddhahood, we come to understand, perhaps not intellectually but with our innermost heart, the eternity of life, and remain unswayed by our ever-changing circumstances while confidently challenging ourselves. Bodhisattva Pure Practices (*Jyogyo*) represents purity. Once we are awakened to the greater self of Buddhahood, we are no longer tainted by delusions. With a secure sense of self, we can even positively influence our environment, thus purifying it. Finally Bodhisattva Firmly Established Practices (*Anryugyo*) signifies happiness—a kind of happiness that withstands all the ups and downs of our lives, including death. Through developing confidence in the Buddha nature as our true self, we free ourselves from trivial concerns for any unnecessary artifice of life and remain at peace with ourselves, knowing that we will ultimately triumph over any obstacle.

It is significant that the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth represent the four virtues of the Buddha. As the names of those bodhisattvas indicate, only through our dedicated practice as bodhisattvas—practice dedicated to the happiness of others—can we break through our lesser self and reveal the greater self of Buddhahood. In other words, our bodhisattva practice is the cause for the Buddha's four virtues to manifest in our lives. Yet from another perspective, it may be also said that Buddhas are in essence those who are awakened to their greater self and act for the well-being of others. In this sense, the altruism of Bodhisattva practice is not only the means to overcome the lesser self and develop the four virtues; it is also a direct expression of these four virtues inherent in life, in our Buddha nature. This is why chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, which calls forth our inherent Buddhahood and its corresponding virtues, provides the greatest basis for an altruistic life—a life dedicated to the happiness of others.

The four virtues of the Buddha, from the standpoint of the Daishonin's Buddhism, describe the ideal characteristics of human beings whose view of self is not hindered in any way by selfish ego. Their understanding of self is so encompassing that their own existence and the world around them become indistinguishable. A limited understanding of self, however, leads to egotism, bringing suffering and misery to both oneself and others. True self-knowledge—an awakening to our true, greater self—in this sense is a key to overcoming selfishness. □

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