

## BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (17) PERFECT IMPERFECTION: ASPIRATION FOR BUDDHAHOOD

Having goals can lead us in a positive direction. In the process of striving for goals, we see our unknown potential unfold before us. As we make progress, however small, we feel a sense of fulfillment and excitement. “Yes, I am moving ahead!” This sense of advancement contributes to our happiness.

Buddhism stresses the value of goals. Attaining Buddhahood—becoming absolutely happy—is the ultimate goal of our Buddhist practice. Our “aspiration for Buddhahood,” therefore, is the starting point of our Buddhist practice; it means to recognize our innate potential of Buddhahood and resolve to develop it while helping others do the same. A bodhisattva is someone who does just this, who is constantly working toward the goal of attaining enlightenment or *bodhi*.

In his *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, Nagarjuna, an Indian Buddhist scholar from the second or third century, discusses the three types of enlightenment—the enlightenment of voice-hearers, cause-awakened ones and Buddhas. The enlightenment of a Buddha is the supreme *bodhi*, that is, the unsurpassed Buddha wisdom. Those who strive to achieve the Buddha wisdom are called bodhisattvas.

Bodhisattvas are said to make four great vows in their Buddhist practice toward enlightenment. They are: 1) to save innumerable living beings; 2) to eradicate countless earthly desires; 3) to master immeasurable Buddhist teachings; and 4) to attain the supreme enlightenment of a Buddha. Put another way, as they begin their journey toward true happiness, bodhisattvas: 1) resolve to help others become happy; 2) resolve to overcome their own delusions and weaknesses; 3) seek the wisdom of Buddhism to the best of their ability; and 4) never to lose sight of their ultimate goal of attaining Buddhahood.

In this regard, Nichiren Daishonin states: “Bodhisattvas invariably make the four great vows, but without fulfilling their first vow, which is to save all living beings, they cannot fulfill the fourth vow, which is to attain supreme enlightenment” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 522). The Daishonin suggests that our altruistic efforts to pray and work for the happiness of others are crucial to our own happiness.

We begin our Buddhist practice resolute and diligent about our daily prayers and Buddhist study. However, as time goes by, our initial “aspiration for Buddhahood” tends to wane, especially when we experience disappointments. Also, after we overcome an obstacle, or when things are going particularly well, we tend to relax in our resolve to continue practicing Buddhism. This is like setting out to climb the highest mountain in the world and giving up climbing discouraged by the first steep ascent, or being satisfied with reaching a small ridge half way up the peak.

In this regard, the Daishonin states:

*Many hear about and accept this sutra, but when great obstacles arise, just as they were told would happen, few remember it and bear it firmly in mind. To accept is easy; to continue is difficult. But Buddhahood lies in continuing faith. Those who uphold this sutra should be prepared to meet difficulties. It is certain, however, that they will “quickly attain the unsurpassed Buddha way.” To “continue” means to cherish Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the most important principle for all the Buddhas of*

the three existences. (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 471)

In the course of our practice, we encounter various obstacles and hardships. Being a Buddhist does not mean to be immune to life's ups and downs; rather, it means having a powerful tool to awaken our supreme potential of Buddhahood and overcome our obstacles. When we mistake the goal of our Buddhist practice as having no obstacles, it will be easy to get confused and discouraged by the realities of conflicts and challenges. For this reason, it is important to understand the true goal of Buddhist practice as a dynamic process of developing the state of life in which we can overcome any obstacle through courage, wisdom and compassion.

In one sense, we are constantly reaching for the summit of our Buddhist practice since the attainment of Buddhahood is not a static condition we attain once and for all. With each step forward, our Buddhahood becomes stronger, more deeply rooted in our lives. So what is most important is to "continue" as the Daishonin says. We will always have some challenges with or without our Buddhist practice. But as we continue to practice Buddhism and build our inner strength, we develop confidence that our lives will be ultimately secure no matter what may happen; we enjoy each moment while working for the happiness of others.

To continue our Buddhist practice, however, we must constantly renew our "aspiration for Buddhahood." Our determination to continue to practice Buddhism and strengthen our Buddha nature is the source of enlightened living and true happiness. We will always have some sort of problem as long as we live. In this sense, we will remain "imperfect." But as we continue to practice Buddhism, we can constantly transcend our imperfect self, always growing in our capacity to challenge obstacles. This process of eternal progress and never-ending self-transcendence is in itself the attainment of Buddhahood; it is a state of "perfect imperfection" in which we can enjoy every moment of our lives.

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